

China is different

Travelling notes from a political perspective

by Beat Schneider,* Switzerland



Beat Schneider. (Photo www.beatschneider.com)

As soon as I board the Air China aircraft, I feel the consequences of geopolitics. Because China is not participating in the sanctions against Russia, we can fly across the Eurasian air sector and thus save a few hours compared to SWISS, which belongs to a sanctioning country. I am

leaving behind a weak Federal Council that is recklessly putting Swiss neutrality at risk.

Along the Eurasian axis

Eurasia, which stretches from Europe via Russia, Central Asia and Iran to China, is the most populous and resource-rich region on earth and is therefore of great strategic importance. The USA is doing everything it can to prevent the realisation of a Eurasian axis: NATO's eastward expansion and blocking German-Russian cooperation. Russia is being targeted in the Ukrainian proxy war, but the main target is China, against which the USA is openly preparing for war. For the Pentagon, it's just a question of when. But now it's down to Beijing!

Lots of ideology and moralising

After a few days in China, I can feel the tension I took with me easing. The atmosphere at home is heated, almost like during the Cold War. The mainstream media are aligned – with nuances – and mobilise against dissenting opinions. It is dripping with ideology and moralising statements. The mood is rather pessimistic and depressive. I notice that people here are more re-



Morning exercise with Tai Chi Quan. (All pictures Beat Schneider)

laxed and non-ideological, somehow more sober and pragmatic. Western studies also describe most young Chinese people as optimistic about the future. A topsy-turvy world! I think that one of the biggest challenges for the Chinese leadership is to find ways to win over young people again and again. This is a challenge that every society faces.

In the Temple of the Sun Park

When travelling in China, I have got into the habit of getting up early and going to a park to do morning exercises with other people. There are more young people in Beijing's Temple of the Sun Park than there used to be. Many of them move to the graceful rhythm of *Tai Chi Quan*. This martial art reveals a lot about China. It consists of a constant *yin-yang* shifting of weight, whereby one backs away from the (imagined) opponent to let him run into the void with little effort and then immediately go back elegantly to the offensive

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nas langer Marsch in die Moderne. Zwanzig nicht-eurozentristische Thesen» (2023). Politically, *Beat Schneider* is a former participant of the 1968 student movement and he was a founding member and member of the national leadership of the *Progressive Organizations of Switzerland* (POCH). For twelve years, he was a member of the Bernese Grand Council and the City Council of the City of Bern.

again until the opponent gives up, exhausted from exertion. This is what happened – on a grand scale – in 1934 in the 10,000 kilometre “Long March”, where the *National People’s Army* was on the permanent defensive and was able to tire out and defeat the enemy with limited but clever counterattacks.

Intimidated

During my meetings at Chinese universities, I realise the current mood at Swiss universities: in some cases, there is fear of expressing critical opinions. Intimidated colleagues only dare to go public anonymously. I notice how committed and self-confident the debates I take part in here are. There are non-partisan colleagues like *Zhang Tangyang* at Shanghai’s Fudan University, who publishes successfully in the West and represents liberal, unorthodox positions here. A topsy-turvy world.

McDonald’s

Even at academic meetings in China, it is customary for crucial issues to be discussed over a meal at the round table. Eating together is an important event in China. At Fudan University, a world-renowned university, I meet *Zhang Weiwei*, *Deng Xiaoping’s* former interpreter and current director of the China Institute, one of the central government’s think tanks. He asks me about the difference between China and the USA and answers me himself: “China has eight great food cultures dating back many thousands of years. The USA has *McDonald’s*.” After a hearty laugh, Zhang uses a thought experiment to explain his theory of China as a civilised state, which is more than a nation state in the European sense: “Imagine that the civilisations of ancient Egypt or classical Greece still existed today and were embedded in modern states. These states would be civilisation states. This is exactly what applies to China. The only difference is that the 5000-year-old civilisation and culture are still alive today in modern China. The Chinese civilisation state is miles ahead of the short-lived US state.”

A special addiction

Over dinner, *Lin Jinhua*, Vice President of the *Marxism Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* (CASS) in Beijing, confides to me that the Chinese have a “special addiction”, namely that they have been addicted to learning

since time immemorial! (At the same time, they are very security-conscious and control-friendly. BS). I notice that the people I meet in China are all very curious and open. They know a lot more about us than we know about them. Our knowledge of China is kept at a shamefully low level. Even basic knowledge is lacking. No wonder anti-Chinese clichés persist! Western China-bashing has an easy game. Ignorance and arrogance are twins.

SUVs again and again

A surprise on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai: there are almost only large middle-class and upper-class limousines on the roads, many of them SUVs. There are practically no small cars. The modern cars are obviously very desirable. In any case, they cause major traffic jams during rush hour. Must China copy all our mistakes! I catch myself thinking typically Eurocentric and arrogant thoughts.

China is not imitating but is much further ahead. For environmental reasons, car sales are severely limited and regulated by drawing lots. Public transport is being massively expanded. In Shenzhen, a metropolis of 25 million people and one of China’s innovation and eco-laboratories, only battery-powered cars, taxis, buses and trucks are still floating through the streets. A revolutionary environmentally friendly Chinese battery is soon to be launched on the market. China is also transforming its cities into energy-saving smart cities, with short commutes, plenty of green spaces and minimised energy consumption and maximised networked traffic.

Socialist

Wen Tiegun, professor of economics at Renmin University in Beijing and well-known agricultural expert, gives me a concrete example of “Chinese-style socialism”: As a country with a strong international network, China suffers from the enormous amount of liquid capital (financialisation), just like the industrialised countries of the West. In China, this is due to the large balance sheet surpluses and the massive investments of Western capital. While in the West there is a steady withdrawal of accumulated capital from the productive sector into the financial sector, where an almost uncontrollable speculative bubble has developed, in China most of the financial capital is under state control. The government has the power and the opportunity

to utilise these resources in a targeted manner for economic development. Specifically, since 2015 it has been pursuing a strategy of using the liquid capital to create modern infrastructure and establish new companies in less developed western China. The state banks there provide enormous start-up financing for new local start-ups, which are then gradually handed over to the rural population. This revitalises entire rural regions and makes them attractive to newcomers from the east of the country.

Correction

In Shanghai, I meet *Li Eric*, a well-known economic expert and CEO of various companies. He speaks plainly and is very popular with the young middle class. He sees flawed economic distortions caused by the market, such as the property boom, and talks about the need for a controlled economic transformation via the supply side. However, this can only be achieved by the state. Investment capital must be channelled into new innovative sectors. This is the only way to avoid the notorious “middle-income trap”. In response to my question as to what China is doing differently from the West, Li replies that although the macroeconomic redirection (not restriction) of the economy is detrimental to certain interest groups in the country, it is China’s great strength – a view also shared by the Washington Post.

Steep climb

I meet *Qian Colins*, one of *Huawei’s* CEOs, at the Shanghai headquarters of the IT group Huawei. He tells me the Huawei fairy tale. Huawei was founded a few years ago by three young engineers and today employs 210,000 people, all of whom are shareholders in the company. Of these, no less than 56% work in research and development. This fantastic ratio is the reason why Huawei was able to develop all modules itself after a year, after the company was sanctioned by the USA and *Google* services were blocked on mobile phones. Since then, according to Qian (in agreement with Western analysts), the showpiece of the Chinese IT industry has been on a steep climb.

Diversions via China

Nowhere on my travels am I mentally as far away from home as I am in China. China is completely different. By taking a diversion via China,



Lama monastery in Beijing.

I see my home country from a distance and learn to better understand and adjust my own point of view. This in turn leads to further understanding of others. The circularity of knowledge lies in the diversions. A central principle of cybernetics.

Both ... and ...

Chinese culture is a culture of both ... and ... It is capable of thinking both sides of a phenomenon together and acting accordingly. The goal of Confucianism is a peaceful, safe and, above all, harmonious world. Applied to today’s economy, this means a harmonious both ... and ... of unleashing and state control of productive forces, of competition and state macro-planning, of innovation and control. This is the great strength and basis for the dynamism of the Chinese economic miracle and at the same time a systemic advantage over the West. There, the category of either-or prevails. Black or white. Something is either socialist or capitalist! In modern China, there is a “both ... and ...” of modernity and cultural tradition. China knows how to play both mental keyboards at the same time and adopt the cultural instruments of Western modernisation without becoming Westernised. This makes the system resilient.

Pomegranate

In Urumqi, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, I meet *Ma Xingrui*. He is a member of the 25-member Politburo, the central organ of power of the Communist Party of China, which today has around 100 million members. As is customary in China, Ma also likes to speak in vivid metaphors and with memorable

images. He says that the 56 ethnic groups in the People's Republic stick together like the many seeds of the pomegranate embedded in the red skin. He is alluding to the conflict with the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang. I have written extensively about this and about Uyghur IS terrorism up until the 2010s in "China's langer Marsch in die Moderne" ["China's long March to Modernity"].

Kindergarten curriculum

The visit to a state kindergarten in Korla (Xingjiang) will be a highlight of this year's trip. It has 260 children and 16 teachers, is in a large area with lots of nature and a neat and modern design. The curriculum includes: Learning and practising many practical skills with adequate tools and instruments, artistic activities, respect in dealing with nature, observing plants and animals, becoming familiar with modern technology and astronautics (!), dealing with success and failure. All with lots of games and sport and preferably in groups. A clear and purposeful concept that opens a broad horizon for young children from an early age.

For Westerners, who have been impaired by authoritarian up-bringing, this is too much top-down, where creativity and individuality are neglected (keyword: don't dictate anything!). The Chinese approach is a sophisticated concept that presumably only works based on a cultural tradition that is thousands of years old and still present. The education that the little ones enjoy is one of the reasons why China is on a solid mental and practical footing today.

Practised feminism

In Beijing, I meet *Huang Shu*, the deputy director of the international department of the *All-China Women's Federation* (ACWF), the largest mass organisation in the world. Huang speaks confidently in facts: Commitment to women's rights has been a central and self-evident concern since the liberation struggle. What sticks in my mind as a former member of parliament is that all of China's legislative measures go to the ACWF for consultation, without whose approval they have little chance of success.

For example, raising the retirement age for women, as happened in wealthy Switzerland, has no chance in China, a country with modest prosperity. However, I am not sure whether China, with its declining birth rate, will not raise



In the kindergarten.

the retirement age for both sexes at some point. It is currently 55 for women (even 50 for female workers) and 60 for men. Or will China compensate for the growing shortage of working generations with artificial intelligence and the labour of robots? China can be trusted to do so.

Omnipotence of the party

The following statement by my interpreter Mi will surprise Western ears: In the *National People's Congress*, the Chinese parliament with around 3,000 members, which is denounced by the Western media as a head-nodding body, there is a pending legislative project that is only making slow progress and is repeatedly postponed: In the law for secondary schools, grammar school lessons are to be made free of charge (!) again. The reason for the postponement is the blockade by the poorer provinces, which would have to pay more, and the richer provinces, which would be asked to pay more in the intra-Chinese equalisation of burdens. The lobbying of the parliamentarians of the respective provinces has been successful. Swiss federalism sends its regards!

Second chance

At the Marxism Institute mentioned above, I also meet *Xin Xianyang*, the director and party secretary of this influential party think tank. For the second time, I have an interesting exchange about Marxism with various colleagues from the institute. Xin quotes a proverb: "The East is rising, the West is declining". Western Marxism is indeed declining. It has missed its chance. While the Western left is struggling with itself,

preoccupied with its own marginalisation and missing the opportunity on global development, Chinese Marxists are at the forefront of growing economic, technological and scientific development. A second chance for Marxism in the 21st century?

Global South

It is present everywhere in China: The *New Silk Road* (BRI), the largest infrastructure project in world history, an expression of the “Asian Rise” and nothing less than a geostrategic model attempt at globalisation in the 21st century. The people here have a different view of the BRI than most Western countries. For them, it is a co-operation project of an established developing country, especially with the countries of the global South, and of great importance for prosperity. Of course, it also serves China’s interests. Like every state in the world, China is acting in its own well-understood interests. The Chinese stand by this. But the BRI is also more than that! China’s increasing geopolitical weight enables the countries of the Global South to choose alternatives to the previous neo-colonial dependence on the dollar and the Monetary Fund, making them less susceptible to blackmail.

Cultural revolution

I am often asked by ordinary people and cadres in China why the collective West has been reacting so aggressively to China for some time now, why Westerners do not understand China and what China needs to do better to be understood.

China is struggling to understand why the West, which is used to acting rationally, is reacting so “irrationally” to a China that has become stronger. China has no explanation for the fact that the Social Democrats and especially the Greens have taken the lead in China-bashing and the transatlantic phobia alliance. An eloquent expression of this is the bellicosity sailing under the label of “feminist foreign policy” and the



Shanghai skyline.

Sinophobia of *Baerbock's* provenance, a pinnacle of irrationalism that appears rational!

The Chinese know that the West is in a major crisis, but I wonder whether China has realised that a cultural struggle, a kind of cultural revolution, has been taking place in Europe and the USA for some time. Its characteristics: Loss of trust in the elites and in the institutions and media, frustration after many years of dominance by the left-liberal mainstream, fear of losing cultural identity and national sovereignty.

The greatest wish

In the marvellous Lama Temple in Beijing, the largest outside of Tibet, where the Chinese celebrate their prayers and wishes with incense sticks, I am asked to place my greatest wish on a shrine. This puts me in a dilemma: Should I make a private wish, or should I wish that we get climate change under control globally so that my two granddaughters and two grandsons also have a good future? The Chinese have it easier. They make the stereotypical three wishes: “Happiness, long life, wealth”.

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