

Living in China is learning to live again

Enrique Posada Cano*

*Sinologist, economist, writer, international analyst and former diplomat who studied, lived and worked for 17 years in China.

I invite the reader to go back in time with me to the mid 60's of the past Century, when planet Earth was divided into two halves: one, called the communist world led by the Soviet Union and on the opposite, the capitalist league, led by USA. China, with 900 million inhabitants was immersed in this first scenario, whereas Colombia was in the second.

Until that time, the only outstanding connection between Colombia and Asia, besides the journeys made to Japan and China by Tanco Armero, a Colombian human-trafficker was the participation of our Nation in the alien and worthless war: Korea (1950-1953). This futile adventure left, on the part of South Korea, a lifelong gratitude, and on the part of China, the presence in such nation's Military Museum of a Colombian flag bullet-holed from Chinese volunteers that battled along with North Koreans. I blushed just by seeing this.

The last ambassador of United States to China, Leighon Stuart¹ packed his bags and said goodbye to Beijing two months before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China -now almost sixty years ago- and, following his steps, another few diplomatic representatives from Western Europe, Latin America, Japan and countries from the African continent did the same. China's contact with the world became limited to its frontier lines and Eastern Europe. When I arrived to Peking to work as a specialist in Spanish language in February 1965, China's marginalization was not only exerted by the West towards the Great Wall, but also from the north on behalf of the Soviet Empire, which also imposed some rejection.

Moscow removed three thousand engineers and technicians that were sent to China as part of a cooperation program. The Soviet-Chinese dispute was not located only in the political sphere, but started to acquire a significant ideological taint that lead to the dispute regarding the dilemma on which of the two communists parties had the truth of Marxism in its hands.

On the morning of our arrival to a dirty white floor as a result of recent snow, we were unable to take pictures of those overstuffed buses to which the Chinese had connected a series of hoses from the exhaust pipes to the engine with the purpose of collecting the final fuel waste, which should have very much resembled a sort of surrealistic still life. They had just been removed from the scene so we had to settle for the description provided by a Brazilian couple that lived at the same "friendship residences" where my wife and I arrived, along with my two children, nine and two years old.

¹ See article. "Goodbye Leighton Stuart!" August 18, 1949, Selected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung, Book IV, published in September 1960 by the Town of Peking Editorial.

We were able to witness, however, for several more years, a scene that made our hearts jump the first time we saw it: a two-wheeled chariot pulled by horses, with attached aluminum tanks that must have been green at some point, which, at the corners of the alleys and neighborhoods collected human detritus from the sewers. It was a feast performed daily by the driver and his assistant at several locations of the capital city. Overwhelmed by the spectacle, we inquired for an explanation to Ricardo Samper, a Colombian that was ahead of us by a couple of years in the incursion to China, who answered: "Do not be surprised by anything you see here; this is what we, as style controllers at the Xinhua news agency disguise using the term 'organic fertilizers'". China is still very poor, but here no one sleeps in the streets, and the fact that someone does not have three meals a day is equal to a national shame. What I can confess is that if I had to be an excrement collector rather than a journalist, even if I were Chinese, I would prefer to wait for death in an ice block".

As soon as we arrived to Peking, I was committed to overcome my short knowledge of this country's history, assisted by twenty Chinese translators, the best of the country, which were my teammates in the task of achieving a Spanish version of the Selected Writings of Mao Zedong. This was how I got acquainted with the history of harassment of the British against China in the first and second opium wars, and from the Germans, French, Russians, Italians, Austrians, Americans and Japanese following all of them. One outrage after the other; this was when the west stigmatized the Chinese as the "Sick of Asia". Is there really a reason to be surprised by the series of interventions, damages and destructions perpetrated against China by eight superpowers when one reads from Frederic Hegel, a significant representative of western philosophy, that China never had history or possessed a sense of national pride?²

When Hegel released such quote, there was still half a century remaining for Joseph Needham, author of the book Science and Civilization in China, to be born, and Robert Temple, author of Genius of China, who identified and described the various hundreds of inventions under the "Made in China" seal, nonetheless he should have been aware that this race was responsible for the printing press, the compass, writing and the gunpowder. These are indeed, enough inventions to acknowledge the intelligence of a Nation.

Having said this, I can state that the first lesson in my 17-year life with the Chinese was their capacity to survive, not only foreign threat, but also and specially, scarcity. Scarcity of everything set by the figures of a population that through all times has always been the largest in the world. The so-called Chinese demographic

² The Immobile Empire: The first great collision of East and West-the astonishing history of Britain, Alain Peyrefitte, October 1992. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

explosion makes that, no matter how large the gross domestic product can be, the per capita income will always be equal to that of a country of intermediate development.

It was in fact, all the pain, scarcity, poverty and a whole list of humiliations that set in stone throughout the passing of the centuries, the Chinese ethics, a unique category that cannot be compared with what we know for using the same name in the West, as they imply different realities. This was the second lesson of my life in China.

The third lesson is about the notion of time; when trying to find equivalence to our standards of chronological perception, we would conclude that the difference is just as comparing a nation who sees history in terms of millennia with another that measures time in centuries. Such infinite perception of the Chinese in this world must have a very particular mark.

Long term plans is the key for the way Chinese plan their future, their work and the national development. When, already in times of economic opening, I worked with the team responsible for having the Spanish version of 28 poems of Mao during two years, and sometimes debated during several weeks the meaning of just one verse, I understood that with the Chinese there is no room for extemporariness, but that with the way they move in the hourly structure, we could refer to it as timelessness.

The fourth lesson relates with something I've called the relativity of thought, which, in contrast to Einstein's relativity, it is not projected in a time-space axis but in the mind. It probably comes from the dialect from the *ying* and the *yang*. I learned, from my direct relationship with them, that nothing human is forever and that situations face the same principles, except for, of course, a fact that for them is unmovable: China's sovereignty over Taiwan. As for the rest, during this long journey of my relationship with Chinese, I have learned that there are few of the Chinese nationals that, such as themselves, showing an apparent stiffness, are more open and available for negotiation and reaching agreements than other people. Given certain conditions, a "no" of a Chinese which would seem definite, can become a "yes" on the next day. It's easier for a denial to become an assertion rather than the opposite.

For my fourth stay in China (1991-1995), I conditioned my return to working in Peking and the acceptance by my employer- the Translation and Publications Central Bureau of the Council of State, of allowing me to live in their residential complex located in the Fenzi Alley (of the Noodles), two blocks away from the Imperial Palace. China was in the middle of the development of political reforms

and aperture, and at the office, we worked on the task of translating selected texts of Deng Xiaoping.

After long years of living in rooms for foreigners, we knew that living “the Chinese way” was like learning to live again. I knew I was to expect restrictions and difficulties, but I was seduced by the challenge of being able to move freely without translators, facing my own strengths and knowledge of the language for each day’s contingencies. In our first Chinese day, my colleague Xue Feng took my wife and me (we had to leave our children in Colombia for education reasons) to a rectangular commercial unit that had a dining room on the first floor. He showed us the wooden shelves with cabinets where the bowls and chopsticks were to be stored after washing them in a community sink, and led us to the cash register where we bought with Renminbi the coupons required for a week’s supplies. It was just midday and there was already a long queue in front of the dispensing tables which had huge rice bowls and trays with vegetables and ground provisions. Translators of more than 20 languages that were ahead of us in the line, offered us their spots, but we kindly rejected their gesture; we knew that the life we were initiating that day could not include the privileges of the past three chapters. This fifth lesson could be called the learning of modesty within the Chinese way of life.

My sixth lesson from the Chinese relates to the above, and also occurred at the same community diner where I started to see that a large share of the diners filled their bowls with as much food as possible and without sitting at a table, ate as they walked, seeking to arrive quickly to their corresponding offices to lay down and take a nap in a sofa or a couple of desks joined together forming a large flat surface. From this phase just described above, I can conclude by saying that Chinese, despite hunger and past droughts, give more importance to sleep than nourishment.

Sometime during 1994, the Government decided to lower the minimum work-week from 48 hours to 40, suppressing labor during Saturdays. On the next Saturday following the day in which the decision was issued, I had to go to the office for some documents and when I arrived, to my surprise, I found all my Chinese colleagues in front of their desks. I asked them why were they there and they answered they felt too bored of home leisure. I understood then that work for the Chinese, more than a way of earning their living, is a *raison d’etre*. This is the seventh lesson and, at the same time, one of the arguments that explain Chinese competitiveness.

Eighth lesson: I didn’t enjoy reading a Chinese saying with the phrase: “when the guest moves away, the tea gets cold” and so I told a colleague of mine. “Don’t take things too seriously - he answered- that depends if both the guest and the host let

the tea get cold; friendship and horses are measured in the long run". I was shocked by such statements and have proven them to be true through time. One arrives to China for the first time and is called a "friend" but if you come back and stay, Chinese will now refer to you as an "old friend".

The "old friend" category has other subdivisions that are related to the time and level of commitment of foreigners. There are, firstly, "the heroics", those that in the harsh times of the freedom wars of the 40's fought side by side with the Chinese; for example, Canadian doctor Norman Bethune. Secondly, "the historic", whose actions relate to the Yenan period, the capital of revolution and beginning of the socialist construction. And, at last, the "old friends" without any other elements, but so important that the Chinese memory is filled with those of us who were there to give our support to the "construction of socialism". This was my ninth lesson.

Then, the tenth place: age. Once again time. Few things are as definite for them as age, and especially for women, whose image changed radically after the age of 35; they no longer tie up their hair in a braid but in a bun, and they no longer use colorful dresses but those in which grey and black are predominant.

I was surprised that, having arrived at the age of 40 and at the end of my third stay in Peking, the Chinese stopped calling me "little En" (En for Enrique) and begun referring to me as "Old En".

Eleventh: appearance is just as important as one's essence; it is a concept which, although not expressed literally can be evidenced through the ancient and cruel custom of tying women's feet so tight to stop them from growing making them more alike to the beauty standard imposed by Confucian males; the only exception is the empress.

Twelfth: Writing has a superior authority over the spoken word and could be another rule there. The respect for texts put in black and white is a sacredness that needed to be challenged, and to which Mao Zedong felt compelled to write an article named Against the Cult for Books.

Thirteenth: I couldn't answer my friend Fidel Duque right away, when three years ago he asked me on the kind of thinking that, in my opinion, was that of the Chinese. I had never asked myself that question, although I recorded their perceptions and conclusions in which I didn't see any French rationalism, Kantian positivism, African empiric-magicalism, or the animism of Hindus. A casuistic on the contrary, an attachment to chance, contingencies almost like a paradigm. But this was a subject that had not crossed my mind until the moment Fidel Duque stroke me with it. It was then when I found graphic writing as the root of their thought. A symbolic thought, I concluded: there must be something else in such

ideography established through pictures made into meaningful characters that made Pablo Picasso say once: “How I’d wish I was born Chinese to draw while I write!”. And I would add: to think in symbols.

Fourteenth: “to lose the face” is at first sight simply another phrase of the daily language of Chinese, but its meaning is deep, as if the face was a synonym of the soul. Perhaps the closest resemblance to the meaning in Spanish is “to fall into shame”. This phrase is used each time someone is exposed to embarrassment as being caught out in deception, or when revealing profound ignorance like that time at the opening of the Olympic Games of 2008, when some western media started to rumor that the whole spectacle representing a nation’s history was the result of computer editing, whereas actually, the Chinese used cartography, an ancient technique shared to Koreans. To their belief, CNN and its peers “lost their face” by making such wrongful assertions, and by continuing next days’ broadcast without addressing any sort of apology.

Fifteenth lesson: I believe nothing inspires more admiration than Chinese intelligence, and not only human intelligence but also that of the animals. In the classic masterpiece “Journey to the West” the monkey Sun Wukong is the main character with its mixed arts and crafts, and without an ethical line that separates them. They carry out a series of tricks without censure as long as they are the result of wit.

Sixteenth: From a popular and legendary wisdom comes the military science of Sun Wutzi. And from there, one learns to incorporate within its thinking baggage a series of principles such as “know your enemy, know yourself, and you’ll win the battle” or this other that says: “do not engage in a battle if not certain of winning”.

There is not enough space in an article such as this one, to include all the lessons I learned from China, but I do not resist the temptation to register a few more: number seventeen is the one that flashes back to 1976, year of the most catastrophic earthquake of the century, when, as I stayed with my wife and youngest son at a military tent, I edited the “Chinese Rebuilds” magazine, the publication in which Chinese persevered despite the disaster. Or number eighteen that relates to this one time in which I passed a red light going out from Xidan Street towards Tian Anmen Avenue. A transit officer pulled me over about a hundred meters ahead, in front of the monumental picture of Mao. He asked me for my documents and let me go with a warning. I left the place with the impression that the infraction would not be punished with a fine. Big mistake; a few days later my Bureau colleagues took me by the hand so I could read: in a bulletin board over a wall, there was the notice of my infraction with my name and the car’s plate digits. I would have rather paid a ticket in cash.

Nineteenth: I imagined that, as a result of the long experience of battles and revolutions, Chinese were loaded with a large amount of aggressiveness in their daily lives. The reaction I got, however, from a cyclist that once cut me off in a road crossing making me do a sudden stop, was to answer back to my clenched fist with a smile, which convinced me that they do not react as we do.

The twentieth lesson has to do with the encephalitis that attacked our oldest son some months after our arrival to China. I baptized the nurse “The Angel” because she devoted herself with such generosity to our child that I don’t recall during those two weeks when our son was flirting with death, seeing her going home.

Lesson twenty one was a bad lesson. A primary school teacher who was frustrated by our youngest son when she wanted him to have the first experience of the “bitter past and the sweetness of new socialism”, making him eat corn cakes, made of food that was formerly for pigs in China. Leonardo tasted the cake, found it nice and raised his hand to ask for another piece. Probably this is lesson twenty two, to reevaluate the western idea that Chinese people are collectivist. Probably due to one of Mao Zedong’s first articles in which he compared Chinese with lose sand. He blended the sand into one beam, but I have always doubted that trait form Chinese communism since they love good food and good drinks.

After the 70’s of the past century, another Chinese leader, Deng Xiapong reinvents history with a simple equation: “one country, two systems”, a tool to say hello to the return an ultra-capitalist Hong Kong to a socialist nation, still primitive, undeveloped but in a definite launch. More than a phrase, it is a theory that many other countries use to start peace processes.

Thus, line after line, we learn from the Chinese. But we need to stop here to make clear what Confucius’s countrymen feel and expressing our deep respect for this foreign nation by saying what someone, foreign or local once expressed: “there are foreigners who arrive in China and after two weeks they write a two hundred-page book; there are others who, after living in the country for a decade can only write an essay and there are some who after living thirty or forty years do not even write a line”.

I learned so many things! Not only from the Chinese, but also from foreigners who visited China; Jean Paul Sartre engraved me the sentence “One is not the same after living in China”. That footprint is deep inside me, going back to Colombia, returning to Peking two, three and four times more.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS