

China: A mysterious, young girl

-- Anuj Poddar, Aspen India Leadership Initiative Fellow



Preface

This past summer, a group of Aspen Fellows descended in Beijing, China for an AGLN¹ Alumni Seminar focused on *understanding* China. As Aspen Fellows (read: above-normal IQs, I-know-it-all-attitude and very opinionated intellectuals) many of us already *knew* China. And yet something drew each of us to this Seminar to *understand* China. For, as Aspen Alumni, we know that if anything can challenge your beliefs and give you new perspectives and understanding, it is an Aspen seminar.

Listen in

Let me start with an extract from my co-Aspen Fellow Tamsin Smith's blog post the China seminar:

"It's important and necessary to dig. No country, no culture, no people are ever what one reads about them. They are also seldom what they at first seem. I am the same way. Perhaps you are too. Listen....Imagine listening through your own life this way. What a beautiful journey that would be. The world is gesturing. True fidelity. Listen in."

So that's what I chose to do: to shed some of my views on China and listen and see. Not just from my Indian ears and eyes. But from those of my co-Fellows at the seminar: American, Russian, Nigerian, Tanzanian eyes and ears and, of course, Chinese ones too.

A seductive, mysterious, beautiful girl

That's what China is. You may be attracted to her...or you may hate her for her attitude...but there is something about her that makes sure you can't stop thinking about her. And yes, every time you think you've got her figured out, she surprises you. You want to know her better, but she only reveals so much and no more, leaving you confused. But have you really tried to figure out *why* is she the way she is?

A Rich Princess or Cinderella?

She has money, oodles of it. And all the LVs² and pink Bentleys and Ferraris to go with it. She loves to go shopping around the world picking up oil reserves, treasury stock and entire nations with their pliant rulers. And during our trip we heard about the monastery in China that was planning an IPO. What more proof do you need that this is the real mecca of capitalism? But maybe she hasn't always been the rich princess that she is dressed up as. She was actually, a while ago, the poor girl with a troubled childhood (the decades of Mao rule), who has now come back into riches. And yet worried if this is just her Cinderella moment. Will her chariot turn into a pumpkin? Don't grudge her this moment. Allow her to revel in it and indulge in the occasional excess and flaunting. She will also learn to deal with wealth...and maybe teach all others too.

Inquisitive but shy, seeking friends but socially awkward

She is inquisitive and seeking new friends. Everywhere we went, there were scores of domestic Chinese tourists (mostly from the Chinese interiors) wanting to take snaps with us. It was like many of them have for long lived confined to their own towns and are now out to explore the sights and the new faces and 'foreign' people. It's pretty much what China is doing. Stepping out into the world, forging new diplomatic relations, seeking new friendships and joining the global party. And yet, with the social graces (awkwardness) of a new, unaccustomed guest foisted into a party where everybody else is a party veteran and already knows each other. And China's loud entry and disregard for the supposed party-hosts is making things uncomfortable.

Her house, her rules

She is the come-of-age young adult who is now running her own home. And hates having a mother-in-law (read: the U.S.) or a whole family of uncles and aunts-in-law to lecture her on how to run her home. She wants to do it her own way and maybe make her own mistakes and learn from it. China is experimenting with its own political and economic systems. From Mao to Deng to the current regime, China has undergone a series of transitions. While Mao continues to live on China's currency notes, hang on the walls at Tiananmen Square and have paeans sung for him, the current leadership couldn't be any further away from him. Yes, there yet isn't elective democracy in China. But as we Aspen Fellows discussed this, it was all too apparent that it is elective democracy that in the US gave two terms to a recent past US President (who has no shortage of critics that question his leadership values) and in India props up several political leaders about whom the less said the better. As I read Hu Jintao's speech given on the 90th Anniversary of the Communist Party of China in July 2011, laying out his vision and direction for China, I couldn't think of a single contemporary politician in *democratic* India who has espoused such a comprehensive and clear vision for our country.

Amoral existence in a spiritual vacuum

Amongst all my take-aways about this mysterious young girl, the one that stood out the most is that she has grown up in and continues to live her life in a spiritual vacuum. The many years of cultural purge by Mao and the suppression of any mass religious activity (seen as a potential threat to political systems) by succeeding leaderships has led to generations of Chinese growing up in this cultural and spiritual vacuum. This, juxtaposed with rapid financial (GDP) growth with its obvious benefits, has led to monetary pursuits becoming the only goal. In turn, that has led to the advent of mindless materialism and pursuit of self-interest, with little shared understanding of right and wrong. And yet, just as she was starting to enjoy all this material gain and doing whatever she thinks is in her self-interest, she is now being lectured by others and being told this is not the way to behave. So she cannot understand what is wrong. And the others can't understand why she behaves this way.

During our conversations with some of the more progressive Chinese liberals, they spoke of the dawning realisation of this vacuum. And of the concerted effort by these liberals to now coerce Chinese society towards building a cultural and spiritual ethos. But that's the one thing that even the Chinese can't buy nor build at the speed with which they build highways and buildings. It's been purged for several generations. It will now take a few generations to rebuild. And as an Indian, after all the comparisons between our economies, cities, productivity et al, this was one comparison I could take solace from.

I came back from China understanding this mysterious, young girl a little better. And yet, not fully so. I shall continue to watch her grow in amazement and awe and with a keen interest in what choices she makes and the concern for how that affects the rest of us.

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¹ AGLN: Aspen Global Leadership Network

² LVs: Louis Vuitton bags (Duh!)