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Rediscovering China

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Rediscovering China
Dynamics and Dilemmas of Reform

Cheng Li

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*Dedicated to
Peter Bird Martin*

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FOREWORD

A. Doak Barnett

This is an extraordinary and in many respects unique book by a remarkable Chinese scholar. Cheng Li (or, in Chinese, Li ChengLi is his surname) has written a revealing and compelling profile of a rapidly changing China during 1993-95, two years of China's reform era a watershed period during which China has been undergoing a far-reaching economic, social, and political transformation.

The book is based on the author's intensive, on-the-spot travel, observation, interviewing, and research in China, made possible by a fellowship from the United States-based Institute of Current World Affairs. This institute has, over many years, given a small group of carefully chosen fellows unparalleled opportunities to study and write about selected foreign countries, offering them unusual freedom to decide what is important to study but also requiring them to demonstrate discipline and responsibility by effectively analyzing and writing about what they have learned. Several institute fellows have been given the opportunity to study and write about China in the past. (As an institute fellow, I myself wrote about China during another watershed period, 1947-49). However, Cheng Li was the first Chinese citizen chosen for an institute fellowship that enabled him to return to study his home country.

Cheng Li was remarkably well qualified to make good use of this opportunity. Both his early experiences in China always challenging and sometimes traumatic and his exceptional educational experiences in the United States provided him with an unusual variety of perspectives from which to understand, compare, judge, and attempt to bridge differences between two countries, eras, cultures, and societies.

Born in Shanghai in the late 1950s, he grew up in the era of Mao Zedong and still has vivid memories of the chaotic tumult of the Cultural Revolution, when both his father, a one-time industrialist, and his elder brother, a student at Shanghai's leading university, Fudan, were sent to remote areas where his brother met a violent death. Cheng Li's early education was truncated and disrupted, but when opportunities for higher education opened up in the post-Mao period, he grasped them. He first enrolled in a three-year medical training program at the Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, and after receiving a medical degree in 1979, he spent several years practicing medicine. But finding this unsatisfying, he decided to change his field and career, and he enrolled in the East China Normal University, also in Shanghai, where in 1985 he received a B.A. degree. His major in English language and literature (he wrote an honors thesis on two well-known women writers, one Chinese, one British) greatly broadened his view of the world and honed his knowledge of the English language. When in 1985 he was offered an opportunity to take graduate work in the United States at the University of California at Berkeley, he seized it. This proved to be an important turning point in his life and career, leading him to study political science, with a special focus on China, and to acquire the skills and credentials necessary for an academic career, which started in the United States.

Since 1985, Cheng Li has been based in the United States, working as a student and scholar. In 1987, after receiving an M.A. in Asian studies from Berkeley, he moved to Princeton University, where he spent the next four years in advanced graduate study in the field of political science, receiving a second M.A. in 1987 and his Ph.D. in 1992. (His Princeton dissertation was on the rise of technocracy in post-Mao China.) Since 1991 he has been a member of the faculty of Hamilton College.

Since starting his scholarly career in the United States, he has authored or coauthored more than a dozen book chapters and journal articles, which have been published in journals such as the *China Quarterly*, *Asian Survey*, and *World Politics*. While the main focus of this scholarly work has been on Chinese government and politics, his study of China's political situation and economy has been broad, and he has developed wide-ranging intellectual interests in Western thought and society through a voracious reading of Western social science writings. Along the way, he has achieved an impressive mastery of the English language, including an ability to write felicitously as well as clearly.

During his two years in China as a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Cheng Li wrote 30 fascinating *ICWA Letters*, each of which dealt with an important aspect of the historic transformation now

taking place in China. These reports skillfully combine scholarly analysis and journalistic reportage. When I read them, as they were being written, I judged them to be far more perceptive, revealing, and illuminating about the important trends than most other writings about contemporary China, either by scholars or journalists.

Cheng Li's book is based on these *ICWA Letters*. Each chapter focuses on particular developments that he believes rightly, in my view to be of crucial importance to an understanding of both the dynamics driving the changes that are now rapidly remaking China and the problems resulting from rapid change that have created great challenges, and dilemmas, for the future.

The author's descriptions of places and his profiles of people bring to life China in the mid-1990s, and he was able to give a human face to the facts and figures in the book. His scholarship and his ability through interviewing and observation to gather large amounts of up-to-date and relevant data provided him with a strong basis for understanding and evaluating situations and trends. His past experiences, wide personal contacts, and linguistic skills permitted him to probe below the surface appearance of things and to learn about changes in thinking, values, and human relationships. In virtually every chapter, he provides both useful historical background and comparisons between China and other countries that add meaning to his discussions of contemporary developments in China.

Cheng Li traveled widely, but he devoted special attention to the lower Yangtze River valley—the dragon that winds through central China—and its dragon head, Shanghai—the most important economic center in the country and Cheng Li's hometown. In most of the past decade and a half of rapid development in China, a large percentage of Western writing on China's reform, opening to the outside world, and rapid economic growth has focused on coastal China, especially Guangdong Province, adjacent to Hong Kong. The picture that this book presents of the extraordinary boom that has been modernizing the Yangtze Valley and coastal areas linked to Shanghai will be an eye-opening one for most Westerners. Cheng Li is well aware of the differences between this region and more remote interior areas of China. But much of what he says in the book is relevant, in varying degrees as the author intended it to be to trends and problems in the country as a whole.

After spending eight years in the United States, a Chinese scholar such as Cheng Li, still a citizen of the People's Republic of China, obviously faced

special challenges when he returned to his homeland, to try to understand, analyze, and write about the great changes that had taken place