

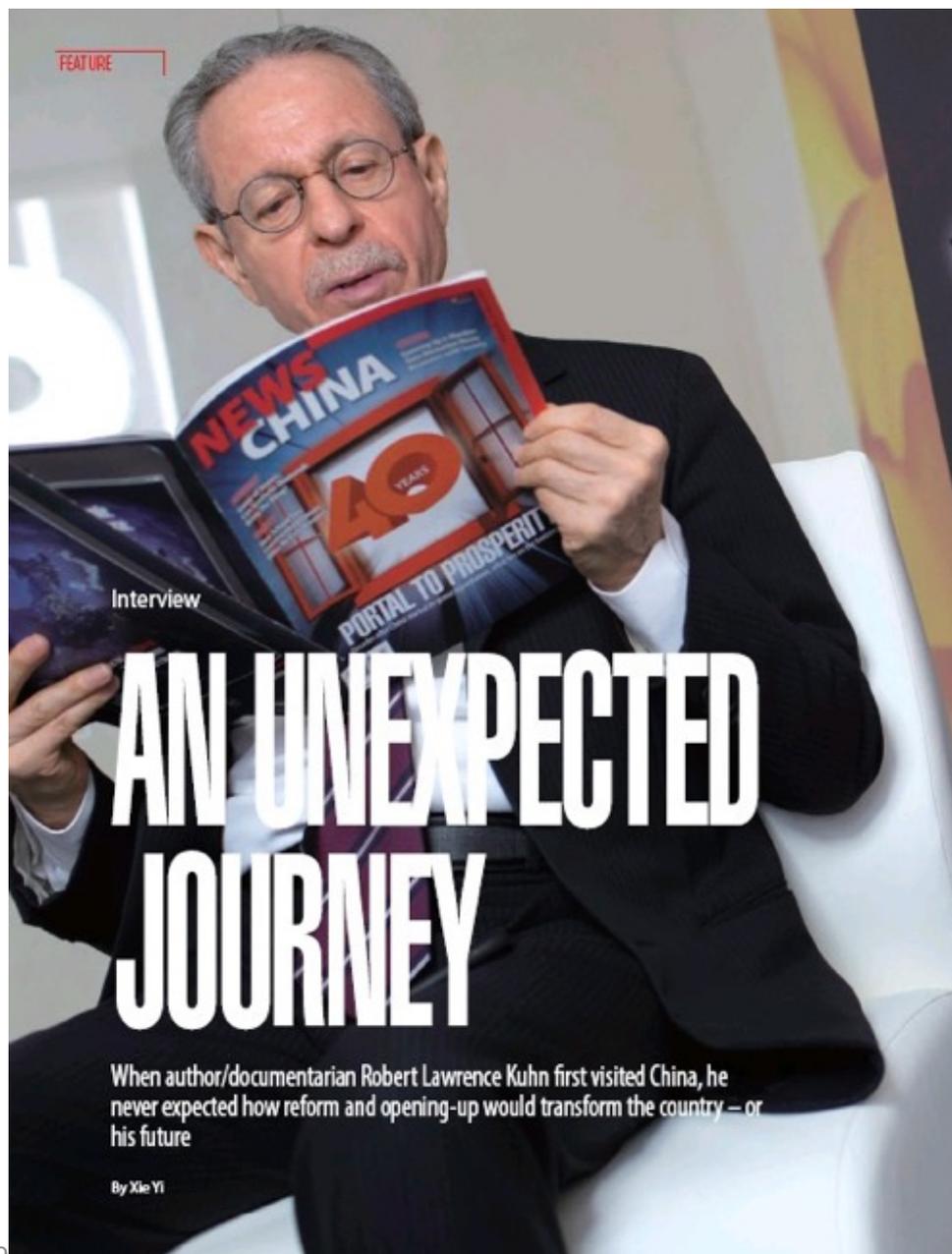
NEWS CHINA

An Unexpected Journey

When author/documentarian Robert Lawrence Kuhn first visited China, he never expected how reform and opening-up would transform the country – or his future

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I played table tennis last night for two hours," Robert Lawrence Kuhn said on a sunny, but still chilly, Saturday afternoon near the end of January. The 74-year-old had been interested in table tennis when he was young and later picked it up again during his years in China. "Now I play table tennis very hard two or three times a week." He was sitting in the NewsChina studio in midtown Manhattan, sipping a cup of "re shui" (hot water), another habit he developed in China. "It's definitely much healthier for you," he said.

It's been almost two months since his return from China – on December 18, Kuhn was among 10 foreigners awarded the China Reform Friendship Medal at a ceremony in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing for his role in propelling China's economic and diplomatic growth over the last four decades. Of the 10 people selected, only five are still living. Kuhn, "an international friend who tells the story of contemporary China to the world," was one of two Americans awarded.

"It's a great privilege," Kuhn said about receiving the medal, the highest honor bestowed to non-citizens, which China calls international friends. "' Pengyou' (friend) is a great word. It's the first Chinese word I learned many years ago."

For Kuhn, the medal was not so much a personal honor as evidence as to how seriously China takes engaging with the world.

"China wants to tell its real story – in its richness, in its complexity and in its dynamism, and in its changes. International communications has become an essential part of China's most comprehensive strategy."

A native New Yorker, Kuhn is familiar to those who pay attention to China-US relations. As a China expert and veteran commentator, Kuhn has reported assiduously on various aspects of the country and its people to the world. But Kuhn is also an investment banker, scientist and business strategist, to name a few. His different professions have given him rich insight into the drastic changes in China over the years since its reform and opening-up.

Three decades ago, before Kuhn first came to China, he had no idea about what would happen in the country and how it would change the rest of the world – and him.

In January 1989, Song Jian, director of the State Science and Technology Commission, invited Kuhn to advise Chinese research institutions on how to integrate into the market economy. Kuhn, who had already built careers in the US mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and corporate strategy sectors, considers Song his mentor. During Kuhn's trips to China, he visits Song to pay his respects and to discuss matters in science and current affairs.

Kuhn said he was hooked on China from the moment he arrived. "The Chinese had a fresh, if naïve, enthusiasm; they were eager to learn, and ready to improve their civic and material lives," Kuhn recalled. Despite the backward economy and impoverished conditions, he had a feeling that China's economics, politics, society and culture would soon come to matter a great deal to the world.

During that trip, he also developed a meaningful friendship with his assigned translator Adam Zhu. The two first bonded over table tennis and Peking opera. They both shared an interest in challenges, taking risks and China's future.

Kuhn recalled how during his visit, Chinese officials had arranged for them to see a Peking opera performance. Kuhn told Zhu he wanted to play table tennis instead. When Zhu declined his request, Kuhn offered a tongue-in-cheek retort: "We're here to talk about entrepreneurship in China. Entrepreneurship means doing things differently and taking risks. If you don't help me, there is no hope for your country, because you don't want to take a risk." Kuhn got his way. "We enjoyed ourselves very much that day," he said.

The hospitality of the Chinese people and their willingness to take risks when necessary left Kuhn impressed. "This individual had the guts and the vision to help me do something that I wanted to do even though it was against the rules," Kuhn said. "Now Adam Zhu is my partner in China." In Zhu, Kuhn said he saw the collective quality of Chinese people that could lead the country to greatness.

That trip had a profound effect on him. In the early 1990s, Kuhn frequently traveled to China to learn and to lecture in his "vacations." "At that time, I just enjoyed experiencing the richness of China." Excited and inspired, Kuhn was eager to share what was happening there with people at home, but no one believed him. Kuhn said people in the US believed that Chinese people were still wearing Mao suits and stuck in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). "That frustrated me," Kuhn said. Out of this pure frustration and with a passion to tell the world what was truly going on in the country, Kuhn decided to make a documentary about China. He had no idea that this would take his life along a different path.

In 1997, Kuhn started a co-production with China Central Television (CCTV) to examine China's journey toward a market economy. It took almost three years to complete. When it aired on CCTV in 1999 and on PBS in the US in September 2000, the project not only won him critical acclaim, but brought something he had not expected. "Suddenly people thought I was kind of an expert at international communications," he said.

Naturally, one project led to another. "The more I learned about China, the more I became an expert on what was happening in China," Kuhn said. Before long, international media began reaching out to him for commentaries. In 2001, Kuhn sold his M&A business in the US and shifted his focus to China, telling the world what he was seeing through interviews and making China-themed TV programs and documentaries.

In order to truly understand China and its development, Kuhn has visited China about 200 times, taking every opportunity to speak with officials, scholars, farmers, students, scientists, grass-roots Party cadres, migrant workers and other groups. From those experiences, "I found great intellectual excitement and personal energy," Kuhn said.

But when asked about what he thought were the most significant changes since reform and opening-up started, Kuhn did not have a quick answer. "The changes in China were so many and so deep," he said.

Not only had he witnessed China transform from an underdeveloped country into the world's second-largest economy and enable more than 700 million people to lift themselves out of extreme poverty, but also its increasing engagement with the world. "Now every important global event involves China," Kuhn said. "The more China participates in the shared responsibility for world peace and prosperity, the more China will be appreciated."

Kuhn said two great examples are the Belt and Road Initiative, a grand project aiming to promote development through infrastructure and cooperation through trade, and China's contributions to the United Nations, with peacekeepers as well as funding, to safeguard world peace.

"China's transformation is unprecedented in world history and for three decades I am privileged to have borne witness," Kuhn said.

Kuhn highlights his meeting in 2006 with Xi Jinping, at that time Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, who advised him that in order to understand China properly, one must appreciate China horizontally across its diverse geographies and longitudinally across its distinct time periods.

Now Kuhn visits China six to seven times a year for about three weeks at a time to work on various projects, such as most recently, a documentary about China's targeted poverty alleviation efforts. To better understand the subject, he traveled to many places, including remote mountainous areas to observe the collective relocation of rural villages in Guizhou Province and poverty alleviation programs carried out by "five levels" of Party organizations in Shanxi Province.

However, Kuhn's close work with government officials on various levels drew scrutiny from critics. Some called his work biased and accused him of representing the Chinese government.

But that doesn't bother him much. As a seasoned commentator and shrewd businessman, Kuhn is skilled at seizing opportunities in adverse circumstances. "When to tell a story is as important as how to tell a story," he said, adding that being the center of controversy is the best time to speak because others are paying attention. "When somebody punches you, you have the opportunity to punch back," Kuhn said, flashing a smile. "There is no sense to tell a story if nobody listens. When people listen, you may not like the context, but that is when you tell the story."

Even in China, some officials told him that they didn't always agree with his opinions. But Kuhn continued to deliver commentaries and present stories from his personal perspective, "Although of course I want China as a country to succeed, I don't consider myself pro or con about specific China-related issues or problems; I just want to find and speak the truth, however complex the reality and however imperfect my perceptions."

What concerned Kuhn was how to tell real stories about China with depth and breadth. "If you are worried about what others may think about what you say, you will be holding back," he said.

To do what he thought was right to do takes guts. "If it's too hot in the kitchen, you shouldn't be a cook."

Kuhn just celebrated the 30th anniversary of his first trip to China this month. After three decades of observing, experiencing, commentating and storytelling, Kuhn has become an expert with profound insights and independent judgment on China-related issues.

The timing is also special for China as it reaches its 40-year milestone of its reform and opening-up, strives for economic development and becomes more involved in the international community.

To do so, Kuhn pointed out that China must adapt to its strengthened position and assume more international responsibilities. "Because the future, not just of China and Chinese people, but the future of all nations and all peoples, to no small degree, depends on how China handles its position in the world."

Kuhn's life experiences coincided with countless key events in China's reform and opening-up. When looking back on the unexpected journey he began three decades ago, Kuhn said he had never planned on becoming a China expert nor did he expect China to become so important so rapidly. "If I said that back then, it would sound today like I'm very smart, even prescient. But I would also be lying."

But there is one thing that Kuhn, at that point, was already sure of and still believes: the profound impact of the reform and opening up on China's and the world's economic dynamism and social development. "When historians of the future write the chronicles of our times, a highlight is sure to be China's remarkable 40 years of reform and opening-up."