

## Reflections on 30 years in China

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By Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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Robert Lawrence Kuhn, host and writer of "Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty". At the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up (December 2018), Dr. Kuhn was awarded the China Reform Friendship Medal.

When China celebrated the 40th anniversary of reform and opening-up in December 2018, I was about to celebrate the 30th anniversary of my first coming to China in January 1989. The invitation had come from Dr. Song Jian, chairman of the State Science and Technology Commission, who asked several American investment bankers familiar with science (my PhD was in brain research) to advise Chinese research institutes in adapting to the market economy. Dr. Song is an inspiration; I am privileged to continue to visit him, discussing basic science and world affairs.

I was hooked from the moment I arrived. The Chinese had a fresh, if naïve, enthusiasm; they were eager to learn, and ready to improve their civic and material lives. I knew then that China's culture, history, economics and politics would soon come to matter a great deal to the world. What I did not know then was how much China would come to matter to me.

On that first trip, I was assigned a guide, an energetic 23-year-old who, as fate would have it, would become my political, business and media partner, now in its 31st year. To describe all the challenges that Adam Zhu and I have faced since 1989 would require a

book not an essay. We are committed to China and its future — to help in our small way China's historic reform and development; to tell the true story of China to the world.

Over these three decades I have met and interviewed hundreds of Chinese from all walks and levels of life: leaders and officials, intellectuals and executives, workers and migrant workers, farmers and peasants, students and soldiers. I have learned from them all and I am honored to be in trust of their memories and views.

We appreciate the past in order to anticipate the future. When New China was founded in 1949, its economy was very weak. In 1952, China's GDP was only 68 billion yuan, less than 1% of world GDP. In 2019, China's GDP is projected to be over \$14 trillion, more than 15% of world GDP. In nominal terms, China has the second largest economy in the world. In Purchasing Power Parity terms, China's economy is already the largest. China's 40 years since the beginning of reform and opening up has witnessed the greatest economic transformation in human history.

What driving principles have enabled China's economic miracle? Here are five (there are more). A people who work long and hard to improve the lives of their families and the destiny of their country. A system that encourages economic freedom and enforces political stability. A vision that sets long-term goals, mid-term objectives, and short-term policies that are monitored and modified continuously. A way of thinking that experiments and tests before implementing and rolling out. A willingness to admit and correct errors.

My writing the biography of former President Jiang Zemin, published in 2005 (a four-year project), enabled me to learn contemporary Chinese history and explain to foreign readers its sweep and struggles: Japanese invasion and oppression; revolution and founding of New China; mass movements and ideological battles; reform and opening up, its beginning and challenges; Socialist Market Economy; China's entry into the WTO; modernization of the CPC; and China's increasing engagement with the international community.

With China engaging more in global markets and world affairs, I am also dealing more with political matters, giving commentaries and interviews on China-related matters and China-U.S. relations on U.S. media.

China's success has not been linear. There have been twists and turns, challenges and troubles, mistakes and errors. Success is enabled by facing challenges and troubles and by learning from mistakes and errors.

I try to tell the truth about China: I do not ignore China's mistakes and errors or whitewash China's problems, historically or currently. A true friend tells the truth, even if it is not always pleasant to hear. And the truth, especially in politics, is rarely simple.

Here's what is simple: China's greatest accomplishment is still underappreciated — poverty alleviation. China has brought over 750 million people out of poverty, the greatest developmental success story in human history. It is the China story that must be told.

China's first national goal is to realize a "moderately prosperous society" by 2020 and President Xi Jinping asserts that China cannot do so if any of its citizens live below the line of absolute poverty. When Xi became China's senior leader in late 2012, there were still about 100 million Chinese who were intractably poor.

In 2013, Xi proposed the concept of "targeted" poverty alleviation, meaning individualized programs for each poor family. "We should mobilize the energies of our whole Party, our whole country, and our whole society," Xi said.

Those who may assume that President Xi's primary purpose is political power, economic domination and military expansion may be surprised to learn that he considers poverty alleviation to be his most important task. Traveling the country, I experienced first-hand

the impact of his statement: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." (Has any other national leader made such a statement?)

The success of China's targeted poverty alleviation campaign, bringing 10 to 14 million people per year out of absolute poverty, depends on strict, quantitative and transparent methods. It defines absolute poverty using annual income, but also includes tests of adequate healthcare, education and sanitation, like flush toilets.

Five methods of poverty alleviation are used: industry, creating a sustainable micro-business; relocating, moving people from remote areas; education and training; ecological compensation; and social security for those who cannot work. Every impoverished household is guaranteed help and every village has designated officials to carry out targeted measures.

Five levels of local Party secretaries coordinate their roles – provincial, municipal, county, township, village. Third-party evaluations are conducted regularly and randomly to ensure accuracy and honesty.

As much as I thought I knew China, I was still surprised by what I found: every poor family has its own file, each with its own targeted plan to lift each out of absolute poverty – that's millions of poor families with customized plans, each monitored regularly and reported centrally. I witnessed a "democratic evaluation" in a remote village, where villagers voted into poverty status one young man whose father had cancer, and cheered when another was raised out of poverty.

Equally startling, local officials are dispatched to impoverished villages to manage poverty alleviation, often for two years. Party officials fighting poverty cannot be promoted unless and until they fulfill their specific, numeric poverty alleviation goals. Officials know that their careers prosper or falter based on results. I watched local officials being held accountable, their careers at stake.

In my 30 years of telling the story of China to the world, I believe China's targeted poverty alleviation is the single most powerful story to undermine biases and change people's perceptions. (Making the documentary wasn't easy: the poorest areas, for weeks at a time; summer, winter, the heat, the cold. Twice I got sick.)

Recognizing China's unprecedented poverty-alleviation success means also recognizing its causal relationship to China's system of strong, command-down government. While all political systems have trade-offs, without such authority, China could not reach its poverty-alleviation goals.

When historians of the future write the chronicles of our times, a feature may well be China's targeted poverty alleviation.

Looking ahead to China 2050, to the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (2049), when the country seeks to become a fully modernized socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful, the world is watching. So am I.

*Robert Lawrence Kuhn is host and writer of "Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty" (Adam Zhu, executive producer; Peter Getzels, director). At the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up (December 2018), Dr. Kuhn was awarded the China Reform Friendship Medal. The medal honors 10 foreigners over the four decades; five are living, Dr. Kuhn is one of two Americans.*

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