



Chinese leader Jiang Zemin's economic legacy

Interview

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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THE WORLD HOST MARCO WERMAN: A former leader of China died today in Shanghai. Jiang Zemin came to power in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest. He remained at the helm for 13 years, ushering in an era of extraordinary economic growth in China. At the same time, he ensured that the Chinese Communist Party would retain absolute political power. the world. Jiang Zemin was 96.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn met Jiang Zemin many times. Kuhn is the author of *The Man Who Changed China the Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin*.

Robert, takes us back to that moment when Jiang Zemin was anointed leader of China's Communist Party. Early 1990s. Where was China at economically and politically?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: China was going backwards, significantly. There were sanctions in the world, condemnations; uncertainty within China. Jiang Zemin at the time was the Party Secretary of Shanghai and was planning on going into retirement. He looked forward to being a professor. And then the call came from Deng Xiaoping, and it totally transformed China.

THE WORLD HOST: As you say, after Tiananmen Square, Beijing was scorned internationally, became a global poster child for attacks on civil liberties. And there's that photo of Tankman showing Chinese desire for freedom. How did Jiang Zemin go about trying to fix that and achieve stability and prosperity?

KUHN: When Jiang became into office with all the turmoil, he told his closest personal friend, who told me, he said, "My head is spinning — I don't know what I'm doing here. So, during this time, he was under pressure from conservative leaders to move the country back to — not the Cultural Revolution, I'm not saying that — but to a statist approach to government.

And then — give Deng Xiaoping the credit — because in early 1992 — so it's like two and a half years later after Jiang was appointed — Deng made his famous *Nanxun*, which means a sort of a southern trip in which he, without any power whatsoever, started to talk about reform. And [Deng] said, "Anybody who doesn't do reform should be removed from office."

So, at the end of that six-week period, Jiang made a decision that we're going to go with Deng and we're going to start reform. And that was Jiang's natural predilection anyway. And that began the whole process.

THE WORLD HOST: And in radically changing China's economy, pushing for reforms and entry into the World Trade Organization, Jiang Zemin also had a serious impact on the global economy, right?

KUHN: Oh, for sure. Americans don't realize that our standard of living — even though there are great problems that the US has with China — that our standard of living has been enhanced, all of us, every one of us, by our economic relationship with China. We get better quality products at lower prices. We can buy more of it because of the diligence and commitment of Chinese workers who labored long and hard in the early days of reform. Jiang's era was transformational.

THE WORLD HOST: How well do you think other countries understood at the time the impact that China's economic change would have on them?

KUHN: When I began going to China, which was in 1990, everybody in the world thought China was a basket case. I had a very close business associate who said to me, "Robert, you're wasting your time in China because China won't mean anything for the world for a thousand years, not 100 years, but 1000 years!" And if you talk to any of the senior people in China, nobody had any expectation that they would have anything like what has happened during their lifetime. But you can look at every economic trend and you could trace its origin to the period of time that Jiang Zemin was leader.

THE WORLD HOST: And now, 30 years later, the global economy in many ways is reliant on China. Just going to any box store here in the United States. Is that a scenario that causes regret or misgivings?

KUHN: Other than climate change, the biggest problem today is global inequality and poverty. China has been by far the world leader in this [poverty alleviation]; one could say 800, 850,000,000 people in China were brought out of extreme poverty. The first 700 million of them were brought about, beginning with Jiang and Hu Jintao, just by simple economic development; they didn't have to have an anti-poverty campaign.

From Jiang Zemin's point of view, one of his greatest transformative acts was to transform the Communist Party itself. It was done through something called the "Three Represents," which sounds banal on its surface, but underneath it basically enabled entrepreneurs — the personification of capitalism — to join the Communist Party and to become full-fledged members of society. That move really enabled the entire private sector to grow with respectability and great strength.

THE WORLD HOST: Robert, you met Jiang Zemin many times. Is there a personal note about him, something that stood out for you about the man?

KUHN: Look, I'd say he was an effervescent, normal human being who was a great Chinese patriot, a staunch believer in the Party. He was a very young man, in his late teens and early 20s, during the Civil War and the revolution. And that fervency of that revolution stayed with him his whole life. But he recognized reality.

At the beginning of his term, he had heard some entrepreneurs making money by setting up the business stands in Beijing. And he got very angry and he said, "This is undermining the ideology of the Party. They're all going to be thrown out." And they were. Then about eight, nine years later, he came over to a senior minister who is a very close friend of mine, and said this. He said, "Minister So- and-So, I

have to apologize to you and to the country for what I did. At that point, I didn't understand economics, I didn't understand business.” He said, “I'm a patriot, I love China — and I'm an engineer, and I know what works. When the boiler in my factory where I worked didn't work, I knew I had to fix it. There was no ideology involved. And so I understand that the market economy is critical for China.”

Now, that didn't undermine his view of the primacy and sole leadership of the Party, but it did enable him to make decisions that would be lasting and enable China to have the great transformation it did.

I call it the greatest transformation in history by the largest population on earth.

THE WORLD HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn is the author of *The Man Who Changed China the Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin*. Thank you very much for joining us for this conversation, Robert.

KUHN: It's a pleasure.

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