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IS CHINA FALLING APART?

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On 1 October 1949 Mao proclaimed the People's Republic of China. On Tiananmen Square that day was Li Shenzhi, together with tens of thousand of other young, idealistic and excited Communists. "China", wrote Li when later he was to describe this day, "had said farewell forever to the past ... to backwardness, to poverty and to ignorance, and had set out on a completely new road, to liberty, equality and fraternity". But this is not how it turned out. "The nearly thirty years of the People's Republic up to 1976 could thus be said to have been a reign of terror", wrote Li Shenzhi in 1999 – 50 years after the establishment of the People's Republic.¹

In the attack on the rightist dissidents initiated by Mao after a few years in power, Li was accused of belonging to this group. And it got worse later. When the revolution celebrated its 10th anniversary Li, who later for some time functioned as adviser to Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, had been sent to a labour camp for retraining. However, not until he heard Mao say about himself that he was China's first emperor Qin Shiuang (a cruel character) and Karl Marx in one person did Li understand that the statement by Lord Acton that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" also applied to Mao, China's last emperor.

Furthermore, Li argues that even if Deng implemented successful economic reforms and allowed greater freedom of speech, the ideology was the same. Li characterizes Deng's use of raw power against the demonstrators on the 4th of June 1989 as an unforgivable crime.

In connection with the celebration of the 50th anniversary for the establishment of Mao's China the falsification of history reaches a new climax. Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who worked hard to correct the mistakes made during Mao's rule, are not even mentioned, says Li Shenzhi. "All that remains in this version of history is lies", Li Shenzhi concludes.

This is quite unbelievable – that a country in the year 2012 keeps its history from its inhabitants, the authorities lying to their people. I have experienced this myself when talking to young Chinese. Most of them have no knowledge whatsoever about China under Mao. When after some years abroad they acquire this knowledge, some become speechless and embarrassed whilst others get angry and denying. Moreover, most Chinese have no insight into or knowledge of Chinese history after Deng, such as the Democracy Wall movement in 1978 – 1979, the student revolts in 1986 and 1989 and the attempt to establish the Chinese Democratic Party in 1997 – 1998.

In the film "The Truman Show" Jim Carrey becomes a TV star without knowing it. Under an enormous linen cloth blown up as a bubble of a half-moon the producer of a TV show has created a "make-believe town" inhabited by decent, kind and nice people. They are all actors who have been well informed about what is going on. In addition we meet Truman Burbank played by Jim Carrey, who knows absolutely nothing about the situation. The fundamental idea of the TV show is to follow all of Truman by means of thousands of hidden cameras. This is a reality show without the star knowing anything about it. Little by little Truman becomes suspicious and wants to find out what is going on. Finally, the truth dawns on him. With the words "In case I don't see you, ... good afternoon, good evening and good night", he cuts through the linen cloth and steps into the real world.

Why does this film come to mind during my work on a paper where the issue of whether or not China is falling apart is the central theme? Because China in many ways is a “make-believe country” where realities are concealed, and where stories told to the people are not true. The authorities pretend that the country has a constitution that is complied with. They pretend that the citizens have some inviolable rights. They pretend that the country is under the rule of law. But everybody knows that this is not true. Are ideas entertained that “something” or “someone” will cut through everything? Is there reason to believe – or fear – that China will disintegrate some day?

What would Deng Xiaoping have said?

Deng Xiaoping wanted no flirting with democracy and no division of power into a legislative, an executive and a judicial branch. What mattered was the Leninist model where everyone obeys the ruling elite of the Party. This is called democratic centralism, but it has little to do with democracy in the sense of representative government, where elected politicians are responsible to those by whom they were elected.

Li Shenzhi characterized Deng’s use of raw power against the demonstrators on 4 June 1989 as an unforgivable crime. Deng’s rationale for his brutal behavior was to draw the line. Domestic stability, that provides a predictable and stable framework for economic activity, was given top priority. The purpose was to restore China’s position in the world through economic growth for the happiness and pride of the Chinese people.

The demands put forward by students and little by little also by workers during the spring of 1989 focused on three issues: reduction of the rate of inflation, removal of corruption, and introduction of democracy. The people wanted honesty and increased transparency in politics.

At the close of the 1980’s *inflation* in China amounted to more than 20 per cent during certain periods. In recent years the inflation rate has been just a few per cent. However, as the year 2011 progressed, following the enormous credit expansion that was enacted to counter the financial crisis of 2008 – 2009, the inflation rate rose to a level of more than 6 per cent. And even more serious: for food it was more than 20 per cent during certain periods. Poor people spend a much larger share of their income on food than do the rich. The distributive effects of inflation contribute to intensifying the trend of increasing economic differences that have long existed in China.

The widespread *corruption*, particularly among cadres in the Party that are in a situation where power can be transformed into money, contributes to steadily increasing economic differences. The dilemma is the same now as then. If it is not possible to do away with corruption, China will fall apart. However, getting rid of corruption requires that the Chinese Communist Party relinquish its monopoly on power. Not until alternatives are established, through the alternation of power between political parties, will it be possible to establish a system of checks and balances that will reduce corruption.

A system of political alternatives, where the people themselves decide who is to govern, is called *democracy*. One of the pillars of a healthy democracy is the division of power into three branches: a parliament that passes laws, a government vested with the day-to-day executive power, and a legal system with a judicial power that also makes sure that the government and the parliament adhere to the law. In an open society we characterize the press

or the media as the fourth power of state. A free press contributes to transparency in society and forces the politicians to accept responsibility for their actions towards the people they govern.

The press and the media are gaining increased influence in China. Many matters come to the attention of the people and the central authorities through exposure in the media. Today, the Internet is the best weapon available to a Chinese who wants to stand up for his rights. The censorship is milder towards the Internet than towards traditional media.

Twitter, with widespread and increasing distribution, is regarded as a type of private communication channel. This gives more room for publishing personal opinions. Many members of the Chinese intellectual elite use Twitter actively and have support groups there.

Deng saw it as important to have a system that was capable of taking action quickly. He did not like the US system with “three governments”, viz. the Congress, the President and the Supreme Court. Deng Xiaoping argued that at China’s economic level one could not afford this kind of inefficiency.

But what would he have said now, considering China’s current economic level? In only a few years the gross domestic product will surpass that of the USA. And when the economic subculture changes, there is a need for change in the political super-culture as well. That is good Marxism. It is a fact that the economic subculture has changed since Deng passed away. So what would Deng have said? Perhaps he would have agreed with Wen Jiabao?

Wen Jiabao’s dream

The demands put forward by the students on Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 have not been properly dealt with. The situation is rather that China has developed a “make-believe society”. One pretends that everything is in order. Only it is not. The whole thing culminates in Jiang Zemin’s theory about “The three represents” that paved the way for allowing business people to become members of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus the dictatorship of the proletariat had come to an end in a formal sense, too. The rich, the powerful and the talented unite against the rest. Business people (the rich) buy advantages for themselves by corrupting cadres and local party leaders (the powerful) at the same time as the intellectuals (the talented) on the whole keep peace and stick to their own activities.

Confucius, the sage, whom today’s Chinese leaders like to refer to, would not have applauded. It is the duty of the intellectuals to oppose established authority if the latter do not keep their part of the deal by ruling the country in a just manner. An emperor who does not deliver will lose his “mandate from Heaven” to rule. This is exactly what the current leaders of China fear more than anything: will the legitimacy of the regime fall apart and will the Party be deprived of its mandate to rule?²

But not all intellectuals keep their mouths shut. He Qinglian, in her book *The Pitfalls of Modernization* from 1998, characterizes China as a country moving in the direction of a system jointly ruled by the Government and the mafia. She describes it as “systematic corruption”, and she accuses those who work on economic reforms of a lack of moral responsibility. In a programme on Chinese TV she cited Marx in support of her view, that

China had become a class society. And she maintained that Jiang Zemin's idea of "The three represents" was a model for enriching the privileged.³

The book she wrote sold three million copies before the authorities managed to ban it. So much for freedom of speech in the "make-believe society". In 2001, after seven months in prison, He Qinglian went to live in exile in the USA.

In the same way as He Qinglian stands more or less alone among the intellectuals, but far from all alone, Wen Jiabao has rather few supporters among the powerful. The Prime Minister of China has repeatedly spoken up for the introduction of democracy. Only to be met with resounding silence.

There are three central elements in Wen's proposal:⁴ Firstly, allow democratic elections, which today take place at village level, at the next two levels – village and municipality. One should notice that free elections in this context do not mean the establishment of political parties. Representatives are elected as individuals – not as members of any party competing with the Communist Party. Secondly, an independent legal system should be established to check the Government. Thirdly, free media and a free press should be allowed.

The second element of Wen's plan, an independent legal system, is the most explosive part of the proposal. In a state governed by law, a party cannot be allowed to stand above the law. Thus, a state governed by law is in conflict with the one-party state. Should Wen gain support for his plan, it might be the beginning of the end of the current regime in China. Wen Jiabao, one could say, would like to place the interests of the country before those of the Party.

Whilst Prime Minister Wen Jiabao is interested in establishing an independent legal system, the President of the Supreme Court, Wang Shengjun, seems to have a somewhat more relaxed attitude to this problem. To him it is more important that the legal system ensures stability and a harmonious society rather than strengthening the rule of law in China.⁵

Riots and unrest

In 2010 an average of almost 500 riots or disturbances took place every day in China. With a little more than 250 Chinese for each Norwegian the corresponding figure in Norway would be two. How many crowds and riots do we have in Norway today? Not two per day but perhaps two per month? Probably one in front of the Israeli Embassy and one in front of the Parliament building. In addition we have torchlight processions in connection with the closing down of local maternity units and the relocation of public hospitals.

There are three main causes of such riots in China: growing irritation concerning pollution and environmental damage, widespread corruption, and the authorities' confiscation of land from farmers. A fourth topic of demonstrations and riots is the fluctuations in housing prices. Demonstrations take place both in connection with abrupt price reductions and large price rises.

In 2004 a law was introduced in China that gives the central authorities the right to expropriate land provided that the farmer who is deprived of his basis of existence receives compensation for his loss. Such re-regulation of land, however, has taken place since the

reorganization of the economic policy in China was started under Deng. Since 1978 a total of 40 – 50 million farmers have experienced this.

Since the individual farmer does not own the land but only has a right of use of up to 30 years, he is in a rather weak position when he is deprived of the land. The compensation is based on the proceeds from the land as farmland, and not on the value of the land for other uses. Based on the value the land may have for industrial or housing developments the farmer will perhaps receive 10 per cent, the village that owns the land collectively will receive 10 – 20 per cent, and the small town that constitutes the administrative unit above the village will receive 20 – 30 per cent.

The greatest piece of the pie goes to the business people responsible for the development projects.⁶ For many small towns the money collected in connection with new use of land represents an important source of income. New uses of land also constitute a reliable source of income for local party leaders. In such transactions corruption is often an integrated element.

Other circumstances that may cause great excitement comprise a health service that does not work, substantial pollution, increasing inflation and earned wages that are not paid out.

In Norway, riots on the scale experienced by China would be regarded as a problem that would have to be solved – and it would be important to identify the fundamental conditions at the bottom of such riots, and how structures could be changed and measures implemented to remove the causes of the riots. In China, however, the attitude is different. Here it is a matter of *dealing with* angry crowds rather than implementing political measures that would strike at the root of evil.

Little by little Chinese authorities have gained good experience in dealing with unrest. To begin with demonstrations are allowed to take place and perhaps grow. Often, the authorities in Beijing express their sympathy with the protesters. The locale cadres are blamed. At the same time local authorities try to find out who the leaders behind the riots are. Later, when the unrest is over and the authorities have perhaps to some extent met the claims set forth by the demonstrators, the leaders are arrested. Should demonstrations get out of control and become too violent, the authorities will take control of what might be reported in the media. Usually this type of dealing with the situation works. Most people still have faith in the central authorities.

One pretends that the country is a state under the rule of law, but that is not the case.

Since the legal system functions poorly and since complaints to local authorities are rarely met by success, riots and disturbances are what people often choose. Demonstrations that result in desired changes encourage more of the same. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao argues that China has to move in the direction of a state based on the rule of law characterized by predictability and equal treatment of people, and where the individual may take the initiative to remedy what he or she experiences as unfair treatment.

During the last four years up to 2010 the number of riots in China more than doubled. And this was even in a period with solid economic growth. The notion that stability in China only depends on sufficiently strong economic growth is too simple. The distribution of output is not without importance, nor is the way in which the increased production is generated.

In 2010, for the first time, the appropriations by the authorities for domestic security were greater than the appropriations to the armed forces.⁷ Dealing with riots and demonstrations is expensive. The costs here are probably just the tip of the iceberg. A one-party state with declining legitimacy, which is apparent from increasingly strict censorship and less tolerance to criticism, is expensive to run.

The right of ownership to the land

A system where each individual farmer owns the land he lives off would weaken much of the basis for riots and demonstrations. Why, then, is the right of ownership to the land not returned to the farmers?

In the spring of 2006 this almost happened. But at the end of the process the conservative and traditional Communists of the Party and the new left joined forces against this proposal. What would be left of the Communist ideology if the state or the village community were no longer the owners of the land – the fundamental means of production? And what about the local leaders of the Communist Party if their opportunity of enriching themselves in connection with changes in the use of land were to disappear? Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao had neither the courage nor the power to force their proposal through. And the farmer remained without property.

In the following year a diluted act relating to real property was introduced. This act opened up for a system under which the individual farmer might rent land for a period of up to 30 years, and with the opportunity of subletting the land within this framework. This was intended to provide possibilities for bigger and more efficient farms, without having a class of wealthy landowners emerging over time.

A rebalancing of China's economy is clearly needed. Demand must be based on increased domestic consumption rather than on real investment and exports. A redistribution of wealth and income to people who are badly off, and who want to spend more money, is necessary.

“The land to tiller” is a very old slogan. The farmer himself should own the land he cultivates. That would stimulate long-term investments to increase the proceeds from the land, as well as farmers' income and consumption. China would increasingly be producing for the domestic market. In a macroeconomic perspective the conditions are now favourable for reconsidering the idea from 2006 of allowing the farmer to own the land he cultivates.

But there is also a danger here. Many farmers may yield to the temptation of selling the family silver and live in a fool's paradise after which they will end up in the cities as unemployed, landless people. The tendency towards increased slum areas in big Chinese cities may gain further speed. Moreover, the transfer of the right of ownership to the land to the individual farmer must take place in a peaceful manner, and there will obviously be a need for a modernized legal system to resolve disputes.

A development towards increased purchasing power for ordinary workers is already underway. China will move upwards in the value chain and produce more sophisticated industrial goods. An increased growth in wages and salaries will push this development through. The five-year plans for 2011 – 2015 are based on an annual growth in wages and

salaries of 12 – 15 per cent. The workers' purchasing power is set to increase. The new slogan – including growth – will be realized.

A successful turn away from exports and real investments to domestic consumption will result in increased production in the services sector. Such production is work-intensive and will contribute to keeping unemployment down.

The popular movements in Eastern Europe

Why have the democracy movements in China not succeeded in the same way as similar movements in Eastern Europe through Solidarity in Poland and Charta-77 in Czechoslovakia? The answer is that in China the democracy movements have been too weak and fragmented. Intellectuals have not been able to team up with workers and farmers. It has not been possible to develop a vision of a broad movement and gather support for such a movement. Mao had an advantage here – the utopian, communist society, which for Mao, to be sure, was only an idealized image he presented. The reality was political power growing out of the barrel of a gun.

Lech Walesa and his Solidarity were able to offer a unifying vision based on a solid set of values. The movement was firmly rooted in the Roman-Catholic Church, and the fact that the Pope was a Pole – visiting Poland – was of course also an advantage. Solidarity was able to focus on something outside the movement itself, something greater than itself; a whole the individual might let him/herself be absorbed by, a community that the individual might become part of. This provided a framework for what was needed, what had to be done, and for what was right and wrong.

In China there is no alternative ideology permeating the people. All the players, including the students in 1989, based their actions on the Marxist system of concepts and pictures of the world. There is no unifying religion. Confucianism is rather a set of rules as to how people should behave towards one another in a more practical sense in order to create a stable and harmonious society. This philosophy does not provide any recipe as to how to overthrow the established system.

The absence of institutions covering several social strata – intellectuals ready for change, landless farmers, exploited workers, self-employed persons (a group that emerged little by little) and impatient students – was the reason why the democracy movement in China at the end of the 1980's was rather weak. Even though the 4th of June 1989 was dramatic and cruel, there was never any risk that the established system would be overthrown. No unified and bonded opposition existed, nor any unifying and charismatic leader. There were feeble signs of cooperation between students and workers, but no firmness and driving force.

Since 1989 the Party has continuously been on the watch against anything that might develop into a nationwide and well-organized movement with a clear message that might kindle the masses. This was lacking in 1989, and thus gave the authorities a relatively free hand.

The reason why Jiang Zemin in 1999 looked upon Falun Gong as so dangerous was that this quasi-religious movement had much of what the students in 1989 lacked – a nationwide organization, a message people could believe in and devote themselves to, a charismatic leader and a broad, popular appeal. Jiang was particularly shocked when he realized that quite

a few cadres in the Party were also part of Falun Gong. Chinese politicians know their history: they know that several dynasties were overthrown because of religious movements.

Unrest on the outskirts of the Middle Kingdom

Beijing is struggling to maintain order on the outskirts of the realm. The Buddhist monks in Tibet – which has status as an autonomous region in China, with somewhat more self-government than the provinces – recur as opposition activists against Beijing. The provinces bordering on Tibet also have many Tibetan inhabitants.

Furthermore, the Uighurs in Xinjiang, and enormous area north of Tibet also cause worry for China's leaders. On the whole, the Uighurs are Muslim immigrants who arrived many hundred years ago. In Inner Mongolia, too, which is situated east of Xinjiang and borders on Mongolia, discontent has recently come to the surface. With its rich deposits of natural gas, coal and rare minerals this region is of great economic and strategic importance to China.

A common factor for Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia is the attempts by the central authorities to integrate them in China by letting a constantly increasing number of Han Chinese settle down in these autonomous regions. This is combined with large investments to boost the economy. Many Chinese believe that Uighurs, Tibetans, and currently also Mongolians, are ungrateful. They believe Beijing is spending large sums of money to help the population – and what do they get in return? Ungratefulness, riots and unrest.

China falls apart – but in a peaceful manner

It should not be ruled out that the one-party state that China now is, might fall apart in a peaceful manner. If so the experiences from Taiwan are interesting. In the same way as Mainland China under Mao, Taiwan under Chiang-Kai Shek was a one-party state. When in 1975 Chiang-Kai Shek died, his son, Chiang Ching-kuo succeeded him as leader of the ruling Kuomintang party and thus as the leader of the country. The son saw the light. He threw himself into the breach for democracy. The level of tolerance in the party went up, the press was given more leeway, and in connection with local elections other parties were little by little given the right to participate.

In 1988 the full step was taken. Taiwan got its first elected president. Naturally, he was from Kuomintang, but a few years later the opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party, won. The president then elected chose a harder line in relation to China. Thus, when Ma Ying-jeou from Kuomintang won the 2008 election, Hu Jiantao heaved a sigh of relief. The tension across the Taiwan Strait eased noticeably. Mr. Ma's re-election in 2012 was likewise met with delight.

“My enemy's enemy is my friend” is an old saying. This is not the case here. The enemy party of Kuomintang is not the friend of Communist China. It is Kuomintang itself, the party founded and led by Chiang-Kai Shek, Mao's worst rival that is the friend of Mainland China. The irony is there for whoever wants to see it.

For China, a peaceful development towards democracy may take place if the three requirements put forth by Wen Jiabao are complied with. To begin with, democratic, personal

elections in small cities and municipalities may take place without a multi-party system. His second requirement, however – the establishment of an independent legal system will imply that the power monopoly of the Party is broken. In the next turn this will make possible the emergence of other parties. One way of organizing this is to allow fractions of the Communist Party to leave the Party to appear as separate parties. Wen's last requirement – giving the media greater independence – will force the politicians to accept responsibility in a different way than now.

A China with a well-informed population will also have to go through the painful process of facing its own history. Or in the words of the well-known Chinese writer Murong Xuecun in an interview with the leading Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten: “Young Chinese today know nothing about what happened in 1989. For a long time I believed that the famine in the 1950's was due to a natural disaster. Not until recently did I learn that it was largely caused by inadequate policies”.⁸

China falls apart – with a bang

The conditions for a peaceful transition to democracy in China are not the best. The risk that this one-party state will fall apart with a bang obviously exists. The Chinese are not adequately protected by institutions and laws. The civilian society is not particularly well developed. Why? Because the Party sees any other large-scale organization as a threat against itself.

In troubled times the leadership also becomes troubled. Will we be able to retain the power? “China's leaders face a troubling paradox. The more developed and prosperous the country becomes, the more insecure and threatened they feel”, says Professor Susan L. Shirk, who knows a lot about China.⁹

What will it take for a new revolution or abrupt upheaval in China to materialize?

Sudden upheavals may be caused by internal forces, by the established machinery of power. A struggle for power within the Party, behind closed doors may result in new fractions taking control the way it happened in the Soviet Union in 1964 when Kosygin and Brezhnev seized the power from Khrushchev. For Khrushchev the defeat in connection with the Cuba Crisis the previous year was a contributory cause of his fall.

Or the people rise in rebellion. Corruption may be the factor that makes workers and farmers unite. Or comprehensive pollution that affects a large number of people, or an epidemic like SARS that China experienced in 2003, when the authorities at first denied it. Or unrest and revolt in Tibet or Xinjiang due to conflicts related to ethnicity.

The one thing that all these potential scenarios have in common is that a sufficient number of people say that enough is enough, and that they do so at the same time, that they draw the conclusion that they are tired of the “make-believe society”, where the truth is concealed, where the differences are constantly increasing, where the censorship is constantly becoming stronger, and where predictability is constantly deteriorating – in spite of the authorities' assertions to the contrary.

If domestic unrest and discontent were to create problems of stability in China, the authorities might be tempted to play the nationalistic card and put the blame on other countries to create solidarity in their own country. Actually, there are more cards in this deck.

The Party may order the generals to attack Taiwan: “Patience has run out with this island that is a part of China but refuses to accept it”. Or the Chinese navy may start maneuvers in the South-China Sea, or even board other countries’ ships or occupy disputed groups of islands. Or China may start a quarrel with India and demand that disputed areas on the border between the two countries, presently owned by India, must be demilitarized and returned to China. Or similarly, China might turn on Vietnam with military threats.

In a situation like this the USA will have to watch its steps and not be tempted to embark on a military adventure that will only contribute to a strengthening of nationalistic currents and forces in China, thus strengthening the regime. The USA – and the rest of the world – should rather try to make sure that the power in China is passed on to democratic forces that in turn may create a better China for the Chinese and a peaceful world for all of us.

¹ See *From Comrade to Citizen. The Struggle for Political Rights in China*, page 158 – 160, by Merle Goldman, Harvard University Press, 2005. The note written by Li Shenzhi was published on the Internet without Li’s approval.

² Believing in a “mandate from heaven” is not compatible with Communist ideology. Yet many people with power believe in it, and that they have such a mandate themselves.

³ Source: Goldman (2005), page 122-127.

⁴ The description here is built on the article “How will China become ‘democratic’?” by Yawei Liu, Carter Centre, September 3rd 2011.

⁵ Willy Lam, 25 March 2011, “Beijing’s Blueprint for Tackling Mass Incidents and Social Management”, *The Jamestown Foundation: China Brief 11*, page 5. Furthermore, the President of the Supreme Court of China, Wang Shengjun, recommends to his younger colleagues that they follow the central leadership in CCP under Hu Jintao “and raise high the great flag of Chinese socialism”.

⁶ See page 15 in “Social Conflict in Rural China”, by Yu Jianrong, *China Security*, vol 3 No 2, 2007.

⁷ “Who knows what our national security people do with so much information? Perhaps if the size of our national security apparatus continues to expand, it may ask all policemen on the streets to record every word uttered by pedestrians,” wrote Liu Di, a well-known cyber-dissident, on the web in 2002. Cheerfully and sarcastically, and a little like the dissidents in Eastern Europe a few decades earlier (Merle 2005, page 193).

⁸ The Aftenposten 18 November 2011.

⁹ See page 5 in her book *China. Fragile Superpower*. Oxford University Press, 2007. Susan Shirk speaks Chinese. She visited China as a student as early as 1971, when she met Zhou Enlai. Later she has been part of American delegations, e.g. in connection with the negotiations on China’s entry into the WTO.

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