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ICWA LETTERS

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Behind the Smile

— Guizhou's Reaction to the Chinese Embassy Bombing —

"Mr. President, is there anything else behind your smile?"

*—question posed to President Clinton by a Beijing
University student during Clinton's July 1998 visit to China*

GUIZHOU, China

May 1999

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Dear Peter,

It was like something out of a Hong Kong gangster movie. When I awoke in my Guiyang hotel room, a note had been slipped under the door: "Urgent. Call me at 9:00 a.m. on my beeper number 126343434 — Mr. Chen." Only a few people knew I was in Guiyang and no one that I could recall named Chen. Clueless but curious, I called the number.

"Mr. Chen?"

"Yes. Do you have any time today?" replied a deep, shadowy voice.

"I've got a full day, but if there is some urgent matter I can make time in the early afternoon."

"Meet me at the coffee shop at 1:00 p.m."

"Uh, excuse me, I have a number of friends with the last name Chen and I cannot place your voice. Who are you?"

"You'll find out when we meet. Don't tell anyone about this."

I immediately walked down to the hotel's front desk and put a trace on the call. Turns out, the staff said, Mr. Chen was a senior-level manager in the hotel. At least that is what they thought.¹

At 1:00 p.m. I took the elevator up to the coffee shop. There in the far corner of the empty restaurant with his back to the wall, a well-dressed, middle-aged

¹ "Mr. Chen" never revealed his organization but I suspect he was from the state security apparatus.

man sat reading a Chinese copy of *"Golf Digest"* magazine, slowly stirring a cup of coffee.

Nervous and in a low voice, Mr. Chen repeatedly waved his hand and reminded me not to tell anyone about our conversation.

"You are a very special [*teshu*] person. We know that," Mr. Chen said, looking into my eyes. "We are a special [*teshu*] organization. You do not know us."

"Actually, I am quite a normal person with a very special [*teshu*] opportunity," I quipped, baffled but calm. "I am a fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs." I continued by describing Charles Crane's vision, ICWA's history and what I am learning in Guizhou, sprinkling the conversation with names of several heavyweights in Guizhou politics — supporters of mine — just in case he did not already know.

I approached the unusual meeting by refusing to play the secrecy game.

"So indeed, the opportunity I have had with ICWA is quite special. There's just one thing: I refuse to have anything to do with organizations that are not above board. That's a personal principle as well as a requirement of my institute. I'm just here trying to understand China's interior and doing my best to attract friends and organizations to Guizhou that I think may help the province. Do you see any problem with that?"

"No, no, no. You keep doing your research. That's fine."

At some point during our two-hour conversation — I am still not quite sure why he wanted to meet — I learned that Chen was a former fighter pilot in the Chinese Air Force.

"What do you think about the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade?" I asked, relishing the opportunity to pose this question to a bomber pilot from Guizhou. "Was it intentional?"

With utmost seriousness, Chen leaned toward me and said, "No question about it, the U.S. intended to strike the embassy. The U.S. government, or at least a faction within the government, wants to destabilize China."

"From what it looks to me, the bombing has done the reverse: it's galvanized China."

"In the short term, you are right: it looks like Clinton has helped Jiang Zemin unify the country around a distraction during a difficult year. But in the longer term this incident could severely destabilize China."

"But isn't stability in China and Asia in America's interest as well? Why would the U.S. want to destabilize China? After all, the world's economies are increasingly

integrated. Stability in Asia is good for the United States."

"But not a growing, more powerful China," Chen maintained.

"Still, I just can't see it. Though I find it hard to believe a mistake like this could happen, I cannot accept that the U.S. would do this deliberately. I believe this was simply but very tragically, an accident."

We moved on to another topic.

Though a bizarre encounter, the mystery pilot is just one of dozens of Guizhou residents I have spoken with about NATO's May 8th bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. The bombing seems to have slapped each person I spoke to in the face — even out here in southwest China's backwater.

Besides a handful of westerners living in the province, Guizhou has few solid symbols of the United States. There are no McDonald's, Pizza Huts or Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants and certainly no U.S.-government offices. Even so, the spontaneity and depth of reaction among the average person on the streets as well as the reach of the government's extensive propaganda machine have provided an unusual opportunity to plumb the depths of the Chinese mind. As with most foreign-policy crises, domestic responses show as much or more about a country and people as does the crisis itself.

AS WE SAW IT

"Americans are evil," a woman cursed me as we approached the taxi line at the Guiyang airport on Sunday morning, May 9, the day after the bombing. As you'll recall, Peter, that weekend I had been traveling with you and your wife Lu, and we had heard only briefly and without detail about the embassy bombing. The woman's angry comment made us immediately aware that something was very wrong.

"How do you know I'm evil? We've just met," I said, awkwardly attempting to defuse her anger.

"You bombed our Embassy and killed our people."

Uh oh, I thought to myself, and decided it would be best to say nothing.

Our taxi driver was less emotional. He told us what had happened: three dead, more than 20 injured. When I asked him to take us to the train station so we could purchase tickets for the four-hour journey from Guiyang to Duyun the following morning, he said, "That's not a good idea, there are a lot of people protesting around the train station. I don't want to insert you three into the middle of that."

We changed route and headed directly toward our ho-

tel, a quiet, riverside guesthouse in Guiyang's university district on the outskirts of the city.

As our taxi neared the university area, traffic was backed up, clogged by thousands of student protesters. We should have known. After a few minutes, traffic began to proceed, but slowly. Our taxi eventually crawled alongside the protesters, keeping even with the students as they marched in the road's emergency lane, holding bright red flags and poster-size signs.

Now just an arm's length from our window, students pumped their fists toward the sky. "Down with American Imperialism!" they chanted.

I slumped a bit in my seat, hoping to escape their notice. Fortunately, they seemed too engrossed to examine the contents of the parade of cars that crept along beside them.

A student leader, marching in front of one of the battalions, referred to a 3-by-5 card as if it was a cue sheet, and let out with a shout: "Down with NATO hegemony!"

"Down with NATO hegemony!" the echo returned.

In form, the students' parade — they walked in a disciplined, four-to-a-row column — looked much like a high school marching band on Independence Day in small-town America. But instead of a banner out in front naming the high school, *this* assembly's standard read, in large characters, "Strongly Support our Government's Correct Policy." Instead of a baton-wielding bandleader, the school president led the way.

The experience was surreal. It all seemed a strange mix of China's long legacy of student protest: the May Fourth Movement of 1919, Anti-Japanese student protests in the 1930s, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and the demonstrations of Spring 1989.

But this time it was 1999 and I was in the middle of it. Photographs from modern Chinese history books were now living pictures, proceeding right before my eyes, and in Guizhou Province of all places.

How do they know to pump their fists that way? I wondered. How do they know how to chant back and forth with the student leader? It's all part of what it means to be a university student in China, I concluded. To become protesters overnight, without a dress rehearsal, the students must have seen some of the same history textbook pictures I had seen. It couldn't have hurt that they had just celebrated the 80th Anniversary of the May Fourth Movement.

AND THE REST OF GUIZHOU PROVINCE

Demonstrations in Guizhou's capital, Guiyang, lasted just two days. On Monday, May 10, people went back to class and work. In cities and towns outside the capital, the reaction was less dramatic but equally profound.

One good friend in Duyun, where we live, told me, "Make sure the people who read your reports know that even way out here in the small cities of China's hinterland, in areas of the country they may have never even heard of, we are shocked and deeply hurt by the bombing." This friend told me that up until the bombing he had had tremendous respect for the United States and its values as a nation. Now he did not know what to think.

The most public protest in Duyun was a procession of about 30 three-wheel motorized pedicabs. Single file, they paraded slowly down the city's mainstreet, holding signs in protest. Other than that, people's reactions have been largely personal. But whether public or private, one common theme ties all the responses together: everyone believes the bombing was deliberate.²

The average man and woman on the street in Guizhou cannot accept anything else. They are certain. So the issue becomes not was the bombing deliberate or not, but *why* would the U.S. government intentionally strike at China?

A businessman I sat with on a train in western Guizhou offered this explanation: "The U.S. was trying to test China's strength, to see how we would reply as a nation. If our government did not vigorously respond the U.S. could further confirm that it stands alone as the world's dominant superpower."

A county leader in Zunyi proudly, but with a hint of insecurity, boasted to me, "Americans underestimate the strength of the Chinese people's feelings [*minzu ganqing*] in our strong reaction to the bombing."

A young man gave me a very different reason why he believed the attack was deliberate, "I'm sure the U.S. struck the Chinese Embassy as a punishment and warning to our government for supporting Yugoslavia's government. We were probably selling weapons to the Serbs. The U.S. would not have bombed the embassy just for the heck of it. That's what my friends and I believe."

From on the ground in Guizhou, it is not difficult to understand why the people believe that the U.S. intended to strike and kill or why they are genuinely enraged. How else should one feel when the odds of one in a billion actually happens?

Never mind that high-tech weaponry, no matter how

² The sentiment is shared nationwide. A survey of 816 Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou residents, conducted by Beijing-based Horizon Research several days after the bombing, reported that 89.6 per cent of the people interviewed believed the attack was deliberate (Agence France-Presse, 13 May 1999).

advanced, remains as capable of mistakes as the humans that input the information. Most Chinese overestimate western technology.

Never mind that a half-dozen ambassadors' residents and other civilian targets were mistakenly hit as well. Most Chinese heard nothing of those errors.

Never mind that Chinese citizens heard little about the plight of the one-million-plus refugees from Kosovo. Prior to the embassy bombing, all that the media showed was the Chinese government's daily berating of NATO's involvement in Yugoslavia as an infringement of the country's territorial integrity. If innocent lives were lost, it was portrayed as cold-blooded and deliberate hegemonic action. Remember: Only a very, very small number of Chinese have access to CNN. The wick was firmly set in the keg of gunpowder weeks before the guided missiles ever struck the Chinese embassy.

When the fuse was lit, the Chinese spirit ignited. Already tender from a long memory of real and imagined historical grievances of foreign aggression, the Chinese psyche got whacked again.

Why else would another man's first response to my question about the bombing be to complain that China has gotten kicked around for too long? "Look," he said, "We invented gunpowder but it ended up getting used on us in the Opium War. Why are we always the victim?"

Why else has one of the most commonly repeated phrases since the bombing been "The Chinese people will never be bullied."

TRUE COLORS

Nationalistic sentiment creates a complicated relationship between the people and the views of their government toward the bombing. The corollary is that any government or leader not strong enough to stand up to the world is in danger of losing their job. Get tough or get out. And a vote is not required for your removal, either. Read the history books: Every Chinese regime in the 20th century, except the Communists, so far, has fallen in part due to the perception from its own people that it did not do enough to resist foreign insults or injury.

Maybe that's why, after the bombing, the government at all levels, from Beijing to Duyun, was so lightning quick to get off the mark and out in front of the protesters and the nation. Maybe that explains the vitriolic rhetoric in the government-controlled press. In this way, Chinese politics is not much different than vote-getting in the U.S.: both spin issues for their constituents' consumption — those who enable them to remain in power.

And so it was. Even down to the township level in

Guizhou Province, meetings of all government and social organizations were called to denounce the bombing and to study important speeches.

The newspaper in Liupanshui, Guizhou's westernmost region, reported the proceedings of the district's Communist Party meeting to discuss the bombing. "The barbaric bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia by the U.S.-led NATO forces presents us with three revelations: First, western enemies who desire to eliminate us will never die; we need to remain alert. Second, all of the U.S. so-called human rights, democracy, freedom, and humanitarianism, ... it's all fake, it's all empty. So-called U.S. human rights is actually hegemonism; under the banner of human rights they violate the rights of all. And finally, weakness is the way to remain beaten down. The Chinese people will not be bullied. The only the way to protect ourselves is to grow stronger, to construct our country and build the capacities of our nation."³

In Guizhou's southeastern region, the front page of the May 11th *Qiannan Daily* presented 13 separate paragraphs reporting the meetings of local government and social organizations. From post-office workers to the local education commission, all were reported to have met to discuss and condemn the "barbaric, criminal" bombing. In true pile-on fashion, the government at every level showed its colors.

PEOPLE'S RAGE

To focus too much on the government response to the bombing, however, would be to miss the significance beyond the bluster: the people's outrage was genuine and far-reaching — all the way to the streets of small-town Guizhou. The people's anger should not be underestimated; it should be understood.

Sure, the government manipulated people's emotions through media reports and by orchestrating demonstrations. But that does not mean the people's rage is insincere. Chinese people are more attuned to the nuance of events than most in the West realize. Though their information sources are not nearly as diverse as those in more open countries, they've been reading the tea leaves of Chinese-government rhetoric for decades.

As they look out to the world, the Chinese are increasingly influenced by nationalism. Long gone is the era when communism defined what it meant to be Chinese. And fading are the days when impressive economic growth provided a self-satisfying aura of greatness. The Chinese identity is increasingly informed by nationalism — that powerful yet unpredictable combination of pride and insecurity that lies just beneath the surface of one's consciousness.

As a foundation of the people's response to the bomb-

³ *Liupanshui Daily*, 24 May 1999.

ing, nationalism has also played an important role in causing the Chinese to question their views of America. While some used to wonder what lay behind Clinton's smile, many now think they know: laser-guided missiles.

Like the tanks of Tiananmen Square, indelible images of an embassy bombed to rubble and the ashes of three journalists being carried off the airplane in urns will most likely harden many Chinese people's images of the U.S. And the thing about images is that they are like wet cement: once dry, they are difficult to recast.

While nationalism influences the way Chinese view the world, the aroused "feelings of the Chinese people" may impact the way they view themselves and their government as well. That's the double-edged sword of nationalism. Once the force is uncorked, it is not always easy to stuff it back in the bottle.

That is the lesson of the May Fourth Movement. What began on 4 May 1919 as a student response to a foreign grievance (the Treaty transferred Germany's rights in Shandong Province to Japan instead of restoring them to China) the movement is remembered best for its far-reaching criticism of everything that was perceived as out-of-date and out-of-touch in China. The May Fourth Movement quickly became a stump for debate on the future of the troubled nation.

Certainly, 1999 is very different than 1919, but given the rift between old and new in China today, concern about the country's future and its place in the world, there may be more parallels than we realize.

Whether the tragic events of the embassy bombing remain only a painful scratch on the Chinese nationalist-laden psyche or begin to hemorrhage may only be known

decades from now when we can see China's present evolution in perspective.

* * * * *

At his final briefing in Beijing on June 15, out-going U.S. Ambassador James Sasser — himself a "hostage" for several days after the bombing — said that while the U.S.-China relationship has been superficially damaged, the structure is sound.

Indeed, webs of relationships that crisscross almost every sector between China and the U.S. have formed fabric between the two countries that is stronger than ever. In 1989, for example, U.S. business had invested U.S.\$1.7 billion in China; today, ten years later, that figure has jumped to U.S.\$21 billion. But the networks stretch way beyond business. Ten years ago, most of Guizhou was closed to Americans. Today, as an ICWA fellow, I live in Guizhou and frequently travel to places that have never seen an American, much less spoken with one. Cultural, educational, and government exchanges, plus the innumerable personal relationships that have resulted have greatly improved occasion for mutual understanding. But they don't guarantee it.

On the popular level, it is as important as ever to increase and strengthen exchange — even between places like Guizhou and West Virginia. Now, it is as important ever that people step forward and toward each other, not turn inward and hostile. It is at times like these that it is important to continue to talk to each other. Tragedy always presents an opportunity for deeper communication.

On the official level, neither China bashers in Washington nor retrograde nationalists in Beijing should be allowed to decide in how the bombing affects the relationship between the United States and China.

The Chinese word for 'crisis' is composed of two characters: 'danger' and 'opportunity.' The bombing's crisis has provided danger to the relationship, that is clear. At the same time, it has provided opportunity for Beijing and Washington to reassess their relationship and move toward a more realistic and mature relationship that works toward the best interest of both countries.

If Doak Barnett were still with us, I imagine he would admonish Beijing and Washington with the same words *The Economist* reported he used with a Clinton adviser who paid a visit at the hospital where Doak was receiving treatment. What to do about China's theft of America's nuclear secrets, the adviser asked? Doak's reply: "Stay cool."

Sincerely,



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