

Buffoons, donkeys and little men

Letter from China

ROSS TERRILL

Good news for Australia in Beijing this week, if a mild setback for Kiwis. In the twelve months to February 2018, 1.39 million mainland Chinese visited Australia, beating New Zealand for the first time. 10-year visas helped, as did allowing applications in Chinese. My hotelier friends in Melbourne should watch out for their sheets and pillows.

China's playing catch-up over Korea. Japan, with less urgency and more dignity, is doing the same. Stars in the drama, it's hard to believe, are two 'buffoons' despised by fancy thinkers in every continent: Trump, a businessman with zero political experience before reaching the Oval Office. Kim, a rough playboy whose only card is Nukes. Yet both amateurs are more interesting and for a moment maybe more important than any pair of politicians in the world. In Dalian with Xi Jinping last week, Kim said that as threats recede 'there is no need for the DPRK to be a nuclear state.' Xi commended Kim for shifting the North's 'strategic focus to economic construction' and encouraged him to focus on 'improving people's livelihood'. If Kim does what he vowed in Dalian, NK and the US could become virtual allies, Kim's eyes would gleam at the prospect of prosperity and reduction in Chinese domination, and Trump's hand in Asia would strengthen. If Kim backs down, his days are numbered, he stays in the Chinese box, and the process of Korean unification will begin. Isn't One Korea just as legitimate as One China?

Sometimes in Beijing if something doesn't happen online, it doesn't seem to happen. An American in Utah wore a Chinese traditional *qipao* for her graduation with a photo to prove it. 'My Culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress' snarled a fragile Chinese boy. 'Cultural appropriation' fumed a girl in Wuhan. To its credit an influential Chinese online paper took the American's side: 'We live in a globalised world. If a US female is criticised for wearing *qipao*, what about the

Chinese white-collar workers who wear suits and ties in the office every day?'

I have to brush up on Karl Marx, whose 200th anniversary just came. Yes, Deng buried him here in 1981, but whatever. My days of learning Communist politics at Melbourne University from Lloyd Churchward, a member of the Australian Communist Party, are long past. But Xi Jinping called the dour German the greatest philosopher in human history. Even the *Global Times* merely said Marx was numero uno 'in the history of the West'. Back in Trier, where Marx grew up, claims were modest. He was 'one of the greatest sons of the [small] city,' said its mayor, receiving a statue of the Communist by a Chinese sculptor. 'This is a gift of friendship which we receive from China, rather than a political statement.' A German bystander conceded that Marx 'changed the world in the 19th century.' His last appearance was the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Actually, Xi is not a leftist, nor a new Mao, two theories that swirl around a man with no theory. His preoccupation is to correct, or go beyond, Deng. It's hard for any foreigner to discern the real motivations among politicians of another country. Chinese are amazed that Abbott and Turnbull fight like cats within their own party. Clinton spent nine days in China in 1998, because Nixon had spent only eight in 1972. Australians seldom grasped LBJ's deep hatred for the Kennedys. But reading scores of Xi's speeches and listening to intellectuals in his circle, I believe Xi Jinping's chief calculation is centered not on Mao, let alone Marx, but on Deng. His political eye is local. Granite-faced Deng had the purely negative aim of pulling off Maoist shackles. Bulky, beaming Xi wants happiness for all.

A spat over labels and names – pearls of great price to Chinese – reveals a nagging asymmetry in the Beijing-Washington duel. 'Certain foreign airlines,' 36 in all, refer to Hong Kong

wrongly, says the Civil Aviation Administration of China. 'They say "Hong Kong",' but that part of China is really 'The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China'. Pilots would be half way to Bangkok before they could land at that mouthful.

Ask Asian students the difference between Japan's 1940s 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere' and China's current 'Belt and Road Initiative.' Bright ones will say Japan used military methods and China so far hasn't - despite its high ambition to link Muslim Central Asia to Europe. That's just method; what about aim? The two seem comparable; the aim is to lead the Lesser Countries of Asia into China's (or Japan's) happy embrace. The other day in Tokyo, Chinese premier Li Keqiang called on Japan 'to align its development strategies with the Belt and Road Initiative'. China's grandly taking the lead. Why should Japan decline? For exactly the same reason as Beijing wants it to accept. In the leadership stakes for Asia, Tokyo prefers Japan-made; China likes its Middle Kingdom brand. Li in Tokyo gave urgent praise to 'regional integration'. Gareth Evans used to sing this song, but John Howard correctly saw Australia as both less and more than a regional power. By linking the US alliance with an excellent relationship with China, Howard went beyond Keating's mantra of 'joining Asia'. Asia's value to the 21st century lies in trading with the entire world. Not wishing to be another EU. Nor under Uncle Sam's shadow like Latin America. Preferring limits to the reach of both China and Japan.

China is Number One in the world race for a supercomputer, it claims. It will be 10 times faster than the current quickest one. But don't forget the donkey. Boiled donkey-skin produces *ejiao*, a prized medicine for menopause. However, China's donkey population fell from 9.4 million in 1996 to 4.6 million in 2016, as farmers left for cities. Many imported foreign donkeys began to arrive after a 2-day trek across Kyrgyzstan.

Beyond donkeys, Chinese customs officials endure a surge of imports of live spiders, snakes, scorpions, and tortoises. They are posted to China in packages, destined to be pets for the lonely wealthy.

I paid my hotel bill in 100-yuan notes, paid to me for some university lectures. Said the young staff lady in Chinese: 'Only a little man pays in cash.' Really? 'Yes, most just wave their phone. I thought you'd be a big man.' Well, one day.

Ross Terrill's books include 'The New Chinese Empire' 'Mao' & 'Madame Mao'