

Remarks by Peter Larson

Founding President, CCFS(O)

On the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the founding of CCFS(O)

Ottawa, December 1, 2016

- I have been asked to say a few words about the early years of the CCFS in Ottawa, which my wife Lorraine and I helped create in 1976.
- Back in 1976, Canada had had diplomatic relations with China for 6 years
- But lots of people were still very uncomfortable with it.
- Remember, it was the height of the cold war. China was a communist country and many Canadians were very fearful of communism taking over the world, including Canada.
- Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, had opposed establishing diplomatic ties, despite the fact that it had been his government that had opened up wheat sales to China in the late '50's.
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- To most Canadians, the Russian variety of communism was seen to be very bad. The Chinese variety even worse.
- I remember seeing a joke in Readers Digest at the time. It said:
"Communism is taking over the world. The optimists are learning Russian. The pessimists are learning Chinese".
- At the time we created the CCFS (O), there was a nervousness about China and very little information.
 - very few Canadians had visited China.
 - The Chinese language was a big mystery, totally unintelligible to us.
 - There was no internet at the time. No email. No wechat. No videos about China.
 - John Burns of the Globe and Mail was the only Canadian journalist in China for many years.
- So, despite the official relations between our countries, there was little information and few Canadians knew much about China.

- But because it was the cold war, most of the information we did get about China was negative.
 - It was poor.
 - It had too many people.
 - There was no democracy.
 - Mao was an unelected dictator, and of course,
 - Communism was a threat to our way of life.
- On the other hand, sprinkled across Canada were a small number of people who were interested in China, and some of them actually knew quite a bit about it. These included:
 - Missionaries like the Reverend James Endicott who had run schools and hospitals in China.
 - Agricultural experts who had lived and worked with peasants on farms in China.
 - Former diplomats who had been posted in China before, during and after the revolution.
 - And of course, Canadians of Chinese origin, many of whom still had family and friends in China.
- Now neither Lorraine nor I were China experts. We had ever been to China and we didn't speak or read Chinese.
- But we were interested in China because it seemed to be a model for the 3rd world.
- China wanted to end poverty. As a socialist country it wanted to end inequality. And it seemed to be one of the few countries in the "developing" world that was actually developing.

- So we started looking for people who shared our interest in learning more about China.
- A few of the people we found were people like Tsin Van and Luna and Tin Yap. They were proud Canadians but were also proud of their Chinese culture and heritage. They were happy that China had finally “stood up” after years of humiliation at the hands of western powers. (I am happy that Luna is here tonight.)
- We recruited Maija Kagis, a Canadian health policy practitioner who was keenly interested in how China was bringing health services for the first time to its huge peasant population through what were then called “barefoot doctors”.
- We also met a lovely person named Jacqueline Majeur. Jacqueline was a real estate agent, and she had helped the Chinese buy this building from Sisters of Good Shepherd – a Catholic order. She always told us how impressed she was by how the atheist Chinese treated her with respect and courtesy during the sometimes difficult negotiations with the Catholic Church.
- Somewhat later we met Professor Yves Bled at the University of Ottawa. Yves had an academic interest in how China was modernising.
- So with a small core group, we created a tiny society. I think we probably had a dozen members in all.
- Our objectives were simple: to learn more about China and to help Canadians understand the Chinese perspective on what they were doing.
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- From the beginning, our committee was clear that this was to be a purely Canadian society. It was not to be a society of “Chinese Canadians” and we did not want to be seen as an “arm” of the Chinese Embassy.
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- In fact, the only help we asked from the Chinese Embassy was to point us toward some Canadians who might be interested in forming such a society.
- After that, we did not ask for, and were not offered, any further help from the Chinese embassy. Embassy staff rarely attended any of our meetings, nor offered any advice on how we should do things.
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- We decided we wanted to bring some balance to the reporting about China to the Canadian public.
- We would try to explain China in the way that China explained herself. We would get speakers, and show movies, and use magazines, books, etc. which would explain another side to China.
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- But at that time, almost all the movies, magazine and books about China were produced by the Chinese government. There were no independent filmmakers or journalists.
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- So our society mostly used official Chinese documents.
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- This caused us a problem. There were many who criticized us at the time for using these Chinese government materials. They said we were just propaganda agents for the Chinese government. Some dismissed us as “China lovers”.
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- Our reason for doing it this way was that the general media attention was so negative about China that we didn’t feel it was all that bad a thing to bring a different perspective to a Canadian public.
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- When China “opened up” in the late ‘70’s, we realised that some of the things we had been saying were unduly optimistic. And today, looking back on it, I now think there was some truth in that critique.
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- How do I compare the CCFS of 1976 to the CCFS of today?
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- Well the situation has changed.

- Today, Canadians know lots about China.
 - According to Statistics Canada, more than 1000 Canadians travel to China every day!!! And when you visit China, you can travel around freely, (that is if you want to) just like you can in Canada
 - Thousands of Canadians study in China.
 - Tens of thousands of Chinese students study in Canada.
 - The internet provides many, many windows into China. Anybody who wants to can spend 24/7 reading about China.
 - Its even possible to get CCTV, the Chinese television network right here in Canada - in both English and Chinese.
- As a result, Canadians know that there is no longer just “one” Chinese voice – there are a billion Chinese voices.
- There are no longer just a few Canadians who know something about China – there are dozens of experts and hundreds of others who think they are experts.
- Yet despite it all, Canadians as a whole still know remarkably little about China. Or they have ideas that don’t always correspond to reality.
- Today, many people have seen the Great Wall, or travelled the Yangtse River or visited the terracotta warriors. They see the “old” parts of China, and they also see the “new” China – its skyscrapers, high speed railways, its new airports or its new highway system.
- But tours rarely give them much time or opportunity to talk to any Chinese people. So they come back having seen things, but still quite uninformed – about today’s China.
- They rarely learn about how China is trying to deal with its huge environmental challenges, about how it is reforming its educational system, about its plans to build new cities, new transportation infrastructure or its new health facilities.
- When Lorraine and I go to China today, our experience has been that when you do talk to Chinese people, especially young people, they readily agree that China has many many problems. But they are generally very upbeat

about how the country is going and China's ability to overcome its challenges.

- Their views square with survey data from Pew Research, a respected American survey research firm which shows that an overwhelming 87% of Chinese say they are satisfied with the direction their country is heading. (This compares with 33% in the USA, for example.)
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- I always encourage Canadians to visit China. "Whatever you think about China," I tell them. "after you get there, you will say well that's not what I thought". And find some way to talk to Chinese people – in a restaurant, in a bar, in a park or at the hotel. While our papers talk at length about China's many problems, you might be surprised to find that most Chinese are very happy and optimistic about the future of their country.
- So I see an important role for CCFS going forward. To help Canadians understand China. To appreciate its successes, understand its challenges, and analyse its failures.
- China is becoming an important player on the global stage, and CCFS can help Canadians understand it better.