

Thoughts about China

I was last in Beijing in 1994 or 1995 (I can't quite remember). The changes in the Chinese culture were already apparent, but things have REALLY changed since then. The street in front of Tiananmen Square is 12 lanes. In 1995 it was 10 lanes of bicycles and 2 lanes of cars. It's now inverted, almost all cars now. They have banned the burning of soft coal inside the 3rd ring of the city now and so the air is much better. Visibility was about 1 mile on the day we arrived but the wind has come up and visibility is now around 5 miles. Blue sky, sunny and about 7C.

Had good meetings (and a wonderful lunch) with the Chinese Aviation Authorities. They are going through some drastic changes right now in order to come into line with the market economy. The main subject of the day was moving. Instead of state subsidized (free) housing, the government is buying people apartments. Everyone in the CAAC will have the opportunity to get a 1,000,000 rmb (Note: about 8.07 rmb per dollar) apartment. The people will need to invest 10% and the government will pay the rest. Their 10% can be financed and after 5 years the apartment will be theirs. The size of the apartment is based on age, years of service with the CAAC, and rank. This is a big move for the Chinese government. They are withdrawing government services and increasing people's salary at the same time. Medical coverage will become more like our insurance (with co-pays and such). They are also starting a retirement fund in which the folks get to save 6% of their salary and draw on it when they retire.

The young people think this is all pretty neat. The older folks (like about 50 or so) don't because they won't have the savings to make the transition. My guess is that the people retired now will not be affected.

Not everything is moving to a market economy. Some people have made some pretty stupid decisions with regards to placing airports and stuff and the government is still going to control those decisions...especially when public money is being used.

We took a walk to one of the main parks yesterday and watched folks fly kites and stuff. It was pretty interesting and we didn't draw much attention. The last time I was in Beijing people stopped me on the street and asked to have their picture taken with me. There are so many Western business people here now that we aren't much of an attraction any more.

The CAAC hosted us for a "light lunch" today. There was a smoke eel appetizer with vegetables, a huge tempura like scampi, fish rolled in a sweet sauce, lemon chicken, shredded eel and mushrooms, peppered beef, broccoli, fried rice, paper wrapped fish, and fresh fruit. It was amazing and great. After lunch, there is a "rest period" during which a lot of the employees practice their karaoke. We were invited to participate, but didn't want to embarrass ourselves.

We finalized our plans for the next seminar, luckily I think I'll be able to combine it with another trip to China. The trip will be the week of May 24th and the seminar will be in Guangzhou or Beijing.

Well, the sun's still out so I think I'll take a walk. I moved up my travel plans and will be heading to Amsterdam a day early (3/2). I'll head from Amsterdam to Brussels on 3/8 and home to the US on 3/12. I've been around the world a couple of times before, but always heading east. This change in direction is unlikely to make me feel any better.

Dave