China Inside Out

10 Irreversible Trends Reshaping China and its Relationship with the World

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For my parents, William R. and Norma Dodson, in gratitude for their patience and sacrifices.
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Acknowledgment

China Inside Out has been a collaborative project with numerous individuals who have contributed both directly and indirectly over the past decade. More than a few of the insights expressed in the book were born through the countless conversations I’ve had with those who have lived, studied, and worked in China for many years, many of whom were North Americans and Europeans. These discussions often were excavations of their experiences, their observations, and their reflections about the swift and dramatic changes in China they’ve become part of.

In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to longtime China veterans Peter Holmes and Keith Cairncross, who through long hours of conversation, have helped me to put many of my own China experiences and musings in perspective. Other close friends and China veterans also have shared their experiences and thinking, especially Palle Linde, Michael “Mickey” Duff, Mark “Six” Kissner, Doug Wack, and Oscar Hernandez. I also feel a need to sound a note of deep appreciation for my counterparts at the Blue Marlin “Think Tank” in the Suzhou Industrial Park—professionals and their families who have a combined hundreds of years of experience from all over China, and whose warmth and humor have provided me a home away from home.

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Men and women in China have the right to dress as they please: plaids, stripes, purples, reds, acid-greens, fuchsias, rhinestones, tight skirts, baggy T-shirts—all at the same time, even, if they choose to experiment (which some do). They can buy at bargain basement prices or, those who can afford it, can shop at expensive boutiques. They can dress as peculiarly as they like—or as fashionably—as the glittering catwalks of Shanghai have spotlighted since the opening years of the twenty-first century.

China hasn’t always been that way, though. As the bad old days of the Cultural Revolution closed in the late 1970s and the country sought its way out of the economic and social chaos that had defined the lives of generations, the Mao-suit was all the fashion. Actually, it was pretty much the only fashion for adults, available in the most drab shades of gray, blue, and green conceivable. The statement the social uniform made was “we are all equal,” though, of course, Communist Party members were more equal than others. For the 30 years after Mao Zedong announced the liberation of the People’s Republic of China, Communist Party apparatchiks tightly controlled all parts of Chinese life: where one lived, if one attended university, what discipline one would study, where one worked, where one shopped, how much one could buy (if shelves were stocked at all), even who to marry (dating was illegal). In other words, up until about 1980, China’s government was totalitarian, interested mostly in exercising its power and ideology at every level of its citizens’ existence.

Now, Chinese citizens have freedoms those aged 45 and over could hardly have imagined in 1980. They can start their own businesses, they can purchase as many homes as they can afford, they are increasingly owning their own cars—once the sole entitlement of Party officials—they can choose where to send their children to school,