**John Torpey** 00:01

How should we think about modern China today? Ian Johnson talks to us about that great country from the point of view of its long history.

**John Torpey** 00:12

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:32

Today we discuss China in the world with Ian Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author, formerly with the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and other outlets. And now after being thrown out of China, a freelance author who writes for the New York Review of Books and other publications.

**John Torpey** 00:52

He's written a number of books and book chapters on China. His most recent book, is "The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao" from 2016 (I believe). He's since been awarded a 2020-2021 National Endowment For the Humanities - Public Scholars Fellowship, for a new book he's writing on China's unofficial history.

**John Torpey** 01:16

He speaks with us today from Singapore. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today, Ian Johnson.

**Ian Johnson** 01:23

That's my pleasure. I look forward to the talk.

**John Torpey** 01:26

Great to have you. Well, this book about the unofficial history of China intrigues me a lot, because I think we need to see China today very much in the context of its long history. And so I want to start out by asking you about that. I mean, if you look back over China's several couple thousands', more than 2000 year history, and put it in its current place in the world, in the context of that history, what would you say stands out as new and different?

**Ian Johnson** 02:00

Well, I guess it's the same for many countries around the world. The principal difference is the degree of interconnectedness that China has. Now of course, scholars will point out that China has always been connected with the outside world through things like the Silk Road, which was a great travel, a great trade route that went through Central Asia, or the Maritime Silk Road that went down through Southeast Asia and as far away as Africa.

**Ian Johnson** 02:31

But China overall was relatively isolated as a civilization. It has great mountain ranges to its west, has deserts to its west and north. And it has nomadic tribes to its north and of course, the oceans to its east. So compared to say, European countries, China was relatively --and I often emphasize that word-- it was relatively isolated. And now, of course, through globalization, it's really at the center of world trading routes and so on and so forth. So that's made a big difference in the Chinese self perception and, I think, in how we see China as well.

**John Torpey** 03:20

I mean, yes, there was the Silk Road in the past, and that meant Chinese influence relatively far in it's, what we might call, it's "near abroad". But it seems to me that China today has a kind of reach into the rest of the world and attempt to influence developments and to take part in developments well outside its immediate location. In a way that's unprecedented, is that wrong?

**Ian Johnson** 03:50

I think that's largely right. In the past, China's Empire expanded gradually through territorial acquisitions in a way like Russia's did by expanding from one geographic area and moving outward and outward. So you have those sort of key cultural areas around the Yellow River and some other pockets further in the west and the south. And then it slowly moved outward like that. It didn't have the same far reaching impact that say, the British Empire did, or the French Empire's.

**Ian Johnson** 04:29

Now, in countries immediately around it, or regions and peoples immediately around, it did have China's cultural impact. For example, here in Singapore, which is quite far away from China. There have been Chinese settlers here for hundreds of years and Chinese culture and so on has spread around this whole region: the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, etc. But this is of course, relatively speaking, not that far away. And so I think now we have China's influence being felt in every continent. And that's, of course, new.

**John Torpey** 05:08

That was certainly my impression. This seems, in some ways, especially noteworthy given the relative degree of inward looking activity, I suppose, on the part of China during the Mao years. That is, the years of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, it was really very much focused on its own development and its own political orientation. And, of course, the tensions with the Soviet Union, the connection with the United States after 1970-73.

**John Torpey** 05:45

So I wonder, how has that past being processed? There's a lot of preoccupation in the West with Germany, where I gather you're going to be spending some time in the near future. There's a lot of concern with what they call "vergangenheitsbewältigung", in German, the question of sort of coming to terms with these pasts.

**John Torpey** 06:10

I was in Nanjing a few years ago and went to the Museum of the Rape of Nanjing and I was, in a way, shocked by some of the things that were said about the Japanese. It was not the kind of way that we have tended to process pasts in the West. So I wonder what you would say about how is contemporary China sort of dealing with Mao and the past that involved Mao?

**Ian Johnson** 06:46

Well, I think in the past, let's say, immediately after the Cultural Revolution, which ended when Mao died, roughly speaking. So it was 1976 when Mao died, and then you had a interregnum, a bit of instability. And then you had Deng Xiaoping taking over around 1978. And after that, there was a bit of a reckoning with Mao; the Mao past, the Mao era. He was criticized to some degree, but overall was found to have been a good revolutionary leader.

**Ian Johnson** 07:18

I think, though, as the in the 80s and 90s, maybe 2000s, there was quite a bit of tolerance of criticism of the Mao era; there were people who ran underground, not even underground, but officially sanctioned magazines and history reviews that looked at the dark side of the Mao era. Now, it was never presented in a way that would challenge the Communist Party's right to rule but it was tolerated a bit more.

**Ian Johnson** 07:47

Now, in the past decade, since Xi Jinping took power, it's almost been a decade-- he took power in 2012-- so in a year and a half from now, roughly, we'll have the 10th anniversary. Xi has made a point that the Mao era cannot be separated from the current era, and he says they're basically two sides of the same coin. You can't negate the Mao era and say, "Oh, I like the reform era." If you accept the party today, you have to accept the Mao era.

**Ian Johnson** 08:20

And so he's really cracked down on these other kinds of journals, independent documentary filmmakers, and people like that, who have tried to do interviews and make films and write articles about the past. So that I think the past is being really whitewashed, and we're gonna see this come up even more so in the coming months. On July 1, the Communist Party will celebrate its 100th anniversary. And you can expect there's going to be a huge propaganda barrage. It's already started, but it'll really pick up pace this spring and early summer as they show the "glorious past". And it'll be interesting to see if they mention any problems of the Mao era or if that'll be just completely whitewashed. I think that's a key thing to look for in the coming months.

**John Torpey** 09:16

Interesting. Well, we'll keep our eye out for that. Another question that I guess arises for me as China becomes more of an international player is that, in some ways, given the past that, we've just been describing it is a relatively unfamiliar country; a relatively unfamiliar place for many people. And I came across --just by happenstance-- a comment I guess attributed to Lucien Pye the other day, in which he was quoted as saying that "China is a civilization that masquerades as a nation state".

**John Torpey** 09:55

And I wonder if you could sort of unpack that comment. Does that make any sense to you? I mean, it makes a certain amount of sense to me as somebody who's really relatively unfamiliar with the place. But the kinds of things I hear suggest that it's a very self-confident people. So I wonder how you would respond to that?

**Ian Johnson** 10:21

Yeah, the concept or the idea of China is constantly shifting. And people in past centuries, to varying degrees, thought of themselves as Chinese. But the whole idea, of course of the nation-state is a relatively new construct; and it came even later to China than it did to other parts of the world. But I think maybe another way of putting it that I find perhaps even more interesting is that China is an empire masquerading as a nation state.

**Ian Johnson** 10:52

And by that I mean that the current boundaries of the People's Republic of China were inherited from the Republic of China, which was under the KMT, which it got the borders from the Qing Dynasty, which was overthrown in 1911, then the Republic of China took over in 1912. And then, of course, the People's Republic took over from that 1949.

**Ian Johnson** 11:19

And the territory is almost the same as the Qing except for the country; the independent country of Mongolia, which managed to separate. But otherwise, you have this enormous --I would almost say inflated-- borders of China that incorporate all of these areas such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, most noteworthy. I hear you really walking in a landmine, but I would say, historically, were not really part of China.

**Ian Johnson** 11:53

Yes, in the past, China has a long history, there had been military expeditions, sometimes a dynasty controlled bits and pieces of these areas for 50 years or 100 years. But overall, these were not core parts of China. And so the country has a real problem in how it deals with these areas, as we see now with Xinjiang, for example.

**Ian Johnson** 12:21

It's very much analogous to the Soviet Union, which inherited the borders of Czarist Russia, and then set up these separate Soviet Socialist Republics for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, etc. And then after the Soviet Union collapsed, they just became independent countries.

**Ian Johnson** 12:38

In China, the Communist China, has not collapsed. And there's no way of imagining these places becoming independent. Instead, they've all been incorporated into the nation state with ethnic Chinese definitions of what is normal, what is standard, what are the norms for behavior. They have taken hold, or they've been pushed by the government. And so this creates huge conflicts with the non-Chinese peoples inside the borders of the People's Republic. And this is at the heart of some of the biggest problems facing the country today.

**John Torpey** 13:16

Right, since you've mentioned Xinjiang, this in a way brings us to the question of contemporary relations with the West and more specifically with the United States. Obviously, Xinjiang is a kind of major flashpoint for those concerned about human rights in China. And I wonder whether you could talk a little bit about how you see the relationship developing.

**John Torpey** 13:41

Let's focus really on the US and China. It's often said that leaning on the Chinese about human rights is like banging your head against the wall; it's not likely to do much, or at least, they're not likely to respond in a way that it might be obviously a response to Western or US pressure. But, I mean, this is part of a much larger, sort of ensemble of relations. And so I wonder what you would say about that?

**John Torpey** 14:15

It seems to me that the relationship not so long ago was famously referred to by Neil Ferguson as "Chimerica". But now, there's a much more kind of aggressive tone. Obviously, the Trump administration took a rather hostile stance towards China. Particularly, around trade issues, international intellectual property, but I think that was received largely in with bipartisan enthusiasm. But in any case, now the sort of language is much more about enemies and competitors at the very least. I wonder how you would see the relationship developing and are we headed in the right direction?

**Ian Johnson** 15:04

Well, I think the relations have changed dramatically. Trump was sort of the bull in the China shop and smashed a lot of things. But that bull was probably going to be set loose anyway. I think there'd been a combination of things have taken place over the past few years. But since Nixon went to China, and the detente started with China in the early 1970s, there had been this bipartisan consensus that we need to make nice with China for broader strategic reasons, primarily then to counter the Soviet Union and maybe to find some way to make peace in Vietnam.

**Ian Johnson** 15:49

And then afterwards, when the Soviet Union collapsed in '89, there was, of course, unfortunately, Tienanmen; the massacre in downtown Beijing against student led protests in 1989. But overall, there is still a sense that okay, "we can still bring China over to our side through trade", and hence, the lead up to joining the World Trade Organization, the negotiations in the late 90s that started.

**Ian Johnson** 16:19

And then there was this feeling of euphoria with the internet. That the internet was something that was uncontrollable, no one would be able to stop it. There would be independent sources of information that yes, they could censor newspapers and magazines, but they couldn't censor the internet. And all these things basically didn't happen the way people in the West had hoped.

**Ian Johnson** 16:39

And there had been, I would say, many, many good faith efforts to bring China on board as a stakeholder. There was an effort, of course, to fight terrorism by having China be a partner. But I would say overall, there was a feeling that on a bunch of levels that things hadn't worked out properly. And some of it was hubris on our part; that we thought we could change China. That was ridiculous. But I think also, there was a feeling that the trade situation hadn't worked out; that China hadn't opened its markets.

**Ian Johnson** 17:12

You can see this in the Chamber of Commerce reports from the US Chamber of Commerce, the European Chamber of Commerce. It's not just, you know, human rights activists or people like that who were upset, but there's a general sort of disenchantment with how things have worked out with China over the past 40 years or so. And it just hasn't quite gone the way people thought.

**Ian Johnson** 17:33

And then I think you have China's own actions, the hubris on the Chinese side, and almost believing its own newspaper clips: that it is the rising power in the West is declining --especially after the financial crisis of '08-- and then China taking a more assertive action in the South China Sea. All of these kinds of things have led to growing conflicts.

**Ian Johnson** 17:59

And so I think that era that started with Nixon and Kissinger has come to an end. And I think that there is probably, not probably, there is a rethink. Trump's way was a much more confrontational, but in a way, a blind confrontational strategy. I think now we're seeing a new sort of more nuanced approach where there are areas of cooperation, say on the environment. There are areas where we just have to get along because we're each other's largest trading partner.

**Ian Johnson** 18:31

But there are areas of profound disagreement, for example, Xinjiang, where if we want to be true to our own democratic principles however imperfectly we live up to them in our own country, but at least we have to call that out from time to time. Keeping silent on it doesn't help anybody. So I think this is a much more complex period; I don't think it's easy to sort of say, "well, it's going to go in this direction or that direction". But I think it will require keeping two or three thoughts in our heads at the same time. On the one hand, China can be a partner, it can be a competitor, but it also will be sometimes an opponent, and I think that's going to be tough.

**John Torpey** 19:15

Interesting. So for me, this raises the question: how has socialism with Chinese characteristics, i.e. capitalism, changed China? I mean, we've been talking about their relations with the United States or with the West, but how has it changed Chinese society? You've written about, obviously, about the religious side of this, but more generally. How would you say things have changed? I mean, obviously, it's a much wealthier society than it was in 1970. So could you comment on that?

**Ian Johnson** 19:52

Yeah, it certainly has changed many aspects of China. Internally, besides the prosperity, which is not something to be underestimated, it's made society more complex and has given people much more space to pursue many individual interests. And, of course, people 10-20 years ago hoped that this would lead to civil society, and there would be truly independent organizations in China, that might be the building blocks of some sort of more open society, forget democracy, but just something more open.

**Ian Johnson** 20:35

I'm not sure that that's happening. It's not happening. But it's still however, the case that people have much more time to pursue their own interests and to live much fuller, richer lives: they travel more, they have faiths and belong to different religious organizations. Yes, some of them are tightly controlled by the government, but for the majority of people, that's not really the case. They can participate in the outside world much more so than in the past. They have many, many more different kinds of books to read and things like that.

**Ian Johnson** 21:19

They can go on trips they can get --usually in the past, the government didn't give people passports-- but now everybody can get a passport (well, not everybody unless you're a hardcore dissident, but pretty much everybody, 99.5% of the population, can get a passport or something, let's just say 95%. And it's just a question of whether you can get a visa to go abroad, but overall, people are traveling.

**Ian Johnson** 21:44

So it's something that's really changed society, and I think built support for the Communist Party in many ways. That won't last forever, as expectations continue to rise. But it has fundamentally changed how society is organized. And you know, even in this difficult time of crackdowns, and so on, there's still a space to pursue independent histories, to publish underground samizdat magazines and journals, and things like that, because of digital technology and because people have more money to spend, they have more free time, etc. So society has become more complex. I guess that's the short answer.

**John Torpey** 22:31

So maybe you could tell us a bit more specifically about what you found in the book "The Souls of China". What exactly is going on the religious front? There was for a time a fair amount of writing, I think, about the extent to which the sort of chase for greater wealth and the sort of rat race, in a way, that had developed or emerged in China was leading people to look for some greater meaning in their lives and they returning to religion, often forms of Christianity. Could you expand a little bit on what you found in that book?

**Ian Johnson** 23:11

Yes, I think that's a fair summary of what's been going on. There was initially say, in the early phase of the reform era, in the 1980s people who were solving primarily material questions of having food and clothing and shelter, and so on and so forth. And pretty quickly, religious life returned. And it's been growing since then very rapidly. And you see this across the board in all five major religious groups in China, which just to summarize, that would be Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism, which is China's indigenous religion.

**Ian Johnson** 24:01

So you have these five groups, or religions, let's say. And they are all growing despite government efforts to rein them in. I think this effort in the past few years to rein in religion is a reflection of this growth. The government has gotten nervous; it saw what happened in Eastern Europe with the Catholic Church in say, Poland, or the Protestant church in East Germany, and does not want to repeat [that] in China.

**Ian Johnson** 24:33

So you have the different responses. You have a crackdown; a very harsh crackdown on Islam in western China and various ways of dealing with Christianity and so on. And then you also have, I think, for the first time --and this is really quite interesting-- a return to the old imperial system of patronizing some religions.

**Ian Johnson** 24:58

You can think of this as analogous to Russia and Putin patronizing the Orthodox Church. That the government in Beijing thinks that some religions --especially Buddhism, Taoism, and more amorphous group of beliefs that are often just called folk religion-- that these things are easier to control; they're more indigenized, and that they can be used to help rule the country in the way the leaders and rulers throughout history have tried to use religion to rule. And so this is new. And that you see the government supporting the reconstruction of these temples, even as it's cracking down on Islam, cracking down on elements of Christianity, etc., etc. So this is quite a new development over the past few years.

**John Torpey** 25:52

So that's more about the interior of China. I wonder what you would say about China's image abroad? There's a lot of discussion in the context or in the vaccination phase, if you like, of the pandemic about vaccine nationalism, vaccine diplomacy, etc. And I would be curious to know how is China sort of managing its reputation abroad? And how much does vaccine diplomacy play a role in that?

**Ian Johnson** 26:30

Yeah, I think the overall answer is that China is aware of the importance of soft power. It had incredible soft power in places like Southeast Asia over the centuries with Chinese culture spreading here, and so on and so forth. But, it's tried to spread this in more modern ways, for example, through Confucius Institutes. These are cultural centers that are often set up at universities; you're probably quite familiar with them in the United States, but many, many other countries have them as well.

**Ian Johnson** 27:02

Overall, though, my impression is that China does not do very well with soft power, partly because it doesn't have such a great story to tell. On the one hand, you could say it should have a great story to tell. All these people lifted out of poverty, for many developing countries around the world, is a miracle. Many countries look to China, and sort of say, "gee, how did they do it?" They basically escaped poverty, it's no longer a poor country; it's a middle-income country. How did they do it?

**Ian Johnson** 27:33

So it has some good stories to tell. But overall, when you have these things like labor camps, and Xinjiang, and you have constant oppression of dissidents, this undercuts so much of that; it makes it very hard to sell China abroad. For example, these Confucius Institutes are a great example of that. If you look at analogous institutions that do well, say, the Goethe Institute that Germany runs, or the Alliance Française from France, or the British Council, they will have programs that are also critical of their countries.

**Ian Johnson** 28:13

At the Goethe Institute, you could see something on the Holocaust or on the plight of Turkish migrant laborers. And you'd maybe come out of there thinking, "Boy, Germany's got some problems." But you'd also think, "Well, that's a pretty interesting country, if they're confident enough to talk about it in their own cultural institutions" right?

**Ian Johnson** 28:35

If you go to Chinese Confucius institutes and they don't have anything like that. It tends to be just Chinese language courses, Chinese cooking, maybe martial arts, a few things like that, but no real discussion. The best movies in China are banned. So many novelists and trying to have a hard time getting published, or getting their works widely distributed, and so on. So it doesn't have a great soft power store.

**Ian Johnson** 29:04

And then, on top of that, COVID is sort of a mixed bag. On the one hand, I think any fair minded person would probably look at what China did and say, "They probably blew it early on by keeping it a secret for those crucial three or four weeks, they might have been able to control the virus better". Arguably, they would never have controlled it; it would have gotten out anyway. So it's one of those "what if". You can't really prove it, right? What would have happened? Even if they'd reacted immediately, it's hard to prove that that would have stopped the virus from spreading. But it probably wouldn't have spread so quickly.

**Ian Johnson** 29:40

On the other hand, once it was loose, they did a pretty good job in controlling it. Now some people would say this is only because of authoritarian measures, etc., etc. But if you look at how they controlled it, they ended up using measures that at the time were poo-pooed as only possible in China because it's an authoritarian state. But in the end, many other countries, including Western democracies did the same thing. You know, people were sort of looking at the Chinese going, "Oh, look, they've got these special centers set up where they keep the sick people. It's reminiscent of the Spanish flu in 1918".

**Ian Johnson** 30:16

Well, Western countries ended up doing the same thing. And they ended up locking down Wuhan. And people said, "Oh, that's impossible to do that; they're about 20 or 30 million people". Well, all of Italy was locked down with 60 million people, right? And so all these countries are now going through second waves, third waves and you think, well, maybe China didn't do it so badly, after all.

**Ian Johnson** 30:39

But again, you have this thing with the vaccine diplomacy on the one hand; great, they're sending out Sinovac and these other things, which seems great. Now, however, there's complications; they're not sending out as much as they thought, the vaccine's underlying numbers have not been released, it's hard to evaluate how effective they are.

**Ian Johnson** 30:57

And you get the impression that it's just really poor, desperate countries that are taking it. And it's hard to know what level this vaccination really is. Or China is just sort of conducting extended trials in other countries around the world. So I think it's been a mixed bag for China in terms of soft power.

**Ian Johnson** 31:17

This is also, I think, undercut by their own diplomatic efforts where they have fairly, sometimes aggressive slash obnoxious, foreign, you know, even diplomats, consular officials who are on Twitter, calling people names, calling Justin Trudeau of Canada; the Prime Minister of Canada, calling him a boy and things like that. I mean, this is just not normal diplomacy, this is fairly obnoxious. So I think that it's had a hard time striking the right note in this field in this area.

**John Torpey** 31:57

I see. So I guess one final question or not quite final question, but one question I'd really like to ask, which has to do with China and climate change. Everybody knows that the climate, the weather, the air in China has been pretty abysmal because of the push towards industrialization and the lack of environmental constraints that were imposed on that form of industrialization. When I was there, there were days when I really didn't want to go outside, it was pretty bad.

**John Torpey** 32:32

And now though, there's this sort of talk that they're going to be real leaders in the fight against climate change. And in many ways, it is really about the United States and China when it comes to addressing climate change. These are the two biggest producers of problematic gases and that sort of thing. So I wonder what you could say about how China is going to take on the climate change challenge, and to what extent the United States and China will cooperate in addressing that challenge.

**Ian Johnson** 33:10

Yeah, this is one of these areas when I said there were three different kinds of areas that we would be dealing with in China, this is one of the areas that we should, hopefully, will have cooperation in or at least have similar goals. I think China's attitude has changed quite a bit over the past decade. About a decade ago, when there were these climate negotiations, China was still arguing the corner that "we're not responsible for this, because you in the West, you historically, emitted most of the carbon that's in the atmosphere. It's mainly your fault. You started the Industrial Revolution throughout the 19th century. When we didn't emit anything, you were pumping stuff throughout the first half of the 20th century, same thing. And we just got to the game late now you're trying to keep us poor by having us cut our emissions".

**Ian Johnson** 34:01

That was the initial argument that China made about a decade ago. And it's pretty much abandoned that. Now says, "okay, we are now the biggest emitter. And even if you look at historical emissions, we're right up there, because of the vast amount of carbon that we've been pumping into the atmosphere over the past few decades". So I think China has changed its attitude quite strongly.

**Ian Johnson** 34:28

And as you alluded to, the air pollution is another area that's pushed the government, because this is something that it can't really ignore. Even if the government --and it's not entirely like this-- but even if it catered mainly to elites, you can have polluted water, but you can have mineral water that rich people drink. And you can have organic farms that don't have the pesticides and heavy metals in the earth that poor people have to eat, but air is hard to get away with from. You can have a tough course a ton of air filters in your apartment. But if you want to go outside, etc., it's hard to avoid that. I think it really created pressure on the government.

**Ian Johnson** 35:13

People say it's an authoritarian state, but it still is a responsive authoritarian state; still has to deal with public opinion on some level. So it began to change its attitude toward emissions and to realize that it had to speed up. And I think also, it saw a business opportunity. In a way that say, the Trump Administration didn't by wanting to just go back to carbon solutions for energy. China said, "Hey, wind technology, solar technology, batteries for electric autos, these are all things we can corner the market. These are new industries, where there are not say, legacy companies like in automobiles that have this immense cachet. We can move in here quickly, and establish ourselves as leaders".

**Ian Johnson** 36:03

And they have so taken very strategic positions there; where if you want to set up a wind farm or some kind of a new company, you're showered with subsidies, you can get permission to open your factory quickly, you can run tests much more quickly. It's not as litigious a society, etc. So there are, I think, real efforts by China on a variety of levels to counter this.

**Ian Johnson** 36:33

Now, it's still not going to probably be as fast as other countries. And this is a problem. I think that there's still many parts of China that depend on coal. So on the one hand, it's got green energy; on the other hand, it's building dozens of new coal fired power plants. And there are many parts of the country that still depend on old Rust Belt industries. All the whole area south of Beijing is rich in coal and there are coking factories, and steel works all around there that accounts for the pollution in the capital.

**Ian Johnson** 37:09

And of course, they would like to. If you're in Beijing, you want to close all that stuff down. But if you're in that area, and you have tens, or hundreds of thousands of workers whose livelihood depends on those factories, you're kind of like "not so quickly, we need to find other jobs for these people to do etc., etc. So there are still big challenges that the country faces.

**Ian Johnson** 37:31

And so I think that they will move. They are moving, but it may not be as fast as we'd like. And I think we have to come to some agreement with them or to push them. And I think one of the best ways we can push China is by getting our own house in order. So if we come up with our own plans that are ambitious, and are as ambitious as any other country in the world, we can say, "Hey, we're doing it, why don't you do it, too?" And that may help. If we're not even able to do it and we're much richer than China, then how can we expect China to do it?

**John Torpey** 38:03

So I do want to ask a final question, which is a question that arises arose for me when I was looking at your biography in advance of this discussion. And it seemed, I'm just guessing here, but it appeared that maybe your interest in China had developed as a result of a junior year abroad kind of program. It was a one year period in the early 1980s when you went to China, and that seems to have sparked an interest that has become a lifelong profession, in fact.

**John Torpey** 38:37

So I guess it got me thinking, are we producing enough people who know about China in the United States, as we once tried to do with, you know, people who were experts on the Soviet Union? Getting to know China strikes me. I gave up on Russian myself in the mid 1980s, because I already spoke German, and I found Russian much too hard. And China, it seems to me, it's just another league beyond even Russian. So it's not the most obvious sort of interest to develop; and it's a tough one, I think, in many ways.

**John Torpey** 39:12

And, I once had the sense that the people we had in the United States who knew about China had been basically the children of missionaries, were maybe even missionaries themselves; people who had other reasons to go to China and develop expertise that simply nobody else had. So I wonder what you would say about that situation?

**Ian Johnson** 39:35

Well, I think for a while that was really true. There were many people who knew about China that had been in China in the 30s and 40s, many times because of missionaries, etc. However, I think one big asset we have now is that we have a lot of immigration from China and from Chinese speaking parts of the world like Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc. And that's given us a huge talent base of people who really understand China and speak the language. Now, I don't think it's enough. I think we need more people, even more people. And I think that we really should continue to promote Chinese in high schools and in colleges, etc.

**Ian Johnson** 40:26

It's always a tough sell because people will often say, "Oh, you go to China, and so many people can speak English, but you go to America, and not so many people can speak Chinese". But of course, if you're in China, or you're in Germany, or you're in any almost any country in the world, the first obvious second language to learn is English. But if you're in America, or another English speaking country, there are many foreign languages that you can learn.

**Ian Johnson** 40:52

I do think, though, I noticed this: when I was working in China over the past decade, I was also teaching undergrads at a study abroad program that was accredited through Loyola University, Chicago; it's called the Beijing Center for Chinese Studies. And the number of students declined. And I think this was partly because it peaked around the time of the Olympics and a year or two after that when there was a big China buzz and everyone was excited about China and it was the rising power and all this stuff.

**Ian Johnson** 41:26

And then came the air quality issues and airpocalypse and all this stuff. And students were kind of like, "Hey, you're young enough, your lungs can afford a few months in Beijing". It's like it's not gonna really kill you. It's only like, maybe, smoking a few cigarettes a day (not that I advocate that).

**Ian Johnson** 41:46

But people got really --and I think also just sort of --again, this China's soft power thing. When I went to the center, I thought, "Oh, I'm going to be teaching Chinese studies majors", but actually, study abroad programs are partly about people who are studying the language, but it's also about people who just want to spend a semester abroad.

**Ian Johnson** 42:06

I think, for many young people, there's not such a great buzz around China. If you're a business major and it's your junior year, and you can go to Florence or Singapore or Jakarta or Bangkok or Beijing. You know, Beijing is like, "yeah, it's really important". But it's kind of like, "eat your broccoli, you know it's good for you, you ought to do it". It's the world's largest economy, that sort of thing. But is it going to be fun? Is there a lively bar district? What are the discos like or something like that. And it's like, well, the bar district actually is pretty lame for a city of 20 million people. There aren't really great nightclubs, and so on and so forth.

**Ian Johnson** 42:49

So you begin to think, "hmm, you know, maybe Florence is better"; it's gonna be certainly more pleasant. Or maybe if I want something different, I'll go to another part of the world. But Beijing seems like it might be a bit of a drag. And then forget about COVID, the effects of COVID and all that.

**Ian Johnson** 43:06

Well, what I would hope is that, despite all the problems that we've just enumerated, people still realize that China is a fascinating place to go to. I loved the 20 years that I spent in China. And I would happily go back, and not as a journalist; for me personally because I think that phase is over. But it's a wonderful place to visit. People are warm, friendly. They're welcoming of foreigners. Many people don't speak English, but it's okay. You can always get around, make yourself understood.

**Ian Johnson** 43:37

And I wish there would be more engagement with China and that things wouldn't be reduced to this binary, Twitter-world-view of things where everything just becomes sort of a flame war and China just becomes another proxy for domestic US political battles. And [I wish] that we understand it is a big, nuanced country. It's still a great country, a fascinating country. And yeah, it has a ton of problems. But it's still really worth engaging with. And there's still great people there with whom we should engage, and not view it as simply a series of concentration camps, even if some concentration camps in Xinjiang do exist.

**John Torpey** 44:22

Great. Well, I think that's an important message for especially younger people to hear. And anyway, Florence, as the first citizen of my hometown, Montclair, New Jersey, namely, Yogi Berra once said, "it's so crowded, nobody goes there anymore". Florence is overrun with people. China's got a lot of people too. I was very struck by that when I was there.

**Ian Johnson** 44:50

When you go to tourist sites, it's never foreigners who are in the majority. It's Chinese. And I found that really refreshing. You go to some parts of the world and it's foreigners who overwhelm. But you go to Chinese sites like holy mountains of these famous places, and it's Chinese people. I find that a good thing; a healthy thing. I think that's one of the neat things about going to China.

**John Torpey** 45:14

Well, someday like Florence, it will be discovered and maybe that will change. But not not for the foreseeable future. So that's it for today's episode. I want to thank Ian Johnson for sharing his insights about China and its role in the world today.

**John Torpey** 45:28

Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance, and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song "International Horizons" as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons. Thanks so much, Ian.

**Ian Johnson** 45:56

Thank you