

John Pomfret
"Chinese Lessons"
October 13, 2009

John Pomfret's perspectives on China were acknowledged with a standing ovation by the large crowd at the October 13th Global Issues Evening. His remarks focused on the staying power of the Peoples Communist Party which some expected its decline after Tiananmen Square 20 years ago. He offered six reasons for the PCP's strength:

- Economic. China has experienced double digit economic growth until now (8% during the global financial down turn) which has been fueled by coastal development as China has become the "factory of the world;" economic reforms that have encouraged entrepreneurship.
- Addressing the needs of the countryside population. While urban communities have exploded, 60% of the population still lives in the countryside. Actions to address their needs (and build allegiance to the party) have included the creation of township village enterprises, eliminating taxes to reduce the gaps between rich and poor and relaxing the one child policy to facilitate population growth—and build a workforce for the future.
- Changes in the cities. Cities have been the source of PCP's power; however, the party has made changes to ensure continued support. Changes such as housing reforms, building a large real estate industry with opportunity for home ownership and creating a rental market; increasing personal and social freedoms by stopping cradle to grave control.
- Media. While not an open media environment, news is more accessible (particularly to those in urban areas) and China has done a particularly effective job in using the foreign press to their advantage and criticizing the west to get support at home.
- Security services. The Party learned from Tiananmen that a change in approach was needed and moved from physical crackdowns to going after heads of groups and "buying them off." There has also been a resurgence of patriotism fostered by the party and security services.
- PCP itself. A reported influencer of the 1989 debacle was the existence of intraparty clashes which PCP has committed to avoid in the future by purging "factions" that are not supportive of the party's actions. Pomfret noted that there are some signs of emerging conflicts within the party that may signal some difficulties in the future.

Pomfret closed with some commentary on challenges that lie ahead for China and PCP: demographic s (100 million people are over the age of 80 and by 2050 ¼ of the population will be older than sixty five) where people will grow old before they become rich; resources required to address serious environmental issues (rivers,air, industrial accidents, etc.); and addressing what he referred to as "what it means to be Chinese." The Chinese people have been "whip-sawed" by change. Life is a mish-mash—part totalitarian, part free-wheeling; part button-down corporate, part jeans-and-t-Thir startup; part Community, part capitalist."

-Sandy Cook