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Pessimism of the West, Optimism of the East

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Over the last few months, I have experienced first-hand both East and West, both China and some countries in Western Europe. I have been quite struck by the contrasts, which may be described as pessimism of the West, optimism of the East.

PESSIMISM OF THE WEST

In Western Europe, there is a pervasive air of gloom and pessimism. My initial impressions came from Denmark, in the cities and the countryside. Later, I experienced travel by train to Paris, and then a little later we rode our bicycles for nine days through the countryside in Denmark and across the border into Germany.

On our ride, we passed through one country town after another, and they felt like ghost towns. "For sale" and "for rent" signs were everywhere. Few people were out and about. In one place, we managed to find the only shop in town, which also provided deliveries from a chemist in another town. In other words, even the local chemist had closed. Only one place – Glückstadt on the Elbe River – seemed different, with the buildings in the old part of the port town glistening and trying to appeal to tourists. On the outskirts, the real situation behind the facade soon emerged: nearly all of those shopping at a discount supermarket were clearly struggling and trying to save what little cash they had.

Are the cities any different? Initially, one might think so, since some have plenty of money to do as they wish. However, Paris felt as though it was becoming like New York: many, many homeless people, sleeping rough, begging ... And you only need to go to Hamburg railway station to find an immense number of homeless people scouring the bins, asking for a few coins, trying desperately to keep going.

Friends in China would ask me from time to time what it is like in Western Europe. My answer: people are pessimistic. The question: why? My answer: the economies in Western countries are in very poor shape. Fifty years of economic decline, failed policies, social upheaval, political breakdown, the fact that the combined forces of the West cannot defeat Russia, the expectation of a European war, the talk of "existential crises" that are really the crisis of the West – this situation makes people pessimistic and full of gloom.

OPTIMISM OF THE EAST

Stay too long in a Western country and the gloom begins to affect you. Fortunately, I do not spend much time in Western countries these days. In fact, I came to Europe for a month from Beijing. What a contrast: I have written earlier of a quiet but evident optimism and confidence in China, which is palpable at every turn. For most people in China – as is now the case in more and more countries of the world – the West is neither of interest nor is it to be feared. The West has in effect become irrelevant.

The reasons for such optimism are plenty. To mention but a few: the greening of China, which has taken place at impressive speed so that China is now a world leader in showing how climate change and environmental problems can be solved – if you have a socialist system. There is also the development of the economy in all aspects, so much so that you see it in everyday life. On a personal note, I experienced this at my local dentist, seeing a medical specialist, buying a few necessities, travelling on the standard 300 kph trains, or when checking my phone at a pass in Xizang (Tibet) that is 5000 metres above sea level. And yes, the phone reception was at the full five bars. How is this possible? When you have the only country in the world with a complete industrial chain, then the latest breakthroughs are affordable for everyone. As I like to put it: whenever I visit a Western country, I feel as though I am stepping into the past; whenever I return to China, I am stepping into the future. And there are many, many people from all countries flowing to China in these times.

At a social and political level, China is progressing at a significant pace that is also stable. After much research and on-the-ground experience, it is clear to me that China's socialist democratic system and rule of law are now more mature and developed than any political system you will find elsewhere. At a cultural level I have found a creative energy that is increasingly being called the new "liberation of thought." This appears most obviously in the ferment of ideas, proposals, and plans that come one after the other. This really is a time when a hundred flowers can bloom and a hundred schools of thought can contend.

As they observe in China, the world is undergoing changes unseen in a century. These are qualitative changes, which entail both significant risks but also immense opportunities for shaping what is known as a "new form of human civilisation." As they say, the times very much suit China.

Pessimism of the West, optimism of the East. Will the West be able to overcome its gloom and pessimism? Only when it stops blaming others, soberly assesses the internal causes, and finds a way for renewal that is qualitatively different from the last few centuries. By that time, the world will be a very different place.