

Paper submitted to the Executive of the Canada-China Friendship Society, November 2011

Report on the Beijing International Forum on People to People Friendship Gary Levy

From September 5-9, 2011 I attended the Forum organized by the Beijing People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Unlike our Canada-China friendship association the BPAFFC is not a group of private citizens who pay a yearly membership fee to belong to a volunteer association. It is closer to what we would call a Crown Corporation – a body closely related to without being officially part of government.

The Association was established in 1981 and has links with 160 organizations in 54 countries. Over the years it has organized thousands of educational, cultural, scientific, sporting and other types of exchanges. As this was the 30th anniversary of its founding the hosts were very anxious to make it a special event. More than 350 people from 28 countries including Chinese and foreign delegates and officials from embassies located in Beijing attended.

I flew to Shanghai several days in advance partly so as not to be jet lagged for the conference but mainly because I was anxious to try out the new high speed rail service between Shanghai to Beijing. It was an impressive experience. The distance, about the equivalent of Ottawa to Winnipeg, took less than five hours and that included stops of about 90 seconds each in Nanjing and Jilin.

The Forum was held mainly at the J.W. Marriot Hotel in the modern Chaoyang district, site of most Embassies and many of the international stores located in Beijing. One evening reception took place in the headquarters of the Beijing People's Friendship Association, an embassy like office located very close to the Forbidden City in central Beijing.

Japan and Korea sent the largest delegations with ten each. The United States had seven, Indonesia and Greece had six each. Most countries sent at least two. It was a bit disappointing being the only Canadian in attendance. The advantage was that it gave me an opportunity, insofar as language would permit, to interact with many other delegations whereas some of the larger delegations tended to stick together during the meals and social occasions.

English and Chinese were official languages of the forum and simultaneous interpretation was used for the business sessions. Three countries, Russian, Japan and France, preferred to use their own language but the hosts managed to accommodate them with either consecutive interpretation or by projecting a translation of their remarks on a screen in either English or Chinese. For informal conversations a bevy of enthusiastic students from the Foreign Languages University helped the many unilingual Chinese and foreign delegate's converse with each other during the tea breaks and social events.

Foreign delegates, particularly those from the English speaking world and western Europe tended to be retired or near retirement. However, the tiny island of Mauritius sent 22 delegates, most of them in their 20s, as part of a special arrangement with the

Youth Network of Mauritius. Also in attendance for part of the conference were a dozen young members of the multicultural Amsterdam Urban Dance Theatre, which has a longstanding relations with the Beijing Friendship Group. They provided entertainment at the banquet and were included in some of the cultural events. The presence of the language students, the Dutch dancers and the Mauritian youth added an interesting informal dimension to the more formal proceedings of the Forum.

The business sessions consisted of an official opening, two plenary sessions and two workshops. Opening speeches were given by: Zhao Jiaqi, President of BPAFFC, Romano Prodi, former Prime Minister of Italy, Chen Haosu, President of China Peoples Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Hou Yulan, Deputy Secretary General of Beijing's Municipal People's Government, Qian Haiyan, Director of Public Administration and Development Management Division of ECOSOC, United Nations and Cheng Tao, Vice President of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs. These were generally short and limited to words of welcome and support for the concept of person to person diplomacy.

Speakers at the plenary sessions were generally the leaders of delegations or senior Chinese officials. They included:

Mr. Wu Jianmin, Honorary President of the China Foreign Affairs University
Ms. Li Xiaoqiang, Executive Vice President of the BPAFFC
Prof. Timothy Chambless, Hinckley Institute of Politics, University of Utah
Mr. Titarenko Mikhail, President, Russia-China Friendship Association
Ms. Zhang Lixin, Deputy Mayor of Chaoyang District
Ms. Qin Lin, President of Sichuan Provincial People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
Mr. Utsunomiya Tokuichiro, President of Japan-China Friendship Association
Mr. Li Ruohong, Head of the China World Peace Association
Ms Lisette Textier, President, France China Friendship Association
Ms. Li Xiaolin, Vice President of the China People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. (CPAFFC)

Politics was notably absent from the speeches with two small exceptions. One of the Chinese speakers suggested that the world was embarked on a path toward peace, friendly development and co-operation and that China was at the forefront of this movement. By contrast, he noted, the United States with its emphasis on military solutions to international problems seemed to be swimming against the current.

A few American delegates felt even this mild rebuke was uncalled for, however, discussions with individual delegates left no doubt that the Chinese approach to international affairs had much more support among the delegates than the more ideological and aggressive American one.

The other bit of politics came from French delegate who took a very strong position against Tibetan "separatists" The reason seemed to have less to do with events in China and Tibet and more with the fact that pro-Tibetan demonstrators had disrupted the 2008 Olympic torch parade in Paris causing some embarrassment to the government at that time.

The two workshops which were held simultaneously were the most interesting part of the Forum although only a small number of countries, including Canada, were invited to give papers. The theme of the first workshop was: People-to-People Diplomacy and Economic and Social Development. Speakers were from Pakistan, Korea, Morocco, USA, Mongolia, as well as China. My paper was selected for the second workshop: International Cooperation Experiences of Friendly Organizations.

I suggested that although Canada-China official relations had not been the warmest over the last few years I looked at the longer term where there was a great tradition of close person to person relationships. I gave three examples -- Dr. Norman Bethune for his humanitarian work, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, for his book and early recognition of China, and more recently Mark Roswell, known as Daschan, for his success as a Chinese television star. In each case their work in non diplomatic areas eventually had major repercussions in the official diplomatic sphere.

It was not possible in ten minutes to go over all the other examples of person to person relations including business, culture, education and so on but I mentioned a few recent trends. I also noted the many areas of similarity between Canada and China (the struggle against distance and geography, the multicultural fabric, the national park system etc). I concluded by suggesting that Canada and the United States were a model of person to person relations but that it had not always been so. I hoped that Canada and China could follow this model and, over time, become equally close.

There was no opportunity for questions or comments so it was difficult to judge the reaction but the Chair of the session, Ms Zhang Lixin, Deputy Mayor of Chaoyang, made general and positive statements about each presentation. During the Forum a number of Chinese officials went out of their way to express to me their admiration for Dr. Bethune who is obviously still held in high regard in China.

Not all the speakers in my workshop represented friendship associations or even spoke about them. The delegate from Greece, Spyridon Merkouris of the Melina Mercouris Foundation, used his time to describe a three year project to bring together experts in Greek and Chinese philosophy for the purpose of producing a book on the work of Socrates and Confucius. He was pleased to announce its publication and had copies available for those interested.

The Belgian delegate, Luc Henau, Founder-promoter, International Two Days Walks of Flanders-Blankenberge, explained his philosophy of international goodwill and friendship through walking. He had recently organized an international walk in Japan and was obviously looking to do the same in China in the future.

The Norwegian delegate, Pamela Hiley, Director of the Norwegian Taiji Center had been practicing and teaching Taiji for 28 years with more than 20 trips to China in search of the root of the ancient art of Taijiquan and the nature based philosophy of Daoism. She explained the teaching of the Daoist masters and even convinced a number of delegates to join her for early morning Taiji exercises during the conference.

At first I thought these interventions were a bit strange and off topic but by the end of the conference I came to appreciate how flexible the Chinese were in drawing in people who were sympathetic to China in any way shape or form. No doubt this goes back to the days when China was isolated diplomatically but, as in many areas, I think there are lessons to be learned from China in this regard.

Others in my workshop focused more specifically on what their associations were doing. For example David Bromwich, Vice-President of the New Zealand-China Friendship Association pointed out that New Zealand has a Dr. Bethune type figure, Rewi Alley. Although not nearly as famous as Bethune he established a number of co-operatives in western China during the 1930s and 40s. The New Zealand Friendship Society has continued to support these providing money (with help from the New Zealand government) and expertise.

The legacy of a heroic New Zealand nurse, Kathleen Hall, who worked with Dr. Bethune, is also commemorated by a scholarship that allows girls from poor rural areas to attend university for 3-4 years and to become public health nurses. The cost of the scholarship (about \$1500 Canadian) is generated from fund raising projects among the New Zealand branches. The New Zealand Association has also established partnerships with the Baile School in Shaanxi and with the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation. For a small country they seem to be doing much more than Canada to establish good relations with China both at the government and non government level.

No American presented a formal paper in my workshop but a couple of them spoke during the open period following the presentations. They put considerable emphasis on academic exchanges and not just at the university level. For example in 1993 two residents of Park City, a small Utah ski community, began an international student exchange whereby every other year 10 students from Park City High School go to China to live and study with students from Beijing #4 High School. Subsequently many from this program have returned to China to continue their studies or their friendships. We met a couple of the graduates of this program one of whom is now doing graduate study in Beijing and the other who is now a permanent Beijing resident and works as a reporter for the Wall Street Journal.

As with similar conferences in North America exchanges in formal sessions are only part of the picture. A great deal takes place during social activities and the organizers went to great lengths to facilitate this process.

The first social event was the opening banquet. Gifts were offered by a number of delegations to the hosts and many souvenir photographs of the event. Day 2 included a visit to the new Capital Museum followed by an evening reception and buffet dinner at the headquarters of the BPAFFC. Entertainment included Peking Opera, dance, shadow puppet and face changing.

The final day was devoted to cultural tours. Delegates had a choice of visiting either the Forbidden City and the Great Wall or a cultural tour. I chose the latter which included a visit to the new socialist village of Gaobeidian, a Beijing suburban area turned into what we would call a modern condo development. There was an opportunity to visit individual residences and meet the residents.

The cultural tour concluded with a visit to a street devoted to antique furniture shops and with a trip to Beijing 798 Art Zone. Over 200 artists have studios and galleries in this complex ranging from the traditional to examples of the most abstract modern art and sculpture.

Although this was not my first time to China it was my first function on behalf of the Canada-China Friendship Association. The main conclusion is that the potential for possible future projects with China is virtually limitless. I appreciate having been selected to attend this event and hope this report may be of some use to the executive of the Canada-China Friendship Association in the months and years ahead.

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