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How One Icelander Remembers 1976 — China's Year of the Fire Dragon

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Ragnar Baldursson and his Peking University classmates in 1979.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF RAGNAR BALDURSSON

The year 1976 was a momentous one in China. For one Icelandic diplomat, it still reverberates.

In October that year, Ragnar Baldursson, then a Peking University student, stood in Tiananmen Square when Beijing's mayor, Wu De, declared the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Mr. Baldursson, who describes the scene in his book "Nineteen Seventy-Six," was one of the few Westerners in China during a year of convulsive events: the Tangshan earthquake, Mao Zedong's death and the fall of the Gang of Four.

As a high-school student in Iceland he had been drawn to Marxist-Leninist groups forming in the wake of 1968 radicalism sweeping Europe. At the age of 19, he won one of two scholarships for Icelandic students to go to China. He arrived in 1975, on the threshold of the Year of the Fire Dragon.

One of the few things he knew about Chinese culture was that dragons were important--just like in Viking lore, where a giant serpent like creature encircles the gods.

He says now that he hadn't at all realized the hold Chinese culture and traditions had on the country, even under Mao who had pledged to break with China's imperial past. Fire Dragon years, a Zodiac combination that occurs in six-decade intervals, had several times in Chinese history marked sweeping political change -- and many greeted the Lunar New Year in early 1976 with apprehension.





Mr. Baldursson in Iceland in the spring of 2015.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF RAGNAR BALDURSSON

At first, the omnipresence of Mao images on walls in dining halls and factories across China gave a sense of stability and permanence – especially for a young Maoist. Slowly, fellow students helped Mr. Baldursson decipher nuances in the political jargon that opened to him a world of contradictions and complex political machinations.

“I became fascinated by the enigma of China,” said Mr. Baldursson, 60, in an interview in Beijing, where he was speaking about his book at the Bookworm Literary Festival and where he is now the deputy chief of mission at the Icelandic Embassy.

“You thought you had understood something, and then something completely unexpected happened,” he says. He cites as an example the fall and subsequent rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping.

After Mao died in September, it was the less well-known Hua Guofeng who was declared China’s new leader; Deng didn’t re-emerge until almost a year later.

With 40 years of hindsight, Mr. Baldursson believes that the conditions for Deng to eventually take the reins and steer China into its era of state-sponsored capitalism, or “Socialist Market Economy,” were created during 1976—and that the key to the political changes he witnessed can be found in Confucius.

He cites the “Analects of Confucius” – which he has translated into Icelandic – to illustrate that in traditional Chinese thinking, what is right changes according to the circumstances.



Mr. Baldursson and some schoolmates at the Great Wall in 1976.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF RAGNAR BALDURSSON

“Deng Xiaoping rectified the mistakes of the Mao regime, of the Cultural Revolution,” he says, though he points out that Deng preserved Mao’s legacy as the founder of modern China even as he took China down an entirely different path.

"In the Chinese tradition, a state leader is seen as the head of the extended family of his people. He should not be accused of errors, but if he commits mistakes they should be corrected. Anyway, what is correct is seen as relative."

At Peking University, Mr. Baldursson's class was the last group of "worker-peasant-soldier" students before entrance examinations that had been suspended during the Cultural Revolution started up again.

It was a fascinating time to be a philosophy student, Mr. Baldursson says, and his classmates were remarkably forthcoming with their opinions at a time when official positions were continually being revised.

He found an additional channel into Chinese society via Esperanto – a language he had learned growing up as his father, Baldur Ragnarsson, was a well-known Esperantist. In China, Esperanto had the official support of Mao.

In 1979, Mr. Baldursson graduated; he believes he was the first Western European to get an undergraduate degree from a Chinese university after the Cultural Revolution.

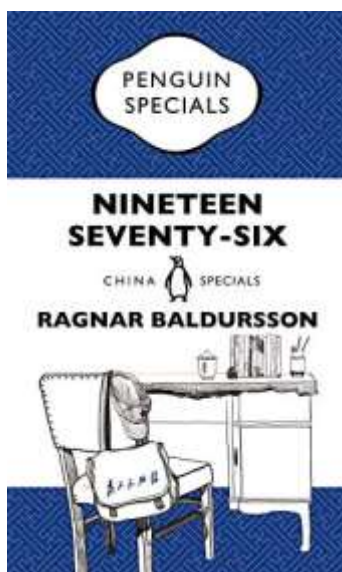
He left Beijing for Tokyo, where he studied Japanese, and then spent some years as a teacher and journalist in Iceland before he was asked to join the foreign ministry when Iceland opened an embassy in China in the mid-1990s.

He keeps in touch with his Peking University classmates via a group on Tencent's WeChat messaging app. Some of his former classmates have visited him in Iceland; several went on to become local and national leaders.

The Icelandic Marxist-Leninist group he continued to belong to dissolved itself in 1985 after a majority vote found that its policies had been fundamentally wrong.

Mr. Baldursson says his insights into Chinese thinking have been an asset in his diplomatic career.

"It helped me understand the Chinese perspective in the final round of negotiations on a free-trade agreement with China, making it easier to reach an acceptable conclusion," he says.



As for his perspective now on the Year of the Fire Dragon -- and the limits of trying to give a definitive account of it -- he quotes Lao Tzu, whom he has also translated into Icelandic: "A path that can be described is not a permanent path."

About the Author

Ragnar Baldursson is a diplomat and scholar of Chinese philosophy. He is the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Iceland in Beijing and has served in the Icelandic foreign ministry for over 20 years. Ragnar was one of the first foreign students admitted to study at Peking University in the 1970s where he gained a BA in Philosophy. He has translated the Analects of Confucius and the Daodejing into Icelandic.

Nineteen Seventy-Six. Penguin 2016