Traveling to Dictatorships

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In 1994, I was asked to lead a delegation of information security experts from the United States and the People’s Republic of China. When not on the West Coast, and in our preparatory briefing, I warned the members of our delegation to be on their guard at all times once they entered the PRC. I told them that they would be under surveillance 24 hours a day. They should expect no privacy when speaking to each other and certainly not when using telephones. They should not discuss confidential information about their companies or about US national security. They should carry no confidential information on their laptop computers. It should make no derogatory or critical comments about the government of the PRC or about the Chinese people.

We flew to Hong Kong and entered the PRC by train to Guangzhou (Canton). Over the next three weeks, we gave lectures in Guangdong, Shanghai, and Beijing to banking officials, government information technologists, and provincial and federal law enforcement authorities. One of my fondest memories is of a workshop on financial systems security that I introduced in Chinese. I had studied Mandarin Chinese for 2 1/2 years in the early 1980s and spoke language with the proficiency of a three-year-old. In my very best accent, with due attention to the four tones required for correct pronunciation and meaning, I said that we were all friends and we all wanted to work. The Chinese translator burst into laughter and said English, “Ha-ha-ha!!! That sounds like Chinese!!” The entire audience instantly burst into gales of laughter; what was particularly interesting was that no one waited for the Chinese translation.

When we visited the capital, our guide, a charming 30-year-old young woman with wonderful English and a seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of China and of the cities and areas we were visiting, took us to the Ba Da Ling -- a portion of the Great Wall of China near Beijing. As usual, we traveled on a tour bus; I habitually sat right behind the driver. On that day, we were stopped on a deserted stretch of road by two scruffy soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army. They were slouching, their collars were undone, and they were smoking: they looked like thugs and we instantly got the idea that they were about to shake us down for cash. The tour guide stepped out of the bus; her head was roughly at the level of their chests. She spoke a few words to them; to our astonishment, both soldiers snapped rigidly to attention with every sign of terror on their faces. turned towards me and said in excellent English, “She is colonel in secret police.”

So think about this for a minute. How likely do you think it is that the bus driver for a group of Chinese professionals visiting the USA would just happen to speak nearly perfect Chinese? And when was the last time you even heard of a secret police force in the USA, let alone having a one of its colonels act as a tour guide?

So the lesson for all of you international travelers is simple: find out about the political and security situation in the countries you plan to visit before you leave. And if you’re going to spend time in a dictatorship, watch your mouth and keep your computer clean.

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