Three Dialogues About Foreign Contact

Dialogue 1: In a Teahouse During the Tang Dynasty

Official Who Supports an Open-Door Policy: Ahh! Life certainly has become more enjoyable now that we've re-established contact with our foreign friends. I find sitting in chairs much more comfortable than sitting on the floor.

Official Who Supports a Closed-Door Policy: You're always impressed with foreign gadgets and geezigs and never think about the problems they bring. Chairs might be more comfortable, but it cost me a fortune to redecorate my house! First, all my tables were too short. Then I had to raise the height of all my cabinets. And now I have dozens of floor cushions we don't use anymore. I can't give them away.

Open-Door Official: But look at all these delicious foods we didn't have before! My favorites are the garlic, peas, and spinach.

Closed-Door Official: Garlic has certainly improved my chef's dishes. But spinach—they can take that back to whatever horrible place they found it.

Open-Door Official: Have you seen the splendid array of products we have in our shops now because of this foreign trade? Yesterday I bought the most beautiful ivory box, and I see you have a new pearl ring on your finger. Where do you think that pearl comes from? Not from anywhere in China, I can assure you!

Closed-Door Official: Well, I guess some things are worthwhile. But think about the forms of so-called entertainment brought in by those foreigners. I don't know about you, but I just don't think it's quite right for women to be riding horses, much less playing polo.

Open-Door Official: Listen. Do you hear that amazing music? That is being played on a pipa, the likes of which came all the way from Central Asia. In case you've forgotten, you couldn't have found anything like it here in China before we traded with "those foreigners." Doesn't that prove my point?

Closed-Door Official: What was wrong with our musical instruments? Why do we need new ones?

Open-Door Official: OK then, what about the new religions? I think it's fascinating to learn about different beliefs from Jews and Christians and Muslims. And Buddhism has become especially popular here over the years.

Closed-Door Official: I just have some problems with the special treatment given to these new religions. For example, Buddhist monks and nuns don't have to pay taxes.

Open-Door Official: Come on, now be fair. The Buddhists run good schools and hospitals, and I just stayed at one of their travelers' lodges. It was very nice.

Closed-Door Official: Hmmm. Do you think they need any floor cushions? Because I could get them a great deal.
Dialogue 2: At the Khan’s Court During the Yuan Dynasty

**Official Who Supports a Closed-Door Policy:** Oh, great. Here they come again. More foreign barbarians.

**Official Who Supports an Open-Door Policy:** Of course. Now that the Silk Road is safer and easier to travel, many more of these intriguing travelers are arriving to learn about our great country.

**Closed-Door Official:** What’s wrong with their countries? Can’t they just stay home?

**Open-Door Official:** Their ideas are refreshing. Remember that scientist—

**Closed-Door Official:** Al-Din.

**Open-Door Official:** Yes, Jamal al-Din. From Persia, wasn’t he? The astronomical instruments he brought allow us to enjoy a more accurate calendar. And don’t forget, he helped to build the new observatory. Wouldn’t you say we have benefited from his ideas?

**Closed-Door Official:** And don’t you forget what we’ve lost because of this “exchange of ideas.” Our people do not think: they’ve shared secrets we should have kept to ourselves! Now foreigners know about our printing techniques and I understand they’ve learned how we make explosive powder. That will surely come back to haunt us!

**Open-Door Official:** But what about the things we get from foreign experience? Don’t you think the hospitals have improved, thanks to all the new Muslim doctors?

**Closed-Door Official:** You are so naive. Think about those foreigners the khan has appointed to be government officials. They’ll steal the cloak off your back.Honestly, I wasn’t sorry to hear about the assassination of the khan’s finance minister. It bothers me that these foreign people are appointed to rule over us.

**Open-Door Official:** What about Marco Polo? Isn’t he from…

**Closed-Door Official:** Venice.

**Open-Door Official:** Yes. All the way from Venice. I hear he says many nice things about us—

**Closed-Door Official:** Like?

**Open-Door Official:** Like we’re friendly to strangers and we’re an honest and peace-loving people. He seems like a really nice guy.

**Closed-Door Official:** He might be nice, but exactly what has he done for China? The khan made him an official, but he doesn’t do anything but travel around on some kind of “inspection.” He doesn’t even read or write Chinese. Some say he’s getting quite wealthy here. I wonder how that’s happening? Selling our secrets, most likely.

**Open-Door Official:** Frankly, I’m quite pleased that the khan has shown more respect for merchants than the rulers of our other dynasties have. Merchants used to be considered the lowest class in society. I never thought that was very fair. They bring us ivory, beautiful perfumes, and useful medicines from far away places. Why should they be treated so badly?

**Closed-Door Official:** Well, foreign merchants may have gotten a bad deal in the past. But now they travel without restrictions and they don’t pay taxes. Sounds like they’ve got a better deal living in China than we do!
Dialogue 3: On the Dock During the Ming Dynasty

Official Who Supports an Open-Door Policy: Wow! We certainly know how to build ships. See those over there? The biggest ones have 4 decks and, with 12 watertight compartments, they are virtually unsinkable. And several hundred men can sail on one ship. Did you know that because they even have cabins, merchants are able to bring their wives along? They can carry enough food for everyone on board. They have tubs of earth for growing fruits and vegetables, and aquariums for keeping fresh fish!

Official Who Supports a Closed-Door Policy: Merchants—hmmph! They’re the lowest class of society. They produce nothing. Why should they travel in such luxury?

Open-Door Official: Well, there won’t be any more exotic explorations like that made by Zheng He. Those beautiful ships won’t be going anywhere.

Closed-Door Official: I think the officials showed amazingly good judgment in stopping those silly voyages. Zheng He’s trips were a terrible waste of money. Name just one good thing China gained from them.

Open-Door Official: For one thing, 30 of the places he visited promised to become tributaries of China.

Closed-Door Official: These little tiny countries send these ambassadors to kowtow to the emperor—

Open-Door Official: A sign of respect.

Closed-Door Official: They bring cheap gifts—

Open-Door Official: Your opinion, sir.

Closed-Door Official: Then our emperor sends their rulers truly priceless gifts and allows them the privilege of trading with us! Now I ask you, how exactly do we benefit from all of this?

Open-Door Official: It’s important that other countries respect us. We are, of course, the most civilized country in the world. We lost too much prestige when the Mongols ruled. And remember the fantastic things Zheng He found. I’d love one of those sashes he brought back from India. I heard they’re spun from thread made of real gold and covered with pearls and precious stones. And those amazing animals.

Closed-Door Official: Sorry to interrupt you, but what good is an ostrich? What does one do with a zebra? And lions and leopards? What are they good for? We just put them in a zoo, and now we have to spend good money caring for them.

Open-Door Official: You can’t fool me. I heard about the time you first saw that African giraffe. You were speechless. We didn’t even know these animals existed! But I suppose you’re pleased with the new trade and travel restrictions?

Closed-Door Official: Obviously, I thought the restrictions were long overdue. Everyone was attacking us—the Mongols from the north, the Dutch and Portuguese from the sea, and those Japanese pirates made safe trade by sea impossible. It’s for the best that we just close our borders.