

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Evan Osnos, Joanne J. Myers**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you for joining us.

We are delighted to welcome Evan Osnos to this Public Affairs breakfast. Evan is a journalist admired by all, but especially by his peers, who commend him for his energetic skill and thoughtful observations of those he met while living and working in China. Many of these individuals are vividly portrayed in this book, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China*.

Evan went to China in 2005 to write for *The Chicago Tribune*. A few years later, he became the Beijing-based correspondent for *The New Yorker*, returning to the States just last year. Fans of his *New Yorker* "Letters from China" column are very familiar with his engaging and telling portraits, which through the years have revealed a great deal about the Chinese character and have helped us to unravel common misconceptions about this Asian giant.

To some degree, every country is a study in contrasts. Therefore, it's not surprising that when you think about China, the first things that come to mind are not necessarily the reality on the ground. In *Age of Ambition* Evan reveals just that, as he documents the historic societal shifts under way in the Middle Kingdom.

In sharing the stories of the various movers and shakers, as well as ordinary folk, he weaves vignettes of Chinese life at many different levels, all which provide unerring insights into what makes the Chinese the people who they are. He writes that China is separated by contradictions and provides an account of what he describes as "the collision of two forces: aspiration and authoritarianism."

Because the rise of China is one of the biggest international stories of the past 25 years, it's not a surprise that scores of books and articles have been written on every aspect of China's progress. No doubt, many more will continue to appear, rehearsing familiar themes and debates. However, this time around, *Age of Ambition* breaks new ground in telling many stories at once—a human story, an economic story, and a political one—all which serve to describe the clash between the rise of the individual and the *Communist Party's* struggle to retain control.

As the rest of the world tries to define a country in the throes of staggering transformation, what we can learn from Evan's telling of these enterprising, brave, stoic, and adaptable Chinese may help us

make sense out of the often confusing complexity that is today's China.

To meet a vivid tableau of actors from all walks of Chinese life, please join me in welcoming a very special guest, Evan Osnos.

Thank you for coming us.

## Remarks

**EVAN OSNOS:** Thank you for a lovely, lovely introduction. I should quit while we're ahead and send us all home.

Thanks, everybody, for coming out. I'm very grateful.

I want to start today by telling you a little bit about what it feels like to be a writer in China these days. One of my favorite descriptions about the experience of being there comes from [John King Fairbank](#), who is the great Harvard Sinologist. He once said, "China is a journalist's dream and a statistician's nightmare," because, he said, "it has more human drama and fewer verifiable facts per square mile than anywhere else on the planet." He said that in 1947. I can report to you that the situation is more or less the same today, though our fact-checking department does a decent job of trying to correct that.

In China these days things are changing, as we all know, so fast that often the challenge is keeping our work up-to-date. In many cases, your greatest asset in being in China these days is not to know too much. People who arrive often feel after a week that they can feel a column coming on, they can write something; and then, after they have been there for a month, they think, "I might have a book in me." And then after you have been there for a year, you realize you actually can't write anything at all for a while because you've just learned how much you don't know about what's going on around you. So that's my excuse for spending eight years before I wrote this book.

I'd like to begin, if we can, by reading a little bit from the first page of *Age of Ambition*, and it will set the context for our conversation today:

Whenever a new idea sweeps across China—a new fashion, a philosophy, a way of life—the Chinese describe it as a "fever." In the first years after the country opened to the world, people contracted "Western Business Suit Fever" and "[Jean-Paul Sartre](#) Fever" and "Private Telephone Fever." It was difficult to predict when or where a fever would ignite, or what it would leave behind.

In the village of Xiajia (population 1,564) there was a fever for the American cop show [Hunter](#), better known in China as *Expert Detective Heng Te*. When the show appeared on Chinese television in 1990, the villagers of Xiajia started to gather to watch Det. Sgt. Rick Hunter of the Los Angeles Police Department go undercover with his partner, Det. Sgt. Dee Dee McCall. And the villagers of Xiajia came to expect that Det. Sgt. Rick Hunter would always find at least two occasions to utter his trademark phrase, "Works for me"—though in Chinese he came across as a religious man, because "Works for me" was mistranslated as "Whatever God wants."

The fever passed from one person to the next, and it affected each in a different way. Some months later, when the police in Xiajia tried to search the home of a local farmer, the man told them to come back when they had a warrant, a word he had learned *Expert Detective Heng Te*.

So why do I start a book on the subject of China today with a television show in a village? Well, when I moved to China in 2005, I was accustomed to reading about the place and thinking about the place in grand, broad strokes. You know, we often talked about it in terms of "one-fifth of humanity" and these "great sweeping changes" in politics and economics. But if you move into a Chinese neighborhood, the things that you hear about and the things that people talk to you about are actually much more private dramas, intimate dramas, perceptual things, the things in their lives that actually shape the way that they imagine themselves as citizens, and ultimately their place in the world. That was the level of altitude from which I wanted to engage China from the beginning.

I am talking today about the "Age of Ambition." What that means is two things. I am referring, obviously, in one sense to the national ambition of a country that is feeling out a new, more muscular position in the world. But at the same time, I am talking about another level of ambition, and that is the collective and individual aspirations of 1.4 billion Chinese people, who are in their own ways discovering the ability to aspire at all in a way that was never possible before.

My hope is that by looking at China in that way, in framing a way of seeing China today, that it will help us understand the kinds of choices that people are making, both in terms of how they orient their own politics and economics at home and also, of course, how China is dealing with the rest of the world.

When we talk about China today, I think it is useful just to remind ourselves where it has come from over the course of the last few decades.

Twenty years ago, 1994, was when I got interested in China. I wandered into a class on Chinese politics, taught by [Roderick MacFarquhar](#), who may be familiar to some people in this room, and it was an amazing story that opened up in front of me. It was a story with these incredible protean figures, like Chairman [Mao](#) and [Deng Xiaoping](#), and it was a story of [civil war](#) and of [revolution](#). All of it was compressed into 60 years. This was about modern Chinese politics, and it was operatic.

At the time, this was only five years after the [demonstrations](#) at Tiananmen Square in 1989. This spring will mark 25 years since those demonstrations. They of course ended in bloodshed. But in other ways they also anticipated the period that was to come.

When I look back on that period, I was at the time taken with the fact that these were young people, barely older than I was, who were very clearly torn between East and West. If you looked at these young people in Tiananmen Square in 1989, they had shag haircuts and they wore bell bottoms and they had these placards that said quotes from [Patrick Henry](#). And yet, they also sang "[The Internationale](#)," the great communist hymn. When it was time for them to deliver their demands, for instance to the [Party](#) leadership, they delivered them in the traditional style, on their knees, delivering them to men who were buttoned up in their Mao suits. So it was this pivot moment in Chinese life.

There was one quote that stays with me. This is a young student demonstrator, who said to a journalist that spring, "I don't know exactly what we want, but we want more of it." [Laughter] That sense of demand and expectation was the beginning of the China that we see today in so many ways.

I flew to Beijing in 1996 to start studying Chinese. I have to admit when I got there it was not what I expected it to be. It was not the country I had imagined on the television. Beijing, in fact, as people who have been there I think can attest, was closer in geography and spirit really to Mongolia than it is to Hong Kong. In 1996, the country had an economy smaller than that of Italy at the time. It smelled of old wool and coal and tobacco. I loved it. I loved this sense that the place was just

opening up around you, history was unfolding, and people were taking risks in all kinds of new ways.

It was not a particularly glamorous place. In 1996, the most luxurious destination in town was a hotel called the Jianguo Hotel, which the architect proudly described as a perfect replica of a Holiday Inn that he had seen in Palo Alto, California. China today is now home to 40 percent of the skyscrapers under construction worldwide.

In the decades since then, China has been defined, above all, by growth, by plenty, by a sudden sense of what you can have that you had never had before. China today, obviously, does not want for food. The Chinese people eat six times as much meat today as they did in 1976.

But they are also in their own way hungry for ideas and information and respect. I think that points us to some of the issues we will be talking about in a second on the international stage.

When China began to move in this new direction, one of the questions that it had to answer for itself was: How do we accommodate our political system with an economic system we know we need to survive?

What they did was make a bargain with their people. They said, "We will allow you to get rich if you allow us to stay in power." That was the bargain. It wasn't complex and it was explicit in many ways. Today, of course, China is the world's largest consumer of movies and beer and platinum and Louis Vuitton and energy—and you can go down the list.

For some of its citizens this has been the source of enormous fortune. For most people it has not. But overall the Chinese, by any measure, lead more educated, more prosperous lives than they ever have before. In 1978, to put it in perspective, the average Chinese income was \$200 a year and today it's about \$6,000 a year.

So who is running this country and what do they aspire to, what is their ambition, if we want to understand China's place in the world today?

In November 2012, I went to watch the unveiling of the new generation of leadership. Whenever a new generation comes to power in China, it's a moment of great political theater.

One afternoon, the senior ranks of the Communist Party gathered together in order to unveil the members of the Standing Committee, the new President [Xi Jinping](#), and the new Premier [Li Keqiang](#). The event, which was billed at the time as a meet-the-press opportunity, though it was not an opportunity for the press to ask questions, was choreographed down to the last detail. It was, as always, inside the Great Hall of the People next to Tiananmen Square. It was, as always, on the same stage, in front of this great tableau of the Great Wall in autumn. The image that was intended for the audience was very clear: it was about consistency; it was about the absence of division within the leadership. They wanted people to feel that this was "business as usual" in every way, as it had always been before.

So when the leaders walked out on stage, the first thing that you saw was conformity. They were dressed in almost identical blue suits, with the exception of one of them, whom I'm happy to talk about; they were all wearing red ties; their hair was dyed to the same shade of black in many cases. The point was that they wanted people to feel that they were in the hands of a group that had reached a consensus.

President Xi Jinping, the new president, steps forward. He's a very interesting presence, physically

he's very interesting, compared to his predecessor, for instance, who was, almost by design, a sort of forgettable figure. [Hu Jintao](#) had been selected by a group, and he was selected in part because they had had enough of the cult of personality after Mao, and the point was to have people that would not attract that kind of following.

Xi Jinping is a very different person. He is physically large. He commands the stage well. He is confident. He moves around very comfortably. He has a sort of [Jackie Gleason](#) quality about him, if you have ever seen him speaking in public.

When he stepped forward, what he said was fascinating. He didn't use any of the old Party language, any of the esoteric Latin of Chinese Communist Party language, about harmonious development or Mao Zedong/[Marxist/Leninist](#) thought. What he said was that he would dedicate himself above all to what he called "the great renewal of the Chinese nation." That, he said, is the Chinese dream. He repeated it over and over in the weeks ahead, and it became, almost overnight, the new slogan for the government, the new central animating idea. At one point we counted it up, and it appeared on the front page of *The People's Daily* 24 times in one week.

So what is the Chinese dream? What is it that he is talking about? Well, he is talking about a return to the way that the Chinese imagine their own place in the world. You know, after all, they see themselves as a great civilization, as they have been for most of human history. They recall the days when they were printing 400 years before [Gutenberg](#). This is a civilization that had one-third of the world's wealth in the 18th century. They say, "That is the position we should be going back to." So when he talks about the great renewal of the Chinese nation, it's quite a sophisticated way of talking about his own past, and of course also their future.

In China you see this kind of national ambition all over the place. If you have been there, you see that they are building more high-speed railway than the rest of the world combined. They landed a spacecraft on the moon last year, and they are talking about a mission to the bottom of the sea. It now loans more money to the rest of the developing world than does the World Bank.

But this growing role for China has also, of course, put it into confrontation with its neighbors. This is what we see if we pick up *The New York Times* this morning and read about China's growing [conflict](#) with Vietnam. But you could have the same story about the Philippines or about Japan. This is a period of immense, immense tension in the [East China Sea](#) and the [South China Sea](#). [*For more on the tensions in the South China Sea, check out [Robert Kaplan's recent Carnegie talk](#).*]

Part of this is because this has been a moment of change in the philosophy and in the doctrine of foreign policy in China. For most of the last 40 years, Deng Xiaoping ordained an idea of the way that China would conduct itself in the world, and he called it "hide your strength and bide your time," by which he meant allow China to grow, to continue to rejoin the community of nations, all the while not upsetting the status quo, most of all not upsetting the United States.

But in recent years China has become less comfortable biding its time and hiding its strength. It feels as if it has now reached a point in which it deserves to be regarded as a great power, and it wants to be regarded as a great power. At a minimum, what it wants is for the existing international system, and particularly the United States, to make room for China's interests in the world. That's the argument that it makes.

I think for some of us in the United States, for Americans, particularly at this moment when we feel a sense of vulnerability economically and perhaps with our role in the world, it is easy to imagine that China is setting out to supplant us at this point, to reshape the international order in a way that would

make them the preeminent power.

I think there are reasons to be cautious about that. I think, if you talk to people in Chinese political circles, what they talk to you about are the immense domestic challenges that they are confronting, whether you are talking about corruption or environmental pollution or the opportunity gap that they are trying to close. The things that are foremost in their minds these days are about maintaining enough stability at home to be able to conduct their affairs and maintain power.

They also recognize that being the preeminent power in the world, as much as they might have the ambition to be that eventually, comes with enormous costs. You have to police international sea lanes, you have to be responsible for taking in refugees, you are expected to do things that China doesn't want to do at this stage in its development.

This is one of the reasons why, when you saw the [news](#) the other day that they had been described by one measurement at the World Bank as being now the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power, you would think they would trumpet this news and put it on the front page of the paper. In fact, they didn't. It was not on the front page at all. And they disputed it. They said, "We think the science is a little off." The reason was that it turns out that when you are number one, people ask a lot of you, and they don't necessarily want to be number one at this point.

I think the best way to imagine China's image for its place in the world in the years ahead is that it wants to see itself as a big power once again in a multipolar world. So it imagines that the United States will not occupy exactly the same position it has had for most of the last 40 years, and it doesn't want to take that position immediately. But it wants to be treated in some ways as a more significant player.

So if we now understand a bit about what Xi Jinping's China dream is, the question is: How much is that China dream shared actually by the people on the ground, the 1.4 billion people who are the engine behind China's enormous growth and, I would also argue, perhaps the greatest source of political uncertainty in the years ahead?

Answering that means getting into what it is that actually drives people, what it is that they talk about, what makes them tick.

I think it's useful to remember, by the way, that individual aspirations, the idea that you could define for yourself what mattered, is not a subject that actually got much attention in Chinese history. There really wasn't much room in the Chinese cosmology for individual aspirations at all. People's lives were embedded; they were understood to be part of broader forces, whether it was the family or the village or the factory or the military unit and then, ultimately, the country. You were a part of a network of ideas and people that defined who you were.

In fact, if you look at Chinese art, for instance, what you find in ancient Chinese art is that the individual figures are these tiny figures who are moving through mountains; they are part of this broader context. And then, if you look at the equivalent in the West, the [Mona Lisa](#) is a full-frame portrait in which it is one person at the center of the narrative.

Historically, even the word "ambition" had a negative connotation. In Chinese, the term is *ye xin*, which means literally "wild heart." To be accused of having a wild heart in Chinese was a terrible thing. It could ruin your career; it could get your family into trouble. What it meant was that you were sort of wolfishly ambitious, that you were putting yourself ahead of the group and putting yourself ahead of others.

For most of Chinese history, the pressure to conform was the dominant fact of life. This reached, obviously, its most dramatic illustration during the [Cultural Revolution](#).

There was a doctor whose work I've read who suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution. He was sent out to the far western reaches of the country. His wife committed suicide. Later he was interviewed about the experience of what he had learned. He had been accused of being a rightist, of being politically unreliable, for speaking out and for criticizing some of the things that were happening. He explained in this way. He said, "To survive in China you must reveal nothing to others. Or it can be used against you. Let your public self be like rice in a dinner: bland and inconspicuous."

You know, China, after all, was, as the [famous book](#) put it in the 1950s, the land in which there was the "Emperor of the Blue Ants." That was Chairman Mao. That was the way that it appeared to us as foreigners. When you went, you saw everybody in matching cotton suits. China today is no longer a place of matching cotton suits.

If you want to go back and look at the moment when it began to change, it was 1978. This was the moment when the government embarked on this [economic re-imagination](#) of what the country could be. In effect, what they said was: "We're going to set aside our socialist scripture and we are going to hold onto the saints"—Chairman Mao, whose portrait still hangs above Tiananmen Square—"and we are going to hold onto the things that define us as a political entity but not as an economic organization."

When you talk to people in Chinese about that moment, 1978–1979, when they began, for instance, to break apart the collective farms and the factories, sending people out to go make a living for themselves, the word that they use in Chinese is *songbang*, which is a verb that is used for the unshackling of a prisoner or an animal. This is the word that they use themselves. So it was that profound as a change in the way that they imagined themselves as individual citizens.

You began to hear it in the language. Even that word, the old word for ambition, *ye xin* ("wild heart"), has changed. If you go onto the Chinese Internet today, if you go to [amazon.cn](#), and you look up what's available on the subject of ambition, you will find that the self-help offerings are all about ambition today. You can buy a book called *How to Have a Wild Heart in Your Twenties*. Or my personal favorite is in the parenting section, *Molding Wild Character: Nurturing a Child to Have an Untamable Personality and Wild Ambition*.

Advertisers have picked up on this. If you look at advertising in China, you look at billboards, there are cell phones that are being marketed with the slogan "my turf, my decision."

Even in rural areas, where things tend to change more slowly—it's easy for us to imagine that these kinds of changes are just happening in the city. In fact, if you go off into the countryside, there is a school, for instance, in the Yangtze River Delta where the students recite the following pledge: "Ever since God created all things on earth, there has not been one person like me. My eyes and my ears, my brain and my soul, all are exceptional. Nobody speaks or behaves like me, no one before me and no one will after me. I am the biggest miracle of nature!"

So in China today what we are seeing is people asking themselves: "What do I want? What kind of world do I envision for myself and for my country, and then what am I going to do in order to achieve that?"

One of the reflections of this, one of the things that I write about in the book, is the ways that this has altered the traditions around love and marriage. It's one of the things that people don't talk about very

much in public life in China but has an enormous impact on the way they see themselves.

To put it in context, in history in China there wasn't really much room for desire and for individual choice when it came to marriage. You were basically paired off by the village matchmaker on the basis of whether your two families were a good fit. Later, it was the cadre perhaps and the local Party committee; or it might have been the lieutenant in your military unit who said, "You two are perfect for each other—congratulations." There was very little room for the bride and groom.

Today that has changed quite dramatically. People now have the right, in effect, to choose who it is that they want to marry. Their parents still play a role—some things are, I would say, universal—but they now have the ability to make those kinds of choices in ways that they haven't ever before, and they have embraced that power of choice.

I am going to read you an online personals ad by a young woman named Lin Yu, who's a graduate student in the city of Wuhan. She placed an ad in the newspaper seeking a young man with the following qualities: "Never married; Master's degree or more; not an only child; no smokers; no alcoholics; no gamblers; not from Wuhan; taller than 172 centimeters; ready for at least one year of dating before marriage; sporty; parents who are still together; annual salary over 50,000 yuan; age between 26 and 32; willing to guarantee eating four dinners at home each week; track record of at least two ex-girlfriends, but no more than four; no Virgos; no Capricorns." [Laughter]

As I've tracked over the last few years the awakening of these individual aspirations and desires, I've come to see it as occupying three baskets, three kinds of desires, three kinds of aspirations. In effect, these are the engines that are propelling China through history at this moment. They are the pursuit of fortune, the pursuit of truth, and the pursuit of faith. I'll explain briefly what I mean.

The pursuit of fortune is exactly what it sounds like. It's the thing that we know most about China. This is the point when in 1979 people had the ability to go out and pursue prosperity for the first time.

But what's interesting is that the more they acquired in terms of their physical assets, the more property they acquired, the more they realized that there were threats to that property, the more they realized they could no longer afford to be uninformed. You had to know who was setting the rules, how policy was being made, who was breaking the rules, who was benefiting. That has created this surge of investigative instincts in China over the course of the last 20 years. You see it, in some cases, in sort of independent media and in other cases, of course, it's flourishing on the web.

As people began to answer some of those questions for themselves, questions about, simply, how their society was organized, then they began to get into the deeper questions. This is where you get to this pursuit of faith. They begin to ask the existential questions: "What am I here for? What are my responsibilities as a citizen, to my neighbor, to my country, to my family? What role does [Confucius](#) play in my life, for instance?"

If you talk to people today in China, I'm struck by the fact that five years ago you would sit down at a dinner table with Chinese friends and the conversation would be about real estate. (Some things are indeed universal.) Then it seemed to shift and the conversation became about travel. It was about where you had been and where you were going. Now the conversation is, "Who is your guru?" Everybody is in this search for some kind of satisfying spiritual solution. That has been quite striking to watch.

Very briefly, I'm just going to end by talking a little bit about a young man who I write about in this book, who is not somebody that anybody has really ever heard of. He's not the most famous person



that I write about, but in many ways, he's the one who I perhaps learned the most from. He's a young English teacher. His name is Zhang Zhiming. He's the son of a coal miner from Guangdong province. When I met him, he had been a security guard, working on the edge of a kind of English-language camp. This was this place where people go to learn English.

For the Chinese young people today, English is much more than a language or a skill; it is like a faith. What you believe is that if you can master English, it will catapult you out of your existing station and into something else. And they're not wrong. It really does open up enormous opportunity.

So Zhang Zhiming, or Michael, as he called himself, had decided that English was going to be the secret for him, and he began to study it constantly. It really sort of became an obsession for him.

I went down and I spent time with his family, with his parents. Eventually he went out on his own. This was his own pursuit of fortune, that he was going to start an English language training company. He did. It was called Beautiful Sound English. This was January of 2009.

I'll read you a little bit from the book about what happened to Michael:

The quality of Michael's English always startled me. For someone who had never left China, he was clear and articulate, and he made relatively few mistakes in conversation and in writing—largely because there was almost nothing he wouldn't do in the name of improvement. When a music teacher suggested he hone his pronunciation by holding up a mirror and making exaggerated movements of his mouth, he did that even on the bus. It attracted some strange looks. When another teacher told him to shout even louder than his hero—who is a Chinese English teacher named [Li Yang](#), whose [system](#) of teaching English is that if you shout English at the top of your lungs, it makes you less inhibited. He met somebody who said, "Your problem is you're not shouting loudly enough."—"he began shouting even louder.

He said to me, "I didn't obtain my goal. All I obtained was chronic pharyngitis." A doctor had to prescribe inhalation treatments to repair the damage.

Most of all, though, Michael scoured the Internet looking to find English recordings that appealed to him, and he recited them over and over to hone his accent. He read me one of his favorites: "Something amazing is happening at Verizon Wireless that will change the way America talks. Something big. Something bold. Something new." Listening to him, I realized there was a universal quality to the sound of salesmanship, even if you didn't really care what it was you were selling. He continued: "Introducing nationwide unlimited talk from Verizon Wireless. Now \$30 less than ever before."

For Michael, the study of English was about much, much more than even the possibility of improving your economic station. He framed it in his writings for his own students as a matter of moral entitlement. He wrote, "You are the master of your destiny. You deserve to be happy. You deserve to be different in this world."

I want to tell you, just briefly, a little bit about what we see in China and in Vietnam. This is something that I was just thinking about this morning. Obviously we're all thinking about, what does this mean for Southeast Asia? You now have this great rising power that is coming into greater confrontation with its neighbors. What is driving it? Why are they making the decisions they're making?

I'll just tell you that on the ground in China there is a homegrown nationalist movement. It is the real

thing. They really believe that they deserve to stake out this greater position. But I think sometimes we should think a little bit about why it is that they are joining these protests, why it is that the young Chinese people will join a demonstration.

Oftentimes it's opportunistic. If you go out and you spend time with these young protesters and you say, "Why are you here?" eventually what you discover is that they have a lot of complaints. They complain about the fact that the economy is slowing down and they can't find the kinds of jobs that they want. Or they complain about the fact that houses are too expensive and they can't afford a house. And they can't protest on those things. You're not allowed to protest on those. But you are allowed to protest on the subject of Japan, for instance, or on the subject of Vietnam and the Philippines. So they join that.

A Chinese professor friend said to me once—and he was joking—he said, "You know, you Americans, you always get it wrong on one thing." He said, "You think that the buses that are disgorging these students at the front of the Japanese embassy—you think that's because they have been put up to it, that they wouldn't otherwise be protesting." He said, "No. The reason why they are busing them to the protest is that if they allowed them to walk, they might get distracted along the way and remember all the other things they want to protest about in China."

I'll just leave it there and say thank you all again for coming this morning.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** Warren Hoge, of the International Peace Institute.

That was a wonderful presentation. We all loved listening to it. You have described so effectively how China has become a world now of individual ambition and great expectations. My question is, what happens when, inevitably, disappointment sets in? How will the Chinese handle disappointment? What manifestation of it do you expect?

**EVAN OSNOS:** This is the essential question these days. There is this very sort of brittle sense of stability in China. You have the feeling that it's stable as long as the status quo can obtain, and the underlying conditions are changing so fast that the economic status quo is not going to obtain. Then the question becomes, how does the political establishment respond when, inevitably, there will be an expression of discontent?

Just to put it in perspective, by the way, there are now in China, on average, 180,000 acts of civil unrest every year. That's 500 a day somewhere in the country. Oftentimes the complaints are about environmental pollution or land grabs or corruption.

I think it's worth saying that often people wonder, "We're now 25 years after Tiananmen; is there going to be another Tiananmen Square?" My own sense is that it wouldn't be another Tiananmen Square because they had one. That's the kind of risk they know how to address. The Chinese government has oriented itself precisely to prevent that kind of action from happening again.

What's harder for them to anticipate and respond to is what happens when you have farmers in one area whose crops are unusable because of environmental pollution and they discover that, in fact, farmers in another area have the same complaint and they start to coordinate, and they coordinate by texts and they coordinate by [Weibo](#), which is the Chinese Twitter.

Up until now, the Chinese government solution has been that you pay the leadership of the

demonstrations to stand down. You co-opt them in some form or another, and then you arrest some people. It's a sort of carrot and stick.

But there will be a moment—and this is the key fact—when the middle class decides that the risk to its own health and the risk to its property, for instance, from corruption or from absence of rule of law is a risk to what they have accumulated. So far they have more to gain by staying invested in the system than they have by challenging it. But that is a balancing act, and it's not static. We have seen it changing.

Xi Jinping, I should say, has made more visits to the military in the first two years he has been in power, or 18 months, than his predecessor did in 10 years. This is because he is adamant about maintaining civilian control over the military.

Would they open fire? This is the big question. Would they open fire on a demonstration? They are still wounded by the experience of 1989. It eroded their credibility in a way that was very hard for them to rebuild. The way they rebuilt it was with prosperity, but that prosperity is not going to be available to them again. So Xi Jinping would have a very tough decision on his hands, I think.

**QUESTION:** Rita Hauser.

I want to ask you an indirect question. The [reports](#) the other day of the [Christie's](#) sales went over the top. The biggest buy by far—huge amounts, and way in excess of estimates—was by a Chinese art dealer who was buying for the filthy-rich Chinese.

Why do I raise this? Because we know personally, and I know from some of the published data, huge amounts of money, billions of dollars, are leaving China, parked outside. What does that mean, when the wealthy, the real wealthy, who have a lot to lose, are moving money away? Is it just in case there's a revolution or what have you? What does it tell you about what the people who really have a lot to lose think about the future of China?

**EVAN OSNOS:** You're looking at a key measure of sentiment among the moneyed class in China. I noticed a statistic the other day that said that the Chinese are now the largest buyers of real estate in Manhattan, supplanting the Russians—who seem to have property interests elsewhere at the moment.

In the case of why they're doing it, the truth is, it's very clear why they're doing it. They're doing it because they feel that it's safer for them to have their assets abroad. That's the curious fact about the U.S.-China relationship. On the one hand, there's a deep suspicion of American ambition and goals in terms of how we want to allow or not allow China to enter the international system. On the other hand, we are still the place of last resort. This is where you put your money. This is where you put your children, for instance.

The thing that I look at is not so much where they send their assets, because that's universal, but I think, in some ways, where their children are going to secondary school, where they are going to high school and college. Xi Jinping, the president, has a daughter who is studying at Harvard under a pseudonym.

So I think as long as people are parking their capital and their offspring in the United States, that bodes well for us.

**QUESTIONER:** What does it tell you about them?

**EVAN OSNOS:** I think there is an enormous amount of uncertainty. I can tell you that in the last 10 years I have never sensed more unease among the winners in the system, the people for whom the system has really worked. There's a feeling that two things have happened: one, that they may have passed this economic crest and there will not be the kinds of gains that there were before, and then two—and I think this is serious—there is a sense that the people who have not benefited as much from the system are no longer as willing to abide. That gets to Warren's question, which is, what happens when they reach that breaking point?

I should say, though, that the Communist Party has proved itself to be adaptable in a way that we have often underestimated—I certainly have underestimated. Many of us in the China world got interested because we thought the place was on the cusp of political transition. That was 20 years ago. What they seem to have been able to figure out how to do is to redefine themselves. The party redefines itself constantly in a way that allows them to preserve the organization.

What I'm saying is that the people, for instance, even the members of the party at the senior levels, who feel that there is this potential for great unrest, before they allowed open warfare, essentially, in China, what they would do is try to redefine success. They would conceivably get rid of some of the low-hanging fruit, the members of the party, for instance, who are not sophisticated enough to know how to prevent damage to their reputations—the people who, as they say in China, steal too openly.

And you're seeing that. We're in the midst of this enormous anti-corruption campaign. That is partly for public messaging purposes. You want to be seen as cleaning up. But it is also because Xi Jinping recognizes that it's going to imperil the whole enterprise if they don't go after the people who are doing the most reputational damage to them.

**QUESTION:** Craig Charney, of Charney Research and the [China Beige Book](#), where I can confirm what you said about the economic statistics.

I'm going to ask a bit of a faux naïve question. As you mentioned, the Chinese Communist Party now has a leader who would actually be a decent competitor in a free election, and if they had one, they would probably stay in power for a generation or might be able to come back and win elections, like post-communist parties in Europe. Why don't they take the risk? Wouldn't that be a better hedge?

**EVAN OSNOS:** First of all, I should say I'm a big fan of the China Beige Book. I'm glad to get the question.

In funny ways, the Chinese political class is the most risk-averse part of the country. This is a country in which people take enormous risks. They move themselves across the country. They take their tiny nest egg and they plunge it into some business and see what happens.

But the political class is not that way. What they say is, "It is our responsibility to move as slowly, as gingerly as possible." The mantra that has been adopted ever since the late 1970s is "crossing the river by feeling for the stones." You are only taking steps when you absolutely have to and when you know what is waiting for you.

If we're thinking in statistical terms, what I would love to see is what they're polling data has. They have, actually, a very sophisticated polling system that they have set up within the Xinhua news agency. But none of those numbers are public.

But there will come a point when they realize, for instance, that contested elections are something that they need to do in order to satisfy the public demand for it. What I imagine will be a conceivable

scenario—and these predictions are worth as much as they sound like they're worth—it seems much more conceivable to me that they would create, in effect, caucuses within their existing party and say, "We will now allow, for instance, the People's caucus to compete with the Confucian caucus within the Communist Party," and get people used to it. You see it on the local level where they have intra-party democracy, as it's known, where they have contested elections.

But the idea of their opening themselves up to a full and uncoordinated, ungoverned process of contested elections is very far away, I think.

**QUESTION:** I'm Shirley Wetherhold, and I'm an undergraduate at the University of Michigan.

I guess my question relates to your perception of the difference between popular and professional politics in China. Like you mentioned before, in rural China a lot of things change more slowly than they do in the cities. While you might have a lot of people in the cities that have already been overtaken by their wild hearts and are ready to do something and are frustrated, in the countryside you still have half a billion people who are still trying to work the system to their minimum disadvantage. I was wondering how you foresaw that contributing to issues of collective action in terms of popular politics, and not just the echelons of society that are professional figureheads or something like that.

**EVAN OSNOS:** The question is a really good one, which is about, when people in the countryside don't feel that they are included in this boom, how do they respond and how do they organize politically, in effect?

One of the ways that you see on the ground very clearly is that when people feel as if they have nothing to lose because they haven't gained anything, then they're willing to expose themselves to enormous risk.

Michael Zhang, the guy I mentioned earlier, who is this English teacher, who had, in his own way, a kind of pure aspiration to join that urban middle class—he really said, "That's the logical result for me." By the time I left China last summer, his sense of opportunity had narrowed quite dramatically, and he was frustrated. He was living in this little apartment on the edge of Beijing—almost literally and figuratively on the edge of prosperity, but without actually having any access to it.

He sensed that he was part of a world that he didn't want to be a part of. He was in this awkward position. He couldn't decide whether he should be protesting. Should he be angry or should he be aspirational? There are a lot of people who are in his position.

But the one thing I would add is that there is, as you suggested—and I think you're absolutely right—this kind of gap between professional politics in China and what's actually happening in people's lives, when they really sort of organize.

You go inside the Great Hall of the People for that unveiling that I talked about earlier. It's the most august occasion you can imagine. Everything is draped in red. I remember, after they gave the final speech from the outgoing premier, [Wen Jiabao](#), there was a story in the paper the next day from an attendee of the speech, who said that her hands had gone numb because she had clapped so many times during the speech. She had wept five times, she said. And this was a speech called "Having a Scientific Outlook on Development." It was not exactly a barn-burner.

Then you go out on the web and you talk to people, and it's this raucous, wonderfully emotional political conversation.

So these two conversations are moving in opposite directions.

**QUESTION:** Good morning. Philip Schlüssel.

I'd like you to comment on three things:

Number one, what is the government doing on the excess amount of pollution that's being produced?

Number two, what can they do or what are they doing to deal with the [riots](#) in western China?

Number three, can you comment on the hegemony of the South China Sea, even in the last few days with the problems with the Vietnamese oil drilling?

**EVAN OSNOS:** All of these are great questions.

The first one on environmental pollution: I can tell you that over the last eight years that I've been there that has transformed as an issue, from something that the middle class never talked about—it was the kind of thing that Westerners would talk about, the terrible air quality—today it's now absolutely top priority for middle-class Chinese. So that has created at least a greater incentive for the government to do something about it.

The problem is, it's like turning a battleship. The entire economy is organized in a way that promotes growth above preserving the environment. So that's going to be a slow process. Number one, that's going to be a rule of law, because people break the rules.

Number two, you asked about the protests out in the west, the riots out in Western China. Last year when I was making a list of the issues that I thought were going to be the biggest issues for 2014, for the first time I put at the top of the list ethnic minority unrest. It has turned out to be the other China. We think about it. This is an area that is three times the size of Texas, if you combine Tibet and Xinjiang together. There is enormous, enormous dissatisfaction with the way that the Han Chinese migration and politics have been conducted.

That's one in which I really worry that they are not going to make a shift in policy. The thing the Chinese government worries about more than anything else is about a threat to its sovereignty. They worry that if they lose Xinjiang, they lose the whole thing.

The last one is the South China Sea. This is where it becomes a question of how much is Xi Jinping really willing to risk. My own sense is that he does not want a hot war. I think he realizes the only thing worse than getting involved in a conflict in the South China Sea or the East China Sea is losing a conflict in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, meaning that it would undermine his credibility entirely.

What they're playing is a very dangerous game. They're pushing it as far as they possibly can, in small, incremental steps, knowing that they will be pushed back once or twice. But they believe, over time, they will establish a new normal.

But I think it's without question the most dangerous element on the Chinese political horizon.

**QUESTION:** Carol Spomer.

I was in China in September of 2012, so I did see the [protests](#), and I didn't know how real they were.

So you've answered a lot of questions—Xi'an and Chengdu, those protests against Japan.

I also saw the autonomous people—I think you just started to answer some of the questions, but I've been wondering about that—and the real estate frenzy and the pickiness of the women. So you confirmed that.

I have just three points I would like you to talk about.

One is the opening of the Internet. I was amazed that Tiananmen Square is still a forbidden subject. They don't have photos. They don't have information. When do you see something opening up, changing in that regard?

Two, do you have any other comments about Lijiang or Dali, the autonomous people, like the Bai? How they are going to be incorporated or set back?

The third, in Shanghai, I saw a lot of young people. They are all dressed in shabby clothes. I was told that they can't afford all the goods they manufacture—so the haves and have-nots.

**EVAN OSNOS:** On the first one, the Internet, I think, is going to be very slow to open in China. In fact, things are moving in the opposite direction at the moment. Xi Jinping has clamped down. I think he recognizes that it's an enormous source of political risk for him. You exercise the muscles of skepticism, and you get used to that. You start to say, "Well, if I can do it online, why can't I do it in the street?" That is going to be a very, very slow process of opening up.

On the second question about what happens to, for instance, the Bai minorities, the real fear, the reason why they come down very hard on the Tibetans and on the Uighurs out West, is that China has 56 ethnicities. We sometimes forget that, but they never forget that.

When they look at the Soviet experience, what they say is—and this seems like an esoteric detail, but it's very telling—when they tell the story of how the Soviet Union [collapsed](#), they say that [Gorbachev](#) made a terrible mistake, that when the Kazaks stood up and said, "We want Kazak leaders. We want to have our own leaders in Kazakhstan," they should have beaten them back. That's the Chinese interpretation. Instead, what they said was, "Okay, we'll accommodate your demands," and then that was the beginning of the end. They believe that that led to a new sense of ethnic awareness inside the Soviet Union.

Then the third one is exactly right. People don't actually have the money to be able to buy a lot of the luxury goods that they see advertised—though I would also add that I think some of the shabbiness is just style.

**QUESTION:** Allen Young.

You described, correctly, the history of China as basically a collectivist society. Then you described what's going on now, which seems to be a caricature of individualism. That is bound to create all kinds of psychological tensions, both as a country as a whole and as individuals. How can they accommodate such enormous changes in values?

**EVAN OSNOS:** The first five years I was in China I was struggling with this question: "How am I going to understand what's going on in the Chinese psyche? How do I really get into these kinds of interior questions?"

Then this is where my *New Yorker* magazine instincts clicked in. I said, "Ah, I'm going to go and

interview their shrinks." So I ended up doing a story about psychoanalysis in China, because it was an excuse to talk about the inner life.

I mention that only half kidding, in the sense that there is this radical swing in terms of how people orient themselves in their values and their identity. But if you think about it, they have done these kinds of radical swings many times over the course of the last 100 years. They went from an imperial civilization to the most revolutionary of civilizations in the course of 60 years. Then they went from the most revolutionary socialist society to this kind of Wild West free market capitalism. So people have sort of priced into their sense of the country that you can do that; you can transform your sense of yourselves.

Eventually it will tack back. But for the moment, it creates a lot of uneasiness, particularly inside families. You have parents, for instance, for whom this kind of individualized ethic is very foreign to them, but their kids cannot imagine anything else. So that creates a lot of tension. That's why I decided that it was a subject worth paying attention to.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson.

If we're talking about families, just to take that as an example, how would you see the evolution in ambition and opportunities for professional women, not just looking for husbands, but actually wanting to have careers and to be independent human beings?

**EVAN OSNOS:** It has been interesting. Over the course of the last 100 years, Mao, strangely enough, actually had a positive effect on the role of women in China. He said, "Women hold up half the sky." He passed some laws that were significant in terms of expanding their access to the workforce, for instance, and the ability to be able to have a life outside of the home. What he did, for instance, was he formally banned arranged marriages. They continued in an informal way, of course. But that was meaningful, and people talk about that law as being a significant moment. It was 1952 or 1951, one of the first things he did after he came into office.

By a lot of measures, the role of women in China is better than other places in Asia. It has improved substantially.

But what's really interesting—and this is where the new research is headed. If you're interested in the subject, there's a book called *Leftover Women*, written by a sociologist named [Leta Hong Fincher](#), which I recommend. She has looked at the numbers and says that over the last 30 years this enormous accumulation of wealth—the largest accumulation of wealth in world history—has largely excluded Chinese women, because it's in property, it's in real estate. What happens if you're a set of parents with two kids and you're deciding who is going to get the apartment — "Who are we going to buy the apartment for?"—they buy the apartment for the son because the son needs it to attract a spouse.

It sounds funny, except that it has enormous economic implications. Women have begun to talk about it in China. They say this is unsustainable because this is distorting the entire economic arrangement.

**QUESTION:** Ron Berenbeim.

I'll start just with a comment, and that is that what you said about women and property would come as no surprise to [Thomas Piketty](#).



In any event, my question is this. Your major theme of all the questions here and everything has been how the Chinese leadership balances its innate caution, which is deeply engrained in the culture—more so than many other cultures—with a risk-taking approach. Where in this risk profile does China's enormous expansion and economic incursion into Africa and South America fit?

**EVAN OSNOS:** It's interesting, because they would not describe it as a risky venture.

You're absolutely right. At the risk of selling somebody else's book here, [China's Second Continent](#) is a new book out on the subject of the Chinese in Africa, and I can't recommend it highly enough, by [Howard French](#), formerly of *The New York Times*.

They see that as a necessity. Moving into Africa was part of the process of their making sure that they had resources. That's what drove it initially. They were worried they were going to lose access to the things that the United States had. They saw that four-fifths of their oil, for instance, was coming through the Straits of Malacca, and they worried that if they lost access to that, what would happen? So they sort of tied up these natural resources.

But they don't see it as a risky venture. They really do see it as something that was a safe bet, and the safest bet available.

The one thing I would add, though, is that they discovered when Libya [fell](#) that they had exposed themselves in ways that they really hadn't even realized before. There were 35,000 Chinese workers in Libya. That was a shock, actually, to the Chinese public. All of a sudden you had blog posts on the Chinese web saying, "I'm stuck in Libya. The government has fallen. My government needs to help me get out." These would be sent around China, and all of a sudden people said, "It's the government's responsibility to save our brethren in Libya." So they had to [send](#) a Chinese ship out to the Libyan coast. It was actually the farthest that this kind of vessel had ever gone. It was a real adventure for them.

It worked. They got people home safely. But when you talk to Chinese members of the foreign policy community, they'll say, "That was a very, very close call. We almost ended up looking like we were way out over our skis."

**QUESTION:** Larry Bridwell, Pace University.

I took four students to Berlin this past summer, four females, two Taiwanese and two Chinese, and they bonded very closely. But I've heard recently that when it comes to traditional Chinese culture, that has been preserved in Taiwan, and one of the things that Chairman Mao did was he eliminated all that bourgeois stuff to replace it with the revolutionary.

I would like you to comment on this traditional Chinese culture and also the future relationship between Taiwan and China.

**EVAN OSNOS:** It's absolutely true that you go to Taiwan today and it feels more classically Chinese in some ways than the People's Republic of China [PRC]. That's because the People's Republic took it as one of its stated objectives to expunge the feudal past, and the feudal past was contained in things like the Confucian classics. It has been described as the single most dramatic destruction of patrimony in world history, the Cultural Revolution, particularly the first three years.

Since then, though, there has been a kind of revival. I wrote a [piece](#) in *The New Yorker* in January about the Confucian revival in China. It's quite striking. People are looking now for that connection to

the past.

We used to live in Beijing. My wife and I lived right next to the Confucius Temple. People would be turning up, and they didn't really know what they were looking for, but they were looking for some connection to this past that had been severed.

The PRC and Taiwan, they're better off now than they have been in a very long time. Their relations are improved. They're no longer in a state of conflict. If you talk to people, you would put the possibility of a conflict between the two much lower on the list than it would have been if we were having this conversation 10 years ago. But there's no immediate end in sight. I would say that that distance will stay.

But the idea that the United States would be drawn into a Taiwan-related conflict is much, much smaller today than is the idea that we would be drawn into some conflict on behalf of an American ally elsewhere in the region.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Evan, it was just wonderful. Thank you for joining us.

### **Audio**

In Chinese, the word for ambition is "wild heart" and for millennia individual aspirations were looked down on, as the group always came first. How China has changed!

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