

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

**Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in
the New China by Evan Osnos**

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Summary

Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China by Evan Osnos is a depiction of current Chinese society and the changes it is undergoing following the country's rapid economic growth. The book describes several individuals and events that the author encountered while living in China between 2005 and 2013. The narrative is largely driven by the experiences and the opinions of Chinese citizens, but also advances several of Osnos's personal arguments.

Broadly, the book's individuals fall into four categories, the first being dissidents who strongly oppose the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its policies. Here, Osnos describes Chen Guangcheng, a masseur-turned-lawyer who drew the ire of authorities for helping people challenge laws and government corruption in court. Chen was imprisoned and placed under house arrest, before escaping to seek asylum in the United States. Ai Weiwei, a popular Chinese artist, is a second major dissident described in this book. Ai began criticizing the government via Twitter following its flawed response to a major earthquake. Ai was also imprisoned, placed under house arrest, and severely beaten by Chinese police. In addition to these two, the book describes several other protests and dissidents in less detail.

The second category is media figures who, while critical of the Chinese government, limited their criticism to non-controversial topics. The first of these is Hu Shuli, a magazine editor. Hu controlled *Caijing* magazine, which became popular among party elites for its economic commentary. Hu constantly challenged the limits of government censorship and eventually started her own magazine after a dispute with *Caijing*'s owners. Second, the author portrays Han Han a racecar driver and author. Although he published his commentary through a blog, Han Han was similar to Hu in that he limited his criticism to low-level topics like the education system.

The third category is strong supporters of the Chinese government and the CCP. One of the first individuals Osnos introduces is Lin Zhengyi, later known as Lin Yifu, who defected from the Taiwanese military to swim to mainland China. He eventually became the chief economist of the World Bank and strongly promoted the Chinese economic model throughout his career. More extreme in his nationalist views was Tang Jie, a young scholar who made several videos denouncing outside media coverage of China and arguing forcefully that China was reclaiming its rightful role as a global leader.

Finally, Osnos portrays Michael, a young man who was interested in learning English and eventually becoming an English teacher. Michael struggled to be successful throughout his life and is emblematic of the many young Chinese who are frustrated with their lack of economic prospects. Through all of these characters, Osnos argues that while China has achieved impressive growth, corruption, economic inequality, and a lack of a unifying ideology are major threats to the country.



Prologue-Chapter 4

Summary

In the Prologue, Osnos describes the rise of China over the past five decades. What had previously been a poor, strictly communist country, had seen tremendous economic growth, leading to a rise in living standards throughout the population. Despite this impressive history, Osnos argues that China remains a complicated story on an individual level. He compares this period to the American Golden Age, in which overall economic trends were extremely strong, while rampant inequality left many people in poverty. Simultaneously, their new material wealth has led many Chinese to question the strict political control that their government maintains. Having achieved some level of basic security, people are seeking greater fulfillment in their public lives. While Osnos notes that the Chinese Communist Party has benefited greatly from the country's economic success, he argues that using this success to justify political repression is unsustainable in the long run. His goal in writing this book is to present this complicated - and often contradictory - reality.

Chapter One begins in Taiwan. Taiwan is an island off of mainland China, to which the nationalist Chinese government retreated following their defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Taiwan maintains a separate government and military, while mainland China claims the island as a rogue province. The author introduces Lin Zhengyi, a young and promising Taiwanese soldier who was originally deeply committed to Taiwanese nationalism. In May 1979 however, he abandoned his military post, swam across a mile-wide strait to the mainland, and defected. At the time, the two sides were bitterly antagonistic toward each other. They regularly shelled each other's territories and attempted to lure defectors by dropping propaganda. Osnos claims however, that most defectors, unlike Lin, left the mainland for Taiwan. While China had a proud and successful history, it had declined significantly beginning in the nineteenth century. When the CCP came to power in 1949, they attempted a series of reforms to make China a wealthy communist state. These were largely unsuccessful and exacerbated poverty in many areas. Only after the Chinese government began privatizing farms and other industries did the country begin to see its impressive economic growth. The chapter ends by describing Lin's daring escape and noting that upon his arrival, he was immediately arrested by Chinese soldiers.

The author begins Chapter Two by noting the contrast the poor and underdeveloped China he visited while in college and the more modern, developed country it has become after his return as a professional journalist. He describes the evolution of Beijing, China's capital, as emblematic of changes occurring throughout the country. The city that had once evoked the inhospitable Mongolian steppes was modernizing and rebuilding itself at an extremely rapid pace. Construction was occurring on a massive scale and the internet, despite the CCP's fairly successful effort to restrict it through the use of firewalls and censors, was a major source of information. Simultaneously, personal ambition and individuality, once derided in Chinese culture,



were increasingly respected. All of this change, despite predictions to the contrary, had strengthened the CCP and its control of the country. Early in his return, Osnos travelled to a rural village to visit Chen Guangcheng, a blind masseur who had trained himself as a lawyer to help protect his neighbors from criminal charges related to the One Child Policy. Because of the notoriety he gained for defying the government, Chen's home was closely surveilled by police, preventing him and his family from leaving regularly. The control was so significant that Osnos was barred from speaking to the lawyer when he visited.

Chapter Three returns to Lin. Following an unsuccessful search effort, the Taiwanese government declared that he had died, sparing them the embarrassment of admitting that one of their most prominent young soldiers had defected. As a result, Lin was unable to contact his wife and children, fearing he would risk their safety by admitting that he was alive. Even after he was formally cleared of suspicion by the Chinese military, Lin was viewed skeptically by his Chinese counterparts and struggled to integrate into his new home. He eventually began studying economics at Peking University.

Lin's arrival coincided with a transformative time in Chinese society. Osnos describes in detail how the CCP had originally pushed its citizens to reject individuality and make sacrifices for the common good. Now, they openly encouraged personal ambition as key to the country's future success. As an exemplar of this trend, Osnos presents Gong Haiyan, a young woman from rural China. From a young age, Gong was entrepreneurial, selling popsicles on the street to make extra money. An injury forced her to drop out of school however, temporarily forcing her to abandon her education and hope for a more prosperous life. Gong, like many Chinese people in recent decades, left her rural home and migrated to Beijing. Young people like her were increasingly abandoning the tradition of arranged marriages, instead using their newfound independence and ambition to pursue their own romantic interests. Finding a suitable partner remained difficult, as other elements of Chinese public life did not adapt as quickly to help young men and women meet each other. Gong, like many of her fellow young people, began online dating. Dissatisfied with her experience, she started her own dating site, Love21.com, and an advice column.

Chapter Four begins with Gong meeting her future husband, Guo Jianzeng, through her dating site. By this time, it had become extremely successful and Gong changed its name to "Beautiful Destiny" and applied the tagline "The Serious Dating Website." Gong was an extremely successful businesswoman and an exemplar of the success that young Chinese could achieve in the expanding economy. The author enrolled in the dating site, seeking to better understand the dating culture. He noted that Chinese people were extremely particular about the qualities they sought in potential matches. In particular, Chinese women sought men who had their own home, car, and a substantial amount of savings. Men with none of these were desired as "triple withouts" and were less successful in dating. More generally, online dating provided young Chinese with a greater choice in their life decisions. This growth of options pervaded all aspects of Chinese life. As the economy expanded and strict communism eroded, Chinese families had more disposable income and more consumer products on which to spend it. Wealth



had always been an important aspect of Chinese marriages, but now that some individuals became far wealthier than their counterparts, its role was amplified.

Analysis

This section contrasts the historical and present view of individuality in Chinese culture, emphasizing its growing importance in society. To accomplish this, Osnos presents individuals who serve as metaphors and symbol for aspects of Chinese society. In Chapter Three, he describes the story of Lei Feng, a soldier highlighted by the Chinese in government in 1959 for his selfless devotion to the country. Lei referred to himself as a “tiny screw” in the country’s machine and images of him working were displayed throughout the country as the model of anonymous self-sacrifice. For years, government propagandists encouraged their people to follow Lei’s example.

In contrast, Gong Haiyan demonstrates the growing role of the individual. From an early age, she was entrepreneurial, seeking material wealth, outside of the traditional communist system, and committed to attaining a higher standard of living through education. Following her severe injury, Gong’s family dramatically affirmed this characterization by driving themselves into debt to pay for her treatment and continuing education. Previously, this would have been viewed as selfish of Gong to expect this treatment, but it is now normal in Chinese society. Her move to Beijing is the ultimate ambitious act, particularly given that she changed her given name from “Hainan” to the more cosmopolitan “Haiyan.”

Beyond her personal life story, Gong’s business encouraged individuality and distinctiveness. It openly defied the long tradition of arranged marriage, instead empowering individuals to make their own romantic decisions. Further, Osnos specifically contrasts the long-running focus on conformity with the detailed 35 question survey he completed when enrolling with the service. Young Chinese are not only allowed to be individuals but are required to be in order to be successful. It is clear from Gong’s experiences and business activities that the Lei Feng’s quiet conformity and devotion to the state is less valued in modern China.

Vocabulary

perceptual, stupendous, inscrutable, idiosyncrasy, bumptious, apparatchik, pragmatic, defector, protean, idealism, infatuation, bourgeois, denunciation, indelible, novelty, subordinate, moonlight, acclimate, dowry



Chapter 5-7

Summary

Osnos begins Chapter Five by stating that prior to the reprivatization of the Chinese economy, the primary enemy of the CCP was class. The government sought to make all people equally wealthy, or more accurately equally poor, and income inequality fell to extremely low levels. This drive for equality entered all aspects of society; athletic competition, personal enrichment, and even ranks within the military were sharply discouraged. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, however, dramatically reintroduced class divisions in Chinese society. Chinese families became obsessed and displaying wealth. The first group of people to do successfully was referred to admirably as the "Got Rich First Crowd." Behind them, a new, cosmopolitan middle class emerged, adopting many of the consumption habits of middle class Americans. This pursuit of material wealth was eagerly passed on to children. Parents drove their children to succeed at this highest levels of education; the richest attended elite prep schools and universities in the United States.

Related to this focus on education, strong interest in learning English emerged in China. Chinese people of all ages and professions, encouraged by their government, viewed English as a link to broader economic opportunities. One of China's most famous teachers, Li Yang, developed Crazy English, a method of having his students shout English sentences in order to encourage fluency. His lessons blended language instruction, strong national pride, and inspiration to his students. Osnos met one of Li's most ardent followers, Zhang Zhiming, at an intensive, weeklong language seminar. Zhang, who used the English name "Michael," was obsessed with learning English. Along with this obsession, Michael became ambitious and devoted to self-creation, as evidenced by his frequent repetition of English motivational statements.

Chapter Six focuses on Macau, a Chinese city known for its independent streak and massive gambling industry. Osnos argues that Macau is a microcosm, albeit an extreme one, of the rest of China. It is a major tourist destination and a spectacle of opulent luxury. Further, the popularity of gambling, which Chinese people consider a form of investment, mirrors the economic activity of the country. Osnos profiles Siu Yun Ping, a man from just outside Macau who became extremely wealthy as a gambler. Eventually, Siu was targeted by a triad, a form of crime organization, who burned his house and threatened his friends in an attempt to extort money. Osnos states clearly that organized crime is major issue in Macau. The free flow of money made the city an ideal place to launder money and the Chinese government was hesitant to address the issue, given Macau's popularity among rich visitors. Among those involved in this crime, however, were a significant number of party officials. Many careers and reputations had been destroyed by scandalous allegations emanating from Macau, but corruption there and throughout China remained a significant issue. By the end of the chapter, Siu had stopped gambling, disappeared completely for a period, then entered the real estate



industry, arguing that it was far more lucrative. He also did not want his children to begin gambling as he had.

Chapter Seven begins by stating that following the economic reforms of the early 1980s, art in China was no longer created exclusively for the CCP and its promotion of Communism and has become more varied and popular as a result. The majority of the chapter focuses on a guided trip that the author took to Europe with a group of Chinese tourists. As a result of the growing economy, average citizens have become wealthy enough to travel like this. Simultaneously, the government had relaxed long-standing travel restrictions, allowing people to leave the country for more than just work or study. Osnos also notes that China has historically viewed the West with a combination of pity, envy, and resentment, admiring its strength while maintaining a sense of superiority.

Throughout the trip, the group moved quickly from site to site, covering five countries in ten days on an itinerary largely determined by the cheapest flights and hotels available. Osnos portrays his various conversations with his fellow travelers to describe Chinese views of Europe. He argues that they largely viewed Europe as a cultural monolith, rather than as individual countries and described Europeans as moving much more slowly than their Chinese counterparts. One traveler admired the freedom embodied by a European friend who had quit his job to travel, arguing that Chinese parents would never tolerate such an action. Another argued that China's rise in the global community would necessitate a decline of the West. Overall, the author suggests that the mixed reactions his companions had toward Europe mirrored the social shifts occurring in China. While they maintained their confidence in China's superiority, they noticed elements of European culture that they found attractive.

Analysis

This section focuses on the social and cultural changes caused by the growing wealth in China's economy. These changes are clearly exemplified by the "Got Rich First Crowd," who were the first Chinese citizens to successfully take advantage of new economic opportunities following economic liberalization by the CCP. Osnos begins Chapter Five with a description of art's role in China's society to demonstrate the extent to which the CCP's ideology had pervaded the country. Even art, which is tangential to a country's economy and government, was seen as a way to promote the party's goal of classless society. This explanation serves as a foil for the evolving society the author explores in the remainder of this section.

This contrast is exhibited sharply in the examples of Crazy English and the gambling economy in Macau. Both cases represent a renewed openness to the outside world, particularly the United States, that China lacked during the early Communist period. Macau is popular with foreign visitors serves as a financial gateway for both legitimate and criminal activity. Further, as Osnos argues, it embodies the excesses of Chinese capitalism. What was once a classless society is consumed by an opulent, high-risk culture of pursuing and displaying wealth. While not all members of the Got Rich First



Crowd spend their money in casinos, their open spending would have been derided in earlier decades.

In addition to demonstrating a linguistic connection to the West, the portrayal of Crazy English augments Osnos's argument that individuality is increasingly accepted and encouraged in China. First, learning English, particularly outside of traditional schools, represents an effort at self-enrichment that had previously been discouraged. Further, the particular method of shouting sentences, particularly in front of large groups, is symbolic of individuality. Osnos makes clear that Li was one of many English teachers. He chooses to portray him because of this symbolism. A culture that had previously valued a demurred sense of collectivism had produced an educational method that encouraged personal expression in the most direct way. Additionally, Osnos's descriptions of Li's students, particularly Michael, suggest a cultish atmosphere. Students at Li's conferences seemed impulsively dedicated to improving their English and enthralled by the crowded atmosphere and Li's own charisma. This attitude was previously reserved only for the CCP. Chinese were expected to have utter and sole loyalty to Communist ideology. Now, interest in groups like Crazy English were at least tacitly permitted.

Finally, Osnos's trip to Europe demonstrates the effects exposure to Western culture had on Chinese society. In a direct way, this is an expression of the country's new wealth, as citizens could now afford to travel extensively. Additionally, it reveals some of the contradictory opinions these travellers hold about their own country. The author's companions maintained a strong sense of national pride and maintain that, while Western economies were more developed at the time, China would adapt their practices and surpass them. In contrast, two travellers appeared envious of the West's openness and more liberal attitude toward advancement, as evidenced by one's admiration for backpackers. Osnos also demonstrates these contradictions symbolically through the group's attitude at the end of the trip. The travellers were clearly fatigued by the intensive itinerary and began exhibiting the slowness they criticized among Europeans. Further, they became frustrated that the guide would not allow them to eat European food, a representation of their country's broader restriction against freedom of expression. The author adds to this characterization by stating that highly organized trips had become less popular generally. Taken together, these experiences represent a conflict between curiosity and admiration for the outside world and reassurance of China's ultimate superiority, despite growing awareness of its flaws.

Vocabulary

tyranny, tycoon, buttress, lambast, archetype, assiduously, mercenary, audacious, libertine, derelict, nostalgia, exhort, flotsam, avant-garde, degenerate, individualistic, diligent, urbane, unalloyed, desiccated



Chapter 8-11

Summary

Chapter Eight begins by introducing the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and its role in Chinese society. The CPD exercised strict control over all types of media from books and films, to video games and ads. Most notably, it largely dictated what information could be printed in the press. The department banned some topics outright, such as the Tiananmen Square protests, and released statements on more current events that news outlets were expected to disseminate in nearly exact form. Most journalists, fearing reprisal, closely followed the CPD's dictates. A significant exception to this was Hu Shuli, the editor of *Caijing*, a Beijing-based magazine and website.

Shuli was far more aggressive in her reporting, often uncovering corruption scandals and refusing to portray an overly optimistic version of events like the SARS epidemic and 2008 earthquake. Despite this, the magazine was particularly popular with high-ranking party officials, giving it outsize influence and a level of protection from CPD censors. Hu was originally a devoted Communist and member of the Red Guard, a national group of particularly loyal Chinese youth. However, her time spent in rural areas convinced her of the failures of Communism and began her interest in investigative journalism. Regardless of institutional support, *Caijing* was still forced to operate within the system created by the CPD. Hu's colleagues described her as adept at testing the limits of censors without crossing them. Most importantly, Osnos argues that Hu only called for improvements within the CCP-dominated system, rather than challenging the system as a whole.

Chapter Nine describes events surrounding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. This was meant to be an exhibition of China's new role as a global power and the government sought to closely control all aspects of the event. Shortly before the games, the Chinese government violently suppressed protests led by Tibetan monks resulting in anti-China demonstrations at various stops on the Olympic torch's world tour. These, in turn, caused tremendous backlash by Chinese citizens denouncing international news coverage of their country. These people viewed this coverage as part of an international conspiracy to infiltrate and destabilize the country. Many responded by threatening outlets they considered overly critical.

In particular, Osnos profiles Tang Jie, a young scholar who created a widely shared video denouncing Western media while advancing a militant sense of Chinese nationalism. Building on the video's popularity, he created a website that collected and denounced international articles that Tang deemed to be unfairly biased. While unassuming in person, Tang was emblematic of an aspect of society called "the angry youth," a group of intensely patriotic young Chinese who defended their country's values and government system. These youth were skeptical of Westernization and democracy. They not only disagreed with their earlier counterparts who led the Tiananmen Square protests, but were uninterested in learning about them. Perhaps



influenced by the CCP's attempts to encourage patriotism, they sought a return to traditional Chinese values and resented the West's suspicion of China's rise. The chapter ends by describing the large demonstrations of support for the Olympic torch received when it arrived in China, suggesting that many shared Tang's views.

Chapter Ten returns to Lin Yifu, who was given a scholarship to study economics at the University of Chicago. As he continued his research and career after returning to China, Lin became increasingly skeptical of the "Washington Consensus," the common wisdom among economists that transition to a free market and democratic governance as rapidly as possible were a necessity for a country's economic development. In contrast, Lin believed that some government control and direction was important in both areas. He had the opportunity to implement these beliefs on a large scale when he became Chief Economist of the World Bank. Contrary to most of his colleagues, Lin was highly supportive of the Chinese government, giving frequent speeches praising its policies, and encouraged developing economies to adopt the "China model" of economic administration.

The end of this chapter profiles Liu Xiaobo, an aging but prominent Chinese dissident. Throughout his life, Liu advocated for democratization and an end to one-party rule. He had been repeatedly imprisoned and suggested that he felt constantly imprisoned by the Chinese government, even when technically free. Though he was initially skeptical, Liu became convinced of the power of the internet to unite and strengthen activists throughout the country. Using the internet, he worked with other activists to write Charter 08, a manifesto demanding 19 dramatic reforms to the political system. Though risking his safety by doing so, Liu agreed to serve as the primary sponsor of Charter 08 and sought to have it released in December 2008.

Chapter Eleven focuses on Han Han, a prominent Chinese race car driver turned blogger. The author argues that he is emblematic of the ways in which the internet has undermined state control. Han Han was inspired to write from a young age by his father, who had unfulfilled aspirations of becoming an author. He became popular after writing a novel, intended as a critique of the high pressure Chinese education system, about a rebellious high schooler. He eventually transitioned into blogging, posting essays that lampooned Chinese officials and government practices more generally. He also derided the fact that the country's economic growth was distributed unevenly among its citizens, leaving many in poverty while a small number of wealthy business leaders became even wealthier. Despite this criticism, it is clear that Han Han was not an extreme dissident. He largely tempered his opinions, avoiding particularly controversial subjects or direct attacks on specific leaders. As Osnos describes, his blog posts were more satirical than direct political statements. Eventually, Han Han expanded into publishing his own magazine, "Duchangtuan," which became extremely popular. Suspicious of his rapid rise, the CPD repeatedly censored articles in the magazine and cancelled the release of an entire issue. Despite this, Han Han developed a massive, loyal following as one of the most notable representatives of Chinese youth. The chapter ends by noting that Michael started his own English school and, unlike previous generations, was comfortable viewing himself as the center of his own personal story.

Analysis

While Part I of this book covered the general evolution of Chinese society, Part II, beginning with this section, explores specific debates and fault lines that have emerged within the country. A major theme presented in this section is the faith and confidence that Chinese citizens, particularly youth, maintain in their country's political and economic system. The clearest example of this is Tang Jie whose video became popular online for its hypernationalist response to outside criticism. The author's tone in describing the video is ostentatious and exaggerated, much like the video itself. He quotes dramatic phrases like "wildly manipulated," "so-called peaceful," and "a scheme behind the scenes to encircle China." This passages characterizes not only Tang's video, but the fervent support of those like him. His is not a nuanced examination of the pros and cons of the Chinese system, but an unapologetic and reflexive defense of the country. Lin Yifu, while not as direct as Tang, embodied a similarly strong devotion to China. Osnos specifically notes that Tang's economic views and policies at the World Bank were a sharp departure from the conventional wisdom of the "Washington Consensus." The purpose of this is not to describe the intricacies of development policy, but rather to demonstrate that Lin was willing to risk his professional reputation and face significant opposition in support of his country.

In contrast to these individuals, Hu Shuli and Han Han did consider the Chinese system to be flawed and sought to criticize and reform it through journalism. Osnos notes that while it is gaining in popularity, this type of journalism is relatively rare in China and most news outlets disseminate the exact information given to them by the CPD. It is clear, however, that these outlets and others like them had a significant following and that many Chinese, contrary to the example of Tang, do feel criticism is warranted. The two individuals also appealed to different demographic groups, Hu to economic and political elites, Han Han to youth, suggesting broad interest. Simultaneously, Osnos notes that Hu and Han Han limited their criticism and do not seek to undermine the fundamental character of the Chinese government. The constant threat of CPD censorship no doubt contributed to this self-restraint, but the author argues that both individuals supported the fundamentals of the Chinese government and seek reform within existing structures. This aligns more closely with the views of Tang and Lin. Hu and Han Han ultimately supported the government, even as they criticized certain aspects of it.

The one true dissident that Osnos describes in this section is Liu Xiaobo, who had a long history to opposition to the Chinese government. It is telling however, that the most fervently anti-government activist is also one of the oldest individuals the author describes. Much like the fact that most youth of Tang's generation were not interested in learning about the Tiananmen Square protests, this suggests that calls for full democratization were increasingly rare. Osonos emphasizes this by describing Liu's initial skepticism about the internet. Though he eventually appreciated its potential, Liu resists using the internet as a medium for protest. Contrasted with the other individuals in this book, for whom the internet is central, Liu is portrayed as out-of-date. The implication is that his ideas are similarly obsolete and outmoded.

Vocabulary

propaganda, impotent, niceties, bourgeois, clamorous, voluble, incurable, impugn, aberration, avarice, precocious, tantamount, disparate, crucible, efface, paradox, anathema, emulate, gnomish, nascent, valiantly, irreverence, lampoon, aesthetic, insolent



Chapter 12-15

Summary

Chapter Twelve focuses on Ai Weiwei, one of China's most popular artists and dissidents. Ai's artwork, created in a studio in Beijing, was extremely unconventional, incorporating various media and creative approaches. Osnos notes that Ai's father had been blacklisted by the CCP for writing a controversial short story, subjecting the family to squalid living conditions and regular humiliation by government supporters. Ai spent time in New York City as a young artist and enjoyed the financial backing of several Western artists. Unlike most Chinese artists, who relied on state patronage, this gave Ai the ability to criticize the government. He did so through a blog, on which he wrote thinly veiled criticisms of the country's leadership, drawing the attention and surveillance of state authorities. He engaged in his most prominent dissident activity after a major earthquake struck Sichuan province, collapsing several schools. Angry that the Chinese government refused to release an official list of those killed despite repeated requests, Ai researched and assembled his own list and regularly tweeted the names of the children on it. In the course of this private investigation, he repeatedly requested that government information related to the quake be made public, illuminating the system's lack of transparency. While in Sichuan to attend the trial of an earthquake activist, he was arrested and beaten, causing a brain injury. He only continued his activism, despite increasingly tight government surveillance, and led a hugely symbolic march in the center of Beijing. Osnos ends the chapter by noting that, among all the activists he profiles, Ai's style and message had the broadest appeal.

Chapter Thirteen returns to Liu Xiaobo and Charter 08. Liu was arrested only three days before the document's release. He was hidden from both his lawyer and family for four months before being sentenced to 11 years in prison for subversion. Charter 08 was fairly moderate when released, calling for gradual reforms to make China more democratic. Its writers hoped to reach a broad audience among the Chinese public and the document slowly gained support and signatures from citizens from various backgrounds. In its official response, the CCP claimed that the reforms called for would lead the country into a violent revolution and subservience to the West, recalling the century of humiliation. Within this context, Ai noted that being a dissident in China is extremely difficult, both because of government restrictions and the disinterest or ordinary citizens who were satisfied with the country's economic success. In contrast however, the internet allowed governments critics to more readily evade censors, forcing the CCP to completely shut it down the area in one region during large demonstrations.

Shortly after this, Hu Shuli and "Caijing" became more aggressive in their coverage of government corruption, drawing strong backlash from the CPD. Even Hu's supporters, including the owner of the magazine attempted to restrict her coverage, creating an internal clash in which Hu tried to buy out the owner in order to gain more control over editorial decisions. The arrangement failed and led to further conflict, eventually



convincing Hu to leave “Caijing” with 140 of her reporters. The chapter ends by noting that Liu, in a decision vehemently denounced by the Chinese government, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2010 for his work on Charter 08. Because no one in his family was allowed to attend the award ceremony, his medal was symbolically placed on an empty chair, while all mention of the event was censored in Chinese media.

Chapter Fourteen returns to Chen Guangcheng the blind masseur-turned-lawyer that Osnos had attempted to visit. Constantly under government surveillance, Chen was placed under house arrest, then imprisoned after speaking publicly about the corruption in his local government. Chen had previously worked with Jerome Cohen, an American law professor at NYU, to devise methods for spreading his knowledge of the Chinese legal system with other rural residents so that they could represent themselves in court and support their neighbors as he had. Even after his release from prison however, Chen’s access to outsiders was extremely limited. The government had installed barriers and floodlights around his house and police officers constantly patrolled outside. His six-year old daughter was even barred from attending school until Chen’s supporters led a successful bumper sticker-based protest against the restriction. Osnos notes that this was an embarrassment for the Chinese government, as they constantly sought to show that they would not respond to external pressure.

This chapter also describes Chinese citizens, referred to as “People with Grievances” who have some complaint against the government. Osnos notes that the government was extremely unresponsive to these individuals, forcing them to navigate a complicated bureaucracy with little hope of recourse. The internet however, allowed them to connect with each other, announce their complaints in a public setting, and organize protests. The Chinese government responded by tightening censors and paying people to post pro-government messages online, hoping to counteract dissidence.

Chapter Fifteen describes the Chinese government response to the Arab Spring. Following massive protests in several Arab countries in late 2010, the Chinese government became concerned that its own citizens would follow suit. They banned the sale of jasmine flowers, a symbol of Tunisia’s revolution, and closely monitored the population while maintaining that a similar event could not possibly occur in China. There was one small protest in Beijing, which the author notes had more journalists and observers than actual protesters. The U.S. ambassador to China, Jon Huntsman, was seen at the protest and Tang Jie, the ardent nationalist, created another viral video denouncing his presence. A second planned protest was prevented by a heavy police presence and a significant movement never materialized.

The government also arrested or questioned hundreds of people who spoke out in support of the protests, including Ai Weiwei. Ai’s whereabouts were unknown for several weeks after he disappeared from the Beijing airport. He was interrogated extensively about his blog and Twitter posts, while the government publicly stated that he was being investigated for “economic crimes.” Ai’s disappearance generated considerable debate within the intellectual and artist communities; some decried the government’s actions, while others maintained that they had the right to detain people temporarily and that the

investigation should run its course. Han Han claimed that criticizing the government as Ai did was pointless, given the severe reprisals it elicited. Following nearly three months in prison, Ai was released after admitting to tax evasion and agreeing to not speak to foreigners or write online for a year. While describing the events, the author states that he is unsure how much he should write about Chinese dissidents. He admits that they are not supported by the majority of the population and that he understands why some Chinese criticize foreign journalists for focusing on stories like Ai's. Ultimately, however, he decides that the popularity of opinions is difficult to gauge in a censored society and that even a small group of dissidents could have a significant impact.

Analysis

In contrast to the previous section, these four chapters present more significant and combative opposition to the CCP. Specifically, by comparing various examples, Osnos argues that traditional forms of physical protest were being replaced by more diverse methods, limiting the ability of the Chinese government prevent and respond to dissidence.

The clearest example of a traditional protest is the Jasmine movement, the demonstration called for in Beijing following the Arab Spring. Though the author does not make an explicit comparison, this theoretically had the potential to be as large as the Tiananmen Square protests two decades earlier. It is apparent, however, that the Jasmine protest had very little physical support. The author suggests that only 200 people, at most, were present. He emphasizes by describing the responses to the protest more than the event itself. By focusing on Tang's video denouncing Ambassador Huntsman and the significant police presence, Osnos implicitly diminishes the impact of the protest itself. It is clear from this example that the Chinese government is very capable of responding to physical protests and mobilizing counteractions. This is also clear in the cases of Chen's home confinement and Liu's imprisonment. The police were clearly adept at physical security and tightly controlled both men's movements.

However, the dissident efforts of both persisted through the internet. Despite Liu's imprisonment, Charter '08 continued to garner support online, even while the whereabouts of its primary author were unknown. Though it had no direct effect, the document drew signatures from a wide swath of Chinese citizens, necessitating a response from the government. Similarly, Chen's followers supported him by posting pictures of themselves wearing sunglasses and successfully lobbied the government, via bumper stickers, to allow his daughter to attend school. It is clear that, while the CCP can exert extensive physical control, they struggle with more diffuse, internet-based initiatives.

Similarly, the author's portrayal of Ai Weiwei suggests the capacity of unconventional forms of protest to be effective. The opening descriptions of Ai and his art strongly characterize him as atypical. Osnos describes his art as modern, noting his use of a variety of media and lack of funding from the government. This eccentric conduct carried into his dissident activities, which were conducted primarily through Twitter and



an online blog. The author states explicitly that the government struggled to contain activities like Ai's. Unlike traditional media outlets, blogs were not subject to the directives of the CPD. Additionally, the internet allowed Chinese citizens to more easily evade government censors by reposting banned information or using coded language to refer to particular topics. It is particularly telling that, even when Ai was arrested by Chinese police, references to his plight remained common among his online supporters. Osnos uses this to show effectiveness of online protest. Even while the Chinese government maintained physical control over Ai, his ideas were disseminated widely among his followers. As in the case of Chen and Liu, this demonstrates the disparity between the CCP's physical and online control. While the government's censors and monitoring attempts were sophisticated and difficult to evade, the nature of internet protests prevented them from being fully extinguished. Unlike the physical space, in which security forces can exercise complete control, the internet has allowed more openness in Chinese society.

Vocabulary

capacious, eccentric, geriatric, brazenly, inauspicious, incipient, neuralgic, pugnacious, proliferate, patronizing, subvert, ubiquitous, charlatan, calamity, potentates, détente



Chapter 16-18

Summary

Chapter 16 begins by describing the Chinese rail system and its impressive growth over the past decade. What had once been an inefficient and widely derided system, now boasted a significantly expanded network, massive modern stations, and impressive high speed trains. This growth, driven by billions of dollars of government investment, was coordinated by the mammoth Railway Ministry, led by Minister Liu Zhijun.

The chapter quickly turns to a tragic crash in 2011, in which the famed Harmony Express high speed train collided with another train as a result of faulty signalling equipment, resulting in the deaths of 40 passengers. The government attempted to suppress news coverage of the crash, but the event and several missteps in the succeeding investigation triggered anger throughout the country. It became clear that the crash was a result of a rushed construction process. The Railway Ministry, determined to meet its ambitious construction goals, sacrificed safety and quality for the speedy completion of the projects. This attitude was driven, most of all, by Minister Liu. Liu was born the son of a farmer, but rose through the ministry to become one of the most powerful and respected men in the country. However, investigations following the crash revealed that Li had engaged in corruption on a massive scale, accepting bribes worth millions of dollars to give freight companies priority access to railroads. He was convicted of corruption and all mention of him on the internet was blocked by government censors. Osnos notes, however, that his trial and the railway reforms announced by the government were largely symbolic. The culture of rapidly completing infrastructure projects with minimal regard for safety persisted, leading to additional accidents and the near certainty that they would continue.

Chapter 17 focuses on the widespread corruption, most notably bribery, that plagued the Chinese government. This was a competitive system. Individuals had to outbid those around them to ensure an official's loyalty. The author describes his interactions with Hu Gang, an auction house owner, who emphasized the importance of building personal relationships with the judges he paid to ensure favorable decisions.

Osnos argues that government corruption had always played a role in Chinese society, but the amount of money involved and its deleterious effects had grown significantly since the 1990s. He lists a number of national tragedies, including the collapse of schools during the Sichuan earthquake and the railway crash described in Chapter 16, that originated from government officials being paid to ignore regulatory violations. Public officials throughout the country had fortunes far surpassing what would be possible with their regular salaries and pervasive nature of corruption, though largely hidden from foreigners, was widely acknowledged by Chinese citizens.

Arguably the most famous corruption case in Chinese history was that of Bo Xilai, a high-level party official who was once favored to become the country's President. The



massive scale of Bo's corruption, his family had amassed assets worth more than 100 million dollars, was revealed when a local police chief claimed that Bo's wife had poisoned a British associate of the family. Bo was expelled from the CCP and stripped of all power. Though the government attempted to censor information about this and other corruption cases, the details became widely known. National leaders attempted to argue that corruption was limited to local officials, but this was clearly not the case. Even the family of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was listed as one of the richest in the world. The Party had long derided the pre-Communist regime as an aristocracy controlled by a small number of leaders, but its own claims of virtuousness and equality were becoming laughable. The chapter ends by noting that, in practice, China had no rule of law. As the country continued to develop, corruption would eventually disappear as it had in Japan and South Korea, or derail the national economy, as it had in Zaire.

Chapter 18 examines the effect of widespread inequality on Chinese society. Michael's English school had failed, leaving him in debt and forcing him to return to living in his parents' home. As he contemplated his future prospects, it was clear that Michael was frustrated and lacked direction. Osnos argues that this sentiment was common among lower and middle class Chinese citizens. They bemoaned the lack of social mobility between their own positions and the rising plutocracy that controlled the country. The author attributes this to a shortage of white-collar jobs and institutional barriers like corruption and a weak court system. This frustration morphed into resentment of wealthy business leaders. While these people had once been admired for their success, they came to symbolize growing inequality, particularly when they became embroiled in corruption scandals. Osnos describes the example of Cheung Yan, once regarded highly as the richest self-made woman in the country to illustrate this point. Cheung's successful paper company was heavily criticized when a labor rights organization revealed how it exploited its workers by fining them for minor infractions, demanding total deference to company leadership, and forbidding them from organizing strikes. While problems like these were not unique to China, Osnos claims they were particularly problematic because the communist system demanded extreme sacrifice in the pursuit of equality. This remained a recent and painful memory for many citizens. The author concludes by noting that this pervasive disappointment could eventually threaten the political system.

Analysis

In this section, Osnos focuses on the inequality and corruption endemic in the Chinese economy, often using imagery and symbolism to strengthen his arguments.

Chapter 16 opens with descriptions of the country's high speed rail system, a symbol of incredible wealth and modernity. Osnos describes the Beijing station "shaped like a flying saucer [with a] silvery vaulted ceiling illuminated by skylights." It served high speed trains that looked like "wingless jet[s]...painted in high-gloss white with blue racing stripes" in contrast to the "soot-stained" carriages that once moved slowly throughout the country (232-233). These descriptions mirror the growth and success of the system as a whole. What was once a symbol of the country's failings was now the



world's largest high speed rail system. It became a source of national pride and emblematic of the country's reemergence into international prominence. The rail network was not merely a utilitarian infrastructure project, but an ostentatious symbol of China's growth.

However, this impressive facade hid a more troubled reality. As Osnos explains, there were major concerns about the safety and reliability of Chinese railroads, largely due to government corruption. The crash described clearly demonstrated the tragic results of these issues. The contrast between the rail system's outward appearance and its actual operation aligns with the general inequality in the country. Much like upper class Chinese citizens who could afford to travel or strong economic growth numbers, the initial appearance of the country's railroads was impressive. Behind this gilded exterior however, the system had significant failings. Similarly, Chinese people who did not immediately become wealthy following economic privatization have limited social mobility and were frustrated with their outlook in life. In this way, the high speed rail system is symbolic of economic inequality.

This inequality is further evidenced through the example of Michael. In a direct sense, the failure of his English teaching business and financial troubles were common among young Chinese citizens without wealthy parents. More broadly, Michael demonstrated a sense of frustration and disappointment with his prospects that extended beyond economic distress. Osnos describes how Li Yang, the famous English teacher and Michael's idol, had been ruined by accusations that he abused his wife. This event was not directly related to Michael's life, but it symbolizes his broader attitude. In referencing Li, Michael denounced his method and stated that he was wrong to "fall in love with it" (265). He acted as if he has been personally betrayed, much in the way he felt wronged by Chinese society generally. Secondly, the author notes that many of the motivational statements pasted on Michael's wall expressed a sense of frustration. In earlier chapters, his common usage of English motivational phrases is presented as a mark of his optimism and passion for the English language. Later, these phrases, and thus Michael's experience with English generally, were conflicted. He still hoped to have a successful business, but did so out of desperation and aimlessness, not the passion he had once exhibited. In both cases, it is clear that Michael's trouble extended beyond pure economics and into his general outlook.

Finally, the descriptions of Minister Liu's rise and fall following the high speed train crash serve as a metaphor for the effects of corruption generally. Liu began his life as a poor farmer's son with little hope of broader prominence. Similarly, the China he was born into was an undeveloped country, heavily dependent on agriculture. Later, Li showed incredible ambition, beginning as a maintenance worker and clerk before rising through the ranks to lead the country's second largest ministry. As minister, Li embarked on an ambitious modernization project, pushing his operation to complete massive projects in short periods of time. Osnos notes that the minister was referred to as "Great Leap Li," a reference to his personal and professional success that tied him to the Great Leap Forward, on Mao's ambition national projects. It is clear that Li is representative of China as a whole. He rose from poverty to extreme wealth and influence. Further, he not only pursued technical success, but also symbolically weighty efforts that would



depict China as a global leader. His corruption also mirrors the country as a whole. Li used his position for personal gain, indirectly causing the death of forty passengers and generally weakening the Railway Ministry by siphoning money from it. He was publicly disgraced and forced out of the CCP. In this way, Li's life is potentially predictive of China's future. As Osnos states at the end of this section, corruption has the potential to ruin China's economy, much as it eventually ruined Li's reputation and professional life.

Vocabulary

pervasive, ostentatious, volatile, lampoon, truncate, fastidious, meticulous, patronage, erudite, kleptocracy, belligerent, plutocracy, unbridled, meritocratic, oligarchic



Chapter 19-21

Summary

Chapter 19 focuses on the decline and reemergence of religion and spirituality in Chinese culture. Osnos begins by describing how Mao's Cultural Revolution affected China in the late 1960s. Designed to cement the Chairman's power as others within the CCP sought to push him out, the Cultural Revolution encouraged young Chinese to form a cult of personality around Mao. His revolutionary ideas, collected in his famous "Little Red Book," became a source of spiritual fascination.

Simultaneously, traditional Chinese cultural and spiritual influences, including religious institutions, were suppressed and eliminated from mainstream society. The government seized religious property, destroyed temples, and outlawed religious practice, claiming it was counterrevolutionary. The author profiles one well-known poet, Lao She, who committed suicide after he was harassed and humiliated by party members at temple in Beijing. More recently, after the government liberalized restrictions on religious practice, Chinese are increasingly turning to older ideological traditions. Osnos argues that, while the economic boom has delivered material wealth, the loss of Communist ideology has left a spiritual void in Chinese society. In particular, the government sought to revive Confucianism, a traditional Chinese philosophical school that underpins much of the country's culture. In contrast to earlier periods when the philosopher was reviled by the CCP, the government built shrines throughout the country, encouraged Chinese citizens and tourists to visit Confucian temples, and developed the Confucius Institute system, which sponsors the study of Chinese culture overseas. The philosophy was tied to Chinese nationalism and associated with pride in the country's long history. This government sponsorship, however, led some people to believe that the philosopher's image was being corrupted and manipulated for CCP benefit. Osnos also notes that Buddhism had become more popular among Chinese people seeking spiritual guidance. It was, however, associated with the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese government considers a dangerous separatist for his support of Tibetan autonomy. Finally, the author notes that even Chinese who are not officially religious often hold superstitious beliefs.

Chapter 20 describes an event in 2011 in the city of Foshan. A young girl, referred to as Little Yueyue by her admiring neighbors, was hit by a van while wandering throughout the city after school. The driver did not stop to investigate and 17 passerby walked past the injured girl before one stopped. Little Yueyue eventually died as a result of her injuries and the driver was sentenced to prison. The entire scene was captured on surveillance video and became a viral sensation throughout the country. Chinese people decried what they viewed as a stark example of a growing national problem. A belief had emerged that those who attempted to assist strangers were likely to get taken advantage of. As a result, people were increasingly self-protective and less concerned about the welfare of others. Many people that Osnos spoke to blamed this phenomenon on urbanization. As more Chinese moved to cities, they became disconnected from their



communities and a collectivist attitude in general. As a result, some Chinese believed the country was better off, if poorer before the economic boom. Osnos argues that the true source of this problem was not distrust of strangers, but rather that of the government and legal system. He notes that all of the case in which Good Samaritans were prosecuted were the result of zealous prosecutors, not ordinary scam artists who pressed charges. This phenomenon fit with the larger trend of corruption in the Chinese government, undermining trust in the system. Osnos notes the government began passing laws that would protect people who attempted to help strangers, but still failed to address the distrust at the root of this issue.

Chapter 21 begins by describing Lin Gu, a friend of the author who became a Buddhist monk. Though Li is extreme, Osnos states that many young Chinese were becoming interested in religion, spirituality, and morality. In particular, he notes that Michael J. Sandel, a Harvard philosopher, became extremely popular in China when his lecture video were posted online and translated. Sandel travelled to China repeatedly and gave lectures to massive audiences on various topics related to morality. His most popular were related to the concepts of the free-market, competition, and how far those notions should be extended into different areas of life. He was also popular because of his teaching style, which encouraged students to develop their own moral arguments and actively engage in debates. Osnos suggests that Sandel also gave Chinese the vocabulary to discuss social issues and critique their society without openly challenging the government.

The author further describes how the Chinese government is increasingly allowing religious groups to exist in the country. While all religious were officially tightly controlled by government regulations, the CCP was tacitly permitting a more diverse landscape to develop. In particular, Osnos notes how frequently he encountered Chinese Christians who worshipped in house churches, small groups outside of the official government-run structure. Members of these churches were increasingly open about their beliefs and many high profile celebrities converted to Christianity. The author ends the chapter by arguing that the government was not actually allowing the growth of religion, but trying to keep up with it.

Analysis

In contrast to other sections that focus primarily on economic well-being, Osnos devotes these chapters to what he views as a spiritual crisis in Chinese society. This emerges as a major theme in the remainder of the book.

It is telling that Osnos begins Chapter 19 by describing “Mao Badge Fever.” These badges, metal pins printed with Mao’s image, became extremely popular during the Cultural Revolution. They symbolize a general fascination with and personal devotion to the chairman that emerged at that time. The remainder of this section describes modern spiritual and ideological trends, but the author presents this event to demonstrate what has been lost in Chinese society. Osnos uses extreme language to describe the devotion to Mao. He notes that his “touch acquired otherworldly significance” and he



“was becoming a god” (277). Simultaneously, obsession with the Chinese leader replaced all other religious and philosophical practice. As a result, the cult of personality surrounding Mao and the obsession with his personal philosophies was the defining ideology of Chinese society, giving it a shared identity. The decline of Mao personally and subsequent shift away from strict Communism removed this current from the country’s national consciousness. As a result, Osnos argues, Chinese people have been left with a spiritual void despite their economic success.

Compared to other sections of the book, in which Osnos allows the experiences of the individuals interviewed to take precedence over his own arguments, these chapters clearly argue that the Chinese government was responsible for this spiritual void. This is clearest in the example of Little Yueyue and the public reaction to her death. The Chinese citizens presented urbanization as the primary cause of breakdown in collectivist values. This is clear in news reports from the time, the general attitude the author conveys, and his specific conversations. By contrast, Osnos states explicitly that urbanization was not the primary problem. Rather, he argues that citizens do not inherently distrust either each other, but, rather, the legal system. In his view, it was the aggressive prosecution of Good Samaritans that prevented most passerby from attempting to help a stranger in need. He goes further in linking this to the Kitty Genovese case in New York. Here, the original conclusion that onlookers had refused to stop or report an assault was disproved by further investigation. The fact that Osnos explicitly contradicts the opinions of his Chinese subjects is telling. He clearly feels strongly about this particular view and considers his outside perspective unusually important. This is consistent with his more general criticism of government corruption. This societal distrust is a result of a corrupt judiciary that serves its own purposes, rather than faithfully executing the law. While several individuals throughout the book decry corruption, Osnos extends its effects to this issue as well.

A similar, though less critical, argument emerges in comparing the author’s descriptions of government attempts to revive Confucianism and that of the popularity of Michael Sandel. In initial descriptions of the Confucian temple near his home, Osnos seems to admire the philosophy and its traditions. However, he is skeptical of government efforts to revive Confucius and his ideas an element of Chinese nationalism. He describes the history show at the local temple as more of an entertainment spectacle than a philosophical discussion. He suggests that the government portrayals of the philosopher were caricatures meant to serve an agenda. He also notes that many Chinese were ambivalent about this phenomenon. By contrast, Sandel is portrayed as incredibly popular. His notoriety derived from internet videos and the American academic was initially unaware of his fame. This suggests a more organic and legitimate interest. Rather than being invented by the government, Sandel’s popularity as arisen from ordinary Chinese students. The author clearly believes that movements phenomenon like this are more valuable than government-sponsored Confucianism. Just as he blames the government for causing the spiritual void, he does not consider it capable of effectively addressing it.

Vocabulary

deification, nepotism, foment, audacity, maligned, repudiated, precocious, coarsening, unconscionable, urbanization, cerebral, countervailing, proselytizing, revery



Chapter 22-Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 22 returns to Ai Weiwei who, though free from prison, was heavily restricted and monitored in his movement outside his studio. Ai clearly felt disheartened and powerless because of this treatment. While this case is extreme, Osnos links it to other examples of government control over the media. He states that censorship extended beyond news media to art forms like film and music and that many Chinese artists are frustrated with the restrictions placed on them. In many cases, foreign made films were far more popular because of their freedom from these limitations. This creativity imbalance also affected technology, where Chinese patents, while more numerous than any other country's, were considered to embody far less value. While Ai and others attempted to fight this censorship, their efforts had inconsistent efficacy. In a less direct way, Osnos suggests that censorship had similarly limited Han Han's writing. Han Han faced considerable criticism from those who attacked him as unwilling to forcefully criticize the government. Over time, he had mellowed his tone and increasingly catered to the Party's implicit restrictions. He even faced accusations that he was not the true author of his books and blog posts. Hu Shuli, now running her new magazine, was also struggling. Though she remained committed to her mission of exposing corruption, many of her reporters had taken different jobs and the publication struggled financially. The chapter ends by noting Hu's optimism that young Chinese would encourage positive reforms in the system.

Chapter 23 returns to Tang Jie, the ardent nationalist. As he became more popular, Tang wanted to criticize Chinese media as well as his usual Western targets. In doing so, he often derided other outlets, even state-run media, as too liberal. He argued that they were attempting to subtly push liberal democracy onto to the country, a would-be betrayal of its core character. The site was temporarily shut down by the government as part of general restrictions following the Bo Xilai case, but reopened in time to cover an emerging dispute of the Diaoyu Islands. These tiny, uninhabited islands were claimed by both China and Japan and were a symbol of a larger regional power struggle between the two. Protecting the claim to the islands was an important nationalist cause and protests erupted throughout the country in reaction to Japan's government purchasing them from a private owner. At the same time, many activists saw the dispute as a distraction from the larger problems facing the country. These contrasting views mirrored opinions of Lin Yifu, who returned to Beijing after his tenure at the World Bank. Lin remained an incredibly strong proponent of the Chinese economic model and was viewed by the government as a symbol of national success given his defection from Taiwan. At the same time, many of his fellow economists viewed him as overly supportive of a system that had clear flaws. Osnos states that Lin was a symbol of the larger Chinese economy because of his strong confidence in his own ability to fulfill his ambitions.



Chapter 24 returns to Chen Guangcheng who made a daring escape from his tightly monitored home to seek asylum at the U.S. embassy in Beijing. With the help of allies in the United States who exerted pressure on Congress, Chen was allowed to travel to New York and become a visiting fellow at NYU. While he was given a heroic welcome, Osnos sensed that Chen struggled to adapt to the United States. He seemed disinterested in an interview with Osnos and created some controversy when choosing to align with various American political groups. The author also notes that Chen chose to come to the United States because staying in China had become unbearable, not because of any real desire. The chapter ends by noting that Michael was still struggling to find professional success. Osnos states that he had a number of potential projects planned, some of which seemed like a waste of time. After spending some time in Beijing and failing to find work, he returned to his home city, notably not being able to afford a high speed train ticket. The author argues that more than anything, Michael wanted to be well-known and associated notoriety with dignity.

The Epilogue describes the 2012 Communist Party Congress, a massive event that occurred every ten years in Beijing to install the new leadership of the party. Xi Jinping, a well-known party official, became president, promising to continue China's economic growth and ensure that its benefits reached all levels of society. Simultaneously, tacitly recommitted the government to authoritarianism, vowing that the country would not abandon its values. He also introduced the concept of the "Chinese Dream," attempting to create a unifying narrative by encapsulating the aspirations of individual Chinese and of the country generally. In reality, Osnos argues that there was no shared identity or ideology in China, the "dream" was, in fact, plural. The author also notes that China was about to pass the Soviet Union as the longest-running one-party state in world history. At this potentially ominous time, the CCP still had the ability to stymie opposition in the short-term, but in doing so risked long-term stability. Xi announced a widespread crackdown on corruption, but Osnos expresses skepticism that this would go beyond cosmetic changes and truly reform the system. This remained the most significant threat facing China. The book ends by describing a street sweeper whom Osnos met who was also an accomplished poet. The man stated that he must be practical in ordinary life but his writing, published online, allowed him much greater liberty.

Analysis

This section contrasts the ideal of the "Chinese Dream," as introduced by Xi, with the reality faced by the individuals profiled throughout the book. In theory, the Chinese Dream was similar to the American Dream. It was the sense that all Chinese could fulfill their aspirations through the opportunities provided by the country's economy. Further, these individual attainments would comprise the larger national character of development and advancement. Arguably, this would fill the spiritual described by Osnos in the previous section. Though it was not strictly spiritual, the Chinese Dream would provide the country with a unifying narrative and a ideological method to translate individual success into service to collective society. In reality, Osnos argues, the Chinese Dream would not serve as a unifying principle. The author states this explicitly, but he also demonstrates it by showing the ways Chinese citizens promptly distorted



and mocked this idea. It became a protest slogan, with individuals suggesting that their Chinese Dream was greater political freedom. People also began saying that censored material had been “dreamed away.” This demonstrates not only rejection of this specific ideology, but also the belief that the CCP could not introduce any such idea. By using Xi’s slogan to criticize the government, the Chinese people demonstrated that spiritual narratives needed to derive from the population itself.

In more practical ways, the individuals profiled throughout the book demonstrate that there is no single China Dream, nor is personal success a guarantee. The clearest example of this is Michael, whose repeated professional failures are emblematic of broader weaknesses in the Chinese economy. Michael is well-educated and driven. In Xi’s view, this would be enough to ensure his success. In contrast, however, he struggled both financially and emotionally. His situation even led him to question his own dignity and personal beliefs. The Chinese Dream was clearly not a reality for Michael. Further, even if he were successful, his desire for individual recognition would not align with Xi’s ideal. Even though the Dream required personal effort and advancement, such advancement was eventually considered a contribution to the collective, not a source of individual pride. By striving for notoriety above all else, Michael implicitly rejects the Chinese Dream.

Further, even those individuals that do find economic success did feel not personally fulfilled. Han Han, Hu, and Tang all demonstrate this through their media ventures. Each, most notably, attained significant success and wealth. They all had successful media outlets and were well-regarded by their fans. They also, however, felt limited by the system and unable to truly write as they wanted to. Han Han chose to temper criticism to avoid government censorship and alienated some of his fans as a result. Hu’s new publication was limited by more direct confrontation with authorities. Even Tang and his hypernationalism drew some backlash, curtailing the financial success of his company. A more dramatic example of this is Ai Weiwei, who was strictly limited by the government and barred from continuing his dissident activities. In all of these cases, the individuals attained economic success consistent with the country’s growth. They failed, however, to reach the spiritual fulfillment implicit in the Chinese Dream. China clearly had the capacity to deliver material wealth, but struggled to address the spiritual void that Osnos identified.

Finally, it is telling that the one person who came closest to achieving a Chinese Dream was forced to leave the country in order to do so. As a scholar at NYU, Chen had the ability to engage openly in political discourse and use his influence to advocate for reforms, if from an external point of view. This activity would have been impossible in China, particularly given the restrictions placed specifically on Chen. The lawyer is obviously uninterested in economic wealth. His own China Dream would be the ability to enact significant political reforms. This remained impossible, clearly frustrating Chen. Through this, Osnos strengthens his argument that China required political reform to continue its success. Chen is an extreme example, but like him, Chinese people yearned for more than just rapid economic growth.

Vocabulary

purgatory, lament, eclectic, flummoxed, morose, acquiescent, vitriol, audacity



Important People

Evan Osnos

Evan Osnos is the author of this book and one of its major individuals. Although his writing focuses primarily on Chinese citizens, their lives, and their opinions, the overall narrative is driven by Osnos's experiences and interests. The author is a journalist who lived in China for eight years, primarily in Beijing. Throughout this time, he moved to several different neighborhoods within the Chinese capital and traveled extensively throughout the country. As a result, he has a large number of Chinese friends and acquaintances with a variety of life experiences and opinions on politics and society. Many of these individuals are profiled throughout the book. Overall, Osnos has tremendous respect for and personal attachment to China. He writes affectionately of his Chinese friends and expresses sadness upon his departure at the end of the book. Simultaneously, he clearly points out China's flaws, most notably its restrictive political environment and lack of unifying national character.

Lin Zhengyi/Lin Yifu

Lin Zhengyi is a Taiwanese-born Chinese citizen. Early in his life, Lin was a promising Taiwanese military officer and deeply committed to the island's sense of independence from mainland China. However, while posted on a Taiwanese island, Lin defected and swam to the mainland. He was originally met with suspicion from Chinese soldiers who considered him a spy. When he is cleared of suspicion by mainland authorities, Lin adopts the given name "Yifu." The Taiwanese government, seeking to avoid embarrassment announced that Lin he died in service to his country. Lin was, therefore, unable to openly contact his wife and children in Taiwan, fearing that they could be treated as traitors.

Eventually, Lin traveled to the United States to study economics, where he became deeply skeptical of the theory that democracy must precede economic development. Instead, he favored the Chinese model of tight state control of the political and economic system to ensure successful policies. Lin maintained these views as Chief Economist of the World Bank, placing him in opposition to many of his colleagues. After leaving the World Bank, he became an ardent supporter of Chinese government policies, earning him some disdain from liberal activists. Throughout his life, Lin has been unable to return to his native Taiwan, which states that he will be arrested upon arrival on charges of treason.

Chen Guangcheng

Chen Guangcheng was a blind masseur living in rural China who trained himself as a lawyer. Chen's goal was to protect those around him from punishments arising from violations of the One Child Policy. Over time, with the assistance of American lawyer



Jerome Cohen, he began to train large numbers of people to serve as their own legal representatives. As a result of his significant success, Chen became a target of Chinese authorities, who restricted his movement and sought to block others, including Osnos, from meeting with him. The government was particularly opposed to the lawyer's practice of speaking to foreign reporters about his experiences.

Chen was imprisoned for four years as a result of demonstrations staged to protest his treatment by the police. Upon his release, Chen's activity was even more tightly restricted. He was barred from leaving his home or communicating with any outside his immediate family. His daughter was not allowed to attend school. Eventually, Chen escaped his rural home and sought refuge at the American embassy in Beijing. An agreement between the Chinese and American governments allowed Chen to become a visiting scholar at NYU. Although he was relieved to be free of oppressive treatment, Chen struggled to adjust to life in self-imposed exile.

Zheng Zhiming/Michael

Zheng Zhiming, who refers to himself by the American name "Michael," is a young Chinese man and close personal friend of Osnos. At a young age, Michael became obsessed with learning English, specifically through the "Crazy English" courses led by Li Yang. He eventually became an English teacher and started several of his own teaching services, none of which were successful. While Michael remained ambitious and devoted to general self-improvement, he became pessimistic about his opportunities in China and frustrated with his lack of success. Particularly in later chapters, Michael serves as a representative of young, educated Chinese who are frustrated with the lack of economic opportunity and a fulfilling lifestyle, despite China's overall economic success.

Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is a well-known Chinese artist and dissident. Ai's art, created in a Beijing studio, is highly unconventional. The artist's first significant foray into political activism was his criticism of the Chinese government's response to an earthquake in Sichuan province. He completed his own investigation into the collapse of school buildings that killed hundreds of children, filing lawsuits against the government in the process. Much of his activism on this issue and subsequent ones took the form of tweets. Ai was arrested on two occasions and physically abused by the authorities on both occasions. He spent several months in prison and his studio was closely surveilled following his release. Despite his growing frustration and pessimism, Osnos considers Ai to be China's most prominent dissident.

Hu Shuli

Hu Shuli was the editor of "Caijing" magazine, a small but popular weekly magazine. Unlike most Chinese media organizations, "Caijing" was significantly critical of the



Chinese government officials, often pushing the limits of what official censors would allow to be published. Osnos argues that Hu was able to serve this role because her close ties to prominent Communist Party members. These personal relationships, along with her desire for reform without altering China's basic political structure insulated her from retaliation. Eventually, Hu became dissatisfied with "Caijing's" ownership, believing they were too restrictive of her editorial choices. Seeking more liberty to criticize the government she and several of her reporters created a new magazine. This magazine was not as popular as her earlier work and, by the end of the book, she struggled to retain writers and editors. Throughout the book, Osnos uses Hu to demonstrate the role censorship plays in Chinese media as well as the inability of organizations to be consistently and strongly critical of the government.

Tang Jie

Of all the individuals portrayed in this book, Tang Jie is the most staunchly pro-government. As a student during the 2008 Beijing olympics, Tang began posting hyper-nationalist videos online, defending China's reputation against protesters throughout the world. Like other young people, Tang was highly skeptical of Western democracy and supportive of more traditional Chinese values. As his popularity grew, Tang began consistently attacking outside media coverage of China as one-sided and falsified. He eventually created his own media site intended to be critical of the Chinese government, while still highly nationalist. It was temporarily shut down by the government for being too extreme in response to China's critics. Osnos presents Tang as a clear example of a young Chinese person who is deeply committed to the existing political system and resistant to the "Westernization" of Chinese society.

Han Han

Han Han is well-known Chinese blogger and racecar driver. Han Han became famous for his novels about teenage life and shifted into online criticism of the Chinese government. Compared to activists like Ai Weiwei, Han Han is measured and restrained in his commentary. Though he was occasionally censored by Chinese authorities, he avoided the more substantial punishment faced by other dissidents. Han Han demonstrates the concessions necessary for self-preservation when criticizing the Chinese government.

Liu Xiaobo

Liu Xiaobo was a prominent Chinese dissident and has been imprisoned repeatedly throughout his life. He is older than most of the other individuals portrayed by Osnos and represents an older and increasingly less influential generation of activists. Liu was the primary author of Charter 08, a document openly calling for significant democratic reforms. As a result, he was imprisoned for 11 years and barred from accepting the Nobel Peace Prize he received for his work.

Liu Zhijun

Liu Zhijun was a wealthy and influential Chinese government official, most known for his leadership of the Chinese railroad system during a time of significant investment and rapid expansion. Following the deadly crash of a high speed train, Liu was forced from office and convicted of corruption on a massive scale. He is emblematic of the many government officials presented by Osnos who used their positions to increase their personal wealth while endangering the well being of Chinese citizens. This corruption, Osnos argues, is China's most significant weakness.



Objects/Places

China

China is a country in Asia with the world's largest population and a rapidly growing economy.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

The Chinese Communist Party is the political party that has controlled China for more than six decades. It exerts total control over the state and its institutions.

Beijing

Beijing is the capital of China and was Osnos's primary place of residence when he lived in the country for eight years.

Got Rich First Crowd

The Got Rich First Crowd is a collective term for the Chinese citizens who became rich immediately following economic liberalization.

Central Propagande Department (CPD)

The Central Propaganda Department is a secretive government organization that controls what is published in Chinese media and censors online content.

Caijing

Caijing was a magazine edited by Hu Shuli that criticized the CCP and instances of government corruption while maintaining general support for the one-party system.

People with Grievances

People with Grievances is a collective term for people who have some complaint to lodge with the Chinese government. It was used to in imperial times and now refers to those struggling to seek redress with the country's inefficient bureaucracy.



Railway Ministry

The Railway Ministry controlled all of China's railways and led a massive modernization and high-speed rail construction initiative. As one of the most powerful government organs, it is also a considerable source of corruption.

Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was Mao Zedong's attempt to preserve his control over China by suppressing traditional philosophies and religion and replacing them with single-minded devotion to himself and the ideology of the CCP.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a school of philosophy based on the writing of the Confucius. Its role in China was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution but was revived by the CCP in an attempt to link it to a new sense of Chinese nationalism.

Chinese Dream

The Chinese Dream was an ideal introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2012. It suggested that all Chinese people should seek to fulfill their personal aspirations as a way of uniting the country with a single identity.



Themes

The prevalence of corruption and its potential to derail the Chinese economy

Osnos forcefully argues that government and economic corruption is the most significant threat to the future of China. He demonstrates both the immense scale of corruption and its potential to harm the country through various examples.

The first of these examples is the city of Macau, a semi-autonomous island that is renowned for its casinos and opulence. Osnos presents Macau as a symbol of the entire Chinese economy. Much as rich Chinese and foreigners gamble exorbitant sums in the city's casinos, the country's economy has seen a massive influx of investment over the past decades. In both cases, the potential risks and rewards are considerable. Similarly, much as newly rich Chinese citizens are eager to display their wealth, gamblers in Macau are obsessed with opulent luxury goods. Simultaneously, Macau demonstrates the corruption endemic to the Chinese economy. In a literal sense, a significant amount of government money is siphoned into private hands and spent in Macau. Beyond this, the organized crime rampant in the city is comparable to corruption in mainland China. Osnos argues that crime syndicates, referred to as triads, are an internal element of Macau. They facilitate much of the wealth transfer that allow gambling to occur on such a large scale. Because of lax law enforcement, the triads make Macau an attractive location for large scale money laundering, a form of economic stimulus for the city. In mainland China, corruption plays a similar role. By providing an opportunity for individuals to become extremely wealthy, corruption facilitates some investment in the Chinese economy and makes work as government employee extremely attractive. However, just as organized crime is a long-term threat to Macau's stability, corruption could eventually derail the Chinese economy by preventing a more even distribution of wealth.

A more direct example of corruption is that Liu Zhijun, the head of the Railway Ministry. Like Macau, Liu and his work are symbolic of growth in the Chinese economy. Liu's father was a farmer and Liu began his career in the lowest ranks of the ministry. Over time, he, like China generally, became rich and influential. Similarly, the high speed railway his ministry built became an international symbol of modernity and development. Both, however, were undermined by corruption. Over time, it became clear that construction on the high speed lines was incredibly rushed, forcing workers to ignore safety concerns in the interest of rapid completion. This eventually caused the death of 40 passengers in a train crash. In the course of investigating the crash, the government uncovered massive bribes paid to Liu personally and a system of corruption that permeated the ministry. Liu was eventually sentenced to a suspended death sentence. The impact of corruption is clear. While it allowed the impressively quick completion of the high speed rail project, it eventually caused the death of Chinese citizens. Similarly, Liu enjoyed incredible wealth and influence for a period before being disgraced. For



China broadly, corruption and government mismanagement has allowed for impressive growth in wealth. Over time however, the structural weaknesses of the system could become exposed and cause considerable problems.

While corruption has a significant economic impact, Osnos argues that it has also had a psychological impact on Chinese society. Following the death of Little Yueyue, most Chinese citizens blamed urbanization for a loss of collectivist values, an important component of the national character. By contrast, the author argues that a corrupt judiciary is at fault. People are afraid to assist strangers, he argues, because of the potential to be manipulated by a judge or prosecutor. This phenomenon is causing considerable alarm in the country as people search for a common values system in the absence of Communist ideology. In this way, Osnos argues that corruption is not only an economic threat, but also undermines social connections within China.

Economic inequality and the resulting frustration of educated Chinese youth

Partially a result of corruption, Osnos argues that unequal economic opportunity are a major source of frustration for educated Chinese youth, and this too, has the potential to undermine the country's stability.

To demonstrate this, Osnos describes the Got Rich First Crowd, the group of people who quickly became wealthy by capitalizing on the country's economic liberalization. Initially, this group is highly respected as a symbol of China's growth. While their success conflicted with ingrained Communist ideology, people came to admire them and the universal potential they represented. Over time, however, this view began to shift.

The author relates one conversation he had in which an associate described the "black collar" class, a reference to the traditional blue collar-white collar distinction. These people were wealthy, wore all black, and drove black cars. More importantly, they were inaccessible to their fellow citizens. This characterization was clearly a critical one. It depicted the Got Rich First Crowd as aloof and uninterested in the rest of society. Further, it implied that traditional white or blue collar workers would be unable to reach the same level of wealth. The black collar class was an entirely different economic class. A significant factor in this division, as Osnos argues throughout the book, is the corruption that allows a few government employees to become extremely wealthy while preventing the majority of Chinese citizens from achieving economic mobility.

In addition to this broad argument, Michael is a specific example of economic inequality and its effects. When Osnos first introduces Michael, he was obsessed with learning English through Li Yang's Crazy English method. Over time, he became interested in teaching his own English courses and started various businesses and services, none of which were successful. With each failure, Michael became increasingly disheartened. He remained committed to achieving some success, but was frustrated with his situation. He was also betrayed by Li, whose reputation was ruined by spousal abuse



allegations. Michael was only one of the many young Chinese caught in a similar situation. He was educated and driven, but unable to find the economic success supposedly common in his country. He even lived for a time in a boardinghouse with other young men searching for work in Beijing, a visual reminder of how common this was.

Michael's story is telling not only because of his financial struggles, but because he eventually lost his optimistic attitude. A country with economic growth like China should inspire hope among its young people, but many like Michael saw little reason for hope. Even if their economic condition had improved, the lack of white collar jobs left them feeling unfulfilled. Osnos makes clear that this depression and frustration, beyond economic challenges, is a major challenge for the country.

The spiritual void among Chinese citizens and the government's failure to address it

Given that economic conditions improved dramatically for most Chinese citizens, Osnos argues that many shifted to searching for spiritual fulfillment beyond material wealth. In addition to a revived interest in religion and philosophy, the government attempted to fill this gap in two major ways, both of which the author argues were ineffective.

The first of these potential solutions was a renewed importance of Confucius in Chinese society. After decrying his philosophy as antithetical to Communist teaching, the CCP sought to rebuild the philosopher's image and link him to Chinese nationalism. They built new temples, sponsored presentations of his ideas, and sought to spread them internationally. While these efforts were somewhat successful in attracting Chinese interest, they struck many people, including Osnos, as shallow and artificial. The author's primary critique of this neo-Confucianism is its link to Chinese nationalism. Osnos seems to believe that the philosophy should stand independently and not be manipulated to serve a particular purpose. Osnos also notes the irony of the CCP violently suppressing Confucian scholarship during the Cultural Revolution and now praising and promoting it. In doing so, Osnos implies that a guiding philosophy of this kind cannot come from a central government, particularly an authoritarian one like China's. While Osnos is clearly concerned about what he terms a "spiritual void," he argues that China must allow free expression so that it can be filled organically.

A second attempt to address this spiritual void was President Xi's Chinese Dream, an attempt at unifying the country behind shared aspirations and national pride. Once again, Osnos clearly argues that this attempt will fail. In this case, many Chinese explicitly rejected the Chinese Dream, mocking it and using it as a tool to criticize the government. Further, all of the individuals Osnos profiles demonstrate the flaws in this concept. All of them became economically successful in some way. Even individuals like Michael were generally financially secure, if not wealthy. What was lacking, however, was personal fulfillment and dignity to match this economic success. This shows the inherent flaw in the Chinese Dream. The spiritual void exists because economic growth, both individually and for an entire country, is insufficient. It is necessary, but cannot



alone give people satisfaction. Addressing this problem by calling for more economic growth is therefore senseless. In this way, Osnos argues that Xi and other Chinese leaders are not only incapable of solving this issue, they also fail to understand the true nature of the problem.

The effect of the internet on the struggle between activists and government censors

The CCP has long enforced strict control over the country's news media, but Osnos argues that this control has eroded somewhat due to the increased use of the internet. To demonstrate this, the author describes the restrictions placed on traditional media by the CPD, noting that most organizations directly reprint the information they provide, then gives examples of how actors outside of these organizations have had some success evading censorship via the internet.

A clear example of this is Liu Xiaobo, the primary activist behind Charter 08. Liu was initially skeptical of the internet, but came to realize its potential. This evolution is symbolic of a general shift throughout the country, as activists and the government realized the power of online protest. The document was subsequently written and circulated among various dissidents online. When it was officially released, Liu was arrested and sentenced to prison. In contrast to previous protests however, this did not eliminate the pressure on the Chinese government. The document garnered thousands of signatures online, eventually warranting an official response from the CCP. It is arguable whether Charter 08 itself made any significant changes in the political landscape. Osnos notes that most people were too distracted with the upcoming Olympics to notice. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the potential for future, internet-based protest. By arresting Liu, the government demonstrated that it maintained physical control over the population. Simultaneously however, the continued circulation of the document demonstrates physical control is insufficient to fully suppress dissent. Because of the internet, barring physical protests or arresting activists has limited efficacy. Therefore, Osnos does not argue that the government has completely lost its ability to control public discourse, but that the internet provides an effective tool to empower activists.

Secondly, the activities of Ai Weiwei support Osnos's argument. Ai was the exemplar of a modern dissident. He was, first and foremost, an artist, not a political figure. Most of his activism was conducted online via Twitter and his blog. Osnos states clearly the government was initially unsure how to respond to Ai. Because he did not run a formal news organization, he was not subject to CPD directives. Further, even when Ai's posts were censored or blocked, his fans reposted copies to ensure that the information was still accessible. The same was true, on a less extreme scale, for Han Han, whose informal blog posts shielded him from direct control. Through these methods, Ai became the most well-known Chinese dissident, both within the country and internationally. This shows another benefit of internet activism, activists could reach a global audience without relying on government-run media organizations. Ultimately however, Ai's experience also shows the limits of internet activism. Eventually, Ai was arrested and



beaten by Chinese authorities. Even following his release from prison, the artist's movement were closely monitored. Once again, Osnos shows that the government maintains physical control of its citizens. The internet has greatly contributed to activism and remains a challenge for Chinese authorities, both those authorities are from powerless.

The faith the many Chinese citizens have in their government and economic model

In contrast to the opinions of most of the individuals he presents, Osnos argues that most Chinese continued to support the one-party system and the economic policies of their government. In Chapter 15, Osnos openly questions whether portraying political dissidents offers an accurate view of the country. He notes that most people were content with their overall situation and limited their criticism to minor reforms to that system. While he concludes that, as a reporter, covering political opposition is important, he presents two examples of individuals that strongly support the Chinese government.

The first of these examples is Lin Yifu, who defected from the Taiwanese military and eventually became the chief economist of the World Bank. Lin's personal story is a clear endorsement of the Chinese model. The author notes that Li left Taiwan at a time when most people were defecting in the other direction, leaving the mainland for the perceived freedom and prosperity of the Republic. By contrast, Li, a promising young military officer, chose the mainland. It is there that he saw more capacity for fulfilling his ambitions and was clearly successful in doing so. Further, in his position at the World Bank, Li formally endorsed the China model over the traditional Washington Consensus. In doing so, Li argued that a market economy with heavy intervention from the central government was not only well-suited to his own country, but was an exportable model. This represents a higher level of support than just suggesting China should maintain its current course. Further, he faced considerable criticism from colleagues at the World Bank and even within China who considered him too supportive of the CCP and blind to its flaws. Again, this support despite backlash is significant. Even as fellow Chinese economists criticized him, Li remained an ardent supporter of his government.

The second example is Tang Jie, who created popular hypernationalist videos and heavily criticized foreign media coverage of China. Tang presents a foil to other individuals like Ai and Han Han, who used the internet to criticize the government. By contrast, Tang viewed defending his country from outside criticism as a patriotic duty. He was heavily supportive of the party and its goals for China. Further, he viewed the country as reclaiming its rightful position as a global leader following the century of humiliation. This is also telling because of Tang's status as a relatively young, highly educated individual. His background suggested that he might be more willing than his older counterparts to criticize the government, particularly given his exposure to the internet and foreign media. In contrast, he stated clearly that liberal democracy was not right for China and criticized even his own country's media for being too liberal and interested in an eventual transition to the Western model. Tang is certainly an extreme

case, but the quality of his rhetoric emphasizes that support for the CCP and its policies is strong throughout China.

Styles

Structure

The structure of this book largely follows the individuals that Osnos chooses to profile. Having lived in China for eight years, the author undoubtedly had a significant amount of acquaintances and experiences from which to choose when providing examples, thus his choices represent a level of control over the arguments the book conveys. Additionally, he arranges his experiences thematically, grouping different stories into chapters about similar topics and chapters into three longer parts that also convey unified themes. Beyond this, the events do appear somewhat chronologically, particularly in the case of individuals who appear at multiple points throughout the book, but the thematic structure takes precedence over strict timelines. This suggests that Osnos views his eight years in China as a fairly constant experience. There are certainly changes occurring in Chinese society, but these are presented as ongoing, at least during the period Osnos portrays, rather than a distinct events that begin and end within the confines of the book.

Perspective

Given the book's structure, its perspective is a combination of Osnos's views and the experiences of the individuals described. Within each narrative, the individual's perspective takes precedence. Osnos relates their emotions and beliefs, or at least his impression of them, and uses examples from their experiences to illustrate his argument. This is particularly in the case of characters like Michael and Ai Weiwei, whom he returns to repeatedly throughout the book. This is consistent with the author trying to depict China as the Chinese see it, not as an outsider would. More broadly, the individuals Osnos chooses to depict reflect his perspective. In most cases, the individuals profiled are in some way dissatisfied with Chinese society. Certainly this is not a reality for all Chinese citizens, but it is the viewpoint Osnos chooses to convey. At one point, he explicitly questions whether portraying primarily dissonants is an accurate depiction of the country. He concludes that, while it is not strictly representative, it is important. Osnos shares this view more directly when describing corruption in the Chinese economy. While he relates the frustration of Chinese individuals, he also makes several arguments in his own voice about the widespread nature of corruption and its potential to harm the country.

Tone

The book's tone largely mirrors that of the individual being described in a given section. A clear example of this is Tang Jie, whose sections are particularly bombastic given his hypernationalist views. The author extensively quotes Tang's videos, often describing the imagery and music used, not only to provide direct information, but to explain the



broader opinions of people like Tang. This is also true for Michael, whose tone Osnos captures through the motivational sayings Michael enjoys repeating. While he maintains this quirk throughout the book, the sayings themselves become more pessimistic as Michael became more frustrated with his life. For other individuals, whose personalities and beliefs are more reserved, Osnos utilizes a more muted tone. Finally, the author's mastery of the Mandarin language allows him to translate Chinese sayings and political statements, giving a more accurate depiction of the views expressed. This is particularly true given that Chinese words can change meaning with only slight differences in pronunciation. This trait, given that there is no comparable practice in Western languages, allows for jokes and hidden meanings that would be impossible to understand without the author's explanations.



Quotes

In Chinese, we say that you can bore a hole in a stone by the steady dripping of water,' her friend Qian Gang told me. Other journalists preferred a noisier metaphor: they called it 'dancing in shackles.'"

-- Evan Osnos quoting Qian Gang and a common saying (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quotes a common saying among journalists to describe how government censors, most notably the CPD, restrict what reporters can publish.

We were one year away from the twentieth anniversary of that movement, but my experiences with Tang Jie and his friends made clear that prosperity, computers, and Westernization had not pushed China's elite toward democracy in the way that outsiders had expected after Tiananmen. Rather, prosperity and the strength of the Party had persuaded more than a few to postpone idealism as long as life for them kept improving.

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 9 paragraph 1)

Importance: This demonstrates that many young Chinese, unlike the generation directly preceding them, do not strongly believe that China should transition toward liberal democracy.

Fundamentally, the culture of the Web was an almost perfect opposite of the culture of the Communist Party: Chinese leaders cherished solemnity, conformity, and secrecy; the Web sanctified informality, newness, and, above all, disclosure.

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 11 paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates how the internet is upending Chinese society and limiting the government's ability to restrict expression.

I was often struck by how comfortable he was putting himself at the center of the story. Earlier generations in China were less comfortable doing this. I asked his father to talk about the three decades he spent working in a coal mine. He said, 'All mines are dangerous. It was very hard at that time. We earned about sixty yuan per month.' And that was all he had to say on the subject. Michael, by contrast, saw his own life as an epic fable of frustration and triumph.

-- Evan Osnos quoting Michael's father (chapter 11 paragraph 3)

Importance: This demonstrates how individualism, once derided in Chinese culture, has become a norm.

The truth was that I struggled with the question of how much to write about Ai Weiwei—or, for that matter, the blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng or the Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo. How much did their ordeals really tell us about China? If the average news consumer in the West read (or watched or heard) no more than one China story a week, should it be about people with dramatic lives or typical lives? The hardest part about writing from



China was not navigating the authoritarian bureaucracy or the occasional stint in a police station. It was the problem of proportions: How much of the drama was light and how much was dark? How much was about opportunity and how much was about repression? From far away it was difficult for outsiders to judge, but I found that up close it wasn't much easier, because it depended on where you were looking."

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 15 paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates that Osnos questioned whether portraying primarily dissidents was an accurate depiction of Chinese society.

People were no longer satisfied simply with the fortune delivered by China's rise. The fall of Great Leap Liu had dramatized a culture of entitlement run amok. For years, Liu had dedicated himself to enhancing his own prospects along with those of the nation. He had lost his sense of proportion, and the question was whether the government he served had, too.

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: This demonstrates how Chinese people, now that they have reached a level of material wealth, are increasingly concerned with the level of corruption in their government.

Similarly, the Communist Party's authority rested on the notion that even if local bureaucrats were corrupt, its top leaders so exemplified wisdom, justice, and meritocracy that dissent and direct elections were superfluous and obsolete. President Hu Jintao said that 'the cultivation of personal moral integrity is considered the most basic quality for an honest official'.

-- Evan Osnos quoting Hu Jintao (chapter 17 paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates that corruption was not only a potential economic threat, but also directly antithetical to the ethos and statements of the CCP.

As the years passed, I sensed that other young strivers like Michael were growing frustrated as well. Low-skilled jobs weren't the problem—those wages were climbing—but there weren't enough white-collar jobs to employ each year's crop of more than six million new college graduates."

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates that many educated, Chinese youth, despite being wealthier than previous generations, were unable to find work that consistent with their education.

The longer I lived in China, the more it seemed that people had come to see the economic boom as a train with a limited number of seats. For those who found a seat—because they arrived early, they had the right family, they paid the right bribe—progress was beyond their imagination. Everyone else could run as far and fast as their legs would carry them, but they would only be able to watch the caboose shrink into the distance.



-- Evan Osnos (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: This shows that many Chinese believed that they were incapable of profiting from the economic boom because of severe inequality.

Outsiders were quick to imagine a sweatshop, but this explanation was not quite right. When therapists were brought in to Foxconn to meet workers, they found what sociologists had begun to detect in surveys of the new middle class: the first generation of assembly-line workers had been grateful just to be off the farm, but this generation compared themselves to wealthier peers. 'What is the most common feeling in China today?' the Tsinghua sociologist Guo Yuhua wrote in 2012. 'I think many people would say disappointment.'

-- Evan Osnos quoting Guo Yuhua (chapter 18 paragraph 1)

Importance: This demonstrates that many Chinese, despite being wealthier than previous generations, did not feel that their lives were personally fulfilling.

In its abuses and deceptions, the Chinese government was failing to make a persuasive argument for what it meant to be Chinese in the modern world. The Party had rested its legitimacy on prosperity, stability, and a pantheon of hollow heroes. In doing so, it had disarmed itself in the battle for the soul, and it sent Chinese individuals out to wander the market of ideas in search of icons of their own.

-- Evan Osnos (chapter 20 paragraph 1)

Importance: This shows that there was a spiritual void among Chinese citizens and that the government was primarily to blame.

Thirty years after China embarked on its fitful embrace of the free market, it has no single unifying doctrine—no “central melody”—and there is nothing predestined about what kind of country it is becoming. When the president unveiled the Chinese Dream, he intended it to be unifying, but instead, his people interpreted it as Chinese “Dreams”—plural.

-- Evan Osnos (Epilogue paragraph 3)

Importance: This shows that the China Dream was an insufficient solution to the spiritual void because each citizen had a different definition of what their dream would be.



Topics for Discussion

Why was it remarkable that Lin Zhengyi (Lin Yifu) would defect from Taiwan to mainland China? What was the general economic situation in each at the time?

This encourages the student to consider the historical context of China's economic boom before it developed rapidly over the past several decades.

Who were the Got Rich First Crowd? Beyond their wealth, how did they defy traditional Communist and cultural norms?

This challenges the student to consider how individuality has become valued throughout China despite the fact that it was sharply discouraged by Communist ideology.

Explain how Macau serves as a metaphor for the Chinese economy. What is the comparison between organized crime and corruption?

This encourages the student to consider why Osnos chose to depict Macau and its extreme wealth. It also shows how organized crime, like corruption in China generally, is deeply embedded in the economy.

Why was Caijing unique among Chinese publications? What does it demonstrate about the ways in which media outlets could criticize the government?

This demonstrates how most Chinese publications completely avoided criticizing the government. Even those that did, like Caijing, had to do so within the one-party system and could call for a complete political revolution.



Why does Osnos describe Tang Jie and his videos? How did Tang compare to traditional stereotypes of Chinese public opinion?

This challenges the student to consider that many Chinese youth support their government and are highly nationalist. This may conflict with common opinions that all Chinese citizens feel oppressed by the CCP.

How was Ai Weiwei different from Chinese dissidents in the past? What does this show about political activity in general?

Ai makes extensive use of the internet and does not fit into traditional media categories that can be monitored by the government. This encourages the student to consider how the internet has shifted the balance of power between dissidents and the government.

Compare and contrast the dissident activities of Han Han and Ai Weiwei. What was Han Han's opinion of Ai?

This encourages the student to note that Ai takes a far more aggressive stance than Han Han, who limits his commentary to less controversial topics. Han Han explicitly stated that he thought Ai's activism was pointless because it was largely censored by the government.

How do the high speed rail crash and the career of Liu Zhijun symbolize China's economy broadly?

This challenges the student to consider the difference between the gilded exterior of the Chinese economy and the potential that corruption has to damage it.

How is Michael representative of young Chinese citizens? What societal problem does he expose?

This encourages the student to consider Osnos's argument that many Chinese youth, though relatively wealthier than their parents, feel frustrated and incapable of achieving their aspirations.



What is the “spiritual void?” What is the government’s role in creating and addressing this problem?

This is a major theme in the later sections of the book and describes a problem that Osnos considers to a significant threat to China moving forward

What societal problem did Little Yueyue’s death expose? How does Osnos’s perspective on this problem differ from that of Chinese citizens?

This encourages the student to consider how collectivist values have been eroded in Chinese society. Osnos’s perspective is telling, because this is the only time that his views significantly depart from those of his Chinese acquaintances.