**Glimpses of Chinese Life**

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 **Ross Terrill**

**A Young Chinese Businessman**

A Chinese friend in his thirties, Chen Lijun, with chiseled features and a ready smile, told me a life story that illuminates China’s twilight socioeconomic condition.

He recently left a government post in Beijing for a small private data-processing start-up called Horizon. His previous job at Standard Press, a large publisher deeply entangled with the communist state, paid 6000 yuan (about A$100) a month. Now, as general manager of Horizon, he gets 20,000 yuan a month. He manages twenty-three staff, all younger than himself, works long hours, loves the simple dynamics, appreciates the pay, and a degree of freedom to speak out to me.

When we talked over coffee at Jianguo Hotel east of Tiananmen Square, I could see Chen’s major reason for switching was political and philosophical. At Standard Press, he sensed “clouds ahead” in the publishing industry. Xi Jinping’s control was growing tighter. The newly arrived president of the press was “not open to new ideas” and “not a man of books”.

The “bogey of thirty-five” is familiar to all Chinese. Turning thirty-five is a special moment. “Choice narrows. People often get fixed, thereafter, on one road forever. If you want better, change by thirty-five.” Chen paused. “Otherwise, at thirty-five if you haven’t climbed, you’re stuck.” Had he stayed at Standard Press, his life in ten or fifteen years would be dull and unfree. “Not-living-not-dying”, he called it.

Chen’s boss in the acquisitions section at Standard Press said, “You’re good and I need you. But if you must leave, don’t go to a small experimental outfit. Choose a big state-owned company. Xi Jinping will give more resources to this type.” Chen laughed. “That was one thing she got right—and Xi got wrong!”

“They’re different from us,” he says of the “kids” under him at Horizon (all in their early twenties). “They seek happiness more than success. If they don’t make enough money, they move. If they get a pile of savings, that’s not a culmination. Self-fulfilment is the culmination. They crave a car, they want to see Tibet, to go to Australia.”

His little firm Horizon may succeed in China’s hybrid system of Leninism above (government) and social-Confucianism below (citizens’ private and chosen economic life). Xi and other top leftists think private firms are useful to China only for a while, then the government will absorb them for the glory of the state and success for the China Dream. Reformers like Premier Li Keqiang argue that small units like Horizon are good for hybrid China now and tomorrow.

Chen’s father is a farmer and carpenter in Shandong Province. For him, under Mao, going beyond high school to university was impossible. “But my dad is smart. While still at primary school he helped teachers beautify their houses. Jesus was a carpenter, too, you know.” Chen never discusses politics or large issues with his father. But father sent son to school and college. “Little guidance but much encouragement,” Chen summed up. He entered a small college at Yantai, in China’s apple country in Shandong.

Chen brought two Western friends’ home to meet his family and other villagers. “Canadian classmates. Everyone stared at my foreign friends as if they were two monkeys from the zoo. I was admired for bringing the first-ever foreigners to our village. My father was so proud.” The parents still work hard on the farm, he says, “while I have a life as a modern man”. They never mention the Cultural Revolution, which held them back, to their son. Nor the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, when Chen was in second grade.

Graduating in 2008 from a second school, Minorities University in Beijing, he was hired by Standard Press, which was then expanding. Publishing suited him because of his high marks in exams for literature. “I learned English like crazy, reading English stuff every day by the lake at the university.”

After six months working in acquisitions and marketing, Chen rose to promoting Standard Press on visits to various provinces. His boss could see Chen had the outgoing personality, eager and always smiling, for such PR work.

But as Xi Jinping tightened the CCP’s grip on culture, Chen outgrew Standard Press. A new chief, Tan Bingzhang, on arrival wrote an announcement on Weibo (China’s Twitter), that he’d been appointed president of Standard Press. “In Chinese culture, you don’t do that,” Chen said with a grimace. “Not nice. Best keep things modest. Leave others to publicize it.”

Recently, Chen visited Tan to get a signature on his earlier quit form from Standard that listed his new job at Horizon as “general manager”. Said Tan, “Huh, just like me, general manager, equal with me.”

Chen demurred respectfully. “But my company is very little and your company is very big.” Chen, under cover of anonymity, added to me: “I did not say what was in my heart—that Tan was not a true leader of a publisher, just a political man. Trying to put on a good face for some future promotion elsewhere, maybe in the Ministry of Education.”

“Horizon might grow large,” I said to Chen, “just like Standard Press.”

He replied: “Companies like ours are a threat to the CCP’s China. Essential for China, but dangerous to the CCP. We are OK for now, but the next two years will make or break us.”

Chen says it’s risky for a small private company to grow big. “Our party-state will tax and regulate it back to small. Argument with the government over tax is hopeless. You just have to hand the money over—55 per cent of revenue, 3 per cent for this, 6 per cent for that. More and more. Didn’t Jesus say, Those who have, should give?” Chen smiled at his paraphrase.

“You cannot fake figures, but our financial people try to do things, you know, that are best for our little business.” I think Chen knows Horizon’s insecurity, but has the appetite to struggle for its future, and for China’s and his little son’s.

If Chen had to guess, how many years until China has a woman president, or a businessman president, or religious believer president? “We had a female Empress in the Tang Dynasty”—618 to 907 AD—“that’s why I admire the Tang very much.” Long pause. “But I would say 100 years. Only if the Party broke down. With other parties arising, or political fighting. Still, the CCP has helped women in some ways.”

“A businessman president?”

“Like Trump in America? Comparing US and China, I see flexibility in the West’s systems that can bring a Trump, but in China, seldom such flexibility.”

“But you have Jack Ma” (the wizard of Alibaba).

“Ma would never dare to stand up and declare an ambition to lead China. And young people would not join him—unless they had a lot of money. Remember, Chinese schools today teach a lot of political propaganda, even to primary pupils.”

I said some Chinese parents tell me they no longer trust the government to produce safe baby food and medicine for their kids. Better to buy from New Zealand or Australia. That issue could escalate from private to political. Chen frowned: “Yes. That’s why the CCP desperately tries to control social media, to prevent people escalating it up to a political issue.”

“Do you feel nostalgia or desire for the countryside?”

“Yes, when I’m worried I feel like I should go back to the Shandong countryside. Probably, I’ll go back when I retire.”

What would Chen like his son, now five, to grow up to do? “Choose something he loves. But I would be pleased if it’s related to the arts, which are a great tool for communication. Music, for instance, speaks internationally, regardless of language. In painting or music, my son could make use of a realm of freedom. Maybe, travel from country to country, Australia, Brazil, see the whole world.” Sounds like the mentality of Chen’s “kids” at Horizon.

Ross Terrill wrote The New Chinese Empire (2004) which forecast China’s ambitious rise, and also Mao and Madam Mao. His new book from Rowman & Littlefield is Australian Bush to Tiananmen Square, published last month.

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The Secret Society

Here are a few points and observations readers might like to consider during discussions about China. They arose out of a conversation I had in Hong Kong thirty years ago with the Hungarian Laszlo Ladany SJ, then generally regarded as the doyen of all China-watchers. A fascinating man and a powerful intellect, he had produced for over thirty years a weekly newsletter called China News Analysis based mainly on his constant listening to radio broadcasts across the closed Communist China—nothing but impeccable China sources. China-watchers throughout the world read him religiously and quoted him, almost always without attribution, not that that ever worried him. More importantly, he was one of the few, if not the only, observer to predict the Cultural Revolution.

I asked him over a memorable lunch in one of the obscure and exquisite little restaurants he often took me to, “Who runs China today?” I meant what individual or faction at that time. However, he took it more broadly and said in effect the following. It’s the Communist Party of course, but it is a different sort of Communist Party from those in the West—Italy, France or Australia. The Chinese Communist Party, while Marxist, is really another Chinese secret society like the Shanghai Green Gang that ran China under Chiang Kai-shek, and many others in China and Japan. It operates like these underworld gangs through extortion, bribery, murder and smuggling. And as with these gangs, it is next to impossible to know what is happening inside the Communist Party. For some periods it has been impossible even to know who the Party leaders were. Ladany reminded me that when Mao Zedong died in September 1976 and was succeeded by Hua Guofeng, Henry Kissinger had said that the Americans knew nothing about Hua, not even where he lived.

Another observation Ladany made was that during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, all education at all levels in all institutions, including schools, universities, museums and libraries, closed for ten years. Millions of books were destroyed. Teachers were run out of town, as was anyone wearing spectacles to read. This period, he said, had produced a generation or two of illiterates, and he wondered what impact that might have in the future.

Well, we might now know. The current Pres­ident for life, Xi Jinping, was fourteen years old in 1966 and twenty-four years old in 1976. In these formative years, the only education he would have received would have been in Marxist-Leninist theory and praxis and Mao Zedong Thought during Communist Party meetings and seminars. Many of those who surround him today would have had similar experiences.

Ten years ago, I wrote about Ladany’s comments in the book Wrestling with Asia: A Memoir (Connor Court). But fifty years ago, I was among a number of senior associates in Australia, the US and the Asia-Pacific region, including Indonesia, Singapore and Japan who came together in the Pacific Institute and warned of the imminent rise of an aggressive and expansionist Communist China and the need for Australia and its allies to take action to protect the strategic sea lanes running though Indonesia and the South China Sea. Fortunately, action in this regard has been under way for some years now, thanks mainly to the US, Australia, Japan, India and others. Of particular interest and value has been the recent strategic agreement between Indonesia and India to build a major naval base near their joint maritime border at the western end of the Malacca Strait and India’s even more recent agreement to form a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Australia.

Along with that, we can assume, surely, that the Five Power Defense Arrangements of the UK, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and New Zealand have not been idle in this matter—and that French nuclear naval power will now remain in the Pacific.

It will be interesting to observe how Xi Jinping’s totalitarian clampdown on China’s society, demanding that everyone adhere to and practise Maoism, fares as it conflicts with the aspirations of the new educated, prosperous and innovative middle classes, who are the beneficiaries of modern globalization and trade liberalisation. We await to see what effect this might have, not only on the national economy, but on Xi’s future and his stated ultimate ambition of world domination within a few decades.

