

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



THE CHINA DIARIES

The Globe's award-winning China correspondent **Mark MacKinnon** and photographer **John Lehmann**'s three-week trip exploring China at a defining moment in its modern history



THE GLOBE AND MAIL PRESENTS:
THE CHINA DIARIES



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John Lehmann and I spent 22 sometimes grueling, always fascinating, days travelling across China by train – but The China Diaries was actually years in the making.

In The Globe and Mail's historic Beijing bureau (in 1959 we became the first Western newspaper allowed to open an office in Communist-ruled China), I keep a list of all the places I need to visit, all the stories I want to write. Over the four-plus years I've been reporting from this massive and fast-changing country, the to-do list has never stopped growing.

I had missed the democratic breakthrough in the fishing village of Wukan because I was outside of China when it happened, but I badly wanted to see what had transpired there since. I knew I needed to get back to Chongqing, the Yangtze River metropolis that has been the scene of so much fast-unfolding drama since the fall of former Communist Party star Bo Xilai in early 2012. I wanted to go to the Tibetan areas of Sichuan to try and understand why more than 100 monks and laypersons had taken the radical step of self-immolating in protest against Chinese rule. I also wanted to do more reporting on the appalling number of forced home demolitions around the country. And I needed to examine the country's mounting environmental crises, as well as the inspiring response to those problems from a nascent civil society.

Most of all, I badly wanted to see Liangjiahe, the tiny village in Shaanxi province where China's new leader, Xi Jinping, had been exiled and assigned to a labour gang during the Cultural Revolution.

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One afternoon, I decided to plot all those unfinished assignments on a map. To my surprise, you could draw an extended arc through those dots that traced a course not too different from that of the fabled Long March that Mao Zedong and his Red Armies had taken more than seven decades before in a very different China.

Throw in my long-standing love of taking the train – fostered while riding the rails through desolate parts of my former home, Russia – and an idea was born.

Thankfully, John was hard at work planning his own trip to China in early 2013. His photographs, video and good humour all helped make The China Diaries something special. Yu Mei, the cheerful and resourceful news assistant in our Beijing bureau, also deserves special mention for spending three weeks on the train with John and I, deftly keeping up with my habit of throwing out the previous night's plan and declaring a new one almost every morning.

My editors at The Globe and Mail – including John Stackhouse, Craig Offman, Sinclair Stewart, Susan Sachs, Michael Snider, Stephen Northfield and Philippe Devos – all helped make The China Diaries happen, and polished the product (including a selection of older but related reports from my four years in China) into what you're about to read.

Mark MacKinnon
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Beijing, China

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China's Next Stop

The China Diaries

Supertrain symbolism trumps safety

Newspaper becomes lightning rod for free press debate in China

How to have a good time in Huaihua

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Mao home a fading shrine; curiosity, not zeal, brough pilgrims in 1982
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China's Next Stop

The police in Liangjiahe were onto us before we even glimpsed the famous caves where China's new leader had once lived.

"Come in here," a plainclothes Public Security Bureau (PSB) officer said, grabbing me by the elbow seconds after I stepped out of a taxi near the walled compound that is the village's administrative centre. He steered us into a small room where other officers quickly joined us.

The PSB men took down our passport numbers and visa information. They asked what we were doing in Liangjiahe (Lee-ung-jah-huh), a town of a few hundred people in the remote northern corner of Shaanxi (Shan-see) province.

But they already knew the answer: We were there because it's where Xi Jinping, the man who became China's President on March 14, had been exiled and assigned to hard labour during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

Other reporters, we knew, had been chased away by plainclothes officers like the men around us, without ever seeing the cave-house Mr. Xi lived in during his teenage years. Now we feared the same. Our hopes sank as the police explained that we needed permission from the local Communist Party secretary to do any reporting in Liangjiahe.

An hour passed, then two. I grimly contemplated the possibility that we had spent 22 days travelling around China by train only to be stopped a few hundred metres from our final goal.

The Globe and Mail had been following roughly the route of Mao Zedong's historic Long March, which helped to give birth to the country's modern communist identity.

Liangjiahe, the teenaged home of that regime's latest steward, is just 80 kilometres from the city of Yan'an, the place where the Red Armies rested and regrouped in 1935 at the end of their march.

As we waited for a decision, the officers gave us permission to wander into the courtyard of the building, where two old men sat warming themselves in the mid-winter sun.

I could see in their faces that their lives had been marked by a single event – the arrival of Mr. Xi in 1969 and the chance to tell that story over and over again to whoever asked. I squatted down and asked if they could tell me what they remembered.

The four-plus years I have been living in China have been astonishing to experience.

I arrived on the last day of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and sat that evening in the city's Temple of the Earth park to watch the closing ceremonies on a big-screen television. The crowd seemed

pleasantly surprised at how well their country had handled its moment in the spotlight.

By 2010, China had passed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy, behind only the United States. China was suddenly the "other" centre of the world. Economically and diplomatically, people increasingly spoke of a new superpower structure, a "G2" made up of Washington and Beijing.

There were symbolic leaps forward too: China put its first woman in space last summer, and completed its first manned space-docking. The first Chinese aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, launched in September.

With all that has come a more assertive foreign policy, especially within East Asia, where China has deployed its coast guard and navy to back territorial claims.

A minority of Chinese are loudly supportive. The rest are proud in a more detached and uncertain way: Their country is being transformed, largely through their hard work, but they have no say in what happens next.

There is a widespread fear that their gains are not safe – polls show that more than half of rich Chinese have made some preparations to leave the country.

Much of the outcome for China and

the world depends on Mr. Xi, and what he does with his decade as the country's "paramount leader."

To get a better sense of him and the challenges he is inheriting, I began compiling a list of stories I wanted to follow – economic, environmental and political – in far-flung parts the country, including Liangjiahe.

One afternoon, I plotted them on a map and an unexpected pattern emerged: You could draw an extended arc through those dots and trace a course not too different from that of the fabled Long March that Mao Zedong and his Red Armies had taken more than seven decades earlier.

Then, Mao and his comrades were making a torturously slow, almost fatal overland retreat from positions that had been surrounded by the armies of Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Kuomintang. Now, it feels as though the chairman's heirs are moving almost as slowly away from a totalitarian system of government that seems doomed to implode without reform. By retracing the Long March of the 1930s, I hoped to discover a little bit about where Mao's heirs might be headed next.

I had fostered a love of the train while riding the rails through desolate parts of my former post, Russia. So, along with photographer John Lehmann and Yu Mei, the Beijing-bureau news assistant, I decid-

ed to spend three weeks on Chinese trains in the middle of winter.



Some of the stories we found appeared in *The Globe* one by one, but it's the sweep of the journey that sticks with me: The trip made me fall in love with China – or at least its people – again, after a period of personal disillusionment caused by living with the poisonous air, intrusive security and lobotomizing censorship that are facts of life in the People's Republic. Beijing, the trip reminded me, is a cynical city that governs a relentlessly optimistic people.

But the journey also showed me how that Chinese sense of hope – and patience – is being tested in 2013, at the same time as their country is going through what could prove to be a pivotal change at the

top.

Collectively, the people I met believe that the time has come for China to change. It does not need to become a Western-style democracy with elected leaders, at least not yet. But it does need to become a fairer place, and soon.

There are 1.3 billion people marching forward into what are unquestionably their country's brightest hours. But they do so wondering if national greatness for China – and more money in their pockets – is worth the sense of powerlessness that comes with this moment of pride.

To take a long-distance train through China is to travel between worlds. One moment, the scene out your window is five-star hotels and corporate towers; the next, it's rice paddies and squat homes with thatched roofs. You have left the developed China that Western businessmen know, and entered the left-behind countryside where little has changed since imperial times.

China's rapidly expanding network of high-speed trains is an effort to patch together those different Chinas, addressing many problems at once.

The most obvious goals are economic: The construction of eight high-speed lines – four running east-west, the others north-south – over the past five years has created work for 100,000 people. A pair of

rail expansion plans worth hundreds of billions of dollars, first in 2009 and then again last year, helped to avoid predicted slowdowns in growth for the world's second-largest economy.

The high-speed network hints at what China could be, as well as what holds it back. Here are trains running faster than those in Europe, with the Communist Party as the metaphorical locomotive pulling along a hard-working people who are getting rich enough to afford such luxuries. But the project has been undermined by the same endemic corruption that threatens seemingly every gain the country makes.

The new railways are taking some of the

burden off the nation's incredibly overcrowded slow-coach services. When all the seats and bunks on those routes are sold out, they sell tickets for standing room, even on routes that are 20 or 30 hours long. On overnight trains, it is common to see families with small children camping in any nook – often the covered area connecting the cars – that they can claim as their space.

The high-speed trains are also an environmental leap forward, emitting far less pollutants than the older versions – no small matter when many of China's large cities are among the most polluted in the world.

Another purpose – as with the Cana-



dian Pacific Railway back in the 1880s – is nation-building.

One of the most startling things about visiting some of the less-travelled parts of China is how disconnected this seeming monolith of a country can be. People in coastal Guangdong, the birthplace of the Cantonese language, are as different from Beijingers in speech, diet and mindset as Sicilians are from Belgians.

In some villages we visited farther inland, the first challenge was finding a local Mandarin speaker who could translate for us, since few of the locals could understand standard Chinese.

Keeping the Chinese empire intact remains as real a challenge for Xi Jinping in 2013 as it posed to emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The Communist Party is betting that high-speed rail will serve to draw these different Chinas closer together, making the nation a more solid construction.

Our first train ride of the trip was on one of these new multipurpose supertrains, known as G-trains, travelling north at ear-popping speed between Guangzhou and Changsha, the capital of central Hunan province.

The G-train slid almost noiselessly out of the futuristic Guangzhou South railway station, a hangar of a place that features

a McDonalds and a Family Mart convenience store. As we picked up speed, we were quickly back in a China that knows few such modernities. Soon, we were travelling 308 kilometres an hour, and the images out the window began to blur.

By the time we arrived at the gate of Mr. Xi's former cave-house, we had seen progress everywhere our trains had stopped: apartment buildings rising from the ground, dirt roads being paved, high-speed railway lines coming into service, mobile phone networks spreading to the remotest corners of the country. People were at work, earning money to give their children a better life than they had.

But we also heard again and again how little China has changed when it come to the rule of law. As in Mao's time, the Communist Party can still demolish your home, declare that you are a "subversive" element, and send you to prison or a labour camp without any public proof or chance to defend yourself.

The system empowers the corrupt and makes dissidents out of earnest people who want to better their country. Somewhere else, the lauded and persecuted rebel Ai Weiwei might be just a moderately successful contemporary artist, or Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate now facing eight more years in jail, just another grumpy author.



Xi Jinping is the first Communist Party leader who comes to power with a biography that may give him an understanding of that systemic flaw. As a 15-year-old, he had his life shattered. The man he grew up idolizing, his father – revolutionary hero Xi Zhongxun – had been condemned as a member of an anti-communist clique and sent to do hard labour in the countryside. The family was plunged into disgrace.

The younger Mr. Xi spent seven years digging ditches and doing farm labour in Liangjiahe, where the soil is so loose and dry that little besides corn can grow. Like

the others here, he lived in a cave-like tunnel he and his fellow labourers carved into the rocky hillside, adding only the modern touches of a metal door and windows at the entrance. Water came from a well, and there was heat only if he collected scrub to burn.

One of the old men I met while waiting in the courtyard told me that his name is Mr. Wang. He had helped to build the village dike alongside Xi Jinping 40-some years ago in a very different China.

Mr. Wang and Mr. Xi's lives have diverged unthinkably since the days they shovelled

dirt side by side in Shaanxi province: Mr. Xi wears sharp suits and drives about in armoured limousines; Mr. Wang wears an oversized and tattered blue worker's jacket, and only black slippers on his feet despite the January chill.

"We were farmers. I didn't think anyone I knew could ever be the country's leader," Mr. Wang said, admitting that he was nervous to talk about his old comrade. But he would say he hoped that Mr. Xi remembered what it was like to "eat bitterness" – a catch-all Chinese expression for living through whatever hardships life throws at you.

"I think it will be helpful to him that he had this experience," Mr. Wang said. "He ate bitterness here, just like us."

Once I was allowed to speak with other locals, I found that they remembered a young man who arrived from Beijing speaking only standard Mandarin, unable to understand the local dialect. But he impressed them with his willingness to work as hard as any of them, one winter taking off his shoes and rolling up his trousers to help to build a dike in the town's frigid river.

"I didn't expect a city boy could come here and live like us," said Liang Youchang, an 83-year-old farmer who worked alongside Mr. Xi building the dike. "When he came back [in the early

1990s] to visit along with his sister, she was weeping when she saw how tough his life had been."

There's a Communist star carved into the stone over the door to Mr. Xi's former cave-home, alongside Mao's famous injunction to "serve the people."

Mr. Xi's family was rehabilitated following Mao's death in 1976, which brought an end to the Cultural Revolution, and his father became a key adviser to Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, when he moved to open China's state-run economy.

The elder Mr. Xi was charged with creating the "Special Economic Zone" of Shenzhen, then a fishing village adjacent to Hong Kong. The younger Mr. Xi rose through the ranks under his father's protection. He graduated from the engineering program at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University and by the time he was 32 years old he was executive vice-mayor of the port city of Xiamen.

Now a thick-set man who favours dark suits and red ties, Mr. Xi was introduced in November in Beijing's Great Hall of the People as the new leader of the Communist Party, the latest successor to Mao Zedong. With no hint of rancour, he makes sure in almost every speech to include a few words of praise for the man who once destroyed his family.

It's a rags-to-riches story the party is not quite yet sure how to tell, perhaps because Mr. Xi's fall and rise illustrates how fluid and ill-defined the concept of justice was, and remains, in the People's Republic.

If our final stop reminded us of Mr. Xi's challenge – fix the system before the people's patience runs out – our first destination on our railway journey showed us how near that breaking point might be.

We came to Guangdong province (where Mao's Red Armies began their Long March) and in the southeast, to the fishing village of Wukan – a town of 1,300 people that has become synonymous in China with both rippling unrest and its primary causes: corrupt local officials and the deals they make with property developers.

Wukan is a place of squat concrete homes surrounded by palm trees, a meagre fishing harbour and two out-of-place constructions that flick at what went wrong: a sprawling holiday resort that looks like it has never had a guest (though locals say it's frequented by Communist Party officials) and the towering gold-domed headquarters of the county-level finance department.

The finance building looks fit for the government of an oil-rich sultanate, rather than a fishing village 230 kilometres from the nearest airport. Locals sneeringly call it the Gold House. The resort is the

Shenzhen Air Holiday Hotel. The villagers collectively owned part of the land it was built on before it was privatized in 1999.

All those with a claim were supposed to receive compensation, but it was meagre compared with the profits developers and local officials made. It was a pattern that would be repeated again and again over the following decade.

Fury over corruption and the court system that enables it is palpable across China. Since the country's last popular uprising – which ended with the bloody military crackdown on Tiananmen Square in 1989 – the vast majority of Chinese have accepted silently the Communist Party's new deal: In an opened-up economy, people will be free to make their fortunes. Just don't challenge our right to rule.

But party cadres, all the way up, have shown themselves unable to stick to their side of the deal. Local officials grab larger and larger shares of the wealth. Town bosses force villagers off farmland to bring in real-estate projects that deliver huge personal profits. Money earmarked for public-works projects disappears into the pockets of local officials, hundreds of millions of dollars at a time.

The anger is not so far of the focused sort that has toppled Arab governments in recent years. But without any effective formal way to address grievances, tens of

thousands of protests are occurring in the country annually.

In 2010 (the last year for which statistics are available), there were 180,000 “mass incidents” around the country. They range from the brief but angry demonstrations that occasionally swell over perceived abuses by individual policemen, to full-on village uprisings. Wukan’s is the most famous.

In 2009, an anonymous resident put together a pamphlet that listed all the transactions and showed how little property would be left for Wukan’s future generations.

“We were supposed to have received huge compensation. The people realized that if we didn’t speak up, we’d lose our last land,” said Zhang Jiangxing, a 21-year-old blogger whose online writings helped to galvanize the population.

Residents realized that the problem would not change until their government did. They took to the streets in late 2011, demanding the right to choose their own representatives. (Chinese villages have held “elections” for decades, but the candidates are carefully screened by the Communist Party and the results are predetermined.)

They took over the centre of town, a pink-brick plaza known as Little Square,

provoking a showdown with armed police, who surrounded Wukan and choked off the supply of food and water in an effort to force residents to back down.

The villagers refused to budge, and eventually achieved a remarkable breakthrough in recent Chinese history: the right to vote freely for the village council. The new seven-man council elected in February, 2012, had only one Communist Party member on it.

The new council made a show of transparency – making its books public for the first time – and set about a series of public-works projects. But recovering the villagers’ land has proved more challenging than achieving local democracy. The problems stretch far higher than the village council can reach.

“All we’re asking for is fairness from the government. We want the corrupt officials to spit out the money they have swallowed. I have five sons, seven people in my family, and no land at all,” said Huang Zhiliang, a 40-year-old occasional labourer who approached us as we stood on Little Square.

“If we don’t get it back, we will ask our leaders to bring the people together again to protest.”

Identical problems – land seizures, official corruption and a sense that ordinary people can do nothing – are easy to find

1,000 kilometres northwest in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, a short drive from Mao's birthplace in the mountain town of Shaoshan.

Tens of thousands of pilgrims still make their way to Shaoshan each year to bow and lay flowers at the foot of a six-metre-high statue of the chairman – some believe Mao has become a deity, watching over the People's Republic that he founded.

We were met at Changsha South train station by Zhang Yuxiang, a 59-year-old tailor and a mother of one who had been fighting a years-long battle to stop local officials from demolishing her modest family home.

Ms. Zhang collapsed into tears as soon as we were all in a van together. "I'm so happy you're here. It gives me hope," she sobbed. "I haven't slept for five days."

She and her neighbour are two of a large, uncounted number of "nail house" owners across China – that is, "stubborn nails" who refuse to make way for development.

She took us to what had once been her neighbourhood, near the smog-shrouded centre of Changsha. Where there had been more than 100 homes flanked by farmlands now stood only a vast construction site, with apartment blocks – dozens of storeys high – rising out of the rust-brown

dirt.

At the edge remained two forlorn homes, those of Ms. Zhang and her neighbour. Both had refused the local government's demand that they move out and accept the offered compensation of about \$27,000.



"It's too low," Ms. Zhang said, her eyes flashing with anger. "Even if I took the compensation, I could never afford another home. Those that took the compensation were relocated to another place, and their land has already been sold from under them again."

(Land in China is owned either by collectives or by the state, meaning an individual rarely has a protected right to their land.)

Ms. Zhang's decision not to leave the home where she ran her tailoring shop for 22 years and raised her only son had turned her life into a Kafkaesque nightmare. Two years ago, the government cut off her water and electricity. Men came

into her house and ripped out the sink and stove.

Now, the main room – which used to be her tailoring shop – looked as though it had been hit by a missile. Her bedroom looked like a camp erected by a homeless person, which in many ways is what she had become. She slept at night on a hard box spring covered with thin quilts. By her pillow she kept a toothbrush, a flashlight and an umbrella for the rain that would pour through the many cracks in her roof.



Her husband and son had already moved out. “It’s too dangerous for my son to be here,” she explained.

In July of 2012, Ms. Zhang – once the head of the local village committee – was taken into police custody for the first time. Though she was never charged with any crime, she said she was tortured by six men simply because she had been defiant.

“I was handcuffed behind my back,” she said, crossing her hands behind her. “Then they [defecated] in water and poured it

down my throat.”

Now, she was down on her knees in the back of the van, forcing her own mouth open to show how she had been made to drink. She claimed the head of the local Public Security Bureau and the head of her village council had been directly involved.

Like many of China’s petitioners, Ms. Zhang blamed local officials for what has happened to her, not the top leadership in Beijing. As the construction moved closer to her house – there was now rubble piled up on all sides of her lonely structure – she had hung a red banner her rooftop. “Protect farmers’ legal rights!” it read.

The banner was positioned beside a photograph of Xi Jinping standing at a flower-dressed podium. She said she believed Mr. Xi would save her home, if only he knew what was happening.

Our next trip began in Changsha’s 100-year-old main railway station. Despite the new high-speed terminal across town, the old station was still bursting with unwashed passengers, shoving and carrying humongous bags of unknown contents on their backs.

We headed back south aboard one of the K-train slow coaches that are the workhorses of China’s rail network, crisscrossing the country at a much more modest

top speed of 120 kilometres an hour.

John Lehmann, Yu Mei and I were booked in “soft sleeper” class – the nicest, with four narrow bunks to a compartment, and overhead space to cram your bags into. Sharing our room was Kelvin Chan, a 30-year-old real-estate developer from Hong Kong. “Maybe they stick all the people with [foreign] passports in the same cabin,” he guessed, speaking the first English we had heard on the trip.

Mr. Chan was on the other side of

China’s great scramble for real estate. He is one of the people brought in by local governments to build New China after Old China – made up of people like Ms. Zhang – is shoved aside.

When the economy was roaring a few years ago, Mr. Chan’s company (owned by his father) worked on developments in bigger cities such as Changsha. But the global economic crisis has tempered enthusiasm for new building even in China, where the whole country often feels like



a vast construction site. The company has been forced to start looking for business at the county level.

They found that the economic downturn had not dampened the enthusiasm of local officials for big-money projects. Mr. Chan was headed to southern Hunan to oversee the construction of a 13-building apartment-retail complex – each building 18 storeys high – in a town of 70,000 people.

According to Mr. Chan, the economics of such transactions heavily favour the local government. For his upcoming project, the town council had compensated residents at roughly 50,000 yuan, or \$8,000, per mu (a Chinese unit of land measurement – 15 mu equals one hectare). The town then sold the land to Mr. Chan's company at closer to \$225,000 per mu, an astonishing 2,800-per-cent markup.

Even still, Mr. Chan said that his company can still make a 20-per-cent profit by selling the finished properties on to eager buyers. The only hiccups were residents like Ms. Zhang who refuse to take their cash and leave.

“We do have some problems with them,” he acknowledged as our train rumbled south. “But we just give some more cash to the government and eventually they solve it.”

Another six hours south by the slower

T-train – this time by “hard sleeper” class, six bunks per berth – sits Guiyang, the capital of China's poorest province, Guizhou.

Guiyang is what they call a “third-tier” city in China – one being left behind not just by the racing coastal economies, but even by the other interior cities that have geographical advantages that places like Guiyang do not.

Guizhou province has nothing: no sizeable industries, no natural resources other than coal, not even the farmland that so much of the country has as a fallback plan. Its main export is its people, who travel to the first- and second-tier cities to work in the factories, often leaving their children in the care of elderly grandparents so they can make an extra few thousand yuan a month needed for the kids' education.

The wealth gap in China can be staggering to observe up close. Parts of Guizhou feel not just thousands of kilometres but hundreds of years away from the ultra-modern skylines on Beijing and Shanghai. Even more jarring is the evidence on the streets of Guiyang, where you can see a family of three sharing a mud-covered scooter on one street and an immaculately clean Lamborghini on the next.

The outgoing tandem of president Hu

Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao made Guizhou the focus of their Construct a New Socialist Countryside campaign, pouring billions into building new roads over the past decade, connecting many villages to water and electricity for the first time.

The improvements in poor provinces such as Guizhou – nearly everyone we spoke to said their lives had improved in the preceding 10 years – will probably stand as one of the chief accomplishments of the Hu-Wen era.

Much of that effort, though, was undermined by official corruption at the local level, blended with impunity and a disregard for those less fortunate.

By chance, the taxi driver who collected us from our hotel in the morning was named Kong Dezheng, a member of one of the most unique families in China: The Kongs are the direct descendants of Kong Qiu, the sage the outside world knows as Confucius.

A thousand men with Confucius's last name ("We don't count the women," a village elder told me) live in a hamlet called Wanzi, a collection of concrete homes clinging to the side of a dirt road that is a winding, five-hour drive west of Guiyang, through the mountains.

The descendants of Confucius live little differently now than their ancestors did

centuries ago, when part of the family first moved here from the northeast of the country. The Kongs grow enough corn in the rocky land to get by, but not enough extra to sell. The young and able leave Wanzi to go work in the coastal factories, leaving their children in the care of the grandparents who remain.

This is a village of old people and babies. It's also a place of extreme poverty. The homes are clustered around a single dirt road that turns into a mudslide when it rains.

"Being related to Confucius hasn't brought us any extra food," said Kong Lingmei, a 69-year-old retired teacher and chief source of family lore. He poured green tea that he boiled on a hot plate built into the centre of his family's dinner table – a uniquely Chinese apparatus that



also served as the only source of heat in their home. Nineteen others lived in the two-storey, eight-room building.

None of the money Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao spent on Guizhou appeared to have reached Wanzi. Indeed, the drive there would have been quicker had local officials not siphoned off much of the cash they were allocated to build a four-lane highway and decided instead that the western side of the province could get by with just two lanes.

“We have too many corrupt officials. If they receive 10,000, we only receive 1,000. The poorer a place is, the more corrupt it is,” said Kong Wei, a 44-year-old farmer. “We sometimes hear money is being sent, but we never receive it.”

“Put your fuckin’ hands up! Put your fuckin’ hands up!”

Chen Qiming, a 26-year-old who performs as MC Tequila, was trying to get the crowd going on a Saturday night at Club TNT, in the Yangtze River metropolis of Chongqing, cursing at them in English and spinning pop songs that a radio listener in Canada would know well: We Are Young by /fun., CCT one of the most-played songs anywhere last year, merged into Bon Jovi’s celebratory It’s My Life.

The crowd of glitteringly dressed twen-

tysomethings obligingly put its hands up.

Bon Jovi’s ode to seizing the moment accurately captured the ethos of the crowd in Club TNT, where it cost \$100 to book a table on a Saturday night, and the bottles of Moët & Chandon champagne that decorate most tables cost \$200 per popped cork.

“In Chongqing’s club scene right now, more and more people like to buy champagne. They want to let others know ‘I’m rich, I can afford this,’” MC Tequila explained. He said that he sings and performs in English to give the club a more “international” feel.

Despite the prices, many in the crowd were students home from university to celebrate the Lunar New Year. As they danced under a ceiling of blinking chandeliers, the revellers around me were proud that this club in middle China looked like a nightspot in Paris, London, New York or Montreal.

The students represent the positive side of China’s trade-off: They have more money, and more opportunity, than any Chinese generation before them. They just want their country to be normal, and on this Saturday night in Chongqing, it very much was.

The Red Armies did not pass through Chongqing on their Long March in 1935. But in 2013, it’s impossible to properly

take the pulse of China without visiting the sweaty metropolis that has dominated headlines while I have been reporting from the country.



Chongqing has long been compared to Chicago, another populous river city that is considered a “heartland” place even as it is overshadowed by the political and economic capitals on the coast. But it’s the Chicago of the 1920s that many see as a parallel for Chongqing – a place that gives rise to heroes and villains, provocative politicians and infamous gangsters.

At first, Bo Xilai, the high-profile Communist Party boss, came across as one of the heroes. Instead, he would become perhaps the most notorious cautionary tale of the new Chinese era.

Like Xi Jinping, Mr. Bo was a “princeling” of the party. Both their fathers had been revolutionaries who were then persecuted by Mao and finally rehabilitated

by Deng Xiaoping, allowing them to protect and guide their children’s careers. But that is where the similarities end.

While Mr. Xi was rising quietly through the ranks, Mr. Bo was making headlines wherever he went. After arriving as party boss of Chongqing in 2007, he launched a spectacular campaign to crush the powerful local mafia, as well as the corrupt officials who abetted them, while charting a populist leftward course economically.

Along with his cult of personality, Mr. Bo worried Chinese intellectuals with the show trials and lack of due legal process that were part of his anti-mafia campaign. One of his victims was Ren Jianyu, a 25-year-old civil servant who published online comments comparing Mr. Bo’s tactics to Mao’s.

In the summer of 2011, a team of Chongqing public-security agents went to Mr. Ren’s house, and told him he needed to go to the police station. He was sentenced to two years in a labour camp, where he was forced to work 10 hours a day welding copper rings together (he never knew why) and relearning his Communist Party history.

“I went through every feeling: pain, hate, denial,” Mr. Ren recalled in an interview after his release.

Still, Mr. Bo was seen as a sure bet to join the top of China’s power pyramid, the

seven-man Standing Committee of the Politburo. Some predicted that he would become Mr. Xi's vice-president. As much of the world knows, the November, 2011, death of British businessman Neil Heywood changed all that.

Mr. Bo's wife, former lawyer Gu Kailai, would confess that she came to see the family friend as a threat, invited him to a Chongqing hotel, she got him drunk and slipped him cyanide.

Ms. Gu was handed a suspended death sentence last summer. Mr. Bo was arrested on unknown charges that will almost certainly include corruption and abuse of power – an extraordinarily sensitive moment for the regime.

The irony is not lost on Mr. Ren: Mr. Bo, the man who persecuted him for speaking his mind, is now the one missing inside China's justice system. He has not been seen or heard from in a year. Unlike Mr. Ren, Mr. Bo is likely to eventually see a judge. But there's no chance that he will be found innocent.

From Chongqing we took a three-hour fast train west to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, not far from the edge of the Tibetan plateau. From there it was an epic 22-hour rumble north and west to Lanzhou, not far from the endless sands of the Gobi desert.

Lanzhou is a grim and dirty city of 3.2

million people supported by coal mines, chemical factories and, on the outskirts, a large People's Liberation Army base. To the east is the city of Huining, where Red Armies that had marched thousands of kilometres finally met up with local Communist forces. The Long March was almost over.

Because of the city's strategic location and ethnic mix – Lanzhou is a city of Han Chinese, Hui Muslims, ethnic Uyghurs (Muslims from Xinjiang province), Tibetans and Mongolians – it is also one of the most tightly controlled places in China. The few people here who spoke of politics said they longed for the freer air of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

In another area, Yu Nan might have been a city councillor, but instead he lives under tight scrutiny. He agreed to meet us, but would not name a place until he was already there and convinced he had not been followed. We joined him in a curtained-off private room in a tea house near the centre of Lanzhou. Even there, Mr. Yu kept a ball cap pulled down low over his eyes.

The 45-year-old said he had first encountered the Public Security Bureau in 1989 while he was a university student in the ancient Silk Road city of Xi'an. As students took over Tiananmen Square in Beijing that spring, students in Xi'an and

dozens of other cities took to the streets to show their support. Mr. Yu joined them, and emerged as one of the leaders of the democracy movement in the city.

But when the tanks and troops were sent in to crush the protests at Tiananmen – leaving hundreds of people, maybe thousands, dead – Mr. Yu and the other student leaders quickly decided that the protesters should be sent home to avoid another massacre. The leaders remained in the walled city centre to ensure that all the protesters were gone before the soldiers came.

Those who lingered were arrested. Mr. Yu spent six months packaging garlic at a re-education-through-labour camp outside the city.

Twenty-four years later, he was still being watched by the police. His more recent troubles stemmed from a 2011 effort to do something the Chinese constitution suggests he should be able to do: run for elected office. Like nearly all candidates who did not have prior Communist Party approval to run in the village elections that fall, he was thrown off the ballot on a technicality before a single vote was cast.

Mr. Yu said he knew in advance that he would never be allowed to win a spot on the village council, even though it's a nearly powerless body. His aim had been to raise awareness about how the election

should have been run, and perhaps to inspire more ordinary citizens to follow his lead the next time around.

“I wanted to witness how the election went so that next time I can tutor others on the process. If there are more people involved, it will be more difficult for them to stop it,” he said.

He used almost the same language I had heard a dozen times already on the journey – that all he wanted was for the Communist Party to follow its own rules: “They didn’t consult us when they wrote the Constitution. At least they should respect what it says.”

That is the bitter irony that is transforming China: Those who were once resigned to Communist Party rule (even some party members) now defy and mock the system. Many see idealistic socialism being replaced by brutal every-person-for-themselves capitalism. Others, however, are connecting and trying to rebuild the fabric of a society they see as torn.

The day after we met Mr. Yu in the tea house, we were invited to visit Bao Xianbing, one of the more inspiring characters we encountered on our long, winding journey.

Tall, gregarious and energetic, Mr. Bao seemed the opposite of the stereotype of the Chinese civil servant. When we arrived

at his office on the 14th floor of a government building near the centre of Lanzhou, he literally bounced up with excitement, pouring us tea and then refilling our paper cups faster than we could sip.

“You’re my first foreign friends!” he smiled, clapping his hands together and pouring more tea.

We had come to see Mr. Bao because I was interested in Lanzhou’s nascent environmental movement. Last year, Lanzhou was named the most polluted city in China by the World Health Organization, based on the amount of particulate matter in the air. That makes it the second-most polluted place in the world, after the bicycle- and tractor-manufacturing hub of Ludhiana in northern India.

And Lanzhou seems intent on topping the next pollution chart – the city’s latest expansion plan involves shaving the tops off about 700 barren mountains to create flat space for more apartment blocks and shopping malls.

The entire time we had been on the train, we had been reading and hearing of the air pollution emergency that had carpeted Beijing since we left the capital, a pall so thick and otherworldly that many residents had taken to referring to the city as Mordor, the always-dark city from *The Lord of the Rings*. Fictional Mordor is home to orcs and ogres. Beijing is where

my wife and asthmatic young daughter live.



Since 2008, the U.S. embassy in Beijing has been posting on Twitter its in-house evaluations of the air quality in Beijing, much to the chagrin of a Chinese government that preferred telling its citizens that it was only a thick “fog” lingering out their window.

The air quality index used by the embassy measures the amounts of ground-level ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, and plots the total amount of pollution in the air on a scale of 1 to 500, with 1 being a perfect day and anything above 300 considered “hazardous.”

The scale proved to be too small to measure Beijing’s air-pollution problems. In November, 2010, the AQI rating went through the roof to an unheard-of 522. At a loss for a term that captured an AQI of

522, someone at the embassy tweeted that the air was “crazy bad,” drawing a grumpy rebuke from the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

This January was even worse. The air in Beijing soared over 500 for 17 consecutive hours in Jan. 12, hitting an unimaginable 755 at one point (which a chastened U.S. embassy called only “beyond index”).

The good news was that the Chinese government had by then been embarrassed into releasing its own air-quality information. The official figure was a significantly lower 498 on the government’s own scale of 500. But it was nonetheless an acknowledgment that China’s growth-at-all-costs economic model had come with real and serious side effects.

Even in Lanzhou, there is a realization that something needs to change. Despite the city’s repressive atmosphere, a group of about 200 concerned citizens came together in 2004 to form the first local non-governmental organization.

The oddly named Green Camel Bell environmental group started out on the city’s university campuses trying to raise awareness and arranging trash-pickup days. More recently, it joined environmental organizations in cities around China in taking independent measurements of the city’s air quality and posting the information online.

Mr. Bao was this week’s volunteer air tester.

“I’m a Communist Party member, if you can believe it,” he told us, still grinning behind his oval spectacles and placing a device that measured air quality outside his 14th-floor window. “This is change and progress, the fact that I’m speaking out. My parents never could.”

He pulled the device in and posted the result on his Weibo account. It’s a typically smoggy day with an air quality rating of 310, or “hazardous” on the international scale. “Our civilization is not as good as yours,” Mr. Bao sighed. “And it’s getting worse, not better.”

Such a public challenge to the government’s grip on information has drawn the predictable reply. Mr. Bao said he was now on his fifth Weibo account after the first four were blocked. The founders of Green Camel Bell have got used to visits from the local Public Security Bureau, although they have managed to maintain a working relationship.

It was inspiring and worrying all at the same time. I asked Mr. Bao if he wanted us to protect his name. Instead, he snapped a picture of me visiting him in his government office and posted it on his Weibo account.

“In a country with one-party rule, the reforms must come because of pressure

from below, from the citizens demanding more and more,” Mr. Yu, the would-be council candidate, told me. “Only when the pressure reaches the top will the leaders realize they need to do emergency surgery.”

China’s new leaders say they get the message. This month, after returning from our journey, I sat under the chandeliers in the Gold Hall of the Great Hall of the People as China’s new Premier, Li Keqiang, promised a “self-imposed revolution.” His would be a smaller, cleaner government, he vowed.

Mr. Xi, too, has said it is time to put power in China “in a cage of regulations.” But four-plus years in China have made me deeply cynical about speeches given

by Communist Party leaders.

Mr. Xi’s push to battle the culture of corruption within the bureaucracy seems impressive so far. Yet a quick search turns up similar speeches given by Jiang Zemin a dozen years ago, where he vowed to “curb and eliminate corruption from the root.” And the labour-camp system that Mr. Xi has made a show of targeting was first declared on its way out in 2005.

Does Mr. Xi have the desire – and just as important, the power – to make real changes?

He has more control than his more recent predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, in large part because he has spent much of his career forging links to the leadership of the powerful People’s Liberation Army. In addition to being head



of the government and leader of the Communist Party, Mr. Xi is also chairman of the Central Military Commission, giving him immediate control over the three institutions that matter most in the People's Republic.

But he rose to the top largely because he was a well-liked compromise candidate, and is only first-among-equals on the seven-man Standing Committee of the Politburo, the group that collectively governs China. The majority of the rest of the committee are seen as conservatives resistant to major reforms.

One touchstone for my understanding of China has been Bao Tong, who was once the top adviser to another general secretary of the Communist Party, Zhao Ziyang, before both men were purged for siding with the students on Tiananmen Square.

Twenty-four years later, Mr. Bao still lives under loose house arrest at his apartment in Beijing. But he is one of the few people who truly know the workings of power in China who will discuss the topic with a foreign journalist.

Visiting him means running through the same surveillance gauntlet we had avoided in Lanzhou. Plainclothes security men photographed John and me as soon as our car pulled up in front of the apartment block in west Beijing. In the lobby of the building, two more officers – one

uniformed, one not – asked to see our identification, scribbling the information into a giant book.

Only then was Mr. Bao, a rail-thin and eternally cheerful 80-year-old, allowed to take us up to his apartment. “They don't do this for the other apartments,” he smiled sadly.

Upstairs, in a narrow living room lined with books, Mr. Bao was cautiously optimistic about Mr. Xi, but worried he would be constrained by the same system that elevated him. But he placed some hope in Mr. Xi because his father, Xi Zhongxun, was always willing to push against the grain.

There are two stories whispered around Beijing: One is that the elder Mr. Xi wore a watch given to him by the Dalai Lama long after it was politically smart to be associated with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader. The other is that he was one of the only senior members of the Communist Party who criticized the decision to use force on Tiananmen Square.

Mr. Bao cannot confirm that anecdote – he was incarcerated by then – but he does not think that it would have been out of character. “Xi's father had great integrity. He was very clear about what is right and what is wrong, and very brave in expressing what he was thinking. I hope that the

son inherited some of his merits,” he said.

I asked what advice he would give to Mr. Xi if the new leader unexpectedly sought it. Mr. Bao took a long pull on one of the cigarettes constantly in his mouth before answering.

“I would tell him to work according to the laws of China,” he said, referring to a post-Mao Constitution that was passed in 1982, guaranteeing rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the ownership of private property, protections that remain only theoretical three decades later. “Even if the laws are uncomfortable, they should follow them.”

Back in Liangjiahe, where our trip ended, residents were also waiting for Mr. Xi to reveal himself, to show them a sign that he remembered the time he spent there. Was his fast start – the more open leadership style, the crackdown on corruption, the noises about dismantling the labour-camp system – a sign that he intended to repair China’s broken system of governance? Or was he just another apparatchik like Hu Jintao before him?

My trip convinced me that China is going to change dramatically over the coming decade. It is up to the Communist Party – especially Mr. Xi – to decide whether it wants to lead that change or dig in for an existential crisis. The People’s Republic must redefine itself, or risk being

pulled down by its people.

As we chatted with Mr. Wang, the old man who had worked alongside Mr. Xi on the village dike four decades ago, the Liangjiahe party secretary finally had emerged into the courtyard, surrounded by perhaps a dozen similarly dressed men.

They walked briskly past us without acknowledging us or our shouted attempts to get their attention. They all stared down at their feet or up at the elm trees that winter had stripped of leaves.

It was as if they were pretending they had not seen us. It was as if the old strictures – the ones that applied under Hu Jintao – no longer applied, and no one yet knew what the new rules were.

We were free to go. And for the moment, anyway, it felt like something had changed.

The China Diaries

Seven decades ago, Mao Zedong and his Red Army were surrounded and on the verge of defeat at the hands of the nationalist Kuomintang. The Communists broke out into coastal Guangdong province and began what became known as the Long March, a strategic retreat that took them west into China's interior and then north until they reached the safety of their base in the city of Yan'an, in Shaanxi province.

The much-mythologized march allowed the Communists to regroup for Mao's eventual victory in the Chinese civil war, setting the stage for the birth of the People's Republic in 1949.

Six decades on, photographer John Lehmann and I are - very loosely - retracing the route, travelling by rail along the path the Red Army walked, stopping along the way to examine the challenges Mao's latest successor, Xi Jinping, will face in the decade ahead.

How will Mr. Xi deal with the demands for greater press and democratic freedoms in Guangdong, the province where his father helped establish the first capitalist "special economic zones" in the early 1980s? What can he propose to help China's interior and west deal with the growing economic divide between urban and rural populations, as well as the mounting demographic challenges?

Will Mr. Xi continue to pursue growth at all costs, as his predecessors did, or will he apply the brake in part to spare the country from further environmental ruin? And what about the restive ethnic minorities?

The journey ends at Yan'an, which also happens to be near the cave where Mr. Xi lived for seven years after his father was purged by Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Despite Mao's murderous excesses, his photo still hangs over Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and appears on every denomination of China's currency. He is still the primary symbol of the Party and the state.

Will Mr. Xi, a man who personally suffered under Mao, be the Chinese leader to speak openly about his crimes? If he doesn't, can China move forward fast enough to meet the growing demands of its people?

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CHINESE DEMOCRACY

Welcome to Wukan, the journey's starting point, where protests over a land grab led to elections and an independent local government

If you want to visit Wukan - the tiny village hailed as a Chinese experiment in democracy - it's best that you don't call ahead.

"If you call [to make appointments], you probably won't be able to see anybody," Zhang Jiangxing, a 21-year-old blogger, warns as our car approached his hometown on China's southeast coast.

Just show up, he advises. So we do.

It's not that Wukan leaders are inhospitable. Quite the opposite. But others higher up in the Chinese power structure seem unenthusiastic about outsiders coming to visit the little democracy inside the People's Republic. "Even as I speak to you, there is someone else listening," Mr. Zhang explains over his own mobile phone.

Wukan is the starting point of our journey of discovery overland through China, one that will stretch over thousands of kilometres and several weeks. Nearly all of this cross-China trip over the next few weeks will be by rail.

But it begins here, a three-hour drive south of Guangzhou railway, to see what Chinese democracy looks like one year after a mini-uprising that produced the country's most independent, and arguably most responsive, local government.

In late 2011, Mr. Zhang used his accounts on Twitter and Weibo, its Chinese equivalent, to tell the world that Wukan's 1,300 residents had taken over the village's main square, demanding the right to choose their own representatives. After a months-long standoff with police, the villagers were allowed to hold an election last Feb. 1 and vote for their own leaders.

What we find is a hardscrabble village - Wukan is home to rice farmers and fishermen - whose leaders are struggling to

deliver on the promises they made to their electorate. The electorate, meanwhile, is beginning to wonder if choosing their own leaders has made things any better.

The Wukan uprising has been declared (by the academic who advised China's new leader Xi Jinping on his doctoral thesis) to have "historic significance" because it showed democracy and social stability could coexist in China. But the new village council remains just a tiny brick at the bottom of a vast, corrupt and authoritarian power structure. And that power structure is obsessively monitoring the democrats of Wukan.

Shortly after we meet Mr. Zhang for tea to discuss the events of the last year, a thin man in a dark jacket walks in through the tea house's open door. "Who are you? Give me your business card," he shouts, grabbing my shoulder. When I ask him to give me his own card first, he releases his grip on me, hands Mr. Zhang a handwritten note and walks out without getting my name. "He's a police informant," Mr. Zhang says with the shrug of someone who sees such people every day.

The system is pushing back against Wukan's uprising in subtler ways, too. Members of the seven-person village committee (only the village chief, Lin Zuluang, is a Communist Party member) say they've hit a wall in their efforts to reclaim villagers' land that

was illegally sold to real estate developers by the previous committee.

That land grab sparked the initial protests in late 2011. A failure to recover most or all of the villagers' land will be viewed by many here as a failure of the new council, and perhaps even of the experiment with democracy.

"On one side, the villagers are pushing us to go faster [in recovering the land]. But the upper levels of government do not move very quickly. We are the meat pressed in the sandwich," says Hong Ruichao, a 28-year-old salesman elected to town council following the protests. "This past year has not been simple."

On Wukan's central square, where the protesters first gathered in 2011, some say that if the village council can't get the land back, the villagers will have to again resort to the only tactic that has thus far delivered results: protest.

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THE ROUTE OF THE LONG MARCH

Encirclement

The Long March took place during a period of civil war. Vastly outnumbered, the Red Army's winding escape - through snowy mountains and across rushing rivers, from pursuing soldiers, artillery and the aerial bombings of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army (Kuomintang) - is a tale of desperation, guerrilla tactics and endurance.

It begins in Jiangxi province, where the Communists were in control and had established a government, and where the Red Army faced annihilation in the autumn of 1934 as the result of an encirclement strategy. The Communists had to break out.

Jiangxi

In October of 1934, more than 80,000 Chinese Communists broke through the blockade. "Moving like a lumbering elephant train, the Red Army made its way to the southwest corner of the soviet zone and slipped over the border..." writes American historian Harrison Salisbury in his book *The Long March: The Untold Story*.

Deals with Chinese warlords and intelligence failures committed by Nationalists meant that the Red Army moved easily and enjoyed early success in its escape from Jiangxi, explains Mr. Salisbury.

River crossing

The Red Army set out to cross the Xiang River with the Nationalist Army in pursuit. Aerial bombings wreaked havoc on the Communists trying to cross the river in November, 1934.

The estimated number of Communists killed in the river crossing and the battle varies widely, with some claiming that 50,000 people, or two-thirds of the Red Army, were killed. Others put the number of dead at 15,000, suggesting that the diminished force was the result of desertions.

Mao's rise

A key politburo meeting in Zunyi - following Mao's military advice to target the poorly defended city - allowed the Communists to take stock and assign blame for the events that led to the flight from the south-east base they had occupied and the heavy losses that followed.

Mao was already a key figure, and while it would be some years before he would fully consolidate his power, the Zunyi meeting in January, 1935 strengthened his position.

Evasion

Following heavy Communist losses, it was crucial to evade both Kuomintang soldiers and aerial bombs.

"Instead of an arrow-like advance, they [the retreating Red Army] began a series of distracting manoeuvres, so that it became more and more difficult for Nanking planes to identify the day-by-day objective of the main forces," writes American journalist Edgar Snow, who travelled to interview Mao in northern China.

The strategy added to Mao's reputation as a skilled military thinker, argues author Sun Shuyun. "Mao himself regarded it as his tour de force."

Luding Bridge

Few moments in the Long March feature more prominently in Chinese Communist mythology than the events at Luding Bridge, where thousands of Red Army

soldiers made a dangerous crossing of the Dadu River in Qinghai province, dodging bullets and flames.

Crossing the river meant walking the planks of a foot bridge - except the planks had been removed by the Nationalist army, so the story goes.

Historians now debate the size of the Nationalist force that confronted the Communists at the bridge and how many planks were actually missing from the bridge.

Mountains

Perhaps the most treacherous section of the Long March was the crossing of the Great Snowy Mountains.

A much-diminished Red Army, on the command of Mao in June of 1935, began climbing a section of the mountain range. At altitudes of more than 4,250 metres they experienced frostbite, a lack of oxygen and snow-blindness. Some carried packs of up to 36 kilograms with food and cooking equipment.

"Men joined hands to keep from falling. Fog and mist alternated with sudden storms. Small avalanches crashed down from the peaks. Bodyguard Wei became dizzy and lost strength," writes American historian Harrison Salisbury in his book *The Long March: The Untold Story*.

Yan'an, Shaanxi

Only a tenth of the original Red Army, an estimated 8,000 people, made it to Shaanxi

province in north-central China by October, 1935 - safe from the Nationalist troops that had pursued the Communists for a year. It would take another year for other Chinese Communist forces to join Mao and rebuild the Red Army.

There would be many more battles - with the Japanese and, once again, with the Nationalist forces - but the Long March inspired many to Mao's movement and gave Communists a powerful tool.

"The Long March is a manifesto. It has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes, while the imperialists and their running dogs, Chiang Kai-shek and his like, are impotent. It has proclaimed their utter failure to encircle, pursue, obstruct and intercept us," said Mao in a party conference report in December, 1935.

Supertrain symbolism trumps safety

Pace and scope of high-speed rail expansion has been source of shame as well as pride

ON THE TRAIN FROM GUANGZHOU TO CHANGSHA -- Xia Guoxin has never been to an airport, but the diminutive 38-year-old imagines they look a little like Guangzhou's ultramodern high-speed rail station, where she cleans the floors after the passengers board trains that hurtle north from here at whiplash-inducing speeds.

"It's very good for China. Much better than the old train station," the migrant worker and mother of one says with obvious pride. But she seems slightly bewildered as to why anyone needs to go anywhere at more than 300 kilometres an hour, on the rocket-shaped train that is now the world's fastest railway.

The trains that leave from here showcase where China is heading: the world's fastest railway system for the world's fastest-growing economy and its rising superpower. But the building of the high-speed network has been hampered by



the runaway corruption that holds China back. And the symbolism of the project has proven more important to the government than issues like safety or affordability.

The Guangzhou South train station is futuristic in style, with ghostly lighting and a metal-and-glass ceiling that make it look like a spaceship in a science-fiction film.

But it smells like the industrial era. The local U.S. consulate's Twitter feed rated the air outside (I always say it tastes like coal) as "unhealthy" Friday morning, although at 171 on the Air Quality Index, it was an average day by the standards of most Chinese cities. Smog from outside the station drifts into the waiting hall, creating a haze that hangs over the arrivals-and-departures board.

The station opened two years ago, but only went into full operation on Dec. 26, when China's latest showpiece achievement - a high-speed rail line linking Guangzhou with Beijing, 2,298 kilometres to the north - carried passengers for the first time. The G-train cuts the trip between Guangzhou and Beijing from 22 hours to a crisp eight.

It's the world's longest high-speed route, and the latest symbol of China's rapid rise, coming into service at the end of a year that also saw the People's Republic launch its first aircraft carrier (albeit a refitted

Soviet ship), as well as complete its first manned space docking.

Like nearly all of China's impressive accomplishments of recent years, the high-speed rail is an accomplishment paid for by the many, but shared by the few. The cheapest seat on the G-train to Changsha, the capital of Hunan province and our next stop, costs 314 yuan (\$49.72). That's 10 times the price of the slower, overnight train to Changsha, and far too much for most of this country to afford.

"My salary is just 1,000 yuan a month. It's too expensive for me to take the D-trains or G-trains," said Ms. Xia, the cleaner. Like most of those who have powered China's economic rise, she works in the big cities but calls the vast countryside home. "I go back to Hunan province once a year. But I take the old trains when I do. The slow trains."

By 2020, China expects to have 50,000 kilometres of high-speed rail lines, by far the most of any country in the world.

"The [Beijing-Guangzhou] high-speed rail line has ... strengthened the country's image," read a recent opinion piece printed in the Global Times, a nationalist newspaper affiliated with the official People's Daily. "China is no longer regarded as a producer of low-quality goods, but a good model for the rest of the world, especially against the background of an economic

crisis in Europe and the U.S.”

The pace and scope of China’s great railway expansion has been a source of shame as well as pride, however. The railway minister who initially oversaw the project, Liu Zhijun, was arrested in early 2011 and is expected to soon face charges of taking millions of dollars in bribes from those seeking railway-construction contracts. And in July of the same year, two high-speed trains collided near the city of Wenzhou, leaving 40 people dead and raising questions about whether safety had been neglected in the rush to build the showpiece rail network.

Concerns linger that China’s high-speed trains are simply running too fast. The locomotive that hauls us from Guangzhou to Changsha is the CRH380A, which looks like a rocket that’s been strapped to the ground. It was designed in China, but relies heavily on technology copied from Germany’s Siemens AG and Japan’s famous Shinkansen bullet trains.

But China’s G-train travels faster than either, reaching a top speed on our trip of 308 kilometres an hour. “I don’t think the Chinese are paying the same attention to safety that we are,” the chairman of the Central Japan Railway Company, Yoshiyuki Kasai, said, shortly before the Wenzhou crash. “Pushing it that close to the limit is something that we would never

do.” A Chinese engineer was subsequently quoted in the People’s Daily saying he personally wouldn’t feel safe riding on his country’s high-speed trains.

Riding the G-train is at first exciting, then a little monotonous. Within minutes of leaving Guangzhou South station, we hurtled over a river plied by wooden fishing boats, then past acres of rice paddies where women in brightly coloured dresses worked with their hands.

Next came villages of stone homes that, but for the telephone and electricity poles, likely look little different than they did a century ago. Then, the images out the window began to blur together as we reached top speed. Something of the magic of riding the rails through a vast countryside is lost when your ears are popping.

Newspaper becomes lightning rod for free press debate in China

Chinese citizens gather outside Guangzhou headquarters of Southern Weekend to publicly voice their opinion about the direction the country is heading

GUANGZHOU, CHINA — Wang Junwei and Yang Xinhua both took to the sidewalks Thursday outside the offices of the newspaper that has become the front line for China's free-speech debate. But the two men came to deliver very different messages.

"We like freedom! We like democracy!" shouted Mr. Wang, a 38-year-old migrant

worker and father of one. The embattled Southern Weekend newspaper, he explained, was an important voice for the voiceless in China, a media outlet with a rare willingness to push the boundaries set by the country's legion of censors.

That independent streak led Southern Weekend into a showdown with its official monitors over a New Year's editorial praising the Communist Party that the newspaper was forced to run in the place of its own editorial calling for greater protection of rights. Journalists at the paper briefly went on strike this week in protest, although a deal has now apparently been reached –



with officials promising less hands-on interference – that allowed the paper to be published Thursday.

The Globe and Mail began its rail journey through China from just southeast of Guangzhou, a voyage that will take us into the heart of the country along the route of the famous Long March nearly 70 years ago that cemented Mao Zedong and his Communist Party in power and led to the creation of the People's Republic. But first we stopped to gauge the impact of Southern Weekend's stand against censorship.

The battle over what it means is just beginning. Editors at the Beijing News, another liberal-minded publication, raised their own challenge to censors this week (although less successfully so far). And the street outside the Guangzhou headquarters of Southern Weekend was transformed Thursday into the rarest of things in China: a speakers' corner where citizens publicly argued about the direction the country is heading in.

With foreign television cameras on him, Mr. Wang – who said he arrived in Guangzhou on Wednesday from his home in central Henan province to look for work – climbed up onto a flower box and held aloft a banner drawn up by another Southern Weekend supporter that criticized the ruling Communist Party and founder Mao Zedong, who is still revered by an outspoken sec-

tion of Chinese society. "It is the government that needs to obey the law!" Mr. Wang shouted, as a dozens of police officers slowly closed in on the small clutch of protesters around him.

Mr. Wang's attacks on the ruling party and its founder drew the ire of Mr. Yang, a burly 50-year-old who said he came to the Southern Weekend office to counter those who were demanding Western-style free speech. "We don't disagree that we need democracy," Mr. Yang shouted at Mr. Wang, a red scarf wrapped around his neck in a show of support for the ideas of Chairman Mao. "But we need equality first!"

The freewheeling debate drew a crowd of onlookers – some of whom occasionally applauded points made by the pro-Southern Weekend protesters – and a swarm of uniformed and plainclothes police. Thursday afternoon, in the wake of the very public



argument between Mr. Wang and Mr. Yang, the police moved to close the speakers' corner, standing aside as a group of plainclothes thugs rushed in to seize Mr. Wang

and several other prominent protesters, dragging them away into a waiting white van.

“I’ve been kidnapped!” shouted Xiao Qingshan, a 45-year-old labour rights activist who was pulled out of his wheelchair by the plain-clothes thugs.

Even before Thursday’s roundup of activists in Guangzhou, the strike at Southern Weekend was seen as an early test of new Communist Party leader Xi Jinping’s interest in political reform. The fact that all discussion of the incident – both online and in official media – was quickly suppressed was seen by some as a sign that the party’s conservative wing has prevailed.

“This is a sad start for the new Chinese government. Long-awaited political reforms are just a dream that will not come true soon,” Zhang Hong, deputy editor-in-chief of the Economic Observer, a Beijing-based newspaper, wrote in an editorial published Thursday in Hong Kong’s English-language South China Morning Post. “The media and liberal intellectuals will find the environment for reporting and free speech as stifled as it has been in the past. With social discontent growing, more confrontations between authorities and liberal intellectuals loom.”

Like most of those protesting outside Southern Weekend, Mr. Xiao was a veteran dissident, recently jailed 18 months for his political activities. In an interview before his disappearance, he said the newspaper’s

battle with censorship was linked to his own battle to get better working conditions for migrant workers. “Southern Weekend reports the facts. They speak for the ordinary people. They challenge the other media so the ordinary people’s voices can get out.”

At least five people – including Mr. Xiao and Mr. Wang – were dragged away in unmarked vehicles, and police forced the rest of the crowd to disperse. It was not clear whether Mr. Yang or any of the Maoists had also been detained.

How to have a good time in Huaihua

One night in the city's Huaihua Great Hotel convinced Mark MacKinnon that the locals do enjoy the occasional fun night out. Or in

HUAIHUA, China — On our seven-and-a-half hour train ride south from Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, to the city of Huaihua, we shared a cabin with Kelvin, a 30-year-old real estate developer from Hong Kong.

There was money to be made around Huaihua, he told us, because its 127,000 residents were renowned in China for their willingness to throw caution to the wind and spend their money.

“If they have a house, they’ll sell it so they can have money to spend at the bar,” he said, thumbing at his iPhone 4 on the top bunk as our train rumbled through a countryside blanketed by smog.

One night in the city's premier establishment, the Huaihua Great Hotel, convinced me that the locals do indeed enjoy the occasional good time.

The hotel's “presidential suite” costs roughly ¥6888 per night, or \$1,090. Staff at the front desk promised we'd enjoy our stay (there's a garishly lit massage parlour in the hotel and a surprising number of Ukrainian women on the elevators), but I wasn't sure The Globe and Mail would enjoy the bill.

Among the items found in the much humbler Room 1402, which cost closer to \$45:

- Three decks of playing cards, two standard sets and one long and narrow Mah-Jong deck (for an extra \$9 you get a Mah Jong table in your room)
- A “JWT” brand desktop computer with external speakers
- Two different types of condoms for sale on the bedside table. One is described as “IMPORTED ORIGINAL COLOR – FOR A FERVOR COLOR” (15 yuan for two). The other: “VIB-RING CONDOM – APPEAL THING – FOR A LOVE FERVOR.” The latter promises “up to 40 minutes of quivering pleasure to both of you.” Apparently “it's easy to switch on and off, easy to wear. And great go experiment with.”



- Men's and women's underwear, in blue and pink boxes, at 20 yuan per pair. In case you forgot to bring your own.
- A can of Red Bull
- A bedside sign reading “WISH YOU GOOD NIGHT DON'T PUT YOUR WET CLOTHES [sic] ON LAMPSHADES, THANKS!”

The deification of Chairman Mao

He's Mao the Communist, Mao the leader, Mao the poet and Mao the son. What's missing is Mao the madman

SHAOSHAN, CHINA -- Zhang Qingling collapsed to her hands and knees in front of the six-metre-tall bronze statue of Mao Zedong, praying at the feet of the long-dead founder of the People's Republic of China as though he were a deity who could answer her.

"I sincerely worship him with all my heart," said the 59-year-old retired teacher, after circling the base of the statue three times with her hands folded. "I grew up in his arms. We are living very happily now, thanks to him. He prays for our families and our safety. I have a bust of Grandpa Mao in my home, and I come here every year."

Her words were soon drowned out by the blare of the song *The East is Red*. Two dozen men in their 50s and 60s stepped forward, right fists raised, to renew their vows as members of the Communist Party of China.

Only the instrumental version was played Saturday morning on Mao Zedong Square, but every Chinese person knows the lyrics: "The east is red, the sun rises. From China arises Mao Zedong. He strives for the people's happiness. Hurrah, he is the people's great saviour!"



"If there was no Mao Zedong, there could be no new China," said a middle-aged man who laid a bouquet on behalf of the official athletics department of northeastern Liaoning province. He refused to give his name.

That Mao changed China's course is indisputable. But the chairman's deification in Shaoshan would make anyone who understands China's recent history squirm.

In Shaoshan, he's Mao the devout Communist, Mao the great military leader, Mao the poet, Mao the dutiful son. Left out entirely is Mao the madman whose ideological campaigns led to the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese and the impoverishment of the entire country. A similar gap remains in China's official history books, where Mao's crimes either get scant mention or are portrayed as being overwhelmed by his accomplishments. (The official verdict on Mao is that he was "70 per cent right, 30 per cent wrong.")

Several thousand Chinese make the pilgrimage every day to Shaoshan, a scenic

town in the mountains of central Hunan province where Mao was born and lived until the age of 18. The number of “red tourists” will surge later this year as Shaoshan gets ready to celebrate the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth in December. The town is undergoing a \$2.3-million facelift to get ready, including the renovation of a museum containing 6,000 Mao artifacts.

Most visitors come in groups organized by their workplaces. They lay flowers beneath



the statue that cost anywhere from 59 to 1,000 yuan - the equivalent of \$9 to about \$160 - per bouquet.

When the Communist Party introduced its new Politburo last fall, there was a flicker of hope that Xi Jinping, Mao’s latest heir as paramount leader, would take steps to unbolt the ruling party from Mao’s legacy, especially since Mr. Xi himself was a victim of Mao, having spent seven years living in a cave during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s after his father was purged by Mao.

While Mr. Xi has called for some legal reforms - the Party has promised to end the hated “re-education through labour” punishment system first implemented to punish those Mao deemed “rightists” - he has thus far continued to cite “Mao Zedong thought” as a basis for how the country should proceed. The constant references to a man who advocated class struggle to achieve social equality are at odds with the reality of a country that abandoned most of his ideas decades ago.

Nonetheless, in a key speech he made just days after taking on the post of secretary general of the Communist Party, Mr. Xi quoted from two poems by Mao before laying out his own ambition to lead a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

“The reason why the Party has clung to Mao for such a long time is that they see him as attached to their legitimacy as a ruling party,” Zhang Lifan, a Beijing-based historian whose father was a Mao-era cabinet minister who was purged as a rightist, said in a recent interview.

“I think Mao’s theories have now become a negative property for the ruling party. But they have to take on the negative aspects of Chairman Mao as an historical burden.”

Mao home a fading shrine; curiosity, not zeal, brought pilgrims in 1982

By Stanley Oziewicz

SHAOSHAN (originally published Dec. 10, 1982) — Former foreign correspondent and current news editor for globeandmail.com Stan Oziewicz was The Globe and Mail's man in China 30 years ago. In 1982, he filed this story from Shaoshan, Mao Zedong's hometown. Last week, current China correspondent Mark MacKinnon visited Shaoshan as part of The Globe's China Diaries.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution as many as 70,000 Red Guards, their little red books held high and their banners waving, swarmed through this village, the birthplace of the Great Helmsman.

Mao Tsetung was their great leader and teacher, and even well into 1971 up to 4,000 people daily would troop through the mud-brick peasant house where he was born. They were there to pay obeisance, to seek inspiration, to proclaim their revolutionary ardor.

Now, on a good day, fewer than 500 make the pilgrimage — one that to an outsider seems undertaken more out of historical curiosity than any lingering fanatical devotion.

For China's current rulers, eager to throw off the albatross of Mao Tsetung though,

that's just as well. Reached after much soul-searching, the official line is that the former Communist Party chairman "made gross mistakes during the Cultural Revolution but, if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes." Disabusing people of Mao's infallibility and his radical notions has not been easy, especially here in Hunan province where his revolutionary vehemence was nurtured.

Mao has been dead more than six years now and the official verdict is more than a year old. But it wasn't until this fall that the leaders of the Hunan party branch were sufficiently cowed by pressure from Peking to criticize themselves for adhering to the personality cult and leftist ideas.

Articles are now published claiming that Shaoshan peasants sing the praises of Deng Xiaoping and company rather than the old Maoist songs. "Thanks to Deng Xiaoping, everybody is happy," one favorite ditty goes. "Thanks to (Party General Secretary) Hu Yaobang, every family is building granaries. Thanks to (Premier) Zhao Ziyang, every household has more than enough grain."

Indeed, Tang Ruiyin, who with her husband, a demobilized soldier, now works the rice fields of the old Mao homestead, lauds the new agricultural responsibility system which has brought unprecedented prosperity to the area.

During the busy harvest time, she even employs a worker. He is fed and paid the equivalent of \$1.20 and a pack of cigarets daily.

Such a practice was not permitted while Mao was alive. “But this is different from the exploitation of the old society,” Tang insisted during an interview. “Sometimes the landlord paid nothing at all. People are now willing, want to work and feel so happy to help others. Besides, they are not forced to. “From my point of view Mao Tsetung paved

the new way for a socialist China. But now he’s dead and his successors are following his path with variations.”

Tang’s house, with its packed-mud floor and roosting chickens in the “living room,” is far less spacious than the house where Mao was born. Both are nestled in a pastoral valley where bare-legged peasants work in paddy fields.

At the entrance of the house is a placard listing rules for visitors: 1. Maintain calmness and seriousness. No smoking or spit-



ting. 2. No touching or moving furniture and farm tools on show. 3. Love and protect trees, flowers and grass. No climbing or cutting wood or bamboo.” As 17-year-old guide Fu Chang-min tells it, Mao’s early home was that of a typical farmer. He obviously has not read *Red Star Over China*, in which Mao described his father to U.S. writer Edgar Snow as someone having a more comfortable status.

Mao’s father may have started out life as a poor peasant but he later became a rich grain merchant. His 13 1/2-room house attests to that: today it would be the envy of many Peking residents who live in concrete matchboxes.

Down the path is the Shaoshan Primary School where Mao studied the classics until he was obliged, at the age of 13, to work full-time on the land and aid his authoritarian father with the accounts.

At a museum nearby, nine rooms record in chronological order Mao’s achievements, ending Oct. 1, 1949, the day he stood at a rostrum in Peking’s Tiananmen Square to proclaim the People’s Republic of China.

There used to be a tenth room, a memorialization of the post-1949 period. Among other things, it recounted the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward.

How to present these tortuous events in public displays – if at all – is now being considered by the historiographers. “There

has to be some rewriting, some revisions,” Duan Xinhua, a senior staff member of Shaoshan’s foreign affairs office, acknowledged hesitantly. She gave no inkling when the room might open.

In China, air quality is a matter of opinion

While the smog has some measurements off the scale, the official line continues to refer to it as ‘moderate’

FENGHUANG, CHINA — I didn’t mean for the tweet to sound smug, but I suppose it could have been taken that way. “While the rest of China was coughing,” I typed Sunday, referring to the hazardous smog that has fallen over most of China, with my friends and family in Beijing breathing the worst of it, “John Lehmann and I were in lovely Fenghuang, Hunan province.”

I added a photograph of a boatman offloading tourists along the river that cuts through this picturesque mountain town (where we had come to visit a village full of bachelors left behind when the local women took jobs in faraway factories). The picture was framed by clear blue skies.



Today, the smog caught up with us, even though we’re 1,700 kilometres southwest of Beijing, and up in the mountains. The first signal was the familiar burning sensation in my lungs that had me waking up grabbing

for my asthma inhaler.

I threw open the curtains for the grim visual confirmation. It was nothing like the photos people were posting of Beijing (which bears more than a passing resemblance to Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings* these days), but the grey pall had indeed settled over our mountain retreat. China’s “airpocalypse” – as the unfolding pollution disaster has been dubbed online – had caught up to us even here.

It got worse as soon as we hit the highway heading back south to the railway station in Huaihua, a grim industrial centre that has been carpeted in smog each of the three times I’ve visited it in recent years. Visibility seemed to decrease every few hundred metres as we gave up the advantage of Fenghuang’s altitude.

The official Chinese government measure says the air pollution index in Changsha, the capital of Hunan, was a relatively benign 127 Sunday on a scale of 500, even as the official Xinhua newswire ran photographs of a city draped in “dense fog.” The truth is likely significantly worse. (Though the government has made an effort to give citizens more information about the air they’re breathing, the gap between the official air quality readings in Beijing, and those offered by the U.S. embassy, remains wide. On the weekend, the government acknowledged the air in the capital had reached a

worst-ever 498 on its scale. The U.S. embassy measurement went through the roof, reaching an all-time high of 755 on Saturday, giving a “beyond index” readings of 500-plus for 17 consecutive hours at one point.)

The smog Monday morning stretched from the northeastern provinces of Liaoning and Heilongjiang to southern Sichuan and Yunnan, with flights cancelled from at airports in 10 different provinces on Sunday. The U.S. consulate in Chengdu, 850 kilometres west of Fenghuang, gave AQI readings of over 300, or “hazardous” for most of Monday morning.

On Hunan television, newscasters paused to play a song with the lyrics: “I don’t want to die in the fog.”

The tune was poignant, although the use of the word *wu* or “fog” continues to infuriate me. The state media has, to my eyes, made the airpocalypse worse by continuing to refer to the smog as a fog, even though anyone who inhales the grey stuff knows that fog doesn’t smell and taste like coal.

The worst offender has been the Communist Party-run Global Times newspaper, which has stubbornly called Beijing’s air quality “moderate” even on days when the U.S. embassy’s Twitter feed was warning its own citizens that the air was “hazardous” or worse. Many Chinese remain astounded, and argumentative, when I tell them that the stuff they and their children are breath-

ing is dangerous to their health.

So what’s happening in China? Why has the air quality suddenly gone from bad to so much worse in the early days of 2013?

Part of it is climate-related. It has been an



unusually cold winter in the Middle Kingdom this year; meaning coal-fired heating plants are working overtime. There has also been precious little wind in any of the smog-hit cities we’ve visited this week. “Pollutants, parts of which came from vehicle waste and coal burning in the chilly winter, gradually accumulated in recent windless days,” was how the official China Daily newspaper explained it Monday.

But this is nonetheless a very unnatural disaster. For decades, China’s government has largely ignored environmental concerns as it pushed the pedal on economic development. The government sought annual growth of 8 per cent, and often achieved significantly higher rates.

The question many in China are asking today is whether 8 per cent GDP growth every year is a “moderate” goal, or a “hazardous” one.

The Matchmaker of Lower Qiantan

Across China, boys far outnumber girls, making it hard - and expensive - to find a wife

LOWER QIANTAN, CHINA -- Long Hongxiang has the most important job in this remote hamlet in the mountains of Hunan province: local matchmaker. For almost 80 years, the three-foot-tall, Yoda-like “grandma” of Lower Qiantan has kept an eye on local singles, bringing together men and women she feels have a future together.

When she spies a young man approaching marrying age - 18 is old enough - she moves in and lets the families know she can help find a suitable mate. She charges about \$635 for her services, which include approaching the bride-to-be’s parents and negotiating the dowry. Her track record justifies the price: Grandma Long claims to have arranged more than 100 marriages.

She says only one ended in divorce. And that wasn’t her fault.

But the real challenge these days is finding an eligible young woman who stays long enough to get hitched in Lower Qiantan, a collection of mud-brick homes connected by stone staircases that’s home to 700 people and only a handful of cars.

China’s demographics - a preponderance of men as a result of population control and

selective abortions favouring boys - combined with the pull of faraway factories and rich husbands in other places, have made Grandma Long’s job difficult. (The residents of Lower Qiantan are from the Hmong minority and allowed to have two children, more if neither of the first two is a boy.)

“We have to wait for the girls to come back, then I can do my work,” Grandma Long says, her face deeply wrinkled by a long life of laughter and worry. Her busy period will come early next month when those who went away to find their fortunes come home for the week-long Chinese New Year holiday.

In the interim, she looks out for a village of lonely young men. Local bachelors say there are about 80 single men in Lower Qiantan over the age of 18, and not one single woman to court.

It’s a problem that is faced by villages across China, where the rate of boys to girls is almost 118 to 100, and even more skewed in rural areas like southern Hunan province. That math means tens of millions of Chinese men are destined to die single.

“I have no demands. I’ll accept any woman I can find,” said Wu Jinsong, a 24-year-old who was gathering firewood recently in the mountains around Lower Qiantan, a place that modernity, in the form of a few mobile phones, is only now starting to touch. Internet dating isn’t an option here; no one in

town owns a computer.

Men who have managed to get married say it costs them and their families upward of 100,000 yuan - cash, plus goods, plus the cost of the wedding itself - to seal the deal. The men complain that families with young women have raised dowry demands as the number of eligible females has shrunk.

The situation has upended some long-standing truths in Lower Qiantan. Local families who for centuries prayed for sons who could take over the farm and take care of them in their old age now see sons as a potential financial burden whose wedding costs can push a family deep into debt. Meanwhile, a daughter who marries well can provide for her parents for years.

“If you have a daughter, you can laugh. If you have son, you will cry,” said Wu Longbao, who got married last year at age 29. But, he said, you still need a

son to tend the farm.

Grandma Long - who thinks she's 98 years old, though she doesn't remember precisely which year she was born - isn't giving up. This week she was planning to make the two-hour walk, leaning heavily on her thick cane, to the weekly fair in the next town to see if she could find any women who might be interested in meeting a young man in his 20s whose case she recently took on.



Her strategy is this: If she can convince a young woman at the fair to meet with her client, she'll make arrangements for them to meet on the outskirts and maybe exchange phone numbers. From there, it's up to the young man to make a good impression.

Romance doesn't play a role: “I don't worry about whether love will result. That can be fostered after the couple is married.”

She says the only reason one of her marriages ended in

divorce was because the couple waited too long to tie the knot. Both husband and wife were in their 50s when they got married, too late to have the children she believes tie a family together for good.

Matchmaking was much easier in the old days, Grandma Long says - referring to pre-revolutionary China. "I would come to the gate of the house, and tell the family, 'There is a man available and these are his conditions, and, by the way, he's blind in one eye,'" she says with a smile that suggests she's referring to an actual case.

"If both sides agreed - and of course the couple didn't get to see each other first - they were not allowed to show regret, even if the man was blind in two eyes!" she says, laughing, in a carved wooden chair that she set up under a poster of Mao Zedong. "Back then, you could tell a beautiful lie to both families. Now I get paid more, but I can't lie."

Even with the matchmaking business getting harder, Grandma Long says she'll never retire - because her work is also the secret of her longevity. "The people here say, and I believe it, too, that if you match two people successfully, you add another three years to your life."

The 'left-behind children'

The deaths of five boys near the city of Guizhou have shone a spotlight on the plight of migrant workers and their families

GUIYANG, CHINA -- Nov. 15, 2012, was a dramatic day in China. In the morning, just before noon, Xi Jinping led a line of seven men down the red carpet in the Great Hall of the People. Together they were introduced as the ruling Communist Party's new Standing Committee of the Politburo, the board of directors of the world's risen superpower.

That night, in the city of Bijie, 2,380 kilometres southwest of Beijing, in China's impoverished Guizhou province, five boys between the ages of nine and 13 finished a day of playing street soccer and begging outside a local university. They needed a place to sleep. Their parents, it was later revealed, were migrant workers gone to toil in China's coastal factories.

Though separated from their children, they were likely hoping to make enough money to give their kids a better education, and a better chance in life, than they had.

On preceding nights, the boys had slept in a makeshift tent they had made from plastic tarps and plywood scavenged from a nearby construction site. But Nov. 15 was different, the coldest night so far that fall, as the tem-

perature fell to just 6 C.

The five boys - Zhonglin, Zhongjing, Chong, Zhonghong and Bo, all cousins from the Tao family - figured that a nearby dumpster would be the warmest of their meagre options. They decided to generate extra heat by making a fire. All five suffocated.

Their deaths shook China, throwing a spotlight on the plight of "left-behind children" - the offspring of the country's army of migrant workers.



China's economic rise has been fuelled by some 250 million men and women from the vast countryside who leave home to take jobs in the factories of the country's booming east coast. State media estimates that about 58 million left-behind children remain in rural areas, accounting for more than a quarter of all children from that background.

Despite its poverty, residents from the five boys' province say Guizhou has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past decade, thanks to massive government

investment that has built roads connecting rural villages to cities for the first time. Rural incomes have risen, and many towns now



have electricity and running water for the first time. The deaths in Bijie are a reminder, however, of how far China's countryside and smaller cities still lag behind the fast-developing east coast.

The Tao boys were left in the care of an impoverished uncle while their own parents went to the commercial hub of Shenzhen, about 1,400 kilometres away, looking for work. Many other children of migrant workers are left in the care of elderly grandparents or even neighbours.

Some in China compared the boys' sad fate to the Little Match Girl of Hans Christian Andersen's 19th-century fairy tale; she spends her last hours alone on the streets, lighting matches to stay warm.

But this was no fairy tale. Zhao Yongzhu, director of the Guizhou office of Oxfam Hong Kong, says that while firm statistics are hard to come by, at least 30 per cent of all children in rural parts of Guizhou province are being raised in the absence of one

parent, often both.

"They feel isolated, lonely. They don't like to tell people what they're thinking and they're not very self-confident. They don't trust people very much," Mr. Zhao said. Oxfam is preparing a new program targeted specifically at helping such children.

But while the shocking tale helped focus efforts on helping others in similar situations, the Bijie-based independent journalist who revealed the tale has been punished for drawing attention to what some see as an embarrassing side effect of China's rapid development.

Li Yuanlong, who posted two online reports about the case in November that quickly became the most-discussed news stories in China, was grabbed by state security officers shortly afterward and driven to the airport in the provincial capital of Guiyang. From there he was flown to a forced "vacation" on the island of Hainan, all to stop him writing further reports.

He's back in Bijie now but under constant surveillance. "The night before yesterday, I found a big camera installed facing the gate of my building. None of the neighbouring gates have one, so it must be aimed at me," he told The Globe and Mail by telephone this week. "I'm speaking to you now with the knowledge they are listening."

Mr. Li says he's unable to find work right now because all the local media know they

shouldn't hire him. He has also been denied a passport that he applied for so that he could go visit his son, who is studying in the United States.

Despite it all, he's proud that his efforts have helped bring attention - and aid - to the left-behind children of Guizhou.

"I will keep on witnessing and being concerned with this issue in any way that I can," he vowed.

Gap between China's rich and poor can't be hidden in Chongqing

One of the most obvious challenges facing the country's new paramount leader, Xi Jinping

CHONGQING, CHINA — Yang Bizhi screeches with delight as a beige van pulls around the corner. She sprints after the vehicle with her greying hair bouncing in a bun on the back of her head. Four other women join the race, but Ms. Yang gets to the van first as it slows to a stop.

Soon she would be five yuan richer.

When the back of the van opens, Ms. Yang yanks a green bag three times as wide as her tiny waist onto the road, and then rolls it onto a waiting blue trolley that she pushes – at a pace defying her 48 years – up one of Chongqing's uncountable steep hills. At the top is a department store that pays her the five yuan (about 80 cents) for getting the bag of winter clothing onto shop shelves.

“We have nothing else to do, so we have to find a way to make money,” Ms. Yang explained, referring to the 20 or so women and men waiting for similar work on the same



street.

Twelve hours later, and a short walk away, dancers at Club TNT make way for a row of waitresses, each carrying a bucket stuffed with a lit sparkler and a \$200 bottle of Moët & Chandon champagne. It costs almost \$100 just to reserve a table at TNT, but the club is packed shoulder-to-shoulder for a floor-show including a Moulin Rouge-style dance performance and English pop songs belted out by a songstress whose name, “Sugar,” was written on a video that played on the walls as she sang.

“In Chongqing’s club scene right now, more and more people like to buy champagne. They want to let others know ‘I’m rich, I can afford this,’” said Chen Qiming, a 26-year-old who sings and DJs in the club each weekend. “One time, I saw a laoban [a “boss”] buy 100 bottles of champagne at once for his table. When the laoban at the next table saw this, he ordered 200 bottles.”

The large and growing gap between China’s rich and poor is one of the most obvious challenges facing the country’s new paramount leader, Xi Jinping, who will take over as president from Hu Jintao in March. In a signal the new leadership at least wants to start discussing the problem, the National Bureau of Statistics last week revealed the country’s Gini coefficient – which measures income inequality – for the first time in more than a decade.

As the official Xinhua newswire put it, the number “paints a far-from-rosy picture of what the country needs to do to bridge the wealth gap and make more people included in its magnificent growth story.”

The official figure of 0.474 is a belated acknowledgment that China has a serious problem. On the Gini scale, 0 is perfect equality and 1 is total inequality – any rating above 0.4 is considered to be dangerous to social stability. But the country’s chief statistician, Ma Jiantang, also made an eyebrow-raising assertion: that Chinese society has been getting more equal each year since 2008, when the Gini coefficient peaked at 0.491.

That seems at odds with the realities on the streets of a place like Chongqing, where it’s increasingly common to see luxury sports cars swerving through streets clogged by three-wheeled taxis. Indeed, a study conducted last year by the Chengdu-based Survey and Research Centre for China Household Finance concluded the Gini coefficient ACTUALLY stood at 0.61 in 2010, which would put China among the most unequal societies in the world.

That’s no small matter for a nominally Communist country, albeit one that gave itself plenty of ideological wiggle room in recent decades by pursuing “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

“A reporter called and asked me to com-

ment on today's data, but wouldn't I be crazy to comment on a fake figure?" Xu Xiaonian, a Shanghai-based economist at the China Europe International Business School wrote Friday on Weibo, China's Twitter-like service. "Speaking of our Gini coefficient, even in fairy tales they wouldn't dare to write like that," he added.

Chongqing, a vibrant Yangtze River metropolis, has found itself at the centre of the income equality debate in recent years. Until his sudden fall last year, Bo Xilai, the city's

former boss and the one-time rising star of the Communist Party, called for a return to Mao Zedong-era socialist values and better distribution of the country's growing wealth.

However, he was ousted following revelations of his wife's involvement in the murder of a British businessman. Mr. Bo himself is expected to soon face trial on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

But Mr. Bo is remembered well by porters like Ms. Yang, who say life for Chongqing's poor was better under his rule.



Yang Xingcheng, one of Chongqing's legendary "bang-bang" porters who carry goods up and down the city's hills on a bamboo pole slung over their shoulders, didn't want to talk politics, but also said business today is "not as good as last year or a few years ago."

Mr. Yang (no relation to Ms. Yang) has been using the same bamboo pole since coming to Chongqing more than a decade ago, and his hands have deep calluses to prove it. Bang-bang men get paid 10 to 20 yuan per trip, depending on the weight of the goods, Mr. Yang said. He usually makes between \$5 and \$15 a day – barely enough to eat, pay rent and save a little for to travel home for the upcoming Chinese New Year holiday.

It's nowhere near enough for him to contemplate buying a house or getting married, let alone mingle with the patrons of Club TNT.

"These houses cost about a million yuan (\$160,000)," he said, waving his hand at the ramshackle working-class apartment blocks around him. "How dare I afford one? And all the girls want you to have a house before they'll marry you."

Even Mr. Liu, the performer at Club TNT, says that while he admires those who can afford the \$100 tables and \$300 bottles of champagne, he's not among them. Most, he said, are either in the construction business

or are officials in the local government.

Mr. Liu says he gets paid 600 yuan (about \$95) for a night's work, and often dines before the show at KFC. "Me and my friends, we're poor people," he laughed.

Monks self-censoring about self-immolation

In scenic Kangding, on the edge of Tibet, the only calm resides in the mountain monasteries

KANGDING, CHINA -- I had come a long way looking for answers, but the young man in the crimson robes had none he was able to give.

I met Thupten (not his real name - it would be dangerous for any monk to talk to a foreign reporter these days) at his temple in Kangding, a town almost 3,000 metres high in the mountains of Sichuan province that are the jagged staircase to the Tibetan Plateau. I had hoped to go higher, to the monasteries of Aba and Gandze that have been ablaze with hopelessness and anger for much of the past four years. I wanted to understand what might have motivated 97 Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople to try and end their lives by setting themselves on fire. It proved impossible.

While we were driving Tuesday in the mountains of Sichuan, a 98th self-immolation was reported by Tibetan exile groups, this time in the neighbouring province of Gansu, another Chinese province with a large Tibetan population. All that's been reported at this point is that Kunchok Kyab was 23 years old when he died near the Bora Monastery, leaving behind his wife and his

10-month-old child. It was exactly the kind of act I find so hard to comprehend, and why I wanted to speak to other Tibetan monks to ask them why this was happening and how they thought this grim era might end.

But the roads to places like Aba and Bora are blocked these days, especially to foreigners. In the city of Chengdu, the Sichuanese



capital with its sizable Tibetan minority, no driver would take us to Aba - let alone to Lhasa or any part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region itself. They believed we would get stopped at one of the many Chinese security checkpoints along the road, and we would all be punished. "They'll beat you first, and then make you come back here," one driver warned us.

We were told Kangding - an occasionally harrowing six-hour drive from Chengdu, still in Sichuan but on the edge of historic Tibet - was as far as we could go. So we climbed into a battered Mitsubishi SUV and headed into the mountains.

The two monasteries we visited in Kangding were places of calm, not anger. Other than the chants and drums of afternoon prayer - and the occasional buzz of a mobile phone - complete stillness reigned over the centuries-old complexes. Apart from the occasional visitor, the hundred or so monks of the Nanwu Temple - and the 40 or 50 at Jingang Temple - live and study in complete isolation.

China's ruling Communist Party government has tried to use that separateness to keep the wave of self-immolations - which began in February, 2009, when a young monk lit himself ablaze outside Aba's Kirti Monastery - from growing any further.

Scenic Kangding has long been a meeting point and trading post between the Tibetans who live further up the mountains and the Han Chinese who live below. But, these days, the atmosphere is a nervous one, with no fewer than five mobile police checkpoints currently established on and around Kangding's main People's Square. The officers at each post are equipped with riot shields and metre-long poles with U-shaped rubber endings that look designed to pin a burning person to the ground. At least one police cruiser we saw in Chengdu had fire extinguishers in the back seat.

Monks in Kangding say they've been told they can no longer travel from one region to



the next unless they first obtain a hard-to-get permit from the Public Security Bureau, creating a farcical situation in which the Tibetan Autonomous Region - long sealed to many foreigners - is now also closed even to many Tibetans living in the neighbouring Chinese provinces. Monks here say authorities also came to tinker with their satellite dishes so they no longer receive foreign channels such as BBC or Voice of America. (China's state-controlled media have alleged the self-immolations are directed by foreigners.)

But news still trickles through. Thupten said word of the self-immolations had reached Kangding via text messages and the occasional visitor. Some of the burnings had occurred just a few hours' drive north of his temple.

So what, then, did he think of them? What would cause a young man or woman to want to die in such a spectacular and horrible way?

Thupten, like all the monks I met Tuesday in Kangding, wasn't willing to either condemn the self-immolations or show any support. "Right now, it's very difficult to talk about this," he said apologetically, as if he didn't trust even the other monks around him. Then the 29-year-old switched from speaking in Chinese to the broken English he is ably teaching himself: "You know, because of politics."

He flipped back to Chinese. "I hope you will come again another time. Maybe then we can speak of these things more freely."

I smiled back at him, but I doubted that day would come any time soon.

Little islands are a big matter of principle

Strident national rhetoric around escalating tussle between Asia's powers over disputed land has only fired up the patriotic Chinese

LANZHOU, CHINA -- The middle-aged man walked over, wanting to share a drink with me, the only foreigner in a Tibetan-themed bar in this western Chinese city.

He toasted Canada. I toasted China. Then my new friend started talking about war.

"We must take back the Diaoyu Islands by force!" he shouted over the live music. He was referring to the quintet of uninhabited islands that Japan controls and calls Senkaku, but which China says rightfully belong to it.

The man said his family name was Ma, and that he worked in the Ministry of Railways in neighbouring Shaanxi province. I started telling him about my train trip around China, but he wanted to keep talking about the need to confront Japan.

"Look at my watch," he said, pulling up his sleeve to reveal a silver Omega. "I have 200-million yuan [\$32-million]. I am a so-called corrupt official. But I would sacrifice my life anytime for my homeland."

Ignoring the tugs from his friends trying to pull him away from our wild conversation, Mr. Ma stood up and gave me a slow, practised salute. "We must take the Diaoyu

Islands by force," he told me again.

Talk of war has followed us everywhere we've gone on this long ride around China, which now stands at 18 days and more than 4,200 kilometres travelled.

To the rest of the world, the dispute over the tiny, remote islands seems just that - tiny and remote. But China's state media has made it an issue of national honour and pride, igniting lingering resentment in the country over Japan's Second World War invasion and occupation of much of China.

While driving in the remote mountains of Sichuan province last week, we passed a giant roadside billboard that shouted: "The Diaoyu Islands are China's!" over a red-tinged picture of the lonely rocks looking very important indeed.

The test of wills between Asia's two great powers began in September when Tokyo nationalized the islands, purchasing them from the Japanese family that had owned them for decades. China has been showing its anger by sending fisheries patrol boats into Japanese-controlled waters on a near-daily basis since then. The showdown became even more unpredictable in recent weeks as both sides sent fighter jets on sorties near the islands.

Beijing and Tokyo appeared to take a small step away from the brink last week when China's leader, Xi Jinping, met a Japanese envoy who proposed a summit

meeting between Mr. Xi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, an idea Mr. Xi said he would “seriously consider.” But neither side has left itself much room for a compromise.

Mr. Abe was elected last month by a Japanese public that wants to see him take a tougher stand against China than his predecessors did. And widespread anti-Japanese sentiment in China is bubbling over in some quarters into a desire for war.

We spent our longest train ride of the trip - 22 hours from Chengdu, the capital of southern Sichuan province, to Lanzhou in western Gansu province - beside four men who drank baijiu, a foul-smelling rice liquor, read the nationalist Global Times newspaper, and talked of what they saw as the growing possibility of a military conflict with Japan. One of the men wore a red Communist Party pin on his grey sweater.

I interrupted their loud conversation to ask what they thought a war would mean.

“China has eight military districts,” one responded, referring to the eight regional commands of the People’s Liberation Army. “Any one of those eight could defeat Japan on its own.”

A week before that train ride we hired a random taxi in Guiyang, one of China’s poorest big cities, and asked the driver to take us to his hometown. Along the way, 31-year-old Kong Dezheng complained about the corruption that has become an

integral part of Communist Party rule, and about how hard it was to raise his family of three with his small income and rising costs.

But when it came to the issue of who owns the disputed islands, he was firmly behind the country’s leadership.

“If there is a war, no matter how poor I am, I will donate to the troops,” he said earnestly. Like the others, Mr. Kong started talking about the islands without being asked about them.

Chinese women take 'rental boyfriends' home for the holidays

XI'AN, CHINA -- For the equivalent of \$65, Zhou Qihao will let a girl take him home. For an extra \$3 or so an hour, he'll let her take him to a movie - but it costs double if she wants to have dinner beforehand.

Mr. Zhou is 24 years old, a bit taller than average at 1.78 metres, thin and "OK" looking (according to his online profile). Most of the year he works in home renovation, but with the Chinese New Year approaching - and all its attendant pressure on young women to show their parents and grandparents they're closer to settling down and starting a family - he's earning a little cash on the side as one of 260 "rental boyfriends" on China's eBay-style direct-sales website, taobao.com.

Mr. Zhou has been paid for two dates and has fielded about 60 other inquiries from anxious women as China's big annual holiday approaches. Over the next few weeks, hundreds of millions of Chinese will travel home, often to see their extended families for the only time that year.

China's annual Great Migration is expected to include some 3.4 billion individual trips by train, bus and air this year, stretching the country's rapidly expanding transport infrastructure to the point of bursting.

In Xi'an, the ancient terminus of the Silk Road, the waiting rooms in the city's main train station were overflowing this week, even though it was more than 10 days before the official holiday began, and authorities were forced to erect giant tents outside the station to accommodate the crush of travellers.

Because so many Chinese live and work away from their native towns and villages, and travel home only once a year, the treasured family time is weighted with pressure to show what you've accomplished over the last 12 months.

For many young women, showing up at home with a pleasant-looking, well-behaved boyfriend - even if your family never sees him again - is better than enduring two weeks of questions about why there's no marriage or kids on the horizon. (China can be a deeply sexist society - women who are unmarried past the age of 30 are often referred to as "leftover women," even in official media.)

"There are all kinds of reasons" that women contact a rental boyfriend, Mr. Zhou explains in an interview via instant messenger. "Some are divorced, some want help getting rid of another boyfriend, some don't want to go to a wedding by themselves."

But most, he adds, "just want someone to go with them to their hometown for three days, just to meet their parents and let them

know they have a boyfriend.”

Mr. Zhou’s online pitch is a flexible one: “I’m healthy and have no indecent addictions (such as smoking, drinking, playing mahjong, etc.), although I can certainly take on the addictions if a client needs,” he writes on his taobao.com advertisement, promising to be “client-oriented” in his services.

Hand-holding, hugs and pecks on the cheek or forehead are free, but he won’t sleep in the same bed. He’s cautious about kissing on the lips too, largely because he erroneously believes he could contract HIV/AIDS that way.

The women who turn to rental boyfriends don’t seem too interested in the extras,

though. Mr. Zhou says his first two clients mostly wanted someone to talk to. Online, those who admit to using the service say it’s all about appeasing their parents. “My parents are very satisfied, so the pressure [on me] is greatly reduced,” one anonymous woman wrote of her experience.

But could one of these “rental” relationships turn into the real thing? Mr. Zhou, who says he’s currently between girlfriends, thinks the odds are long.

The women who can afford to hire him are simply out of his league.

“You know how it is in China,” he writes via instant messenger. “For a young man who doesn’t earn very much, talking about love is unrealistic.”



What we discovered on our Long Ride

Mark MacKinnon, The Globe and Mail's China correspondent, and staff photojournalist John Lehmann spent 22 days - and travelled 7,745 kilometres - exploring the country at a defining moment in its modern history. Their final instalment of The China Diaries looks at what left them impressed, depressed, inspired and frustrated

YAN'AN, CHINA -- Photographer John Lehmann and I started out with the broad goal of retracing the storied Long March that Mao Zedong led his Red Army on in the 1930s. Instead of walking, we travelled mostly by rail, stopping at cities and towns

along the way to take the pulse of the country that Mao's latest successor, Xi Jinping, is inheriting.

We started out in Wukan, in coastal Guangdong province, a village famous for rising up last year to demand the right to elect its own representatives. Then we headed inland, to Mao's home province of Hunan, followed by a stop in China's poorest province, Guizhou. After that came the Yangtze metropolis of Chongqing, the power base of onetime Communist Party star Bo Xilai before his dramatic fall from grace last year. Then we pushed west, toward the country's restive Tibetan regions, and then north toward Shaanxi province, where the Long March ended. Shaanxi is also where



Mr. Xi was exiled decades later during the Cultural Revolution.

In our Long Ride, we travelled 7,745 kilometres (including road trips from the various stations along the way) and stopped in 14 cities and villages over the course of 22 days. We took nine separate train trips, ranging from three to 22 hours in length, in four different classes of comfort.

Most impressive thing we saw

The high-speed train line we took early in our journey, from Guangzhou to Changsha. That line stretches all the way to Beijing, cutting the trip time between Guangzhou and the capital from an onerous 30 hours to a much more tolerable eight. China's high-speed rail project has been hurt by corruption and cut corners, but when it is completed it will bring this sprawling country closer together than ever before.

Runner-up The fact that there was mobile service - and 3G Internet - almost everywhere we went, from the booming cities of coastal Guangdong province to the Tibetan plateau, where monks in one monastery send text messages to their brothers the next mountain over. Even in some otherwise-forgotten villages we stopped at along the way - places that had no indoor plumbing and only the most basic of schoolhouses - there was always a China Mobile or Uni-com signal.

Most depressing thing we saw

The schoolhouse in Wanzi, a corner of Guizhou province we visited by chance. There was no electricity, no heat. The squat toilet was something the students and teachers (who have only junior high school educations themselves) built by hand. A few years ago I visited schools in Shanghai that are considered - by some standards - to be the best in the world. The kids in Wanzi may as well be growing up on another planet.



Runner-up The fact that the Internet, everywhere we went, was subject to the same inane restrictions. No Facebook, no Twitter, no YouTube, no New York Times, no Bloomberg.com. China this year celebrated the fact one of its citizens finally won a Nobel Prize. They would win a lot more if people here could read, watch and think whatever they want.

Best moment

Standing in the serene monasteries of Kangding, on the edge of the Tibetan plateau. The Tibetan areas of China are afire with anger and hopelessness these days, but

the Tibetans remain incredibly hospitable to any visitors, including any Han Chinese genuinely interested in Tibetan culture and religion.

Most frustrating moment

For me, it came on the longest train ride of our trip - 22 hours from Chengdu in southern Sichuan province to Lanzhou in Gansu western province - when train staff seemed to decide we were spies sent to gather intelligence on what train service was like in more remote parts of China. First, they wouldn't let us visit the third-class seats, and then they wouldn't let me hold the dinner car menu. Finally they blocked John from taking a picture of me eating scrambled eggs with chopsticks. Paging John Le Carré.

Favourite place



Fenghuang, an ancient town in the south of Hunan province. It is postcard-perfect China, a place of pagodas and stone bridges slung over the slow-moving Tuo River. Get there while you can - the rest of China is

encroaching fast, with swathes of “ancient-style” condominiums going up where something beautiful used to be.

Most depressing place

Guiyang, the capital of China's poorest province, Guizhou. The city is filled with tightly wound people scrambling to try to make a living. The astonishing part was the number of luxury cars - not just the Audis and Mercedeses that are standard fare for Chinese officials, but Porsches and Lamborghinis too - we saw idling among the three-wheeled taxis and mud-caked public buses. Living in Beijing, you see a gap between rich and poor that reminds me of some of the more troubled parts of the United States. In Guizhou, the distance between the absurdly well off and the hopelessly poor reminded me of South Africa.

Moment that gave me hope for China's future

Meeting Bao Xianbing, a 34-year-old bureaucrat in the city of Lanzhou. Every day, he sticks an air quality monitor out his window and posts the particulate matter recordings on his Weibo account - alongside a picture of the city's always-hazy skyline, taken from his 14th-floor office - so netizens can compare his measurements with the official data published by the local government. He also showed me how he gets around China's infamous Great Firewall of Internet restrictions so he can use Facebook

and Twitter and read BBC news - all on his government computer.

Moment that made me despair

The same day I met Mr. Bao, I met another bureaucrat in Lanzhou, this time in one of the city's Tibetan-themed bars. This official was just as friendly to me as Mr. Bao, but insisted on ruining a nice conversation by constantly talking about the need for China to fight a war with Japan. He admitted to being a "so-called corrupt official" and claimed to be outrageously wealthy as a result.

The big picture

At Chongqing train station, I wound up standing beside a young woman - perhaps 18 or 19 years old - who was studying metallurgy at Northeastern University in faraway Shenyang. She was with her grandparents, who came to the train station carrying two baskets stuffed with duck, goose and chicken eggs from their farm, as well as a bag of dried sausage - gifts to share with the extended family during the coming Chinese New Year holiday.

As I chatted with the student about life in Canada and the gender ratio in her metallurgy class in Shenyang (she was one of only four women in her class), I looked over at her grandparents. The way they looked at their university-going granddaughter - the pride and amazement in their faces as she spoke to a foreigner in a foreign language - reminded me of how far the people of this country

have come in the past two generations. The Communist Party government wants to take credit for that, but all it has done is get partly out of the way.

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Older Entries

Rural China's rubbish revolution: Villagers band against corruption

Opposition to trash incinerator in tiny Panguanying tests residents' resolve to conduct peaceful revolt

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PANGUANYING, CHINA — Most residents of the tiny village of Panguanying had never been inside their local Communist Party office before. The single room, with its meeting table surrounded by red flags and an oversized hammer-and-sickle on the wall, was a place for high officials and cadres, not for ordinary farmers like them.

But things are different in Panguanying these days. This hardscrabble community some 300 kilometres east of Beijing, in the pastures north of the seaside resort of Beidaihe, has become the latest Chinese town to rise up and demand an end to corruption, and environmental degradation and even the chance to freely pick their own leaders.

On Wednesday, a crowd of perhaps 100 residents stormed past a single official – who tried to remind them they were breaking the rules – and briefly took over the village committee office in order to welcome this reporter, anxious to tell him of their grievances against the local government.

“I’m afraid. My heart is beating. I keep

waiting for them to throw us out,” Ren Fengrong, a stout 64-year-old woman, shouted above the excited crowd. Like the rest of the suddenly defiant residents of this town, Ms. Ren was grinning ear-to-ear despite her fears.

The villagers stayed in the office for about an hour, and the police never came to evict them. It was a small victory for something still completely new to much of China: people power.

The long-simmering anger among Panguanying’s 1,800 residents boiled over last week when residents tried to use local council elections – which are usually stage-managed by the Communist Party – to choose as village chief a man known for his opposition to a giant trash incinerator that is being built on farmland just outside the village. He is also not a member of the Communist Party.

Pan Zhizhong, the 49-year-old sheep farmer who has emerged as the face of the anti-incinerator movement. He seemed certain to win when residents lined up at the local primary school to vote on Nov. 29. Or he did until a group of thugs, including a rival candidate who is also the brother of the local Communist Party chief, arrived at the school and carried away the ballot boxes in full view of dozens of stunned voters.

The anger in Panguanying is just one of the tens of thousands of “mass incidents”

(as the bureaucracy here refers to them) around China each year. Most are motivated by either official corruption, environmental concerns, or some blend of the two. The government considers the exact number of mass incidents too sensitive to be made public.

Residents of Panguanying say they've been inspired by events in Wukan, a village in southern Guangdong province that rose up to oust corrupt local officials last January, eventually winning the right to choose its own town council.

Like Wukan a year ago, Panguanying is now in peaceful revolt. After the theft of the ballot boxes, hundreds of residents surrounded the local police station to demand answers about why officers on duty inside the polling station did nothing to prevent the tampering. Crowds have also protested in recent days outside the township and county Communist Party offices, demanding to know when a new election will be held.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, local officials say police are investigating the allegations – which are supported by videos seen by The Globe and Mail – that the election was intentionally disrupted. However, there's no timeline for a conclusion to that investigation, or for a new vote to be held.

Frustrated with the response from local authorities, the villagers – most of whom

raise livestock for about \$400 a month – are hoping to get the attention of China's new leader, Xi Jinping, who came to power last month promising to crack down on the country's runaway corruption problem.

Outgoing President Hu Jintao warned during a key Communist Party conclave last month that corruption had become so grave that it could “cause the collapse of the party and the fall of the state.”

The trouble in Panguanying began in 2009, when the local Communist Party boss, Pan Hongshu (no relation to the sheep farmer Pan Zhizhong), sold his family's farmland to a private company that wanted to build a \$35-million waste incinerator in the middle of the village's other farms.

Though the party boss needed the consent of the village to make the transaction – which netted his family hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to documents seen by The Globe and Mail – residents say they were never consulted and that forged documents showing their approval had been presented to the government of Hebei province.

“China's waste-incineration technology is not very modern,” said Shan Xinli, a retired environmental protection bureaucrat who raised the alarm about the project. “The chemicals it would release into the water, the soil, the vegetation, the air... could cause cancer.”

The campaign against the incinerator scored a huge victory last year when Pan Zhizhong, the sheep farmer-turned-politician, convinced a court to halt its construction on the basis villagers hadn't given their approval.

Last week's village election was seen as something of a referendum on whether the incinerator project could be restarted.

In Panguanying, residents say that during previous elections they were forced to mark their ballots in front of local officials. "I didn't vote for [Communist Party boss] Pan Hongshu last time and they saw that. Three days later, 10 people beat and kicked me until my face was swollen," said Yang Zhiqiang, a 46-year-old farmer. "But when I went to vote this time I wasn't afraid."

The reason for that courage, many here say, is they're inspired by Pan Zhizhong, who first fought the incinerator project to a halt, then dared to run for office against the brother of the party chief.

The soft-spoken Pan Zhizhong is a charismatic but reluctant hero. Ask people here who they want to lead their village council and most shout his name. Though he says he'd rather be a farmer than a politician, the room drops quiet to listen when he speaks.

The odds remain stacked against Panguanying's little democracy movement. In Wukan, the last village that won the right to hold its own elections, residents say the

city's economy has suffered in the year since – punishment, they believe for daring to buck the local establishment.

Standing in the middle of the Communist Party office, I asked the crowd around me if anyone was scared. "I'm not," answered Pan Zhizhong. The farmer standing beside him gave the same bold answer.

Quieter were the responses from those standing behind them: "I am." "I am." "I am."

What the new leadership means for China

Xi Jinping began his tenure as China's paramount leader with smiles and an apology, perhaps a sign that the emerging superpower has chosen a less rigid kind of Communist boss. Mark MacKinnon reports.

Published Nov. 16, 2012

For a man who had just become leader of the world's most populous country, facing a yawning wealth gap, growing friction with China's neighbours and damaging scandals within his own Communist Party, Xi Jinping looked remarkably relaxed as he met the world's media Thursday in the Great Hall of the People. He even smiled a few times.

That in itself represented a change, in style if not yet substance. After a decade of dour stiffness from the outgoing Hu Jintao, Mr. Xi's grins - and an apology for arriving late to the news conference - were welcomed by many Chinese as a sign that he might just be a different kind of Communist boss.

He'll also be a more powerful leader than he was initially expected to be. Mr. Hu shocked many on Thursday by stepping aside as head of the Central Military Commission - he had been widely expected to remain for another two years - giving Mr. Xi immediate command of the People's Liberation Army. That allows Mr. Xi a freer hand

at the start of his tenure than any Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping.

Mr. Xi may also be aided by having to deal with a smaller Standing Committee. The all-powerful group, which functions as the Communist Party's board of directors, was reduced in size to seven members, in apparent hope of streamlining decision-making after Mr. Hu presided over a nine-member body.

"Xi Jinping starts day one as commander-in-chief. This will help him consolidate his position," said Willy Lam, an expert on Communist Party politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

It's not clear what Mr. Xi will do with his moment. The pudgy 59-year-old with the shiny black hair, who saw his family purged during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s and who spent seven years working as a labourer and living in a cave, will be the first Communist Party leader with a personal understanding of the uglier parts of the movement's history. His father, a former vice-premier, is reputed to have spoken out within the party against the use of force to crush pro-democracy protests on Tiananmen Square.

That breeds optimism that Mr. Xi will allow greater political openness than his predecessors, perhaps by permitting people to speak openly about the crimes of Mao Zedong.

Mr. Xi used his initial speech to display a more populist touch than his recent predecessors. Instead of dryly listing off socialist theories, Mr. Xi talked about what the Chinese people wanted: “better education, more stable jobs, more income, greater social security, better medical and health care, improved housing conditions and a better environment.” He sounded - a little - like a politician campaigning for office rather than what he is: a career apparatchik elevated to power via a byzantine back-room process.

“Worth the wait! [He has] a very human touch!” one Beijing-based microblogger wrote online after Mr. Xi’s speech.

Mr. Xi, who is also Vice-President of the government, will complete his ascension in March when he will formally take over as president from Mr. Hu. While important internationally, the post is widely viewed as less powerful inside China than the leadership of the 82-million-member Communist Party and three-million-strong People’s Liberation Army.

Mr. Xi is more Westernized than previous Communist Party bosses. He has fondly recalled the family in Iowa he stayed with on a 1985 trip to the United States. (There’s a photo of him smiling goofily with the family at what appears to be a birthday party.) His wife, Peng Liyuan, is a famous singer, set to become the most prominent first lady China has had since Mao’s wife was purged and

jailed for her role in the Cultural Revolution. The couple’s only daughter studies under a pseudonym at Harvard University.

But others see Mr. Xi as a member of the party’s privileged, “princeling” class, as children of China’s famous revolutionaries are known. They’re viewed as a generation that believes they were born to rule and who have no intention of letting go of their accumulated power and wealth. An investigation earlier this year by the Bloomberg news agency - which traced upward of \$750-million (U.S.) in assets to Mr. Xi’s extended family - supports that thesis. The bloomberg.com website has been blocked inside China since it published the exposé in June.

Mr. Xi’s first remarks as general secretary suggested he’s aware of how the Communist elite are viewed in the country they rule, following a year of corruption scandals.

“Problems among our party members and cadres of corruption, taking bribes, being out of touch with the people, undue emphasis on formalities and bureaucratism must be addressed with great efforts,” he said, speaking under the chandeliers of the East Hall of the Great Hall of the People.

Other Communist leaders have made similar remarks in the past. What made Mr. Xi’s speech different was the personable tone. The first words out of his mouth were a humble “sorry to have kept you waiting” - words that stunned assembled Chinese

and foreign reporters more accustomed to being ignored by Communist officials. One of the first measures announced following the power transfer was a cut in the price of fuel, starting from Friday. Another apparent change was at least a temporary loosening of some of the controls on the Twitter-style Sina Weibo microblogging website. One previously banned term you can now search for: “Xi Jinping.”

Political rivalry reflects a split within China's Communist Party

On the conservative 'new left' of Chinese politics, is Bo Xilai, the boss of Chongqing, who's become famous for crackdowns on crime and nostalgic celebrations of Chairman Mao. As Mark MacKinnon reports, Mr. Bo is aiming for a seat on the all-powerful, nine-man Politburo as it is reshuffled in the next year. At right is his rival, Guangdong chief Wang Yang, the liberal governor of China's freest state. Their contest offers a rare glimpse inside the Communist Party, as factions battle for China's soul

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On the 90th anniversary of the founding of China's ruling Communist Party, the boss of the sweltering Yangtze River metropolis of Chongqing gathered 100,000 people in a soccer stadium and led them in a birthday singalong for the ages. They belted out, Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China, among other standards of decades past.

A 90-minute flight away, in the coastal manufacturing hub of Guangzhou, the anniversary was also celebrated July 1, but the master of ceremonies gave the day a somewhat more subdued tenor. "For a mature ruling political party, it's more important to

study and review its history and strengthen a sense of anxiety than just to sing the praises of its brilliance," Guangdong's Party chief, Wang Yang said in remarks that were published in the official People's Daily newspaper.

By Western standards, that was a very subtle poke at Bo Xilai, the singing boss of Chongqing. But in the murky world of Chinese leadership politics, Mr. Wang's jab was rare for its directness. Here was one top Party official taking public aim at another's leadership style, on a day that was supposed to be set aside for celebrating the Party's successes.

The remark drew back the curtain a hair's breadth on a behind-the-scenes rivalry that could shape the direction the world's rising superpower will take in the coming decade.

Mr. Bo and Mr. Wang are not only provincial Party bosses, but rivals for coveted spots on the nine-man Standing Committee of the Politburo – the top of China's power pyramid – during the once-in-a-decade leadership shuffle set to take place over the next year. And the regions they now govern offer starkly differing models for the direction China should head next.

The rivalry between the two men reflects a split within the Chinese Communist Party that, no matter how good the Party is at presenting a united front to the world, some see as a struggle for China's very soul.

On one side, there is Mr. Bo's Chongqing model, the favourite of a powerful faction of hard leftists who are prone to harkening back wistfully to the era of Chairman Mao, and want to see the country's pursuit of growth balanced with a renewed focus on social stability, including more equitable distribution of China's new-found wealth.

On the other is Mr. Wang's more open Guangdong model, the choice of a smaller clutch of free-market liberals, who argue that now is not the time to pause the country's economic and political reforms.

Since Mr. Bo took over as Party Secretary in Chongqing four years ago, he has won wide praise for smashing the region's crime syndicates. But he is even more notorious for his nostalgic embrace of "Red culture" – which includes not only revolutionary songs but bureaucrats being sent to the countryside to work alongside farmers, and Mao quotations being sent to millions of mobile phones by Mr. Bo himself.

Mr. Bo's campaigns have made him a hero of the country's "new left" but also unnerved some prominent intellectuals, who hear unsettling echoes of the Cultural Revolution, when tens of millions were violently purged in the name of ideological purity.

Meanwhile, Mr. Wang – who preceded Mr. Bo as Chongqing party boss before moving east to Guangdong – has recently emerged as the new hope of the country's liberals.

Guangdong, particularly the cities of Shenzhen and Guangzhou, famously gave birth to China's economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. Now the region is home to the country's freest media and has become an incubator for civil society. But a wave of strikes and protests in the province in recent years has unsettled other top party officials, who make no secret of their preference for stability over freedom.

"Bo's approach is a populist approach based on appealing to the masses with historical nostalgia," said Russell Leigh Moses, a Beijing-based analyst of Chinese politics. "Wang's efforts are no less populist, but they rest upon the notion that the Party's legitimacy will have to rest on more than simply economic growth."

Some Chinese see the coming battle as critical to whether their country continues its lurching reform, or takes a dangerous step backward. "Chongqing is on the way to becoming North Korea. Guangdong is on the way to becoming Singapore," said Yu Chen, an investigative journalist at the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis Daily, widely considered one of the country's most independent newspapers.

It's unfair, though, to lay that unflattering comparison purely at the feet of Mr. Bo. Chongqing and Guangdong are as different culturally and politically as Newfoundland and Alberta; no politician could hope to

lead in either place without adapting to the local realities (as evidenced by Mr. Wang's career – he only emerged as a leading “liberal” after arriving in Guangdong) and local bureaucracies.

But with as many as seven of the current nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo set to retire in the next 12 months, both men are accentuating their differences, in an apparent effort to win support from the rival wings of the Communist Party.

BO XILAI'S CHONGQING

When Bo Xilai arrived here four years ago, this region was sometimes referred to as “Detroit on the Yangtze.” It wasn't meant to be a flattering comparison.

Chongqing was then known in the rest of China for two things, besides its spicy food – as one of the centres of the country's automotive industry, and as a hub of organized crime.

Now it's known primarily as Mr. Bo's political laboratory.

Initially, many saw Mr. Bo's assignment to this sweaty megapolis (which, including the surrounding countryside, is home to 29 million people) as something akin to banishment from Beijing.

He'd been seen as a lock for the 2007 Standing Committee of the Politburo lineup – and perhaps later for one of the country's highest offices. But he was left out when

President Hu Jintao strode onto the red carpet at the Great Hall of the People, surrounded by the other eight most powerful people in China, the members of the new Politburo.

The two factions sometimes portrayed as battling within the Communist Party are one associated with Mr. Hu, who has his roots in the Communist Youth League, and another linked with his predecessor Jiang Zemin, with its power base in Shanghai and the party's influential “princelings” – the sons of famous revolutionaries.

While the Youth League and Princeling factions are each internally divided in the current left-right schism, many princelings have ties with the more hard-line, old-fashioned elements, and prominent Youth League figures are associated with the reform push.

Mr. Bo, as the son of Bo Yibo (a colleague of Mao's and one of the “eight immortals” of the Communist Party), was a princeling.

He had showed his populist touch as the mayor of the port city of Dalian, and earned sound economic credentials during three years as the country's Minister of Commerce.

Then 58, he had the right look, the right background and the right family connections. Many outside observers were convinced that the slick Mr. Bo's ascension was inevitable.

But then, in what looked like a carefully crafted compromise, the 2007 Politburo lineup contained only one rising star from each faction. The Youth League faction advanced Li Keqiang, the man now set to take over from Wen Jiabao as Premier in a year's time. The Princelings put forward Xi Jinping, the man expected to become China's next president and paramount leader.

Why Mr. Xi was chosen over Mr. Bo has never been revealed, but the snubbed princeling responded to his new role by making himself impossible to ignore.

Soon after arriving in Chongqing, he launched a crackdown on the city's powerful crime triads, turning loose the police in a sustained campaign that saw more than 2,000 arrests, including the spectacular trial and conviction of Xie Caiping, the "Godmother" of Chongqing's underworld.

Corrupt local officials were targeted as well; the former head of the city's justice department (Ms. Xie's brother-in-law) was executed in 2010 after being convicted of rape and bribe-taking.

"Strike the black," as the campaign was known, was a resounding public-relations success. Many Chinese Internet users expressed a wish that Mr. Bo would be "banished" to their own corrupt regions next.

But some academics and human-rights activists were unsettled by the lack of due process and allegations that torture had been

used to extract confessions. The lawyer who took on the daunting task of trying to defend the mafia suspects found himself behind bars for perjury.

"So many things have happened in this city ... things that cause one to feel that time has been dialled back, that the Cultural Revolution is being replayed and that the ideal of the rule of law is right now being lost," He Weifang, a prominent law professor at Beijing University, wrote in what he called an open letter to his colleagues in Chongqing.

Chongqing is indeed a place that can feel a decade or more behind the fast-changing cities of China's east coast. Though Mr. Wang and Mr. Bo both worked to reverse the trend, one of Chongqing's chief exports remains labourers willing to work for low wages elsewhere in China.

The city's media is among the least critical anywhere in the country, sticking strictly to the line of the official Xinhua News Agency when not extolling the virtues of Mr. Bo and Red culture.

It's one of the hardest places in China to have a political discussion, since most Chongqing residents make clear their preference of avoiding a topic that can only cause them trouble.

But concerns over Mr. Bo's direction deepened when he followed "Strike the Black" with "Sing the Red." In this campaign, residents are encouraged to relearn songs associ-

ated with the Cultural Revolution (or, in the case of many young Chinese, learn them).

On weekend afternoons Chongqing parks are filled with groups warbling away about the glories of Mao's revolution.

In another throwback to the 1960s and 1970s, local government officials were dispatched to the countryside for stints working and living alongside rural villagers.

This was particularly disconcerting from a man whose family was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (his father, a veteran of the Long March and a key planner of the disastrous Great Leap Forward, was jailed and tortured for 15 years after being named as a counter-revolutionary by Mao's wife). But Mr. Bo's back-to-the-future style of governing has found a following in Chongqing and beyond.

When Mr. Xi, the president-to-be, travelled to Mr. Bo's Chongqing last year, he applauded both Strike the Black and Sing the Red.

"These activities have gone deeply into the hearts of the people and are worthy of praise," Mr. Xi said, calling the campaigns "a good vehicle for educating the broad masses of party members and cadres about [politically correct] precepts and beliefs."

Then again, some would say Mr. Bo – and Mr. Xi on his visit – are less true believers in rolling back the clock than politicians trying to appeal to hard-line factions in the Party's upper echelons.

"There's a perception that there has been a

strong turn towards a more nationalist, assertive, stability-loving authoritarian system in China, and a turn away from things like the rule of law and cosmopolitanism," said Joshua Rosenzweig, a Hong Kong-based human-rights researcher.

"There's no way to know whether what Bo's been doing in Chongqing reflects his conception for what the criminal-justice system should be doing in all of China, or whether it's just part of his campaign to make it onto the Politburo Standing Committee."

WANG YANG'S GUANGDONG

It may not be exactly Swinging Guangdong, but for years this province has been the place where the Communist Party has experimented with a more open China than the one it allows in the rest of the country.

Because of its proximity to Hong Kong and the coast, the province was chosen by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s as the testing ground for economic reforms, changes that took hold more deeply here than anywhere else.

Today, Guangdong is China's shop window to the rest of the world, the heart of its manufacturing and export industries. Many here believe the rest of the country should be looking to it again as a model, this time as it tries out greater media freedom and limited civil society.

Residents say their province is the way it is because they themselves are fundamentally

different from those who live in China's north and interior. The heartland of Cantonese language and culture, Guangdong maintained contact with foreigners and the outside world even during the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution.

Many in Guangdong today profess that what happens in Beijing doesn't matter to them, as long as Beijing leaves them alone.

(Beijing seems to concur that the region is different, maintaining an informal policy of never allowing a Guangdong native to become the provincial governor, to keep a lid on the region's independent streak.)

Dubbed a liberal by a faction looking for someone to rally around, Wang Yang, the province's current party boss, gets credit in Guangdong mainly for being a little more hands-off than your average Communist Party Secretary. The more open media scene that buoys Southern Metropolis Daily and other authority-challenging publications, for example, preceded the 56-year-old Mr. Wang's arrival.

Again, that is credited to the influence of Hong Kong, where a free press tradition introduced by the British today continues under China's "one country, two systems" administration.

But Mr. Wang gets credit for not interfering. "I would call Wang Yang a smart leader, because he understands the kind of place he is governing," said Tang Hao, deputy

professor of political science at South China Normal University in the regional capital of Guangzhou. "He understands how to deal with social problems in this province. He understands that non-governmental power is not anti-government power."

On paper, Mr. Wang is a classic Communist Party boss, someone who rose up through the ranks quietly, aided by patrons in the higher echelons.

His timing was almost perfect: Born in rural Anhui province, he was 24 years old when he arrived in Beijing to study political economics in 1979, just as Deng Xiaoping was moving the country away from its ruinous experiments with hard-core communism. Shortly afterward he joined the Communist Youth League, arriving as a rising star named Hu Jintao, also once seen as a reformer, was inheriting the organization's helm.

As Mr. Hu rose through the ranks, so did Mr. Wang. In 2003, shortly after Mr. Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao assumed power, Mr. Wang was made deputy secretary general of the State Council, Mr. Wen's cabinet, which then included rival Bo Xilai as Commerce Minister.

Two years later, Mr. Wang was transferred to Chongqing. And in 2007, after the new Politburo was unveiled in Beijing, he moved to Guangdong.

Though Mr. Wang lacks Mr. Bo's popu-

list touch, he has nonetheless managed to portray himself as a leader who listens. Like Mr. Wen, another top Communist who's cultivated the image of the caring liberal, he daringly lets the grey hair at his temples show, a choice that distinguishes both men in a party otherwise dominated by improbably black-haired septuagenarians.

He may well come to be seen as the Party boss who finally allowed civil society to flourish in Guangdong and beyond. Starting in late 2010, the province began easing restrictions on the registration of non-governmental organizations, a concept previously anathema to the Party.

While the rest of China makes it incredibly difficult for NGOs to achieve legal status – they're required to find an official organization willing to sponsor them, which rarely happens – Guangdong now allows domestic NGOs to set up shop with far less paperwork and red tape. The new atmosphere has drawn well-established groups such as action-movie star Jet Li's One Foundation to open offices in Shenzhen and Guangzhou after years of working in legal grey areas elsewhere in the country.

"We could see the openness here," said Zhan Min, office manager of the Maitian Project, an independent charity that offers support to poor schools in rural China and is in the process of opening a Guangzhou office after years of working without legal

status in Shanghai. "The local leaders in Guangdong are bolder and braver than leaders inland, who are more concerned about the risks."

But Guangdong under Mr. Wang is only "open" in the context of China's authoritarianism. Journalists and editors can report on topics forbidden to their colleagues in other parts of the country, but they know better than to criticize the country's top rulers, or Mr. Wang himself. And the NGOs being allowed to register in Shenzhen are only of the most apolitical sort – do-gooder charities are being legalized, but nothing tied to religion or having any kind of human-rights agenda is expected to be welcomed any time soon.

There are those within the stability-obsessed Communist Party who would argue that Mr. Wang already has gone too far. Guangdong was the centre of a wave of labour unrest last year that spread through much of the country's manufacturing belt, forcing employers and governments to raise wages.

More violent incidents – such as a riot last month that saw villagers sack a local police station and set police cars on fire after the local government seized farmland for a development project – are also more common in restive Guangdong than in other parts of the country.

The government has backed down from

many of these protests rather than crushing them, perhaps giving another hint of Mr. Wang's gentler leadership style.

"If the Party would like to secure the nation's interests, they would find the so-called Guangdong model and Wang Yang's opinions more helpful [than the Chongqing model]," said Prof. Tang. "The simple way of using power to stabilize society is not suitable for today. They need to use social power to deal with social problems, they need to use market power to deal with market problems."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The outside world may get a hint of whether one or both of Bo Xilai and Wang Yang are set to join the world's most powerful leadership group in the coming weeks as the wider Central Committee of the Communist Party gathers in Beijing.

There may well be no pronouncement on the political future of either man – there are still months left in this secretive campaign for office before the next Standing Committee of the Politburo is unveiled, and Central Committee decisions don't have to be ratified by any congress, or pass muster with any court – but their ideas will surely be debated by its 300-odd members once the doors of the Great Hall of the People are sealed to outsiders.

Those in the best position to judge the relative merits of the two men are likely

the residents of Chongqing, who have lived under the leadership of each one. Of course, there will never be a vote allowing residents to express what they really thought of the two men's comparative styles of government, but there's little question Mr. Bo has captured local imaginations with his campaigns. Mr. Wang, meanwhile, is remembered as a weaker, if more tolerant leader.

"Wang Yang promised the city economic development, and he delivered it, although some people don't appreciate it because the money didn't reach them," a Chongqing government official who asked not to be named said over a lunch of the region's famous hot food. Though the restaurant was nearly empty, he dropped his voice to a whisper so no one could hear he was discussing the party secretaries. "Bo took the shorter route [to popularity] and tackled the city's crime problem, so of course Bo is the more popular of the two."

"Both Bo and Wang spent a lot of efforts improving people's standard of living," said Zhang Yuren, a media expert at Chongqing Normal University. However, he said, "there are big differences: Bo believes the city should have a patriotic spirit, and he connects it to Red culture. Wang is different. He wants a diversified, more open culture."

But do enough other members of the Central Committee want the same? In many ways, the Bo-versus-Wang debate is just the

latest incarnation of the behind-the-scenes struggle that has existed inside the Communist Party since the 1980s. Reformers such as then-Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang threw their support behind the students demanding change on Tiananmen Square in 1989. Afterwards, they spent the rest of their lives under detention.

No surprise, then, that the debate has become a whispered one, though Wen Jiabao has occasionally shaken the establishment with statements about the country's desperate need for political change. Now, with Mr. Wen set to leave office with little in the way of political reform to show from his decade as Premier, the country's liberals look to Mr. Wang with tired hope and Mr. Bo with fresh anxiety.

"I've been to North Korea," said Mr. Yu, the Southern Metropolis Daily journalist. "I would definitely rather live in Singapore

Mao's revolution at 60: He wouldn't recognize it

After decades of brutal struggle and civil war, China's economic progress outstrips its political reforms.

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Hangzhou, China — This Thursday, as tanks and missiles roll through Tiananmen Square in Beijing and fireworks explode overhead to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of Communist China, a retired factory worker will gather with her children and grandchildren in this historic city on China's booming east coast, and sigh a little – regret mixed with relief – at what those six decades have brought them.

Ms. Wu, the factory worker, was a 13-year-old girl listening to the radio with her schoolmates when Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic on Oct. 1, 1949. She and the others cheered at the time, because it meant the long war between the Communists and the Kuomintang was finally over.

She soon got caught up in the fervour of those early days of the revolution, sporting a red scarf and leading a youth group as landlords were evicted from their plots. A decade later, she wound up on the other side of that political divide when her husband – a professor at Beijing University – was denounced as a “rightist” and sent to

the countryside for three years of re-education-through-labour.

“I was left to raise four children by myself,” Ms. Wu, 73, says matter-of-factly. More than three decades on, she won't let her full name be used, still trained to be worried that just telling her story could land her in trouble. “It's not good to publicize some things.”

The carefully orchestrated pageantry of this week will portray the Communist Party as having made this country of 1.3 billion into an economic and military superpower over the past 60 years. There's truth in that, but the story of the past six decades is also one of a strikingly resilient people who endured one of history's cruellest regimes for the first 30 years of Communist rule, then sprinted forward as soon as their shackles were loosened.

How China grew from a backwards country of 540 million people in 1949 to the rapidly modernizing, third-largest economy in the world is a story that – for all the recent success – pitted a paranoid and murderous regime against its own people for long periods. Much of that history was written on the shores of West Lake, the graceful heart of this little-known city. It was here that Mao worked on the constitution of his People's Republic and conjured up the purges of the Cultural Revolution. Former U.S. president

Richard Nixon visited West Lake during his breakthrough visit to China in 1972.

But it's a past that remains largely buried and unaddressed, forgotten by all sides in the name of letting the country carry on its current upward trajectory.

Ms. Wu's husband's name was eventually rehabilitated in 1978, but the damage was done. "He was affected physically. He was very healthy before," Ms. Wu says, her voice drifting off. Her husband never fully recovered, and he died a decade ago.

Like many Chinese, times got better for the family after Mao died and was succeeded by the diminutive Deng Xiaoping. Mr. Deng irrevocably changed the direction of the country by opening it to the outside world and embracing the market economy. The silk factory where Ms. Wu worked in this scenic coastal town got busier, and wages gradually rose. She retired with a pension, and she and her husband had enough money to put all four of their children through university.

"In the beginning, we were short of money and couldn't even send the children to kindergarten," she said, pride seeping into her voice as she neared the end of her tale. "Now they have several apartments each. Except for my son who moved to America."

When the Red Army arrived in Hangzhou in early 1949, it entered a war-battered and predominantly agricultural city of 1.2 mil-

lion people, situated around West Lake, a vast and placid body of water ringed by parklands and pagodas. In the new government's first five-year economic plan for the country – there have been 11 – it was decreed that Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province, should be a "Geneva of the East."

In a time of disastrous economic moves, the decision to spare Hangzhou the heavy industry that fouls the air of so many Chinese cities was a stroke of good fortune. Mao came to love the tranquillity of the place, and stayed here at the State Guesthouse on the shore of West Lake in 1953 as he went over his draft constitution for the People's Republic. In all, the chairman made more than 40 visits to the city, and Hangzhou is dotted with monuments to him.

But his affection for the place did not spare Hangzhou from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, which he launched shortly after another of his sojourns on the shore of West Lake in December, 1965, where he met with his second-in-command and drew up a list of those they wanted to see purged first in the violence they were about to unleash.

Zhejiang province was in an effective state of civil war for much of the 1960s and 1970s, with competing factions that both claimed to be acting in Mao's name slaughtering each other and destroying farms and

homes. Hangzhou's university campuses became centres of leftist extremism and Red Guard activity, and the scale of the purge of party ranks, combined with widespread labour unrest, led to a more dramatic economic collapse in Zhejiang than in other parts of the country.

It was a time of fear, disappearances and public executions. In all, Mao is blamed by some for more deaths than Stalin or Hitler. But at a 60th anniversary photo exhibit held this month in downtown Hangzhou, it is almost as if none of it ever happened.

Before-and-after photographs taken around the city emphasize how much it has changed and grown. Crumbling bridges and empty fields shown in black-and-white photographs from decades ago give way to multilane highways and forests of high-rise towers in the colour photos from 2009. Sometimes the gap is smaller, showing how entire developments have sprung from the ground in a matter of years, sometimes less. There's no hint of the famine and ruin of the Great Leap Forward, no evidence that the persecution and mass murder of the Cultural Revolution ever happened. Just 60 years of moving forward at breakneck speed.

"The policy of wiping out history has been successful," said Zhuang Daohe, a dissident lawyer and signatory of Charter 08, a pro-democracy manifesto that calls for, among

other things, a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation commission to address China's recent past. "This forgetting will have terrible results. It will make us weak to prevent the same things from happening again."

Shortly after the interview, Mr. Zhuang and a colleague who took part in the interview were contacted by local security agents and warned not to speak to foreign media until after the anniversary. In the days that followed, several others in Hangzhou who had agreed to be interviewed by The Globe and Mail suddenly cancelled their appointments.

For all its suffering, Hangzhou was one of the first places where China started to emerge from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. When Nixon visited the city, the document known as the Shanghai Communiqué – which for years formed the basis of the critical U.S.-China diplomatic relationship – was actually negotiated inside the same West Lake diplomatic compound where Mao wrote the constitution.

The city was among the first to benefit in the decades that followed from the "reform and opening" economic policies introduced by Deng Xiaoping. While retaining its laid-back feel and the idyllic scenery around West Lake, today's Hangzhou is a city of 6.4 million that has seen high-technology and auto parts industries grow alongside tradi-

tional specialties such as tea, silk and tourism.

Yang Liangen spent the 1970s trying to evade arrest as he moved through the countryside performing free magic shows and selling throat lozenges to the audience afterward. Such freelance performances, as well as the lozenges nicknamed Little Fuzzy Brains, have a nearly a century of history on Hangzhou street corners, with the shows often involving music, storytelling and funny anecdotes about the ruling classes of the day. They were banned during the Cultural Revolution, forcing entertainers like Mr. Yang underground. He kept on performing, but says he was arrested “tens” of times in that era.

But with the introduction of reform and opening in the 1980s, Mr. Yang suddenly found himself being sought out by the government in a very different way. Zhejiang province was one of the quickest to embrace the new economic openness, and thousands of businesses sprang up. The nearby city of Wenzhou was opened to overseas investment in 1984, a change that had dramatic effect on Hangzhou and the entire province.

Mr. Yang was contacted by the Hangzhou city government and asked to head up a new business that would manufacture and sell the same aniseed-flavoured lozenges that he had once sold by hand after his performances. There was very little money for

the venture, but a small factory producing Little Fuzzy Brains opened in 1990, with six employees.

“In the beginning, we couldn’t balance our costs, so we lost money,” Mr. Yang explained, shuffling papers around on a desk cluttered by two ashtrays, an abacus and an ancient Philips telephone. Even when he’s trying to look important, the 70-year-old grandfather seems more like the charming travelling magician he was than the busy chief executive officer he became.

Business took off in 1996 after Beijing launched a privatization campaign and Mr. Yang was allowed to go it alone without a state partner. His company now employs 12 people, and produces 9,000 boxes of Little Fuzzy Brains a year for sale across the country and occasionally for export.

“If there was no reform and opening, this business would be impossible. We’d still be selling underground, in a secret way,” Mr. Yang said.

With his children grown and successful – and affluent enough to send his grandchildren to expensive universities – Mr. Yang is an optimist about where China is now headed. But instead of celebrating on Oct. 1, he says he’ll be at his desk.

Like many in this country, where tens of millions are now lifting themselves out of poverty, it’s as if he’s still trying to make up for all the money he could have made had

his early years gone differently.

For all China's recent economic progress, this still nominally socialist state has only rudimentary public health care and just the barest of pension programs, forcing people like Mr. Yang to worry about money at a time when someone like him in the West might be retired and enjoying his success. "I'd like to take the day off, but there's no time. I need to make more money. I need to save for my retirement."

The bestselling novel *Brothers* begins during the Cultural Revolution when one of the two main characters is caught trying to catch a glimpse of women's bottoms inside the public latrine. In those puritanical times, the character, then a teenage boy, is marched through the town and he and his family are publicly shamed. By the end of the novel, set amid the anything-goes capitalism of today's China, the same character owns a gold-plated toilet seat and hosts a beauty contests for virgins.

The book was criticized in some circles for its vulgarity, but Yu Hua, the Hangzhou-born author of *Brothers*, says he used graphic and sexual scenes to both capture the wild changes China has gone through in the past six decades and to shock readers into contemplating subjects – such as recent history and today's political system – that are often not discussed. The tactic worked: The novel sold more than one million cop-

ies inside China ("Not including fakes," Mr. Yu added proudly), while many others downloaded the book over the Internet, or directly onto their mobile phones.

"Many of my readers were shocked. But after the shock, they realized that yes, life really is like this," the 49-year-old said, sipping an espresso in the lobby of a Beijing hotel.

Like his characters, Mr. Yu came of age during the Cultural Revolution. Later, while studying at Beijing University, he joined the student-led pro-democracy demonstrations on Tiananmen Square. Mr. Yu argues that the military crackdown on those demonstrations – ordered by Mr. Deng – was the most important moment in the past 60 years since it led to today's awkward hybrid of a relatively open market economy with a tightly controlled, one-party political system. It was only this year that Mr. Yu acknowledged publicly for the first time that he had taken part in the Tiananmen protests.

"Before 1989, China's economic and political reforms were both developing. The political reforms were not moving as fast as the economic ones, but they were happening. After 1989, political reform completely stopped," he said. "This caused the social polarization and wide corruption in our society."

As critical as he is of the China's political system, Mr. Yu acknowledges that the fact

that Brothers was published at all inside China is yet another sign of how far things have come since the madness of the Mao era.

“There’s a lot for China to be proud of. People are richer, we enjoy more freedom,” he conceded after some prodding. “For example, I’m talking to you right now, and I don’t think I will get in a lot of trouble afterward, maybe just a warning. But if we had this conversation 30 years ago, I would be arrested right away.”

Mr. Yu adds some more caveats. China’s breakneck economic growth of recent decades is unsustainable, he says, and the rapidly expanding gap between largely urban upper and middle classes and the predominantly rural poor will cause major problems. Like Mr. Zhuang, the dissident lawyer, he worries that the collective amnesia induced by the Communist Party about its past crimes will leave the door open for a slide back into extremism.

But there’s one point on which Mr. Yu and Mr. Zhuang agree with optimists such as Mr. Yang and Ms. Wu: The country is heading somewhere completely new that couldn’t have been predicted when Mao proclaimed the People’s Republic back in 1949.

Mr. Yu chuckled at the thought. “If Chairman Mao were alive today and he saw what China has changed to, I think he’d request that his portrait be taken down from Tiananmen Square.”

The Tiananmen dream: lost in one generation

Twenty years after China violently ended pro-democracy demonstrations, the protesters' mission appears to have faded. Students today have little desire to pursue their forebears' goals and have mixed views about whom to blame for the massacre

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BEIJING -- If Beijing University has a beating heart, it's a three-sided plaza in the centre of the graceful campus that students simply refer to as "the Triangle." The hub of China's most prestigious and politically active university, it has repeatedly served as a launching pad for the country's often volatile student movement.

In 1989, this serene, tree-lined spot was very nearly the nexus of a peaceful revolution until Deng Xiaoping ordered the army to crush the student-led protests that had paralyzed Beijing. Back then, the Triangle was awash in posters calling for democracy and an end to corruption inside the Communist Party. Students regularly gathered here to begin their marches to Tiananmen Square.

Twenty years after hundreds - some say thousands - of protesters, many of them Beijing University students, were massacred on Tiananmen Square, revolution is the

last thing on the mind of the students who still gather here. The political posters are gone, replaced by an Internet bulletin board that is carefully monitored by authorities. Students who gather in the Triangle are surrounded by job ads, movie posters and tables offering free samples of Acuvue contact lenses and Avon cosmetics.

Few of the Tiananmen-plus-20 generation seem bothered. The commercialized Triangle fits a generation that thinks of getting ahead in their careers first, and of changing a fossilized political system far later, if at all.

"In 1989, the focus was on political reforms. But nowadays, the students have more diversified demands, not only political ones. Because of the rapid development of the economy, many things are going on, and will go on, the right track and in an orderly way," said Ding Deliang, a 24-year-old international relations student who plans to join the government-run Xinhua news agency after he graduates this summer. "Some of the students' demands were met by the government. The government is doing things on democracy and freedom that it wasn't 20 years ago, so I think people have a sense of satisfaction."

Today's students are far better off and have far more to lose than their predecessors did in 1989. Then, isolation from the outside world and soaring inflation helped turn the students' demonstrations into a

nationwide protest, with workers across the country staging strikes to both support the students and put forward their own demands. But after two decades of rapid economic growth, many students are willing to give the government more time to pursue the country's current development path.

That's not to say that students at Beijing University, better known here as Beida, are entirely apolitical. In more than a dozen interviews conducted with students on and off campus, nearly all expressed some concern with the direction in which his country is heading, and most voiced a desire to have more freedoms, if not necessarily Western-style democracy.

But unlike in 1989, many today believe that the government, gradually, is taking the country in the right direction. Among the students interviewed, several who were most critical and outspoken of the government said they were joining the Communist Party and going into public service, hoping to help speed systemic change from within.

"Why are there not so many protests now? Because students today like to vent their patriotism in a different way," said Zou Jianye, a 24-year-old international relations student, sipping green tea at a campus cafeteria. "Going into the streets is not a good way, in the short term or the long term. Sometimes you have to reconcile your dreams and ambitions with reality. Bread

comes first."

In other words, the Communist Party's economic reforms have bought time and breathing space for its seemingly anachronistic system of one-party rule. Without ferment from below, the party's 60-year hold on power looks a good bet to continue for some time.

That victory for the government is difficult to swallow for those still grieving the events of June 4.

"It's pitiful, the materialism and practicality that has replaced idealism today. This is a real tragedy," said Ding Zilin, a former university professor whose 17-year-old son was killed in the protests that day. "But in my mind, we cannot blame the young people too much. The root of the problem is the Communist Party. They made it policy to mislead the people for 20 years."

A QUIET UNDERSTANDING

When a Globe reporter interviewed Beijing students on the 10th anniversary of the crackdown, he found outright denial about what had happened on June 4, 1989. "I do not believe students died in Tiananmen Square," a student said. "Some soldiers died, not students."

It was the effect of a complete ban that the government slapped on discussion of the events, one that exists to this day. The events of 1989 are never mentioned on state-controlled media, and those who try

and speak out about the crackdown usually find themselves in prison or under house arrest.

But the Internet has made it far easier for students to access information the government doesn't want them to have. Only two students interviewed professed any confusion about what happened that day, and even they understood the vague outlines and were aware that the government used force against students who were peacefully calling for change.

"I have seen video of this event. I know what happened," said Mr. Zou, who this summer will take up work at the government-run, English-language China Daily newspaper. "People are reluctant to talk about this event. But you can get materials about this on the Internet."

Mr. Zou and Mr. Ding were preschoolers when the shots rang out in Tiananmen Square. Soon after arriving at Beida, they heard whispers of the event in dorm-room conversations. Brave professors occasionally broke with doctrine to let their students know that something dramatic had happened to their forebears in 1989, gently nudging them toward researching the topic on their own. What they found - foreign press reports of the army turning its guns on students who were calling for more freedoms and an end to official corruption - startled them.

But 20 years of government propaganda efforts have also had their effect. Many Beida students are as critical of the pro-democracy demonstrators for creating the standoff as they are of the army and government for ending it so violently.

"I have questions in my mind. I don't believe what I saw on the Internet completely," said Wanghong Qixie, a 19-year-old entrant to Beida's urban environmental science program after graduating as one of the top students in the city of Urumqi in western China. "I was told that some of the students were quite irrational and impulsive. And I heard that some of the students [who took part in a 1989 hunger strike on Tiananmen Square] stopped eating during the daytime but were secretly eating at night."

But even if most students at Beida know about their university's dark history, many are still highly uncomfortable talking about it.

"You want to talk about that? First, let me check there are no police around," a 24-year-old international relations graduate says, springing to his feet and scanning the nearby tables in a Western-style on-campus café.

He sat back down, and for a moment shoved aside the thick textbook he had been studying as preparation for the GMAT entrance exam that he is taking in hopes of being accepted to a business school in the United States.

“We know what happened, though maybe not all the details,” he explained, lowering his voice and speaking in rapid-fire English. “For me, I want to know these things, so I find a way. I don’t know how many of us try, but there’s always a channel. But it’s always better to claim you know nothing about this.”

Many of the students agreed to speak only if their names were not used. The leaders of the Beijing University Student Union refused to be interviewed.

“Nobody wants to challenge the authorities,” said a 22-year finance and economics student who nervously observed a man - who seemed too old to be a student - lingering nearby in the Triangle as she spoke to a foreign reporter. “It’s a very risky thing to talk about this question.”

STILL SEEKING ANSWERS

Seventeen-year-old high school student Jiang Jielian was among the thousands gathered on Tiananmen Square on the night of June 3, 1989, when the tanks rolled in.

That evening, the state-run television station had broadcast a warning urging Beijingers not to leave their homes. Defying his mother - a strait-laced philosophy professor at Renmin University and a card-carrying member of the Communist Party who was urging him not to go to Tiananmen - Mr. Jiang locked himself in the family bathroom and climbed out the window to go join his friends on the square.

Outside, he met up with a classmate and they bicycled together toward the city centre. When they arrived around 11 p.m., a tense standoff was already under way between the protesters and the army. Eventually, the troops were ordered to open fire.

When a bullet struck Mr. Jiang in the back, he initially told his worried friends that he thought he had been hit by a rubber-coated round. None of them believed the soldiers would use live ammunition to break up a peaceful demonstration. He was one of the first to die in the crackdown, just after 1 a.m. on June 4.

“My son didn’t want to be a hero. He was just a participant. He wasn’t doing it for himself, but he was totally devoted to it,” his mother, Ding Zilin, said. “His was an idealistic generation.”

At first, Ms. Ding kept silent about what had happened, even as she frequently contemplated suicide. It wasn’t until 1991 - after then-premier Li Peng told a press conference that the government wouldn’t publish a list of those who had died on June 4, 1989, because the parents of the dead didn’t want the names released - that she decided to speak out. She couldn’t tolerate the suggestion that she was somehow ashamed of her dead son, whose portrait hangs in the living room above an urn containing his cremated remains.

Ms. Ding began meeting with other parents

of those who had been killed on Tiananmen Square. The Tiananmen Mothers, as the group became known, defied government surveillance and pressure to painstakingly gather the names of 195 students who died that day. Ms. Ding, now 72 and still leading a campaign to get the government to reveal the full truth, believes the real number is higher but that it won't be known as long as people are scared to talk about it.

Twenty years on, Ms. Ding is well aware that the cause her son died for is almost dead itself. She says today's students are more materialistic and practical than her son's generation, something she blames on a successful government "brainwashing" campaign that has kept discussion of Tiananmen Square out of the media and the classrooms.

"It's a cruel reality that today's young people don't know the truth. They say what happened 1989 wasn't necessary, and the people who were involved in the movement died for nothing. Today's students would never have given their lives. They think [their] life is most precious," she said bitterly in an interview at her apartment, where she still lives under constant watch.

She acknowledges that improving economic conditions have played a role in dulling students' desire for change, and says parents - who remember all too well what happened on Tiananmen - have also contributed to raising a generation that is almost completely

uninterested in how their country is run, or why.

"Parents don't want to see their children get hurt, so they try to keep their children far away from politics, because Chinese politics are so terrible. There are no guarantees about your life if you get involved."

Ms. Ding's allegations that today's Chinese students aren't fully informed - or allowed to speak their minds if they are - are backed by a high-profile vote conducted by students in Hong Kong, a special autonomous region of China where free media is allowed and dissent is largely tolerated. After an awareness-raising campaign on campus in April, students at the University of Hong Kong voted 93 per cent in favour of a motion to condemn what happened on June 4, 1989, and to call on Beijing to apologize for killing pro-democracy demonstrators.

"The more important matter is to really learn about what actually happened and not just listen to what others say and not just blindly believe in one set of media," Jenny Ngai, the Student Union's acting external affairs secretary, told reporters. "In order to move your country forward, you have to learn about history."

Wang Dan, a first-year history student who emerged as one of the leaders of the protest movement back in 1989, is now 40 years old and still trying to raise awareness of what happened that day. He recently issued a call

for all Chinese to wear white, a traditional colour of mourning, next week on the 20th anniversary, a call that few ordinary Chinese will hear because of a state media ban on discussing either Tiananmen Square or dissidents such as Mr. Wang.

Nonetheless, Mr. Wang, who was at the top of the Chinese government's most-wanted list after June 4, 1989, believes the pro-democracy camp can find hope in the changing attitudes of students and the fact the Chinese government can no longer completely hide what happened.

"More and more young generation [have] started to look for the truth," he said in an e-mail interview from Taiwan. "[Right now] there is no room for Chinese people to talk about politics. I believe once the political situation changes, the passion for politics will re-appear."

China's campuses are still indeed known to erupt from time to time. Twice in the past month, university students in major provincial centres have marched off campuses and blocked roads to show displeasure with local authorities. Photographs posted online of a large demonstration at Nanjing University showed students carrying banners written in Chinese and English, including one that read "Non-violent and Non-cooperation."

With some 6.1 million new graduates about to enter a suddenly bleak job market,

joining more than a million from the class of 2008 who have yet to find work, the government is openly concerned that the days of Chinese student unrest are not over. "If you are worried," Premier Wen Jiabao told a student audience late last year, "then I am more worried than you."

But those Chinese students who know their history appear to have taken a dual lesson from the events of 20 years ago. They're horrified at what the government and army did, but they also assign plenty of blame to Mr. Wang and the protesters for pushing things too far, too fast.

The sense you get on Beijing University's campus is that the next student revolution, if and when it comes, will likely be a far slower-moving and more cautious affair than the students of 1989 had the patience for.

"I agree with these ideas, with freedom and equality. But still I think that what the government is doing might be good for this moment. We need to change things gradually," explained the 24-year-old cramming for his GMAT. "These things that happened 20 years ago are never going to happen again."

Then he furrowed his smooth forehead and stared back into his textbooks. "Actually, I don't know that. I really don't know."

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DEATH TOLL

No one knows for sure how many died.

The Chinese Red Cross said 2,600, but retracted that under intense government pressure. The official Chinese figure is 241 dead, 7,000 injured, including soldiers.

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POLITICAL UNREST

April 17: Thousands of students gather in Tiananmen Square to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang - a symbol of anti-corruption.

April 27: The Chinese navy joins the call for reform - 10% of Beijingers are now protesting.

May 15: Mikhail Gorbachev arrives in Beijing on a state visit. Protesting students block his escort on nearly every street.

May 16: 3,000 people are on hunger strike in the square. Chinese Premier Li Peng insists the government cannot capitulate.

May 19: Rumours of martial law circulate. Hunger strike called off and mass sit-in of square begins, drawing 1.2 million supporters. Premier declares martial law.

May 20: People's Liberation Army (PLA) convoys are sent into Beijing but are blocked by protesters.

May 24: Troops leave the city unable to get to Tiananmen Square, humiliating the government.

May 30: Students erect Goddess of Democracy statue.

June 2: Party elders approve the use of military might to quash the demonstration.

THE ASSAULT

300,000 troops enter the city from all four corners. Beijingers take to the streets to block their advance.

10:30 p.m.: Fighting breaks out when soldiers try to smash through protesters' barricades outside the Muxidi apartment buildings (where high-level party officials live). With stones being thrown by protesters, the army opens fire with AK-47s loaded with battlefield ammunition. An untold number are killed.

1 a.m.: The army finally reaches Tiananmen Square and awaits orders. It has been told to clear the square by 6 a.m.

4 a.m.: Student leaders organize a retreat. Some people, thought to be parents of protesters, try to enter the square later in the morning. When they don't leave as ordered, soldiers open fire. This happens repeatedly throughout the day until people stop coming.

"TANK MAN"

The day after the massacre, a young man carrying shopping bags steps out in front of a column of tanks driving along Chang'an Avenue. Instead of running him over, the tanks try to avoid him. Undeterred, the man climbs onto a tank's roof and argues with the driver before being pulled away by on-lookers and disappearing.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Government keeps lid on information

After suppressing information about the Tiananmen Square democracy protests and subsequent massacres for 20 years, there has not been a need to impose dramatic new restrictions to stifle remembrances in the lead-up to the anniversary.

Online references to what happened in the spring of 1989 have long been blocked, but savvy Chinese Internet users find ways around them. China has also launched a four-month crackdown on unapproved Internet cafés, lasting from June 1 to Sept. 30.

Government pressure on activist lawyers appears to be increasing this year, Chinese Human Rights Defenders stated, with some prominent human-rights defenders having trouble renewing their licences to practise.

Chinese customs are also expected to step up checks and seize copies of the recently published memoirs of the Communist Party chief who was ousted for sympathetic views toward the student protesters.

The anniversary won't pass without commemoration on Chinese territory, however, as events are planned in the specially governed areas of Hong Kong and Macau. They are forbidden, however, on mainland China.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL PRESENTS:
THE CHINA DIARIES



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