

# PROLOGUE

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

In the village of Xiajia (population 1,564) there was a fever for the American cop show *Hunter*, better known in China as *Expert Detective Heng Te*. When the show appeared on Chinese television in 1990, the villagers of Xiajia started to gather to watch Det. Sgt. Rick Hunter of the Los Angeles Police Department go undercover with his partner, Det. Sgt. Dee Dee McCall. And the villagers of Xiajia came to expect that Det. Sgt. Rick Hunter would always find at least two occasions to utter his trademark phrase, “Works for me”—though, in Chinese, he came across as a religious man, because “Works for me” was mistranslated as “Whatever God wants.” The fever passed from one person to the next, and it affected each in a different way. Some months later, when the police in Xiajia tried to search the home of a local farmer, the man told them to come back when they had a warrant—a word he had learned from *Expert Detective Heng Te*.

When I moved to China in 2005, I was accustomed to hearing the story of China’s metamorphosis told in vast, sweeping strokes involving one-sixth of humanity and great pivots of politics and economics. But, up close, the deepest changes were intimate and perceptual, buried in daily rhythms in ways that were easy to overlook. The greatest fever of all

was aspiration, a belief in the sheer possibility to remake a life. Some who tried succeeded; many others did not. More remarkable was that they defied a history that told them never to try. Lu Xun, China's most celebrated modern author, once wrote, "Hope is like a path in the countryside: originally there was no path, but once people begin to pass, a way appears."

I lived in China for eight years, and I watched this age of ambition take shape. Above all, it is a time of plenty—the crest of a transformation one hundred times the scale, and ten times the speed, of the first Industrial Revolution, which created modern Britain. The Chinese people no longer want for food—the average citizen eats six times as much meat as in 1976—but this is a ravenous era of a different kind, a period when people have awoken with a hunger for new sensations, ideas, and respect. China is the world's largest consumer of energy, movies, beer, and platinum; it is building more high-speed railroads and airports than the rest of the world combined.

For some of its citizens, China's boom has created stupendous fortune: China is the world's fastest-growing source of new billionaires. Several of the new plutocrats have been among the world's most dedicated thieves; others have been holders of high public office. Some have been both. For most of the Chinese people, however, the boom has not produced vast wealth; it has permitted the first halting steps out of poverty. The rewards created by China's rise have been wildly inconsistent but fundamentally profound: it is one of the broadest gains in human well-being in the modern age. In 1978, the average Chinese income was \$200; by 2014, it was \$6,000. By almost every measure, the Chinese people have achieved longer, healthier, more educated lives.

Living in Beijing in these moments, I found that confidence in one's ideas, especially about China's future, seems to vary inversely with the time one spends on the ground. The complexities blunt the impulse to impose a simple logic on them. To find order in the changes, we seek refuge, of a kind, in statistics: in my years in China, the number of airline passengers doubled; cell phone sales tripled; the length of the Beijing subway quadrupled. But I was less impressed by those numbers than by a drama that I could not quantify: two generations ago, visitors to China marveled most at the sameness of it all. To outsiders, Chairman Mao was the "Emperor of the Blue Ants," as one memorable book title had

it—a secular god in a land of matching cotton suits and “production teams.” Stereotypes about the Chinese as collectivist, inscrutable drones endured in part because China’s politics helped sustain them; official China reminded its guests that it was a nation of work units and communes and uncountable sacrifice.

But in the China that I encountered, the national narrative, once an ensemble performance, is splintering into a billion stories—stories of flesh and blood, of idiosyncrasies and solitary struggles. It is a time when the ties between the world’s two most powerful countries, China and the United States, can be tested by the aspirations of a lone peasant lawyer who chose the day and the hour in which to alter his fate. It is the age of the changeling, when the daughter of a farmer can propel herself from the assembly line to the boardroom so fast that she never has time to shed the manners and anxieties of the village. It is a moment when the individual became a gale force in political, economic, and private life, so central to the self-image of a rising generation that a coal miner’s son can grow up to believe that nothing matters more to him than seeing his name on the cover of a book.

Viewed one way, the greatest beneficiary of the age of ambition is the Chinese Communist Party. In 2011 the Party celebrated its ninetieth birthday—a milestone unimaginable at the end of the Cold War. In the years after the Soviet Union collapsed, Chinese leaders studied that history and vowed never to suffer the same fate. When Arab dictatorships fell in 2011, China’s endured. To survive, the Chinese Communist Party shed its scripture but held fast to its saints; it abandoned Marx’s theories but retained Mao’s portrait on the Gate of Heavenly Peace, peering down on Tiananmen Square.

The Party no longer promises equality or an end to toil. It promises only prosperity, pride, and strength. And for a while, that was enough. But over time the people have come to want more, and perhaps nothing more ardently than information. New technology has stirred a fugitive political culture; things once secret are now known; people once alone are now connected. And the more the Party has tried to prevent its people from receiving unfiltered ideas, the more they have stepped forward to demand them.

China today is riven by contradictions. It is the world’s largest buyer of Louis Vuitton, second only to the United States in its purchases of

Rolls-Royces and Lamborghinis, yet ruled by a Marxist-Leninist party that seeks to ban the word *luxury* from billboards. The difference in life expectancy and income between China's wealthiest cities and its poorest provinces is the difference between New York and Ghana. China has two of the world's most valuable Internet companies, and more people online than the United States, even as it redoubles its investment in history's largest effort to censor human expression. China has never been more pluralistic, urban, and prosperous, yet it is the only country in the world with a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in prison.

Sometimes China is compared to the Japan of the 1980s, when a hundred square feet in downtown Tokyo sold for a million dollars, and tycoons were sipping cocktails over ice cubes shipped from Antarctica. By 1991, Japan was in the largest deflation of assets in the modern history of capitalism. But the similarities run thin; when Japan's bubble burst, it was a mature, developed economy; but China, even overheated, remains a poor country in which the average person earns as much as a Japanese citizen in 1970. At other moments, China's goose-stepping soldiers, its defectors and its dissidents, recall the Soviet Union or even Nazi Germany. But those comparisons are unsatisfying. Chinese leaders do not threaten to "bury" America, the way Khrushchev did, and even China's fiercest nationalists do not seek imperial conquest or ethnic cleansing.

China reminds me most of America at its own moment of transformation—the period that Mark Twain and Charles Warner named the Gilded Age, when "every man has his dream, his pet scheme." The United States emerged from the Civil War on its way to making more steel than Britain, Germany, and France combined. In 1850, America had fewer than twenty millionaires; by 1900 it had forty thousand, some as bumptious and proud as James Gordon Bennett, who bought a restaurant in Monte Carlo after he was refused a seat by the window. As in China, the dawn of American fortune was accompanied by spectacular treachery. "Our method of doing business," said the railway man Charles Francis Adams, Jr., a grandson and great-grandson of presidents, "is founded upon lying, cheating and stealing." Eventually, F. Scott Fitzgerald gave us the slippery tale of James Gatz of North Dakota, who catapulted himself into a new world, in doomed pursuit of love and fortune. When I stood in the light of a new Chinese skyline, I sometimes thought of Gatsby's New York—"always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world."

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In the early years of the twenty-first century, China encompasses two universes: the world's newest superpower and the world's largest authoritarian state. Some days, I spent the morning with a new tycoon and the evening with a dissident under house arrest. It was easy to see them as representing the new China and the old, distinct realms of economics and politics. But eventually I concluded that they were one and the same, and the contrast was an unstable state of nature.

This book is an account of the collision of two forces: aspiration and authoritarianism. Forty years ago the Chinese people had virtually no access to fortune, truth, or faith—three things denied them by politics and poverty. They had no chance to build a business or indulge their desires, no power to challenge propaganda and censorship, no way to find moral inspiration outside the Party. Within a generation, they had gained access to all three—and they want more. The Chinese people have taken control of freedoms that used to be governed almost entirely by others—decisions about where they work and travel and whom they marry. But as those liberties have expanded, the Communist Party has taken only halting steps to accommodate them. The Communist Party's commitment to control—to ordain not only who leads the country but also how many teeth a train attendant shows when she smiles—contradicts the riot of life outside. The longer I lived in China, the more I sensed that the Chinese people have outpaced the political system that nurtured their rise. The Party has unleashed the greatest expansion of human potential in world history—and spawned, perhaps, the greatest threat to its own survival.

This is a work of nonfiction, based on eight years of conversations. In my research, I gravitated most of all to the strivers—the men and women who were trying to elbow their way from one realm to another, not just in economic terms, but in matters of politics, ideas, and the spirit. I came to know many of them when I was writing stories in the *Chicago Tribune* and, later, *The New Yorker*. I followed them as their lives evolved and veered in and out of my own. For an American writing abroad, it is tempting to envy China's strengths where America feels weak, and to judge the country harshly where it grates against my values. But I have tried, above all, to describe Chinese lives on their own terms.

I have used real names, except in several cases that I have noted, in

which I obscured an identity because of political sensitivities. All the dialogue is based on the accounts of one or more people present. Part I begins at the earliest moments of the boom; I introduce several men and women who were swept up in China's rise from poverty, and describe the risks they took and the ideas that animated them. The more that people succeeded in their economic lives, the more they demanded to know about the world around them, and in part II, I describe the rebellion against propaganda and censorship. In the final part, those pursuits converge in the search for a new moral foundation, as men and women on the bottom rung of the middle class set out in search of what to believe.

The story of China in the twenty-first century is often told as a contest between East and West, between state capitalism and the free market. But in the foreground there is a more immediate competition: the struggle to define the idea of China. Understanding China requires not only measuring the light and heat thrown off by its incandescent new power, but also examining the source of its energy—the men and women at the center of China's becoming.