

Strangers at Home

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The people that the Chinese are often most worried about are other Chinese.

Chinese living and working abroad have played an enormous role in the country's economic boom. For years, they have sent money back and offered hope to those at home during periods of calamity and chaos.

Yet holding a foreign passport doesn't make these expatriates any less Chinese. Of all people, they are expected to be most attuned to the complex realities of life in China. When they fall short, they are treated with official suspicion and individual disdain.

When I first studied in Beijing in 1974 I had a Canadian classmate who was classified as a "Patriotic Overseas Chinese." The status afforded her special access to people and her ethnicity meant that otherwise distant Chinese students embraced her. She always made the point that her background gave her insights into China and its revolution, things beyond the ken of Caucasians like me.

"You simply don't understand China's unique national conditions." This common refrain is still chimed with certainty, and stridency, by average citizens, just as leaders of the party-state employ it when addressing foreigners. Unless you appreciate, and accept unequivocally, China's "unique national conditions" you betray yourself as lacking insight into and empathy with the mysteries of that country's tortured history and complex present realities.

This kind of talk allows for a kind of "Chinese exceptionalism." People employ it whether they are rejecting well-intentioned observations on social mores or staring down the incredulity of outsiders confronted by egregious political and mercantile behavior. Not only can the criticism of outsiders be deflected in this fashion, even those with intimate ties to the country are frequently derided for failing to appreciate China's conditions. Sometimes, individuals are taught a lesson about the country's peculiarities by means of a long stint in jail.

In the past few months there have been two cases of Chinese insiders who have been tried and jailed in murky circumstances. The Australian businessman Stern Hu was sentenced in March accused of taking bribes, and earlier this month the U.S. citizen and geologist Xue Feng, reportedly tortured during a long pre-trial ordeal, was jailed for eight years on charges of espionage. Both men were involved in the resources industry and there is speculation that the severity of their sentences reflects the sensitivities of the Chinese in all matters related to resource security. However, it was presumed that both Messrs. Hu and Xue might have been treated more leniently because they are foreign nationals who were offered open consular support by their adoptive countries.

Both men are members of China's new-era globalized citizens. They are post-modern overseas Chinese. That is, like many previous generations of Chinese, for reasons of family, fate or personal fortune they sought a life outside the country of their birth. However, due to the economic boom of recent years and the extraordinary opportunities it has offered, they choose to work for foreign companies back in China.

Historically, overseas Chinese have been men and women who although identifying as Chinese, or only even partially Chinese, elect to reside primarily overseas. In recent years, however, the category of sojourning Chinese has broadened to incorporate those former citizens of the People's Republic who went overseas in search of a better education, jobs and lifestyle. Presuming that their foreign passports and international connections provide them with a measure of protection, they shuttle freely between China and global commercial centers, partaking in the migratory existence of the international business elite. They can maintain a pride in China while enjoying the benefits of being foreign citizens.

A diaspora of overseas Chinese developed during the 19th century as the Qing Empire went into economic and social decline. Since then generations of Chinese have contributed to societies and cultures all over the world. They became important members of communities throughout Southeast Asia, North America, Australia and the Pacific long before modern China found a role for them.

Families and communities might benefit from those connections, but in a world in which local clan ties and narrow loyalties were paramount, the sojourners

were frequently derided for being “pseudo-foreign Devils,” tainted by the untoward manners and ideas of foreign climes.

During China’s reform era starting in 1978, and in particular in the past two decades, countless overseas Chinese have been playing a crucial role in China’s economic reform. They have also contributed in a myriad of ways to the integration of their homeland in the global economy. To be Chinese by birth, or even to enjoy Chinese ancestry, there is an all-too-often stated expectation that you understand the overt rules as well as the unspoken codes of your native land. Intuitively you are supposed to understand and be vigilant about China’s particular situation and conditions.

When things go well and there are opportunities to be grasped, the overseas Chinese, with their inside-track appreciation of the distinctive modus operandi in the People’s Republic ride high. When the complex nexus of national interest, party-family ties, local power brokers and influence peddlers is antagonized, however, these intuitive insiders, the commercial compradors with local knowledge, are particularly vulnerable. The protective sheath of foreign citizenship proves to be little more than a gossamer.

Some Chinese were studying overseas during the heady months of the mass protest movement of 1989, and large numbers decided to keep away following the brutal repression of June 4. It seemed as though the economic and social changes allowed by the Communist Party until then would be stalled. Eventually, the economic reforms continued and transformed the country in unexpected ways, but the lessons of 1989 were not lost on China’s leaders. They instituted a vast educational and media campaign to instruct young and old alike in China’s unique realities.

Those conditions, hard to define at the best of times, includes an official menu of factoids and attitudes: China has an unbroken recorded history of 5,000 years; it is a multi-ethnic nation incorporating peoples as varied as the Han, Tibetans, Uighurs and Dai; historical necessity and contemporary realities determine that only the unified leadership of the Chinese Communist Party can maintain stability and pursue China’s unique path to modernity ensuring economic prosperity for all. It also includes such nebulous claims that there is a particular “Chinese” way of doing things, that Chinese people have a unique purchase on the world of the spirit, and that although China is a global culture only Chinese can really understand it.

Saturating textbooks, films, TV programs and the news media, awareness has become part of the fabric of contemporary Chinese life and thought. The success of the two-decade-long campaign is evident, for example, in the patriotic demagoguery of the Chinese Internet, as well as in everyday nationalistic fervor. Chinese living overseas as well as foreign Chinese working in China are equally expected to get with the program.

Nonetheless, overseas Chinese will remain profoundly enmeshed in the story of China in the 21st century. The fate of individuals like Stern Hu and Xue Feng elicit comment and concern, but on a far greater scale new populations in Africa and Latin America, as well as throughout the Pacific and in towns and cities in Europe and Russia, will provide other dimensions to the global Chinese presence. In turn complex new dynamics are developing, not only for foreign communities, but for China itself.

It is here that the Chinese party-state's treatment of individual figures like Messrs. Hu and Xue is instructive. Following the detention of each of these individuals their cases remained shrouded in secrecy, their treatment at times arbitrary and cruel. Falling victim to Chinese-style due process their families, as well as the diplomatic representatives of their new countries, were aghast and dismayed. If the Chinese authorities were using the jailing and sentencing of these two men to offer a cautionary tale, the lessons they broadcast not only to the world, but to the broader overseas Chinese community, are profoundly disturbing.

While many commentators have remarked on the revived and invented traditions popular in China today, it was in the early years of the Republic of China in the 1910s and '20s that the modern transposition of traditional ethical and moral categories began. Along with more benign values such as "humanness" and "rightness," the concept of "loyalty" was instilled with a new meaning. Fealty to the ruling monarch was replaced with loyalty to the state and the nation.

Lao Chen, the protagonist in the controversial 2009 novel "In an Age of Prosperity: China 2013" by Chan Koon-chung (also known as "The Gilded Age" in English), is a Hong Kong resident of Beijing. He lives in a near-future utopia. The year is 2013 and China is the dominant economic power in the world, the society is stable and its citizens enjoy boundless consumer wealth. Harmony, the one-word slogan promoted by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, reigns supreme. So what if

the ever-vigilant and paternalistic government exacts a heavy price for social order and individual quiescence?

But Lao Chen senses something is wrong. He knows people are happy enough with “90% freedom,” but he wonders what is really missing. There is an inexplicable gap in everyone’s memories, a lost month, and vagueness surrounds it. It is as though the society itself has been anaesthetized. Smug satisfaction disguises an unmistakable putrescence. Whenever he voices his unease, Lao Chen comes up against a brick wall. People tell him that, despite his long years in Beijing, he still doesn’t understand China’s realities.

Surely the situation cannot continue in this political stasis for long? Political reform, a government more open to oversight and criticism, a free media and independent judiciary—perhaps these are all part of the next stage in the Chinese story? But such hopes fly in the face of China’s “unique national conditions.” Late in the novel a 40-page justification for the repressive harmony of China today is offered by a fictional Politburo member, He Dongsheng. To quote Linda Jaivin’s translation of a passage from He’s speech:

“Let’s just keep the situation as is; after another 20 years of stable development we can reopen the discussion about reform. For the moment, at most, we could try to reform a few things here and there, as part of a gradual move towards benevolent government... Political reform? Is it that simple? In the end, you’ll emerge from the transition, not with the commonwealth you desire, not the European style of social democracy or the American style of a free, democratic constitutional government, but rather a Chinese-style fascist dictatorship that’s a compendium of nationalism, cultural traditionalism, patriotism and national racial purity.”

The book’s author, Mr. Chan, is a publisher from Hong Kong who has been living in Beijing since the 1990s. He has knowingly created a fictional account of Chinese reality. In discussing his work Mr. Chan has observed that dealing with China today demands a talent similar to that of the famous Tang-dynasty singer Jiang Shu. She was an artist who could sing two songs at once: one in the back of her throat and the other through her nose. “Two-song Jiang Shu” lived over a millennium ago, but today her talent enmeshes Chinese people, regardless of what passport they happen to hold.

The Chinese authorities claim a monopoly right to define and interpret the nation's unique conditions. In reality, social change, evolving attitudes and widespread aspirations continue to challenge the status quo. Mao Zedong honed his revolutionary instincts on Chinese soil rather than studying overseas, yet it was his foreign-education colleagues who were directly responsible for the opening up and reform of China that is changing the world.