

Interview with WSWs correspondent

# Changing political attitudes in twenty-first century China

## Part Two

8 December 2004

*The following is the conclusion of a two-part interview with World Socialist Web Site correspondent John Chan who recently visited China for the first time in several years. Part One was published on December 7. Chan was born and raised in the southern province of Guangdong. In the course of his recent trip, he visited the provincial capital of Guangzhou as well as several towns and villages.*

**WSWS:** Is there much political discussion in China?

**JC:** There is private discussion, mainly about official corruption and social issues. People talk fairly openly among their own circle of friends.

**WSWS:** To what extent did you sense what could be called a socialist sentiment?

**JC:** There is a confused form of egalitarianism. Many people have illusions about the West. They think that the welfare systems in the US and other Western countries are a means for achieving equality. They simply wouldn't believe me when I told them about the extent of poverty there. Many think it has to be better than in China, because at least there are unemployment benefits and free health care.

Sections of official academia and the overseas "democracy movement" have long exploited the illusion that the goals of "market reform" are social concessions and welfare. Some even argue that the ruling party will turn into a European-style social democratic party through "political reform".

**WSWS:** What do people think about the Communist Party?

**JC:** There is real cynicism about it, even from those who have joined the party. Most people today, especially younger officials, say their decision to join the party had nothing to do with any ideological faith. They joined to get a job in the public sector, administration or management. Some of them told me they felt disgusted at having to join because they had no faith at all in the party's ideology. No one really believes that the Communist Party has anything to do with communism, even those who have been members for decades.

Workers in state-owned enterprises are generally hostile to the regime. Since the restructuring of the 1990s, they have been in a state of constant fear that they will be laid off tomorrow. Such work is no longer considered the comfortable or secure job that it once was. Previously these workers had public housing, pensions, healthcare and free education.

I talked with one couple—both had jobs in state-owned enterprises. They said they were lucky because they were among the last people in public housing. Even now they have to pay for a portion of it. The husband told me he was hostile to the Communist Party. When I asked why, he said that the party lied to the people. He was disgusted by the propaganda in the state-controlled media. The Chinese leaders think that everyone is stupid, he said, but actually they are not. Workers like this have had many experiences with the regime.

**WSWS:** Did you speak to anyone who was a party member?

**JC:** One person I know was an official who had been in the Communist Party for 20 years. He is working at a financial institution and had been in the army. He knew quite a lot about the government and the social issues facing farmers and workers. He pointed out that the so-called living allowance provided by the Chinese government to laid-off workers is only enough to buy a bag of rice. It is just enough to prevent workers dying from hunger. But he had illusions that the welfare systems of the West were better.

His stories about what it was like inside the bureaucracy were interesting. One day he told me that he was very happy because he had managed to complete his balance sheet and had not offended anyone. When I asked him to explain, he pointed out that a bank's balance sheet was a very tricky thing when corruption was all-pervasive. He had to manipulate the account figures to cover up the corrupt practices and wastefulness of other officials. This is just the norm.

A large number of officials are engaged in a demoralised, parasitic lifestyle. Drinking and dining waste billions from the government budget every year, while having sex with prostitutes has become a must-do for officials and businessmen. I heard a story about a police chief who used his staff to look after his interests in disputes with other officials. This is not unusual; they operate like the mafia.

**WSWS:** Whom did your friend blame?

**JC:** He blamed Deng Xiaoping for the rampant corruption. I asked him about this year's celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Deng's birthday. Deng is now praised as "the general architect" of market reform, he said, but it started with Mao. It was Mao who worked hard to establish the rapprochement with the US and the West, which then laid the international foundations for Deng's policy. He insisted there was no fundamental difference between Mao and "capitalist roaders" because some forms of deregulation were already being carried out in the early 1970s under Mao.

**WSWS:** This discussion wasn't in a public place?

**JC:** No, it was at his home. People are still looking over their shoulders. Although they might have close connections with the government, they have to be careful about what they say. Obviously they can't go to the root of the problem. Even the more critical Chinese intellectuals only regard the working class and the oppressed as impoverished subjects—to be saved by those on high, perhaps by a few enlightened rulers who would establish a democracy.

**WSWS:** Did you visit Internet cafes?

**JC:** Yes, quite a lot. I thought that I would have to provide a lot of personal details, but that is not the case. There are Internet police, and rules and regulations, and they do pick up people from time to time. But

that is really for show and is not all that effective in containing or controlling Internet use. Such a thing is impossible anyway, because there are so many people on the Internet. Many families have their own connection. A significant number of people have a broadband connection, and several often share a connection in the same building.

Many young people use the Internet cafes and it is fairly cheap—two or three yuan an hour. They are always crowded. The regulations state that you must be over 18 years and provide your ID to the supervisor, but in practice nobody really pays much attention to this. While you are provided with a number, I'm sure it's very difficult to find out who has done what on the Internet.

**WSWS:** What were your impressions of the television, radio and press coverage available?

**JC:** In Guangzhou and neighbouring areas, there are some 50 television channels. This includes television from Hong Kong. But the government controls the public cable network, which you need if you want to access the wide range of programs. For example, if Hong Kong television reports something that is unfavourable to Beijing, it is blocked and replaced with songs. So people know that as soon as the songs come on, the state censor is at work.

**WSWS:** What is the news coverage like?

**JC:** The more critical commentary is generally in the newspapers rather than on television. Some newspapers are faintly liberal, criticizing, at times, certain social conditions—like mine disasters or hospital conditions and other tragedies. The younger generation of journalists is not reluctant to expose social evils, but they are often disciplined by the regime. Nevertheless, it is increasingly difficult to restrict access to news and political ideas when social and economic life have become so integrated with modern technology and the rest of the world.

**WSWS:** Is nationalism very prominent?

**JC:** Yes it is very prominent. Chinese nationalism is on display everywhere. You see many propaganda signs in the streets. There are signs in large Chinese characters in residential areas exhorting people to support the army. But young people and workers are quite hostile to this type of propaganda, which they identify with the bureaucracy.

**WSWS:** Are people well-informed about world events?

**JC:** It depends on which social layer. Generally, among young people, there are great illusions in the material culture of the West and the social reforms of the post-war period. However, there are few illusions about the US invasion of Iraq. Most people are critical of the Iraq war and know what the US is doing. Everyone thinks the war is about oil and power and the invasion of a poor country.

The deployment of two US aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait in 1996, the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the collision between the US spy plane and a Chinese jet in 2000 all had an impact on the attitude of people to the US. Some of my former schoolmates were involved in the protests outside the US embassy in 1999.

**WSWS:** Is an anti-US attitude encouraged in the state-owned television?

**JC:** The Chinese government did attempt to exploit the spontaneous anger over these incidents to promote nationalism. However, it would be wrong to think that the government has the upper hand in controlling public opinion. Often nationalist sentiments are bound up with social grievances, which are generated by the regime's open door policy to international capital. The devastating impact of protectionist sanctions by the US against Chinese exports has produced resentment among workers and farmers as well.

I had a very interesting conversation with a woman farmer who was angry at the Bush administration's decision to ban the export of Chinese prawns. Local companies used to collect her prawns for processing and export them to the US. Now they have cut their buying price and she has

been plunged into a state of poverty. She then began to express her hostility to the US over the war in Iraq. It is something of change for a Chinese peasant woman to be talking about world affairs.

**WSWS:** Does the issue of socialism or Trotskyism come up in discussion?

**JC:** It is obvious that most people have not heard of Leon Trotsky. Socialism is generally identified with Stalinism. Because of the hostility to the regime, it is difficult to have a serious discussion on socialism with most people.

**WSWS:** Are Trotsky's books on sale?

**JC:** No, not in ordinary bookshops. But you can find them in official state-owned bookshops, such as Xinhua. There are a few books on Trotskyism, and some of them are quite significant. There is the publication of a series of writings by former Chinese Trotskyists such as Wan Fanxi and Zhen Chaoling.

Zhen was jailed by Mao in the 1950s and only released in the late 1970s. Wan Fanxi was in the leadership of the Chinese Trotskyist movement before he split with its leader Peng Shuzi in the 1940s. He died in England a few years ago. I haven't read the books carefully yet. But the introduction to the series states that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, these authors' writings may help in understanding those who argued that Stalinism was not genuine scientific communism or socialism. Wan is regarded as a Trotskyist who never wavered in his conceptions, right up to his death.

**WSWS:** Can anyone buy these books?

**JC:** It is not clear. In front of these books there is a sign stating that they are internal publications, available only for cadre involved in research. I assume that you have to prove that you are an academic to purchase them.

Most people in China would never have heard of the Chinese Trotskyists. But the publication of these books indicates, at the very least, that there is concern within the regime about the impact of Trotskyism. After all, their political legitimacy is still based on the false claim to represent socialism or communism.

Another book I saw there was about the collaboration of the Communist Party and the Kuomintang in the 1920s. This history has also become a topic of academic interest. There is now an open acknowledgement that Stalin's policy of subordinating the Communist Party to the Kuomintang produced the tragedy of the Second Chinese Revolution [1925-27].

But you can almost predict the conclusion: the defeat of 1927 was tragic, but it was Mao who summed up the lessons. Because of the belatedness of capitalist development, the Chinese working class was numerically too weak to carry out the democratic and national struggle. Thus it was necessary to turn to the peasantry and sections of the bourgeoisie—the strategy that brought the Maoists to power in 1949. This argument is typical of the official apologies offered for Maoism. It is based, of course, on a complete rejection of Marxism and genuine socialism.



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