SANG YE'S CONVERSATIONS WITH CHINA

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“Tell a story!”

It was a simple request, as well as a frequently heard plea, during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. It was also a common prompt for people anxious to exchange information, tales, rumors, and gossip in the declining years of Mao's rule and the painful years of recovery that followed.

Each request for the recounting of an individual story, for the surreptitious telling of a private tale, or for the sharing of an anecdote that would entertain or inform; every account that might elicit a sympathetic response resulting from shared experience; all of the reminiscences of sufferings (or lucky escapes) tinged with a bitter understanding of the absurdist tragedies that touched nearly every family; in fact, any description of life lived outside the realm of relentless public performance or away from collective surveillance, each was in breach of the greater story, the singular narrative of the nation's life as told by the Chinese Communist Party itself.

The reappearance of the individual and the endless variety of life was part of the unraveling of the story that the Communist Party told itself, one that, through its hold over the nation, it constantly reiterated to the people of China and indeed the world. It appeared first behind closed doors, through furtive exchanges of personal histories, and then in a more open and joyful atmosphere of celebration at the end of an era of totalitarian control, and finally, although always fitfully, in the mass media itself.

During the heyday of state socialism, the individual story was submerged by a collective tale of History writ large. In it, the complex skeins of personal lives were reduced to undifferentiated stereotypes and formulaic accounts. Living at the western extreme of the socialist world, the Czech

writer and dissident Václav Havel observed how this singular story came to silence all others.

It began with an interpretation of history from a single aspect of it; then it made that aspect absolute and finally it reduced all of history to it. The exciting multiplicity of history was replaced with an easily understood interaction of “historical laws,” “social formations” and “relations of production,” so pleasing to the order-loving eye of the scientist. This, however, gradually expelled from history precisely what gives human life, time and thus history itself a structure: the story. And banished from the kingdom of meaning, the story took with it its two essential ingredients: uniqueness and intrinsic ambiguity. Since the mystery in a story is merely the articulated mystery of man, history, having lost the story, began to lose its human content. The uniqueness of the human creature became a mere embellishment on the laws of history, and the tension and thrill inherent in real events were dismissed as accidental and so unworthy of the attention of scholarship. History became boredom.¹

Biography has enjoyed a particular place within the tradition of China’s socialist culture. When joining the ranks of revolutionaries or before being inducted into the party, each candidate was required to make a clean breast of their personal history by writing a detailed, confessional autobiography. Only after making such a confession and receiving official absolution could the aspirant be absorbed into the great collective enterprise. In each stage of the revolution and with each new political campaign or purge (and these occurred with increasing frequency from the early 1950s until the late 1970s), these autobiographical accounts were reexamined and used to determine the fates of the individuals as well as of their families and associates.

The party’s own history projects, whether hagiographic renditions of revolutionary heroism or parables built up around the histories of villages and factories, were narratives in which individual tales of trial and tribulation were shaped to conform to the party’s overarching story of victory over adversity and progress in the face of oppression. Even when a formerly dispossessed peasant or an exploited worker was interviewed for an official oral history, the uncomfortable details of individual lives that might threaten the coherence—and didactic value—of the account for others

1. Václav Havel, “Stories and Totalitarianism,” *Index on Censorship*, 1988, no. 3, p. 16.

were glossed over. Everyone was allowed to be different, but in exactly the same way.

Sang Ye's *China Candid* is a unique collection of individual stories, powerful personal narratives that tell tales in the face of party rule as no other book from China has done. It shows little regard for the officially sanctioned version of modern Chinese history. That history, and the way it is told through the Chinese media, is influenced by the particular culture of communism, which defines the life of a society, and therefore of the individuals and groups that make up that society, in terms of party slogans and congresses, the speeches and meetings of leaders, and through the prism of its mass political (or, more recently, what are called "public information") campaigns. Sang Ye's history of China, in contrast, comprises the voices of the people who have lived that history under, but often despite, the Communist Party and its mechanisms of control. The interviews here were conducted over many years, and through them Sang Ye provides us with an alternative history of the People's Republic of China from its founding in 1949, and in particular since the collapse of Maoist high socialism and the rise of economic reform starting in the late 1970s.

The voices we hear through the pages of this book never offer a simplistic or categorical rejection of their history; neither do they offer a blanket condemnation of party policies or even of the baleful rule of Mao Zedong. The selective censorship of the reformist era, which began in 1978, inevitably colors individual memories of the past, especially when alternatives to the official version of history—both pre- and postrevolutionary history—find only scant purchase in the sphere of guided public discourse: the press, cinema, TV documentaries, mainstream publishing, even the Internet. When the past is actively manipulated by propagandists and commercial advertisers alike to legitimate the needs of the present, as well as constantly being used to bolster the image of the ever-victorious party, private and individual memory is all the more precious—and friable. To understand both the present and the past, it is vital to attend to the stories of individuals who, through their own lived experience and their articulation of it, recuperate for both themselves and others an understanding of a collective past that is all too often distorted by the media.

In a sense this book responds to the questions raised by the historian Michael Frisch when he wrote about Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*—one of the works that first inspired Sang

Ye when he began writing in the early 1980s. Frisch emphasized that memory is at the center of the enterprise of oral history. He asks rhetorically: “What happens to experience on the way to becoming memory? What happens to experiences on the way to becoming history? As an era of intense collective experience recedes into the past, what is the relationship of memory to historical generalization?”² It is memory as history, and the way all history, collective or individual, is recast as memory, that, as the personal accounts in this book show, underpin the ways in which the past is invoked in the present. These narratives also bring to light the way people make sense of the world through telling themselves stories about their personal journeys.

Such truth-telling does not, however, exist in isolation, or merely at those moments when the individuals who speak to us here are in conversation with Sang Ye. Rather it is part of a broader story about the massive untruths that continue to obscure so much of modern Chinese history and life—untruths legislated by a system that, ultimately, holds the individual in contempt, a system in which socialist authoritarianism has now negotiated a strategic partnership with corporate capital. To an extent these narratives are possible only because of the rise of the “cult of the individual,” the individuated subject and consumer-actor, that has been the most egregious feat of social engineering in reformist China. It is a time when cruising the mall has replaced party-organized street marches; an age in which the right to shop has unseated obligatory rituals of mass politics. The individuals who speak to us here are both in the embrace of China’s particular brand of nationalistic consumer-socialism and at times wary of it.

The social production of memory—through individual stories, official histories, academic courses, and the mass media, along with the Internet—entails also a cultural production that includes volumes like this. Written originally for publication in China, *China Candid* has yet to appear on the mainland. Just as an entrepreneurial publisher in northeast China was planning a mainland edition, one of the regular publishing crackdowns—what

2. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 188.

amounts to a biennale of censorship—was launched by the authorities in Beijing, resulting in bans on numerous book projects.³

Even if a mainland edition had been possible—and the frank nature of the material in this book made it unlikely—it would have been a truncated work. A number of the interview subjects, fearful that their candor would lead to reprisals from the local authorities, told Sang Ye that they did not want their conversations to appear in any form on the mainland. For example, the young athlete who speaks in “Unlevel Playing Field” (chapter 13) is aware of the highly sensitive nature of his revelations about drug use and China’s international sporting aspirations, just as the eloquent executioner in “Parting Shot” (chapter 25) did not want his ruminations on the death penalty and firing squads to be read by his superiors or the families of executed criminals. A full version of the book did, however, eventually appear in Hong Kong, the southern extreme of the People’s Republic. It was published under the title *1949, 1989, 1999*, and this edited and retitled English version is based on that edition. After translating the full text, I decided, for reasons of length and reader interest, to delete material that seemed too repetitious or obscure for an international audience.

Most of the interviews in this book, which could equally well be called conversation-narratives, superficially conform to the contours of the history of the People’s Republic of China, but, more important, they reflect (and offer reflections on) the nation’s tumultuous history from a personal level. Sang Ye investigates—and literally interrogates—this human dimension of China’s history, giving us a perspective on both the past and the present that is as informative as it is unsettling. And this is not an account of communist rule or a record of the life of a country told by self-serving bureaucrats, ardent economic reformers, or frustrated dissenters. There is much bathos and humor among the characters in this book, people who have been and remain participants, victims, and in some cases persecutors enmeshed in modern Chinese life. Many of these interviews discuss in depth what could be called the mechanics and minutiae of the economic reform era initiated by Deng Xiaoping and the Communist Party in 1978. It is an era that has seen the country’s economy transformed and the nation’s aspirations and hopes realized and buoyed in an unprecedented fashion.

Some of those who speak in this book have been involved in the blatant

3. For details of the routinization of such “cultural correctives” in China, see my *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 56–58.

or covert privatization and exploitation of state resources, collective wealth that in many cases was built up over decades through the labor and the sacrifice of countless people. For example, although since the late 1990s the People's Liberation Army has had to curtail its freewheeling business ventures, the man interviewed in "An Army on the March" (chapter 18) provides insights into the minds of men and women serving in the military who have discovered the profit motive; he shows how the PLA, a bastion of socialist values, learned to be money-grubbing. Then there is the old revolutionary who despises Deng Xiaoping for turning China capitalist (chapter 3, "The Nondissident"), although he continues to enjoy the perquisites of a retired, high-level party cadre living off the largesse offered by reformist prosperity. In contrast, we hear from the unemployed worker from the countryside (one of over two hundred million who have left the land to find work in the cities) who believes that another leader like Mao Zedong will one day appear in the midst of the "floating population" to champion the cause of the downtrodden against the exploiting party bureaucrats and new capitalists (chapter 2, "Chairman Mao's Ark").

Many of the interviewees also talk about the corrosive changes that have been wrought on the professional ethics and attitudes of men and women long nurtured by the socialist state and the public purse. The retired English professor in the northeast province of Jilin (in "Generating Income," chapter 19) has learned vital lessons about business scams from slick middlemen and market entrepreneurs who are now teaching the teachers how to make a quick buck. Her new acumen has helped her ex-colleagues and students increase their income at a time when public-funded education is sinking into ever-deeper crisis.

Others, like the self-styled "computer bug" (*diannao chong*) interviewed in chapter 12, belong to a brasher and more self-assured generation. This young man, working in Beijing's equivalent of Silicon Valley, is proud of both his commercial shrewdness and his nation's ancient civilization (while pointedly dismissive of his parents' generation, the former Red Guards, who once attacked it). He expresses an acute awareness of the humiliations his country has suffered as a result of technological backwardness, political upheavals, and imperialist avarice. His message is as unambiguous as it is unapologetic: We're here. We're mean. Get used to it.

Other conversations introduce us to people who have felt the frustrations produced by a rapacious market economy grafted onto a labyrinthine sociopolitical system; the resulting miscegenation is heir to all the short-

comings of senescent socialism and primitive capitalism. The man who starts a private orphanage is a portrait of patience and tenacity in the face of official obstruction (chapter 6, “Looking Ahead”), while a couple who have had their young son kidnapped by child traders offer heartrending insights into the failures of a state that once presumed to control every aspect of life for the collective good (chapter 7, “Getting Organized”).

Undercurrents of violence run through the interviews, whether in the form of state-sanctioned punishment, acts of cruelty and unkindness perpetrated by the system, or individual acts both direct and covert. Many people in these pages recall chilling encounters with what are called “the organs of the people’s democratic dictatorship” (the police, the law courts, jails, labor camps, or the army). Those who have survived the attentions of officialdom share a firm belief that living well is the best revenge. Some even try to live in ways that may change the nature of the system itself. Take, for example, the entrepreneurial farm manager (chapter 23, “Just One Party”), or the founder of the private orphanage mentioned earlier. In their conversations we find no hint of the bombast of public dissent, the grandstanding of the entrepreneur, the glib patter of the sanctimonious, or the rancor of the defeated. Even without systemic change and political reform, many of Sang Ye’s interlocutors are creating individual futures far different from the somber collective realities of China’s past.

Equally, some of the people in this book have profited immensely from the get-rich-quick opportunities provided by China’s reform era (see, for example, chapter 1, “A Hero for the Times,” and chapter 21, “Mastering New China”); others have used the wiles of their profession or their sex to trade their way up the socioeconomic ladder (see chapter 15, “Time as Money,” and chapter 16, “Little Sweetie”). They are all people inured to China’s capricious political and economic climate; they display a hard-won wisdom, one that is often thoughtful and always canny. Some celebrate their good fortune while wishing their fellows ill; some are satisfied with their lot and despise the new dispensation, one that has benefited many but also witnessed the growth of harrowing social inequities; others survive with tenacity, heedless of the grand plans of their rulers although always mindful of the precariousness of their own situation.

China Candid offers no simple entry point into China; no linear narrative emerges from these disparate and highly individual stories. It is a book that confronts and challenges many of the dominant views of China. Although they tell no single tale, these stories amount to something of a

biography of the People's Republic of China. Of course, these life narratives can only ever constitute tiny parts of the story of the People's Republic; equally, they are "histories" that are narrated in the present, that is, in the era of economic weal (and concomitant political bane) of the 1980s, the 1990s, and the new millennium. Within these narratives there are elements of pure recall as well as of reflective summation. These voices speak to the past from the perspective of the present. Some narrate a tale of the here-and-now for an audience of one, Sang Ye, an interlocutor who is acting as an agent for all other audiences, including ourselves. Others speak only about the past; a few also address the future, such as the agricultural cooperative manager in "Just One Party" (chapter 23) who can envisage a time when the dominant Communist Party will give way to a pluralistic political environment, or the UFOlogist in "Beam Me Up" (chapter 24) who is ready to welcome extraterrestrials into China's midst.

Many of the stories are polished and are "performed" seemingly fluently. This is not merely a result of Sang Ye's editorial finesse, for China is a country where self-expression is an art form born of constant storytelling and honed by years of public political performance. These stories represent the efforts of individuals to make sense of their lives as they discuss with, debate, and at times refute Sang Ye. They seek a narrative cohesion for the multifaceted histories of their lives, a sense of self and biographical meaning, and readers are also invited to engage in this search. We are all involved in a similar enterprise, one enhanced by the entrée that Sang Ye provides to a world of particular diversity and richness.

These life-story interviews tell a history of a China that is itself a place created by individual histories. Of course, as Sang Ye tells us in his introduction, his choice of interview subjects is idiosyncratic and often the result of circumstance, even though his approach to each encounter is informed by his own history of writing and engaging in other conversations in China over several decades.

Sang Ye's search for the history of individuals who have lived through the People's Republic, and his often tenacious conversations with individuals from many walks of life, confronts readers with powerful and disquieting accounts that confound not only the public history of contemporary China, but even the versions of Chinese and Western memoirists, reporters, and scholars whose mass-market writings generally hold sway over popular impressions of that country around the world. In Sang Ye's telling, the

party-imposed boredom of socialist history of which Václav Havel spoke dissolves; variety, ambiguity, and complexity take its place.

During the mid-1980s, as China's literary and publishing culture underwent a revival—a commercial boom born of new, market-oriented government policies that saw the gradual displacement of the party's monopoly over the media—Sang Ye and a Beijing woman novelist, Zhang Xinxin, joined forces. Together they interviewed dozens of Chinese people from all walks of life. These were people who until then had never had a voice in the mass media. Sang and Zhang's interviews were conducted outside the narrow confines of official, state-directed culture. Serialized in leading literary journals in 1985, the interviews created a publishing sensation, and the following year they resulted in a best-selling book titled *Beijing People: One Hundred Personal Accounts of Normal People* (*Beijingren*, literally “Peking Man”). An edited English version, published in the United States under the title *Chinese Lives*, featured a foreword by Studs Terkel.⁴

In writing *Chinese Lives*, Sang and Zhang were not only responding to new cultural opportunities, the growing appetite of a voracious reading public, and the enlivened publishing world of China. They were also extending a kind of popular social investigation that had come to enjoy considerable cachet following the Cultural Revolution. Writers of reportage—a style of Chinese “new journalism” or literary reporting—most notably the *People's Daily* journalist Liu Binyan, had for some years pursued stories about individuals who had fallen victim to the party's machinations, piquing the public's interest in tales of tragedy and woe from the Maoist era (spanning the 1950s to the late 1970s).⁵ The two young oral historians were more catholic in their tastes and interests than veteran reporters like Liu, and, rather than rake over the details of recent political purges or use their writing to right perceived wrongs, they concentrated on reflecting the vibrant and unsettling realities of the present. Their work made them

4. Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye, *Chinese Lives: An Oral History of Contemporary China*, ed. and trans. W. J. F. Jenner and Delia Davin (New York: Pantheon, 1987).

5. See, for example, Liu Binyan, *People or Monsters? And Other Stories and Reportage from China after Mao* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

famous: Zhang, already a well-known novelist, went on to become a TV personality before emigrating to the United States. But the accolades of urban readers did not satisfy Sang Ye, and he soon set out to travel China once more in search of new stories and other ways of engaging with the country of his birth and the culture that held him so powerfully in its thrall.

He moved permanently to Australia after 4 June 1989. Since then he has produced a number of new oral histories, one of which, *The Year the Dragon Came*, was published in 1996.⁶ It was a controversial investigation of the state of recent, mostly mainland, Chinese immigrants to Australia, their abiding cultural values, the disturbing strain of xenophobia found among many of them, and much also that reflected badly on Australia and its treatment of new arrivals. Many had been lured to antipodean shores by the government's recently launched policy to sell education (in particular English-language courses) to a hungry Asia-Pacific market. They all had outspoken views about their adopted homeland and the fate of the new "overseas Chinese." Sang Ye's book revealed a less-than-comely face of immigrant experience in Australia that challenged the comfortable assumptions of multiculturalism.

After completing that book, Sang Ye began the search for interview subjects for the present volume back in China. By far his most ambitious project to date, *China Candid* is a portrait of China free from the censorship and editorial constraints that had marked *Chinese Lives*. For although *Chinese Lives* had an immediacy and honesty unique to China in the 1980s, setting a new standard for realistic journalism, the hand of the censor, as well as the more ineffable shadow of self-censorship, had wrought many changes in the text.

Born and raised in Beijing into a family of educators and cadres, Sang Ye (a nom de plume) studied at Tsinghua Middle School—an institution that gave birth to the Red Guard generation—and he came of age as one of the country's first freelance journalists. He is a tall and imposing figure who speaks the clipped and authoritative language of Beijing. He is a profoundly knowledgeable autodidact, an unaffiliated historian of modern China possessed of a sardonic wit. He also has a highly developed sense of the absurd that is informed by his years of obsessive research on the dialectical confusions and about-faces of the Maoist era and contemporary Chinese politics.

6. Sang Ye, *The Year the Dragon Came*, ed. Linda Jaivin (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, 1996).

He is also a noted writer of *causerie* or literary essays who, because of the elegance of his literary style, has often been mistaken for a septuagenarian.⁷ As a chronicler of contemporary China, he is deeply suspicious of socialism and the state Marxism that for decades wrought havoc on the country, resulting in countless deaths in the past and continued suffering in the present. He is wary also of post-Deng economic nationalism and questions the long-term viability of a one-party state that has no sure footing in its own past or abiding confidence in the ideology that masquerades as the mainstay of Chinese civilization.

Sang Ye's family history—some of his relatives were functionaries in key state institutions—and his fascination with the organs of state control and the way that power is exercised in China, as well as his assiduous research into many aspects of the country's modern history, have provided him with a broad insider knowledge. As a result, he is a formidable interviewer who can both insinuate himself into the nuanced world of his interlocutors and turn an equitable exchange into an edgy interrogation: see, for example, chapter 21, "Mastering New China," where he provokes the speaker into revealing how some private enterprises flourish because of covert family and party connections.

But such insider knowledge is of a different order from that of his partners in discussion. Their understanding is the result of pressing daily reality; their insights are often born of trying circumstances. Much that was once hidden or secret in the lives of such individuals is now made public; many of the revelations of these people are also the product of agonized reflection on their own situations and the skein of Chinese social life. And Sang Ye's China is a voluble and often rancorous country. Although he is a member of the educated urban elite, he is acutely aware of the history of condescension and manipulation that has characterized interactions between the Chinese intellectuals (and here I include the communist intelligentsia, Mao Zedong being but *primus inter pares*)—men and women with a mandarin view of the world and their role as the voice and conscience of China—and the people. And the people Sang Ye speaks to are, for the most part, individuals whose actions, except in the intimate discourse of the private realm, have always been tempered by the need to explain themselves to the authorities—at school, in self-criticisms or polit-

7. These essays were published in the Beijing monthly *Dushu* (*Reading*) in the late 1990s, under the aegis of its then editor Shen Yuanshen.

ical study sessions, in written depositions about themselves, or in the coerced confessions about their actions during key political campaigns (as was the case after the 1989 mass protest movement and following the purge of adherents of the Falun Gong meditation sect, starting in 1999). They have all lived and worked in a sea of words, a morass through which each of them navigates a precarious individual course. And they are all talkers who confront assumptions about how China does and can “tell a story.”

Sang Ye is also suspicious of contemporary intellectual agendas, be they neo-Marxist, neoliberal, or nationalist.⁸ He is alert to and highly critical of the deracinated language of the elites as well as that of the commercial mass media; his ear is finely tuned to the rich variety of demotic voices. He is, above all, a skeptic, although not necessarily a cynic. For, as he shows both in his introduction to this book and throughout the interviews, his relationship with the People’s Republic is both confrontational and codependent; he both respects and is repelled by what he encounters, and, while always engaged with the vastness of the country and its people, he searches too for his own worth as he plumbs both the humanity and the inhumanity of his fellows.

Sang Ye’s interview style has evolved over many years. The majority of the conversations in this book are the result of extensive background research, followed by detailed discussion and familiarization with his interlocutors. The interviews themselves contain long digressions by Sang Ye to prompt his conversation partners to reflect on certain issues or to discuss matters that they might otherwise be unwilling to confront. When transcribing and editing his interviews, however, he omits his questions and interjections; he also effaces his own presence, a technique that is particularly (and tantalizingly) evident in his interview with the prostitute (chapter 15, “Time as Money”) and the executioner (chapter 25, “Parting Shot”). If his own authorial voice remained, he argues, there would be probably just as much of him as there is of the interview subjects. To retain such material would leave us with a book perhaps twice as long.

Sang Ye’s method of recording and transcribing his interviews entails a twofold transformation of the conversations. The transcript he creates on the basis of a recorded interview—deleting long pauses, rearranging mate-

8. Regarding such agendas, see my “Time’s Arrows: Imaginative Pasts and Nostalgic Futures,” in *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry*, ed. Gloria Davies (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 226–57.

rial into a sequential and coherent narrative, cleaning up grammatical and syntactical lapses, and so on—effectively turns aural artifacts, that is, spoken conversational reflections, into visual objects, that is, final texts that fix the fluidity of exchange in a permanent printed form. As a result, the inflection of individual voices, the unique cadences of speech, the speed at which people talk, the dialectical peculiarities of the standard Chinese used by his interview partners—all their idiosyncratic verbal styles, quirks, and habits—are homogenized into text neatly divided into the sentences and paragraphs of publishable prose. Then, as noted, Sang Ye omits his questions (and his occasionally rather pointed interrogations), often creating the impression that these are fluent historical testimonies captured by some omniscient ear or, rather, scribe.

Of course, in these conversations Sang Ye has not necessarily elicited spontaneous narratives; neither is he sharing with the reader some sudden revelation. The interviews should not be seen as the product of a fortuitous recording of previously unthought-of or unsaid things about intimate lives. For many, these are articulated versions of stories that have been reconsidered and reformulated time and time again, though perhaps never so rigorously as here. That is to say, this is not a book that pretends to reveal an unsullied truth about “China” or “the Chinese.” The attentions of a knowledgeable and gregarious reporter like Sang Ye, an ex-Chinese national who holds a foreign passport and who will publish their remarks in the international Chinese media, and in English, may well have encouraged some of his coauthors (and this is really what they are) to exaggerate or perhaps to color their stories. As he points out in his introductory essay, however, Sang Ye is fully aware of this possibility, and it is best to remember that rhetorical embellishment in these accounts is sometimes no more than that.

Another potentially misleading impression given by an immutable text like this is that Sang Ye’s interlocutors would say the same things about themselves on all future occasions. This is because as soon as they are transcribed and edited, these interviews become as stable and unchanging as any other written document. I am not suggesting that these testimonies should in any way be discounted or undervalued. As with any other written document or recorded data, however, readers should be mindful of the contingencies surrounding the creation of the book and the state of tension in which the text inevitably exists.

The end result of this process is a collection of seamless narratives that, now edited and translated into a manageable English text, creates a double

layer of disconnect between those original intimate conversations and you, the reader. Those who read Chinese, of course, may consult the published Chinese text to find some counterbalance to the often bland words that have been marshaled here to represent the many rich voices of this book's authors.

This translation has also had to take into account the fact that *China Candid* was written for a Chinese audience—to be more precise, a mainland-educated Chinese audience, one familiar with the history and sociopolitical context discussed by the interviewees. However, that original text makes few concessions even to Chinese readers, replete as it is not only with each speaker's verbal tics but also with local argot and what now sound like arcane political expressions, formulations familiar to people of earlier generations but foreign to many younger readers. I have added footnotes where necessary to guide the reader through the fog of political slogans, campaigns, and shifting party priorities that has suffused every aspect of Chinese life for over half a century and impinged on every life story told in this book.

It is inevitable, too, that the “treachery of translation” has meant that much of the flavor and verve of the original interviews has been lost. Sang Ye readily acknowledges that in transcribing the spoken word, the timbre of voices, regional differences, nuances and lilts were heavily discounted. In the passage of those texts into English, much more is diminished. The originals are fresh and powerful as only a language rarely seen in print in mainland China can be. The interview subjects do not speak the flat Newspeak of the official Chinese media, nor do they affect the faux-casual verbal posturing of urban hip-grunge, or chic-lit, that is often taken by the international media to represent the cutting edge of contemporary China. It is also far from the often stilted, pseudorealistic parole of the new wave of Chinese cinema that, more than any other cultural form, has come to represent the mien of China overseas.

The homogenizing effects of my own editorial hand have further flattened out much of the lively language used by the people in this book, although my collaborator in this enterprise, Miriam Lang, has done her best to maintain a scrupulous felicity while attaining a greater elegance in the final text than I could have hoped to achieve by myself. She meticulously compared the translations by various hands with the originals, correcting awkward expressions and editorial oversights with rigor, precision, and finesse. She offered so many apt suggestions that she must share the credit

for producing the final work, although the clumsy turns of phrase that remain and the editorial selections made are solely my responsibility.

If it is impossible to replicate in English the colorful range of the original interviews, it is equally difficult to do more than intimate the effect of the wooden bureaucratese and formulaic expressions, tempered by decades of party propaganda, that appear in virtually every chapter of this book, sometimes spoken without irony by interview subjects but just as often used with a sardonic, if not satirical, edge by people both captive to yet dubious of China's officialese. Similarly, in creating this English version, to employ the colloquialisms of my native Australia would have made for a creole that non-Australian readers would find alienating, or even worse, comic; while to attempt an Americanization of expression would have produced for me a caricature of expression that I would find foreign. The result is a compromise in terms of both diction and voice, something that could perhaps be dubbed a pan-Pacific solution. Like Sang Ye, I have attempted to present the authors' voices using words without too much saliva.