

Interview with Evan Osnos: The Pursuit of Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China

"Journalism was like an amazing passport that gave me permission to go out into the world and listen to people's stories." Evan Osnos' interest in journalism sparked early in his high school career. As he began writing for his high school paper as well as the local newspaper, Osnos realized that journalism was a great excuse to constantly meet new people and learn about the world. He grew up overseas because his father was a reporter, "So I've always had this idea that you could be a foreign correspondent and that could be a way to live a life."

Osnos began living this way of life himself as the *Chicago Tribune's* Middle East correspondent in 2002 and then later as the Beijing Bureau Chief. "I had gotten the China bug in college and ever since I studied abroad in Beijing, I continued looking for ways to go back," he said. Three years later, Osnos joined *The New Yorker* as the magazine's Beijing correspondent and continued to specialize in writing about topics related to China. His blog for *The New Yorker*, called "Letters from China," is full of fascinating stories about the individuals he encountered in China as well as opinion articles about China's political and social issues. Osnos is now *The New Yorker's* correspondent in Washington D.C., where he writes about politics and foreign affairs.

His first book will be released in May 2014, and titled *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. In the book and our interview, Osnos shared his perspective on China's remarkable transformation over the past twenty years and the distinct features of the "new China." The China that Osnos saw as an undergraduate student was completely different from the China that he sees now. In his eyes, the most sweeping change was the rise of the internet in China. "In 1996, the Internet had just been launched on university campuses," Osnos recalled, "There were a million bloggers at the beginning of 2005. By the end of that year, the number had grown to 4 million." This sudden spread of the Internet had a transformative effect on the way the Chinese view themselves and their government. It has become a "political force" acting like a "central nerve that runs through Chinese society."

In contrast to this positive development in China, Osnos also noted that there are still areas that need great improvement. In particular, the lack of media freedom still remains to be a serious issue. Foreign correspondents living in China can experience anything ranging from no government interference to direct intervention. "As a foreign journalist, you have to be constantly thinking about how your presence affects the people you talk to," Osnos pointed out. "You may not suffer the direct consequences of dealing with sensitive topics, but the people who are interviewed can get hurt." There are several accounts of foreign journalists being approached by Chinese policemen the moment they arrive at a village to interview the people living there. Some foreign journalists cannot even obtain visas due to political reasons. "It is not okay that a country as sophisticated as China chooses not to participate in the world of ideas," he said bluntly, "This is dangerous to the country and its people."

Despite such flaws, Osnos still views China as a "wonderful place to be a reporter"

because of its immense size and constantly changing environment. Calling the single greatest drama of China's past ten years "the rise of the individual," Osnos explained a remarkable change in Chinese society that ultimately led to China's "pursuit of fortune, truth, and faith." Over the course of China's history, there was little room to be an "individual" because there was no philosophical and social significance attached to this concept. During the Qing dynasty, there was a law that dictated more severe punishment if the crime disrupted social order. The motive of the crime had less importance. Mao Zedong continued to put emphasis on this collectivist culture. In "The Little Red Book," a collection of statements from Mao's speeches and writings, it is stated that the individual is subordinate to the organization. In other words, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) agenda was the first and foremost priority. "Thirty years ago, if you got up and said 'I want to start a business,' you couldn't do it. If you said, 'I want to define what matters to me on a moral or philosophical level,' you couldn't do that either. It had to be what the Party gave to you as a range of options," Osnos stated. "All those barriers have collapsed now."

The breakdown of obstacles that hindered the rise of individuals led to the "new China," which Osnos described as defined by the pursuit of three things: fortune, truth, and faith. These are the "engines propelling China in this moment in history." The pursuit of fortune was initially triggered by Deng Xiaoping's economic reform. "The word that people used in 1978 when they left their *danwei*, or work unit, was 'songbang,' which means 'to untie' and it is usually used when referring to animals." As the Chinese became unfettered from their old jobs and obligations, they realized that they have the power to make economic decisions on their own. The more economically successful they became, the more they discovered the costliness of ignorance. "The Chinese wanted to know what the real state of affairs was once they started to obtain property and take ownership. They knew they couldn't just rely on inaccurate information given by the state press."

This resulted in the second phenomenon, which Osnos calls the "pursuit of truth." Once basic needs are met, people develop a taste of what it means to ask questions and get answers. The quest for true knowledge and enlightenment concerning politics, economics, and culture led to bigger questions about morality, philosophy, and life. With these existential questions in mind, the Chinese began their "pursuit of faith." In the past, Mao was viewed like a god and socialism was a religion. When the Party decided to abandon socialism as an ideology, people looked for other ways to fill in the hole that had appeared. "It became essential to answer questions of what is means to be a citizen, a moral being." Osnos has met many individuals who are incredibly self-aware and desire to know the truth. "I knew a Chinese reporter who was a total social butterfly. I got back in touch with him recently and found out that, surprisingly, he had become a monk up in the mountains. His search for answers had led him to something beyond journalism," he shared. Osnos even saw the awakening of the Confucius temple nearby his neighborhood in Beijing. "During Mao's time, the temple was used as a storage facility and it was disrespected. Now, it is a place bustling with great energy and excitement." He believes that this is undoubtedly a dynamic time in Chinese life. This is the "New China."

So what does Evan Osnos think is the prospect for democracy in this "New China"? On a fundamental level, Osnos believes in the idea that the arch of history bends

toward justice. He views human dignity and ingenuity as powerful forces that can transform a whole nation. Although there is much to celebrate for what the Chinese government has done over the last forty years, Osnos indicated that the current philosophical and ideological instability in China is a problem that the Chinese government will inevitably have to resolve. "The government's active opposition to constitutionalism is not a sustainable policy. It will eventually have to follow its own instincts for wanting the rule of law." He hopes that the government will take proactive steps in engendering political transformation. "They proved that they can be inventive and bold in the past. It is time for them to be bold again."