

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The untold human stories of China's economic boom

There's a personal dimension to the nation's rapid transformation that is crucial

There's a personal dimension to the nation's rapid transformation that is crucial to our understanding of it — yet mostly hidden from view

Yuan Yang 9 HOURS AGO

Keep up with the latest news on Asia's biggest economy.

Explore the China Focus hub

My maternal grandparents married in 1961, amid a man-made famine. On her wedding night, the bride walked home along streets shared by the bodies of the dead. Her colleagues had surprised her with an extravagant wedding gift — a handful of boiled sweets — which she held like gemstones in her pocket.

My parents were born after the harvests returned, and began secondary school in the 1970s. At the start of each autumn term, my father would pay for his textbooks with barrow-loads of sweet potatoes. My paternal grandparents grew fields of the purple-skinned roots, which came into season in the early autumn and lasted throughout the winter.

My father had enough to eat, so long as what he wanted to eat was sweet potato. Every year, in the waning days of winter, he would get sick of their creamy caramel-orange hearts, the cloying mouthfeel that stuck no matter how they were cooked. He would start dreaming of the watermelon crop, two seasons away. But by the dog days of summer, sleeping with a hoard of watermelons under his bed, he would tire of their watery emptiness and long for sweet potatoes again.

I was born in 1990. One of my first words was *ga-ga*, the Sichuanese baby-talk for “meat”. Every morning, my maternal great-grandmother would strap me to her back and walk to the village market. She would run her fingers over the thick stems of asparagus lettuce, the fluffy pea shoots, the bumpy-skinned bitter gourds, naming each of them for me. I would wave my fat fist towards the red meat hanging from the butcher's hooks and say “*ga-ga*”.





Yuan Yang's maternal grandparents playing music together in their hometown ...





... and the infant Yuan Yang with her parents in the early 1990s © Yuan Yang

My great-grandma would smile and buy the meat, and back home she would proudly recount: the little one said she wanted meat!

In a country where the gap between rural and urban meant everything, I lived with my maternal grandparents in a place that straddled the two. It was a Communist work unit, or *danwei*, buried in the mountains of China's south-western interior.

In the planned economy of the Mao era, the *danwei* not only organised industrial production, but also provided a complete social infrastructure for workers to live within. My maternal grandparents expected their *danwei* to take care of them, and it did.

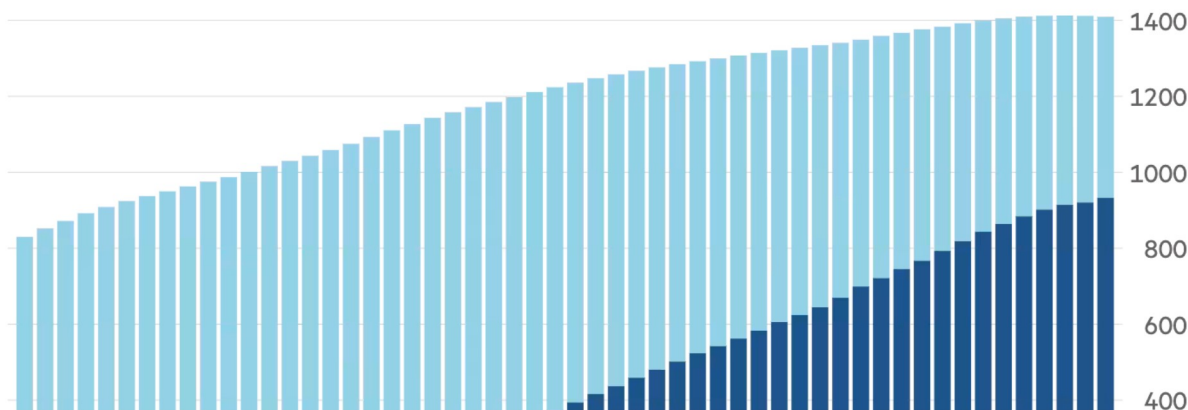
My paternal grandparents were peasants. My father, who was born into rural poverty, knew he would do better than his parents, as long as he got off the sweet-potato farm. He got into a university on the other side of China, in my mother's home province, where they met.

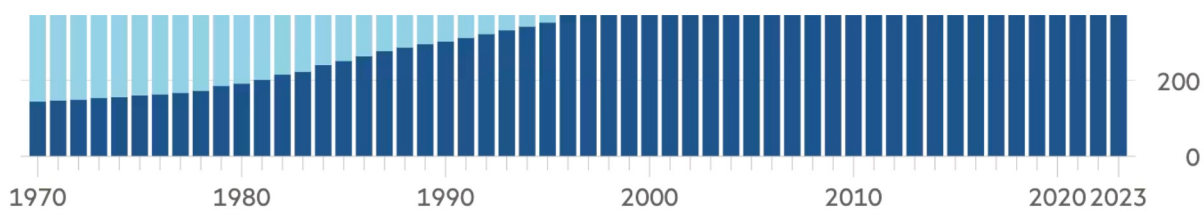
Two-thirds of China's population now live in cities and towns

Population (mn)

Urban

Rural





Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, LSEG

© FT

Shortly after I was born, my father left for the UK to pursue a doctorate in computer science. It was a simple decision for him: all the students who could leave were doing so. Chinese academia lagged behind the west, especially in the sciences. The government's massacre of students and workers in Tiananmen Square in 1989 had left many questioning the future of China's universities.

When I was four, my mother took me to join my father in the UK. From then on, my mother and I visited China only in the summer holidays, a routine pilgrimage to my maternal grandparents' home. The whole country to me was encompassed by the smell of white gardenias growing in my grandparents' vegetable patch, the skin-feel of the wet heat of the south-western Chinese summer.

When I left the UK to live in China in 2016, as the FT's Beijing correspondent, I embarked on the journey not knowing what to expect of the country I had known only as a child. Like most people in the west, I had heard the story of China's economic miracle, the lifting of hundreds of millions out of poverty.

I had also heard the stories of censorship and repression. The country was a mix of contradictions: a Communist party presiding over an ultra-capitalist society. And, particularly after the stock market crash of 2015, rumours of a debt crisis abounded — yet one never fully emerged.





Yuan Yang and grandparents at Beijing airport as she left China in 1994, aged four . . .





... and with her father in Edinburgh, shortly after arriving in the UK © Yuan Yang

I wanted to untangle the contradictions in China's political and economic systems, which threaten to trap the country in an increasingly stiffening social hierarchy — one that is both familiar and also different from the inequalities faced by western countries.

By the end of my posting in 2022, the increasing state suspicion of foreign journalists made it ever more difficult to report intimate stories from the ground. In hindsight, I was lucky to have had such access. What was missing most, I felt, from our understanding of China's transformation — and what is most difficult for foreigners to come by — was a human-level view of how families and individuals are shaped by living through a breakneck pace of change.

My friend had been involved in labour activism, writing blogs about workers' rights aimed at young factory staff

Throughout my teenage years, I'd had glimpses of the country's rapid enrichment on my visits in the 2000s, after China's accession to the World Trade Organization brought with it a flood of orders for manufactured goods. Some of my parents' friends, who had left academia for business, became unexpectedly wealthy. Others, who had been posted to middle-of-nowhere towns that had grown into booming cities such as

Shenzhen, suddenly found themselves owning property worth millions of dollars.

My grandparents had come of age in the Mao-era China of the planned economy, and my parents in the Deng-era China of the market reforms, and I had inherited a collection of confusing vignettes of each.

In the summer of 2008, my mother dragged me to a dinner with her friends in Beijing, including someone she told me was a Communist party official. Over a dinner table excessively stacked with dishes, this portly man took out his iPhone and read out the start of Karl Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production."



'Sitting on the Wall — Haikou' (2005) © Weng Fen

It was clear to me that he was gloating. Lehman Brothers had just collapsed, and the global financial crisis was taking hold. I remember the occasion because it was one of the first times I saw an iPhone.

But what was the man actually gloating about? China's Communist party had overseen a capitalist growth miracle, and China had taken an increasingly central role in the global trading system as the world's factory.

One of the first friends I made when I arrived in 2016 was Sam, a sociology graduate student about my own age. I had interviewed one of her professors about Apple's iPhone assembly chain, and the professor had introduced me to Sam.

Sam provided me with a bridge between the west and China's political traditions. In China, I found that political concepts came grouped together in novel ways. "Left" was used to refer to people who favoured the status quo of Communist rule, and thus sticking with tradition. "Right" referred to people who supported democracy and free markets, and thus bringing in the new. Sam had studied the political systems of China and the west, and could navigate both topsy-turvy landscapes.

As a sociology student, she often embarked on the same kind of hit-or-miss fieldwork projects I undertook as a journalist, turning up at factories or businesses to catch workers on a lunch break to interview. We swapped tips for how to avoid being caught by security guards.

About the photography

The lead images that accompany this piece are by Chinese photographer Weng Fen, taken from his series ‘Sitting on the Wall’ and ‘Bird’s Eye View’, which he began in the early 2000s and which focus on human figures set against urban landscapes. ‘The distant cities are the by-products of modernisation’s dream,’ he has said. ‘In the eyes of people they represent civilisation and modern progress’

When I first met Sam, it seemed to me that my assignments were higher-risk, because of my status as a foreign correspondent. Over the years I knew her, I came to realise that she was taking risks far beyond what I had imagined.

Sam had always been involved on the periphery of labour activism in China, writing and editing blogs about workers’ rights aimed at young factory staff. In the summer of 2018, a nationwide crackdown on student labour activists began, and Sam became harder and harder to reach. I never asked her directly what she was up to — I didn’t want her to compromise herself by talking to me. Finally, one day, she told me she was going to lie low for a while.

“If I’m taken,” she joked, the last time we saw each other before she disappeared for some time, “you can write the news.”

My immediate thought was that Sam’s personality, full of self-effacing humour yet intense idealism, could not be contained in a news article.

In the time that I couldn’t speak to Sam, I started writing scenes from the time we had spent together. And I also continued to report on the state’s crackdown on student labour activists. All of them were from China’s top universities, and had sacrificed their careers — not to mention their personal security — because of their political beliefs. I wanted to understand what propelled such bright young people to take these huge risks. I wanted to find the origins of their passion for rectifying the vast inequalities that China had amassed since its capitalist reforms.

The more I wrote, the more I thought that the answer couldn’t be fully described by only narrating Sam’s own life. Having grown up in a middle-class urban family in

Shenzhen, Sam was from an unusually privileged section of her post-1990s generation. The social divides that Sam cared about had to be described through the lives of people who spanned those divides. So I sought to interview other young people who had come of age in the wake of China's economic transformation.



'Sitting on the Wall — Haikou' (2007) © Weng Fen

After years of searching, the interviewees I became closest to turned out to be young women — perhaps because they saw in me a fellow traveller and confidante, and because they were not only reflective about the way the country's changes had changed their inner lives, but were willing to share their intimate reflections.

Not far from Sam's apartment compound, at the end of the subway line, lives Leiya. In the 1990s, Leiya had come to the big city from the countryside at the age of 15. She was following her parents, who were two of the hundreds of millions of migrant workers who had ventured far from home in order to earn money in China's new factories.

This internal migration created a generation of “left-behind children” — rural kids who were barred from enrolling in urban state schools by the internal passport system of *hukou* registration, and thus prevented from following their parents. Most lived with their grandparents on the farm back home, but Leiya lived alone with her younger brother. At the age of 15, out of loneliness and desperation, she dropped out of school to follow her parents to the city. She weaseled her way into a factory job, underage.

Those who had made their riches during China's boom were afraid they were the product of a miracle that their children couldn't repeat

By the time I met Leiya, she had gone through several more factories, which she had left in search of better working conditions. She had a 15-year-old daughter herself, and she was intent on doing what her parents had not been able to do — to keep her family together in the city, and to get her daughter Xinling into a state-run high school.

Of course Leiya, along with the community of female migrant workers around her, all want the best for their children, but they are up against multiple barriers. They face not only the invisible forms of privilege, social capital and connections that divide the rich and poor the world over, but also face the steep levels of economic inequality and *hukou* inequality that mark out modern China. On top of all of that, there is the economic slowdown, and the fear that the “last bus” to social mobility is about to leave the station.





'Bird's Eye View — New Beijing 9' (2007) © Weng Fen

At the other end of the spectrum of class anxieties are the rich Beijing clients of Siyue, who runs an educational consultancy to the urban elite. Siyue herself was marked as a future drop-out by her teachers, having been moved frequently between schools in Shenzhen and in her village home by her itinerant parents, who were part of the country's first wave of entrepreneurs. She didn't rub along well with the discipline of China's rigid education system, but loved learning — and so became an educator herself.

We had known each other for a while through our friendship groups in Beijing, but I had never known her back-story before I mentioned to her my idea for a book, and the interviews I had done with Sam and Leiya on the themes of inequality and social mobility.

“Of course,” she said, “all parents feel this anxiety. They're scared of falling off the ladder.” Her metaphor clarified to me what was at stake in China's current stage of development. The business people Siyue served had made their riches during the boom, and were afraid they were the product of a miracle that their children couldn't repeat. In short, they were afraid of their own children losing their class position. By the 2010s, the ladder of society had grown extremely tall: it was the distance from a basement apartment shared with six other migrant workers, to a villa with a garden in the capital city.

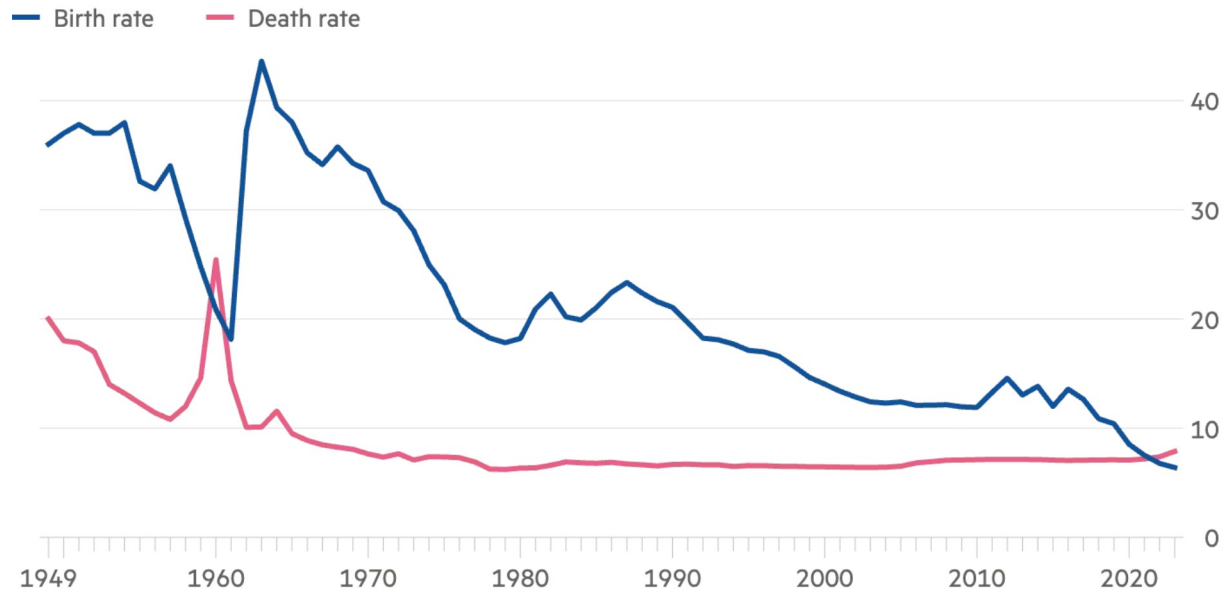
In their different ways, Leiya and Siyue had both benefited from China's explosive growth: Leiya through the factory work brought to the southern and eastern coast; Siyue through the demand for private education. Now their lives also exemplify the problems facing different parts of Chinese society as the economy cools.

China's social problems are starting to encapsulate those of the rest of the world. It has the problems of rural childhood malnutrition common to much poorer nations, as well as the problems of urban property prices and competition for graduate employment common to much richer ones. Yet the government is becoming

increasingly keen to hide blemishes from view, despite the fact that in no society — particularly in one undergoing such rapid changes as China's — can there be complete peace.

China's birth rate has fallen to a record low, and deaths now outnumber births

Rate per 1000 population



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, LSEG

© FT

I'm grateful to have arrived in China at the time I did, shortly before the door to the outside world started closing. As suspicion between the west and China has risen, so has suspicion in China of foreign journalists such as myself, and foreign influence as a whole. It has become increasingly difficult to tell intimately reported stories from China, particularly ones that require deep trust between writer and interviewee. But it is stories like these women's that we are missing in our grasp of modern China. To understand China's future, we need to understand what it feels like to be living through its present.

Yuan Yang's 'Private Revolutions: Coming of Age in a New China' is published by Bloomsbury on May 9

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#) and [X](#), and subscribe to our podcast [Life & Art](#) wherever you listen

