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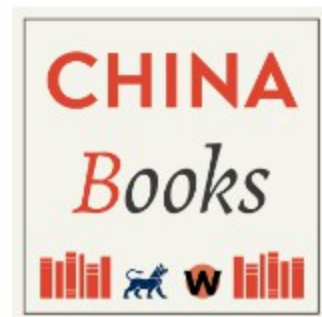
## Ep. 3: How China's Future Looked in the Past

*A 20th century Chinese public intellectual fell for the socialist dream, only to become disillusioned. His biographer tells us the full story.*

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — DECEMBER 5, 2023

HISTORY

POLITICS

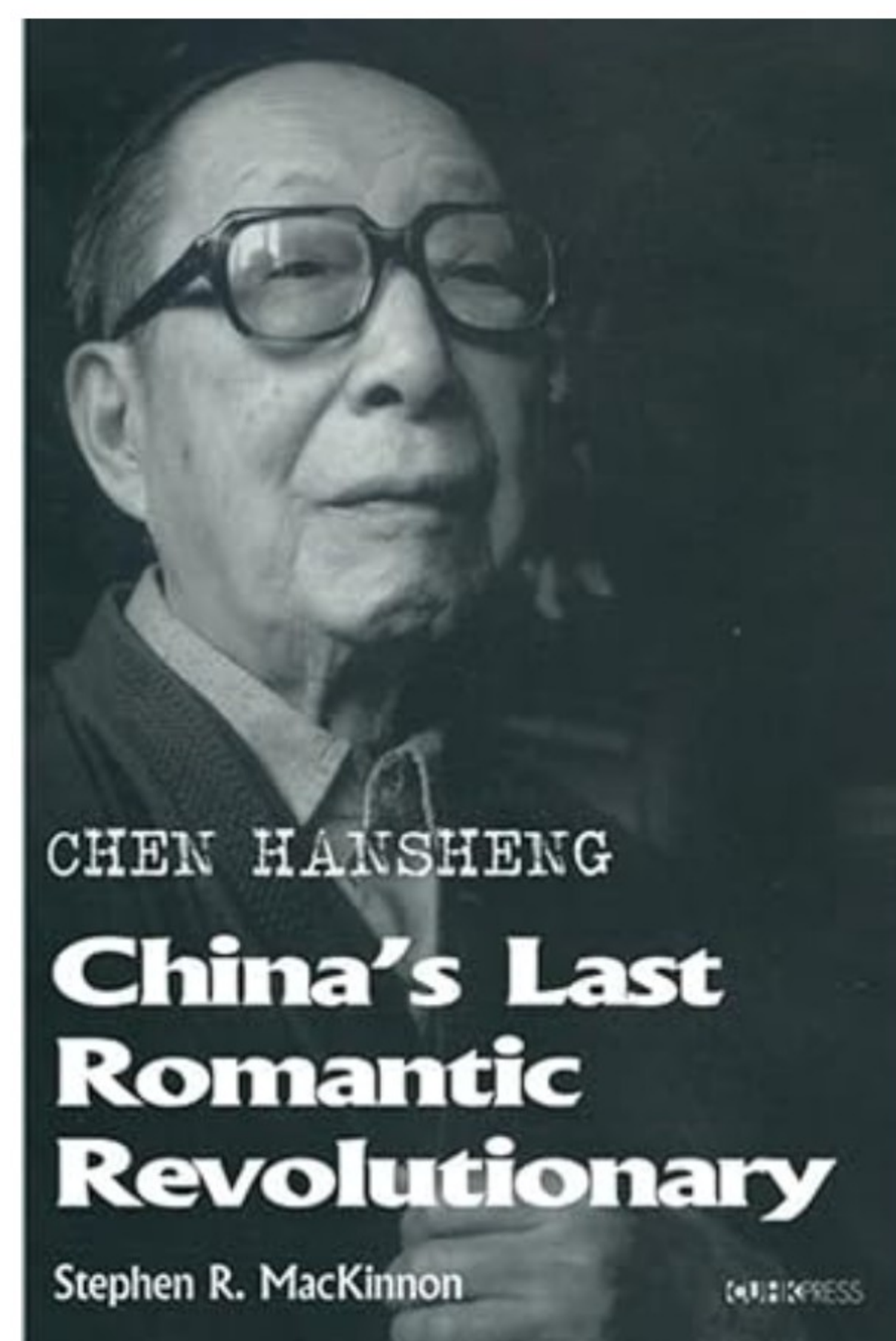


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**D**reams of a better future have driven many a revolution — but not all have turned out the way the dreamers imagined.

China's early revolutionaries, a century ago, aimed to rid the country of what they saw as corrupt capitalism and the world of colonialism and imperialism. Socialism, they said, would bring a future of peace, prosperity, equality and social justice. Not all of that worked out.

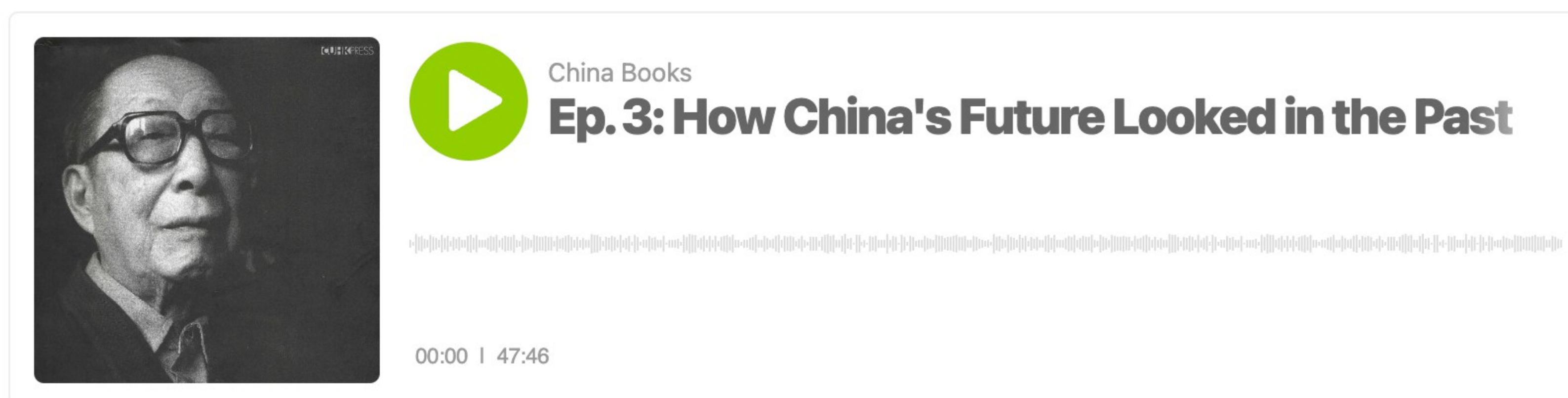
One of those dreamers was Chen Hansheng, a prominent Western-educated public intellectual who wrote, lectured and taught in the United States in the 1930s and 40s while secretly working for the Soviet Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party. He worked over time with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, and with Richard Sorge, the Soviet spy in Germany and Japan, and was close friends with Agnes Smedley, an American journalist who supported China's Communist revolution, and with Soong Ching-Ling, the widow of Sun Yatsen.



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Chen's comprehensive sociological surveys of rural regions of China in the 1930s also painted a vivid picture of the realities on the ground for China's farmers and villagers, whom China's Communist revolution ended up helping in some ways and hurting in others, particularly in the preventable Great Famine of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when as many as 50 million people starved to death.

Chen died in 2004 at age 107. He lived through a century of epic change in China, and in the world, that brought some of what he wanted from socialist revolution — but not in the way he expected — and a lot of disillusionment. In this episode, Stephen R. MacKinnon, author of the new biography [Chen Hansheng: China's Last Romantic Revolutionary](#), lays out Chen's remarkable story:



China Books  
Ep. 3: How China's Future Looked in the Past

00:00 | 47:46

## Guest



Stephen R. MacKinnon is an emeritus professor of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history, and former director of the Center for Asian Studies at Arizona State University. He used to live in China, which has been the focus of his work since the early 1960s. He has written dozens of articles and edited volumes, and is the author of five books on China, including *Chen Hansheng: China's Last Romantic Revolutionary* (2023), *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* (2008), and *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (1987).

## Transcript

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Predictions are a slippery thing, especially when it comes to China.

You could fill several bookshelves with tomes that have, over time, predicted one future for China or another — a coming collapse, or a capitalist bonanza, a population crisis of too many or too few people, a future of technocratic, or autocratic, or perhaps even democratic politics; a future of technocratic, or autocratic, or perhaps even democratic leadership, a future of cheap goods produced in smoke-belching factories, or of cutting edge technologies competing for the top rung in the global economy. A future in which a blazingly successful Chinese economy surpasses that of the United States — or one in which slowing economic growth, along with a shrinking and aging workforce, and heavy local debt, produce headwinds strong enough to throw everything off course. Any of these stories could have been told convincingly at one time — perhaps for a long time.

There's another way of looking at how the future looked in the past. This episode focuses on one life that spanned the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century — a romantic revolutionary, some might say, who rose to prominence and political influence at the highest levels in China — and ended up disappointed.

*(Music up)*

This is the China Books Podcast, a companion of the China Books Review. I'm Mary Kay Magistad.

*(Continue music under)*

01:35: And the book in focus in this episode is called *Chen Hansheng: China's Last Romantic Revolutionary*. It's by Stephen MacKinnon, an emeritus professor of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese history at Arizona State University. He met with Chen Hansheng in Beijing from 1979, every week or two for two years, to get his story down.

If you've never heard of Chen Hansheng, it probably wouldn't have bothered him much. He was more about the substance than the spotlight. But he's considered by at least some Chinese to be the father of social science research in China. He was U.S.-educated, at Pomona College, the University of Chicago, and Harvard, and then went on to do a PhD in Berlin. He was a respected international public intellectual – who lectured and wrote often for US organizations, while secretly being a member of the Soviet Comintern and later of China's Communist Party. He worked with Premier Zhou Enlai, as well as with a famous Soviet spy, and maintained a close friendship with Soong Ching-Ling, the widow of Sun Yat-Sen. At one point, Zhou Enlai even asked Chen to be a Vice Foreign Minister – and Chen turned it down. Too much scholarly work to do, he said. Too much risk involved, he knew, from having seen purges during the couple of years he spent in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. But even with his abundance of caution, he didn't escape being detained and interrogated during the Cultural Revolution. He was eventually rehabilitated enough that the state-run China Daily newspaper ran a rosy column on his life and achievements when he turned 100.

Chen Hansheng died at age 107 in 2004. Now, author Steve MacKinnon says, there's renewed interest in him in China:

03:23: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** There are museums to him now. He's had his ups and downs, and was forgotten. I think he has come back among Chinese intellectuals. And my book – Sanlian, which is a major Chinese publisher, wants to do a translation right now, right away. And so, there is an interest in him again. And his concern with the Chinese peasant and the rural scene, which is not in great shape in China, his concern with that *\*is\** recognized. That is what he's best known for, to some degree inside China and outside China.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Steve says Chen was also known to the Kuomintang Party – both when it was the government in China, and when it went into exile in Taiwan.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** There were at least three attempts to assassinate him from the Chiang Kai-Shek side, so they certainly knew about him – and saw him as influential, influencing Western opinion, especially.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Like the time Chen met twice with a special U.S. envoy sent by President Roosevelt early in World War II, against Kuomintang objections. U.S. aid to the Kuomintang thereafter was considerably less than they would have liked. Steve says senior Kuomintang official, Chen Lifu, ordered at least one of those assassination attempts against Chen Hansheng – causing Chen and his wife to flee to India and stay there for a couple of years.

4:40: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Chen Lifu was sort of a hatchet man, in some ways, of Chiang Kai-Shek. And these were people who also had overseas educations. And Chen Hansheng, I think partially as a joke, gave me a letter to Chen Lifu when I was going to Taiwan also, in the '80s. And so I saw him. And he was in his 90s, and he said, "Ah! Chen Hansheng! That's why we lost the Mainland!" *(Laughs)* He gave me a lecture about that. And I gave a letter to Chen Hansheng, just saying "hi, how are you doing?"

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So Chen Hansheng had some stories to tell. But he also had a story he told himself about the future – of how socialism would bring peace, prosperity, and equality, at home and around the world. Here's the rest of our conversation.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What is a Romantic Revolutionary, and how was he one?

05:26: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Well, in my mind anyway, and I think in some ways in his mind, he was of that generation of what we call third world countries, or non-Western countries, nationalists. As he began to go into becoming a political activist. He identifies with that generation of Ho Chi Minh, M.N. Roy, Agnes Smedley, who he was close to, who saw a kind of new world which is not dominated by colonial powers, especially. Others, even Emma Goldman, had a vision of a world that was socialist, but was equal nations around the world, new nation states. And so I think it was nationalism and anti-imperialism and the idea of building then a socialist world because capitalism also was part of the colonial picture.

So he was very internationalist. We would say global today, a global vision, which seems today kind of naive, I guess. I've heard Chinese and others consider him. Maybe I had a naive vision, but it was a common vision of that generation. Remember, he lived over a hundred years. So, in the '20s when he met Li Daqiao, for example, the founder of the Chinese Communist Party, who had that kind of vision, too.

06:50: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, and of course more recently, over the last 20 years at least, the global vision has tended to be globalization, which is very much about capitalism rather than about this socialist vision.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** And it's a different vision than Mao, say, who was not an internationalist in an ordinary sense. Zhou Enlai probably shared some of that.

Nehru had this vision, but Madame Sun Yat-sen, Soong Ching-Ling, and he were very close, as I point out in the book. She shared that idea. And perhaps Sun Yat-sen did too, in some ways. I don't have that kind of insight into Sun Yat-sen. He's a rather mysterious thinker, to say the least. But, yes, I think that it was a kind of socialist vision, and the Chinese have often told me, Chinese intellectuals who knew something about him, or their parents knew him, said he was really not hardcore, totally loyal to whatever the Party says is right.

He was more of a nationalist. The way we talk about Ho Chi Minh, was he a communist or a nationalist? And he did lean more on China building up as a state, but one that will take care of the peasants, the ordinary people, in a socialist fashion, and he believed in collective cooperatives and all of this sort of thing.

08:10: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And he believed in centralized power, so he believed that a central government running –

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes, I think so. I don't think he believed in a strictly Western democracy. He thought that the Chinese Communist Party would become democratic, within, at least. Yes, he was very disillusioned with the Stalinist direction it took in the '50s when he returned to China. He thought it would gradually be open and democratic within itself, and that maybe this would extend beyond. But I know he did talk to me about the Party itself should become more open and democratic and have free discussions within its power structure. That's really what he envisioned.

08:50: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So his vision of socialism didn't necessarily include allowing individuals to have a say.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** That's a good question. Maybe he had an idea it could evolve that way, that people would be elected to the Party and so on. I think he saw the Party was necessary to overthrow the system. He didn't talk to me ever much about after that. When he was a young man at Pomona, he was very much taken by American democracy, and thought Woodrow Wilson was great. But this is before he really became radicalized by events in China later.

09:20: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So Chen Hensheng was, in some ways, from an unlikely background given what he ended up doing with the Communist Party in China and the Communist movement in general. He was from an elite family in Wuxi, which is, of course, a commercial and manufacturing hub halfway between Shanghai and Suzhou. His family included powerful and wealthy merchants on his mother's side, scholars on his father's side. He liked to say he was born into a stereotypical poor scholar family, but you say in the book that was only in relative terms. His family's home 'only' had 20 rooms, which was modest compared to the mansions of his wealthy merchant relatives. In some ways, he seemed set to live a comfortable, somewhat traditional life. But then he heard this story about sun-kissed oranges that changed the trajectory.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes. That's wonderful that he heard this story about the sun-kissed oranges...

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** ...that had originated in Sichuan province, but then scientists in California had –

10:00: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Southern California. So Luther Burbank took the Chinese orange, but then made this wonderful naval orange that we know. And so Chen Hansheng, studying in the schools that I talk about in Hunan and so on, thought, 'my God, I want to study with Luther Burbank and become a great botanist to create this sort of revolution and bring this back to China.' So he started studying English and trying to get into the channel that would send him abroad. The trouble was his eyes were always bad, and he wore big glasses. And he couldn't do the lab work. He would screw it up. And this kept happening. And so he begins to switch. He took the exams and gets into Pomona.

But first, before that, which I think is very interesting, he went to this work-study high school in Deerfield, Massachusetts, which was a religious founder thing where you work-study. Everybody did the tables and so on. So here's this upper-class Chinese who never did a stick of manual labor, of course, waiting tables and cleaning

toilets and the whole thing.

And I think that made him very different than other Chinese intellectuals later in life. He had a sense of that, and then he was working tables when he first went to college because he ran out of money at Pomona.

11:35: But very soon the whole idea of being a scientist was out the window given his eyes and glasses and he was doing very well. His ability to absorb English. He was in the literary society, the only non-white person. He excelled and got very interested in history, American history, then European history, even started studying Russian.

11:53: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** He did a master's in history at the University of Chicago. He spent a year at Harvard and then he did a PhD in Berlin.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yeah. Some of how that PhD in Berlin worked, it's still a mystery. The records are not real clear. There are various versions of it and he wasn't real clear with me ever about it exactly.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** About whether he got a full PhD?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I think he did. I think he did, but I think he may have used his Master's thesis and just developed it some more.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And then he picked up German and Russian along the way?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yeah, he sure did. He studied Russian at Harvard, I know, and maybe a little bit at Chicago. And at that point he begins to plug into the more nationalist student movement amongst overseas Chinese in America. and becomes more nationalist himself.

I wouldn't say left-wing though. Some of them, there were some real Communists amongst them. And he wasn't really plugged into that until he really gets to China. He's still, you might say, a little more bourgeois at that point.

12:48: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But you do mention that when he was in Berlin, and this is post-World War I, Germany was going through hyperinflation and everything else, you said this sort of showed him how unstable capitalism could become. Did you get a sense from him that that that was the beginning of a turning point?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I think so, that perhaps. It probably was – how shaky the economic system was. He had some U.S. dollars and they could go very far. But also the poverty of the fellow students, but also people on the streets, the homeless, the whole thing.

So, yes, I think it did make him wonder about capitalism as the answer to the world's economy, so to speak.

13:27: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So then 1924, he goes back to Beijing. He starts to teach at Peking University. It's at a time when the university was integrating Chinese and Western learning within a German institutional model. Chen was still in his late 20s then. Detractors were calling him the baby professor. And then a couple of years later, protests broke out in Tiananmen Square. We don't always hear a lot about these particular protests, but they were sort of transformative for Chen's thinking.

13:53: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** They really were. The warlord shooting of students, Duan Qirui was a warlord in control of Beijing at the time, shooting students who were protesting concessions to foreign powers right off of Tiananmen. And Lu Xun was there, and very upset by the whole thing. So we know actually more about it probably through Lu Xun. Li Daqiao was there and was wounded. Li Daqiao is the founder of the Chinese Communist Party, was a professor of philosophy at Beijing University at the time, and Chen Hansheng was beginning to really interact with him. And his wife, who had a German camera, was into photojournalism and began to record these photos, and they were pasted around. And it was a shock, the shooting of the students. It really, in a way, started him to move to international communism. They go off into exile, actually, right after that. So their life is transformed.

14:47: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So, after the Tiananmen protests of '26, Chen and his wife joined the Soviet Comintern, is that correct, or was it just Chan who joined?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I think they both joined. I don't have absolute evidence that she did, but I think so. Because she went, actually, she had to leave earlier than he to go to Moscow to escape. Her photos got her in a lot of trouble, and they barely escaped themselves. He skips the Moscow period in his Chinese autobiography, and I guess why, because in the '80s, Russia was bad news, so I guess he didn't want to write about it. But it was very influential, I think, because at that point, he turned to the peasant question. And he

was right where the debate about what to do with the Russian peasant was going on. The Agrarian Institute, the Comintern International Agrarian Institute. And it was a very important debate that he witnessed, but also saw the techniques that they were using in evaluating Russian peasantry. And I think he acquired skills and thoughts and ideas.

15:47: And he returned to China then with good contacts in this new Academy of Social Science and what became Academia Sinica, which is now in Taiwan, not in China, to do rural studies of what is the reality of rural economy in north, central, and south China. It was impressive the way he organized all kinds of young people.

What he is known for is that. There's another side, and that's his political activity at the same time. If you look him up on Google or something, accused of being a spy, doing intelligence work for Moscow, and then maybe eventually Beijing. Yes, he did have contact with Richard Sorge, who is the all-time great spy of the 20th century for Moscow, in a lot of ways, who was executed by the Japanese, finally, in World War II. And later, he did have contact with the security intelligence czar, Li Kenong, in Yan'an, and later in the PRC. But to be a spy, per se, doesn't really characterize him accurately. He was a public intellectual. In an important way, in the early and mid-'30s, especially in Shanghai, and was involved in all kinds of forums, but a lot of them international, in New York and elsewhere. That was his sort of primary political activism. At the same time, of course, these rural surveys, which have been influential. And the people who he had working on them, became the economic planners of the 1950s and 1980s – Xue Muqiao, for example (1950s), in the 1980s Sun Yefang, who were Wuxi kids, from Wuxi, who had a college education and then they became into his economic surveys and learned to do economic surveying, writing about the economy and so on.

17:35: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What do you think drew him to wanting to focus on conditions for farmers and villagers in China?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** He had this long meeting with a then very important figure in the Chinese Communist Party named Cai Hesen. Cai Hesen was a colleague, almost, of Mao, but much more of an intellectual and was higher in the party by far in 1927-28. There was also a man named Peng Pai, who organized peasants in southern China in 1926-27. They were together in a sort of hidden place outside of Beijing, and it blew Chen Hansheng's mind (that) the classic Marxist view that an urban industrial center is where the revolution should happen, which is the way the Chinese Communists started, is not the future.

It's got to be with the peasantry. He says it just had a tremendous impact on him. And when he was escaping to Moscow, he, I think, asked to be in this Agricultural Institute.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So as a means to an end of helping the Communist Party come to power, rather than out of empathy for the farmers?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Maybe a means of the Communist Party to come to power, but I think that he saw these desperately bad conditions of the rural population. And he did have, I think he had empathy for that.

19:00: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** I ask in part because it struck me as I was reading your book when it got to the Great Famine, there's very little said about that. You know, I mean, it's mentioned that, you know, eventually he did get out into the countryside and he saw how bad it was. But I would have thought that that would be an extraordinarily transformational moment for him, having spent decades doing surveys in rural areas, getting to know people, getting to know what conditions for their lives were like, knowing that this famine was not caused by natural disasters. It was caused by political pressures on local officials to first of all, say that they were producing ridiculously abundant harvests and then 'okay, bring it in so that we can export it and make some money for China.' And then farmers were being forced to give up their seeds. They'd already melted down their tools. And it was a very avoidable catastrophe.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** That's right. There isn't too much about it in the book. And that is, I think, because he did not, and this must have been true of a number of the other liberal intellectuals that he knew in Beijing who were on the, by this time there had been the Anti-Rightist movement and they had all been put on the side in terms of actual influence on policy. I think they were living in a kind of cocoon. I think he didn't fully understand the depth of it until well into it. He does talk about (how) they themselves were supposed to stay in bed for two days each week. And then he heard some reports from people who had been out.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So he didn't go out himself?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Not until '60 or something like that.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But I guess by the time he was talking to you it was '79.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Right.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So he knew all of this, right? But it sounds like he didn't spend a lot of time talking about it, and that it didn't change the extent to which he remained engaged with the Party.

20:50: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** That's a good point. He was shocked, but it did not turn him totally against the Communist Party. He blamed Mao personally for the whole thing. He was not a Mao fan, ever, I don't think, really. Of course, the Cultural Revolution affected him in being sent to the countryside and so on.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Well, and he was interrogated.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yeah, interrogated a lot, and his wife died, and then he was sent out to farm. And there he did relate to the ordinary peasants and seemed sympathetic. He was quite unhappy with the way economic planning and economic policy went in the '50s, and also bitter that his data from those surveys in the '30s was never really brought, it was still sitting there in archives.

21:35: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** I just wanted to pick up on the collectivization versus co-ops, which was something that he cared deeply about going way back. Can you explain what it was that, for people who don't know about collectivization versus co-ops, what did he hope would happen with farmers and what did happen?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Cooperatives, and we even have them in the United States to some degree, is sharing tools, energy, still having private property, in other words. And there would be, in this way, a kind of local democracy about what to do with our village. And it was an idea that has its origins back into the Russians again in the '20s. And then during the war, he was very active in what was called the Gung Ho movement, industrial co-ops at local level, peasant level, which worked for a few years fairly well, and then it fell apart. But – making munitions, uniforms, making little hand grenades to fight the Japanese. And this was behind the lines. It wasn't necessarily a Communist thing. And he raised money to try to help support this, out of Hong Kong. And he was excited by this movement, but also he saw collectivization is exactly what Stalin did in the Soviet Union, and it created the Ukraine famine in '32-'33. It was around 1955 that the idea of agricultural cooperatives was debated up to a pretty high level in Beijing. And he was certainly supportive of that. And then with Mao, especially, it moved to greater and greater collectivization. But Deng Xiaoping also supported that.

23:10: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So his vision of how China's future would look when he became a member of the Chinese Communist Party, it sounds like it was one that gave more agency to individuals, if not an actual vote. And that it would be a different kind of economy that had more participation and more decision making on the grassroots level.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes, I think that's right. Yeah, I think that's right. He was also a bundle of contradictions. Anybody is, as you're pointing out, like about the famine and so on. But yes, I think that's what he meant. Agricultural cooperatives would be a local participatory system. He didn't talk about it as a political entity, necessarily. So he did think that agricultural cooperatives would stabilize a rural economy. At the same time, an emphasis on light industry, and not heavy industry, would create a much stronger Chinese economy. Ironically enough, in the last 15 years, the idea of agricultural cooperatives is a way to help the Chinese rural economy, which is still not good, but still struggling in a variety of ways. And of course, China has become the light industry capital of the world, internationally. Ironies of the whole thing.

24:25: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** How did you come to focus on China as a scholar yourself? What drew you to it?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** It's fairly simple. It really began for me in college at Yale as an undergraduate and I was very into history anyway, European history, some American history. And at that point, Arthur and Mary Wright had just come to Yale. I went to some of their lectures, and I thought, 'wow'. And I began to take a little Chinese, but also thinking that if I wanted to be a professional historian, I was beginning to think about it somehow, the canvas is so open and blank in Western languages about China. This is in, say, 1961-2, something like that. Basically, there was some very dusty old texts, often written by missionaries. So I was pulled in intellectually, I'd say.

But then, of course, there's the anti-war, the Vietnam War, and so on. And I moved more to the left. politically myself, I think. And I went to Hong Kong, had just married, leaving Berkeley, more or less, to Hong Kong and was there in the middle of the Cultural Revolution in '68-'69, when Hong Kong was supposed to, quote, fall, and the establishment was getting out of town. It was great for us because it was a much cheaper place to live

than it ever has been since. But I think that pulled me into a lot of what was going on.

25:50: And I was in Taiwan in the language programs in the '60s at Taiwan University. And we had old warlords running around. And Chiang Kai-shek was arresting students for political activities. And people were disappearing. It was a kind of grim intellectual atmosphere in the '60s.

My intellectual interests were expanding. So I was diving into Chinese sources, and first working on the Qing Dynasty, the fall of the Qing Dynasty. And I wrote a book about Yuan Shikai and the Qing was my first dissertation and book. Yuan Shikai, by the way, is banned now in China. You can't put him on the internet because people make analogies between Mr. Xi and Yuan Shikai becoming emperor.

26:30: So I then got a job here in Arizona, not thinking I would necessarily stay, but it turned out I did. And I went to China with the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1972. So the first time I really had contact. I didn't meet Chen then, but I met people around him a little bit. That was, of course, a staged or managed, heavily managed trip.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, you were there for a month?

26:55: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yeah, we were there for a month. And we went to Dazhai and we went to the May 7th Cadre Schools, where everybody told us everything's were great, but...

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** How did it strike you as you were seeing it?

27:07: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** The shock, the poverty of China, frankly. And I think it was confusing, because we were sympathetic in some ways to the Chinese revolution, I guess you could say. And we were invited there. We met two of the Gang of Four.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Which two?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** It was Zhang Chunqiao, who was the head of Shanghai, and Yao Wenyuan, with Zhou Enlai. And clearly there was tension in the room, it was very obvious. This is – we were right after Kissinger and Nixon, so I think the idea was, okay, we'll have some American leftists come too, to make the Gang of Four happy, or something like that.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** When you were there in early '72, what did you know about what had happened in China over the previous decade, the famine and the anti-intellectual campaign in the '50s? Was any of that known to you at that point?

27:55: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Oh, sure. Yes. We were certainly aware of the Great Leap Forward and something of the famine, maybe not the true dimensions of it. And the Cultural Revolution — as I say, we were a little split within the group. There were some who were, it was great, others a little doubtful. And I was a little more on the doubtful camp. However, I don't want to act like I saw through it all somehow. It was clear there was some Potemkin village stuff going on around us, but still the enthusiasm. Of the people that we met, workers and peasants and soldiers and the Cultural Revolution group was still just very exciting, after studying the place for 10 years and finally going there, going to the university.

I remember going to Beida and it was chilling. There were these well-known American-trained people who had gone along with the Cultural Revolution, who were leading this around. But I asked to see one or two old professors, who had been professors of my professor, and it was scary. I mean, you know, they clearly – you had a sense that there was a great deal of tension. Also, Lin Biao had just been shot down, and there were pictures of his body, supposedly, plastered around on the walls.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** This was Mao's former defense minister, who –

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Who was going to be the heir apparent. And that's pretty crude, in a way. The hardball politics. We were aware of it, but not as aware as today, and we were much softer about it.

29:20: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. So then, fast forward to 1979, you got an invitation to come and teach journalists at the People's Daily, the state-run newspaper, how to be foreign correspondents.

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes, how to be foreign correspondents, that's right.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** You took up that job for a couple of years and your wife was doing, was she doing the same thing at Xinhua?

29:45: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Polishing and editing their external, their international posts. We were there because of Agnes Smedley. And Agnes Smedley was a great American leftist feminist, but who was also



very much in this anti-imperialist movement, first in relation to India, and then in relation to China. But she was a very popular, pretty well-known writer by the middle '30s. And my wife and I – Janice, my deceased wife – she and I got into writing a biography of Agnes Smedley, in part because she came out of Arizona, out of redneck mining towns, very much of that kind of background, not like Edgar Snow or somebody who had a kind of nice middle-class background.

30:22: And she is very big in China still. Right now, there are three exhibits of Agnes Smedley's life going on in China right now, one in Beijing. There've been previous ones, Shanghai, Xi'an. Chengdu, so on. And she's buried in Babaoshan, which is the quote, the big national martyrs cemetery outside of Beijing – her ashes. Now, fortunately, maybe, for her reputation, she died in 1950. So what she might have thought, or what would have thought about what happened later in the PRC, of course, she was not a part of. But she was very much a promoter of the Chinese Revolution. And she and Chen Hansheng became rather close in a variety of ways. And they used each other. She wrote about his projects, and he helped her with a journal, and one thing or another. And they stayed friends. They both got in trouble, more she. The FBI really went after her in the late '40s, around the time she died. But the Chinese gave us access to all kinds of people to interview about Smedley.

And Chen Hansheng and she worked in parallel ways. And so I think that was the avenue. They wanted to help us friends of Agnes Smedley. So as soon as Carter recognized China, we could formally go there.

31:39: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So, what did you focus on as you were preparing a new generation of foreign correspondents at the People's Daily?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** (*Chuckles*) They were all connected men, about age 30, who had come out of the Cultural Revolution. The most well-known one that you may know today was a man named Bo Xilai, who sits in a prison outside of Beijing today. And he was Mr.

Xi's, Chairman Xi's biggest rival, as you recall. But there were others like that. And I was supposed to teach them, what are the basic things you need to know about Western countries, and the way Westerners behave, if you're going to be posted there? And a number of them were – not Mr. Bo Xilai. He went in a different direction.

And I was to lecture in English. Some of their English was good, some of it was not. So in some ways, they were getting a Master's degree. And they all did get it, wrote little theses. And I had, of course, Chinese with me, who were partners in this. I think one or two were watching me. There were reports, I think, going on. But this was a very exciting time, '79 Liu Binyan, who was a prominent Chinese journalist, later got into trouble, and there was a lot of opening up going on around the People's Daily, frankly. It was a very interesting time to be there. All kinds of opening up of the economy, of course.

33:00: In terms of what they should know about the West, I tried to focus on issues, our social makeup, individualism. Individualism is not a pejorative or insulting term, which it is in Chinese. Or the fact that religion is important in identity, and important in lives of people outside of China. They have a lot of trouble understanding that. And so I tried to bring in some people who were politically progressive, but also religious, strict believers, in Judaism, for example. Then I tried to talk about the economy. And I got in a little trouble talking about alienation, Marxism and alienation. Could you have alienation under socialism, which was actually an issue going on. And some people thought, you better stop talking about that.

33:45: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Did the students you were teaching talk to you anyway about what their experiences had been like over the years leading up to that?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes, they did. Yeah. And of course I've had ongoing relationships with them. They're only 10-15 years younger than I am, really. We have a sort of alumni group, you might say. And so yes, I've been in touch with them over the years. But at the time, yes, some of them – some more than others, some more than others. But I remember Bo Xilai talking about how – he didn't talk about what was done to his mother, admittedly – but he worked in factories and was thrown around. His father was very important, a Long Marcher and all of that.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Were most of the students you taught kind of from elite families?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Yes, almost all. Almost all. They had been thrown out of school during the Cultural Revolution, so some of them had come back, and some had been at Beida for a year or two, but older. They were very smart. I did ask the people around me, I said, "don't high cadres also have daughters?" And they said, "that's not funny."

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** It's just interesting that obviously it was a time of transition, but clearly part of that transition was a recognition of, okay, we've got Gaige Kaifeng now, we're going to open up. In order to do that, we need to have our own people out in the world trying to understand things better and inform the Chinese population, which in some ways Chen Hansheng did.

35:10: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** That's right. Yeah. Actually, we met him on that earlier trip about Agnes Smedley – '77, I think it was. And then we were – by the summer of '79 we were in Beijing for two years. And I went to see him. And he says to me, almost immediately, "I want to tell you the story of my life, in my words. But we're not going to tape it." His family was nervous. This is quite close to the Cultural Revolution. And he said, "I want you to – I'm going to dictate it to you in English, because nobody around here understands English anyway. And then you read it back to me."

I saw him almost every week, sometimes every two weeks, for two years. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was always joking, and would switch languages, and he would dive into pretty serious subjects. And I guess some Chinese would say he was too Westernized, or too something, I don't know. But I wouldn't say that exactly.

I was drawn to him. One is naturally drawn to the warmth of his humor, and always kidding around with the people around him, or anybody going in and out. But he would go out with me to the elevator and then say some of his sharpest comments quietly to me outside of his house, especially if there were other Chinese intellectuals around, who knew some English.

His idea was, this should just be, boom, published, his life story. And his idea was it should be done by a foreigner, because it would be censored if it was in China. Basically, he wanted it to appear out in English at least first. But it was somewhat rambling. And he skipped over a lot of things. He then did a Chinese oral history about four or five years later that was published in the late '80s, that is mostly saying what a great Communist he was, really, in a way, or at least follows his Communist connections, and leaves out everything else, in terms of also a lot of his international activities.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What did he skip over?

37:10: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** He skipped over the Institute of Pacific Relations, which was in the States, but it was a huge global NGO with councils. And the China Council was very active. There was a Japan Council. Even Moscow was involved briefly. It got in big trouble with the McCarthy period. And that kind of destroyed it, actually, in the end. Also, his contacts with the Kuomintang figures, like this guy Hu Shi. And then the book has nothing about the PRC period, really. His oral history does have a PRC period, but it's quite poor. He doesn't go into his life after 1950 in China. It does deal with some of his foreign travels, and, and it does describe the Cultural Revolution, the death of his wife, some. But it's only fragments of what he really was thinking, especially about major policy issues and personalities. And the Soviet influence, for instance, on the PRC, really shocked them both.

I think when they went back. They weren't somehow expecting that.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What do you think he wanted when he asked you to spend all this time with him telling you his life story? Like what did he want those who read about his life in the future to understand about what he'd lived through, and I guess the impact he'd had as well? Did you ever have that kind of conversation with him about 'why does this matter to you, other than as a way of just living on past the time when you're actually around?'

38:30: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** That's a good question. I'm not sure I have a clear answer. I'm not sure I'd put it to him exactly that way. But I don't think it was simply an ego trip. Maybe there was some dimension of that. But I think it was about the vision of a China that is robust and anti-imperialist, but also embracing the world, especially the socialist world of non-Western nations, but also having good relations with the West. I think he did believe in that, so to project that sort of vision.

He also wanted to criticize the Great Leap Forward and policies that started earlier. He thought that the emphasis on heavy industry, following the Soviet Union, all of this was bad news. And in retrospect, he was correct. But he wanted to tell the story that way, of his view of the Chinese Revolution, I guess you might say, which he felt, after Tiananmen especially, he was very upset.

39:26: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Coming back to the title of your book, *China's Last Romantic Revolutionary*. I mean, romantics tend to get disillusioned when things don't go the way that they expect them to. At what point do you think he became disillusioned?

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I think that in the '70s, before the fall of Gang of Four and so on,

I think he was quite disillusioned, and very upset by the behavior of other intellectuals going along with the Gang of Four. And it was only really with the emergence of people like Hu Yaobang. I'm not so sure that he thought Deng Xiaoping was so great, because of the earlier economic policies of the mid 50s that Deng Xiaoping endorsed of collectivization and so on, that he really didn't think was a good idea. But there was this guy, Wan Li, if you remember that name, he was important in the changing of economic policies in the early 80s. He would come and see Chen Hansheng, even at the time I was talking to him. So that there was an interaction with that group. So in the '70s, I think he was not happy about where it was all going at all. But then (in) the early '80s, at least up until close to '89, his optimism came back. And then came crashing down.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What do you think Chen Hansheng would think of China now?

40:46: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I don't know, really, what he would have thought about the huge privatization of parts of the economy that took place in the first decade of the 21st century. He also was very troubled by the corruption element, and saw that as traditional, feudal political behavior. He was a boy scout about human behavior, and was very condemnatory of corruption or, I don't know, men with many mistresses and all that sort of thing.

He, I think, would be probably not impressed by Mr. Xi. The emphasis that is almost Stalinist of state-run everything, I doubt that he was an advocate of going that far. But, all-out capitalism would be another question, because he – I think he thought that failed under the Guomindang.

41:30: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But he'd be looking at a China where the economy is 40 times bigger than it was 40 years ago, where 800 million people have been brought out of poverty, often by their own efforts, where China is considered by most countries in the world now to be one of the most powerful countries in the world, some think more powerful than the United States.

41:55: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** I think he'd be very pleased by the strength of the Chinese economy, however it did it, and that China is a power in the world. I think he would want to see it use its power more usefully. But the Belt and Road sort of idea, I think he might endorse that, if it helped in Africa and Latin America.

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Let me wrap up with one more question, for you. When you look at what's happened with China and how China today squares with kind of what you thought China's future would be when you first started studying it....

**STEPHEN MACKINNON:** Does it square, you mean?

**MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** It's just always interesting to think back and think, where did we think this was all going? I, I only started really focusing on China in the '90s. So even for me, it's been quite a leap. But you started 30 years earlier.

42:42: **STEPHEN MACKINNON:** It's been an extraordinary change and unbelievable, really, in my lifetime, from, as you say, the '60s to where we are today, and what you were just referencing earlier about the tremendous rise in the standard of living of the entire population. There's still half that are not living as well as maybe they should be. The inequalities are great. But it's extraordinary, the transformation. I never would have predicted, I think, in the China I was seeing in the '70s. And I suppose you have to credit the Chinese Communist Party for that, in part – but mostly the Chinese people and the entrepreneurial instincts that were always there, we knew from the history. But the ups and downs of the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen, and even this recent weird COVID episodes. It's an unpredictable place (chuckles), totally. But it's been a wonderful subject to write and think about, I must say. In his life, one of the things that attracted me, he took the entire 20th century, so I could voyage through 20th century Chinese history with Chen Hansheng. And it was a wonderful trip he kind of took me on in writing this book, and it took me a long time to put it all together. It's a sweeping change in one man's life, looking at through one man's life.

## **CONCLUSION**

A sweeping change – that gave China some of what Chen Hansheng had dreamt about, but not in the way he'd expected, and with far too much that left him disillusioned and embittered. Not least among those things was living to see the crackdown on Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrators in 1989. Tanks on their way to Tiananmen Square rolled down the avenue outside his Beijing apartment in Muxidi. And there, civilians were shot, even before the troops got to Tiananmen Square itself.

Steve's book starts with the compelling image of Chen raging against this violence, remembering the Tiananmen killings he'd seen 63 years earlier that had made him decide this kind of brutality and tyranny needed to end, and Communism was the path to make that happen. It would be a tidy story to start and end there. But of course, so much more happened in the middle. Chen Hansheng had committed to a certain path to the future, and for a long time, he believed in the Communist movement, so much, apparently, that even an avoidable famine that probably killed more than twice as many Chinese as died in World War II, didn't stop him from keeping on that path.

When Chen Hansheng sat down with Steve for hours and hours over two years – he had a story to tell. And as Steve said, Chen left out a lot of things. Many of us do, as we tell our own stories, including about how we thought the future looked, in the past, and how that shaped our decisions, and our lives and how, perhaps at times, our vision of the future was wrong.

(Music)

Many thanks to Stephen MacKinnon for being a guest on this episode.

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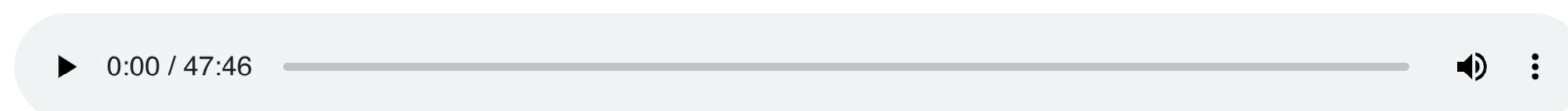
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Thank you so much for listening for listening. See you next time – on the first Tuesday of the month. Meanwhile – happy reading.

(Music out) ■

## Audio



**Correction:** *An earlier subtitle for this piece characterized Chen as a “Communist spy.” While he was a Comintern member and closely affiliated with Soviet spies, there is no evidence for this.*

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