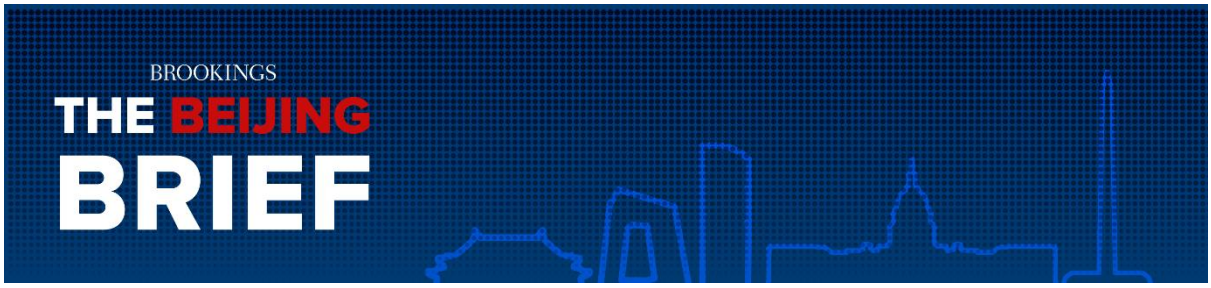

***The Beijing Brief* podcast**
The Brookings Institution

"Is China dynamic or dysfunctional?"

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Episode Summary:

Ryan Hass and Jon Czin are joined by Evan Osnos, a Brookings nonresident senior fellow, to look at China from the ground up. What do people really want and how has that changed over the past decade? And how are they living through a period today of slower growth, tighter control, and rapid technological change?

[music]

HASS: Hello, you're listening to *The Beijing Brief* from the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Ryan Hass, director of the China Center.

CZIN: And I'm Jon Czin, the Michael H. Armacost Chair in the China Center. *The Beijing Brief* is a biweekly podcast focused on unpacking the forces shaping U.S.-China relations and China's political, economic, and technological ambitions.

On this show, we spend most of our time on Beijing's decisions, its leadership, its economy, its military, and today we wanted to do something a little bit different and look at China from the ground up. What do the people want? What do they believe? And how are they living through a period of slower growth, tighter control, and rapid technological change?

HASS: So to get into this, we have invited one of the most perceptive and era-defining writers of our time, who happens to be a celebrity in his own right. His name is Evan Osnos. He is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, but more importantly for today, he is a nonresident senior fellow of the John L. Thornton China Center.

He lived for eight years in Beijing. He has chronicled the evolution of China from *Age of Ambition* to *Age of Malaise*, to the most recent article, "The Future Made in China." And we're going to dig into all this. But before doing so, welcome to the show, Evan.

[1:08]

OSNOS: Thank you, Ryan, Jon. It's great to be here. I am a listener of the show, and it is a joy to be able to join you. That was a very generous introduction.

But my involvement with Brookings goes back a very long way to my arrival in Washington now, 13 years ago, and it's great to be joining you.

[1:24]

HASS: Well, thank you. Evan, why don't we start out with your China origin story. How how did you end up in China? How did you get interested in China? What's, what's your backstory?

[1:33]

OSNOS: I was a freshman in college, and I started studying with Roderick MacFarquhar, which is a name that many China hands will recognize. He was one of the great dons of the China world. He really specialized in elite Chinese politics. He'd written books on the Cultural Revolution. He had worked, obviously, in the UK. Many people will know he was a member of Parliament. And then came to the United States.

And what he was teaching when I encountered him was revolutionary politics. And so I studied everything that he taught to undergrads. But he got me started. I started studying Chinese at that point, and carried on through college, studied a bit after

college. Then I went off to the Middle East as a newspaper reporter, but I always wanted to go back to China as a reporter.

And so when I had the first opportunity, I kind of wheedled my way into a newspaper job in China in 2005. And then after I'd been there for a few years, *The New Yorker* came calling, and I started working for *The New Yorker* in China in 2008, and that was now 18 years ago. And I lived there until 2013 and came here. And now I kind of go back and forth periodically, not as often as I'd like. I don't think any reporter is going and getting as much depth as we would like. But we do what we can.

[2:49]

HASS: So you were in China from 2005 to 2013. The sort of capstone of of that experience was your book, *Age of Ambition*, which won many awards, was recommended by President Obama, was on the shelf of everyone who happened to work at the White House during that period of time. ? What what did you take away? What is reflected in *Age of Ambition*?

[3:07]

OSNOS: Well, you're kind to remember a book that came out now as long ago as 2014, which in the China world is eons ago. But I think what I was trying to encapsulate in that period and in that concept of the *Age of Ambition*, which by the way, for any book writers out there, that's one of those titles that came to me very early on in the process and remained kind of crystal clear to me throughout the reporting and the writing.

And it was about trying to understand two kinds of ambition. One was the individual ambition, the almost volcanic pressure provided by people across the country in large numbers operating sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, sometimes in the form of companies, sometimes as political partisans, and sometimes as artists trying to manifest their place in the country and their effect on history.

And it was then in in confrontation with the ambitions of the nation, which were bound up, of course, in the Communist Party's notion of governance, which was as a one-party authoritarian state.

So it was really that, that collision, that tension, which to my mind was a big question mark about which of these would come to prevail.

[4:15]

HASS: And when you left in 2013, what was the national mood? What what was your sort of perception of how, how things felt in China?

[4:22]

OSNOS: We were at the beginning, I think, of an era that didn't yet have a name. We didn't understand what it was to become, which is, of course, the Xi Jinping era. He had just come to the fore at the apex of power at the end of 2012, and he was beginning to make his effects known. Particularly, this was the beginning of a

crackdown on corruption, which has expanded over the years into a more general purge.

And I think there was a feeling that that clearly the era of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao and all of the things that came along with that were ending, but it wasn't at all clear what was arriving. It was a kind of strange interregnum.

But I will tell you that the end of *Age of Ambition* is a a note of frustration, not my own, but I was voicing what I was hearing from the people I'd been following for many years in China. So, you know, I was following businesspeople and dissidents and people who quite deliberately were occupying very different places in the Chinese political cosmos.

But everybody was feeling as if the opportunity to define your own path was becoming more limited. That was, for me at least, the note that it ended on, and I think has then become, in some ways it was a a preamble to the world that we're inhabiting now.

[5:42]

CZIN: It occurs to me it's a much more elegant way for what my colleagues and I were trying to get our minds around at the time. Right? We kinda clunkily called this at one point the post-post-Deng era. Right? Like, we could tell that things were changing, but it hadn't really crystallized in our minds yet, like, what what this new period was going to be.

So I'm curious, like, you talked about the vibe at the time and what would you have prognosticated at that time about how, you know, how this contradiction was going to to play out, especially in light of what you've written subsequently?

[6:09]

OSNOS: I I would say that, just as as you guys were trying to make sense of the post-post-Deng era, I was living in the shadow of what I would call the post-Jell-O era, by which I mean we were still in some ways defined by the the understanding of technology and its place in the history of of governance by Bill Clinton's immortal observation. His prognostication, in some sense, that trying to control the internet, as he said in his, in his observations about China, is as easy as trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.

That became, I think, what we now look back on as a profoundly wrong assessment of the nature of technology and open society. But I was, at that time, I think still still shaped in my understanding of the role of the internet in China—and we were just talking about the internet back then; AI was way over the horizon—but the internet had felt at the time as if it was this, this source of energy pushing outward against the constraints and against the ambitions of the state.

And that was something that I think turned out, of course, to be profoundly wrong in what the internet would mean for the nature of Chinese governance, because ultimately technology became a powerful instrument on behalf of the state. And in fact has, as we've seen over the years, the way that it allows individuals to express

themselves is counterchecked and ultimately overwhelmed by the ability of the state to use technology to prevent those individual voices from threatening its rule.

[7:43]

CZIN: So then almost a decade later, you come back and you write this piece about the age of malaise. Right? How much of of that causes that malaise, right, and how much of it is some of the other exogenous shocks that China experiences in the meantime? You know, COVID, the Trump administration and the first trade war, the repression inside the system. What, what are your your diagnosis of what transpired in those intervening years?

OSNOS: Well, I think that that the heart of the matter was that one of the core ideas of the post-Deng and then post-post-Deng eras had been that there was a kind of sphere of private life. And if you were in business, that meant that as long as you maintained commitment to the primacy of the Communist Party, you could build your business, it, it was a kind of wink and a nod that you could actually, probably be corrupt along the way, and that you would be able to continue doing that.

And then in people's private lives, I'd written in *Age of Ambition* about things like even the choice of who you were going to marry, which had become this new field of of kind of personal self-definition that had been hard to do under the more repressive political eras.

And I think what has come to the fore over the last decade has been the realization that actually the Party is moving more aggressively into those private spheres of life. So it's become really clear when it comes to things like how many children are you going to have? Of course, the one-child policy was—there was the sunset of that policy now replaced by sort of active encouragement of trying to get people to get married and settle down and have kids.

And the interviews I was having with people in China, particularly young women, was that they felt that this was contravening their understanding of an unspoken compact with the state, which is we will not challenge you politically if you allow us that personal sphere. That violation in their minds, that sort of insult, I think, was what was the foundation of the *Age of Malaise* as I came to see it.

[9:37]

But but the other thing was that I was writing about this in the wake of COVID, and very specifically when I was in Shanghai, for instance—shanghai had been subject, as people will recall, to very stringent zero-COVID. It was perhaps in, in its way almost the, the harshest demonstration of what that could feel like in a big city.

And I think for a lot of people, it had been a breach for them that being ordered to stay in their homes for two months after having imagined that they had sort of burst the the surly bonds of ordinary obedience to the state, that they had achieved such personal success that they could go outside of these kinds of things. Suddenly they realized actually, no, they were subject to that too. So that was the other piece of it.

And then the the the last bit I would say, is that malaise is actually quite an uncertain concept. We had an age of malaise in our own country in the late 1970s. I invoke that in the story. And when we had the age of malaise, it was kind of, was that the end of the American idea, or was it something else?

And I make the point in the story that basically the Soviets and the Americans were were both going through a period in which it wasn't clear which experiment was gonna work. The Americans then burst through in the 1980s and reinvented ourselves. The Soviets did not. And so I I ended that piece in a, in a, to my mind at least, a sense of uncertainty about whether China could climb out of its malaise or not and what it would take to do so.

[10:57]

HASS: When we were in Shanghai shortly after COVID, we had a similar feeling of deep malaise. You know, the people who were locked in their houses, the people who committed suicide by jumping off of roofs of apartment buildings. You know, this was an intense, visceral experience.

And now when you travel throughout China, you know, four years later, it feels pretty normal. Are you surprised at all by how how quickly things have sort of reverted back to a more sort of normal flow of life and and pattern of behavior? Or is that superficial? Are we missing something deeper, more structural?

[11:32]

OSNOS: I think that that phenomenon which you're describing, which I I experience as well, is a kind of amnesia that actually we have had here, too. I comment on this—I mean, just privately I feel this way often, that we have sort of memory holed the full depth of the experience of COVID and all that it meant, how it shook our sense of ourselves, our mortality, our governance structures, our notions of our connections to one another and to the state. That is a universal fact.

In China, I think China has, um, a long history of effective amnesia, meaning people are quite skilled at closing the door on something painful that has happened and then saying, "Okay, I don't forget, but I put one foot in front of the other."

What I find when I have these conversations now with people who were in Shanghai in that period, either if I have these conversations in China or abroad, It is not forgotten. It is very present. It is a scar. And it's the kind of event that I think may turn out to be, as we go through the sort of the years to come, an ingredient in the political evolution of China that is easy to underappreciate now, but may turn out to be more significant.

Because I do think, just to underline this idea that I I gestured to before, which is that for people who had succeeded in China, who felt like, "I've, I learned the rules of the game and I played your game." And then all of a sudden they found, "Well, wait a second, if my child or I test positive for COVID, we might be separated in a moment without any ability to interfere. There's nobody you can call. There's no favor you can call in."

And so that was a, I think, that was a resetting of the mental balances.

[13:16]

CZIN: It's so interesting to hear you talk about that period, especially because, you know, you talk about the the implicit social contract between the party and the populace. Right? And I think for a long time, a lot of China watchers would talk about this, that there was this implicit bargain. Right? Part of that was about having private space. Right? You moving away from totalitarianism to more of an authoritarian regime, which we talked about with Minxin Pei a couple episodes ago.

But another part of it, too, was about economic growth. And my concern was that for a lot of Western commentators, like, we treated this almost like like a Lockean kind of contract, right? Like, you sign here and you have your commitments.

But I think what we've seen in the in the last few years play out is that this was all kind of implicit, and you could, the party could break that contract and persist, right, and actually grow in power and strength.

So I'm just curious to hear, hear your thoughts about that, you know, about how the Party has evolved and tried to cope with these challenges in those subsequent years.

[14:08]

OSNOS: I do think that there is a way in which as the economy has slowed, that it has forced the Party to make other claims, to offer other goods, in a sense, patriotic goods. And part of the reason that you hear it now making this very emphatic, propagandistic campaign around technology advancement, around telling China's story, around leadership in the world more broadly, is partly because it no longer has the ability to say, "And we have the most dynamic, fast-growing economy in the world." If you hung your banner from that pole, it's wobbly.

But I I think the idea that it was a simple bargain that would say, "You deliver 10% growth a year and we'll keep you in power," it was always more complex than that.

And I I think that, you know, in the same way that that China is trying to define its its relationship with its public in new ways, we are too. I mean, I I'm constantly aware, in a way that I really wasn't when I was living in China. I I almost put the United States out of my mind because it was not the matter at hand.

And now I I am trying, in my own small ways on the page, to try to put these two national stories into some relationship with each other because, like it or not, they are related, meaning how China looks in the world is related to how America looks and vice versa.

[15:35]

HASS: Well, we will want to turn the mirror back on the United States a little bit later in the conversation, but before we do that, I just want to close out this discussion on "age of malaise," this period of time that you were capturing, by asking you to reflect

upon a question that you grappled with in the piece, which is can autocracy and capitalism coexist alongside each other?

With the benefit of several years now of of being able to watch and observe China, has your thinking on this question evolved at all?

[16:01]

OSNOS: If you're asking if I've reached an answer, unfortunately not. But I will tell you that it is crystallized in more clarified form, and I'll give you an example, which is right now, take for instance, AI development in China. You've had you've had a pace of development and a scope of innovation that has startled some American competitors.

But then you also have cases like Manus, which was an AI company, as people will recall, which was sold to Meta. But when the founders of the company tried to leave and then eventually go to the United States, then they realized they weren't allowed to leave and that they had, in effect, become nationalized as assets. Individuals, essentially, they were too important.

You know, there's going to be a whole technical conversation about the rules around that transaction, their departure, and so on. But the the effect was clear, which is that it remains unclear to me if China can strike the balance between dynamism and control that it is seeking.

And the analogy that recurs in my mind , goes back to the early period of the reform era when Deng Xiaoping and his cohort talked about a birdcage economy, which was, after all, a a system that had enough oxygen to let the bird grow and thrive, but not enough space that the bird could fly away. And maintaining that very fragile arrangement, that birdcage economy was never guaranteed and to my mind is still very much up in the air.

[17:32]

HASS: You know, just to extend your thought one step further, in recent weeks, there have been new regulations that have been put out in China that prohibit leading technological figures and their family members from leaving China without approval. Which is an extraordinary statement to make, and rule to put in place that I think will have a short-term effect of keeping top talent locked inside China.

Over the longer term, I think it's a question mark, is whether or not a ambitious, bright, leading thinker that has the world at his footsteps or her footsteps will choose to put themselves in that birdcage to start the next company that will transform the world or to do it somewhere else.

[18:11]

OSNOS: I agree with you. I think it's a huge development because exactly as you described, people will face a choice. Either they will say, "I am here forever now," or they will say, "I have to leave," to use the Silicon Valley term, "pre-idea," meaning do I, do I go before I've demonstrated any significant value?

And I think just to tie together a few of the themes we've just been talking about, in some ways the barrier, the the outer bounds of this birdcage economy concept become clear in the bodily moments, literally the physical moments when a person is told they cannot physically leave the country no matter how successful they are economically, or in the Shanghai COVID example, when you're told you bodily cannot be control of where you want to be and and why.

And I always found that to be very interesting. It's like where the technology meets the fragility of the flesh, and that is ultimately where these governance questions become clearest to us.

[19:05]

CZIN: As we then look ahead to to your most recent piece that you wrote in *The New Yorker*, I mean, I think one of the themes that, that's emerging in this conversation in this piece is that you are now discussing a country that is both tremendously dynamic in many ways, but also deeply dysfunctional. Right? You have this dynamism and dysfunction coexisting- at, at the same time. And I think that really shines through in your your most recent piece.

So you have this this dynamism and this dysfunction playing out at the same time, and I think that's a big part of China's story right now, especially when you look at the at the kind of illustrative example you just gave of China's technology sector. Right?

So I mean, there's so much angst and anxiety in the conversation about this in Washington and in Silicon Valley, of course. Like, how do you see what's happening in China, especially how the governance intersects with the technological space. Right? Like, how are they managing this potentially transformative moment?

[19:57]

OSNOS: Well, I'll tell you that to put it in connection with what we were talking about a moment ago with the age of malaise, I, as I was starting to form this sense of the technology initiative—we'll just call it that, sort of broadly defined in China --I was trying to understand, well, how do I situate this alongside the reality of all of these indicators of dysfunction, of disaffection, which in some ways may even be a more powerful sociological phenomenon.

And I asked a a friend who, who works on these issues, I said, "How do you make sense of this?" And he said, "Look, they coexist just as they coexist in the United States." And I I took that to heart, meaning that we are right now in this country contending with the reality that you have extraordinary technological dynamism. If you're sitting in Silicon Valley, you feel as if yesterday is a mile away. And then at the same time, you can step out into the rest of the country and have this overwhelming sense of, in some cases, stagnation being the dominant impulse, being frozen in place. So you have to be able to put these two facts into one juxtaposition.

And I I have to tell you, just this is one of those moments where I feel very fortunate that *The New Yorker* exists and that, for reasons beyond me, it permits me to keep writing for them, that you can write a 10,000-word story that has both of these phenomena at play. So you're writing about the property crash and the, and the

fertility crisis, and the fact that people feel this, to use Xu Zhiyuan great expression, the writer Xu Zhiyuan described it as a "profoundly confused era" because of AI, because of the geopolitical situation, and because of the downturn.

And at the same time take stock of a technological transformation—there's really no other word for it—that I think is important to underline in print. Because unless you're working in the world that we are in, the specifics and the scale of China's technological investment at a time when America's politics are chaotic is easy for the American public to either underappreciate or overlook.

And so part of this project was to say, while we are disinvesting, for instance, in research and development, when the CDC is described on the front page of *The New York Times* as "zombified" because of the cuts and the undermining of its functioning, , China is proceeding with a kind of ruthless efficiency.

And you can read that one of two ways, either as an encouraging development or as a deeply discouraging development, depending on which values you hope to see expressed worldwide.

[22:27]

HASS: So Evan, in the United States, the discussion around China often bifurcates to extremes. Either China is 10 feet tall and they're getting ready to conquer the world, or they are, you know, just encumbered by problems and on the cusp of collapse.

The piece that you wrote and the, what you're just describing challenges both of those narratives. You obviously wrote this piece with an awareness of the zeitgeist, the mood, the discussion that's taking place in the United States. How did you want your piece to be interpreted and understood against that American backdrop?

[22:56]

OSNOS: Yeah, I have a a great editor who likes to say that, you know, the best kind of long essay is the one that says, That thing you thought was true is not true, but that other thing is also not true too. And in some ways, that is, is actually the intellectually responsible approach to writing about China.

And I think especially now where these two contradictory portraits are inaccurate alone and required to coexist. So I mean, to be more specific about it, I said, Okay, I want to go and understand what the technology feels like. And so in order to get into places like technology companies, you do as one does, and you, you know, get in touch with companies or venture capitalists, and eventually they will get you in the room with these companies. And then you have to immediately situate it in the context of how much is hype and propaganda and how much is real.

So I would have these moments where I would say, Okay, state media is promoting the fact that there are robots everywhere. So how are people actually experiencing robots? So one fact can be true, which is there are nine industrial robots installed deployed by China for every one that is deployed by the United States. And if you're somebody interested in America's industrial future, you should take heed of that fact.

But it is also true that if you go into, as I did in the story, a convenience store that is staffed by a humanoid robot, very much a propagandistic exercise, and you order a hot dog, the hot dog unfortunately fell into what might be described as the uncanny valley between the machine and the customer. And, you know, you have to be able to kind of have those two experiences in order to be able to convey it.

[24:38]

CZIN: Yeah. I think, I think that's really well put. I mean, I think what is, what is really striking to me in this too is that, you know, you capture both the dynamism and the dysfunction. I think this is one of the things that gets lost in Washington. Right? Like, there's a tendency to... You know, we talked about this with Jane Perlez, right, about the shiny bauble beat, right, and about how to how to take these things with a with a grain of salt and a little bit of caution.

And I think there's sometimes in the conversation in Washington a tendency to be dismissive of this, right? Like, it's not real, it's not formidable, or they've just, they've just cheated and they've mimicked, right, and there's not a real ... there's not a there there when it comes to the technological dynamism.

And what I worry about a lot is that we underestimate that despite the dysfunction, right, and the system's proclivity to propagandize, like, there is a real really formidable country that we're up against. Right?

And I think the framing that you had about that moment of the 1970s, I think that's an apt analog for right now. Right? Like this is, both countries are in this period of dynamism, but also deep dysfunction I think on both sides. And the real trillion-dollar question is who's able to reinvent themselves? Right? And who is using this time and space and their resources wisely to to do that.

[25:44]

OSNOS: Yeah. I I think you, you've nailed it actually. I mean, it's... resilience is in the end the most prized product that we're talking about. And China has, in some ways, and I I kind of came to this, I encountered this view from some smart observers when I was writing a few years ago in China that that China has had comebacks before. Right? I mean, a prime example would be the advent of reform in the late 1970s, you know, a period when China had sort of self-reduced to such poverty that it was poorer than North Korea, poorer than sub-Saharan Africa, and then all that came after.

And the question now is, is it in fact capable of throwing off the dysfunction, throwing off of the disaffection, which is profound, or not? And is that possible in our country? So I very much see these as parallel questions.

I will also just to get to, to what you I think raised that's so important, Jon, is, and I hear this both in Washington and in Silicon Valley, is China used as a tool of rhetorical exploration. So they'll say, "Well, it's either, you know, China is just copying and cloning, it's nothing to worry about," or, "Yes, but we can't do any regulation on American technology because China." And that frustrates me enormously, because neither one of those portraits is helping us make smart decisions.

[27:00]

And I think we're getting to the point now, I think there's a little bit more of an, of a an informed conversation coming into view, partly through the work of people like Kyle Chan at Brookings, who have really helped us understand what is going on with Chinese technology development, where is their strength and weakness, what is the state policy structure that's coming into view.

And and it is forcing the United States, though I don't think nearly intelligently enough yet, to have a conversation about the possibilities for an AI conversation between these two powers that I don't see as happening anytime soon, but I also don't see it as optional.

Look, I, I think, you know, we are, all of us, I think the three of us have sort of come of age in a time when it's become increasingly clear that the great big questions of the world, and I know it seems tired to say climate, but it is still one of the things that we have to talk about as two countries, pandemic prevention, and AI. If we don't talk about them with the gravity with which we talked about nuclear weapons, I don't think we're coming at them with anywhere near to an adequate solution.

[28:12]

HASS: I expect the next leader of the United States, whoever that is, will be required to have the competence and temperament to do exactly what you're describing in order to meet a threshold of viability for higher office.

I want to turn the the mirror back to the United States in one second, but before we do so, one last question on your reporting in China, which is part of what separates your reporting in just sort of its eloquence and its insight from just about everything else out there is your ability to embed human voices into the conversation.

You finished your last piece by reflecting upon a conversation with a fortune teller in Beijing. Bring us, bring us behind the curtains on this. How did you end up talking to a fortune teller? What what what's the story there?

[28:53]

OSNOS: Well, you're you're kind to read to the end of the piece. So I I I'd been spending all of these weeks and months at that point really talking to people, prognosticating about the future, either in the U.S. thinking about China or in China, of course, thinking about China and the world. And it was, it it was quite stifling to have these conversations in one factory after another.

And I said, "I need to kind of..." I'd been hearing about young people in China going to fortune tellers, which I thought was such a revealing instinct, that they were living at the age of, you know, the greatest powers of forecasting, but what they really wanted was to go and have somebody examine their birth date and examine their hand and come up with a vision of the future.

And so I happen to know the old fortune teller district because I lived in Beijing there for a long time. And so I, you know, I I I scanned a bike, as one does, of course, revealing my location to authorities, and then biked across town.

And so I I go across town to the fortune teller district, and sat down with somebody, and honestly, the the experience was fascinating because what I realized was that we are asking of a fortune teller in that moment what we ask of an AI model. I mean, I I'd asked him something simple like, you know, "What does the future hold for my kids?" And and I could see him kind of scanning my face and giving me the answer I wanted to hear, which of course is what ChatGPT does. He did everything except say, "Brilliant question."

But then I was, within that moment, I just, it, it, it became clear to me ultimately that that is really what we are groping for in China. Particularly people on the ground were, are are trying to figure out, how can I reasonably anticipate what is to come? And that's impossible.

And so I found it satisfying to go back, as I often have over the years, when I'm struggling to make sense of the official story in Beijing delivered in in sort of stentorian terms, I find that it is useful to go back to the humid, human, earthy elements of China that in its way are kind of what drew me to the place.

[30:57]

CZIN: One of the things that's been striking in, just in the last few weeks, especially with the Xi state visit having just passed, is that there there was some polling done by our colleagues at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs that talks about how the mood has shifted in the United States.

And in in addition to doing wonderful reporting on China, you also have done a lot of going west of the Beltway and 95 to see the rest of the country, of our wonderful country. And we're really curious to get your thoughts about, you know, since you spend so much time on the ground in other parts of the country, your your sense of what is shifting in terms of the vibe on China, right, where more and more Americans do seem to have, if not a favorable view of China, a less hostile view, more receptivity to, to China. What, what do you think is is is going on? Is the sand really shifting beneath our feet in some ways outside of Washington or?

[31:41]

OSNOS: I think there are a few things at work. I mean, one of them is, there is this China-maxing phenomenon, which we've all read about, some have written about, where, you know, young influencers are, in some cases being sponsored by relevant authorities in China to go over, and to observe, and to be dazzled.

And that actually does travel widely. I I don't have any way of quantifying the effect of that, but I think we need to take that seriously. And I I think it's not just young influencers. In some cases, you know, there are people who I think are are not being critical enough of the story they're being told in some cases.

But I think what it really reflects is that our perceptions of China in America are entwined with our perceptions of ourselves. And I think part of the reason why the portrait, for instance, that Dan Wang, the analyst who wrote *Breakneck*, generated so much interest was because he was describing a phenomenon in China, the the building, the engineering state, as he'd framed it, that felt like it was a description of

something we were lacking, and, and to a certain kind of reader and audience that was both thrilling, satisfying, maddening, and maybe inspiring because they would say, "Well, how do we somehow reclaim that energy?"

His portrait is actually much more complex than the title or the shorthand would convey. But I think that there is some portion of the American public that I- that, that feels our political sclerosis, our infighting, our inability, uh, to use the now cliched reference, our inability to build a train in California at a time when China is building so successfully.

But I think that what that misses is what happens when a state can go full speed ahead without public discussion on a project. That could be building a train, it could also be developing the one-child policy. What we know is that there are enormous social and political and historical repercussions.

[33:49]

So in some ways, and this is, you know, now self-flagellating, I think that a generation of writing on China has still not achieved the effect of us trying to give Americans a really robust sense that China's gains also come with these big questions about what's durable, what's sustainable.

But I think, yeah, I think fundamentally it comes down to the fact that you now have a a period when people are so unsure about America's path forward that there is some comfort in a superficial way in looking at China.

Also, look, I think China has learned lessons diplomatically. Let's be more tactical for a second. I think they have put aside the "wolf warrior" phase, which was so unsuccessful as a technique, and the soft power efforts that they're directing around the world, some of which are apparent and some of which are subterranean and are kind of working their way through the information ecosystem, have an effect to some degree.

But I would be curious what you guys make of this because that, for me, this is a hard one to figure out even as somebody who works on American politics. Do you think that we're experiencing a a more positive turn in American public opinion about China, or is it superficial?

[35:04]

CZIN: It's hard to say, but it's something that I wonder about. I mean, this is one of Donald Trump's superpowers, right, is the ability to change the conversation, and he did it in his first term on China in particular. Right? And I think he kind of captured some of the energy that was already crystallizing in some parts of Washington at the end of the Obama administration. Right? And so maybe he's done it again with the stalemate that we currently have with the Chinese and the softer, kinder, gentler approach that we've been taking, I would, I would argue overall.

Our colleague Matt Turpin made this point at some point, Trump likes to cut against the grain. Right? So whatever the consensus is among us at the Brookings

Institution and, you know, the so-called deep state, Trump wants to swim in the opposite way. Right? Even if it's a consensus that he's put in place himself.

But what I really struggle to fathom is how, how real that is. Right? Like, what are people really thinking? Because you do see so many elements of hostility toward the PRRC. They can't buy real estate in places like Florida and Texas. Right?

So it, it's honestly very hard. I I sometimes joke, like, Chinese politics I can make sense of, but our own is much more challenging.

[36:05]

HASS: You know, Jon has put forward one hypothesis. I'll offer one other, which is that what we're watching may be less about China and more about us. I think that there's just a broad sense of fatigue in our country with grand strategic projects, punctuated most recently by the situation in Iran. A desire for renewal, regeneration, finding, you know, the best version of ourselves.

And if that requires recalibrating a little bit the amount of intensity that we're going to allocate and the amount of resources that we're going to allocate to dealing with China, then that is a price that some Americans appear more than willing to make.

But this leads me to the final question, Evan, which we want to draw you out on before we wrap up, which is that you have, throughout your career, sort of had this impeccable timing for spotting moments of transition and then helping explain and define them for for the public.

So as you sort of think ahead to future projects, do you think that the the next major transition that deserves to be captured by your pen will occur in the United States or in China?

[37:04]

OSNOS: Well, I will tell you that's a a ludicrously generous way of describing my record. I I amble from one interesting thing to another and just stand there and and bathe in the in the light of it.

I think I think honestly what I find myself drawn to right now is trying to understand what the lessons of an earlier machine age in America during the Industrial Revolution, what lessons they hold for us today. Because we are right now in the opening moments of what I think we will come to understand as a period in which the social and political dynamics of the country are being transformed by the flywheel of technology at the middle of it, and that is not a simple enterprise. It is not by any means something that guarantees social harmony.

And, I'm now working on a book that is about the 1920s and the strains that were produced by a period of enormous growth in America's technological capability. But what happens when people are left behind or chewed up in that process, and what effect do they have on the social composition and direction of the country?

In some ways my refuge is to go back in history and to try to understand what's happening. That can be a perilous enterprise. You know, many a Chinese writer over

the years has tried to invoke a historical analogy as a way of interpreting and understanding the present. Some of them have gotten away with it.

But I I I am finding that that, for me, that, that history is the most eloquent way of cutting through this period in which everybody seems to be talking their book at a time when it's very hard to know who's telling the truth.

CZIN: Well, I have full confidence you'll come up with something more pithy than the post-post-industrial age.

OSNOS: I like that. I—titles.

CZIN: Titles. Yeah.

OSNOS: Titles.

HASS: Well, Evan, thank you so much for being with us. This has been such a rich conversation. We hope that you will allow us to have you back again to continue it in the future.

OSNOS: My great pleasure. Thanks for the invitation. It's great to be with you.

[music]

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