Book Reviews

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Book Review

程翔 (Ching Cheong),《千日無悔——我的心路歷程》(*My Thousand-Day Ordeal – A Spiritual Journey*), Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 2012, 348 pp.

reviewed by
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My Thousand-Day Ordeal is a *tour-de-force* by veteran journalist CHING Cheong of his traumatic detention and imprisonment in China from April 22, 2005, to February 5, 2008. The English title does not capture the nuance evoked by the Chinese title – "A Thousand Days without Regrets – My Spiritual Journey". And both the Chinese and English titles shortchange the powerful punch delivered by the nightmarish account of his precipitous descent into the Satanic legal hell in China and his graceful redemption through baptism by fire. The book offers the same gripping narrative of well-acclaimed political and spiritual autobiographies that chronicle the personal epic in different epochs in the history of Communist China – beginning from the early years of the Republic where patriot returnees were jailed on trumped-up espionage charges, through the tumultuous Cultural Revolution years where former Red Guards were hounded by the revenge of heaven, to former counter-revolutionaries who wasted their youth in China's gulags and found God.[1] *My Thousand-Day Ordeal* is more. It does not only have the built-in tension of a patriot's unrequited love, and an idealist's shattered dreams. It also has the inquisitive breadth of a veteran investigative reporter, and the introspective and analytical depth of a soul-searching intellectual.

Ching's case was unusual because he was not a Western or Hong Kong journalist who made his career exposing dirty linen in China. Driven by patriotic fever, he left a much higher paying teaching job in 1973 and joined the reporting staff of Hong Kong's *Wenhui Bao*, the daily newspaper directly controlled by the Communists in Hong Kong. The School Captain of a leading Christian high school in Hong Kong, and a graduate of the premier University of Hong Kong, he was a rare find in the conservative British colony suffering from sinophobia, as China was just emerging from the fanaticism of the Cultural Revolution. The Communists in Hong Kong also

saw in him someone who had the profile and skill set of one that Beijing would like to groom as a community leader when the British colony would revert to China in 1997. He did earn their confidence in due course and was promoted as the Deputy Chief-Editor, spent two years studying in Amsterdam and Paris, and was assigned as its Beijing correspondent in 1980. Both the fate of China and Ching made an abrupt turn when Beijing crushed the Student Democracy Movement in June, 1989, after which Ching and over 40 of his colleagues resigned from the *Wenhui Bao* in protest. From 1996 on, he worked for the Singaporean *Straits Times* in its Taipei bureau, where he covered Beijing-Taipei relations. What got him in trouble was his relationship with the Eurasia Foundation, which commissioned him to write reports on Chinese politics and economy. Espousing political reforms in Communist and post-Communist states, Eurasia was branded as a spy agency by the anti-reform faction in China. On April 22, 2005, Ching was detained by China's State Security bureau agents at the Hong Kong border after he finished his business in Shenzhen, China. There his 1,020-day nightmare began.

Ching was later charged with engaging in espionage and disclosing state secrets to a foreign spy organization. The book offers a dramatic account of the interrogatory tactics used by Chinese law-enforcement agents in the investigative stage. As Ching later found, the authorities had no prosecutable evidence on Ching and they tricked him to volunteer self-incriminating information. They misled him to think that they had already collected 95 per cent of the overwhelming evidence against him, and asked him to disclose the remaining 5 per cent to show his contrition. To entice him to cooperate, they insinuated that an intellectual like him was naïve, ignorant of the cloak and dagger game of international espionage, and was an easy prey of spy agencies, thus suggesting that Ching might only be charged with the lesser offence of being an unwitting accomplice to a serious crime. Lest this false promise would not work, they threatened that he would never be released unless he signed his confessional statement, much less given a chance to communicate with his family in Hong Kong, who was then not informed of his political ordeal and whereabouts. Held in complete *incommunicado* with the outside world, deprived of legal counsel, placed in indefinite solitary confinement, Ching succumbed and wrote the 20,000 word full-disclosure confession, stating that he had provided written reports to the Eurasia Foundation for money, but had not illegally obtained state secrets, much less provided them to Eurasia. The admission of guilt was premised on a double conditional – Ching added that he never knew that Eurasia was a spy agency, that if it were, then his behaviour might have constituted an act of spying, and it might cause harm to the Chinese state, for which he apologized and accepted legal responsibility. Based on his statement, a government spokesman stated in an international press conference that Ching had admitted

collecting intelligence for a foreign spy agency for a large sum of money. The dice is now cast for Ching to bear the grief of his self-inflicted wound.

Ching would still have refused to sign his imprisonment warrant had he not been subjected to the extreme psychological distress of the investigative interrogation process for 105 days, euphemistically called "monitored living" (*jianshi juzhu* 監視居住). As Ching's subsequent research found, the innocuous label masks draconian coercion tactics that can be considered psychological and physical torture. Illegal in other common-law countries, it is justified in China's Criminal Litigation Law by "the need to arrest when the evidence is insufficient" (Art. 65). This is clearly contrary to the prin-ciple of presumption of innocence and deprives the suspect the basic rights of defendants protected by law. During the three-and-a-half months, Ching did not know where he was confined. None of his family members or contacts was informed of his whereabouts. He was not allowed to contact legal counsel, read newspapers or watch television. He could not tell night from day as all windows were completely covered by shutters. The lights were turned on for 24 hours, including the time he slept. He was under intimate surveillance around the clock by three teams of two guards, who watched his every move, even when he was taking a shower or using the toilet when its doors must remain fully ajar. He was not allowed to chit-chat with the guards.

The all-pervasive surveillance continued for the following two phases of the criminal process. Ching was formally detained after he signed his confession statement thereby admitting guilt. He was transferred to a detention centre of the State Security Bureau in Beijing, where he was housed for 508 days, after which he was tried in court and incarcerated first in a Beijing prison and later in a Guangzhou prison until his release on February 5, 2008. During detention, the complete isolation of solitary "monitored living" was gone, when he was placed in a 20x8 sq. ft. cell with three other detainees, behind a thick steel door opened by a heavy lock. The steel door had a six-inch square opening in the middle through which food was sent in and out during meal time, and where detainees had to place their hands to be cuffed before they could leave the cell. All movements inside the cell were under electronic surveillance by a close-circuit monitor, supplemented by patrolling guards on a corridor overlooking the cells.

When Ching was transferred from detention to prison, he also graduated to a higher form of proletarian dictatorship. Prison life in China is geared towards not only deprivation of personal freedom, but psychological transformation. The goal is "admission of guilt, submission to law" (*renzui fufa* 認罪服法). This is accomplished by forcing prisoners to internalize the identity of a criminal. As a form of criminal branding, check-in came with a complete, nude body search in public line-up, where the oral, anal and

genital areas were checked supposedly for hiding illegal substances. Traces of personal identity were removed. Their heads and beards were shaven. They were made to put on prison clothes marked with iron bars and underwear painted with prison emblems, wearing prison footwear, and putting on an ID badge with photo, full name, convicted crime, prison ward and cell number. When speaking to a warden, the prisoner had to squat down first, and speak to the warden looking up, stating his full name, convicted crime and prison sentence. While waiting for the evening news in the assembly place, prisoners need to bend down their heads, and could only raise them to watch the screen when the warden gave the command. Personal freedom was reduced to a minimum – prisoners could only eat, sleep, work, shower, and use the toilet on a fixed schedule, punctuated by seven roll-calls per day. The only free time was Sunday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., most of which was used to do laundry. To drill in submission, prison rules were read twice a day, prisoners who could recite the 38 rules received credit for reducing prison time. Feeding became part of the dehumanizing process as well. Prisoners took the meals not inside a dining room, but sitting on the floor of an outdoor playground, exposed to the wintry elements or under the summer scorching sun, around two tin basins with rice in one and non-staple food in the other, dished out by the head prisoner of each cell. Despite what is stipulated in the "Prison Law", both the quality and quantity of daily meals were always deficient. This can be seen in the monthly food supplement bazaar where prisoners scrambled to purchase a minimum of 20 packs instant noodles. Even with this self-help relief, Ching lost 50 pounds during his three years behind bars.

Living under such dehumanizing milieu led to deviant behaviour. It is customary for prisoners to use foul language where every uttering was instinctively spiced with elaborately concocted curse words. Ching also observed apparent homosexual behaviour, including holding hands, fondling, grabbing from behind, lying on another's thigh, and touching the other's genitals. To seek escape from such repression, some prisoners engaged in passive non-compliance of prison rules, the punishment of which was transfer to prisons in the northwest, where the physical conditions were harsher but prison life was less regimented. A temporary relief was hospitalization in a medical facility which also served the public, where better hygiene, decent meals, more personal free time, and availability of unrestricted viewing of multiple television channels provided a coveted get-away vacation from the doldrums of prison life.

The haven that Ching found was the spiritual asylum of Chinese philosophy and Christianity which he was allowed to purchase and read. The teachings of Buddhism on human suffering, Daoism on pain and death as part of nature, and Confucianism on triumph of virtue over adversity offered some comfort, but they did not touch Ching as profoundly as did the Christian

Bible. The most inspirational for Ching was the passages in the Book of Job on why the virtuous had to suffer, the reassurance of God's protection in his traverse through the valley of darkness in Psalm 23, the exhortation to be joyful in suffering, and to return injuries with kindness in Romans 5 and 12. Ching was never moved to tears or feel the sacred and the transcendent when he read the philosophical works, but he sobbed uncontrollably when reading the biblical texts, and felt the urge to engage in dialogue with God. He became a Christian convert in August 2007 when his elder brother, a Protestant pastor, visited him in the Guangzhou prison. Unlike Paul, Ching's road to Damascus took him 40 years when, as a defiant young materialist, he first rejected Christian teaching in his high school days as opiate for the masses.

In the Library of Congress cataloguing scheme, *My Thousand-Day Ordeal* is classified under "Journalists – China – Biography" and "Christian testimony". The book's contents certainly fit both categories, but they also transcend these labels. Neither category conveys the rich detail, the extensive research, the strong attachment, even profound obsession with which Ching embraced the subject. His description of the overall design and lay-out of every prison, detention centre and interrogation facility is as meticulous as an architect's blue print; their floor plan, size and measurement and interior furnish as exact as the inventory lit of a real-estate listing agent and home insurance adjuster. With journalistic flare, his account of strange sights within prison walls and state security detainee transfer, the check in and check out procedures as mesmerizing as a mariner's journal and explorer's diary. Yet he would not let the embellishments distort the facts, but let primary documents speak for themselves. He listed the hourly schedule of the Guangzhou Prison's daily routine, a full bibliography of the 30 books he read with relish in detention and in prison. His narrative on his own prison labour work includes the corporate profile of the company and its affiliates that produced and sold products made by prison labourers in the Guangzhou Prison, including its management, produce line, output, sales, financials and contact information. Most journalists' autobiographies and Christian testimonies would not have the 13 appendixes as well as 15 tables and boxed texts comparing Chinese and international statutes, or a frequency count of key words in the Bible. To be completely accurate and truthful about his sources or to leave an unedited documentary record as Bonheoffer's Letters from Prison, he does not merely paraphrase, summarize or quote his sources, he also reprinted the collection of correspondence he had with his wife, employer, two brothers and two sisters and friends. The historian's dismissal of journalist account being an unreliable source clearly does not apply in Ching's case. Indeed, the book is not only the spiritual travelogue of a man for all seasons, it is also a treasure trove of Chinese and comparative criminal statutes and procedures, treatment

of detainees and prison life, and human right conditions in China in the late reform and early Twenty-first Century period.

Notes

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1. Eric Chou, *A Man Must Choose* (New York: Knopf, 1963); Ken Lin, *The Revenge of Heaven, Journal of a Young Chinese* (New York: Putnam, 1972); Boli Zhang, *Escape from China: The Long Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom*, translated by Kwee Kian Low (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002).