

Lunch with the FT *Chen Guangcheng*

‘China will see democracy’

The blind activist made headlines when his dramatic escape from house arrest sparked a diplomatic stand-off between Washington and Beijing. He tells *Jamil Anderlini* that his exile will not halt his campaign for human rights

Chen Guangcheng's new home in a grim New York tower block looks curiously like the hospital complex in downtown Beijing, where the legal activist recently occupied centre stage in an extraordinary political drama. Indeed, in the lobby there is a burly man with an earpiece, who, were it not for his Caucasian features, could have been one of the crowd of police and security agents that kept Chen prisoner for seven years.

I tell the man my name and why I'm here and after a few minutes I'm ushered into a lift. It is only a few months since the 40-year-old, blind almost since birth, made his daring and unlikely escape from house arrest in a remote village in eastern China. Despite breaking his foot when he jumped over a wall outside his home, he reached Beijing, where he was smuggled into the US embassy, prompting a diplomatic stand-off between America and China.

After a week of frantic negotiations, a compromise eventually saw the Chinese government provide Chen with a passport and he headed, via hospital, to the US, where he is now studying law at New York University.

As I wait for Chen in his white-walled apartment, I recognise Jerome Cohen, the NYU professor of law and expert on Chinese human rights who helped the US government negotiate the activist's exit. Then Chen himself enters, led by his wife, Yuan Weijing. He is wearing a white shirt with a red tie offset by the dark glasses that have made him such a recognisable figure to human-rights followers in China and around the world.

Though I've written thousands of words about him and talked briefly on the phone to him while he was in captivity, this is the first time we've met. He speaks with a powerful, didactic turn of phrase, in well-educated Mandarin that belies his peasant roots, though thankfully without the flowery classical aphorisms beloved of Beijing or Shanghai intellectuals. He walks with a limp but says his foot is healing and he will soon be able to visit the Statue of Liberty.

Lunch, ordered in by Chen's minders, is an excellent, enormous Italian meal of pasta, pizza and salads from Otto Enoteca Pizzeria on nearby Fifth Avenue. Before we start eating, he asks if he can hold my digital recorder. "I have a deep fondness for audio recorders," he tells me, as he examines my device with his fingertips. "I was given one in 2005 that I used to document accounts of the government's violent family-planning practices. It survived countless confiscation raids on my house and I still have it today."

His casual, dispassionate reference to the work that got him into so much trouble is striking, as is the serenity and forgiveness he displays while describing horrific events and the people who subjected him to them.

As we start our meal, I ask Chen how he likes the food in New York. His wife gives him a piece of pizza, telling him what it is and that he can use his hands to eat it. He smiles and says he likes all kinds of cuisine, especially Japanese and Indian. He explains that, while under house arrest in his village, he was regularly stopped from going out to buy food and supplies, and he and his family often went hungry.

In his simple, aphoristic style he continues, "Sour, sweet, bitter and spicy – they all have their own nutritional value, and it's the same in a person's life – eating some bitterness [having bitter experiences] also has its benefits and value."

I ask about his first impressions of America. Chen says he's impressed by the freedom of speech and expression he has witnessed. "Ordinary people in the US are not afraid to express their own opinions," he says. "It comes so naturally; I think it's one of the most important factors that have made the US the world's most powerful country."



‘China’s laws are not the problem, the problem is that they are not properly enforced in real life’

Chen's work exposing the abuses carried out in the name of China's one-child policy, and his representation of women forced to have late-stage abortions, and families punished for having more than one child, is well known in the US, making him a cause célèbre across the political and religious spectrum. His work in providing free legal advice to disabled people means that not so long ago Chen was also celebrated by the Chinese state.

Discrimination against the disabled is rife in China, especially in remote rural areas such as Dongshigu, the village where he grew up. Career options for the blind are limited, with the luckier ones finding work as musicians or masseurs. Chen himself studied traditional massage in the southern city of Nanjing but, once there, began to attend law lectures in his spare time. The only one of a large family of peasant farmers to attain anything beyond rudimentary education, he and his story would be highly unusual even were he not blind.

The state's tributes ceased, however, once Chen turned his attention to the topic of population control. In 2005, he was placed under house arrest, then jailed for more than four years on charges of disrupting traffic and damaging public property. Released from prison in 2010, he was sent back to his village and house arrest. As word of his plight spread, foreign reporters, Chinese activists and concerned citizens began traveling to his village to try to see him,

documenting their attempts and the violence they suffered at the hands of his captors. Last December, for example, when the Hollywood actor Christian Bale tried to visit Chen in his village with a CNN television crew in tow, he was attacked, leading to international headlines declaring Batman's defeat by the Chinese Communists.

Others who've met Chen have described the charismatic effect of his simple direct manner, and I sense it myself in some of his answers – a kind of innocent idealism that can make him seem naive but that lends his thoughts and opinions more power. There is, also, a strong undercurrent of righteous anger as well as a stubborn insistence on using logic to confront the contradictions of authoritarian repression.

When I ask whether he's worried about becoming irrelevant back home, as has happened to other dissidents once exiled to the west, he disagrees forcefully. He can, he says, still communicate with people in China. "When I was in prison I couldn't even call my wife on the telephone, except for once a month," he says. "But did I have more influence when I went into jail or when I came out? Do you think my communication with friends in China will be easier or harder now than when I was in prison? I believe I've answered your question."

But what about the suggestion encouraged by the Chinese government that, by leaving for the US, he has shown he is a pawn in America's plan to destabilise the Communist party? "The Chinese people are smart enough to ask for themselves how I'm being used by America and for what," Chen responds. Anyway, he adds, he plans to return to China once he has finished his studies at NYU.

When I express doubt that the Chinese government will allow him to return, he dismisses my concerns. "[The Communist party] wouldn't be so stupid," he says. "They know if they try to stop me going back that I won't just give up. I have a legal [Chinese] passport obtained through the normal legal channels and they don't have any legitimate reason to stop me." He says he is prepared, if necessary, to camp out in JFK airport until he is allowed to board a plane for China.

He has thought carefully about how this trip to the US will affect his ability

to work for a more just society back home. His insistence on the legality of his passport and visa says a great deal about the kind of activist he is but also about the way China has changed over the past 20 years. Historically, when Chinese dissidents such as Fang Lizhi – the late 1989 Tiananmen Square protest leader who spent more than a year in the US embassy in Beijing before fleeing to the US for "medical treatment" – went into exile the Chinese government has, contravening its own laws, prevented their return.

But over the past two decades, even though the country lacks an independent judiciary, such behaviour has become much harder to sustain as the party has placed a huge public emphasis on the "rule of law". This has led in turn to the emergence of a new kind of activist, of which Chen is one of the most prominent. As Cohen and others point out, he is not a "dissident" in the pure sense of the word because he is not calling for the overthrow of the government or a radical shake-up of the existing order.

Chen's "first demand", as he calls it, is that the Chinese government obeys its own laws and its own constitution, which ostensibly guarantees human rights, freedom of speech and many other values that are taken for granted in the west. "When you read China's constitution, you realise that if we could only fulfil those basic requirements then China would be a great country," he says. "China's laws themselves are not the problem, the problem is that they are not properly enforced in real life."

This is both what makes Chen's case poignant and what makes him so dangerous for China's rulers – his activism is based on simply asking the authorities to live up to their own pronouncements.

Chen's apartment

New York

Funghi misti
Linguine puttanesca
Goat cheese agnolotti
Four cheese pizza
Rocket salad
Pasta alla norma
Rigatoni con stracotto

Food from Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, One Fifth Avenue, New York

Total (incl service) \$95.00

He is most passionate discussing his nephew, Chen Kegui, who remains in detention in China for defending himself with a kitchen knife as government officials stormed his house when they discovered Chen Guangcheng was missing. His nephew has, he says, been charged with "intentional homicide" for injuring his attackers in self-defence. Others who helped in Chen's escape are similarly subject to official surveillance and harassment.

I ask whether he resents the Communist party for the way he and his family have been treated, and if he considers himself anti-communist. He stops eating and asks his wife if there are any chopsticks with which to tackle his linguine, but there aren't so he soldiers on. "It doesn't make sense to say I oppose the Communist party or the Chinese government – after all there are more than [80m] party members and there are good and bad people in any large group," he says. "Within the party and government there are very few people who hold real power, and the rest don't even get to vote on who represents them. Opposing the entire Communist party is not a justified, rational or objective position to take."

I press him further on his political views and his stance on democracy. "Just like every political system, democracy is not perfect and needs a lot of improvements but it is the best of all the political systems we have in the world today."

I ask if he is familiar with Winston Churchill's famous observation that "No one pretends democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

There follows a moment of confusion and it becomes clear that Chen has no idea whom I'm talking about. This, too, is a reminder of why he is such a magnetic force in contemporary Chinese politics – a blind, self-taught peasant who has formulated, in his own words, one of the most famous quotes in modern history without knowing the name of the person who originally said it.

He continues, emphatically: "China will see democracy, I'm one hundred per cent sure – it just needs time. If everyone makes an effort to build a more just and civil society then it will come faster and if everyone stands by and does nothing, then it will come slower but is still inevitable. Whether the authorities wish it to or not, the dawn comes and the day breaks just the same."

Jamil Anderlini is the FT's Beijing bureau chief

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