

The godfather of the hyper-modern city

– Chen Liangyu

Henrik Valeur, 2011

"I apologize"

Chen breathe

"I apologize to the party, the people and my family"

He sits down. A broken man who has lost everything. The last two years he has spent in prison in Beijing and under house arrest in a distant province. It is spring 2008 and he is now sitting in a courtroom in Tianjin, waiting for his verdict.

He risks the death penalty.

Until two years ago, Chen ruled the largest city in China. First as the Mayor of Shanghai and later as its Party Chief.

He had worked his way up from a minor position in a factory to become one of the most powerful men in China, a close friend of the former President and a dangerous rival to the current President. At a meeting with other party officials he had even dared to ridicule the Prime Minister.

That was why he was now sitting here. He was sure about that.

They would let him lose face; he who had given the whole country a new face. Shanghai was China's face to the outside world and Chen had not only given the city a facelift, he had completely changed its looks. During his reign, the bleak industrial city, filled with stinking rivers huddled under an unbearable smog of poisonous smoke from steel mills, shipyards and the use of coal in private homes, had been transformed into a proudly towering, shiny clean commercial and financial center, with a skyline that would blow away even the most important foreign leaders, who were now all making pilgrimage to the city.

Chen had created this glossy image of the new China, which was shining in the Huangpu River and outshining the monuments from the colonial era on the other side of the river. It was his creation. Was this a way to thank him?

Where were all the people he had helped and who had been padding his back? Nobody had tried to contact him since that day, two years ago, when he and his “right hand”, the Mayor, had traveled to Beijing to meet the President. A meeting only his “right hand” had come back from.

He noticed the movements of the judge's mouth, but he did not hear the words. He was in a different place.

He was back in the classroom at the Military Academy of Architecture. It was during the Cultural Revolution. The teacher, who had always supported Chen, had been send away and now the other students were laughing at Chen's projects. Some of them even spat on the projects on the way out of the classroom.

Chen was left alone. Dreaming. One day he would realize these projects. And then he would tear down the projects of the other students. But first he had to fight his way into power. He had to be humble. His first action was to seek out the student leader and thank him for criticizing his projects.

Chen had abased himself to many people over the years, but only to those above him. Eventually, only the President was above him and Chen was one of his most trusted and closest allies. He was as close to the top as one could get. Now, all the humiliations would be forgotten and his dreams would come through.

He began by building nine new sub-cities around Shanghai. Five million people were to move out from the unsanitary conditions of the inner city, into these new habitats, which were designed by international architects in romantic styles that imitated the settlements in their home countries. There was an English town, a Swedish village ...

In the inner city, the old low-rise Lilong areas were cleared to make way for new towers of glass and steel. So much was built that steel was in short supply all over the world and it was said that half the world's cranes were located in Shanghai.

But Shanghai was not only becoming a bigger and better city, it was also becoming the center of a region with nearly a hundred million inhabitants. Shanghai would be linked by the Maglev – a state-of-the-art magnetic high speed train – to the two old imperial cities: Hangzhou to the southwest and Nanjing to the northwest. The Maglev was already running at a short distance from the international airport of Shanghai towards the city center. The line had never really been finished so the end station was still on the outskirts of the city, but there was no time to fix that, because the project of connecting the Yangtze River Delta region, perhaps the biggest infrastructure project in China since the construction of the Grand Canal, was now under way.

The modest projects, which his fellow students from the Military Academy of Architecture had spat on, had become entire new cities, even an entire new region.

His lawyer whispered in his ear: "It will be alright, you'll be all right"

"What?"

"18 years. If you are humble they may let you out earlier."

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