

# Chen Yonglin on defection and delay

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Commentary by

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G'day. Here's another on the ground report from Webdiary contributor **Chris Saliba**, this time on a public event in Melbourne featuring Chinese defector Chen Yonglin. Chris's first citizen journalist report for Webdiary was [There's a riot goin' on](#). His last piece, [The thought crimes of Jennifer Zeng](#), was translated into Chinese on websites [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). Chris's blog is [here](#). Thanks Chris!

## Chen Yonglin on defection and delay

by **Chris Saliba**

Last Friday the Melbourne Chinese Studies Group held a discussion night, titled *Defection and Delay*. The star attraction was Chen Yonglin, with other speakers including Dr Dennis Woodward of Monash University and Dr Paul Monk of Austhink Consulting. The two hour session was chaired by former ABC China correspondent Helene Chung Martin.

For some reason or other, the venue was Designs Australia, which appeared to be some type of upmarket furniture boutique. Modish lifestyle furniture sprawled throughout the showroom environment, tagged with hellishly expensive prices. Dare I sit down anywhere? I felt like I'd stumbled into Auntie Mame's Beekman Place apartment during her modern phase. After finding one long, richly upholstered bench-type affair I asked the woman at the other end if she was saving the space for anyone. 'I think my friends have gone to the wrong place,' she smiled grimly, fumbling in her handbag for a mobile phone.

Chen Yonglin sat patiently through all of this hullabaloo, with people snapping pictures of him left, right and centre, their camera flashes firing off little bolts of lightening. With his youthful looks and smart suit, he looked like a well prepared school student about to give a speech rather than the controversial figure he is.

You'd have to be brave I thought, fronting up for this sort of do, all eyes boring into you, and your English not exactly honed for intense questioning and scrutiny.



*Chen Yonglin in Washington last month. Photo: AFP*

When speaking Chen had a habit of meandering off onto subjects that didn't seem related, I daresay the result of his thinking in Chinese and speaking in English. It was hard to follow him at times, and thankfully Helene Chung Martin frequently came to the rescue to clarify matters.

Our chairperson kicked off proceedings by suggesting that Chen's defection from the Chinese Communist Party is the biggest event in Australia-China relations since Tiananmen. Why did he sacrifice such a brilliant career, she asked?

'I want to live as a man of dignity,' Chen said, telling us that in China there is no such thing as freedom of speech. For those who risk it there is 'prison, or you get sent to mental hospital'. We all chuckled at what we assumed was a witticism, but soon came to our senses. This was no joke. China currently imprisons hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners in their re-education through labour camps, a hell on earth whose core business is brainwashing. (Chen himself was required to attend a re-education program before commencing his work in foreign affairs.)

Chen then gave us a bit of family history. In 1971 his father was persecuted to death by the Communist Party, and as a result his family experienced great hardship. His mother worked as a primary school teacher. 1985 saw him enter the Foreign Affairs College in Beijing, which pleased his mother immensely. He spent six years in the college.

Surprisingly, Chen claimed that he joined the pro-democracy movement at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He 'joined hands with other demonstrators to block the soldiers'. This is certainly paradoxical, when we consider his later career. (During the talk Chen did explain that for a family without means, the only real job opportunities lie in the Communist Party. His family did struggle for money, and he felt a responsibility to help provide for them.)

In 2001, when Chen came to work in Australia, his job entailed collecting names and reporting on Falun Gong practitioners. It was this spying work that created a crisis of conscience. Previously, he had only known CCP propaganda about Falun Gong practitioners, which painted them as an evil cult that advocated and practiced gruesome public self-immolations. But when the diplomat actually met the people he was reporting on, he found them to be sincere, honest people. 'I can't believe these people commit suicide,' Chen said, contrary to state propaganda.

At this point Helene Chung Martin asked the question that was on everyone's lips. Are you a Falun Gong practitioner? 'No,' Chen replied. Nevertheless, he believed that Falun Gong practitioners 'should be given right to do so. Freedom of certain beliefs.'

On the subject of spies, Chen made the alarming claim that more than one kidnapping by the CCP is happening every year in Australia. Most of those Chen

claims are kidnapped are Chinese nationals. Furthermore, the major task of these spies is to harass Chinese dissidents.

Chen's treatment at the hands of the Immigration Department is another extraordinary tale. When he tried to defect, he says that the Immigration Department didn't seem interested. On the 31st of May (Chen could effortlessly throw out key dates in his immigration ordeal) a DFAT senior officer, 'repeatedly asked me to return to the Chinese Consulate'. He was even was advised to call them, and told that they were worried about him! Even more absurdly, he was told not to worry, that it was nothing to leave the consulate for a few days.

Having failed to persuade Chen to walk back into certain doom, our good people at the Immigration Department offered a tasty menu of options. Business migration scheme? Off shore protection visa? (Much mirth from the audience.) On shore protection visa? Chen chose the last.

Chen was asked about his family in China, and naturally he said he was very worried about them, in particular his mother. 'My mother is scared,' he said. 'She's been persecuted. They're really scared. No one never dares to talk bad against the party.'

Moreover, Chen said, the CCP spiritually and physically persecutes the Chinese people. The CCP 'does not respect people's interests'. So pernicious have the effects of communism been, the Chinese psyche has been reduced to 'slavery, the dark side of the heart'. 'Chinese civilisation has been destroyed by communism,' Chen asserted. To the charge that he's a traitor to his country, Chen counters he's only a traitor to the CCP.

Will he ever return to China? Yes, when China becomes democratic. His aim now is to 'wake the conscience of the Chinese people'.

After Chen had been put through so many questions by Helene Chung Martin, the two academics, Dr Paul Monk and Dennis Woodward were asked for their reactions.

Paul Monk thought the claim of a thousand spies a reasonable estimate, going so far as to say it could actually be a conservative figure. Significant numbers of Chinese people in Australia were experiencing harassment, he said. On the subject of Chinese democracy, he reminded the audience that some of the best intellectuals in China have been calling for democracy for years.

Dennis Woodward highlighted the major embarrassment Chen's seeking asylum had caused the Australian government, coming as it did in the midst of our currently seeking a free trade agreement with China. Add to this the grief that John

Howard was experiencing from his backbench over the treatment of asylum seekers. It all couldn't have come at a worse time.

A good point made by Paul Monk was that the Australian government had no choice but to grant Chen asylum, due in large part to the extraordinary media coverage his plight had received. Things may have been very different if Chen had simply been invisible, like so many others languishing in detention centres. This point received a round of applause from the audience.

Once we'd heard from the experts, we were all given a chance to ask questions. Someone asked about the attitude towards the Free Tibet movement in the Sydney Consulate. The woman next to me let out a sigh of relief. 'I'm glad he asked that, because I was going to.'

You can guess the answer. 'Sensitive issue,' Chen said.

Furthermore, we were told that during Chinese President Hu Jian Tao's 2003 visit to Australia *The Australian* had written a letter of apology to the Chinese Consulate for carrying an advertisement by the Free Tibet Council. Allegedly, a senior Chinese official had put pressure on the paper. (A lot of shocked gasps in the audience.)

**Margo: I've no idea whether this claim is true. I do know that China pressured Fairfax - without complaint from the government - not to run material on Falun Gong during President Hu's visit to Australia in October 2003. See the chapter in my book on the Hu visit republished at [China s not a normal country](#).**

There were several critics in the audience. In a heated and lengthy harangue, a Mr Chap Chow, a refugee advocate slammed Chen for betraying his country. He accused Chen of stoking anti-Asian sentiment in Australia by his manner of dropping his job and seeking asylum in a seemingly opportunistic way. He was furious that Chen had 'stolen documents' from his own country.

Another audience member, Mr Joe Monterro, accused Helene Chung Martin of pointedly ignoring him throughout the discussion, and insisted he would have his say. He worked with a Chinese-Australia Friendship group, and claimed that many of his members were experiencing physical harassment, and that Chen must have known what was going on.

It was just at this climatic moment that the whole discussion came to an end. Chen had to away to a dinner appointment, and could not be delayed. No more questions would be taken.

I walked away with a hazy, fragmentary impression. I was still confused by many aspects of Chen's story. A pro-democracy activist that joined the CCP? Why did it take him four years to leave the consulate? A man who snitched on Falun Gong practitioners, but now receives their support in Australia? All of the allegations he has made – spies, yearly kidnappings – seem like something out of a comic book. How could this be real?

One thing is sure, our own government recognises Mr Chen as a genuine refugee, and considers him to be in too dangerous a position to be returned to China. No matter how much our officials may have preferred that he return to his job and stop making such a fuss, they know he would face a dire future if sent back to his homeland. It's now up to our government agencies, if they're interested, in chasing up his claims and learning the truth. If people are being spied on and harassed, then our government must do something about it. We need to establish if what Mr Chen alleges is true, and if so, must demand China stop the persecution immediately. If true, it's a national scandal that nothing is being done to stop people who have sought protection being harassed by a government friendly with ours.

Sadly, you get the feeling that once the media attention dies down the whole story will just evaporate into thin air. It's not too much of a stretch to say the government would like it that way. Our economic relationship with China is 'critically important' for the future of the Australian economy Trade Minister Mark Vaile has said, and furthermore, 'we intend to keep it that way.'

Our Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, is currently appeasing the Chinese Communist Party by banning Falun Gong protests outside the Chinese embassy in Canberra. When interviewed on Nine's Sunday Program Downer [described their protests as 'constant propaganda'](#). He, of all people, should know the true plight of Falun Gong practitioners in China. It is they who are the victims of constant state propaganda.

When Mr Chen was asked why he chose Australia when deciding to defect, he replied, 'Because Australia is an important Western Democracy'.

Thanks for the compliment, Mr Chen. I hope we don't disappoint you any time in the future.