

China story... and that 'party' line

Cassandra Chew

Journalist Peh Shing Huei was getting questions about "the party" in the title of his new book on China. It is called *When The Party Ends - China's Leaps And Stumbles After The Beijing Olympics*, and mostly, people wanted to know which party he meant.

At the book launch yesterday, he made clear it did not refer to any political party, but to China's coming-out party.

"Most China-watchers refer to the Olympic Games of 2008 as the party when China symbolically came onto the global stage," he said.

He was speaking to about 70 people who attended the launch at the Singapore Management University. His book, the first to be launched at the Singapore Writers Festival, looks at China's rise and challenges after the 2008 Olympics.

The 38-year-old was based in Beijing as The Straits Times' China bureau chief from 2008 to 2012, a period bookended by the Sichuan earthquake three months before the Olympic Games and the dramatic fall of Chongqing strongman Bo Xilai last year.

The 320-page book, published by Straits Times Press, is available in bookstores for \$28 before GST and also at www.stpressbooks.com.sg.

During a 20-minute question-and-answer session, he took questions on a wide range of issues facing China today, from mass protests to pollution, as well as the brain drain.

On human capital flight, he said the main reason wealthy Chinese leave is the lack of as-



Mr Peh speaking at his book launch at SMU yesterday, when he took questions on a wide range of issues facing China today.

ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

set security in communist China. Another reason is corruption, which is endemic and businessmen are left with no choice but to be part of the grey economy.

Asked about pollution in Beijing, he said it is partly the result of the government subsidising the purchase of cars to encourage domestic consumption after the global financial crisis.

The government now has to weigh whether to focus on reducing air pollution or hitting its 8 per cent yearly growth target, the basis for its legitimacy.

Moderator Ravi Velloor, for-

eign editor of The Straits Times, asked for his take on the 180,000 civil unrest incidents that take place annually in China.

"The numbers might come across as rather startling, but many end within a day, which means they are resolved pretty quickly," Mr Peh said. He thought it unlikely that the disparate issues would combine into "one single spark" that would lead to political change.

Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, who attended the event, said of the book: "Many books have been written on China, often by Western corre-

spondents from leading newspapers. Peh's book stands tall beside them. It has an insiders' feel to it, and a sureness of touch in his analysis of China. His book is a credit to ST correspondents in our bureaus around the world."

Mr Velloor said: "Peh's book kept me riveted. I think his narrative is so powerful, he's so honest in his work, he's what every journalist should aspire to be. He's critical, he's sceptical but he's never cynical."

Asked about the challenges of his years in China, Mr Peh said: "As a foreign correspondent, your movements can be

limited. One of my regrets is that I never made it to Tibet, because foreign correspondents by and large are not allowed to go to Tibet. I would have loved to be there."

What moved him, covering the 2008 Sichuan earthquake

"One man, in particular, he'd lost his home, mother, wife; his father was still severely injured. We were talking at a makeshift tent that was his home, and he insisted on sharing his bowl of noodles with me. The Chinese people, especially when you move away from the bigger cities, surprised me with their warmth, how open they were, and how willing they were to share their stories with someone who really couldn't do that much to improve their lot in life."

On dedicating the book to his late boss

"The late sports editor of ST, Tay Cheng Khoon, was my first supervisor and he taught me everything about journalism. He taught me not only how to write, but also how to interview. He said, 'Peh, interviewing someone is not just a matter of walking up to them and asking them questions'. For my first year in ST, he pretty much tore up everything I wrote and told me I was rubbish, and I was. Because of that, I learnt and, because of that, I am able to put out a book today. He left us six years ago, and I dedicate this book to his memory."