

# In China's "median city" people are surprisingly risk-averse



ILLUSTRATION: CHLOE CUSHMAN

**O**VER RECENT decades, individual Chinese dreams reshaped the world. The largest manufacturing power on Earth emerged, in part, because hundreds of millions of rural men and women left behind families and villages to toil in coastal boomtowns. Behind dry graphs showing steep growth rates lurked stories of the human heart. Generations raised amid Maoist conformity reinvented themselves as entrepreneurs and risk-takers.

If Chinese optimism is now fading, the world needs to know. Certainly the economy is slowing. Consumers and businesses are in a funk. The Communist Party devotes large resources to tracking the public mood, but keeps its findings to itself. So Chaguan duly attempted his own straw poll, flying to a city with a claim to being China's most typical.

About 5m people live in the urban core and rural counties of Yichun, which is known for its lithium mines. It is a third-tier city in the mountains of Jiangxi, a south-eastern province of middling wealth and size. At 34,600 yuan (\$4,850) Yichun's per-person disposable income matches the national median level almost perfectly. Yichun has the same proportion of old people as China does overall, and the same birth rate. Like many inland cities Yichun has modernised rapidly, gaining new parks, an airport, a high-speed train station and some shiny skyscrapers in just a few years.

In any political system, governments should want citizens to answer "yes" to two questions: is the country on the right track, and will your children's lives be better than

yours? Your columnist recently put those queries to dozens of Yichun residents. Their answers helped him see China in new ways.

Most revealing, those graphs showing national wealth growing swiftly and smoothly, year after year, do not match the experiences of the folks in Yichun. Instead, they described lives transformed by good luck, or blighted by bad timing. They talked of generational inequalities, created as opportunities emerged and vanished over recent decades.

When recalling life-changing moments—such as buying a home just before property prices soar—Chinese sometimes talk of *shang che*, or boarding a train. In conversation, Yichun locals could often identify a precise year in which their fortunes turned.

A couple in their 60s—but both looking much older than that—invited Chaguan to slices of watermelon in their three-room home, hidden in a maze of tumbledown brick shacks. The wife recalled the demolition of her rural village in 1979, a stroke of fate that saw her freed from communal farm work and assigned to an urban work unit. Her husband remembered 1991, when both were laid off by the same collective electronics factory, at the start of a China-wide wave of industrial restructuring. Fearful about how to feed their young twin sons, they opened a meat stall. The 1990s were good years to open a business, he mused, and life was soon “comfortable”. The couple sold meat for 22 years.

Their twins are 38 now and work in the southern megacity of Guangzhou. “Their lives are not as good as mine,” lamented their father, who frets about his sons’ low-paid jobs, though they went to university. “Society deceives people,” said their mother, noting how graduates across China struggle to find good jobs. Only one boy has married. They handed 400,000 yuan, much of their life’s savings, to his wife’s family as a bride price.

Just across town, but a world away, the owner of a deserted hair salon sighed that “business is a mess”. Two years after the covid-19 pandemic, customers are still tightening belts. He is calmer about the long-term prospects of his children—two boys of 11 and seven, who loped past in football shirts. He bought an apartment in 2011 and another in 2016. Today the flats are worth twice what he paid for them, though their value has slipped from a peak in 2022. He fears his sons will enjoy fewer opportunities than he did. Still, he said, those apartments will help them find wives.

A 23-year-old shop assistant described a gulf between youngsters whose parents bought urban apartments years ago, and those who did not. Others have money because their family homes were demolished as Yichun modernised, earning their parents compensation payments. Her own rural family is “not as well-off”.

After decades of growth, the Communist Party enjoys reserves of political capital. In a Buddhist temple, Chaguan met a middle-aged man in the hard-hit construction sector. He had come to pray for his “peace of mind”, he said. He blames himself, not the party, if life is difficult. “I need to work harder,” he said.

A local pawnbroker served tea while her colleague inspected a diamond ring being sold by an embarrassed young man. A divorced mother in her late 30s, she believes people

are becoming more risk-averse. Many of her contemporaries used to work in big cities. Increasingly, she sees them returning to Yichun, where with even a mediocre job “you won’t starve.” More and more youngsters dream of safe jobs in the civil service, she noted.

In tough times, the state is called a haven. The collapse of several big property developers has shaken buyers across China. Tellingly, a salesman at a half-built luxury-apartment complex in Yichun’s newest district emphasised that the developer is backed by a central-government ministry, and has ample funds to complete the project. The salesman considered starting his own business to make more money, but doubts he will take the risk. “Probably, I will go for stability right now,” he admitted.

Yichun is not in despair. A few locals accuse party leaders of mismanaging the pandemic and the economy. Others marvel at their city’s rapid development. Several wonder if their country’s old growth model is ending. *Shang che* was the dream. Today’s China has fewer trains to board. ■







