

RELEASED: Tuesday December 8, 2015

Foreign Correspondent: Our Man in China

Monday December 14 at 8:30pm on ABC – a one-hour special

In his farewell report for the ABC, correspondent Stephen McDonell looks at the spectacular changes that have swept China during his 10 years there – and the untold sequels to some of the big stories he's covered.

A preview of this one-hour special is available on request and Stephen McDonell is available for interviews.

When Stephen McDonell trekked into the remote town of Yingxiu after a catastrophic earthquake in 2008, the focus of the destruction was the flattened school. Its pupils were among 80,000 people killed in Sichuan Province.

"It looks like a town which has been bombed" – Stephen McDonell, 2008

A few weeks ago McDonell returned to Yingxiu. The school was just as he had found it – a poignant rubble memorial – but it was now at the epicentre of an earthquake tourism venture complete with viewing platforms, tour guides and pony rides.

"They were the same age as us ... It's really sad" – teenage girl tourist

Hundreds more schoolchildren died when another school collapsed in nearby Juyuan. Local man Zhao Xiaofeng, whose daughter was killed, still remembers McDonell publicly challenging an official about whether the school was poorly built.

"Next question please" – official's response to McDonell, 2008

Seven years later Mr Zhao says the townspeople are still waiting for an explanation.

"Could you help us by raising this question again?" – Mr Zhao to Stephen McDonell, 2015

Again there is no official comment. Official secrecy and heavy-handedness are traits that have changed little in McDonell's decade in China. But increasingly its citizens insist on being heard.

In 2010 villagers in Fujian province blamed a spate of cancer deaths on an industrial incinerator that was belching out plumes of thick black smoke. They exploded in rage when officials tried to stop them talking to the ABC.

"As citizens don't we have the right to speak? Can't we express our grief?" – village leader Lin Guanghao, 2010

Five years on, McDonell returns to find out what's happened to the village – and feisty Mr Lin. It's a tragic tale that says a lot about the way modern China works.

But for the vast majority of Chinese, life has improved in the past 10 years as the economy has powered ahead, towing countries like Australia in its wake. Optimism abounds amid uncertainty about the future.

Five years ago a top economist told McDonell that China's economic trajectory was unsustainable because it was too reliant on foreign demand.

"One way or another China will rebalance. It's not an option" – Professor Michael Pettis

That rebalancing is under way. While no one knows how much China will slow down, the economy is slowly transitioning from sweatshops and cheap exports to services and domestic consumer power.

Symbolic of the all the change is Beijing which has been transformed into a thriving modern capital with hip architecture, high speed trains, a subway network and chronic traffic gridlock.

Stephen McDonell prefers to use his bicycle. As he says, after 10 years: *"For me China has been a wild ride."*

Our Man in China – a special one-hour *Foreign Correspondent* report, 8:30pm Monday December 14 on ABC.

*Stephen McDonell is moving to the BBC in Beijing.

Stephen McDonell is available for interviews and a preview of this one-hour special is available on request.

Coming up next week, is the final of our one-hour *Foreign Correspondent* special reports:

Digital Disruption – Airst Monday December 21 at 8:30pm on ABC

Mark Corcoran reveals how the digital revolution is changing the way we get the news.

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