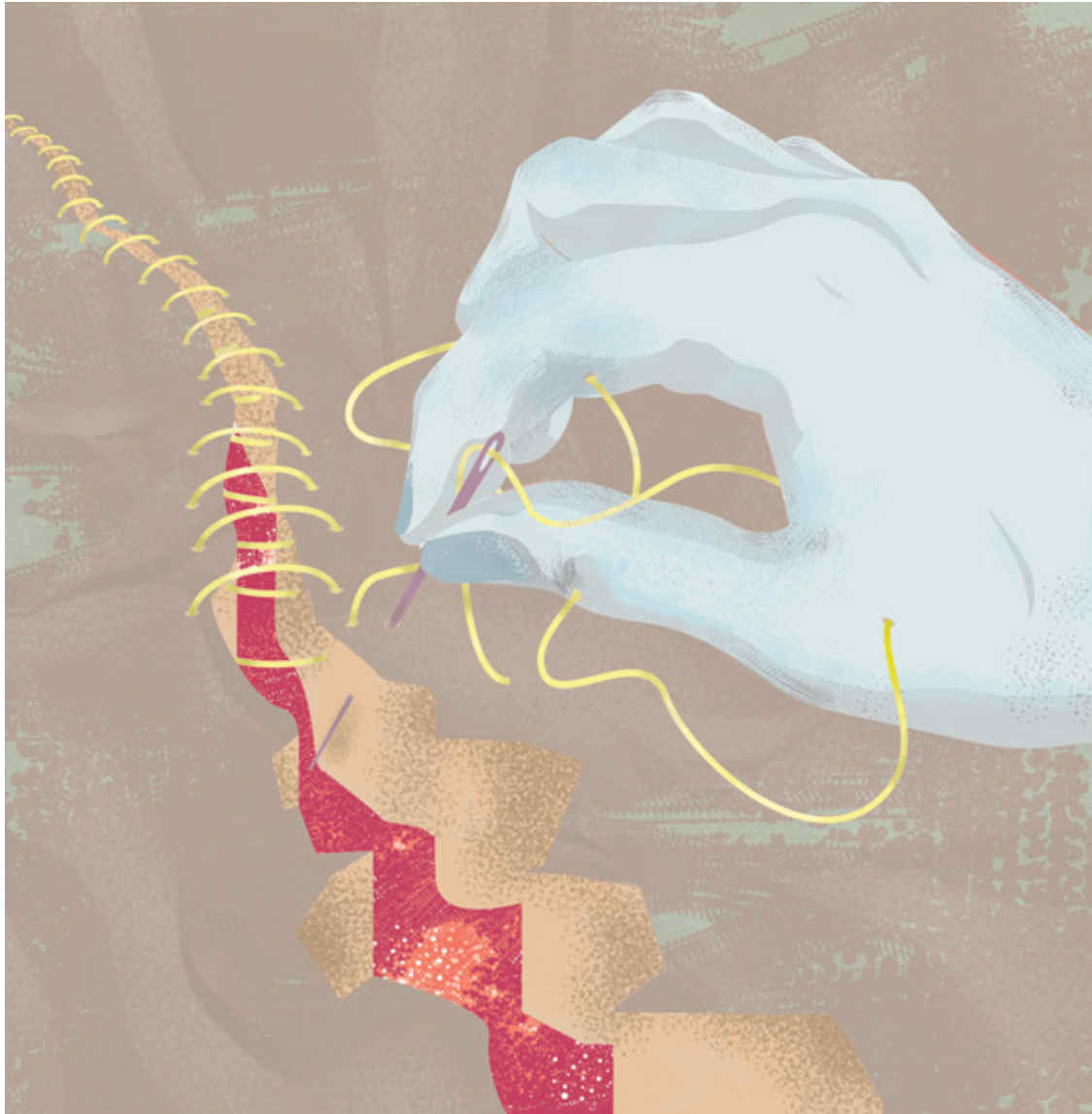


MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1, JAN-MAR 2018
STATES OF EMERGENCY
The Sichuan Earthquake Ten Years On



MADE IN CHINA
JOURNAL

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CHIN*o*RESI*E*
mismatched shards of China

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly recognise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency...

Walter Benjamin



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States of Emergency

The Sichuan Earthquake Ten Years On

On 12 May 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit Wenchuan county, Sichuan province. Felt as far as Beijing, the tremors caused horrific damage: 69,229 people died and 17,923 went missing. Yet, the aftermath of the seism was also a time of hope. Chinese citizens from all over the country outdid each other to show solidarity with the victims, not only donating money and goods, but also rushing to the disaster zones to provide assistance. Young volunteers from all walks of life poured into Sichuan to help, with many of them going on to establish their own social organisations. As local governments began to recognise the importance of NGOs in providing disaster relief and social services, 2008 was widely seen as a ‘Year Zero’ for Chinese civil society.

At that time, hardly anybody could have foreseen the wave of repression against civil society that was to come and that is today the norm. Indeed, there were worrying signals even then—the threats against the parents of children who had died in the disaster and the trial of Tan Zuoren, for instance—but the general atmosphere remained forward-looking and optimistic. On the 10th anniversary of the earthquake, this issue of *Made in China* revisits the optimism of those early days and examines what is left. In **Be Grateful to the Party!**, Sorace probes how the Chinese Communist Party has used propaganda and other means to boost its ‘affective sovereignty’ in the wake of the disaster. In **The World Is Yours!**, Xu describes the moral dilemmas that afflicted him as a scholar and volunteer in the earthquake areas. In **Sichuan, Year Zero?**, Kang offers a retrospective on NGO development in Sichuan since 2008, challenging the idea

that it was a ‘dawn’ for Chinese civil society. In **Civic Transformation in the Wake of the Wenchuan Earthquake**, Sun examines the evolution of state-society relations by looking the interactions between state, society, and individuals. In **The Power of the Square**, Gao explores the specific case study of an emergency shelter in Mianyang. Finally, in **Documenting the Sichuan Earthquake**, Svensson analyses the most significant Chinese documentaries portraying the catastrophe to audiences around the world.

This issue also includes a new op-ed section, with pieces from Hurst, Lin, Fiskesjö, and Cliff weighing in on current affairs. In the China Columns section, we feature **Beijing Evictions, a Winter’s Tale** an essay by Li, Song, and Zhang about local civil society and the evictions in Beijing at the end of 2017; **Justice Restored Under Xi Jinping**, in which Nesossi reconstructs two decades of miscarriages of justice in China; and **The Global Age of the Algorithm**, in which Loubere and Brehm look into the development of the social credit system in China. Finally, we include a conversation between Elisa Nesossi and Eva Pils about human rights in China.

In the Window on Asia section, Sorace explores the political implications of Ulaanbataar’s chronic pollution. The cultural section comprises two essays. In **Figuring Post-worker Shenzhen**, O’Donnell introduces several works of art that depict the post-worker demographics of Shenzhen, and its emergence as a ‘creative’ city. In **Rural Migrant Workers in Independent Films**, Florence examines how the representation of migrant workers in China has evolved over the years through the lens of independent Chinese movies. We conclude by interviewing William Hurst about his new book on legal regimes in China and Indonesia.

The Editors

BRIEFS
Jan-Mar 2018

JAN/MAR 2018

Members of Student Reading Group Detained and Harassed

In November 2017, the police detained two recent graduates and four students who were attending a reading group at the Guangdong University of Technology in Guangzhou. The self-described Maoist reading group organised critical discussions of social and political issues. While most of the members were soon released, the organisers Zhang Yunfan—a recent graduate of Peking University—and Ye Jianke were detained for ‘gathering crowd to disturb social order’. In early December, more individuals affiliated with the reading groups were either interrogated or detained, but news of their detention was only made public in early January 2018. Starting with Zhang Yunfan, several members issued public statements explaining the personal and political reasons that led them to become involved with the group, disclosing their experience of harassment and torture under detention in order to mobilise public support. A statement signed by hundreds of academics, students, and public intellectuals—many affiliated with Peking University—called on the local authorities to review the case, release Zhang Yunfan from police custody, and protect his rights under residential surveillance. All detained members of the reading group eventually negotiated an end to their detention and have now regained their freedom. While not unprecedented, this kind of harsh treatment of students involved in on-campus activities remains quite rare. *KL*

(Sources: **Chuang**; **Hong Kong Free Press**; **Radio Free Asia**)

Constitutional Amendment Approved by the National People's Congress

On 11 March, during the annual Two Sessions (*lianghui*), the National People's Congress passed a number of historical constitutional amendments with 1,958 votes in favour, two against, and three abstentions. Among the 21 changes to the Constitution, the most controversial revision was the removal of term limits for the posts of President and Vice-President, which had been announced by Xinhua as early as 25 February. This amendment potentially paves the way for Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely (see Hurst's op-ed in the current issue). The legislature also amended the Preamble of the Constitution to include ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ and the sentence ‘the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics’—key tenets of what has officially become known as ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’—to promote the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the state. The amendments also pave the way for a major overhaul of the government, a move which will affect more than two dozens ministries and agencies with the aim of reinforcing Party control. Most importantly, the revision enshrines in the Constitution a powerful new watchdog, the National Supervision Commission. This new organ is equal in power to the State Council; it outranks all ministries as it reports directly to the Party centre. It will take charge of a national network of supervision commissions, linked with local anti-corruption offices. This will widen the scope of the Party's authority over all civil servants, whether they are Party members or not, excluding the protections envisaged by Chinese civil law. *EN*

(Sources: **Financial Times**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **South China Morning Post 3**; **Xinhua**; **The New York Times 1**; **The New York Times 2**; **Xinhua 1**; **Xinhua 2**)

Unrelenting Repression of both Lawyers and Activists

The first quarter of 2018 has seen continuous and unrelenting repression of both lawyers and activists in China. Four days into the new year, 32-year-old Tibetan activist Tashi Wangchuk went on trial for ‘inciting separatism’, a crime that carries a punishment of up to 15 years in jail. He was detained in January 2016, after appearing in a *New York Times* video that documented his efforts to preserve Tibetan culture and language. According to Wangchuk’s lawyer, the video—in which the activist criticised the education policies of the Chinese authorities—constitutes the prosecution’s main piece of evidence. Also in January, prominent *weiquan* lawyer Yu Wensheng had his legal licence revoked, and was subsequently detained while walking his son to school. This was in retaliation for an open letter in which he criticised President Xi and called for political reform. In 2014, Yu had already been detained for 99 days, enduring interrogations lasting 17 hours, as well as physical abuse that resulted in a hernia. He is currently being held under ‘residential surveillance at a designated location’. In February, it was reported that jailed *weiquan* lawyer Jiang Tianyong’s health had severely deteriorated. According to his sister, Jiang is suffering from memory loss, raising concerns that he is being force-fed psychoactive medication—a method commonly employed by Chinese authorities against political prisoners. Likewise, in March, former state prosecutor Shen Liangqing was briefly detained after speaking out against President Xi’s constitutional changes. And things are not looking up for Chinese activists: in March, Fu Zhenghua, previously a deputy head of China’s Ministry of Public Security, who has led several high-profile investigations and crackdowns, was appointed Minister of Justice. *EN & TS*

(Sources: **Amnesty International 1; Amnesty International 2; BBC; Business Insider; China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; The Guardian; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; Radio Free Asia; Reuters 1; Reuters 2**)

Gui Minhai Seized in the Presence of Swedish Diplomats

On 20 January, Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai, who was abducted from Thailand in 2015 and was just granted limited freedom in October 2017, was again detained by authorities while in the presence of Swedish diplomats. Gui was traveling from Shanghai to Beijing with two Swedish consular officials to seek medical attention. However, at Jinan station, in Shandong province, plainclothes security agents forcibly took him away. He reappeared three weeks later in a forced confession filmed in front of a group of reporters from pro-Beijing news media, including the *South China Morning Post* (see Fiskesjö’s op-ed in the current issue). In the forced statement, Gui was coerced into saying that his trip to Beijing was part of a Swedish plot to get him out of China. Chinese authorities have since stated that he is now being held in captivity for leaking state secrets. Gui, a Hong Kong resident and Swedish citizen, was originally abducted from his holiday home in Thailand in October 2015, and brought to China under the pretence of facing charges related to a traffic accident more than a decade ago. In October 2017 he was released under partial house arrest and allowed to communicate with his family using video chat. The Swedish foreign ministry and the European Union have demanded that Beijing release Gui, with Sweden calling the most recent abduction a ‘brutal intervention’. The Chinese government has responded by denouncing Sweden’s ‘irresponsible remarks’ and suggesting that continued protest could threaten bilateral relations. Gui’s case exemplifies the Chinese government’s intensifying crackdown on dissident voices, both in China and globally. China has repatriated thousands of suspected criminals and dissidents from 90 countries, including the US, despite the fact that extradition treaties only exist with 36 nations. The tactics range from abduction to threats aimed at inducing ‘voluntary’ repatriation. *NL*

(Sources: **China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Foreign Policy; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia; The Washington Post**)

Surveillance and Repression of Uyghurs Intensifies in Xinjiang and Globally

In recent months the human rights situation in the restive northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been deteriorating rapidly. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, the Muslim ethnic minority that constitutes the majority of the local population, have been sent to re-education camps. Stories from the camps paint a stark picture, with detainees being held indefinitely as part of a newly normalised predictive policing regime. This follows a continuing crackdown targeting Uyghurs since 2014, which bans religious practices and dress, and is ostensibly aimed at stamping out religious extremism. With this anti-terror rationale, Xinjiang has become a testing ground for a state-of-the-art high-tech surveillance state. Authorities have been collecting biometric data at state-organised medical check ups, and Uyghurs are now required to install surveillance apps on their mobile phones. These actions have been accompanied by the rapid increase in the use of facial recognition software, iris scans at police checkpoints, and a range of other types of data collection that feed into an 'Integrated Joint Operations Platform' (*tihua lianhe zuozhan pingtai*) providing real-time analysis of 'security threats'. Xinjiang residents are also being assigned 'safety scores', with those deemed 'unsafe' being sent to the re-education camps (see Loubere and Brehm's essay in the current issue). The Chinese government has also increased pressure on Uyghurs outside of the country. Family members of Uyghur reporters for Radio Free Asia have gone missing in an apparent attempt at intimidation. Uyghurs in other countries, even those with foreign nationalities, have also been pressured to provide personal information—such as addresses, photos, and scans of foreign identity documents—to Chinese security forces. Those who refuse are compelled through threats to their families. The Chinese authorities have not publically acknowledged the existence of re-education camps. *NL*

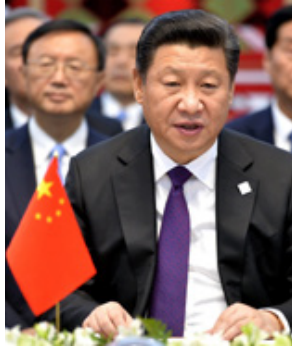
(Sources: **China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Foreign Policy; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia; The Washington Post**)

Foreign Companies Bow to Pressure from Beijing

In January, the Chinese authorities blocked the website and app of the Marriott hotel group for one week after the company listed Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as separate 'countries' in an online customer survey. To make things worse, a Marriott employee used a corporate Twitter account to 'like' a tweet in which a pro-Tibet group expressed approval for the survey's identification of Tibet as a country. In the midst of a public relations nightmare, Marriott profusely apologised and fired Roy Jones, 49, the hourly worker at a customer engagement centre in Omaha, Nebraska, who had liked the tweet. A similar incident involved Daimler, when its subsidiary Mercedes-Benz posted on Instagram a photo of a car along with an inspirational quote from the Dalai Lama. Delta Airlines, Qantas Airlines, clothing designer Zara, and medical instruments maker Medtronic were also involved in similar spats over the past few months. Far more consequential is the capitulation of Apple. On 28 February, the Cupertino-based company formally transferred its Chinese iCloud operations to Guizhou-Cloud Big Data, a local firm with close ties to the Chinese authorities. Apple also began hosting its iCloud encryption keys in China. Although Apple has publicly declared that it will not transfer accounts over to the new data centre unless users first agree to the updated terms of service, the move has caused widespread concerns regarding the privacy and data protection of users. Companies are not the only targets of pressure from Beijing. On 30 March, the organisers of the Man Booker International Prize admitted that, after receiving a complaint from the Chinese embassy in London, they had changed the nationality of Professor Wu Ming-yi, one of the writers included on the 2018 longlist, from 'Taiwan' to 'Taiwan, China'. The organisers only backed down after a public uproar, announcing that in the future they would list the 'country/territory' of authors, rather than their nationalities. *IF*

(Sources: **ChinaFile; Quartz; Reuters; SupChina; The Guardian; The Telegraph; The Verge**)

OP-EDS



President Xi Jinping.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

The Abolition of the Two-term Limit: A Sea Change?

William Hurst

On 25 February, almost at the same moment his visage appeared on screen at the Closing Ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games in Korea, Xi Jinping made a play to keep himself at the centre of Chinese politics for many years to come. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced that it would advise the repeal of term limits for the President and Vice President from Article 79 of China's 1982 Constitution. On 11 March, the National People's Congress duly voted to codify the changes. Removing the limit means that Xi could continue in office indefinitely past the end of his second five-year term in 2023. Some have been tempted to see this as a simple and naked power grab, putting China into the basket of tin-pot strongman regimes. China's official media, meanwhile, have downplayed the move—portraying it as necessary to advance and secure liberalising reforms. The reality, of course, is more complex, even as the recent machinations can rightly be seen as the next logical steps in a progression that began several decades ago.

To take this step, Xi had to ensure there would be no meaningful opposition. Doing this over the past five years has been no mean feat. Almost immediately upon assuming office, he embarked upon an ambitious campaign under the banner of anti-corruption to root out and purge adversaries—through the dramatic downfall of first Bo Xilai, followed quickly by figures linked to Zhou Yongkang and his 'Petroleum Faction', and then a number of other potential opponents, many tied to former President Jiang Zemin. The final strokes came in 2017, first in July, when Sun Zhengcai was removed as Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing, then in October, when the entire Politburo Standing Committee—save Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Xi Jinping himself—was successfully eased into retirement at October's Nineteenth Party Congress. Almost no politicians are left in position to demand any quid pro quo for supporting Xi's amendments.

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With no rivals left standing to demand or bargain, Xi traded away only the potential assignment of blame. China is beset by myriad difficulties—including a slowing economy, ecological and public health crises, and stand-offs in the international arena. The over-arching responsibility that will rest with the President is heavy.



The Chinese Constitution.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

With no rivals left standing to demand or bargain, Xi traded away only the potential assignment of blame. China is beset by myriad difficulties—including a slowing economy, ecological and public health crises, and stand-offs in the international arena. The over-arching responsibility that will rest with the President is heavy. As paramount leader for the foreseeable future, Xi Jinping alone will need to shoulder all tasks of addressing China's problems to fend off social and political instability at the national and international level. Should he stumble, his—and even the CCP's—political survival could be in jeopardy.

Removing constitutional checks on presidential power threatens liberals, regime critics, and those who would benefit from a greater institutionalisation of politics and continuing moves toward a rule of law in the long run. These potential objectors are too diffuse to target in campaigns and their opposition too deep-seated to be neutralised preemptively. Xi thus had to deploy another familiar strategy: linking rule of law construction to the stable maintenance and further accumulation of power by entrenched elites (or individual leaders).

Since the 1990s, moves to consolidate personal power have consistently been paired with calls for, or even concrete steps to bolster, a 'rule of law'. So long as steps toward a more robust legal system are perceived as genuine and credible, business leaders, liberal critics, or other supporters of more institutionalised order will find it hard to stand in the way of the power-augmenting changes with which they go hand-in-hand.

Ever since the dawn of the Reform Era in 1978, China has pursued the development of a 'rule by law' in the arena of private (commercial and civil) law, while defending a rigid redoubt of neotraditionalism in public (criminal and administrative) law. The CCP allows and promotes judicial independence and predictable dispute resolution in precisely the area of law that underpins the development of markets and contributes to the Party's perceived legitimacy. But when it comes to law as an instrument of the state's legitimate coercion—e.g. in matters of crime and punishment—the Party retains the prerogative and tendency to intervene pervasively into the adjudication of specific cases.

Institutions and rules can be strengthened for building markets and facilitating social harmony, even as they are suborned by the powerful, who employ the state's repressive apparatus to their continuing advantage.

By cementing his individual leadership for a longer term, Xi Jinping has not only increased his own personal responsibility, he has raised the stakes across the board. The risks of regime collapse, on the one hand, or of China slipping into sultanistic kleptocracy, on the other, have both increased significantly.

Removing presidential term limits and hardening the powers of China's surveillance state fit hand in glove with meaningful progress toward consistent and transparent decision making regarding intellectual property, private property, and financial regulation. Rule by law and neotraditionalism have coexisted in this hybrid for decades. Xi's latest moves are but the logical next steps in its development.

This hybrid is neither normatively commendable nor indefinitely stable. Even though Xi is not morphing into Mao or Stalin—who both ruled under conditions of generalised revolutionary mobilisation not replicable in China today, or even Suharto or Marcos who presided over more encompassing neotraditional orders spanning both civil and criminal law—he is changing the game of Chinese politics.

By cementing his individual leadership for a longer term, Xi Jinping has not only increased his own personal responsibility, he has raised the stakes across the board. The risks of regime collapse, on the one hand, or of China slipping into sultanistic kleptocracy, on the other, have both increased significantly. Even if he can maintain China's hybrid governance successfully, what will come after Xi exits the scene?

Assuming his implicit claims of *après moi le deluge* will keep Xi in power for the rest of his life, might the subsequent flood of generalised succession struggle wash away China's social stability and economic progress along with CCP rule? Or might we see a rejuvenated and reinvigorated CCP preside for many years yet over a stable authoritarian market-economic order? Only the years ahead will tell, but over the past couple of months Xi Jinping has definitely moved the ball down the court in ways that will resonate long after the 2022 Beijing Olympics are forgotten. ■



A man pulls his belongings in a cart in Daxing district (Beijing). Photo: Global Times.

The evictions were undoubtedly not just an unintended consequence of a disaster. They were preceded by the forced closing of shops, restaurants and housings in similar areas, and by the announcement of a plan to relocate Beijing's city government and public institutions to a nearby province.

Eviction and the Right to the City

Kevin Lin

Beijing's eviction of migrants from their dwellings in November 2017 following a deadly fire left tens of thousands homeless within days. It was rightly seen not as a legitimate response to a fire hazard but a convenient opportunity to push forward new political goals with regard to the city's migrant population. The evictions were undoubtedly not just an unintended consequence of a disaster. They were preceded by the forced closing of shops, restaurants and housings in similar areas, and by the announcement of a plan to relocate Beijing's city government and public institutions to a nearby province. This is part of a wider strategy to supposedly slow down the urban growth of the capital—moves that have produced heightened anxiety and uncertainty among the Chinese floating population. This poses the question: do migrants in today's China have a right to the city?

Significantly, those evicted comprised all kinds of migrants: e-commerce couriers, shop owners, street vendors, as well as IT professionals. This heterogeneity reflects the fact that Beijing is not an industrial city: much of its heavy industry has long been shut down or relocated to neighbouring provinces. In contrast to places like Shenzhen or Dongguan, where migrants are the bedrock of the local economy, migrants in Beijing are less central to economic activity, which may be one reason for the harsh measures undertaken by the authorities. However, migrants, if broadly defined as people from outside of Beijing, make up more than a third of Beijing's long-term residents, or over eight million people.

What the Beijing authorities might not have fully anticipated is that many who have obtained a Beijing hukou may continue to identify themselves as migrants, sharing not only the frustration of urban lives with other migrants, but also the feelings of being excluded and disposable. In one sense, migrant as a cultural identity cuts across the hukou line, which may explain why the phrase 'low-end' (*diduan*) touched a nerve for wide swaths of the population. So while the eviction speaks of a 'low-end population'

A common argument against eviction says that if those migrant workers who serve in the restaurants were forced to leave, there would be no one serving Beijing residents. The recognition of the role of migrant workers as servants and builders in a city like Beijing is simultaneously a factual statement and a reaffirmation of their 'low-end' socioeconomic position.



The border of Houchang urban village in Beijing.
Photo: Qiaochu Li.

(*diduan renkou*), the anxiety (and shared identity) extends beyond just rural migrant workers in the so-called 'low-end economy' (*diduan jingji*).

Such shared sentiments may explain the outpouring of sympathy that followed the eviction (see Li, Song, and Zhang's essay in the present issue). But the form such sympathy takes may risk being paternalistic, and the paternalism of caring for the unfortunate can deepen the entrenchment of the social position of the migrant. A common argument against eviction says that if those migrant workers who serve in the restaurants were forced to leave, there would be no one serving Beijing residents. The recognition of the role of migrant workers as servants and builders in a city like Beijing is simultaneously a factual statement and a reaffirmation of their 'low-end' socioeconomic position. It can lead to the thought—comforting for the status quo—that so long as they are not evicted or treated too harshly, their lives on the margins need not be questioned.

Another notable and somewhat unexpected response came from civil society, offering a glimpse of a possible resurgence of the public voice. A public statement in late November signed by academics, independent intellectuals, lawyers, and other civil society activists evokes the language of legality, human rights, and constitutionalism, contending that the eviction of migrants 'is a serious case of violating the law and the constitution and impinging on human rights' (Wang 2017). A second statement released in December by eight legal scholars and lawyers called on the National People's Congress to review the constitutionality of the eviction, citing violations of five constitutional rights centred on land, housing, and private property rights (Wei quanwang 2017).

The framing of the rights of migrants as a liberal-constitutional issue related to property rights—a reminder of the once vocal constitutionalism movement of the 2000s—sheds light on a largely unstated ideological contestation. The rights of migrant workers have been alternatively framed in relation to China's new working class's capacity to organise resistance by labour scholars and activists, or in terms of vulnerability of a social group in need of legal and constitutional protection by rights-oriented intellectuals. In practice, there is an overlap in labour and legal and citizenship rights, as can be seen from the fact that many labour scholars and activists also

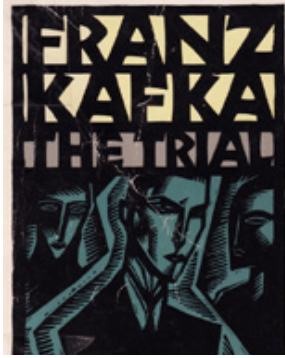
signed the first statement, where, for pragmatic reasons, a legalistic rights discourse is dominant. Still, such critique based on the protection of individual property rights leaves open the question of why evicted migrants are stuck in their place, socially and geographically, and of their collective rights.

There were acts of defiance in the form of sporadic collective protests and individual assistance to displaced migrants. One activist was detained and an organisation shut down; Hua Yong, a migrant artist who shot videos of the eviction, fled Beijing fearing for his safety, and was later detained and released. However isolated, these acts testify to the existence of alternative visions of what the city may look like, including the right for voluntary assistance to those in need, and documentation of abuses of power. Both are forbidden today.

The threat of urban protests was likely on the minds of the authorities. By some measure, China has one of the highest rates of urban riots. Many of them are expressions and assertions of the kind of city that the citizens want to see. Environmental protests to prevent polluting factories have resulted in some of the most successful mobilisations in recent years. Similarly, riots over the brutality of urban management officers (*chengguan*) have drawn wide support across the city. In light of this, the authorities have been pouring resources into pre-empting and containing urban riots.

Will China's ambitious urban transformation further deepen tensions among the urban population and migrants? It is hard to escape the conclusion that, as such a policy requires extensive state intervention, the eviction of migrants or other harsh measures will continue to recur. Still, there is hope that faced with this, more and more people will likely start to ask what kind of city they want and demand their right to the city. ■

Will China's ambitious urban transformation further deepen tensions among the urban population and migrants? It is hard to escape the conclusion that, as such a policy requires extensive state intervention, the eviction of migrants or other harsh measures will continue to recur.



Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.
Photo: Are.na

—

These fake confessions represent a modernised version of Stalin's show-trials. They violate both international and Chinese law, and several prominent Chinese judges and legal officials have protested bravely, arguing that legal matters are supposed to be decided in the courts, not on television.

Confessions Made in China

Magnus Fiskesjö

Globally, mass media face a difficult dilemma: how to report on the Chinese spectacles of prisoners forced to perform fake, scripted confessions? The Chinese authorities produce these confessions in order to create a new 'truth', one that is to be disseminated through Chinese state media and, if possible, through foreign mass media, and social media as well. Chinese mass media must, of course, simply obey orders to present, and even assist in the arrangement of these new Orwellian 'truths'. But what should mass media outside of the control of Chinese state authorities do with these grim performances? Some have handled this problem with integrity, others disgracefully.

Over the last few years, there has been a long string of these coerced confessions, in which the Chinese authorities force political prisoners to go on television and debase themselves. These gruesome spectacles have featured lawyers, journalists, publishers, bloggers, music stars, and many others with an independent voice. To the dismay of their friends, colleagues and relatives, after disappearing into the hands of the authorities, these victims will appear on the screen to denounce themselves and everything they used to stand for. Inside China many, if not most, people know that it is all fake and meant to intimidate and browbeat people into silence. Chinese citizens know that they cannot denounce this game openly, or they could end up on the stand themselves. In this regard, the tactic is largely effective.

These fake confessions represent a modernised version of Stalin's show-trials. They violate both international and Chinese law, and several prominent Chinese judges and legal officials have protested bravely, arguing that legal matters are supposed to be decided in the courts, not on television (Fiskesjö 2017). The spectacles fly in the face of the painstaking effort to build up the 'rule of law' in China over the decades since Mao's death. But today, we no longer hear the admonitions, previously issued by Chinese judicial authorities, to stop police torture and forced confessions

But the question for free media organisations remains: how to report the ghastly spectacles? Some have tried to stick to the old journalistic principle of reporting 'both sides', however misplaced this may be with the flagrant gross inequality in the situation of prisoners who are speaking under duress.



Gui Minhai
Photo: People.cn

(Xinhua 2012). In the increasingly harsh environment inside China, it has become too dangerous to openly criticise these spectacles.

In the latest case, in February 2018 Swedish publisher Gui Minhai—who is an old friend, and who has been detained in China since he was kidnapped from Thailand by Chinese agents in late 2015—was put up for his third mock 'interview' attended by select, pliant Chinese media (Phillips 2018). The previous two occasions involved his self-smearing (along the lines of 'K' in Kafka's *The Trial*), first with regard to an old criminal offence dug up for the purpose, and secondly with regard to the main issue, his publishing and book-selling in Hong Kong.

This third time, the spectacle's producers included not just the usual propaganda arms of the regime (e.g. the Xinhua News Agency, etc.), but also the formerly independent *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) of Hong Kong. In agreeing to 'interview' a torture victim in between the torture sessions, the paper gave in to pressure from China, exerted by its new Chinese owners (Alibaba). Recently, the paper has given many signs of taking directions from its new masters, and this scandalous decision came on the heels of another similarly planted interview made under duress, with the imprisoned legal assistant Zhao Wei (Phillips 2016). It certainly shows the SCMP can no longer be trusted as an independent news organisation.

But the question for free media organisations remains: how to report the ghastly spectacles? Some have tried to stick to the old journalistic principle of reporting 'both sides', however misplaced this may be with the flagrant gross inequality in the situation of prisoners who are speaking under duress. These media, instead of pointing out the deceit themselves, often cite human rights organisations stating that these are fake events. Readers are then expected to be their own judge. But many people outside of the Chinese context are not used to imagining that an 'interview' could be faked and orchestrated through torture. The news media owe it to their readers to make clear, that this is what is now happening.

Headlines become very important here, since they frame the issue for most readers. It is a perennial issue for newspapers that headline-writing page editors fail to grasp what their journalists reported. Thus, perhaps out of ignorance, we sometimes see headlines on otherwise

acceptable articles, which misleadingly say that the victims ‘speak’ as if they were in a position to freely express themselves. This is bound to mislead readers—many of whom only read the headlines.

One example was the report from NHK World on the day after the ‘interview’, headlined ‘Hong Kong bookseller criticizes Sweden’ (NHK World 2018). This headline is gravely misleading, as it omits the fact that the bookseller in question, Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, was not voluntarily ‘criticising’, but *forced to* criticise his adopted country according to a script. In his situation, he is well aware of the fact that following the script is the only way to hope to avoid more torture, harm coming to his relatives, or even death. For news media like the NHK to omit this, is truly atrocious. They offer no more than a buried hint, that the victim ‘met with reporters... while under supervision at a detention facility.’

Another striking and shameful example came in Norway’s leading daily paper, the *Aftenposten*, also on 10 February 2018 (Rønneberg 2018). The headline proclaims, as a matter of fact, that ‘Gui thinks’ Sweden is using him as a ‘chess piece’. This is, of course, the *Aftenposten* itself becoming the chess piece of the Chinese torturers. News reports like this one will mislead many readers into thinking the victim spoke his own mind, and these media all become complicit in the Chinese authorities’ scheme. These are successfully planted propaganda victories.

Early on in the saga, while the Chinese authorities were focussed on destroying his bookstore in Hong Kong, Gui Minhai was quite successfully discredited by means of digging up and twisting of an old traffic incident that in fact appears to have been resolved long ago and in accordance with the laws of that time (Bandurski 2016; Huang 2017). Yet many media organisations and even the government in my country, Sweden, fell for this scheme by continually referring to it as a reason for Gui’s detainment.

One low point was when, in a television segment that featured Gui’s abduction and illegal imprisonment, a national public television journalist spent a great deal of his allotted time on stage pressing the non-question, ‘What about the traffic incident?’—probably under the false impression that he was pursuing ‘both sides’ in the name of ‘fairness’. It was a scary display of how authoritarian China managed to stage direct Swedish journalists, without even setting foot in the newsroom. Such victories have allowed



Peter Dahlin pictured during his forced confession on CCTV. Photo: CCTV13.

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 But if we want to avoid being intimidated or becoming complicit, we must refuse to be duped. We must expose and protest against the charade and demand the release of those who, like Gui Minhai, have been violated in this way. And we must ask our media to take it as their duty to spell out the horrible truth: the forced confessions are scripted performances directed by the jailers, from behind a fake stage.

the Chinese authorities to focus on their main goals: to close and dismantle Gui's bookstore, while intimidating the entire Hong Kong publishing industry, thus sending a message to the rest of Hong Kong and the world.

Most Swedish media have by now largely woken up to what China is doing, although occasionally there are still ignorant editors who are naïvely continuing to make similar mistakes, unwittingly serving as the conduits of this most insidious form of state propaganda that uses live people as props. The coerced character of these spectacles should be obvious to any independent observer, including how they commonly make use of personal flaws in the prisoners' past, so as to smear and discredit those targeted. This allows the Chinese authorities to achieve their main goal: to silence these voices. Free media owe it to their readers to explain that these performances offer insights *only* into the torturers' scheme, and not into the victim's real views; they should not leave out the fact that no alternative views or protests are tolerated in China.

We actually already know a lot about the concrete procedures behind these fake confessions, and in substantial detail. Multiple victims, when regaining a chance to speak freely, have given us accounts of how it works. Recent major examples include Gui Minhai's heroic colleague Lam Wing-kee and the brave female lawyer Wang Yu—both of whom spoke out despite the immense risk of repercussions (France 24 2018; HKFP 2016). Several foreigners detained and treated according to the same program have also given us similar accounts, including another Swedish citizen, Peter Dahlin (China Change 2017). The victim is intimidated through a series of measures that can be called modern 'clean' or 'stealth' torture (Rejali 2009): sleep deprivation, extended isolation, being forced to stand for long periods, excessive heat or cold, threats against family members and colleagues on the outside, and so on. These measures will break down almost anyone. In the end, very few of us, if any, would refuse to read the script for the cameras.

But if we want to avoid being intimidated or becoming complicit, we must refuse to be duped. We must expose and protest against the charade and demand the release of those who, like Gui Minhai, have been violated in this way. And we must ask our media to take it as their duty to spell out the horrible truth: the forced confessions are scripted performances directed by the jailers, from behind a fake stage. We should also clearly distinguish these

horrors from the kind of police misconduct, corruption, and torture seen in many, if not all, countries around the world. This is different, because we are not talking about rogue policemen, or even horrifying conspiratorial police torture rings, like the one exposed by the *Chicago Tribune* (Berlatsky 2014).

We are talking about a political crime wave, orchestrated by a government-run propaganda machine that uses living human beings as props and tools for political influence. To be sure, there are other comparable examples, such as the Islamic State in its infamous victim videos shot just before their execution. But China's campaign is especially dangerous because of the country's increasing weight in the world, which it is now throwing around in order to re-define the 'truth' by force. We should not let them. ■



General Wang Zhen (1908-1993).
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Xinjiang Today: Wang Zhen Rides Again?

Tom Cliff

Nostalgia for the boyishly-brutal Wang Zhen flooded across Han Xinjiang in the days, weeks, and months following the intra-communal violence of early July 2009 in Urumqi. Many Han invoked Wang Zhen's notorious approach to management of Xinjiang's non-Han (and in particular, Uyghur) population as the solution to what they termed the 'ethnic problem' (*minzu wenti*).

One legend—with a number of variations, as all good legends must have—venerates disproportionate response. According to this story, in 1950, as Wang Zhen's forces were spreading down into Southern Xinjiang, a Han man had unthinkingly or insensitively prepared a meal of pork in a Uyghur village, and was killed or badly beaten for the transgression. Upon hearing about this, Wang Zhen had his troops surround the village so no one could escape. He then forced the villagers to hand over the perpetrators and publicly executed them in the village square. Next he had his troops slaughter two or three pigs and boil them up in a large cauldron; at bayonet point, the troops then forced each and every remaining resident of the village to eat a bowl of boiled pork. Given the shortage of meat to feed his own soldiers, this was surely a high-cost exercise.

Two clear points can be drawn from such stories: a) Wang Zhen held the view that Uyghurs existed in Xinjiang at the sufferance of the Han-led Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and acted on that belief; b) many Han idolise Wang Zhen for, as they see it, keeping Uyghurs under control. Reflecting on what could have been done to prevent the July 2009 violence—which is widely understood across China as the indiscriminate killing of Han, including pregnant mothers, by Uyghurs of all ages and sexes for no apparent reason—some older Han in Korla reconstituted Wang Zhen's memorable (and possibly apocryphal) contribution to the ethnic policy debate. As head of the military government in Xinjiang from 1950 to 1952, Wang Zhen had apparently sized up Uyghurs as 'a troublemaking minority', and wrote to Mao Zedong advocating that they be 'thoroughly wiped out' to avoid any future problems. Even Mao felt that this was a little extreme—or at least

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What is playing out in Xinjiang is a composite version of twentieth-century authoritarian fantasies and popular dystopias that is made possible by twenty-first-century technology.



Chen Quanguo, current Communist Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.
Photo: Ts.cn.

Every action and every utterance goes onto an unseen scorecard, and saying or doing 'the wrong thing' could well have you taken off to one of the many political re-education centres that Chen Quanguo dramatically expanded as soon as he took over the reins in Urumqi.

premature—so he redeployed Wang. Now, it seems that tragedy and farce have converged: Mao's successor-emulator, Xi Jinping, has found his Wang Zhen.

As Party Secretary of Xinjiang, Chen Quanguo has apparently taken up Wang Zhen's unfinished business. But while Wang Zhen just wanted Uyghurs to get out of the way of his developmental plans or be wiped away completely, the current system is both destructive and inclusive. What is playing out in Xinjiang is a composite version of twentieth-century authoritarian fantasies and popular dystopias that is made possible by twenty-first-century technology (Clarke 2018; Vanderklippe 2017).

The system starts with total surveillance (Millward 2018). When Uyghurs have any communication with people outside China (including their own relatives), they get visits from the Public Security Bureau within an hour or two, and suffer repetitive questioning about who the caller was, what they are doing overseas, and what they spoke about. The police, of course, know exactly what they spoke about because they were listening. The point is to let the Uyghurs know that they are being watched and listened to very closely. Every action and every utterance goes onto an unseen scorecard, and saying or doing 'the wrong thing' could well have you taken off to one of the many political re-education centres that Chen Quanguo dramatically expanded as soon as he took over the reins in Urumqi (Radio Free Asia 2017a). Simply having spent time overseas whilst not in the company of an authorised tour group puts you under suspicion; students studying in Islamic countries such as Egypt or Turkey have been told to return to China, then met at the airport and immediately whisked away for re-education.

The next step is to subject select Uyghurs—and now also Kazakhs and other non-Han people—to a totalising regime of physical and psychological abuse. Horrific, and credible, reports of what goes on inside the political re-education camps have been coming through since the beginning of 2017: inmates made to repeatedly recite lines of gratitude to the Party while being tortured with white noise, contortion, and marching exercises; sleep deprivation to break their spirit (ChinaAid 2018). The high rate of deaths in custody supports reports of vicious beatings and intrusive physical torture (Radio Free Asia 2018b, 2017b). An estimated 5 to 10 percent of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang—up to



Graffiti on the external wall of an apartment building inhabited by Uyghur families within an oil company compound. Photo: Tom Cliff

The upkeep cost of this surveillance state can only be estimated, but it is undoubtedly very high. The political cost is immeasurable: over the past two decades, repressive practices aimed at Uyghurs in Xinjiang have negatively impacted inter-ethnic relations, provoked a series of violent incidents, and caused Xinjiang residents to feel insecure, irrespective of their ethnicity.

800,000 people—is now locked up in these camps, with more being taken in all the time (Human Rights Watch 2017; Radio Free Asia 2018a).

Overseas, in a dormitory near you, Uyghur students wake screaming in a cold sweat; they are having nightmares about their family members back in Xinjiang, or their own future without a home or a family. Their families have told them not to return under any circumstances, and now refuse to take their calls. Sub-prefectural police departments in Xinjiang send text messages to Uyghurs from their area who have been living overseas for years, demanding passport and residency information. The logic is consistent with social control practices within China: ‘You are originally of our locale, you belong to us.’ But these police are not primarily aiming to gather information, they are sending a warning: ‘We know your telephone number, we know your name, we know where your family members live in Xinjiang. Be careful, don’t be critical.’ In such ways, family members residing in Xinjiang are used as leverage in attempts to control the activities of Uyghurs living overseas (Denyer 2018; U.S. Embassy 2018). All this, too, amounts to a very high-cost exercise—and on a much larger scale than Wang Zhen’s pork.

The cost is both financial and political. The upkeep cost of this surveillance state can only be estimated, but it is undoubtedly very high (Zenz 2018). The political cost is immeasurable: over the past two decades, repressive practices aimed at Uyghurs in Xinjiang have negatively impacted inter-ethnic relations, provoked a series of violent incidents, and caused Xinjiang residents to feel insecure, irrespective of their ethnicity. Han, Hui, Kazakh, and Uyghur people alike fear for personal or family members’ safety and economic prospects; many even fear the environment in which they live, and the place to which they all feel that they belong. And although the Chinese state media claimed in March 2017 that the number of violent terrorist incidents had dropped with ‘religious extremism notably curbed’ by April 2018, my sense is that these feelings of insecurity have increased dramatically over the very same period (Cao and Cui 2017; Xinhua 2018). This is clearly no basis upon which to build a harmonious, moderately prosperous society, as is the stated aim of the Party-state in Xinjiang and across the country (An 2017).

So, why is the Party-state doing this? I raised this question in a recent discussion with a senior colleague. We should assume, I said, that we do not know the ultimate aim

They have access to much more and better information; they have legions of people to gather and process this information.

of the Chinese leadership in Xinjiang—and thus we do not know what motivates their policies and practices. ‘That’s a bit conspiratorial, isn’t it?’ my colleague replied. ‘They say that they want to prevent violent terrorist attacks, promote economic development, and assure long-term social and political stability. Why wouldn’t they want that?’

‘Why not?’ I now return to the question. I do not have the answer, of course, because I do not have access to any of the internal communications—far less to informal and unspoken communications—that might give me clues as to what that answer might be. But I do have a proposed starting point. I think it is important to reject once and for all the idea that Chinese leaders do not realise the effects of what they are doing. Chinese leaders do not need policy advice from foreign critics. They have access to much more and better information; they have legions of people to gather and process this information. The leaders themselves are neither stupid nor inexperienced in matters of social management. They, too, can surely see that the hyper-securitisation of Xinjiang is producing widespread feelings of insecurity and consuming vast amounts of human, material, and political resources, and thereby laying the groundwork for social and political instability for decades into the future (Rife 2018). And thus my questions ‘Why are they doing it? What do they hope to achieve?’ become relevant. ■

CHINA COLUMNS



The border of Houchang urban village in Beijing. Photo by the authors.

Beijing Evictions, a Winter's Tale

Qiaochu Li, Jiani Song, and Shuchi Zhang

In response to a deadly fire in a Beijing neighbourhood inhabited mostly by migrant workers, the authorities of the Chinese capital launched an unprecedented wave of evictions. Without any notice, migrants who often had spent years in the capital were told to leave their habitations and relocate elsewhere in the midst of the freezing north-China winter. While foreign media widely reported on the unfolding of the crisis, they often overlooked the outpouring of outrage in Chinese public discourse. This essay seeks to fill this gap.

On 18 November 2017, a fire broke out in a building in Beijing's southern Daxing suburb, killing 19 people including 8 children. Most of the victims were migrants who had come to Beijing from other parts of the country. According to the local authorities, around 400 people lived in cramped conditions in the two-story structure, which also served as a workshop and refrigerated warehouse for local vendors (Tu and Kong 2017). In the days that followed the tragedy, nearly 20 people were detained over the fire, including managers and electricians of the building.

In response to the tragedy, on 20 November the Beijing government kicked off 40 days of citywide safety inspections, with a particular focus on warehouses, rental compounds, wholesale markets, and other constructions on the rural-urban fringes across Beijing (Zhu and Gao 2017). This led to a wave of evictions from the suburbs of the city. Without any notice, migrants who often had spent years in the capital were told to leave their dwellings and relocate elsewhere in the midst of the freezing north-China winter. While foreign media widely

reported on the unfolding of the crisis, what was often overlooked is the outrage that was expressed in Chinese public opinion over the evictions. This essay seeks to fill this gap in three ways. First, it outlines how Chinese civil society attempted to resist the crackdown. Second, it puts forward a novel comparison between the official response to the fire by government of Beijing and that of London in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy. Finally, it considers the implications that the tragedy has had for local labour NGOs.

Voices from Chinese Civil Society

Chinese academia was the first to stand up against the evictions. In the wake of the crackdown at the end of November, more than 100 Chinese intellectuals signed a petition urging the Beijing government to stop using safety checks as an excuse to evict migrant workers from the city. According to this letter, 'Beijing has an obligation to be grateful towards all Chinese citizens, instead of being forgetful and repaying the country people with arrogance, discrimination and humiliation—especially the low-end population' (Lo 2017). A couple of weeks later, in mid-December, eight top Chinese intellectuals, including legal scholars Jiang Ping and He Weifang, demanded a constitutional review of the Beijing municipal government's actions during the mass eviction (Wei quanwang 2017). They published their petition letter to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress online. In this document, they argued that the government had infringed upon five constitutional rights of the Chinese citizens, including land rights, the right to participate in the private or individual economy, private property rights,

the inviolability of human dignity, and housing rights. Unsurprisingly, the letter was quickly deleted from Chinese social media (Gao 2017)

Chinese civil society, in particular those labour NGOs that provide assistance to migrant workers, also did not remain silent. According to Wang Jiansong, a professor at the China Industrial Relations Institute in Beijing, nearly 50 activists from different labour groups signed another petition letter condemning the government campaign (Wang 2017). Far more consequential was a 'Suggestion Letter', entitled 'Beijing solidarity', that was released on 25 November by a young graduate using the pseudonym Que Yue. Que suggested the establishment of a network of partners to conduct a field survey in the communities nearby in order to connect those in need of help with professional aid agencies. As more and more volunteers joined the cause, Que also set up a WeChat group aimed at drawing a participatory 'Beijing Eviction Map' that showed both the locations and number of people affected by the evictions (Qi 2018).

In the days that followed, information poured in from different community actors, and a continuously updated document with information related to available assistance became a focal point of action. In charge of the editing was Hao Nan, director of the Zhuoming Disaster Information Centre, a volunteer organisation set up in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that specialises in processing disaster-related information and coordinating resources. His job consisted of connecting NGOs, citizen groups, and individual volunteers to work together to collect, check, and spread information. NGOs and the citizen groups conducted investigations in several areas where evictions were taking place and disseminated information about available assistance among migrants. At the same time,

volunteers were responsible for collecting useful information online and for checking that the information coming from those who offered to provide assistance was accurate. In an interview with the authors, Hao Nan described the difficulties in assisting the migrants, saying: ‘Some of the migrants actually did not need our help, and some of them thought our information was useless. For example, they needed to find places to live nearby, but we could only find cheap places far away from their neighbourhoods.’ Furthermore, most migrants could not access this kind of information due to the existence of different, and seldom overlapping, social circles on WeChat.

Meanwhile, some NGOs in Beijing began to mobilise autonomously. On 23 November, the Swan Rescue Team (*tian'e jiuyuan*), an organisation set up in 2016 to provide emergency relief, began to offer migrants free assistance with their relocation. However, after a few days its leader suddenly announced that they would quit the rescue efforts, asking the public to ‘understand that we are nothing more than a particle of dust, what we can do is tremendously limited’ (Qi 2018). The New Sunshine Charity Foundation (*xin yangguang*) provided funding, medical treatment, temporary resettlement, and luggage storage to evicted migrants. The Beijing Facilitators Social Work Development Centre (*beijing xiezuozhe*) provided mental health support. Staff from the famous labour NGO Home of Workers (*gongyou zhi jia*), which was located in the area of the evictions, regularly visited migrants nearby and released updates for volunteers and journalists, but quickly received a warning from the government to cease these activities. Finally, the Tongzhou Home (*tongzhou jiayuan*), a worker cultural centre first opened in 2009, offered evicted migrants the chance to store their luggage or spend the night there. This went on until 28

November when its director, Mr Yang, was visited by police officers who told him to shut down the organisation. ‘I have worked in a factory, been a street vendor, and run a few small businesses—I know how hard it is to be a migrant worker,’ Yang said. ‘I don’t regret helping them. It was the right thing to do and there is nothing to regret’ (Qi 2018).

Migrants themselves were not silent. According to witnesses and social media posts, on 10 December many of them took to the streets in Feijia village, Chaoyang district, to protest against evictions. Protesters shouted slogans like ‘forced evictions violate human rights’, while others held up home-made banners with the same message (Zhou and Zhuang 2017). The voices of the workers were recorded by Beijing-based artist Hua Yong, who in those weeks uploaded dozens of videos documenting the situation and his conversations with migrant workers on YouTube and WeChat. On the night of 15 December, he posted several videos on his Twitter account entitled ‘they are here’, referring to the police who was at his door to detain him. He was released on bail three days later (AFP 2017).

A Tale of Two Blazes

Though not often linked, the events in Beijing recall the Grenfell Tower fire in London five months earlier. While occurring thousands of miles apart, the two accidents do have something in common. First, they both largely affected migrants. Although no official demographic statistics can be found publicly online, Grenfell appeared to be a very mixed community, with the 71 victims composed of a high proportion of migrants, including those from the Philippines, Iran, Syria, Italy, for example (Rawlinson 2017). Like in Beijing, there were also concerns

about a possible underreported death toll, as some undocumented migrants were among the dead but were not accounted for. This is similar to the case of Daxing, where the community primarily consisted of non-Beijing citizens and 17 out of the 19 victims were migrants who had come from others part of China (Haas 2017). The only difference is that migrants in Daxing were interprovincial, whereas in the Grenfell Tower they were international.

Secondly, migrants in both cases were mostly 'low-skilled', and from relatively poor and deprived segments of society. Being a social housing block in London, the Grenfell Tower accommodated a primarily low-income community. Xinjian village, where the fire broke out in Beijing, served the same functionality. It lies in the so-called rural-urban fringe (*chengxiang jiehebu*), where property is generally cheaper and infrastructure is of poorer quality. While white-collar migrants and college graduates can afford to rent in well-established communities, low-skilled (primarily rural) migrants tend to gather in places like Xinjian.

In light of all these similarities, it is even more interesting to compare how the two governments reacted to the fires. Both had set goals to limit the total population of their cities, and both performed fire safety assessments all over the urban area. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, in spite of public outrage, Beijing authorities took this opportunity to evict rural migrant workers. Forced evacuation also occurred in other London high-rise apartment blocks that failed the fire safety checks after the Grenfell Tower incident, but the buildings were not torn down and revamped for weeks, during which time the government promised to 'make sure people had somewhere to stay' (Holton and Knowles 2017). In addition, the British Home Office also published the

Grenfell immigration policy, which grants 12 months initial leave to remain and possible future permanent residency to the migrants involved in the fire.

From this comparison, we can draw two lessons. The first is that previously ridged and clear borders have become subtle and invisible. This applies most clearly to Beijing, where, thanks to the economic reforms, the Chinese household registration system (*hukou*) is no longer serving as a de facto internal passport system that stops people from migrating. This means that Chinese citizens do not face explicit barriers in terms of moving within their country. But there are invisible walls in terms of welfare entitlements, as the hukou system still links provision of social services to the place of registration. And just as immigration policy in developed countries is more selective towards highly-skilled migrants, the conditions for granting a local hukou to internal migrants in big cities like Beijing are also geared towards attracting the wealthy or the highly-educated. As a result, those low-skilled internal migrants are highly unlikely to obtain a Beijing hukou, and the Beijing government is not obliged to provide better housing for them. They are treated as second-class citizens in their own country.

The invisible border is also seen in the living space of those low-skilled migrants. In China, most rural migrant workers have to reside in island-like slums whose connections to other parts of the city are cut off. For instance, the accompanying photo was taken in December 2017, when one of the authors visited Houchang village, a slum known for being home to many migrant drivers and chauffeurs. On the left side of the picture is the village where migrants live. The rooms are so small that some furniture has to be put outside. Just to the right of the road lies an advanced residential complex with private basketball

and badminton courts. Behind this newly built accommodation is the Zhongguancun Software Park, where several high-tech IT companies are based. Right at the crossing, we saw a rubbish truck collecting waste from the software park, but just one street apart, in the village, there was not even one trash bin. We could not get an aerial view of the village, but one can easily imagine a segmented landscape, with the village area being stripped of access to public services and composed of basic infrastructure, but surrounded by fancy modern buildings within just ten meters of its perimeter. Every morning, migrants flock out to the city as drivers, delivery workers, etc., providing low-cost labour. In the evening, when they are supposed to relax, they squeeze back into the village. This scenario recalls the science fiction novelette *Folding Beijing* (Hao 2015), in which the city is physically shared by three classes, who take turns living in the same area in 48-hour cycles.

Another lesson that we can draw from the comparison between London and Beijing is that under all migration management systems, it is low-skilled migrants who bear the brunt of the catastrophe whenever a disaster happens. High-skilled workers are rarely affected and can easily work around the situation, even when they themselves become targets. While the dichotomy between high-skilled and low-skilled seems to be neutral and focuses on learning rather than inherited qualities, we should always bear in mind that when people are low-skilled it is largely due to institutionalised factors, not simply a matter of bad luck or bad choices. Taking education as an example, big cities are rich in experienced teachers, museums, opportunities for international exchange, etc.—a situation that allows urban citizens to receive a much better education than that available to people in under-developed areas. Awareness of this is a first

step to prevent disasters like the Beijing fire from becoming the justification to victimise already vulnerable segments of society.

New Workers, New Priorities

With a view to labour NGOs, the evictions have at least three layers of meaning: first, they highlight structural and demographic changes in the Chinese workforce; second, they show that there is an urgent need for labour NGO activists to find new strategies to conduct their activities; and third, they demonstrate that the political context is swiftly changing. According to our personal observations, migrant workers who dwell in Beijing's urban villages work in a variety of industries that go far beyond traditional occupations in small retail, decoration, domestic work, vehicle repairing, etc. Today's migrants work in industries that are characterised by the logics of modern large-scale capital investment, including logistics, delivery, and real estate. Although the specific distribution of employment by industry still needs to be investigated thoroughly, the abundant supply of information, as well as the increasing ease of transportation and communication, have already made it possible for the urbanised workers to respond promptly to challenges coming from changes in government policies.

However, while the migrants themselves are increasingly able to respond quickly in the face of new threats, the response of labour NGOs—the traditional champions of migrant workers—to the evictions reveals the serious limitations of their current organisational approaches. It is well documented that labour NGOs first appeared in China in the late 1990s, and

went through a phase of expansion in the Hu and Wen era, especially in the years that preceded the financial crisis. These NGO practitioners are first and foremost professionals in the fields of the law, social services, or occupational safety and health. To this day, these organisations mostly focus on providing individual legal aid, carrying out legal training and legal dissemination among worker communities, investigating violations of labour rights in factories, and organising recreational activities aimed at the working class. Through these activities, they are able to create short-term networks among their clientele, fostering fledgling feelings of solidarity.

The mass evictions clearly exposed the deficiencies of such approach. On the one hand, these labour NGOs have already been hit by a harsh wave of repression in 2015 and 2016 that has severely undermined their ability to operate (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018). While those organisations and individuals that campaigned for a more militant activism based on collective bargaining today no longer exist or are unable to campaign, the remaining NGOs have no choice but to resort to self-censorship and limit their activities in order to survive. In addition, the core members of these organisations tend to consider themselves professionals rather than activists, and find themselves under considerable pressure from their families, peers, and state officials to avoid overly sensitive work. There are also clear class differences between NGO staff and the workers they assist, with the former largely belonging to the urban middle class and having a white-collar background. This gap was evident during the evictions, when the information and assistance services provided by these NGOs scarcely broke through social barriers to reach the workers.

While labour NGOs are marred by these constraints, individual agents appear to be far more active. Not only labour activists, but also ordinary middle class people decided to step up when confronted by the situation that migrant workers faced in Beijing during the evictions. They felt compelled to appeal for the rights of the urban underclass. For the first time, information and articles concerning labour and the 'low-end population' grabbed the spotlight on various social media platforms normally used primarily by middle class users. This resulted in an unprecedented prominence for the 'underclass discourse' in the public discussion, bringing together activists from intellectual backgrounds as diverse as Marxism, Maoism, and liberalism

While labour NGOs are becoming increasingly powerless, the actions of these individual citizens provides some hope in the otherwise stark reality in which migrant workers remain trapped in a dire situation under increasing pressure from the world's most powerful and undisguised police state. In light of this, it is our urgent duty to adapt to the rapidly changing socio-political climate, and make new alliance aimed at forging solidarity across different sectors of society, and developing more effective strategies and organisational models to support marginalised migrant workers and others who are falling victim to state repression in contemporary China. ■



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Justice Restored under Xi Jinping

A Political Project

Elisa Nesossi

Since Xi Jinping's ascendance to power, several cases of miscarriage of justice have been remedied, and significant reforms have been implemented to prevent abuses by the police and the courts. While on the surface these reforms could be considered groundbreaking, they have not found much international admiration or praise, as they are being carried out at the same time as a ferocious crackdown on civil society. It is now clear that in Xi's reforms there is more than meets the eye.

On 5 August 1994, a woman named Kang was found raped and murdered in a cornfield in a western suburb of Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei province. A few days later, the Shijiazhuang police established a special taskforce to investigate the case and, based on clues offered by local residents, identified one key suspect: a man named Nie Shubin. In early 1995, Nie was sentenced to death and executed. Back then nobody paid particular attention to the fate of this young alleged criminal. It was only ten years later when another man, Wang Shujin, confessed to that same crime that this case came to light. Following Wang's confession and suspecting that Nie Shubin had been wrongly executed, Ma Yunlong, then a journalist for the *Henan Shangbao*, published a short article on the case. Convinced by Wang's confession and insistent on Nie's innocence, he sent his report to more than two hundred newspapers around China. Ma was particularly sympathetic to the relentless suffering of Nie's mother, and he recommended that she employ two lawyers who could help her work on the case. With the aim of seeing justice done, he himself

started his own personal investigation into the case—an investigation destined to last for several years and that contributed to his forced early retirement. While the Hebei Court had relied on the alleged confession of Nie Shubin to sentence him to death, it could not equally use Wang Shujin's confession about his guilt to incriminate him. That would have been too politically costly: it would have meant admitting that the police, procuratorate, judges, and the political-legal committee (*zhengfawei*) in Shijiazhuang and Hebei province had got it wrong in the first place. Too many people had been involved in Nie's execution in 1995, and too many interests would have been negatively affected by reversing the verdict and declaring his innocence. Notwithstanding the continued petitioning of Nie's mother, and the work of numerous lawyers and journalists, the Hebei justice authorities maintained an unnerving silence on the case for almost six years.

In 2013, Wang's case was adjudicated for the second and third time but, once again, notwithstanding his insistence of his own guilt, the court did not sentence him for Ms Kang's rape and murder. In 2014, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) ordered the Shandong High Court to review Nie's case and a public hearing was held in April 2015. The term for the review was extended four times until June 2016 when the SPC finally decided to retry the case. Only then was the time politically ripe for justice to be done. Just a few months before, Zhang Yue—the then secretary of the political-legal committee of Hebei province—had been caught up in Xi Jinping's purge against corruption and put under investigation. At last, in December 2016, after a retrial, the SPC declared Nie Shubin's innocent and awarded his family a substantial compensation (Forsythe 2016).

Spanning over two decades, this case fully exposes the influence of politics—both high-politics and institutional politics—

on the administration of justice in China. It clearly shows the change in approaches toward criminal justice that have played out during the Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping eras. Back in the mid-1990s, when Nie Shubin was tried and sentenced, the imperative was to get criminal cases solved swiftly and criminals punished harshly. During this period, leaders perceived this approach as ensuring the maintenance of social order at a time when economic liberalisation had brought a steady increase in criminal activities and the emergence of new forms of crime unheard of just a decade earlier. In 2013, when the case was reopened, Xi's priorities were utterly different. He wanted the justice system to be accountable and transparent, working under the rubric of 'ruling the country in accordance with the law' (*yifa zhiguo*). Having Xi himself engaged in a personal battle against miscarriages of justice, cases of wrongful convictions could no longer be tolerated (Wang 2014).

The Need for Change

Nie Shubin's wrongful conviction was just one of many miscarriages of justice that have been remedied since Xi's ascendance to power. 2013 was a particularly distressing year in this respect. There was first the case of the 'Two Zhangs'—Zhang Hui and his uncle Zhang Gaoping—who were declared innocent after having been sentenced to the death penalty and imprisonment, respectively, on charges of rape and murder in 2004 (Zhou 2013). Then, there was the case of Li Hualiang, a Henan man who was wrongly kept in prison for more than twelve years for the rape and murder of a teenage girl (Lu 2013). This was followed by the case of five men who had unjustly spent eighteen years in jail, accused of the robbery and homicide of a taxi driver (Zhu 2017). Later in the year, another man in Anhui—Yu Yingsheng—was declared innocent after

serving many years of a life sentence for killing his wife (Jia 2014). The same month, Nian Bin, convicted of fatally poisoning two children in Fujian province, was declared not guilty and freed from death row (Ma 2014).

From 2014 to 2017, courts around China have cleared another nine cases of wrongful conviction and the majority of them have made big news in the Chinese media. Xi has addressed the issue on several occasions, and the political-legal committee, the SPC, along with the other justice institutions, have become heavily involved in identifying the causes behind such unfortunate events. In this general atmosphere of relative openness and political goodwill, Chinese netizens have been allowed to express their anger, journalists to report sad stories of scarred individuals, and legal scholars to discuss in open forums issues of torture and abuses of powers.

These cases of miscarriages of justice—some cleared because the real culprit had confessed to the crime, others on the basis of the legal principle of reasonable doubt and the lack of sufficient evidence—highlights the fact that in the recent past there has been something seriously wrong with China's justice system. They prove unequivocally that the system of collecting evidence has still been based on archaic methods of torture aimed at obtaining confessions from criminal suspects through any means necessary; that the police have played an inordinately large role securing convictions in comparison to the other judicial organs; that lawyers have had only a minimal, if any, voice in the process of defending the accused; and that cases were too often decided behind closed doors by the intervention of the all-too powerful political-legal committees. A case like that of Nie Shubin's proved that the interests of the police, the procuratorate, and the political-legal committee, were aligned and needed

to be protected at all costs, and that courts were powerless in the event of inconvenient truths emerging. Thus, these cases have also indicated that all too often trials have been a mere formality, intended to corroborate what the police and the procuratorate had already established beforehand—leaving judges relatively powerless to play their rightful roles in the justice system.

Xi's Remedial Justice

With Xi's coming to power, it seemed that the time for change had come. The Xi era opened with a new emphasis on procedural justice and building accountability. Reflecting on the weaknesses of China's justice system that cases of wrongful convictions had brought to light, the Chinese leadership under Xi has sought to foster stronger oversight of political and judicial authorities at the local level in order to enhance transparency. Political rhetoric on the promotion of the rule of law accompanied important announcements of reforms during the Third and Fourth Party Plenums in 2013 and 2014, and the issuance of a number of legislative documents aimed at preventing the occurrence of miscarriages of justice (Trevaskes and Nesossi 2015).

One of the key reforms put forward under Xi has placed the trial at the centre of criminal proceedings (*yi shenpan wei zhongxin*) (Biddulph et al. 2017). One of the objectives of this new trial-centred doctrine is to counter the traditional tendency of the Chinese police to rely solely or primarily on confession, rather than other kinds of evidence that are more difficult and time-consuming to obtain. The new approach aims at shifting the focus from police testimony and evidence to the revelations of facts at the trial, with the objective of improving the quality of evidence gathering and reinforcing the supervisory role of the prosecution in ensuring that the police do

not abuse their power. Differently from the past, court hearings should become decisive in determining the facts of a case, and evidence provided by the police and the procuratorate should be thoroughly tested in court.

The Political Logic

While on the surface these reforms could be considered groundbreaking, they have not found much international admiration and praise. This is perhaps because they are, paradoxically, being carried out at the same time as the expansion of legally dubious tactics employed to suppress any form of dissent, and to ferociously crack down on human rights lawyers and other civil society representatives. At the very beginning of the Xi era, many China observers anticipated that a renewed emphasis on *yifa zhiguo* and an official commitment to the prevention of miscarriages of justice might cause an overhaul of past abusive practices in the justice system. Since that time, though, the logic behind Xi's governance platforms has unfolded gradually to reveal its political utility.

It is now clear that the intent behind Xi's *yifa zhiguo* is to strengthen Party leadership through the use of the law, in order to further merge Party and state. Reforms of the justice system spurred by cases of injustice have been designed to persuade an increasingly sceptical Chinese population and international audience about the government's good will. Miscarriages of justice have been used strategically to help Xi's leadership distance itself from Hu Jintao's agenda of 'stability maintenance' (*weiwen*) and harmonious society (*hexie shehui*). They have aided him to escape the fallout of the scandal that engulfed Zhou Yongkang, who, as Minister of Public Security and Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Committee under Hu Jintao, had

approved and supported some of the abusive practices that had led to egregious errors of justice. In this spirit, miscarriages have been useful to tell a credible story about how the current leadership is doing things differently—perpetuating the myth that the Party can be held accountable by the Chinese citizens and, as such, can be trusted.

Legal reforms prompted by wrongful convictions are also intended to increase the efficiency of the criminal justice system, to curb corrupt practices, and restore the lost legitimacy of the Party-state. By claiming to solve the problem of miscarriages of justice, Xi can legitimise his political authority—indeed, in his view justice can be achieved only if coordinated by the centre of political power. However, contradictory agendas promoted under the broad umbrella of *yifa zhiguo* have made it clear that Xi's aim has not been that of increasing accountability at the expense of coercion, but of intensifying both for the sake of political utility. Rather than shifting its objectives towards fair trial guarantees to help ensure the accountability of the justice system, the Party remains fixated on its coercive power. Thus, when the current administration claims to be willing to deal with past judicial errors in order to prevent them from occurring in the future, they are not doing so merely to increase the accountability of the political-legal system. Their paramount concern is to ensure the preservation of the political status quo and Party's legitimacy. Overall, this means that miscarriages of justice will continue to be remedied selectively to serve a certain political agenda. Only those who are useful for the larger project of legal and political reforms aimed at creating a more 'just' system, so defined by those in power, will have their innocence publicly recognised. ■



'Face, Face, Face'.
Photo: Teruhide Tomori, Flickr.com.

The Global Age of Algorithm

Social Credit and the Financialisation of Governance in China

Nicholas Loubere
Stefan Brehm

Much has been made of the Orwellian social control aspects of the emerging 'social credit system' in China. However, social credit is more than simply a Chinese version of big brother: it is an unprecedented climax of the global financialisation project and a signal of a potential dark digital future dominated by algorithmic rule.

This essay expands on the arguments presented in a [recent article](#) published in *The Conversation*.

Beautiful credit! The foundation of modern society. Who shall say that this is not the golden age of mutual trust, of unlimited reliance upon human promises?

(Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, 1873,
The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today)

In recent years, few news items out of China have resulted in as much anxiety and fear in western media and public discourse than the Chinese government's on-going attempts to create a 'social credit system' (*shehui xinyong tixi*) aimed at rating the trustworthiness of individuals and companies. Most major western media outlets have spent significant energy warning about China's efforts to create an Orwellian dystopia. The most hyperbolic of these—*The Economist*—has even run with menacing headlines like 'China Invents the Digital Totalitarian State' and 'China's Digital Dictatorship' (*The Economist* 2016b; *The Economist* 2016c). These articles both implicitly and explicitly depict social credit as something unique to China—a nefarious and perverse digital innovation that could only be conceived of and carried out by a regime like the Chinese Communist Party (Daum 2017).

Social credit is thus seen as signalling the onset of a dystopian future that could only exist in the Chinese context. But how unique to China is this attempt to 'build an environment of trust'—to quote the State Council—using new digital forms of data collection and analysis (General Office of the State Council 2016)? Is this Orwellian social credit system indicative of an inherently Chinese form of digital life, or is it a dark manifestation of our collective impulses to increase transparency and accountability (at the expense of privacy), and to integrate everyone into a single 'inclusive' system to more easily categorise, monitor, and

standardise social activity? In this essay we propose that Chinese social credit should not be exoticised or viewed in isolation. Rather, it must be understood as merely one manifestation of the global age of the algorithm.

Engineering a Trustworthy Society

While there have long been discussions about creating an economic and social rating system in China, they took a much more concrete form in 2014, with the publication of a high-level policy document outlining plans to create a nationwide social credit system by 2020 (State Council 2014). The proposed system will assign ratings to individuals, organisations, and businesses that draw on big data generated from economic, social, and commercial behaviour. The stated aim is to ‘provide the trustworthy with benefits and discipline the untrustworthy... [so that] integrity becomes a widespread social value’ (General Office of the State Council 2016). While official policy documents are light on detail with regard to how the social credit system will ultimately operate, they have suggested various ways to punish untrustworthy members of society (i.e. those with low ratings), such as through restrictions on employment, consumption, travel, and access to credit. In recent months, there have already been reports of blacklisting resulting in restrictions for individuals, but as of yet this only applies to those who have broken specific laws or ‘failed to perform certain legal obligations’ (Daum 2018a).

The Chinese social credit system is emerging rapidly, and the aforementioned blacklists are connecting data from dozens of governmental departments. However, it is still far from being a unified or centralised system. Like most new

policies in China, social credit is being subjected to the country’s distinctive policy modelling process (Heilmann 2008), where local governments produce their own interpretations of policies, which then vie to become national models. Over 30 local governments have already started piloting social credit systems, which utilise different approaches to arrive at their social credit scores, and which use the scores to achieve different outcomes. In contrast to other policies, however, large Internet companies have also been given licenses to run their own pilots (Loubere 2017a). The most widely used private social credit system is Alibaba’s Sesame Credit, which utilises opaque algorithms to arrive at social credit scores for their customers. Those with high scores have been able to access a range of benefits from other Alibaba businesses and their partners (Bislev 2017). Sesame Credit is significant due to the huge amounts of economic data held by Alibaba through Alipay and Ant Financial, but it should not be conflated with governmental social credit system pilots. It is not clear how or if the government and private systems will be integrated in the future, which seems to be causing a degree of tension between regulators and the Internet giants (Hornby, Ju, and Lucas 2018)

Financial(ised) Inclusion

While social credit can be seen as an outgrowth of our collective impulse to achieve a more trustworthy society, a unified fully-functioning social credit system will ultimately turn the quest for trust through transparency and accountability upside down, because it would hold citizens responsible vis-à-vis their rulers. At the core of the emerging system, the State and financial actors define, quantify, and calculate trustworthiness and honesty—

it is a technocratic fix based on the logic that, with the correct set of algorithms, the good citizen can be engineered into society. Social credit therefore seeks to transform individuals into a new ‘civilised’ (and ‘credit conscious’) population through the imposition of an incentive and disincentive system that can mould logical profit-maximising citizens into civilised subjects.

In the case of China’s proposed social credit system—as with any credit rating system—these rewards and punishments are meted out through engagement with, and incorporation into, the market. The calculation of credit scores requires market activity, which in turn requires a credit score. Moreover, if social credit is to live up to its technocratic promise of systematically eliminating untrustworthiness, everyone must be assessed equally—i.e. everyone must be included in the system. In the absence of a social credit score the worst must be assumed, meaning that the burden of proving ones trustworthiness falls to the individual. Thus, in a society dominated by social credit, integration into the socioeconomic system is a necessity rather than a choice. In this way China’s social credit resonates with the global financial inclusion project, which seeks to integrate marginal and impoverished populations into the global capitalist system—primarily through expanded access to credit—as a means of promoting economic development and social empowerment.

In the same way that Chinese social credit appears poised to extract huge amounts of personal data from individuals in its quest to create a trustworthy society, proponents of financial inclusion justify intrusive methods of assessing creditworthiness in order to reduce lender risk from untrustworthy borrowers. Indeed, just months before their hyperbolic headlines about China’s digital authoritarianism, *The Economist* praised the use of psychometrics and other personal

digital data by lenders in developing contexts as being a beneficial financial innovation (*The Economist* 2016a). In this way, the financial inclusion project depicts the application of financialised logics as the means of producing a more fair and accountable inclusive system, where the trustworthy reap rewards that were denied them in the past. However, underpinning this neoliberal fantasy is a glaring contradiction that shatters the illusion of inclusion as being unbiased and fair—those with capital are able to set the terms of their engagement with the capitalist system much more easily than those without.

This points to the fact that the rich will largely be able to extract more of the rewards from their participation in financialised rating systems—such as the social credit system—while avoiding the sanctions. Moreover, punishments are much more dramatic for those without accumulated capital, as their very existence depends on their continued participation in the capitalist system for daily survival. From this perspective, the spectre of China’s financialised social credit system portends a society comprising individual micro-entrepreneurs operating in a shared economy mode where livelihoods are determined by credit scores. Indeed, Sesame Credit already works with sharing economy apps, such as Daowe, which provides a platform for a literal gig economy comprised of individuals (with their credit scores listed) advertising the sale of their services or products (Loubere 2017b). Those looking for a plumber in the area can select one with the highest score, just as people in the west decide hotels and restaurants based on Yelp or TripAdvisor reviews.

Financialisation Gone Wild

In this sense, the emergence of social credit represents an unprecedented climax of the global financialisation project. Financialisation can be broadly defined as ‘the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors, and financial institutions in the operation of domestic and international economy’ (Epstein 2005, 3). Social credit opens the door for financialising social behaviour. To elaborate this claim, consider the relation between social and financial capital. The OECD, for example, defines social capital as ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’ (Keeley 2007, 103). In the digital age these networks become the linchpins between the social and economic spheres. On the one hand networks are more concrete and easier to observe than the norms and values shaping the perceptions and behaviour of network members. On the other hand, social networks represent a crucial means for both gaining access to material resources and shaping the rules for resource distribution. Thus, analysing and contextualising social networks in a big-data driven world allow for inferences to be made about both the social and economic attributes of an individual.

The invention of social credit establishes an explicit and tangible link between social behaviour and economic benefits. In this context the State is able to assume a new role not dissimilar to that of a corporate shareholder. Social credit creates a market for social capital and transplants the rationale of profit maximisation into the realm of interpersonal relationships. Through managing networks, digital activity, and private action, an individual or organisation can impact social value and,

by extension, financial capital. Thus, social credit creates new incentives that can be used to align the interests of citizens and organisations with those of the Government. The state, as a shareholder in ‘the people’, enjoys the dividends of good behaviour and loyalty, which is rewarded through economic privileges. In this all-encompassing financialised system, social action becomes increasingly entrenched within the economic realm, and individual behaviour is more and more shaped by financial motives. In a nutshell, social credit represents the ultimate marketisation of political control because it provides incentives for maximising citizen value through politically and commercially aligned social behaviour.

Using algorithms to render citizens and organisations compliant with the visions and rationales of the ruling regime reduces the State’s information and monitoring costs dramatically. In the context of China, this has the potential to reshape the ‘fragmented authoritarian’ model, which is characterised by decentralised decision-making and policy implementation (Mertha 2009). One could envision a future in which the many local officials and bureaucrats that enjoy privileges due to the Central leadership’s reliance on their support to govern the masses will be subject to the rule of algorithms themselves. Only a small elite would be needed to manage algorithmic rule, entailing a dramatic re-concentration of power. If Chinese experiments are successful, they will certainly serve as a model for many other countries; authoritarian regimes, democratic systems with authoritarian tendencies, and eventually democracies that struggle to maintain legitimacy in an increasingly polarised and fragmented political landscape.

The Repressive Logics of Financialised Governance

As noted above, despite the discourse of inclusion resulting in transparency and fairer distribution of resources, social credit and the financialisation of social behaviour are inherently biased and paradoxically result in socioeconomic exclusion within an all-encompassing inclusive system. In addition to being partial to those with capital, social credit will likely also widen other socioeconomic cleavages. Tests and experiments again and again confirm that data and algorithms are just as biased as society is and inevitably reproduce real life segmentation and inequality (Bodkin 2017). Cathy O’Neil, the author of *Weapons of Math Destruction*, for instance, warns that we need algorithmic audits (O’Neil 2016). After all, algorithms are not some naturally occurring phenomena, but are the reflections of the people (and societies) that create them. For this reason, the rule of algorithms must not be mistaken as an upgraded, more rational, and hyper-scientific rule of law 2.0. This is particularly true in China, where the concept of the rule of law has been increasingly developed and theorised by the Party-state to justify its attempts to consolidate control over society (Rosenzweig, Smith, and Treveskes 2017).

In recent years China has already been providing glimpses of the repressive possibilities of algorithmic rule. In particular, recent reports about the construction of a sophisticated high-tech surveillance state in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region anticipate a near future where a digital social credit system sits the core of a coercive security apparatus that is inherently biased against certain segments of society—producing dramatically inequitable and ultimately violent results (Human Rights Watch

2018). In an op-ed for the *New York Times*, James A. Millward describes the extent of the surveillance infrastructure primarily targeting the Uyghur ethnic minority. This includes police checkpoints, iris scans, mandatory spyware installed on mobile devices, and pervasive CCTV with facial recognition software. These surveillance technologies feed into, and draw on, a database that includes information about personal identity, family and friends, movement and shopping behaviour, and even DNA that is collected at medical check-ups organised by the government. Ultimately, these data are run through algorithms that assign residents with public safety scores deeming them ‘safe’, ‘unsafe’, or somewhere in between (Millward 2018). Those who are deemed to be a threat are often detained and sent to re-education centres (*Foreign Policy* 2018). While this is not the government’s proposed social credit system per se—as these types of data are not legally allowed to be collected for public or market information (Daum 2018b)—the logics underpinning this type of coercive surveillance infrastructure and the dreams a nationwide citizen rating system, are the same.

These developments represent a new reality that, while shocking initially, has become a banal part of everyday existence in a few short years. It is becoming increasingly clear that Xinjiang is a testing ground for technologies and techniques that will be rolled out nationwide—and even beyond—in the near future. For instance, over the spring festival period railway police in Henan used glasses augmented with facial recognition software connected to a centralised database to identify suspected criminals (Wade 2018). China’s massive surveillance market is also a global affair, with companies from around the world lining up to develop products for both the Chinese State and private businesses operating in the country (Strumpf and Fan 2017). This points to the fact that China is

not developing its surveillance capabilities in isolation but is at the forefront of a global push towards increasingly centralised and interconnected surveillance apparatuses. Rating systems like the proposed social credit system will inevitably sit at the centre of surveillance regimes, providing the basis for how individuals and organisations are monitored and assessed, and what they are able to do (and not do) within society.

Our Dark Digital Futures

China's proposed social credit system and the on-going construction of a surveillance state in Xinjiang represent the vanguard of more efficient means of socioeconomic control that are being taken up around the globe. They are dark outgrowths of the digital revolution's supposed 'liberation technologies'—underpinned by our very human compulsions for transparency, security, and fairness. Credit systems are, of course, not new, nor are they Chinese in origin. Most industrialised nations have been relying on credit ratings for a long time in order to quantify the financial risk of countries, firms, and individuals (Yu et al. 2015). Indeed, some of the most disturbing aspects of Chinese social credit, such as its integration into social media, are not uniquely or originally Chinese. In the US, Affirm, a San Francisco-based lender headed by PayPal co-founder Max Levchin, has been experimenting with social media data to evaluate the credit risk of car buyers since 2013. And Lenddo, a Hong Kong-based company, took an even bolder approach and informed debtors' friends on Facebook when they didn't pay instalments in time. Even the Orwellian nightmare unfolding in Xinjiang has its parallels elsewhere, such as with the recent revelations that in the US, the New Orleans Police Department and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have been working with Peter

Thiel's company Palantir Technologies (which also has connections with the CIA and the Pentagon) to experiment with 'predictive policing' based on data collected from police databases, social media, and elsewhere (Fang 2018; Winston 2018). Taken together, these developments reveal a vision of a digital future where we are all locked in a continuous and banal system of monitoring, accounting, categorising, and tracking—which has potential far reaching consequences for those who challenge the hegemony in any way, or even just for those who do not have the resources or capacity to participate in the socioeconomic system on the terms mandated.

Big-data driven social benchmarking sparks entrepreneurs' and politicians' imaginations about the opportunities lying ahead. And even though not all visions will be economically or politically viable at any place in the world, the general trend appears to be global and irreversible. Social credit and the dreams of financialised governance are not Chinese or authoritarian particularities, but are, perhaps, our 'shared destiny' (*gongtong mingyun*)—to use a term employed by Xi Jinping when talking about the Chinese vision for the future of humanity (Barmé, Jaivin, and Goldkorn 2014). This, however, doesn't make it less, but rather more worrisome. The logical conclusion of society-wide financialisation is the blurring of the border between political and commercial realms, and the sharpening of the repressive tools wielded by the rich and powerful. In China this scenario appears to be inevitable. To quote Lucy Peng, the chief executive of Ant financial, '[Sesame Credit] will ensure that the bad people in society don't have a place to go, while good people can move freely and without obstruction' (Hvistendahl 2017). ■

Elisa Nesossi

Human Rights in China

in Conversation with Eva Pils





Elisa Nesossi
Australian National University

The topic of human rights is highly contested and subject to a range of diverse interpretations. This is even more apparent in authoritarian contexts like China, where political leaders pass progressive laws and regulations, and sign international treaties, while at the same time regularly cracking down on those citizens who attempt to proactively claim the very rights assigned to them by officialdom. In this conversation, Eva Pils—author of *Human Rights in China* (Polity, 2018)—and Elisa Nesossi discuss the significance of human rights in today’s China. They look at the challenges that both discourses and practices of human rights pose, not only to the Chinese authorities and citizenry, but also to those outside the country.

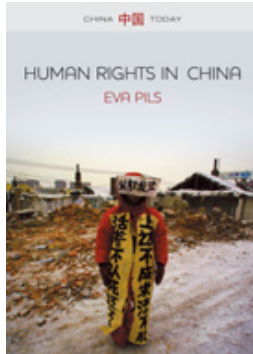
Elisa Nesossi: In your book, you describe the articulation of human rights in China as a vibrant and important social practice that is not entirely dependent on formal institutions and that is partly taking place outside the institutions of the Party-state. Drawing on a vast array of very different sources and extensive fieldwork in China between 2010 and 2017, you offer a compelling view of the ways in which rights defenders in contemporary China use the concept of rights (*quanli*) or human rights (*renquan*), as well as official or establishment discourses about rights. Why do you feel that it is imperative to engage with the ‘vernacular’ of human rights in order to understand the trajectory and practice of human rights in China since the 1990s?

Eva Pils: I think that it is important to keep making the case for human rights and the values of equality and freedom that underpin them. Human rights have wide appeal and are universal. Yet the Chinese government likes to portray human rights as a culturally alienating imposition by hostile foreign forces. Scholars in and outside China who see human rights discourse as a form of cultural imperialism tend to support this—in tendency—relativistic narrative. This relativistic argument needs to be challenged.

There was a time when the government seemed more committed to human rights progress than now. In the wake of its crackdown on the 1989 democracy movement, it had hoped to re-gain acceptance and trust by adopting human rights language and limited, gradual rule of law reforms. But while this allowed human rights defenders to emerge as a force—a movement, even—in Chinese society, Xi Jinping’s government is now attempting to shut this movement down, because it does not want to continue liberal reforms. It persecutes rights defenders with unprecedented vigour, while representing itself as a superior alternative to liberal democracy, at best using ‘human rights’ in purely rhetorical ways.



Eva Pils
King’s College London



Human Rights in China,
Eva Pils, Polity, 2017.

So it is now all the more important to show that ordinary people seeking justice have taken to using human rights discourse and have made it their own without any hesitation. As I describe in my latest book, they relate the idea of rights held just by virtue of being human to conceptions of justice that can be found in the pre-modern Chinese tradition, incorporating both into their language and everyday practices. This is why you can see people assert ‘human rights’ (*renquan*) and ‘wrongs’ (*yuan*) in the same breath. Even as the Party-state’s authoritarianism deepens, the social practice of human rights persists as a real and forceful challenge to the system that will not go away. It testifies to the strength of ideas that are now ever more embattled—not only in China.

EN: ‘China has lifted millions out of poverty’. This is one of the arguments frequently used by the Chinese authorities to claim achievement in the protection of socio-economic rights and challenge their critics. It is a claim that the Party-state also refers to when arguing that socio-economic rights—the right to subsistence (*shengcunquan*) in particular—must be improved before civil and political rights can be addressed. To what extent do you feel that this overall argument and developmental perspective are tenable, or even useful?

EP: Development is an important goal, but claiming that GDP growth is the answer to China’s socio-economic rights issues is wrong. When Mao Zedong died in 1976, China was impoverished and weakened as a result of Mao’s disastrous governance mistakes. Tens of millions had died of famine in the 1950s, and the 1960s and 1970s had brought turmoil and violence. The liberalising reforms of the post-Mao era undoubtedly allowed China to recuperate and recover some of its position in the global economy which, by virtue of its comparative size, one might say it ought to have. Many emerged from dire poverty to build modestly prosperous lives. But these millions of people hardly waited to be ‘lifted’: they lifted themselves as soon as it became possible. In that sense the claim that ‘China has lifted millions out of poverty’ is at best confused.

The Party-state likes to claim agency and take credit for poverty alleviation and economic growth because this is how it hopes to justify continued, repressive one-party rule. In human rights terms, it claims that it has protected socio-economic rights while deferring civil and political rights reforms. But the fact that continued repression coincided with growth does not mean that repression was required to

achieve growth or indeed that growth justified repression—in fact, growth had ensued when the Party-state relaxed its control over people’s lives.

It is also important to point out that GDP growth—making everybody better off in the aggregate—does not equate to protecting socio-economic rights. There are two reasons for this: first, the ‘state capitalist’ model of growth has produced many individual victims of socio-economic injustice. China’s real estate boom, for example, is premised on a huge forced redistribution of land that has driven hundreds of millions of people out of their homes and off their land—which is needed for property ‘development’. Complaints against forced evictions, inadequate compensation, and other rights violations in this context are not only often useless, they can also trigger further persecution and abuse. Second, growth has relied on ruthless new social divisions exacerbated by discriminatory state policies. The Party-state is far from honouring its human rights obligations, for example, toward the children of rural migrant workers, who are routinely denied access to education in the cities where they live. So, the argument that China has lifted millions out of poverty distracts from the very real socio-economic rights violations we should be focussing on.

EN: In today’s China, public expression is rich and vibrant. You rightly say that ‘[expression] is so widely available, it has so many different authors, and it so easily transcends—or blurs—the boundary from private to public.’ And, citing legal sociologist Yu Jianrong, it seems that nowadays ‘everybody has a microphone’. However, while China still tightly control freedom of expression, the techniques used by the Chinese authorities to exert this control have also become smarter. What do you mean by this, and what implications does it have for human rights?



State control over the Internet has increased under Xi Jinping (Source: Chinaworker.com)

EP: Repression has become smarter through technological control and manipulation. Consider how much the way in which the Party-state infringes rights has changed. ‘Classical’ twentieth-century Communist Party censorship and infringements of freedom of expression, thought and conscience, information, association, and political participation tended to be overt and hard to miss: they were evident from the use of strict censorship of the press, ubiquitous visual propaganda and megaphones blaring out party slogans, for example. Totalitarian twentieth-century infringements of liberty and integrity of the person were usually equally flagrant: they took the form of internment, incarceration, assassinations, and torture.

Much of twenty-first century repression is different, subtler and smarter. Today, the country is highly consumeristic, in many ways more diverse and individualistic, and brimming with media content; but there is still a vast array of censorship rules, as well as sophisticated practices of online content suppression and deletion. Even social media, with its opportunities for individually generated and distributed content, is affected. There is so much imagination and creativity, yet the Party-state operates a complex system of ‘thought guidance’ that includes the manipulation of social media discussion—think for instance about hired ‘trolls’ and the ‘50 cent party’. There are many pretend-participatory mechanisms such as ‘public consultation’ preceding evictions; but the Party calls the shots on everything it decides to control, and accountability though public scrutiny or legal procedures is minimal.

Technology has helped the Party update not only its censorship and thought guidance strategies, but also the more individuated means by which it controls ‘elements of instability’ such as human rights lawyers and invades their personal liberty. I do not just mean the updated forms of (white) torture that leave little or no trace, or the sophisticated use of medication to make targets ‘confess’ to wrongdoing, but also the vastly more sophisticated surveillance techniques that nowadays leave you unsure about how free you are, because your movements, consumer decisions, communication, and interaction with others can be tracked anywhere, anytime. The result of this is that in many ways control of the individual person has become less visible, cheaper, and more pervasive and effective. While this is bad for human rights advocacy—and advocates—they, too, have learned how to use smarter forms of advocacy, e.g. by more effectively reporting cases of abduction, detention, and torture, and by connecting to each other and to groups outside China via Internet block circumvention tools.



China and Mass Surveillance,
image by neondystopia.com.

EN: In the conclusion of your book, you argue that human rights advocacy and repression have important transnational dimensions, and that China’s rights abuses have become a global issue. This means that both advocacy and repression have ‘gone global’, increasing the complexity of the political struggle for human rights. In this context, what are the challenges that the human rights situation in China presents to those outside the country?

EP: For a long time advocacy was more transnational than repression: what has been called ‘the global human rights movement’ entered China in the form of civil society

organisations and foreign-sponsored programmes from the 1990s onward. It helped Chinese society transform and allowed Chinese rights defenders form alliances with actors abroad.

China under Xi Jinping has not only sought to stop this, as noted earlier; it has also embarked on a massive outreach programme. This means that, along with infrastructure investment and exchange, Chinese repression is also more frequently exported beyond China's borders.

I do not only mean when publishers and rights defenders are abducted and brought back to China from adjacent countries. I mean also the practice of keeping tabs on all Chinese nationals abroad and the more subtle influence cultivated by collaborating with institutions and organisations abroad. One might think that bankrolling think tanks, paying for propaganda 'supplements' in western newspapers, or funding students and researchers to spend time abroad cannot possibly be harmful to societies where human rights and liberal-democratic values are supposedly entrenched. In reality, as we become beholden to Chinese government support or dependent on Chinese government permissions, we become vulnerable to self-censorship and complicity in repression by the Chinese government. A complacent failure to recognise our vulnerability can undermine our commitment to human rights values.

The way we think about human rights has not quite caught up with this situation yet. People still tend to think of the human rights situation in other countries as problems involving perpetrators and victims 'over there'. But many of these problems are here now, they are becoming ours as we are ever more implicated and directly responsible. I think this is one of the greatest challenges to liberal democracy today. ■





STATES OF EMERGENCY

**The Sichuan Earthquake
Ten Years On**



'Reconstructing the homeland in the aftermath of disaster. When you drink the water, remember its source: be grateful to the Party!' Photo by the author.

Be Grateful to the Party!

How to Behave in the Aftermath of a Disaster

Christian Sorace

During the earthquake that hit Sichuan province in 2008, over 7,000 classrooms in shoddily constructed schools collapsed, killing at least 5,000 children. Grieving parents staged protests and called for an official investigation to punish the officials and building contractors found responsible for the tragedy. The Communist Party responded with more than just censorship, imprinting its own narrative on the rescue and reconstruction, so the slogans written by grieving parents are now doubly buried underneath monuments to the Party's glory and benevolence.

On 12 May 2008 at 2:28 pm in the afternoon, when children were attending school, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck the Wenchuan region of Sichuan Province. Over seven thousand classrooms in shoddily constructed schools collapsed. The killer buildings were dubbed 'tofu-dregs schoolhouses' (*doufuzha xiaoshe*)—tofu-dregs are soft and mushy remnants from the process of making tofu, a metaphor for slipshod construction coined by former premier Zhu Rongji during an inspection visit in 1998 to the site of a newly built dam that had collapsed. In Sichuan's schools, at least five thousand children died. Grieving parents staged protests and called for an official investigation into why the schools collapsed and punishment of the officials and building contractors found responsible for the tragedy.

Travelling through the wreckage at the end of May 2008, a couple of weeks after the quake, poet and self-styled barefoot ethnographer Liao Yiwu (2009, 100) documented the rage of grieving parents condensed in the following slogans:

Demand justice for the dead students and teachers of Juyuan Middle School

Demand that the government severely punish the murderers responsible for the collapsed school buildings of Juyuan Middle School!

Recover the debt of blood for the people responsible for causing the ‘toufu-dreg construction’ of school buildings!

The Communist Party responded with more than censorship. It imprinted its own narrative on the rescue and reconstruction. During my 18 months of fieldwork between January 2012 and August 2013, I photographed and wrote in my notebook numerous slogans praising the Communist Party’s disaster relief effort:

An earthquake doesn’t care, the Party does

*In times of disaster, the Party is there
In this life, walk with the Party*

*Be grateful to the mighty Communist Party
for our new roads, new bridges, and new
houses*

*Reconstructing the homeland in the aftermath
of disaster. When you drink the water,
remember its source: be grateful to the Party!*

In the contrast between these two sets of observations lies the source of the Communist Party’s authority: the ability to control the discursive parameters through which people talk about, engage, and make sense of their world. Or, as Xi Jinping insists, patriotic citizens must defend their ‘discursive rights’ (*huayuquan*) to ‘tell China’s stories well’ (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*).

Those who tell a different story have no such rights. The slogans written by grieving parents are now part of the landscape of ruins, hieroglyphs of lost futures. They are doubly buried underneath monuments to the Party’s glory and benevolence. In China,

words like ‘manmade disaster’ (*renhuo*), ‘responsibility’ (*zeren*), and ‘blood debt’ (*xuezhai*) are added to the rubble of words that cannot be excavated. An inverted Tower of Babel that reaches down to the abyss.

Affective Sovereignty

The Communist Party’s ‘discursive rights’ are central to its authority and power because words are not disembodied modes of communication but attach us to the world. The Communist Party unabashedly organises political life on the basis of this understanding. In the body politic, words and affects are not the private domain of the individual but the social ties that hold together public life. As a result, how people in China talk and feel falls under the jurisdiction of Party sovereignty—what I call *affective sovereignty* (Sorace forthcoming).

In the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the Party encouraged disaster victims to ‘bid farewell to sorrow and face the future’ (*gaobie chuanguotong, mianxiang weilai*), and to move out from under the dark clouds of ‘tragedy’ and into the radiance of ‘heroism’ (*cong beizhuang xiang haomai*). Less than a handful of months after the earthquake, all Chinese citizens were asked to ‘transform the public enthusiasm’ (*minzhong reqing*) for disaster relief into preparation for the Olympics, and to ‘overcome disaster and welcome glory’ (*chuanyue zainan, yingjie guangrong*)—the implication being that the expression of individual grief, as negative affect, would be an affront to national pride.

The Communist Party provides the acceptable guidelines for the expression and temporality of grief. One must not mourn for too long or let grief get in the way of optimism. Sadness must not metastasise into rage. Face the future rather than the past. The past is a dangerous place to live.

Above all, do not dwell on the questions posed by the dead (Bandurski 2015). All of this affective corralling and cajoling is de-personalising and merciless. The imperative to surrender to the demands of the world is eloquently captured by Roland Barthes' (2010, 126) reflections on mourning his mother's death. '*I resist the world, I suffer from what it demands of me, from its demands*' (emphasis added) to rejoin the charade that life continues as if nothing changed. There is an unrelenting reality principle thrown up in response to death, and in China it is the Communist Party who defines the reality to which one must surrender in order to survive.

In the earthquake zone, those who were left cold by the warm embrace of the Party were labelled 'unruly subjects' (*diaomin*). As one internal Party document put it: for 'individual parents who are emotionally out of control (*xinli shiheng*) and engage in physical conflict' a 'public security conversation' would be needed.

The Miracle of Post-disaster Reconstruction

The Communist Party's official narrative of the post-2008 Sichuan earthquake reconstruction is that it was a 'miracle' (*qiji*). The reconstruction is celebrated as an example of how 'hard work for two to three years can leap across (*kuayue*) twenty years of monumental change'. Over five million people rendered homeless by the earthquake—more than the entire population of Los Angeles—were moved into new homes within a three-year period. Celebrating this 'miracle', on the third anniversary of the earthquake, the *People's Daily* praised the Communist Party for being capable of this kind of 'faith', 'mobilisation capability', and 'ideological dedication to the people.'

Far from disseminating empty propaganda, the Communist Party was re-enacting a variation of its foundational narrative of legitimacy: without Party benevolence, disaster victims would be helpless, scattered, and exposed to the devastating power of nature. For the individual, nature is terrifying and deadly, but under the Party's collective leadership, wisdom, and protection, nature can be defeated. Another way of saying, without us, there is only 'chaos' (*luan*). In this familiar mantra resonates the Party dictum 'without the Communist Party, no new China' (*meiyou gongchandang, meiyou xin zhongguo*), conveying the message *don't ask too many questions and be grateful*. Two years after the earthquake, the Communist Party organised 'gratitude education' (*gan'en jiaoyu*) activities among the earthquake survivors. The gift of the reconstruction required affective reciprocation.

For the Communist Party to be the agent of salvation, the devastation caused by the Sichuan earthquake could not be perceived or discussed as a 'manmade catastrophe' (*renhuo*) in which school buildings collapsed due to shoddy construction materials, corruption, and regulatory negligence. The Sichuan earthquake was a 'natural disaster' (*tianzai*), for which no one could be held responsible. The Communist Party's authority in the earthquake zone rested on the fragile distinction between 'natural disaster' and 'manmade catastrophe'. The discourse of 'natural disaster' had to be reinforced like a structurally damaged building on the verge of collapse. Official media outlets were banned from reporting on the 'toufu-dreg' schools, dead children, and protesting parents. Party authorities were tireless in asserting that the Sichuan earthquake was 'beyond any doubt a natural disaster' and 'an act of nature that could not be prevented'.

Activists, like Tan Zuoren, who persisted in asking uncomfortable questions were arrested on charges of ‘incitement to subvert state power’ (*shandong dianfu guojia zhengquan*). Most China watchers view this crime to be a meaningless, catch-all category for the state security apparatus to arrest whomever they deem threatening. I suggest, however, that it means what it says. As Mao once quoted Confucius, ‘a single word may rejuvenate a country (*yi yan xing bang*), a single word may bring disaster to a country’ (*yi yan sang bang*). Or as Confucius (2014, 37) also said, ‘in the matter of language, a gentleman leaves nothing to chance.’

Orphans

The government never publically released the names of the schoolchildren who died during the earthquake, despite its promise to do so. To keep that promise would mean answering, or at least acknowledging, artist and activist Ai Weiwei’s questions: ‘Who are they? What pain did they endure while alive, what grief do they provoke, now dead?’ (Sorace 2014). It would mean allowing the names of the dead to live on in the questions of the living. Ai Weiwei’s memory wall only provides a temporary shelter for names orphaned from their owners.

Despite Ai Weiwei’s international fame, the Chinese Communist Party has discursively defeated him at home. When it is not censored, Ai’s confrontational message and style of activism does not resonate with the majority of Chinese citizens. His activism and artwork on the earthquake shook without damaging the Party’s discursive hegemony. Instead of following Ai’s call to reject ‘the erasure of your memory’ and reflect on the lives and deaths of the earthquake victims, most Chinese citizens commemorate the Communist Party’s response to the Sichuan

earthquake and celebrate its hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Twin dates marking China’s glory and reappearance on the world historical stage. These triumphs cannot be interrogated without calling into question the symbolic foundations of the Communist Party’s legitimacy.

Discursive Dictatorship

In his book on censorship, Nobel Prize winning author J.M. Coetzee (1997, 15) reflects on how the language of the state permeates the soul, and slips into the lines of even the most precise and vigilant of writers. Coetzee’s point is that we cannot escape from the language under which we are pinned: ‘For there is nothing outside the theater, no alternative life one can join instead. The show is, so to speak, the only show in town. All one can do is to go on playing one’s part, though perhaps with a new awareness, a comic awareness.’ As long as the Chinese Communist Party is writing the script, it will remain in power.

Discursive control is a more likely explanation of Xi Jinping’s governance strategy than some despotic urge to become emperor. It is also entirely foreign to the English-speaking China commentariat who believes that words are the mere shadow games of power, and that Communist Party discourse is empty propaganda. Perhaps the parents of dead children whose names cannot be publically commemorated would disagree.

But the Communist Party’s power depends on more than the redaction of memory—it is revitalised through the capture of emotions. After all, there are endless ways to touch the heart: the relief of still being alive; the dread of uncertainty; the submission to optimism; the exhaustion of speaking to a brick wall—all reasons to be grateful to the Communist Party. ■



Volunteers aiding in the Sichuan earthquake recovery efforts. Photo taken by the author.

The World is Yours!

Youth and Civic Engagement from Sichuan to Parkland

Bin Xu

In the wake of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake millions of volunteers were driven by sorrow, love, and compassion to travel to Sichuan to help with the relief effort. This spontaneous and self-organised movement of idealistic youths was unprecedented in contemporary Chinese history. However, many of them failed to transcend the boundary between simple volunteering and the type of activism necessary to address the causes of suffering in the wake of the earthquake.

If I had to select only one place to tell the stories of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, I would choose Beichuan High School.

At 2:28 pm, 12 May 2008, Beichuan High was torn apart by a 7.9-magnitude earthquake. The main building collapsed and buried most of the students. Parents rushed to the school, calling their children's names and hoping they could rescue them by digging through the rubble with their bare hands and simple tools before heavy-duty machinery arrived. Most of their efforts, however, proved to be in vain. More than 1,000 students, roughly 30 to 50 percent of the total school population, died.

Beichuan High was one of the first places that Premier Wen Jiabao visited in the wake of the quake. Against the background of ruins, he quickly established his image as a 'grandpa' by tearfully comforting the parents and promising an all-out rescue effort.

Wen visited the school eight times. During a visit to the school's temporary campus, Wen wrote down a phrase on a blackboard, 'Adversities reinvigorate a nation!' (*duonan xinbang*), which became one of the official catchphrases about the earthquake.

About the same time as that visit from Wen Jiabao, Siyi, a young volunteer from Guangdong, was cleaning Beichuan High's dorm building, which fortunately remained standing. During her task, she came across a piece of paper containing a handwritten love letter. Siyi could not remember the exact words or whether it was from a boy or a girl. 'But we've gone through that age, and I wasn't so much older than them,' said Siyi, 'so I felt this love letter was very special and then took a picture.' Did the student who wrote or received the letter survive? She did not know. The message, like most adolescent love letters, probably ended up nowhere, leaving nothing but a scar on a young heart. But it was found in a place where life was even more fragile than a piece of paper and evaporated as easily as a morning dewdrop. Siyi said the love letter was one of the things that compelled her to stay in the quake zone for several months, in difficult conditions—sleeping in tents and with no running water.

Siyi was one of the millions of volunteers driven by sorrow, love, and compassion to go to Sichuan to help the rescue and relief effort. They are the main characters of my book *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Xu 2017). They cried in front of computers and televisions and decided to do something. They organised themselves into groups and travelled from places as far away as Beijing and Shanghai. Numerous tearful eyes watched this huge wave of grassroots volunteering with surprise and delight, and many joined them. The volunteers, most of whom were young, wore t-shirts with enthusiastic slogans, cleaned toilets in

crowded shelters, delivered food and water to hard-to-reach areas, and taught in tent schools.

This wave of volunteering was even more extraordinary and significant when it was placed in the context of the history of the People's Republic. Youth and altruism were two things prized by the Communist leaders of yore (Gold 1991). The youths, who were not contaminated by the 'old society' before 1949, were expected to build a brand new, Communist world. Mao made a famous speech to praise the youth:

The world is yours, as well as ours, but it is eventually yours. You young people, full of vigour, are blossoming, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you.

Note that this 'morning sun' speech was delivered to a crowd of selected elite youths, who were 'red' and smart enough to study in the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Thus, the 'you' in 'the world is yours' referred to a privileged social class represented by this particular audience. This nuance was rarely noticed, however. Communist altruism was largely embodied by Lei Feng, a young model soldier who represented not only selflessness but also loyalty to the Party. Even at the end of the Mao years, when many became disillusioned with the empty political rhetoric, a sizable army of volunteers were still mobilised by the government and their work units (*danwei*) to work in the devastated Tangshan area after the massive earthquake in 1976.

Nevertheless, the Sichuan earthquake was the first time so many volunteers spontaneously self-organised or were organised by civic associations, rather than by the state or their *danwei*. At the time, these young volunteers shattered the bias toward them—a generation of little

emperors' (*xiaohuangdi*). They seemed to instantiate China's promising future. In that moment and place, Wen's words made sense: the adversities did seem to reinvigorate a generation.

Under the Night Sky, the Stars

Siyi said that the most memorable thing about working in the quake zone was the sight of stars twinkling over the rubble, illuminating the dark Sichuan night sky. She told me: 'That's something you'll never see in cities. They're so beautiful.' This somewhat deceptive simplicity and beauty made many volunteers wish to stay in the quake zone forever. It was deceptive, because during their brief stay the volunteers could temporarily leave behind all the challenges in their day-to-day life. All human relations were reduced to the 'helper-helped' connection, and, probably more importantly, the volunteer assumed the role of a helper imbued with a somewhat condescending feeling of being needed and loved. Thus, it did not come as a surprise that the volunteers, consciously or unconsciously, attempted to be cocooned in the nice, warm comfort zone of volunteering.

Outside the comfort zone, however, the wounds of the quake were left open and raw. Many volunteers had the experience of teaching in a tent school. Not far from their tent was a pile of ruins, which the volunteers passed on a daily basis. This pile of ruins might entomb 100 or 200 students. Altogether 5,335 students died in their schools, according to official statistics. 'It was because the earthquake!' explained the official media. But few volunteers really believed this narrative, given that many of them saw rebars in the ruins as thin as chopsticks, concrete mixed with large amounts of sand, and sometimes no rebars

or concrete at all. They also heard stories of, and even saw first hand, how the students' bodies were dug out of the rubble, dead and rotten. They felt the unspeakable trauma of the parents. All these experiences would have naturally led many volunteers to a simple question: 'Why did so many schools collapse?'

Nevertheless, very few volunteers asked the question. The interviews recorded in my book show an ethical and political dilemma they faced. They wondered: 'I volunteered because I wanted to reduce the people's suffering, but should I cross the boundary to address the causes of their suffering, through serious and open public deliberations, and even activism to find out causes of the suffering?'

Those who answered yes joined the campaigns launched by Ai Weiwei and Tan Zuoren to collect and verify the names of student victims. They were harassed, pursued, threatened, expelled, and detained. Tan Zuoren was sentenced to five years in prison.

Those who answered no felt a sense of guilt that kept gnawing at their conscience. It was one thing to make angry comments online as a distant netizen; it was quite another if one as a volunteer actually went there, talked with the embittered survivors, and had to directly face this dilemma. Volunteers used all kinds of rhetorical devices to get around the difficult questions they faced on a daily basis—telling themselves: 'It's normal in this society'; or 'I can't change anything, and so I'll forget about it'; or simply 'I don't care'. Their apathy was not a result of an actual threat from the authorities, but a fear of imminent danger implied in the political context. That was what most Sichuan volunteers chose to do.

Even grimmer is the scenario of a 'spiral of silence': the more repressive the political context is, the less likely one is going to talk about or act on the issue of injustice; the less

one talks about or acts on the issue, the more repressive the context becomes. In the end, with no hope to take action, one somehow loses the ability and desire to talk about the issue and silently buries it in the quiet realm of unconsciousness.

This collective silence led to the state's unchecked representation of the past—or official forgetting of some parts of this past. Official commemorations were held, and memorials were built to celebrate the 'victory of the battle against the earthquake'. The largest memorial was built right on Beichuan High's old campus. The memorial has two main buildings and many grassy mounds. The burgundy colour of the buildings fits well with the green of the mounds. Nice and clean. But, too clean. Most ruins were wiped out, but the ruins of the main classroom building which buried more than 1,000 students were too big to be removed. Instead, they are covered by a huge grassy mound with only an inconspicuous banner to tell visitors that the students and teachers of Beichuan High died there. No details. No numbers. No names. No explanations. It is also located in a place far from the normal shuttle route, so many visitors may not bother to walk that far. This strategy is what I call the 'topography of forgetting'—the state reshapes the topography of a disaster site to reshape memory.

Driven by sorrow, compassion, and the 'can-do' spirit, the Sichuan volunteers accomplished something extraordinary. They transcended their group boundaries and particular interests to participate in one of the biggest waves of collective action in recent decades. But many of them failed to transcend the boundary between the 'nice, warm, and harmless' volunteering, and the activism that aims to address the causes of the suffering of the people they helped. The ultimate reason for this failure is the repressive political system, which is generally successful in subduing challenges

to its legitimacy. But the political dynamics in China are complex. The system and the people constitute and reinforce each other; the boundary between the two is always blurred and porous. Not everyone can become Tan Zuoren. But everyone's superficial compassion, silence, and inaction perpetuate the unspeakable suffering of the victims, whom everyone claims to help.

I am not putting myself on a moral high ground in relation to the volunteers. I was one of them. I faced the same dilemma they did, but in a different way. I went to Sichuan first as a volunteer, then to collect data for my dissertation. The emotional toll of this research was certainly heavy. As a father, I often felt my heart was bleeding when listening to stories and seeing the ruins. Yet, I used their suffering as the 'data' to write my dissertation, to get my degree, and later to publish a book with a university press, hoping to use the book to convince the tenure committee to allow me to keep my job. I did little to reduce their misery, except for a brief period of volunteering and some donations. In all these years, I have repeatedly asked myself: Am I exploiting their suffering? How can I—an academic who wrote some rarely-cited articles and an English-language book which may only sell several hundred copies—address the causes of their suffering socially and politically? Honestly, I have no definitive answers.

The only thing I can do (and did) was to use my privilege as an academic writer to let people know what had happened and what my take on the issue was. I gave lectures in the US and China, within and outside academia. In a public lecture in China, someone in the audience even brought up the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward Famine—his relatives starved to death and women in his village were married to better-off outsiders to keep their current husbands and children alive—and this person was a village Party secretary! China never stops

surprising an observer. So far, no National Security agent has bothered to invite me for a tea or chase me around. So, instigating these kinds of public conversations is the type of small action I am able to do now. Am I doing enough? Probably not. Am I doing the right thing? Perhaps yes. But how many of my fellow Sichuan volunteers are able to do even these small things, especially as they would have little to gain but a lot to lose if they do? Very few.

From Sichuan to Parkland

When I was writing this essay, a generation of American youths, who are now growing up in the shadow of Donald Trump, had to face their own tragedy and an existential challenge on a bloody Valentine's Day. On 14 February 2018, a man with a semi-automatic gun killed 17 students in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida. My sorrow was intensified by a coincidental geographic adjacency in my past. We once lived in Miami for a few years, and my daughter's violin teacher resided in a neighbourhood close to Parkland. I quickly found the similarities between Sichuan and Parkland: children died in their schools; there were 'thoughts and prayers'; the incident provoked a storm. I even cynically expected the same subsequent trajectory: after a heated debate, nothing substantive would be done, and, like Sichuan, Parkland would be forgotten or, at best, become an empty signifier like 'Columbine'.

Nevertheless, the event took a decisive turn. The youths in Stoneman Douglas High stood up for themselves. They self organised into groups but gave a collective middle finger to the superficial 'thoughts and prayers', or to adults' lies about the 'mental illness' of the killer, or to stories about 'good

guys with guns defending children from bad guys with guns'. They eloquently told the politicians who took money from the National Rifle Association a clear 'Shame on you!' They walked out of their schools. They drove to Tallahassee to pressure the Florida state legislators on gun control laws. When the petition failed at the state level, they organised a nationwide March for Our Lives, on 24 March in Washington, D.C., and almost all major cities in the United States. Parents stood with them, drove them to protests, and helped them, but it was the students, who were of the same age as those victims in Beichuan High, who occupied the front stage.

I observed this whirlwind and joined the March with sorrow, admiration, and enthusiasm. In my head cycled *The Last Gunshot*, a song by my favourite singer Cui Jian, which, according to speculation, may be a roundabout commemoration of the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989. The lyrics fit well with my hope:

A stray bullet hit my chest.
All of a sudden, the past flooded my heart.
Oh, the last gunshot!
Oh, the last gunshot!

The students in Tiananmen Square fell and never stood up again. The students in Parkland fell, but their classmates stood up and rode the wave. It would be naïve to explain their bravery only by their individual characters. Rather, it is a bravery enabled by the current political context, which, despite its defects and hypocrisy, still contains law-regulated space for open defiance. This space is much smaller and, in some situations, unthinkable in China. The Parkland students could go to the state capitol to press legislators without being threatened or detained, while the volunteers connected to Tan Zuoren and Ai

Weiwei were detained and harassed without explanation. The Parkland students could organise a nationwide march, while Sichuan volunteers did not even have the desire to talk about the issue, since it was impossible for them to change anything. The public sphere also protected this space for the Parkland students' political engagement. In a CNN 'town hall', Senator Marco Rubio was grilled by the teenagers and their parents. In Sichuan, some protesting parents were repeatedly detained and placed under surveillance, and the media were muted. Even if the efforts fail, as Stephen Colbert says in his programme on the Parkland shooting, the youths still have a last resort: 'This is an election year. If you want to see change, you have to go to the polls to tell the people who will not protect you that their time is up' (Russonello 2018). For the Sichuan volunteers, the last resort was no resort at all.

A Candle in the Wind

My reader, before you laugh at my naiveté, allow me to say that I am fully aware of the struggles and hardships the youth encounter in the United States and of the complexity of American politics. History is replete with American examples of slaughtered and silenced youth, such as the Kent State shooting and the killing of the Freedom Summer volunteers. I taught these events for years. But this cannot overshadow the difference between the two political systems and corresponding personal choices. Although no one would guarantee the success of the Parkland youths, they can at least do something. We adults hear their angry voices, and many of us express our own anger by joining them. In contrast, in the ten years since the Sichuan earthquake, any such attempt by the Chinese youth

has been suppressed easily. All we hear is a deathly silence underpinning the state's loud self-congratulations on its successful response to the disaster.

If I sound pessimistic about Sichuan and China, let me end with a more upbeat quote from Lu Xun, who cherished hope for Chinese youths despite his deep disappointment with them.

I hope that Chinese youths will walk out of the cold air. Simply walk upward. Don't listen to the cynics. If you can do something, do something. If you can say something, say something. If you have heat, then give out light. Even if you are a firefly, you can shine in the darkness. You don't have to wait for a torch. If there is no torch in the end, then you are the only light.

Lu Xun. *Hot Wind*. No. 41 (author's translation)

Almost a century later, we still cannot say if Lu Xun's hope has any chance of becoming reality, but let us carry it like a candle in the wind. The world may be absurd enough for us to give up, but it is nevertheless our choice to continue pursuing meaning in a meaningless world. Perhaps, in the end, the Great Helmsman had a point, even anachronistically: 'The world is ours, as well as yours, but it is eventually yours!' ■



The ruins of a hospital in rural Sichuan. Photo: Dominiqueb, Flickr.com

Sichuan, Year Zero?

Yi Kang

The aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake has witnessed the development of a variety of indigenous NGOs. While the first two years after the earthquake were a ‘honeymoon’ period for local governments and NGOs, after 2010 feelings became more mixed. On the one hand, a series of policies openly acknowledged the important role of social organisations in supplying public goods and social services; on the other, new laws and regulations not only restricted the activities of overseas NGOs in China, but also severely limited access to foreign funding for domestic organisations.

I still clearly remember how during my visits to the quake-struck areas one year after the Wenchuan earthquake, local officials would unanimously commend the various social organisations and volunteer groups for their enthusiastic, industrious, and effective relief efforts. Back then, I also witnessed the establishment of a number of indigenous NGOs. In recent years, however, I have found at my field sites that local government support towards social organisations has floundered. I have also heard more and more complaints from NGO representatives about the difficulty of working with local officials. As the tenth anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake approaches, the time is ripe to look back and ask whether the earthquake really was a major turning point for Chinese society, as it was presented at that time (Shieh and Deng 2011; Teets 2009). Conversely, looking forward, is it still possible to say that a vibrant civil society is on the rise in China?

Throughout my field research in the areas affected by the Wenchuan earthquake over the past nine years, I have witnessed the development of a variety of indigenous NGOs—a term in which I also include non-profit organisations voluntarily organised

by citizens, even if they do not have an official registration—which actively assisted in the post-disaster recovery and continued working in local communities after reconstruction was completed. In particular, I looked at their evolving interactions with local governments. The first two years after the earthquake were a ‘honeymoon’ period for local governments and NGOs. In interviews, both sides frequently highlighted each other’s ‘collaborative role’ in post-disaster rehabilitation. However, after 2010, feelings were more mixed. On the one hand, a series of policies openly acknowledged the legitimate and important role of social organisations in supplying public goods and social services in China, facilitating their registration and encouraging them to seek funding from the government and various domestic foundations in order to provide social services. However, the 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law not only restricted the activities of overseas NGOs in China but also severely limited access to foreign funding for domestic NGOs, threatening their very survival (Franceschini and Nesossi 2017). When I returned to Sichuan in recent years, I found that the divergence in the development trajectories of different types of NGOs was becoming more apparent.

Many NGOs that gained official registration in the earthquake-affected areas between 2009 and 2010 were sponsored, entirely or partially, by local civil affairs bureaus through quasi-official organs such as social work associations (*shehui gongzuo xiehui*). From their inception, these NGOs eagerly established alliances with government agencies, and thus state actors had great confidence in their loyalty. Like parents rearing their children, local governments generously offered economic support and policy favours to them. For instance, despite the lack of experience of these NGOs, local government agencies continuously contracted them for various

public services and even entrusted them with large-scale policy, pilot policy programmes. In return, these NGOs carefully catered to the government’s needs and satisfied the bureaucratic culture of upward reporting, enabling the relevant officials to take the credit. Unsurprisingly, such organisations easily grew and expanded over the years, and even engaged in a limited degree of policy advocacy. Such groups quickly came to dominate, or even monopolise, the local NGO ‘ecosystem’. However, depending on continuous state support, sooner or later they began resembling government agencies themselves, which, in the eyes of residents and of certain sober officials, diminished their value as a third party standing between the state and citizens.

After the earthquake, a few survivors and volunteers decided to found NGOs by themselves, without any support from the local state. Such grassroots organisations had neither abundant resources nor close contact with state actors, and thus usually had a hard time fending for themselves in the years after their establishment. To survive, they actively expanded their networks to seek donations and advice. Through these networks, they made friends from different parts of the world and gained exposure to foreign civil society practices and knowledge. Given their limited resources and narrow scope, the government often paid little attention to them, and usually generally regarded them in a positive light. However, as these grassroots organisations steadily grew—securing funding from a wide range of non-governmental sources, building professional expertise, and gaining wider support in the local communities—local governments inevitably took notice and attempted to intervene in their development, compelling them to demonstrate loyalty. While striving to keep an optimal distance from the government, these NGOs cautiously avoided offending local officials who could

have easily threatened their survival. Some eventually drew closer to the government, applying for government-funded projects and seeking opportunities to ingratiate themselves with powerful government authorities.

Overseas NGOs also played a crucial role in post-earthquake relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. They swiftly arrived at the quake-struck areas and joined the relief work. Throughout the rehabilitation process, they provided a variety of different kinds of support (e.g., funding, human resources, technical assistance, etc.) to earthquake survivors, local governments, and indigenous social organisations. They were generally well received by residents and local officials. After things became more stable, quite a few overseas NGOs formally established local branches or supported the founding of indigenous NGOs in order to continue participating in community building. New organisations that received generous overseas sponsorship actively launched various public services programmes, which were warmly welcomed by local governments.

Nonetheless, officials tolerated a certain degree of NGO autonomy only as long as they could harness the resources of these organisations for their own benefit and, as time went by, tensions gradually emerged. Local officials not only continuously asked these NGOs to contribute resources and ideas to fulfil governmental agendas, but also increasingly intervened in their operations to ensure that they followed the directives of local authorities. NGO staff members had to spend their time drafting and submitting proposals and reports requested by officials, even if they regarded such activities as being a waste of resources and hence handled them perfunctorily. In turn, feeling dissatisfied, officials intentionally made things difficult for these organisations. In the past few years, the diminishing ability to determine

local policies and priorities, as well as the government's bureaucratic style and administrative interventions, has frustrated quite a few overseas NGOs that funded local NGO activities. One after another, they have reduced or withdrawn their financial support. In 2016 and 2017, many analysts were discussing the chilling effects of the Foreign NGO Management Law, but what I had observed in Sichuan in previous years showed that even without explicit legal intervention, local governments would discourage overseas support and funding to local NGOs by simply taking a predatory approach: all they had to do was consume the overseas resources of these organisations and marginalise their impacts in local governance.

In recent years, with the passing of the Chinese Charity Law that relaxed registration and fundraising requirements for domestic NGOs, private philanthropic foundations have been on the rise (Simon and Snape 2018; Teets 2018). Many foundations have actively supported grassroots NGO development in Sichuan, especially in the areas of post-disaster recovery and community rebuilding. At the same time, as the Chinese government has acknowledged the legitimate role of NGOs in supplying social services, NGOs in Sichuan now have various channels to seek government contracts for public service provision. When I visited the quake-struck areas in 2017, I found that almost all local NGOs, including those previously supported by overseas funding, had turned to domestic funding sources such as purchase-of-service contracting by different government agencies and flexible grant schemes from domestic foundations. The NGO representatives I talked to generally viewed foundations as an alternative—often preferable—source of funding compared to the government, in light of their more efficient, flexible, and constructive ‘investment’ approach and

business management style. However, they also understood that foundations scarcely deviated from the agenda of the state, as they relied on the permission and support of the authorities. While the new funding game provides relatively stable financial support to NGOs, it forces them into competitions where they must actively accommodate the preferences of the funders. Some adjustments might be constructive for the purpose of organisational development, but most of these changes actually distracted NGOs from their original mission.

A New Dawn for Chinese Civil Society?

For many, 2008 was a ‘Year Zero’ for Chinese civil society, as the relief and reconstruction process following the Wenchuan earthquake witnessed a significant surge in spontaneous grassroots action and organisations offering help to local communities in the disaster-affected areas (Roney 2011; Shieh and Deng 2011; Teets 2009; Zhang et al. 2013). Scholars closely following post-quake developments over the long term, however, are more hesitant in their assessment. For instance, Christian Sorace (2017) has illustrated the top-down nature of the reconstruction process, effectively showing how the tragedy was taken as a perfect opportunity for the Chinese leadership to demonstrate strength and leniency, but hardly created opportunities for a substantive expansion of civic participation. Xu Bin (2017) has observed the state’s cruel response to complaints and claims of parents who lost their children in the earthquake, as well as the increasing marginalisation of civil society organisations. Carolyn Hsu (2017) has noted that although NGOs and social entrepreneurship are transforming China by mobilising popular resources and support

to solve various social problems, the state, meanwhile, is taming their productive powers for its own ends. Thus, the game being played is very different from that which many observers predicted at that time, and the rise of Western-style civil society in China appears to be little more than a mirage.

My research echoes these recent critical works. The post-quake development trajectories of various local NGOs show that, although after the earthquake the Chinese government embraced the third-party management model and a more open associational environment, it remains unclear whether Chinese NGOs can flourish and contribute to the rise of a civil society in the western sense of the term. In fact, most of these NGOs have limited aspirations that do not extend to promoting civil society as a political space: they simply wish to avoid trouble and complement the state in serving populations in need. Moreover, the narrowing of funding sources has caused anxiety and driven NGOs to compete for the favour and patronage of donors. Recently established NGOs are likely to become government- or business-like organisations before they can demonstrate their unique value. Indeed, over the past nine years, I have witnessed NGO development in the quake zones transform from a grassroots-driven, relatively organic, and untamed process, first into a rather fluid and dynamic situation, and then into a top-down managerial set of procedures. Still, not everything is lost. The new funding game that sees the coexistence of government and business rationales, as well as recent developments like the facilitated channels for philanthropic public fundraising and NGOs’ versatile strategies for self-sufficient growth, may open new windows of opportunity for Chinese NGOs. ■



Sichuan earthquake memorial. Photo: Pxhere.com

Civic Transformation in the Wake of the Wenchuan Earthquake

State, Society, and the Individual

Taiyi Sun

Relations between the Chinese state and society have undergone important transformations since the Wenchuan earthquake. While the rise of voluntarism and the rapid increase of social organisations cannot be overlooked, the state continues to pursue a deliberate strategy to cultivate relationships with those organisations that support the regime, while cracking down on those that pose a potential threat. This essay examines the evolution of state-society relations by looking at three different spheres: state, society, and individuals.

On 12 May 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the Wenchuan region, Sichuan province, causing widespread damage in 10 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in China. According to official data, about 45 million people were affected by the seism, including no less than 69,229 casualties and 17,923 missing persons. The earthquake also resulted in tremendous economic loss, which has been estimated to be more than 845 billion yuan (Deng 2009).

While the direct human and economic impacts of the earthquake were significant and tragic, there were also less direct, but long-lasting consequences for state-society relations. Over a million volunteers poured into the region and mobilised their resources to support the relief work, and as many as three to five hundred non-governmental organisations (NGOs) joined the effort (Jin and Wang 2008). For this reason, 2008 has been referred to as China's 'NGO year zero' (*NGO yuannian*) or 'the year of civil society' (*gongminshehui yuannian*) (Shieh and Deng 2011). In the wake of the tragedy, the number of social organisations in China grew steadily, if not rapidly, and many of those Wenchuan volunteers

turned into organisers and leaders of social organisations after the quake relief effort (see Gao's essay in the current issue).

The evolution of state behaviour was more complex. An unprecedented visit on site by then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao on the night of the earthquake gave clear indications about the policy priorities of the state. Whether due to the temporary incapacity of local governments or to a deliberate choice to give more space to NGOs, civic engagement was tolerated, if not welcomed, to facilitate the reconstruction and recovery of the quake-stricken regions. However, since 2009, and particularly after 2012, we have seen a bifurcated policy. On the one hand, there have been frequent crackdowns against those organisations and social activists considered dangerous to regime stability; on the other hand, many social organisations have earned the trust and support of local governments that to this day rely on them for service provision and delivery of public goods (see also Kang's essay in the current issue).

Still, the state matters only up to a certain point. A commonly overlooked yet extremely important factor when talking about the Chinese civil society is the

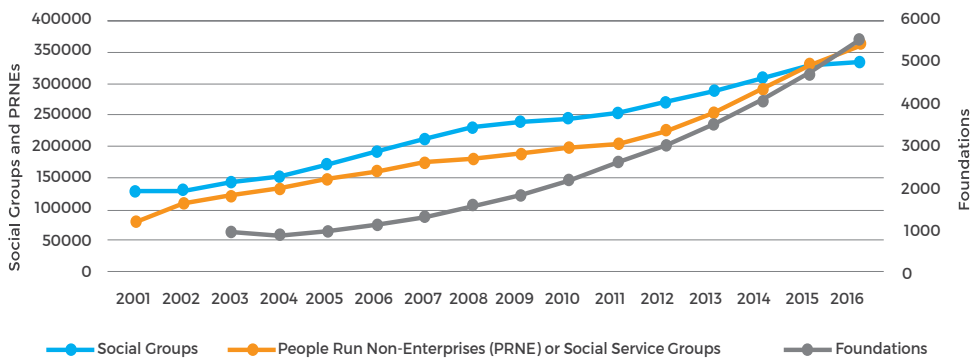
individuals' attitudes towards the NGOs. Unlike in western societies where citizens tend to trust NGOs more than governments, Chinese citizens, especially in rural areas, trust NGOs much less than the authorities (World Value Survey 2015). This individual scepticism towards social organisations poses severe challenges to the development of civil society in China.

The Awakening of Society

Since the Wenchuan earthquake, voluntary associational activities have increased steadily in China. According to reports by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, by the end of 2016, there were a total of 702,000 social organisations (*shehui zuzhi*) registered in the country, among which 336,000 were social groups (*shehui tuanti*), 361,000 were citizen-initiated non-enterprise units (*mingban fei qiye danwei*), and 5,559 were foundations (*jijinhui*). All of the categories of organisation have increased in number steadily over the past decade.

Much of this development coincided with the boom in the number of Internet users in China. Community organisers and social

Growth of Social Organisations in China



Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs Social Service Development Report (Data collected from the 2008–2016 reports)

activists used the Internet to organise and promote activities, which later led to the formation of official or unofficial social organisations. For example, in 2011, taking advantage of a few pictures of children beggars that went viral on Chinese social media, some activists were able to ignite a campaign to fight against child trafficking, saving at least 5,869 children from horrible fates. One year later, they established a new ‘Child Safety Fund’ (*ertong anquan jijin*) to continue to track and rescue victims of human trafficking.

My interviews with NGO leaders in Sichuan province reveal that many of them were first exposed to social activism in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake, when they joined the relief efforts. Once the immediate emergency was over, they found that they had lost interest in their previous jobs and remained in Sichuan to create their own NGOs. Their initial campaigns often included a social media element, and once they reached a sufficient number of constituents to have some impact, they would create formal organisational structures and start operating as ‘proper’ social organisations. If successful, many would register officially.

The transformation of the social sphere can be seen not only in the increase in the sheer number of organisations, but also in the types of activities undertaken. The Wenchuan earthquake led to more intensified public scrutiny of the behaviour of officials and celebrities. Immediately after the earthquake, social activists started to report on the amounts of money donated by individual celebrities, and how the money was spent. Even though the government ended up receiving the majority of the donations, and the lack of transparency in this regard remains a controversial point to this day, the practice of society checking and monitoring the state and other powerful individuals was thus established. Officials

earning modest wages but wearing luxury watches were exposed online, and in many cities individual activists started lurking outside high-end restaurants to take pictures of cars with government licence plates to expose them online. With several officials being charged with corruption and waste due to this kind of societal monitoring, it is evident that the post-Wenchuan nascent civil society was not only growing larger but also becoming more powerful.

The Bifurcation of State Policy

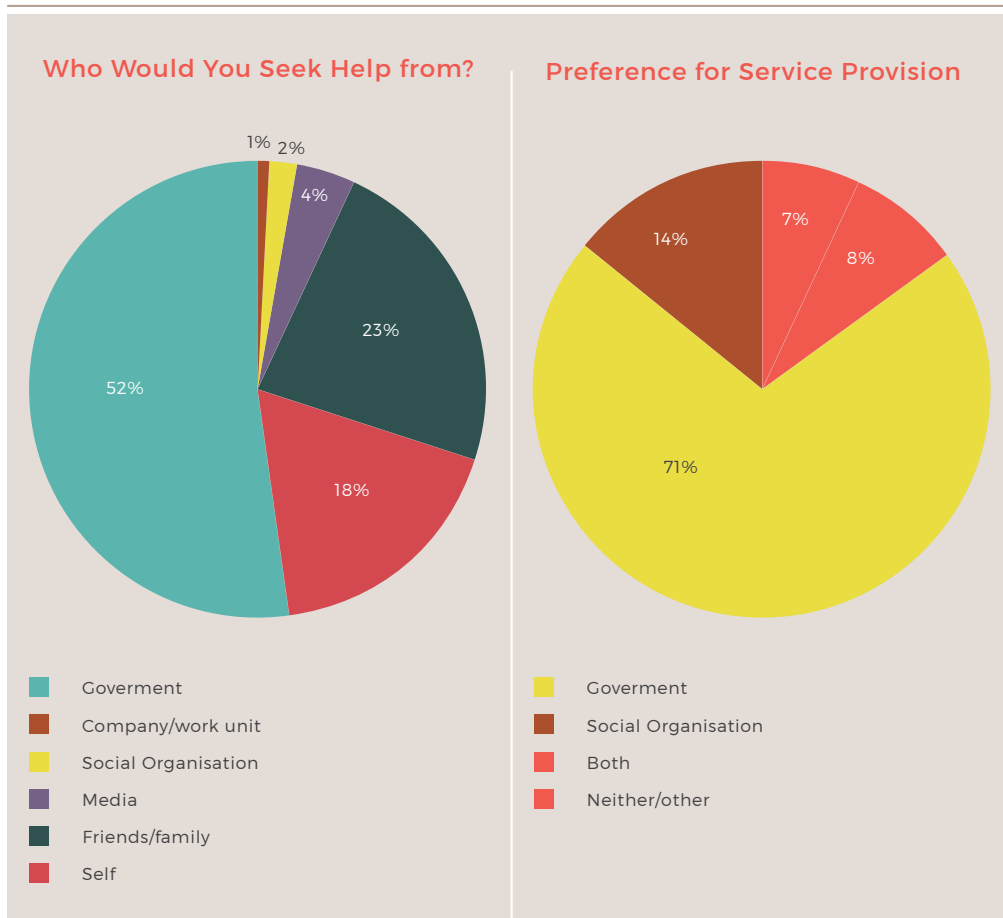
The recent abolition of the presidential term limit in China is testament to the growing centralisation and assertiveness of state power in recent years (see Hurst’s op-ed in the current issue). At the national level, the awakening of civil society has made the Chinese state more nervous and this has led to a severe crackdown on any activity that appears to challenge the regime—especially organised collective actions. However, at the local level, in counties and townships in Sichuan province, officials have adopted a differentiated strategy.

Scholars have previously observed this strategy of distinguishing between regime-supporting and regime-challenging social organisations, arguing that the Chinese state is highly motivated to suppress and collect information from regime-challenging organisations (Kang and Han 2008). The experiences in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake have revealed that local authorities follow another rationale in enacting this differentiation, i.e. they aim at extracting productivities, from and outsource responsibilities to, regime-supporting organisations (Sun forthcoming)—thus employing the carrot rather than the stick in most cases.

Before the Wenchuan earthquake, many local officials in Sichuan had never encountered NGOs and believed that these organisations were all anti-government. When the earthquake significantly reduced the capacity of several local governments to provide public goods and services, NGOs assisted them with the provision of goods and services. In case of problems, they even shouldered part of the blame, thus shielding certain officials from being the direct target of complaints. These experiences changed the perspectives of many local officials regarding the potential usefulness of NGOs. After the earthquake many local

governments started entrusting NGOs with service provision and other responsibilities (Sun 2017).

One example was the distribution of sticky rice dumplings (*zongzi*) during China's Dragon Boat Festival. In the past, to celebrate this traditional holiday, local governments in Sichuan province would give out free *zongzi* to villagers, but often received complaints about uneven or unfair distribution. For this reason, this became one of the tasks outsourced to NGOs and, since the transfer of responsibility complaints against the government have decreased. As one local official told me



during an interview: ‘If they do a good job, the government can still get the credit; but if they did not do a good job, they will take the blame. Why wouldn’t we let them help with such tasks?’ With tight budgets and limited staff size, local officials in Sichuan now actively seek societal involvement in governance, as long as they do not challenge the status quo.

Sceptical Individuals

The World Value Survey and several other indexes indicate that citizens in most countries tend to have more confidence in NGOs than in their governments (World Value Survey 2015; Edelman Trust Barometer 2015; Asian Barometer Survey 2017). This is not the case for China. In addition to these survey results, which reveal that Chinese people have more confidence in their government than in NGOs, a survey that I conducted between 2014 and 2015 with 1,224 respondents in 126 villages in Sichuan also indicates that the rural population in the province is even more sceptical of NGOs than the World Value Survey average.

When rural individuals hear about NGOs—or more familiar terms such as social organisations and charitable organisations—they visualise an unorganised, less trustworthy, and less resourceful group of people without legitimacy to operate. When asked whom they would seek help from, respondents overwhelmingly chose the government (53 percent) and family/self (41 percent). Very few would seek help from other societal actors (media four percent, social organisation or charitable organisation one percent). If they had to choose between the local government and civil society for service provision, most of them (71 percent) would choose the government over social organisations (14 percent). What is surprising, is that even

those who are extremely dissatisfied with the local government—those who chose one or two on a scale of 1–5 indicating their satisfaction with their local government—still picked the government (65 percent) over social organisations (22 percent).

The literature on civil society in China tends to depict the state as the main challenge to the non-state social actors in an authoritarian context (Gallagher 2004). However, the distrust and scepticism of individuals towards non-government associational activities and organisations might be just as important a challenge. My survey also indicates that if one is a member of any NGO, her/his trust towards NGOs will increase significantly. Therefore, NGOs in China should not only seek to deliver goods and services but should also attempt to recruit new members and empower them to be individuals that are able to carry on the mission of the organisation.

The state-society relation in China cannot simply be described as ‘state versus society’. The post-Wenchuan experience has revealed that despite the tightening of the public space by the central government, local governments are quite accommodating when the condition is right. Many new organisations sprang up, especially when they are non-regime challenging. Survey and interview results from this study also indicate that the future of the Chinese civil society in the quake zone, and in China more generally, will not only need a more accommodating state allowing for more space, but will also require a more involved citizenry participating in civil society organisations to build the population’s trust of civil society organisations. ■

FURTHER READINGS ON THE SICHUAN EARTHQUAKE:



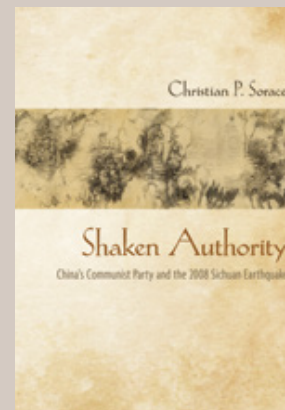
Yi Kang, *Disaster Management in China in a Changing Era*, Springer 2014

This book shows how Chinese officials have responded to popular and international pressure, while at the same time seeking to preserve their own careers, in the context of disaster management. Using the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake as a case study, it illustrates how authoritarian regimes are creating new governance mechanisms in response to the changing global environment and what challenges they are confronted with in the process. The book examines both the immediate and long-term effects of a major disaster on China's policy, institutions, and governing practices, and seeks to explain which factors lead to hasty and poorly conceived reconstruction efforts, which in turn reproduce the very same conditions of vulnerability or expose communities to new risks.



Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*, Stanford University Press 2017

The 2008 Sichuan earthquake killed 87,000 people and left 5 million homeless. In response to the devastation, an unprecedented wave of volunteers and civic associations streamed into Sichuan to offer help. *The Politics of Compassion* examines how civically engaged citizens acted on the ground, how they understood the meaning of their actions, and how the political climate shaped their actions and understandings. Using extensive data from interviews, observations, and textual materials, Bin Xu shows that the large-scale civic engagement was not just a natural outpouring of compassion, but also a complex social process, both enabled and constrained by the authoritarian political context.



Christian Sorce, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, Cornell University Press 2017

In *Shaken Authority*, Christian Sorce examines the political mechanisms at work in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the broader ideological energies that drove them. Sorce takes Communist Party ideas and discourse as central to how that organisation formulates policies, defines legitimacy, and exerts its power. By taking a distinctive and original interpretive approach to understanding Chinese politics, *Shaken Authority* demonstrates how Communist Party discourse and ideology influenced the official decisions and responses to the Sichuan earthquake.



Earthquake survivors line up for food at Jiuzhou stadium in Mianyang. Photo: Raul Vasquez, Flickr.com

The Power of the Square

Post-earthquake Activism in Mianyang

Huan Gao

The year 2008 saw an explosion of civic activities in China, ignited by the devastating earthquake in Sichuan province. Even amid this widespread activism, Mianyang city stood out as a unique site of popular mobilisation, with local people becoming active, self-organised, and creating a network of new NGOs that exists to this day. This kind of activism was a rare thing in Sichuan, where most cities only created new NGOs with the help of external actors. This essay considers how Mianyang's distinctive pattern of local mobilisation was enabled by public spaces, in particular the emergency shelter at Jiuzhou Stadium.

The year 2008 saw an explosion of civic activities in China, ignited by the devastating earthquake in Sichuan province. Countless volunteers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), informal associations, and loosely connected Internet-based groups devoted themselves to disaster relief activities (see Xu's essay in the current issue). Even amid this widespread activism, Mianyang city stood out as a unique site of popular mobilisation. Though a poorer city without much civic activity before the earthquake, Mianyang locals became surprisingly active and self-organised, creating a network of new NGOs that exists to this day. This kind of activism was a rare thing in Sichuan, where most cities only created new NGOs with the help of external actors. Mianyang's distinctive local mobilisation, I argue, was enabled by public space. In particular, the emergency shelter at Jiuzhou Stadium in Mianyang was a uniquely large, visible, and accessible venue, providing not only the physical site but also a symbolic centre for grassroots mobilisation.

The Jiuzhou Stadium

Mianyang is an inconspicuous city in Sichuan, located roughly 110 kilometres northwest of the provincial capital, straddling the Longmen Mountains to the west and the Chengdu plain to the east. In 2007 it had a population of 5.38 million, with a per capita GDP of 11,354 yuan—just below the provincial average (Sichuan Bureau of Statistics 2008). The earthquake hit this city especially hard, causing 21,963 deaths, 9,174 missing people, and a total economic loss measuring 25 billion yuan (Sichuan Provincial Government 2009, 17–37 and 52).

In the evening of 12 May, only a few hours after the earthquake, nearby residents began gathering around Jiuzhou Stadium, as the area provided a suitable place to wait out aftershocks. The stadium is a sports multiplex located at the western edge of Fucheng district, the urban core of the city. It sits on a 13.6-hectare lot, with a river running along its northern and the eastern edge, and a major city road to the south. The entire area is large, open, and flat, with multiple structures and carefully manicured lawns and greenery. The structures of the stadium were mostly undamaged by the earthquake.

On the morning of 13 May, as tens of thousands of people who escaped the ruins of Beichuan finally arrived in urban Mianyang amid the pouring rain, the Party secretary of Mianyang decided to let the evacuees take shelter in the stadium. On this first day, over 18,000 people streamed into the structure in the span of a few hours (Heng 2011). Premier Wen Jiabao visited on the afternoon of 13 May, and this exposure may have encouraged other earthquake victims, as more and more homeless individuals from all around Mianyang poured in. Tents filled the lots around the stadium and spilled over to the street and the riverbank area. Though emergency shelters were continuously being

set up around Mianyang, Jiuzhou Stadium remained flooded with evacuees. One week after the earthquake, at its busiest, it housed between forty and fifty thousand people, based on different estimates (Zhou 2010, 198; Beichuan County Government 2016, 301). It was the largest emergency shelter in all of Sichuan (Zheng, He, and Cao 2008). The bulk of people only dissipated towards the end of May, but the stadium did not fully empty until more than a month and a half after the earthquake, on 29 June. Even in the relatively calm last week of June, it housed over three thousand evacuees. The crowd at Jiuzhou was the single largest public gathering created by the earthquake, and it provided the site and the means for robust popular activities.

Organisational Challenges

Tens of thousands of desperate people housed in one stadium meant to hold less than six thousand created enormous challenges for the city. From preventing communicable diseases to managing waste disposal, everything became disproportionately difficult given the population density. The situation was made even more chaotic by waves of reporters, volunteers, support personnel, and local people looking for lost family and friends who turned up at the site. The local government of Mianyang dedicated as many resources as it could to the management of the stadium. At first, on 13 May, it sent about four hundred city employees (Mianyang Local Gazetteer Office 2009). In the following days, new personnel were continuously added, and at the peak of activity nearly one thousand city employees worked around the clock at the stadium (Zhou 2010, 198). In April 2016, an activist who had been a city employee at the time told me: ‘For more than a month

the Mianyang prefecture government did nothing else; everything was put on hold.' Due to this Herculean effort to manage Jiuzhou Stadium, Mianyang officials did not have spare manpower left to organise volunteers; in fact, they came to depend on self-organised volunteers for crucial services.

Lang, a well-off businesswoman, was among the locals who gathered at the stadium on 13 May. She found utter chaos: newly arrived donations were piling up at every unloading bay, and local people like her who wanted to help milled about aimlessly. Lang went directly to the highest-ranking official on the spot, asking permission to organise volunteers and to help with the reception and distribution of supplies. Officials first wanted the Mianyang Communist Youth League (CYL) to organise volunteers, but when they could not locate CYL officials in the midst of the chaos, Lang obtained permission to organise as she saw fit. With official sanction, the businesswoman quickly rounded up other volunteers and together they received, catalogued, and distributed all the water, food and other supplies they found at one particular unloading bay. Seeing how efficient these self-organised volunteers were, and relieved to have one fewer task to take care of, government officials let Lang's team manage this unloading bay throughout Jiuzhou's tenure as an emergency shelter.

In addition to managing supplies, Lang and other volunteers helped evacuees to start an evening dance group. According to Lang, a few days later, though people were being fed and clothed, they needed something uplifting to do. One evening, she and a few volunteers set up candles and speakers in a lot just across the street from the main structure of the stadium and invited people to join them in folk dances in the makeshift square. When this quickly grew into a nightly gathering with hundreds of people,

local officials did not object to the initiative. Lang's activities demonstrated that, in this moment, members of the general public faced remarkably few restrictions when it came to the use of the space around them. After the stadium was cleared of evacuees, Lang's team launched several long-term projects in Mianyang and one year later managed to register a formal NGO. For years, she continued fruitful collaboration with many other local volunteers whom she had first met at the stadium.

In April 2016 I interviewed another activist surnamed Wang. He had started a volunteer team when he was in university, though it had never expanded beyond the campus. On 13 May, after mobile phone service stabilised, he called many of his university friends and together they went to Jiuzhou Stadium. Once there, they also took on the task of receiving and distributing supplies. Unlike Lang, they did not even ask for permission in the midst of the chaos. According to Wang, it was not always smooth sailing, as his team came into conflict with government officials working at the location. However, despite the conflict, they were still permitted to work, as it was impractical for officials to keep them out, given the bustling crowds. Wang's team of volunteers had been on indefinite hiatus since they had left university, but their experience at Jiuzhou Stadium gave them a new boost of energy to resume regular community services and take on new charity projects. In a short time, they became involved with earthquake reconstruction activities and also became a valuable member of Mianyang's newly created NGO scene.

An Ark of Life

A major public building used as an emergency shelter for more than a month and a half was a rare occurrence in the

post-earthquake landscape. To control the chaos, most local officials across the region opted for distributed emergency shelters and for rapidly recreating pre-earthquake communities. For example, the city of Shifang began relocating evacuees to less affected areas close by and had them board with locals in private homes (Deyang Bureau of Civil Affairs 2008). Most villagers were eager to help, but their particular volunteerism was situated in private homes: there were no crowds, no unending public activities, and very little media presence. The city of Dujiangyan built pre-fabricated homes in record speed, and evacuees began moving into this temporary housing as early as 23 May. These temporary housing communities were administered by existing village leaders or urban residents' committees; they were closed off to outsiders, constantly patrolled by volunteers and the police force, and every visitor had to sign in and sign out (Dujiangyan Government 2008). Earthquake evacuees in Shifang and Dujiangyan quickly left public spaces and also the public eye. For this reason, it became more difficult for volunteers or NGOs to bring them donations, to offer them counselling, or to organise activities for them. Indeed, NGOs working with earthquake victims in temporary housing communities could only enter by invitation from the local authorities.

This was in stark contrast to Jiuzhou Stadium, which for several weeks remained a highly visible and accessible public space. Doors to the stadium could not be closed, as evacuees in dire need and workers offering essential goods and services were constantly coming and going. Tents spilled into surrounding lots and green space and could hardly be surrounded by a wall. Visits by high-level officials and media attention further increased the cost of forcefully restricting access to the area. Also, due to adverse natural conditions across a large swath of Mianyang, maintaining a high-

capacity shelter like Jiuzhou Stadium was helpful for local authorities. As a result, Mianyang residents gained a rare public space. There, volunteers' daily interactions with earthquake victims both encouraged and enabled sustained activism, and their encounter with fellow local activists created the foundation for future collective actions and organisation building.

In the wake of the earthquake, Jiuzhou Stadium acquired a grand and elevated reputation: media reports called it nothing less than an 'ark of life' (*shengmingfangzhou*), and local activists still remember it fondly by that name many years later. While this may be in part state propaganda at work, there is no denying the importance of Jiuzhou, both for disaster relief and the development of NGOs in Mianyang after 2008. Nearly all local activists began their NGO careers at Jiuzhou. While Mianyang NGOs remain constrained by restrictive regulations today and are constantly reshaped by government interference, they still represent something new and authentically grassroots. ■



Still from *Red White*, by Chen Zhong.

Documenting the Earthquake

Marina Svensson

Unlike previous disasters in China, the Sichuan earthquake was extensively documented in images and film, leaving behind an archive of national trauma unparalleled in Chinese contemporary history. This essay examines 16 documentary films produced by 10 filmmakers in the wake of the disaster. These visual testimonies help preserve individual memories of a traumatic event that to a large extent is unaccounted for in the official media and cultural productions.

Parents and bystanders were among the first to provide footage of the Sichuan earthquake, shakily recorded on their mobile phones and camcorders. In contrast to earlier natural disasters, such as the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, the Sichuan earthquake has been extensively documented in images and on film. To date, at least 10 filmmakers have produced 16 independent documentary films on the earthquake and its aftermath. Many filmmakers ended up tracing the ways in which people coped with their experiences during months and even years following the disaster.

Un-silencing Grief

In late May 2008, directives were issued to domestic media that prevented them from reporting on poor school construction and protesting parents seeking justice for the untimely deaths of their children. The images of desperate families with photos of their dead children kneeling in front of officials, marching to local government buildings, or trying to protect and secure child graves, were only seen in foreign media and, later, in many of the independent documentary films. The lack of transparency and accountability for the deaths, and the silenced voices of the mourning parents, triggered a number of individuals—including activists such as Tan Zuoren and prominent artist Ai Weiwei—to travel to the disaster zone to gather information. Several independent filmmakers, who felt a strong sense of obligation to record the national trauma, also arrived early to the scene in order to document voices and stories that had been erased in the official media.

Many parents, activists, filmmakers, and concerned citizens thus came to challenge the official narrative of national unity, responsible leadership, heroism, and gratitude that dominated the official media.

The filmmakers helped parents to bear witness to their trauma and fight for justice, and in some cases also became engaged in the investigations themselves (particularly evident in the case of Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei). Many filmmakers continued to follow events and individuals' stories over the years that followed, documenting not only the official reconstruction effort, but also the struggles of the affected families to overcome their losses, to heal, and rebuild their lives.

Documenting Disaster

The 10 filmmakers discussed in this essay have diverse backgrounds, motivations, and approaches to documentary film (see Box 1 for the list of films and filmmakers). Some of them have a background in film studies or had made several films before they turned their lenses on post-quake Sichuan—examples include Du Haibin, Chen Zhong, Zhao Qi, Fan Jian, and Mu Zijian. At least three filmmakers come from Sichuan, i.e. Chen Zhong, Ma Zhandong, Mu Zijian, and thus had knowledge of local dialects and customs, which also show in the deeper engagement their films have with the communities depicted.

Those who arrived early on the scene started filming without having secured any funding—for instance, Du Haibin had to borrow a camera as he rushed to the area without preparation. A few of them later managed to get funding from international funding organisations and broadcasters. For example, Fan Jian's film *The Next Life* (2011) was a co-production with the Japanese TV station NHK, whereas Zhao Qi's film *Fallen City* (2014) received funding from a range of institutions, including the IDFA Bertha Fund, Sundance Fund, NHK, ITVS, Knowledge Network, YLE, NRK, and premiered on PBS. Unsurprisingly, those films that received

support through international financing are of better technical quality in terms of editing, colouring, and sound, and they have also been more widely screened abroad. Du Haibin's film *1428* was one of the first films produced after the quake, with funding from CNEX, and it received the Best Documentary Award at the 2009 Venice International Film Festival. Other films have had more limited exposure abroad and at various unofficial film festivals in China.

Whereas some filmmakers spent a relatively short period of time in the area, many ended up making several visits over the subsequent years (for example Chen Zhong, Ma Zhandong, Fan Jian, and Zhao Qi). Their films are, therefore, able to probe more deeply into the long-term rebuilding process, and the lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities touched by the tragedy. The films show different styles and aesthetics, ranging from observational, expository, participatory, to performative modes. Many filmmakers adopted an observational style and engaged with individuals and communities over a long period of time (Chen Zhong, Ma Zhandong, Fan Jian, Zhao Qi, and Mu Zijian). Another group of filmmakers approached the topic from a more activist and expository perspective (Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei). One should, however, distinguish between Ai Xiaoming's more participatory mode of filmmaking, making ample use of the footage shot by local citizens themselves, and Ai Weiwei's more performative and confrontational mode.

There are also differences between the first films made in the aftermath of the disaster and those that documented developments over a longer period of time. The initial films often have a very raw, direct, and fragmented character. This is fitting, as it illustrates how people experience and articulate the first shock and the almost unbearable pain after a major traumatic



Stills from *1428* documentary by Du Haibin.



event—examples include Pan Jianlin's *Who Killed Our Children* and Du Haibin's *1428*. Pan's film documents different voices and accounts of the disaster, providing a sense of the grief and struggles of parents to get answers regarding how and why their children had died, and giving a picture of how chaotic the immediate aftermath of the disaster was. Du's film *1428* takes its title from the exact time the earthquake occurred on 8th May. The first footage was shot just a few days after the earthquake struck and provides vivid documentation of the massive scope and extent of the destruction. The film lacks a main character and story line, although a father and his son who live in a shack are some of the recurrent figures in the film. The use of powerful imagery of ruins and debris, the lack of voices or an explicit narrative, and the disjointed structure of the film give the viewer a sense of what living in a disaster zone can be like.

Later films, such as those by Chen Zhong, Ma Zhandong, and Fan Jian, among others, focus more on the disaster's impact on individual families and communities. They address their efforts to rebuild their lives, their emotional healing, and their coming to terms with the disaster. A recurrent

topic in many of these latter films is the struggle of families to have a second child after the death of their first-born during the earthquake. In many cases it was an only child who had died and, while they now were allowed to have a second child, many couples felt emotionally torn over this decision, and in addition have difficulties conceiving. Fan Jian's film *The Next Life* thus depicts the ordeals of a family who lost their eight-year old daughter and who later, after several IVF treatments, finally manage to get pregnant again.

The later films also provide fascinating accounts of different customary practices and the role of religion during times of mourning and trauma. For example, in *Red*, White Chen Zhong focuses on a Daoist temple in Shifang municipality and the role of different ritual and burial practices, which gives his film a strong ethnographic character and shows the important role religion played in the healing process. Some of these later films do not explicitly address the destroyed schools, protests, or calls for justice among parents, but instead show how individuals deal with their loss in more personal and intimate ways. Whereas these films offer some hope for healing and show



human resilience in the face of adversity, the more expository films made by Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei discussed above offer no such comfort. They reveal unhealed (and perhaps un-healable) trauma, lack of redress and official accountability, as well as repression. The argumentative narrative, engagement with victims, and confrontation with officials in these films underscores the ways in which filming is a form of civic engagement and social activism for filmmakers such as Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei.

Archiving Trauma

Although the modes of filming as well as the topics and perspectives are highly variegated, the different films together constitute a valuable repository and archive of national trauma unparalleled in Chinese contemporary history. Whereas documentary films may not help people to get redress, and their circulation in China at the moment is very limited, these visual testimonies help preserve individual memories of a traumatic event that to a large extent is unaccounted for in the official

media and cultural productions. They not only provide an important visual repository that will help individual citizens to remember one of China's most devastating events but also provide important materials for scholars who want to study the socio-political context of the earthquake, as well as customs and belief systems in Sichuan. ■

Documentaries

At least 10 different filmmakers have together made 16 films documenting the Sichuan earthquake and its aftermath.

Who Killed our Children (Pan Jianlin)

Red, White (Chen Zhong)

One Day in May (Ma Zhandong)

Tears in Ashes (Jia Yuchuan)

1428 (Du Haibin)

Our Children; Citizen Investigation; Why are the Flowers so Red; River of Oblivion;

Enemy of the State (Ai Xiaoming)

Little Red Cheeks; 4851; Disturbing the Peace (Ai Weiwei)

The Next Life (Fan Jian)

Fallen City (Zhao Qi)

One Child (Mu Zijian)

An aerial photograph of a city in Mongolia, showing a mix of modern high-rise buildings and traditional low-rise structures. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, with a bright light source breaking through near the horizon. A large red rectangular box is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the title text in white. The foreground shows several large, circular, white water storage tanks on rooftops, a white car, and a colorful playground area.

WINDOW ON ASIA

—
Mongolia



Ulaanbaatar Ger Districts



Coal Steam, Baganuur, Mongolia

Ulaanbaatar, City of the Future

Christian Sorace

Ulaanbaatar has come to be associated with dystopian levels of air pollution, especially in the wintertime, when the temperature drops to minus 40 degrees. In almost every account, the culprit for the devastating pollution of the capital city of Mongolia is the ger districts, areas not connected to municipal infrastructure, where people mainly rely on burning low-grade coal to keep warm. As Ulaanbaatar's future is shrouded in smoke, many older residents wistfully recall a different city from the past. And yet, to this day there is no discursive space to ask: were Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia better off under socialism?

Ulaanbaatar means ‘red hero’ in Mongolian, but the grandiose roots of this name today are lost, as the city has come to be associated with dystopian levels of air pollution—especially in the wintertime, when the temperature drops to minus 40 degrees (Celsius and Fahrenheit converge when it is this cold). In almost every account, the culprit for Ulaanbaatar’s devastating pollution is the *ger* districts—areas not connected to municipal infrastructure, where people mainly rely on burning low-grade coal to keep warm during the harsh winter. With the surrounding mountains and river trapping the smoke coming from the fires of its poorest inhabitants, a city once considered a ‘showcase of socialist progress’ is now depicted as in ‘crisis’ with no foreseeable solution. This state of affairs has been epitomised in the popular social media hashtag #Prayforulaanbaatar.

The dominant register when discussing Ulaanbaatar is crisis. At a press conference (Boldsukh 2017) on 11 January 2017, Mongolia’s then president, T.S. Elbegdorj sounded a controversial warning: ‘The pollution has reached a level where it has

caused stillbirths. If this is not disastrous then what is? It has become dangerous to live in Ulaanbaatar. Ulaanbaatar has become a futile city with no future.' Many local residents echo this sentiment of uncertainty, a sentiment exacerbated by increasing distrust in the promises of politicians, which in turn is starting to erode faith in Mongolia's democratic institutions. Protesting the air pollution, Mongolians have marched on Suhkbaatar Square in the heart of Ulaanbaatar chanting the slogan 'we are suffocating' (*booj ukhlee*), which as Chisato Fukuda points out also means 'we are extremely frustrated' (Fukuda 2017). When I was in Ulaanbaatar in January 2017, protesters placed facemasks on several of



S. Zorig also known as the 'Golden Swallow of Democracy'—Statue with Facemask.

the city's statues, including those of the socialist leader Tsedenbal (1954–84) and Mongolia's hallowed democracy activist Sanjaasurengiin Zorig, who was stabbed to death in 1998. Perhaps only the statue of Lenin, which was moved in 2012 from downtown Ulaanbaatar to the courtyard of a four-star hotel in Terelj National Park, can still breath fresh air.

As Ulaanbaatar's future is shrouded in smoke, many older residents wistfully recall a different city. In the words of a friend who grew up there during the final decade of socialism: 'My Ulaanbaatar where I grew up and played no longer exists.' She is not alone in this sense of loss. Several Facebook pages are devoted to posting old photographs of socialist-era Ulaanbaatar with its clean streets, modern buildings, parks, and open spaces. The problem with such urban aesthetic reverie is that it is disconnected from the political and economic conditions of urbanisation. Socialist Ulaanbaatar was constructed out of an ideological vision grounded in different conceptions about public space and community. But people's nostalgia for Ulaanbaatar as a space seldom translates into openly expressed longing for socialism.

There is no discursive space to ask: were Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia better off under socialism? Foreign media depicts Ulaanbaatar's air pollution as a catastrophe disconnected from political and historical context, while domestic discourse focuses on finding practical and technological solutions to the air pollution crisis. The collapse of socialist political infrastructure resulted in the dissolution of herding collectives, migration flows from the grasslands to the capital, and privatisation of land driving the expansion of ger districts. However, the context of democratisation and land privatisation are ignored in favour of a narrative that isolates and blames the ger districts as the cause of Ulaanbaatar's



(1) Local residents gathering coal, Nalaikh January 2017. (2) Marmot memorial statue, Nalaikh. (3) Coal scavenging, local residents. (4) Coal distribution on the side of the road. All photos by the author.



lack of a future. From this perspective, the possibility that positive aspects of socialism were lost in the transition to democracy cannot be considered.

Mongolia's status as an 'oasis of democracy' is guarded against critical scrutiny in a way that forecloses the imagination of new political possibilities. The discourse of democracy poses an obstacle to a future whose contours may not be visible, but whose necessity can be felt in the unbearable contradictions of the present. Is it possible to act on the recognition that there may not be much that is democratic about democratic institutions under capitalism? As Slavoj Žižek (2009) has argued, free elections may counterintuitively render a government 'more impervious to criticism by [social] movements' in that leaders can respond to protestors: 'Who are you to criticise us? We are an elected government, we can do what we want!' This is not to argue for the abolition of elections but for the democratisation of political and economic life.

The temporalities of utopia and dystopia converge in the satellite city of Nalaikh, about 35 kilometres outside of Ulaanbaatar. The Nalaikh state mine opened in 1922 and ran for almost the entirety of the socialist era until 1990, when it closed down because of a fatal methane gas explosion and the disappearance of Soviet subsidies. When I visited Nalaikh in January 2017, local residents were scavenging coal from slag heaps on the outskirts of the city (see Figure three), their survival depending on the use and sale of the remaining coal deposits. The coal from Nalaikh ends up in Ulaanbaatar's ger districts, where its combustion provides winter heat at the cost of the future.

In the midst of Nalaikh's abandoned socialist past and precarious present is a small monument commemorating the disappearance of a local species of marmot (see Figure two). They stand alert in anticipation of their extinction. By contrast,

the bodies on the slag heaps appear entirely consumed in the strenuous labour of survival. Both images pose questions. Is there a future beyond immediate survival? For what purpose is labour expended? They are uncomfortable questions because we lack convincing answers to them. But just because our political vocabularies are damaged and less able to inspire confidence does not mean that Ulaanbaatar's future should be abandoned to the impasse of the present. ■



WORK OF ARTS

Figuring Post-worker Shenzhen

Mary Ann O'Donnell

In 2013, Handshake 302, an independent art space located in a 12.5-square-metre efficiency apartment, was opened in Baishizhou, Shenzhen's most iconic urban village. The space functions as a gallery or an apartment, depending on the needs of the collaborating artists. Over the past five years, the curators have been able to create site-responsive art that grapples with the city's uneasy negotiation between the formal and the informal, the urban and the rural, the emergent and the vanishing, as well as the anxieties that the Shenzhen's success has generated.



In 2013, Zhang Kaiqin, Wu Dan, Liu He, Lei Sheng, and I opened Handshake 302, an independent art space located in a 12.5-square-metre efficiency apartment in Baishizhou—Shenzhen’s most iconic urban village. The space functions as a gallery or an apartment, depending on the needs of the collaborating artists. Over the past five years, we have created and curated site-responsive art that grapples with the city’s uneasy negotiation between the formal and the informal, the urban and the rural, the emergent and the vanishing, as well as the anxieties that the city’s success has generated. Our decision to open an art space in Baishizhou was made in the context of the ongoing demolition of Shenzhen’s urban villages and the forced relocation of their residents. In this essay, I introduce several artworks that present Baishizhou, its post worker demographics, and the emergence of Shenzhen as a ‘creative’ city.

Washing Feet and Coming on Land

Handshake buildings and the narrow alleys in between comprise the defining architectural features of an ‘urban village’

(*chengzhongcun*)—Shenzhen’s informal but not disorganised working class neighbourhoods. Built by village collectives in the 1990s, Shenzhen’s urban villages continue to evoke the city’s rural origins, its status as ‘China’s first city without villages’ notwithstanding. These brutal tenements are called ‘handshakes’ (*woshoulou*) because it is possible to reach from one’s window across a narrow alleyway and shake hands with a neighbour. Not that anyone actually reaches into the alleys, except to hang laundry on the innumerable electrical wires connecting Baishizhou’s 2,340 buildings and estimated 35,000 rental units.

The official Baishizhou footprint occupies roughly 0.73 square kilometres. Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) abuts its northern, southern, and eastern borders, and the Shahe Golf Club lies next to its western edge. Internally, vernacular Baishizhou comprises six sections that point to the neighbourhood’s history—the Shahe Industrial Park and the five villages—Baishizhou, Shangbaishi, Xiabaishi, Xintang, and Tangtou. Their administrative integration is an artefact of collectivisation. In 1959, the villages were designated Shahe Farm, a provincial-level outpost of the Guangming Overseas Chinese Dairy in northern Shenzhen. Four



Trainers (2017) photography by Zheng Kuai, Handshake 302 artist-in-residence, October 2017

of the villages are located north of Shennan Road, and the fifth—the actual Baishizhou village—is hidden away behind the Window of the World theme park, south of Shennan Road. Since at least 2012, the corporation that represents the five villages has been in negotiation with LVGEM, the appointed real estate company, over compensation for demolishing village-held properties.

Roughly a decade ago, Shenzhen began to squeeze manufacturing out of its borders—first from the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and then from its outer districts. They squeezed out textiles, electronics, and toy factories like ‘toothpaste from a tube’, as a friend once described it to me. When Shahe’s eastern factories were demolished in 2016, they were already being used for storage and as transfer stations in the online economy. The surviving factories in the eastern section of the industrial park were gentrified into restaurants, cheap studio space, and even microbreweries. Today, as Baishizhou hovers at the edge of annihilation, it has an estimated population of 140,000 people, although like many other Shenzhen statistics, this number disintegrates upon inspection. Does it include the roughly 1,800 members of the historic villages? The former workers and staff of Shahe Industrial Park? Residents of the housing developments that are only accessible from Baishizhou, but technically not built on the Baishizhou footprint? Or does it represent the registered population in the four community stations (*shequ gongzuozhan*) through which ‘Baishizhou’ is administered? Like much in Baishizhou, demographic figures operate as placeholders for information we believe should be on record, but somehow hovers just beyond confirmation.

During her residency at Handshake 302, second generation Shenzhen migrant Zheng Kuai photographed a pair of athletic trainers that had been hung out to dry. The trainers

dangle above accumulated grime and dank gutters and, like Van Gogh’s *Shoes* (1886), point to the contemporary organisation of labour and its shifting topographies. In homage to Heidegger’s now famous interpretation of Van Gogh’s painting (Heidegger 2008), we might describe the toilsome tread of a rural migrant, who left his natal village wearing a t-shirt and blue jeans, cheap socks and synthetic shoes, carrying a middle-school diploma to pursue dreams of a better life. The shoes, we imagine, became soiled and sweat stained in the walk from the tenement to his job. Did he wash the shoes himself or did the woman who cares for him do it? We wonder because the effort to clean the shoes points to care, to a gentle self-respect and the ambition to rise beyond one’s current status. But it is just as likely that he earns his wages in a job where cleanliness is mandatory.

Several decades ago, when Shenzhen actually was the ‘factory of the world’, the migration that brought millions of rural workers to the SEZ was described as ‘washing feet and coming on land’ (*xijiao shang’an*)—a reference to the rice paddies where farmers worked barefoot. The expression is explicitly southern and coastal. Villagers from Shenzhen, for example, also used the expression to describe no longer having to work in the oyster industry, which had been central to the area’s pre-reform economy. Indeed, rural urbanisation in Shenzhen is easily imagined as post-mud. During the heyday of industrial manufacturing, when oyster fields, rice paddies, and lychee orchards were being transformed into a paved network of industrial parks, commercial centres, and housing estates, the city oozed and belched as construction sites pumped out thick cords of sludge. Today, however, teams of sanitation workers keep the sidewalks clean. The men wear trainers and formal shoes, the women wear high



Baishizhou Superhero (2014) installation by Liu Wei

heals and shiny sandals, and all expect—and are expected—to keep their feet clean and dry.

A National Bildungsroman

Shenzhen's official history has figured the city as the male subject of a national bildungsroman. Located in the plaza of the Shenzhen history museum, for example, the public sculpture *Path Breaking* (1993) reinterprets the character *chuang*—which depicts a horse charging through a gate—as the creative spirit of China at the threshold of a new world. *Chuang* is a northern expression, evoking generations of workers leaving the country's central plains to work in the northeast of China and Mongolia. Eyes fixed on the road before him, legs powerfully braced, arms flexed in anticipation, and fingers gripping the iron frame of the door that for too long isolated China from the world, the central figure of the statue embodies national will to power. Similarly, the statue of Deng Xiaoping on Lianhua Mountain represents the city through heroic masculinity, a leader confidently striding

forward into the world (via Hong Kong). In contrast, projects completed at Handshake 302 have attempted to figure Baishizhou, its residents, and, more ambitiously, their urban agency and contributions.

Consider, for example, *Baishizhou Superhero* one of the first installations at Handshake 302. In this oeuvre, Liu Wei's playful cartoon characters transformed Handshake 302 into a magic telephone booth. Visitors stepped into the space and through the power of a photo stand-in became one of seven possible urban village superheroes—Methane Man, Wonder Granny, Stir Fry Fly, the Amazing Beer Babe, Village Guardian, Super Dog, or Cat-a-go-go. Friends could then take pictures of each other as they impersonated some of the most visible forms of labour in Baishizhou. At first glance, the installation seems a tacky party game until we remember that these jobs—deliveryman, child care provider, food hawker, beer waitress, and village fireman—constitute entry level access to Shenzhen's post-manufacturing economy. After all, these superheroes provide the services and social network that Shenzhen's informal residents need to make themselves at home

in a city which denies them the social welfare benefits concomitant with local household registration (*hukou*).

In fact, the city's demographics have shifted as quickly as its ever-changing mission statement precisely because it has structured its *hukou* to retain desired migrants and exclude people who are considered 'temporary'. During the 1980s, for example, only transfers from an urban work unit (*danwei*) were granted the right to permanence through a Shenzhen *hukou*. Migrants with an official registration worked to build the city's administrative apparatus as well as its infrastructure, while informal migrants worked in township and village industrial parks, engaged in quasi-legal commercial activities, or laboured on construction teams. In the 1990s, during the city's boom, the majority of migrants came to work in the city's informal economy. Professional migrants came to work as architects, designers, accountants, and lawyers, securing a Shenzhen *hukou* via state-owned enterprises, while the majority of migrants continued to labour without formal inclusion in the municipal apparatus. In this important sense, Shenzhen was always already post-worker, because workers were defined by their exclusion from the city. Workers lived in dormitories and urban villages, which were by definition transitional. When, in 2005, the city began restructuring from manufacturing to creative production, Shenzhen began attracting young creatives, even as factory workers were forced to leave the city or to change jobs, finding work in service or as small capital entrepreneurs. In 2016, then Municipal Party Secretary Ma Xingrui announced that the city's administrative population had breached 20 million, but its *hukou* population remained less than 3.5 million.

Thus, at a second glance, the insidious charm of *Baishizhou Superhero* becomes even more apparent. The Shenzhen Dream hinges on the fact that migrants come to the city in order to improve their material lives. Within the maelstrom of globalisation, however, the latent potential of human beings to transform themselves has been limited by the imperatives of commodification. The superpower of an unpaid grandmother, for example, is to create value by providing unpaid childcare so that both fathers and mothers can join the gendered labour force, as deliverymen or waitresses. The superpower of all Baishizhou migrants is, in fact, the power to sell their labour on an unregulated market for as long as their bodies hold out. A popular expression maintains that migrant workers 'sell their youth' (*chumai qingchun*). As individuals, there are limits to the scale of transformation. When a deliveryman's legs can no longer pump a bicycle or when a waitress' breasts succumb to gravity, these workers are replaced by younger, more energetic migrants. And there is the fantastic allure of the superhero myth—unlimited strength to endure and transcend physically exhausting and emotionally alienating jobs in order to realise oneself as a proper Shenzhenener with a local *hukou*, propriety, and salaried job. After all, those who do not leave Baishizhou continue to exist in the liminal space between hometown and Shenzhen, their figure not yet determined.

A Model of Post-industrial Restructuring

The rise of Shenzhen as a creative city has been a result of national-level planning decisions and municipal-level interpretations. By 2000, a mere twenty years into the reform era, the Chinese government had already recognised that

many cities had ‘over-zoned’. Especially in the Pearl River Delta, competition within and between cities meant that industrial zones were no longer effective catalysts for modernisation. This was also true in Shenzhen, where low-end manufacturing of textiles and shoes—and artificial Christmas trees, plastics, and soap dishes—had already moved to neighbouring Dongguan. The new national strategy required that cities restructure their economies from assembly manufacturing to higher-value markets, including graphic design and high-quality printing, fashion and trade fairs, technology, research and design, biotech, and financial services. Today, creatives have joined the city’s transient population, living in urban villages to save money and time on their daily commute.

In the fall of 2014, when 23-year-old Fu Honghong accepted a graphic design job at a firm in OCT, she did not know that Baishizhou existed. University had allowed Fu to transfer her rural *hukou* to a provincial city and her new job was the first step toward achieving a Shenzhen *hukou*, which would give her children access to the city’s public schools and medical system. Before she started her job, Fu learnt that the firm did not provide housing and the salary was less than the monthly rent in an OCT housing estate. Rather than share an apartment with

five roommates or lease an apartment that was a one-hour commute away from her office, Fu decided to rent a one-bedroom apartment in neighbouring Baishizhou. This would allow her to reduce commuting time, save money toward a down-payment on a condominium, and to forward remittances to her parents. ‘I have,’ she admitted with a shy laugh, ‘bland goals. I want a family and a house in a convenient part of the city.’

The relationship between Baishizhou and the OCT illustrates the city’s ongoing transformation. In late 2005, for example, Shenzhen launched its restructuring with the Shenzhen Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) in the eastern industrial zone of OCT. Within several years of its establishment, the UABB had achieved international recognition and was generally acknowledged as Shenzhen’s most important cultural event, heralding the city’s ambitions to elevate its standing from a glorified industrial park to creative city. Shenzhen succeeded. Previously considered by many to be an over-ranked manufacturing town, it is now domestically acknowledged as China’s fourth city after Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Outside China, Shenzhen has been represented as one of the country’s most important creative hubs. The goal of the UABB has since expanded to exploring urban possibility within the larger



Floating Desires (2015) installation by Fu Honghong.

context of the Pearl River Delta mega cities and, more recently, China's expansion into the South China Sea via the Belt and Road initiative.

The OCT has not only symbolised Shenzhen's rise as a creative city, but has also been deployed as a national model for post-industrial restructuring. In addition to the UABB, which the OCT hosted in 2005, 2007, and 2011, the area has attracted many of Shenzhen's most important architecture firms, design studios, and cultural institutions to take up residence in its factory buildings, including the city's leading independent modern art and design museums. While its theme parks seem dated, the OCT housing estates and starred hotels provide fantasy experiences, where staff dress as gondoliers, greeting guests with practiced smiles and offers of help. Nevertheless, the OCT model of creativity is not easily reproduced, primarily because its success has depended upon two factors: free land via the work unit system of development that prevailed in Shenzhen during the early 1980s; and shunting the cost of workers' living expenses onto Baishizhou and other urban villages, a business practice which became prevalent in Shenzhen after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992.

On the one hand, the OCT was developed by a national ministry that did not have to pay for land. This came about as a result of the 1980 Sino-Vietnamese War. In 1980, the national government relocated roughly one hundred Sino-Vietnamese refugees to Shahe and Guangming, while other refugees were sent to cities and farms in Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. The daughter of one refugee mentioned that her parents had been jealous of relatives who had been settled outside Huizhou, which was 'a real city' and not 'a rural backwater' like Shenzhen. Based on the presence of these refugees, when Shenzhen intensified its modernisation efforts in 1985, the Ministry

of Overseas Chinese Affairs was given 4.8 square kilometres of Shahe land to develop. The Ministry appointed Singaporean urban planner Meng Daqiang to consult on OCT's overall plan, which emphasised a garden layout and the separation of manufacturing and residential areas. This plan proved beneficial. By 1990, it was clear that neither Shahe nor OCT industrial parks could compete with industrial parks in Luohu and Shekou, which were located next to the Port of Hong Kong and the Port of Shekou, respectively. Instead, OCT decided to use its location as a suburb to both Luohu and Shekou to develop theme parks and leisure areas for the city's growing population and Hong Kong businessmen.

On the other hand, in the early 1990s, Shenzhen pioneered the restructuring of socialist work units. In the Maoist system, urban *danwei* provided factory workers with housing, medical insurance, and education opportunities for their children. In contrast, in the 1980s, Shenzhen enterprises began hiring workers who did not have a local *hukou*, enabling factories to provide housing, medical insurance, and education opportunities only to a small percentage of workers. Most of these workers moved into handshake rentals, which, given the distribution of villages throughout the city, were located within proximity of any official development. The majority of young creatives who work in OCT, for example, live in Baishizhou until they can afford upscale rents or make the down-payment on a condominium.

Fu Honghong's installation at Handshake 302, *Floating Desires* represented her experience of walking between her job as a graphic designer in OCT and her shared rental in Baishizhou. Dreams and ambition like plastic wrap and styrofoam lunch boxes glut the alleys and accumulate in the overfull garbage cans. The debris and steam, crowds and shouting, disconcert recent

arrivals and long-term residents alike. Although immaterial, these bland desires—to find a job, to meet a life partner, to buy a house, and move from an urban village into Shenzhen proper—have informed the shape of Baishizhou. Fu created this map out of double-sided tape, plastic wrap, and acrylic paints. The materials themselves are easily found in Baishizhou, where garbage pickers collect the rubbish littered around overfull garbage cans. Just up the street from the art space, a forty-something (fifty-something?) auntie sits in front of a stairwell leading up to a hotel with rooms to rent by the hour or the night; no one stays longer than a week unless things do not work out. She hunches over her cellphone, ensconced on a cheap wooden chair that can be purchased from one of the second-hand furniture stores in a nearby alley. Fu says, ‘It took a month to see past the odours and grime. Now I see that there’s no time to rest, but if it weren’t for Baishizhou, there wouldn’t even be a place to start. We just keep working, compelled by desire and Shenzhen dreams.’

Ghostly Matters

The ghosts of China’s violent inclusion in the modern world system haunt Shenzhen. One trips over colonial ghosts along Chong-Ying Street in eastern Shenzhen and rubs up against the ghosts of overseas Hakka throughout Longgang District. Ghosts have settled beneath the Yantian Reservoir when Tangtou Village was submerged so that the East River Waterworks could be constructed circa 1958, and they flit along the banks of the Shenzhen and Pearl Rivers, memories of those who drowned trying to swim from ‘Red China’ to the ‘Free World’ during the Cold War. Maoist workers haunt the renovated factories of the Shekou Industrial Zone, and the ghosts of rural migrants manifest in the city’s demolished urban villages. Indeed, the uncanny presence of disappeared history has not only accompanied the city’s emergence as China’s fourth city, but also, and more importantly, defined it. These immanent hauntings also appear as ‘stages



Specter (2017) construction and performance by Sabrina Muzi, Handshake 302 artist-in-residence, June 2017

of development' in normative accounts of the city's post-Mao rise from a 'fishing village' to modern metropolis.

In January 2018, no other place in Shenzhen materialised encapsulated the city's ghastly topography as completely as Baishizhou, where it was still possible to find architectural traces of every era of the city's modern history. In the northern section of Baishizhou, which does not consist of the actual Baishizhou village, but rather an amalgam of the Shahe Industrial Park Shangbaishi, Xiabaishi, Xintang, Tangtou, and gated communities, one could find freshwater wells that had been dug during the late Qing, an old munitions warehouse that was used during the war against Japan, and rural Hakka dormitories that were built in 1959 for Tangtou families displaced by the East River Waterworks project. There were two-story factories first built in the early 1980s, two-and-a-half family villas that were built in the late 1980s, and handshake buildings from the 1990s, as well as thousands of restaurants, mom and pop shops, and neon signage that have flourished as hundreds of thousands of people have used Baishizhou as their gateway to the Shenzhen dream. The ghosts that haunt Baishizhou also anticipate a seemingly inevitable future when the neighbourhood has been demolished and replaced with high-end housing estates, office complexes, and state-of-the-art cultural spaces.

Handshake artist-in-residence, Sabrina Muzi constructed a shamanic cape and handheld props from objects that had been found or donated in Baishizhou, her artistic practice itself a reflection of the highly organised work of garbage collection, sorting, and resale that defines life in Baishizhou. She hired three people to perform as the spect, their identities distinguished by the objects in their hands—one carried a discarded control board, one carried a glowing staff, and one carried a

small flashlight. The performers posed at and walked through several of Baishizhou's representative spaces, including a market street, a restaurant, and the Baishizhou subway station. In each space, the juxtaposition of the specter to the residents of Baishizhou highlighted the tenacious informality of the area. In one ecstatic image, the 'control board specter' walks in front of a temporary storage facility, which was constructed illegally on the rooftop of a condemned factory. In the foreground are discarded tyres and boxes, which have been organised for future re-use. In the background, just beyond the pastel tiles of Xintang are the high-end high-rise apartment buildings in neighbouring OCT.

Muzi's colourful cape and formal poses arrested a gaze, but the wires and flickering lights of the props suggest the conditions of haunting Baishizhou. Like Zheng Kuai's focus on Baishizhou's wires, *Specter* takes reckoning with Baishizhou not only as a liminal space, but more precisely as a transient space. To live in Baishizhou is not necessarily to be from a rural area, but rather to be ruralised with respect to the city proper. The current residents do not simply live in the shadow of demolition and relocation, but rather the specter of demolition transvalues the work and lives of Baishizhou residents. They materialise suddenly and just as abruptly vanish into viscous uncertainty—apparitions like electricity, flickering across and between the neighbourhood's dense network of wires. ■

WORK OF ARTS

Rural Migrant Workers in Independent Films

Representations of Everyday Agency

Eric Florence

The recent wave of evictions of tens of thousands of rural migrants in Beijing has served as a harsh reminder of the subaltern condition of many of these people in today's China. This essay examines how rural migrant workers have been represented in Chinese independent documentary films. It points to the importance of conceptually linking the political economy, sociology, and cultural politics of labour in order to apprehend the subject-making processes of migrant workers in today's China.

It's like guerrilla warfare. What matters is to get water. Everything is demolished around here, there is no water... Once the migrants school is demolished, you'll have nowhere to go to. How do you think that makes me feel? I can only blame myself for not giving you a better life.

When the Bough Breaks, Ji Dan (2010)

The recent demolition of entire areas in the suburbs of Beijing and the ensuing wave of evictions of tens of thousands of rural migrants have served as harsh reminders of the subaltern condition of many of these people in China today. The previous issue of *Made in China* focussed on the ongoing debate on precariousness in contemporary China, shedding light on the complex changes affecting labour regimes and the increasingly diverse and fragmented labour landscapes across the country. In this essay, I will delve into a different but related issue: how rural migrant workers have been represented through a specific form of intervention—Chinese independent documentary films. The importance of looking at the ways various categories of rural migrants are represented, and how migrants themselves take part in their own self-representation—the so-called cultural politics of labour—hinges upon the assumption that both the study of the political economy and sociology of labour on the one hand, and the study of the cultural politics of labour on the other, are needed to apprehend the subject-making processes of migrant workers in today's China (Sun 2014).

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Although the relationship between rural migrants and filmmakers is an unbalanced one, an exploration of independent documentary films provides a glimpse into how migrants' desires, aspirations, hopes for a better life, and their quest for social mobility, engage with—and are strongly shaped by—historically produced institutional and structural forces. Rural-to-urban migration processes in post-Mao China are deeply rooted in large-scale structural inequality of power and access to wealth. They have also been shaped by politico-institutional configurations, and by the relationship between Party-state, market forces, and capital. Hence, we can consider rural migrants in post-socialist China as standing within historically, culturally, and institutionally constituted 'matrixes' of power (Ortner 2006), i.e. the rural-urban chasm, the reformed institutions and mechanisms of demographic control and appropriation of labour, and a whole network of multi-layered hegemonic discourses.

In the late 1980s and first half of the 1990s, many of the mainstream media accounts shared an overall homogenising depiction of rural workers. Starting from the second half of the 1990s, in parallel with similar processes taking place in the fields of Chinese social sciences, media, and popular literature, some documentaries began to deconstruct the image of voiceless hordes of unsightly people 'pouring blindly' into Chinese cities (Florence 2006). Since the late 1990s, the channels of mediation of migrant workers' lives and toil in the cities have become increasingly diversified, including through popular literature, radio, TV shows, photography, and films. With digital advancements over the past decade or so, online forms of representation by both workers themselves—what Jack Qiu has defined as 'worker-generated content' (Qiu 2009)—and by urban elites, such as journalists or NGO activists, have become

increasingly widespread. The categories of migrants covered by this specific form of cultural politics have also become more varied, with the inclusion of not only young factory workers, but also miners, domestic workers, vagrants, etc.

A Bottom-up View

Independent documentary films such as such as Li Hong's *Return to Phoenix Bridge* (1997), Wu Wengugang's *Life on the 'Jianghu'* (1999), Du Haibin's *Along the Railway* (2001), Ying Ning's *Railroad of Hope* (2002), Ai Xiaoming's *The Train to My Hometown* (2008), Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home* (2010), Ji Dan's *When the Bough Breaks* (2010), Guo Zongfu's *Coal Miner* (2012), Huang Weikai's *Drifting* (2005), Zhao Dayong's *Nanjing Lu* (2010), and Xu Tong's *Wheat Harvest* (2012) depart from the more mainstream—often paternalistic and at times voyeuristic—cinematic representations of rural migrants (Sun 2014). With their uninterrupted long sequence-shots, they provide the subjects with enough time to narrate their experiences in full. While each of these films possesses its own specificity in terms of form and cinematic arrangements, they share a bottom-up perspective, often focussing on ordinary people from all walks of life who narrate their experiences and reflect on their lives, as well as on society as a whole. For such filmmakers, building a relationship of confidence with the subjects requires a quasi-ethnographic approach that implies living with them for extended periods of time (in some cases for one year or more). Berry and Rofel highlight that it is out of this relationship that the 'social and political commentary of the film' is able to develop (Berry and Rofel 2010, 11). Duan Jinchuan, one of the pioneering figures of new style Chinese documentaries, similarly

stressed the importance of building a relationship with the filmed subjects (Lü 2003, 96; see also Robinson 2010).

In light of this, *Return to Phoenix Bridge*, widely referred to as one of the earliest independent documentaries focussing on the everyday life of female migrant workers, managed to de-dramatise the depiction of these women. This was accomplished through the use of long sequences simply concentrating on these women's daily chores and living conditions. In *Along the Railroad*, a 2001 film focussing on the lives of vagrants living beside the railway tracks in Baoji, Shaanxi province, Du Haibin provided a platform for people who can hardly find space to voice their views on their own lives, or on society more broadly. Hence, to some extent, the film opened up a space for making visible the subjectivities of people located at the lowest rungs of society, the so-called 'blind migrants' (*mangliu*). By leaving ample time for the subjects' narration, making their everyday life visible along with the space they live in and their emotions and aspirations, the rather homogenising category of 'blind migrant' is

somehow fissured. The long sequence shots exposed quite crudely the very harshness of their everyday living conditions, as well as their own reflections on the precariousness of their existence. As one of the characters in the film said: 'Nowhere to stay when it was cold, nothing to eat when hungry, no doctors to see when sick. It made me feel sad about my life.'

To some extent, such exposure stood at logger's head with the quite mainstream—but far from undisputed—idea that personal efforts inevitably lead to improvement in one's condition, a value which has become a major mode of legitimation of access to wealth and status in post-Mao China.

An Embodied Characterisation of the Rural Condition

Through the subjects they portray, through their narratives, and through the bodies of their characters, the documentary films explored in this essay hint at powerful markers of the politico-historically



Wheat Harvest, Xu Tong (2012).



Still from *Railroad of Hope*, Ying Ning (2002).

produced rural-urban chasm and the traps of the political economy underpinning rapid economic growth in post-Mao China. The way these films mediate the rural conditions experienced by migrants is again, on the whole, quite different from that of the mainstream media narrative of the 1980s and 1990s, which linked material poverty to subjective or cultural poverty characterised by the ‘low quality’ (*di suzhi*) of the rural populace (Yan 2008; Sun 2013). They do so in an embodied manner, by enabling the expression of the rural condition as lived experience that often causes hardship and suffering.

In filmic representations, one sees a recurring background of poverty, disease, and material constraints, such as debts, unaffordable health or education costs, family normative pressures, and violence. In her latest book, Pun Ngai describes how in the 1980s and 1990s, policies related to agriculture, education, and health in the countryside combined with political economies in urban areas to produce labour markets that favoured massive and rapid capital accumulation. She also describes how

these policies have enabled ‘a production regime within which a separation exists between the production sphere in industrial regions and social reproduction in rural areas’ (Pun 2016, 33–34). In a specific passage of *Railroad of Hope*, one of the first documentary films shot with a DV camera by filmmaker Ying Ning, this embodied hardship of the rural condition takes on a highly tragic and intense form in the tale of a woman who—in front of her child—explains that almost twenty years before she had been forced to marry a man she did not know, and that since then she had to live with this extraordinarily heavy load so as not to sadden her parents and to preserve her son’s future:

The woman: ‘Since 1982 I have lost any joy in life.’

The filming assistant: ‘If you were to live again, what kind of life would you wish to have?’

The woman: ‘I have no wishes any more.’

These Chinese documentary films also enable the viewers to get a glimpse of the multiplicity, complexity, and ambivalence of the motives that rural migrants put forward in order to explain their decisions to leave their hometowns: compelling rural poverty (debts, cost of health and education), the wish to become more independent from their family, the hope to discover the world out there, etc. Along with the vast scholarship on rural-to-urban migration in China, they show that human experiences can never be reduced to a simple mono-causal narrative. Chinese independent documentary films also allow us to approach the simultaneously empowering and highly constrained dimension of migrants' agency, showing how it develops both against the background of historically and institutionally produced economic forces (Brettel and Hollifield 2007, 21).

Remote Mountain, a film shot in 1995 in an illegal mine shaft in the Qinlian mountains, Qinghai province, more than three thousand metres above sea level, features a compelling explanation of why three young people filmed in the mine had decided to migrate to work in such a dangerous environment. Hu Jie filmed the bodies of these minors very closely, and because of the narrowness of the shaft, one hears their breath as they dig and excavate full baskets of coal. In one specific passage, one of the men carrying a heavy yoke, replies to the filmmaker's question as to why he is still working in the shaft despite being critically ill with pneumoconiosis:

What I think of this? This is in order to live. We are here in order to earn a living, to get married, rebuild the house, send our kids to school. This is in order to live.

Railroad of Hope (2002) offers another perspective on the agency of rural migrants. The film revolves around the question of why these migrants decided to leave their

mountainous hometown in Sichuan province to work in cotton fields in remote Xinjiang. Much of the film tends to lend credence to the idea that, while they were not literally compelled to leave, a set of powerful forces at home and in the destination area have somehow pushed them to get out of their hometown. The film also mediates the agency and the capacity of rural migrants to reflect on their lives, as well as on the factors limiting their endeavours. Two segments of this movie demonstrate how powerful material forces shape people's decisions. In the first, a terribly disfigured young woman, injured while toiling in a factory, exemplifies not only the constraints of the countryside, but also the structural violence of labour regimes in post-Mao China. The strength of this scene lies in the invisible but compelling forces that make this young lady, whose face has been irremediably damaged and who received minimal financial compensation for the injury, once again leaves her hometown to labour in the cotton fields in Xinjiang.

In the second segment, two women in their forties reply to the question: 'Do you feel happy?'

Woman 1: 'Well I don't know, really. I am not sure what this means. Happy people don't need to go far away to get a job.'

Woman 2: 'It's all for our children and our parents.'

Woman 1: 'This is not a happy life. Happiness is to stay at home. When two kids have to go to school, one may not afford it, we *have* to get out.'

One should note that younger people in the same film tend to put forward reasons more related to positive and 'emancipatory values', such as the will to change one's condition compared to their older counterparts. What this shows is that the decisions these people make are interwoven



Still from *When the Bough Breaks*, Ji Dan (2010).

and shaped by a number of forces, such as normative family and gender expectations, expectations regarding social mobility, material constraints related to health and education costs, as well as a politics of desire constructed within the migration process. These elements all combine to shape migrant workers' subjectivities and agency in complex ways.

When the Bough Breaks

The movie which, I argue, manages to show most powerfully the complex ways in which rural migrants' aspirations and will engage with material forces—both at home and in the workplace—is *When the Bough*

Breaks, a 2010 documentary by pioneer filmmaker Ji Dan (Litzinger 2016). The filmmaker spent a year with a family of scrap collectors she had met in 2004 while working on a film project on a Beijing school. Five years later, she heard that the eldest female sibling in the family had vanished—it is never quite clear in the movie whether she died, but she was supposedly forced into prostitution at some point. The film focusses on the relationship between the parents—in particular, the crippled father who lost one leg—and the two remaining daughters. Xia, the eldest daughter, holds on to one single project with extraordinary determination: to enable her younger brother to attend a good high school and later university. Xia's perseverance and determination to succeed

in her goal is contrasted by the father. He and his wife are originally at best ambivalent about their daughter's plan. He first agrees to it, recognising that 'education enables you to get anything', but later strongly opposes it, aware of what this dream would cost him and his family. At some point, Xia's mother, exhausted, tells her daughter: 'You know, it is already so tough right now, with this project of yours, the bough might break.' The father's entire body is so full of scars, exhaustion, hardship, and suffering. His body bespeaks precariousness, liminal subsistence, which leans towards physically and psychological collapse, alcoholism, and violence.

Through these characters of the father and daughter, in a single documentary Ji Dan manages to shed light on the complexity of what shapes the agency of rural migrants in today's China: a mix of powerful aspirations to improve one's condition and equally powerful forces that tend to maintain them in a subaltern position. Throughout the film, the daughter is ready to make any sacrifice—such as dropping out of school herself to earn money—so that her younger brother can enter a good high school. At one point, Xia says: 'I'll sell my blood to send him to school if I have to.' A series of implicit questions run through the film: what kind of political economy pushes people to endure such hardships and make such sacrifices? Would it not be wiser to listen to Xia's brother, who, perhaps tired of shouldering such normative pressure, at one point suggests that it might be better to simply let him attend an ordinary school? But by doing so, would this not prevent him from having any chance of accessing university? And would this not essentially be making a concession to some kind of social determinism according to which rural people ought to only perform the jobs for which they are suited? These are complex issues relating to the institutionally unfair nature of the education system, the

structural obstacles to social mobility, and the enduring subaltern condition of rural migrants. Ji Dan manages to mediate this tension and complexity in an incredibly powerful way.

In conclusion, these Chinese documentaries allow us to approach core dimensions of the subaltern condition of migrant workers—of their determination, agency, and modes of engagements with the world. To a certain extent, these films provide subtle insights into the societal and socioeconomic transformations linked to unprecedented growth and massive capital accumulation that took place in China over the last three decades. They not only shed new light on the experiences of migrant workers by making their hopes, desires, and embodied hardships visible, but also illustrate how all this suffering constitutes an important, if not fundamental, part of such transformations. ■

ACADEMIC WATCH

William Hurst on *Ruling Before the Law*



It is often assumed that the law in China, as in many other developing countries, is weak or unimportant. In his new book *Ruling Before the Law: The Politics of Legal Regimes in China and Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), William Hurst offers a compelling comparative study of legal regimes in China and Indonesia to dispel this misconception.

What prompted you to compare two countries as diverse as China and Indonesia?

William Hurst: There were three main reasons why I opted to compare China and Indonesia. First, I wanted to engage in the type of ‘apples comparison’ I have called for in the past (Hurst 2018), looking at China side-by-side with another large and complex country built on equally extensive field research in both places. Second, China and Indonesia are about as close to being ‘most

different systems’ as you can get while still being broadly comparable. Maoist China was a staunchly leftist revolutionary regime, whereas Indonesia under Suharto’s New Order was a paradigmatic right-wing military dictatorship. China has a strong state, but Indonesian state capacity has always been weak. Everyone in Indonesia must officially belong to a religion, while Chinese society is one of the least formally religious in the world. Yet both countries emerged in their present forms within months of each other in 1949, their per capita incomes tracked each other reasonably closely up until about 1998, and both have legal systems rooted in what we could term broadly the Civil Law tradition. This makes them ripe for what in the book I call a ‘Millian Two-Step’ comparative analysis, deploying a most-similar systems design subnationally within each country and a most-different systems design to compare between them. Third and finally, these are the two countries I was equipped to study and they are also two intrinsically important places—the world’s largest and fourth largest countries by population, the most globally influential authoritarian regime and the largest and most important new democracy, the most significant remaining Communist state and by far the most populous majority-Muslim society. By comparing both subnationally and cross-nationally in this way, I am able to elucidate distinct legal regimes in each country at specific points in time and at work in particular areas of law.

In both China and Indonesia, law is often assumed to be weak. To what extent have you found this to be true?

WH: The alleged weakness of law in both China and Indonesia has been much exaggerated. Many observers have looked for law to play certain political and social roles and to work through patterns and mechanisms familiar to them from very

different contexts. Law in Indonesia and China is powerful and vitally important, but rarely does it play the exact roles foreign scholars—or even some insider practitioners—might expect (or assume it ought to). Looking at legal regimes on their own terms, we can see better how law actually works and the influence it has on society and politics.

Contrary to much of the existing scholarship, you argue that traditional rule of law paradigms make for blunt tools when trying to make sense of the development trajectories of these two countries. Why is that so?

WH: Rule of law as traditionally conceived—especially in Anglo-American scholarship since the early twentieth century—is exactly the kind of narrow-gauge portal that constrains what observers see of the law’s operation within its own institutions, or of its impacts on other aspects of politics and society. When we adopt traditional rule of law paradigms we put on blinders that severely restrict our field of vision. Only after we take these off can we begin to look through better-tuned lenses to observe the complete picture of law and politics with greater acuity and parse its dynamics more effectively. I argue in the book that legal regimes offer a better perspective for analysing specific areas of law during various time periods in both China and Indonesia since 1949. Looking just at China, we can see what I term a ‘mobilisational’ legal regime in play during the Maoist era, with a specific emphasis on criminal law. During the Reform era, China has developed a hybrid legal regime that combines ‘rule by law’ in the civil arena with what I call a ‘neotraditional’ legal regime in criminal law. Building markets and growing the economy requires predictable adjudication and resolution of civil disputes, while persistent and pervasive intervention

by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and non-legal political entities into the criminal process facilitates the maintenance of the Party’s authoritarian rule. This hybrid, incidentally, is the mirror image of that which has developed in Indonesia since *Reformasi*, where democratisation has forced state and powerful social actors to refrain from direct or excessive intervention into crime and punishment, even as they remain unconstrained from interfering pervasively into civil dispute resolution.

Much has changed in both China and Indonesia in the eleven years since you started your research. In the period after you completed the research for this book, have you noticed any significant changes in the two countries’ legal regimes as well?

WH: Sure. There are significant changes in politics and law all the time, and both countries have certainly seen specific aspects of their legal regimes evolve since 2006. Even since you sent me these questions, the CCP has called for amending China’s Constitution in important ways that could, for example, enable Xi Jinping to remain in office indefinitely. I have tried to address as much of this change as possible, keeping the book as current as I could up through to at least early 2017. This was a challenge, especially since the scope of my research begins essentially with 1949, but I am reasonably confident that neither country has had its mix of legal regimes set onto a fundamentally new trajectory since I began my research. Of course, that does not preclude change in the future. Indeed, though both hybrids of neo-traditionalism and rule by law appear remarkably stable, I would expect that truly significant ruptures or redirections of politics could certainly occur in either China or Indonesia at some point in the decades ahead and that these could well have similarly watershed implications for their legal regimes. ■

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