

# MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 3, ISSUE 3, JUL-SEP 2018

## **ON A CHINESE SCREEN**

*Media, Power, and Voice in China*



MADE IN CHINA  
JOURNAL

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CHINA iRESiE  
mismatched shards of China

**It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve. Great areas of it, even for a Party member, were neutral and non-political, a matter of slogging through dreary jobs, fighting for a place on the Tube, darning a worn-out sock, cadging a saccharine tablet, saving a cigarette end.**

George Orwell, 1984





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## On a Chinese Screen

### Media, Power, and Voice in China

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The previous decade saw widespread discussions about the role of the Internet in reshaping power relations in Chinese society. New media—it was widely believed—would give voice to the poor and downtrodden, allow citizens to better supervise government activity, and foster lively cultural exchanges. Workers would also benefit from this, as the Internet provided them with the tools needed to bring their grievances into the spotlight and enhance their ability to connect with their peers to establish new forms of solidarity. A decade later, what is left of that cyber-utopian discourse? As the Chinese Party-state steps up the censorship and manipulation of online information, and as new media is increasingly used as a means to reinforce control and surveillance over the population, a more sombre assessment of the role of the Internet seems to have gained traction in the court of public opinion. The scandals that in recent years have engulfed those social media companies that in the late 2000s and early 2010s gave rise to many of those thwarted expectations—Facebook in primis—have nothing but contributed to the disillusion.

This issue of *Made in China* offers a series of essays that assess the relevance of the cyber-utopian discourse against the background of the latest developments in Chinese politics and society. In the special section, **Sun Wanning** considers how the struggles of Chinese migrant workers have been constructed in public discourse and how media has come to play a role in their struggles. **Julie Chen** analyses the plight of Chinese platform workers. **Mimi Zou** shows how social media provides considerable scope for employers to monitor employees. **Marina Svensson** examines how Chinese

workers have been portrayed through the lens of photography. **David Bandurski** investigates an ‘independent’ Chinese documentary, revealing how foreign media can inadvertently become co-producers of state propaganda. Finally, **Zeng Jinyan** interviews writer **Wang Lixiong** about his latest novel, a damning portrayal of a cyber-dystopia.

The issue includes op-eds on the Jasic mobilisation by labour scholar and activist **Zhang Yueran**; the controversy surrounding Chinese scholar Hu Angang by his former colleague at Tsinghua University **Jane Hayward**; and the first anniversary of Liu Xiaobo’s death as experienced by his long-time friend **Jean-Philippe Béja**. The op-ed section also features a reflection on the situation of Chinese political studies by **William Hurst**. In the China Columns section, **Lynette Ong** examines how the Chinese state outsources violence and social control to private actors, while **Zhang Shuchi** describes the plight of Chinese workers in Papua New Guinea. The Window on Asia section offers two essays by **Sabina Lawreniuk** and **Hyejin Kim**, which respectively look into the latest elections in Cambodia and the recent Candlelight Movement in South Korea. In the cultural section, **Christian Sorace** delves into the work of movie director Geng Jun, and **Suzanne Scoggins** reviews Zhao Liang’s documentary *Crime and Punishment*.

We wrap up the issue with two conversations: the first with **Anna Lora-Wainwright** about *Resigned Activism*, her latest book on environmental activism in China, and the second with **Fang Kecheng** about the website CNPolitics. ■

The Editors

**BRIEFS**  
**Jul-Sep 2018**

**JUL/SEP  
2018**

### **Vaccine Scandal Rocks China**

Consumer scandals continue to engulf China. News broke out in late July that Changsheng Biotechnology Co. and Wuhan Institute of Biological Products Co. had respectively manufactured more than 250,000 and 400,000 substandard infant vaccines, an unknown number of which may have been administered to Chinese toddlers. This revelation sparked outrage across Chinese society. Social media platforms were inundated with criticism of unscrupulous corporate conduct and lax government supervision. On 30 and 31 July, furious parents even staged a protest in Beijing outside the offices of the National Health Commission and National State Drug Administration. Such massive public backlash was not only due to the fact that defective vaccines would fail to protect infants from common diseases—such as diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus—but also due to the revelation that government officials had covered up for Changsheng Bio-technology Co. when it was discovered that the company had been falsifying its production data in October 2017. In response to the public outcry, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang vowed to conduct a thorough investigation. Fines have since been enforced on the two corporations involved, their executives detained, and more than 40 government officials punished. These efforts may, however, do little to restore Chinese consumer confidence in domestic products, as this is just the latest in a series of repeated scandals since the milk powder incident in 2008. *NLiu*

(Sources: Bloomberg; Caixin; CNN; Ershiyi Shiji Jingji Baodao; SCMP; Wall Street Journal)

### **Xinjiang Garneres Global Attention**

Since October 2017, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been marked by intensified surveillance of Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic minority (see the Forum in the present issue of *Made in China*). According to scholar Rian Thum, an ‘entire culture is being criminalised’, as reports have emerged that up to one million Uyghurs have been detained in political re-education camps. Prominent Uyghur figures, such as Professor Rahile Dawut, football star Erfan Hezim, and musician Abdurehim Heyit are all believed to be currently held in such camps. Until recently, this has been met with silence from the international community. However, in August the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released a report expressing concern, and called for the immediate release of all wrongfully and unlawfully detained individuals, as well as for the end of ethno-religious profiling. Likewise, in September, Human Rights Watch—an NGO based in the United States—released an extensive report detailing and providing evidence about the Chinese government’s mass internment camps; abuse and mistreatment of ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minorities; as well as the increasingly intrusive controls on everyday life in Xinjiang. Government leaders in Muslim countries—in particular Malaysia and Pakistan—have also expressed concern. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has continued to deny all allegations, and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has discredited the reports as ‘one-sided information’, claiming instead that the Autonomous Region is currently ‘enjoying overall social stability, sound economic development, and harmonious coexistence of different ethnic groups’. The Ministry further stated that the ‘policies and measures in Xinjiang are aimed at preserving stability, promoting development and unity, and improving livelihood.’ *TS*

(Sources: CNN; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Reuters; SupChina; The Economist; The Independent; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2)



## #MeToo Lands in China

In spite of almost immediate censorship from the Chinese government, China's nascent #MeToo movement has refused to be stifled. During the summer of 2018, the movement—predominantly led by student activists—resonated across university campuses in China. Online, the #MeToo hashtag has since collected over 4.5 million hits on Weibo, with activists sidestepping online censors through the use of homophones, including #MiTu, which roughly translates to #RiceBunny. #MeToo in China has led to accusations against multiple high-profile men in the realms of academia, media, and civil society, including activist Lei Chuang, environmentalist Feng Yongfeng, and journalists Zhang Wen and Xiong Peiyun. Recently, accusations against two other well-known men have emerged—Buddhist Master Xuecheng and billionaire Richard Qiangdong Liu, founder and CEO of JD.com. On 15 August, Xuecheng resigned from his tenure as head of China's government-run Buddhist Association after being accused of sexual assault and harassment. A 95-page dossier, compiled by two supervisory chancellors at Beijing's Longquan Temple, contains several reports of Xuecheng sending sexually aggressive texts to nuns and disciples, with one woman accusing him of rape. Liu was arrested on 31 August following allegations of rape from a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota. If found guilty, Liu faces up to 30 years in prison. Although the movement so far has stopped short of attacking any powerful figure in the Party-state apparatus, the downfall of such high-profile and influential individuals has been well-received as victories for China's #MeToo movement. *TS*

(Sources: **Chublic Opinion; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; SBS; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The Atlantic; The Wall Street Journal; The Washington Post 1; The Washington Post 2**)

## One Step Forward, Ten Steps Back for Human Rights

This past quarter has seen the continued repression of human rights in China. However, there was some welcome news on 9 July, when Liu Xia—widow of late Chinese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo—was released from effective house arrest and moved to Germany. Sadly, 9 July also marked the third anniversary of the '709' crackdown, which saw the arrest of over 300 human rights lawyers and activists. On the anniversary, the European Union urged the Chinese government to release almost 30 detained activists, including publisher Gui Minhai (a Swedish citizen) and lawyer Wang Quanzhang. At the same time, in Hong Kong a group of lawyers and activists held a silent protest outside the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal. In response, the Party-state stepped up repression. On 11 July, Qin Yongmin, a veteran pro-democracy campaigner, was sentenced to 13 years in prison on charges of 'subversion of a state power'. On the same day, Mongolian historian and author Lhamjab A. Borjigin was detained following charges of ethnic separatist activities. These charges are reportedly related to his book, documenting the life of ethnic Mongolians during the Cultural Revolution, wherein Borjigin claims that at least 27,900 Mongolians died, and 346,000 were imprisoned and tortured. A few days later independent liberal think tank Unirule Institute of Economics—which has often taken a critical stance toward government policies—was evicted from their Beijing office following an apparent tenancy dispute. Likewise, Jianjiao Bulao (roughly translated 'Pepper Tribe'), an online platform where female factory workers 'screamed' about workplace issues, was also shut down in July. In a similar incident, 84-year-old physics professor, Sun Wenguang, a vocal critic of China's human rights record, was forced off-air while he was giving a live interview with Voice of America and his whereabouts has been unknown since then. *TS*

(Sources: **Hong Kong Free Press; Quartz; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; Voice of America News**)

## Jasic Strike Paves the Way for Yet Another Crackdown on Labour NGOs

On 24 July, a group of workers at Shenzhen Jasic Technology, were beaten up by security guards and arrested by police while protesting against their illegal dismissal. Back in May they had reported the company to the local authorities for illegally manipulating work schedules, using a punitive system of fines, underpaying social insurance and housing funds, and blacklisting employees. The local branch of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) had, at that time, suggested that workers organise a factory-level union. This prompted the workers to gather 89 signatures out of a labour force of 1,000 for the union membership application (see Zhang Yueran's op-ed in this issue). Instead of heeding their call, management proceeded to create its own 'worker representatives committee', which excluded candidates nominated by the workers. The local authorities and the ACFTU withdrew their original support for the workers' union and claimed that the unionising was illegal. In the wake of the arrests, the protest gained solidarity not only from fellow workers elsewhere, but also from Maoist student-activists. As the protest grew, on 24 August the government cracked down on workers and the solidarity group, detaining dozens and subsequently charging a number of individuals. On the same day, state media published articles accusing Dagongzhe Zhongxin, a Shenzhen-based labour NGO, of instigating Jasic workers at the behest of 'hostile foreign forces' based in Hong Kong. Almost three years after the crackdown of December 2015, once again the Party-state is exploiting a specific case to target labour NGOs as a whole. Nevertheless, the explicit demand for unionisation, the open defiance against management and police assaults, and an emerging student-worker alliance distinguishes the Jasic case, making it a surprising development in a period of downturn for China's labour movement. *KL*

(Sources: **China Labour Bulletin; Red Balloon Solidarity; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Weiquanwang; Xinhua**)

## Shenzhen Urban Redevelopment Pushes Migrants to the Fringes

On 11 June, Foxconn employees posted an open letter at the company's facility in Longhua, Shenzhen, to express their discontent with the redevelopment of surrounding urban villages. They alleged that this redevelopment would double or even triple rents, making housing completely unaffordable for them. Residents of Shenzhen's urban villages—mostly migrant workers—have recently been notified by their landlords that they will have to move out upon the expiry of their current contracts. This comes in the wake of the latest urban upgrade in Shenzhen. In November 2017, the Shenzhen government proposed an action plan for upgrading urban villages from 2018 to 2020. The city currently has 1,044 urban villages, with a total of more than 10 million residents. The proposal calls for the transformation of urban villages into 'clean, orderly, harmonious, safe, and happy homes' by July 2020. Migrant workers decide to live in urban villages mostly for the low rent. However, according to a study carried out by Hong Kong University, the average rent has gone up from 550 yuan per person per month in 2015 to 700 yuan in 2017. Rather than evicting residents outright, real estate companies have been enlisted to redevelop urban villages into commercial housing. Companies either renovate and rent out existing buildings at higher prices, or demolish and build new apartment complexes. While it is not the same coercive eviction of migrant workers that took place in Beijing in late 2017, the redevelopment is likely to push many migrants, who in recent years have seen stagnating wages, to the fringes of the city. *KL*

(Sources: **Nanfang Zhoumo; NetEase; The Guardian; Yicai**)

**OP-EDS**



Demonstrators holding posters of Mao Zedong, reminiscent not only of political rallies in the 1960s, but also of worker protests in state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s. PC: Mimi Lau. South China Morning Post.

## The Jasic Strike and the Future of the Chinese Labour Movement

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Zhang Yueran

This summer, the struggles of workers at Shenzhen Jasic Technology, a publicly listed private firm specialising in the manufacturing of welding machinery (hereafter referred to as Jasic), to form a labour union have attracted widespread attention both inside and outside China. The worker activists decided to push for unionisation in order to address a wide range of workplace grievances, such as an inflexible work schedule, under and late compensation for overtime work, excessive and unreasonable fines, and stringent workplace regulations (for instance, regulations that restricted access to bathroom breaks). The campaign was initiated in May, in the wake of the arbitrary firing of a worker.

In mid-July, the workers' efforts towards unionisation led to heightened repression from the employer, with the leading worker activists fired and physically beaten. After staging a series of collective actions protesting their employer's repression and the highly biased handling of the case on the part of the police, on 27 July a total of 30 worker activists and their supporters were detained by the police in Pingshan District, Shenzhen, on suspicion of 'causing disturbances' (*xunxin zishi*). About a month later, on 24 August, more than 50 workers, students, and activists who had organised or participated in solidarity actions with the detained workers, were themselves detained in several police raids in Shenzhen and Beijing. At the time of writing, some of the arrested activists have been sent back home but remain under heavy state surveillance, some are still detained or have been put under house arrest in unspecified locations, and others are facing formal legal prosecution.

Reports from foreign media have tended to focus either on the involvement of the Maoist students in the solidarity actions or on the gigantic scale of state repression, especially with regard to the raids that took place in August. However, within China, the Jasic struggles first became a hot topic in late July, largely thanks to the determination, bravery, and audacity displayed by the Jasic workers themselves in their struggles. Videos of Jasic workers delivering impassioned speeches as they staged protest actions outside the police station went viral. Articulate, touching, and inspiring, their speeches have all left

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heartfelt impressions on both bystanders and online audiences. It is for this reason that the videos and related articles were widely read and shared even on many online media platforms that usually had nothing to do with politics and activism, such as the sports forum Hupu, where a trending post in late July (since deleted) was titled ‘the guy [referring to a leading worker giving a speech] is so handsome!’

A deeper look at the dynamics and various twists and turns of the Jasic workers’ unionisation struggles reveals how this episode has important implications for the broader labour movement in China on at least two different levels.

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First, the aspect of the struggles that I personally find most inspiring is the organisational effectiveness demonstrated by the workers. Worker activists at Jasic first proposed the idea of unionising in May, then in late June and early July started to organise co-workers, collecting their signatures on a unionisation petition. In the end, they were able to garner more than 80 co-workers’ signatures within only a couple of weeks. Although at this point the prospect of establishing a democratic, worker-run union at Jasic is bleak—with rumours suggesting that since the leading worker activists were detained in late July, the employer and the district-level branch of the official trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), have already established a company-run ‘yellow’ union at Jasic—the very fact that within less than a month more than 80 co-workers came out to publically support the worker-run campaign is, in itself, a huge achievement.

I have participated in previous unionisation campaigns (albeit in the United States), and have attempted to persuade co-workers to support unionisation efforts. Such personal experiences have taught me that convincing co-workers to support the establishment of a union goes far beyond simply asking them to write down their names; rather, it involves considerable amounts of organisation. Worker activists need to explain to their colleagues what a union does, how it will be managed once established, and why setting up a union could effectively help solve the issues that have been plaguing them. More importantly, they need to nurture trust and solidarity among co-workers, and convince them that workers will indeed become powerful enough to defend their own rights when everyone unites together. Worker activists also need to show co-workers that achieving such large-scale solidarity at the workplace is possible. Lastly, they need to ensure that their co-workers’ commitment to this kind of unity outweighs their fear of potential employer retaliation, so they will be courageous



Slogans on the back of a protester’s T-shirt. PC: Mimi Lau, South China Morning Post.

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In manufacturing factories of the same scale in the United States, where unions enjoy more leeway and independence in running unionisation campaigns, the whole process of organising and mobilising workers normally takes about three years, if not more.

enough to sign petition forms. All these steps entail endless communication, persuasion, and encouragement, and require worker activists to forge strong bonds with their co-workers to win their trust.

Despite such arduous organisational work and the challenges associated with it, worker activists from Jasic still managed to garner support from more than 80 co-workers—approximately 10 percent of the workforce—within a very short period. Such an achievement should not be underestimated. Consider, for instance, the fact that in manufacturing factories of the same scale in the United States, where unions enjoy more leeway and independence in running unionisation campaigns, the whole process of organising and mobilising workers—from the starting point of a unionisation campaign to winning majority support—normally takes about three years, if not more. Seen in this light, the Jasic worker activists' ability to win over 10 percent of their co-workers in a couple of weeks in such a restrictive environment is little short of a miracle.

However, whether a unionisation campaign succeeds or fails does not just depend on the organisational ability and dedication of the workers. A unionisation campaign is also essentially a race between workers and the employer, who tries to react as harshly and swiftly as possible before the unionisation spreads like wildfire. In the case of Jasic, the employer's reaction was both extremely harsh and extremely swift. All of the leading worker activists were fired at a very early stage of the campaign, before unionisation could seriously pick up steam in the factory. Winning over more than 10 percent of their co-workers' support was undoubtedly very impressive, but a couple of weeks was not enough for these worker activists to cultivate a far-reaching, well-connected support network in the factory and to turn the co-workers who signed the petition from *supporters* to *fellow leaders*. In other words, despite growing rapidly, the campaign was crushed by the employer almost as soon as it started—long before it could become strong enough to survive sustained repression.

Therefore, after the leading worker activists were fired, and especially after they were detained, the worker-led unionisation effectively came to a halt because no other Jasic workers could step up to become new leaders inside the factory. The lack of new leaders was surely compounded by the fact that the whole factory was placed under heavy police surveillance after 27 July. When workers from other factories and students from all over China flocked to Shenzhen to stage solidarity initiatives and advocate the release of the detained workers, almost no Jasic workers publicly participated in these actions—though a few Jasic workers did play the role of informants for the

solidarity groups—and no industrial action was staged inside Jasic. In the end, the blossoming worker solidarity, which the leading Jasic worker activists worked so hard to build, was quickly dismantled in the face of heavy-handed repression by the employer and the state alike.

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Second, it is also important to reflect on the role of the ACFTU in this struggle. In May 2018, when receiving workers from Jasic who had come to lodge complaints, leaders of the ACFTU branch of Pingshan district pitched to the workers the idea of unionising as one possible way to address their workplace grievances. This official encouragement was one of the crucial factors that sparked and encouraged the workers' efforts to organise towards unionisation. In early June, the Pingshan union officials further suggested that the first step for the workers seeking to unionise should be to ask co-workers to put their signature on petition forms to express their support for establishing a union. Up until that point, it had seemed that the official trade union was supportive of the unionisation efforts. In July, however, leaders at the Pingshan union drastically changed tack, demanding that Mi Jiuping, one of the leading worker activists, write a statement declaring that the workers' endeavours to establish a union had nothing to do with the ACFTU. From there on out, leaders of the Pingshan union sided with the employer, decrying the worker activists' attempts to unionise autonomously as nonsense and threatening that they 'shall bear legal responsibility' for their actions.

Nevertheless, on 23 July, after the worker activists had already been fired and had staged a series of protest actions, the official WeChat account of the Pingshan union published a post declaring that it would support and guide Jasic 'to set up a union in the company as per laws, regulations and procedures', seemingly registering a note that was sympathetic to the workers' cause. On 29 July, however, when people from all walks of life rushed to Yanziling Police Station to voice their support for the worker activists detained two days earlier, leaders from the Pingshan union were seen standing alongside representatives of the employer, secretly observing all the actions taken by supporters of the workers.

In this way, the official trade union vacillated throughout this episode—at times acting in a supporting role, and at others repressing the workers on behalf of the employer. Eventually, when workers needed the union's help the most in the face of an impending crackdown, the ACFTU did not hesitate to turn its back on them and side with the employer and the Party-state.

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In this way, the official trade union vacillated throughout this episode—at times acting in a supporting role, and at others repressing the workers on behalf of the employer. Eventually, when workers needed the union's help the most in the face of an impending crackdown, the ACFTU did not hesitate to turn its back on them and side with the employer and the Party-state.



This is where the ACFTU stands after two waves of reform efforts in the Pearl River Delta. After earlier tentative attempts, the first wave of union reforms took place in the wake of the hugely influential 2010 strike at the Honda plant in Nanhai, Foshan. On this occasion workers advanced democratic reform of the union branch in their company as one of several demands. After 2010, a wave of labour protests ensued in the Pearl River Delta, calling for either the reform of existing local unions or the establishment of new ones, the enhancement of internal union democracy, and the implementation of the collective bargaining mechanism. These movements, to some extent, achieved positive outcomes. Local unions were formed, union leaders were elected through open nomination and secret ballot, and collective bargaining was implemented often resulting in significant wage increases. In addition to the struggles of the workers themselves, this wave of reform was also facilitated by a degree of political openness on part of the official leadership of the ACFTU at various levels. Nevertheless, starting from 2013, the space of operation for these reformist leaders has increasingly shrunk, and the attitudes of the ACFTU leadership towards workers has become increasingly ambiguous, ultimately leading to the end of the first wave of reforms.

As the space for labour organising further narrowed in the Pearl River Delta after the crackdown on labour NGOs that took place at the end of 2015, a second wave of ACFTU reforms ensued. This time the protagonists were not workers but some prominent Chinese labour scholars. They pinned their hopes on the official trade unions not because they saw the ACFTU as a particularly fertile ground for organising, but because the other possibilities for labour organising were perceived to be essentially blocked. They set up various programmes in collaboration with the official union to train a new generation of young and dedicated unionists who were seriously committed to advancing labour rights, in the hope that they would be able to breath new life into the ACFTU. In particular, as organising at the workplace became increasingly difficult and collective bargaining became increasingly formalised and hollowed out, they put an emphasis on reorienting the ACFTU towards community- and neighbourhood-based organising. The idea was to turn the ACFTU from a weapon that workers could deploy to confront their employers, to a vehicle through which to build a sense of solidarity in workers' everyday life.

In part, the appeal of this second wave of reforms is due to the fact that it is politically more feasible and less risky given the current political situation. It allows the ACFTU to frame what it does as a 'community service' that has nothing to do with politics, and to thus eschew the terrain of contentious struggle

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between labour and the state-capital alliance. In other words, the Jasic struggle puts the ACFTU back in the position from which it has been trying to escape through its 'retreat' from the workplace to the community. It is on this ground that the promise of the second wave of ACFTU reforms can be assessed. These reforms might make some marginal improvements that deliver various services workers need in their communities and cultivate a community-based sense of solidarity among workers, and this might make workers' lives better in a meaningful way. However, as long as the ACFTU opts to shy away from workplace struggles, whatever improvements it might deliver in communities and neighbourhoods will remain fleeting. ■

An earlier version of this op-ed was translated from Chinese into English by Nan Liu.



Hu Angang.  
PC: Handout

## Is Hu Angang Really an Ultra-nationalist?

The Recent Media Controversy in Political Context

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Jane Hayward

An article appeared recently in the South China Morning Post (SCMP) concerning an open letter calling for the dismissal of ‘triumphalist academic’ Hu Angang, a professor at Tsinghua University (Huang 2018). The letter, addressed to Tsinghua President Qiu Yong and signed by a number of university alumni, criticises Hu for ‘pursuing personal glory’ by claiming that China has surpassed the US in terms of economic and technological strength. This position, according to the signatories, spreads fear among other countries and misleads China’s leaders by overestimating national strength.

The sentiments expressed in the letter appear to have powerful backing. An editorial in the state-run newspaper *Global Times* appeared around the same time, also criticising Hu’s ‘blind over-confidence’ (Shan 2018).

According to the SCMP article, such public criticism of Hu is likely a result of recent pressures faced by the Chinese government. Incidents such as the ‘blackballing’ of the Chinese telecoms giant ZTE by the US, and recent trade disputes, have caused China’s officials to review their nationalistic stance, the article suggests, so expressions of overt nationalism by public figures are being reined in.

The portrayal of Hu in these accounts—that of a Party hack toadying to China’s leaders through self-serving displays of patriotic fervour—is too easily absorbed by Western pundits, many of whom assume that the role of policy advisors in China’s authoritarian regime is to ‘tell the Emperor what he already thinks’. I suspect there is more going on here than meets the eye, however. As a former employee of Hu’s at Tsinghua, I would like to contribute my own interpretation of events, at least as far as I can make heads or tails of them.

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Hu Angang is a professor of economics at Tsinghua University’s School of Public Policy and Management, where he heads the Institute for Contemporary China Studies (ICCS).

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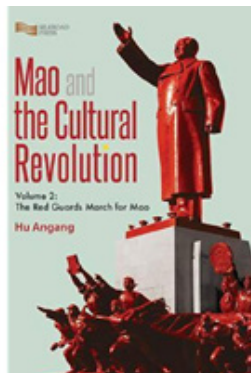
Hu is a professor of economics at Tsinghua University’s School of Public Policy and Management, where he heads the Institute for Contemporary China Studies (ICCS). His Institute is involved in writing policy recommendations for the National Five-Year Plans, and has had a number of reports

commissioned in recent years by the National Development and Reform Commission. In 2015, Hu's Institute was officially recognised by the Party Central Committee as one of China's first twenty-five 'national new-type think tanks', a status which guarantees that its policy reports will be fast-tracked to relevant government bureaus and receive priority attention from leading policymakers.

I was employed as a postdoctoral researcher at the ICCS from 2013 to 2016. Hu's aim in hiring me was to raise the international profile of the ICCS, and to help the Institute get publications in international (English language) peer-reviewed journals—a required criterion in Chinese university ranking systems. Hu is a larger-than-life character and working as his postdoc was not always plain sailing. But what struck me during my time at the Institute, albeit only through the eyes of a visiting foreigner, was the high esteem in which he is held by his closest colleagues. This stems both from his ability to garner the attention of China's top leaders, and from his willingness—much underestimated by external observers—to put forward unorthodox views which may divert from, and challenge, official Party doctrine.

That Hu's reports garner attention at the highest levels of the Party and government is shown by the number of *pishi* (comments) they receive. The *pishi* system allows the authors of policy reports to know if their recommendations have caught the attention of state leaders. Hundreds of reports are forwarded regularly to government and Party organs, the vast majority of which go unread. Those deemed of interest receive a *pishi*—usually a brief remark scrawled on the front page, such as a direction to forward the report to a particular bureau or individual, and a signature. In the past, the authors of reports had no formal way to find out if their reports had received attention unless they worked within internal government institutions. Nowadays, a formal system has been introduced whereby the *pishi* is scanned and relayed back to non-government think tanks such as Hu Angang's. Such 'comments', which are highly sought after and hard to come by, are taken very seriously by the institutions and included in the evaluation systems along with publications. Hu's Institute is known for its impressively high number of *pishi*, most of which are obtained by Hu himself. I was once shown the scan of one of these on a colleague's computer. The messy signature was Li Keqiang's.

Hu's willingness to challenge Party orthodoxy is evident in the case of his book, *Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (2016), the English version of which I proofread while his postdoc. Originally published in Chinese in 2008, the book provides Hu's own historical interpretation of the Cultural Revolution,



*Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, 2016.

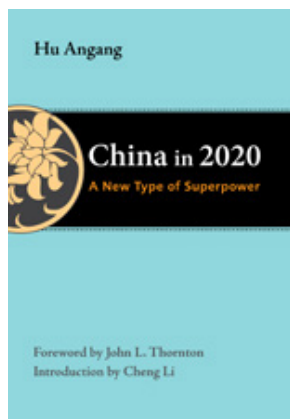


*China's Collective Presidency*, 2014.

which deviates from the Party's official version. The book was published in Hong Kong but banned on the mainland. According to my colleagues at the Institute, following its publication, other mainland scholars waited in anticipation to see the reaction from Chinese authorities. Had it been met with approval, this would have signalled a potential broadening of accepted historical interpretations of the Cultural Revolution. As it was imparted to me, only a scholar of Hu's stature could have gotten away with writing such a book.

The general consensus from those who work closely with Hu is that his high praise of China and the Party in public, often perceived as ingratiation by Western commentators, is what enables him both to challenge conventional Party thinking and make robust criticisms of state policy in his internal reports, while still being taken seriously at the highest echelons of government.

Hu's book *China's Collective Presidency* (2014), the English version of which I also proofread while at Tsinghua, may be a case in point. Hu argues that the power-sharing between the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee, all democratically elected by Party or government bodies, is superior to the tripartite and bicameral systems of the US and the UK. On the surface, the argument appears to be a nationalist polemic on the superiority of China's political system over Western liberal democracies—a reading accepted by most foreign pundits. Another interpretation is that this is a statement to Party members about the importance of guarding against the excessive concentration of power within the Party hierarchy. Research over the long term by Hu and others at his Institute on improving mechanisms of participation within the Party suggest that this latter interpretation takes precedence. Framing the argument as a critique of liberal democracies is, in my view, best understood as a rhetorical device to appeal to more intransigent groups within the Party.



*China in 2020*, 2010.

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As always, it is important to put the writings of any scholar in context and, in relation to the recent outcry over Hu's work, his record of advocating for cooperation with the US is significant. In 2009, for example, his Institute collaborated with the Brookings Institute to advocate for an agreement on climate change between Chinese leaders and the Obama administration at the Copenhagen summit. Hu produced an internal report in which he called on the Chinese government to heed their recent Olympic slogan—'One World, One Dream'. At the time, too many in the Chinese government were suspicious of US intentions, so Hu's endeavours were unsuccessful.

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Hu highlights a number of strategic errors made by the US. Among those mentioned, what stand out are the references to America's expansionist tendencies, its excessive expenditure on defence, and propensity to get bogged down in wars or military interventions—including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

As to his recent statements regarding China's economic and technological prowess in relation to America's, one of the articles where Hu makes this argument appeared in the online journal *Guancha* in April 2017 (Hu et al. 2017). It is entitled 'The Rise and Fall of Great Powers'. In the article, following the empirical evidence Hu cites in support of his claim that China has surpassed the US, is a discussion of why some powers rise while others decline. This discussion is particularly significant. Here, Hu highlights a number of strategic errors made by the US. The ones that stand out are the references to America's expansionist tendencies, its excessive expenditure on defence, and propensity to get bogged down in wars or military interventions—including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. All of these, argues Hu, have contributed to the decline of US power, and serve as a warning for a rising China.

Focussing on this aspect of Hu's argument, I think it is possible to see his claim about China surpassing the US in a different light. It is well-known among International Relations theorists that constructing the image of a more powerful enemy is a mobilising strategy used by hawkish elements to promote and justify all manner of policies and expenditures. By raising China's status in relation to the US, Hu seeks to deflate this image of the US as an imminent threat, defang those in the Party taking a more militaristic or aggressive posture who rely on this image to bolster their standing, and strengthen the position of those in policy circles arguing in favour of Sino-US cooperation. The article concludes by calling for a 'new type of great power relations' based not on zero-sum games, but on the establishment of common interests.

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On this basis, I disagree with the SCMP's account that criticism of Hu's statements is a sign of Chinese officials revising their former nationalistic stance. The alumni letter, for example, uses a phrase from the ancient military strategist Sun Tzu—'know yourself, know the other' (*zhi ji zhi bi*)—warning against the danger of over-estimating one's own strength in the face of an enemy. The *Global Times*' article, similarly, concludes with a warning that 'patriots... must not undermine Chinese society's efforts to unite against hegemonism.' These are not calls for humility. They are calls for vigilance—and are no less nationalistic for that. The public criticism of Hu Angang is, I suspect, not a reaction against overt displays of nationalism, but a symptom of more hawkish elements within China's leadership asserting themselves against those espousing a more conciliatory approach—as advocated by Hu, albeit strategically couched in the language of national strength. ■



Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo died on 13 July 2017, aged 61. PC: Handout

## Remembering Liu Xiaobo One Year On

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Jean Philippe Béja

When he learned that Liu Xiaobo had won the Nobel Peace Prize, Vaclav Havel—who had not been acknowledged by the Nobel Academy—was extremely happy. Although his doctor had strictly forbidden him to drink alcohol, he opened a bottle he kept hidden for the great occasions, and drank to his success. When asked to write a foreword for the collection of Liu's works that I edited, he did it enthusiastically. In 2011, the Czech dissident who had spent many years in prison before being rewarded with the presidency of the Czechoslovak Republic, died in Prague, aged 75.

Liu Xiaobo was not so lucky: on 13 July 2017, more than eight years after his arrest, he died of liver cancer in a Shenyang hospital, surrounded by plainclothes policemen who had not allowed him one minute of intimacy with his wife Liu Xia. He was not the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate to die in prison. Before him, in 1936, Carl Von Ossetski, a pacifist who had been jailed by Hitler, died in a prison hospital in Berlin. Germany was then in the hands of the Nazis.

To add insult to injury, Liu Xiaobo was incinerated the day after he died, and his wife was forced to proceed to a 'sea burial', dispersing his ashes in the sea near Dalian so that there would be no grave where his supporters could gather to mourn him.

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Liu's wife, a poet and artist who had never been involved in politics, spent eight and a half years under house arrest. Her crime? To have been Liu Xiaobo's wife, and to have refused to clearly break with him (*huaqing jiexian*). During all these years, she was isolated from the world, followed by plainclothes policemen wherever she went, and only allowed to be driven 400 miles to the Jinzhou jail to see her husband for half an hour every month. 52 years after Yu Luoke denounced the 'blood theory' (*xuetong lun*) that stipulated that political positions are transmitted through family association, 40 years after the famous Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee launched the policy of reform and opening up, a woman was deprived of her freedom only because she was related to a man that the Party had deemed 'an enemy of the State'!

After Xiaobo died, she could not collect the letters he had written her during his imprisonment, and could not see his medical reports to understand when he was diagnosed with cancer. Everything had disappeared, the authorities said, in a convenient fire that engulfed the Jinzhou jail just two weeks before his death. In July of this year, thanks to the pressure exerted on the Chinese government by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, she was allowed to leave China and has since settled in Berlin.

I rushed to see her, but although she is now safe in Germany, she refuses to give interviews or to have her declarations published. Her freedom will not be complete as long as her younger brother Liu Hui is under parole and can be sent back to jail at the whim of the Party leaders. But she reminded me: ‘I don’t understand politics, anyway, and I am not interested.’

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When they met in the early 1980s, Liu Xiaobo, like her, did not understand politics. A student at Jilin Normal University, he did not take part in the Democracy Wall Movement (*minzhu qiang*), but worked in a group of poets in his native province. A staunch individualist, a Nietzschean, he made a name for himself as a ‘black horse’ (*heima*) on the Chinese literary scene with an article entitled ‘Crisis: The Literature of the New Epoch Faces a Crisis’ (Liu 1986). In this article, he denounced liberal intellectuals’ self-satisfaction, their tendency to consider themselves the only victims of Maoist terror, and to assume the posture of the counsellor to the Prince. He exhorted them to cut the umbilical chord with the Party-state and ‘think for themselves’. His words deeply shocked liberal and conservative writers alike. A born provocateur, he declared in 1988 that if it took 100 years of British presence for Hong Kong to become what it now was, China should be colonised for 300 years to reach that degree of modernity (Jin 1988).

This iconoclasm makes Liu Xiaobo a direct heir to the May Fourth intellectuals who did not hesitate to vehemently denounce Chinese traditional culture. A successful intellectual, he was invited to the most famous Western Universities—the dream of all Chinese intellectuals at that time—as he was widely different from his fellow writers.

But when confronted with history, Liu Xiaobo changed. He was in New York as a visiting scholar at Columbia when the 1989 pro-democracy movement shook his motherland. He immediately decided to go back and went straight to Tiananmen, where he stayed until the massacre. He did not refrain from criticising the students’ behaviour, saying that they were not acting democratically. He also criticised them



Liu Xiaobo, giving a speech at Tiananmen Square on 2 June 1989. PC: Scott Savitt



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*I feel that those who perished that day are looking down on me from above ... I do my best to make every word from my pen a cry from the heart for the souls of the dead.*

Liu Xiaobo

for asking the government to reverse the verdict it had passed on their movement by declaring it a ‘counter-revolutionary turmoil’: ‘Why do our fellow citizens feel so grateful towards reversal of verdicts? To send a righteous person to hell is an exorbitant privilege, to reverse the verdict is so too’ (Liu 1989, 277).

The students did not blame him for his attitude, and on the night of 3 June he helped convince them to leave the Square. After the massacre, he took refuge in the home of an Australian diplomat, but after a few days, he could not stand to be safe while his students and friends were being pursued by the police. He was arrested and sent to Qincheng prison for a year. During his imprisonment, he declared in a televised interview on CCTV that nobody had died on the Square on that night. Although it was true, he later deeply regretted granting this interview to the Party’s official mouthpiece.

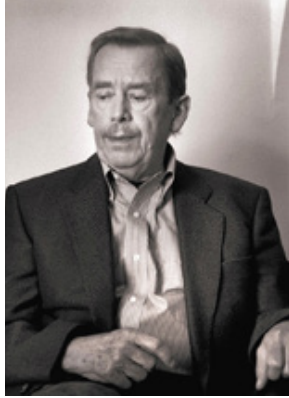
This decided the fate of Liu Xiaobo. In his words: ‘June 1989 has been the major turning point in my life which is just over one half of a century in length’ (Liu 2012a, 321); ‘I feel that those who perished that day are looking down on me from above ... I do my best to make every word from my pen a cry from the heart for the souls of the dead’ (Liu 2012b, 293). The elitist Nietzschean turned into a caring activist and philosopher. ‘When the famous members of the elite refuse, at the most dangerous moment, to rise in order to defend their ethics and their conscience, when they refuse to pay the individual price, the masses do not have the duty to support them’ (Liu 2002, 8).



Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia.  
PC: Supplied

During the 1990s, Liu worked hand in hand with Ding Ziling and the Tiananmen Mothers in order to obtain the truth about the massacre. June Fourth led him to appreciate the courage of ordinary citizens who gave their lives to protect the students. The years he was free were spent launching petitions to protest the Party’s repression, to denounce the oppression of marginalised citizens, writing on the children exploited in brick factories, on the fate of migrant workers (*nongmingong*), and enjoining his fellow citizens to dare speak truth to power. ‘Dictatorships need lies and violence in order to maintain the coercion and fear upon which they depend ... No single person, of whatever status, can fight back against regime violence alone, but the refusal to participate in lying is something that every person can accomplish. To refuse to lie in day-to-day public life is the most powerful tool for breaking down a tyranny built on mendacity’ (Liu 2012b, 295).





Vaclav Havel (1936–2011).  
PC: Jiri Jiroutek

Like Vaclav Havel, Liu Xiaobo exhorted his compatriots to live in truth. His penetrating analyses of the regime, his conviction that the peaceful growth of an independent civil society was the best way to fight the tyranny of the Party, and his deep engagement with non-violence made him one of the most remarkable Chinese intellectuals of the twenty-first century. After his release from three years in a re-education-through-labour camp in 1999, he became one of the most respected personalities in the dissident sphere. He enjoyed the esteem both of old Party cadres disgusted by the 4 June massacre, such as Mao's former secretary Li Rui; of intellectuals active in the 1980s, such as historian Bao Zunxin with whom he developed a profound friendship; and of the younger generation, such as Liu Di and Yu Jie who became active after 1989. In such a fragmented milieu, this is a very remarkable achievement, which probably explains why Liu received such a heavy sentence in 2009.

Although the Party has consistently tried to erase his image—his essays and articles were never published in China after 1989—he still enjoys a strong support in dissident circles, and his all-out engagement with non-violence will definitely influence the future behavior of the opposition. His commitment to the cause of democracy, his emphasis on the necessity to uphold the memory of the June Fourth Massacre, his unceasing protest against human rights violations will continue to inspire the activists who dare rise against the reign of strong men. Liu's call to his fellow citizens to use truth to undermine a system built on lies makes his legacy more important than ever in an increasingly repressive China. ■





*The bathos, or manner of sinking, in sublime paintings, inscribed to the dealers in dark pictures.* Designed and engraved by William Hogarth.  
PC: Library of Congress

Dealing with this ‘new normal’ crucially means choosing between different ways of grappling with the new data, even as we cope with the loss of access to more and more of the old.

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The most straightforward choice is the blandness of ‘mere’ description. Descriptive research is limited by its lack of theoretical innovation or explanatory claims. But it can also be essential for our baseline understanding of critical processes and phenomena. Drawing on troves of new data or sources—be they documentary/archival, quantitative, or even scraped—to fill in lacunae or correct mischaracterisations in prior work is immensely valuable and never boring to worthy readers. Such description, however, is only able to propel the field forward in small hops—no great leaps—and is therefore likely much better suited to articles or reference works than books (importantly, bland work on its own probably also cannot form the core of a successful tenure or promotion dossier for a social scientist). Still, without backfilling areas we thought we knew or had previously passed over in ignorant silence, we are left with incomplete, and perhaps in some cases incorrect, accounts as the foundations of our current understandings, assumptions, and projects, forever stunting our future development.

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Classically, we find bathos in a literary text when an author works up a great lather of passion and erudition, only to leave the reader with a trite or ridiculous conclusion—ending a seemingly epic story with a whimpering crestfallen squib, rather than a gratifying bang. Much methods-driven research on contemporary China that leverages new data to test small-bore hypotheses from other fields can be similar. What one colleague calls ‘one-sentence findings’ are prefaced with a lot of what another refers to as ‘methodological heavy breathing’, only to fail to measure up to the hype. This problem is worst in bathetic books. But the strengths of the paradigm can shine through in articles, and such work both makes our field more systematic and subjects some basic claims to vital scrutiny facilitated by new sources and sophisticated techniques.

Bathetic articles may be too bedizened with technical bling for some tastes, but they are essential if we are to have confidence in the validity of our causal claims. Only this approach allows the sort of hypothesis testing that much of contemporary social science demands. And only this type of work can engage directly and intelligibly with certain disciplinary debates from which the study of China has for too long been isolated.

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Classically, we find bathos in a literary text when an author works up a great lather of passion and erudition, only to leave the reader with a trite or ridiculous conclusion.

Going brashly out on a limb to build new concepts and theories, taking the aleatory risk that they may prove wrong, is the final option. Even when brash work succeeds, it necessarily steps beyond the bounds of what may be demonstrated unassailably by the latest techniques and its validity may remain in dispute. There are many ways to pursue brash work and all of them also involve leveraging new data and sources. But they, critically, do not rely only on new data to carry the day or on its use to test limited hypotheses taken off the shelf. Rather, they at least endeavour to help the study of China become a ‘producer field’ by generating concepts and theoretical insights that might travel to other contexts (Reny 2011).

One brash approach is to engage in cross-national comparisons—as I called for last year (Hurst 2018). Another is to focus on concept formation, crafting new ways to understand already established facts and patterns of Chinese politics or society, perhaps with new wrinkles revealed by recently uncovered data or sources. A third is to confront established ideas with new facts to make generalisable claims about China that are both more accurate to its context and potentially more portable to others. Any of these three requires a certain bumptious chutzpah that may be off-putting to some bland or bathetic proponents or practitioners. If bathetic work can be overwrought, brash research has a clear tendency to over-claim. It is also almost always better suited to books than most types of articles—though new concepts can sometimes be introduced in articles, even they are usually best fleshed out in books. The article format simply lacks the space and scope to introduce bold new ideas *and* to elaborate their nuances and generalisability by applying them to empirical contexts. Similarly, only books provide sufficient range to allow authors both to develop new theoretical frameworks *and* to explore their implications fully across multiple deeply researched cases.

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So, where does this leave us? Are we still a field in need of a curative cleanse and a brash turn toward cross-national comparison, concept and theory building, or radical leaps up the ladder of generality? Yes.

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So, where does this leave us? Are we still a field in need of a curative cleanse and a brash turn toward cross-national comparison, concept and theory building, or radical leaps up the ladder of generality? Yes. But we need not abandon all bathetic hypothesis testing. Instead, we need only recognise the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and ensure that each enjoys pride of place in specific types of publication venues. We must also recognise that almost no single piece of research can likely incorporate healthy measures of all three approaches. In fact, no single researcher in his or her career is likely to master all three paradigms equally.

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To use a different analogy, the abundance of fruit that now lies upon the ground is of many different species, distinct from those that older scholars had been fond of characterising as 'low-hanging'

The best and most innovative research must walk on two legs, even if it shies away from great leaps. Good books and articles of general interest must engage new streams of data *and* make gains for either methods and rigour or theory and concepts. Researchers pursuing a strategy of bathos should concentrate on disciplinary or generalist journals for their primary outlets (as indeed many such researchers already do). Most brash work is similarly not as well suited to articles and rightly demands full elaboration in monograph form. Finally, we must not forget about the bland orphan of descriptive scholarship that simply brings new or better data to bear on previous gaps or thinly-based conventional wisdom. Such research, even if it doesn't anchor any individual's career, deserves a home in area studies journals, which actually used to publish a great deal of it.

We do not have to make an exclusive choice—and indeed we do so at our peril. Instead, we must ensure a coexistence of the three forms if we are to become a theory-producing corner of the discipline that also takes full advantage of our comparative advantages and all available data to assess causal relationships with clear-eyed precision, while keeping ourselves grounded in the fullness of the country we are all groping at different parts of the elephant to understand (Baum and Shevchenko 1999).

To use a different analogy, the abundance of fruit that now lies upon the ground is of many different species, distinct from those that older scholars had been fond of characterising as 'low-hanging' (O'Brien 2006, 38). Moreover, more and more trees in the orchard are being ring-fenced, leaving most would-be climbers and pickers to glean what they can from the vast bounty at their feet. Just picking up, tasting, and describing new kinds of fruit can be extremely valuable, even if it seems milquetoast to many social scientists.

Similarly, using new fruits to complement or augment recipes taken off the shelf from remote parts of the disciplines can help improve and refine those, even if the new improvements to dishes strike some as unimaginative or jejune. Finally, the daring can use the new ingredients to craft new recipes out of whole cloth, but while running the non-trivial risk that the resulting creations prove unpalatable to the point of producing more dyspepsia than insight. It is time for all of us to recognise the choice we face, and then for each of us to choose a path forward and accept the baggage we take on as we walk it. ■



**CHINA  
COLUMNS**



PC: Ken Douglas @flickr





## Outsourcing Coercion and Social Control

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"Thugs",  
Shanghai (2012).  
PC: Rob-Shanghai  
@flickr.com

Lynette H. Ong

*To carry out coercion and social control, the Chinese government often resorts to non-state actors, including 'thugs-for-hire', profit-seeking brokers, and even commercial enterprises. This piece examines the circumstances under which the authorities use these means and the reasons behind their choices, arguing that this is mostly related to the need of reducing the cost of repression and evading responsibility.*

**D**uring the Occupy Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, protestors were reportedly beaten up by unidentified thugs from neighbouring Guangdong province in China (Lim 2014). In 2012, local authorities hired scores of thugs to lock up the blind activist Chen Guangcheng in order to keep him out of the public eye (Branigan 2012). Local governments also work with professional intermediaries to convince aggrieved citizens to give up their resistance against the state, and engage private security personnel to intercept petitioners heading to Beijing (Wen 2017).

Why does the Chinese government—which is known for its strong-arm tactics—*need or desire* to use non-state actors to carry out coercion and social control? In this piece, I argue the government seeks to deploy non-state actors



to perform coercive acts or exercise social control for a wide range of reasons, such as reducing the cost of repression and evading responsibility. These non-state actors range from ‘thugs-for-hire’, to profit-seeking brokers and even commercial enterprises (Ong 2018 and 2019).

### ‘Thugs-for-Hire’

The government is most likely to use ‘thugs-for-hire’ when it is carrying out *illegal* actions or *unpopular* policies, such as collecting unlawful exactions, evicting farmers and homeowners from their properties, or intimidating petitioners and dissidents. The third-party nature of these actors makes them expedient for carrying out illegal and unpopular policy implementation when formal uniformed agents, such as the police, could not be sent without harming state legitimacy.

The government is also likely to hire thugs when it seeks to evade accountability for its own actions. More often than not this is related to the use of illegitimate violence to crack down on citizens. To the extent that the government does not want to be seen as using illegitimate force, it is likely to outsource violence to third parties. The thugs’ elusive identity allows the government to maintain an arms-length relationship with them and the violent acts they commit.

In China, thugs are most likely to be hired to evict farmers and homeowners from their properties, and to intimidate protestors and dissidents into giving up their actions against the state. Because these state actions are unpopular, if not outright illegal, local governments are very reluctant to deploy formal coercive agents to carry out the work. Thugs, who are hired on a project basis, also help local governments that are weak in fiscal and coercive capacity to carry out central-mandated policies, such as land expropriation, housing demolition, and maintaining social stability by minimising dissent. ‘Thugs-for-

hire’ could be seen as contractual workers, who can be hired and terminated easily, unlike formal agents on government payroll (*bianzhī*) who enjoy a range of work benefits.

### Agency Problems

Yet, outsourcing violence is often subject to agency problems. The government cannot exert tight control over these agents’ actions. When thugs are sent to intimidate residents and demolish houses, excessive violence is often used, which can result in casualties. When local governments hire private security personnel to intercept petitioners, it is common for these private agents to abuse their power against vulnerable citizens seeking help. When municipal authorities employ ill-trained *chengguan*, some of whom are local ruffians, violence against marginal unlicensed street vendors becomes rampant. Effective and efficient as these coercive measures may be, agent-centred excessive violence often serves to attract sympathisers, which in turn mobilises support for resistance, rather than deters it.

Violent agents may start off as ‘thugs-for-hire’ on government projects for local authorities. However, over time they can evolve into mafia groups running vices such as gambling and prostitution rings. Some local authorities in China have grown so reliant on local mafia groups that their own power has been usurped. While it is challenging to estimate the scale or degree of this problem, we know for certain that the nexus between local governments and local mafia groups has become grave enough to warrant the Xi Jinping administration’s launch of a massive campaign to fight against local organised crime (Shi 2018).

China is by no means the only country that hires violent agents to do dirty job. The United States government contracted out abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib to the security company Blackwater. During the Arab Spring protests, the Mubarak and Assad regimes also

mobilised thugs—the ‘Baltagiya’ in Egypt and ‘Shahiba’ in Syria—to violently attack pro-democracy protestors (Batal al-Shishani and Elsheikh 2012).

## Huangniu

In my research on housing demolition (*fangwu zhengshou*), I write about how the Chinese state also works with profit-seeking middlemen who can help establish trust between officials and citizens to resolve conflicts (Ong 2019). These brokers bring together the state and aggrieved citizens to facilitate state-society bargaining that would not have taken place otherwise. This bargaining may result in payouts or under-the-table deals, which help to resolve protracted stand-offs that might have otherwise spilled over into street protests.

In housing demolition projects in Chinese cities, municipal and local governments not only face tight deadlines, but they are also under intense pressure to contain social contention. These two priorities can often be conflicting

in nature. When a date for demolition is set, all households in the designated area must vacate by the agreed upon deadline. Lack of compliance from one or two households can potentially put the entire project in jeopardy, necessitating severe tactics on the part of local governments and property developers. At the same time, however, preventing and repressing popular protests by aggrieved residents being quickly pushed out of their family homes is also a priority of municipal and local governments.

Local governments have limited options in dealing with this dilemma. Even though violence, such as hiring thugs, is often the most efficient means to evict residents, local officials are increasingly constrained in deploying coercive force against recalcitrant urban households. Increased media scrutiny and greater educational attainment of urban dwellers have given rise to a growing rights awareness, especially in major cities across the country. When the state is restrained in using violence but faces strong pressures to complete projects on time, it becomes more receptive to bargaining with citizens. The demand for brokers capable of facilitating a deal has therefore increased.

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“Almost Gone”,  
Shanghai (2012)  
PC: Rob-Shanghai  
@flickr.com



These brokers are called ‘*huangniu*’ in Chinese—a generally pejorative term that literally means ‘cattle’, but is used to describe middlemen who provide highly sought-after goods or services at prices above market value. In the context of housing demolition, these brokers are usually hired by disgruntled citizens to bargain with the state for better deals. In general, state officials willingly work with *huangniu* in order to forge agreements with society. The intermediary role of these professionals is enabled by the trust they have established with both the citizens and local officials. The extra payouts that are attributable to intermediary efforts, in terms of extra financial payout or apartment units, are then split between the citizen-client and the *huangniu*.

## A Commodification of State-society Bargaining

These profit-seeking brokers represent a commodification of state-society bargaining by matching demands from discontented citizens with the supply of special favours by state officials. In so doing, a commercial—and technically illegal—deal is secured that involves a compensation over and above that mandated by official policy, or what other citizens in a similar position who do not engage an intermediary are entitled to.

Brokers who collude with insider-government agents help clients to secure favourable treatment. In contexts outside of housing demolition, under-the-table payments are made to corrupt intermediaries who issue drivers’ licenses that may otherwise take them a few rounds of tests to obtain. Routine traffic offenders pay a *huangniu* with connections in the transport authority to wipe their records of traffic offences. Similarly, *huangniu* are utilised by truck drivers seeking exemptions from inspections, companies that need registration but do not meet the requirements, and taxpayers who want to pay lower taxes.

These examples, and many more, underline the wider implication of intermediated illegal transactions—the widespread abuse of state power bestowed upon government agents.

Corrupt brokers are in a unique position to bring together the state and citizens who are unable to reach demolition agreements. On the one hand, they have intimate connections with government agents that make them privy to insider information about government policies or the decisions of local officials unbeknown to citizens. On the other hand, they are able to gain the trust of clients, either because they are part of their networks or because they publicise their close connections with government agents. The *huangniu* promise their clients compensation higher than that mandated by official policy and, more often than not, they are able to deliver. In addition, *huangniu* provide related services essential for securing higher compensation. These include producing fake marriage and divorce certificates, bogus proof of pregnancy, and other similar documents to inflate the number of household members to be resettled. These related services accentuate the illegality of the transactions and the role of corrupt intermediaries in housing demolition. But, they also increase their clients’ entitlements to higher compensation.

The case of *huangniu* in housing demolition highlights the state’s *willingness* and *ability* to engage with *market agents* who can help to fulfil state’s objectives in exchange for profit. Together with ‘thugs-for-hire’, the existence of these kinds of intermediaries underscores the Chinese state’s adroit use of non-state or market agents to pre-empt, absorb, and repress social contention and protests, when state actors cannot do it efficiently or effectively. ■



'A worker's soul'  
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## My Rights Have Been Left behind in Papua New Guinea

The Predicament of Chinese  
Overseas Workers

Shuchi Zhang

*Increasing numbers of Chinese companies are sending employees abroad as part of China's global push. Still, Chinese workers abroad often find themselves vulnerable. By tracking the case of one employee in a Chinese enterprise in Papua New Guinea, this essay reveals the plight of China's relatively powerless overseas workers, an image that stands in stark contrast to the widespread depiction of an increasingly assertive and powerful Chinese global presence.*

'Mr Dong [pseudonym] is one of the external hires for our project in Papua New Guinea (PNG) ... he does onsite surveying. Natives in PNG were outraged at their vehicles getting stuck in the soft soil embankments. Convinced that these roads were dysfunctional, they hit him with sticks without any forewarning ... in fact, he had nothing to do with such road conditions.'

One of Mr Dong's supervisors

'Medical examinations show the dislocation of the first joint connecting my head with the cervical vertebrae; surgery is the only treatment for this ... I suffer from severe headaches after walking for a while, and cannot lift anything, nothing at all; if I am lifting something I have to stop walking, and must sit down once my headache hits.'

Mr Dong

**M**r Dong, a Chinese overseas worker born in the late 1980s, is employed in PNG—over 6,200 kilometres away from his hometown in Northwest China. The brutal incident that occurred in PNG in May 2014 entangled him in a legal limbo in the Chinese court system that only came to a tentative conclusion four years later, when the First Intermediate People's Court of Beijing delivered its judgement of second instance. With increasing numbers of Chinese companies sending workers abroad as part of China's global push, this case has much to tell us about the increasingly globalised Chinese legal labour regime. It also reveals the plight of China's relatively powerless

overseas workers, an image that stands in stark contrast to the widespread depiction of an increasingly assertive and powerful Chinese global presence.

## A Legal Odyssey

From a legal perspective, the crux of the dispute in Mr Dong's case—just as in most legal cases involving work-related injuries—lies in the determination of labour relations. Who was responsible for compensating him due to his injury? In April 2013, Mr Dong started working for China Overseas Papua New Guinea Corporation (*zhong haiwai baxin gongsi*, hereafter COPNGC)—a wholly-owned subsidiary of China Overseas Engineering Group Corporation Ltd. (*zhong haiwai gongcheng zeren youxian gongsi*, hereafter COEGC Ltd.)—and was dispatched to PNG to work as a surveyor on the Mendi-Kandep Highway project. Fortunately for him, compared to the common practice of sending workers overseas under murky terms of employment that do not provide legal resource to workers, the central state-owned enterprise followed formal recruitment procedures and Mr Dong signed a written employment contract. The legal loophole, however, was that the company signed the contract in their capacity as an overseas-registered independent legal entity, thus creating a jurisdictional problem. Both signatories to the employment contract agreed that the company would purchase personal accident insurance worth 500,000 yuan for Mr Dong while he was abroad.

The Regulations on Insurance against Work-related Injuries issued in December 2010 stipulate that enterprises within China must insure all their staff members against work-related injuries, and that in the absence of such insurance, enterprises shall compensate injured employees in accordance with the coverage and standards specified in the work-related injury insurance. But it is not clear which firm was directly responsible for Mr

Dong's employment: the state-owned firm or its foreign-owned subsidiary. For example, neither enterprise had contributed to his social security, which was still linked to his previous employer. Given that COPNGC was foreign-owned, Mr Dong had to prove that COEGC Ltd. was his actual employer in order to be eligible for insurance compensation in China for work-related injuries.

Mr Dong sought legal assistance from Beijing Yilian Legal Aid and Research Centre of Labour (*Beijing yilian laodongfa yuanzhu yu yanjiu zhongxin*), an NGO providing professional legal support related to labour laws [disclosure: the author of this essay is Director of Research at Beijing Yilian]. With its Deputy Director Han Shichun and Lawyer Liu Wei as his attorneys, Mr Dong applied for labour arbitration in 2015 but his request was rejected because COPNGC was the signatory to his employment contract. The Chinese Labour Law stipulates that plaintiffs can take further legal action if they object to labour arbitration decisions that serve as procedural prerequisites. So, in September 2015 Mr Dong and his legal team prepared additional evidence and supporting materials and litigated a second time, continuing to request the determination of the labour relation.

A key point of Mr Dong's case was based on an understanding of the Regulations on Management of Foreign Labour Service Cooperation issued by the State Council in 2012. According to these Regulations, foreign enterprises, institutions, or individuals are not permitted to recruit workers within China who will be sent to work overseas. Being a foreign-owned enterprise, COPNGC is not eligible to directly establish labour relations with Chinese workers within China. During the trial, his attorneys argued that Mr Dong's employment contract with the foreign-owned enterprise violated this rule and should, hence, be deemed void. This would prove the existence a factual labour relation between him and COEGC Ltd. As a second prong of argumentation, the attorneys also pointed out that the Administrative Regulations on

Contracting Foreign Projects issued in July 2008 by the State Council clearly states that firms contracting foreign projects must not subcontract their projects to other companies with no commensurate qualifications. In other words, COEGC Ltd. must be responsible for subcontracting to COPNGC and is, by extension, responsible for the project on which Mr Dong worked in PNG.

The judgements of first instance and second instance, delivered respectively in January 2018 and May 2018, both supported Mr Dong's argument, ruling that labour relations existed between COEGC Ltd. and Mr Dong. In addition, in the verdict of second instance the court emphasised that the Administrative Regulations on Contracting Foreign Projects demand that firms purchase overseas personal accident insurance for dispatched workers, and that evidence showed that Mr Dong's commercial insurance policy was paid for by COEGC Ltd., further substantiating the claim that COEGC Ltd. was indeed Mr Dong's employer.

Determining labour relations was a comparatively easy process; but lengthier and more complicated procedures awaited Mr Dong, including the identification of his work-related injuries, the assessment of his work capacity, and the request for compensation from his employer.

## A Blow to the Neck

In the popular imagination, on travel websites and guidebooks, PNG is exoticised as a place of spellbinding beauty and native traditions. The reality, however, is more complicated. In a recent country guide published by the Chinese government, the country is described as a place marked by conflict, unemployment, and a lack of infrastructure (Department of Outward Investment and Economic Cooperation 2017).

Obviously, Mr Dong and his co-workers were dispatched to the real PNG and not the one of the touristic imagination. PNG

imposes stringent constraints on visas for foreign workers because of high domestic unemployment rates, and designates China as a 'high-risk' country (Department of Outward Investment and Economic Cooperation 2017). By the end of 2016, there were merely 1,069 Chinese dispatched workers in PNG. The conditions for this small cohort are rather dismal. Ordinary workers dispatched to PNG are entirely segregated from local communities in their daily lives. When problems arise, they lack access to the local institutions and resources that could safeguard their rights and interests. Furthermore, the local minimum wages, average wages, social security, and other benefits they receive in the PNG are significantly inferior to those in their home country. They also face a local workforce that is largely underpaid and therefore often hostile. Monthly wages for local workers approximate 800 kina, the equivalent of 1,574 yuan based on the current exchange rate, and earnings for technicians average 1,200 kina. The National Employment Law in PNG requires employers to purchase social insurance for employees, but a local labour aid agency has yet to be established.

China's Regulation on Work-related Injury Insurance stipulates that Chinese workers dispatched overseas should first join work-related injury insurance schemes in their host countries while suspending their work-related injury insurance schemes in China. Only when local insurance schemes are unavailable are they entitled to retain their Chinese insurance. But insurance is no trivial matter, especially given the poor medical conditions in host countries and the difficulties involved in seeking compensation from overseas employers. Most workers fall under the management of cooperative enterprises contracting out labour services, and not state-owned enterprises carrying out their own projects. Comparatively speaking, Mr Dong's situation was favourable because he was actually employed by the company he worked for.

## Exporting Labour and its Discontents

While extreme, the situation facing Chinese workers in PNG is far from unique. As of 2016, 4,394 central state-owned enterprises had established businesses overseas. In 2016, China's outward foreign direct investment flows and stock accounted for 13.5 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively, of the global totals, and the volume of China's outward investment flows ranked second highest among all the countries (regions) worldwide (Ministry of Commerce, National Bureau of Statistics, and State Administration of Foreign Exchange 2016; UNCTAD 2017).

Increasing rapidly alongside outward foreign direct investment are the numbers and economic contributions of overseas workers. By 2017, the number of overseas workers from China totalled 10.1 million, ranking fourth worldwide after India, Mexico, and Russia (World Bank 2017). Annual remittances from Chinese overseas workers amounted to 64 billion USD. Globally, this was second only to the 69 billion USD remitted to India. At the national level, China's unsound domestic legal institutions and its inactive participation in international labour laws and mechanisms have resulted in weak protections for the rights and interests of its overseas workers; incidents at workplaces and attacks from local communities are frequent occurrences for Chinese workers.

Traditionally, workers from countries that export capital on a large scale because of their long-term capital accumulation take up professions and positions with added value. This added value tends to increase as these countries upgrade their industries and strengthen their education and social security systems. This is not the case with regard to China, however. Statistics published a few years ago show that over 80 percent of Chinese overseas workers were still employed in labour-intensive industries, such as construction, textiles, and fishing (Fan and Yin, 2013, 340).

## A Subordinate Vanguard of a New Globalisation


The story related above illustrates the contrast between the legal protections and treatment of foreign workers in China, and the dismal conditions that Chinese workers have to endure overseas, often without recourse to legal protections either at home or abroad. They fall, as it were, through the cracks, and are subjected to the full brunt of the systemic risks of globalisation. While China's perceived status as a global power continues to grow, Chinese overseas workers remain subordinate and relatively powerless, even as they play a crucial role in the global expansion of their country's power.

Realistically, the short-term approach to protecting Chinese overseas workers' rights lies in initiating changes domestically in China. This includes pressing the Chinese government to shoulder more responsibility, to amend its domestic employment legislation, to expand its participation in international legal labour systems—as well as in global and regional institutions focussing on migrant workers—and to offer a series of feasible support channels, such as consular protection early-warning mechanisms and security institutes for overseas workers. Reinforcing the protection for the rights of Chinese overseas workers has not only added novel challenges and impetuses to China's domestic legislation on employment, but has also been linked to the success of the government's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as to the expansion of the country's clout in global governance.

What happened to Mr Dong, nevertheless, indicates that there is much more that China must do in this new era characterised by the global Chinese worker. ■

An earlier version of this essay was translated from Chinese into English by Nan Liu.





**FOCUS**  
**Media, Power,  
and Voice in China**







“Sojourn into Fantasy”  
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## Changing Representations of China’s Workers

Wanning Sun

*Representations of workers in public discourse in China have changed dramatically over recent decades. Taking a long historical view, this essay retraces the shifting narratives of the Chinese working class since the Maoist era. It does so by describing the role played by the media, not only in determining and framing working-class identity politics, but also in influencing the outcomes of worker struggles.*

How workers and peasants are constructed in public discourses depends on the specific class relationship between the labour and the political/social elites of the time. If we take a long historical view, we can see a dramatic transformation in the ways in which Chinese workers and peasants are imagined, talked about, and represented in media and also in the broader popular discourse. For instance, as early as the 1920s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced Marxist-Leninist notions of class struggle and actively promoted awareness of exploitation among workers. Its political agenda at this time was to mobilise China’s peasants and workers to overthrow the old regime (Perry 2012). To raise consciousness, the CCP organised workers to give regular public speeches condemning the evils of private property and the class system, and extolling the virtue of overthrowing exploiters and oppressors.

As the CCP’s power base grew, cultural workers in journalism, arts, literature, theatre, and all other domains of cultural production continued to promote the discourse of class struggle. Mao Zedong made it clear that in a class-based society, class differences must trump all other considerations. Combining Leninist ideas of mobilisation with Chinese notions of collectivist cooperation, the Party also actively experimented with new ways of mobilising the rural population for purposes of transforming social structures in its wartime headquarters in Yan’an in the 1930s and 1940s (Clark 2008).

When the CCP founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, it faced the enormous task of building not only a new national economy, but also a new working-class identity politics. China’s workers and peasants, previously imagined as being exploited and oppressed by landlords and capitalists, had to be reimagined so that they could identify with, and actively participate in, the socialist modernisation process (Sun 2015).

## From Master to Subaltern

Throughout the revolutionary period of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, workers and peasants—the proletariat—were positioned as members of the most advanced forces of production. However, four decades of economic reforms and the embrace of a neoliberal economic order from the late 1970s to the present have seen a gradual loss of such elevated political status. As Guo Yingjie observes, ‘there is no denying that large sections of the working class have lost their privilege and joined the new poor since losing their “iron rice bowl” and becoming detached from the CCP’s historical mission’ (Guo 2008, 40). Lü Xinyu, a Marxist scholar in China, also notes that while Chinese workers and peasants used to be the political and moral backbone of socialist China, in recent decades they have well and truly become a ‘subaltern’ class (quoted in Zhao 2010).

In contemporary China, the subaltern working class referred to by Lü consists mainly of rural migrant workers (*nongmingong*). In addition to a wide range of employment sectors—such as domestic work, service and hospitality, small businesses, and rubbish collection—the manufacturing sector and seasonal construction work make up the majority of the migrant labour force (Sun 2014).

Class relations between rural migrant labourers and the urban middle class—a socio-economic elite group—have been profoundly reconfigured in the four decades of economic reforms. Consequently, the CCP has had to make necessary adjustments to its rhetoric on class discourse, necessitating—yet again—another cultural transformation. First, it had to eliminate the class struggle discourse. This meant acknowledging the reality of socio-economic stratification in China in the reform era, but proposing the doctrine of social harmony as a strategy for managing class inequality and conflict. Second, class consciousness had to be suppressed rather than cultivated. Instead of representing workers

and peasants as the politically privileged class, now the middle classes are touted as being exemplary of preferred values, lifestyles, and behaviours in contemporary China.

The social identity of the worker has also changed, along with the political, social, and economic meaning of work. Once upon a time, the term ‘worker’ (*gongren*) denoted dignity and ownership of the means of production, but workers are now widely described as *dagong* individuals, denoting casual labourers for hire in the capitalist labour market. Workers in the socialist era engaged in labour (*laodong*), which gave them pride and moral legitimacy. In contrast, workers today are referred to as *nongmingong*, meaning ‘peasant workers’. *Nongmingong* exist as cheap labour, which is either in excess or short supply, and are in constant need of self-improvement in order to make themselves qualified for capitalist production (Yan 2008). Whereas in the socialist era workers were described as the ‘masters of the nation’ (*guojia de zhuren*), they have now become, on the one hand, the occasional recipients of urban and middle-class sympathy and compassion, and on the other hand, the objects of their discrimination and contempt (Sun 2009).

## Changing Media Responses to Enduring Injustices

Rural migrant workers in the construction sector face a widespread and entrenched problem of wage arrears, whereby workers routinely experience non-payment, wage reduction, and denial of proper compensation for work-related injuries. A closer look at how urban mainstream media cover such issues provides some clues as to how the cultural politics of class changes over time.

How should news media handle the grievances and disputes surrounding wages and other labour issues facing rural migrant

workers? To some extent, this depends on whom is asked this question. From the point of view of the Party-state, media should function as a stabiliser, defusing social pressure. According to this view, media should devise a voice-sharing strategy designed to ameliorate social conflict and maintain stability. Others argue that for the sake of self-interest, powerful social groups may want to give some of their discursive space to weaker social groups, so that the latter can have channels to vent their discontent. Others again believe that media should exercise its power to give voice to disadvantaged people, since media has the power and responsibility to expose wrongdoings, mobilise public opinion, and put pressure on the powers that be. Of course, this takes courage, but—according to the proponents of this view—journalists must remember that they represent the conscience of society.

One story is worth telling in this regard. On 7 December 2002, Huang, the wife of a rural migrant worker in Shenzhen, one of China's earliest Special Economic Zones, climbed onto the top of a 30-metre-tall pole near her husband's construction site. Her husband, Luo, had been injured while at work, but was too poor to afford the medical expenses and the company had refused to pay. In desperation, Luo's wife wanted to kill herself. Passersby saw her and alerted the police; journalists rushed to the scene of the incident and extensively covered it. Rescue efforts were successful, and through the mediation of the local police, the company agreed to pay medical expenses upfront. This case was among the first of many incidents to come in following years, whereby aggrieved rural migrants have risked their lives to stage public spectacles in the hope of forcing the local authorities to take immediate action. From the point of view of rural migrant labourers, even though they have been told there is a legal channel to seek address, very often, they know all too well that they neither have the money nor time to pursue legal channels. The role of media in this specific incident was crucial but fraught. Following the

incident, divergent opinions were published online, with some criticising the media for encouraging such 'publicity stunts', and others praising journalists for their social conscience (*People's Daily* 2003).

Sympathetic coverage of the plight of workers was frequent under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2003–2013). When incidents such as the one cited above occurred, journalists would often turn up at the scene and, in many cases, mediate between individual migrants, the employers, police, and the local government. Furthermore, reporting of such incidents in the media had the effect of publicly shaming the offending company, as well as putting local authorities on notice.

From the early 2000s onwards, attempts to resolve labour disputes through drastic measures—be it threatening to jump off buildings, blocking the government headquarters, or causing public spectacles in public spaces—have played out in many Chinese towns and cities. However, a closer look at how media responds to such incidents over the past two decades suggests that such sympathetic coverage was short-lived. Following the end of the Hu–Wen administration, the political mandate for stability maintenance (*weiwen*) has seen the juxtaposition of a number of different narrative frames. These include: the 'social justice' (*shehui gongzheng*) frame, i.e. giving voice to the plight of workers; the 'social harmony' (*shehui hexie*) frame, i.e. emphasising the importance of strategic appeasement in order to defuse social discontent; the 'education and guidance' (*jiaoyu he yingdao*) frame, i.e. chastising migrant labourers for their unlawful actions and urging them to seek 'proper channels' (*zhengdang qudao*); and finally, the 'law and order' (*yifa banshi*) frame, whereby the conduct of migrant workers or labour activists is quickly criminalised and their access to public representation through media—including social media—often denied. Despite its rhetoric of a 'people-centred approach' (*yi ren wei ben*), the current regime has leaned towards a more intolerant,



oppressive position on dissenting voices, and has proven to be more than willing to resort to legal force for the purposes of containing, if not eradicating, labour activism.

Middle-class media also oscillate between media-as-spokesperson for rural migrants and media-as-a-pressure valve, while all the time remaining susceptible to the vagaries of the Party-state's mandate of legitimacy production and stability maintenance. Migrant workers seeking justice over wage arrears can be portrayed as deserving of compassion and sympathy on some occasions, while on other occasions they can be criticised for their 'crazy', 'irrational', and 'ignorant' tendencies to resort to extreme measures (Sun 2012).

## Digital Technologies and Self-Empowerment?

In the past decade or so, the arrival of digital media technologies, the ubiquitous use of mobile devices, and the spread of social media have afforded rural migrants a hitherto unavailable means and platform to express their political voice. As I have documented elsewhere (Sun 2014), the increasingly widespread affordability of the mini digital video camera has made it increasingly possible for rural migrants to document egregious labour practices on the part of employers. Technological developments from the late 1990s have enabled some rural migrants to become media activists. Nowadays, having access to QQ and WeChat—China's main social media platforms—labour activists and workers can circulate poetry, fiction, blogs, photography, and other forms of creative work produced by themselves and about themselves.

A small but growing number of migrant cultural activists are exploring effective ways to make creative use of digital media to participate in struggles for self-representation and debates on social inequality and citizenship. My own sustained interactions with more than a dozen

NGO workers and labour activists in Beijing, Suzhou, and Shenzhen between 2004 and 2013 have convinced me that effective labour activism is becoming virtually synonymous with the effective harnessing of new media technologies.

However, we must caution against technological-determinism, which assumes that technology has brought a perfect solution for rural migrants' struggle for economic justice and political voice. While there is plenty of evidence pointing to the subaltern's self-empowerment through social media and digital technologies, there is also plenty of contrary evidence suggesting that rural migrants' embracing of the online and digital world does not necessarily lead to political empowerment (e.g. Wallis 2012). Similarly, for each instance where labour NGOs and grassroots advocates have been successful in mobilising subaltern consciousness through WeChat, microblogging, mobile phones, and other digital platforms, there also seems to be more instances pointing to the limitations of such online activism.

Rural migrants and labour activists' intention and motivation to engage media in struggles for voice, recognition, and economic compensation will continue as long as social and economic injustices exist, but the level of their success is, and will continue to be, determined by the political logic of the situation, and dictated by the imperative of stability maintenance. In view of the authorities' current penchant to enforce censorship, undertake crackdowns, and in some cases even resort to imprisonment in response to various forms of media activism, the space for labour activists to strive for more empowerment via the media has been considerably diminished despite the widespread use of social media. ■



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## Platform Economies

### The Boss's Old and New Clothes

Julie Yujie Chen

*The recent growth of China's platform economy is jaw-dropping. What Chinese platform workers have experienced is the epitome of the intertwining transformations that digital technologies have engendered, not only in the Chinese economy and society, but also in global capitalism more generally. This essay argues that a better understanding of the situation of these workers will inform us about China's economic conditions and provide a glimpse into the future of Chinese labour struggles.*

In the eyes of both China scholars and the public, the recent growth of China's Internet economy is jaw-dropping. Not only did Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent enter the top 10 most valuable tech companies in the world, but new players have also emerged on the global stage. For instance, ride-hailing platform Didi Chuxing, mobile payment methods Alipay and WeChat Pay, and bicycle-sharing platforms Mobike and ofo have become household names all over the world because of their rapid success and global presence.

The 'platform economy'—a term loosely used to describe the economic activities that are performed by Internet platforms—is estimated to have facilitated transactions worth more than 49 billion yuan (7.7 billion USD) in 2017, involving 700 million users and 70 million workers (China's National Information Center and Internet Society of China Sharing Economy Committee 2018). According to my calculations based on data included in the *China Statistical Yearbook (2017)*, in 2016 the platform economy absorbed 18 percent of the labour force in the tertiary industry in 2016. Moreover, an annual increase of 10 million workers since 2015 makes the platform economy the fastest growing

sector in China (China's National Information Center and Internet Society of China Sharing Economy Committee 2016, 2017, 2018). In the meantime, widespread labour disputes and unrest also make it a site for more labour struggles (China Labour Bulletin 2017, 2018).

Because of the pressure on economic restructuring in the aftermath of the 2018 financial slowdown, and thanks to support from the central government, China's platform economy shows no sign of slowing down. What Chinese platform workers have experienced is the epitome of the intertwining transformations that digital technologies have engendered not only in the Chinese economy and society, but also in global capitalism more generally. Consequently, a better understanding of the situation of these workers will inform us about China's labour and economic conditions, as well as more general challenges in terms of inclusive and sustainable development with implications that have relevance far beyond China. This essay aims to shed light on these dramatic and overlapping transformations by highlighting two related tensions.

## Old Wine in New Bottles?

The first tension exists between a persisting struggle of workers against 'the same old problems' and an emerging new set of challenges related to new modalities of value extraction in the platform economy. It is evident that Chinese workers in the so-called 'new economy' are still fighting against traditional forms of exploitation, like wage theft and unilateral termination of contracts without compensation (China Labour Bulletin 2016). Drivers working on the ride-hailing platforms, for instance, still protest against illegal vehicles and high monthly fees paid to the car companies (Chen 2018; China Labour Bulletin 2018). Nonetheless, the 'old wine in new bottles' of labour struggles should not distract attention from a fundamental

shift happening to the value accumulation mechanism in the platform economy—i.e. the fact that the platform economy is, by nature, a form of data capitalism (Srnicsek 2016). Data is the foundation upon which a digital platform functions and continues to exist—without data, algorithms cannot work; without a continuous influx of data into the platform system, algorithms cannot improve; without properly functional algorithms, the platform would fail.

A number of scholars have started to grapple with the implications of massive data collection for democracy and the ways in which it is transforming political economy at national and global levels (Foster and McChesney 2014; Zuboff 2015). Big data collection affects all participants in the platform economy, but workers always face more intensive data capture, and harsher control and discipline enacted through algorithms. For instance, the 531,000 delivery riders at Meituan—the largest online takeaway platform, which performed 2.9 billion deliveries per hour during the daily peak time in 2017 (Meituan-Dianping 2018)—are all subject to the platform's commands for dispatching and route planning. The 2.9 billion hourly deliveries could have never been accomplished without constant influx of real-time data about riders' mobility and performance.

At the core of value extraction and accumulation in the platform economy is a continued trend of shifting surplus away from workers and the general population, and towards capitalists by means of financialisation and automation (Dyer-Witheford 2015). Platform workers' livelihoods, welfare, and reproduction are entangled in data production and manipulation for the growth of the digital platforms, just as factory workers are caught up in the processes of industrialisation. This does not mean to suggest that industrialisation and legacy labour struggles have stopped being relevant nowadays, but that capitalism's turn to datafication has not yet captured substantial interest among labour scholars. It should. Its profound implications for Chinese workers is all the more significant and urgent against



the backdrop of China embracing digital technologies for development and governance. The State's centralised data infrastructure is under construction with projects like the social credit system that incorporates both public and private sectors and will be used for political, economic, and social governance (Liang et al. 2018; Loubere and Brehm 2018). Establishing meaningful connections between day-to-day worker struggles and the structural shift to data capture is a daunting task on the horizon for scholars, workers, and activists alike.

## Outside the Law?

The second tension emerges between the momentum of what Ching Kwan Lee refers to as 'decentralised legal authoritarianism'—i.e. the central government's institutionalised regime to contain workers' collective actions at the local level—and the elusive position of platform companies that are at once implicated in the local informal labour market, yet are also able to get around local regulations (Lee 2007). The dominance of informal labour in China sets in motion a distinctive trajectory of platform economic behaviour. From the e-commerce boom to the ride-hailing market, platform economies rely heavily on the large pool of cheap and informal labour. Take ride-hailing platforms as an example. Instead of disrupting the traditional taxi industry, most ride-hailing platforms—including Didi Chuxing which controls more than 90 percent of the market—also retain traditional taxi services on the platform along with other transport services like ride-sharing. In this way, Chinese ride-hailing platform companies build on the vast pre-existing grey market of illegal and informal taxi services (Chen 2018). This grey market exists in the first place because of the labour segmentations produced by state-owned taxi enterprises and the vastly different regulations at the local levels (Chen 2018). Traditional taxi drivers in one city may find their challenges different

from those faced by their counterparts in the neighbouring city or province. They fight local battles, face decentralised regulations, and find it difficult to mobilise for a nationwide cause, which is analogous to other worker struggles as observed by Lee (2007). This pattern carries on to the ride-hailing market as regulations go local.

Ride-hailing apps were legalised in 2016 with the intention to standardise and regulate the market. By the end of 2017, more than 210 municipal governments have passed localised bylaws to regulate the ride-hailing market (China's National Information Center and Internet Society of China Sharing Economy Committee 2018). Local regulations stipulate licence criteria and application procedures for vehicles, drivers, and ride-hailing platform companies. For example, Beijing mandates a 'double-local' rule—that is, only drivers with Beijing *hukou* operating vehicles with Beijing licence plates are eligible to work legally on the platforms (Beijing Transportation Committee 2016). Shenzhen, a migrant city, requires one-year proof of residence in the city from an applicant driver, but in the spring of 2018 it ruled that only electric cars can be used to apply for the operational licence for ride-hailing services (Shenzhen Transportation Committee 2016, 2018). Local policies that set various requirements for vehicles and drivers indeed embody the needs of local authorities, whether for managing population mobility, stimulating new industries, or a variety of other reasons. But the relationship between drivers and platforms is left mostly undefined across the nation and, as a result, platforms have little legally mandated responsibility for drivers' work conditions, social security, and long-term welfare.

Policy orientation of this kind is more likely to make drivers' lives more precarious than to pressure platform companies into compliance. As of June 2018, Didi Chuxing had legal operational licences in only 51 cities out of the more than 400 cities where it operates (Yue 2018). In 2017, it was also reported to have participated in recruiting unqualified drivers

to work on the platform (Yangtze Evening Paper 2017). This quasi-legal position not only fails to prevent the company from collecting massive amounts of data and accumulating value through its information network, but also puts a majority of drivers in a collectively vulnerable position because of illegitimacy *de jure*. They suffer the brunt of market volatility, as well as the penalties inflicted by suddenly tightened local regulations. Drivers in Beijing, if caught in violations of rules, face up to 30,000 yuan of fines and the temporary seizure of their driver's licence (innoinsights 2018).

## Beyond Cyber-control

The relationship between drivers, ride-hailing platforms, and regulatory bodies at different levels is symptomatic of the economic and regulatory environment for the platform economy. Platform companies thrive because of the network effect of digital technologies (Srnicsek 2016), as well as their brazen violation of regulations. They also thrive by taking advantage of the existing informal labour market and reinforcing labour segmentation. Subcontracting prevails in sectors like online food-delivery and logistics. Platform companies control the labour process via algorithms across geographies (Rosenblat and Stark 2016), which renders them increasingly significant actors in labour management and segmentation.

It is important to point out that labour control of Chinese on-demand platform workers also goes far beyond the level of algorithms. It takes the shape of both a network and a hierarchy when 'decentralised' regulations compound the effects of cybernetic systems imposed by platforms. In the same way that social media platforms curate users' online content and by extension shape public discourses (Gillespie 2018), digital work platforms broker economic rewards, risks, and opportunities among workers. A clearer definition of platform

companies' intermediary and governing roles, and the correspondent liability in the legal framework, is in order.

Indeed, there are many other noteworthy aspects of platform economies in China that this article does not elaborate on, such as the discourse of flexible work as a new type of employment and robust workers' self-organisations. The two tensions outlined above do not exist in isolation. They intersect. They both contain something old and something new. It is the elusive combination of 'Boss's Old and New Clothes' in the platform economy that underlines the high stakes for regulators and Chinese platform workers—not to mention the working class in general. ■



## Rethinking Online Privacy in the Chinese Workplace

Employee Dismissals over  
Social Media Posts

*The Truman Show*  
(1998)

Mimi Zou

*The increasing popularity of social media usage in the workplace, as well as rapid advancements in workplace surveillance technology, have made it easier for employers in China—as elsewhere—to access a vast quantity of information on employees’ social media networks. Considering that Chinese privacy and personal data protection laws have been relatively weak, there have been a growing number of cases brought before courts in China involving employer access to, and use of, employee social media content. This essay examines a number of these cases.*

**S**ocial media has ushered in an age of unprecedented information sharing in the Chinese workplace. According to the 2017 edition of the WeChat’s User Report, 83 percent of respondents are utilising the app for work-related purposes. Furthermore, 57.22 percent of respondents indicated that their new contacts on WeChat were work-related (Penguin Intelligence 2017). The increasing popularity of social media usage in the workplace context, as well as rapid advancements in workplace surveillance technology, have made it easier for employers to access, acquire, and utilise a vast quantity of information on employees’ social

media networks. Social media has become a valuable resource for employers to screen job applicants, monitor employee performance, and investigate employee wrongdoings.

Employers, both in China and elsewhere, often justify such actions on the basis of business concerns about reputational risks, leakage of intellectual property and trade secrets, and other legal liabilities that could arise from employees' social media activities. At the same time, employees' privacy interests are clearly at stake. To tackle these risks, in recent years some state legislatures in the United States have introduced specific laws prohibiting employers from requiring job applicants or employees to disclose usernames and passwords for their personal social networking accounts (Park 2014).

In the Chinese context, however, to date, privacy and personal data protection laws have been relatively weak. At the same time, there have been a growing number of cases brought before Chinese courts involving employer access to, and use of, employee social media content, most commonly in employee dismissal cases. This essay examines a number of these cases, which highlight the extant regulatory gaps in China that provide considerable scope for employers to monitor and inquire into their employees' social media activities, to the detriment of their privacy interests.

## Legislating Privacy in China

Until recently, in China there has not been a comprehensive law at the national level that regulates privacy and personal data protection. A patchwork of rules and principles in this domain has developed in a piecemeal and fragmented manner. To start with, the Chinese Constitution does not refer to a general right to privacy (*yinsiquan*). Article 34 provides that a citizen's personal dignity is protected as a fundamental right and Article 40 protects the privacy of citizens' correspondence.

Article 101 of the 1986 General Principles of Civil Law sets out the protection of personal name, portrait, reputation or honour as 'personal rights' (*renshenquan*) of a natural person, but does not explicitly mention any right to privacy (NPC 1986). In cases involving the written or oral dissemination of a person's private correspondence, which has the practical effect of damaging that person's reputation, the Supreme People's Court has treated such cases as infringement on the rights of reputation (SPC 1988, par. 140).

It was not until the Tort Liability Law, introduced in 2009, that the right to privacy was recognised as one of the civil rights and interests enjoyed by an individual, the infringement of which constitutes an actionable civil tort (NPC 2009, arts. 2 and 62). The new General Provisions of Civil Law of 2017 (hereafter 'General Provisions') further expands the protection of the right to privacy by listing it alongside other personal rights. Article 110 states: 'A natural person enjoys the rights of life, inviolability and integrity of person, health, name, likeness, reputation, honour, privacy, and marital autonomy, among others' (NPC 2017).

It is significant that the General Provisions expressly articulates a broad protection of personal information as an actionable civil claim that is independent of the right to privacy. Article 111 states that: 'The personal information of a natural person are protected by the law. Any organisation or individual who need to obtain the personal information of other persons shall legally obtain and ensure the security of such information, unlawful collection, use, transmission, trade, or disclosure of others' personal data is prohibited.' However, the definition or scope of 'personal information' (*geren xinxi*) is not found in the General Provisions. There is no further elaboration of what activities would constitute 'unlawful' collection, use, transmission, trade, or disclosure.

A recent legislation, the Cybersecurity Law (CSL), is a major step taken by Chinese lawmakers toward establishing a

comprehensive framework for regulating online privacy and security issues (NPC 2016). The CSL defines the protected scope of personal information collected, stored, or transmitted electronically. ‘Personal information’ refers to ‘all types of information recorded by electronic or other means that can identify an individual either in itself or in combination with other information, including but not limited to a citizen’s name, date of birth, ID card number, personal biometric information, address, and telephone number’ (NPC 2016, art. 76). The CSL imposes obligations on ‘network operators’ (*wangluo yunyingzhe*), including obtaining individual consent for handling personal information, and maintaining the security and preventing unauthorised disclosures of personal information (arts. 40–43).

In December 2017, the Standardisation Administration of China issued the Personal Information Security Specification (hereafter ‘Specification’; see SAC 2017), which contains a set of recommended standards regarding the protection of personal information in China (although there are no penalties imposed for breach of such standards). The Specification sets out eight basic principles and standards that cover the collection, storage, use, processing, transfer, disclosure, and any other processing activities involving personal information that are undertaken by ‘personal data controllers’ (*geren xinxi kongzhizhe*).



PC: maxpixel.net

Overall, the legal protection of an employee’s (online or offline) privacy rights has been relatively weak. Recent developments such as the General Provisions could offer employees a channel for seeking civil damages if their employer has unlawfully collected and disclosed their personal information on social media. If one takes a broad interpretation of the CSL and applies the personal information protection standards under the Specification, employees may indeed enjoy enhanced legal protections where employers fail to obtain their employees’ consent in collecting and using their personal information from social media. However, there remains significant ambiguity in how these new regulatory norms will actually apply in practice.

## Dismissal Cases Involving Employee Social Media Posts

We now turn to examine a number of cases involving the dismissal of employees based on their social media posts. The cases discussed below represent a ‘snapshot’ of the common types of such cases that have been brought before local people’s courts in China. Under the Labour Contract Law (art. 39), the employee’s misconduct must be *serious* in order for the employer to justify the dismissal for the purpose of *not* paying the required economic compensation to the dismissed employee. These circumstances include where the employee has seriously violated the rules and procedures set up by the employer, caused severe damage to the employer due to serious neglect of duties or pursuit of private benefits, has simultaneously entered into an employment relationship with another employer that seriously affects the current position, or is under investigation for criminal liabilities.

The first type of cases involve information posted by the employee on her/his social media networks that entail actual misconduct

or wrongdoing that led to his or her dismissal. In one exemplifying case—*Chen v. Di Nuo Wei Ya International Freight Forwarders (Shanghai) Co., Ltd.* (Case 1, 2013)—the employer dismissed the employee on the grounds of unauthorised absence from work for over eight days. Where the employee challenged the dismissal and sought economic compensation, the employer submitted as evidence notarised copies of the employee’s Weibo posts during the period of absence. The posts, which included a photo of the employee sunbathing, showed that she was undertaking personal travel without approved leave at the time. The court recognised the Weibo posts submitted by the employer as admissible evidence and ultimately dismissed the employee’s claim for wrongful termination.

Another category of such cases relate to statements expressed by employees on social media out of frustration and dissatisfaction with the employer, managers, and/or colleagues. The courts have been more cautious in scrutinising the legal basis for employers to dismiss employees in such cases. In *Beijing Bonatongcheng Technology Co., Ltd. v. Li Chennan* (Case 2, 2014 and 2015), the employee (Li) signed an agreement with his employer that upon the dissolution of his labour contract, he would be paid economic compensation if he refrained from making any comments that would damage the employer’s reputation. Shortly before he left his job, Li posted a comment on his Weibo account that the employer frequently withheld wages. The employer claimed that Li’s comment seriously harmed its reputation, which was the basis for not paying Li economic compensation upon termination. Li argued that he was merely disclosing a fact, which did not cause malicious damage to the employer. The court at the first instance concluded that while Li’s post was detrimental to the employer’s reputation; there was no lawful basis for the employer’s refusal to pay Li the agreed compensation. The court at the second instance reached the same conclusion and held that it was not entirely up to the parties to decide on the required

compensation for termination of employment since the law protected the employee’s right to such compensation.

In the third type of cases, an employer has used defamation laws against the employee where the latter’s social media communications caused damage to the former’s reputation. For example, in *Xi’an Mou Gong Ye Xuexiao v. Tang* (Case 3, 2016), the employer successfully sued a former employee for infringing its right to reputation under Article 101 of the General Principles of Civil Law. The plaintiff was a vocational school and employed the defendant as a teacher. Following his termination based on incompetence, the defendant posted disparaging comments about the school in his WeChat groups—some of these (closed) groups included his students. His comments consisted of accusations that the plaintiff did not offer proper qualifications, issued fake diplomas, and took a large ‘cut’ of students’ internship wages. In court, the plaintiff argued that the defendant’s claims were false and resulted in several students withdrawing their enrolment at the school and many more students were contemplating similar actions. The court ruled for the plaintiff and ordered the defendant to publish a written public apology and pay damages of 2,000 yuan for the plaintiff’s loss resulting from reputational damage (which was much less than what the plaintiff sought).

## Collective Disputes and Social Media Posts

In some cases, employee dismissals have been based on social media speech relating to the organisation of collective industrial activities. In *Pei Shihai v. Shunfeng Express Group (Shanghai) Express Co., Ltd* (Case 4, 2016), the plaintiff worked as a driver for the defendant, a large courier and logistics company. The defendant dismissed the plaintiff for serious violations of company rules because the plaintiff had sent messages to a WeChat group of coworkers regarding potential workplace



disturbances (including strike action). The plaintiff brought a claim seeking economic compensation for his dismissal. He contended that he did not instigate any strike activity and was merely discussing with his coworkers about defending their rights. His messages to the WeChat group were aimed at resolving the conflict via lawful means. The plaintiff also argued that the WeChat discussions were private speech that occurred outside working hours and it was unreasonable for the defendant to regulate such speech. Moreover, the plaintiff argued that no strike did actually occur and the defendant's evidence before the court was insufficient to prove that the strike would have happened.

In this case, the defendant argued that the plaintiff's WeChat messages showed that he had intended to instigate a strike and rallied his coworkers to participate, including the communication of specific action plans that would have severely threatened the defendant's operations. The strike did not happen because the defendant took action accordingly. The court of first instance ruled that based on the WeChat records furnished by the defendant, the plaintiff's speech was provocative and he should have known the potential consequences. The court was of the view that employees should comply with workplace rules and professional ethics, which the plaintiff did not. The plaintiff appealed to the Shanghai Intermediate People's Court, arguing that he was merely discussing with coworkers how to protect their rights. He asserted that the defendant's records only showed some parts of the WeChat discussions and did not show the messages he had sent to the group seeking to dissuade a potential strike. Upholding the first instance court's ruling, the court decided that the plaintiff's speech was made within a WeChat group consisting of coworkers and, as such, it exceeded the scope of personal freedom of speech. Even though such speech was made outside working hours, it was still inappropriate and unreasonable since the content was likely to cause dire consequences for the defendant.

In a related case involving the same labour dispute—*Sun Liang v. Shunfeng Express Group (Shanghai) Express Co., Ltd.*—the plaintiff sought economic compensation for his dismissal by the defendant. The plaintiff was dismissed on the basis of violating company rules by posting comments in a WeChat group consisting of 117 coworkers that sought to incite participation in industrial action over wage issues (Case 5, 2016). His claim for compensation failed before the labour arbitration committee and court of first instance. He appealed to the Shanghai Intermediate People's Court. Similar to his coworker in the above case (Pei Shihai), the plaintiff claimed that the WeChat record provided to the court by the defendant was incomplete and that he was merely complaining about their wages with his coworkers. The defendant's evidence showed WeChat logs with some of the plaintiff's messages, which proposed plans for work stoppages and road blockages at certain times and places. The plaintiff also claimed that he was inebriated when he posted the comments during non-working time and the comments were of a private nature.

The Shanghai Intermediate Court ruled that the employer was justified in dismissing the plaintiff without compensation. The plaintiff had made provocative speech on WeChat that attempted to instigate collective disruptions in the workplace. The court was of the opinion that the employer had an implied legitimate expectation based on the employment relationship that employees should carry out their duties in good faith, voluntarily maintain the order of the company, and comply with the company's regulations. Even if such duties were not explicitly written in the labour contract and/or employee handbook, they were 'self-evident'. If there is a dispute regarding work arrangements, employees may exercise their 'right to dissent' (*yiyiquan*) but still had the responsibility to observe proper procedures, that is, not disturb the daily operation and the lawful rights and interests of the company. Adopting the same reasoning as the abovementioned case, the court decided



that the plaintiff's comments were outside the scope of his personal freedom of speech since they were posted to a WeChat group consisting of coworkers. Even though there were no actual damages caused to the company, his speech was still 'inappropriate and unreasonable'. The plaintiff's actions violated the employer's legitimate expectations arising from the employment relationship and infringed basic professional ethics.

Some comparative insights may be useful here. In the US, a notable area of protection for collective employee speech has been carved out from Section 7 of the National Labour Relations Act. Section 7 specifically protects workers' rights to self-organise, bargain collectively, and 'engage in other concerted activity... for mutual aid or protection'. In recent years, there have been numerous cases before the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB) that involved challenging employers' policies and disciplinary actions relating to employee social media postings. The NLRB has increased its scrutiny of employer policies that impose overly broad restrictions that prohibit employees from posting negative comments about the employer.

The cases brought before Chinese local courts to date highlight the extensive reach of employers' actions in this realm. Power asymmetries in the employment relationship also mean that employees do not readily challenge their employers' social media policies and other interferences with social media activities, including cases where employees are using social media to organise collective industrial activities. Furthermore, employers can use defamation laws against employees for reputational damage from the latter's social media activities, which can result in the chilling of various forms of employee speech. In future cases, the courts are likely to grapple with difficult questions related to if and how the new privacy and personal information protection laws would apply, and how conflicting interests of employers and employees (and, potentially, the state) arising from the use of social media technologies in the workplace ought to be balanced. ■

## Legal Uncertainties

Recent regulatory developments such as the General Provisions and CSL, as well as the recommended standards under the new Specification, offer some potential for strengthening the protection of employee privacy interests by requiring employers to obtain employee consent for collecting, using, and handling personal information. At the time of writing, it remains to be seen how both laws and the Specification will be implemented in practice, especially in cases brought before the courts. This legal uncertainty will continue to leave employers with substantial room for manoeuvre when it comes to monitoring, accessing, and using their employees' social media communications.



Portrait of miner Yang Guanlan in Shandong by Song Chao.

## Visualising Labour and Labourscapes in China

From Propaganda to Socially Engaged Photography

Marina Svensson

*Photography has always been a powerful tool to depict the lives of workers in China. Whereas during the Mao period political control over image production in China created a visual hegemony that glorified socialism and class struggle, more recent digital developments have enabled ordinary Chinese citizens and workers to document their lives and circulate these images online.*

What can photography bring to our understanding of labour in China? This question needs to be addressed taking into account the role and possibilities of photography more generally, its development over time, and the history and special conditions in China. After 1949, political control over image production in China created a visual hegemony that glorified socialism and class struggle, while rendering social problems, inequalities, and injustices invisible. However, like in so many other fields, the reform period has enabled a growing and diverse group of people to challenge earlier prescribed visual aesthetics and ideological control. Photographers today experiment with new ways of documenting Chinese society, and also address hitherto invisible issues as well as new problems. Economic and social reforms have created new types of workers, for instance migrant workers, more precarious labour conditions, for example in factories in the South and in private mines, and new forms of marginalisation and exploitation, such as illegal work within the sex industry.

These socio-economic developments have drawn the attention of domestic and foreign photographers alike, such as Edward Burtynsky—working on Chinese topics like the steel and coal industries, manufacturing, shipyards, recycling, and the Three Gorges Dam—and Sim Chi Yin working on topics such as gold miners and migrant workers (Estrin 2015). Digital photography, the Internet, social media platforms, and the expansion of smartphones, not only have provided professional photographers with new possibilities, but they also have enabled ordinary Chinese citizens and workers to document their lives and circulate these images online. Today a wide range of photography tackling social problems and labour conditions can be seen on the Internet, in art spaces, as well as on social media platforms. If, as the filmmaker Wim Wenders (quoted in Levi Strauss 2003, 1) argues, ‘the most political decision you make is where you direct people’s eyes,’ China indeed has gone through a visual

revolution challenging the political gaze and visual hegemony. This being said, however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still maintains a strong interest in—and the means to—control and censor both the written word and images.

This essay discusses how photography can serve a twofold purpose, as both a valuable historical record that helps us understand how ideology and politics have shaped images of labour and the working class in China, and as an important affective and intellectual tool to analyse current labour issues.

## Photography, Social Engagement, and Calls for Change

In the West, photography has long been regarded as a tool to create awareness of social problems, injustices, inequalities, and the life and struggles of marginalised groups of people (Bogre 2012; Franklin 2016; Levi Strauss 2003). Since the late-nineteenth century, documentary photography and photojournalism have addressed topics such as slum housing, landlessness, child labour, poor working conditions, poverty, and migration. Socially engaged photographers and photojournalists have on their own accord or in collaboration with scholars and civil society actors, including news media, photo agencies, and NGOs, documented and uncovered social and political problems with the aim to create awareness and support for social and political change.

In the field of documentary photography on labour issues, one of the earliest and most well-known photographers is Lewis W. Hine, who in 1908 was commissioned by the United States National Child Labor Committee to document child labour in the country. Another example is Dorothea Lange, who during the American depression in the 1930s, together with the economist Paul Taylor, worked for the Farm Security Administration to document

the causes and consequences of agricultural intensification and exploitative factory farming. A more recent example is Sebastião Salgado, who started out as an economist but in the late 1970s decided to devote himself to photography in the belief that it could be more powerful than pure academic work. While Salgado has been criticised for aestheticizing suffering, he has also been widely defended and praised, and in 2010 he was awarded the American Sociological Association Award for Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues. Salgado maintains a strong belief in the power of photography to give rise to debate and action: ‘What I want is the world to remember the problems and the people I photograph. What I want is to create a discussion about what is happening around the world and to provoke some debate with these pictures (Salgado 1994).’

However, the increasing accessibility of photographs has created its own set of challenges. Already in 1974, W. Eugene Smith—who among other things is famous for his photographs of the victims of the Minamata mercury scandal in Japan—expressed awareness of how the sheer number of photographs can numb people, although he ultimately held the view that photography can be an important tool for critical thinking. In his words: ‘Photography is a small voice at best. Daily, we are deluged with photography at its worst, until its drone of superficiality threatens to numb our sensitivity to all images. Then why photograph? Because sometimes—just sometimes—photographs can lure our senses into greater awareness. Much depends on the viewer; but to some, photographs can demand enough of emotions to be a catalyst to thinking’ (quoted in Franklin 2016, 201). This emotional or affective quality of photography is also the reason why so many NGOs and activists today make use of photography in their work.

As a result of the digital revolution, we are today surrounded by ever more images that compete for our attention, and thus visibility remains a question of politics and power relations. Susan Sontag (2003) has argued that



Migrant workers taking a rest in a factory in Dongguan by Zhan Youbing.

the proliferation of images of violence and pain can result in ‘compassion fatigue’ that undermines our abilities to feel, connect, and act. Images may thus hinder, rather than foster, action and solidarity, creating a distance that prevents connectivity and civic engagement. Other scholars and photographers have challenged her conclusion, however, and believe that photography can still play an important role in awareness raising, civic engagement, and humanitarian and political activism (Bogre 2012; Franklin 2016; Levi Strauss 2003). One needs to distinguish between images that play on people’s sense of guilt and give rise to pity, charity, and good-will, and images that provoke outrage and calls for more radical social and political changes. Moreover, one also needs to distinguish between images that portray people as victims and images that portray them with dignity and agency.

## From Visual Hegemony to New Visualities

The CCP understood early on that photography can be useful in ideological work and serve as a propaganda tool (see, for instance, Roberts 2013 and Wu 2017). The proper role of photography from the

perspective of the CCP was laid down in different speeches and directives, which came to inform Chinese photojournalism in the three decades that preceded the reforms. Photographers were called upon to show the progress and success of communism by documenting technical advances, new factories, and large infrastructural projects. It was not possible to take and publish photographs that hinted at social problems, hardships, or resentments, as this would have been seen as a critique of the political system. For this reason, photographs of the Great Famine of the early 1960s do not exist, but there are ample photographs celebrating the Great Leap Forward and its advances in steel production. In the photographs of the 1950s and 1960s, workers are depicted as heroic and strong, toiling to build the New Socialist China with commitment and revolutionary fervour. They are physically sturdy, well-dressed and clean-faced, and engage in difficult work without flinching. The photographs portray the strength and collective spirit of the working class without hinting at any difficulties or poor working conditions.



Private mine in Henan province in the 1990s, by Niu Guozheng.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the role and content of photography began to change. Photojournalists were inspired by the shifting ideological and cultural landscape, and began to experiment with new aesthetics, resulting in the appearance of a new humanitarian realism in photojournalism. At the same time, new artistic uses of photography—inspired in part by the influx of the works of Western photographers—appeared, while family photography became less political and more individualistic in character. Furthermore, the increasing affordability of cameras led to the emergence of a new generation of photographers, artists, and enthusiastic amateurs.

Since the late 1990s, we have seen a growing number of socially engaged photographers who address societal changes and problems, as well as photographers who embark on more personal and artistic explorations. Special photo journals, art spaces, and photo festivals, have given photographers new platforms to showcase their work (Chen 2018). Socially engaged photographers, such as Lü Nan (known for his work on mental patients),

Zhang Xinmin (who was among the first to document migrant workers in Guangdong in the early 1990s), Nie Guozheng (who has documented the life of miners), and Lu Guang (famous for his work on the Henan HIV crisis and environmental pollution), have addressed topics and groups of people that previously received scant attention. Many NGOs—Project Hope working on rural education was one of the first—also began to make use of photography to draw attention to their work. The digital revolution, including the Internet, social media platforms, and smartphones, has enabled more people to document their lives and personal memories. On social media, especially Sina Weibo, Chinese citizens have been exposed to images of groups of people and issues that the traditional media are often still silent about, such as the struggle and plight of petitioners, trafficked children, and villagers who have lost their land (Svensson 2016).

Although initially reluctant to take to Weibo, workers, activists, and labour NGOs now use the platform to share photographs about their activities, including protests and strikes. Labour NGOs have also encouraged and trained workers to document their life and work, and have organised a variety of exhibitions (Sun 2014). The Love Save Pneumoconiosis Foundation, an organisation that opened its Weibo account in 2011, has actively used

photos and videos of migrant workers suffering from the deadly work-related lung disease. Some migrant workers afflicted by this illness have also begun to use social media to circulate information and images of themselves and their lives. These photos and videos show the workers' weak and emaciated bodies and reveal the seriousness of their condition, arousing empathy and support. Nonetheless, it is beyond doubt that most workers use their smartphones more for fun than as a tool to raise awareness about labour issues (Wallis 2013; Wang 2016).

At the same time, a more activist type of photography—which could be described as inverse surveillance or 'sousveillance'—has developed thanks to new digital technologies and platforms. Although the digital revolution has brought about new forms of visualities and enabled more people to make and circulate their own photographs, the Chinese state can still control and prevent the circulation of unwanted content. This is happening at the same time as the sheer quantity of information available is making it difficult for these images to be seen and actually have an impact.

## Reading Labour Issues in and through Photography

How can we read photography in the context of Chinese labour? In 2008, Susan Meiselas and Orville Schell brought together the work of 18 Chinese photographers in the exhibition *Mined in China* which was first shown in the United States and later also in China. In 2011, a new expanded exhibition called *Coal+Ice* was first shown in the Three Shadows Art Centre in Beijing before travelling to other places in China and the United States. Both exhibitions were sponsored by the Asia Institute in New York. These exhibitions included historical photographs from China Pictorial (*Renmin Huabao*) as well as contemporary photography from the 1990s and 2000s. Historical

photographs from China Pictorial and other news sources provide rich information about the view and role of the working class during the Mao era but often less information about actual working conditions. The range of photographs illustrate both the changes in visual representation of miners as well as their changing working conditions.

One representative photograph from 1969 shows a group of miners, including a few women, standing and sitting on the underground track leading into a mine. They are not working, however, but busy reading Mao's *Little Red Book* and holding a large portrait of him. The photograph is clearly staged to showcase how studying Mao is helping and inspiring the miners in their work. The miners are well-dressed and clean-faced, and the photograph provides no indication of hardship. Instead, it provides a reminder of how in the Maoist era ideology permeated all workplaces, and how miners were both celebrated and disciplined at a time when work was considered 'glorious'.

This and other historical photographs provide an interesting contrast to the more contemporary photographs in the exhibition. The weakening of the grip of ideology over photography has led to new aesthetics and ways of documenting the life and work of miners. At the same time, the reform period has also led to the emergence of private mines and, in many cases, worsening working conditions. The workforce today includes migrant workers with less skills and lower social status than their predecessors or their counterparts in state mines. Socially engaged photographers capture these changes in the nature and status of the work. For instance, Niu Guozheng's photographs in Henan and Geng Yunsheng's photographs in Yunnan since the 1990s both reveal the precarious situation of those miners who struggle to make a living in a dangerous line of work. Their photographs show bare-chested miners covered in soot engaging in taxing manual labour, carrying buckets of coal in small, private mines that one may assume are not very safe.



One early striking photograph by Niu Guozheng—included in the celebrated 2003 exhibition *Humanism in China*—shows a teenage boy covered in soot on a heap of coal and rocks. He stands with a cheeky and self-confident smile, basket on his arm, dressed only in a pair of shorts and sandals. Slightly ajar on his head, adding to the sense of casualty and humour, sits a helmet that is more for show than for safety. The image works on a number of levels. On the one hand it raises questions of working conditions, safety, and underage miners; but at the same time it reveals the boy's pride and resourcefulness, and acknowledges his agency.

Showing the more negative and dangerous aspects of mining, Zhang Jie has taken photos of families holding photos of family members who have died in the mines. Wang Mianli's photographs, in contrast, portray technically advanced mines—seemingly mostly state owned—where luckier miners work. These photographs privilege the physical settings and the machinery rather than the people working there, and through their composition and colouring give a somewhat techno-optimistic image of the mining industry. Another photographer, Song Chao, worked as a miner himself before taking up photography. His portraits of miners in black and white turn our attention from the mining industry to the individual miners themselves. Although the men are dark and dirty from the soot, their individual character, pride, and strength stand out, and the photos end up highlighting their agency.

These photographs remind us that the mining industry is highly diverse, with quite different working conditions and classes of workers. More importantly, the different styles of the photographers included in the exhibition show how Chinese photography today has diversified and become more individualistic in character. The exhibition obviously can be read and probed in many respects, and it indeed gives rise to a number of questions, some of which can only be answered by turning to academic works and media reports on the

mining industry. Nonetheless, the photographs work more affectively than mere text and facilitate both awareness and engagement.

## Building Empathy through Photography

Academic work and statistics often fail to capture the lived and embodied experiences of labour in different times, conditions, and places. In the best of circumstances, photography can provide a deeper, more empathic understanding that fosters respect and solidarity. It can furthermore serve as a catalyst for critical thinking and theoretical reflection. Through photography researchers and students of labour can get closer to subjects, sites, and topics that might otherwise be closed and out of reach to them.

Photography, however, may also hide or fail to explain larger institutional and structural contexts and issues. For this reason, one needs to have the necessary background information in order to critically read and analyse visual representations of labour. When looking at photographic records, we need to ask ourselves some critical questions: what are the limitations of photography? What is invisible or has been left out? What photographs are missing? Are workers depicted as victims or as agents of change? Who is taking these photographs and why, and does it matter? Only if we reflect on these questions, will we be able to critically understand the power of photography for engagement and solidarity. ■

The *Mined in China* exhibition can be seen at: <http://www.minedinchina.com/>.





## Documenting China's Influence

Screenshot from the trailer of *China: Time of Xi*.

David Bandurski

*Back in 2017, the Discovery Channel aired China: Time of Xi, a slick documentary series presenting China as a dynamic nation on the cutting edge under the stewardship of its 'people-centred' President, Xi Jinping. While by most accounts the series was simply good programming featuring renowned international personalities, this essay takes a more critical look at the circumstances surrounding the production, arguing that there was more to it than it meets the eye.*

One year ago, on the eve of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Nineteenth National Congress, the Discovery Channel, one of the world's most recognisable cable television brands, aired a slick documentary series presenting China as a dynamic nation on the cutting edge, under the stewardship of its 'people-centred' President, Xi Jinping. The programme, *China: Time of Xi*, was hosted by international personalities, including American architect Danny Forster and Australian biomedical engineer Jordan Nguyen (Discovery 2017). Produced for Discovery by Meridian Line Films, which identifies itself as a 'UK-based independent production company', it aired in 37 countries and regions across Asia, reaching tens of millions of viewers (2017).

By most accounts, the series was simply good programming—a timely and relevant response to China’s political event of the year. A report in the *Straits Times*, Singapore’s English-language daily, quoted creative director and executive producer Liz McLeod, the founder of Meridian Line Films, as saying that ‘this is obviously a moment when Discovery’s audiences will be wanting to know more about President Xi and about Chinese policy, and so it was a very good opportunity to make this series now’ (China Daily 2017).

## Nesting China Dolls

Take a more critical look at the circumstances surrounding *China: Time of Xi*, however, and the plot quickly thickens. The series was in fact the product of a three-year content deal inked in March 2015 between Discovery Networks Asia-Pacific and China Intercontinental Communication Centre (CICC), a company operated by the State Council Information Office (SCIO)—the Chinese government organ, sharing an address with the Central Propaganda Department’s Office of Foreign Propaganda (OFP), responsible for spearheading its official messages overseas (Gitter 2017). The news chatter surrounding the series came almost exclusively from official state media, which nevertheless took pains to persuade readers of its independence (People’s Daily 2017). Even the *Straits Times* article offering the quote from McLeod was sourced from the *China Daily*, the official English-language newspaper of the SCIO (China Daily 2017).

The UK-based Meridian Line Films was yet another case of nesting dolls ending with the CICC and the SCIO. In its annual report filed in July 2015, Meridian Line lists as company directors both Jing Shuiqing, CICC’s deputy director, and Wang Yuanyuan, its creative director (Companies House 2015). According to the same report, 85 percent of Meridian Line shares were held by a company identified as ‘China International



Chinese scholar Hu Angang is one of the famous personalities who make an appearance in *China: Time of Xi*. He has recently been at the centre of a controversy in China (see Hayward’s op-ed in the current issue).

Communication Center Ltd,’ a name CICC frequently uses interchangeably with China Intercontinental Communication Center (China Daily 2007). Chinese company records show that the CICC directed by Jing Shuiqing, its legal representative, is fully owned by China Intercontinental Press (SAIC 2000), a company held by the Central Propaganda Department (SCIO) (SAIC 1994). That company’s legal representative is Chen Lujun, currently deputy director of the News Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department—and therefore one of the country’s top censorship officials for film and the news media (though he regularly appears in the media wearing another hat, as a film industry executive) (DocuChina 2017).

The point of this rapid rewind through what was billed last year as an independent television production is to demonstrate one of the more subtle means the Chinese government has at its disposal to influence the narrative globally about its domestic politics and its foreign policy—international film co-production.

## From Soft to Sharp Power

In a paper released the month after *China: Time of Xi* was broadcast across Asia, authors Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (2017) introduced the term ‘sharp power’ to describe the efforts of countries like China and Russia to ‘distract and manipulate’, as opposed to the hard power of economic inducement or outright coercion, or to the appeal and attraction of soft power. Walker and Ludwig cited such ‘borrowed boat’ tactics as the insertion of *China Daily* supplements like ‘China Watch’ in foreign newspapers, or the airing of documentaries produced by China Global Television Network (CGTN) on channels outside China. These cases involve utilisation of domestic media channels for what is more or less transparently Chinese state content.

By contrast, the co-production model is far subtler, and far more recent. As scholar and documentary filmmaker Ming Yu noted in 2017 (Yu 2017), the 2011 release by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) of a policy document titled ‘Opinions on Accelerating Development of the Documentary Industry’ was a key turning point for international co-productions (SARFT 2012). According to the policy, the ‘energetic advancement’ of the documentary industry would ‘have great significance for boosting international cultural dialogue and cooperation, advancing the going out of Chinese culture, and raising Chinese cultural soft power.’ Outside official CCP discourse, talk of ‘culture’ may seem warm and inviting. But for China’s leaders culture is twinned with the language of ideological dominance, a link we can spot clearly in President Xi Jinping’s August 2013 speech to his first propaganda and ideological work conference, where he described ‘Chinese culture’ as a tool of international discourse power (China Copyright and Media 2013). As Li Congjun, the director of the official Xinhua News Agency, wrote at the time: ‘In the world today, whose communication methods are most

advanced, whose communication capacity is strongest, determines whose ideology, culture, and value system can be spread most widely, and have the greatest influence on the world’ (Li 2013).

## An Illusion of Independence

Since 2011, CICC has racked up a long list of successes in rolling out its cultural programming, aided by international co-production partnerships. To offer one more recent example, there is *The Story of Time*, a documentary co-produced by CICC, Guangxi TV, and Vietnam Television (VTV)—Vietnam’s national television broadcaster. The film builds on the recollections of teachers and students from Vietnam who spent time in Guangxi to convey what a description by CICC calls ‘the deep friendship between China and Vietnam’ (VideoChinaTV 2017). The programme was timed to air both in China and in Vietnam during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit held in Da Nang, where Xi Jinping’s speech followed that of US President Donald Trump (Tan 2017).

Unlike the ‘borrowed boat’ approach, or the outright launch of Chinese-produced programmes and channels overseas—such as CGTN America—the co-production model allows China’s state propaganda apparatus to piggyback on the trust and credibility that domestic or regional broadcasters such as Discovery Asia or Vietnam Television have already established with their audiences. Further, it helps project the illusion of distance between the Chinese state and the production process, such that the ‘independence’ of documentaries like *China: Time of Xi* can be taken seriously, despite obvious alignment with state propaganda messages. That is, until we take the often simple step of lifting the veil—looking, as I did above, at the short trail of breadcrumbs leading back to the centre of China’s propaganda regime.

When it comes to international film co-production, the veil is almost never lifted. Which leads us to the final, and perhaps most important, advantage of China's continued engagement with production cultures overseas through enterprises like CICC: the normalisation of the Chinese state as a creative partner and financier.

## Normalising Propaganda

In September 2015, when the executive vice president of National Geographic Channel (Asia), Simeon Dawes, unveiled the broadcast slot for *China From Above*, a two-part documentary produced jointly with CICC, no one noted the oddity of the fact that Cui Yuying, a deputy director of China's SCIO, was there to address the audience, saying the documentary would 'provide a better understanding of China for foreign audiences' (China.org.cn 2015). Similarly there was no media coverage of the fact that the co-production partner was fully owned by the Central Propaganda Department, of which Ms. Cui was also a deputy director.

Likewise, *Realscreen*, an international magazine covering the television and non-fiction film industries, could write ingenuously in June this year that China was 'making a big comeback as a co-production partner' at France's Sunny Side of The Doc, one of the world's leading markets for documentary and factual content—despite the fact that all of the partners named, including CICC, were run by the Chinese state (Bruneau 2018). The article even quoted CICC's president, Chen Lujun, speaking excitedly about a new co-production with Radio and Television of Portugal (RTP) about porcelain and its impact on globalisation. The collaboration may sound innocent enough; but official Chinese coverage makes it crystal clear that the project with RTP is linked to Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy initiative—the Belt and Road—and that the Portuguese broadcaster has joined China's 'Belt and Road Media Cooperation Union', an alliance of

media companies around the world committed to working with China on stories linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BIFF 2018).

Imagine how different this news might look were I to write Chen's remarks in *Realscreen* as a kicker quote with just a bit more context:

We want to act as a bridge between China and Europe,' said CICC President Chen Lujun, who is also deputy director of the News Bureau of China's Central Propaganda Department. 'Porcelain is a symbol of oriental wisdom and we are happy to introduce that to the world.'

As China becomes an ever-present player on the global cultural and intellectual stage, we should be mindful of the deeper political context surrounding what Xi Jinping has enticingly called 'China's story' (An 2018). Always dancing around this story is another chronicle, wilfully or neglectfully untold, about how that story has been directed, manufactured, and influenced by a single dominant protagonist, the Chinese Communist Party. ■





# Imagining the Digitalisation of Politics

A Conversation with  
Wang Lixiong

Zeng Jinyan  
translated by Christian Sorace

**Wang Lixiong is an author whose topics cover political fables, Tibet and Xinjiang issues, and the practice of grassroots democracy. His representative works include *Yellow Peril (huang huo)* published in 1991. In December 2017, he published a new novella about the digitalisation of Chinese politics titled *The Ceremony (da dian)*.**

Zeng Jinyan: From *Yellow Peril* to *The Ceremony*, your work abounds with rich layers of thought and analysis. When I am reading your writing, I receive so much insight. If my understanding is not biased, the plot of your new novella revolves around an unfolding conflict between dictatorship in the digital age (*shuzihuashidai de ducaizhe*) and the functioning of bureaucratic groups (*guanliao jituan*). The fundamental activities of bureaucratic groups are commercialisation and the pursuit of their own interests above all else—a situation which has caused the autocratic system to internally defend itself, engage in a power struggle, and collapse. Finally, the players in this game of chess use a strategy of ‘moving toward democracy’ as the first step of the next round of autocratic power struggle. My question is: from the Mao era to the period from Deng Xiaoping until Hu-Wen, and now in the Xi Jinping era, what has changed in the activities of bureaucratic groups?

Wang Lixiong: To put it simply, Mao was a god and a dictator, he had a *large charisma*; Xi is heading in the direction of dictator and manufacturing a god-like status, but he has a *small charisma*. The degree of resemblance between them will become increasingly high—the difference is that Xi is unable to obtain the kind of sincere worship that society gave to Mao. Further, more than Mao, Xi has at his disposal high-tech methods of surveillance and a big data system. During the Mao era, bureaucratic groups could use to their advantage a special trait of dictatorship, which is the inability of the ‘few to govern the many’ (*shao zhi duo*). They were able to find loopholes and leave in place the appearance of authority while pursuing their own interests. In the end, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in the hope that he could master the thoughts of millions of masses to implement [the principle of] ‘many governing the few’ (*duo zhi shao*) over bureaucratic groups. This resulted in ‘everything under heaven being in chaos’ (*tianxia daluan*) and ‘ten years of turmoil’ (*shi nian haojie*). High tech has given Xi the ability to implement the method of the ‘few governing the many’ (*shao zhi duo*) and thus resolve the historical problem of dictatorship. Xi has manufactured a terrifying deterrence by removing any place of escape; as a result, he is able to strictly exercise control over bureaucratic groups.

Mao’s status as a god enabled him to reverse the direction of authority and change its rules and regulations, so much so that he was able to smash and rebuild its machinery. As a representative of the bureaucratic groups and a person who suffered gravely from the Cultural Revolution, after Mao



Wang Lixiong. PC: Thinkerworks.



Xi Jinping in 2017. PC: Wikimedia Commons

passed away, Deng Xiaoping resolved to put restrictions on the leadership as the Party rebuilt itself in order to preclude another Cultural Revolution. To prevent the reappearance of another Mao Zedong who would be above the Party and harm the bureaucratic groups, Deng promoted ‘Party construction’ (*dang de jianshe*) and ‘intra-Party democracy’ (*dangnei minzhu*).

Deng’s promotion of intra-Party democracy can be likened to a ‘machinisation of power’ (*quanli jiqihua*). As opposed to power revolving around the will of an individual leader, the ‘machinisation’ of power does not have a ‘leader’ in any genuine sense of the term. All members of the bureaucratic group are part of the machine, and they mutually conform and restrict each other in accordance with the rigidity of the structure. The highest authority is only a position— it is not important who fills it. That person must not violate the rules of the machinery and further still, must not destroy the machine itself.

Because autocratic power needs the bureaucratic system for its implementation, bureaucrats have methods for concretely manipulating those policy decisions from above that damage their corporate interests, such as foot-dragging, distorting facts, and settling matters by leaving them unresolved. Through these means, they hollow out these policy decisions, making their implementation basically impossible. This kind of ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ (*guanliao jituan de zizhuxing*) is the foundation for the machinisation of power. From ancient times until today, ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ has existed extensively—it is not embodied in formal institutions and procedures, but is an evolving set of tacit understandings and unwritten rules. Although bureaucrats compete over concrete issues, as a whole they actually combine to form a community that is adept at plotting together, pursuing shared interests, and using readily available connections within the bureaucratic system to conspire and form a protection network. For the central state’s power to be implemented, it needs to comply with ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ and satisfy (or at least not offend) bureaucratic interests—only then can the hand accomplish what the heart desires rather than become an adversary that pays lip service to power and opposes it in secret. Even with Mao’s authority, it was difficult to launch a movement that touched bureaucratic power; e.g., it was even hard for Mao to publish a single article in Beijing about it. Ultimately, Mao circumvented the bureaucratic groups by directly appealing to the masses to revolt and demolish the bureaucracy. But in the end, even Mao could not escape the bureaucracy—after one smashes the old, new bureaucrats will, as they have always done, form their own interest groups. As soon as Mao died, his



Mao Zedong in 1963. PC: Wikimedia Commons



wife put in prison, and his inner circle captured in one net, power was comprehensively restored to the factions who were previously accused of ‘taking the capitalist road’.

Autocratic systems of government have never been good at resolving the problem of transferring power. In the past, the Communist Party’s methods for appointing a successor caused continuous turmoil. In his later years, Deng learned this lesson and appointed two generations of successors. Every ten years, power was to be handed over to the next generation. Perhaps Deng only planned ahead for the steady transfer of the next two generations of leaders, but their simultaneous co-existence took the shape of a limiting condition. The first generation, because they needed to hand over power, did not dare to boost their ego in a way that betrayed Deng; the second generation also relied on Deng’s legitimacy in order to guarantee that power would be transferred to them in a timely manner. As a result, both sides viewed Deng as a ‘guiding principle’: Deng used his personal authority to guarantee that these arrangements became a common understanding internal to the Party. Even after Deng died, the previous generation that wielded political power needed to hand over power on time to the successive generation. It was the first smooth transfer of power in Communist Party history.

Generally speaking, internal Party factions are harmful to the Party to the extent of miring it in life and death factional struggles; at the same time, a Party without internal factions is also harmful, as it can become a unified total Party dictatorship which governs by producing clouds with one turn of the hand and rain with another—i.e. through the exercise of arbitrary power. This also endangers the Party and subjects the process of succession to turmoil. ‘Every other generation appoints its successor’ (*gedai zhiding jiebanren*) at one stroke solves both of these problems. Every other generation demarcates two factions—‘N Faction’ and ‘N+1 Faction’ (‘N’ changes in accordance with the algebra of succession) which naturally form two ‘mountain strongholds’ (*shantou*). However, one faction will always be stronger than the other; they will never be momentarily evenly matched. In this way, a life and death struggle can be avoided. The successor in waiting will never actively challenge [power]; as long as they guarantee that there are no mishaps, they will assume their position when the scheduled time arrives. The faction in power will avoid excessively repressing the weaker faction because the balance of power will inevitably change. The faction in power wants to avoid retaliation once the weaker one takes office and becomes the stronger one. When one is strong, restraint must be exercised.



*The Ceremony (Da Dian)*, Wang Lixiong, 2017

After the succession and transfer of the relationship between strong and weak, the side that became strong still does not dare to excessively expand its power. Apart from the remaining strength of the predecessor, one must worry about the fact that the predecessor appointed the next generation of successor who naturally belongs to the opposing faction. This means that one must take into consideration that at the end of one's term in office, power will be handed over, and one will once again be in the position of being weak. These regulations restrain and protect both sides. In this kind of internal party allocation, there are no differences in ideology or political line and no different concepts of governance, to the extent of there being no differences in strategy. There is no need for competition between both sides. They simply need to follow the programmed rise and fall of the curtain, and climb on stage when it is time to sing. Not only would this resolve the difficult problem of how to transmit autocratic power, but it would even be more stable than the transfer of power between parties in a democracy.

When leaders direct power, it is possible to break through the status quo. Hitler's war and Mao's Cultural Revolution are two examples, but it may even be possible to include positive instances, such as Chiang Ching-kuo's lifting of the ban on political parties in Taiwan and Gorbachev's political transformation in the Soviet Union. Internal power struggles, however, are also likely to bring about collapse. But after power is machinised, a leader is only the spokesperson for the interests of their power group. There will be no breakthroughs, only N series of alternations between each side acting together to safeguard this type of mechanism. From the perspective of maintaining the Communist Party's own stability, it can be said that the machinisation of power which 'does not toss from side to side' and 'silently makes a fortune' is the most optimal mode.

If Xi followed these arrangements, then after ten years and two Party Congresses, he would hand over power to Hu Jintao's appointed successor Hu Chunhua, and appoint a successor for the next generation. In this way, the mechanism would become further regularised and continue into the future. But instead, he has changed a mechanism that it has taken over 20 years to cultivate, and returned to Mao's methods. At present, it is still too early to tell if he will use dictatorial power to step over the bureaucratic groups in order to do something different. But what he has done is increased the possibility of unpredictability in the system and collapse. From a certain perspective, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

ZJ: On the basis of your research and experience dealing with grassroots-level police engaged in stability maintenance, in the Xi Jinping era, are there any new characteristics in the psychologies and work techniques of government employees at the high, middle, and lowest rungs of the political and legal system? What are the reasons for the changes?

WL: The officials of this generation lack capital in any respect. As long as they have power in their hands, they can overstep other people; in all situations, they use power. In the past, power was embedded with other things, such as ideology, united front work, international image, and media constraints but now power basically relies on violence. This generation of government officials lack faith and ideology, they just attain their goals by any means necessary and put their individual interests above everything else. On the one hand, they inhumanely carry out orders and maintain the machinery of power; on the other hand, if one day the overall trends shift course, it can be imagined that ‘not one real man’ (*jing wu yi ren shi nan'er*) will be found [translator’s note: Wang is referring to a speech Xi Jinping gave to Guangdong officials in January 2013 during which he allegedly warned that the Soviet Union rapidly collapsed due to the fact ‘there was not one real man’ there to stop it].

ZJ: Although your novel includes the figures of Zhao Gui, a bureaucrat engaged in business (*guanshang*) and Boss Xie [translator’s note: xie means ‘shoe’], a private entrepreneur, the writing mainly focusses on the struggle internal to bureaucratic groups and does not portray the possible prospect of an authoritarian state’s putting to use the digitalisation of commerce. What do you think about the recent intensity of resistance and criticism of Facebook’s collection and abuse of big data, including leading users toward commercial totalitarian control? Is it possible to describe the prospects for the digitalisation of totalitarianism from the perspective of the market?

WL: Human society confronts the autocracy of power and also confronts the autocracy of capital. In the connected world, the optimistic hopes brought about by the decentralisation of the 2.0 age have been smashed by today’s Internet capitalist monopolies. In China, the alliance between state power and capital is even more prominent, which places the Internet under a dual autocracy. Capital uses its monopoly over science and technology to serve the autocratic power of the state; as a result, political power amply avails itself of the methods of modern science and technology—what I call ‘techno-scientific autocracy’ (*keji zhuanzhi*)—enabling autocracy to attain unprecedented heights.

Formerly, autocracies relied on control over the military and police, and a monopoly of weapons to stay in power. Although these methods were formidable, all along they had one soft



*Yellow Peril* (Huanghuo),  
Wang Lixiong, 1991

under belly—the few were unable to govern the many. No matter how much governance machines expanded, the rulers would always be few in relation to the people they governed. Inevitably, there would always be places that the eye could not see and the hand could not reach, places that are overlooked and neglected, in which the force of revolt could grow, an ant hole could cave in, or germinations of instability could be produced, and ultimately lead to the collapse of autocracy. It is like the Western saying:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost,  
For the want of a shoe, the horse was lost,  
For the want of a horse, the rider was lost,  
For the want of a rider, the battle was lost,  
For the want of a battler, the kingdom was lost.

The main problem of autocracy in the past is that it was impossible to dispatch soldiers to watch over and give each horseshoe a nail. As a result, it was impossible to put an end to the chain that led from the missing nail in the horseshoe to the destruction of the country.

However, *The Ceremony* describes a network of shoes, in which each horseshoe is given a SID (Shoe ID) allowing any sign of fracture to be discovered in advance—the ID registers if the shoe is replaced, or the horse stops running, or the rider changes. As a result, the chain from the missing nail to the destroyed country will never happen again. The Shoe ID network described in *The Ceremony* has not yet become reality, but it would not be technologically difficult. In the age of computers and the Internet, people have been integrated into a digital situation and become bits of data; as a result, autocrats can use digital technology to implement the ‘rule of the few over the many’. Big data can capture all traces, and algorithms can detect all suspicious situations. Although autocratic power is the rule of the few, the power of computers exponentially exceeds the power of humans. Autocratic power is equipped with the strongest science and technology and can now accomplish what it was not able to in the past; conversely, what rebels might have achieved in the past is impossible today. Science and technology not only provides autocracy with new methods of control but also provides it with a material foundation—as modern science and technology ensures that there will never again be famine and helps the people maintain ‘moderate prosperity’ (*xiaokang*), the most historically powerful motivation for revolution recedes from the stage. What is left to challenge autocracy? In line with the development of Artificial Intelligence, autocratic power will not only be able to forecast crises before they happen and detect threats but will also establish absolutely obedient and

super-strength robotic police and military. When autocracy reaches this step, what change remains possible? At the time when all threats and crises can be eliminated, forever becomes the horizon, and the ‘absolute power that corrupts absolutely’ will absolutely remain the same. If you look at the reality of the world today, autocratic regimes are becoming more autocratic and democratic societies are retreating into autocracy—among the reasons for this is techno-scientific autocracy that enables those in power to rule by the few over the many.

And yet—although autocracy has tighter control than it did in the past due to techno-scientific autocracy and seems to completely lack the possibility of collapse, and although in *The Ceremony* there are no ruthless characters that appear, no conspiratorial factions, no military turncoats, and no indications that the entire edifice will collapse—all that is needed is a bureaucrat who desires to protect himself, an ambitious businessman, a young border police officer, and an engineer who does not show the slightest interest in politics, in order to make the enormous autocratic machinery fall apart, without even the semblance of a reaction.

The reason why I wrote in this way is that I wanted to display the Achilles’ heel of techno-scientific autocracy—i.e. the fact that autocratic power is necessarily dependent on rapid technological progress, but autocrats are unable on their own to control and manipulate science and technology and are forced to rely on experts and entrust operations to their subordinates. It is the people placed at the nodal points integrating science and technology with the autocratic machine who are the ones that hold the keys to it and control its power. The methods of autocracies to control their internal personnel are ineffective because autocrats are ignorant about its internal operations and cannot see which nodal points might produce threats, to the extent of not even knowing where the nodal points are. Consequently, it is beyond their capability to set up defences against attacks evolving from within. Even if they mend the pen, the sheep are long gone. Along with the continuous development of science and technology, there will always be sheep who escape before the old fences can be mended.

In the past, power’s strength was linear—the strength or weakness of the army was directly proportional to the amount of soldiers and weapons it had. To overthrow power also required a linear equation of strength and costs over the same period of time; to defend against being overthrown only required controlling this kind of linear increase. But the strength of science and technology is non-linear—to topple the autocratic machine from within, sometimes all that is needed is command over a single nodal point—and with zero cost, this process can

be limitlessly replicated and disseminated. By manipulating the format, it is possible to return everything there is to blank space and reboot the system.

In theory, it is possible to guard against this kind of danger by ensuring the absolute loyalty of all internal members. The problem is that the most reliable form of loyalty—‘faith’ (*xinyang*)—is what is missing from today’s autocratic machinery, which operates only on the basis of interest and fear. Yet autocratic power is inevitably unfair; apart from injuring the governed, it cannot avoid to some extent injuring its own members. When interests are no longer maintained by the system, the only mode of restriction left is fear. The origins of fear are the punishment suffered in case of defeat—if there was a 100 percent assurance of success, fear would have nothing to hold onto. The special characteristic of science and technology is its fatal precision—an attack can happen at any time and from any unexpected place within the internal machinery of autocracy launched by anyone who controls one of the nodal points of the technological apparatus. From this perspective, techno-scientific autocracy provides autocrats with unprecedented power but at the same time exposes them to imperceptible dangers that are difficult to take precautions against. Science and technology can both make autocracy invulnerable to attack and collapse suddenly. The uncertainty confronted by techno-scientific autocracy is not at all less than that confronted by traditional forms of autocracy. The story told in *The Ceremony* is simply an explanation of this principle.

The story told in *The Ceremony* has not yet happened today mainly because techno-scientific autocracy is the next phase after the digital age. At present, we are at the beginning of this epochal shift, the changing characteristics of which are becoming increasingly visible. According to my logic, the age of techno-scientific autocracy will internally collapse similar to the pattern described in *The Ceremony*, and in most cases, it will happen unexpectedly and abruptly. After it collapses, the characteristics of autocracy will probably remain the same. As I described in *The Ceremony*, even if people wave the banner of democratisation, new authorities will continue the tradition of the few governing many. The street names can be changed without ever stepping foot off the path of autocracy. Traditional democracies lack the essential factor of science and technology—universal suffrage, multi-party democracy, and freedom of speech, etc.—do not have the ability to handle techno-scientific autocracy, and in fact, are extremely susceptible to being manipulated by it. The way out of this situation is to replace techno-scientific autocracy with techno-scientific democracy.



Another possibility of collapse is the fragmentation of power into multiple groups mutually at war with each other. This situation usually follows the emergence of mobs of people, social upheaval, and a succession of uncontrollable catastrophes as everything slides into collapse. I did not describe this kind of prospect in *The Ceremony* because I already outlined it in *Yellow Peril*. Looking ahead to what will happen after *The Ceremony*, to this day, I still think that *Yellow Peril* is the most likely scenario.

ZJ: Since its publication in 1991 until today, *Yellow Peril* has influenced many people to imagine China's future. This book depicts the future of the world flooded by Chinese refugees due to World War III, which was triggered by China's civil war. Ai Weiwei has referred to himself as a 'refugee' (*nanmin*), and many other independent thinkers in and outside of China are conscious of their state as refugees. During World War II, Hannah Arendt along with a group of intellectuals from Europe became refugees during their exile in America. In the context of today's global refugee crisis, does current global refugee flow make you re-imagine or add anything to your ideas in *Yellow Peril*?

WL: It has been 27 years since *Yellow Peril* was published and China has moved seemingly in the opposite direction of the vision described in the book. Not only has China not collapsed but it has emerged as a great power. But 27 years in the long river of history is only a glimmer on the water—a minor undulation or ripple that could pass by without being noticed. To this day, the root causes of the crisis described in *Yellow Peril* still exist and are even graver now than they were when I wrote it. In this age of prosperity, I often sense that the disaster in *Yellow Peril* is not far away, but cannot say for sure exactly when it will thunderously descend into reality. I previously wrote an essay called 'A Discussion on *Yellow Peril* Ten Years Later' and the following passage is still what I believe today:

*In China today ... the only power that can hold together China as a whole is political power. In these circumstances, the unprecedented stability of Chinese society is not at all strange, because apart from political power nothing exists anymore which is strong enough to make society cohesive and guide the people ... to visualise this situation, imagine political power as a bucket containing over 1.3 billion people represented by scattered sand [translator's note: the analogy of the people to 'scattered sand' was first used by Sun Yat-sen emphasising the need for political and national cohesion]. Within the scattered sand, there are lively and disorderly activities of different groups. But because of a loss of faith, the bucket has become brittle and is less effective at containing—what used to be iron in the Mao era is now made out of glass. But even if the bucket is glass, no matter what happens,*

*the scattered sand inside will never challenge it. This is the reason why people outside of China perceive it as a place of stability and prosperity.*

*But this stability should not be celebrated as a good omen but is more accurately understood as containing enormous danger. The danger, of course, is what if the vibrations from a single accident cause the glass to break? The only thing holding China together would be gone and society would spin out of control—at that time, what would become of China, what could anyone do? All of the crises will erupt together, and the scattered sand will fly upward and fill the entire sky, without any way to put it back in order . . . China will free fall and shatter into pieces and shards, and even those fragments will disintegrate into powder. It is very likely that this disaster would be destructive. In human history, many large civilizations have perished and there is no reason why we should blindly believe that the Chinese people will never become extinct.*

ZJ: I also noticed that there are two main female characters in *The Ceremony*: a prostitute from the countryside named Lü Mei and a high-class intellectual named Yi Hao. These two female characters mainly appear as a passive sexual objects. Lü Mei is the sexual bribe given to Li Bo, a National Security Council Technology official. This 'gift' is supposed to help the politically unfeeling 'technology male' (*jishu nan*) recover his physiological sexual ability and self-confidence, and at the same time indicates that Li Bo came from a rural background, and is still sentimentally attached to his rural origins. When Li Bo encounters difficulties and flees, the simple and guileless Lü Mei spares no effort to help him and bring food to his cave hide-out. The book also simply mentions how Lü Mei was subject to domestic abuse from her brother and husband, and in the same village was brutally tied up and gang raped by a father and his six sons who seized the power of controlling the village through violence.

As an expert at the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on the one hand, Yi Hao is manipulated through a 'dream creator' (*mengzao yi*)—a machine that creates rays which generate sexual excitement—by undercover National Security officer Liu Gang. On the other hand, it is when she is entirely unconscious of what she is doing as a result of the machine-induced state that she helps her husband Li Bo overcome his inferiority complex. Again, for Li Bo, successful intercourse gives him vital energy and helps him recover his self-confidence. From Li Bo's perspective, this sexual encounter overcomes the estrangement between him and his wife and is the beginning of a beautiful future life together. It could even be said that Yi Hao's role in the novel is to depict Li Bo's 'humanity' (*renxing*): because of her, we see Li Bo's sense of responsibility and love for his family; his sexual energy and capability make him become a 'human' and not simply a numb technological machine. In your conceptualisation, do the images of a 'sexual abuse' and 'manipulated' women who are unable to act independently serve as metaphors for the actual situation of Chinese women today? Do women have a way out?

WL: All of the women in my parent's family and in my family have their own careers and incomes, and at the same time are cherished and doted on by the men. For this reason, I did not

intend for the characters of the ‘sexually abused’ and ‘controlled’ to become metaphors of Chinese women’s actual situation. The situation naturally arose following the logical development of the story, and was not the result of a prior understanding of the realities of Chinese women. Today, even though women may be pampered by men, it is often in exchange for using their sexual appeal to satisfy male desire. This reflects women’s subordinate status and loss of self-esteem.

In regards to women having a path forward, I describe my vision of an ideal state (*lixiangguo*) in an unfinished work called ‘There is a Utopia’ [*you tuobang*; translator’s note: Wang Lixiong is playing on the Chinese word for utopia *wutuobang* in which the first character *wu* is a homonym for ‘without’; in this title Wang switches the *wu* with *you* meaning ‘to have’ or ‘there is’]. In this piece, I imagine a society in which women and children are provided for; housing is provided; and women are the core of the family. I think that if we were able to take this step, it would resolve the social problems that women face today.

ZJ: As a female reader, I think that your novel does not offer enough space to allow your readers to understand the stories of these two female characters. To put it differently, these are not stories told by the women about themselves; instead, these two women appear only as psychological projections in the stories of other men. For example, in the novel, after Li Bo has sex with his unconscious wife and scribbles down a brief note before he leaves saying ‘secret mission’, we have no idea what Yi Hao is thinking—is it a rape? What does she think about the fact that her husband had sex with her while she was unconscious, especially considering that they have not had sex for such a long time, and the sex happened when she was trapped in a stupor as a result of the Dream Creator manipulated by the national security agent Liu Gang? You do not write about it from her perspective. Yi Hao’s life is primarily elaborated through Li Bo’s perspective. How do you think about and understand women—mainly as spiritual resources? Do you think this discrepancy between author and reader is due to a generation gap?

WL: I am not a ‘pure’ writer—I often write novels only to express an idea and use literature as a means of attracting readers. The truth that concerns me is mainly the political aspect of life, I am not willing to part with too much ink to explore human nature. One of the weaknesses in my writing is that I am not good at portraying women. All of my previous writing is like that—*Ceremony* is not an exception. To a certain extent, I am limited by my own gender. I have never had the experience of being a woman, and do not dare to put myself in a woman’s shoes and try to write from a female perspective. You are entirely correct—like you said, I write women from the perspective of a man, and do not really give them an independent character. To overcome this would require a conscious practice—perhaps if I ever decide to fully immerse myself in literary creation, I will have to take a class in this.

ZJ: I notice that in the first two chapters of the book, there are lots of descriptions of sex. One of the threads in the book is Li Bo's sexual impotence and the recovery of his sexual self-confidence by having two different encounters and types of sex. The most crucial factor in building Li Bo's ego-identity is the power of sex. Although he is an indispensable IT functionary in an autocratic regime, he is also a component of the autocratic machinery that must follow the prescribed rules. Li Bo's only activity with any hint of autonomy is related to his sexual ability, self-confidence, and arousal. China is considered to be a sexually active country but also one that never achieved sexual liberation. Are you able to systemically introduce to the readers the ways in which you understand sex?

WL: In all societies, sex is an important part of human life. Especially in the hormonal phase of exuberant drives, sex can influence and even determine the rest of one's fate. The protagonist Li Bo's fate reflects the influence of this aspect. However, in the novel, I do not describe sex for the sake of describing sex, but as a necessary plot device, and as it is representative of the dream engineering in the 'dream creator'. Liu Gang's possession of the 'dream creator' represents his power to control other people through sex. Li Bo resists by taking the power to fabricate dreams back into his own hands.

ZJ: One last question that is not related to your novel, but that is closely related to your long-term thinking on China's way forward. On 13 July 2017, Liu Xiaobo passed away. So many people were stunned. Can you describe a bit about your relationship with Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia? How do you understand the circumstances leading up to and after Liu Xiaobo's death? What do you think is Liu Xiaobo's spiritual wealth and political legacy? What kind of influence will Xiaobo's death have on social movements and dissident movements in China?

WL: For many years, I lived in a neighbourhood adjacent to where Liu Xiaobo and his wife lived. We were intimate friends, and our families would frequently visit each other. Here, I am only talking about my understanding of Liu Xiaobo's request to leave the country before his death—I think it was to obtain freedom for Liu Xia and her younger brother. He stood fast in China his entire life and repeatedly declined opportunities to move abroad. When I suggested to him that he should emigrate, for the reason of providing Liu Xia with a free and safe life, he would not consider it, and probably thought he was better able to protect her. He was determined to sacrifice his life in prison for his cause, but in his last moments he asked to leave the country—in my understanding, this was a sacrifice for love, he used the last of his life to plan for his wife's future.

As an outsider who was not involved in Liu Xiaobo's negotiation with the authorities for his wife's freedom, I could see that China's authorities would not honour his sacrifice and accept his request, but instead, would make his entire life's

commitment to standing fast in China lose its final moment of 'completeness' (*wanzhengxing*). But I still commend this decision, because it is precisely this incompleteness that expresses his love for his wife. People around the world might not be able to understand what a huge sacrifice this was for him, but so long as it was able to allow his long suffering wife to have one final feeling of love, its significance absolutely exceeds whatever importance people might invest in the concept of 'completeness'. ■



# WINDOW ON ASIA

—  
Cambodia  
South Korea





"Ombrello Viola", Riccardo Pesaresi @flickr.com



## 'Hun Sen Won't Die, Workers Will Die'

The Geopolitics of Labour in the Cambodian Crackdown

Sabina Lawreniuk

*Over the past year, the Cambodian government has engaged in a full-frontal assault on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. The latest development has seen Cambodia effectively becoming a one-party state, after the ruling party swept all 125 seats on offer in the National Assembly at the polls held in July 2018. This essay examines the ways in which both labour politics and China have played a role in these changes.*

In September 2018, the European Parliament tabled a high-stakes debate on the aggravated human rights situation in Cambodia. Under threat was the continued inclusion of Cambodia in the EU's Everything But Arms (EBA) trade scheme. The EBA agreement—introduced by the EU in 2010 to promote economic growth in the world's Least Developed Countries—grants Cambodia and 48 other beneficiary states tariff-free imports to the EU market, as the name suggests, on every product except arms and armaments. Yet this access comes with one, albeit significant, catch:

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen.  
PC: Wikimedia Commons

a clause in the agreement binds beneficiaries to recognise and uphold fundamental human and labour rights conventions.

It is not hard to parse where the Cambodian government has fallen foul of this requirement over the last 12 months. Rather, it is more difficult to accurately convey the intensity of the government's full-frontal assault on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly; a nuclear response to electoral decline in the 2017 local elections and the subsequent fear of losing power in national elections in 2018. Encompassing the closure of newspapers and radio stations, dispersal of protests, and increased surveillance of civil society in public records and online, the so-called 'crackdown' peaked with the imprisonment of the main opposition party leader, Kem Sokha, before the ultimate dissolution of the opposition party itself at the behest of Cambodia's injudiciously partial Supreme Court. Without a credible opponent on ballots, the government swept to victory at the recent national polls held in July; its 77 percent share of the vote delivering an unprecedented clean sweep of all 125 seats on offer in the National Assembly.

## Nothing New under the Sky

'Descent into outright dictatorship', screamed the *Cambodia Daily's* headline on the morning of 4 September 2017 when news broke of Sokha's arrest. The sentiment, if not strictly hyperbolic, was somewhat disingenuous. Cambodia's democratic credentials have not been recently shed. Instead, they have been long stretched by a government brought to power in a bloody 1997 coup and a leader who self-identifies as the 'strongman of strongmen'—the sixth-longest serving non-royal head of state in the world. For many years, however, Cambodia's rulers have had to take care to mask the autocratic tendencies of their tenure; the nation's economic dependency on aid and then preferential trade, like the EBA, rendering

the government beholden to maintain at least a façade of liberal progress to satiate the 'good governance' strings that come attached.

There is little chance that the EU's watchdogs have, until now, simply missed the evidence of a deeper malaise. The red flags signalling a democratic deficit have always been prominent: from the long-standing harassment, detention, and assassination of peaceful human rights defenders like Chea Vichea, Chut Wutty, and Tep Vanny, to ratcheting up efforts to deter civil society organisation through dubious, hostile legislation. More likely, the trade-offs between popular power and stability have been weighed by the EU and accepted, where these have tipped in its favour—in this case, shoring up a regional ally and trading partner, as well as delivering rapid rates of economic growth that have won Cambodia middle-income status, thus serving up a ready exemplar of neoliberal development logic.

Here, the electoral cycle has been the historic rhythm to which the waxing and waning of Cambodia's democratic aspirations and aspersions have been pegged. The government's control has tended to tighten during election season, only to cede once results have been returned. In this way, the leadership has managed to tread a path between its benefactors' demands for liberal development and its own concern for the continued restitution of its command. Indeed, with the 2018 election now out of the way, there have already been signs of a return to Cambodia's own brand of normalcy. Sokha and other political prisoners like Tep Vanny have been released, if under unusual license: Vanny, having had her original conviction overturned by royal pardon, has been handed down a new suspended sentence for earlier charges; Sokha remains under house arrest, confined to the few streets around his home in the capital.

However, for many commentators these reversals signal the onset of a customary softening of the government's stance in the post-election setting. Significantly, among their number appears to be the EU, whose response has been a mirroring of this relaxation



of attitude. At the time of writing, the threat of withdrawal of the EBA looks to have been rescinded. In its final resolution, passed on 13 September, the EU Parliament watered down its strongly worded rebuke of the Cambodian government's actions. While reiterating calls for the immediate and full release of Kem Sokha and reinstatement of his party, strongly-worded sentiment denouncing 'sham elections' and an 'illegitimate government' that appeared in an early draft motion was diluted to 'concerns over conduct' and 'credible process' in the accepted edit; the proposition of a broad response, like suspension of the EBA, became targeted sanctions aimed at individuals responsible for the most serious abuses of rights.

*Plus ça change*, then, has been the response in some circles, as the always uneven, sometimes uneasy, yet timeworn truce between the two sides, Cambodia and the EU, appears to have been reinstated. Nevertheless, there are indications beneath the banality of surface impressions that the balance of power has significantly shifted. For one thing, from the Cambodian side this return to normalcy has been accepted with nothing akin to the good grace of old. Instead, the Cambodian government's inclination to regard its admonition with hostility rather than humility has been markedly evident. 'Hun Sen won't die, workers will die,' the Prime Minister himself has warned icily whenever the menace of sanctions like the revocation of EBA looms. A government statement decried the September resolution as 'biased', 'reckless', and 'insensitive'.

## Wooing the Workers

There is a fundamental truth to Hun Sen's words. His party's focus on garment workers throughout the recent electoral campaign is, perhaps, a sign of the government steeling itself for impact. Indeed, the garment sector, whose rapid expansion over the past two decades has been the ballast of Cambodia's

booming economy, is heavily reliant on the EU market, with almost 50 percent of Cambodia's exports of clothing and footwear heading there in 2017 (ILO 2018). The loss of the EBA would represent a significant threat to the viability of the sector where for buyers, as manufacturers know, the bottom line is always the bottom line. The imposition of tariffs would cost the sector somewhere in the region of 700 million USD, risking the flight of investors and thus placing the 800,000 jobs in the industry in jeopardy.

The government's concerted overtures to garment workers since last summer—increased wages, improved social security benefits, and personal audiences with the Prime Minister—are, in part, a response to this threat: an effort to forge new alliances between the ruling party and a group which, though sizeable, it has typically ignored in its electioneering—concentrating instead on its traditional bedrock of support in rural areas. Yet this favourable attention also serves as early insurance against any potential fallout from the EU's actions. Indeed, while making these efforts to win esteem among garment workers, the Cambodian government has also pushed a pre-emptive narrative that links any punitive reprisals from the EU to the backstage meddling of exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy, now based in Paris. The latest statement on the EU's September resolution, for example, acerbically references 'a notorious opposition figure' in its opening paragraph, and goes on to frame Rainsy as having an active role in the EU's process, claiming that 'this resolution was finalized with his assent' (Mission of the Kingdom of Cambodia to the European Union 2018).

The promotion of this narrative is also aimed at decoupling the traditional links between Sokha and Rainsy's party—the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)—and workers, who have been a strong base of support for the opposition. The political crisis that broke in 2013, though it had the opposition leadership as its figurehead, was fuelled by the rising discontent of workers, when a general strike called in the wake of a disputed election brought not tens, but hundreds of thousands of people

on to the streets and the government almost to its knees. Alongside its softer appeals for the favour of workers, it is this kind of uprising that the government has sought to prevent through a concomitant punitive regime targeting the trade union movement. A new, draconian trade union law passed in 2016 has all but paralysed many once vibrant organisations. A mix of half-baked clauses and unachievable conditions, characteristic of Cambodia's preference for rule by, rather than of law, have made it hard if not impossible for many local branches to fulfil the criteria to formally re-register with the Ministry of Labour, as required. Instead, their operations are left in a precarious grey area of the law. Many leaders are now too frightened of the threat of carceral penalties to join their members on the picket line.

Yet the government patronises and dangerously underestimates workers if it believes that this unrest is whipped up only by the actions of trade union bosses and opposition leaders, and that by dispensing with the latter the concerns of the former will simply go away. Two decades of stagnating and declining wages are intuitively sensed by workers in their stalled livelihoods and waylaid aspirations of improved living conditions and life chances. Banning protest and curtailing unions addresses the symptoms but not the cause of Cambodia's recent wave of disquiet, which underneath this rough dressing of calm is otherwise left to fester.

## Warming Up to China

It is the increasing inability of the Cambodian government to manage the rising discontent of workers within the strictures of its donor-directed liberal façade that underlies, at least in part, Cambodia's significant geopolitical manoeuvres of recent years. Worker consent, happiness, and democratic acquiesce to the current regime's rule has proved incompatible with its ruthlessly exploitative brand of neoliberal crony capitalism, where the

continued impoverishment of those at the bottom is driving the massed wealth of a few at the top. The killing of five striking workers by military police during the 2013 unrest shows just how thin this veneer of liberal propriety has been stretched.

Accordingly, the Cambodian government has warmed of late to China's advances in the region, a key node in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. China's financing and loans come with their own strings attached, accused by some of being 'debt trap diplomacy'—the perils of which countries like Sri Lanka have become all too aware of in recent months (Abi-Habib 2018). Yet, despite the risks, China does provide a ready supply of funds with a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to internal affairs. The allure of this interested apathy has proved hard to resist among Cambodia's leaders, looking to leverage against EU dictates. Today, 70 percent of Cambodia's 4.3 USD billion in bilateral debt is owed to China, whose share eclipses even that of multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Since 2013, China has also been Cambodia's largest foreign direct investor, ploughing in an average of 1 billion USD annually, surpassing Cambodia itself in 2016 as the leading source of investment capital in the country.

It is the weight of this new backing, beyond previous Western dependencies, that has allowed the Cambodian government to be so bullish of late in its home and foreign policy response, without fearing the consequences of highlighting the EU's shallow and often hypocritical stance. The EU's wavering resolve in tackling the crisis in Cambodia likely stems, too, from its worries about strengthening the bond between Cambodia and China, which would weaken its own influence further. Alas, as Hun Sen astutely notes, Cambodia's new win-win is likely lose-lose for workers in any eventuality. Their livelihoods are at stake whether the EU intervenes or abandons them to global industry's race to the bottom. ■



## Online Activism and South Korea's Candlelight Movement

Hyejin Kim

*The Candlelight Movement of 2016 and 2017 that successfully called for president Park Geun-hye to step down is among the largest social movements in South Korean history. This movement attracted millions of participants over a sustained period of time, while maintaining strikingly peaceful demonstrations that ultimately achieved their goal. This essay looks at the role of the Internet and new media in fostering a new generation of activists and laying the foundation for a successful social mobilisation.*

Candlelight rally in Seoul, June 2008.  
PC: Michael-kay Park  
@flickr.com.

South Korea has a storied history of mass agitation for political causes. The Candlelight Movement of 2016–2017, which called for president Park Geun-hye to step down, is among the largest—if not the largest—street demonstration in that history. Set against any of several measuring sticks, it was a remarkable success. It attracted millions of participants over a sustained period of time. The events were strikingly peaceful—strangers smashed up against each other and encountered police, but participants prevented violence and there was not a single fatality. And, of course, the National Assembly eventually impeached



the president, who was later dismissed, tried in criminal court, and eventually sentenced to a lengthy prison term.

Globally, examples like South Korea's are rare in the present moment. At a time when 'populist' forces appear adept at mobilising discontent, and when political interests are capable of using the Internet to distort public discussion, there may be something to learn from South Korea. In fact, while the Candlelight Movement was a response to revelations that Park had been discharging her duties irresponsibly and allowing a personal associate to share inappropriately in her public power, its success hinged on more than the egregiousness of the wrongdoing.

## Cold War Legacies

Demonstrations have long been a regular feature of life in Seoul. Aggrieved groups take quickly to the streets. While demonstrations indicate a liberal environment in which people are free to organise and express themselves, most have not ignited public support in the way the Candlelight Movement did. Divisions among activists have also plagued these events. The largest movements have seen divisions emerge between the unaffiliated individuals who initiated the action via online platforms and the established civil society groups.

Consider an episode from 2002, an especially significant year for mass political expression in South Korea, with a presidential election and fervent celebration of the nation around the hosting of the football World Cup. That year, individuals communicating over the Internet organised a candlelight vigil to commemorate two schoolgirls who had been killed in an incident involving American soldiers. As the peaceful movement progressed, some 130 civil society organisations joined in and raised other issues. Many of these groups chanted anti-American slogans, which expressed the frustration of many at Bush-era policies, but also alienated others who had been raised in a

context where such views were taboo. Surveys show that individual participation declined when these organisations entered the fray (Kim 2008, 30).

Another set of candlelight vigils took place in 2008, this time in response to perceptions that the government was careless in relaxing restrictions on the import of American beef. These demonstrations also caused tension between online activists and established civil society groups. The movement was initiated by young people who organised themselves online (Kang 2017). The youth organisers had requested participating groups not to display banners at rallies, so that the protests would stay focussed on the particular issues at stake. However, civil society groups ignored these requests, and some even displayed a very militant attitude. In one instance, members carried steel pipes to protect themselves in the event of a police encounter, or perhaps to warn off the police. These civil society groups deliberately adopted the styles of authoritarian-era anti-government activists. Participants who came prepared for confrontation contributed, in combination with the police response, to the outbreak of scuffles.

Images of militant-looking participants and of physical confrontations made it all too easy for the media to depict the 2008 candlelight protesters as disloyal activists. The figure of the violent, treasonous protester was a trope of Cold War politics in South Korea. The victims of military violence at Gwangju in 1980 were depicted in this way. The authoritarian regime had made a habit of hiring young men to initiate violence at opposition rallies, in order to perpetuate the view of critics as unpatriotic troublemakers. In 2008, these themes emerged again. Police confrontations at the demonstrations led to a downturn in the participation of individual citizens (Kim 2008, 24). In the end, despite the fact that these demonstrations were organised by a new generation of online activists employing a completely different approach to their

predecessors, conservative media portrayed participants in the 2008 candlelight vigils as communist sympathisers (Shin 2016).

The foundation of the divisions among activists lies in the Cold War legacies that continue to shape South Korea's civil society. While younger activists tend to form new, often issue-specific communities through the Internet, former activists of the 1970s and 1980s remain influential in organised civil society. The latter tend to use dramatic words like 'struggle' (*tujaeng*) to describe their activities and to use songs associated with the anti-dictatorship movement, as if they were still fighting against an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, in the early 2000s, conservatives revived McCarthyist language to discredit progressives, claiming they are pro-Pyongyang and seek to undermine the Republic of Korea. These depictions and the approach of some civil society groups could be off-putting to many middle-class Koreans who had assimilated anti-communist sentiments through political socialisation, even if they took positions favourable to redistributive policies. These political formations have driven a wedge between online-based activists focussed on particular causes and the realm of organised civil society.

## Podcasts and Spoons

In the Candlelight Movement of 2016–17, however, these two groups managed to cooperate. Demands were formulated in a way that did not appear radical, which made the cause appealing to middle-class Koreans. Two new developments behind this achievement deserve attention.

First, critical discussion of politics had moved to online platforms over the previous decade. Under the Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–17) administrations, South Korea experienced a number of setbacks in terms of political liberties. Many journalists and reporters who tackled issues that were

sensitive to these presidents had to leave their positions or were demoted. These journalists and producers chose online outlets as spaces for continuing their work. In places where the government exerts strict controls on the media, the Internet can be an important tool for people to disclose injustice, as research on China has shown (Svensson 2016). In the South Korean context, this turn to online platforms did little to diminish the standing and credibility of these new media organisations. The Internet is where most people in South Korea go to get their news. According to the Reuters Journalism Research Centre at Oxford University, 77 percent of Korean news readers access media content through an Internet portal website, compared to an average in other countries closer to 30 percent (Newman et al 2017, 126).

As critical journalists left for online media, citizens followed. This led to a radical transformation of the media landscape in South Korea, with the emergence not only of new outlets but also of new formats. For instance, political podcasts have now become a form of online media that has grown in prominence over the past several years. Online media figures are extremely successful in pulling in listeners. Political programmes gain larger audiences than other traditional formats. The main platform, *Podbbang*, hosts 10,000 audio podcasts alone. Of their top 10 podcasts, seven address politics.

Second, online modes of political engagement were not only critical, but also entertaining. The most prominent podcasts are humorous and fun to tune into. Online platforms have produced entertaining ways of talking about politics. One example is a discourse around 'spoon theory' (*sujeoron*) (Kim 2017), which describes people born with or without privileges, respectively, as 'gold spoon' and 'dirt spoon'. Collectively, these were the most searched terms of 2015 on South Korean online portals (Choe 2015). Actors and singers whose parents were also celebrities were among the first to be labelled 'gold spoons'—they were criticised for making their way through their



Former South Korean president Park Geun-hye.  
PC: Wikimedia Commons

parents' connections rather than through talent or hard work. Netizens then continued to show their creativity and make up distinct grades of privilege, such as 'diamond spoon' or 'platinum spoon'.

The 'spoon' terminology was a way to engage with the serious issue of wealth inequality. Related memes were shared for fun but they were also a means for society to learn about inequality and express concern about the issue. Other jokey discourses operated in a similar way. By presenting serious political themes in an entertaining light, the new modes of communication drew in audiences and gave these discussions a contemporary feel. In podcasts, the approach was to be overtly irreverent but at the same time hosts brought in experts and ensured that the conversation maintained substance. The style of the discussions resonates with a global Internet culture in which nothing is sacred and anything can be lampooned. Unlike previous instances

of social mobilisation, spreading jokes about 'spoons' or watching someone laugh and curse the president simply does not fit with the images expected of 'pro-North Korean' forces. This style is far removed from what could be identified by conservatives as a radical—and therefore illegitimate—movement.

## Rediscovering the Internet as a Progressive Force

By autumn 2016, when the Park scandal broke, many Koreans were already adept at thinking critically about the president—especially about inherited privilege, which Park, as the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee, represented. Ordinary Koreans were prepared to take to the streets against the sort of injustice that the scandal exposed.

These factors helped lay the groundwork for a movement that could overcome the Cold War categories that had undermined previous social mobilisations in South Korea. Now, more than a year after a new government was formed, public debates have moved in a progressive direction. The Justice Party, a labour party, became the second largest party in the National Assembly and has punched above its weight in setting policy discussions. Progressive issues such as the length of the working week, work-life balance, and women's status top both the political agenda and public debate. The ruling party finds itself under pressure from the Justice Party to take a progressive policy line.

There is hope to be found in the South Korean story. Mass political engagement can come in forms other than 'populist' support for anti-immigrant or racist causes. And, the Internet can also be a force for genuine political expression rather than a medium for distortion and manipulation. These points should be welcome in today's global political landscape. ■

锤子镰刀

THE HAMMER  
AND SICKLE  
ARE SLEEPING

编剧 导演 Screenplay  
耿军 Geng Jun  
制片人 Producers:  
王学博 郭冬 许飞雷  
Sean Wang Guo  
演员 Actors:  
徐刚 张志勇 薛宝鹤  
Xu Gang Zhang

with  
Cultural Co. Ltd.  
Culture Communication Co. Ltd.

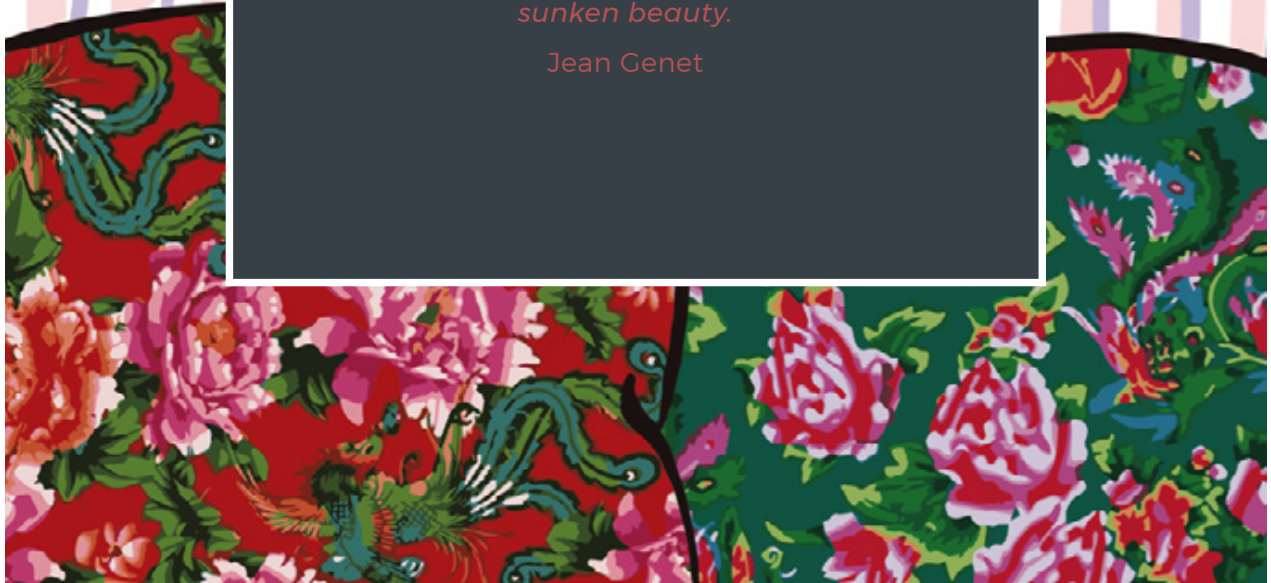
WORK OF ARTS

# Communist Hibernation

Christian Sorace

*I recognise in thieves, traitors, and  
murderers, in the ruthless and  
the cunning, a deep beauty—a  
sunken beauty.*

Jean Genet





Still from *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* (2013)

**G**eng Jun's films are set in north-eastern China where he grew up. As Geng Jun put it in an interview I conducted with him at a friend's studio in Songzhuang this past August:

When people watch my films, maybe they will see different actors and actresses and characters, but the main character in my films is the setting (*changjing*). I write my stories for the setting, which is the foundation of my expression.

The landscape of China's north-east—also known as its rustbelt region—is inseparable from its political economy. During the Mao era, the north-east was the heartland of heavy industry (in particular, steel and machinery), natural resource extraction (oil and coal), and collective agriculture (corn, sorghum, and wheat). Its workers and farmers stood proudly at China's symbolic vanguard. However, these same political economic factors that made it attractive under the socialist planned economy rendered it vulnerable to privatisation and liberalisation during the reform era. For state-owned enterprises (SOEs) located in the north-east, layoffs began as early as the 1980s, but dramatically intensified after the Fifteenth Party Congress in 1997 during which 'it was decided that SOEs were to evolve into profitable firms and that a chief means to achieve this goal would be the laying off of

workers to cut costs' (Hurst 2009, 49). It is estimated that between 1997 and 2004 over 35 million workers were laid off throughout China (Hurst 2009, 35). This wave of layoffs had catastrophic effects on labour relations and the lives of workers in the northeast. As Ching Kwan Lee wrote at the time: 'Many aggrieved workers find themselves going back and forth between passivity, depression, and even self-destruction, on the one hand, and outbursts of rage, desperation, and heroic acts of collective defiance, on the other' (2007, 69–70).

In the early years of reform, natural resource extraction was profitable but at the steep cost of environmental destruction, which undermined its economic sustainability. Geng Jun recalls the early 1980s as a 'golden age of state planning' in which everyone wanted to go into mining because of the relatively high salaries and perks, such as 'salted duck eggs, cured meat, and bread'. But by the 1990s, 'some mines and oil fields became increasingly desperate as they began to exhaust their deposits of mineral resources, even as prices and markets for the commodities they produced were booming' (Hurst 2009, 44–45). In our conversation, Geng Jun describes the



privatisation of natural resources as a process of theft and redistribution of wealth into the hands of people with political connections. In his words: ‘After people destroyed Dongbei’s [note: ‘Dongbei’ is the Chinese word for north-east] resources, and made their money, they left the area and took the money with them, most likely buying real estate in places like Beijing and Hainan.’ Then he quickly adds that this is a familiar story and pattern throughout China.

In terms of agricultural production, the north-east was once regarded as the ‘bread basket’ of the People’s Republic because of bountiful harvests of staple crops produced at economies of scale (it was for this reason that it was also coveted by the defeated Japanese imperialists). The region also boasted among the earliest and most successful models of collectivisation in the late 1950s. Even in the 1980s, the north-east was one of the only regions in China in which there was *resistance* to de-collectivisation. As the ‘urban form’ began to envelope agricultural land (Sorace and Hurst 2016), the region’s farmers also slowly lost their lands and livelihoods. The empty field is also a metaphorical condition of life—in Geng Jun’s film *Free and Easy* (*qingsong yukuai*, 2017), the characters frequently refer to their lives as ‘*huangfei*’, meaning fields that are no longer cultivated.

Geng Jun’s movies take place in Heilongjiang province after two decades of continuous layoffs, disinvestment, and disrepair. With long panoramic and tracking shots of dilapidated buildings and abandoned fields, Geng Jun’s camera reveals a landscape in which time has stopped—frozen between the *no longer* and the *not yet*. In his discussion of Béla Tarr’s films—another director from a socialist background—Jacques Rancière describes a similar phenomenon of ‘the loss of revolutionary temporality and its future-orientation in which the present is a duration of abeyance and anticipation of the life-to-come’ (2013). Recent attempts to revitalise the north-east do not include—and perhaps do not even recognise—

these people who Geng Jun describes as ‘being abandoned by the age’ (*bei shidai shuai diao*) and left with ‘nothing to do’ (*wushi kezuo*).

But Geng Jun does not offer sociological portraits of China’s downtrodden. Instead, he films dark comedies that resemble what a Samuel Beckett play would be if it were staged in China’s north-east. Almost all of Geng Jun’s characters are con artists and criminals with the twist that they are hilariously inept at crime. The cast of characters from his two recent films *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* (*chuizi liandao dou xiuxi*, 2013) and *Free and Easy* include: a travelling soap salesman whose soap incapacitates anyone who smells it; a holy fool with a speech impediment and stuffy nose; a fake monk beggar; a pair of delinquent cops; a cripple; a man dressed as an elderly woman who sings revolutionary songs for money; a hapless forestry official; and laid-off workers who occasionally wander into the scene as targets of the various ongoing hustles. They are anything but the stereotype of cold-blooded criminals; in fact, there is something lovable about their mannerisms, and the sheer futility of their schemes. Besides, as Geng Jun put it, they have nothing else to do.

## Falling Asleep

The title of Geng Jun’s recent short film *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* conjures an image of a future that has gone away and is not coming back—at least not in any recognisable way. The once exalted emblems of proletarian unity—the hammer and sickle—are no longer put to work in constructing the future, but have become mute objects strewn amid empty factories and barren fields. Geng Jun explains his thinking behind the title in these terms: ‘After farmers lose their land and workers lose their jobs, their tools become idle (*gongju jiu xianzhi le*). The hammer and sickle are sleeping. But at the same time, they can become weapons of self-protection (*fangshen wuqi*) or murder weapons (*xiongqi*).’ Tools are no longer



used for harvesting grain and forging metal, but are brandished as instruments of survival. A new twist to the Marxist stages of historical development: after farmer and worker comes the con artist and criminal. The title of the film, however, also refers to a sabbatical from violence. As Lunar New Year approaches, one of the main characters decides to take a holiday from crime, and writes in his diary on the wall of his apartment, ‘the hammer and sickle are sleeping’. It is perhaps in the decision *not to act* that promises a utopia of pure potentiality.

But we are also disarmed and vulnerable when we are asleep. In *Free and Easy*, a travelling salesman asks strangers to smell the soap that he is selling—one deep breath and they fall unconscious.

The soap does not merely incapacitate but also induces pleasurable reveries. When the police show up to question three victims, one of the workers (played by Geng Jun himself)

describes feeling ‘...like I was having a dream. It was hot, and I was thirsty. All the women on the street were wearing beautiful dresses. I was somewhere warm.’ Impatient to solve the case, the police officer cuts short the worker’s narration of his dream. Later in the film, the same officer tries a bar of confiscated soap on himself and passes out. When his partner asks: ‘What was it like?’, the half-conscious, beatific police officer responds, ‘Free and easy.’

The magical soap is more than a mere plot device; it is also an ambiguous commentary on social life. From a tradition of critical theory, it is possible to interpret the soap as people’s willingness to be duped and distracted from their own exploitation—the trope of going through life asleep. After all, *the people are being robbed*. But it also possible to understand the soap as providing a momentary respite from a world with nothing to offer.



## Fragile Solidarity

In a land of cutthroat capitalist competition and survival, Geng Jun’s characters are surprisingly tender and empathetic to the needs of others, even the people that they are robbing.

A travelling salesman asks strangers to smell the soap that he is selling—one deep breath and they fall unconscious. Still from *Free and Easy* (2017).

When the thief in *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* holds up a man on his way home carrying fireworks, oranges, and a toy gun as a Lunar New Year gift for his son, he asks the worker about his present economic state. The



A moment of tenderness between thieves. Still from *Free and Easy* (2017).

man responds that his boss at the mine has not paid him for months. The robber hands back the toy gun to the man to give to his son, but keeps the oranges and fireworks. Later in the film, the robber breaks into a house and as he is leaving discovers a crippled man feigning to be asleep under the blankets (who also happens to be another swindler). As he is about to depart with the stolen money, the crippled man's nephew, who is a devout Christian, comes home and invites the robber to stay for dinner. When the nephew sings a hymn to God during dinner, *the robber attempts to return the money to the person he stole it from, who refuses the offer*. In this gesture of double-refusal, a friendship and future partnership is born. The same robber later encounters (unbeknown to him) the partner in crime of the crippled man who is standing on the side of the road dressed as an elderly woman. She tells him a predictable sob story: 'I am from out of town, I came to find my relatives, but they're gone. I've been here for days now, and I don't have any money left. Can you just give me a little cash to get home?' All he can offer her are two of the oranges he stole from the worker earlier in the film. As he walks home, she performs for him by singing 'Little Bamboo Raft' (*xiaoxiao zhupai jiang zhongyou*)—a song written in 1974 during the Cultural Revolution:

The red star shining  
Guiding me into battle  
The Revolution rising like a wave  
We will always follow the Party  
Breaking down the old world  
The new world stretches before us.

The red star is dim and no longer illuminates a path forward. The optimism for the future in the song lyrics is conspicuously out of place in the desolate landscapes of Geng Jun's movies. It also produces a rather comical effect. According to Geng Jun, this scene in particular has attracted the disapproval of the authorities:

They thought that it wasn't appropriate for someone to beg for money by singing a revolutionary song. When I screen the movie, sometimes representatives from the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) or Party members come and express their dissatisfaction.

On the surface, there is a comic juxtaposition of a beggar singing a revolutionary song—but at a deeper level, it raises the question: who are the heirs of the revolution? As the Communist Party stays in power through the twin mechanisms of stability maintenance and

capitalist exploitation, perhaps the genuine spirit of communism is incarnated in the homosocial tenderness among thieves and liars who have ‘nothing to do’ and no one to rely on but each other.

## Complicit Criminals

For Geng Jun, referring to his characters as ‘criminals’ is misleading because everyone is a criminal in Chinese society:

All of us are criminals and participants [in the system]. It is because we are too weak and did not stand in the way that our situation has become like this. My stories are only a surface layer, but in my heart, an even deeper layer is that I am also, in fact, a criminal.

In this quote, the definition of criminal is expanded from its traditional usage in the court/penal system to indict all of society. Like his characters, Chinese people are victims of their own criminal complicity in the system which oppresses them. The ability to get by depends on a willingness to give in. Each decision not to act is a counter-factual history of the absence of freedom:

Why is everything messed up? Why is there collusion among officials and business people? Why do we suffer hardship? It is because we never resisted or fought. Instead, we believe that we are weak. I have never thought that I film society’s lowest rung and weak groups. On the contrary, I think that I film the great majority of people ... I don’t know what people mean by the term ‘disadvantaged social groups’ (*ruoshi qunti*) [author’s note: *ruoshi qunti* is a sociological term in China referring to the economically and politically dispossessed].

It is a radical statement to say that there are no disadvantaged groups in China because everyone is complicit in the maintenance of the system. You are always someone’s criminal and another person’s victim. But Geng Jun’s comment also draws on a familiar legacy that locates sovereign power in the hands of the people. This idea is conveyed in Mencius’ famous statement: ‘The time is not as important as the terrain and the terrain is not as important as having unity with the people ... an unjust cause finds little support’ and well known Chinese phrases, such as ‘water can carry the boat or overturn it’ (*shui neng zai zhou, yi neng fu zhou*). In Mao’s account, as soon as the state separates from the masses, it becomes a ‘paper tiger’ (*zhilaohu*) that has become disconnected from the source of its power. Power is always ultimately in the hands of the people, even if they are unable to recognise it, let alone act on it.

Geng Jun finishes the interview on a pessimistic note: ‘Individuals can accomplish very little on their own; communities can accomplish a lot more. But when individuals are powerless and communities are also powerless, all that remains is desperation.’ But this may not be as bleak a prognosis as it seems. It is important to remember that *desperation* in Geng Jun’s films *does not take itself seriously*. His characters seem to have adapted to their absurd circumstances, and are seldom discouraged by their constant failures. The insouciance of the criminal is also an emancipation from the solemn rituals of the state. Perhaps they have stumbled upon a powerful antidote to a Party-state that is incapable of laughter, and regards itself with a *deadly seriousness*. ■



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## Crime and Punishment on a Chinese Border

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Suzanne Scoggins

*Zhao Liang's 2007 documentary Crime and Punishment details the emergence of a local police state in a small Chinese town on the border with North Korea. The film follows national border officers who have been called in to take over the town's policing duties, and the ways in which they interact with local people. As the film unfolds, one incident after another, viewers are drawn into a world of policing which is slow, tiresome, petty, and punctuated with violence.*

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Still from Zhao Liang's documentary *Crime and Punishment*, (DGenerate Films, 2007).

**Z**hao Liang's documentary *Crime and Punishment* (*zui yu fa*) provides a rare, candid window into the tedium of law enforcement in China. Filmed in a poor district of Dandong, a city along the Yalu River on China's border with North Korea, it follows a group of border officers charged with taking over law enforcement duties at the local police station. As the camera lingers long past the point of comfort on details such as the military-style folding of bed sheets or a scrap collector's pained face, the viewer is drawn into a world of policing where law enforcement is slow, tiresome, petty, and punctuated with violence.



*Crime and Punishment*, (DGenerate Films, 2007).

## Power and Powerlessness

In the film, the border police are initially praised for their service at a station in the impoverished Zhen'an district of Dandong, having set up regular patrols and assumed a variety of duties that typically fall on the shoulders of the local people's police. These officers are attached to the army, not the Ministry of Public Security, and their presence in a largely rural area such as this is relatively rare. Unfortunately, the film does not capture the more serious security concerns that we can only guess led to this arrangement. We are instead treated to a parade of petty criminal cases that showcase the desperation and powerlessness of the residents who come into contact with the border police.

From berating a mentally ill man for making a false call about a dead body that was actually a pile of blankets, to the busting up of a mahjong game, the motley crew of officers lumbers from one small case to the next. Viewers will likely feel sympathy for the plight of the three men who get caught trying to make money off illegally harvested trees in advance of the Chinese New Year or the deaf man detained for pickpocketing a cell phone. In both cases, the police exercise casual violence on camera—smacking the suspects around in order to elicit information and a much-prized confession. In China, a case is not solved until the perpetrator has confessed—a fact acknowledged by one of the officers on camera after his colleague hauls away a suspect to an undisclosed area where a confession will presumably be coerced. In rare cases, however, the need for a signed confession can work in a suspect's favour. The deaf cell phone thief is ultimately released for lack of evidence because the officers are unable to take his statement.

## Violence and Petty Harassment

Zhao weaves the theme of violence though many of the film's interactions, and rightly so, given the coercive duties that frontline agents like these are charged with performing on behalf of the state. Unsurprisingly, the more violent acts of interrogation are committed off camera. Since stations have long been required to film interrogations, removing suspects from the interrogation room, away from the cameras, in order to grease the wheels is a widespread practice, and in interviews, officers have acknowledged that they know just where to go and just where to hit in order to avoid proof that they used excessive force (Scoggins 2018). Naturally, most if not all officers are in on this game, and in one 'good cop, bad cop' scene we see the good cop grin to the camera as he tells the bad cop—who is taking the suspect away—to go easy on him.



Two cops beating a suspect's bruised face. Still from Zhao Liang's documentary *Crime and Punishment*.

The oddly swollen faces and general lethargy of the suspects shown on camera immediately following such incidents are the physical signs of officer brutality. Yet we also see evidence that the power of the border police is not wholly unchecked. When one lumber thief is hauled back to his house to show where he illegally felled the trees, his wife sees his puffy face and begins shouting at the border officers. She follows them down the road, telling them they can enforce the law and levy fines but cannot go around beating people, especially right before the New Year. Shortly thereafter, we learn that the men were able to keep the lumber and pay a significantly reduced fine because the supervisors of the border officers feared repercussions.

Pettiness is also a theme that runs through the film. In no place is this more evident than the flashes of anger displayed by the

border officers after they overhear the scrap collector's son curse the police in a phone conversation. Of all the town residents shown throughout the film, the scrap collector is most memorable. Hauling the elderly man in with his donkey and cart in order to berate him for lack of a permit seems like petty harassment enough, but the frustration and vitriol that erupt in the wake of the overheard phone conversation—replete with threats to keep his cart and kill his donkey—are difficult to watch. Rather than policing serious crimes, we see the border police and their bruised egos on full display as they harangue poor and vulnerable residents for very little in return. The scrap collector is finally let go with a warning, and he hastily drives his cart around the corner and out of sight, presumably to resume his work.



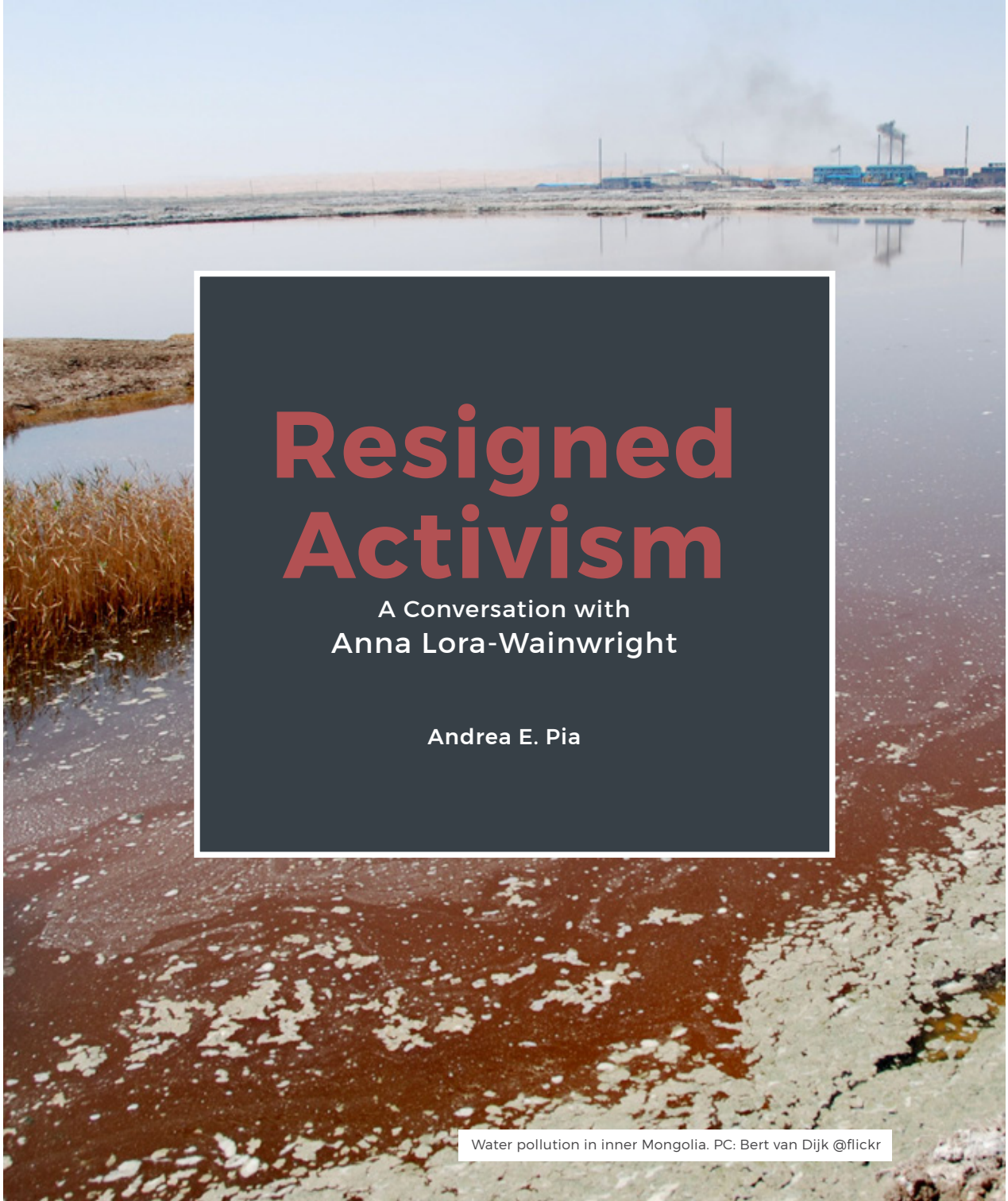
## The Banality of Everyday Life

Those who make it past the first hour of an undeniably slow film will be rewarded with the promise of a murder case. As officers post notices around town, clean guns, and set up checkpoints, viewers may understandably hope that the real action is about to begin. Instead, we are treated to shots of a few normal traffic stops, a driver whose defiant refusal to stop may remind China-watchers of other well-known incidents (Williams 2017), and the interception of the film's hapless lumber thieves. Because the latter two are shown back to back, the viewer is led to believe that the officers—exasperated with their inability to make progress on the case and angry at the man who refused to stop—take their frustrations out on the lumber thieves. This may indeed have been the case, but in telling their story, we miss out on a chance to see how they resolve the murder. This is a shame since the handling of murder cases in China has sparked suspicion that the government's claim of having one of the lowest murder rates in the world is fabricated (Li 2017; *The Economist* 2013).

Those looking for a window into the everyday life of law enforcement officers in China will not be disappointed. An early scene captures a conversation about hair dye and hair loss. One officer confides that his hair problems began after a particularly bad summer with the coast guard. He blames it on late nights, insomnia, and stress—issues that have been well documented by scholars (Scoggins and O'Brien 2016; Wang 2015; Wang, et. al 2015)—and we are told that Apollo shampoo will help. As the border officers tramp through snow while patrolling isolated areas or sleep with their faces crushed into office chairs, viewers should take heart that the film's slow pace mirrors the realities of ground-level work. While this does not necessarily make for riveting viewing, its authenticity makes it a fair trade.

## Blurred Boundaries

The film—released in 2007—feels especially relevant today in light of the ramping up of police presence in Xinjiang. Reports of re-education camps and increases in government spending leave us with many questions and few glimpses into what interactions between security agents and residents actually look like on the ground (Zenz 2018a and 2018b). Although set in a very different context, the world captured by Zhao gives us remarkable insight into how law enforcement practices can blur boundaries between right and wrong, violence and mercy. Zhao peppers his scenes with shots of the officers cursorily taking care of two dogs, leaving us to wonder if the dogs represent the public or the officers themselves. The final scenes present an answer. As one officer and one dog are summarily dismissed by way of pink slip and knife to the stomach, respectively, we see how some agents of the state get caught in the gears of a force much stronger than they are. ■



# Resigned Activism

A Conversation with  
Anna Lora-Wainwright

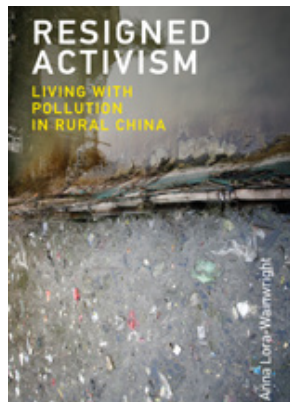
Andrea E. Pia

Water pollution in inner Mongolia. PC: Bert van Dijk @flickr

**In today's China, rapid development and urbanisation has resulted in widespread environmental pollution and degradation. In many parts of the country contamination has become a mundane but oppressive part of daily existence. In *Resigned Activism* (MIT Press 2017), Anna Lora-Wainwright examines how Chinese people living with environmental degradation attempt to improve their situations in ways that are infused with deep resignation and feelings of powerlessness.**

Andrea E. Pia: China's experience with bottom-up mobilisation against pollution and in support of a cleaner environment has been one of immediate repression first, and of instrumental assimilation later. Accordingly, today's environmental question of how to decouple economic growth from the exhaustion of irreplaceable natural resources has ultimately gone mainstream in China. While mentions of widely praised documentaries and films such as Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* (2016) or Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (2015) have, more or less, been wiped off the Chinese Internet, the government is now taking strong environmental action, such as enacting an outright ban of imported plastic in the country. And yet, little seems to have changed for those whose lives are inextricably entangled with pollution. Drawing on fieldwork carried out over a five-year period in various communities in central, south, and southwest China affected by pollution, and in collaboration with different Chinese research institutions and NGOs, your book raises the uncomfortable question of what role resignation plays in China's environmental politics. Why do you think it is important to take the perspective of 'resigned activism' to understand China's current environmental predicaments?

Anna Lora-Wainwright: Although, as a fan on Pierre Bourdieu's work, I have long been interested in processes of social reproduction, I never actually set out to research resignation. My original goal was to compensate for the lack of scholarly and media attention on environmental consciousness and forms of agency among relatively marginalised communities in rural China. Having spent almost two years living in a village in Sichuan for my first book project, *Fighting for Breath* (which is about the ways in which villagers cope with cancer) it bothered me that there has been so much focus on the middle classes as environmental actors while rural communities have been essentially ignored. I wanted to show that these communities also care about pollution and that they could play an important role in environmental protection. As any anthropologist should do, however, I had to revise my conceptual focus and my argument to be faithful to fieldwork findings. The research I conducted in Yunnan with Yiyun Zhang, Yunmei Wu, Qiliang Wang, and Benjamin Van Rooij was particularly foundational in shaping my analysis. Similar attitudes emerged during collaborative research in Hunan with Jixia Lu—this was part of a larger project involving several colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and other institutes, and was supported



*Resigned Activism*  
(MIT Press 2017).

by FORHEAD, the Forum on Health, Environment and Development—and in Guangdong with Liping Li, convincing me of the value of comparing analytically across these cases. Indeed, the villagers I encountered during these collaborative projects seemed concerned about the effects of pollution on their crops, water, air, and their own bodies. They had on occasion embarked on low-level activism, including petitions to county governments, blockades, and direct liaising with polluting firms. But even when they did, their accounts were coloured with a pervasive sense that nothing much can be changed, that they are relatively powerless, and that their voices consistently go unheard. For me the term ‘resigned activism’ is a way to draw attention to these co-existing realities.

Why is this important for China’s environmental predicaments? For three main reasons. The first is that there is a lot more concern with, and awareness of, pollution among even relatively disempowered communities than is typically acknowledged, and this may well escalate should a drastic event occur or an opportunity arise. Resignation, in other words, may be a fertile ground for future collective action as much as it may be a mechanism for maintaining the status quo. The second is that for citizens to be truly involved in the type of public participation envisioned by advocates and activists, they need to feel that their experiences and their plights count for more than they currently do. It is painful enough to live in a polluted environment, but engaging in time-consuming and futile activism can be completely demoralising. Third, communities’ and individuals’ entanglements with pollution are often rather complex, and may involve direct or indirect economic dependence on polluting activities. Faced with the need to meet ever-growing living costs, as well as the steep costs of healthcare and education, residents of polluted areas may feel unable to demand a cleaner environment if this may entail the loss of livelihood opportunities.

AEP: To middle-class, urban-minded environmental activists outside of China, who have no experience of political mobilisation in an authoritarian regime, the argument contained in your book may reinforce the implicit orientalist assumption that Chinese citizens are victims of their own ‘eating bitterness’ mentality—that is, deep-rooted meekness inhibiting truly adversarial forms of environmental activism. But your account of habituation to pollution shows how carrying on amid life-disabling environmental hazards requires anything but passivity. You interestingly suggest that what we see in rural China is the substitution of the collective with the familial. The activism of your research participants is spent more on protecting individual families than the environment they share. To what extent do you think is it possible to reclaim these energies for the sake of a broad-based people’s environmentalism in China?



Polluted landscape in Northern China. PC: Jungle News, Wikimedia Commons.

ALW: First of all, I do not think labelling villagers as individualistic or as powerless victims helps us to understand the complex realities they face and the ways in which they navigate them. Much of the argument in the book and in other publications with colleagues involved in the Yunnan and Hunan case studies opposes this superficial reading of reality. Low-level efforts to fight pollution are sometimes characterised disparagingly as NIMBY ('not in my backyard') or individualistic. But these may just be relatively resigned moments in a much longer and more tortuous engagement with pollution—moments when there seem to be no other option but to protect oneself and one's immediate family.

Conversely, villagers try to reclaim agency in ways that may not be immediately apparent, or may even seem counterproductive. For instance, people's decision to take on potentially harmful jobs or to bear polluted environments requires agency, even though we may not describe it as a choice, strictly speaking. Many villagers I encountered viewed living with pollution as a necessity (the expression '*mei banfa*'—literally, 'there is no way'—was an extremely common response to questions about how they cope with pollution) or a trick of fate (a sense that pollution was an inevitable part of development). These decisions are also part of a delicate balancing act that those who live with pollution have to engage with in their everyday lives, and which affects their attitude towards activism.

Most importantly, my emphasis on the term 'resigned activism' is not to suggest that we should only look at resignation. What I argue is that in order to understand activism anywhere, we need to also pay attention to resignation, and that these two forms of engagement are not mutually exclusive, especially if we look at activism in any given locality across a longer period of time. Neither communities nor individuals are constantly active in the conventional sense. Indeed, being politically active requires considerable energy, organisation, social cohesion, and a certain amount of agreement among a group of people about what the problem is and what may be the solution. But even during times when no visible signs of activism are apparent, communities and individuals affected by pollution are busy making sense of their environment, facing the challenge of how to make life livable and relatively healthy for themselves and their families. These efforts, which in and of themselves may not count as activism, are nevertheless a crucial background for the development of more conventional forms of action. Conversely, when political engagement, for instance through petitions, fails to bring the hoped for results, this may well reinforce a deep-seated sense of resignation and it may inform locals' expectations for what a healthy environment may be and what they are entitled to demand.



In my experience, people focussing on the protection of themselves and their families does not necessarily hinder collective action. To the contrary, maintaining a concern for pollution at the individual and family level is a precondition for a broader environmentalism. I think what inhibits a broader environmental movement is not resignation and fatalism. Nor is it individualism—I am not a fan of the term, and I do not think it describes adequately nuanced realities in rural China. It is rather the converse: the current political impossibility of a broad environmental movement that may even remotely challenge the Party's authority, is an important part of the reason why resignation emerges so frequently. The fact that the very top leadership in China is now advocating more and more attention to environmental protection—creating a 'beautiful China' (*meili zhongguo*) and building an 'ecological civilisation' (*shengtai wenming*)—also sends a strong signal that the Party-state is acting to protect the environment, effectively reclaiming the terms of the debate away from communities.

More broadly, I do not believe the processes of habituation and normalisation that I describe are only taking place in China. Trying to make our surroundings bearable and intelligible is an essential part of the human condition. There is plenty of evidence from other studies of heavily polluted regions in the United States for instance to suggest that pollution gradually becomes a normal part of life.

AEP: You link China's environmental predicaments to the prospects of systemic change, demonstrating that challenges to China's complex governance machine often get metabolised in a way that makes the system more resilient. This seems to suggest that the way in which the Chinese Communist Party keeps its place in society is by feeding off its own crises, which are themselves reflections of the contradictions inherent in capitalism. Do you think it is still possible to write about pollution and environmental degradation today without mentioning supernational forces like capitalism?

ALW: Environmental degradation is certainly tied up in more complex dynamics that transcend nations. Environmental impacts travel. Conversely, the causes of degradation cannot be explained only on a national level. The global economic system of production and trade means that some areas emerge as local sacrifice zones, which bear the uneven burden of the global thirst for resources and conspicuous consumption. We should always remember this before pointing the finger at the Chinese government for the environmental disasters—slow and acute—unfolding within its borders. At the same time, there are also very local reasons why environmental degradation affects certain places rather than others. For instance, localities which are poorer and keen to catch up with their wealthier



neighbours may forego environmental protection in order to attract investors. So the ways in which pollution affects given places are a combination of local and global dynamics.

AEP: In your book you describe forms of water stewardship that are constantly frustrated by a political context which denies communities the very capacity to offer and effect radical change. As scholars/activists, what do you think our role should be in shaping future environmental politics, in China and elsewhere?

ALW: My involvement in interdisciplinary projects has taught me how complex it is to affect change, to design interventions that may be feasible in the long term and to do so together with the local population, without whose support no intervention would ever be sustainable.

There have been countless times when, being faced with individuals, particularly children, affected by pollution I felt frustrated by my inability to 'help'. But what does it mean to help? Drawing on powerful connections (if we have them) to shame local officials or expose local pollution nationally or internationally? Who will this help in the long run? What will it change? I think as scholars and as activists we need to learn to choose our battles, our allies, and our targets carefully, and to be patient in identifying the most productive ways forward. But above all, our role should be to produce better understandings of the complexities at hand, to engage with the communities affected in an inclusive and open-minded manner, being mindful of the conflicts and contradictions we may encounter. Beyond China, when it comes to protecting the environment, I believe we all need to reflect on our individual responsibilities and serve as public intellectuals to encourage others to do the same. But just as importantly, we need to lobby governments and corporations to take more responsibility for environmental protection too. Ultimately, only with better knowledge of the interconnected problems we face as individuals, families, communities, nations, and as a planet, can there be more effective action to tackle these problems. ■



## CNPolitics

A Conversation with  
Fang Kecheng

**Kevin Lin**

We are happy to announce a new collaboration between the *Made in China Journal* and the website CNPolitics.org, a Chinese-language academic website specialising in the popularisation of social science research. In the coming months, CNPolitics will translate and feature a selection of our articles, making them available to a Chinese-speaking audience. In this conversation, CNPolitics founder Fang Kecheng, who is currently a PhD Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, discusses the ideas and principles behind his initiative.

Kevin Lin: How did you start CNPolitics and what do you hope to achieve with this project?

Fang Kecheng: I started CNPolitics when I was a political journalist at the *Southern Weekly* (*nanfang zhoumo*). In the early autumn of 2011, our political editor came up with the idea that we should publish something new in addition to factual reporting. He suggested that we could have a special column called ‘Political Views’ (*zhengjian*, which later on became the Chinese name of CNPolitics), introducing findings from scholarly research on Chinese politics. Soon after he proposed this idea, however, he moved to another magazine. I volunteered to be in charge of this new column. How did I prepare for its launch? Very simple: by posting a call for contributors on Renren, a now-defunct Facebook-like social media platform. A few students studying in overseas universities joined and prepared the first group of articles. But the column never appeared in *Southern Weekly*, because the censors by then were too worried about introducing ‘Western academic research’ to a Chinese audience. They asked us to feature only studies by scholars who are ‘officially recognised’ by the Party-state. Disappointed by this decision, we started CNPolitics as an independent project. We built our own website, and set up accounts on major social media platforms including Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, and Facebook. The reason why I did not give up this project was that I believe—as you do with the *Made in China* project—in the value of introducing academic studies to the general public. There is a wall between academia and the public, and it is very unfortunate that academic studies, which are often supported by taxpayers, are not accessible to a public audience. We want to tear down that wall and bring the intellectual resources to a wider readership.

KL: We all know that writing about social issues and politics in Chinese for a Chinese-language audience can be very sensitive. Has this been challenging for you?

FK: Of course, it is very challenging. We have articles that we never tried to publish. We avoid certain sensitive topics, and when editing I try to frame the articles in a less sensitive way, replacing certain words with ‘safer’ options. I rely on my own judgement, which is based on my journalistic experience in China. But we still make mistakes. On Christmas Day of 2015, our social media accounts were permanently deleted and our website was blocked in China. That was triggered by one sentence in an article on Syria: ‘Assad likes when people call him father, or Dada.’ We lost about 180,000 subscribers on WeChat, and about 80,000 followers on Weibo. Shortly after that, we launched our new accounts, but have not yet been able to reach the previous number of followers.

KL: How has CNPolitics evolved over the years in terms of form and content?

FK: We constantly experiment with new forms. We produced infographics from 2012 to 2014 and they were hugely popular. We also have podcasts, short videos, and webinars. In terms of content, we recently expanded our scope to include not only political science studies, but also other social science disciplines; and to focus not only Chinese politics and society, but also more global and comparative studies. This is partly due to the increasing censorship under Xi—it is no longer sustainable to focus solely on Chinese politics.

KL: Finally, where do you think CNPolitics will be heading in the next few years? Do you still see some space for this kind of website in the current media environment in China?

FK: CNPolitics is a volunteer-based project. Thus, we are limited in our capacity for expansion. In the current media environment, my best hope is for us to be able to continue to exist and provide content to the general public. We once discussed the possibility of turning CNPolitics into a commercial start-up project, but we found it very difficult due to the sensitivity of the topic and the fear that commercial interests would influence our content. The best-case scenario would have been for us to register as a non-profit organisation in China, but this is not possible under the strict new NGO regulations. Therefore, we will continue to run as a volunteer group. I do not mind if CNPolitics grows very slowly at the moment, as long as we are able to continue this project. The space for this kind of website is limited, not only because of political censorship, but also because of commercial competition. It is extremely difficult to get people’s attention in the current social media environment, particularly for operations such as ours with limited resources at our disposal. Ultimately, our goal is to continue reaching for a wider audience without compromising or distorting our content. ■



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