OUT OF THE FOG

Looking Back at Covid Governance in China

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Out of the Fog
Looking Back at Covid Governance in China

The year 2023 began with a series of jolts in China, as the government abruptly rolled back its notoriously strict pandemic measures following countrywide protests in late 2022. While external popular perceptions saw China as being uniformly locked down for the first years of the pandemic, the reality was that the country's pandemic governance was unevenly applied and varied substantially from place to place. The result was mixed—and often even contradictory—attempts to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2, with vastly differentiated experiences on the ground. While heterogeneous and fragmented governance in China is nothing new—and indeed is the basis of how most scholars understand policy implementation in the country—the pandemic nevertheless produced patterns of governance that were at times surprising, while also reinforcing previous trends. This issue of the *Made in China Journal* examines patterns of pandemic governance and the subjectivities associated with living through lockdown and the ever-present possibility of quarantine.

In the focus section, **Wei Zhu** examines the grid management system's often-oversimplified function of service provision and argues that grid managers constituted a middle layer between the Party-State and Chinese society, generating new dynamics between the two. **Nellie Chu** discusses a protest by migrant labourers in Guangzhou's urban villages against the lockdowns associated with China's zero-Covid policy, arguing that the episode laid bare the social inequalities between migrant labourers and village landlords on which the global supply chains for the low-cost manufacturing of fast fashion depend. **Chen Xiaoling** takes the sudden death of a medical student in late 2022 as a starting point to discuss how China's exploitative public health system has created a deteriorating work environment for medical professionals, eroding their passion, morale, and ethics, and resulting in a chronic shortage of such personnel. **Han Tao**, **Hailing Zhao**, and **Jesper Willaing Zeuthen** discuss the colour codes that regulated mobility in China during the pandemic, focusing on how the infrastructure of automated control was challenged when people affected by the system and those administering it had to find ways of working around, altering, or re-enforcing the code. **Han Tao**, **Hailing Zhao**, and **Rachel Douglas-Jones** delve into the so-called poison kings—people who, knowingly or otherwise, became transmission vectors of Covid-19—demonstrating how the label was deployed mostly as a moral category, even though sometimes there were legal implications. Finally, **Han Tao**, **Hailing Zhao**, **Rachel Douglas-Jones**, and **Ane Bislev** explore different responses to uncertainty about PCR testing in China during the Covid-19 pandemic, centring on the management of insecurity through chance, play, and humour.

This issue also features a brief forum on Chinese civil society after the pandemic, introduced by **Mark Sidel**. On one side, **Taru Salmenkari** draws attention to a boom in the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that she witnessed in China during her fieldwork in the spring of 2023, after pandemic restrictions were lifted, arguing that more attention should be paid to how some Chinese NGOs managed to survive increasing repression and the political skills they acquired in the process. On the other side, **Holly Snape** and **Wang Weinan** emphasise the controls and restrictions that are dominant in the strategy of the Chinese authorities vis-a-vis civil society and the third sector, putting forward the idea that the Chinese Communist Party is pursuing the establishment of a 'command civil society'.

In the China Columns section, **Xiao Tan**, **Nahui Zhen**, **Leiheng Wang**, and **Yue Zhao** explore how the pandemic has affected the research of China specialists, discussing the challenges of doing fieldwork in China and the tactics used to manage them. **Meiyun Meng** narrates the life stories of three women to shed light on the struggles beneath the successes achieved by highly educated women who chose to migrate to Shenzhen, especially the obstacles imposed by patriarchal norms. **Olivia Yijian Liu** examines the rise and fall of the 'maker culture' of individual empowerment and open-source production, which started at the grassroots and was then elevated as part of China's national economic development strategy of

mass entrepreneurship and innovation. **Heidi Østbo Haugen** and **Anne Tjønndal** discuss international cooperation between China and Norway in the sports field in the runup to the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. **Chan Chor See** highlights the dual role of traditional Chinese medicine during the fifth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Hong Kong, showing the interconnectedness of medicine and politics in the city.

In the Op-Eds section, **Stephanie Yingyi Wang** looks back at the closure in May 2023 of the Beijing LGBT Centre—one of the largest and longest-running LGBTQ non-profit organisations in China—and discusses the reasons for and implications of this event. **Lü Pin** offers an assessment of the current situation of the feminist movement in China. **Holly Donahue Singh** and **Yun Zhou** review discussions of China's and India's population size, arguing that as individuals are being flattened to numbers, questions about reproductive autonomy are glossed over.

In the Work of Arts section, **Xiangli Ding** closely examines and analyses some of the paintings produced by artists commissioned by the Chinese Communist Party to portray new large-scale water engineering infrastructure in the early Maoist era, highlighting the profound technological grandeur and immense labour intensity expressed in these oeuvres. To wrap up the issue, we feature six conversations. **Christopher Connery** engages **Ralf Ruckus** about his book *The Left in China: A Political Cartography* (Pluto Press, 2023). **Jenny Chio** and **Joshua Neves** have a dialogue about changes in how scholars, including themselves, have approached China and futurity over the past few decades. **Shui-yin Sharon Yam** interviews **Sarah Mellors Rodriguez** about her *Reproductive Realities in Modern China: Birth Control and Abortion, 1911–2021* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), and **Jia Tan** on her *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (NYU Press, 2023). **Coraline Goron** chats with **Denise van der Kamp** about her *Clean Air at What Cost? The Rise of Blunt Force Regulation in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Finally, **Darren Byler** talks with **Josh Chin** about his new book, *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control* (St Martin's Press, 2022, co-authored with Liza Lin). ∎

The Editors

BRIEFS

JAN–JUN 2023

Gender-Based Violence and Debates about Feminism

The first half of 2023 witnessed various forms of violence against women in China. Two cyberbullying incidents sparked particular anger. In January, Zheng Linghua, a 23-year-old female postgraduate student, took her own life after enduring six months of abuse from online bullies due to her pink-coloured hair. In early June, a mother from Wuhan jumped to her death after being targeted by online trolls for dressing nicely after her young son was crushed to death by a car on his primary school campus. The woman had also been subjected to heavy surveillance by local police. The widespread issue of photoshopped sexy images and 'secret filming' on university campuses and public transportation also provoked heated discussions. In March, a college student from Soochow University posted maliciously photoshopped images of his female classmates on porn websites. Similar cases were also reported at Chongqing University and the University of South China, where several male students were found using fake pornographic images to slut-shame and defame their female classmates. In April, former ping pong world champion Zhang Jike was accused of using non-consensual intimate photos and videos of his celebrity ex-girlfriend to pay off gambling debts. In the same month, actress Jiang Mengjie received support and praise when she exposed on social media that she had been a victim of upskirting blackmail. Also in June, a *BBC* investigation of young Chinese men selling subway groping videos for profit went viral but was quickly censored on Weibo. About the same time, a female student who was said to have falsely accused a man of secretly filming her on the subway received fierce online attacks and public backlash for several days on Weibo.

Despite the backlash targeting victims, young women have continued to speak out about sexual harassment, advancing the #MeToo movement in China. The movement has now extended to several new prominent figures, including some individuals involved in the feminist movement in China. In April, Fan Xin, the founder of the publishing house Folio—well-known for publishing feminist books—was accused of attempted sexual assault of a female employee; writer Zong Cheng, also a self-proclaimed feminist supporter, faced multiple accusations of sexual harassment; Shi Hang, a well-known figure on social media and in literacy circles, was accused by two dozen women of sexual harassment. Within academia, in January, Zhao Ming, a professor at Southwestern University, was fired after accusations of coercing one of his female students into an 'inappropriate relationship'; in May, Zheng Guosheng, a professor at Zhengzhou University in Henan Province, was suspended after being accused of manipulating and sexually assaulting a then 16-year-old girl 11 years ago; well-known historian Mao Haijian was sentenced by a Macau court to seven months' jail for sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, young Chinese women have been debating what feminism means in China today. With the clampdowns on domestic feminist voices and activities within China, Japanese feminist scholar Chizuko Ueno has received an extremely warm welcome from young Chinese women. Her books have been widely translated, circulated, and discussed. Yet, in February, young female netizens were upset about an online interview with Ueno in which three female interviewers—all graduates of Peking University—focused only on marriage-related questions. Another online discussion, between Ueno and Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua, in March raised frustrations and polarised opinions as Dai only criticised neoliberalism in relation to gender problems in China while completely overlooking the role of the state.

It is also worth noting that in the first half of 2023, in addition to sexual violence against women, the conditions for LGBTQI+ groups continued to worsen. After a series of crackdowns on LGBTQI+ organisations and activists, in May, the Beijing LGBT Centre closed

its doors after 15 years of operation (see Wang's op-ed in the present issue). *LL*

Worries About the Unemployment Rate and Surging Strikes

The first six months of China's post-Covid era have been marked by a concerning youth unemployment rate and an increasing trend of strikes in both the manufacturing sector and the gig economy. Facing a worrying unemployment crisis, China has implemented several strategies to boost employment. In April, the employment rate for young urban workers aged between 16 and 24 reached 20.4 per cent—a record high since the National Bureau of Statistics of China started to publish the country's monthly unemployment rate in January 2018. With more than 11.6 million college graduates slated to enter the job market this summer, the Chinese Government plans to expand job opportunities in the state-owned sector, encourage young people to start their own businesses, and promote employment in China's rural areas. In several provinces, the number of civil service jobs has increased by more than 50 per cent. In February, Guangdong Province announced a 'three-year action plan' to send 300,000 young people to the countryside by the end of 2025. In May, the Ministry of Education issued a notice encouraging universities to create jobs for research assistants to improve employment for college graduates.

Workers above the age of 35 are also facing employment issues. In April, the story of a 38-year-old former journalist who became a delivery rider after failing to find a white-collar job sparked concerns on social media about the phenomenon of middle-aged unemployment (中年失业). The Chinese authorities have been promoting 'flexibility' as a solution to the woes of the country's workforce. In March, the Ninth National Workforce Survey issued by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, China's official trade union, revealed that about 84 million of China's employed workers are engaged in new employment forms related to the internet economy and new technologies. At the same time, the Chinese Government has been encouraging traditionally disadvantaged social groups to pursue flexible employment. In March, the Guangdong Government announced plans to implement 'mum posts' (妈妈岗), encouraging women with young children to undertake flexible

jobs. In the same month, the Central Government proposed raising its retirement age and continued to promote the idea of elderly individuals taking up flexible work.

Meanwhile, retirees and workers in the manufacturing sector and the gig economy staged protests. According to the Hong Kong–based nongovernmental organisation China Labour Bulletin, strikes in the manufacturing sector have surged to a seven-year high, with at least 140 factory strikes recorded in the first five months of this year. In February, retirees in the cities of Wuhan, Dalian, and Guangzhou protested against declining health insurance coverage and reduced pensions. In April, hundreds of food delivery workers from Meituan went on a week-long strike in Shanwei, Guangdong Province, over a drop in earnings and cancelled allowances.

Incidents related to workplace safety and fatalities persisted across sectors. In February, a recordbreaking 53 people were killed after a coalmine collapsed in Inner Mongolia. In April, 11 were killed in a factory fire in Wuyi, Zhejiang Province. In May, a Chinese fishing boat operating in the Indian Ocean capsized, leaving 39 people missing: 17 Chinese nationals, 17 Indonesians, and five Filipinos. In the same month, five workers were missing after a fire in a coalmine in Henan Province. Also in May, nine were killed in an explosion and fire in a production area of Luxi Chemical Group in Liaocheng, Shandong Province. In early June, a landslide at a mine in Sichuan Province killed 19 people. *LL*

Xinjiang

In Xinjiang, the first half of 2023 was marked by a new phase of state repression of ethnic groups, and by continued pushback from diaspora activists. Media reports have shown that repression in Xinjiang has become less conspicuous than during the height of the crackdown in 2017–19, as many re-education camps have been closed or transformed for other purposes. However, Uyghurs and other minorities outside the camps still face invasive state surveillance, forced labour, arbitrary detention, and exit bans. It was recently revealed that one Uyghur teenager was detained for 'advocating extremism' after sharing a video on WeChat of the 'white paper' protests. Other reports have shown that forced labour has become less visible but more intense, with the expansion

of coercive labour transfers. Eager to capitalise on the cheap labour and boost their patriotic image, many Chinese companies have flocked to Xinjiang, while simultaneously obscuring their links to the region when courting Western partners for potential business deals. The Chinese Communist Party's growing relations with Palestine, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other nations, along with visits to Xinjiang by the Arab League, have allowed the Chinese Party-State to muster support for its policies among the Muslim world. The state has also dramatically increased its spending on tourism as a method to control Xinjiang's culture and remould its image. Moreover, the state has continued to target diaspora communities abroad with threats to their family members in Xinjiang to silence dissent. Diaspora groups have testified to a dire humanitarian situation of stalled asylum systems in their host countries, psychological distress, and increasing transnational repression. Nonetheless, collective organising delivered small victories, such as in February, when a coalition of human rights activists and lawmakers forced Xinjiang Governor Erkin Tuniyaz to cancel his planned trip to Europe. *AK*

Hong Kong

Hong Kong's National Security Law enabled officials to continue eroding the city's freedoms in ever more subtle and sinister ways during the first half of 2023. This was evident in March, during the first protest against a government policy (about land reform) in two years. The police capped attendance at 100 people, made participants wear numbered tags around their necks, and surrounded the crowd with a cordon. In May, local media outlets reported that hundreds of books on political topics, including the Tiananmen massacre and the Umbrella Movement, were no longer available in the city's public libraries. That month, the government announced it would cut the number of democratically elected District Council seats to 20 per cent. On 4 June, the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, authorities detained dozens of demonstrators attempting to commemorate the event, and a three-day nationalist carnival occupied Victoria Park, the place in the city where commemorative rallies and vigils were traditionally held. A week later, the unofficial anthem of the 2019 prodemocracy movement, 'Glory to Hong Kong', disappeared from music streaming sites after author-

ities sought an injunction against it. That month, a former ByteDance executive claimed that the Chinese Government accessed Hongkongers' TikTok data, including their network information, SIM card IDs, and IP addresses, to monitor and identify protesters and civil rights activists. Recent media investigations also revealed the expansion of Hong Kong's 'de-radicalisation' programs for hundreds of young activists who participated in the 2019 movement and have since been incarcerated. Drawing certain parallels with Xinjiang's re-education camps, the programs reportedly use pro-China propaganda, close monitoring, punishment, and solitary confinement to eradicate political activism and compel loyalty. Meanwhile, the national security trial of 47 prodemocracy figures, most of whom languished in pretrial detention for more than two years, has begun: all face up to life imprisonment. *AK*

Persecution of Activists, Lawyers, and Editors

In the first half of 2023, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to persecute activists, lawyers, and editors. In March, Taiwanese publisher Li Yanhe, who wrote under the pen-name Fu Cha, was detained in Shanghai shortly after he arrived to visit his family. He is a founder of Gusa Publishing, which has published books critical of the CCP. In early April, a Shandong court sentenced two of China's most famous human rights lawyers who were associated with the 'New Citizens Movement' for subversion of state power: Ding Jiaxi received 12 years' imprisonment and three years' deprivation of political rights, and Xu Zhiyong received 14 years' imprisonment. Days later, human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng and his wife, Xu Yan, were arrested after attempting to attend an event in Beijing hosted by the EU delegation to China, to which they had been invited by the EU ambassador himself. Later that month, it was revealed that several protesters from the November 'white paper' movement were released from detention, after months of secrecy surrounding those who had been detained. One of the women, Cao Zhixin, was a former book editor at a publishing house in Beijing. She explained that she and her friends—all young women working in the literary and artistic scene—had no previous activism experience. It was also revealed that month that Dong Yuyu, a liberal-leaning columnist and

deputy editor of the newspaper *Guangming Daily*, was underlined detained last February after meeting in Beijing with a Japanese diplomat, who was also detained. Dong, a former Harvard Niemen Fellow, is expected to stand trial for espionage. In June, human rights lawyer Chang Weiping was sentenced to three and half years in prison for subversion of state power. He was most recently arrested for speaking out against torture he experienced during his previous arrest. *AK*

Amended Anti-Espionage Law Takes Effect

China's amended anti-espionage law took effect on 1 July 2023. The new version codifies greater investigative powers for authorities, allowing them to inspect companies' facilities and electronic equipment, along with their employees' digital devices. It also expands the already broad definition of espionage to include actors 'seeking to align with an espionage organisation' or attempting to obtain or share 'other data, materials, or items related to national security or national interests'. Many feared this could provide even more room for arbitrary enforcement of the law. Foreign companies in particular voiced concern that the law would criminalise normal business activities such as gathering information about local markets. The law was revised in the context of President Xi Jinping's tightening grip on national security. In the months before it passed, government authorities in Shanghai and Beijing raided the offices of US consulting firms Bain & Company and Mintz, and detained five of the latter's Chinese employees. Mintz specialises in corporate investigations and was reported to have been involved in auditing Xinjiang supply chains. Around the same time, Chinese regulators also restricted foreign access to the Wind corporate database, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure academic database, and the China Judgments Online legal database. In combination with the new anti-espionage law, these measures reflect the Chinese Government's growing efforts to restrict foreign actors' access to potentially sensitive information. Driving this trend, some analysts argued, is the desire to scapegoat foreign influences for domestic protests against zero-Covid policies, conceal the true state of China's underperforming economy, and limit foreign investigations into the mass detention of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

However, the anti-espionage law and other national security–related measures risk conflicting with Beijing's goal to attract foreign investment following China's post-pandemic reopening. *AK*

OP-EDS

Beijing LGBT Centre.
PC: Xin Ying (CC).

Fare Thee Well Beijing LGBT Centre

Stephanie Yingyi WANG

The closure of the Beijing LGBT Centre (北京同志中心) on 15 May 2023, only three months after its fifteenth anniversary, caused shock and heartbreak among the Chinese queer community both within China and abroad. One of the largest and longest-running LGBTQ non-profit organisations in the country, the centre had operated as a physical gathering space, a national hub for advocacy and service initiatives, and an incubator for a young generation of queer activists.

Even though the organisation had held fast against multiple waves of governmental shutdowns of LGBTQ spaces and organisations (Wang 2021), news of its closure came as no surprise to those who have been actively involved in the movement. In fact, over the past two years, multiple events it organised were forcefully terminated. The organisation was also subjected to constant harassment and threats from the authorities, and public intolerance.

When it was in the Xin Tiandi Building in Beijing's Chaoyang District—which in the past housed several important feminist and LGBTQ nongovernmental organisations (NGOs)—the centre had to deal with homophobic neighbours who frequently interrupted its activities and reported them either to the building management or to

the police. Because of these hateful reports, many activities had to be held in other temporary locations. In 2021, the organisation eventually moved elsewhere.

Breaking New Ground

The final official closure of the centre is mourned by thousands of supporters, volunteers, and staff who joined its activities in the past and saw the organisation as a beacon of light in a darkening landscape. Founded in 2008 by several queer activists from different organisations, the centre's foremost goal was to provide LGBTQ individuals with various services, including discounted mental health counselling and HIV testing, and safe spaces for community-building activities such as film screenings, dating events, English corners, parties, and discussion groups.

Over the years, the centre also engaged in various groundbreaking political projects. One of the central threads connecting its various programs is the idea that the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQ people must be fostered by affirmative legislation, strong institutional support, and cultural acceptance. In 2014, working with LGBT Rights Advocacy China, an NGO focusing on the legal inclusion of LGBT persons, the centre played a critical role in launching the first LGBTQ impact litigation case, helping a gay man win a lawsuit against an electroshock conversion therapy practitioner (Davis 2014). This was the first milestone in the organisation's important work against conversion therapy.

The centre's core team strove to bring in feminist perspectives when envisioning its programs, introducing projects centring on *lala* women (a Chinese slang term for lesbians), bisexual, pansexual, and transgender individuals. Around 2012, the centre began to provide affirmative training for LGBTQ-friendly therapists and counsellors and to compile information on LGBTQ-friendly clinics. Starting in 2017, the organisation also advocated for the de-pathologisation of transgender individuals in China, working with trans-friendly doctors and experts to promote incremental and sustainable change.

As well as this advocacy work, the organisation kept its feet firmly grounded in community-building projects, while branching out with new initiatives to suit the shifting political context as space for civil society organising continued to shrink. This included an effort to incubate a company solely focusing on LGBTQ-friendly counselling services—connecting therapists with LGBTQ individuals seeking psychological support. Another initiative entailed the creation of volunteer-run self-help groups that provided safe spaces in which to share experiences and build solidarity. Finally, the organisation also initiated several pathbreaking programs to promote LGBTQ inclusion and employment opportunities in major international corporations based in China. Even though the centre is gone, its affiliated counselling service,

self-help groups, and the corporate program carry on its mission, and will continue to operate amid China's hostile environment, albeit in a depoliticised manner.

Queer Sexualities under Attack

Although rights-based activism on issues such as labour rights, anti-discrimination, and women's rights has been under attack and subjected to increasing censorship in China since the early 2010s, work on queer sexualities did not seem to invite intense governmental scrutiny until recently. The most recent affirmative court ruling against forced conversion therapy on a gay man took place in 2017 (Tcheng 2017). However, with the revival of national heteronormative and paternal discourses about the imperative to build the Chinese Dream (中国梦) and enhance Modernity with Chinese Characteristics (中国式现代化), gay male sexualities and homosociality have once again been stigmatised as deviant and responsible for the 'boy crisis' (男孩危机)—that is, the corruption of hegemonic masculinity with effeminate gender expressions that threaten the dominant heterosexual nuclear family form—and therefore a national crisis.

Over the past six years, we have witnessed the shrinking of both political and cultural spaces for LGBTQ visibility and representation. Online gay-themed dramas have been banned by the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau, as well as the National Radio and Television Bureau, since as early as 2018 (Zuo 2022).Government authorities have also targeted those producing LGBTQ content for other mass media, with the most renowned case being that of author Tianyi receiving a 10-year and six month prison sentence in 2018 for breaking Chinese obscenity laws with her boy's love writings—that is, a genre that features romantic relationships between male characters and targets heterosexual female audiences (Flood 2018). All this was the precursor to the demise of politically active LGBTQ organisations in China, especially those with transnational connections and histories. The 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law further marginalised these entities by rendering illegal any international funding opportunities not approved by the Chinese authorities.

The Beijing LGBT Centre's shutdown is the latest in a long series of disheartening closures of prominent LGBTQ organisations in China in recent years. In 2020, ShanghaiPRIDE, one of China's longest running and biggest festivals celebrating LGBTQ visibility, cancelled its annual event and terminated all activities due to political pressure (Shen 2020). A year later, major LGBTQ social media accounts run by university students were targeted and deleted overnight by the Chinese instant messaging and social media platform WeChat (Reuters 2021). WeChat claimed that some of the groups had broken rules on sharing information on the internet. In November of that year, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, the non-profit organisation that won prominent anti-conversion therapy and anti-discrimination court cases, abruptly announced its

Premises of the Beijing LGBT Centre. PC: Qie Peng (CC).

closure on its WeChat account, without disclosing the reason (Wu 2021). While not necessarily outright political in their orientation, these organisations had the capacity to mobilise their followers, and were rooted in solid community bases, which made government authorities uneasy. Today, the organisations that are still active in China either maintain a very low profile or depoliticise their projects by replacing explicitly gay language with neutral phrasing aligning with state-endorsed discourse.

With the advent of 'runology' (润学, a new term referring to the trend of 'running away' from China) among politically aware Chinese youths in the wake of three years of zero-Covid lockdowns, and especially since the White Paper movement, queer activists are also among those choosing to leave the country. With little to no space in which to organise and finding themselves under constant police harassment, many people have developed anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of those who have access to networks from previous international and cross-regional organising experiences have managed to physically uproot themselves from China by joining visiting programs overseas, applying for graduate school, and even finding ways to seek asylum. However, many of those who decide to stay in China, or who cannot leave, are living with the constant fear of political suppression or in distress, unable to pursue a livelihood; after all, for many activists, work is life and life is work.

A New Era

The closure of the Beijing LGBT Centre signals a new era for the Chinese queer movement. Rights-based activism centring on legal rights and inclusion for those with a distinct sexual identity is no longer the path forward that it was three decades ago. Long gone are

the rosy days of organising and agitating for political change in the lively activist gay scenes in urban centres. Queer people, especially the younger generation, can now only retreat into online communities, which are also under intense scrutiny. These individuals are building on the foundation laid by LGBTQ organisations, shifting spaces of visibility and representation from in-person to online modes of existence. Their initiatives include producing podcasts and videos that highlight personal narratives to educate the public and normalise queer sexuality in a depoliticised manner. On social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu (小红书), makeup tutorials by trans women are extremely popular. These individuals have found a way to increase their visibility while making money by producing sponsored content, such as for cosmetic products. However, content that can be construed as political takes a much longer time to publish or is censored outright. Those that are published can be instantly taken down by the censors if anyone reports them to these platforms.

One of the main implications of the centre's closure and the general shrinking of space for the Chinese LGBTQ movement that is rarely discussed is the affective turmoil that will haunt this generation of activists and the next. With the abrupt unexplained closures of organisations, the organisers, staff, volunteers, and followers have not been able to properly and openly mourn their loss—the loss of physical queer spaces, of myriad LGBTQ-centred projects and activities, and more importantly, of old and new connections.

Although there was an outpouring of emotional posts on Chinese social media platforms detailing fond memories of the Beijing LGBT Centre shortly after the announcement of its closure, they generally avoided mentioning anything political, and used elaborate metaphors to imply that 'you cannot kill us all'. Such self-censored posts are symptomatic of the pervasive fear and political depression that have taken over the Chinese LGBTQ community (and much of Chinese civil society) over the past decade. These are coping strategies developed by netizens to manoeuvre within spaces characterised by extreme and swift censorship.

The reactions to these posts have been mixed, however. While some sympathise with the frustration expressed therein, others have voiced anger and betrayal, turning to conspiracy theories about the centre's leadership and management. Surprisingly, these conspiracy theories tie into state-sanctioned discourse about 'hostile foreign forces' (境外敌对势力). Even with transparent financial statements that clearly show the sources and uses of project funding, these individuals continue to make up stories about the abuse of financial donations. This is a common pattern whenever civil society organisations are closed in China, with gossip and rumours swirling, followed by cyberbullying targeting members of the organisations and their supporters. In the case of the Beijing LGBT Centre, what has been most disheartening is that these accusations against its staff in some cases come from those for and with whom they had worked tirelessly.

At such an abysmal time, queer activists in political exile and those remaining in China try to use a range of means to continue their work. It is a critical moment for all of us who have been involved in this once-thriving movement to mourn our losses and offer ourselves the time and space to heal from past traumas, from political oppression, from organisational dysfunction, and from the myriad feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, depression, and betrayal. Activism is not only about achieving goals and making effective changes, but also should be an opportunity to elevate and empower individuals. By caring for themselves, queer activists can re-establish their connection to the movement and recharge to envision alternative strategies for the future. ∎

China Girl, Illustration by
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Stay Angry and Leave Hope for Tomorrow

Understanding the Feminist Movement in China

LÜ Pin

Where does the future of our movement lie? This question has surely troubled many Chinese feminists like me in the past year or two. Against all odds, the feminist movement had been making progress in China. From 2018 to 2020, when critical public spaces in the country were closing, the explosive emergence of the #MeToo (米兔) movement had astonishing impacts. It put feminist demands on the public agenda in an unprecedented way and compelled society and the government to respond, even if their responses were often regressive. However, as the sharp authoritarian turn flattened everything and everyone in its path, the movement lost a significant amount of its organisational and accountability power.

Like many other Chinese feminists, I have experienced considerable anguish and turmoil, the extent of which depends on the degree of my hope for change. Only recently, the 'A4 Movement' (白纸运动) has provided a moment of awakening and prompted me to restart the search for the future, even though I believe the premise must be first to recognise that certain hopes I had in the past no longer exist, and that everything we are facing is unprecedented. In this piece, I will briefly outline the state of the Chinese feminist movement since 2022, but the focus will be on assessing the resources of this movement and the path it can take.

The De-Organisation and Survival of the Feminist Movement

The 'chained woman' incident in January 2022 and the defeat of Xianzi's sexual harassment case against Zhu Jun in August 2022 have starkly illustrated the limitations on the feminist movement in China (for background on Xianzi's case, see Xianzi 2021; on the 'chained woman' incident, see Cao and Feng 2022). Starting in July 2018, the Xianzi case spanned almost the entire timeline of the #MeToo movement in China. The fundamental question that was raised by a young woman's lengthy lawsuit against a powerful figure was whether sexual harassment can be addressed within China's legal system.

The final answer given by the court—namely, its refusal to validate her claims of sexual harassment due to 'insufficient evidence'—was undeniably frustrating. This certainly does not mean that victims can no longer seek legal justice; the legal process still exists. However, what has been proclaimed to the world is that the (un)fairness of the outcome cannot be questioned, and the process itself is inherently violent. The setback of the Xianzi case is not merely about Zhu Jun personally overturning the verdict; it also indicates the unyielding nature of the system and, therefore, prematurely crushes the resolve of many victims seeking justice.

The 'chained woman', an anonymous woman with a mental illness, was trafficked, forced into marriage, imprisoned, and subjected to forced childbirth. She is a remnant of a previous era, embodying the enduring, unaddressed nightmare that Chinese women face: the extent to which they can be harmed and exploited simply because they possess a uterus. Many people experienced a moment of 'moral shock' in cross-class empathy for the chained woman, realising that there is no social contract between our country and women. The overwhelming anger that ensued did not lead to the rescue of the chained woman; it only resulted in the government taking over her confinement. Many people faced harassment and threats because they tried to act, while others simply expressed their anger through social media posts. Though difficult to quantify, the police violence triggered by this event targeted ordinary feminists on an unprecedented scale. Pre-emptive suppression was

Only recently, the 'A4 Movement' (白纸运动) has provided a moment of awakening and prompted me to restart the search for the future, even though I believe the premise must be first to recognise that certain hopes I had in the past no longer exist, and that everything we are facing is unprecedented.

> When the movement reaches scale, it is no longer possible to maintain legitimacy through consensus among participants. Those who cannot navigate the boundaries of legitimacy and those who challenge it from the margins do not receive widespread support from the feminist masses.

widespread. When minor protests were still in the planning stages or even just brewing emotionally, the police were already knocking on doors. This crackdown, implemented through social media surveillance, prevented even small-scale organising from taking shape.

The feminist movement in China has remained active and has even seen some development, becoming the last visible social movement in a context in which civil society has been withering due to increasing political repression. This is because this movement has awakened many urban young women and has helped women form alliances based on gendered experiences on social media, which has been increasingly active since the shrinking of offline public life. It is also because of the evolution of the movement's agenda and organisational forms: despite becoming increasingly wild and spontaneous, the movement has maintained itself within the legitimate space delimited by the state. It does not directly challenge the Communist Party regime and has never launched large-scale direct confrontations with the Party-State.

When the movement reaches scale, it is no longer possible to maintain legitimacy through consensus among participants. Those who cannot navigate the boundaries of legitimacy and those who challenge it from the margins do not receive widespread support from the feminist masses. The state deeply regulates the movement's boundaries and ecology, while normalising and naturalising self-restraint in the movement's strategies, even among those who consider themselves critical and radical. This also explains the surprising nature of the persecution faced by the feminist movement of late. The names of those arrested and imprisoned for feminist organising are memorable, but they are still very few, especially when compared with other social movements.

Permissible Anger and Resistance

I am not denying the achievements and significance of the feminist movement in China. Rather, its sustainability is premised on not being perceived as a substantial threat to the Party-State. Of course, the Chinese feminist movement has experienced tightening regulation and repeated purges, including political smearing, censorship of speech, dilution of activists' efforts, and the dissolution of organisational structures down to the microlevel. Feminists have endured too much. However, while part of this movement can continue to exist to an extent within the boundaries of the law, another part has become practically impossible. I used to believe that as the state continuously moved the political red lines, the feminist movement would increasingly move away from its political safe zone. Now I believe that the loss of organisation does not necessarily mean the decline of the entire feminist movement. However, the form of this movement will likely be far removed from what it once was, and it is uncertain whether it will still constitute a movement in the future.

Feminism will continue to exist and spread in non-public spaces in China. Feminism has a strong appeal to Chinese women because they have no other outlets for expressing their grievances. The rise of resentment is not due to women being more oppressed but because they have reached a point where they can no longer tolerate it. From this perspective, the emergence of feminism in China is an unintended outcome of the 40 years of Reform and Opening Up. As the political space continues to shrink, the Party-State needs to maintain economic vitality and the flow of people and information, and requires a female labour force with 'high quality' (高素质). This means feminism still has room to manoeuvre if it avoids criticising the government and refrains from taking direct action.

In today's China, the internet is heavily censored and filled with violence and manipulation, leading many feminists to withdraw or go into hiding. Even in this situation, social media platforms, although subject to strict scrutiny, still tolerate feminism by allowing likeminded individuals to gather in echo chambers. They provide a space for feminists to engage in debates and resistance related to their daily lives. Through their experiences in online feminist communities, many individuals have been able to establish cognitive boundaries and even educate and form alliances within their own communities, challenging patriarchal hierarchies, gender norms, and gender culture in families, schools, and workplaces.

The dissemination of feminist knowledge is flourishing and becoming more popular than ever, even though the production of that knowledge seems to be declining. There is a greater demand from the audience, which has created a considerable market. Commercialisation ensures sustainability, although it is unreliable and filters the knowledge that can be disseminated. Literature, art, culture, and lifestyle are all topics that can be explored, with varying degrees of censorship and popularisation depending on the medium of dissemination, such as publishing, podcasts, videos, and so on. However, they are mostly engaged in popularising what is allowed—that is, linking feminism with practical life and providing explanations. For instance, the popularisation of feminist works by Japanese scholar Chizuko Ueno in China is partly due to her identity as a foreigner and a scholar, which gives her a broader platform for dissemination, and she resonates with Chinese feminists because of her understanding of East Asian culture. As for non-commercial feminist knowledge and dissemination projects, they emerge every day, relying on feminists' 'voluntary contributions', although many of them cease before accumulating a significant audience. I believe these small-scale and even microlevel projects are more precious than large-scale dissemination efforts, not only because they contribute to building communities but also because they produce knowledge. By grafting a feminist perspective on to various issues, they expand the breadth of feminist knowledge and deepen feminist insights.

People continue to debate crucial issues related to women's lives, in a manner that is permitted and always directed towards personal choice. In February 2023, one of the hottest debates on the Chinese internet

The dissemination of feminist knowledge is flourishing and becoming more popular than ever, even though the production of that knowledge seems to be declining.

Anger is always seeking an outlet, often requiring an uncensored, universally relatable, and 'perfect' case of violence that is not easily targeted by male-dominated voices on the internet.

revolved around a video featuring three Chinese women discussing feminism with Chizuko. During the interview, the three Chinese interviewers, all of whom were married, focused only on marriage-related questions. This interview was supposed to be an opportunity to discuss and explore feminist issues, but it was overshadowed by the interviewers' tendency to use this opportunity to justify their choice to marry. This approach triggered huge dissatisfaction among many feminists, but the public discussion later shifted to criticism of the three women's personal lifestyles based on assumptions and speculation. The intense scrutiny generated by this video on its creators indicates the dearth of public topics that can be discussed in China. However, it also shows that the positioning of women in negotiations within patriarchal systems has become an important public topic. While women are still in the process of breaking free from traditional subordinate roles, they find themselves pulled in conflicting directions, including by the relationships between feminism and the implied neoliberal orientation of 'self-realisation', equality in intimate relationships, and the maximisation of women's self-interest. Some view these values as overlapping, while others see them as conflicting. Another critical issue, given the current population crisis, is whether women should marry and have children. This question is used to test one's loyalty to feminism and is also a call for women to engage in passive resistance against the state, although the debate itself is limited to the dimension of personal choice. It may not matter which viewpoint prevails for the feminist movement; what matters is that this broad debate leads to the diffusion of feminism.

Moreover, Chinese feminists have the potential to create focal moments for women's rights, albeit only on the internet. They carry a lot of accumulated anger due to the state's endless evasion, delay, and even violent suppression of women's rights. Anger is always seeking an outlet, often requiring an uncensored, universally relatable, and 'perfect' case of violence that is not easily targeted by male-dominated voices on the internet. Some cases can remain uncensored, but feminists have been consistently working to expose many more cases so that individual examples will generate significant momentum. In other words, behind the widely known individual cases, there is a continuous struggle by countless individuals to make their voices heard. Once a focal moment is formed, feminists can have a tremendous impact on public opinion, even if they are powerless to change the system and cannot establish organisational structures for the movement. Anger usually cannot be sustained for long and eventually collapses, awaiting the next spark. Loosely organised feminist anger still has the potential to erupt.

The Significance of Maintaining Uncertainty

Although urban educated young women are the visible advocates for feminism today, the diffusion of feminism has benefited a diverse range of individuals, including women who are marginalised in terms of class and age. So, what does this mean for the future of the movement?

This depends on how we envision change in China. If we understand change only as the overthrow of the regime, the feminist movement will never possess such power, but this is also not a position advocated by many feminists. If we believe that change is the state making meaningful institutional reforms to women's rights, we have very little leverage. A powerful authoritarian state can still address individual cases or allocate welfare resources to women, but its authority and arbitrariness remain unchallenged, with a refusal to engage in dialogue or negotiation, let alone succumb to pressure. We must move away from the notion of change being indicated solely by reform or revolution, since both are unlikely. What is meaningful is to maintain the vitality of society and sustain hope for tomorrow. Although it has been de-organised (去组织化), the feminist movement still holds great significance for China because it continues to sustain widespread discontent, even in its retreat.

Empowering women through feminism is also crucial for their struggles within culture, knowledge, and everyday life. It relates to the extent to which people can lead autonomous and meaningful lives under authoritarian rule, and how they can connect with one another. Some participants in the 'A4 movement' have formed seemingly apolitical communities in their daily lives, but they can come together at a particular moment to join the resistance. The reconstruction of women's lifestyles will have far-reaching impacts on the whole of society and, in the current context, this will primarily be driven by women's own decisions. I value the choice to remain unmarried and childless as a woman's strategy for nonviolent non-cooperation with the state, but what I value first and foremost is women attaining the freedom they desire for themselves, and second, the possibility for them to use that freedom to contribute to changes not yet envisioned. Immersed in Chinese feminism, one is often disheartened, occasionally uplifted, and always confused. However, seeing so many feminists persevering and spreading their beliefs reminds us that the effort to keep hope for tomorrow is both fragile and precious. ∎

Chinese Children. PC: Fernando Mafra (CC), Flickr.com.

The Individuals in the Numbers

Reproductive Autonomy in the Shadow of Population Planning in China and India

Holly DONAHUE SINGH, Yun ZHOU

It was never quite her decision. 'I wasn't ready to be a mother, but it was impossible not to,' Hui (a pseudonym) said during our interview in 2016, not long after China's decades-long One-Child Policy ended. Her husband had made it clear to her that the 'DINK' (Double Income, No Kids) life—which Hui had long idealised and believed would ease the pressure of living in Beijing—was unacceptable to both him and his parents. From the moment Hui turned 25, well-meaning family members never hesitated to point out that her 'most fertile years' were quickly drying up. Eventually, Hui relented, giving birth to a baby girl at 28, a year after her marriage. 'It's fulfilling an obligation,' she quietly noted.

Sitting among a small group of women in an infertility clinic in Lucknow, India, Amrita (a pseudonym), a Sikh woman, explained to us: 'Whatever happens, the one who has nobody—' She trailed off and then started again: 'To become a mother is the most important job. Outsiders say: "That poor lady." The one who doesn't have any children learns what their importance is.' The other women around her nodded

in agreement. They understood the criticism women endured for being childless, not only from family members, but also from more distant relatives, neighbours, and even strangers.

Stories such as these remind us that childbearing stands at the intersection of the biological and the social, the personal and the political (Almeling 2015; Ginsburg and Rapp 1991). How individuals make decisions about parenthood—and the meanings they attach to children—reflects a society's deeply rooted norms about gender and family. This is what we tend to forget when we discuss demographic trends in the world's two most populated countries: China and India.

In January 2023, China reported its first population decline in more than six decades: a shrinkage of 850,000 people. The last time the country saw a drop in its population was 1961, three years into the famine ensuing from the Great Leap Forward. The United Nations estimates that in April 2023, India has traded places with China to become the world's most populous country (United Nations 2023). Each home to more than 1.4 billion people, China and India have long conjured images of crowdedness. Discussions of the two countries' populations are often preoccupied with the issue of size, with alarms going off for both growth and decline. But what are the stakes in asking whether they have too many or too few people?

Population Governance in Contemporary China

In China, population planning has been a crucial part of the Party-State's political calculations for decades now (Greenhalgh 2008; Wang et al. 2013). Despite a sharp decline in China's total fertility rate (TFR) throughout the 1970s, in 1980, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) instituted the One-Child Policy in the hope of producing a population size most optimal for jumpstarting economic development and fuelling the country's rise in the global order (Greenhalgh 2008; Whyte et al. 2015). China's TFR has stayed below the replacement level since the early 1990s (Cai 2008; World Bank 2023). In recent years, as the Party-State grew increasingly concerned about the adverse implications of China's rapid population ageing and diminishing demographic dividend, population governance has taken a sharp pro-natalist turn.

The One-Child Policy that has left indelible marks on China's family structure and population sex ratio is gone. In 2016, the Party-State sanctioned a second child for all married heterosexual couples in mainland China, and the quota was increased to three children in 2021. Local governments have since been rolling out a variety of measures to incentivise births—from extending maternity leave and promising cash benefits to vowing to provide easier childcare access. In this vein, in May 2023, the China Family Planning Association (CFPA), a 'people's organisation' under the CCP's leadership tasked with promoting family

planning, announced a 20-city pilot program aimed at promoting 'new-era marriage and childbearing cultures' to create a 'childbearing-friendly society' (see CFPA 2023).

Reproductive Autonomy in the Shadow of the Patriarchy

From the beginning of the One-Child Policy to its nationwide relaxation since 2016, population governance in China is rooted in a quantitative vision: counting humans and engineering a population size that will best achieve the Party-State's political and economic objectives. On one hand, extensive scholarly and journalistic writing has documented the gendered abuse and infringements of people's right to have children under the draconian One-Child Policy (for a review of the literature, see Whyte et al. 2015). On the other, the relaxations of birth quotas and the myriad new incentives for births have ushered in an alliance between a newly pro-natalist state and entrenched patriarchal familial demands. Just like Hui, many women are viscerally aware of such expectations from their families of timely marriage and childbearing. Biting back their hesitancy and mixed feelings, they sometimes view having one child as the 'natural next step' after marriage—an obligatory act that will 'complete' the marriage and transform the couple into a 'real' family (Zhou 2019).

But what is a 'real' family, and who can or cannot be a part of it? How does the imaginary of an 'ideal' Chinese family end up marginalising some people? Whereas for some Chinese women, like Hui, mother-hood has become an obligation that is nearly impossible to avoid, for others—especially those existing outside the institution of heterosexual marriage—it is a right that has long remained elusive. Heterosexual marriage continues to be regarded as the necessary precondition for childbearing and the foundation of a family in China. Unmarried women encounter persistent challenges in accessing assisted reproductive technology, like egg freezing, and maternity benefits. Even among highly educated young urban Chinese women today, non-marriage unions, such as cohabitation, continue to be viewed with apprehension—as carrying distinct gendered risks and stigma (Zhou 2022a).

At the same time, for all the clamour surrounding China's population decline, LGBTQ+ people—and their desire for family and rights in parenthood—have been rendered largely invisible. Recent years have witnessed unrelenting crackdowns on LGBTQ+ activism, spaces, and lives in China (see also Wang's op-ed in the current issue). Marriage and family are synonymous with heterosexuality. In this sense, while the Chinese Party-State is incentivising births, only one kind of sex is allowed. National data from throughout the 2010s show that about 80 per cent of the Chinese public believes that same-sex sexual behaviour is always or mostly wrong (Zhou 2022b).

India's Ambivalent Reproductive Governance

In India today, reproductive policies enable fertility choices. Policy has taken different guises since the 1950s, when India first instituted family planning programs aimed at reducing the birthrate; today, a wide range of contraceptives are widely available on the market. Some forms of contraception can also be obtained for free or at a reduced cost in government health facilities. Abortion has been legal since 1971 and it is readily provided, with little debate about the issue except for sex-selective abortion, which has been a common practice among people seeking sons. Diagnosing foetal sex has been illegal since 1994, although the law has been difficult to enforce and there have been repeated modifications to further discourage the practice (Ram 2001; Singh 2018; Sreenivas 2021).

Since 2005, government programs have been encouraging hospital deliveries—for instance, by providing cash subventions, which has led to dramatic increases in people giving birth in hospitals rather than at home, particularly in rural areas, where nearly 70 per cent of India's people live (Unnithan 2019). Infertility treatments, including assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and other specialised procedures, are available, even though clinics offering these tend to be clustered in larger urban areas and in private facilities, creating financial and other barriers for the less well-to-do.

There are no national policies regulating births, but some states have enacted limits on access to elected office or social support programs based on the number of children, barring people with more than two children from running for office or receiving welfare, such as subsidised food. Other states have proposed such policies, but ultimately abandoned them after public protest. Policies shape what services are available, where, and how much they cost, but cultural and familial perceptions of appropriate reproduction are at least as important as policy in the everyday dimensions of reproduction, and very often what others will think or say weighs heavily on individual decisions.

The idea of 'population' still resonates powerfully with many people in India and elsewhere in the world. India has long been labelled a crowded country, with many often wrongly attributing its scarcity of food and water, ecological damage, and economic deprivation to the large numbers of people who call the country home. India's total land area is much smaller than China's, so, in comparison, there are more people sharing less space. Stories that focus on the country's high population, as well as those that address ethically troublesome practices—such as India's rise as a destination for foreigners seeking children through transnational gestational surrogacy services that were once provided by Indian clinics (Deomampo 2016; Majumdar 2018; Pande 2014)—may divert attention from other reproductive experiences. For example, India is also home to millions of people who experience infertility problems, such as Amrita and her companions at the infertility

clinic discussed above. Since India banned transnational surrogacy and the increase in awareness of assisted reproductive technologies, more domestic stories about the inequalities and inequities of surrogacy and other experiences with infertility are beginning to be heard (Majumdar 2022; Pande 2021; Singh 2014).

Reproductive Decisions between Control and Autonomy

A focus on numbers overshadows the personal and familial dynamics that influence fertility, including the timing of marriage, birth, and spacing between births, as well as underlying desires to create a new social role for oneself such as that of 'mother', or to fulfil other expectations of one's own or family members, such as the longing for sons. Although it is difficult to track infertility in India numerically because of the attached stigma and lack of data from large-scale studies, estimates have suggested that more than 18 million couples are affected by this in the country (Ganguly and Unisa 2010). The (un)availability of infertility treatment, financial challenges, intrafamilial dynamics, as well as social perceptions shape the decisions of people like Amrita and can limit their options.

In our interviews, Indian women seeking infertility treatment talked about wanting children not only for themselves, but also for their extended families. In cases of secondary infertility, women talked about wanting to give their existing child a sibling. Some researchers argue that the spectre of infertility looms large over decisions about the timing of marriage and reproduction because of the stigma associated with remaining childless, especially for women (Unnithan 2019). Many Indians I have met in the more than 15 years since I started field research learned about the advanced biomedical infertility services available mainly through private clinics because of movie stars' stories of IVF and surrogacy or through media accounts of foreign individuals and couples seeking infertility treatment in India because of prohibitively high costs or restrictive laws in their home countries.

Even though many Indians have embraced the idea of smaller families, living as a single person, living married life without children, or using non-normative family-making strategies such as adoption, these remain transgressive (Bhargava 2005; Lamb 2022). Experiences of infertility and involuntary childlessness have all too often been left out of stories of lower-income, higher-fertility countries and accounts that ignore the perspectives of people marginalised because of their class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity, rendering these categories what researchers have called the 'invisible infertile' (Fledderjohann and Barnes 2018).

While providing universal infertility treatment has been identified as a global need for nearly three decades, few countries have reached that goal. In India, the infertility of people marginalised due to their religious, caste, or class identities remains largely invisible and, for many

people, unimaginable (Singh 2020). Studying fertility and infertility ideologies and experiences through the lens of popular culture and everyday life shows the nuances of reproductive life in India beyond statistical reports (Singh 2017). Policy that takes all reproductive experiences seriously can contribute to increasing reproductive autonomy, even when women consider the desires of other family members while making decisions about their own bodies.

Finding the Individual in the Numbers

In short, conversations that overwhelmingly focus on problematising population size miss the mark, glossing over questions about reproductive autonomy—or the lack thereof. As individuals are being flattened and reduced to numbers, largely swept into the shadows are people's—especially women's—everyday struggles and negotiations for the right to both have and *not* have children. In China, left uninterrogated are the heteronormative assumptions baked into population governance about what an 'ideal' family should look like or how 'good Chinese women' should behave. In India, continued emphasis on reducing fertility hinders the full realisation of fertility desires, even when these are about having small families, especially among members of groups marginalised because of socio-religious status or fertility struggles, within or beyond heteropatriarchal norms.

In its 2023 State of World Population report, the United Nations Population Fund recommends that people and policymakers ask whether and to what extent women can make their own decisions about reproduction (UNFPA 2023: 4). Forty-four per cent of women around the world cannot decide autonomously about their own health care, sex, or contraception. Nearly half of pregnancies are unintended. Treatment options for infertility remain out of reach for much of the world's population.

According to the population projections from the United Nations (2023), India's population matched and then surpassed the population of mainland China in April 2023. As the title of the 'world's most populous country' changes hands, it is critical to not miss the individuals in the numbers—that is, to assure people of their rights to work towards the families they wish for and the tools to help them along the way, offering a path to brighter possibilities for the future, in India, China, and elsewhere. ∎

COLUMNS

Notebook. PC: @gaaalen (CC), Flickr.com.

Doing Fieldwork in China During and Beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Study

Xiao TAN, Nahui ZHEN, Leiheng WANG, and Yue ZHAO

The Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for those conducting fieldwork in China. To understand how the situation has shifted, we collected firsthand accounts from internationally based China specialists, showcasing the difficulties they encountered and the strategies they used to cope. We also obtained insights from scholars based in China, which provided valuable perspectives on the changing fieldwork environment in the country. By reflecting on these findings, we aim to support a smoother transition for researchers looking to resume their fieldwork-based research in China in the post-pandemic era and beyond.

In their influential book on doing fieldwork in China, Heimer and Thøgersen (2006: 1) describe the experience as 'eye-opening but sometimes also deeply frustrating'. Indeed, while fieldwork provides an essential foundation for understanding Chinese politics and society, it also poses significant challenges that demand careful consideration. These challenges have been widely recognised and include, most notably, the heavy reliance on partner institutions and personal relationships (关系) for access to research objects, as well as managing the ever-changing political risks (or red lines) in an authoritarian context (Glasius et al. 2018; Gold et al. 2002;

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	10	48
Male	11	52
Ethnicity, internationally based researchers		
Chinese	5	50
Non-Chinese	5	50
Ethnicity, China-based researchers		
Chinese	11	100
Career stage		
PhD	2	10
Early career (0–5 years' research experience since the awarding of a PhD)	9	43
Middle career (5–15 years' research experience since the awarding of a PhD)	5	24
Late career (15+ years' research experience since the awarding of a PhD)	5	24

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interview/survey sample

Heimer and Thøgersen 2006). Understandably, these challenges vary considerably across disciplines and research topics and are further shaped by researchers' different positionalities (Berlin 2019; Cui 2014; Zhao 2017).

Before the outbreak of Covid-19, China specialists were already grappling with the growing sensitivity of the Chinese political environment (Harlan 2019), which not only presented challenges in acquiring data but also entangled researchers in a multitude of ethical issues professionally, personally, and politically, as summarised by Alpermann (2022). In this already challenging context, the pandemic introduced new layers of difficulty. In addition to the health risks, China's extended zero-Covid policy, which remained in place until December 2022, significantly limited researchers' access to field sites and institutions.

Moreover, the continued tightening of ideological control, coupled with the increasingly strained relationships between China and many Western countries since the onset of the pandemic, has further complicated the situation.

Against this backdrop, we—a team of early-career China scholars based in Australia—sought to explore how the pandemic has affected the fieldwork and research of internationally based China specialists. We aimed to explore the challenges of conducting fieldwork and the tactics used to manage them. We were also keen to understand how the domestic academic environment in China has evolved over the past three years for those conducting social science research, fieldwork, and engaging in international collaborations. In this essay, we summarise and reflect on our findings and hope to contribute to a smoother

transition for scholars looking to resume their field-work research in China as the country reopens its borders.

Methodology

This project grew out of a workshop called 'Fieldwork in a Time of Covid', organised by Emeritus Professor Michael Webber at the University of Melbourne on 22 July 2021. The workshop brought together scholars from the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong, and mainland China who shared a common interest in exploring strategies for research in or on China during and after the pandemic. Using the key themes identified during the workshop as a starting point, we launched a research project funded by the University of Melbourne's China Engagement Seed Grant. Through this project, we aimed to learn from China specialists' firsthand experiences, knowledge, and insights.

We used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, supplemented by participants' written responses to our survey questions. Between October 2022 and February 2023, we interviewed 21 China specialists—10 internationally (six in Australia and four in other countries) and 11 based in China. To ensure diversity in our sample, we selected participants from our research team's professional network, with a focus on research-led universities in Australia and China. We balanced gender, ethnicity, and career stage, with a particular emphasis on including early-career researchers (see Table 1 for details). We also aimed to include interviewees from a range of social science disciplines that utilise fieldwork as a core method of inquiry in their China research, including geography, sociology, political science, public policy and administration, and communications (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Thurston and Pasternak 2019).

To gain a better understanding of the fieldwork experiences of PhD researchers, we organised a workshop and an essay competition in October 2021 and late 2022, respectively. During the workshop, four doctoral students shared their experiences of conducting fieldwork during the pandemic. The theme of the essay competition was 'Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights' and we received submissions from eight PhD students, who wrote about their experiences conducting fieldwork in contemporary China (for the winning essays, see Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies 2022).

Results from Internationally Based China Specialists

1.   Concerns and Difficulties

Except for the postgraduate researchers, at the time of our survey, none of the participants had travelled to China since 2020. This was primarily due to the pandemic and China's zero-Covid policy, which either restricted physical access or made the trip too costly and risky to undertake. The limited flight options, health risks, long and uncertain quarantine times, high costs and risks of travel, reliance on health codes in China, and caring responsibilities were cited as concerns for doing fieldwork while China maintained its zero-Covid policy.

The urgency to conduct fieldwork varied according to career stage, with most graduate researchers needing to complete it in a timely manner. One of the PhD students we interviewed and all participants in the two events we organised aimed at PhD students had persisted with fieldwork despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. The process was fraught with difficulties and anxiety, and several uncertainties brought about by Covid-19 were mentioned repeatedly: doubts about the feasibility of and opportunity to stick to original research methods, increasingly stringent ethical scrutiny from affiliated institutions due to the higher risks in the field, frequent cancellations of flights, and changes to travel and accommodation arrangements both in China and elsewhere.

Drawing on their extended observations, our interviewees expressed strong concerns about the political situation in China and, to a lesser extent, the state of relations between it and major Western countries. Some of the more experienced academics nostalgically recalled the 'good old days' when physical distance was the primary barrier. Some respondents also pointed out how the line between sensitive and non-sensitive research topics has become increasingly blurred over time, resulting in the formal suspension of collaborations due to political and safety concerns.

These concerns appear to be particularly prominent among non-Chinese respondents. As one of our non-Chinese interviewees stated:

More barriers started to appear around 2016 when being a foreigner really became a problem for interviewing local officials, at the county level or above, or doing research on particular topics—namely, the poverty alleviation campaign … I am also deeply concerned about the political situation in China, the state of Australia–China relations, recent arbitrary detentions and harassment of journalists and academics. I don't think I would feel safe in China right now as an Australian.

The increasingly negative view of China on the international stage has further complicated the situation. As noted by another non-Chinese interviewee:

In Germany, in a major poll from November 2022, China was seen as even less trustworthy than Russia—despite the latter being omnipresent in the media as an aggressor in Ukraine. This has led to an increasingly caustic debate among German China scholars on whether or not to continue research in China if that requires working with the Party in some way or another.

In addition to Covid-19 and associated political challenges, the university system seems to have added another layer of constraints. Researchers in precarious positions beyond the PhD stage faced problems due to their employment status and performance expectations. As one elaborated:

I've been juggling multiple jobs to meet deadlines and maintain various contracts. Given these demands, conducting fieldwork is simply not a priority for me unless it is specifically required by an employer. If the goal is to build my research profile, fieldwork is both time-consuming and [the] outcomes uncertain, so I'd rather postpone it.

Those in a tenured position also expressed frustration. As a mid-career tenured academic put it:

Unlike the North American system, where academics are typically paid for nine months and are then free to arrange their time for the remaining three, the Australian academic system expects us to balance teaching, engagement, and research. In the context of research, productivity is expected. However, the resource-intensive nature of fieldwork, requiring both time and money, can create tension. To be candid, I've been unable to conduct extensive fieldwork since completing my PhD. Before Covid-19, I only did it during short trips and often during my own vacation time while visiting family and friends in China.

Moving up the career ladder, some late-career academics are challenged by their overwhelming leadership and service responsibilities.

2. Coping Strategies

Depending on the discipline, research topic, available funding, and individual networks and skillsets, researchers have adopted one or more of the following strategies for fieldwork research:

1. Continue fieldwork by collaborating with partners or agencies in China, which typically involves (re)framing research questions and/or adjusting research design to align with China's domestic policies and political narratives.

2. Temporarily cease data collection while utilising data collected in previous fieldwork in China.

3. Shift the research focus from China's domestic to global processes.

4. Decrease the overall reliance on fieldwork by modifying research topics or adopting alternative research methods, such as replacing interview analysis with policy and digital data-based analysis.

The scholars who demonstrated the greatest resilience in terms of continuing fieldwork despite Covid-related disruptions are those who managed

to leverage their previous collaboration with China-based partners. In these cases, the interviewees hired local assistants—through either their China-based partners or PhD students conducting fieldwork in China—to collect data on their behalf. Access to informants was primarily supported by China-based collaborators and, in some cases, the assistants' own networks. Access to informants has predominantly relied on the support of China-based collaborators and, in some cases, the assistants' personal networks. Research carried out within these teams often necessitates adjustments in terms of questions or design. For instance, some interviewees have reported changing their research location due to Covid-19 restrictions or the resources available through their research partners. During interviews, they have omitted certain questions when faced with sensitivity issues raised by their sources. They have also explored alternative public sources of data whenever possible.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not all researchers have had the same level of success. The heightened political sensitivity of certain topics has presented significant challenges for some. Several interviewees shared instances of rejection by long-standing collaborators due to the perceived sensitivity of their subject. Research projects that are highly prioritised by the central government—such as China's Covid-19 restrictions, poverty alleviation, and the Three Gorges Dam—often trigger heightened vigilance at the local level. In such cases, researchers have had limited flexibility in shifting their research questions and design, as conducting research on these topics was generally considered too risky.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to these challenges. For example, two of our interviewees attempted to study poverty alleviation during the Covid-19 pandemic—a politically sensitive topic. While one faced outright rejection from local officials despite having some connections, the other was able to conduct interviews by joining a Chinese research team that had stronger local connections and focused on a closely related but more positively viewed topic: rural revitalisation. By aligning her research with the Chinese team's project and reframing her approach, she was able to continue her research.

Indeed, many of our interviewees have noted that joining a Chinese scholar's research project and conducting fieldwork together are potentially the most effective approach in the current environment. They attach high importance to professional networks—whether with local authorities, Chinese partner universities, or individual academics—for the successful completion of fieldwork in China.

While the collaboration-based approach is appealing and effective, it is not without its limitations. As discussed earlier, the growing sensitivity of certain research topics has led to the cessation of some collaborations to avoid risks to the researchers, their partners, and sources. Even when local agencies were involved during the pandemic, there were many Covid-related limitations, such as when and how far people could travel. In addition to concerns about the political and physical risks, an expanded ethical procedure may be required, such as training third-party individuals on ethical matters and ensuring the confidentiality of interview material (Glasius et al. 2018; Naufel and Beike 2013). Moreover, relying on China-based partners for fieldwork can raise concerns about power dynamics, leading to potential ethical issues. As elaborated by one of our interviewees: 'Research by our Chinese colleagues is an option but creates a strange scenario in which they may become service providers or contractors for Western scholars. In other words, it may create imbalances of power.'

For others, relying on fieldwork conducted by others has never been desirable; the value of fieldwork lies beyond simple data collection. They felt that without travelling to the field sites, personally participating, and observing the environment, researchers could miss important insights and contextual elements essential for stimulating ideas and revealing research questions.

Results from China-Based Specialists

1. Changing Environment

The difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic have also frustrated researchers based in China. The high level of uncertainty about which areas will become 'high risk' and therefore require prolonged quarantine made it difficult to determine when and where to conduct fieldwork. As highlighted by several of our

interviewees based in China, many of their research projects are commissioned by the Chinese Government. In these instances, the government demonstrates a vested interest in investigating issues and provides substantial support, including data provision, interview coordination, and assistance with accommodation and transportation. However, many of these projects were suspended because of local Covid restrictions or the heightened focus of government officials on pandemic control efforts.

This was further complicated by individual localities and institutions implementing additional requirements to minimise risk in response to the political priority of maintaining the zero-Covid policy (that is, local governments taking excessive policy steps, 层层加码). According to one interviewee:

> [W]hen my city's policy was to quarantine for three days [after returning from another place], my university required an additional 10 days' quarantine before we were allowed to enter campus, which further drove up the time cost of any trip … And we had to report every trip in our department's WeChat group [which was not necessary before Covid], but I wasn't willing to disclose my research plan to every colleague.

Another interviewee explained that their research project involving middle-school students was suspended for three years due to the strict policies around school visits during the pandemic. They were refused access to schools, which prevented them from engaging with the students necessary for their project.

Political sensitivity and risks were considered the top concerns alongside the uncertainty and risks brought about by Covid-19. While criticism of China's political system has traditionally been considered a red line, our interviewees noted that research on more peripheral political topics—such as governance, rural policies, and public opinion—has also come under greater scrutiny. Given the international criticism of China's zero-Covid policy and its politicisation, researching pandemic-related topics could also be considered sensitive and risky. Importantly, guidance on which research topics are too sensitive to implement is never clear. As one interviewee shared:

> China is currently a 'risky society'. By risky, I mean the risks around both Covid and research topics … The key is that no-one knows where and when the danger will come from, just like buying a lottery ticket, so everyone needs to be very vigilant in managing their own risks.

In this challenging context, censorship and self-censorship have, unsurprisingly, become more widespread and rigorous. However, given the Covid-19 restrictions and blurred boundaries, discrepancies in censorship practices remain significant. At the institutional level, censorship and self-censorship seem to be stricter in more remote localities and universities, but individual perspectives vary. Some interviewees suggested avoiding fieldwork altogether, noting that 'in the ideological sphere, China is essentially "at war", so fieldwork is not welcome and should be avoided'. Others remained optimistic and believed fieldwork was not as difficult as imagined and could resume once the pandemic was brought under control.

Attitudes towards international collaborations among institutions and academics were also characterised by ambiguity and conflicting policies. While some institutions cautioned their faculty to be wary of international collaboration during the pandemic, others continued to promote collaboration with international universities, particularly those that are highly ranked. The motivation for this often stemmed from the aspiration to enhance the Chinese university's ranking, as international collaboration continues to be valued in ranking systems. Some institutions offered incentives such as project-based funding for international collaboration to encourage partnerships. However, such collaboration can be impeded by review processes involving endless paperwork and complex intra-institutional politics that can lead to censorship. In some cases, career disincentives also exist. According to one interviewee:

> The policies around collaborations are conflicting at my university. In my contract, research collaborations are encouraged. But if I collaborate with a scholar from a different university but am not the first author [on a collaborative publication], the publication wouldn't be counted in my annual performance review.

Given these challenges, several participants suggested it was better to avoid formal partnerships and rely on individual relationships for collaboration.

One topic that emerged from our interviews was the changing attitude towards China studies. In recent years, there has been a trend towards developing China's own knowledge (主体性知识) on China, which involves rejecting Western social science's views on China and encouraging social science researchers to publish more in Chinese. This trend has been accompanied by incentive structure adjustments at some institutions. As explained by one interviewee:

> Three years ago, my university still highly valued English SSCI [Social Sciences Citation Index] journals, but that's no longer the case. Things haven't changed much in natural sciences— Nature and Science are still the best. But in social sciences, the change is apparent. There are no longer additional rewards for publishing SSCI papers.

For individual scholars, this trend could suggest that collaborating with international scholars has become less desirable.

2.   Suggestions for Resuming Fieldwork in China

When asked for suggestions on how internationally based China specialists can resume fieldwork in China, China-based respondents agreed that the best-case scenario would be to form a joint investigation team to pursue topics of mutual interest. If this is not feasible, they advised researchers to leverage their personal and professional connections (that is, their 'social capital') to gain access to fieldwork opportunities. If possible, it would be best to avoid formal processes that could trigger the complex institutional review procedures that can lead to censorship. Other strategies, such as building trust before conducting fieldwork and recruiting local assistants, have been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Glasius et al. 2018; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Thurston and Pasternak 2019) and will not be discussed in detail here.

Looking Ahead

Overall, our research participants shared a view that conducting fieldwork in China has become increasingly difficult over the past decade. These observations align with previous research that has painted a rather bleak picture of researching in China (Harlan 2019). Covid-19 has not only introduced new, pandemic-specific risks and restrictions, but also exacerbated pre-existing challenges—notably, by further narrowing the political space for social research within China (Krause et al. 2021; Woodworth et al. 2022). Additionally, negative views of China on the international stage have led to more cautious and suspicious attitudes towards conducting research in and about the country.

A crucial theme that emerged from our research was a shared sense of inadequate institutional support. Unfortunately, some universities have created obstacles rather than providing much-needed assistance to their students and staff. Many PhD students have had to persist through the research process with little guidance or support from their institutions and, in some cases, they have been burdened by rigid ethical requirements. Researchers beyond the PhD stage face challenges such as excessive demands for research productivity and other responsibilities—all within the context of the neoliberal logic that governs universities today (Franceschini and Loubere 2022). These challenges ultimately limit their opportunities and ability to conduct fieldwork.

Despite the challenges brought about by Covid-19, we were impressed by the extraordinary resilience of our participants, who adapted to the significant obstacles posed by the pandemic to continue their research. As all participants emphasised, connections and research collaborations with China-based partners proved to be the most effective and resilient strategies in this extremely challenging context. However, the space for international collaborations in China is narrowing, as China-based colleagues point to a shifting emphasis on developing China's own knowledge and a stronger tendency towards risk-avoidance due to the uncertainties of conducting social research involving international partners.

Looking ahead, with China lifting its travel restrictions in December 2022, travelling to China for fieldwork is now feasible again. However, the factors discussed in this essay, including the growing sensitivity of research topics and ambiguous attitudes towards international collaboration, are expected to have long-term effects. These factors highlight the need for strategic and thoughtful approaches when conducting fieldwork in China and (re)establishing international collaborations with Chinese partners. Ultimately, this will be a challenging yet exciting rebuilding process.

Figure 1: The famous billboard in Shenzhen that reads: 'Time is money, efficiency is life.' PC: Lu.

Cheers and Tears

Life Stories of Highly Educated Women in Shenzhen

MENG Meiyun

This essay sheds light on the struggles that lie beneath the successes achieved by highly educated women through migration to Shenzhen. By exploring the life stories of three women, the article uncovers how these individuals navigated the obstacles imposed by patriarchal norms, which hindered their pursuit of neoliberal values such as self-improvement, competition, and individual responsibility. It also unveils the 'conditional' opportunities for women who pursued aspirations in Shenzhen, inviting readers to explore the hidden complexities beneath the city's rapid development from a small border town to the 'Chinese Silicon Valley'.

Shenzhen, the 'Silicon Valley of China', embodies rapid development and the profound challenges it brings. Harvey (2005: 1) describes China's market-oriented reforms as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' and points out that China is the outcome of a 'particular kind of neoliberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control' (Harvey 2006: 34). Shenzhen's extraordinary transformation from a small border town with a population of 300,000 in 1980 to today's vibrant centre of creativity and entrepreneurship is often held up as an economic miracle driven by neoliberal globalisation (Keane and Zhao 2012). Undoubtedly, the city's rapid growth has sown in its residents the seeds of neoliberal values, emphasising profit, competition,

self-improvement, and a strong work ethic (Gao 2021). However, behind the facade of this economic miracle, Shenzhen grapples with the dark side of the neoliberal principles it has embraced, where the pursuit of financial gain and social recognition is also known to manipulate collective emotions and shape individuals' aspirations and desires (Anderson 2012; Gao 2020). For instance, rural migrant workers are subject to extreme exploitation in the workplace to the point of being driven to self-harm and suicide (Pun and Chan 2013; Pun 2005).

The experiences of female workers in Shenzhen navigating migration and integration into the labour force present us with a nuanced picture of both the opportunities and the obstacles these women face. While some rural women who move to Shenzhen manage to find economic opportunities and empowerment as *dagongmei* (打工妹, 'factory girls'), challenges persist, and patriarchal constraints often linger, as some of these women did not choose to migrate in the first place and are compelled to remit earnings back home to male family members (Pun 2005; Han 2021). Unravelling the intricacies of these intersecting experiences is vital to understanding Shenzhen's development and the challenges of its neoliberal globalisation (Gao et al. 2021).

This essay delves into the experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen, exploring the complex relationship between the promises of neoliberalism and the constraints it imposes on women's agency. While existing literature has primarily focused on rural women navigating patriarchal constraints through migration to Shenzhen (Pun and Chan 2013), this study shifts the spotlight to the life stories of three generations of highly educated women in the city, revealing the diverse realities they face in pursuit of their aspirations. By analysing the various factors contributing to their experiences, such as Shenzhen's evolving socioeconomic landscape (Gao et al. 2021), gender norms rooted in Chinese tradition (Pun 2005; Pun and Chan 2013), and migration dynamics (Qian and He 2012), we gain insights into the intergenerational differences of these women's life journeys in this southern metropolis. Moreover, by uncovering the complex interplay of individual agency, societal expectations, and the gendered forces shaping these three women's lives, this essay aims to shed light on a broader discourse about gender inequality within the context of internal migration in China.

A Trailblazer and an Outsider: Lu's Story

At the age of 17, Lu (who was 57 at the time of my interview in 2020) left Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province, to pursue higher education at a university in Nanjing. As one of only 10 female architecture students in a department of 64, Lu excelled in her studies. Under the state system of unified job allocation, which guaranteed lifelong employment and cradle-to-grave welfare, she received job offers in several places, including Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen. In 1980 Shenzhen was at the beginning of its trajectory of economic development and was just a small border town with a population of less than half a million (Ding and Warner 2001), so Lu made a bold choice when she accepted a position as an architect there. Both the attractive salary she was offered and the city's potential influenced Lu's decision. She knew that Shenzhen's political role as a test field for China's Reform and Opening Up policies would provide opportunities for highly educated individuals, promising high salaries and career growth. She also recognised the city's significance for economic development and urbanisation, which further motivated her to move there.

After three years in her assigned position, Lu's career took an unexpected turn. She decided to venture into entrepreneurship with her line manager, becoming one of many trailblazers 'jumping out' from a state-owned company. Her new endeavour was very successful—a success that was closely intertwined with the rapid urban development of Shenzhen. Through her architecture company and multiple projects, she contributed to the boom in residential construction for the growing influx of migrants.

Lu's migration to Shenzhen occurred at an opportune moment, aligning with the city's burgeoning economy and relatively affordable housing prices. As a highly educated individual, she capitalised on these favourable conditions and managed to acquire 10 properties in the city before the age of thirty. Such a feat has become nearly impossible for white-collar workers in Shenzhen, as they would need to save their entire salary for about 40 years to purchase a single property today (Tong 2021). Lu's story exemplifies how highly educated women born in the 1960s could attain unique opportunities for career advancement

and financial success through migration to Shenzhen, leveraging the city's transformation during that early period.

By embracing neoliberal ideals such as competition, self-improvement, and individual responsibility, Lu achieved remarkable success, surpassing her peers in state-owned companies, who were still saving for their first homes. Embracing the popular mantra in Shenzhen 'Time is money, efficiency is life' (时间就是金钱, 效率就是生命) (see Figure 1), Lu positioned herself as an agent of her own success, leveraging the dynamic environment of the city to make a significant impact. However, her journey was not without challenges, as it was then uncommon for women to assume leadership roles in her field (as it still is; see, for instance, Tsang et al. 2011).

For instance, despite being a founder of the company, Lu encountered difficulties having her opinions acknowledged and respected by her male co-founder. She said: 'I felt that, even as a co-founder of the company, the other, male, co-founder would often dismiss my opinions without much consideration. He believed accepting me as a woman and business partner was already a generous leadership gesture.'

Lu's experiences of discrimination by her co-founder exemplify the hidden struggles of highly educated women as they pursue neoliberal success by leaving state-owned companies and starting their own businesses. They also highlight the complex relationship between gender norms rooted in China's patriarchal traditions and Shenzhen's neoliberal ideals. While women represent a significant portion (about 25 per cent) of entrepreneurs in China, they often are stereotyped as lacking skills, capital, and networks, or are deemed too bold for leadership roles (China Daily 2015). Moreover, despite gaining access to the entrepreneurial field, women often encounter the glass ceiling and potentially unequal treatment that limit their ascent to more powerful positions. Lu's experience of being a company founder yet having her opinions dismissed exemplifies the systemic gender bias that persists in Shenzhen (Luo and Chan 2021; Han 2021). While market-oriented reforms may have offered surface-level opportunities for Lu's career advancement and enhanced her agency, it was not enough to eradicate deep-rooted gender biases.

Lu's story is representative of the challenges faced by professional women born in the 1960s in pursuing opportunities in Shenzhen. As the city rapidly developed under the Reform and Opening policy, it became an enticing destination for highly educated individuals, offering new policies and support for their career pursuits. In contrast, the next story showcases how highly educated women born in the 1970s leveraged internal migration as a powerful tool to escape patriarchal norms in their hometowns while striving for success in Shenzhen.

Following, Struggling, and Thriving: Chen's Story

Born and raised in a small town in Jiangxi Province, Chen (48 years old at the time of my interview in 2020) migrated to Shenzhen in 1999, following her husband. Her motivation for leaving her hometown was not only the promising future that Shenzhen seemed to offer but also her desire to shield her daughter from the pervasive influence of the traditional culture that prioritised male offspring (重男轻女) and dowries (彩礼文化) in her community (Murphy et al. 2011; Li and Li 2021).

Like Lu, Chen faced challenges and gender bias as a young female civil engineer in a male-dominated industry. During the initial phase of her career, when attending business dinners alongside her husband, she was often referred to as 'Mrs Li' (李太太). This title diminished her role and opinions in negotiations, as she was identified as subordinate to her husband. However, Chen took charge and actively facilitated collaborations between her company, real estate firms, and the local government. She gradually earned the title 'Boss Chen' (陈老板) by reinforcing her leadership and assertiveness in the industry.

Chen's transition from being identified as 'Mrs Li' to 'Boss Chen' symbolises the empowerment of women within the context of internal migration in China (see, for instance, Seeberg and Luo 2018; Sun 2016). Her journey created opportunities for professional growth and challenged the patriarchal norms that commodify women. Despite facing initial marginalisation, Chen's success highlights the potential for

women to assume leadership positions and make meaningful contributions in male-dominated industries. Like Lu, Chen's achievements were accompanied by 'invisible' battles and negotiations specific to women, demonstrating her resilience and ability to thrive in Shenzhen's business realm.

Chen expanded her company in 2004, coinciding with Shenzhen's introduction of new preferential policies benefiting highly educated migrants (Wang 2022). In 2009, Wang Yang, then party secretary of Guangdong Province, introduced the policy known as 'vacating the cage to change the birds' (腾笼换鸟), which aimed to create space for higher-end industries by encouraging the departure of 'low-quality' (低素质) rural migrant workers—thereby raising average 'quality' (素质) as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita—and making way for 'high-quality' talent (Xie and Hu 2009). Embracing this Shenzhen Talent Policy, Chen leveraged her connections and influence to offer employment opportunities and accommodation to 20 highly educated women from her hometown between 2006 and 2015, thus playing a crucial role in her company's transformation from a start-up to a medium-sized enterprise with 80 employees.

Chen's actions were driven not solely by charitable intentions. On the one hand, as an established female entrepreneur, she saw her facilitation of the relocation of highly educated women to Shenzhen as a transformative pathway for them to challenge themselves in the neoliberal labour market and break free from systemic constraints, including patriarchal norms and hierarchical systems in their hometowns. Her efforts became a collective route to empowerment (Sharma and Sudarshan 2010; Moyle et al. 2006). On the other hand, it is important to recognise that her company also benefited from developing its own strategy for talent development through targeted recruitment, which enhanced its reputation as a trustworthy employer and provided an advantage in overcoming intense competition in the local labour market. At the same time, by providing access to Shenzhen's labour market for these women, Chen also introduced them to the intense 'entrepreneurial spirit' of the city, potentially leading to 'new' forms of exploitation engendered by neoliberalism (Anderson 2012).

Chen's journey exemplifies the transformative potential and new challenges brought about by internal migration to Shenzhen compared with the time of Lu's arrival. Leveraging the benefits of Shenzhen's Talent Policy, Chen empowered herself to navigate societal narratives that confine women to subordinate roles and perpetuate patriarchal norms in her hometown (Shen 2016). However, the expansion of her business also foreshadowed the growing number of highly educated individuals in Shenzhen's labour market, which could potentially perpetuate the exploitation and impede the progress of newcomers like Wu—a returned overseas graduate born in the 1990s (90后海归)—as the following story illustrates.

Coming for Fantasy, Leaving for Reality: Wu's Story

Wu (30 years of age at the time of my interview in 2020) recently decided to leave Shenzhen and return to her hometown after struggling for seven years in the city. Her migration history began with her attending a college in Beijing and later pursuing a master's degree in Durham in the United Kingdom. After graduating in 2015, she moved back to China and opted for Shenzhen over her hometown and Beijing. Back then, Shenzhen was undergoing a significant economic transformation that built on the previous policy of 'vacating the cage to change the birds', shifting from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based economy with the aim of becoming China's Silicon Valley (Hu 2019; Chen and Ogan 2017).

Shenzhen seemed an optimal destination because Wu imagined that, as one of the four major cities in mainland China, it would offer her high-salary career opportunities and a metropolitan lifestyle (see Figure 2). In her words:

Shenzhen was an ideal place for me at that time. It was modern, energetic, and close to Hong Kong. I thought I could work with creative young people under the supervision of an open-minded superior. At the same time, I could also frequently visit and enjoy art exhibitions, concerts, and various cultural experiences in Hong Kong. Most importantly, I thought Shenzhen was less bureaucratic than many other Chinese cities.

Figure 2: An example of the metropolitan lifestyle sought by Wu. PC: Wu.

Wu's imagination of Shenzhen as an ideal city illustrates the appeal of the urban 'fantasy' (Tseng 2011) that encompasses a vision of self-improvement. Her aspirations to work with creative individuals in a competency-oriented setting, rather than one reliant on *guanxi* ('personal connections') in her hometown, align with Shenzhen's neoliberal values, such as the idea that effort produces gain. In her imagination, Shenzhen was characterised by a flattened power relationship between superiors and young workers like her, freeing the latter from the hierarchical norms that dominate some bureaucracies. Indeed, during her initial years in the city, Wu found happiness and fulfilment, realising her aspirations, and earning considerably more than her counterparts in her hometown. She also relished the freedom to explore Hong Kong during weekends.

However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 drastically altered her experience. The pandemic and the lockdown measures confined her to a small rented space and she was subjected to the gruelling '996' work schedule (that is, working from nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a week)

due to her lack of seniority—all of which robbed her of the chance for diverse cultural experiences. Simultaneously, the influx of Chinese students returning from abroad undermined her advantage in the local labour market as a highly educated individual with overseas exposure. Shenzhen—one of the top destinations for such returnees who studied in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia—experienced a surge in its labour force for those with comparable educational backgrounds to Wu's (He 2020), which intensified competition within her company. Wu's long work hours and reduced competitiveness showcase the reality of exploitation that lay beneath her initial urban fantasy.

As well as coping with high-intensity work patterns, Wu faced multiple other challenges. She discovered that her anticipated competency-oriented setting was an illusion and her male superior viewed her as a tool rather than an individual worthy of respect. For instance, she was called late at night to accompany male clients for business, which showcased her workplace's gendered power dynamics. Moreover, on her thirtieth birthday, she was labelled a 'leftover

woman' (剩女) by her mother, who urged her to promptly find a husband to avoid missing the ideal time for marriage and pregnancy. However, Wu knew she would struggle to afford homeownership or children's education in Shenzhen, which added to her dilemma. Driven by the urgency to form a family and a sense of impotence amid increasing competition and manipulation, she decided to leave.

Wu's experiences epitomise the exploitation targeting highly educated women in the context of Shenzhen's neoliberal globalisation, which is aggravated by the persistent gender norms of China's patriarchal traditions. The intensified competition and exploitation Wu faced reveal a dark side of the prevailing neoliberal values in Shenzhen, raising questions about whether these women will be the next 'birds' to be 'vacated' to leave space for workers of higher 'quality' (Wang et al. 2009), such as PhD graduates or established researchers (Wang 2022). Moreover, the burden of social expectations and her biological clock (Te Velde and Pearson 2002) weighed heavily on Wu, demanding that she provide comprehensive wellbeing, including high-quality education and living conditions, for her future children. This additional pressure exacerbated the difficulties she encountered. In parallel with the experiences of rural workers in Shenzhen (Pun 2005), highly educated women of Wu's generation face common forms of exploitation, highlighting the entrenchment of gender inequalities and the constriction of women's agency within Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

Making Visible the Tears

By examining the narratives of three generations, this essay highlights the intergenerational differences among highly educated women in Shenzhen. Lu and Chen, representing the post-1960s and post-1970s generations, were drawn to Shenzhen by the promise of high salaries and career opportunities through the Shenzhen Talent Policy. They displayed resilience in navigating gender inequalities that once constrained their aspirations. In contrast, Wu, from the post-1990s generation, was enticed by the allure of a metropolitan lifestyle but faced the darker side of Shenzhen's evolving neoliberal globalisation, with reduced advantages in the labour market and limited agency to address gender inequality.

The analysis of these intergenerational differences reveals several factors perpetuating gender inequality in Shenzhen today. Although higher education was once a significant advantage, the city's rapid economic growth due to neoliberal globalisation (Gao et al. 2021) has led to an influx of highly educated individuals, eroding the previous advantages and intensifying competition in the local labour market. These changes have particularly affected highly educated women of the post-1990s era and beyond, reducing their competitiveness in the labour market and undermining their agency (Ramdas 2012). Additionally, the ingrained gender norms deriving from China's patriarchal traditions impose societal expectations on highly educated women regarding motherhood and childcare. These expectations not only naturally disadvantage them in labour market competition but also affect their ability to negotiate with male partners over the distribution of domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. In particular, the increasing challenges of attaining homeownership limit internal migration for highly educated women in present-day Shenzhen as they find themselves having to navigate gender inequality and pursue successful careers while meeting social expectations. The interplay between entrenched gender norms and competition-driven neoliberal values in Shenzhen perpetuates 'new' forms of exploitation targeting highly educated women, treating them as replaceable agents in an increasingly saturated labour market.

Each generation of highly educated women in Shenzhen has experienced its share of challenges, enduring 'tears' that include exploitation, career bottlenecks, and discrimination, while also celebrating the 'cheers' of achievements such as economic independence, metropolitan lifestyles, and contributing to the wellbeing of their loved ones. Through a comprehensive examination of systemic biases and power dynamics perpetuating gender inequalities, we can develop a greater appreciation of the complexities of gender inequality within Shenzhen's ever-changing social fabric, which can help us create a more inclusive and equitable future for highly educated women in Shenzhen and beyond. ∎

Figure 1: Makers in Chaihuo makerspace, Shenzhen, August 2020. PC: Olivia Yijian Liu.

China's Maker Movement

What Is It and Why Does No-One Talk about It Anymore?

Olivia Yijian LIU

In 2015, the 'maker culture' of individual empowerment and open-source production was elevated as part of China's national economic development strategy of mass entrepreneurship and innovation. Despite the hype, however, the top-down, government-promoted maker movement in China has been in decline since 2017. Drawing on seven months of participant observation as an intern in Shenzhen makerspaces and high-tech start-ups, as well as 95 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021, this essay examines recent developments in China's maker movement and the perceptions, experiences, and negotiations of individual makers in this process, shedding light on the dynamics of entrepreneurship and innovation in China from the bottom up.

I n the spring of 2012, Zhiyi (a pseudonym), the owner of a grocery store in a small village in northern China, decided to move to Shenzhen in search of a job. After holding several temporary positions, he settled on working as a driver. One day, while in his car listening to the radio, he heard William, the founder of Flora Makerspace (both pseudonyms), explaining what a 'makerspace' (创客空间) was. This was how Zhiyi learned about the existence of spaces dedicated to 'makers' (创客)—people who enjoyed engaging in 'hands-on' work and playing with digital technology to realise their ideas and build hardware products (Dougherty 2013; Anderson 2013).

This immediately aroused Zhiyi's interest:

I never liked selling food and drinks, but I needed to make a living. What I really like is engineering. As we sold food, we needed to deal with refrigerators, cold storage, and compressors. I was naturally attracted to these machines … I wanted to learn more from an engineer, but my village was conservative; there was a saying, 'teaching the apprentice starves the teacher' … After I came to Shenzhen, I was disappointed because I could not enter the tech industry with my background … I always imagined that there should be a place for me in Shenzhen. Although I did not understand what a maker or a makerspace was at that time, when I listened to William's radio interview, I immediately felt it was exactly what I wanted. I hurriedly wrote down the phone number of Flora Makerspace and I called them when I got off work … I have since gone there whenever I have time. (Interview, August 2020)

Zhiyi's story illustrates the emergence of China's maker movement. The first makerspaces started appearing in the early 2010s in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing (Xue 2018), but the maker culture of individual empowerment and open-source production remained relatively unknown in China until about 2015. William, a pioneering maker-entrepreneur who often travelled overseas to attend Maker Faires, conventions of do-it-yourself (DIY) enthusiasts initiated by *Make Magazine*, was fascinated by the idea of 'making', and in 2011 established the Flora Makerspace in Shenzhen, so that 'every ordinary person [could] use open-source technologies to create, innovate, and solve the problems around them' (Interview, August 2020). For many grassroots makers, makerspaces provide not only access to machines, components, and tools for prototypes and production, but also an inclusive community space where people with similar hobbies can communicate, learn, share knowledge and skills, and create their own technologies. According to Zhiyi, the time he spent at Flora Makerspace before 2015 was 'pure joy':

The makerspace was very small at that time, only a room of 10 square metres … I often went there to make friends and learn things … I am very grateful to Flora Makerspace, as it offered people the opportunity to participate in free exchange activities. No matter which field or industry you are in, you can exchange ideas, and this breaks the barriers between different industries. Although I was a novice in technology, I had been selling [groceries] for many years, and I also had my expertise. I felt I was being welcomed there. (Interview, August 2020)

The makers one would encounter at Shenzhen's makerspaces were mostly electronics and DIY enthusiasts, who shared a commitment to embracing open-source tools, ideas, knowledge, and product design. They defined themselves by a shared idea of what their technology and production should look like and created out of joy and individual initiative. For example, a maker who was a Beijing opera enthusiast made a music box with opera characters dancing on top, while another with a passion for music created a cosmetic cream box that can record and play hip-hop (see Figures 2 and 3).

Things began to change in 2015, when former premier Li Keqiang officially endorsed the maker culture (State Council 2015a, 2015b). Grassroots makers recall how sudden was the increase in attention, with their status 'elevated' by diktat overnight (Interview with a manager in a Shenzhen-based makerspace, September 2020). But why did the Chinese State decide to promote the maker movement? And how has this endorsement affected it? To address these questions, I relied on semi-structured interviews with makers, technopreneurs, and incubator and makerspace operators in Shenzhen in 2020 and 2021. The names of all interlocutors and makerspaces mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.

I also conducted participant observation as an unpaid intern and volunteer in two Shenzhen makerspaces, which were home to a group of local, returnee, and foreign makers. From July to September 2020, I did a two-month internship at Flora Makerspace, which is owned by high-tech start-up Flora Tech. Both the makerspace and the company were in Shenzhen's Nanshan District, an area with a high concentration of large companies and start-ups. My responsibilities during the internship included research, translation, and assisting others, and I went to the offices of Flora Makerspace or Flora Tech almost daily.

Additionally, from December 2020 to February 2021, while I was doing an internship at another start-up, I often visited the Try-Out Makerspace, in Shen-

Figure 2 (left): A music box made by a maker, May 2021. Figure 3 (right): A hip-hop facial cream made by a maker, July 2020. PC: Olivia Yijian Liu.

zhen's Huaqiangbei Subdistrict, an area famous for its electronics marketplaces where technopreneurs and makers can easily obtain necessary components for their prototypes. Many makers at Try-Out Makerspace referred to it as a 'heaven for electronics'. I assisted the makerspace with their biweekly tech barbecue and other events.

The State-Led Maker Movement

During an official inspection tour in Shenzhen in January 2015, former premier Li Keqiang visited what the state considered important sites of technological innovation, including a makerspace called Firewood Makerspace (柴火创客空间) (see Figure 4). Li lauded Firewood for its entrepreneurial spirit and positive effects on the Chinese economy. In his words, as quoted in the state news media: 'Firewood Makerspace showed the vitality of mass entrepreneurship

and innovation, and such creativity will serve as a lasting engine for China's economic growth in the future' (China Youth Daily 2015). Li asserted that he was a maker himself, and encouraged the grassroots masses to join the maker movement: 'The fire burns high when everybody adds wood to it [众人拾柴火焰高]' (China Youth Daily 2015).

After returning to Beijing, Li immediately turned making into a national economic development strategy, which was later translated into policies centred on 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' (大众创业 万众创新). Numerous policies, initiatives, and programs have been implemented at both national and subnational levels (see, for instance, State Council 2015a, 2015b). In this context, China's maker movement has become part of a larger politico-economic project of grassroots entrepreneurship and innovation aimed at ensuring the country's continuing economic growth and employment (Lindtner 2015, 2020). This agenda is also evident in an announcement by the Shenzhen Science and Technology Innovation Committee (2020):

Figure 4: Photos of Li Keqiang's visit placed at the entrance to Firewood Makerspace, August 2020. PC: Olivia Yijian Liu.

The goal of makerspaces is to lower the threshold of entrepreneurship, improve the innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem, and to stimulate the vitality of innovation and entrepreneurship in society. With their professional services, makerspaces shall encourage entrepreneurs to apply new technologies, develop new products, expand new markets, and cultivate new business formats.

Accordingly, makerspaces have become a means to boost entrepreneurship. For instance, many of the 498 new government-sanctioned national makerspaces established in Shenzhen in 2020—such as Tencent Makerspace (which incubates start-ups related to Tencent's business) or Shenzhen University Makerspace (which incubates start-ups founded by Shenzhen University students)—were founded by leading Chinese firms, state-owned enterprises, and state institutions (Shenzhen Science and Technology Innovation Committee 2020).

Responses from Grassroots Makers

The increased role of the state in the maker movement has elicited negative reactions from the grassroots maker community in China. As Hiro, a Japanese maker who has been active in Shenzhen's makerspaces since 2008, told me:

In the first three months of 2015, [a maker friend] was very happy about China becoming a maker nation. However, he then realised that many [groups] just wanted to make money using the name 'maker', but they did not understand who makers were or what the maker spirit was … I was also in Shenzhen at that time, working for one month for the Maker Faire Shenzhen. It [the maker movement] was also my dream. I was so excited that China had become a maker country. However, that was a misunderstanding … Not only 'maker' cafés [see Figure 5], 'maker' kindergartens, and other venues started using

the name 'maker', but also leading firms such as Alibaba and Tencent presented themselves as 'maker' companies! (Interview, February 2021)

As the movement shifted, the term 'maker' came to be associated with business opportunities and the desire for economic profit. Leading Chinese firms such as Alibaba began to run all types of shopping festivals under the name 'Maker Faire', aiming to motivate Chinese consumers to shop on their digital platforms. When it came to start-ups, businesspeople frequently asserted themselves as makers in applications and pitches for financial subsidies from government agencies and investments from private equities, aiming to benefit from the maker movement.

These developments contrasted sharply with many of the ideals of the original maker movement. The intent of many of these new self-proclaimed 'makers' was not to create things with technology, but to get rich by association. As one Chinese entrepreneur in Shenzhen told me:

From my personal experience, around 80 per cent of self-proclaimed 'makers' were 'businessmen', while 20 per cent were real makers. When a city's maker culture is strong, I think that the proportion of commercial companies should be relatively small. However, in Chinese Maker Faires, 90 per cent of the attendees were commercial companies in recent years. (Interview, August 2020)

According to the World Bank Database, China witnessed a remarkable surge in new business registrations, with over 245 million new companies being registered in 2016 (World Bank 2016). This marked a peak from 2010 to 2020. Mr Yi, an incubator director who works closely with the Science and Technology Innovation Committee of Shenzhen, expressed concerns about this figure, referring to many 'high-tech entrepreneurial teams' established in 2015 and 2016 as 'deceptive' (弄虚作假):

We incubators thought the Chinese capital market was overheated—everyone felt they should become an entrepreneur. We always insisted that entrepreneurship is a rational choice, but that was not the case at that time. Innovative projects, especially those with an original idea, were relatively rare, while most of the projects were kind of 'you copy me, and I will copy you back'. I think too many copycats were in the market. (Interview, May 2020)

(Left) Figure 5: A makerspace café, Nanshan District, Shenzhen, August 2020. PC: Olivia Yijian Liu. (Next Page) Figure 6 : Number of investment decks in China from 2012 to 2020 (the dark blue at the bottom layer represents seed funding, and the dark green represents round-A funding). Source: Huang and He (2021).

In an 'economy of appearances', many who aim to make a quick monetary return primarily focus on 'dramatic performance' and 'the self-conscious making of a spectacle', knowing that 'the more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible [was] an investment frenzy' (Tsing 2005: 57). In one instance from my fieldwork, an entrepreneur who had received a local government subsidy for high-tech projects said: 'Our product has nothing to do with AI [artificial intelligence], but we have to put "AI technology" as our business function and scope when making a funding application' (Fieldnote, August 2021).

In addition to speculators, some hobbyist makers also tried to take advantage of the shift to realise their entrepreneurial aspirations. For example, Jiasheng, a drone enthusiast and civil servant, decided to quit his stable government job to become an entrepreneur as the official rhetoric around the maker movement was heating up. He described his subsequent experience in the drone industry:

When mass entrepreneurship and innovation were very popular in 2015 and 2016, there were hundreds of companies engaged in making drones in Shenzhen. Many people came to me at that time asking to start a business together, because if you had a background somewhat related to the industry, and as long as your marketing skills were decent, you could get investment with one PowerPoint [presentation]. In the end, a wealthy businessman invested in a drone project and asked me to lead a 10-person team to develop the prototype. Two years later, we almost completed the prototype, but the project ended unsuccessfully because the capital market situation then was totally different. (Interview, August 2020)

The statistics support Jiasheng's account. In 2015, start-ups in China's drone industry received a total of US$450 million in investment funding, with more than half of the deals awarded to projects at the seed stage (Sina Tech 2016a). Among these early-stage ventures, many entrepreneurs were hobbyist makers like Jiasheng, who had difficulty achieving technological breakthroughs. In Jiasheng's case, the high cost of research and development and the lack of technological advantage eventually made his team decide that continuing was too risky. Jiasheng saw the decision to shut the business as partly a result of the capital market change from 2015 to 2018. He described the survival rate among his peers in Shenzhen's drone industry as 'extremely low': [A]mong 10,000 projects, the survival rate in the capital winter was no more than several dozen' (Interview, August 2020).
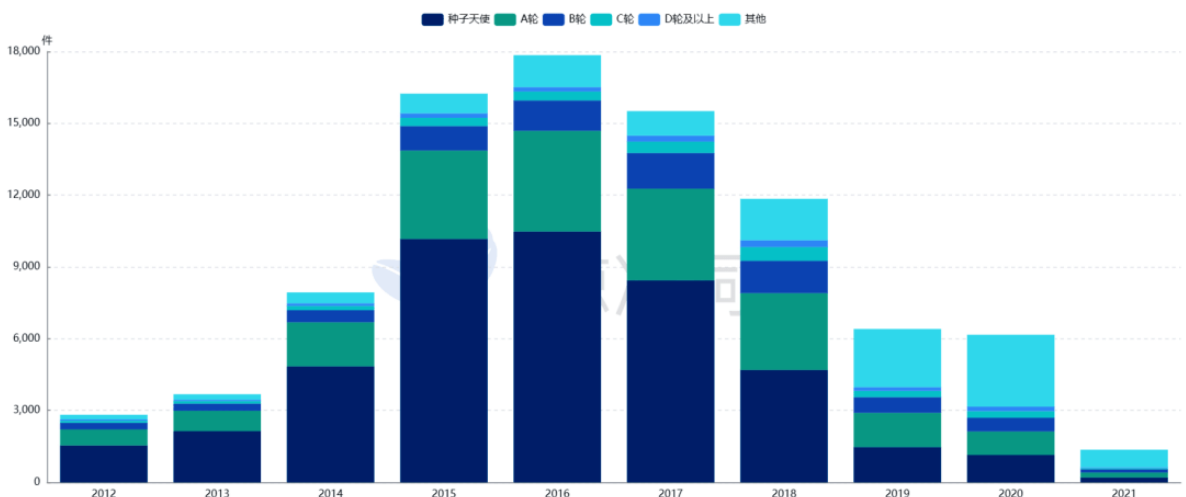
Indeed, by 2018, the so-called capital carnival (资本狂欢) led by the state-sponsored maker movement had been replaced with a 'capital winter' (资本寒冬), in which fundraising activities significantly dropped. As shown in Figure 6, investment deals in early-stage start-ups (mainly at the seed stage) declined considerably in 2018 and 2019, as investors preferred mature start-ups, which could count on a relatively stable market share and had a lower risk of bankruptcy (Huang and He 2021).

Dr Ning, an AI entrepreneur, noted the change in the capital market:

> The current AI products have passed the bubble of the venture capital period. Unlike three years ago [2017], when, as long as you were a student in AI and you were willing to do a venture project, everyone would like to invest money in it, everyone now knows that it [an AI project] is not so reliable [for financial return], because AI requires substantial capital investment and the cost to complete an AI project is very high. (Interview, August 2020)

Many speculative AI projects and technologically immature maker projects accordingly disappeared from the market. Most makerspaces that functioned as co-working spaces or incubators for high-tech start-ups closed between 2016 and 2018 due to a lack of mature business models and excess inventory, disappearing as suddenly as they had appeared (Sina Tech 2016b; Xue 2018).

The 'Death' of Maker Culture in China

In the Huaqiangbei Museum, a space established in 2021 to record the unique culture of the electronics market, photos of some makers at Try-Out Makerspace and their DIY products were displayed in the exhibition hall celebrating grassroots technological innovation. Nic, a member of Try-Out Makerspace, believed putting maker culture in a museum signified its death. He said emotionally:

> It's dying! Who would put living things in a museum? People put things from the past in there ... Have you seen any museum that is about things that still exist? It's amusing ... What is fundamental [for the government] are technology, science, AI, the financial sector, etcetera; makers are not the priority. (Interview, February 2021)

Nic's sentiments about the 'death' of the maker culture in Shenzhen did not come out of nowhere. In early 2021, Try-Out Makerspace was forced out of its rented office in Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei Subdistrict. Their landlord, a local government agency, said it was due to office renovations and asked them to empty the space within one month. Many makers were then compelled to work from home for a few months.

Why did the Chinese Government seemingly withdraw its endorsement of the maker movement? One reason is the emergence of the above-mentioned 'economy of appearances' (Tsing 2005) because of the Chinese State's infatuation with new technologies of which it has a limited grasp. Realising their own shortcomings, Chinese policymakers moved to make educational meritocracy a key metric in selecting 'real' high-tech companies. A landmark moment in this shift came in 2018, when the State Council issued its 'Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Innovation and Entrepreneurship to Create an Upgraded Version of Innovation and Entrepreneurship' (国务院关于推动创新创业高质量发展打造'双创'升级版的意见), a set of policy guidelines that marked a new stage in the mass campaign for 'high-level entrepreneurship and innovation, [and] high-quality development' (高水平双创 高质量发展). This new direction is stated clearly in an article published that year by the State Council:

> If one starts a project only to make money and to be rich overnight, it is impossible to truly achieve valuable innovation. High-level and high-quality entrepreneurship and innovation mean that we must get rid of a pure capital orientation, and pay more attention to the demand of industries, and aim to create value for customers. Entrepreneurship and innovation are like 'gold and sand' [大浪淘沙]. When the sand is washed away, only the gold is left. (Sheng 2018)

In this article, 'real' high-tech entrepreneurial projects are compared to 'gold', while pseudo-high-tech start-ups are 'sand' that should be 'washed away'. It criticised businesspeople who played 'capital games', making polished presentations only to gain profit, while falsely branding themselves high-tech entrepreneurs who could produce 'core technology breakthroughs' (Sheng 2018).

In this manner, the Chinese State seemed to acknowledge the drawbacks of the centrally planned maker movement, which had resulted in the emergence of many low-quality start-ups. It then repositioned the focus of mass entrepreneurship and innovation to high-level projects characterised by a 'mature mentality, rational thinking, and actions aimed at market competition' (China Daily 2018). The state accordingly tightened its requirements for entrepreneurship subsidies. As Mr Yu, the former director of a university incubator program, told me: 'Unlike the common large-scale subsidies of a few years ago, the government is now more rational and subsidises only the best' (Interview, May 2020).

The emphasis of Chinese Government agencies on educational meritocracy has its drawbacks. Felix, a foreign entrepreneur in Shenzhen, told me:

For the Chinese Government, the term 'AI company' is so important, while the market and the business model are not so important. I have also found that [educational] qualifications matter too much: how many PhDs do you have in your company? How many master's degrees do you have? In result, some companies just look at one's education [profile in the hiring process]. It doesn't lay out what the actual skills are. (Interview, September 2020)

In this way, despite the policy shift to educational meritocracy in issuing government subsidies, the 'economy of appearances' (Tsing 2005) remains in China's high-tech industries.

After this shift, many of those engaging in tech entrepreneurship were 'high-level talent from overseas' (海外高层次人才). Responding to my question 'Do you define yourself as a maker?', many who returned to China after 2018 were unfamiliar with the terms 'maker' and 'making', and asked me what I meant. Others were openly reluctant to define themselves as a 'maker', believing makers were failed

entrepreneurs. Evidently, public perceptions of makers have changed dramatically since the inception of the mass campaign.

On the other hand, the maker community has returned to their lifestyles prior to 2015. In 2021, I encountered several makers who were still actively engaged in their electronic craft in the few remaining makerspaces in Shenzhen. For example, Zhiyi continued to visit Flora Makerspace weekly to DIY his products. Following the dissolution of his company, Jiasheng established a one-person consultancy offering drone navigation services. What motivated them to persist in 'making' was their passion and fascination with open-source prototypes. Despite the changes in the policy landscape, these makers found personal fulfilment in pursuing their creative endeavours.

Ultimately, the top-down shifts in China's maker movement have led to the emergence and disappearance of various groups of 'makers', including speculative enterprises and pseudo-high-tech projects in pursuit of individual interests by any means. This highlights not only the limitations of the governing approach to entrepreneurship in China but also the frictions that underpin China's high-tech boom. ∎

Yilamujiang and Johaug after the 2022 Beijing Olympics 30-kilometre race. Illustration: Gundersons.

Winter Olympic Dreams and Foreign Friends

Heidi Østbø HAUGEN, Anne TJØNNDAL

To win glory at the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, China commissioned 100 Norwegian winter sports coaches and support staff to train 200 Chinese athletes. Norway hoped to strengthen the global status of ski sports by nurturing Chinese elite contestants. Despite compatible motivations and good athlete–coach relationships, the program had limited success in terms of enhancing Chinese winter sports coaching methods. However, the exchange was symbolically important to China as proof of foreign friendship and commitment to Olympic ideals.

With outstretched arms ready to provide a hug, the winner of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics cross-country skiing women's 30-kilometre Mass Start welcomed the last contestant as she reached the finish line. As the two embraced, Norwegian Olympic champion Therese Johaug consolingly told the last-place finisher, Dinigeer Yilamujiang of the Chinese team: 'Be proud of yourself! I know how hard you've worked.' It was not the first time the two women had met. Members of China's cross-country skiing and biathlon teams trained on the same tracks as Norwegian winter sports athletes in the years leading up to the Olympic

Games in Beijing, and Norwegian skiers had watched their Chinese peers develop from insecure novices to world-class contestants.

Yilamujiang was one of 200 Chinese athletes who trained in Norway under the Sino-Norwegian sports agreement signed in 2017. The agreement committed Norway to organising training camps for Chinese talent, dispatching skiing experts to China to train Olympic contestants, and helping China promote the development of winter sports (Regjeringen 2017). When the 2022 Olympic cauldron was lit, more than 100 Norwegian coaches and other support staff had participated in the training of Chinese athletes (Norges Idrettsforbund 2020). In the year after the Beijing Winter Olympics, we interviewed 15 of these coaches to capture their experiences as foreign experts hired to produce Chinese athletic champions. By the time their assignments had ended, most felt in equal parts invested in the athletes' future and frustrated with the Chinese sports bureaucracy.

Same Bed, Different Dreams

Norwegian and Chinese interests in a successful collaboration were motivated by different goals. On the Chinese side, the cooperation with Norway was part of heavy investment in snow sports leading up to the 2022 Winter Olympics. The General Administration of Sports of China (GAS) increased expenditure on winter sports by 23 per cent per year on average after Beijing was awarded the games (GAS 2021). Even in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic limited travel and the hosting of events, China's national winter sport centre spent as much as RMB1.16 billion on 'physical training' (体育训练), including programs to train Chinese athletes abroad—travel for which was not halted during the pandemic. Foreign coaches continued to be invited to China, while Norway was a main destination for prospective Chinese Olympians. Chinese athletes from sports schools and provincial teams attended Norwegian training camps in cross-country skiing, biathlon, and ski jump (Norges idrettsforbund 2020).

Norway's efforts in the collaboration had both commercial and cultural aims. A bilateral China–Norway sports agreement signed in 2017 marked the end of years of diplomatic chill and trade sanc-

tions that had ensued when Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 2010. Besides improving trade relations, Norwegian politicians hoped to strengthen the global status of ski sports by nurturing Chinese elite contestants. Strong performance in cross-country skiing is a source of national pride in Norway, but a lack of international competition threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the sport. What better way to prove cross-country skiing's global relevance than to train Chinese athletes and give a population of 1.4 billion a stake in it?

Norwegian coaches, several of whom were former Olympians, were initially astonished with the progress they witnessed in the Chinese athletes, who adapted well to a new cultural environment and Norwegian coaching principles. Some athletes had started to ski only in their late teens and disproved the idea that an early start was a precondition for success in snow-based sports. Chinese President Xi Jinping attributed the potential for such rapid improvement to China's strong national sports system: 'Because we have a "nation-wide support for sport-system" [举国体制], with all aspects planned and optimised, we can inject a lot of fresh blood into the ice and snow sports in a short time to overcome talent shortage difficulties' (Zheng et al. 2022). This idea of a virtually endless supply of Chinese talent and a system based on disposability would eventually become a source of divergence between sports professionals in China and Norway, wherein the latter claimed that unrelenting pressure and constant competition obstructed athletic development.

An Aspiring Winter Sports Superpower

Cross-country skiing and biathlon are considered niche sports in most countries, and many consider the commercial entertainment value of these ski sports to be low. This begs the question: why would China invest so many resources in sports that are hardly practised in China and about which few people around the world care?

An obvious answer is that China wanted to do well when the Winter Olympics were held on its home turf. At the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, China won

The popularisation of snow sports was hailed as an achievement of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Illustration: Gundersons.

the most gold medals of all nations and the second most medals in total after the United States. Sports bureaucrats faced high expectations for the feat to be repeated when the Winter Olympics were brought to China. In addition, China had promised the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in its bid that granting the games to Beijing would help popularise winter sports, the viewership and commercial value of which lag far behind the summer Olympic sports.

China's dedication to producing Olympic winners started long before it became a host country for the games. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, elite sports were used to highlight the values of individualism and structured competition, and as a vehicle for stirring national pride (Brownell 1995). At the 1984 Los Angeles Games, China took home an astonishing 15 gold medals and finished fourth in the overall medal tally. The Olympic Games were commercialised in the 1980s, which coincided with China's Reform and Opening-Up policies. The Los Angeles Games provided a spectacular and attractive enactment of a market economy at a time when the Chinese public and leaders struggled to grasp what market reforms meant (Brownell 2021). China's success at the games signalled to people both at home and abroad that the country was ready to engage on the world stage. More recent investments in winter sports in China were

made with a similar rationale to those in the summer games (Guo and Xu 2023). The Chinese sports system lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to secure Olympic medals in snow-based sports. The Norwegian coaches we interviewed were fascinated by the idea of working with talented athletes who had little or no experience with winter sports. Those who were assigned participants to be transferred from summer sports had to start by explaining the basics. 'This is cross-country skiing,' one of them said to a group of potential Chinese recruits while showing a video of Norwegian athletes climbing a hill on cross-country skis. 'The point is to move from A to B as quickly as possible assisted by skis and ski poles.'

Foreign Friends and Adversaries

China has developed elite sports through the strategic employment of foreign expertise with its 'invite in and go out' (引进来、走出去) strategy, whereby foreign coaches have been recruited to come to China and overseas training is organised for Chinese athletes (Zheng et al. 2019). Such efforts were intensified in the leadup to the 2008 Olympic Games, which saw

the launch of a comprehensive program to recruit foreign coaches and organise overseas training under the GAS. The program indicated the GAS's determination to enhance China's elite sport performance in select disciplines by applying foreign expertise. It also enabled China to introduce new sports in which it had no prior domestic experience or coaching capacity.

Foreign elite coaches who train Chinese athletes have a symbolic as well as a practical function. Their commitment demonstrates that Chinese and foreigners can unite around the common goal of making China's athletes excel. China employs the trope of friendship to describe its sports cooperation, and assistance from abroad to strengthen the country's sporting power is often cited as evidence that fair-minded foreigners support China's peaceful rise. A case in point is the press release from the Chinese Embassy in Oslo after the Olympics, which acclaimed Therese Johaug's 'patient waiting' for Dinigeer Yilamujiang by the finish line (Chinese Embassy in Oslo 2022). The dispatch recounted instances of mutual appreciation between Chinese and foreigners during the Olympics and thanked Norwegian sports professionals for their valuable support in the development of winter sports in China. A sentimental heading set the tone: 'Let warmth and humanity shine.'

The notion of friendship is central to the vocabulary of Sino-foreign exchanges under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Chinese Government and media consistently describe China's relationship with the world in terms of how friendly foreign actors are towards it. The language of friendship embodies the idea of the opposite: an outside world that is populated by adversaries of Chinese prosperity. Portrayals of Western countries as either antagonistic or friendly are not diametrically opposed; both underscore the imperative of growing China's power and dominance in the global system. Making friendliness the key parameter for evaluating Sino-foreign interaction precludes the possibility of exchanges that are open-ended and governed by values other than being for or against China, as Brady (2003: 249–53) has argued. The perception of the world as divided into friends and foes was explicitly articulated in the Chinese Embassy's press release, which was subtitled 'The Embassy Spokesperson's Response to Certain Distorted Coverage in Norwegian Media on Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics'. The appreciation of the friendship is simultaneously a confirmation that

the People's Republic of China operates in a hostile global environment in which vigilance—sometimes even belligerence—is necessary for the country's self-preservation. 'Placing Sport at the Service of Humankind'

The *Olympic Charter* states: 'The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity' (IOC 2021). Modernism and the belief that progress depends on ideological guidance are central to both the Olympic movement and China under the CCP. The Olympic movement's focus on staging competitions between nations while using a set of vague but grandiose terms to propagate the virtues of globalism fits well with political discourse in post-reform China. Tangible results in Olympic arenas, however, require more than just rhetoric.

China has built a national sports bureaucracy and funding system around the overall goal of achieving 'Olympic glory' (奥运争光). The Sino-Norwegian coaching collaboration was embedded in this system. At the top is the GAS, which devised its first Olympic strategy in 1985 and subsequently released 'Strategic Olympic Glory Plans' every 10 years (Zheng et al. 2019). These plans legitimise the status of elite sport as a policy priority. A system of provincial sports bureaus with teams that compete against each other nationally was set up under the GAS, and it uses results from the National Games of China to allocate resources to and govern the provincial bureaus (Ma and Kurscheidt 2019). The provincial teams are also expected to prioritise sports that are seen as particularly compatible with their province's traditions and the inhabitants' physical attributes (Zheng et al. 2019: 57). For example, Xinjiang, which in Chinese propaganda is presented as the global birthplace of skiing (China Daily 2022), emphasises cross-country skiing, and invited Norwegian experts to assist in this endeavour even before the bilateral winter sports agreement with Norway was signed.

China devised a deliberate and strategic approach to maximise return on investments in sports measured in terms of Olympic medals. Sports that are skill-based and characterised by one or more of the keywords 'small, fast, women, water, and agile' have been prioritised since the 1980s. The strategy favours sports that are less popular globally because competition is weaker and prioritises individual sports that need

relatively low investment (Zheng and Chen 2016). The strategy builds on sports theorist Tian Maijiu's research on training methods. Tian devised a theory for clustering sports (群训练理论), which has been immensely influential for the allocation of resources to various sports and the training methods adopted (Zheng and Chen 2016). Tian's ideas have greatly influenced the bureaucratic organisation of sport in China, including how the 14 national sports management centres subordinated to the GAS are structured. In winter sports, which are collected under one national centre, the influence of Tian's strategic principles is evident in the focus on training female athletes and on sports that emphasise speed. Both choices were aimed at achieving the highest possible return on investment.

Loyal to the Athletes, Not the System

The Chinese sports system, with its emphasis on maximising Olympic results by recruiting from a large pool of athletes at the regional level, represents a stark contrast to the Norwegian system. As a small country, Norway has adopted a holistic and 'hands-off' approach to elite sports at the youth level, with play, versatility, and intrinsic motivation as key components. The systemic differences in the governance and structure of sports also affect views on what 'good sports coaching' is and how the coach–athlete relationship functions. A Norwegian coach described the Chinese approach to athletes as 'use and discard' and said this is only possible in populous countries because they have a wealth of athletes from which to select. Another compared the treatment of Chinese athletes to that of racehorses, which are precious but only valued for their physical prowess.

The coaches we interviewed expressed uneasiness about working within the Chinese sports system. Their discomfort had multiple sources. First, they experienced discrepancies between the goal of collaboration and the behaviour of the Chinese leaders and coaches involved in the programs: 'It felt somewhat contradictory when they came here to learn from the best skiing nation in the world, but they insist on doing everything the Chinese way.' Second, this discomfort was intensified as the Norwegian and Chinese coaches disagreed about which training methods would produce the best results. The differences related to training volume and intensity, as well as the approach to becoming a world-class skier. Where Chinese coaches prioritise high-intensity training, the 'gold standard in the Norwegian model is 90 per cent low-intensity and 10 per cent high-intensity', one coach explained. Several Norwegian coaches described situations where they experienced ethical dilemmas as Chinese coaches would push athletes 'too hard' physically in training.

Third, the Norwegian coaches took issue with the treatment of the athletes in the Chinese sports system, describing it as 'authoritarian', the Chinese athletes as 'afraid of the Chinese leaders', and the Chinese coach–athlete relationships as using 'the lash to whip dogs into shape'. Managing the Chinese sports system became increasingly difficult for the Norwegian coaches over time as their personal relationships with the Chinese athletes deepened. These issues led to a situation where the Norwegian coaches developed loyalty to the Chinese athletes rather than the Chinese leaders and the sports system they represented: 'I have chosen to prioritise the athletes and not focus too much on what the Chinese leaders and coaches say and do,' one interviewee said. The coaches' loyalty to the athletes was expressed in multiple ways during the collaboration, including with passive and covert resistance such as meeting demands for more training hours by writing 'bogus training logs'. Somewhat reluctantly, many Norwegian coaches admitted to being 'too naive' about the differences between the two sports systems.

Few Lasting Effects

According to the Norwegian coaches and support staff involved in the China–Norway sports agreement, the project ended with little to no transfer of coaching methods between the two countries. While the Chinese athletes improved, the Chinese coaching philosophy remained unchanged. The Norwegian coaches blamed the Chinese sports system for the limited knowledge transfer: 'It does not matter what individual insights the Chinese coaches gained from their stay in Norway, because they need to be loyal to the system. The system is valued more than their

Will future Chinese participation in snow sports reach the levels of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics? Illustration: Gundersons.

own thoughts.' Over the course of the collaboration with China, the Norwegian coaches gave up on any ideals of contributing to systemic change and resigned themselves to working with the athletes only. None of the Norwegian coaches we interviewed believed that the collaboration with Chinese athletes and coaches would lead to any lasting effects in terms of the popularity of winter sports in China, coaching methods, or better treatment of athletes. As one Norwegian coach declared: 'It takes more than an old cross-country skier from Norway to change the Chinese sports system!'

The *Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for the Development of Sports in China* expressed high ambitions for the development of professional talent in winter sports to lay a foundation for an outstanding Winter Olympics in 2022 (GAS 2016). In a subsequent five-year plan, these aspirations were toned down, development initiatives were discussed in the past tense, and focus was placed on gradual evolution rather than leaps of progress (GAS 2021). Some of China's

greatest achievements in the 2022 Winter Olympics came through US-born freestyle skier Eileen Gu, who became a naturalised citizen to compete for the Chinese team. This highlighted how the retraining of sports talent is only one of several routes to bringing Olympic glory to China. Cost effectiveness became more important after the Beijing Winter Olympics ended and public spending generally was cut back. Olympic glory is coveted, but not at any price. Pragmatic assessments of the costs and rewards of training athletes in sports like cross-country skiing, biathlon, and ski jump may conclude that it is not worthwhile. ◼

Apothecary mixing traditional chinese medicine.
PC: Christopher Trolle, Flickr.com.

Politics and Traditional Chinese Medicine in Hong Kong's Fifth Pandemic Wave

CHAN Chor See

This essay examines how the dual role of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) during the fifth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Hong Kong prompts us to consider the interconnectedness of medicine and politics in the city. On the one hand, the Hong Kong Government strongly promoted the use of TCM in what arguably amounted to nationalist propaganda. On the other hand, TCM provided an alternative method of treatment when the option of hospitalisation was not available or desired, with community TCM clinics' free consultation services and related projects demonstrating a bottom-up politics based on mutual aid.

'Putting aside political views, *lianhua qingwen* capsules [連花清瘟膠囊] really eased my sore throat,' said the title of a LIHKG post dated 3 March 2022, when the fifth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Hong Kong was at its peak (LIHKG 2022). *Lianhua qingwen* (LH) capsules are a type of proprietary Chinese medicine for influenza that were strongly promoted as an effective treatment for SARS-CoV-2 by the central Chinese Government. LIHKG is a popular online forum dubbed the 'Hong Kong Reddit' and was a key platform for the decentralised mobilisation of the anti-extradition protests in 2019. Members of this forum often engage in wordplay and satire, but the writer of this post meant what he said. Some netizens expressed distrust in the remedy, replying: 'Don't worry—they are all yours.'

Others showed genuine interest and asked about the writer's experience with the drug. More intriguingly, one netizen left a comment using a similar phrase: 'Putting aside political views, a lot of Chinese medicine is superb.' Another inverted the logic of the phrase, asking: 'What if you do not put aside your political views?' (this comment included an LIHKG emoji showing a smoking cow with a witty smile).

The sociopolitical tension around the use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) captures the complexity of the fifth wave of Covid-19 in Hong Kong. While many places in the world experienced disruptions to the normal order of things due to Covid-19, Hong Kong slid into the pandemic from another abnormality: the large-scale anti–extradition bill protests had just died down when the virus hit. The feeling of stagnancy Hongkongers experienced during 2020–22 came not only from pandemic fatigue, but also from post-protest fatigue in the face of unprecedentedly strong political oppression under the draconian National Security Law. Just as it is difficult to separate the time frame of the pandemic from that of the post-protest period, it is difficult to 'put aside' political views when considering the pandemic in Hong Kong. Hence, when Hongkongers argued about medical treatments and health policies during the pandemic, they were in fact weighing different political views and judgements of Hong Kong's social and political conditions.

In using the term 'traditional Chinese medicine' in this essay, I am referring to the centuries-old medical system that uses herbs and unique methods of treatment, rather than 'medicine from China'. I will mainly discuss proprietary Chinese medicine, which refers to over-the-counter TCM products in their finished dosage form (for instance, capsules, powder, and pills). While people who consult TCM practitioners usually receive prescriptions tailor-made to their individual body type, different kinds of proprietary Chinese medicines can be bought in pharmacies without guidance from TCM practitioners.

Unlike in mainland China and Taiwan, where integrated approaches combining Western medicine and TCM were adopted at the very beginning of the pandemic, in Hong Kong, TCM had only served at most a supplementary role from the first to the fourth waves of the pandemic, from early 2020 to late 2021. Only two official TCM programs were offered: the Special Chinese Medicine Outpatient Program

for recovered Covid-19 patients, and an inpatient scheme to treat those with mild symptoms in community treatment facilities. However, things changed during the fifth wave, starting in December 2021, when the number of infections surged to more than a million within a few months, causing the collapse of Hong Kong's medical system. The government began promoting the use of TCM for Covid-19 by inviting mainland TCM professionals to the frontline and distributing proprietary Chinese medicine for free. TCM practitioners from both the public and the private sectors were able to treat Covid patients through telemedicine consultations. I suggest that the dual role of TCM during the fifth wave of the pandemic prompts us to consider the interconnectedness of medicine and politics in Hong Kong. On the one hand, the government strongly promoted the use of TCM, arguably embodying a type of nationalist propaganda. On the other hand, TCM provided an alternative method of treatment when hospitalisation was not available or desired.

We can observe three ways in which politics and medicine are intertwined. First, the government politicised TCM as a tool to promote patriotism, invoking Chinese culture, the metaphor of family, and a rhetoric of 'gratitude'. Second, there are multiple factors causing public distrust in TCM, all of which must be understood in relation to politics. Third, there is an alternative to wholesale gratitude or rejection of TCM in its use by grassroots mutual aid networks. This essay begins with the background, development, and institutionalisation of TCM in Hong Kong from the colonial period to now, followed by three sections corresponding to the three points mentioned above. I draw on analysis of state media, social media posts, and interviews with TCM practitioners featured in newspapers.

The Development of TCM in Hong Kong

Understanding the unique position of TCM in Hong Kong requires a brief historical review of its institutionalisation in the city. Before the 1997 handover, the colonial government not only refused to support TCM, but also used policies to suppress its influence. According to historian Law Yuen Han (2020), many

Hong Kong citizens prioritised TCM over Western medicine before World War II. For instance, Tung Wah Hospital, the first non-profit hospital in the city, which opened in 1870, originally provided only TCM services. However, the colonial government prioritised Western medicine in the public health sector and used different regulations to limit the growth of TCM in hospitals. In the early twentieth century, Hong Kong's colonial authorities took the opportunity to introduce Western medicine to the public when it granted a large piece of land for the Tung Wah Hospital and allowed the landowner class of Kowloon to build the Kwong Wah Hospital. Though TCM was initially provided in Kwong Wah Hospital, the government gradually imposed regulations on its use, such as setting a quota for the number of patients who could seek TCM treatment, preventing the hiring of TCM practitioners, and banning TCM practitioners from treating contagious diseases. When the Tung Wah Hospital encountered financial difficulties and sought government funding in the postwar period, the colonial authorities required it to gradually stop its TCM services altogether (Tung Wah Group of Hospitals 2011). The lack of public and non-profit TCM services was one of the reasons Western medicine gradually became mainstream in Hong Kong. In other words, the colonial government's support of Western medicine and suppression of TCM built up the 'hegemony' of Western medicine (Chiu and Sze 2021). The suppression of TCM, therefore, could not be separated from colonial rule.

In contrast, in the post-handover period, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) started to institutionalise and strengthen TCM. TCM practitioners began campaigning in the late 1980s and succeeded in including TCM as a part of the Basic Law Article 138, which states that the HKSAR Government will 'formulate policies to develop Western and traditional Chinese medicine and to improve medical and health services'. After the passing of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance in 1999, the Chinese Medicine Council was founded and registration of TCM practitioners was imposed. Publicly funded local training for TCM was developed at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, and the University of Hong Kong between 1998 and 2002. Policies that benefited TCM have been slowly changing the landscape of the public health system. For instance,

in 2014, TCM clinics were set up in each of the 18 districts of Hong Kong. The Hospital Authority also began an integrated Chinese–Western medicine program in seven public hospitals in four areas of care: stroke, lower back pain, palliative cancer, and shoulder and neck pain. This resulted in both inpatient and outpatient TCM follow-up services being included in preparations for a 'Chinese Medicine Hospital' that is expected to open in 2025 (Chiu and Sze 2021). Compared with the colonial period, now more support is given to the TCM sector by the government. As sociologists Chiu Wing-kai and T.O. Sze (2021) put it: 'In the last years of the twentieth century, [TCM] successfully took advantage of the political transition to achieve licensing and institutionalization of training.'

The development of TCM has been slow under the HKSAR Government's promotion and it remains secondary to Western medicine in many ways. For example, though TCM practitioners may be registered and are no longer required to use the demeaning label 'herbalist', as in the colonial period, their salary remains the lowest in the public medical system—even lower than nurses with three years' experience (Chiu et al. 2020: 78). Nevertheless, it is evident the political changes in Hong Kong have directly determined the resources and legal standing of TCM. This helps us understand TCM's unique dual role during the fifth wave of the pandemic.

Nationalist Promotion of TCM

During the fifth wave of the pandemic, the HKSAR Government called for expressions of 'gratitude' (感謝內地援港醫護) and familial love to construct a nationalistic promotion of TCM, demanding patriotic responses from the people. In late February 2022, the Emergency Regulations Ordinance was implemented, exempting mainland medical professionals and workers from all statutory requirements relating to licensing, registration, and application to work in Hong Kong. The public questioned the legitimacy of using the Emergency Regulations Ordinance. The Hospital Authority Employees Alliance also disagreed with the policy in a statement issued in February, based on concerns about cultural and clinical discrepancies between mainland and Hong

Kong practitioners, as well as the issue of accountability (HA Employees Alliance 2022). Despite public suspicion and criticism, 391 mainland Chinese healthcare professionals from different disciplines were sent to Hong Kong, including seven TCM experts and 20 TCM practitioners (HKSAR Government 2022; Wen and Guo 2022). The HKSAR Government also emphasised mainland China's support in donating or helping to purchase three types of proprietary Chinese medicines, including LH capsules. As of early April 2022, more than 930,000 units of LH capsules had been distributed, mostly through the anti-epidemic service bags that were directly distributed to all households (HKSAR Government 2022).

As mentioned above, the HKSAR Government framed this support with a rhetoric of gratitude and the importance of familial relationships. In her speech to the mainland medical support team during their farewell ceremony, then Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam thanked China's Central Government for a speedy response to the HKSAR Government's 'plea' (請求) to meet Hong Kong's 'urgent needs' (燃眉之急) (ISD 2022). She said the medical support team helped 'make better use of the advantages of Chinese and Western medicine cooperation in anti-epidemic treatment' (更好發揮中西醫協作在抗疫治療的優勢). In particular, she thanked the mainland support team for help that 'fully manifests the spirit of selflessness ... and the sentiment [that] blood is thicker than water, which is really precious' (Ho 2022).

Expressions of fraternal relationship were employed, and the reciprocal nature of familial relationships was emphasised. In reports that appeared in the state-sponsored press about the mainland support team, phrases about fraternal relationships such as 'brotherly love' (手足情深) and 'brothers who think alike can overcome any difficulties' (兄弟同心其利斷金) are recurrent (see, for instance, China Traditional Chinese Medicine Newspaper 2022). In numerous stories in these forums about young medics helping elderly patients, the emphasis is on the reciprocal nature of the relationship. The medics are reported to have taken care of the elderly by offering both medical and emotional support, such as holding their hands to walk with them or chatting with them (HKMAO 2022; China News 2022). There are frequent descriptions of the elderly expressing gratitude for the medics' service—for instance, giving their carers coconut candies, writing them thank

you cards, and singing them the patriotic song 'My Ancestral Country and Me' (我和我的祖國) (Zhu et al. 2022). These stories depict mainland China and Hong Kong as family members with a close and reciprocal relationship.

There is, however, another layer to the family metaphor that indicates an authoritative ancestral relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong. For example, an article in *Southern Daily* describes the supposed familial relationship between mainland medics and Hong Kong citizens in terms of their common dependence on the nation-state: 'The hearts of mainland medics and Hong Kong citizens are close because they both lean on the same ancestral country' (內地醫護與香港市民的心，因為背靠共同的祖國而緊緊相依) (Zhu et al. 2022). By translating *zuguo* 祖國 as 'ancestral country' rather than 'motherland', I follow John Flowerdew and Solomon Leong (2007: 282), who point out that the term connotes the Chinese tradition of installing shrines at home for worshipping one's ancestors. Hence, the term places the nation-state in a sacred position and implies an uneven power relationship between the imagined ancestral country and Hong Kong citizens.

While the mainland medics are described as representatives of the Chinese State, TCM is depicted as a representation of Chinese culture and a medium through which the mainland medics can express their familial love for their patients. The TCM representative of the mainland medical team, Tong Xiaolin, directly linked TCM, Chinese culture, and the Chinese State, saying: 'Hong Kong is a part of China with the soil of Chinese tradition and a wide usage of TCM. After our investigation, we discovered that Hong Kong citizens are desperate to use TCM' (China Traditional Chinese Medicine Newspaper 2022).

The government's rhetoric about gratitude deserves further analysis because it reflects the authoritarian side of the imagined 'familial relationship', as demonstrated in the controversy caused by a *NowTV* reporter. When, during a government Covid-19 press conference in mid March 2022, the reporter asked how a patient could lodge a complaint of malpractice against a mainland medical staff member, the question was condemned in an online petition by a pro-Beijing group, Politihk Social Strategic, as 'unprofessional and a possible violation of the National Security Law' and 'spreading hate' because it was 'unappreciative of mainland aid' (Leung 2022). Under enormous pres-

sure, *NowTV* eventually issued a public statement to apologise for the incident and restate the organisation's gratitude for the mainland medical team. What is normally a natural response in a reciprocal relationship, 'gratitude', in this context, was sanctioned by the state as the only properly patriotic act. As though it is an ancestor who has unchallengeable status and warrants worship at a shrine, the country authoritatively demands its citizens show 'gratitude'. This mirrors Christian Sorace's (2020) analysis of expressions of gratitude during the pandemic in China and the United States, aptly saying that 'gratitude is the ideology of sovereignty in crisis'. He contends that by demanding gratitude, the government is urging people to emotionally accept the state's version of reality and not question what else might be done. It attempts to prevent people from recognising the weakness of the sovereign power and, more importantly, the fact that the people themselves are sovereign.

Public Distrust of TCM

The government's promotion of TCM ironically generated increased public distrust of this type of medicine, as can be seen clearly in the online discussion about and widespread distrust of LH capsules. I suggest there are three interconnected factors that could have fostered this distrust, all of which are linked to the political context in Hong Kong:

1) the need to differentiate oneself from supporters of the Chinese nation-state; 2) the need to show opposition to the political economy embodied in the promotion of LH capsules; and 3) a belief that TCM is backward and contrary to modernisation.

An example of the public rejection of TCM can be seen in a Facebook post by Anthony Perry, a famous Hong Kong actor and prodemocracy celebrity, in which he mocked LH capsules as well as the logic of 'clearing heat' (清熱) that underpins TCM—that is, the idea that some symptoms are caused by excessive interior 'heat' in the body and a balance can be achieved by using certain herbs that have 'cooling' effects. The post received more than 21,000 likes, showing the popularity of criticisms of LH capsules and TCM more broadly. His post said:

> If clearing heat helps kill the virus, you might as well drink the mixture of charm paper and water! In the future when you have any emergency sickness, just drink the 24-flavour herbal tea, and do not get any operations. After a few centuries, people are still so stupid. That would harm so many people! In times of chaos there are omens of evil. (Dialogue of scammer selling fake pills in ancient China) Beat the gong slowly mate … My fellow countrymen, I am not selling fake medicine, but a special remedy. See! This elixir is made with snow lotus from heavenly hill and incense, for detoxing, soul restoring and life sustaining. (Perry 2022)
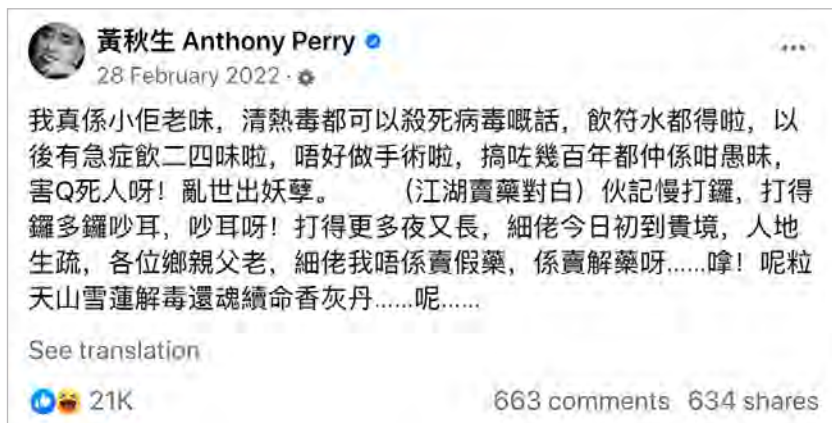

Figure 1: Anthony Perry's Facebook post. See above for translation.

Perry's post embodied all three of the factors of distrust listed above. Because TCM had been refashioned as a symbol of nationalism and support for the state, some people who did not support the nation-state automatically moved to reject it. For instance, in the LIHKG forum post mentioned at the beginning of this essay, when the writer said LH capsules were helpful, one netizen teased that he was 'Mr Ng'—a generic name for a believer in the government's propaganda about LH capsules, as shown in the picture the netizen posted (see Figure 2). 'Mr Ng' showed his support of the LH capsules to the reporter, saying that '1.4 billion Chinese people got cured because of the capsules' (Now News 2022). Even though the writer of the post had included the disclaimer to 'put aside political views', he was still identified as an uncritical, fervent supporter of the government. Therefore, some people who do not buy into the nationalistic discourse reject LH capsules and TCM in general. When Anthony Perry mocked LH capsules, some netizens praised him for being 'brave and outspoken', seeing his act as a political statement demonstrating distrust of nationalistic propaganda. In this oppositional logic, people's distrust of LH capsules is founded more on distrust of the state than of the pills and TCM itself.

The political-economy background of LH capsules warrants further attention, specifically in relation to the second factor of opposition to the pandemic assistance identified above. I argue that what appears to be distrust of LH capsules and TCM is in fact opposition to Chinese nationalism and the political economy that undergirds it.

By evoking nationalism to package TCM as a symbol of the Chinese State, the state strives to exert its influence globally and strengthen its political economy at home. Sociologist Xu Jialun has offered a thorough examination of the promotion of LH capsules, suggesting it is an example of the longstanding political trend of promoting Chinese proprietary medicines inside and outside China. First, nationalism and the lack of social welfare meant TCM was supported even during the Cultural Revolution that called for the 'abolition of tradition'. Though Mao Zedong and his comrades did not really believe in TCM, the Chinese Government at that time strategically provided welfare through TCM, which was more affordable than Western medicine, to strengthen national identity. There was also a diplomatic agenda, as Mao saw TCM as a symbol of China and hoped to exert nationalistic power by exporting TCM to the world. In this way, he hoped to improve China's relationship with the West and lessen dependence on the Soviet Union for the provision of Western medicine and equipment (Chakrabati 2013, cited in Xu 2022). Hence, TCM was not abolished but, instead, gained legitimacy in the socialist era.

Second, the interplay among government-led marketisation, selective globalisation, and economic nationalism has led to the growth of proprietary

Figure 2: Photo posted by a netizen on LIHKG. The caption reads: 'Mr Ng deeply trusts the LH capsules and satirises other Hong Kong people who do not believe in them. He says that "1.4 billion Chinese people got cured because of it".'

Chinese medicines with questionable effects. The Chinese Government has much less control over Chinese proprietary medicines than it does over Western medicines. For instance, proprietary Chinese medicine is exempted from the requirement for clinical trials before production. Even when the National Development and Reform Commission enforced dramatic price reductions for Western medicines, the price of proprietary Chinese medicines dropped only a little or not at all. As a result, pharmaceutical factories are encouraged to produce new proprietary Chinese medicines for substantial profit. Third, against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese globalisation more broadly, China has expanded exports of TCM products. The manufacturer of LH capsules, Yiling Pharmaceutical, saw a twentyfold increase in revenue from foreign markets in the first half of 2020 compared with the previous year. Most profits were concentrated in low and middle-income countries (Xu 2022). We can therefore see the mainland government's attempt to promote TCM to strengthen its political economy.

I argue that Hongkongers' rejection of LH capsules is not a wholesale rejection of TCM. Xu (2022, citing Xu and Yang 2009) points out that due to the loose regulation of proprietary Chinese medicines, it is common to see products that do not follow the pharmacology of TCM. The controversy about the effectiveness of LH capsules, therefore, can be traced to state policies that favour Chinese medicine based on state-led marketisation, selective globalisation, and economic nationalism. In Hong Kong netizens' discussions of LH capsules in response to Anthony Perry's post, there are numerous comments showing their concern about political-economy issues, such as 'making money from disaster' and that 'it is obviously a transfer of benefits to state enterprises'. Hence, there is a need to recognise that the widespread distrust of LH capsules could be based on opposition to the political economy underpinning the Chinese medicine industry, rather than a fundamental rejection of TCM itself.

Third, TCM is seen as not fitting within the framework of modernisation. Perry's Facebook post included an aside to indicate that he was imitating the dialogue of a scammer selling fake pills (江湖賣藥對白)—a common figure in ancient Chinese literature and drama. His description of the promotion of LH capsules is likened to a scam artist who is beating a gong as he brags in rhyme about a special pill made with incense. Netizens echoed Perry's idea through notions associated with premodernity, saying things like: 'The cosmopolitan city has become like a rural village', and 'I feel like I have returned to ancient China'. From their perspective, TCM is associated with a backward and superstitious premodern China.

This association has a long history in China. Along with the British colonial government suppressing TCM in Hong Kong, intellectuals in the early Republic of China also saw TCM as backward. In an essay, medical anthropologist Liu Shao Hua (2020) advances an interesting discussion of the ways in which TCM and emerging political tensions were entangled in the quest for modernity in the early Republic of China. In the 1920s, there was an 'abolish TCM movement'. Both Sun Yat-sen and Lu Xun, who were among the first batch of Chinese students to receive education in Western medicine, overtly rejected TCM. Lu criticised TCM as a symbol of a traditional and inferior culture, claiming that 'TCM is nothing but a conscious or unconscious liar' and comparing Chinese people to 'patients' who needed to be cured with 'science'. In 1929, the Republic of China implemented a law to abolish TCM, which was only derailed because of a huge wave of protest from TCM practitioners (Liu 2020). Both the colonial government and the May Fourth–era intellectuals used the framework of Western modernity to reject TCM, but with different political aims. The former suppressed TCM to 'civilise' Hong Kong and to strengthen its own rule, while the latter pursued their political ideal to modernise China after the 1911 revolution.

This brings us back to the question of how we should understand the political implications of Perry's and other Hongkongers' distrust of TCM as a backward technology. I argue that this idea represents a mainstream cultural imaginary in Hong Kong that scholar Mirana May Szeto wittily terms 'petite-grandiose Hong Kongism' ... a kind of inferiority–superiority response to Hong Kong's multiple colonial experiences, both British and Chinese' (Szeto 2006: 253–54). In this analysis, Hong Kong poses as the exemplary—and superior—model of cosmopolitan and capitalist modernity, especially in relation to China. Paradoxically, this perspective is arguably the result of Hong Kong's deep-seated sense of inferiority about having been colonised and subordinated to the West. Hence, Hong Kong internalises the colonisers'

founding myth as its own and justifies its 'primitivisation' of 'the Other': mainland China. It is important to note that Szeto does not consider Hong Kong to be self-generating this discourse. China's ever-tightening control over Hong Kong, with authoritarian and oppressive measures in recent years, poses a threat to Hong Kong citizens, triggering the strengthening of 'petite-grandiose Hong Kongism', which carries with it fear of and anger towards the Chinese State.

TCM as an Alternative to *Minjian*

I now turn to the very different attitudes of those who use TCM as a grassroots alternative to Western medicine and government-sponsored programs. I argue that the private TCM clinics' free consultation services and related projects demonstrate a bottom-up politics based on mutual help. They also demonstrate an alternative way of promoting TCM, which does not evoke Chinese culture and tradition, but is based on pharmacology.

The unique conditions of the fifth wave of the pandemic created an opportunity for more TCM practitioners in Hong Kong to gain frontline experience of treating Covid-19 patients. As mentioned above, before the fifth wave, only patients who were in community treatment facilities could ask for TCM, while others received only Western medicine. However, in mid February 2023, when the medical system collapsed, many people were not sent to hospital or other community treatment facilities, and some did not even report their infected status to the government. Meanwhile, some private TCM clinics began to offer free telemedicine consultations and other services, which I identify as a part of *minjian* (民間)—that is, a sphere of society that cannot be depicted through the categories 'state' and 'civil society', where people have evolving mutual aid practices, such as through clans and religious organisations (Chen 2010).

I use *minjian* here as a reference to Chen Kuan-Hsing's discussion of the term. He points out that *minjian* has always existed in Asia and did not disappear in the process of modernisation. Instead of relying on 'civil laws' and evoking the idea of 'citizens', Asian political culture recognises the importance of 'sentiment' (情) and 'reason' (理). In this setting, informal institutions and activities operate differently to the elite groups of civil society (Chen 2010: 237). I would suggest that private TCM clinics are not typical civil society organisations but are a part of *minjian*. Civil society in Hong Kong has faced heavy blows in recent years, with the disbandment of more than 50 organisations after the implementation of the National Security Law (Kwan 2021). In this context, it becomes important to acknowledge *minjian* as a space for actions that are more fluid than the establishment of civil society organisations and not so easily erased.

The rhetoric of 'Hong Kong people saving ourselves' (香港人自救, or translated as 'self-help') has been prominent in the city's battle with the pandemic, and the phrase 'saving ourselves' (自救) has been used repeatedly by different civil society actors (Lai 2021). Due to the loose grammatical rules of Cantonese, I suggest there is a hidden plural sense in this rhetoric: the term can be understood as both 'mutual help' and 'self-mobilisation'. In a comparative study of Hong Kong's and Singapore's responses to Covid-19, some scholars have pointed out that Hong Kong's success in containing the virus in the first half of 2020 was due to 'community mutual-help' and 'self-mobilization' (Yuen et al. 2021: 1284). Examples included facemask drives organised by prodemocracy district councillors, and the staff strike organised by the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance to demand the closure of the Hong Kong–China border (Yuen et al. 2021: 1288). Yuen et al.'s study concluded that Hong Kong's 'civil society–led model mobilised resources to overcome barriers, increase compliance, and pressure the authorities to tighten measures' (2021: 1300).

The actions taken by private TCM clinics followed the same rhetoric of 'saving ourselves' and filled the gap as part of *minjian* when many formal civil society organisations were dissolved. By the time of the pandemic's fifth wave, most prodemocracy district councillors had been disqualified or resigned from their positions. In early March 2022, Winnie Yu, the chairperson of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance, was arrested under the National Security Law, and has remained in custody since (Chau 2022). During that time, some private TCM clinics with no formal affiliations with political or charity organisations took the initiative to offer free medical services. In an interview, one private TCM clinic, Alpha Health, shared its experience of treating more

Figures 3 and 4: Instagram posts by Alpha Health Chinese Medicine Clinic posted in early March 2022. The post in Figure 3 (Left) is about the free telehealth service, 'Hongkongers saving ourselves plan', and Figure 4 (Below) refers to the 'unemployment mutual help plan'.

than 300 Omicron-variant patients for free within a month. It even took a further step, offering an 'unemployment mutual help plan' by hiring unemployed people to help deliver medicine to patients (Tsang 2022). The 'saving ourselves' rhetoric poses a stark contrast with the government discourse of 'thanking the mainland medical support team'. Instead of requesting and relying on the central government to make top-down decisions and send forth professionals, the slogan 'saving ourselves' emphasises the need to build bottom-up networks locally. While grassroot clinics targeted 'fellow Hongkongers', they did not invoke notions of family, but instead approached treatment through voluntary and reciprocal networks among peers.

Many TCM practitioners shared their professional medical knowledge on social media, effectively providing public TCM education. In view of the controversy surrounding LH capsules, they designed accessible infographics that listed the basic TCM principles based on different body constitutions. In other words, they offered a much more user-friendly and accessible guide to TCM than the government. In this way, they were challenging the hegemony of Western medicine and changing people's perceptions of TCM. TCM practitioner Wong Mei Yee from Alpha Health Chinese Medicine Clinic recalled her experience of offering free TCM services: 'Now more people understand that TCM is not just for regulating the body [調理身體], but could also cure acute sickness' (Tsang 2022). As they established their professional knowledge of the pharmacology

of TCM, they created room for people to gain a more comprehensive picture of the practice not obscured by political views.

Pandemic TCM Discourses

The discourses about and practices of TCM during the pandemic have offered an interesting view of how medicine and politics are intertwined in Hong Kong. For one, both the central and the HKSAR governments packaged TCM in a nationalist discourse by mobilising expressions of familial relations and gratitude. At the same time, various factors give rise to public distrust of TCM that are inseparable from the political context. Finally, TCM has found a niche within *minjian*, the social space outside the state and civil society, as a way of practising the politics of mutual aid.

Figure 5. Instagram post by the CMP Clinic explaining the ingredients and application of three different types of proprietary Chinese medicine.

In the LIHKG forum post at the beginning of this essay, the writer expressed his trust in LH capsules 'putting aside political views'. However, I suggest that political views cannot be put aside. There is an unprecedented need in Hong Kong to unpack all kinds of political notions critically and reflectively, as well as to rethink what actions can be taken. ∎

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Out of the Fog

Fight COVID-19, QuantFoto (CC), Flickr.com.

Grid Managers, the Moral Logic of *Guan*, and State–Society Dynamics in China

Wei ZHU

This essay aims to provide a nuanced understanding of China's grid management system. It looks into the system's often-oversimplified function of service provision to argue that grid managers constitute a middle layer between the Party-State and Chinese society, generating new dynamics between the two. It also argues that lying behind such dynamics is a moral logic well described by the popular use of the term guan (管), *which can mean both 'care' and 'control' and implies a ready acceptance of the state's presence in people's everyday lives.*

These grid managers were sitting in an office room. Their phones—all linked to a power bank—were inundated with calls from people who had found that their health code had suddenly turned red and wanted to know what to do to make it green again. The grid managers had stayed up the whole night until 5 am and were now resuming work after less than three hours of sleep. There was no time for rest or breakfast; they were saving every minute for anti-Covid efforts, from answering phone calls and organising mass PCR testing to communicating with people who were to undergo home quarantine and putting a seal on their doors. It was not easy, not at all.

This description is taken, with some minor rephrasing that does not alter the original meaning, from a Weibo post widely circulated on 29 October 2022, after a surge in Covid cases in Shenzhen (Mr Lihai 2022). Similar descriptions are ubiquitous in Chinese state media, where grid managers (网格员) are portrayed as a cohort of people extremely busy coping with a huge workload. For instance, in one article, the authors quote the diary of a grid manager in Hangzhou with the intention of telling the supposedly touching story of her continuing to work during Chinese New Year, despite the fact that her father was dying and her boss and relatives were urging her to return to his deathbed (Chang'an Comment 2020). Grid managers have been depicted as models to follow in Xi Jinping's 'New Era', so wholeheartedly devoted to serving the people that they willingly sacrifice their sleep, their family life, and their own health—just like all models chosen by the Party-State since the time of Lei Feng, if not before. And the system of grid management (网格化管理) as a whole was touted as key to China's success in fighting the pandemic—at least before the demise of the zero-Covid policy in December 2022.

That the propaganda machine would portray grid managers this way should come as no surprise. First introduced in 2004 in Beijing, grid management has been implemented nationwide since 2013, when the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party included it as part of its initiative of social governance modernisation (CCCCP 2013). In line with this, Chinese state media has been framing grid managers as selfless servants of the public good and the system as an innovation—if not a proper revolution—in urban management. In particular, the official discourse has been emphasising how the system supposedly embodies the idea of self-governance, while integrating dazzling new technologies that enable both efficiency in service delivery and precision in detecting trouble-makers and pre-empting potential problems (see, for instance, Wu 2020). In contrast, the Western media and academic publications have been paying more attention to the surveillance function of this system, pointing out its intrusiveness in collecting information through both human reporting and surveillance technologies, as well as its potential for realising a police or surveillance state (see, for instance, Chin and Lin 2022; Jiang 2022; Wu 2014).

Despite such differences in framing and conclusions, these publications tend to have one thing in common: they simplify the role of people, either grid managers or grid residents. If the latter are often considered merely passive subjects at the mercy of the Party-State, the former are commonly seen as cogs in the state apparatus, either contributing to the improvement of local governance or embodying the banality of evil. In this essay, I present a more nuanced view by arguing that overlooking the service provision function of grid management—the focus of domestic propaganda—and reducing it to nothing but a ploy to sugar-coat the Party-State's surveillance efforts is an oversimplification. I will start with a presentation of what grid managers do in terms of service provision and their resultant role in the power structure. I then discuss the general perception of grid managers, which I propose we may understand through the notion of *guan* (管). It is my hope that this essay will provide an alternative understanding of grid managers and state–society dynamics in contemporary China. I should also note that this article is a preliminary reflection aimed at asking the right questions, rather than providing conclusive answers, on topics that I will further investigate through ethnographic fieldwork in the coming years.

Service Provision: Grid Managers In Between

Who are grid managers and what do they do? If asked before the Covid-19 pandemic, very few people would have known how to answer this question. Although the implementation of grid management in most places dates to as early as 2013, and a photo and the contact information of the local grid manager is typically displayed in each residence block, the existence of these people and their role used to go relatively unnoticed. Nevertheless, they were there, taking charge of everything within their assigned grid with the goal of 'dissolving small matters within the grid and big problems within the community' (小事不出网格, 大事不出社区). Comprising 100 to 300 households each, the grids have become the basic unit of governance in both urban and rural areas in China. When working at full capacity as planned in the relevant policies, as many as 1.4 million grid managers

should be employed at any one time (Pei 2021)—a massive social group worthy of our attention on its own terms. To examine the role of grid managers, we can take the Covid-19 pandemic as a watershed moment and divide it into roughly two phases. Let us begin with the tasks that can be more or less classified as 'service provision' in each phase.

Before the pandemic, grid managers were tasked with everyday affairs and specific assignments that would vary across regions: ranging from pest control to distribution of birth-control supplies, from checking roadside lamps and plants to dispute mediation in the neighbourhood, these jobs could be scattered and trivial (for a vivid description of the life of one grid manager, see Li 2022). Grid managers were also in charge of providing community members with the various certificates they needed to claim a pension or apply for an unemployment subsidy. Sometimes they served as volunteers, standing guard on the street or providing free haircuts for the elderly, while at other times they were actively engaged in writing and advertising propaganda articles and in the construction of National Civilised Cities (全国 文明城市)—an honorary title awarded every three years to cities that fulfil a list of requirements, such as orderly traffic and spotless streets.

If many saw these 'services' as trivial or even irrelevant before the pandemic, this was no longer the case once Covid-19 entered the picture. With anti-Covid regulations tightened and mass PCR testing and regional lockdowns normalised between 2020 and 2022, grid managers became more visible and interactions with them unavoidable in everyday life. While the zero-Covid policy was enforced, it was grid managers who conducted contact tracing whenever a case was confirmed. They were also the ones who sealed off residence exits for those under home quarantine and helped transfer people—sometimes forcibly—to collective quarantine facilities, disinfecting the home after the move was done. They facilitated food supply and coordinated deliveries when people were locked inside their homes. They were the ones to whom people turned when their health code changed colour capriciously or they needed to resume mobility during lockdown. In other words, on top of the scope of their original work, during the pandemic, grid managers took up new responsibilities that were more directly related to people's livelihoods.

This list of tasks clearly shows that, whether before or during the pandemic, to be a grid manager was no easy job. What is also evident is that these tasks—physically demanding and time-consuming as they seem—vary substantially in terms of the professionalism required. While some demand nothing but physical labour, others require specific skills. However, as we can evince from job advertisements for grid managers, recruiters usually do not demand specific qualifications from candidates. Applicants must support the leadership of the Communist Party, have a local household registration, be young and educated (in many places, there is a maximum limit of 35 years of age and minimum requirement of college education to apply), and be willing to bear hardships. They are not required to have a specialised education or relevant working background, though this is of course preferred. In other words, the sorts of 'community services' grid managers provide—some of which in other countries would be undertaken by nongovernmental organisations, while others would not exist at all—in China are provided by agents deployed by the Party-State.

In a sense, the existence of grid managers and their takeover of community-level service provision mean that the Party-State has monopolised social services in China through its agents on the ground. Even though resident volunteers are often also involved and relied on to attain specific or contingent goals, grid managers are always there, mobilising, coopting, organising, and leading (for the role of grid managers in conflict resolution, see, for instance, Tang 2020). Significantly, grid managers have a different relationship to the Party-State than their counterparts on residents' committees—the basic governance unit before the advent of grid management. While those who work on residents' committees are—at least nominally—elected by residents, grid managers are salaried staff employed through calls announced by the local government, and thus more directly involved with the Party-State apparatus and are a more overt demonstration of its presence.

Grid managers, I argue, constitute a layer between the state and society and such in-betweenness serves two functions. On the one hand, by taking over social service provision from a fledgling civil society—one that during the past decade has fizzled due to increased state repression and cooptation—this layer binds people vertically to the Party-State at the

expense of their potential to bind horizontally with one another. If one defining characteristic of civil society is its independence from the government, it nonetheless appears that in the Chinese context the Party-State is creating a 'state-run civil society', as paradoxical in nature as the government-organised nongovernmental organisations that are prevalent in China (Hasmath et al. 2019). On the other hand, this layer functions as a buffer zone separating the Party-State and society in terms of accountability. To use food supply during lockdowns as an example, while the Party-State was often mentioned when people expressed their gratitude for receiving good food, grid managers and the workers in white hazmat suits were usually the ones blamed when things went wrong, as can be seen from numerous online denunciations of them (for a conceptualisation of gratitude throughout the Party's history, see Sorace 2021).

This latter dynamic resonates with Hansen's (2013) use of the notion of moral displacement to account for how university students in China reconcile the incongruity between the existence of corrupt officials and the alleged purity of the Party. Although grid managers are not among the ranks of government officials and are not necessarily Party members, a similar moral displacement is at play here: it is morally expedient to pin blame on nearby identifiable individuals rather than the faceless Party-State situated high above. In this way, the existence of grid managers as a layer in between enables the Party-State to simultaneously expand its power and retreat from its responsibilities, just like a caterpillar—to borrow the metaphor from Chinese scholar Qin Hui (2013: 249)—that stretches one end of its body and contracts the other when crawling forward.

Care and Control: The Moral Logic of *Guan*

While the above discussion touches on what grid managers *do*, in this section, I examine what they are *expected to do* in the eyes of the Chinese public. Despite their positive image in state media, grid managers have triggered public outrage on social media several times. Sometimes, this was due to the excessive and unreasonable constraints they imposed on their charges. For example, in October 2022, a Chinese writer shared how he managed to avoid seven days of collective quarantine by fighting for 24 hours against a grid manager who had abused his power in disregard of central policy on quarantine (Mei 2022). At other times, tragedies caused by their failure to respond to people's needs sparked outrage. In a post from February 2020, a Weibo user in Wuhan accused the grid manager in her community of indirectly causing her father's death (CDT 2020). The man had turned to the grid manager because he suspected he was infected with Covid-19 but received no help and subsequently left his home for fear of infecting the whole family, only to be found to have committed suicide a few days later.

These two cases result from seemingly contradictory causes—in one case, too many constraints and in the other too little help. Both were caused by behaviours that did not align with people's general expectations of grid managers at the given time. Significantly, the same Chinese word, *guan*, is typically used in online complaints or accusations against grid managers when referring both to their excessive intervention (管太多, *guan taiduo*) and to their irresponsible inaction (不管, *buguan*). This dual usage implies that *guan*, as an action by state agents, when undertaken in the right way and in balanced proportions, is legitimate and good in and of itself. In other words, grid managers are expected to *guan*, so long as they do it just right. By examining how this word is used in the wider context of the pandemic, I would argue that it points to a moral logic that is central to China's state–society interaction.

The same term appeared in many posts by those who were in favour of the zero-Covid policy after it was abolished in December 2022. Unprepared for the sudden policy shift, many deplored what they saw as a premature termination of restrictions and expressed their worries about an uncertain future by posting online comments such as 'The state does not *guan* [care about] us anymore!' (国家不管我们了!), or showed gratitude and determination with statements such as 'I thank the state for *guan* [taking care of] us for three years' (感谢国家管了我们三年) and 'From now on we can only *guan* [care for] ourselves' (接下来只能自己管自己了). It is evident that here *guan* carries a positive meaning that can be roughly translated as 'caring for' and 'taking care of', and emerging from these comments is a vision of the state as affectionate towards and protective

of its people—in fact, state *guan* is presented as the very reason that people were able to avoid infection with the virus. In other words, *guan* here works to a desired end of health and safety.

However, *guan* can also mean something more restrictive, which ranges from 'managing', as in the very term of 'grid management', to 'controlling', as in 'control area' (管控区, *guankongqu*). This second meaning was dominant in the way local governments across the country adopted the 'control area' label from September 2021 to ensure zero-Covid was achieved in 'a dynamic and accurate way' (Wu 2022). It applied to localities where contacts of confirmed cases had been, with the result that such areas were cordoned off and people within forbidden to leave or gather for any reason other than mass PCR testing (Wu 2022; also see O'Donnell 2022). And if we super-impose the two definitions of *guan* in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes obvious that the word as used in online posts—indicative of the state's protection and care—corresponds to a wide array of policies promulgated by the Party-State and imple-mented by its agents on the ground.

At one end of this array are policies of welfare provision, such as free in-hospital treatment for Covid patients; on the other are policies so restrictive that everyday life came to a complete halt, with the months-long lockdowns in various regions being the most telling example. Falling somewhere in between these extremes of care and control are all kinds of regulations, from mask mandates to colour-changing health codes. They vary in terms of the degree of control and influence on ordinary people, but when referred to by the single word *guan*, such differences are smoothed over. In other words, the duality of *guan* and its ambiguous usage bridge different policies and practices, implying, I argue, an equation of control with care (coincidentally, Zhu et al. used *guan* to describe the care–control relation between commu-nity and people with severe mental illness and their families; see Zhu et al. 2018). What is also implied is the causal relation—or, rather, illusion—that compli-ance with state regulations, however controlling and encroaching they might be, is the sufficient and neces-sary condition for safety. This argument aligns with past survey results, according to which the general public in China widely accepts the state's surveil-lance methods as a promise of personal safety (see, for instance, Su et al. 2022; for a discussion of how

surveillance can be considered a 'good gaze', see Morris 2020)—after all, surveillance can be included as part of the unspecified means of *guan*.

This dual understanding of *guan* recalls the long-standing metaphorical equivocation in China of family and state, and of the traditional paternalistic figure, who, despite being dominating and controlling, is appreciated for taking care of and providing for the whole family (see, for instance, Steinmüller 2015). But if intimacy exists alongside paternal authority inside the family, and nationalistic sentiments comparable to filial affection are widely felt towards the Party-State (Fong 2004), such sentimental connections hardly apply to how people feel about grid managers. Given that grid managers are not civil servants and work on a short-term contractual basis (Zhao and Douglas-Jones 2022), they do not occupy the proper paternal place to receive appreciation for enacting 'care', although they have the outsourced power to exercise 'control'. Instead, when people refer to the notion of *guan* in online complaints or accusations against grid managers for their excesses or inaction (too much or too little *guan*), they are not appealing to any moral agreements between themselves and the grid managers, as there is no such pact, but instead to the care and protection tacitly promised by the duality of *guan*. This reveals a pragmatic strategy that resembles rightful resistance (O'Brien 1996)—that is, to protect personal rights and further interests by making claims legitimised by official ideologies with a language willingly accepted by the Party-State. The image of a protective and providing father has long been embraced in state propaganda, as can be seen from the affectionate nickname given to Xi Jinping, Uncle Xi (*Xi Dada*, 习大大), and from the ceaseless emphasis by the Party-State on its determination to secure the safety of Chinese people (see, for instance, CCCCP 2021; People's Daily 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

What does grid management mean for the Chinese people? This essay has tried to provide one perspec-tive by investigating how the existence of grid managers generates new state–society dynamics by constituting a layer in between the two. I also argue that lying behind such dynamics is a moral logic,

among others, that emerges from the popular use of the term *guan*. The duality of this term gives rise to an amalgam of care and control and implies a ready acceptance—and even invitation, consciously or not—of the state's presence in people's everyday lives.

I discussed two groups of actors: state agents who are directly employed in the grid management system—that is, the grid managers; and those who live within grids and interact with grid managers, and with the state through them—that is, the ordinary people who constitute their charges. Contrary to what is claimed by domestic propaganda, these two groups cannot be identified purely as service providers and recipients, for even the most innocuous social services performed by grid managers can still, as I demonstrated above, be pernicious to civil society and to people's ability to form interpersonal bonds with one another. Nor can they be neatly divided into superordinate and subordinate, with the service provision aspect of grid management reduced to mere surveillance in disguise, as is believed by some Western observers. Although different in institutional identity, grid managers do not occupy a privileged place in people's political imaginary and whatever power they possess ends with their contract, while ordinary people can wield the notion of *guan* to make moral appeals to their advantage. Grid managers and their charges are related in a subtle way that cannot be summarised as a dichotomy but needs examining through their lived experiences within the grid management system. It is my belief that to fully understand this system we must divert attention from policy design to real people and what is happening on the ground. ∎

Rush hour at a busy thoroughfare in the urban village. PC: Nellie Chu.

Urban Villages, Grid Management, and the Contradictions of Capital

Nellie CHU

In November 2022, migrant labourers in Guangzhou's urban villages protested en masse the lockdowns associated with China's zero-Covid policy. While some critics in China and abroad described the mechanisms of population control in the zero-Covid policy as the 'return' of an all-encompassing state control akin to that of the Maoist period, this essay argues, rather, that the episode laid bare the social inequalities between migrant labourers and village landlords on which the global supply chains for the low-cost manufacturing of fast fashion depend.

On the evening of 14 November 2022, hundreds of migrant labourers in Kanglecun and surrounding urban villages (城中村) in Guangzhou simultaneously stormed out of their apartments and pushed down the tall water-filled plastic barricades that lined one of the main thoroughfares of this garment district. The demonstrators, most of whom came from Hubei Province and were part of an informal *Hubeicun* (Hubei village), had organised the collective action online via their hometown associations. Before the most recent lockdowns, these migrant labourers had been frantically fulfilling production orders for 11 November ('11/11'), which is marketed by online corporate giants Taobao and Tianmall as 'Singles' Day'—one of the biggest and most profitable days of the retail year. Falling profits

and dwindling orders since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic had made the sudden surge in demand especially important to the economic survival of the small businesses in the area, as well as to the livelihoods of the migrants who sustained them. With the lockdown mandates enforced in the months before the protest having brought most, if not all, garment manufacturing to a standstill, on that night, demonstrators cheered and applauded as they walked down the road in collective defiance of the longstanding lockdowns and other strict anti-Covid measures in Guangzhou. Images of resistance and protest quickly circulated across social media channels in China and abroad, garnering international media attention for the scale and intensity of anger and discontent in these demonstrations.

Critics and pundits in China and abroad described the population-control measures of China's zero-Covid policy as the 'return' of an all-encompassing state control akin to that of the Maoist period. While that claim is dubious, such assumptions tend to obscure the ways in which the rollout of the zero-Covid policy throughout 2021 and 2022—particularly the use of grid management (网格化管理) as a tool of population control—relied on capitalist mechanisms, such as the mobility of people, commodities, and capital. To be sure, many observers have speculated that zero-Covid protocols across China enabled some corporate leaders and local government officials to amass tremendous wealth through mass testing and the distribution of medicine and other essential items. However, such speculation only scratches the surface of the issue.

The unrest among migrant labourers in Guangzhou's urban villages (including Kanglecun, Lujiang, and Datang) in November 2022 tells a slightly different story. It demonstrates how grid management—a key component of China's zero-Covid policy (O'Donnell 2022)—exposed the contradiction between labour and capital in this manufacturing hub, rather than representing a simplistic 'return' to Maoist forms of state control. This contradiction becomes apparent when the mobility of migrants, commodities, and capital that is necessary for supply-chain capitalism grinds to a halt. More specifically, in this essay, I draw on my longstanding ethnographic research on migrant labour and global fast-fashion supply chains in urban villages to argue that the recent unrest in Kanglecun and elsewhere exposed the existing social inequalities between migrant labourers and their village landlords on which the global supply chains for low-cost mass manufacturing depend.

Widening Gaps

Nestled within the northern and south-eastern corners of Guangzhou, dense, low-lying buildings known as 'handshake buildings' (握手楼) cluster within pockets of the city's urban landscape (Bach 2010; Hsing 2010; Al 2014; Bolchover 2018). The result of intense urbanisation in the past four decades, urban villages are unique in that their residents no longer rely on agriculture for income but are not considered fully urban, according to the *hukou* (household registration) system—a population-control legacy from the Maoist period (Chu et al. 2022; Smart and Zhang 2006). Another difference lies in the ownership of land. While city neighbourhoods are built on state-owned land, in these villages, longstanding members of former Maoist agricultural collectives continue to possess the administrative use rights over their land. Here, few people are concerned about landownership per se; rather, they focus on issues of administrative use rights and fair redistribution of money based on land values (Hsing 2010). According to the *hukou* system, holders of land-use rights are still considered rural citizens, though some have become wealthy landlords who rent apartments to rural migrants searching for jobs and affordable housing. For this reason, village collectives governed by the village landlords (colloquially known as 土二代, *tu er dai* or 'landed second generation') retain much of their administrative autonomy over everyday business and security affairs (Chu 2022).

Urban villages have long defied the technocratic schemes of urban planning and population control put forward by the municipal government. Governance of everyday activities within the urban villages—including traffic safety, sanitation, public security, and market exchanges—primarily falls within the purview of the *tu er dai* landlords, who remain organised according to pre-Maoist lineages and former Maoist collectives based on their surnames. Although urban residents commonly see these places as an eyesore, the *tu er dai* landlords have become extremely wealthy from their possession of use

Migrant labourers at work outside of a *jiagongchang* household workshop. PC: Nellie Chu.

rights over the land. In fact, they have become a largely invisible group of rentiers and gatekeepers whose economic and political interests are tied to the everyday functioning of the urban villages (Chu 2022). Most, if not all, village landlords have moved out of the urban villages and have rented out their concrete multistorey apartment buildings to migrant labourers searching for employment in the city. In urban villages in Guangzhou, some of these migrants, particularly those from Hubei Province, have taken up residence in the apartment buildings vacated by their landlords and run industrial workshops there. In Kanglecun, decades of informal and low-cost garment manufacturing for the global fast fashion sector have thus yielded immense profits for the *tu er dai*, transforming these villagers from peasants to landlords.

The ambiguity in the governance of Guangzhou's urban villages, split between *tu er dai* landlords and municipal authorities, has enabled the transnational supply chains of fast fashion to flourish along the narrow and twisted alleyways. This prosperity has also been made possible by the hundreds of thousands of migrant labourers who live and work here. Approx-

imately 200,000 to 300,000 migrant workers—most of whom (80 per cent of the local migrant population) are from Jianli and Tianmen in Hubei Province—sustain the thousands of small, informal 'household workshops' (家工厂, *jiagongchang*) that line the buildings' corridors. Each *jiagongchang* serves a single node across the wider supply chain for the low-cost manufacturing of fast fashion, including the dyeing of fabrics, the cutting of garment pieces, garment assembly, and packaging. Many household workshops are individually owned by migrant bosses, who in turn hire itinerant migrant workers, paying them piece rates (Chu 2018).

Before the lockdowns of 2022, the ability of these *jiagongchang* to sustain the 'just-in-time' delivery of low-cost fast fashion lay precisely in the mobility of labour, commodities, and capital, which floated in and out of Kanglecun and other urban villages. Here, migrants, many of whom were middle-aged women and migrant men who undertook factory work in Guangzhou and Shenzhen during the early years of market reforms, could experiment with the risks and rewards of entrepreneurial self-enterprise. Whether

Image of a makeshift warehouse in the urban village. PC: Nellie Chu.

they are small-scale factory owners or temporary workers who earn piece rates, they paradoxically call themselves 'boss' or *laoban* (老板), despite the drudgery of their factory work.

While men demonstrate their masculinity by celebrating the 'freedom' to move in and out of different factory jobs, women prefer part-time temporary work in the workshops, which allows them to juggle their industrial work with childcare and other domestic obligations. Moreover, many migrants return to piece-rate work when their small-scale enterprises fail so they can 'take a break' (休息一下) and brainstorm their next venture. During my research, I have met migrants who have run fashion wholesaling, food service, and construction businesses; they see their factory work not so much as 'labour' in the conventional sense, but as a stepping-stone to entrepreneurship. As my forthcoming book explains, migrants'

A row of garment factories along a busy street in the urban village. PC: Nellie Chu.

work in the *jiagongchang* yields a sense of freedom that they would not experience if they remained in larger, more centralised dormitory factories such as Foxconn.

Even if they were paid low wages, the *mobility* of their labour eased the harsh and difficult conditions of their work (Yang 2022). I often witnessed arguments between itinerant workers and the owners of the *jiagongchang*. Workers dissatisfied with the conditions of their temporary jobs simply walked out and found employment in other factories in the area. Older women who did not have to deal with childcare during the afternoons would drop by a *jiagongchang* for a few hours during the day to earn some extra money by snipping off loose threads from finished garments. Others juggled multiple jobs, working in a fabric stall in the mornings and in the afternoons picking up materials to recycle in the large-scale fabric wholesale markets. Temporary workers, particularly women, fulfilled their household obligations during the day, so household workshops were at full-scale operation in the evenings.

In short, the movement of people, commodities, and capital in and out of the urban villages before the lockdowns of 2022 sustained the livelihoods of both migrant labourers and village landlords, even as their social positions as renters/rentiers remained starkly unequal. Before the pandemic, surveillance and control of migrant populations by uniformed officers in the urban villages served merely to regulate the flows of people, goods, and capital across village borders. Members of the village collectives had no interest in stamping out the migrants' manufacturing activities, which provided them with regular and profitable rental income. In fact, before the pandemic, village landlords and the private security officers they hired functioned as gatekeepers of the flows of labour and capital to siphon off profit from the migrants. During the day, when manufacturing activities slackened and migrant workers rested, the gates of the traffic control stations came down and officers required all vehicular and bike traffic to provide identification, licences, and proof of registration. However, during the early to late evenings, when

manufacturing activities resumed at full capacity, the gates opened and officers turned a blind eye, allowing unrestricted flows of people and raw materials in and out of the urban villages.

Migrants' labour conditions and livelihoods in the urban villages thus hinged precariously on their own mobility, as well as the fluidity of capital as it floated upwards into the pockets of the rent-seeking landlords. For the migrant labourers, being physically mobile yielded a limited sense of freedom, agency, and control over the daily rhythms of labour and their livelihood. Some male migrant labourers even saw becoming a 'boss' as a mark of masculinity—an embodiment of the pioneering and risk-taking entrepreneur. The ability to be mobile, even in a very limited sense, eased—if not obscured—the exploitative effects of low-cost mass manufacturing across global supply chains. Yet, as soon as the lockdowns immobilised the daily activities of the *jiagongchang* and the migrant labourers, the crushing effects of extraction and exploitation rose to the surface, eventually leading to mass unrest.

Grid Management and Unrest in the Urban Villages

On the evening of 14 November 2022—the day of the protests—images and videos of migrant labourers gathering in the streets circulated across social media. Bloggers and other observers used pseudonyms to anonymously share documentaries and analyses via social media, elaborating on the difficult conditions that migrants faced in urban villages. Some of these commentators explained that the migrants' demands highlighted their growing sense of distrust of the village landlords. According to one video blogger, migrants put forward the following demands: 1) that residents be allowed to take Covid-19 tests by the front door of their apartment, instead of being required to stand in line downstairs, to minimise the risk of cross-infection; 2) that food and essential goods be distributed directly to residents and not through village landlords; and 3) that the end date of the lockdown be announced so business could resume as soon as possible (Wang 2022).

Though seemingly pragmatic and reasonable, these demands revealed the tensions that brewed beneath the surface of daily labour and life in the urban villages, which had been exacerbated by the institution of grid management—an urban planning technique implemented nationwide to enforce Covid-19 prevention policies and other bureaucratic requirements. Numerous security checkpoints were established across Chinese cities to regulate the movement of people—and presumably the virus—across spatial grids (Wei et al. 2021). These security checkpoints, and the face-to-face encounters they allowed, constituted the human component of this complex network of grid management. The checkpoints included body temperature scanners, which closely resembled metal detectors, as well as security personnel who took people's temperature, checked their QR health codes, and ultimately granted permission to pass through. However, because these checkpoints were set up primarily in entryways of residential compounds, commercial buildings, and along the perimeter of the urban villages, the infrastructural landscapes of apartment buildings, roads, and urban zones determined the size and population density of each 'grid'.

Within each node of the grid, neighbourhood committees (居委会) were tasked with carrying out regular testing, as well as the distribution of food, medicine, and other essential items to those living within the grid. Many of these committees included village landlords and employees of third-party property management corporations, as well as resident volunteers from the apartment compounds or residential neighbourhoods. Most of these members were local Cantonese-speaking residents. In the case of the urban villages, an entire district or subdistrict might constitute a node of the spatial grid, including hundreds or even thousands of migrant labourers living outside the purview of the village committee and municipal government. As members of the 'floating population' (流动人口) under the *hukou* policy, living under the radar of state enforcement within informal neighbourhoods such as the urban villages provided migrants with some level of protection from police harassment and systemic discrimination. Most migrant residents were not formally registered, so village committees had no way of knowing how many people lived in an apartment.

Consequently, hundreds, if not thousands, of migrant labourers fell between the cracks of the official grid management that oversaw the distribution of food and essential items during lockdowns. Across social media, migrants under quarantine in urban villages complained about inconsistent, substandard, and inadequate food supplies. One journalist on social media mentioned that deliveries by the government were patchy and inadequate (Women on a Swing 2022). On days when he did receive food, he was provided only with instant noodles, canned goods, and instant rice, which were not enough for his family of four. Village committees, whose volunteers were tasked with delivering medicine, were grossly understaffed. Some attempted to navigate the complex mazes of narrow alleyways to deliver supplies, but many simply gave up or could not find the recipients (Women on a Swing 2022). Consequently, online orders for essential items, including medicine for illnesses other than Covid-19, which were necessary to compensate for the inadequate supplies provided by the government, could not reach migrant residents. Thus, even though migrant residents in Kanglecun and other urban villages were organised into spatial grids, the zigzag layout of those villages, compounded by the invisibility of the migrant population in China, left large numbers unaccounted for, exposing the problems with grid management in urban villages.

Failure to deliver public goods exposed not only the problems of urban management, but also, more importantly, the negligence and lack of will on the part of the village landlords and local authorities to address the needs of the migrant population. The lockdowns brought to the surface the tensions between migrants and village landlords that had been bubbling unseen for many years. Many migrants believed that village landlords had become de facto middlemen who received provisions through their village collectives before redistributing them to their migrant tenants. It was rumoured that some landlords had hoarded supplies for themselves, while others had resold goods to migrant residents at inflated prices. For the most part, migrants did not know whether food and supplies were sent from the village committee or directly from the municipal government. The lack of communication and transparency exacerbated the inequalities that had existed long before the pandemic. The lack of channels through which migrants could air their concerns and grievances intensified their struggle.

Layers of Exploitation

The heavy-handed lockdowns in Kanglecun and other urban villages throughout 2022 revealed the historical layers of extraction and exploitation enforced on the migrant population in Chinese urban villages. During the Covid-19 pandemic, *hukou* policies that deny migrant labourers' claims to state welfare, overlaid with the global supply chains that exploit their labour and expose them to rent-seeking villagers, were compounded by the grid management that cut off their main sources of economic survival. This made plain for all to see the market cycles of extraction and exploitation to which the migrant population in urban villages is subjected—cycles that have intensified over the decades since the introduction of market reforms. It also brought to light the inequalities in wealth and local political power between migrant labourers and village landlords.

Indeed, the unrest of November 2022 was not an isolated event, but part of a string of other collective actions by migrants, who attempted to assert their claims to dignified labour and decent livelihoods in Guangzhou way before the pandemic began. These collective actions included public protests against the large-scale confiscation of pedicab bikes by local officials in 2015 (pedicab deliveries of raw materials for garment manufacturing provided a livelihood for many itinerant migrants). Since 2012, sporadic protests had erupted in Kanglecun and other urban villages across Guangzhou against local real estate developers negotiating with village committees over the transfer of land-use rights (Xu 2013; Bandurski 2016). The developers and village landlords intended to demolish the apartments and industrial sites on which migrants' livelihoods depended. Migrant protests in Kanglecun eventually managed to stop the profit-seeking practices of developers and village landlords, at least for the time being.

With the introduction of strict lockdowns in the urban villages in 2022, the state's biopolitical grid management policies determined the possibilities of migrants' life projects, which hinged not only on their ability to live, but also on their capacity to be physically mobile to claim for themselves the power to dictate the terms of their labour exploitation. As I have illustrated, migrants fought to survive in the precarious conditions in the city by moving from one low-paying job to another to ease the exploitative effects of global supply chains. Indeed, migrants whom I encountered labouring on sewing machines in the *jiagongchang* over the course of my ethnographic research often found relief from the monotony of their work by periodically returning to their families in their home villages.

Migrants often wax nostalgically about the relative cleanliness of the air, water, and vegetables in their home villages. For many who work in the *jiagongchang*, going to the wet market to buy fresh vegetables serves as a reminder of life in their home village and provides a brief reprieve from work they find hectic and monotonous. (Many migrants do not have their own kitchens and some kitchens do not have refrigerators, which added to the challenges of survival during lockdown.) When the immobility imposed by the pandemic control measures prevented these migrants from dictating the terms of their own labour, this finally exposed the detrimental effects of supply chain capitalism on which Kanglecun and other urban villages in Guangzhou flourished.

In short, the stifling of economic activity for the sake of Covid-19 prevention in Guangzhou's urban villages did not (re)introduce Maoist-era forms of state governance. A *longue durée* perspective on the emergence of urban villages, as well as the socioeconomic struggles of China's migrant population since the introduction of market reforms in the late 1970s, shows how the country's zero-Covid policies exposed the patterns of capitalist extraction and exploitation on which global supply chains in Guangzhou's urban villages are anchored. The precarious labour conditions and livelihoods of migrant labourers in China existed long before the start of the pandemic; the policies of community-based health and security that were implemented in 2021 and 2022 merely brought them into public view. While the detrimental effects of rentier capitalism merging with state governance in urban villages are not new, what is noteworthy about the migrants' collective action in Guangzhou in 2022 is that it paved the way for a cascade of related actions in factories and cities across the nation. Unless the plight of migrant labourers in China is addressed, unrest will continue to disrupt the 'grids' of population control and urban management. ■

Protest organised by medical master's students at the Anhui Medical University on 13 December 2022. PC: @whyyoutouzhele Twitter account.

'They Want the Horse to Run but Without Providing Feed'

Labour Exploitation of Healthcare Workers in China

Xiaoling CHEN

China has long experienced a chronic shortage of medical personnel, which is compounded by low incomes for healthcare workers. Against the backdrop of the sudden death of a medical student on 13 December 2022, this essay explores the structural issues in China's public health system. I argue that China's exploitative public health system has created a deteriorating work environment for medical professionals, eroding their passion, morale, and ethics, and resulting in a chronic shortage of medical personnel. These effects have created a vicious cycle that is detrimental to China's healthcare provision capacity.

On 13 December 2022, the hashtag 'Sudden Death of a First-Year Graduate Student on Duty at the West China Hospital of the Sichuan University' (#华西研一学生在岗猝死#) on Sina Weibo triggered heated discussions about the welfare of healthcare workers in China. Chat logs and medical records circulating online indicated that 23-year-old student Chen Jiahui had tested positive for Covid-19 and had a fever for three days, but his mentor told him to keep working all the while, resulting in his death from cardiac arrest. The hospital denied the claims and announced that,

The entrance of West China Hospital of Sichuan University. PC: VCG.

contrary to rumours, Chen was alive and in intensive care. Even so, insiders observed that Chen's diastolic pressure was as low as 13 and his life was being sustained only by machines. At the time, his death was compared with that of Dr Li Wenliang (Xiao et al. 2022a), suggesting the treatment was a meaningless and humiliating ploy to delay the inevitable for political purposes. Many considered this effort a strategy adopted by hospital administrators to gesture towards their efforts to save lives, to avoid accountability, or to buy time to respond to a public relations crisis—or all three. In the middle of this crisis, the Graduate School of Clinical Medicine of Sichuan University published an article on its WeChat account to pay respect to its medical students, who 'fight on the frontline of Covid-19 containment' (the official account was closed and the article deleted after the event attracted public attention). Meanwhile, many netizens blamed Chen's death on his overwhelming workload resulting from the uncontrollable spread of Omicron variants after the government lifted its Dynamic Zero-Covid Policy on 7 December.

At that time, many healthcare workers attempted to go beyond the contingent circumstances and draw public attention to the deep-rooted exploitation of medical students and residents. As one healthcare worker stated on Weibo: 'Please focus on the *systemic* violent exploitation of the residency system on medical students. This Weibo post was to speak up for our medical students' (emphasis added). Indeed, Chen's death was not a unique case and there are records of suicides of healthcare professionals going back years, long before the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in 2017, Hua Dong, a 27-year-old resident at Qilu Hospital, killed himself by intravenous injection of propofol partly due to stress from continuous night shifts and low compensation (Yuan and Zhang 2017). Without doubt, the Covid-19 outbreak made a situation that was already untenable even worse. Social media discussions indicated that since 2020, medical students and residents had been forced to participate in Covid-19 containment under threat of losing their graduation, medical certification, and postgraduation employment opportunities. While being on the frontline, they were treated the worst in terms of personal protective gear, working conditions, and compensation. Many were shamed as 'deserters' (逃兵) for refusing to join the effort. After China lifted its Zero-Covid Policy, medical students and residents organised protests in many hospitals and universities,

demanding to be 'allowed to return home, equal pay for equal work' (应返尽返, 同工同酬), and stating that '[You] do not properly compensate us residents, so we refuse your threats' (不补规培, 拒绝威胁).

On Weibo under the abovementioned hashtag, a medical student wrote:

Unfair and unjust treatment is rampant throughout our entire student period. Some might ask: 'Aren't you in school? Why are you still working?' ... We pay tuition fees, which is a normal part of pursuing an education. But are we paying to be at the bottom of the hospital hierarchy? To be manipulated by our mentors? To be treated as a punching bag by officially employed healthcare workers ... Some people may say that medicine requires rigour, and that someone must strictly regulate you before you become a doctor. Is this true ... Perhaps all doctors would say that the passion they had when they were medical students was consumed along the way to becoming a doctor. If the passion is gone, what can sustain you? Consuming passion is also an important lesson for graduate students pursuing a degree in medicine. I become more and more indifferent, but I wasn't like that before. They talk about passion and dedication, but can anyone survive without eating and living? Nowadays, who doesn't ensure their livelihood before discussing their passion? But is our livelihood really guaranteed?

This essay attempts to address some of the questions raised by this student. From 2009, China implemented nationwide healthcare reforms, which by 2011 had achieved national coverage of more than 95 per cent of the population from less than 80 per cent during the 2000s, contributing to increased demand for healthcare provision. Despite a consistent effort to establish a tiered public health system that triages patients at community-based health institutions, large public hospitals in counties and cities remain overcrowded, resulting in high demand for healthcare workers in these areas. Underfunded and constrained by policy, public hospitals are incentivised to pursue profit in part by exploiting their employees. This essay highlights some of the structural problems in China's healthcare system and discusses multiple ways in which healthcare workers are treated unfairly. Based on my analysis of the working conditions and welfare of medical students and residents in large, certified resident training hospitals and healthcare workers in county-level public hospitals, I argue that China's exploitative public health system has created a deteriorating working environment for medical professionals, eroding their passion, morale, and ethics, resulting in a chronic shortage of medical personnel. These effects have created a vicious cycle that is detrimental to China's healthcare provision capacity.

Medical Students and Residents as Cheap Labour

Low compensation and unstandardised training are two deep-rooted problems in the certified training institutes for medical professionals (State Council 2019). Despite the critical role of the residency program in preparing students for medical practice, many healthcare workers said it had not provided proper clinical training. Instead, they were required to perform only low-skill tasks such as writing up medical records and measuring blood sugar levels and blood pressure, which are considered nurses' responsibilities. According to Gong Xiaoming, Deputy Director of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Peking Union Medical College Hospital, in some hospitals, training was a formality and was not properly evaluated: '[Residents] merely work but do not receive training' (Yuan and Zhang 2017). Apparently, this situation has not changed. Many residents believed the training during their residency was a waste of time and they had to retrain themselves after finding a job.

In 2013, seven national government departments led by the National Health and Family Planning Commission announced the *Guiding Opinions on Establishing a Standardised Training System for Residents Physicians* (NHFPC et al. 2013). This residency program often takes three years to complete and is targeted at three categories of people: those who have completed undergraduate education but are not officially employed (ungraduated residents), those who are pursuing a master's or doctoral degree (graduate residents), and those who are sent by their employers

to the certified (and often superior) medical institutes for training (employed residents). Since the program was enforced nationwide in 2015, the residency certificate has become institutionalised as essential for a medical career. By 2022, more than 460,000 medical students had been trained by the program in more than 100 certified institutes, most of which were top-ranking public hospitals in large cities.

This residency program was conceived as early as the 1990s but did not become a reality until 2013, coinciding with a rapid increase in public demand for healthcare provision. Many healthcare workers believed that, despite good intentions, the residency program was used by the certified hospitals more to compensate for labour shortages than to cultivate qualified medical practitioners. As one netizen observed:

> If a tertiary hospital with training qualifications wants to hire doctors, there are too many people vying for the positions. It's not that there's a lack of resources, but that the directors don't want to hire full-time employees because they would have to share the profit. However, they can exploit students without having to pay them and students are obedient, so they can easily be exploited.

Statements like these can be corroborated by the fact that many hospitals would not be able to sustain their operations without using residents' labour. As one insider commented: 'Many hospitals would be paralysed without students pursuing a specialty master's in medicine. The number of full-time employees is insufficient to support the turn-around of admitted patients. Specialty masters are the cheapest labour.' Another netizen said:

> Many clinical departments can't survive without labour from residents, postgraduates, and master's students. Of course, they also obtain many opportunities for practising and learning. But for hospitals, their healthcare provision capacity and patient admission would be significantly reduced without them.

These accounts capture how the pressure to sustain hospital operations, and thus China's health system more broadly, has largely shifted to medical students and residents through the interconnected hierarchies of education, certification, administration, and bureaucracy.

These days, four certificates—an academic degree, a diploma, a residency, and a medical licence—have become a basic requirement for medical master's students. Although students have the option to obtain a residency after graduation, many feel compelled to complete their residency training before graduating to be competitive in the job market. An anaesthesiologist in Qilu Hospital in Shandong Province noted in 2017 that there were many residents working in its Anaesthesiology Department, which provided anaesthesia for 200 to 300 surgeries every day, with doctors working an average of more than 10 hours a day. He explained: 'Anaesthesiologists work more than 12 hours for two-thirds of the week. They start working at 7:30 am and rarely leave before 7:00 pm. This is the nature of our work, and residents are more exhausted than we are' (Yuan and Zhang 2017). A resident and graduate student at Qilu Hospital said he arrived for work every day before 7.30 am, did morning rounds, changed dressings, and wrote up medical records. In the afternoon, he participated in surgeries and, once the doctors had left, he had to stay to prepare for the next day's work. When he was not on duty, he needed to conduct research for his mentor (Yuan and Zhang 2017). Chen's death showed that the situation for residents had not improved by 2022. The West China Hospital in Chengdu City requires graduate students to complete 33 months of residency and complete their thesis in three months. Even though graduate school does not begin until September, students are required to 'voluntarily' sign up for residency beginning in July. This means they have few breaks during the three years of graduate school (Zhang et al. 2022).

Compared with their workload, the compensation for residents is disproportionately low, albeit differentiated depending on the categories into which they fall and the hospital where they work. Salaries for undergraduate and employed residents comprise a basic income and performance bonus, which is often higher than that for graduate residents but lower than for official employees. Graduate residents' compensation comes from public funding, which allocates a minimum of RMB30,000 (US$4,350) to each student per annum, part of which is allotted to training infrastructure. Despite large differences in

living and housing expenses in Chinese cities, this public funding does not consider the residents' location. According to a survey conducted in 2020 by Dingxiang Yuan (2022), China's renowned healthcare platform, 27.5 per cent of residents' monthly compensation was less than RMB1,000 (US$145 or US$1,740 a year) and, within this group, 8 per cent had no income. Only 32.3 per cent of residents had a monthly subsidy of more than RMB3,000 (US$435), and only 4.4 per cent of these were graduate residents.

West China Hospital's resident recruitment introduction indicates that the salary of undergraduate residents is RMB48,000 to RMB60,000 per annum (US$7,000–8,700). One of Chen's classmates said the hospital gave its graduate residents a monthly subsidy of RMB800 (US$116) in their first year, which increased to RMB1,000 in the second year if they obtained their medical licence (Zhang et al. 2022). Low compensation and stressful workloads are pervasive, leaving few options for students who want to find a less exploitative environment. As one medical student wrote on Sina Weibo:

> Under every college's Super Topic, the common sentiment is to run away and not come to study there. Each medical school and their affiliated hospital are in collusion, where can medical students run to? They are just being used as fuel, jumping from one pit to another. Everything stems from the second when we filled out our college application form.

A National Institutes of Health study indicates a high dropout intention among medical postgraduates due to dissatisfaction with the healthcare environment, career choice regret, and high perceived stress (Peng et al. 2022).

The exploitation and burnout medical students and residents experience have eroded their passion and life aspirations. As one netizen commented:

> Medical students are among the most obedient [听话] groups. From the first day of school, we are disciplined and reprimanded, to 'have medical ethics', to 'be dedicated', to 'be selfless', and to 'be fearless'. If one is not oppressed to the extreme, will one ever come to question those that are always taken for granted? How many people have carried with them a passion for

medicine and a reverence for life … Yet, now they cannot even protect their own lives. So, tell me, what did I study for so many years? My kindness, enthusiasm, and dedication have been completely consumed, and yet a group of people, who drink my blood and eat my flesh, stand on the moral high ground and accuse me. How ridiculous!

Director Zhang, a former gynaecologist, is now Director of the Human Resources Department and member of the Community Party Committee at the Ling County People's Hospital (hereinafter LPH) in Shanhe City, Guangdong Province. She said that a major reason for the chronic shortage of medical professionals over the past 10 years was that many medical students, on graduation, chose non-clinical roles such as salesperson for a pharmaceutical company or medical administrator. Students who decide to stay in practice often work in county-level public hospitals like LPH where exploitation and unfair treatment take different forms (Interview data).

Worker Exploitation in County-Level Public Hospitals

I conducted ethnographic research in LPH between September 2021 and June 2022, during which I mainly worked in the departments of neurology and neurosurgery. As the largest public hospital in the county, LPH is representative of the many public hospitals in China's more than 2,800 counties and county-level districts. They are squeezed between top-ranking city-level and provincial public hospitals on the one hand, and community-based primary healthcare institutions at the township level and below on the other. They are often overcrowded with patients with diverse needs, ranging from simple everyday illnesses such as the common cold to life-threatening emergencies like heart disease and stroke. China has 2.4 licensed doctors per 1,000 inhabitants—half the rate of top-ranking Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and similar to countries such as Mexico (2.4), South Korea (2.5), and Japan (2.6). This low doctor-to-patient ratio has profound everyday effects for doctors,

such as heavier workloads, longer hours, impacts on physical and mental wellbeing, and burnout—all of which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Dong et al. 2022; Xiao et al. 2022b). These effects are complicated by factors such as China's large ageing population and the uneven spatial distribution of healthcare resources.

At LPH, the departments of neurology and neurosurgery and the affiliated Interventional Radiology Centre serve the county's 119,000 high-risk residents aged 60 and above, who represent 11.67 per cent of the county's population. LPH faces significant challenges in attracting and retaining young healthcare professionals. Director Zhang explained that they faced more severe staff shortages than hospitals in larger, more affluent cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The latter have better financial and political resources, provide higher salaries and better career prospects for their employees, and thus tend to compete with neighbouring places such as Ling County for staff (Interview data).

When I arrived at LPH in 2021, its Neurology Department had two directors, two deputy directors, and eight physicians equally divided between two districts; a ninth physician worked in the Cardiology Department to mitigate its staff shortage. By June 2022, two young doctors had resigned, a senior doctor was hired but left after several months, and two junior physicians intended to resign but eventually stayed. It was not until the spring of 2023 that three new hires arrived to fill some staffing gaps. Healthcare workers in county-level public hospitals feel that their time and expertise are not used effectively. Zhou Huiying, Deputy Director of District 1 and my field-work supervisor, said she was doing the same tasks she had done back in 2011 when she was a hospital intern and graduate student in Guangzhou. In city-level and provincial public hospitals, directors and deputy directors are not required to admit patients or take nightshifts. Although LPH helps train general practitioners for community-based health institutions, doctors saw these people more as a burden than as compensatory labour because they had little time to provide help before rotating to the next department. Two years after being appointed deputy director, Zhou was finally taken off nightshifts.

Many senior healthcare workers said LPH was like a 'self-financing factory' (自负盈亏的工厂)—an allusion to the factories built during the 1980s and 1990s when China reformed and opened up. Like most public hospitals in China, LPH is underfunded and therefore highly profit-driven. The hospital's leaders encourage each department to admit as many patients as possible, despite a severe staff shortage. Although Ling's Health Bureau claimed to have 2.78 certified (assistant) physicians per 1,000 residents, many senior physicians serve as directors, administrators, or both, and engage in minimal clinical tasks, shifting most of their clinical workload on to junior physicians. For most of 2021 and 2022, District 1 had 48 to 52 beds with one for intensive care and, counting Deputy Director Zhou, each doctor was assigned 10 beds for patient admission. In 2021, the district admitted 15,245 patients, averaging 3,049 patient beds per doctor, which means a neurologist managed eight to nine patients at a time.

Doctors were on a five-day roster and had few holidays or weekends off (Table 1). In theory, this accumulated to 186 hours per month per doctor; however, few doctors ever left work on time. Those on night shifts often worked extra hours until midday to complete routine tasks (highlighted in yellow in the table). During regular shifts, they generally worked overtime, and some returned after lunch to work extra hours. Director Li Qin, a former neurologist with 10 years' clinical experience and now director of an important administrative department at LPH, told me: 'If you have an emergency in the morning, you'll need to complete your planned work in the afternoon', which, unfortunately, was not uncommon for clinical departments with life-threatening emergencies. Long Yue, Director of the Department of Neurosurgery and Interventional Radiology Centre, said that due to their proximity, county-level hospitals treated many more emergencies than city-level and provincial hospitals. As a result, their doctors also face much higher risks when communicating with patients and their caregivers regarding diagnoses, treatments, and health expenditures under time constraints.

The doctors believed in the significance of sharpening their expertise, but were constantly distracted by administrative tasks that compromised their clinical capacity and healthcare provision. To avoid getting sued due to China's worsened patient–doctor relations (Du et al. 2020), healthcare workers are required to file more and more paperwork that goes

Name	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Doctor 1	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am
Doctor 2	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm
Doctor 3	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am
Doctor 4	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am
Doctor 5	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am	8–11.30 am	8 am – 5.30 pm	5.30 pm – 8 am	Finish work at 8 am	8–11.30 am
Legend	Regular Shift	Dayshift	Nightshift	Post-nightshift rest			

Table 1. Example of a weekly roster for District 1 doctors

beyond reasonable clinical purposes. What's worse, LPH faces financial constraints and delayed its plan to fully digitise its medical records system. Thus, healthcare workers must file both handwritten and digital medical records, significantly increasing their per patient workload. A survey indicates that administrative tasks have substantially contributed to burnout among doctors (Dingxiang Yuan 2022). These tasks compete for time with diagnosis, treatment, and patient communication, eroding patient trust and respect in doctors and intensifying the patient–doctor tensions they were put in place to address. Professor Zhu Jie, an expert in cerebrovascular diseases from a hospital in Guangzhou and who served as a deputy dean at LPH during 2021, commented on the roles of county-level public hospitals in China's tiered healthcare system, stating that doctors in county-level hospitals were tougher but more docile and thus could handle as many patients as necessary if pushed hard enough. They serve as the most important medical

workforce, dealing with the large patient population at the county level, helping to cushion the pressures on higher-ranking hospitals in large cities.

Doctors' wages are unreasonably low given their training and expertise, workload, and stress. In 2017, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security spearheaded reform of the salary system in public hospitals, which was enforced nationwide in 2021 (MHRSS 2017, 2021). These reforms gave public hospitals more flexibility to develop their own wage plans to increase incomes for healthcare professionals while discouraging malpractice and corruption. Despite these efforts, disproportionately low wages continue to be a feature of China's public health system. A survey of 25,120 medical professionals from June 2019 to January 2020 in six Chinese provinces revealed that 35.5 per cent of those surveyed had a monthly income of less than RMB5,000 (US$723) and 56.5 per cent earned between RMB5,000 and RMB10,000 (US$1,444) (Xiao et al. 2022b). Most of

Name	Title	Year began practising	Basic income (RMB, before taxes and deductions)	Basic income (RMB, after taxes and deductions)
			(1) Public salary + (2) Social welfare	
Chu Wanxing	Director of both the Neurology Department and District 2	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lu Jianguo	Director of District 1	2004	10,556	7,459
Zhou Huiying	Deputy Director	2012	7,349	5,582
Xiao Duojie	Doctor	2013	7,191	5,486
Zhou Guoli	Doctor	2014	6,491	4,393
Zhao Qiankun	Doctor	2015	4,494	3,030
Peng Yimei	Doctor	2019	6,411	4,403

Table 2. Basic incomes in District 1 of Neurology Department in a 2021 month.

the participants (83.7 per cent) held a bachelor's or master's degree; 51.3 per cent were aged between 26 and 35, with 25.4 per cent aged between 36 and forty-five. These figures suggest that many of the participants were senior practitioners with substantial experience.

Wages, especially bonus plans, vary significantly according to location, hospital, and department. At the LPH Neurology Department, salaries are predetermined based on seniority and qualifications for all public employees and adjusted every two years by the MHRSS; social welfare such as housing compensation is determined by the local government; and departmental bonuses are usually a percentage of the total profit a department has made for the hospital. Table 2 exemplifies the first two components in a random month of 2021 in District 1, which are disbursed around the tenth day of every month. Although Dr Peng has less experience than Dr Zhao, her qualifications, including a master's degree, her *bianzhi*

(编制) status, and a resident's certificate allow her to earn even more. People with a bianzhi status are considered public employees and thus enjoy better salary, social welfare, and social and political status.

Bonuses are the most crucial part of the doctors' monthly income, although they vary between doctors and from month to month and are disbursed irregularly. The lack of transparency and inconsistency of bonus plans have become a major source of workplace suspicion and discontent. Bonuses in the LPH Neurology Department are determined according to three components: 1) workload, such as the number of nightshifts, patients, and procedures, where patient admission and minimally invasive image-guided procedures are major sources of the departmental bonuses; 2) departmental contributions such as joint consultations (RMB5 each), outpatient services (less than RMB10 per patient), mentorship, and teaching; and 3) managerial contributions based on the quality of medical recordkeeping. For example, Chu Wanxing,

Director of both the Neurology Department and District 2, said that for each procedure, Director Lu as the main surgeon received 80 per cent of the amount allocated by the hospital, while the rest of the doctors and nurses shared the remaining 20 per cent. The head nurse of District 1, however, complained that despite much procedure-related work, nurses received less than half of the remaining 20 per cent for their post-procedure workload, while nurses in some departments received a RMB50 bonus for preparing a patient for surgery. Zhou Guoli said he split an RMB1,000 bonus per procedure with Director Lu. His bonuses ranged from RMB7,000 to RMB10,000, making his monthly income about RMB11,400–14,400 after taxes and deductions (US$1,644–2,077). In the entire department, only Director Lu had mastered minimally invasive image-guided procedures, and doctors Zhao Duojie and Zhou Guoli were his aids; all three were students (and aids) of Director Long Yue. Nurses hoped to share more of the profits from these procedures, the introduction of which has increased their workload significantly.

Doctors' attitudes towards their incomes shifted according to with whom they compared themselves. They had given up comparing their salaries with their peers in the United States and instead compared themselves with their LPH colleagues. Doctors and nurses often complained that their wages were disproportionate to their levels of stress, risk, and workload. Despite this, they were content when comparing their salaries with the average income in the county. Among them, neurologists saw themselves as having a moderate workload, stress level, and income compared with their peers. Deputy Director Zhou expressed her satisfaction given the high unemployment rates caused by the economic downturn exacerbated by Covid-19 lockdowns and said that at least doctors would always find a job. Doctors resented the hospital administrators' lack of fairness when comparing their salaries with those in other departments in LPH, such as the laboratory and the Urology Department. It was suggested that the hospital deans used their power to benefit these latter departments, as they were once their directors and still shared their bonuses. Regular urologists had monthly bonuses of about RMB20,000 (US$2,900), and senior urologists had total monthly incomes

ranging from RMB30,000 to RMB50,000 (US$4,300–7,200)—both of which were much higher than the neurologists' incomes.

Doctors felt that hospital administrators wanted them to work hard but did not provide enough support, and repeated the phrase: 'They want the horse to run but without providing feed' (想要马儿跑又不给马儿吃草). They believed LPH's large administrative structure consumed a significant portion of the profits made by the clinical section. By January 2023, the hospital employed 1,631 people, with more than 250 employees working in nine administrative departments and offices; 54 employees worked in the Finance Department—the largest among the nine. Many doctors believed that hospital administrators and county health officials took a share of the bonuses that were supposed to go to them. Doctor Zhou said he did not care how these individuals split the money and whether they engaged in corruption, but they should at least be fair to the doctors. Zhou was one of hardest working doctors; he was married, took out a mortgage, and had his first child in the spring of 2022. He said: 'I hope my kids have more options.'

True or not, these suspicions and perceptions have eroded doctors' morale and passion. Sometimes on receiving their paycheque they complained that their salaries were the same no matter how many patients they admitted and how many procedures they assisted with, and they felt less motivated to work hard. Starting in November 2021, the hospital administrators began to conceal how hospital profits were distributed among different departments and started to withhold 20 per cent of departmental profits for hospital-level performance evaluation of medical recordkeeping, without clear guidelines. Fearing the power the finance administrators possessed, neurologists were reluctant to talk with the Finance Department about their confusion and complaints. Instead, they discussed the bonus plans and their own salaries in the office, and Deputy Director Zhou acted as a broker to communicate their concerns with directors Chu Wanxing and Lu Jianguo and hospital administrators.

An increasingly opaque hospital redistribution plan has made it difficult for the directors to provide satisfactory explanations to the doctors for their incomes.

Healthcare workers have recognised the advantages of holding senior clinical and administrative positions in the hospital. As Deputy Director Zhou told me:

> When you become a director or above, either in clinical or administrative departments, you have more power and freedom. You have more say over your time, medical practice, and salaries. That's why almost all doctors want to get these positions. However, there are often a maximum of two directorships [one director and one deputy director] in each department, so the hospital creates many administrative positions to keep senior doctors happy.

As one of the two women directors among approximately 100 male directors in LPH's clinical sector, Deputy Director Zhou aspired to have more normal working hours including, if possible, being able to have breakfast with her two children before rushing to weekday meetings at 8 am. She hoped to take them out for fun for several weekends a year without having to worry about her patients and mentees.

Navigating Contradiction and Ambiguity

Before I started my fieldwork at LPH, a retired county bureau chief told me that the deputy chief of the county health bureau had pocketed tens of millions of yuan and would retire at the end of 2021. He said, 'LPH might have a hard time', reminding me to look out for myself. Li Zhenlu, deputy director of a street office in Haiwan District—one of the most affluent in Shanhe City—called the national healthcare insurance plans a 'Ponzi scheme', implying rampant corruption and fraud. His wife, Doctor Hu Xiaoyun, a paediatrician who had been practising at Haiwan District Hospital since 2012 with *bianzhi* status, was penalised by the hospital for refusing to prescribe medicines that would not have helped her patients. Her bonus was cut to 10 per cent of what was promised in her contract. In 2020 and 2021, Doctor Hu Xiaoyun was assigned to work in the Haiwan Covid-19 Fever Clinic, cutting short her maternal leave and keeping her from her newborn son and three-year-old daughter. Both Doctor Hu Xiaoyun and Director Li Zhenlu

worked on the frontline of Covid-19 containment and had to stay in rental accommodation for months, leaving their home to their children and their own parents. Doctor Hu resigned in 2021 and was shamed as a deserter before the hospital administrators let her go. She later found a job at a physical examination centre in Shenzhen with a four-hour round-trip bus commute every day. 'At least I can get off work regularly for my children now,' she said. Among my informants, she was the only *bianzhi* employee who gave up her status.

Since its establishment in 2018, the National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA) has enforced a joint action plan to crack down on corruption and fraud in the national healthcare insurance fund (中国医疗保障基金 or 医保基金)—a pool of premiums mainly from two public health insurance schemes: one paid by working citizens and their employees, the other for non-working citizens paid out of pocket. In 2022, Guangdong HSA audited 44,924 healthcare establishments, penalised 415 of them, and recovered RMB1.56 billion (GHSA 2023a). Despite the pervasive involvement of governments and health officials, state media focused on reporting the roles played by hospitals, healthcare workers, and insurees. Reported violations include unreasonable prescriptions, duplicated charges, overcharging, and health expenditure beyond the security caps for hospitals (China News 2021; GHSA 2023b). Shanhe City's HSA and Health Commission conducted two audits on LPH in July and September 2021 under the NHSA joint action plan. In response to audits like these, LPH has organised multiple intrahospital teams to perform quality control weekly, biweekly, monthly, and irregularly depending on the priorities of the moment. Given the impact of the auditing results on departmental bonuses, each clinical department was compelled to implement its own quality-control procedures. In District 1, Deputy Director Zhou and Doctor Xiao were appointed to flag incomplete and problematic medical records and patients with over-the-cap expenditures, daily.

These seemingly definitive violations reflect the ambiguity, contradictions, and inconsistency of the regulations and objectives within the public health system, which have exacerbated the challenges of medical autonomy (Yao 2017), burnout (Xiao et al. 2022b), and workplace violence (Du et al. 2020). Clinical directors and healthcare workers embody

these ambiguities, contradictions, and inconsistencies in different ways. Doctors referred to themselves as medical practitioners, risk managers, quality controllers, and bookkeepers. They must monitor numerous indicators daily, such as health expenditure, out-of-pocket expenditure, length of hospital stays, and the breakdown of fees for various medical items per patient. Directors called themselves doctors, managers, businesspeople, and accountants—exemplified by the messages they passed down to their subordinates through workplace rituals such as weekday meetings. Directors Chu and Lu frequently reminded the doctors of various violations and their penalties, including suspension of hospital operations and medical licences.

They vaguely warned that the authorities were 'catching typical cases' (抓典型) and urged doctors to 'observe the bottom line and not cross the red line' (守底线，不要踩红线). They reminded them to avoid overprescribing and prioritise medications on the centralised drug procurement lists, while insisting on 'prescribing medications in accordance with diagnosis' (对症下药). While some directors were focused on improving their department's clinical capacities, others strived to make profits. Director Chu warned that LPH had exceeded its 2021 healthcare fund cap by RMB7 million. He required doctors to admit as many patients as possible, provide 'personalised service', and prescribe rehabilitation services to 'increase effective incomes'. He also stressed that 'practising in accordance with laws and regulations' and increasing effective incomes were 'political tasks' (政治任务). The seemingly endless list of political tasks often took precedence over the clinical and ethical aspects of medical practice, especially when the objectives for the former and the latter did not align.

The political, administrative, and managerial mandates that physicians must navigate during their everyday practice are even more extensive and vaguer. Directors understood the risks involved in practising medicine under these requirements in addition to clinical discretion. Therefore, they repeatedly urged doctors to write detailed medical records and obtain informed consent from patients and caregivers for everything they do, emphasising the need for self-protection. Doctor Peng, as the most junior doctor in District 1, experienced episodes of confusion, anxiety, and burnout after receiving new messages. She would go through her medical records, engage in intense self-reflection, and seek peer recognition repeatedly, adding an extra burden to her regular work. Deputy Director Zhou said whether and to what extent doctors can meet these requirements depended on the priorities of the time and day-to-day situations.

The ambiguities, contradictions, and inconsistencies shown above arise as state policies are passed down through the country's political, administrative, and managerial hierarchies, each with its own set of priorities and objectives, creating challenges and misaligned incentives for practitioners. For instance, drug prescriptions were affected by policies aiming to encourage centralised drug procurement, eliminate mark-ups for medicines sold in public hospitals, and lower medication expenditure. The policies also aim to discourage doctors from over-prescription, leading hospitals to focus on other profit-generating avenues like rehabilitation services. Additionally, doctors were required to meet performance metrics tied to bonuses, such as prescription quotas for each listed drug for each hospital, department, and/or doctor. The LPH pharmacy had the power to withhold supplies of medications and force doctors to use alternatives or stop prescribing medications. Imported 'gold standard drugs', which are often more expensive and effective, generally run out quickly, leaving doctors with few options. Doctor Zhou said the centralised drug procurement lists reflected a 'planned economy' for medication, and he envied peers in the United States who have more autonomy in a free market.

Doctors feel powerless when facing political, administrative, and managerial interference and, as a result, take risks (and the associated stress) to seek solutions. Their diagnoses and treatments were mediated by factors related to patient management, such as the types of insurance coverage patients have, which determine reimbursement rates and affordability, and patients' social status, such as whether they have connections with the hospital's leadership (关系户). Often, patients were advised to purchase medicines outside the hospital. Patients were unhappy with this solution because these medicines would then not be covered by their insurance. They also needed to spend time comparing prices and procuring the medicines, increasing the burden on their already exhausted caregivers. Cutting medication made

inpatients anxious about the efficacy of their treatments. Many patients with cerebrovascular diseases evaluated their recovery progress and the degree of importance their doctors attached to them based on the number and frequency of medications they received. The longer patients were hospitalised, the more medicines they needed to pacify their anxiety. Covid-19 restrictions exacerbated this situation as inpatients were prohibited from leaving the wards during their stay, giving them more time to worry about their health. Additionally, doctors tended to admit patients with mild symptoms and extend their stay as strategies to increase hospital revenue, further complicating the situation. These strategies often created distrust and conflict between doctors and patients.

To mitigate the risks arising from a worsening working environment, doctors often employ interpersonal tactics to seek institutional recognition. Some recognised the advantages of having more power and thus wanted to hold administrative or clinical positions or move to a larger public hospital, further exacerbating the chronic staff shortages. Doctors and nurses also saw *bianzhi* status as crucial, not just for job security and higher incomes, but also for institutional protection in cases of patient threats and lawsuits. Among LPH's 1,631 employees, only 812 had *bianzhi* status and one-third were *dailisheng* (代理生); most of the latter, including Doctor Zhao, were working in clinical departments. In the face of the limited number of people with *bianzhi* status and the poor social stigma attached to temporary/contract workers, hospitals created the *dailisheng* status to retain health professionals. As a new category of employee in public hospitals, *dailisheng* can enjoy incomes and social welfare that fall between that of *bianzhi* employees and that of temporary workers (临时工). Doctor Zhao's strong desire for *bianzhi* status motivated him to prioritise aiding Covid-19 affected cities, even at the cost of missing his licensure exam and the birth of his second child. Interpersonal connections (关系) with hospital administrators are seen as essential for upward mobility and risk management. Despite experiencing negative reactions like severe rashes, doctors continued to consume alcohol at social events with hospital administrators as a performance of loyalty and to build interpersonal connections. Doctor Zhao also experienced episodes of temporary blindness and severe nausea after heavy alcohol consumption. Doctors hoped that having these connections would be useful if they make a mistake in the future. Through these processes, they have developed their own strategies to increase their life satisfaction while addressing the risks of practising in a workplace filled with inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions.

The Impact of the Pandemic (and Beyond)

Li Qin took on the directorship of an administrative office in August 2020. She received confirmation of her appointment one day in June and cried until 4 am the next morning. 'I studied [Chinese] medicine for eight years and practised neurology for 10 years, but I couldn't endure this job anymore.' She had thought about it thoroughly before submitting a second application to transfer to an administrative position. Although she was the most competitive candidate for the deputy directorship that Deputy Director Zhou eventually held, Director Li did not think she was qualified. She felt that she could not handle the workload, responsibilities, and stress of being either a senior physician or a deputy director. She was expecting her second daughter, which exacerbated her stress and anxiety. She said: 'I was exhausted. Even though the job was rewarding, and the income was high, I was truly burnt out.' She believed that other neurologists would be a better fit because of their ability to withstand high levels of stress, having a master's degree in neurology, mastery of minimally invasive image-guided procedures, and excellent communication skills.

She blamed herself for lacking these crucial qualifications, even though she was one of the most empathetic, responsible, ethical, and respected physicians from the perspective of her patients and colleagues. She felt ashamed and that it was inappropriate to ask for a full-time position in the outpatient clinics. Outpatient doctors have a much lower workload and less stress than inpatient physicians while still enjoying prestige as a doctor and receiving high incomes, which she thought was unfair to her inpatient colleagues. 'I will feel like a traitor to them. I couldn't overcome this mental barrier.' Instead, she prepared a backup plan to resign and teach at

a nursing school. After lengthy negotiations, the hospital leadership valued her expertise and offered her the current position. They also provided her with some outpatient sessions to compensate for her drop in wages. Although her current income was only about half of what she had earned before, she was content with it. She could finally have a solid sleep every night and did not need to worry about the phone ringing or hearing an ambulance. Li thought of herself as the luckiest doctor, because very few healthcare workers could enjoy such luxury.

This essay sheds light on the ways in which healthcare professionals have been exploited. Facing increased demands, most public hospitals are underfunded, experiencing staff shortages, and are subject to multiple regulations and objectives. They are thus incentivised to prioritise profits over patient care and cut costs through the exploitation of their employees. While large reputable public hospitals use their affiliation with medical schools to issue resident certificates to exploit medical students, county-level public hospitals often overburden their employees with non-clinical tasks to mitigate risks from litigation brought forward by disgruntled patients. Junior and non-*bianzhi* employees are particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their low levels of expertise and employment status. Furthermore, spatial inequalities in public resources and staffing have exacerbated labour exploitation, hindering medical practitioners from realising their career aspirations. Thus, healthcare workers face heavy workloads and high levels of stress and risk, while receiving disproportionately low and unfair incomes and welfare provisions. Consequently, many suffer from physical and mental problems, which erode their passion and morale and affect their life satisfaction.

Seeing through the lens of healthcare workers is critical to understanding the intersections of labour economics, political priorities, and health governance in contemporary China. This essay draws attention to some of the structural issues plaguing China's public health system, such as rampant corruption and fraud and vested, conflicted interests. Political, bureaucratic, and managerial objectives constantly impinge on medical autonomy. Healthcare workers feel powerless and have limited options but follow a constantly evolving and increasingly challenging set of regulations, which can sometimes compro-

mise their medical integrity. This essay captures the tensions that have arisen between an educational and regulatory apparatus that trains a competent and ethical public workforce to improve population health and a disciplinary apparatus that cultivates obedient citizens and state agents for social control and party legitimacy. It is critical to study the profound implications of a chronic labour shortage on population health. While state discourse depicts healthcare workers as dedicated professionals with high ethics, the Chinese Government has created working environments that constantly put them in ethical dilemmas. More studies are needed to address how deteriorating working conditions have eroded patient trust in doctors and affected patient–doctor relations, and to understand the roles of public hospitals and healthcare workers in China's transition from a post-socialist country to an authoritarian regime.

Worker exploitation and structural issues within the public health system were significantly exacerbated by the Chinese Government's political prioritisation of zero-Covid for almost three years. Against the backdrop of a seemingly unstoppable economic downturn, the war against the pandemic (战役)—including restrictive measures such as frequent lockdowns, mass testing, and surveillance (Chen 2023; Chen and Oakes 2023)—has become a major source of party legitimacy. These public health responses were largely political and ideological rather than scientific and rational, with profound consequences. These containment measures not only competed for labour and funding with the regular operation of the health system, but also swallowed public funding and exacerbated the economic decline. After the containment strategy was lifted, excessive deaths were not properly documented, and trauma and grievances were left unaddressed (Stevenson and Mueller 2022). My interviewees' experiences and Chen Jiahui's death exemplify the struggles of Chinese workers in an increasingly exploitative, bureaucratic, and ideology-driven health sector that mirrors other Chinese industries and public sectors. While public hospitals were wrestling with both the pandemic's repercussions and the intensifying anticorruption campaign (Xu et al. 2023), many private hospitals went bankrupt (Qian 2022). More and more health professionals attempted to leave clinical positions, or the health sector altogether, in search of a better

working environment (Zhang 2023), creating a dire health-provision landscape. Without forward-looking leadership to amend deep-rooted issues for public welfare, more profound social, political, economic, and health effects of the pandemic will take years to surface. ∎

Yellow Light. PC: Boris Bruckhauser (CC), Flickr.com.

Red, Yellow, Green: Test, Test, Test

Han TAO, Hailing ZHAO, and Jesper Willaing ZEUTHEN

When the Health Code was in use in China, the local governments of Shenzhen and Changsha, like many others, required individuals to present a 'green code' to move within and between locations. In this essay, we focus on moments when green codes unexpectedly turned yellow. By studying these changes, we gain insight into how the infrastructure of automated control was challenged when people affected by the system and those administering it had to find ways of working around, altering, or re-enforcing the code.

Shenzhen, the home city of Tencent and a global technology hub, has long been one step ahead of the rest of China in digital governance and control. In October 2022, the city's Bao'an District—where one of the authors of this paper, Hailing, was living—witnessed a small-scale outbreak of Covid-19. In response, the district government announced a '24-hour PCR test order', meaning people could only enter public places, including restaurants, bars, and shops, by providing a negative PCR test result obtained within the previous 24 hours and displayed on the Health Code app. Free PCR testing stations were set up in almost every gated community in Shenzhen, operating from 6pm to 10pm, when most people were returning home from work. People who failed to register a valid negative test result would find their codes automatically turning from 'green' to 'yellow' a few days later. It did not matter whether the code was green: if the test result was too old, their mobility would still be severely restricted.

One evening, when Hailing and her mother were queuing at the testing station for their daily PCR test, her mother looked at her phone and, to her surprise,

found that she had a yellow code. As they realised that her code had changed, people in the queue immediately began to move away from them. This was not an isolated incident. As many people in Shenzhen were given yellow codes by the automated systems, seemingly without reason, the city government set up numerous testing centres specially designated to deal with these cases. These centres were also supposed to handle cases considered to be 'risky', especially those involving people working in occupations categorised as more dangerous than others by the municipal government, such as taxi drivers, delivery workers, bus drivers, community health-care workers, etcetera. These individuals had to visit the special centres along with those who received a yellow code. Over the months of testing at her local community testing centre, Hailing had repeatedly witnessed delivery people being turned away even if they held a green code.

Test centres for yellow-code holders were much bigger than those in local neighbourhoods and people had to travel some distance by foot, bike, or car to reach them. When Hailing's mother's code turned yellow that evening, they turned to the WeChat account of the Shenzhen Health Commission and found that the nearest yellow-code centre was about a 10-minute walk away, in a public park. The hygiene procedures there were the same as in their community. About two hours after being tested in the yellow-code test centre, Hailing's mother's health code turned green again, even though the latest test result was not yet ready. When it came, the test result did not arrive any faster than it would have from the community testing facility.

Integrating with Shenzhen's Existing Smart City

Before Covid-19, Shenzhen's advanced digital control mechanisms resulted in a huge amount of labour recruitment to facilitate the high-tech governance of several million migrant workers—the highest concentration in China. This recruitment campaign was part of the 'Weaving the Net Project' (织网工程), an initiative to govern the migrant population through 'internet plus social construction' (互联网+社会建设) (Zhao and Douglas-Jones 2022). In 2020, this project recruited more than 16,000 'community data workers' (网格员) to sift through and produce data on the citizenry—a number that increased tremendously during the pandemic. In fact, given the endless Covid-19 outbreaks in Shenzhen between 2020 and 2023, the data workers came to play an increasingly important role in helping local governments better understand and control the various communities in the city. Before Hailing's arrival in Shenzhen from overseas in October 2021, for example, the community data workers were the ones who came to visit her parents' home, checking whether it was isolated enough for Hailing's home quarantine and setting up cameras in front of the main door because Hailing had been given a red code during her hotel quarantine. Hailing's personal information—including her phone number, name, travel history, and ID number—was also collected by the community data workers.

In October 2022, when a resident in Hailing's gated community tested positive, all the neighbours in the building were automatically given a red code, as were the classmates of the infected resident's two children. All community residents were asked to stay at home and the street-level government (街道办) sent a work team to test every household. During this 'community-scale special test' (社区核酸检测), Hailing found that the work team members were in possession of a booklet with the names and phone numbers of each registered household. Hailing saw her and her mother's names and phone numbers in it. This made it easy for the workers to know who was at home and who was not and who needed to be traced later. In fact, one of Hailing's neighbours happened to be travelling to another city at that time, so the data workers called all their family members to make sure they got tested as soon as possible.

Dealing with Difficult Individuals

Those who sought to evade testing—for instance, by staying home—would be called by the community data workers, who would warn them that they might receive a 'red code' later. The general assumption in Hailing's community was that the strict approach to these untested people was due to the worry that they might find ways to go out even with a yellow code.

A 'red code' meant that the local government could forcibly quarantine the person in question. Hailing's aunt, who was also living in Shenzhen, had lung surgery in August 2022. She was unable to go outside to be tested in the first few weeks after the surgery. Unsurprisingly, her health code turned to yellow. A week later, she received a call from the street-level government, saying they had discovered her health code had been yellow for some time and she should do a test as soon as possible to avoid being given a red code and having the government workers come to her home. After negotiating with this caller, Hailing's aunt accepted the fact that she would be given a red code, but the government workers agreed not to visit her as she reassured them she would stay home. The government worker trusted that she would not try to leave.

As more and more nearby areas came under quarantine, Hailing and her family had no choice but to keep doing PCR tests every day to enable them to go out. On waking one morning, Hailing found her code had turned yellow. She had been tested the previous night about 8pm, the negative result had arrived about 2am, yet she received a yellow code about 4am. She then found a new notice on her building's WeChat group: from 9am to 11am, health workers would be coming to test those in the community who had yellow codes. When she went for testing again (only 10 hours after the previous test), she found a very long queue: almost every household had someone who was yellow in the queue. When scanning her personal PCR code, she asked the testing worker why so many residents had suddenly received a yellow code. The worker smiled bitterly, saying: 'Probably the district government does not want us to go outside at all, there are so many high-risk areas.'

Shenzhen is an example of how the local governance structure, including its digital infrastructure and associated labour, worked together during this unprecedented period. These structures had been designed largely for governance of migrant populations, but Covid-19 control and prevention work offered a better opportunity to more comprehensively categorise, discipline, and monitor population mobility on a broader scale. This gave the city a distinct advantage in preventing large-scale outbreaks over longer periods, to the point that some government reports on the pandemic highlighted Shenzhen as a 'role model' city. Shenzhen was one of the cities with the most PCR testing centres in China. At the same time, Shenzhen was also home to many of China's fastest-developing PCR testing companies, which expanded across the country as the industry became highly profitable.

In this sense, Shenzhen can be seen as both an exception to pandemic governance and a vanguard in terms of the application of high-tech surveillance and governance. As such, it is worth examining Shenzhen's experience of the pandemic through comparison with other places that had a smaller mobile population and less prepared infrastructure—for example, Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province in central China, which is where one of the authors, Han, experienced the pandemic.

Handling Yellow Code Complaints in Changsha

Between July and October 2022, Han returned to her hometown, Changsha, three times. Entering a new city always increased the risk of a changed heath code. The first time Han's health code turned from green to yellow in Changsha was on 13 July 2022, the fifth day after her arrival. She had followed the instructions for incoming domestic travellers: two PCR tests within three days of arrival, one on the first day and one on the third day. She had also filled out the 'arrival report form' on Changsha's official WeChat mini program.

She discovered her yellow code when she was entering a mall on day five and the security guard asked everyone to scan the venue's QR code (场所码). This scanning wass done to record and track which places individuals visited. When scanned, the name of the venue shows up at the top of one's health code. After Han's scan, the security guard saw the yellow colour on the screen and stopped her entering. Han was confused, even embarrassed, and stepped back outside the mall. Knowing that her cousin was already waiting inside the mall's restaurant, she walked around and found that the mall had security guards only for the main entrances and she could easily enter through the doors of a clothes shop.

She researched online and figured out that she needed to submit a 'yellow code complaint' (黄码申诉) via an app called 'Health 320' (健康 320) and then call the local helpline. She followed the steps, made

screenshots of all her PCR test results, submitted the complaint, then called the helpline. The person who answered the phone, however, told her that she had to do a third PCR test and upload the result: 'This is the only way we can change your health code to green. You see there are three PCR test time slots in the complaint form, so you must upload three PCR tests to fix your code; otherwise, we can't operate the system.' Han quickly located a hospital that had a 'yellow code PCR test centre' and did a test that night. After the test result came back negative, she submitted the complaint. The next day, her code did not automatically turn green as she was told it would. She called the helpline again for 'human service', and the person answering the phone changed the health code manually for her.

The second time Han visited Changsha, she did two tests in addition to the 'two PCR tests within three days of arrival' rule. It was the mid autumn holiday period (10–12 September) and the city was packed with tourists. Han's three friends visiting from other parts of China were not as cautious, as finding a PCR test spot had already cost them a lot of time and energy. On 12 September, the four of them were entering a mall and, when they scanned the venue code, one of Han's friends, Sherry, yelled: 'Oh no! Why is my health code yellow now? What should I do?' Sherry's train to Wuhan was in the afternoon and she needed to return to work the next day.

'Hunan in-province yellow code complaint' on the Health320 App.

As an experienced Changsha health code trouble-shooter, Han gave Sherry step-by-step instructions on how to deal with the situation. However, the helpline was extremely busy due to the holiday period. Han and her friends assumed that there were many people like Sherry who were hoping to travel to their home cities that day and had been given a yellow code. Sherry waited for 10 minutes in the phone queue, but the call was disconnected before she could speak to anyone. Sherry then tried to find and contact the community (社区) centre to which her hotel belonged, hoping at least for some clarification. However, after several unanswered calls to the community centre, the community worker finally picked up the phone and shouted: 'Stop calling! Don't you know we are having our midday rest now!' Sherry explained: 'But I am having an urgent situation. My health code is yellow and [the helpline] is busy, can you help me with this?' The community worker said no and hung up. She tried the helpline again and, after waiting 30 minutes, Sherry finally spoke to a human. After Sherry repeated her situation, the person double-checked that she was leaving Changsha that day and changed her health code to green. Sherry was eventually able to catch her train back to Wuhan, but everyone was exhausted.

The third time Han went to Changsha was in mid October with a friend, Jing. Due to previous lessons learned, they did a PCR test every day from day one. However, on the morning of 18 October—day three in Changsha—Jing received a message saying she and a Covid-19 positive case had 'come into spatiotemporal contact' (时空交集). As a result, they had to stay at home for seven days and take three PCR tests over the period. The place where Jing and the positive case had supposedly come into spatiotemporal contact was a quarantine hotel 6 kilometres from the Changsha North train terminal. Han and Jing had travelled together, but while Jing was given a yellow code, Han did not receive any texts. As Jing never went near the hotel, they believed this 'mistake' should be rectified immediately.

After Jing submitted her complaint via the Health320 app, they began calling the helpline. The call was answered after 50 minutes, but she was told the platform was undergoing maintenance, so they would not be able to change the code for Jing. Jing then called the Tianxin District Centre for Disease Control and Prevention as suggested. It was

a personal mobile phone number managed by one person, which, unsurprisingly, was busy. Half an hour later, the person who answered the phone simply said: 'Contact your community centre to submit the yellow code complaint! We only check and pass the complaint submitted through communities.' They called the community centre, but no-one answered. As a local, Han knew where the community centre was, though she had never actually been there. It was just —a five-minute walk from her home, so Han and Jing decided to walk there.

After Jing explained her situation for the third time—now in person—the community worker said: 'Well, we can't submit your yellow code complaint unless you show a plane or train ticket to leave Changsha today. We only submit urgent complaints, such as if you need the green code to travel.' Jing tried to argue with the community worker, but another community worker who overheard their conversation said: 'You should follow the text. I am sure the yellow code is not wrong. There must be a reason you got the code. Think about where you have been.' Jing showed her the map, telling her it was not possible for a tourist to enter the quarantine hotel. The community worker paused for a second and said:

> You might be mistakenly given a code, but we don't know why and we can't undo it. You know, a lot of departments can give you a yellow code, but we don't have the power to give or cancel your yellow code. Right now, we only follow the red-head [official] instructions that require us to only submit urgent complaints to the district centre. This is not our area, go find someone else.

Jing and Han thought it was a problem of over-implementation (层层加码). They continued making calls to different departments until 5pm and learned that it was the Tianxin district-level government and not the Changsha city-level Centre for Disease Control and Prevention that required proof of immediate travel plans to handle yellow code complaints. Again, Jing felt exhausted and numb after numerous attempts to call different places. The only option for Jing seemed to be to continue doing PCR tests every day and stay home as a 'close contact' yellow code. The next morning, Jing received another official text on her mobile phone instructing her to report to the community centre because she was a non-local. Jing

thought that, after three PCR tests and this text, she could try the community centre again. Han accompanied Jing to the community centre and found the same community worker, whom they asked whether she might submit the yellow code complaint for Jing. The community worker took photos of Jing's ID and phone screen with the yellow code, saying she could try submitting it to the district, but it might not work. A few seconds after her submission, Jing's health code turned green. Both Jing and Han were surprised by the speed but felt relieved.

Pandemic Governance Meets Local Governance

For many Chinese cities, the health code infrastructure has promoted a form of digital governance that vaguely recalls the aspirations behind Shenzhen's 'smart city' label. Shenzhen has been the model city for digitally enabled pandemic control in terms of the governance structure and how labour has been organised. In Shenzhen, free PCR test centres for locals and visitors were shown on Baidu and Gaode electronic maps that integrated seamlessly with WeChat, with test locations updated frequently.

However, attempts to emulate Shenzhen have been spotty. In Changsha, it was difficult to find a test facility unless you were a local. Electronic maps showing the location and opening hours of testing facilities were poorly updated, and the fewer free PCR test booths were announced on district WeChat groups and public accounts, so one had to know where to look. In Changsha, there were many situations in which administrators and individuals worked together to find ways around the Covid-19 restrictions, like only guarding one door of public buildings, helping make calls to the district centre, or allowing citizens to operate despite being designated 'yellow'. In Shenzhen, the punishment for not following restrictions was more severe, perhaps because of larger outbreaks and an aspiration to create an all-encompassing pandemic governance regime.

Circumventing decisions made by the automated system required more effort in Shenzhen, where street-level bureaucrats were working with, rather than against, the health code. The health code appeared to work much as it was designed to in the smart city infrastructure of Shenzhen. In Changsha, the health code was also integrated with the existing bureaucracy, but—perhaps in the same way as other political campaigns—it was not always implemented the way it was 'supposed to be' and instead became another part of the policy implementation terrain that had to be navigated by officials and citizens alike.

In the everyday experiences discussed above, we see how the automatic and often incomprehensible changes to health code designations were bypassed manually and even in very personal ways. Sometimes the call centres worked as intended, but in many cases, personal contact with local authorities was required. In Changsha, Han found it to be a surprising advantage that she knew to which community her parents' home belonged—something she had not found much need to know earlier on, but to deal with the effects of the new regimes of pandemic governance, it suddenly became relevant, as the street-level bureaucrats were the ones who would eventually help her. Similarly in Shenzhen, because of the intensified personal surveillance during Covid-19, Hailing and her family came to know the data workers operating in their local area.

While many of the staff encountered by the authors of this essay were probably hired for the purpose of ensuring Covid-19 governance, they were still physically placed in the local community administrations or data worker management organisations, which in Shenzhen were in place well before the pandemic. Overall, existing local institutions were revitalised by the health code–testing regimes that emerged as a by-product of pandemic governance. Infrastructure for the health code is new, but if you have existing knowledge of who is who in a building block, it is reinforced by the institutionalisation of surveillance embodied in governance regimes such as those organised during a systemic crisis like the pandemic in China. ∎

Plague Doctor Inspired Leather Mask. PC: Dmitry Demidov (CC), Pexels.com.

The Poison Kings: Markers of Mobility and Morality

Han TAO, Hailing ZHAO, and Rachel DOUGLAS-JONES

This essay looks at the so-called poison kings—people who, knowingly or otherwise, became transmission vectors of Covid-19. We explore the history of the term and its relationship to the corona-shaped virus. The examples we bring demonstrate how the label was deployed mostly as a moral category during the Covid-19 pandemic, even though sometimes there were legal implications. Through different cases, we observe how the term was also used to manage novel freedoms after the lockdowns.

In October 2022, a young couple from Inner Mongolia, who had just secured new jobs in high-tech companies in Nanshan District, Shenzhen, spent several days house-hunting in nearby Bao'an District. Whether they knew it or not at the time, the couple was subsequently confirmed as carriers of Covid-19. As they visited prospective homes in several residential communities in Bao'an, they did so in the company of realtors. These realtors—probably themselves migrant workers—then took the virus home to the big urban village of Buxin (布心村). Along the way, at least according to official data, they infected several people they met, leading to more than 800 positive cases. The entire city village of Buxin was put under quarantine. In a WeChat video describing the young Inner Mongolian couple's house-hunting

journey in Bao'an, a local government official called them 'poison kings' (毒王). Pointing to the chains of infection that had passed from the couple to the realtors and on into the urban village, he remarked that 'as they go, not even a blade of grass grows' (所到之处寸草不生)—a paraphrasing of the Tang-era poet Liu Zongyuan's parable of the *Snake Catcher* (捕蛇者说).

In this essay, we explore the emergence of the 'poison king' label. We follow it from its appearance during the late stages of the pandemic, at a point when most of the world had lived through the most intense phases of infection and had started to reopen but the Chinese authorities maintained their zero-Covid policy. Against this background, being marked as a 'poison king' was an everyday risk. Lists began to emerge online, on television, and on government websites of where people had been before their positive diagnosis, along with the suspected numbers of people they had infected. Drawing together different instances of 'poison king' narratives, from WeChat groups to the authors' own experiences in Shenzhen, we explore how the concept condensed concerns about—and anxiety over—good social conduct along with fury towards those seen as flouting rules.

Origins of the Label

The phrase 'poison king' pre-dates Covid-19 and was initially used to refer to the strength of a virus strain rather than specific individual carriers (Sina 2022). In particular, it was used to describe sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) viruses, which are collectively known as corona viruses due to their protein spikes that, under magnification, resemble crowns. As such, the moniker 'poison king' has been used to refer to ever more virulent strains of this category of viruses. Omicron, for example, took the crown in July 2022, when a headline announced that the 'poison king' had arrived in Xi'an, Beijing, and Macau. On that occasion, the term did not refer to individuals on a journey infecting people along the way, like the couple from Inner Mongolia mentioned in the opening, but rather to variant BA.5 (Omicron), which had been detected across various cities that month.

Only during the Covid-19 pandemic did the 'poison king' terminology become a means of speaking about individuals who transmitted the virus far and wide

or, in the words of the World Health Organization, 'super spreaders'. In the early days of the pandemic in 2020, the Jinjiang Poison King (晋江毒王)—a man surnamed Zhang who had returned home to Fujian from Wuhan—gained notoriety, popularising the concept. When he was asked where he had been, instead of admitting he had been to Wuhan, he told local authorities he had come from the Philippines. He then attended several big banquets and wedding ceremonies in his village, involving thousands of participants. His conduct resulted in 3,557 people being put under quarantine, and he was eventually charged by police with 'crimes against public safety' (Haitian Times Review 2020).

While Mr Zhang's partying had widespread consequences, other poison kings had lesser impacts. In February 2020, in rural Beijing, a local resident surnamed Wang had a friend who was confirmed positive attend an event at his home. However, when he felt sick himself, he did not report to the local authorities or go to hospital. Instead, he went out and hosted a dinner with his relatives. These decisions led to 46 people being required to undergo quarantine. The official report recorded the stress this situation put on the local managers of Covid-19 containment, arguing that 'Mr Wang's behaviour has put huge pressure on our tracing and isolation work' (Haitian Times Review 2020). Nevertheless, Mr Wang was not arrested.

These two cases found their way to a list of the 'Top Ten Poison Kings' that circulated widely on Chinese social media, the range of which makes evident that poison king is not just a moral category but also one that indicates likely legal and criminal consequences (Haitian Times Review 2020). Many of the people involved in the listed cases were investigated by public security bureaus or arrested on the grounds of being a threat to public safety. Unsurprisingly, news about the poison kings spread on both mass media and in WeChat groups, often with accompanying details of their travel itinerary, people they had met, and the consequences they were facing. As the examples we discuss below illustrate, this both illuminated a range of expectations about what constituted good conduct and carried the increasingly heavy moral expectation that once one became 'toxic', they must stay home.

解封第一天

- ◯ 8:00 理发
- ◯ 9:00 去吃一碗炸酱面
- ◯ 10:00 开车加油
- ◯ 11:00 洗车
- ◯ 12:00 整一顿烤肉
- ◯ 14:00-16:00 各大商场疯狂消费
- ◯ 17:00 烫顿火锅
- ◯ 19:00 电影院看个电影
- ◯ 21:00 整顿小烧烤
- ◯ 23:00 街上散个步消食
- ◯ 24:00 睡觉

解封第二天

- ◯ 以上是确诊病例活动轨迹公布...

Unbound Day 1

- ◯ 8:00 Haircut
- ◯ 9:00 Go for a bowl of noodles
- ◯ 10:00 Driving for gas
- ◯ 11:00 Car wash
- ◯ 12:00 Have roast meat
- ◯ 14:00-16:00 Shopping in major malls
- ◯ 17:00 Hot pot dinner
- ◯ 19:00 Watch a movie at the cinema
- ◯ 21:00 Have a small barbecue
- ◯ 23:00 Take a walk down the street
- ◯ 24:00 Go to bed

Unbound Day 2

- ◯ Above is the confirmed case activity track announced...

Figure 1: A meme spreading on the social media platform Xiaohongshu on 30 November 2022, the day the end of lockdown was announced.

Unsealing and Its Consequences

At the end of November 2022, the citywide lockdown in the southern hub of Guangzhou was suddenly lifted, with districts and housing compounds 'unsealed' (解封). Temporary control orders were removed and widespread PCR testing was halted. Yet, after weeks of lockdown in the face of rising case numbers, as December began, the city did not simply revert to a pre-lockdown atmosphere. Instead, many people continued to feel hesitant.

One reason for this hesitation was the knowledge that, in resuming everyday activities, from getting a haircut to going to the cinema, the locations one visited could form a trace—a record constructed through digital means—which, once assembled, could circulate widely. Figure 1 illustrates how that trace is anticipated, taking the form of a meme that circulated on social media platform Xiaohongshu (小红书) in the weeks after lockdowns were lifted. The focus is on the mundanity of the activities, rather than the surveillance technologies in the background that would subsequently confirm them. Typed into a phone's notes app, Figure 1 shows a long-awaited activity list for the first day of the end of lockdown: having a haircut, dining out, watching a movie, and taking a walk. A list of things to which anyone might look forward to make up for lost lockdown time, albeit a densely populated schedule. Reading to the end, however, one finds that the second day is not an activity list. Instead, it announces that the list has become the 'confirmed case's activity track', serving as a reminder that if they tested positive afterwards, their personal information and previous activities might be recorded and publicly announced. While the meme operates as a form of humour, confirmed cases would have had their movements documented in conversations with health or data workers post infection and, if necessary, those accounts would be confirmed by digital tracers (Thylstrup 2019). The

list shifts from being a prospective agenda of nice things to do to a retrospective report, reconfigured as condemnable conduct. Thus, the meme, operating as a hypothesis and a warning, asks whether the risk of day two is worth all the delights of day one.

To those who viewed it as it circulated on Xiaohongshu and other social media apps, the meme conveyed feelings of both fear and ambiguity about going out, despite the end of lockdown. It relayed the existential question: 'If I go out, will I become the next poison king?' For those of us based in southern China during the nationwide shifts in pandemic policy, it was always difficult as an ordinary citizen to negotiate the tension between individual desires (to go out) and moral expectations (to stay home). As such, an innocuous list like a person's (imagined) daily schedule risked—as day two of the meme shows—becoming retrospectively stigmatised as immoral behaviours, should they subsequently test positive. Throughout the pandemic, numerous confirmed cases, especially super spreaders' activity tracks, were discussed and criticised by netizens. In some cases, as in the list mentioned above, super spreaders' names, jobs, and contact information were exposed, followed by public shaming. The post illustrates a general messaging tendency that emerged during periods of lifted lockdown, which emphasised a moral obligation to stay at home.

Poisoning from a Thousand Miles Afar

While our first example shows how people weighed the risk of going out with the possibility that their day's itinerary might become public knowledge, some were labelled as poison kings without a chance to do anything about it. When two of the authors, Hailing Zhao and Han Tao, returned to China in 2020 and 2021, respectively, they quickly became aware of circulating buzzwords that linked Covid-19 to overseas returnees, especially international students. From the early days of the pandemic, national and local authorities categorised those who returned from overseas and tested positive as a single group under the label of 'confirmed cases imported from abroad' (境外输入病例)—a category used in daily official reports on new confirmed cases. This cemented the
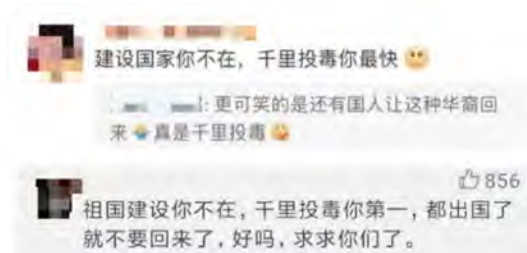
Figure 2: Comments on Weibo in 2020.

existence of this group as a cohesive whole within the popular imagination. Entering China from overseas, these individuals were frequently suspected of causing 'poisoning from a thousand miles' (千里投毒).

People returning from overseas were asked to observe isolation and make 'truthful declarations' about their itineraries, but stories circulated about returnees who did not do this. Whether they had taken medicine to hide their fever before boarding a flight (Xinhua 2020) or travelled widely on arriving home, eventually causing many people around them to have to isolate themselves (Sohu 2020; Tencent 2020), a general atmosphere of hostility towards overseas returnees increasingly took hold in both private and public discussions. Some commentators openly expressed a sense of mistrust, suggesting that the travellers were coming back from far-off places to poison others.

In Figure 2, responding to an article in which an international returning student complained about their quarantine hotel, Weibo commentators say: 'You are not here to build our nation, but you are first in spreading the poison from afar. What is even more ridiculous is that there are still compatriots who allow these overseas Chinese to return. This is really a case of spreading the poison from afar.' The second comment, with more than 800 approvals, states: 'You are not here for the construction of the motherland, but you have been the first to poison her ... Those who have gone abroad, please don't come back.'

Among returning travellers, Chinese international students were the most likely to post about their journey online; they were also the most likely to be morally judged through the narrative of 'poisoning' others. Despite expensive flights, strict PCR testing,

and quarantine requirements, many who had been studying abroad returned home during the pandemic. In addition to sharing the complex logistics of their journeys on social media and group messaging services, some also shared complaints about the quality and cost of quarantine hotels, occasionally quarrelling with hotels or health workers over food delivery, testing regimes, and other aspects of the strict hotel quarantine rules by which they had to abide before any onward travel. When one such student, Xiao Yang, returned to Shanghai from Italy and posted a vlog about his experience, commentators welcomed him home, reminded him to drink lots of water, and expressed concern about his potential to bring infection into the country (The Paper 2020). The more aggressive comments contrasted the good treatment of the student by China with the immoral treatment of China by the student, stating things like 'the motherland treats you well, and you return the favour by taking advantage of her' (祖国拿你当亲人, 你把祖国当冤大头).

Later that same year, in July 2020, Han returned to China. To do so, she completed two weeks of hotel quarantine, during which she returned five negative PCR tests (Zhao et al. forthcoming). Yet, on emerging from hotel quarantine, she was still considered a 'risk' until she had completed a further seven-day quarantine, this time at home. On the final day of her home quarantine, three fully equipped health workers (大白) arrived at her door for the last PCR test. By that afternoon, Han was no longer 'poisonous'.

This shows that international students could find ways to rid themselves of the poison king label; once they finished their hotel quarantine and self-isolation at home, they generally ceased to be considered 'poisoners from afar'. However, not all categories to whom the poison label was applied had this option, as we demonstrate below.

Barricading Poison

If we return to the house-hunting couple to whom the label was applied in our opening vignette and follow the 'poison' into the communities where it spread, we find another version of how 'poison' is

attributed to different sources, with consequences for how local lockdowns were managed in increasingly tense contexts.

The local government worker who labelled the couple 'poison kings' in the video circulated in Hailing's WeChat group was clearly frustrated. As a leader in the street-level government (街道办主任), he found himself surrounded by a crowd of residents attempting to destroy the barricades that had kept their urban village blockaded for weeks as a result of the infections. The inhabitants of Buxin were mostly migrants, working as salespeople and cleaners for the nearby shopping malls and middle-class communities. After weeks of being locked in, they found themselves jobless, with no end in sight to their isolation. In the video, the local government official reiterated the cause of the quarantine of Buxin, tracing it back to the migrant couple who had just travelled from Inner Mongolia. The urban villagers in the video were angry not necessarily because of these migrant poison kings (most of the villagers themselves were migrants from other places), but because of the long-term strict quarantine rules that were making their daily lives more and more difficult. As the urban villagers were trying the destroy the barricades themselves, the street-level government leaders had to come out and speak to them directly. Even though they attempted to calm the situation with the promise of prompter government services, in the end they had to concede. In just one day, the barricades were removed, and the quarantine was ended.

Similar narratives about 'poison kings' reappeared shortly afterwards in Guangzhou. On 14 November 2022, migrants in Kanglecun, an urban village in Haizhu District, Guangzhou, started a huge riot that they called 'rushing the barrier' (冲卡) (Lianhe Zaobao 2022; see also Nellie Chu's essay in this issue). Kanglecun is known for its small textile factories and most of its factory workers and businesspeople are from other parts of China, especially Hubei Province. Since the large Covid-19 outbreak in Guangzhou in early November, Kanglecun had been seen as the 'source of poison' on many Chinese social media platforms, as those migrant workers were considered 'factors of uncertainty' (不稳定因素) by locals. As more and more cases were found in the district around Kanglecun, increasingly discriminatory restrictions were imposed on the villagers. More and more factory workers who had tested positive

were moved to quarantine centres by force, and more jobless people in the village became angry with the zero-tolerance policy. Some videos shared online by factory workers (which soon disappeared) showed that some PCR testing centres were open only to so-called locals, meaning the landlords who rented out their properties to migrant workers. Their tenants, the migrant workers, could only queue and wait to be tested after the locals. And how were tenants and landlords distinguished from one another? Their ability to speak Cantonese. Demonstrations and confrontations escalated—first, between the migrants and locals and then between all the residents and government workers. Finally, armed police were sent in to pacify the confrontations.

The question of 'who was the source of the poison' soon spread across Guangzhou and the internet. When the riots happened in Kanglecun, similar discussions also occurred on a WeChat group that Hailing had joined. The group had 310 members, most of them owners of properties in a gated middle-class community nearby Kanglecun; but there were also community workers from the street-level government and several local police officers. The lively discussions saw exchanges between two divided parties, with the dominant faction, typing in Cantonese, blaming migrant workers as the 'source of the poison'. These people demanded the migrants go back to their home-towns and insisted that the property management company should shut all the exits. Given that about 70 per cent of the migrant workers in Kanglecun are from Hubei Province, most of the WeChat group participants called them *Hubei lao* (湖北佬), a deroga-tive term in Cantonese to describe migrant workers from that province. A minority of users in the WeChat group were people typing in Mandarin claiming that *Hubei lao* could also understand Cantonese and be property owners in Guangzhou. The existence of voices from Hubei property owners seemed to be a particular surprise to so-called locals in the WeChat group, who had not considered that their middle-class community might also be home to better-off migrants from Hubei. Some of the group members soon made statements that none of the 'property owners' in the community should be stigmatised and the term *Hubei lao* was just a joke to demonstrate the close connections in the neighbourhoods; the rather heated discussions finally ended with repeated clarifications that 'Guangzhou is an open city'.

Poisonous Labels

In this essay, we suggest that the poison king concept focused concerns and anxieties, and refracted existing tensions as it circulated and was put to use. Studying how it did so has allowed us to uncover an ethics of a surveillance culture that was 'normative, contex-tual, disclosive and relational' (Lyon 2017: 835), especially in the morally evaluative era of pandemic conduct. Our essay has followed the label's expan-sive capacities, from the individual staring at her phone wondering whether a trip to the hairdresser was going to be morally costly, to groups of people experiencing secondary levels of access to testing facilities on the grounds of their language abilities. Moreover, it is important to note that this is not a static or singular category. As the examples illustrate, it can be applied across social classes, from overseas students to businesspeople to migrant workers. In some cases, it clearly operated along existing lines of tension, as in the final example of immigrants and migrant workers where conflicts between ideas of rurality and urbanity already shape social relations in fragmented and changing urban and data landscapes.

Clearly, to be labelled a poison king is undesirable, but it does not have the same implications or power for everyone or in every situation. The bearer's social position influences what is required to escape the stigma and, as we have shown, how the label impacts lives. From hesitating to go out in the anticipation of becoming a poison king, to returning home from over-seas only to risk being called a poison king, different groups of people experienced both the risk and the impact of the label differently. In our final example of contestation over a barricaded urban village, it became evident that existing divisions, assumptions, prejudices, and projections shaped both how the label was assigned and how it was left behind. ▪

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Testing Uncertainty

Chance, Play, and Humour as Pandemic Response

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This essay explores different responses to experiences of uncertainty about PCR testing in China during the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine creative responses that were developed to manage unknown testing outcomes, durations, and environments. As a contribution to empirical work on experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, our work centres on the management of uncertainty through chance, play, and humour.

This essay examines responses to the uncertainties brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Living with—and in a state of—uncertainty in China is hardly new. From uncertainty over the individualised risks of pollution (Tilt 2013) to uncertainties about the spaces available to civil society organisations (Pan 2020) or whether one's chicken really is organic (Wang 2020; Lora-Wainwright 2013), the capacity to navigate uncertainty is a generalised necessity. However, we suggest that during the pandemic, novel types of uncertainty elicited novel modes of coping, which drew on humour, art, and chance to relate to—and sometimes differentiate oneself as the subject of luck in—an ongoing situation of uncertainty.

While the pandemic has been replete with scientific, moral, and normative uncertainties, in this essay, we reflect on how people responded to uncertainty within environments that were monotonous but still laden with risk. As researchers based in China at various points during the pandemic, testing became part of the fabric of our daily lives, both in our physical and our online environments. Thus, our inquiry into responsiveness comes in the form of stories about testing infrastructure, all of which originate in the second half of the Covid-19 pandemic in China. By 2022, there was greater familiarity with the pandemic infrastructure and, as such, greater space for response. Across the examples covered in this essay, we are interested in the questions of how people navigate, what motivates the shape of responses, and how it feels to be in a relationship of response to uncertainty, rather than seeking certainty from what could be known.

Our examples are drawn from two of the co-authors' experiences of everyday PCR-testing life, and from the online worlds that grew up around the novel language and practices brought about by testing, waiting, and managing the new landscapes of both physical and social pandemic spaces. The first, which introduces a practice unfolding within PCR queues, makes a game of testing chance. The second takes concerns about the fate of pets whose owners were quarantined and reincorporates those animals into the body-politic of subjects being tested for Covid-19. The final example takes us out of the home into public space, where uncertainty is spatial, atmospheric, and temporal.

Becoming a Small Leader

Mass PCR testing is hugely expensive. To ease the costs of nationwide testing in the first year of the pandemic, in August 2020, China's State Council introduced specifications for what became known as the mixed-tube nucleic acid test (核酸混采检测/混检) or 'pooled testing'. In practice, this meant the pharyngeal swabs of between 10 and 20 people would be collected in a single tube for processing for nucleic acid detection (State Council 2020). In January 2022, these specifications were adjusted to allow for '20-in-1 mixed collection'—a shift aimed at

Figure 1: People queueing for mixed-tube nucleic acid tests. Photo taken by the author.

further decreasing the burdensome costs of testing. The mixed-tube nucleic acid tests were largely free in major cities considered 'risky', such as Shenzhen, where residents were required to do at least one PCR test a day, either at a local hospital or a normalised nucleic acid testing centre (常态化核酸检测点), to ensure their phone's health code stayed green and 'alive'. In other southern cities like Guangzhou and Changsha, people often needed to do at least one PCR test every three to seven days, following the 'all those in need are tested' (应检尽检) rule introduced in April 2020 and remaining in effect until December 2022 (Xinhua 2020).

With this frequency of required testing, queuing became an excessively familiar and repetitive part of everyday life for residents of many cities. The mixed-tube test method sped things up, allowing testing centres to screen many people already holding a green health code. How the queue played out on a given day was an unknown element, adding a novel form of uncertainty.

Since mixed-tube testing combines samples from either 10 or 20 people, to organise collection, the health workers administering the tests used the

queue itself as a means of counting. Walking down the line, health workers (大白) would hand a new tube to every tenth or twentieth person. Having been handed the tube, it would be that person's job to pass it on to the health worker who was taking swab samples. With a one-in-10 or one-in-20 chance of being the person to hold the tube, the name 'small leader' emerged for this role. Simply being the first in each mixed-test group did not constitute 'leadership', but it did confer a sense of being special. It became common to see 'small leader' posts on WeChat Friend Circle.

It might have been trivial but becoming the 'small leader' was often considered worth sharing on social media, especially during long, boring PCR test queueing. It was sufficiently important that when one of the authors, Han, was charged with handling the test tube, she was asked by a girl behind her: 'Would you mind if I borrow your tube for a second?' It was clear that the girl was going to post this photo somewhere, probably with a title like: 'I am the small leader' (小队长, in which 队 translates as both 'team' and 'queue'). Some netizens joked that being a 'small leader' in the test queue was the biggest job they ever had. Figure 2 captures Han's experience of being the 'small leader', while Figures 3 and 4 show images about the role circling on our WeChat groups and anonymously in meme format.

Testing seems to promise certainty as it produces a binary result: one is infected or is not. However, as a technology of risk management, mixed-tube testing, while significantly speeding up processing for green-code holders, added uncertainty. Unlike the sense of chance associated with becoming a 'small leader' of the queueing citizens, this uncertainty remained in the time frame of test results. If a mixed-tube nucleic acid test result was positive, *everyone* in that group would be required to take another test, this time in a single tube, within 24 hours to confirm which of the group was positive. It was a game of chance—your lot cast in with the other nine or 19 strangers. In the time between being part of a positive mixed-tube test and the return of one's single-tube test result as negative, the person was marked as 'mixed-tube test result positive' in the health code system and could be required to self-isolate. As such, this system embedded a form of shared risk, group surveillance, and associated uncertainty.

Figure 2: Author holding the tube as the 'small leader'.

Testing Dogs

This capacity to play with the way pandemic management technologies shaped everyday life appeared in familiar and unexpected places. Testing, with its vagaries and shifting requirements, remained a central site of interpretation. The examples that follow come from Douyin (抖音), a short-video app operating within China with structural similarities to the app known in Europe and North America as TikTok. In this example, those undergoing testing were not humans, but animals.

Animals had played an ambivalent role during early lockdowns and in broad global discussions about whether the virus had jumped from animals to humans and whether it could continue to move between species. Strictly enforced quarantines, including mandatory evacuation of residents during cleaning of apartments, saw stories of health workers killing pets during their owners' quarantine or animals starving when their owners were suddenly required to isolate away from home. In

昨天队长今天队尾🐕

24分钟前

第一次做核酸就是队长.
可是我不懂行情. 忘了拍照.

当事人：
现在非常后悔，想再当一次队长

请问当核酸检测队长
是一种什么体验？

Figure 3: Han's WeChat Friend Circle (used with consent and with name removed). Figure 4: Microphone: 'May I ask you what kind of experience it is to be the captain of PCR testing?' Pandaman responding: 'The first time I did a nucleic acid test I was a small leader, but I didn't understand the market and I forgot to take a picture.' Commentary in red: 'Now the interviewee regrets it very much and wants to be the captain again.' Source: Sohu (2022), meme accessed 1 February 2023.

#上海浦东柯基被打死##长春某社区扑杀新冠阳性患者宠物#疫情并不可怕，这些操蛋的举措才让人心寒！

See Translation

无害化处理

·活埋　·人肉骚扰
·安乐死·威胁全家

Figure 5: Weibo users posting a drawing of health worker–volunteers killing pets. Source: Klovecake (2022), accessed 1 February 2023.

2021, a woman from Shangrao, Jiangxi Province, was required to quarantine in a hotel while her flat was disinfected. During that time, her security camera recorded health workers killing her dog, a corgi, with a crowbar. Once she returned from quarantine, she posted the footage online, much to the consternation of pet owners. When local authorities reported that the dog had been the subject of a 'harmless disposal' (BBC 2021), images were posted to Weibo (see Figure 5) critically memorialising this 'harmless disposal' by depicting the health workers with a triangle symbol above their masks, referencing characters from the hugely popular online series *Squid Game*. In *Squid Game*, figures masked with a triangle on their face are of higher rank than everyday 'players', but are still required to obey orders, capable of holding guns,

and killing players of the game who fail. By referencing their (delimited) power, these Weibo posts commented on the 'harmless disposal' by inverting the usual representation of health workers as holding swab sticks, putting wooden bars in their hands—tips bloodied from dispatching cats and dogs, and a corgi lying at the front.

Later, however, as photos of pets wearing masks on their daily walks began to circulate, so too did Douyin clips of children 'testing' their household animals. The atmosphere of uncertainty around pets and their pandemic fate had shifted. Circulating as both cute and humorous videos, the 'daily funnies' saw children role-playing health workers with their toys and pets, offering them 'PCR tests'. In Figure 6, the child, having discarded one swab, approaches the face of her
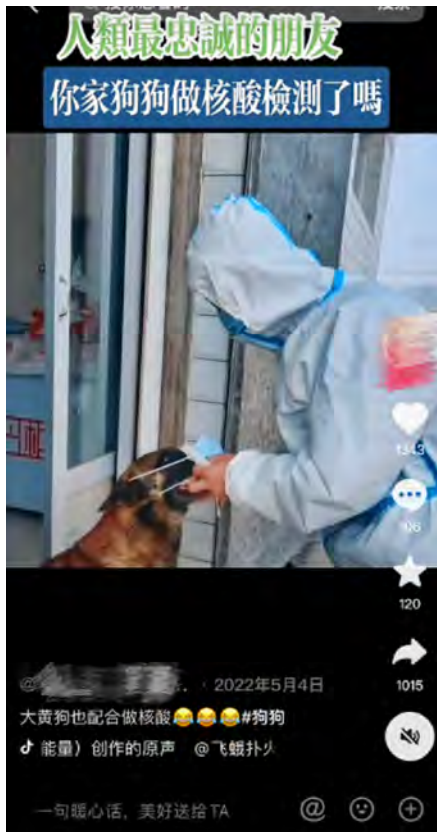
Figure 6: Douyin users' videos with tags such as 'cute pets', 'cute kids', and 'dogs'.

pug with another, with no small look of terror on the dog's face. 'Be patient Niuniu, your sister is going to nursery soon', comments the videographer, reassuring the dog—and, by extension, others—that the testing regimes to which he is subject will soon be over. Similarly, as a health worker gently lifts a surgical mask from a dog, the caption asks whether your 'most loyal friend', your dog, has had a nucleic acid test. Making companion species part of the rule-following—part of pandemic governance regimes through tests, masks, and encounters with health workers—shifts the relationship between animals and those charged with enforcing pandemic rules and goes some way to rewriting the sometimes-violent expendability of animals in the following of rules.

Humour is not an unusual response to uncertainty, as it allows for distance, indirect commentary, and re-narration. For this reason, it is not surprising that it was deployed in many of the most widely shared videos to express sympathy both with the children, for whom testing regimes had become routine, and the animals on whom 'testing' was taking place. To put testing into a child's world is to make play of a situation that cannot be argued with. But in addition to playfully involving pets for the comfort of children, the animal testing also expands the regime of testing beyond humans. The inclusion of animals within extensive testing regimes became more common in the second half of the pandemic. When an outbreak hit Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, for example, a video

Figure 7: Local park in Shenzhen after reopening. Artefacts of testing remain, from the check-in desk to the nurses' testing booth. The park is largely empty of people.

was shared of a hippo opening its mouth wide for a swab and receiving half a watermelon as a reward (Koetse 2022), following on from hippo testing in Belgium in 2021 (Mawad and Hu 2021). From fish to hippos, dogs to cats, to widely shared footage of pandas receiving their own PCR tests (iPanda 2022), animal testing entered public consciousness.

Pandemic Remnants

Our final example comes from the physical environment of test sites. If people were queuing daily for tests, considerable public space had to be given over to testing sites. In early 2023, a park near Hailing's

home in Shenzhen that had for the past two years served as a Covid-testing site was dismantled overnight. Having been used to test 'risky' workers, particularly those working in logistics and public transport, the site had ceased to be a public space. Hailing, who lived near it for many months during the pandemic, knew it as the place to which she had to go to take a test if she received a 'yellow code'.

The uncertainty here is neither that of chance in the testing queue nor the humour that involves pets to deal with unknown extensions to testing regimes; it is about the atmosphere of place. While the restrictions had vanished suddenly, the park remained quiet. Many people were at home with the virus, isolating and recovering, as the sudden end to restrictions led to widespread infections and few were out in public.

Figure 8: At the entrance to the park in Shenzhen, the barriers that had blocked it off from public use have been stacked next to the gate.

Caution, combined with illness, meant that when Hailing visited, there were just three other people making use of the park. Seeing them in the distance, while trying to visit the park 'normally', led to a sense of spookiness.

The last time Hailing had visited the park before its dismantling was in late October 2022, when her health code had turned yellow. She had first been registered at the desk (Figure 7, in brown), which when she returned in 2023 was lying on its side. The sign above it, indicating that this was the testing channel for employees working in public transport, was crushed and muddied on the ground. The testing had been done in the large temporary white box at the top right corner of Figure 7, inside which two nurses worked. Revisiting the park, the white box was now empty and what had been a highly regulated and governed space was in disarray.

At the entrance gate, Hailing and her mother found the barricades that once kept the park closed (Figure 8) piled up. The street was quiet and shops had closed again.

The uncertainties here are multiple: there are uncertain responses to the new and unexpected openness, with an all but empty park. A sense of risk continues to pervade the act of 'being out' in public space—particularly in such charged spaces following their change of purpose. There are also the remnants of testing infrastructure, now abandoned, marking the presence of the recent, busy testing past. Abandoned infrastructure is sometimes described in its 'obduracy' as a rearticulation of 'distinctions of past and present' (Schabacher 2018: 144). Rather than playful or creative, this example of an uncertain response to the sudden discontinuity in testing infrastructure marks the space of the uncanny. In the rapid change of policy, reflected in the sudden shift in the possible uses of public space, uncertainty is translated into caution. Hailing and her mother, on visiting the park, found it deserted—its previous purpose still present in remnant form—due to a wave of infections that came after the end of restrictions.

Uncertainty animates feelings of hope and terror (Patel 2007). We might expect that responses to uncertainty are clarity-seeking. However, none of the

responses to the uncertainties about Covid-19 testing we have discussed makes any attempt to remove it. Nor do they seek greater accuracy about cases or better numbers from which to estimate risk. Instead, they show us experiences of adjustment and response in the face of an uncertainty that appears as chance or doubt. Whether it is gaining social status by turning one's task of carrying a test tube into a 'small leader' in the queue or sharing a post about one's child PCR testing their dog on social media, these responses to uncertainty offer us perspectives on what it has meant to manage in conditions of testing uncertainty. In her discussion of responses to uncertainty in early China, Mercedes Valmisa describes adaptation in the Chinese context as 'not passive resignation but a creative attitude' (2015: 10). In this sense, we may also see uncertainty as a productive space where alternative social worlds and projects (and perhaps creative forms of ethical response) arise (Povinelli 2011), as people find their way forward in the new uncertainties of post-Covid 'normality'. ■

FORUM

More Third Sector, Less Civil Society

Civil Society Repression, Sometime Third-Sector Robustness, and the Moulding of the Nonprofit Sector in China

Mark SIDEL

In the two articles that follow, we have quite different perspectives on civil society and the third sector in China. Professor Salmenkari provides one perspective:

> A boom in the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) sector was evident in post-Covid China during my fieldwork in April–June 2023. After the Covid-19 lockdowns were lifted and the leadership change was completed in late 2022, there was an upsurge of NGO events, collaborations, and transnational networking.

Salmenkari recognises that '[r]epressive measures, such as NGO closures, continue to this day':

> Based on my observations, most Chinese advocacy NGOs had revived their activities with optimism and enthusiasm by the spring of 2023 when I did my fieldwork. I found the advocacy NGOs I had been following throughout my two decades of research relatively intact and teeming with new energy. Environmentalists, women's rights activists, sexual minorities, disability rights groups, HIV-focused organisations, and migrant NGOs all organised public events, participated in NGO cooperation, networked with businesses and officials, and gave voice to new political demands. Some Chinese advocacy NGOs have consolidated their presence on global platforms. This active presence, the acquisition of new political skills, and the expansion of NGO networks form what I refer to as a boom among advocacy NGOs.

Contrast Salmenkari's optimistic view—which I consider an overly optimistic view, though Salmenkari also recognises the repression of some advocacy NGOs—with that of Snape and Wang. They emphasise, in a more academic way than I do here, the controls and restrictions that are dominant in the Chinese strategy on civil society and the third sector:

> [T]he CCP is seeking, with the help of its state, to expunge the 'illegitimate' realm of social organising; to change the rules for determining passage into the 'legitimate' realm; and to plan and manage the 'legitimate' realm dynamically through tangible and intangible means. We roughly conceptualise this as the Party's pursuit of a 'command civil society' …

> This pursuit is not only about tearing down and suppressing; it is also about building a civil society that works reliably in the service of the preferences of the CCP, on the assumption that it knows what is best for society.

What are we to make of this seeming contradiction? For Salmenkari, we are witnessing a flourishing of NGO activity coming out of Covid, even in an environment that she acknowledges has been repressive. For Snape and Wang, it is an increasingly constrained environment in which party controls now stack on top of state controls to produce an even more restrictive framework.

In fact, there is no contradiction here. Snape and Wang and Salmenkari are describing a strategy that has different elements. We have an effective Party-State at work, moulding and controlling Chinese civil society to its own design, and seeking a particular set of outcomes. Those outcomes include, particularly in the Xi Jinping era:

- A set of overall controls and restrictions on the sector that enable the Party-State to restrict or stop any organisation anywhere throughout China, at any level, and working in any field. Snape and Wang give us some of the latest developments in that restrictive strategy, with an emphasis on the Party's increasing role.
- A differentiated framework in which some fundamentally non-threatening groups are allowed to work, and sometimes allowed to

work robustly. Salmenkari's paper emphasises this bounded robustness that is permitted to some groups, for some purposes, at some times (and in my view, she overestimates the robustness that has been permitted and has resulted).

Why does China mould the civil society/third sector in this way? Because it wants to completely control the political threats posed by civil society, while permitting and often encouraging third-sector organisations to help the state in the provision of social services, volunteering, and other work that the Party-State wants to encourage.

That *moulding* of civil society and the third sector by the Party-State towards a particular political, institutional, and operational design is the key feature of policy on the sector in the Xi era.

Virtually everything that occurs—repression, encouragement of provision of social services, state contracting with third-sector organisations for the provision of services, encouragement of local nonprofit services during Covid, the reactivation of some robust activities after Covid—is tied to that overall strategy.

So, as readers of the *Made in China Journal* absorb the two articles that follow, I suggest they try to keep in mind that the Snape and Wang article discusses recent developments in the overall strategy of control and constraint—the dominant factor in China's policy on civil society in the Xi era—while the Salmenkari article discusses a certain robustness that is sometimes permitted to certain groups, at certain times, for certain activities for the Party-State's purposes in the midst of a framework of control and restrictions.

Let me also point out that when I read these two articles, I am struck by how the contradiction they express has always affected philanthropic and aid practice in Chinese civil society and the third sector.

In the philanthropic and aid community, we have always had to negotiate this seeming contradiction: clear repression and increasing controls on civil society on the one hand (here, the Snape/Wang perspective), and a robust set of activities sometimes, for certain purposes, at certain times, on the other (the Salmenkari perspective).

The philanthropic and aid community has tried to take advantage of the narrow robustness sometimes allowed to some Chinese organisations to encourage more independent social service provision and, in earlier times, some advocacy activity in China.

But this programmatic emphasis on working with and funding clearly bounded robustness should not prevent either the philanthropic and aid community or the academic community from recognising that the overall strategy of the Chinese Party-State is one of control and constraint, of firmly moulding the Chinese civil society and third sector to its political ends. Any robust activity coming out of Covid is an element in the strategy, an aspect of the moulding of the Chinese third sector that the Chinese Party-State is engaged in each day. ∎

Chinese NGOs discuss the second draft of the Environmental Protection Law in 2013. PC: Taru Salmenkari.

A Post-Covid Spring Has Come

The Latest NGO Boom in China

Taru SALMENKARI

A boom in the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) sector was evident in post-Covid China during my fieldwork in April–June 2023. After the Covid-19 lockdowns were lifted and the leadership change was completed in late 2022, there was an upsurge of NGO events, collaborations, and transnational networking. Live events, including NGO conferences and the Beijing Queer Film Festival, were revived. Many of the earliest Chinese NGOs celebrated important anniversaries, including the environmental organisation Friends of Nature (自然 之友), which marked 30 years since its foundation; Facilitator (协作者), a migrant labour NGO that has been active for 20 years; and the Beijing LGBT Centre,

which operated for 15 years but whose premises were shut barely three months after its anniversary, leaving its future uncertain.

Many researchers identify the Xi Jinping era as a period of repression of civic activism (Zhu and Lu 2022). Indeed, since 2015, Chinese authorities have arrested feminist and labour activists and lawyers and closed some activist organisations. A lot has been written about this, in this journal and elsewhere. Repressive measures, such as NGO closures, still continue.

Apart from outright repression, China's zero-Covid policy imposed many unintended restrictions on NGO activity. Travel restrictions and lockdowns impeded

attendance at face-to-face meetings. With economic stress on donors and fewer funding opportunities for activities, the pandemic financially strained non-profit organisations, leading to a contraction of the sector (China Development Brief 2023). Covid-19 restrictions coincided with the period around the announcement and consolidation of the new national leadership at the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—a time when NGOs, like all citizens, avoid activities that could be considered politically sensitive.

While much attention has been paid to these dynamics, much less has been written about those NGOs that managed to survive and about the political skills they acquired during this period. The information I relay in this essay comes from meetings I attended, from NGOs' social media posts about their events and campaigns, and from NGO reports and policy proposals in the northern spring of 2023. However, the interviews I cite to illustrate the mindset of Chinese NGOs all precede the Covid-19 pandemic.

Old Folks Are Still There

Based on my observations, most Chinese advocacy NGOs had revived their activities with optimism and enthusiasm by the spring of 2023 when I did my fieldwork. I found the advocacy NGOs I had been following throughout my two decades of research relatively intact and teeming with new energy. Environmentalists, women's rights activists, sexual minorities, disability rights groups, HIV-focused organisations, and migrant NGOs all organised public events, participated in NGO cooperation, networked with businesses and officials, and gave voice to new political demands. Some Chinese advocacy NGOs have consolidated their presence on global platforms. This active presence, the acquisition of new political skills, and the expansion of NGO networks form what I refer to as a boom among advocacy NGOs.

To construct the big picture of how advocacy NGOs are faring, I tracked well-known first and second-generation advocacy NGOs on the social media platform WeChat. Depending on the issue, the first NGOs appeared in the 1990s or early 2000s.

The second-generation NGOs, mostly founded before 2010, are likewise widely known. The post-Covid NGO boom was not limited to these first two generations, but the experiences of subsequent generations may be more varied.

It is not surprising that the early NGOs survived or even strengthened their standing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first-generation NGOs are known for strong-willed, well-networked leaders committed to finding new nonstate ways to solve sociopolitical problems. Each of these groups carved their own social space in a path-dependent way—none that I know without tensions with the political establishment, which at that time did not understand what NGOs were. The first generation provided the model for later NGOs to follow.

Of course, their experiences cannot be generalised to all NGOs in China. Many less prestigious NGOs do not have the political clout these early organisations have cemented (Li and Wang 2020). Moreover, in the Xi Jinping era, repression and surveillance often have targeted younger generations of activists.

Of the advocacy NGOs, environmental NGOs (ENGOs) came out of the Covid era even stronger, having acquired more skills, global connections, and new environmental laws. Leading ENGOs have advantages not available to most other NGOs. They possess superior empirical and technical information, some of it collected by volunteers. Many environmental problems, such as pollution, are numerically measurable against official standards. This gives credibility to these organisations' demands, which are often backed by laboratory tests and requests that relevant laws are enforced.

ENGOs can be politically influential also because they have an official counterpart in the Ministry of Environment and Ecology, which is better equipped to fulfill its mandate when ENGOs monitor environmental problems. Prestigious ENGOs can lobby the ministry to back their policy and legislative proposals. As one ENGO leader stated in my interview: 'They [ministry officials] do not think like us, but we can talk to them.'

While leading ENGOs attract middle-class fee-paying members and funding from domestic foundations, things are very different for labour NGOs. According to my interviews, labour NGOs were drained financially after China restricted

foreign funding for NGOs in 2016. Later, they suffered from targeted repression, Covid lockdowns, limited media attention, and meagre public interest.

Several labour rights NGOs and law firms discontinued their WeChat use in recent years. Although not all NGOs use WeChat, this hints that labour rights NGOs were not participating in the post-Covid NGO boom. Nevertheless, the government seems to recognise the need for the services such NGOs used to provide, as migrant labourers are now permitted to join the official trade union.

Migrant NGOs continue to be active in places as diverse as Beijing and Shaanxi Province. Many migrant-run groups were forced to relocate when the areas where migrant labourers lived were demolished. Some—for instance, Beijing-based Mulanhua Kai (木兰花开)—have managed to survive this challenge. On 20 May 2023, the Migrant Workers' Home (工友之家) held a closing ceremony at its migrant labour museum in Picun Village, on Beijing's outskirts, which was slated for demolition. For years, the organisation had successfully resisted numerous efforts by the authorities to close its school and cultural centre, but now it faces the challenge of establishing roots in another community.

The situation may be different in Guangdong Province—another centre of labour and migrant NGOs due to its large migrant population and proximity and connections to Hong Kong. There, some migrant NGOs' WeChat accounts have been blocked. In Hangzhou, the first migrant-run NGO transformed itself into a municipal service (Chu 2022). Bureaucratisation cannot be considered a failure, as official status helps in responding to migrants' needs.

Women's rights NGOs appeared very early, with official backing from the official Women's Federation. However, the alliance did not protect young feminist activists from repression since 2015, perhaps because of the rifts that were already visible within the campaign for the anti–domestic violence law, which was passed that year. However, the third party in the anti–domestic violence movement, women's rights NGOs, are still around. The first-generation women's rights NGOs are still active or, if they are not, their retired founders continue to take part in NGO activities. This includes early NGOs promoting women's studies at a time when, according to young Chinese feminists, gender studies are now under attack in the universities.

While it is an act of stereotyping, it is not too much of a stretch to characterise women's NGOs from Beijing as political, from Guangdong as promoting women's entrepreneurial skills to improve their social position, and from the revolutionary heartlands of Shaanxi as cooperating with the Party. In Beijing, a central issue is violence against women, while early NGOs from Shaanxi focused on family and education, at least around Mother's Day and Children's Day, when I did my investigation. Nevertheless, Shaanxi women's NGOs highlighted many non-mainstream issues, including migrant children's education and the lack of proper social support from the public sector for women to respond to the recent pro-natalist turn in state policy.

Under pressure in 2021, many LGBTQ+ groups changed their WeChat accounts, and sometimes even Chinese names, but continued their work and joined the post-Covid NGO boom. However, the boom proved short-lived for this cohort, as in mid May and early June 2023, some of them were silenced. Yet, LGBTQ+ parties and events were still advertised all over China during Pride Month in June 2023. Many Pride events were planned as semi-private hiking trips or book clubs, others as commercial drag shows and dance parties. While WeChat accounts revealed some forced closures, in other cities, a busy Pride program took place as planned.

Shanghai Pride officially agreed to stop its activities in 2020, although many events that used to take place under its umbrella continued until 2023. While Shanghai Pride can now do less inside China, it does more outside, participating in global and Asian LGBTQ+ networks and events. Zoom was the platform for Pride Talk in 2022 because of the Covid lockdown, but in 2023, Zoom was used again to include LGBTQ+ activists from China, Nepal, and Singapore to share their experiences.

The main shortcoming of the first-generation NGOs is the unclear separation between the organisations and the activities, skills, and networks of their strong charismatic founders. When old NGO leaders retire, they remain active in activities and public discussions using their former NGO identities. I identified activities involving the leaders of some first-generation women's rights, labour, and environmental NGOs, but could not verify whether their NGOs still functioned as organisations.

Repression Does Not Depoliticise

Contrary to a presumption that greater repression would make NGOs less political, Chinese NGOs emerged from the challenging period with increased political skills. They engaged in more legislative advocacy and participated more intensively in global governance.

Chinese NGOs' legislative advocacy began with the Domestic Violence Law, passed in 2015 after two decades of advocacy. Another milestone was the Environmental Protection Law, in which the Friends of Nature aspired to include public interest litigation by NGOs. When I participated in an NGO consultation organised by the Friends of Nature in August 2013, the draft law did not yet include public interest litigation by independent NGOs, but the ENGO-written clause was eventually included in the final version of the law passed in 2014. During the pandemic, the Friends of Nature won influential environmental cases in China's highest court and used its advocacy skills to leave its mark on new laws.

Influential NGOs lobby lawmakers and relevant agencies directly or are consulted by them, while others use established feedback channels in the Chinese political system, such as the public consultations that are customarily launched for each draft law. By requesting individual members to send feedback to the National People's Congress, the LGBTQ+ community managed to make the Chinese legislature discuss a proposal for same-sex marriage in 2020, and feminist NGOs succeeded in adding more teeth to the 2022 Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law. This feedback strategy individualises collective political action and does what Fu (2018) calls 'mobilising without the masses'.

Once a law is in effect, further opportunities to mobilise without the masses open. NGOs publish guidelines for ordinary environmentalists or victims of gender-based violence to use these laws in courts. They instruct in detail which institutions to turn to, which clauses to cite, and where to find support.

Following the model set by influential NGOs, many organisations which did not do legislative advocacy before are doing it now. Even a social workers' professional association recommended its members send feedback about a draft disability law. To learn political advocacy skills, others have consulted veteran NGOs, including Chinese foundations that are advocating for changes to the forthcoming Charity Law.

Opening Up from Covid-19 to the Outside World

After the end of Covid-19 restrictions, NGOs revived their international exchanges. Many invited foreign guests to speak at their events. ENGOs were building denser networks beyond China, meeting with their European, African, and Asian counterparts to prepare for the COP climate conference, collaborate to expand green energy solutions, and monitor the carbon neutrality of Chinese infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. Increasingly frequent international communications are facilitated by Covid-era technologies such as Zoom.

In the spring of 2023, two Chinese ENGOs on my WeChat feed, including a provincial one, became official members of UN subcommittees working on climate negotiations and sustainable development goals. The same ENGOs had earlier participated in China's climate networks led by government-organised NGOs (GONGOs). GONGOs tended to dominate Chinese NGO participation in international conferences due to their language skills and expertise, but now even some provincial ENGOs have the skills to join transnational governance on their own.

This now-normalised NGO participation in foreign policy arenas is the result of long-term struggle. When I started my research two decades ago, Chinese GONGOs had to persuade the Chinese Government to allow people's forums—the gatherings of civil society organisations that regularly accompany international summits—when China was hosting them. Now the Chinese Government willingly provides access for Chinese NGOs to its China Pavilions at international climate and biodiversity summits, as global civil society has an established presence at these forums.

When China hosted the 2022 BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit online because of the pandemic, Chinese ENGOs organised their own online meetings with NGOs and experts from some or all member countries. China's growing

global influence opens more platforms for Chinese NGOs to grow their global NGO networks, but it also raises African and Asian NGOs' interest in cooperation with Chinese NGOs. ENGOs now penetrate many central Chinese foreign policy targets for reasons that are initiated either by the NGOs or by the government.

Among Chinese advocacy NGOs, ENGOs are on the frontline to join global civil society because so many international negotiations are happening on climate and biodiversity, but also because these problems are global. While Chinese women or disability rights NGOs are rarely interested in cooperation with regions like Central Asia, for ENGOs, even these regions are important. Chinese ENGOs have a two-decade–long history of transborder activism on rivers flowing through China and neighbouring countries (Matsuzawa 2011). Now Chinese infrastructure investments give similar impetus for cooperation.

ENGO's motivation for people's diplomacy is to solve the global climate and biodiversity crises. NGOs are proud to have sustained international cooperation even when Covid isolation, trade barriers, and geopolitical tensions strained diplomatic relations between China and Euro-American powers.

More involvement in foreign policy and legislation brings leading ENGOs closer to the government, with many choosing political influence over 'autonomy', if that means working outside governmental processes. In many ways, advocacy by Chinese NGOs resembles that by NGOs in Europe (Levy and Ketels 2021).

More than cooptation, I am concerned about how lobbying with appeals to measurable technical information and the corporate responsibility–type solutions, because this is an effective strategy in China, could bind some Chinese ENGOs to the green technologies, which activists elsewhere accuse of environmentally destructive production processes.

Repression and Continuity

Contrary to some interpretations (Kang and Heng 2008; Han 2018), there is no clearcut distinction in China between issues or organisations that are government-approved and those that face repression. Most issues are not sensitive as such. Repression against some types of Chinese feminism did

not prevent the passage of the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law—which prohibited sexual harassment and included other feminist demands—by the National People's Congress in October 2022.

There are no safe areas. No advocacy NGO lives beyond the possibility of repression. Even prestigious ENGOs with political clout experience repression when the authorities decide to block them from publishing about certain investigations or tell them to give up a campaign. That said, even if one case must be abandoned, there are always many other problems in China to tackle, as one of my former ENGO interviewees put it.

On WeChat, repression manifests as retracted posts in my feed about an event or a new report. In these cases, information flows become restricted to a limited group. The insider group will still meet and reports will be circulated on paper among NGOs and with government representatives the NGO wants to lobby. A WeChat message to refund tickets suggests the cancellation of an event. My interviewees have also experienced more extreme repression with even personal communications about a case blocked on social media.

In China, being an established NGO evidently protects activists as the authorities give them early warning about the boundaries they are not to cross (Salmenkari 2018). For NGOs, repression means a loss of effort already put into a case, but it could help them direct their energies to more winnable cases. The looser networks of young media activists and independent lawyers could explain why they meet harsher forms of repression than established NGOs (see Salmenkari 2004).

Leading ENGOs can be so political because, counterintuitively, they are so involved in politics. Some activists explained to me that, when the authorities become concerned, NGOs' strategy to legitimate their work is to make it more public. The leading ENGOs that make policy proposals openly are seen as transparent by the government and the state does not need to suspect any ulterior motives.

An organisation-centred focus on the repression of Chinese NGOs misses many continuities. The closure of an NGO seldom ends its activities; it can lead to the registration of another NGO or even to the proliferation of NGOs (Salmenkari 2018). If one looks beyond individual organisations, continuity

through repression is evident. Informal networks, social positions, and shared missions do not depend on organisations but can be carried from one organisation to another or to an informal group running similar events.

A novel requirement, which Xin and Huang (2022) interpret as state control, is the demand to establish a Communist Party cell within sizeable NGOs. Many NGOs now have a specific Party Cell section on their homepages. Judging from social media, many NGOs hold special events for their Party members or organise workshops with the Communist Youth League, both of which integrate Party Cell activities with regular NGO activities. To celebrate the Communist Party's anniversary on 1 July, many NGO Party Cells visited a museum to combine Party history and leisure. However, other NGOs hold meetings to study Party documents, publish these documents on social media, or participate in Party-led meetings.

Not all the pressures NGOs face come from the state. Young Chinese feminists' online activities are vulnerable not only to state repression but also to nationalist and misogynist trolls, who report such activity as inappropriate to block their posts (Liao 2023). The Chinese NGO scene has not avoided the Chinese #MeToo movement against sexual harassment. #MeToo led to the discontinuation of one famous NGO, internal problems within others, and to feminist guidelines to prevent sexual harassment in NGOs. ENGOs sometimes call the police to protect them against polluting factories' efforts to physically prevent them from collecting evidence about unlawful activities. A lens too focused on the state could fail to see how multivocal, conflictual, and challenging space society is.

Repression Cannot Be Generalised

This article has shown how inadequately repression alone explains what is going on in Chinese civil society, as NGOs can simultaneously experience repression and a boom. Which reality you see partly depends on which NGOs you study and how. My research on what NGOs do focuses on active NGOs, while researchers who focus on repressive methods are more likely to see NGO closures and arrests. Recording repression is important, not least because of its moral and supportive dimensions. However, it is equally important to acknowledge successful NGO struggles for recognition and political influence.

Perhaps, as Keane (2017) argues, authoritarianism is a misleading analytical tool, which, as a binary, restricts our analytical capacity. China studies could learn more from social movement studies, which treats repression and access to policymaking as independent factors (Tarrow 1998). Instead of highlighting either repression or successful advocacy, it would be beneficial to understand better how interwoven the two are in the life of Chinese NGOs. ∎
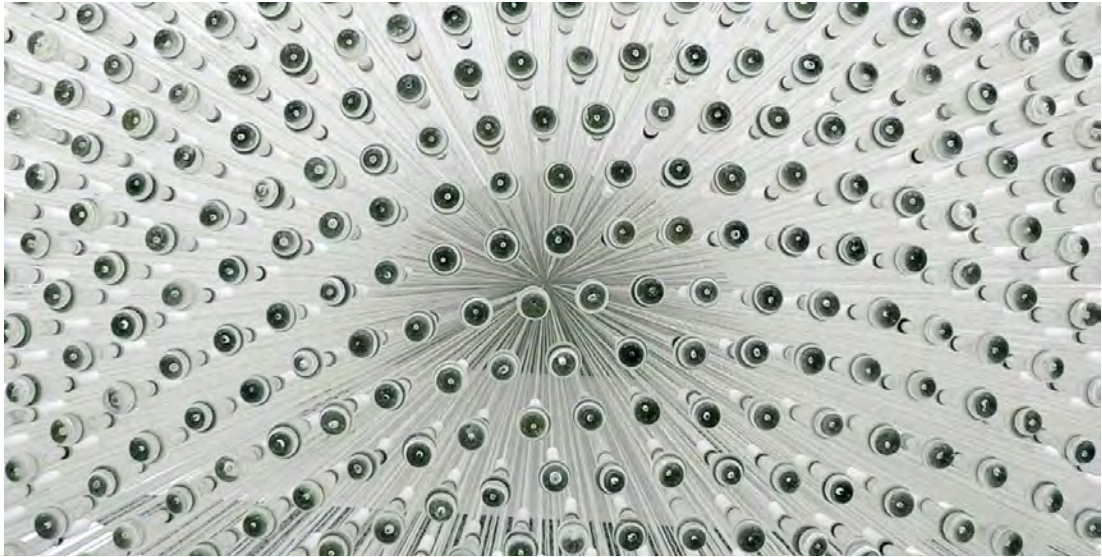
Towards a Command Civil Society?

China's Xi-Era Rules on Social Organising

Holly SNAPE, WANG Weinan

What are the future possibilities for Chinese civil society? Practitioners and academics speak of optimism or pessimism—whether 'spring' will soon come or whether civil society organisations (CSOs) will remain in the depths of 'winter' (Zhu and Lu 2022). The tougher it seems for CSOs to survive, the more common such language becomes. In recent years, it has proliferated. In the spring of 2023, one practitioner spoke to us of the farcical situation as they saw it: 'While policy calls for "high-quality" development in the nonprofit sector, many organisations are like beggars seeking

scraps to survive.' But while some argue that Chinese civil society faces serious threats, others see signs of flourishing. As Shieh (2022) observes: '[A]nalysts have tried to make sense of [the] future. Most have taken a wait-and-see attitude, others have a more pessimistic outlook.' How can we explain the coexistence of such divergent, even irreconcilable, views? What does the overall terrain look like today? Can we look beyond the bricolage of seemingly disparate parts and perceive a totalising trend in the Chinese Party-State's developing rule systems?

To understand and explain the tectonic shifts in the institutional terrain for civil society under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its top leader, Xi Jinping, we may need to disrupt the current common analytical paradigm—one that has us see the world in terms of the relationship between state and society. To do this, we might start with a general question: in a single-party Leninist system, does the role of the party produce critical differences in civil society compared with a multiparty system? In shaping the institutional environment, does the ruling party play a role distinct from that of its state? For instance, the party may guide the formulation of state and societal rules, formulate rules jointly with its state, and use its own rule formulation and implementation capacity to create rules that interact with state laws and regulations and social norms or customs. It may do some or all of these to different degrees during different periods, taking an indirect or more hands-on approach.

Further, is the role of the CCP in shaping the institutional environment limited to repressing or is it also one of active building? The CCP's steps to 'explicitly mark as harmful' any notion of civil society 'which might provide a means of external oversight' (Creemers 2015: 107) is well documented, as is its suppression of lawyers (Pils 2018), advocacy groups (Zhu and Lu 2022), and many others. But the possibility that the CCP is systematically using Party, state, and even societal rules to *build* its own vision of civil society (albeit not by that name) is underexplored.

What we find in tackling these questions is an institutional triptych: an 'illegitimate' realm, a 'legitimate' realm subject to attempts at Party and state planning, and a filter system–like gate in between.

Thinking about Civil Society in a Single-Party System

Attempting to understand the overall institutional environment means attempting to integrate partial and fragmented pieces of the puzzle. In so doing we must rely on certain perspectives, concepts, and discursive choices. Here, we first address those choices.

'Civil society' has a complicated genealogy. Two classic views are that civil society exists independently of the state and, conversely, that it does not. The first often regards civil society as helpful in driving change in the relationship between state and society, holding the state to account, and promoting democratisation. Certain iterations of this view even rest civil society's definition on state-made protections, regarding civil society as 'a complex dynamic ensemble of *legally protected* nongovernmental institutions' in tension with the state (Keane 1998: 11; emphasis added). Here, we reject this narrowing, as to pin a definition of 'civil society' on it being necessarily 'legally protected' would be to discount a vital segment of social organising that Chinese state policy regards as 'illegal'. Conversely, a Gramscian view holds that civil society is an integral part of the state—its 'most resilient constitutive element' (Buttigieg 1995: 4).

Specific to the single-party system of the People's Republic of China (PRC), researchers have developed the two basic understandings above. Jessica Teets (2014) argued that, rather than posing a threat to the state, CSOs can support it under 'consultative authoritarianism'. Kang Xiaoguang and colleagues developed a framework of 'administrative absorption of society' (Kang and Han 2005, 2007), arguing that the state adopts a 'categorised control system' to apply differentiated approaches to CSOs based on its perception of their usefulness and political risk. 'Absorption' in this framework describes a set of state means to make organised society succumb to or comply with state demands. Its core mechanisms are control—preventing CSOs from challenging the state—and 'functional substitution', using state behaviours to satisfy social needs thereby making some types of social organising redundant. Importantly, Deng Zhenglai (2011) highlighted that this 'absorption' approach overemphasises the formal rules and state capacity while overlooking social practices and underestimating social agency.

Striking real-world changes in the institutional environment over the past decade have inspired a new round of studies, which, though deeply insightful, typically still fit loosely under a 'state–society relationship' paradigm. Kang (2018) updated 'administrative absorption' using the language of 'neo-totalitarianism', but ultimately upheld his original framework, capturing the dynamics of interplay between society and the state. Zhu Jiangang and

Deng Hongli (2022) coined the concept 'governance absorption of charity', stressing state absorption of social resources rather than state control of society per se. Diana Fu and Emile Dirks (2021) described a 'three-pronged' state strategy toward social organising comprising tightened regulation of domestic and international CSOs, a crackdown on grassroots organising, and greater Party presence. As clear and compelling as Fu and Dirks' conceptualisation is, and though it explicitly factors in the Party, we cannot use it to perceive, analyse, and explain the interplay between the strategy's 'prongs'.

Disrupting the 'State–Society' Paradigm

While the 'Xi era' has seen the CCP's role vis-a-vis both state and society evolve and expand in myriad policy fields, the source of the need to 'disrupt' the paradigm runs deeper than recent events. A distinguishing feature of a Leninist single ruling party is that it seeks to influence society not just through its state but also directly by deeply penetrating society (Jing 2019). Under the binary analytical lens of the 'state–society' relationship, not only is the Party–state relationship obscured, but also the Party's actions in relation to society are collapsed into those of the 'state' or fall outside the field of observation (Snape and Wang 2020). This obscures interaction between the Party and society, as well as between the Party and the state; it also obscures interplay between the Party and society *via* the state.

It might seem counterintuitive to use a disaggregating lens to examine overall trends in civil society at a time when the Party is increasingly melding itself to its state (Wang and Tang 2019) and building itself in society (Koss 2021). Yet, it is precisely at such a time that the distinct role of the Party from within the state and society may grow and change.

In the study that underpins this article, we set out with a general Party–state–society framework—a 'disruptive' analytical project that has gradually gained ground in relation to the Chinese single-party system (Lin 2002; Thornton 2013; Shen et al. 2020; Snape and Wang 2020). Instead of resorting to the heuristic of the 'Party-State'—typically used to observe changes in Chinese policy and regulation—we treat the Party as

analytically distinct from the state; instead of thinking about the 'state–society' relationship, we think about interplay between the Party, the state, and society. We regard the Party as having its own organisational structures, rules, and modes of operation, and make this an explicit part of our observation process.

We further the 'disruptive' project by using a multi–rule systems approach that is attentive to the Party's rule systems, to the state's legal and regulatory systems, and to the forms and possible outcomes of interplay between these, triangulating this with what decades of scholarship tells us about societal norms. This enables us to examine a concretely defined set of behaviours—the creation and adaptation of rules—and helps us to observe the interplay between rule types. For example, while the PRC State has promulgated key laws affecting social organising, the Party has simultaneously doubled down on directly formulating policy on CSO development. A 'multi–rule systems approach' enables us to account for interplay between such different rule systems and possible totalising trends.

We examined state laws and policy documents, Party documents, and leaders' speeches, which play an important role in linking the latter with the former (for instance, state officials with roles in Party leadership bodies orally distil the spirit of Party documents to state administrators). As Shi Tianjian (1997: 12) pointed out, in Chinese politics, where documents rather than law are the authorities' main communicative device, the 'imprecise' nature of language used by documents requires administrators to engage in significant interpretation. This places a premium on discursive signalling (Schoenhals 1992) through speeches and writings to guide administrators in how to apply their interpretative discretion. Hence, we treat speeches and the discourses they weave as a basic focus alongside formal documents.

Our study focused on social organising in forms both recognised and rejected by the state. 'Social organisations' (社会组织) in theory have some degree of autonomy from the state and are distinct from Party organisations. They are an object of Party and state rulemaking and therefore a feasible focus for investigation to capture an overall picture. We analysed a body of formal Party, state, and joint Party-and-state documents (党政联合发文) on 'social organisations' collected using PKULaw and CCP websites, as well as speeches, meeting readouts, and documents on
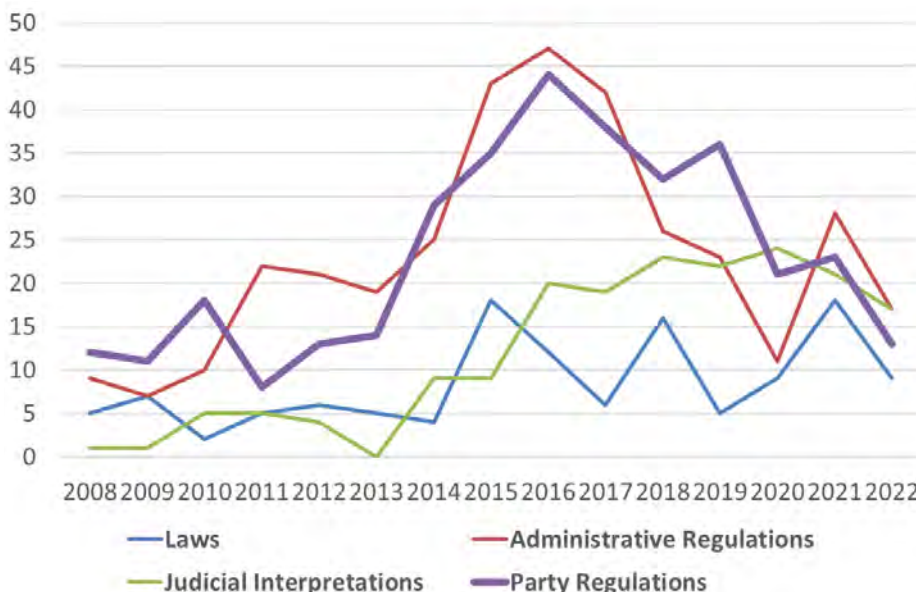
Figure 1: Documents on 'social organisations' by type

Note: The figure shows the results of an 'in full text' central-level search in PKULaw (8 February 2023). It includes every type except departmental rules (部门规章), which rank lower and are vast in number, as inclusion would obscure the ratio of Party documents to state administrative regulations and laws.

'social organisations' using different terminology. We searched PKULaw for 'social organisation' 'in title' and 'in full text' for documents issued between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2022 (before 2000, documents typically used specific organisation types—for instance, 'social groups' [社会团体]). The 'in full text' search retrieved 6,063 central documents (5,663 currently in effect). The 'in title' search retrieved 286 central documents, which formed a core of the formal documents that we studied (borrowing from legal analysis, reading full texts, triangulating, and rereading full or partial texts in an iterative process). Figure 1 illustrates the importance of Party documents, which clearly account for a significant proportion of all policy on social organisations. It also shows the need for attention to the interplay between different rule systems. For instance, there is a clear spike in Party documents roughly in step with state administrative regulations around 2016 when the Charity Law and supplementary legislation went into force.

We tentatively conceptualise what we found as the Party's pursuit of a 'command civil society'—that is, the CCP appears to be pursuing three objectives: to obliterate what it regards as the 'illegitimate realm' of social organising (nonstate registered, unregulated social organising); to control how and which social organisers enter the 'legitimate realm'; and to plan and manage the 'legitimate realm'. These objectives amount to a significant change to the status quo that developed in the first 30 years of Reform and Opening. We explain each below.

Obliterating the 'Illegitimate' Realm

Sporadic campaigns to suppress CSOs are not new, but 2021 saw a novel approach to expunge altogether the 'grey space' in which many non–state-registered

"Roll your sleeves up and get to work, follow the blueprint to the very end." (Beijing, October 2017) PC: Wang Weinan.

organisations exist (Snape 2021). This novel approach seeks to stymie the practices, partnerships, and informal channels on which non-registered CSOs have long relied to operate.

The PRC Constitution recognises citizens' right to freedom of association, but state rules place a precondition on the exercise of that freedom, requiring citizens to submit to 'administrative management' to realise this right (Wu 2018). Since the state began constructing piecemeal rules on organising in the 1980s and 1990s, as a precondition to exercising the freedom of association, a citizen was required to register with a state agency before establishing a social organisation. This was not to gain rights requiring state regulation, such as tax relief; it was to obtain approval to exist. An unregistered organisation was, in the eyes of the regulatory regime, 'illegitimate' or even 'illegal' (official discourse uses '非法', which can mean both). An 'illegal'/'illegitimate' social organisation (ISO) could be shuttered and banned from re-emerging.

Registration was not a direct one-step process. A would-be-legal social organisation (SO) first had to obtain agreement from a 'professional supervisory agency' (PSA) in the field in which it wished to work—for instance, an education-focused SO might go to its local Education Bureau. Potential PSAs were commonly unwilling to perform the role because it brought them responsibility and risk but little benefit. If organisers did manage to find a willing PSA, step two was to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) or one of its local bureaus. This two-step process formed the infamous 'dual management system' and created a threshold that was prohibitively high for many would-be SOs.

Yet an enormous informal sector of ISOs formed and even flourished (Wu 2018). Many organisations that were unable to register found ways to operate despite the formal rules, developing a repertoire of 'survival wisdom' (生存性智慧) (Deng 2011). 'Illegality/illegitimacy' brought challenges, which organisers found ways to overcome. To gain status, some

became affiliated with a registered social organisation or university. Some registered as businesses (Simon 2013), while others opted to take their chances and not register at all, finding ways to collaborate with willing parties regardless. Each method formed a kind of informal norm, generally accepted by their societal interlocutors and even, sometimes, by specific state agencies despite formal rules to the contrary (Hildebrandt 2013).

Affiliation could bring access to physical space, social networks, and the official name, address, and seal of the organisation to which they were attached for processing official business. Common strategies included drawing on social networks to gain coverage from the media, public appearances by officials, and assistance with policy advocacy from system insiders. Online spaces offered an alternative to physical meeting spaces when their lack of identity prescribed access to the latter. For office space, they rented residential premises.

Though the state had its formal rules, for decades the reality was a mixture of non-implementation, selective implementation, and sporadic implementation (Deng 2010), paired with 'survival wisdom' on the part of both state and societal actors. 'The state' long failed to shut unregistered social organisations en masse, and individual state agencies and administrators—needing to find solutions to perform their duties—quietly tolerated or openly developed relationships with them (Spires 2011). In short, it was one thing for the central state to require citizens to submit to administrative management; it was quite another for state agencies and administrators to have the capacity or the will to enforce this requirement.

In 2021, the Party joined forces with the state and sought societal assistance to implement a novel campaign, amounting to a sharp departure from the decades-old status quo. The campaign against ISOs targeted unregistered organisations (MCA 2021a). To compare the 2021 campaign with those in the past, we collected and analysed central and provincial-level documents and campaign meeting readouts from the campaigns of the same name for the previous three years (the approach contained in the 2020, 2019, and 2018 documents also rang true of earlier years). We found through documents and meeting readouts that the 2021 campaign was novel in two pivotal ways. We then triangulated this understanding with SO practitioner conversations in the spring of 2023.

First, the campaign brought the Party's capacity to bear instead of that of the state alone. During past crackdowns, one or two state agencies sought to implement state regulatory documents. In 2018, two state agencies, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security, cracked down on ISOs (MCA and MPS 2018). Provincial-level governments, too, drew core implementation capacity from only civil affairs agencies and sometimes public security agencies. The same was true of the 2019 and 2020 campaigns.

Conversely, the 2021 crackdown brought to bear the authority and resources of Party agencies via a 22-agency 'Party-and-state joint document'. This document was formulated and implemented by powerful Party agencies alongside state ones. It carried the seals of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Central Organisation Department, Central Propaganda Department, Central Politics and Law Commission, and the Central Administration for Cybersecurity, alongside those of multiple state agencies (MCA 2021d).

The second novel element of the campaign's design was its target. Past campaigns had used an inefficient approach of picking off individual ISOs. The burden of proof on the state had sometimes acted as a buffer for social organisers. This highlights a significant distinction between reliance on state rules and reliance on Party ones: state rules theoretically follow certain legal requirements. In this case, state authorities struggled to gather sufficient evidence on individual ISOs to support shuttering and 'banning' them (MCA SOMB 2018).

Conversely, the 2021 campaign aimed to suppress the space and conditions for unregistered organisations to survive (Snape 2021). It targeted the conditions on which existing 'survival wisdom' depended. The new campaign sought to 'root out' every physical and online space, connection, and activity facilitating ISO existence.

This campaign was vastly broader in terms of who it called on to implement or comply. The 22-agency document contained six sets of basic orders demanding compliance from multiple parties: businesses, registered social organisations, and public institutions; Party members and cadres; media agencies; public service providers and infrastructure operators; internet companies; and financial institutions. The orders were further refined in subsequent

meetings and documents detailing implementation requirements for each subset of societal, Party, and state actors.

The two novel points—Party participation and the targeting of survival conditions—worked in concert, using a Party-and-state joint document that commanded authority to solicit strong, broad, and consistent compliance in ways a state document could not. Named implementors of this joint document had a form of direct jurisdiction over a wide range of possible implementation and compliance entities. Here, the distinction between using a state document and using a Party-and-state one becomes clear. For instance, if the state's civil affairs system were to ask media platforms to implement its policy, this would be *an external request from a state entity without jurisdiction*. Conversely, because the Party's propaganda system 'leads' media platforms and has an organisational network to facilitate enforcement of its leadership, using a Party document meant this was *an order from above and within*. The MCA cannot order local government officials beyond the civil affairs system to cease symbiotic relationships (Spires 2011) with ISOs; Party organisation or discipline departments likely can. The MCA was able to pair with the powerful (Party-led) Cyberspace Administration of China to demand compliance from 28 internet platform operators and companies such as Tencent, Alibaba, and Baidu, as well as calling on the People's Bank of China, Xiaomi, and Bilibili (MCA 2021b), to ensure no ISO had access to internet services and to cut off domain names, websites, and communication channels, along with means for accepting payments and donations.

The Party-and-state joint document targeted each of the 'survival wisdom' practices that had developed among unregistered social organisations and officials, even citing such practices in its opening passage. It did so by requiring all types of individuals and entities to cease and desist and creating penalties for noncompliance, such as placing noncompliant registered SOs on 'abnormal activities' lists, endangering their potential funding sources. Its targets included legal organisations offering affiliation, officials making appearances to boost an ISO's credibility, and operators of online platforms offering space and services. It included banks allowing ISO transactions, public infrastructure operators enabling events, and media agencies offering publicity. Instead of targeting just

'ISO' behaviours, it pulled the rug from under long-standing practices, changing the social conditions that supported them.

The 2021 campaign requirements are now being 'normalised' (Zhan 2022) through new, permanent implementation mechanisms—for instance, with new draft annual SO inspection rules treating holding activities with ISOs as a cause for instant failure to pass the inspection (MCA 2022b: Art. 12.5). It comes in the context of emerging forms of tech-assisted governance capabilities that help to facilitate implementation—for instance, the MCA's public WeChat account now features a function letting anyone type in the name of an SO and retrieve its basic data, enabling them to determine the 'legal/legitimate' nature of an SO. The Party's intervention commands compliance from both state and societal entities—within which it has organisational presence, uses Party rulemaking that can blur or skirt administrative procedural requirements, and brings to bear the resources and authority of Party agencies on both state and society. The shift in approach—topped off in 2023 with the creation of the CCP Central Social Affairs Department—presents an inflection point in the status quo and a fundamental challenge to existing and long-accrued 'survival wisdom'.

Governing the Gate: Who Can Enter the 'Legitimate' Realm?

Persevere in 'guarding the political gate' of social organisation registration.
—Zhan (2022)

Today the registration 'gate' between designation as 'illegal/illegitimate' and 'legitimate' is pivotal. The Party-driven campaign to expunge existing survival approaches transforms the registration question into an existential one. The rate of SO registration in 2021 was at its lowest point since 2008, having slumped to 0.86 per cent (NGO Guancha 2022), suggesting the difficulty of passing through the 'gate'. Though Covid-19 prevention and control measures were likely an important factor in the 2021 figure, keeping numbers 'steady' is also clearly expressed as an aim of government policy.

State legislators have failed to ease passage for most. The 2016 Charity Law is the PRC's closest legislation to a basic law on social organisations, yet there remains what is effectively a legislative gap. The state opted in the 1990s to create various types of social organisation legal persons through secondary legislation but has since failed to produce a higher tier law to stipulate their rights and obligations. In the years before the Charity Law's promulgation, state-sponsored pilots around the country trialled multiple models of 'direct registration' for certain types of social organisation. Practitioners and legislators (Zheng 2016: 45) had hoped that the Charity Law would push through direct registration, solving the problems faced by many would-be legitimate SOs, but this did not happen (Ma 2019).

Party document formulators, meanwhile, teamed up with state counterparts to intimate that even 'direct registration' would be less than direct. Just weeks before the Charity Law went into effect in 2016, a top-level Party-and-state joint document ordered: 'When reviewing applications ... solicit the opinions of relevant departments or organise experts to conduct evaluation' (CCGO and SCGO 2016). This means that even the select few for whom 'direct registration' might be possible must undergo an application process to evaluate their eligibility.

Given the heightened importance of the 'gate', the persistence of 'dual management', and the failure to streamline registration processes for both direct and indirect registration, the discretionary authority of administrators is a critical 'linchpin of the statutory scheme' (Snape et al. 2016: 18). Administrators' decisions are influenced by state legislation and policy documents but also by Party documents and the speeches that link the latter with the former.

Against the backdrop of the Party's newly asserted claim to 'lead everything' (Jiang 2019), it has initiated deep changes in the broader regulatory environment in which all state agencies and civil servants operate, integrating the Party more tightly with the state and bolstering the former's influence. In 2019, the Party Centre made the order to 'bring out the political nature of state organs' (展现国家机关政治属性) (Central Committee 2019). State organs responded in their own planning and policy documents by asserting their 'political nature'.

At the ministry level, the state system responsible for directly managing the 'gate' responded to the new 'political' framing of its identity and work. The MCA's *Social Organisation Development Plan for the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan Period* (MCA 2021e) stressed strengthening the nature of SO registration and management organs as political organs (政治机关属性) and 'raising the threshold' for registration. Its basic implementing principles required: 'Strengthen SO registration and management organs' nature as political organs, [such that they] not only fulfil legally stipulated duties but do more to foreground their political functions.'

The subministry civil affairs system that administers the 'gate' responded by stressing its functions as political, using its annual nationwide teleconference to set guidelines for the civil servants who determine the fate of would-be registered SOs. For the first time, the 2022 annual teleconference readout stated: 'Coordinate political functions with legally stipulated duties' (MCA 2022a). Vice-Minister Zhan Chengfu (2022) distilled this into instructions, telling the civil servants who decide the fate of would-be registered SOs: 'At all levels ... build a strong consciousness of [your] being political organs ... incorporate a stress on politics in each step and throughout whole processes ... and *persevere in guarding "the political gate" of SO registration*' (emphasis added).

Zhan went on:

> Some believe thought-political leadership [思想政治引领] is the job of the PSA and the Party building organ but not [state] registration and management organs ... and some don't know how [to do such work] ... [T]his notion is muddled, and even entirely wrong.

As shifts in the Party–state relationship deepen, state agencies are increasingly being directed to think 'politically' both in determining who can enter the 'legitimate' realm and in managing them once they enter (to which we turn below).

The 'gate' is increasingly framed also as a mechanism to assist in actively planning and shaping the structure and makeup of the 'legitimate' sector. The 2023 conference on SO registration and management called for 'optimising the registration pattern' (优化登记布局), which can be understood in reference to other documents (for instance, MCA 2021e) as

requiring the *use of registration* to build a realm of SOs with 'balanced' coverage across different fields, regions, and levels of jurisdiction. That is, registration is envisaged as a means to actively shape social organising, permitting the establishment of certain types of SO while rejecting those that do not fit the 'optimised pattern'.

Commanding the Legitimate Realm

As a Leninist party, the CCP has always emphasised its 'organisational' capabilities and sought to embed itself in societal entities (Shambaugh 2008). However, during the first decades of Reform and Opening, the number of registered SOs was limited, the growing numbers of 'illegal/illegitimate' SOs were not feasible sites for Party-building (the Party cannot build itself in an entity its state regards as illegal), and the Party paid registered SOs less attention than it does today—for instance, early requirements were limited, focusing first on social groups (社会团体) and then on 'social intermediary organisations' (Chu 2020). Though policy in the late 1990s began calling for Party-building in certain types of social organisations (Beijing Shequ Qingnian 2017), implementation was weak. For example, Wu Zhongze (2000), then head of the MCA Civic Organisation Management Bureau, cites a survey finding that 89 per cent and 91 per cent of social groups in Beijing and Shanghai, respectively, had no Party organisation, despite policies requiring establishment.

Under the Xi administration, the CCP has foregrounded SO-related Party work. It seeks to achieve comprehensive coverage and deep penetration of the 'legitimate' realm, to enable itself to exert influence on both a granular level (inside individual SOs) and overall (over the realm of ideas and discourse that shapes SO activities). It is attempting to embed Party organisations and maintain Party work in all SOs and is pursuing this aim not only through new and existing Party mechanisms and methods (Xin and Huang 2022), but also, critically, by inserting its requirements into each process of *state regulation* of SOs.

Party and state documents are thick with directional or topical championing to guide Party activists, state administrators, and SOs themselves. They champion certain fields, topics, and types of work, or certain broad ends towards which SOs are expected to work. This ranges from 'encouragement' to concrete mechanisms to steer and incentivise. It is paired with discursive steering of the conceptualisation of social organising itself, from the denoting of unregistered SOs as 'illegal/illegitimate', to the championing of 'charity' (慈善) (rather than 'public interest' [公益], 'civic organising' [民间], and so on). Such ideational steering is codified across Party documents and law, meaning it is embedded in the workings of the regulatory system. We now detail the tangible and the discursive means used to 'command' the 'legitimate' realm.

A) Multidirectional Embedding of People

In 2015, the CCP Central Committee General Office issued a key SO Party-building document, the *Opinions on Strengthening Social Organisation Party-Building Work (Trial Implementation)* (CCGO 2015). It called for 'integrating Party work into the processes of SO operations and development' and 'unifying' Party leadership with SOs' own 'law-based self-regulation'. The document's scope reached far beyond previous documents on the subject, which had been issued not by the Central Committee but by a department thereof and which had focused on a subset of SOs. By contrast, the 2015 document was a Central Committee document and covered a far greater range of organisations: all three types of SO that must register with the civil affairs system as well as community SOs and intermediary organisations (such as law practices, auditing offices, and tax agents).

The Opinions required 'bidirectional entering and overlapping position holding' (双向进入、交叉任职) of an SO's management personnel and its Party organisation's leadership. The Party secretary should be present at SO management meetings and the choice of SO leader should be vetted by Party-building work organs (CCGO 2015). The document instructed attaching 'importance to transforming SO leaders and core staff into Party members'. While 'usually' the Party secretary should be selected from inside the SO, 'when the SO has no suitable candidate, a higher Party organisation can be asked to select and
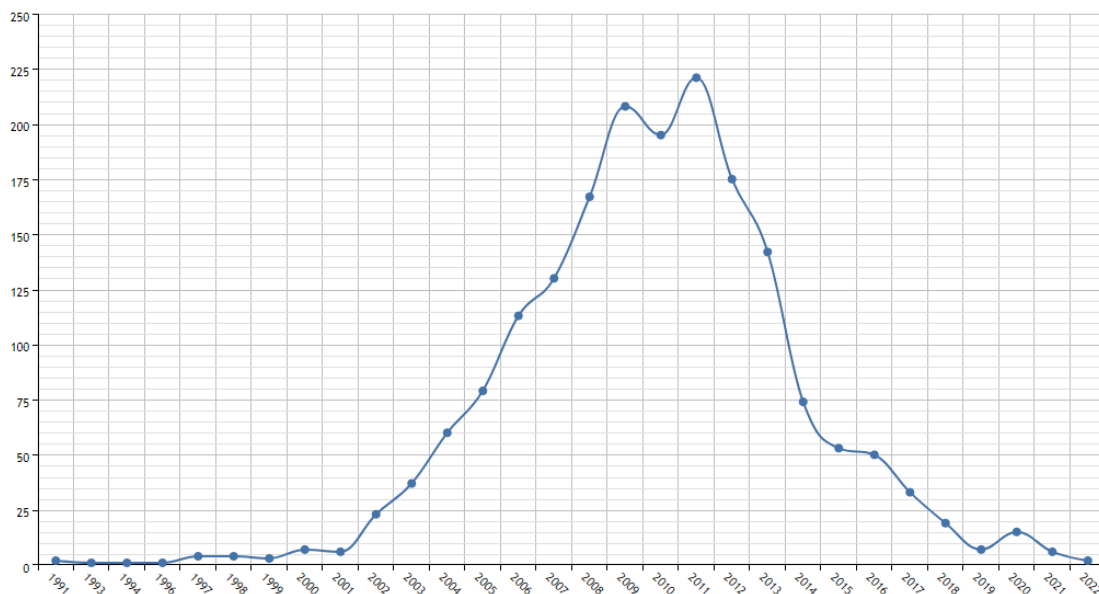
Figure 2: Chinese-language research on 'civil society' in CNKI. Note: We searched CNKI for the term 'civil society' (公民社会) 'in title' (8 February 2023). This retrieved 1,842 articles, most of which were published in 2011 (221), following which numbers clearly sank. A similar trend is observable for '市民社会', which is also used to express 'civil society'.

deploy someone'. In short, from the inside out, the Party is seeking to absorb SO leaders and core staff members into the Party and to encourage existing Party members in the SO to step into SO Party organisation (SOPO) roles. From the outside in, it may insert Party members into SOs. The Party also encourages placing SOPO members in positions of authority in state institutions (such as local people's congresses) (CCGO 2015: Art. 20).

The SOPO secretary, whether selected from within or inserted from without, is naturally also embedded within the Party's own organisational system. This means they are obliged to report up to their higher Party organisation (CCGO 2015: Art. 20). When the SOPO secretary is also the SO's leader, their embedded position in the Party's organisational system creates a direct channel between the SO leadership and the higher Party organisation—in theory, enabling orders and information to flow between the SO and the higher Party organisation.

A Leninist party seeks full coverage not only over all sectors and fields but also over social organising characterised by the geographic jurisdiction within which it takes place. Community SOs (社区社会组织)—a type of organisation voraciously championed by both Party and state policies—can be exempted from the registration requirement (that is, not labelled an ISO and shut down). Instead, they are managed by subdistrict offices/township governments or community Party organisations/residents' committees (see MCA 2017: Art. 3.1). Crucially, their activities are contained within their geographic spaces (see MCA 2017: Art. 42). Policy on community SOs replicates the above patterns of embedding. It calls for 'encouraging community Party members to serve as the heads of community SOs' and turning key community SO staff members into Party members (MCA 2017: Art. 4.1). Community SO staff who are already Party members are to be 'absorbed' into the leadership of their community's jurisdictional Party organisation—

that is, they are to work both inside the community SO and inside the leadership of the Party organisation with geographical jurisdiction over that community.

The Party also attempts to coopt and embed non-Party members. In 2020, the CCP Central Committee amended its United Front Work Regulations, designating SO practitioners as 'persons of new social strata' (新的社会阶层人士) (Central Committee 2020: Art. 31), thereby making them potential targets for united-front work. For instance, the Party selects and manages 'extra-party representatives' (党外代表人士) to link the Party and SOs. United-front workers are to select and train people from within 'the new social strata' to act as extra-party representatives and insert them into key roles—directors, vice-directors, and members—in state structures such as the people's congresses and their special committees (Central Committee 2020: Arts 40, 41, 43, 45).

B) Organisational Coverage

The 2015 Central Committee document (CCGO 2015) called for 'two full coverages' (两个全覆盖)—requiring all SOs to have a Party organisation and be covered by Party work. It pressed for the creation of Party-building work agencies as part of a differentiated set of relationships between different types of SO Party organisations and their superior organisations; SOPOs nestled into or created from within SOs must also be slotted into the Party's chain of command (隶属关系).

To implement the above requirements, to guarantee and dynamically monitor implementation of Party-building in SOs, the Party is heavily reliant on the state. State policy documents, when analysed alongside Party documents, show state agencies have systematically incorporated implementation into their regulatory processes—sometimes referred to as the 'Three In-Steps' (三同步) or 'Six In-Steps' (六同步) because Party-building is looped in to occur concurrently with the regulatory process in question, enforced by state agencies. For instance, the MCA (2016) began to require a mandatory 'letter of commitment' in which the applying SO must declare to the state registration agency its commitment to Party-building work. The MCA (2018) made it mandatory for all registering or registered SOs to include Party-building in their charters, which state agencies check as a condition of registration. Other

processes in which state agencies (and even third parties) enforce SO Party-building include SO annual reporting and evaluation: state policy requires SOs to include information on their Party-building in annual reports and evaluation teams are required to give increasing weight to Party-building to the extent that they can now skew evaluation and undermine other types of indicators. Further mechanisms are then looped into the state regulatory system to deter SOs from noncompliance (for example, poor Party-building determined through evaluation can be a matter of instant exclusion from government service procurement).

By relying on state administrators as well as its own efforts, the Party has achieved a sharp rise in its 'coverage' of SOs. The *2017 CCP Intra-Party Statistical Bulletin* showed that 303,000 SOs had established Party organisations, accounting for 61.7 per cent of the total registered (CCP COD 2018). By 2019, the statistical bulletin claimed that the principle 'all that ought to be built shall be built' (应建尽建) had been 'basically achieved' (CCP COD 2020).

C) Ideational and Discursive Steering

The Party also seeks to influence social organising by controlling (or expunging) certain discourses and by promoting its preferred discourses and ideas.

The Party's infamous 'Document No. 9' reportedly articulated its opposition to 'civil society' (公民社会), denouncing the advocacy of 'civil society' as being intended to 'remove primary-level Party organisation leadership and state presence from the self-governance of the masses ... and even place them in opposition, to ultimately form political opposition' (Minjing Yuekan 2013). The Party line has affected the multiple rule systems and academic research. For instance, in 2016, the MCA Civic Organisation Management Bureau (民政部民间组织管理局) swapped out the 'civic' or 'of the people' (民间) in its name for 'social' (社会), becoming the MCA Social Organisation Management Bureau (民政部社会组织管理局). While Party and state have long emphasised the need for control over speech and the dissemination of opinions in relation to the development of free social organising, such control appears to have grown. Figure 2 shows the sharp drop in the use of 'civil society' in the academic literature in CNKI,

Party, State, and Society Meet. The sign reads "Forever Follow The Party." Before it, a group of "public square dancers" choreograph their own moves to tunes from their stereo; behind it, the government building stands in its shadow. (Anhui, April 2023) PC Wang Weinan.

one of China's foremost academic databases. Usage peaked in 2009–11 and dropped sharply between 2012 and 2015, all but disappearing by 2018.

State administrators are involved in implementing rules on discourse and ideas. For instance, the MCA's (2021c) *Notice on Further Strengthening SO Management and Strictly Regulating SO Behaviour* stressed the need to 'adhere to the correct political direction, public opinion orientation and value orientation', 'strictly review the content of activities', and 'never provide channels or platforms' for the 'dissemination of wrong ideas and views and bad culture'.

Instead of 'civil society', 'charity' (慈善) is now widely used, although understandings of its meaning vary. Before the Charity Law, there was a period when researchers could quite freely discuss topics such as 'legislating on the right of association' and the choice of basic legislative paths related to social organising

(for instance, Liu et al. 2013). But with the introduction of the Charity Law, the views of its legislators have become clearer and subsequent debates have focused more on the Charity Law's implementation and amendment. Legislators have begun to show a clear preference for 'charity' over 'public interest' (公益), with the latter now modified by being affixed to 'charity'. Compared with the possible connotations of the term 'public interest' surrounding citizens' rights and a public sphere, 'charity' is more closely aligned with Party priorities of resource reallocation, volunteerism, and giving.

In 2016, the Charity Law's (Art. 3) definition of 'charity' reflected what many hailed as a 'broad' understanding of charity that arguably encompasses both 'charity' and ideas related to 'public interest'. But two years later, the *Regulations on the Registration and Management of SOs (Draft for Comment)* threatened to shrink that concept, equating charity roughly to 'helping the poor and aiding those in difficulty' (扶贫济困), and so on. Remarkably, unlike the Charity Law (Art. 3.5), the draft did not regard environmental protection as falling within the scope of 'charity'. The regulations (draft for comment) remain unpassed five years on, and some argue that a prolonged legislative process is preferable to pushing through a version with which many disagree (Liu and Ma 2018). Over the course of 2021–23, as practitioners and academics discussed revisions to the Charity Law, many spoke of the need to expand the definition of charity—for instance, to include animal welfare and community development (for example, Ta Foundation 2023). In January 2023, a draft for comment was opened to public scrutiny. The draft itself makes no change to the definition, though we still do not know whether any of the recommendations lodged will be accepted.

The chosen legislative path of first promulgating a Charity Law rather than a basic law on social organisations or association has privileged the perspective of function over rights or behaviours. Administrative regulation formulators then intimated a possible (but not passed) narrowing of the definition of that function (charity), which is so closely linked to SOs in the legislation. This emphasises the functionality of social organisations rather than letting them be understood from the perspective of the right to associate.

Most recently, discourses such as that on 'common prosperity' (共同富裕) and 'tertiary distribution' (第三次分配)—a buzz term currently being used

in Party and government policies that stresses the charity sector's role as distributive (Zheng 2021)—give even greater prevalence to a functional understanding of the role of SOs. While neither is entirely new, these concepts are gaining significant attention, having appeared in a spate of Party documents and speeches. For example, in 2017, the Nineteenth National Party Congress stated, '[W]e must continuously promote the common prosperity of the people.' In 2019, the Nineteenth Central Committee's Fourth Plenum made an order to 'pay attention to the role of tertiary distribution and develop charity and other social welfare undertakings'; and the 2020 Fifth Plenum cited 'the common prosperity of the people'. Such concepts and discourses are increasingly used to influence the institutional environment and resource structures that determine how social organisations in the 'legitimate' realm may operate. The Party uses value messaging in the documents and speeches at such plenums and congresses; these then seep into state policy documents and tools (such as service purchasing policies and evaluation indicators) as state agencies demonstrate their compliance with performing their 'political functions', affecting the resource and regulatory structures that influence SO operations.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether we see a deep frost settling on the social organising environment or signs of spring may depend on what we are looking for, what we are looking at, and what we hope to find. What is clear is that the shift in the institutional environment creates a stark contrast with the status quo that had developed over the first three decades after Reform and Opening.

Studying shifts in the institutional environment that had developed in fits and starts over the 30 years before the 'Xi era', we have attempted to draw together the threads of multiple rule systems to analyse the 'overall' institutional environment for social organising. This approach is explicitly attentive to the Party's rule systems, as well as to those of the state and, as far as is possible through primarily documentary research, to prevailing social norms of

organising. Though only scratching the surface, we have attempted to begin perceiving points of interplay between such different rule systems.

Using this multi–rule systems approach, we found that the CCP is seeking, with the help of its state, to expunge the 'illegitimate' realm of social organising, to change the rules for determining passage into the 'legitimate' realm, and to plan and manage the 'legitimate' realm dynamically through tangible and intangible means. We roughly conceptualise this as the Party's pursuit of a 'command civil society'. Just as a command economy is characterised by its attempt to suck away all space for markets to determine prices and allocate goods and services, the project to build a 'command civil society' attempts to suck away space for the operations of any actors and actions that do not fit within its planned and regulated sphere.

The pursuit of a 'command civil society' is operationalising Party-and-state joint documents and Party documents alongside state laws and regulations to target the social norms—the 'survival wisdom' (Deng 2011)—formed over past decades by social organisers and state administrators. The Party is using its characteristically Leninist penetration of societal and state entities to create rules for tech companies and universities to undermine means for SOs outside the state's regulatory purview to exist.

This pursuit is not only about tearing down and suppressing; it is also about building a civil society that works reliably in the service of the preferences of the CCP, on the assumption that it knows what is best for society. It seeks to gatekeep access to legitimate identity as a 'social organisation' and to influence those SOs which do manage to enter the 'legitimate' realm using the Party's presence in their decision-making mechanisms, the Party's influence over their leadership makeup, and the Party's sculpting of the discursive environment in which they operate (in turn influencing the projects they can design, the fundraising strategies they can pursue, and so on).

The state's longstanding failure—be it due to lack of will, resources, or strategy—to implement its own regulatory measures in the past was one enabling factor in the development of the post-Mao status quo. Today, it is the state on which the Party is largely reliant to facilitate Party-building and work within the 'legitimate' realm of social organising.

The regulatory regime shows that, to actualise full coverage of the 'legitimate' realm with Party-building and Party work, the Party is heavily dependent on its state. While the Party has many of its own means to press for Party-building, it is the state's multiple regulatory processes and mechanisms that act as vital catalysts and nodes in dynamically facilitating initial and continued Party-building implementation and Party work.

Reflecting on this attempt by the CCP to create such a system, it is important to remember that it is one thing for the Party to vigorously pursue the development of a 'command civil society' and quite another for it to succeed in so doing. If we can reasonably assume that associating is a common form of human behaviour—and that people have agency—enforcing preconditions on the right of association and eradicating all unregulated social organising may be too tall an order for any regulatory regime. Similarly, even the strongest efforts towards Party-building and discursive shaping may not pre-empt 'legitimate' CSOs from following their own preferences and finding innovative ways to so do. The trends in regulating set out above may instead result in new forms of organising, both within and without the boundaries delimited by the Party. They may drive a new round of learning and accumulating 'survival wisdom' on the part of social, state, and perhaps even Party entities and individuals, bringing new shape to social organising in what even today is arguably a 'most vibrant and dynamic voluntary sector' (Sidel 2022). ■

WORK OF ARTS

The Heavier the Rain, the Harder We Work, Chen Bo, 1958.

Concrete Sublime and Somatic Intensity

Visualising Water Engineering in Socialist China

Xiangli DING

During the 1950s, the construction of large-scale water engineering infrastructure emerged as a crucial undertaking for the socialist state. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of engineers, Party cadres, and workers, this monumental task brought about revolutionary transformations to the landscape of China. Concurrently, a multitude of artists were commissioned to visit these projects and capture their essence. By closely examining and analysing some of these works of art, this essay aims to highlight the profound technological grandeur and immense labour intensity expressed in them, while also shedding light on some of the aspects that remained invisible within the state-sanctioned visual representations of these projects.

As flood and drought have been the major threats to people's livelihoods in agricultural societies, river management has generally been a core administrative responsibility of local and state authorities around the world and throughout history. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is no exception. In the 1950s, the Party-State was keen to boost agricultural productivity and demonstrate its capacity for labour mobilisation by transforming the country's rivers and mountains. As part of the global revolution in concrete technology and the continuation of China's long tradition of water management, the construction of large-scale water engineering infrastructure became an essential task

of the fledgling socialist state in that decade. With the commencement of the Huai River campaign, the comprehensive planning of the Yellow River, and a suite of flood control and hydropower projects across the country, the waterscape of China underwent unprecedented transformation. What is often overlooked is how, in addition to the material achievements in terms of the organisation of water, the erection of tens of thousands of concrete, rock, and earthen dams, the waterscape transformation also rendered a revolution in art and visual culture.

According to Christine Ho (2020), during the Mao Zedong years before the Cultural Revolution—the so-called 17 Years (1949–66)—three genres of painting emerged as mainstream: industrial sublime, revolutionary history, and cultural diplomacy. The new state's pursuit of industrialisation and modernisation rendered scenes of industrial construction one of the three major themes of artistic production at that time. Because of the scale and nature of water engineering projects, dams and reservoirs became a popular subject in visualising the industrial sublime of socialist China. Centred on the water engineering–themed illustrations and photographs created in the 1950s and 1960s, this essay seeks to examine the connections between those infrastructure projects, visual culture, and socialist politics. While the artworks followed and reflected the overt changes in the physical landscape, the creation and exhibition of those works also affected people in a more covert and subtle way. For many artists, regardless of whether their work was spontaneous or commissioned, the creation process was a chance to re-educate and adapt themselves to the Maoist revolutionary culture. For the audience, the works showcased the achievements of the socialist state in a visually artistic and spiritually uplifting manner. In so doing, this genre intended to inspire awe of the socialist state and make the audience adamant supporters of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In 1942, Mao gave a series of talks during his meetings with literature and art workers in Yan'an. According to Mao, literature and art—the most important mediums of communication—should serve the masses and the Communist revolution (McDougall 1980). In 1954, Jiang Feng, the president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, published an article in the *People's Daily* complaining about the indifference to politics and the cultural deficiency of some artists. A few months later, Zhu Dan, Jiang's colleague at the academy, called for the improvement of the political calibre of artists. Quoting Maxim Gorky on the role of 'writers as the eyes, ears and voices of social classes', Zhu explicitly stated that the arts should be the weapon of social classes and ought to serve the Party and its revolutionary enterprise (Zhu 1955: 5). Wu Zuoren, then a professor at the academy and vice-president of the Chinese Artists' Association, called for immediate action. In this context, while the visualisation of Communist revolutionary history continued to be the focus of art in state propaganda and politics, it was joined by the visualisation of agricultural and industrial production and infrastructure construction in marking the expansion of Chinese socialist visual culture.

Traditional Chinese painting (国画, *guohua*) had long been criticised for failing to reflect the social reality of China. In particular, the genre of landscape painting was exclusively associated with the aesthetic of the privileged literati class. Hence, it was marginalised in the first few years of the PRC. As a result, poverty, unemployment, and low morale prevailed in the *guohua* field (Gu 2020: 169). In 1953, Communist poet Ai Qing, then a member of the executive council of the Chinese Artists' Association, gave a speech to a group of artists in Shanghai in which he called for the reform of Chinese painting, stating that 'in painting landscapes one must paint real mountains and streams' (Ai 1953). Painters were encouraged to innovate the content of their practice and their skills. At an institutional level, the establishment of the Beijing, Shanghai, and Jiangsu Chinese painting institutes in 1957 and 1960 provided many ink artists with a reliable source of income and a platform to create and improve their artistic practice. Compared with wartime instability and economic struggles under the Nationalist Government, many artists appreciated the peace that followed the Communist victory and were excited about the progress and development being promised by the establishment of the PRC (Lu 1986). Nevertheless, as they became assimilated constituents of the Communist state's cultural apparatus, artists affiliated with those institutes were expected to comply with the CCP's propaganda objectives.

Figure 1: *Transform Flood into Benefit*, Zhang Xuefu, 1956.

Controlling the Huai River

Even before the formation of these institutes, many artists had begun to explore a new style of portraying rivers and mountains. In 1950, the PRC's first large-scale water engineering project was launched, in the Huai River Valley (Pietz 2015). Along with its technical and management apparatus, a fine arts team was organised, affiliated with the Political Department of the Huai River Campaign Commission, bringing employment for artists across the country.

There were many water engineering infrastructure projects in the Huai River campaign, but among them the multi-arch Foziling Dam was one of the

most technologically challenging. The dam was on the Pi River, a tributary of the Huai River in Anhui Province. It was purported to be the first large-scale hydropower project being built under the CCP's watch. The spectacular concrete dam was a striking visual element for artistic production. For example, Zhang Xuefu's ink painting *Transform Flood into Benefit* (化水灾为水利, see Figure 1) foregrounds the concrete dam. Human figures in the lower part of the painting and the remote mountains in the upper background emphasise the dam's spectacular size. Because of its impressive visualisation of the technological sublimity of new China, the painting was gifted by the Chinese Government to Indonesian President Sukarno in 1956.

Other artists approached the infrastructure from different perspectives. For instance, Xiao Shufang's gouache painting of *Kids at the Foziling Reservoir Construction Site* (佛子岭水库工地的儿童, see Figure 2) is refreshing. Unlike other works, which foreground the concrete dam, Xiao placed it in the distance as background behind several children playing a game of dam-building. The colour and composition of the watercolour convey a bright and joyful sentiment to viewers. He Qitao's gouache painting *After Work* (劳动后的休息, see Figure 3) depicts dam workers relaxing and washing in a stream after a day's hard work at the construction site. This type of 'rest' scene would be hard to find in artworks created during the Great Leap Forward (1958–62).

Meishan Reservoir, a project on the Shi River, another tributary of the Huai, also drew the attention of artists. In a famous painting (see Figure 4), *guohua* painter Zhang Wenjun depicted a magnificent bird's-eye view of well-organised labour at the Meishan dam construction site—a notable divergence from the classical style, as scenes of human labour of that magnitude were generally not to be found in traditional Chinese landscape painting. Zhang was deeply impressed by what he saw during his visit to the construction site:

> In none of the previous eras was it possible to organise so many people to labour voluntarily, intensely, and happily to build a wonderful life for the people. This thoroughly reflects the spirit of our new era. I think this is the best subject for modern Chinese landscape painters. (Zhang 1962: 30)

Figure 2: *Kids at the Foziling Reservoir Construction Site*, Xiao Shufang, 1954.

The combination of labour and landscape aligned well with the socialist state's ideology. Hence, the painting was praised as representing the 'birth' of a new Chinese landscape painting.

In another painting of the Meishan Reservoir (see Figure 5), Lu Yanshao foregrounded locals' shabby homes with the concrete dam only as background, the thatched roofs reflecting the poverty of residents. Among the commissioned artworks, this could be interpreted as an individual expression at odds with the objectives of official propaganda. Yet, from a different angle, the destitute condition complemented the modernity promised by the dam.

Sanmenxia Dam on the Yellow River

It is impossible to talk about hydropower infrastructure projects in the early PRC without discussion of the Sanmenxia Dam on the Yellow River, which was most famously depicted in Wu Zuoren's oil paintings. As a National People's Congress (NPC) representative, Wu attended the second meeting of the First NPC, in 1955, at which vice-premier Deng Zihui presented the Yellow River Plan. With great enthusiasm, Wu aspired

to engage through illustration with the epic changes on the Yellow River. Wu Zuoren was born in Suzhou in 1908 and studied oil painting in Europe in the 1930s. After 1949, he was appointed as the first provost of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. In the 1950s, he also served as the vice-president of the Chinese Artists' Association, the principal of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and a representative of the NPC.

Wu was one of the most prominent artists in twentieth-century China. In a speech delivered in 1951, as a member of China's cultural delegation to India, he articulated what he thought was the task of Chinese artists:

> In general, the basic characteristic of fine art in China is close collaboration with politics. [It] aims to encourage and educate the masses. Art workers strive to learn from life, study policies proactively so that [our works] can reflect life correctly and win the fondness of the masses. (Wu 1951)

In 1955, as a representative of the NPC, Wu visited Sanmenxia for the first time and completed many sketches onsite. After returning to Beijing, he created his first oil painting of Sanmenxia, titled *Zhongliudizhu* (中流砥柱, see Figure 6).
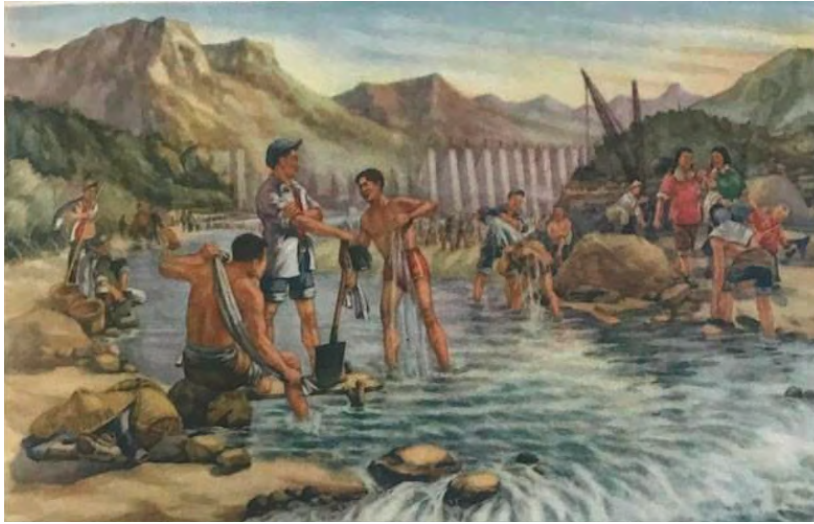
Figure 3: *After Work*, He Qitao, 1955.

Figure 4: *Meishan Reservoir*, Zhang Wenjun, 1958.

Figure 5 (Above): *Meishan Reservoir*, Lu Yanshao, 1956.

Figure 6 (Below): *Zhongliudizhu*, Wu Zuoren, 1955–56.

Figure 7: *A Corner of the Sanmenxia Dam Construction Site*, Wu Zuoren, 1959.

In the painting, the hydropower project is still in its early stages, with no concrete dam yet visible. It depicts, from afar, the precipitous terrain of the steep gorge and the unique rocky islets standing amid the torrent—the work of mother nature. Yet, closer inspection reveals humans working on the right bank and the islets. Although the composition of the painting is predominantly about capturing the natural beauty of Sanmenxia, the almost oblivious human figures and tents suggest that nature is under reconstruction, and a human-engineered landscape will permanently replace the natural one. In Wu's own words: 'In Mao Zedong times, all natural barriers will be subdued. The harmful Yellow River will be turned into a beneficial river to serve the socialist construction' (Wu 1956). Four years later, in 1959, Wu returned to Sanmenxia at the height of the Great Leap Forward. The rocky islets had been replaced with cranes and

the concrete dam was under construction. In addition to a bird's-eye view of the dam construction site, Wu painted a smaller scene centred on two cranes, a truck, and the Great Leap Forward slogan painted on the dam: 'Long Live the General Route' (总路线万岁) (see Figure 7). Seeing these paintings as a series, Wu successfully conveyed the technological sublime of the Sanmenxia project and the perceived triumph of the socialist state over nature.

During the Great Leap Forward campaign, high targets were set for agricultural and industrial production. Likewise, in the field of cultural production, quotas were assigned to each work unit (Ho 2020: 156). As a result, many Chinese ink paintings were created depicting the Sanmenxia hydropower project. As the first mega concrete dam on the Yellow River and the only hydropower project receiving Soviet assistance in the First Five-Year-Plan, Sanmenxia became a national focus for state propaganda (Ding 2021). Many Chinese painters across the country were organised by their work units to visit the dam site. Li Xiongcai, a *guohua* artist from Guangdong, visited Sanmenxia in 1958 and created multiple sketches of the project. Compared with Wu Zuoren's paintings, Li's focused on the scenes of busy work at Sanmenxia—probably due to the timing of his visit. One depicts an explosion at the construction site (see Figure 8). Li decided to record the moment by illustrating flying fragments—a scene never before illustrated in Chinese painting.

Another iconic example of Sanmenxia art is He Haixia's *Conquering the Yellow River* series from 1959, in which he illustrated the same construction site scene from different angles. Like Li's works, He's were realistic reflections of the project site. Many art critics, however, suggested there was a lack of conceptual experimentation and 'poetic' expression in these landscapes (Gu 2020: 182).

In late 1960, Fu Baoshi, the director of the Jiangsu Provincial Chinese Painting Institute, organised 13 of the institute's artists to engage in a nine-province tour over three months. Sanmenxia was their second stop, resulting in multiple paintings and sketches. Fu Baoshi's *The Yellow River Runs Clear* (黄河清, see Figure 9) and Qian Songyan's *The Great Yu Temple* (大禹庙, see Figure 10) were widely seen as the most outstanding works. Unlike other artists, Fu did not include the dam per se in the painting. Though he was excited to see the sublimity of the project's hectic

Figure 8: *Sanmenxia Construction Site*, Li Xiongcai, 1950s.

working scenes and gigantic machines, he realised there would be no inscape if he chose to illustrate these subjects. Coincidentally, before their visit, the Sanmenxia reservoir had begun to retain water. With the loss of velocity, sediment started to deposit and thus the Yellow River turned clear. After days of pondering, Fu was inspired by the old Chinese proverb: 'When the Yellow River runs clear, a saint will emerge' (黄河清, 圣人出).

Fu wrote:

Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao, the Chinese people are the real saints. 'Yellow' and 'clear' are the exact opposite. The object of the Sanmenxia project is to change the Yellow River, transforming water disasters into benefits. Therefore, I decided to address the concept of 'clear' in my painting. (Fu 1962)

By depicting powerlines and a clear reservoir, Fu's painting left space for viewers to imagine the revolutionary changes on the river beyond the frame.

Qian Songyan, another Chinese painting master, was among the group of 13 Jiangsu artists who visited Sanmenxia. One of his most renowned paintings of Sanmenxia is *The Great Yu Temple*. According to legend, in early Chinese history, Yu the Great successfully mitigated flooding on the Yellow River with diversion channels, making him a figure of worship for those wishing for peace and stability on the river. A temple to Yu has stood in the hills near Sanmenxia for centuries. From an architectural perspective, it is not impressive, but it provided a notable contrast with the cranes and construction across the river. The scene was imaginative and poetic, and Qian also wrote a poem on the lower righthand side of the painting:

The Great Yu has enjoyed sacrifice for millennia, yet the turbid water continues in front of the temple

Figure 9: *The Yellow River Runs Clear*, Fu Baoshi, 1960.

Today the Yellow River is subdued. We laugh at him for his helplessness when facing the ghost gate

Six hundred million people are now saints, the Great Yu must be startled to see the closure of the dam, the river dragon is cut to bring benefit in the millennia to come.

The Ming Tombs Reservoir

If the paintings of these concrete dams represent the technological sublime of socialist water engineering, artworks of the Ming Tombs Reservoir convey the intensity of socialist labour. Unlike those engaged exclusively as artists at the dam construction sites, many artists in Beijing were mobilised to participate in manual labour on the reservoir.

In 1954, when premier Zhou Enlai visited the Ming Tombs on the outskirts of Beijing, he said: 'The Ming Tombs is a must-visit place for foreign visitors. It is a pity that there are mountains but no water. If we can build a reservoir with a large body of water, it would be more picturesque' (Shi and Xu 2008: 68). In the same year, Zhou's proposal was shared with the Beijing municipal government. In the autumn of 1957, a nationwide water conservation campaign began and became a major program of the Great Leap Forward. In January 1958, the reservoir project was launched in the southeast of the Ming Tombs area. In six months, more than 400,000 People's Liberation Army soldiers, government employees, students, peasants, and residents of the capital city were mobilised to work on the construction site.

In addition to manual labour—shovelling and transporting earth—students and staff from art institutes in Beijing observed and drew in their sketchbooks. For many, it was an exhausting but stimulating experience. In March 1958, those artists set up an exhibition

Figure 10: *The Great Yu Temple*, Qian Songyan, 1960.

was hard. According to Israel Epstein, a pro-Communist foreign journalist affiliated with the Chinese Culture Ministry:

> Every intellectual had seen peasants use a carrying-pole, but few had tried it. The first day, our shoulders would ache badly. The second day they would swell. But on the third, provided we persisted, they would harden and we would be lifting loads we never thought we could attempt. Certainly, it meant gritting our teeth. (Epstein 1959: 4)

Two weeks of backbreaking manual labour deepened those intellectuals' and artists' perceptions: 'They could not regard themselves as individual performers; the rhythm of the huge mass job determined their actions and their pace' (Epstein 1959: 6). Officials had developed various tactics for labour mobilisation and management, such as organising labour races, identifying labour models, and staging dramatic performances to improve efficiency. Likewise, the state commissioned paintings and photographs of the construction of the Ming Tombs Dam that were intended to generate enthusiasm and defeat fatigue. Unlike the art depicting the Foziling Dam in the early 1950s, scenes of 'rest' are non-existent in the visualisation of labourers at the Ming Tombs Reservoir site. For example, the cover page of *The Ming Tombs Reservoir Illustration Selections* depicts several men ramming earth at the dam site (see Figure 11), reflecting the strength of and team spirit among the labourers.

There were also several works of art reflecting the contribution of women at the construction site, which conformed to and reflected the highly regarded gender equality in the socialist political economy. To complete the dam before flood season, labourers were organised to work at night as well as during the day. This provided artists another way to depict the project. Li Hu's *Night Scene of the Ming Tombs Reservoir Construction Site* (十三陵水库工地夜景, see Figure 12) skilfully illustrates the intensity and modernity of the project. His masterful employment of ink presents us with an unprecedented night scene of the water engineering campaign during the Mao era.

that included more than 200 drawings of the dam construction site. Unlike conventional art exhibitions that were visited only by social elites, people from all strata of the new socialist society, including ordinary workers, peasants, government workers, and state leaders stopped by and expressed their appreciation and critique of the artworks. A report noted that the exhibition demonstrated that 'artists had entered the spacious studio of the life of the masses and [socialist revolutionary] struggle' (Yi 1958: 23).

The Ming Tombs project was an earthfill dam. Unlike concrete dams, which relied on machines, somatic labour was the predominant force at the Ming Tombs reservoir site, and thus became the focus of many paintings and photographs. Work at the site

Figure 11 (Top, Left): *Cover page of The Ming Tombs Reservoir Illustration Selections*. Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1958. Figure 13 (Top, Right): *The Heavier the Rain, the Harder We Work*, Chen Bo, 1958, Figure 12 (Bottom): *Night Scene of the Ming Tombs Reservoir Construction Site*, Li Hu, 1958.

Figure 14: *Inauguration of the Ming Tombs Dam,* Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1958.

The Chinese Photographers' Association invited photographers in Beijing to record the Ming Tombs Reservoir project. Thousands of photos were taken. One of the most highly rated was Chen Bo's *The Heavier the Rain, the Harder We Work* (雨越大, 干劲越大, see Figure 13). Pouring rain and people in raincoats carrying poles depict the intensity of labour.

The Chinese Government also invited French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson to visit the Ming Tombs Reservoir construction site, and one of his colour photos was published in *LIFE* magazine in January 1959. This visual representation of China's water engineering campaign—red flags, tents, and a multitude of well-organised labourers waiting to be assigned—reached a Western audience at a time when the country was still largely isolated.

The Invisible

In the film *The Ming Tombs Capriccio*, released in 1958, it is said that 'labouring is the best rest'. Through water engineering projects, the socialist state not only altered the look of rivers and mountains, but also pushed the limit of people's somatic capacity. State-sanctioned visual culture effectively served to boost the morale of socialist labourers and inspire a bond between individuals and the State. However, what had been painted, illustrated, and captured on camera was not necessarily the whole picture of water engineering in Maoist China. Large projects such as the Sanmenxia Dam usually came at the cost of the displacement of tens of thousands of residents from the area to be flooded by the reservoir. As a group of 'unimagined communities', these people and their homes were invisible under state censorship (Nixon 2013). The government-endorsed socialist realism reflects only part of the reality of these large projects. We must comprehend both the visible and the invisible in our assessment of water engineering in Maoist China. ∎

CONVERSATIONS

The Left in China
A Conversation with Ralf Ruckus

Christopher CONNERY, Ralf RUCKUS

The Left in China: A Political Cartography (Pluto Press, 2023)

In *The Left in China: A Political Cartography* (Pluto Press, 2023), Ralf Ruckus traces the fascinating history of left-wing, subversive, and oppositional forces in China over the past 70 years. He looks at the interconnected movements since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, drawing out the main actors, ideas, and actions. Taking us through the Hundred Flowers Campaign in the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the democracy movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and the workers' movements that accompanied these events, he draws a clear picture of the political currents of China, its ruling party, and leaders through to Xi Jinping with a spotlight on contemporary struggles.

Chris Connery: Unlike the authors of other books featured in the *Made in China Journal*, you locate yourself outside academia. We have met a few times in China and Hong Kong over the years. When people ask me whether I know you and, if so, what you do, I usually reply: 'He's a revolutionary.' It's clear that I mean that with admiration. Maybe you wouldn't describe yourself in those terms, but that's not the important thing. Could you share with our readers some sense of your life and activities over the past couple of decades, and how that shapes your thinking and writing about issues of concern?

Ralf Ruckus: I like the question because it takes me back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I started to get involved in the anti-war movement, squatting, labour protests, and other social struggles—first, in West Germany and later in Britain. At that time, an important distinction was made in the left: either you belonged to the reformist camp of social democrats—or later, the 'greens', who opted for mere improvement of conditions within capitalism—or you were part of revolutionary groups and engaged in social struggles that aimed at toppling capitalism. This distinction and the label 'revolutionary' were important to us because, based on the experiences of radical movements and widespread social struggles from the late 1960s into the 1980s, we thought that revolution was, indeed, possible and on the horizon.

The imminent major social and political change or revolutionising of social relations is not brought about by a vanguard party filling workers with class consciousness nor by a 'left-wing' coup to take

over state power. Instead, it is the result of the empowerment of the working classes, including workers, migrants, and women, through their own struggles. So, rather than entering an academic career to join the educated class and educate the workers, I joined radical political circles that engaged in 'militant inquiries'. That meant we worked on construction sites, in factories, and in other workplaces, started discussions with workers, intervened with flyers, and organised protests. We did this not as a vanguard but as participants who wanted to learn from the workers as much as we wanted to get involved in social and political struggles on their side. Our practice was based on a rather critical reception of 'workerist' concepts used by earlier groups in Italy and Germany.

A revolutionary process that topples world capitalism needs the development of a *global* working class. That has still not happened, so I wanted to do something in that regard, too, and got involved in social struggles and organising in other parts of the world. For instance, I went to Russia to document the workers' situation in the early 1990s, worked in call centres in Italy in the early 2000s, and supported Amazon workers' organising in Poland in the 2010s. This also brought me to China since the mid 2000s. There was no way to work in proletarian jobs in China, so I focused on exchanges with workers and left-wing activists to learn about the conditions and struggles inside and outside workplaces, the feminist movement, and left-wing debates in China. And since the left in most parts of the world knew little about social struggles and left-wing groups in China, I began to translate and publish books from Chinese workers, activists, or left-wing academics in German, English, and other languages before I finally wrote two books myself.

Today, despite the many ongoing social struggles, even within the left many people do not even express hope for a revolution that topples capitalism, and for that reason the label 'revolutionary' seems to be used far less than 40 years ago. In any case, whether anything I have done since back then was, indeed, revolutionary remains to be seen. The results are what make something revolutionary, not the claim to the label.

CC: Along with Alain Badiou and others, I think the 'second revolution' to come could be decades, perhaps centuries, in the future, and that our present tasks include attentiveness to new political energies and alignments that could keep revolutionary possibility alive; the 'results' you mention above might not be visible until long after our times. So I'm comfortable with a provisional use of the term revolutionary, even in times like these, with little on the near horizon.

I've been impressed by the international character of your political work and your dedication to social investigation, in the radical sense of that term, and I'm interested in what this history brings to your understanding of the political scene in China. I wanted to share a couple of anecdotes from my own time there. After a lecture I had given in Chinese about left and right politics in the contemporary period, an

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undergraduate asked me: 'Why is it that the left in China is considered right in the West?' And at an academic conference in Shanghai in 2012, a local scholar, with occasional glances in my direction, described three political positions in the contemporary intellectual sphere:

1. Liberals (自由主义者), who advocated a Western liberal-style economic order, including privatisation, protections for private property, multiparty politics, and individual rights.

2. Western-style Marxists, whose critique was directed largely at the Chinese State, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the state-owned as well as privately owned sectors of the economy. This rendered their critique ultimately quite similar to that of the liberals.

3. Chinese Marxists, who are critical of capitalist power and are faithful to the Chinese revolution and its legacies, and who seek to draw on that legacy to strengthen the dedication of the state and the Party to achieving a better socialist society.

In recent years, as you know, the common pejorative term for Western-style Marxists as described above is 'White Left' (白左), an expression that has retained considerable currency.

Your book's subtitle, 'A Political Cartography', suggests that a certain amount of conceptual mapping is needed when applying the term 'left' to the Chinese context. I have a few questions about the politics of the term and will return throughout my questions to the translation difficulties suggested in the anecdotes above. I'd like to start with some historiographical questions that arise from your use of the term to include the entirety of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), from 1949, through the Cultural Revolution, to the present.

Let's begin with the pre–Cultural Revolution period. How would you characterise the terms left and right, as they were used in official discourse (such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign)? What relation, if any, does this version of 'left' have to the protest movements during that period that you describe as 'left'? Ho-fung Hung (2011), Elizabeth Perry (2008), and Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang (2006) use terms such as 'rightful resistance' or 'moral economy protest', and Perry has suggested that this type of protest can be more 'system-supportive' than 'system-subversive'. Many of the 1950s protests you describe use the state's language and promises. What, in your view, makes a 1950s protest 'left'?

RR: The mere distinction between 'Western-style Marxists' and 'Chinese Marxists' among left-wing Chinese intellectuals is misleading. That separation serves to defend those leftists who follow the CCP line and promote 'Chinese interests', and it is used to attack those who do not follow the CCP line and criticise the CCP regime. In addition, the term 'Western' suggests that there is only one position to which Chinese leftists could refer, apart from a 'Chinese' one. That shows a disregard for positions and influences originating, for instance, in the

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Global South or other post-socialist countries. Here, it seems to be also used as a derogatory description, branding those who follow foreign ideas as 'non-Chinese' or traitors.

However, those official separations aside, even if we give a more complex account of left-wing positions in China and include various left-wing circles that do not see themselves as intellectuals, distinguish different currents of the so-called New Left close to or critical of the Party, and look at Maoist and other anti-capitalist currents in labour or feminist circles, the problem persists that the usage of the term 'left' is contested and fluid.

That is not unique to the Chinese context though, as confusion or struggle over the meaning and usage of left-wing—as well as 'liberal' or 'right-wing'—exists in other world regions, too. Left-wing activists I know in Poland, for instance, avoid the term left-wing or Marxist altogether because it is generally identified with the country's socialist past. And the French translators of my 2021 book *The Communist Road to Capitalism* argued against the usage of left-wing or leftist as a description of Chinese activists and other actors because, according to them, the corresponding French terms, *gauche/gauchiste*, are often used for the reformist French Socialist Party.

It is important to overcome the confusion and find a common reference to and understanding of 'left-wing' in China and elsewhere. That can open new possibilities for collaboration and struggles across borders or even for common strategies to overcome capitalism and patriarchy, as well as other forms of exclusion, exploitation, and discrimination. To agree on a common understanding, we need clear categories. That is why I started the book *The Left in China* with a proposal for a left/right framework. According to that framework, the positions of social or political actors should be identified using at least two attributes: their position on the distribution of wealth and their position on the distribution of power. I call positions supporting the equal distribution of wealth according to people's needs 'left-collectivist', with 'right-exploitative' as the opposite. And I call the equal distribution of power 'egalitarian', with 'authoritarian' as the opposite.

Another important element of my analysis is my focus on the relation between social struggles or movements and left-wing actors or groups. As you know, I do not look at left-wing leaders, intellectuals, or other individuals and their 'thought'. I am interested in social conflicts and struggles, and in how these produced or inspired left-wing actors or movements, because that is the dialectic that potentially creates revolutionary processes. For China, that means that I focus on social struggles against the conditions set by the CCP regime and its allies, and that I look at oppositional left-wing circles that grew out of those struggles or started to support them.

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considers necessary is a rightist deviation. Meanwhile, forcing through measures that the Party thinks should not yet be taken is a leftist deviation. In Mao's exact words:

> When the right time comes for something to be done, it has to be done. If you don't allow it, that is a Right deviation. If the right time has not come for something and yet you try to force it through, that is a 'left' deviation. (Mao 1977: 230–31)

Pro-capitalist forces and those with right-wing views surely existed in China in the 1950s, too. Yet, the concept of deviations from the Party line gave CCP leaders a tool to declare anyone who opposed their policies a rightist, whether a person demanded capitalist markets or argued for the interests of workers during a strike.

The terms 'rightful resistance' and 'moral economy' that you mention were used for the struggles of peasants and urban state workers against the deterioration of their conditions during the capitalist reforms of the 1990s and 2000s. These terms can, indeed, also be used to describe the strikes that began after the nationalisation of urban industries had been carried out in the mid 1950s. At that time, workers believed that the socialist transition should guarantee them a better status or position as the new 'masters of the factory' as well as material improvements, and that it should create equal conditions for all workers.

The crucial aspects for determining these struggles as left-wing or not are: who was involved, what was at stake, and how did they happen? The biggest group behind the strikes were workers in recently nationalised work units. They were dissatisfied with their working conditions and their subordinate position in the workplace; they were angry because they had believed the CCP's promises and expected better conditions and more control over production processes in their work units; they largely used the CCP's or socialist language, as this was the language with which to take the Party at its word and negotiate the fulfillment of the socialist promises; and they engaged in workplace actions and demonstrations to voice their anger and push through their demands. In this case, all elements of the who, what, and how point to a social struggle with a left-wing tendency against a left-wing authoritarian and exploitative regime.

It is surely important to analyse whether certain forms of struggle in a particular context are 'system-supportive' or 'system-subversive'. That is the problem with all struggles and movements, though. They can be limited to demands that can be solved 'within the system', as it might be the case of the struggles in the mid 1950s; they can be coopted and used by a regime to strengthen its legitimacy and improve its methods of management or governance; and they can lead to disappointment and resignation on the side of the protagonists and weaken future attempts at struggle.

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Whether social or political struggles are, indeed, 'system-supportive' or 'system-subversive' is often hard to determine in advance. As with the term 'revolutionary', it is the result that counts. In retrospect, we can see that the strikes in the mid 1950s did not last long and were not able to establish lasting organisational forms. However, they were so threatening that the regime opened ways for public critique during the Hundred Flowers Movement in the hope of releasing social pressure; and, shortly after, the regime repressed all criticisms and punished those who had attacked it during the Anti-Rightist Movement to weaken any opposition.

CC: I was planning to ask you for some Polish comparisons later in the conversation, so thanks for bringing it up here. I wholly agree with you about the importance of forging common ground across borders among all those struggling against capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and all forms of exclusion, exploitation, discrimination, and domination. I think that the two axes by which you evaluate the positions of social and political actors—their positions on the distribution of wealth and of power—are especially useful comparative measures during the past 20 or 30 years.

The period before the turn to market capitalism in the socialist world raises some particular issues. One concerns the CCP. In the 1950s, the CCP was of course the maker of the 'broken promises' that in your account galvanised the workers' movements of that decade. And the Party leadership of that time contained strong voices for worker power and worker autonomy, such as Li Lisan, later branded a rightist.

The Cultural Revolution was another matter; and there is of course nothing in the Soviet or Eastern European experience with which to compare it. Here, guided by the theoretical work of Mao and his allies on contradiction, the nature of class, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the nature of revolution itself, the Cultural Revolution Group in the Party's leadership encouraged the formation of extra-party organisa-tions and anti-leadership struggles in schools, factories, and elsewhere. This allowed for a remarkable outburst of radical energies and polit-ical experimentation that continued for more than a year and whose after-effects lasted much longer (Russo 2020; Connery 2023). As Joel Andreas's 2019 *Disenfranchised* shows, in the last years of the Cultural Revolution, workers made considerable gains in workplace authority, equality of compensation and treatment, and workplace democracy (everything but autonomy!) due to the efforts of radicals within the Party and in positions of factory leadership.

Perhaps one could argue that the CCP, before 1978, was a somewhat uneasy fit in the 'left authoritarian' quadrant of a left–right mapping. This has had consequential after-effects. During the period when the New Left in China was most prominent—2000–15, I would say—even though most in the New Left understood that the CCP leadership was supporting and enabling the deepening of market capitalism, their

When the Cultural Revolution reached the work units in late 1966, against the intention of Mao and his allies, the confrontation reached another level. 'Conservative' skilled workers and cadres stood against 'rebel' unskilled workers, apprentices, temporary workers, and others. And the rebels were joined by other dissatisfied groups such as rusticated urban workers and youths.

faith in state capacity and in the virtual socialism embodied in the Party's slogans and official documents gave many of them a conviction that a leftist hegemony within the Party was possible and should be struggled for (Wang Shaoguang is the most prominent exponent of this view). Although this possibility now seems more distant than ever, their position—though it has doubtless contributed to the current severe weakness of left critical energies—is understandable. Could you comment on the CCP's shaping of China's political cartography from the pre-reform period to the past decade?

RR: I agree that the period between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s—that is, the phase immediately before the reform period started in 1978—raises some issues, and the CCP is at the heart of them. Mao's calling for the Cultural Revolution did, indeed, trigger a unique series of events, and the important point here is how we read them.

Among the first Red Guards following the call of Mao and his faction in the summer of 1966 were many children of Party, state, and military cadres. They attacked not only teachers and cadres of the rival faction of 'capitalist roaders', but also ordinary people whom they called 'black categories'. The latter were, according to the pre-1949 status or position of the male household head, categorised, for instance, as 'landlords' or 'counterrevolutionaries', and these labels were extended to family members. Among those attacked were, in fact, many proletarians and their children. The first or 'conservative' Red Guards referred to what they called the 'bloodline theory'—that is, they demanded to step into higher positions as heirs of their 'red' cadre parents. In the autumn of 1966, a second wave of young 'rebel' Red Guards—many young people from the 'black categories'—used the chance to mobilise and organise, this time against these privileged children, their claims, and their attacks (for a good account of all this, see Chapter 3 of Wu 2014).

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Obviously, the composition of the two factions depended on the location, and the picture is complex. Yet, it is important to note that many of the social actors behind the rebel faction made similar claims to those behind the strikes in the mid 1950s. They felt excluded, discriminated against, and exploited in the socialist system, and they demanded material improvements, such as permanent employment. And some groups among the rebels radicalised. In general, the rebels used Maoist concepts and respected Mao as a revolutionary leader, but these radical groups took the critique much further. Where Mao saw bureaucratisation or the 'capitalist roaders' in the Party leadership as a problem of certain cadres, the radical rebels analysed this as a systemic problem of Chinese socialism under the CCP. They demanded a different socialism and referred to the Paris Commune.

The Cultural Revolution Group and the CCP leadership around Mao were faced with a situation they could not control anymore: the Cultural Revolution had led to the collapse of Party and state structures and turned into a confrontation between different factions. They reacted with a mix of repression, cooptation, and concession. The army was called in to crush the rebellion, and it played a major role in the consolidation of power through so-called revolutionary committees; rebel leaders were coopted into these committees and the Party leadership; and concessions were made including those in work units that Joel Andreas (2019) mentions, but they changed neither the structural inequalities nor the political setup of the state. The social contradictions persisted and were reflected in continuing conflicts between 'conservatives' and 'leftists' in work units and on all state levels.

Important for my mapping is that the 'leftists' in the Party leadership aimed at improving the economic situation of proletarians and avoiding further social stratification. In that sense, they can be categorised as 'left-collectivist'. At the same time, they remained an important part of the 'authoritarian' party regime. Meanwhile, the Maoist rebel dissidents demanded not only economic improvements but also a form of socialism controlled by workers and peasants—a 'left-collectivist' and 'egalitarian' position.

Of course, the assessment of the rebellion during the Cultural Revolution and of the 'leftist' faction in the leadership is contested. You point to the central problem here: the argument that an exploitative or authoritarian system can be changed by a left-wing faction within Party or state structures. That dire argument is not unique to China, as shown by the 'entryism' of leftist parties in other countries and their belief that they can 'change the system from within'. Often leftist leaders or intellectuals utilise this belief, call for the 'education' of the masses, and refer to Gramsci's argument for a leftist hegemony in the institutions to justify their careers inside state structures or the education sector.

In China, the intellectuals of the New Left see the Cultural Revolution as an attempt for a second revolution in China against 'capitalist roaders' in the Party, while they do not give much importance to the social contradictions and the structural problems of Chinese socialism at that time. They count on a new leftist faction inside the CCP leadership that could give the Party a different turn and bring it back on a socialist course against the marketisation and capitalism the Party has promoted in the past decades.

Yet, the Party's vanguard position, political change imposed 'from above', authoritarian forms of power, the patriarchal nature of the CCP, the concept of leadership in a bureaucratic organisation—all these remain largely unaddressed. These aspects—the unequal distribution of power, so to speak—were at the core of many social conflicts in China since the 1950s. And it is no coincidence that the most important social mobilisations after the Cultural Revolution—the movements in 1976, 1978, and 1989—all included discontented workers who demanded a more democratic form of socialism, workers' control over the Party, and workers' control in the work units.

As you mention, today the New Left and other 'anti-capitalist' elements inside the CCP are weakened. Meanwhile, the CCP leadership still claims to be 'socialist'. In the past years, it has emphasised Maoist folklore and socialist narratives of welfare and development that Bo Xilai and his allies had already used around 2010 to the applause of New Left protagonists. And the CCP promotes its domesticated version of Marxism, void of class struggle and revolution. Thus, today, young people in China can call themselves 'left-wing' while supporting the authoritarian rule of the CCP, capitalist exploitation termed 'socialist market economy', and Chinese nationalism.

CC: In talks in Chinese in China and in a recently published piece in English, I have claimed that left or anti-capitalist critical theory and analysis is at its lowest ebb in 130 years. Even though I thought it a fairly extreme claim, I never received any argument.

By contrast, the age of the New Left, from the 1990s through the first decade of this century, produced important analytical and theoretical work on gender, class division, the rural situation, and other issues. While varying in their degree of radicalness—ranging from social democracy to left communism (sometimes in the work of the same person)—this work intersected with social movements in interesting and politically promising ways.

The last piece I can think of in this vein—Wang Hui's 'Two Types of New Poor and Their Future' (see Wang 2012, 2014)—came out in the early 2010s, and reflected with analytical depth the new political possibilities marked by workers' movements allied with left nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) before the crackdown.

Although you downplay the role and importance of theory in your book, you clearly do not find theory unimportant; you have been central in introducing Italian *operaismo* to a Chinese-reading audience; I refer to the three volumes of translated essays in *Operaismo and Its Critique* (工人主义及其批判) that you released on your website (Gongchao 2018).

One graduate student in China I know who publishes very interesting blog-like commentary about class, workers' movements, and regional politics told me that he thought that the most acute challenge for the left in China today is the lack of theory and analysis. Do you agree with his and my judgements about the current weak state of theory and analysis? What kind of theoretical and analytical work is currently needed on the left in China?

RR: I have quoted you during talks on your claim that left or anti-capitalist critical theory and analysis is at its lowest ebb in 130 years in China. So, what are the reasons? The antisocialist turn of the CCP and its domesticated Marxism? The sell-out of leftist intellectuals to the regime? The repression of left-wing and feminist dissent or opposition in the past few years? Or the limitations of the ongoing class struggles? In my opinion, this has many reasons.

Again, the problem does not just exist in China. Left-wing or anti-capitalist critical theory and analysis is in crisis in many places around the world. The two main left-wing grand narratives of the twentieth century have failed to deliver on their promise to overcome capitalism or, at least, control its brutal effects: Marxism-Leninism, including its Maoist strand, stood behind so-called workers' states that were in fact authoritarian states with a new, 'socialist' class system of exploitation; and social democracy has been complicit in the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism with its devastating effects on working classes. A third left-wing narrative supported by anti-authoritarian currents such as anarchism played a role in many movements, especially since the 1960s, but was not able to dominate them or produce considerable successes. In that sense, so far it has failed, too.

Several important new elements of theory and practice have been added to the left-wing canon, including feminism and anti-racism, which have inspired many struggles and gained traction in left-wing circles since the last quarter of the twentieth century. But despite the deepening economic, social, and environmental crises, and the many resulting social mobilisations since the start of this century around the world—such as the wave of 'square occupations' and general strikes around 2010—we have not seen a new revolutionary spirit and hope similar to those between the 1950s and the 1970s. Back then, such spirit and hope could be felt during anticolonial struggles, the 1968 student mobilisations, the rebel struggles during the Cultural Revolution, or the wildcat strikes of migrant mass workers in many regions.

In the late 2000s, in the aftermath of the so-called Global Financial Crisis, that situation seemed to change. Around the world, social movements, strikes, and other struggles were on the rise. In China, after the migrant worker strike at Honda in Guangdong in 2010, many expected the formation of a new migrant working class that would be able to play a significant role in challenging capitalist relations in the country and beyond. Wang Hui's pieces seem to be written in the spirit of this time, as he hoped for a 're-politicisation' of social struggles, and he thought this had to happen through intellectual activists stepping in to represent working-class interests—a Leninist model of intellectual leadership that in my view needs to be thrown on the trash heap of history, but that is another story.

Globally, the situation has changed in the past 10 years. Social movements have not yet developed the impetus for fundamental change for which we had hoped. In China, the end of double-digit economic growth, the restructuring and relocation of industries, and tougher repression of grassroots worker activists, labour NGOs, and feminists since 2015 have changed the game. Today, left-wing and feminist circles are on the defensive, many not daring to come out publicly or support social struggles in workplaces or on the street. These are dark times, indeed.

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What can we do in a time of such muted social struggles and harsh repression? On the one hand, left-wing discussions are continuing in China, and this includes learning processes and exchanges on social struggles in China and beyond as well as on left-wing political analyses and theory. On the other hand, besides repression and censorship, other factors limit left-wing discussions in China—namely, the counterrevolutionary CCP narratives on leftism, socialism, or Marxism and the mystification and legacies of Cultural Revolution–type Maoism in oppositional left-wing circles. My book is meant as a contribution to a process of rethinking left-wing politics by critically analysing China's history from a left-wing perspective, and it is meant as a challenge to these CCP narratives and mystifications.

I do not want to 'downplay the role and importance of theory', as you say, but I do not put that much attention on 'theorists' and their history of ideas. Instead, I argue for initiating analyses of social history, theory, and practice with a materialist approach—that is, by first analysing social conditions and struggles through the lens of the protagonists. And instead of asking how leftists represented, led, or dominated the struggles—not only a Leninist but also a bourgeoise perspective—I want to first understand how social struggles inspired left-wing currents and how this dialectic between struggles and left-wing currents changed over time.

Consequently, I am not sure whether the 'lack of theory and analysis' is 'the most acute challenge for the left in China'. I would rather ask *what kind* of theory and analysis is lacking and what it is supposed to be used for. If we agree that the power to overthrow capitalism and to create a society without exploitation and discrimination lies in the hands of the proletariat or *certain parts* of the working classes, then we should start analysing and theorising the revolutionary process with and from the perspectives of the proletariat or these parts of the working classes. This is the problem not just in China but elsewhere, too: many left-wing activists do not make any inquiries into the situation of proletarians or workers.

For this reason, we introduced Italian *operaismo* to a Chinese-reading audience—or better: a critical view on *operaismo*'s methods of analysis and intervention developed during the struggles of migrant mass workers in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, including a critique by feminists close to *operaismo*. The most interesting part of this for the current situation might be the concept of *conricerca*, or 'co-research' in English (also translated as 'militant inquiry'). This is a form of organising and intervention that brings together left-wing researchers, activists, and workers. The aim is to use interviews, assemblies, debates, or flyers to build working-class collective power and eventually use that for the revolutionary class struggle. This concept for working-class self-empowerment is also meant as a critique of the Leninist vanguard party strategy.

This distinct perspective can also be used analytically when developing left-wing narratives or theory regarding contemporary or historical social processes. When looking back at history, left-wing analyses

should start with changes in social conditions and struggles and how those changes inspired different left-wing movements or debates or how they even created revolutionary openings. And when dealing with current affairs, these analyses should start with research into the everyday experiences of workers and other subjects in different sectors and situations. To do that, left-wing researchers or activists need to be with proletarians and learn from them, by regularly discussing and socialising with them, or by skipping a life and career as an intellectual altogether and taking a proletarian job if that is possible.

Under which conditions social struggles have morphed into serious threats for the capitalist and patriarchal system, which sections of the proletariat or working class have been on the forefront of the struggles, what forms and contents of left-wing critique and intervention have made sense in particular situations—these questions must be addressed in such 'co-research', but they must be based on analyses of past or current social conditions and struggles at the grassroots level.

CC: I personally do spend more time reading and speaking to intellectuals and academics, and am very grateful for the work of others who are more directly involved in workers' struggles and workers' lives: you, Eli Friedman, Ivan Franceschini, the Chuang group, Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin, Chris King-chi Chan, and many others in and outside China—all of whose work has theoretical dimensions, albeit quite varied. I've sometimes thought that the current path of the CCP under Xi Jinping—greatly increased dirigisme overall and more direct administration of the economy, in both the state-owned and the private sectors, plus a continued unwillingness to adopt even mildly redistributive or household-friendly economic policy—might cause more left intellectuals to question their faith that the Party could allow opportunities for a new socialist or even social democratic hegemony. If a break were to happen and a more independent left intelligentsia emerged, the kinds of analyses for which I'm calling would have a better chance to develop, and ties with workers' and other social movements could develop organically. I do think that without clear and philosophically sound analyses of the Chinese State and economy from the perspective of its revolutionary transformation—and to date this has been largely absent—social movements and worker activism will find it difficult to move forward. We need to find space for the necessary debates and discussion that could involve intellectuals, activists, and workers, and contribute to forming a frame of reference for a range of transformative projects.

As you point out, this theoretical crisis is not limited to China. But China poses distinctive challenges: state ideology, the Party–capital relationship, the specific character of social formations. Other factors include state repression, which as you mention has grown significantly in the Xi period, and the closer embrace of nationalism and Chinese exceptionalism on the part of many formerly critical intellectuals. And, as in much of the world, there is also the strength of market and entrepreneurial ideology in society at large. Militant inquiry, as you well know, is not without its challenges in China, and these are not solely a

matter of state repression (Gullotta and Lin 2023; Franceschini and Lin 2018). It would of course be one of several paths towards fostering the kind of theoretical and analytical constellation that could contribute to a shared orientation.

To conclude our discussion, which I've enjoyed very much, I'd like to invite your speculation on the state of Chinese workers today and into the future, as well as in a global context. A few years ago, before Covid, I had a conversation with worker activist Lao Xie, whom I believe you also know. His interview with *Chuang* (2019) is one example of the kind of analytical work of which I think we need much more. Our conversation was after Jasic, and after the wave of state repression aimed at worker organisation, but I was surprised when he expressed optimism about the state of workers in China at that time: labour shortages, increased opportunities in the countryside, and other factors gave workers structurally more power than they had possessed in a long while. Do you share his optimism? How do you view worker power expressing itself and changing over the coming years? Based on your experience elsewhere, how would you compare the current condition of Chinese workers with that of workers elsewhere in the world, such as Poland and India?

And finally, in debates and discussions in the United States and elsewhere about the left's relationship to China, an important point made by many of those anti-capitalists who are critical of the Chinese State is that rather than apologetics for the Chinese State, anti-capitalists outside China should make common cause with workers, feminist activists, oppressed minorities, and other social forces within China. As you write in your Epilogue, this is not easy given current conditions there. Do you have any suggestions for how leftists outside China can contribute to the forms of international solidarity called for by these times?

RR: Forms of left-wing politics and intervention in China are not just in crisis because of repression, as you say, even though repression is a major problem. They are also weakened by other factors—for instance, internal contradictions such as hierarchical structures in organisations and by ideologies of leadership and representation, which basically end up as paternalism. I address some of these issues in the conclusions of my 2021 book *The Communist Road to Capitalism*. In contrast to the approach of many labour NGOs, for instance, militant inquiry as an organisational concept is not only trying to tackle hierarchies between workers and activists or intellectuals. It can also be the base for class politics and research using a revolutionary perspective 'from below', instead of a leftist perspective of leadership and regulation of social movement 'from above'.

I agree that, as with any other region, China poses challenges when analysing its state and economy. In my view, these lie both in the socialist past and in the capitalist present. In other words, the left must come

Surely, in times of few open mass struggles, it is hard to imagine that proletarian empowerment can produce a revolutionary situation. However, it is in these bleak periods that activists and intellectuals should develop respect for proletarian practices and struggles, so they are prepared to provide the necessary solidarity and support when mass struggles kick off again.

to terms with the failures of socialism in its Maoist form and confront the challenges under the current capitalist regime. I do not expect any breakthrough here until a new, strong working-class movement forms, though. The weakness of social struggles and movements is the main reason behind the weakness of the left, including its lack of analyses of a revolutionary transformation.

In that sense, I also agree that we need a clear analysis of the state and economy 'from the perspective of its revolutionary transformation'. I just do not expect the necessary sparks for revolutionary thought and practice to come from the side of the intellectuals, and especially not from an intelligentsia that thinks workers, migrants, or women involved in social struggles need a 'party' or some other outside left-wing 'elite' to overcome alleged limits of proletarian political imagination.

This reminds me of an anecdote Giovanni Arrighi told me in the mid 2000s. During auto workers' strikes in northern Italy in the late 1960s, he was called by worker activists to join an assembly of striking workers. They had seen the wage increases they had won eaten up by inflation, and they asked him as an intellectual to join them and explain what inflation was about and what factors produced it. They asked for intellectual input to understand a complex economic process, but he had to go to them and join their assembly. And, despite asking for explanations, they remained the main actors in their own struggle, experiencing and using their disruptive power against capital.

This is how I imagine the relation of left-wing intellectuals, activists, and proletarians. Left-wing proletarian perspectives, desires, and practices determine potentials and outcomes of social and revolutionary struggles. Left-wing intellectuals and nonproletarian activists can play a role in this by providing necessary resources—knowledge, experiences, skills, or money—but the initiative and control over the struggles should stay with the proletarians.

Surely, in times of few open mass struggles, it is hard to imagine that proletarian empowerment can produce a revolutionary situation. However, it is in these bleak periods that activists and intellectuals should develop respect for proletarian practices and struggles, so they are prepared to provide the necessary solidarity and support when mass struggles kick off again.

It is interesting you mention the optimism Lao Xie and a few others put forward when talking about the future of working-class struggles in China. Indeed, there are factors that could lead to the increase and use of workers' structural power, such as the ongoing labour shortages. Similar factors play a role in other countries in Asia and in Europe, for instance. As dim as the situation in China looks now, we should observe how these factors develop and what kinds of struggles will evolve from workers' usage of disruptive power in particular constellations.

What is more, capitalism is currently going through a series of economic, social, and environmental crises globally, and these are also producing new geopolitical tensions. On one hand, this might lead to

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more wars and other catastrophes we need to prevent. On the other hand, in this period of systemic instability, a temporary 'window of opportunity' has opened, as the foundations of capitalism are already shaking. In such a phase a progressive working-class movement has the chance to cause capitalism to collapse—a chance it does not have in times of systemic stability.

What we are hoping for are proletarian mass struggles as strong and widespread as those in the 1960s and 1970s mentioned earlier, for instance. Countries such as Poland and India have also seen industrialisation and particular forms of integration into global or regional markets—and social struggles provoked by the impact of these developments on proletarians and peasants. But given China's key role in global chains of production and trade, such struggles there would be particularly influential and disruptive.

Chinese workers have experienced material improvements in the past three decades, and these were partly concessions to their demands and struggles. However, the period of rapid growth and capital concessions ended, so the questions are when and how workers in China will be able to stage mass struggles again and whether these struggles can 'transgress borders' and connect to those in other regions.

Let us be realistic, though. While in China state repression is employed to keep social struggles small and isolated, in other parts of the world, many large social movements seem to be mostly dealing either with the effects of the multiple crises or with the effects of conflicts within the ruling classes—conflicts that lead to reactionary politics and the making of reactionary mass mobilisations. Some of the rather progressive social movements are massive, but they remain largely defensive and develop 'in reaction' to economic hardships, authoritarian state measures, environmental threats, or the deterioration of conditions for workers, migrants, or women.

So far, in practice, there are not enough substantial connections between these movements—for instance, between environmental and labour movements or between movements in different countries, despite verbal references and exchanges. And these movements do not develop and follow any revolutionary project aimed at breaking up the system of nation-state borders that divides proletarians, and aimed at toppling capitalist and patriarchal relations globally. Such revolutionary vigour might be expressed here and there, but it has not yet become dominant anywhere.

This leads me to the question of solidarity. Surely, the left cannot take a shortcut and substitute for the lack of a revolutionary movement. It can deal with the situation as it is and develop practices that might facilitate the making of such a movement in the future. You already mentioned the necessity to stand by the side of workers, feminist activists, oppressed minorities, and other social forces in China.

In the case of China, we need to address both sides of the class conflict. On one side, considering repression and censorship, an important form of solidarity is to make the voices of Chinese workers, feminists, and others heard and include their situation and struggles in our debates and interventions. On the other side, the CCP pretends to be socialist and covers up its capitalist, nationalist, racist, and patriarchal policies that make it, essentially, a right-wing regime. Solidarity with progressive social movements and left-wing oppositional forces in China therefore demands that we support them in their struggles against domestic and foreign capital as well as vis-a-vis the right-wing CCP regime and its form of authoritarian rule. ■

'Chinese Dream Series I: Harmonious Society', Alexander F. Yuan, 2016. Inkjet Print 90" x 60" and Online Interactive ChineseDreamArt.com. Used with permission of the artist.

A Conversation about Futurity, Critique, and Political Imagination

Jenny CHIO, Joshua NEVES

This discussion is a dialogue about changes in how we, and others, have approached China and futurity. It has two movements: 1) A Conversation about Futures Past, and 2) Five Propositions on the Future Perfect. We begin with a conversation about some of the scholarly and popular discourses that framed our understandings of China and the future in the post-reform period, especially from the late 1990s until the start of the Xi Jinping era (c. 2012). We then reflect on how we have responded to these issues in our own work, including Jenny's *A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China* (University of Washington Press, 2014) and Joshua's *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Duke University Press, 2020). In the second part, we turn our attention to the present implications and limits of futurity as a lens for critique and political imagination in China and globally.

Section I: A Conversation about Futures Past

Joshua Neves: One of the ways we have been talking about China and futurity is as part of a shift from prior understandings of socialist or even reform-era China that focused on (or at least desired to know) *what was happening* in the country, to more recent discourses that emphasise *what China is doing* to the world (including the current fascination with the Chinese Dream and the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], among many others). The latter, of course, is tied up with China's mushrooming global significance in the 2000s. Before returning to this theme, I thought we could start by discussing the recent history of futurity in and about the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially as it regards the PRC's 're-emergence' on the world stage in the late 1990s and the start of our graduate work in the early 2000s. In your memory, what were the significant events or imaginaries during this period? What images or aspirations held sway? In short, what did it mean to interrogate China's future a generation ago?

Jenny Chio: In the 1980s and post-Tiananmen 1990s, the burning question seemed to be: 'What will the future look like in (or for) China?' At that time, the future, a globally shared future, was expected to radically change China. But after the PRC's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, after the Beijing Olympics of 2008, and in the midst of Xi Jinping's never-ending China Dream, the question now seems to be: 'What will China *do* to/for the future?' Now China is expected to radically change the future—or, as politicians might say, 'our' future. So, the subject of the future, or more precisely the subject affected by the future, has shifted entirely, from 'China' as a bounded cultural-political space to 'the world'. What this means in practice is that the object of my study increasingly seems no longer to be 'China' as a sociocultural morass/milieu but rather something, somewhere, or someone in the world and the impact of China on this object, place, or person.

But when I think back to where I was and what I was doing in the early 2000s, I was mostly trying to imagine what *rural* China's future was amid the country's urbanisation push. From the perspective of the countryside, the city was the future. For villages, the path to the future was paved by urbanisation (城市化), and this was pretty much taken as a given in policy and in practice. Of course, this ignored the question of what the future should look like from, in, or for the city.

That is where your work comes in, for me at least. What were you reading in graduate school? What did these books say about the past and future of China?

JN: It is important that you bring up rural China, which has been the consistent focus of your work, because this also seems to be one of the areas in current research and cultural politics that has re-emerged as a central theme in future-China debates. From popular books like *Blockchain Chicken Farm* (Wang 2020) to engagements with state violence

Underglobalization (Duke University Press, 2020).

in Xinjiang to peripheral infrastructure and extraction economies (including the BRI), and so much more, there is a sense that much of what matters now is taking place well beyond the highly visible coastal cities and so-called Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. This is certainly one place where the dominant thread of anglophone academic research of the early 2000s is being inverted. But you are certainly right that at the start of the millennium, urban futures were central to China scholarship and popular imaginaries. Here I have in mind a range of works in media and cultural studies (Abbas 1997; Dai 2002; Pickowitz and Zhang 2006; Rofel 2007; Braester 2010; Visser 2010) that centred on urbanisation, displacement, cultural politics, and the basic premise that China's urban explosion was globally significant. Indeed, it was widely seen as announcing the future as urban. As a graduate student interested in cinema and the city, I was fascinated by Wu Hung's personal and art historical portrait, *Remaking Beijing* (2005), and Zhang Zhen's edited *The Urban Generation* (2007), among similar works across the disciplines. Like other scholars at the time, both authors focused on the traumatic speed and scale of transformation in recent decades, as well as the social and cultural responses to inhabiting monumental changes, including the vibrant media cultures and art and activist scenes that were then taking root. These studies were of course countered by a lot of high-flying and often dystopian rhetoric in journalistic and foreign relations discourse, including popular anxieties about *The Coming Collapse of China* (Chang 2001) or *When China Rules the World* (Jacques 2009), among countless others.

In short, the massive scale of urbanisation in China from the late 1990s was experienced as a world historical event that shored up new (and old) imaginaries as if overnight. It was, after all, a repetition of previous developmental bursts (like the Ten Great Buildings 十大建筑 project of 1959, which sought to transform the capital city to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the PRC). I still remember how abruptly China's economic rise reshaped understandings of globalisation in the North Atlantic; or at least how it was routinely narrated this way. It seemed as though at one moment all the orientalist fears and hopes were tethered to Japan or even South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong, and then suddenly it was the PRC, often alongside India, which dominated discussions of 'our' future. But the futurities envisioned from the vantage of the city in this period were at once familiar and provisional. For many, inside and outside China, this sense of possibility was double-edged. On the one hand, it led to celebrations of democratic potential and emergent public spheres, new qualities of life, and the integration of China into the world economy; on the other hand, it raised concerns about what constituted the 'Chinese characteristics' (中国特色) of this future, especially in relation to the Party-State apparatus, a massive floating population (流动人口), burgeoning income inequality, environmental degradation, breakdown in social supports, etcetera. Pertinent to our discussion is the simple fact that urban futures in this period were often visual promises. Urban plans, architectural renderings, sloganeering billboards, and futuristic videos literally scaffolded cities that had been
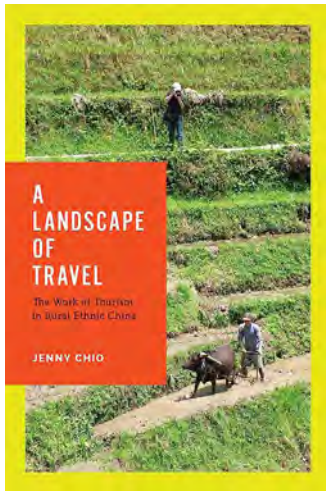
A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China (University of Washington Press, 2014).

turned into massive demolition and construction sites. There was a very real disjuncture between the life-worlds imagined by these futuristic images and the street-level experience of cities like Beijing, not to mention hundreds of lesser documented cities throughout the country.

Given that your work in this period centred on the rural, I am curious to know what the important ideas and debates were for you and how they differ from urban projections? Do you see this as a matter of perspective—I was in Beijing and the dense coastal corridor, you were in the villages of Upper Jidao and Ping'an—or was this a deliberate focus on rural futures?

JC: The defining popular book that strikes me from the early 2000s has to be Peter Hessler's *River Town* (2001). I recall that in every banana pancake–serving cafe I went to in China, English-speaking people were talking about this book. It mirrored what I think foreigners *wanted* to experience in China, but at the same time it was a reminder of just how *foreign* China was (or seemed to be). And likely because it was set in a relatively unknown, small city (Fuling, now part of Chongqing municipality), Hessler's narrative encapsulated how the past and the future of the Chinese people were imagined: somewhat marginal, still largely 'earthbound' (an imagination shaped by Fei Xiaotong's seminal ethnography of rural Yunnan in the years before 1949), full of struggles, and dependent on the largesse of the Chinese State and well-meaning foreigners.

These characteristics were also embedded in mainstream discourses about 'rural China' and China more broadly at the time, which can explain why the Chinese State under president and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao in the early 2000s was so invested in solving the so-called three rural issues (三农问题), referring to peasants (农民), agriculture (农业), and rural villages (农村). When I started graduate school in 2003, one big question with which we China social scientists (at the University of California Berkeley at least) occupied ourselves was the rural–urban divide. The 200 million–plus rural Chinese migrant labourers moving throughout the country were an indicator, so it was thought, of the country's future—simultaneously celebrated as sign of the country's economic growth potential and fretted over in terms of the perceived socioeconomic problems that could emerge from so many rural Chinese being, due to the *hukou* system, 'out of place'. I would argue that the overwhelming question, conceptually, was and remains: where and how do rural Chinese fit into the imagined, and desired, urban future of China? I am thinking of Solinger (1999), Zhang (2001), and Murphy (2002) on rural migrant labourers, but also Schein (2000), whose influential theorisation of 'internal orientalism' helped shape understandings of how gender and ethnic differences inform the cultural politics of the rural–urban divide.

Thus, even as China was leaping into global markets and pouring money into urban growth in the early 2000s, it had not quite 'arrived' in global modernity, apparently, because it was still burdened by the

rural. This self-positioning as just on the 'edge' of global modernity was likewise reinforced in the acronym 'BRIC' that was coined around the same time in a report published by Goldman Sachs (O'Neill 2001). Referring to the 'developing' economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, this semantic grouping locates these countries as somehow not quite or not yet central to global geopolitics—a position the Chinese State strategically adopts as needed to justify its own exceptionalism. When I think now about how I imagined studying China's future as a graduate student nearly 20 years ago, I realise that the task with which I was so compelled—namely, trying to understand the various components of Chinese society rather than trying to understand 'China' as a whole—is now impossible (perhaps impossible *again*). I do not mean this in a cynical way, but rather to suggest that it is, in part, the result of contemporary twenty-first-century geopolitics. If the goal now is to understand China's role in the future of—fill in the blank here (The world? The United States? Africa? The Asia-Pacific?)—then China is treated, again, as a singularity. This, I honestly believe, is what the current Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping wants, which is for the world to stop peeking behind the curtain, so to speak, and to just focus on the main performance.

JN: Your last point is important because the way we framed this issue at the start of our conversation was that the question of *what China is doing to the world* primarily mattered to—or was even determined by—Euro-American institutions, knowledge-making, and aims. But as you suggest, one of the key problems here is that a dominant understanding of or approach to China and futurity has emerged, and it seems to serve a wide range of discrepant interests. The distinction between 'China and the West', among other popular and problematic framings, obviously fails to capture this complexity, but the point is that this bounded 'China' is being reproduced, for different ends, by officials, economists, and experts of various stripes. One of the important shifts that jumps out at me, for example, is that the openness that pervaded earlier imaginings of the future—regardless of their accuracy—is now shuttered, replaced with a future that is seen as closed, predictable, or fated (as with the outcome of the Twentieth National Congress of the CCP in late 2022). This is obviously a problem and constitutes one of the limits of futurity politics to which we should return later in the discussion, especially as I am not convinced that area-studies-as-usual (and the question of what is happening in a determined place) is up to the challenge.

I am also struck by your framing of rural modernity as central to, even if largely ignored by, the developmental aspirations of the period (beyond, that is, urbanisation as a preordained telos). I struggled with a similar problem related to China's transformations in the 2000s. Only rather than turning to subnational differences—rural, ethnic, autonomous zones, etcetera—I was thinking about regional or transnational cosmologies as a way to contest ideas about China's singularity (whether of people, cultural politics, governance, encounters with

globalisation, colonial and imperial legacies, etcetera). This was no doubt influenced by robust discussions in inter-Asian cultural studies, as well as a wide range of scholars dealing with what felt like similar problems in Argentina, India, Nigeria, Poland, Singapore, Taiwan, and other postcolonial, postcommunist, or Global South contexts. South Asia, in particular, became an important sounding board for me in trying to ascertain what are, on the one hand, globalising tendencies or problems, and what remains specific to China's 'post-socialist' transformation, on the other. In the work of Partha Chatterjee, Swati Chattopadhay, Bishnupriya Ghosh, Ranajit Guha, Lawrence Liang, Bhaskar Sarkar, among many others, I found a body of social and political theory that was very helpful in refusing the singular and ethno-nationalist visions you described above—visions that are only becoming more ubiquitous now—precisely because of their value for thinking about resonant problems in the PRC, and often in fresh ways.

But let us return to the question you posed about *researching* China.

JC: When I said earlier that I think the Chinese State wants us—meaning foreign academics and researchers—to stop peeking behind the curtain, I also implicated myself. After all, the more I have become immersed in China studies, the more I have fallen into a reliance on what Gail Hershatter (2014) calls 'campaign time'—my thinking about China orients itself increasingly along the major national campaigns and/or slogans, from Open Up the West (西部大开发), to Construct a New Socialist Countryside (建设社会主义新农村), to Harmonious Society (和谐社会), to the China Dream (中国梦), now to the BRI (一带一路). And even just listing these campaigns by name makes apparent how the object of the future has shifted for and in China.

A shorthand for everything I have been saying might be 'China beyond China'. In other words, the quality of the future that is at stake is no longer understandable or analysable from just within China's political boundaries (if it ever was; see also Franceschini and Loubere 2022). But how is this more, or less, than mere globality/globalisation? *Where* is China's future? Maybe a concrete way to think about it is through the exodus of Chinese intellectuals over the past decade, in the Xi era, and how this differs from the exodus that happened in the early 1980s, around 1989, and from Hong Kong around the handover in 1997? It is as though the China Dream has pushed a certain class of people out of the country for opposing reasons: artists and activists who no longer see future China as a viable place but also young, motivated, and economically ambitious Chinese students for whom (as a result, no doubt, of their relative socioeconomic privilege) the *where* of the future feels wide open. Their futures could be in the United States, China, or any number of places.

Where has this situated you and your work? How did your turn to South Asia build on your thinking through China, or Beijing specifically, and *where* do you see the future of your research on China?

JN: These examples certainly resonate with me. The China beyond China framing, for instance, reminds me of something I tried to formulate in *Underglobalization*, which I sometimes describe as being about the space between China and the world. I am also struck by the example of the recent exodus of people from China, including, as you suggest, those fleeing what feels like a hopeless future, on the one hand, and the growing numbers of students, professionals, tourists, etcetera, who see the world as a place of opportunity, adventure, and self-realisation, on the other. This is hardly specific to China, but it does have specific dimensions that matter to our conversation about the future as a political subject or stake. The consolidation of China's current leadership and its place in the world system, while certainly experienced as a point of pride and economic opportunity for many, has also been tied to a deep cultural depression. This (too simple) dichotomy underscores another basic aspect about futurity. As your examples indicate, the *where* of China's future also implies a *who*—that is, who gets to imagine social and political futures? And for whom are these schemas narrowing, pedagogical, or harmful? We talked about this earlier regarding the problem of futurity as a singular rather than plural configuration. But it is also more than that.

One way that I have approached this question of *where* or *who* is by tracing shared rather than divergent histories (of the future). For instance, while China and India are often presented as offering opposing futures for the Global South—and here I am thinking of the exoticising images of dragons and tigers that dotted the covers of magazines like *The Economist*—I have instead been fascinated by just how much their struggles with development, legitimacy, and globalisation coincide. In this, I was certainly inspired by the postcolonial studies scholars with whom I worked at the University of California Santa Barbara. While that field has been much critiqued for its limitations, I still feel strongly about its capacity for a kind of global or multi-sited critique that is too often absent in 'area' studies. I recall reading Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (2010), to take one example, and thinking it was in many important respects *about* Beijing. It starts by describing how multiple generations of urban and social planning regimes—colonial, national, global—had not only reshaped the city of Delhi but also continuously failed to meet the needs of the local population. The old masterplans, once built, were soon in shambles. This is perhaps a familiar point, but it matters because it emphasises how futurity has been repeatedly employed as a modernisation technique. And while it would be wrong to evacuate futurity discourse entirely of its promise, it is equally misguided to not underscore the relationship between futurity and power. The future, at least in the social and political senses at issue here, operates at scale—indeed, it produces it. So, rather than focusing on established differences, I was also interested in what comes into view when we emphasise instead the shared and ongoing encounters with colonial and imperial forms under globalisation. There is a lot to unpack in such a statement but the simple point for this conversation is that the endemic clash-of-civilisation mode

'Chinese Dream Series III:
A Hundred Flowers Bloom',
Alexander F. Yuan, 2016. Inkjet
Print 90" x 60" and Online
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the artist.

of critique and futurity (that is, the United States versus China, West versus East) stands in the way of alternative understandings or *futurings*. In this sense, I found that starting from Global South cities, popular media, and politics was a useful way to map geopolitical formations both below the nation-state (subnational) and beyond it (transnational). These actually existing communities and social infrastructures, rather than WTO geographies, could serve as the basis for rethinking the category of futurity itself.

In my book, I take up this problem through the portmanteau word 'underglobalisation' (a term that combines ideas about underdevelopment and globalisation). Globalisation is still a dominant blueprint for the future of the world system, even if it is increasingly challenged by, say, China and Russia's current 'no limits' partnership, among others. The point about present forms of underdevelopment, on the other hand, is that globalisation projects consistently obscure the fact that they require inequality as a precondition (rather than inequity being an accidental outcome). So, I wanted to understand how this inequality 'showed up' in official claims and ideas about development and the future. One way it showed up was in proliferating discourses about piracy, fakes, imitation, counterfeit culture, technology transfer, and even examples like the former category of children born without permission under the One-Child Policy (超生). These charges were, to my mind, symptomatic of a wide range of important issues. But they also

'Chinese Dream Series I: Harmonious Society', Alexander F. Yuan, 2016. Inkjet Print 90" x 60" and Online Interactive ChineseDreamArt.com. Used with permission of the artist.

tended to inhibit our understanding of illicit culture. Why, for example, were so many people talking about intellectual property violations rather than the proliferation of illegality itself—of illegal ways of life? This has everything to do with the power of futurity.

I am leaving a lot to the side here, but one ramification of this is the recognition that contemporary global dynamics are increasingly shaped by tensions between legality and legitimacy. From informal media and counterfeit medicine to migrant workers and illegal housing, more and more people live without legal rights and protections. The question is: What happens when legal contracts and imaginaries—including rights, petitions (信访), civil society, and citizenship—fail or become dangerous? And on what grounds are new political relationships claimed and sustained? My interest in the book is to look at the ways that media forms and practices participate in a kind of dissensual future-making in which those marginalised by formal development processes find ways to inhabit the present and establish their own claims on the hereafter. This potentiality offers another way to understand the future as a political form, in part by insisting on how future-making is deeply embedded in the present. My current research builds on this work but shifts its attention to problems of overdevelopment as one of the core models, and thus political challenges, of this present.

The interest in what development obscures and how it fails certain groups of people has been one of our shared projects over the past decade or so. How do you see *A Landscape of Travel*, alongside your

more recent work, in relation to these concerns, including your own engagement with film and video? And how does the view from rural and ethnic China help us to understand—or perhaps change our understanding of—the question of China and futurity today?

JC: I have yet to decide whether *A Landscape of Travel* is about tourism development or rural development in China. In many ways, the semantics do not matter much because the government policies and investments that arrived in villages like Upper Jidao and Ping'an in the early years of the twenty-first century collapsed the two; but in other critical ways—as I hope my work from this project shows—it was precisely the privileging of tourism over rural development that caused some of the most contentious conflicts and deep disappointments for village residents. The fundamental reason behind such disappointing development was that tourism development invariably centres on the figure of the *tourist* (personified by the urban or cosmopolitan traveller), so tourism development in rural villages was really aimed at urban Chinese and worldly cosmopolitans. If it really was rural development, on the other hand, the projects would have (ideally) centred on the *rural* (personified by the peasant/villager).

But what matters most here is the fact that development in whatever shape or form is fundamentally about the future; the temporal thrust of development is inherently future-facing. My interest in ethnic minority lives and rural experiences in China, therefore, remains shaped by an interest in not only how these marginalised communities make space for themselves (and are made to have a place) in China as a nation-state, but also how development as a discourse and a process engenders and necessitates certain actions in the present that are expressly for the future. Rural China, it seems, bears the weight of the future in so many ways: in the past, as the source of and motivation for the revolution; in the present, as the place where urbanites find respite and politicians see extractive profits; and in the future, as the sign that the nation has 'made it' when rural communities are firmly ensconced in a 'moderately prosperous society' (小康社会).

While my research on tourism is situated in the very recent past and the almost-present, even as much ethnic minority tourism is premised on romantic and deliberately atemporal 'cultural heritage past', working with documentary film and video in China has prompted me to think more deeply about media, memory, and imaginable futures. The production of representations involves the enfolding of past, present, and future. Xiaobing Tang's 2015 study of what he dubs the emergence of a 'socialist visual culture' in China provides a detailed and specific analysis of how the imagination and the depiction, in terms of the choice of both artistic medium (woodblock prints, New Year's paintings, oil, charcoal) and content (the typology of rural subjects, from landlords and peasants to soldiers and workers), of rural China as China's future preoccupied artists in the early years of the PRC. The point was for the art to simultaneously uphold the work of the revolution in the present and its vision of a utopian future. But Jie Li's expansive book-as-museum (2020)

reminds me that memory itself is a device of the future: looking backwards to remember how the future used to be imagined and forwards to imagine what the future might want to remember.

Perhaps more ethnographically, I think a lot now about how documentary practices in China, especially the rural, small, and localised videos in minority regions on which I have focused the most, are best understood as a device for the future to remember the present. Tibetan students in a videomaking class are implored by their teachers to record Tibetan life, so they go off and make films about riding motorcycles through the grasslands or their friends haggling with Han Chinese tourists over the price of a horseback ride; Miao videographers record (and now livestream) bullfights between water buffaloes from Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi (see Chio 2018). These videos gesture, coyly and indirectly, at a future viewing subject, suggesting that even if you do not think these topics matter, they are *memorable*. What might these twenty-first-century media objects reveal if/when juxtaposed against the ethnographic films produced by Chinese social scientists in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1980s as part of the Chinese State's Ethnic Classification Project (民族识别, a national research project that determined which ethnic groups would be officially recognised)? In the latter films, it was the nation's future at stake; in the former, contemporary videos, *whose* future is being imagined is less straightforward. 'China' fades into the background of a documentary film made by a Tibetan pastoralist about the multiple uses of yak dung (Lanzhe 2011); the 'nation' that appears and is celebrated in a Miao festival video looks, sounds, and moves as a mass, an intensely crowded gathering of Miao celebrants (Chio 2019).

One hypothetical question for us both might be: Can we imagine a future that is not disappointing, to someone—whether to the Chinese State, segments of the Chinese citizenry, or 'the world' around China (Sinophone and non-Sinophone alike)? It is an unfair question to ask, but I pose it critically and ironically in terms of formulating new directions for thinking through futurity in and of China.

Section II: Five Propositions on the Future Perfect

Making claims about the future does important cultural and political work. And writing now as scholars critical of the future of futurity, we want to emphasise this longstanding function—that is, futurity's governmental, developmental, and aspirational operations, among others—and offer a set of modest, provisional, and conjunctural speculations situated in and targeted at the present. It is easy enough to acknowledge an analytical misstep after the fact, especially when it comes to speculating about what is to come. But *futurity*—the quality of being of or in the future—is tantalising in its seemingly infinite possibilities of imagining what will have been, especially when we temporally locate ourselves in a future *beyond* the future that is being conceived.

No future is ever entirely open-ended, unstructured, or unbounded by the present, let alone the past. Below are five propositions on futurity, critique, and the political imagination in China. We view them as starting points and points of contention or interrogation, in acknowledgement of our own blind spots and limitations. The aim is less to speculate about what will have happened in the future and more to recalibrate *futurity* as a tool for critique or analysis.

1. 现实是过去的未来 / *Reality is the past of the future*. Challenging the retrospective framing of the present remains one of the crucial tasks associated with remaking futurity.

> We borrow this phrase from the title of Huang Weikai's 2009 eponymous documentary to (re)operationalise futurity for the present conjuncture. As the film's English title, *Disorder*, also signals, orderly or normative futures act to pathologise, erase, or relocate present realities and histories. These occlusions now constitute a kind of common sense: the future perfect, which is to say they limit the social and political imagination in troubling ways. To start from the idea that 'Reality is the past of the future' is to at once underscore how futurity operates as a world-building technology and to insist that much of what constitutes tactical future-making for people around the world exceeds this retroactive image.

2. The political imagination of the future is fundamentally *visual* or *mediated*. Moreover, this futurity is constituted by audiovisual constructions that take place in the present.

> China today is a society based on spectacle as much as it was in the era of High Socialism. The material, tangible forms of audiovisual futurity that adorn China's cities and villages, from digital facades and billboards to screen-printed plastic fencing, surveillance cameras, and ubiquitous smartphones, demand conceptual flexibility to analyse how the politics of the present comes into being. This is because state-sanctioned sounds and images—not unlike Hershatter's 'campaign time'—oversaturate both popular and scholarly receptions of the future. And the opposite is also true: small tears in these visual repertoires come to stand in for popular will. Against these and similar preoccupations, we want to suggest that the present requires both a renewed attention to official visions of the future—which are too often taken as static or known—as well as modes of analysis and critique that look below or beyond established questions about discourse, image, or plan. In other words, while we know that new technologies and visual projections readily change their shape or quickly become disappointing, even anachronistic, they continue to play the part of the subject of history (when it comes to the future). As such, they prevent us from seeing or imagining otherwise.

3. The habitual focus on political leaders and the nation-state occludes the deep collaborations between antagonistic states (including so-called authoritarian states and democracies) and transnational state–market ventures. Futurity emerges in this underbelly just as much as on the main stage.

Popular political discourse focuses on hand-wringing politicians and especially US and European leaders' worries about and desires to contain China's 'rise'. But against this state-centric view is an equally troubling version of future-making shored up by state–market partnerships. This includes the increasing dependence of 'the West' on Chinese industries for consumption, investment, and so on, but also techno-economic enterprise between US or European and Chinese tech firms in Xinjiang and elsewhere. What Darren Byler (2021) calls *terror capitalism* offers an image of this futurity, in which the penal colony is used as a testbed to establish new surveillance capacities, forms of enclosure, and processes of unfree labour and extraction that can be sold and applied elsewhere. While this view is contradicted by the performative rhetoric of US leaders demanding export controls on artificial intelligence technology, computer chips, and 5G infrastructure, such uncertainty is perhaps the point. To understand this future-making requires us to look beyond familiar geopolitical spectacle.

4. Understanding the future in/of China must involve a renewed focus on the rural, among other techno–urban peripheries, even though futurity operates as a technology that at best ignores and at worst obscures rural conditions in China and globally.

An often assumed and under-questioned precondition of the future, in China and elsewhere, is the disappearance of the rural. Even the Maoist dictum of learning from the peasants was predicated on a future in which peasants would become (agricultural) industrialists, and rural villages would be turned into planned, orderly, electrified communities. The tension between the *idea* of the rural as an *ideal* counterpoint to present maladies and the *imagination* of the future as an *urban* imaginary continues to overlook and undervalue the realities of rural and peri-urban conditions in the contemporary moment. We need futures unhinged from the developmental paradigms that understand the rural as primitive, a raw materiality, or a space of tourist wonder. The aim is not nostalgia or a new Luddism, but to recognise so-called hinterlands as dynamic life-worlds whose needs and capacities already demand and make other futures.

5. The limits of political imagination are located precisely where the future collides with futurity.

Futurity is always located in the here and now; it is the imagination of the future from the perspective of the present. As such, we need futurities that are uncoupled from universalising paradigms of modernisation, technologisation, and urbanisation. To critique

the limits of political imagination is to remind ourselves of the simultaneity of multiple presents and manifold political possibilities, the fact that rural and urban are inextricably enmeshed, visual and mediated constructions are creative and complicit, and memory processes are as much for the future as they are about the past. It is also about the supposed threat of global chaos that is repeatedly invoked by politicians and pundits in 'the West' should 'our' future become enfolded into China's. The political project of the CCP has always been oriented towards the future; the project of China Studies, therefore, is to interrogate the political imagination of the future within the realities of the present (and the past). This means questioning not only claims made *about* China, but also our own assumptions about conditions in China and their effects on 'the world'. ∎
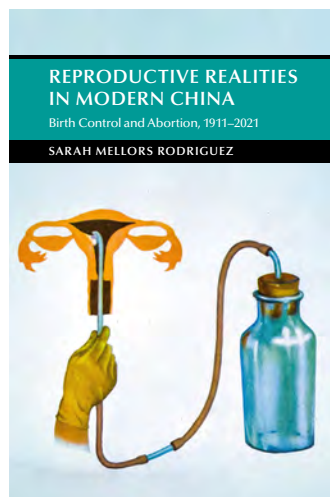
Reproductive Realities in Modern China

A Conversation with Sarah Mellors Rodriguez

Shui-yin Sharon YAM, Sarah MELLORS RODRIGUEZ

Reproductive Realities in Modern China: Birth Control and Abortion, 1911–2021 (Cambridge University Press, 2023)

While China's reproductive policies have long been studied as a mechanism of biopolitical control, the everyday reproductive experiences of Chinese people are often eclipsed. Spanning more than a century, Sarah Mellors Rodriguez's important monograph *Reproductive Realities in Modern China: Birth Control and Abortion, 1911–2021* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) fills this gap by examining how Chinese citizens, especially working-class women, navigated the changing cultural and sociopolitical landscapes of reproduction. Supplementing state archival research with oral history interviews, the book enacts a feminist methodology that highlights the lived experiences of individuals from different class backgrounds. Meticulously researched and cogently written, Rodriguez's volume is an important addition not only to China studies, but also to scholarship on reproductive politics, health, and medicine.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: What is the origin story of this research project and this book? What motivated you to trace the reproductive policies and practices in twentieth-century China?

Sarah Mellors Rodriguez: I became interested in reproduction and contraception in China nearly 15 years ago. In 2009, I started teaching English at a suburban middle school in Guangdong Province. I had heard about the harsh enforcement of the One-Child Policy and that transgressors were sometimes forced to undergo abortion and sterilisation surgeries. Yet, to my surprise, I had a number of students in my classes with as many as eight siblings. My pupils often teased each other, joking that one student had cost his parents an additional 1,000 yuan in fees or that another had managed to evade the policy altogether. Their nonchalant attitude towards the policy caught me off guard.

In 2011, when I was teaching English and history at Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics in Jiangsu Province, I was asked to teach a compulsory class for university faculty and administrators. As I grew closer to my adult students, they invited me to their homes and confided in me about their personal lives. Like their parents decades earlier, some students admitted that they had known very little about sex or birth control when they were married in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of them, then in their forties and fifties, had undergone multiple abortions in accordance with the One-Child Policy, the violation of

which could lead to heavy fines or even expulsion from the university. This led me to research human rights violations associated with the One-Child Policy for the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, a bipartisan US Government agency that monitors rule of law issues in China.

It was this series of events, which revealed the vast degree of variation in policy enforcement and the enduring gaps in sex education and birth control use, that piqued my interest in studying the history of contraception. I wondered how these contemporary stories fitted into the longer narrative of birth control use in China.

SSY: Methodologically, you supplemented mainstream archival sources with oral history interviews so you could, as you put it in the book, 'approach birth control and abortion from the perspective of lived experience' (p. 3). Feminist research methodology privileges the stories and embodied experiences of those who are rendered silent in the dominant public sphere. In what way does critical feminism inform your research agenda and priorities? Put differently, what is the relationship between feminist research methodologies and the study of modern Chinese histories?

SMR: Critical feminism is essential to my book and my approach to history in general. One of the goals of *Reproductive Realities* is to move beyond top-down, policy-based analyses of reproduction in China because that type of scholarship often inadvertently denies individual agency and overlooks women's lived experiences. Instead, my work aims to shed light on how women from diverse class backgrounds navigated and responded to changing state policies.

As to the relationship between feminism and the study of modern Chinese history, a good starting point is the 2008 article 'Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis', in which pioneering feminist historians Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng chart the impact of Joan Scott's work and gender studies as a whole on Chinese historical research. As Hershatter and Wang argue, for decades, the study of modern Chinese history rarely privileged women or feminist perspectives and when it did, in the 1970s and 1980s, it focused on things like kinship practices or whether the 1949 revolution helped or hurt women. Thanks to the 'gender turn' in Chinese scholarship in the 1990s, feminist historians began privileging gender (rather than just women) as a category of analysis and interrogating the meanings associated with gendered terminologies and identities.

In the past three decades, scholars have produced a wealth of research on women and gender in China, and there is a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that highlights the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. In short, while the use of a feminist lens in my work is certainly not novel and I owe much to scholars writing before me, my approach is relatively new with respect to the history of reproduction in modern China. My intention in employing femi-

nist methodologies is to place women's experiences at the centre of analysis while challenging official state narratives that often sideline gender issues.

SSY: You wrote extensively about medical pluralism and syncretism in China, wherein 'medical practitioners and consumers turned to' both Western biomedicine and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) to address fertility regulation (p. 215). At the same time, the two medical systems have also been politicised throughout China's history in relation to the nation-state. How did the politicisation of medicine affect people's reproductive choices across time? How did access to different forms of reproductive medicine—or the lack thereof—influence people's decisions?

SMR: The contentious relationship between traditional and Western medicine in China yielded conflicting official messages about the reliability and safety of certain traditional medicines. For instance, at various points in the 1950s, Chinese authorities launched targeted campaigns to both encourage and discourage traditional Chinese herbal contraceptives. This would have generated a lot of confusion about the specifics of contraception at a time when access to information about birth control was already highly uneven. As I argue in the book, at the level of practice, it seems that most people were not particularly concerned about whether a medicine was 'Western' or 'traditional' and instead simply sought contraceptives and abortifacients that were available and effective. The fact that traditional contraceptives were less expensive and more widely available for much of the Mao era would have made them more accessible to poorer individuals and those living in rural areas.

Unfortunately, conflicting official campaigns and inconsistent access to reliable reproductive medicines also made women even more vulnerable to dangerous medical practices. For instance, as part of the first official 'birth planning' (state-led family planning) campaign, between 1956 and 1957, the Ministry of Health circulated TCM contraceptive formulas in newspapers and magazines. However, some users of these recipes reported debilitating side effects, including severe pain, uterine haemorrhaging, and full-body swelling. Repeated reports of negative side effects associated with herbal contraceptives led the central government to condemn these methods in 1962. Yet, the same formulas reappeared in official publications only a few years later and, in the 1970s, some 'barefoot doctors' [赤脚医生, minimally trained rural medics] were encouraged to prescribe the condemned formulas to their patients.

SSY: In Chapter 1, you discuss how Chinese elites and feminists were influenced by Margaret Sanger's discourse on eugenics and birth control. Your analysis points to a transnational network of liberal elite feminism and eugenics. For instance, some Chinese feminists and intellectuals saw birth control and abortion as a form of women's empowerment and independence. Some even depicted birth control as a societal responsibility for working-class Chinese women: by practising birth control and preventing the birth of poor children, they could help lessen the burden placed on the nation. As you rightly point out, these narratives perpetuate an individu-

alist understanding of reproductive choices, rather than interrogating how dominant cultural and sociopolitical forces inform women's reproductive decisions and the future of their children. Did you find any instances in which Chinese feminists or intellectuals articulated a vision of feminism and reproductive autonomy that was not yoked to nation-building and/or eugenics?

SMR: As you mentioned, many of the sources I encountered explicitly framed birth control and childbearing in terms of either individual responsibility or collective benefits—that is, nation-building or racial strengthening. Yet, there were certainly some self-proclaimed feminists in the early twentieth century who endorsed birth control for the sake of women's reproductive autonomy. Mirela David's 2018 article 'Female Gynecologists and their Birth Control Clinics: Eugenics in Practice in 1920s – 1930s China', for example, highlights the work of Chinese women gynaecologists who established birth control clinics and disseminated contraceptives for the express purpose of aiding and empowering poor urban women. Unfortunately, official opposition to contraception and difficulties accessing the urban poor stymied their efforts, but as David argues, these gynaecologists were driven by a genuine concern for women. To my knowledge, efforts to promote reproductive autonomy were confined to Chinese elites. Nevertheless, it is possible that people from other walks of life were concerned about this issue and that their work is not known because it did not leave a paper trail for historians to analyse.

SSY: In 1994, in preparation for the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, a group of Black women in the United States invented the framework of reproductive justice (RJ) (Sister Song n.d.). Driven by an understanding that reproduction decisions are informed by intersecting power systems and oppression, the RJ framework uplifts the experiences and voices of marginalised poor women, women of colour, and trans people. Given that there are transnational confluences of reproductive discourse and practices—such as Margaret Sanger's influence on Chinese intellectuals and gynaecologists (Chapters 1 and 2), and the use of 'menstrual regulation' as a guise to terminate a pregnancy in both China (Chapter 2) and the United States—were there any resonances between the RJ movement in the United States and reproductive attitudes in China at the time? Did you see any articulations of reproductive justice in China?

SMR: I did note certain resonances between the RJ movement and conversations in China about reproduction in the early twentieth century. As did Margaret Sanger in the United States, some Chinese intellectuals observed that the intersection of patriarchal social norms and class inequality particularly disadvantaged poor women and restricted their autonomy. This line of thinking reflected, at the very least, a basic understanding of the overlapping systems of power that govern reproductive behaviours.

   To my mind, though, the most obvious connections between the RJ framework and my research come from more recent decades. One of the key facets of the RJ framework is protecting the right to *not* have children. In my interviews with younger people, I found that our discus-

sions increasingly veered in the direction of individual reproductive decision-making. The desire for greater personal fulfillment beyond childbearing, as well as the financial challenges associated with raising children, made educated women want to either reproduce along an individualised timeline or, in some extreme cases, not have children at all. Although unmarried women and those without children face immense discrimination (see, for instance, Fincher 2016), not having children could also be construed as a kind of privilege reserved for urban women with education and greater financial resources.

As to reproductive justice and the specific issue of abortion access, perhaps because abortions were so widespread—widespread to the point of being compulsory—during the past several decades, defending abortion access had not been a central priority of Chinese feminists. Rather, the conversation has focused on protecting women from invasive population policies and over-zealous birth-planning officials. In the past five years, however, abortion access has become an issue of greater concern since some provinces, like Jiangxi and Guizhou, are restricting 'non–medically necessary' abortions to 14 weeks. Given these policy changes, concerns about reproductive justice are on the rise.

Ruby Lai's 2022 book, *Premarital Abortion in China: Intimacy, Family and Reproduction*, which investigates premarital abortion among Chinese migrant workers, sheds new light on this issue. Lai demonstrates how financial circumstances, migration status, and gender norms shape access to and attitudes towards premarital abortion. For young women migrant workers who become pregnant out of wedlock before they have the financial and marital stability to support a family, access to safe abortions is critical. With changing demographic patterns and reproductive policies, then, the kinds of conversations surrounding reproductive politics in China are shifting.

SSY: The reproductive experiences of marginalised communities in China, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ people, were often not represented in mainstream archives. How were these groups impacted by state policies on reproduction over time? Methodologically and ethically, how should scholars unearth and highlight their experiences?

SMR: This is something I would have liked to discuss more in my work, and I hope that future scholarship will address this topic more fully. Unfortunately, my research suggests that LGBTQ+ people were subjected to many of the same reproductive expectations as their heterosexual counterparts.

The situation of ethnic minorities is a little more complicated. At first, in the 1950s and early 1960s, ethnic minorities were sometimes excluded from birth-planning campaigns due to fear of sparking ethnic conflict. For example, unlike their Han counterparts, ethnic minorities living in major cities were not required to view films or attend focus groups promoting birth planning. However, by the late 1960s, ethnic minorities were increasingly being encouraged to limit their family size and were even blamed for China's large population; 'otherising' tropes painted

ethnic minorities as 'backward' and unwilling to adapt to modern demographic patterns. Perhaps that is one reason that ethnic minorities were included in the One-Child Policy, which was enacted in 1979 and restricted all couples regardless of ethnicity or place of residence to one child each. Yet, it is worth noting that when the original policy was relaxed in 1984, ethnic minorities were subsequently permitted to have multiple children—two in urban areas and three in rural ones. Unfortunately, some Han people felt that by adopting this new policy the government was giving ethnic minorities preferential treatment—a sentiment I encountered among my undergraduate students while teaching in China in 2011. Although the original intention was to limit ethnic conflict, it inadvertently heightened tensions between Han and non-Han people. Arguments that population policies governing ethnic minorities exhibit favouritism not only ignore the fact that in some rural areas Han people have long been able to have multiple children, but also fail to recognise the other ways in which ethnic minorities face limits on their autonomy. One need only look at the example of forced abortions and sterilisations among Uyghur women in Xinjiang to debunk the myth of preferential reproductive treatment for ethnic minorities (Wieting 2021).

In terms of the broader project of excavating the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and ethnic minorities, other scholars are already doing important work to that end in the fields of history, comparative literature, media studies, and anthropology, to name a few. A combination of access to more diverse sources and creative research methodologies has allowed scholars to shed significant light on the experiences of minority groups.

SSY: Based on your research, how did people circumvent or resist the state's biopolitical control of their reproductive lives?

SMR: In the early twentieth century, when abortion was illegal and contraception was politically suspect, women underwent back-alley abortions and experimented with various forms of contraception—typically medicines that 'regulate menstruation'. In these instances, access to contraception or abortifacients might be empowering but they also made women vulnerable to physical trauma, legal repercussions, and even death. In the 1950s, when restrictions on birth control and abortion were relaxed, some people embraced these options while others simply refused to use contraception. For example, in some cases, men and women avoided attending meetings designed to promote birth planning or lied to policy enforcers about whether they were using birth control.

From the 1970s through to the end of the One-Child Policy in 2015, couples used a variety of different strategies to evade state policies, including surreptitiously removing an intrauterine device (IUD) to try for another child, undergoing sex-selective abortions, or having unauthorised children for which they were charged heavy fines. In

some cases, these efforts to circumvent state control were successful in that couples were able to have the additional children they desired. This would have been particularly important for rural couples who did not already have a son but sought one to assist with farm labour and carry on the family line. Sympathetic local cadres might even give couples an extended period to pay off the 'excess child fees' [多子女费] they had incurred or might not force them to pay at all. Despite these successes on the part of parents seeking additional children, widespread policy evasion and lax policy enforcement could also trigger violent crackdowns on unauthorised births. For instance, as Thomas Scharping (2005) and Tyrene White (2018) have shown, when census results revealed that certain rural areas still had comparatively high levels of fertility, authorities enacted 'crash drives' of forced abortion and sterilisation to radically lower the birthrate in a short period.

SSY: Your book charts the beginning and the end of the One-Child Policy, but state reproductive control persists. What will the reproductive future of Chinese people look like?

SMR: As a historian, I am always reluctant to speculate about the future. What I can say is that despite the rollback of the One-Child Policy in 2015, so far, efforts to encourage women to have more children have not borne much fruit. The high cost of raising and educating a child, particularly in urban areas, educated women's emphasis on independence and career advancement, and memories of the One-Child Policy's brutal enforcement, have made producing larger families less desirable. Rather than improving nationwide access to social services that would benefit mothers, in response to the declining birthrate, the State Council recently proposed that abortions be limited to those that are 'medically necessary'—a move that builds on existing abortion restrictions at the provincial level. The language of the proposed law is deliberately vague, meaning that the conditions under which a 'medically necessary' abortion is considered justified are unknown. Such a policy, if implemented, could force mothers to carry dangerous, unwanted, or unviable pregnancies to term. The policy could also portend more limited access to reproductive health care across the board with particularly serious implications for unmarried mothers, women living in rural areas, and same-sex couples. Another proposal, though directed at men, similarly suggested limiting access to vasectomies. These phenomena indicate that individual interests—namely, women's interests—will continue to be subordinated to those of the state.

Rather than resorting to the familiar coercive tactics of the past, individual provinces have recently taken more progressive steps to encourage births. For example, at the national level, children born to single mothers are not eligible for the residence permits they need to obtain health care and education, and in some cases unmarried mothers may even be fined for their out-of-wedlock births. Similarly, it is illegal for unmarried women to undergo in vitro fertilisation, a service that given health disparities between urban and rural areas is mainly avail-

able to urban women. However, Sichuan Province recently eliminated all birth restrictions and is even offering paid maternity leave and medical bill reimbursement—benefits married women are guaranteed—to single mothers. Certain cities are also extending maternity leave allowances and some provinces are even considering offering paternity leave. For the time being, though, it seems like access to reproductive health care and the extent to which people can exercise their own reproductive agency will continue to vary significantly across China with rural women shouldering more than their share of the burden of raising the birthrate. ∎

Feminist activists staged a funeral disco for the shutdown of the @FeministVoices Weibo account in 2018.

Digital Masquerade
A Conversation with Jia Tan

Shui-yin Sharon YAM, Jia TAN

Jia Tan's *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (NYU Press, 2023) interrogates the intersections across digital media of feminist rights activism, queer culture, and neoliberalism in an illiberal context. Drawing on a wide range of artefacts—interviews with feminist advocates and queer media practitioners, participant-observations at queer community events, and cultural analysis of social media content, queer films, and dating apps—Tan develops the useful concept of 'digital masquerade'. 'Digital masquerade' describes the ways in which queer and feminist media users and activists navigate neoliberalism, technological affordances, gender norms, and censorship, which are simultaneously liberating and constricting. *Digital Masquerade* is an important book that dismantles reductive constructions of feminist and queer activism in China.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: Your concept of 'digital masquerade' complicates the binary understanding of activism in illiberal contexts as either conformity and compromise or agentic resistance. For instance, rights feminists posted altered images of their bodies online to raise consciousness about intimate partner violence, while at the same time avoiding state sanction. In the chapter 'Performative Rights', you also discuss how staff in nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and activists evoke and perform different concepts of rights (权) depending on the contexts in and media platforms on which they found themselves. Why do you think it is important for scholars to develop a more nuanced understanding of feminist and queer activism in China beyond the binary of agency and conformity?

Jia Tan: When we consider activism as either conformity or resistance, we are thinking of it in relation to the state and its apparatus. This binary understanding of activism as compromise or resistance is prevalent in scholarly frameworks that conceptualise activism within illiberal contexts, as well as in international news coverage of feminist and queer activism in China. China is often portrayed as illiberal and

oppressive, with instances such as the detention of feminist activists, raids on LGBT venues like bars and clubs, cancellations of LGBT film festivals and community events, and media and internet censorship. However, it is crucial to develop a framework that not only recognises the significant social changes brought about by feminist and LGBT activism but also conceptualises activism beyond its relationship with the state or state oppression. Historically, feminist activism in China has been intricately linked to the state, exemplified by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). In comparison, the new wave of feminist activism that I explore in my book is more connected to NGOs and various forms of commercialised media, warranting the need for a fresh research framework.

A central question in my book is how we can theorise media activism within a context that is both illiberal and neoliberalised. In addition to state censorship and sanctions, the pink economy has flourished in neoliberalised China, and liberal discourses such as equal rights for women and LGBT individuals have gained currency. For instance, I discuss Alibaba Taobao's sponsorship of gay and lesbian couples travelling to the United States to get married. While such examples can be criticised for perpetuating neoliberal homonormativity or homo-nationalism, these critiques may not fully capture the complexity of feminist and queer activism in China.

To address these complexities, I introduce the concept of the 'digital masquerade' to examine the interplay between technological affordances, censorship, and the creative energy within feminist and queer media activism. A masquerade can be both submissive and disruptive to dominant social codes. I expand the understanding of masquerade beyond individual subjectivity in feminist and queer theory to encompass the materiality of masquerade in the digital era. My usage of masquerade departs from psychoanalytic theories and focuses on assemblages of embodied experiences and technological affordances within specific historical contexts. 'Digital masquerade' encompasses the diverse ways in which individuals act and engage with technology in specific contexts, allowing us to move beyond the binary understanding of activism as mere conformity or resistance.

SSY: Throughout the book, and especially in the last chapter, on app-based lesbian short films, you say the social change brought by feminist rights and queer media is inextricably tied to social media platform affordances, state surveillance and censorship, and the neoliberal economy and consumption. To be more specific, you demonstrate that articulations of rights feminism and queer activism are co-constituted by digital technologies and conditioned by the dominant sociopolitical contexts. What are the implications of your argument for social movement and queer feminist scholars, and for activists?

JT: One of the key concepts that I aim to introduce in my book is the notion of 'rights feminism'. I employ this term to translate *nüquan* (女权) to emphasise the resurgence of rights consciousness and discourses within contemporary feminist articulations. This is connected to other

rights-related terms such as *quanli* (权力, 'rights and power'), *quanyi* (权益, 'rights and interests'), and *weiquan* (维权, 'rights defence'). The concept of *nüquan* can be traced back to the early twentieth century. My book primarily explores the diverse formation of a new wave of rights feminism and queer activism in contemporary China in the twenty-first century.

In the 1990s, the prevailing translation of feminism was *nüxingzhuyi* (女性主义), which emphasised feminine identity but obscured the meaning of rights. What I aim to identify in my book is the resurgence of rights discourses. While feminist ideas and debates have long existed in China, what is new in this wave of rights feminism is the identification as rights feminists. My book delves into how these feminists are emerging as new subjects of rights, stemming from the resurgence of rights discourses.

Furthermore, I explore the convergence of feminist and queer practices, which highlights the often-overlooked queer presence within the feminist movement. By engaging feminism in dialogue with queer thinking and lesbian movements, I aim to expand the historiography of feminism in China, which has often sidelined lesbians and female homoeroticism under heteropatriarchy. An intriguing aspect of this new wave of rights feminism is the significant role played by queer women, with the previous lesbian movement paving the way for this new wave of rights feminism, as evident in the involvement of queer women activists in the feminist action at Shanghai Metro Station in 2012, when lesbian activists displayed anti–sexual harassment slogans in the station. Moreover, my exploration of rights feminism and LGBT rights engages with what I identify as the 'Liberal Paradigm Critique' in gender, queer, and rights studies. This includes critiques by scholars such as Nancy Fraser of the 'elective affinity' between second-wave feminism and neoliberalism, David Eng's concept of queer liberalism, and the tensions between studies of rights-based movements and of human rights. As mentioned earlier, when considering China as simultaneously neoliberal and illiberal, my book aims to provide insights into the complexities of feminist and queer activism within this context.

Another significant feature of this new wave of rights feminism and queer activism is the pivotal role played by digital media forms—such as digital filmmaking and distribution, social media, and e-journals—as vital arenas for feminist and queer expression. I hope to utilise the term 'digital masquerade' to theorise media activism as assemblages of embodied experiences and technological affordances within specific historical contexts. By doing so, I hope we can avoid being trapped in a sense of helplessness when facing censorship and other forms of control in a world that is increasingly tilting towards illiberalism.

For activists, I hope that my book can serve as a record of feminist activism and a repertoire for future activism. Much of the information about feminist and queer actions discussed in the book was previously widely accessible online, but now a significant portion of it is no longer available due to censorship and the ephemeral nature of online media. In recent years, we have witnessed unfortunate developments such as

the decline of feminist and LGBT NGOs, the suppression of the #MeToo movement and feminist online discussions, and the marginalisation of gender studies in Chinese universities. The ShanghaiPRIDE event, which I discuss in my book, ceased its operations in 2020, and the Beijing LGBT Centre was shut in 2023. The space for the new wave of rights feminism and queer activism charted in this book is diminishing, even though media-based feminist actions, such as the #MeToo movement, have continued to thrive since 2018.

However, concurrently, there has been an unprecedented surge in online discussions about feminism. More and more women, particularly urban young women, are identifying as *nüquanzhuyizhe* (女权主义者), or what I refer to as 'rights feminists' in my book. The current discussions about the meaning of rights feminism are heated, with rights feminism becoming a more explicit target of online misogyny. Hopefully, my book can offer a historicised perspective on the development of Chinese feminism and the shifting meanings of feminism, including rights feminism. Moreover, my emphasis on the convergence of rights feminism and the lesbian movement contrasts with the recent feminist debates that have garnered significant attention, which primarily focus on heterosexual marriage and childrearing decisions.

Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China (NYU Press, 2023).

SSY: You drew on a very diverse body of primary artefacts in your book: film festivals, interviews with activists and legal advocates, feminist social media campaigns, community-based queer films, and video content developed and circulated by lesbian dating apps. How did you curate this archive, and what informed your analytical approaches?

JT: The formation of feminist and queer activism in China was heterogeneous, and the inclusion of different primary artefacts captures this diversity. I conducted extensive research fieldwork in China from 2014 to 2019 and attended numerous small and large community events. My fieldwork took me to major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, where feminist and queer events were more frequent than elsewhere. Some of the community events were multiday gatherings with hundreds of participants, while others were shorter, two-hour events with a smaller audience. I also had the opportunity to meet with activists in other contexts, such as in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Through my fieldwork, I discovered that these feminist and queer activists are situated within a myriad digital media landscapes. For instance, some may be involved in rights advocacy and media campaigns, while also using lesbian dating apps to watch videos. Others may actively participate in community-based digital filmmaking workshops and film festival circles, while also engaging in legal activism. While dating apps may initially appear overtly commercial, Chinese dating apps have attempted to collaborate with NGOs and initiate antidiscrimination actions in public spaces.

Furthermore, this diverse body of material also helps me capture the complexity of activism within a simultaneously liberal and neoliberal context. For example, in the chapter on dating app videos, I highlight the limited focus on urban, middle-class, and homonormative lifestyles, which is a common criticism raised by the 'Liberal Paradigm Critique'. However, by examining the specific content and context of these dating app videos, a more nuanced and complex picture emerges that cannot be simply explained as a new form of homonormativity. Similarly, when exploring different references to weddings in feminist and queer activism, I argue that marriage and its associated rituals have more intricate implications than solely advocating for the legalisation of same-sex marriage based on equal rights, which complicates the argument of homo-nationalism.

SSY: In your analysis, you point out that many acts of queer digital masquerade—such as the funeral disco for Feminist Voices—exude a kind of 'creative lightness' (p. 145) in terms of their tone, style, delivery, and aesthetic. How and why are playfulness and light-heartedness significant to feminist and queer media activism in China?

JT: The idea of creative lightness is crucial in my theorisation of digital masquerade. The way I use the term does not assume the existence of an authentic personal identity behind the masquerade. Instead, it focuses on the various ways individuals interact and engage with technology in specific contexts. The term digital masquerade allows me to emphasise the lightness, flexibility, and creative utilisation of digital media in feminist and queer activism and culture in China. This lightness highlights the portability of digital cameras and mobile phones, the ease of spreading information through social media, or the quick connections made on social apps. The concept of lightness also points to the relatively minor presence of feminist and queer activism and media content in a larger picture of mainstream and heteropatriarchal culture.

Digital masquerade can be perceived as light-hearted and humorous, but it can also evoke melancholic or heavy-hearted emotions. For example, I use 'platform presentism' to describe how social app videos exemplify the 'lightness' in their tone, form, and organisational style, resembling a form of digital masquerade. However, it is important to note that these expressions are not always light-hearted or humorous. Instead, they encompass a range of emotions, including the coexistence of melancholic lesbian subjects and the presentism of urban mobile life.

Similarly, a wide spectrum of light and dark emotions can be found in other digital expressions, such as the diverse constructions of first-person audiovisual content, the provocative and angry expressions denouncing sexual abuse and harassment, as well as the more recent #MeToo movement. Despite these differences, the term digital masquerade is productive in highlighting the lightness of digital forms, as well as the tactical approaches to engaging with technology as a complex assemblage. Exemplified by the funeral disco that took place

shortly after the closure of the @FeministVoices Weibo account, digital masquerade can sometimes be playful, involving swift and guerilla-like acts in the negotiation of daily life.

SSY: Following up on the previous question, the use of ephemeral and humorous tactics in social movements is a transnational phenomenon. For instance, in 2020, Thai queer and student activists were known for their creative and humorous use of cartoon characters and inflatable ducks and dinosaurs to mock the government. What transnational coalitional potential do you see between feminist and queer activists in China and those elsewhere?

JT: Transnational coalitions have always been an integral part of feminist and queer activism, with creative and humorous expressions serving as important strategies for mobilising public attention and empathy. The specificities of media regulation, censorship, and industry development set the boundaries of my book's research, which focuses mainly on feminist and queer media culture in mainland China. However, it is important for readers to not perceive this book solely as a book about China, as transnational and transregional connections and exchanges play a crucial role in the phenomena examined.

My book addresses several significant transnational dimensions. First, the international and UN human rights framework is crucial in the tactical use of rights by feminist and queer activists. Notions of feminist rights and LGBT rights are influenced by UN conventions and widely discussed and disseminated in conferences such as the Asian Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. International bodies like UN China and Oxfam actively promote gender equality in China and provide support to feminist and queer NGOs.

Acknowledging the importance of previous Sinophone queer thinking and activism in Hong Kong and Taiwan, this book adopts approaches such as inter-Asia referencing to highlight the transnational politics of knowledge production and the complexity and multiplicity of Chineseness. Particularly, it traces the formations of transnational film festival networks like the Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance (APQFFA) and the Network of Asian Women's Film Festival. The inclusion of queer films from Tonga in the APQFFA network raises questions about Pacific indigeneity within the transpacific context, which has the potential to challenge existing epistemic structures of queer theory based on the binary of West/non-West or non-indigenous/indigenous. I see potential in a South–South coalition through such transnational exchanges and practices.

This vision of global and local connection is also shared by feminist practices, as demonstrated by the 2013 feminist school held in Beijing, which brought together activists from Mexico, South Korea, and China. The Queer University group also practised a South–South coalition. In addition to the content introduced in my book, the group developed a participatory video training program (2017–19) between Chinese and African queer activists. ∎

Clean Air at What Cost?
A Conversation with Denise van der Kamp

Coraline GORON, Denise VAN DER KAMP

Clean Air at What Cost? The Rise of Blunt Force Regulation in China (Cambridge University Press, 2023)

China's green transition is often perceived as a lesson in authoritarian efficiency. In a mere few years, the state managed to improve air quality drastically without apparent resistance from the market. In *Clean Air at What Cost? The Rise of Blunt Force Regulation in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), Denise van der Kamp explains how the Chinese Government has tackled industrial pollution, with what effects, and what limits. The book centres on the concept of 'blunt force regulation' (BFR), which is examined through the extremely costly blanket factory shutdowns and demolitions that have been observed across China over the past decade. Van der Kamp is the first to provide a solid explanation for it. Drawing on two years of fieldwork in China's industrial heartlands during which she collected significant qualitative and quantitative data, she argues that BFR is a way for the central government to force local bureaucrats to comply with environmental policies and targets that otherwise would not be implemented. It is therefore a sign not of the efficiency of authoritarianism, but of its inability to induce compliance through traditional regulatory means. This study not only sheds new light on the long-debated 'implementation gap' in China's environmental policy, but also makes an important conceptual contribution to the study of regulation in authoritarian regimes.

Coraline Goron: If we try to define BFR, at what level of analysis would you place it? Would you classify it as a policy tool or would you rather call it an enforcement mechanism? In public policy, we tend to distinguish between 'command and control' measures, such as regulatory standards, and 'market-oriented' policy instruments like emissions trading. There are hot debates about their relative efficacy and efficiency. The Chinese Government also uses these instruments. We also know that China has developed its own enforcement mechanisms, such as the 'target responsibility system', which evaluates and sanctions the performance of local officials on specified environmental indicators, and, under President Xi Jinping, the use of central and provincial environmental inspections of local environmental issues, which have led to a wave of fines and punishments. How does BFR interact with the concomitant use of other policy instruments and enforcement mechanisms to address pollution in China?

Denise van der Kamp: I would classify BFR as both a policy tool and an enforcement mechanism. By blunt force regulation, I refer to the Chinese Government's use of indiscriminate, inflexible methods to reduce pollution—such as rapidly shuttering companies to address local pollution problems. I argue that political leaders use these extreme measures to force local leaders to take immediate action on pollution, especially after prolonged failures in pollution control. In contrast, the

Air Pollution in Beijing. PC:
Kentaro Iemoto (CC), Wikimedia
Commons

target responsibility system—where central leaders use targets and promotion incentives to motivate local leaders to implement policies—is much more vulnerable to shirking and noncompliance. In other words, BFR is a response to the failures of the target responsibility system. As for the central environmental inspections that you mention—where central leaders use anticorruption-style inspection campaigns to catch noncompliance—I agree that this is also one of Beijing's tools to overcome the weakness of the target responsibility system. However, as I discuss in more detail below (and in Chapter 6 of my book), there are some serious limitations to this approach.

While BFR may be grabbing the headlines, the Chinese Government is also using less extreme methods to reduce pollution, including market mechanisms (such as emissions trading), naming and shaming, or a more conventional, standards-based approach to regulation (such as punishing firms for failing to meet new emissions criteria). These tools have had varying levels of success but there is no doubt that the government is committed to expanding their use. Just look at how Beijing has invested in developing infrastructure that can monitor firm-level emissions or its efforts to recalibrate regulators' authority and incentives so they are less vulnerable to local political interference. Standards-based regulation in China is not just window dressing.

However, a key point in my book is that BFR undermines these other policy tools, especially standards-based regulation. What is the point of elevating local regulators' authority if political leaders can simply

override that authority and impose a three-month shutdown to deliver blue skies? What is the point of investing in systems to build more cooperative relations between regulators and firms if these same regulators are then charged with abruptly cutting off power to factories—a common tactic for reducing emissions? One would assume that as standards-based regulation begins to take hold, Beijing would start to phase out BFR to prevent these two approaches from undercutting each other, but data I collected show otherwise: BFR and standards-based regulation are still being used with similar levels of intensity all over China. It will be interesting to see how the Chinese Government manages these conflicting policy tools as it pushes ahead with its net-zero ambitions for economic development.

CG: Your book offers a powerful theory to explain why the Chinese Government resorts to BFR: that it is a top-down coercive response to the lack of enforcement by local officials. You explain that it works by removing all local discretion from implementation. This is a credible explanation for the widely acknowledged 'implementation gap' in China's environmental policy. It also debunks fallacious theories predicting that China's 'environmental authoritarianism' would be more effective in addressing environmental issues because of its strong capacity to impose unpopular measures. However, you do not fully elaborate on the link between this necessity to coerce local governments into action and the nature of the political regime in China. So, what political factors contribute to BFR? Could it happen in any context where there is political will but a major implementation gap or is it distinctive to China's political and governance system (regardless of whether we call it authoritarian, Leninist, corporatist, or state-capitalist with Chinese characteristics)?

DVDK: BFR is not unique to China. I argue that it can happen in any context where there is political will to enforce policy at the top but weak compliance on the ground. Indeed, in my book, I explore several cases outside China—in the Philippines, India, and the United Kingdom—to show that BFR is a more general political phenomenon, and one of a set of potential responses to the principal–agent problems that occur in regulatory enforcement. A state does not have to be authoritarian or lacking in regulatory capacity to engage in BFR.

However, I do show that the character of BFR—including how forceful or indiscriminate it is—is shaped by institutional features such as a state's enforcement and coercive capacity. It may be more severe and last longer in authoritarian states because leaders can use coercive powers to sustain enforcement despite public pushback. Cases also show that weak resource capacity can limit the scale of BFR; otherwise, leaders will find that their resources are spread too thin. Thus, China's unusual combination of high coercive power (leading to more severe BFR) and weak enforcement effectiveness (leading to a need for more frequent BFR) means it may be distinctive in the severity, breadth, and length of its blunt-force campaigns.

CG: You argue that the Chinese State's lack of infrastructural power explains its weak capacity. You define 'infrastructural power', following Michael Mann, as the incapacity of state leaders to enforce binding rules across a territory. You further elaborate that this incapacity is due to a lack of credible punishments of violations of environmental norms, which stems from the lack of incentives for local officials to enforce these norms, and from the weakness of institutions—such as an independent judiciary, an empowered civil society, and a free press—capable of controlling them. But is infrastructural power necessarily stemming from the effectiveness of these rule-of-law institutions or could it be that an authoritarian regime like China's has its own (non-democratic) types of infrastructural power—notably, through the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda, discipline, and cadre management systems?

DVDK: By weak infrastructural power, I mean simply weak enforcement effectiveness—that is, political leaders cannot get local politicians or powerful local actors (such as large polluting firms) to consistently obey their orders. But the awkward thing about infrastructural power is that we cannot easily predict when it will be weak or strong. States with immense resources and coercive power may still lack infrastructural power, while states with limited resources and weak centralised authority may still develop strong infrastructural power—as I illustrate in Chapter 8 of my book. This is because infrastructural power is ultimately a *relational* outcome. A ruler's enforcement effectiveness depends on the reactions and the power of the groups they are trying to control, and these fluctuate constantly. Thus, when both rulers and the ruled wanted economic development in China, leaders did not have to work too hard to get local officials and firms to do as they wanted (other than setting down relatively stable, profit-focused incentives). But when the rulers started pushing for more environmental protection, and at the expense of the industries that had been made powerful by years of economic development, China's leaders suddenly found that incentives and resources were not enough to enforce policies effectively.

Does this mean that if China is to avoid BFR, it will need independent courts or powerful third-party organisations that can force both rulers and the ruled to follow through on the promises they make to each other? Perhaps. Certainly, this was key to the evolution of infrastructural power in European liberal democracies. Or maybe a more realistic alternative in China's case would be to solve the *relational* problem in environmental policy implementation—that is, rulers must simply convince local bureaucrats and powerful firms that it is also in their interest to clean up the environment. And we do see some advances on this front. There appears to have been a substantive change in promotion incentives, where—in wealthier areas at least—leading cadres are being promoted for environmental performance over economic growth. Beijing has developed increasingly sophisticated data-gathering mechanisms to monitor pollution, including real-time emissions monitoring of large polluters in all Chinese cities, which makes it easier to spot when firms (or their political protectors) are violating the rules. Finally, the anticorruption campaign has spooked local officials and seems to be disrupting collusive state–business relations. This could be why

anticorruption investigations are associated with decreases in pollution levels, even when central *pollution* inspections appear to have limited long-term effects on pollution levels (as I show in van der Kamp 2021).

Perhaps these party-based reward and punishment mechanisms—especially when backed by new real-time data—will reshape local officials' priorities, leading them to believe that the environment *is* the most important goal. This way, the state would build infrastructural power in environmental policy implementation without needing independent courts or binding institutional commitments. However, studies suggest that infrastructural power built on an alignment of interests tends to be short-lived, porous, and vulnerable to shifts in how the society or the local state views their leaders' priorities. Which brings us back to the question of what, in China's case, constitutes a more enduring form of infrastructural power. I do not have any definitive answers on this yet, but it is something I am continuing to research.

CG: What I find very ambitious in your book is that you not only develop your theory based on fieldwork data and case studies, but also test it empirically through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. As a side note, I really enjoyed the fact that you open each chapter with a fieldwork anecdote or interview quote; it makes the argument so much more palatable! So, I would like to dwell on the empirical demonstration. In Chapter 4, for instance, you find that BFR is more often used in localities with low revenue per capita. Could you explain why BFR is not simply the result of a lack of implementation resources—that is, the weakness of the local environmental bureaus? Since arm's-length regulation requires government financial and technical capacity to monitor and deter polluters, one could argue that they would undertake BFR because they cannot afford effective arm's-length regulation.

DVDK: I entirely buy the argument that BFR is in some ways an easier solution to environmental problems when local environmental agencies lack the money and personnel to implement policies. In fact, I came across a local official who said exactly this—that BFR is sometimes preferable, not just because it is easier to shut firms than to monitor them, but also because it makes it easier for local bureaucrats to cover up past misdeeds. When a firm is found guilty of pollution violations through monitoring, this leads to investigations into which bureaucrat failed to do their duty. But when all firms are presumed to be violators and punished indiscriminately, there is no need to inquire into which regulator has been corrupt or who has shirked their responsibility. In effect, BFR allows local officials and bureaucrats to evade personal responsibility for implementation failures. Of course, these advantages might drive local officials to independently undertake BFR to meet pollution reduction targets—just as you suggest.

However, this book focuses on an adjacent phenomenon, in which higher-level leaders (provincial and above) order local leaders to shutter firms to address pollution problems. In other words, I focus on top-down implementation orders, not efforts initiated at the city or county level. For instance, the quantitative data I used focus on orders coming from top-level ministries, in which local regulators are given
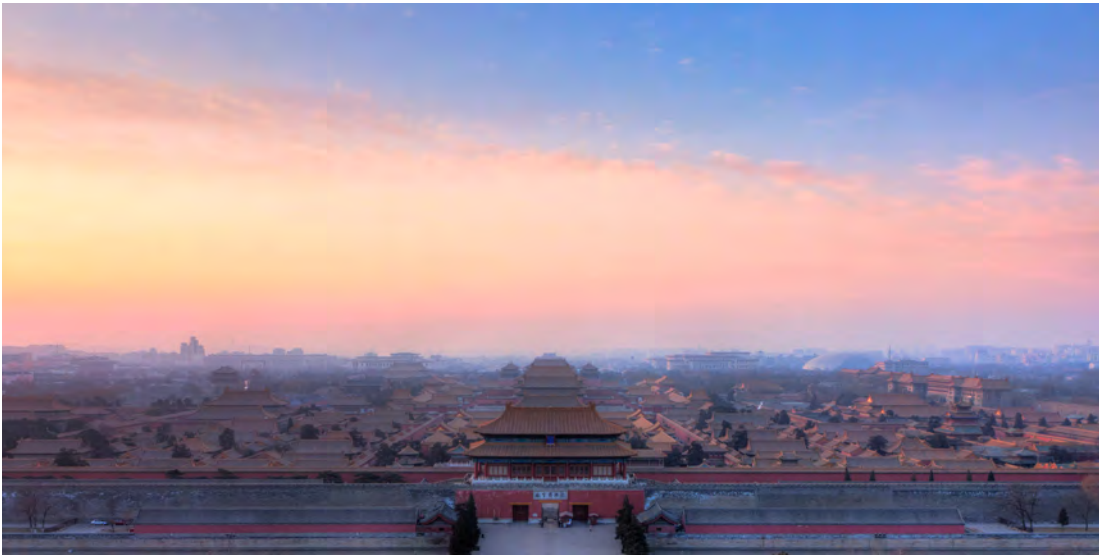
The Forbidden City seen from Coal Hill. PC: Pixelflake (CC), Flickr.com

lists of firms that they must close or downsize by a deadline. In interviews, I confirmed that these lists constituted orders coming down from higher levels. Thus, my quantitative analysis shows a positive association between low enforcement resources and *top-down* orders to undertake BFR (not locally initiated BFR).

Could it be that top leaders are ordering local officials to use BFR because they know it is less resource intensive than standards-based regulation? Perhaps. Certainly, BFR is not about singling out and punishing local officials in the manner of an anticorruption campaign. However, BFR is still very painful (leading to job cuts and revenue losses), especially in the top-down form that, as I show, is directed at resource-poor regions that are least able to recover from the economic blow. This is not a decision that leaders undertake lightly. Moreover, this economic cost will also deter local officials from undertaking BFR just to overcome the resource shortages that prevent enforcement through more conventional measures. This is why I argue that top-down policies to rectify noncompliance are also part of the equation; BFR cannot be all from local initiative.

CG: To write this book, you spent several years in China and collected data in various provinces. Doing fieldwork in China has always been challenging, even though it was perhaps easier a few years ago than now. Could you tell us a bit more about your experience? What did you find most challenging and most rewarding?

DVDK: When I started my fieldwork, I had some strong hypotheses on fiscal capacity and environmental outcomes and planned to conduct case studies to test these predictions. However, the more places I visited, the more I was distracted by stories of concentrated factory shutdowns

and unpredictable enforcement tactics. After a while, I realised that I could either write a boring book on fiscal capacity or investigate this more interesting question of why factory shutdowns had become so widespread.

The challenge was finding people who would talk about this phenomenon. But the rewarding part was once I did gain access, I found that many people, especially firm owners, were asking the same questions as me. Why was this happening? Why was the government setting up conventional regulation and promising firms they would be rewarded for good behaviour, only to shut greener firms as well as heavy polluters? It was also striking that local regulators—the very actors tasked with carrying out BFR—were largely sympathetic to firms, agreeing that one-size-fits-all methods were intensely frustrating for factory owners. One local official even suggested that firms would be more self-regulating and compliant if they were given the time to build up compliance after new standards were introduced. So, if both Chinese regulators and Chinese firms agreed that incentive-based methods were the better option, why were they not being used?

Once I formulated these questions, it took several more interviews and case studies to develop some answers. I also had to look for data that could tell us something about this phenomenon and relied on a lot of knowledgeable colleagues for tips on where I might find these data. Hopefully, all this has led to a much more interesting product than that abandoned book on fiscal capacity.

CG: Finally, going back to the institutional weaknesses that may underpin China's lack of infrastructural power—especially the weakness of the judiciary and the lack of civil society—I was wondering how to square this argument with my and others' research findings on China's environmental civil society. I am fully on board with you on the fact that the power of civil society in China is severely constrained. In the past decade, the political, legal, and societal environments for nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have become more repressive and those who want to continue have come under stronger pressure to 'accommodate power' by aligning their goals and actions with those of the state and 'steering clear of anything understood as opposition' (O'Brien 2022: 15–16). This unfortunate trend tends to compound your argument about civil society's weakness and inability to control power and regulate polluting firms. However, in my research, I find evidence to the contrary. First, local officials fear the public exposure of environmental problems, which attracts the attention of higher-level regulators and therefore tremendously increases the risks of triggering BFR and political and legal punishments. I found that local environmental NGOs and activists skilfully use this fear of exposure to pressure local officials to enforce environmental standards. While this often occurs beyond public view, it can be effective. Some environmental NGOs have developed highly professional skills that make them valuable, if sensitive, enforcement partners for the government. Of course, this capacity hinges on the 'conditional tolerance' (Lu and Steinhardt 2020) of the central Party-State towards them, but within these boundaries, I believe environmental civil regulation has a role to play.

DVDK: I agree that environmental civil society in China is incredibly sophisticated. I am also impressed by Chinese environmental NGOs and activists and their skill in navigating boundaries or identifying pressure

points, which they then leverage to get the government to cooperate. It is striking that, as you point out, there is such dense interaction and cooperation between environmental NGOs and local officials, even as the formal space for NGO activity shrinks. Going forward, one of the big debates will be whether this dense cooperation leads to some kind of cooptation, constraining the power of NGOs to monitor enforcement or keep local regulators accountable on a large scale. I look forward to seeing how your work or work by others in this area—for instance, Li Yao, the author of the seminal book *Playing by the Informal Rules* (2018)—pushes forward this debate. ■

Surveillance Cameras in Beijing. PC: Nir Sinay (CC).
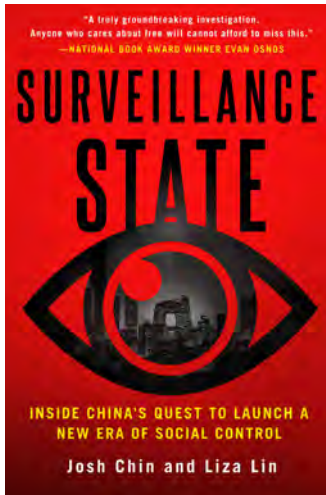
Surveillance State
A Conversation with Josh Chin

Darren BYLER, Josh CHIN

Surveillance State Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control (St Martin's Publishing Group, 2022)

In their new book, *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control* (St Martin's Publishing Group, 2022), investigative reporters Josh Chin and Liza Lin examine the emergence of automation-assisted digital surveillance in China and in spaces of Chinese development around the world. Drawing from reporting done in Xinjiang, eastern China, Uganda, and elsewhere, they tell a gripping story of the way China's immense bureaucratic state is being integrated with cutting-edge technology, producing a form of authoritarian state power that is unprecedented in the way it moves from consumer convenience to authoritarian control. At the same time, Chin and Lin's work expands the object of critique beyond the Chinese political and economic system, to understand digital surveillance as a contemporary global phenomenon arising simultaneously from multiple centres—namely, China, the United States, and Israel. They also humanise the issue by telling stories of what privacy and surveillance look like on the ground from Uyghur, Han, and Ugandan citizen perspectives. The reporting that forms the core of this project began in 2016 and 2017 and, along with the reporting of Megha Rajagopalan, Gerry Shih, and others, it shaped global understanding of the way technology was being utilised to perpetrate automated forms of anti-Muslim racism that rose to the level of crimes against humanity in northwestern China.

Darren Byler: One of the most fascinating points you and Liza raise in your book is the way Chinese citizens think of the term 'privacy' (隐私). You show how usage of the term has skyrocketed since China shifted towards a technology-driven market economy. If you search 隐私 in Google Books Ngram Viewer, you see there has been a 350 per cent increase in usage between 2010 and 2019. Yet, at the same time, one of your interviewees suggests that 'many people [in China] can't grasp the concept of privacy'. Can you speak about this rise in thinking about privacy, security, and surveillance and whether you found any discontinuities between China and the other spaces to which you travelled in your research for the book?

Josh Chin: It's funny reading that quote now. One realisation we came to in writing the book and talking with readers about it afterwards is that a lot of people everywhere, not just in China, have trouble grasping the concept of privacy. Or maybe it's more accurate to say almost everyone has a hard time defining privacy and, by extension, figuring out when, how, and how vigorously to defend it.

In the United States, there's a fascinating body of research that shows consistent contradictions between what Americans say about the value of privacy and the value they ascribe to it in real life. The obvious example here is how easily the United States embraced the efflorescence of state surveillance after 9/11. But there are countless other examples, especially in the current era when it's no secret that social media platforms are sharing our data regularly with the government, yet we continue to use them more or less as we did before.

The conversation about privacy is especially fascinating in China because of how quickly it's evolving. When we started looking at digital surveillance, it was really only intellectual elites—the sort of people whose work you'd expect to be captured by an Ngram search—who would actively engage with our questions about privacy protection. Most people we talked to, even relatively savvy middle-class folks living in rich cities like Beijing and Hangzhou, didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it. They didn't have a real reason to. That is, until Covid zero.

When the Omicron variant hit Shanghai in 2022 and the Chinese Communist Party started using its surveillance technology to track residents and enforce lockdowns, a lightbulb seemed to flicker on for a lot of people. Suddenly, members of the Han majority were experiencing the sharp end of surveillance. You started to see more public pushback against tracking tools like facial recognition—to the point where the government recently came out with draft rules restricting its use. None of those rules will ultimately apply to the government itself, but the fact that Chinese leaders feel the need to be seen as restricting a core surveillance tool is a testament to the degree of public suspicion. Where things go from here is very difficult to say, but I don't think there's any doubt that a significant percentage of the population in wealthy Chinese cities is far more attuned to privacy than before the pandemic.

DB: You argue in the book that Chinese technology companies are building on a model of 'surveillance capitalism' pioneered by companies like Facebook and Google—a model of capital accumulation that in Shoshana Zuboff's conceptualisation focuses on harvesting behavioural data to build prediction products—but that Chinese companies are using it in ways that are both similar and different. The most prominent of these differences is the exceptional relationship they have with state security. Another important difference is in the way Chinese platforms are integrated across many domains of the economy as super-apps. So, for instance, Alibaba and Tencent have access to the same kinds of consumer data as Amazon, but they also know where 'users spend time, who their relatives and friends are, what movies they like, how much electricity they use, and what they like to do on vacation' (p. 107). Do you feel that Chinese companies are less focused on eliciting desire through the attention economy and advertising than US-based platforms, and more focused on intensifying convenience and control? To what extent is population management part of the business model of mainstream technology companies in China?

JC: It comes down to environment and incentives. Alibaba, Tencent, and almost any other private Chinese tech company you can think of take Silicon Valley as their inspiration. And the core mission that drives

them is the same one that drives your Googles and Facebooks: upend established ways of doing things (ideally, but not necessarily, for the better) to accumulate mountains of money. But China is not California.

Part of the reason Chinese tech companies ended up prioritising all-in-one convenience, versus a narrow focus on attention, is in part because daily life in China used to be so inconvenient. Everything was done in cash, and the bureaucracy was maddening. Something as basic as paying your electricity bill meant dragging yourself to the post office and standing in line for an hour. If you're an internet company competing for users, one of the biggest value propositions you can offer is removing that friction from people's lives by giving them a platform where they can do everything with a couple of button clicks.

That approach became even more entrenched once companies developed the ability to do sophisticated behavioural analysis with those data. No successful tech company is allowed to exist in China for long without proving its utility to the Communist Party. Once Alibaba and Tencent realised they could sell their data as a behavioural crystal ball to government officials, that became a core part of the business model. And in a country where the domestic security budget rivals the budget for the military, it's a lucrative business to be in, even if you strip out the political necessity.

DB: Another important aspect of the book is that you show how Chinese surveillance systems travel transnationally and then investigate on the ground in Uganda what this looks like. What were some of the major continuities and discontinuities from the way surveillance systems worked in Uganda relative to China? Beyond the price point and logistical convenience of using Chinese systems, did you get a sense that Chinese technology was viewed by Ugandan authorities as better adapted to antidemocratic purposes?

JC: It's important to keep in mind when talking about exports of surveillance technology that China isn't the only country doing it. In Uganda, the Chinese company that eventually won the bid to build the country's surveillance system, Huawei, was competing with Genetec, a Canadian firm. Uganda's security forces had previously purchased spyware from an Israeli firm. There was nothing in the Chinese technology per se that made it better for suffocating political opposition.

The difference was in China's sales approach. Before Huawei won the bid, the Chinese Embassy arranged for Ugandan police to travel to Beijing to get a firsthand look at how the Public Security Bureau used the technology to impose control on society. After Huawei won the bid, we discovered that Huawei employees had helped Ugandan security forces hack into the encrypted communications of a top opposition leader—seeming confirmation of the company's reputation for no-holds-barred customer service.

So, there's no doubt that China sells instruction in its approach to surveillance along with the surveillance systems themselves. The trick: there might not be another country on Earth that has the capacity to

copy China's model, which requires both an immense budget and a sprawling, relatively competent, and disciplined bureaucracy. Uganda certainly can't match China in that respect. As a result, its application of state surveillance to political control turned out to be much messier. But in the end, it succeeded in helping keep Uganda's leader, Yoweri Museveni, in power and, for Beijing, that's probably all that matters.

DB: The reporting you have done on the situation in Xinjiang has shaped global understanding of the speed, scope, and scale of surveillance in that context. In the book, you show this by tracking the emergency response time of police to a test run of one of the thousands of 'convenience police stations'. You show the overwhelming scale by drawing on Tahir Hamut's observations of vans being loaded with detainees from his neighbourhood in Ürümqi day after day after day. Near the end of the book, you note that Xinjiang is a place where the surveillance appears to really work, while elsewhere in China it's 'riddled with blindspots'. What are some of the features of surveillance in Xinjiang that make it truly a limiting case of the surveillance state that is difficult to replicate elsewhere? Were the protests we saw across China in November 2022 in some ways against the spread of Xinjiang-style surveillance? Or do you see surveillance of 'ideological diseases' in Xinjiang as quite delinked from China's pandemic controls?

JC: I'm so glad you brought up the November 2022 protests, because they're essential to understanding the dynamics of state surveillance, in Xinjiang and in the rest of China as well.

Not long after I came home to Beijing after my first reporting trip to Xinjiang in 2017, I described what I'd seen there to a Han Chinese human-rights lawyer. Without skipping a beat, he said what was happening in Xinjiang was just a preview of what was coming for the rest of the country. I remember being sceptical at the time. It seemed like hyperbole from someone who'd maybe spent too much time confronting the extremes of Communist Party power. Fast-forward to January 2020 and the start of the pandemic. Suddenly, residential compounds are funnelling residents through a single entry point and checking IDs, just like the government did in Xinjiang. A few months later, everyone has to download a health code app that tracks their movement and rates them according to the infection risk they pose—a replica of the way the government tracked the spread of 'ideological viruses' among Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

The parallels became even more pronounced once the Omicron variant arrived and cities like Shanghai rolled out all the surveillance technology they had to keep people locked inside their apartments. Shanghai in the spring of 2022 was even more dystopian than Ürümqi in the totality of physical control imposed on an urban population.

But the differences became apparent eight months later. The protests that broke out that winter were astounding; we hadn't seen people in China direct a collective middle finger at the Party like that since 1989. There was a limit to the state control people would accept and the Party

had ploughed head-first into it. But that limit doesn't exist in Xinjiang because the Party has succeeded in terrorising Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims into submission. They never had the numbers or the power to resist. It's ironic that the 2022 protests started in Ürümqi with a deadly fire in an apartment building occupied by Uyghurs. Locals blamed pandemic controls for obstructing firefighters, but it later emerged that the crowds that filled the streets had been overwhelmingly dominated by Han Chinese. Uyghurs were too afraid to join, even though it was their friends and relatives who had burned. ■

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