

MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 9, ISSUE 1, JAN-JUN 2024

BENDING CHINESENESS

Culture and Ethnicity after Xi



MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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EDITORIAL

Bending Chineseness

Culture and Ethnicity after Xi

A new Chinese Government textbook for university students, *An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race* (中华民族共同体概论), promotes President Xi Jinping's vision for governing the country's diverse population. This approach shifts away from celebrating cultural differences—what the political scientist Susan McCarthy once termed 'communist multiculturalism'—and towards a Han-dominant identity, which is a form of racial nationalism inspired by sociologist Fei Xiaotong's concept of 'multiple origins, single body' (多元一体). While the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as amended in 2018 guarantees minority rights and political autonomy through the framework of 'minority nationalities' (少数民族), the textbook suggests that Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongols, and other Indigenous groups should eventually assimilate into Han culture, raising concerns about the future of minority languages and traditions. President Xi's new approach to national unity has faced significant resistance from both minority and Han officials. Yet, this resistance only prompted an even more muscular response: revamping government departments, harsh crackdowns in minority-populated areas, and removing minority officials who oversaw ethnic affairs. In this issue, we ask contributors to reflect on the state of ethnic minority culture in the wake of Xi's new ethno-nationalist order and explore what remains of cultural differences at the end of dreams of communist pluralism and ethnic autonomy.

We open with an essay in which **Juan Qian** explores the implications of historical disputes about the Qing Dynasty for China's national identity and territorial claims, particularly given the current efforts by the Chinese Government to promote a unified 'Chinese national community'. **Thomas White** discusses how longstanding derogatory associations between peoples of the frontiers and animals have been reworked in twenty-first-century China both by

minority artists and activists and by new imaginaries of nation-building and connectivity in the Xi era. **Jenny Chio** draws from the recollections of two Miao women to delve into the experience of being seen or being asked to be looked at as a minority person in China, arguing that the most powerful aspect of Chinese multiculturalism today is how it functions on the assumption that it cannot be so difficult to be oneself. **Suvi Rautio** delves into how the Chinese Government's 'Traditional Village' heritage scheme validates statist views on tradition and Chinese civilisation while at the same time offering new ways of understanding discourse about ethnicity and multiculturalism. **Ye Yang** examines the dynamics of the integration of the Liangshan Yi ethnic group into China's labour market, showing how, as their participation in migrant labour increases, they are confronted with major challenges, including precarious employment conditions, exploitation by intermediaries, and social marginalisation. As Uyghurs face policies of forced assimilation in China, **Mirshad Ghalip** focuses on the role of attitudes and ideologies in Uyghur heritage language maintenance through the stories of four individuals based in the United States. **Ruslan Yusupov** discusses China's national campaign to 'Sinicise Islam' (伊斯兰教中国化) through the lens of the architectural renovations of some famous mosques. Finally, **Dawa Lokyitsang** asks the question 'Are Tibetans indigenous?', arguing that scholars must highlight the political stakes as well as the potentiality of why a group of people would or would not identify as indigenous.

This issue also features a forum in which contributors offer different perspectives on how Blackness has been imagined, defined, or practised in different moments of PRC history, from Black Panther visits to China and anti-racist solidarity in the Mao period, to the multilayered ambiguities of Global China today. **Huang Mingwei** explores contemporary formations of Chinese antiblackness by staging a conversation between Africa-China studies and theories of anti-blackness—namely, Afro-pessimism. **Derek Sheridan** takes on the contentiousness of writing about race in Africa-China relations and points out how these tensions are related to other contentions about the nature of political-economy asymmetries in these relations, and the politics of knowledge production regarding who is speaking about whom. **Kun Huang** traces early translations of Black literature in Republi-

can-era China and unpacks the parallel visions of the Harlem Renaissance that travelled across the Pacific. **Ruodi Duan** deconstructs the high tide of encounters between China and African American liberation movements during the Maoist era, highlighting how, while Chinese narratives in the 1960s promoted a linear vision of Black militancy that would join forces with the white working class, Black Power activists engaged with Maoism as a framework for a politics of racial nationalism that did not always aspire to interracial and anti-capitalist coalition-building. **Zifeng Liu** attempts to recover Mabel Robinson Williams, an African American radical woman, as a key figure in the history of Black internationalism in China, revealing and interrogating the gendered and sexualised terms under which she appears in the Chinese archive of Afro-Asian solidarity. **Maya Singhal** explores Black and Chinese collaborations in quality-of-life crimes—fare evasion and illegal street vending of counterfeit designer goods—in New York City’s Chinatown to consider how these minor crimes and everyday activities might be sites in which to develop working-class, anti-state solidarities. **Fred Lai** and **Qidi Feng** engage **Noo Saro-Wiwa** about her novel *Black Ghost*, in which she explores the lives of several African economic migrants living in China. Finally, we feature a couple of excerpts from **Yvonne A. Owuor’s** novel *The Dragonfly Sea*, with an original introduction by the author.

This issue also features several essays on assorted topics in the China Columns section. **Yangyang Cheng** examines the long history of US–China academic exchange to offer a critique of the concept of open science as a depoliticising myth that conceals the uneven structures of power undergirding knowledge production and transmission. **Luke Hein** sketches a few scenes from his time teaching a general interest class about China in Alabama State correctional facilities, demonstrating that US prisons represent an underserved but fertile site for China Studies. Tackling China’s Three-Child Policy, **Susan Greenhalgh** argues for the need to discuss population as a question of governance rather than numbers and asks what the Chinese authorities are doing in the name of population, what is most significant, and what forms of resistance are possible. **Yawen Li** takes creative expressions of solidarity from mainland China to recent global social movements about Ukraine and Gaza as a starting point to excavate the role of interna-


tionalism as a key dimension of radical leftist thought in modern Chinese history. **Monique Taylor** analyses the development of the digital yuan in the context of China’s broader economic and political strategies, including enhancing financial inclusion, centralising the nation’s payment ecosystem—currently dominated by private fintech players—and potentially challenging the US dollar’s global dominance. **Zhongxian Xiao** discusses how, while Chinese officials have been presenting a rosy image of high-speed railway growth under the label of ‘Chinese Speed’ since the 1980s, over the years the term has been redefined through a process of public contestation. **Chuling Adam Huang** delves into migration governance in a large-scale labour migration scheme in a Chinese city on the border with Vietnam, paying attention to the local government’s struggle to balance economic development goals with border security concerns. **Casey Wei** looks into *yabi*, a controversial Chinese subcultural phenomenon that has been around since the late 2010s, and argues that it exemplifies the return of the feminine supernatural—present throughout imperial and modern Chinese history—as a response to the challenges of the Anthropocene from the present-day involuted generation.

The issue also includes three opinion pieces. In the first, an anonymous former student of Uyghur scholar Rahile Dawut reacts to the life sentence meted out to her former mentor; in the second, **Darren Byler** and **Karissa Ketter** tackle China’s role in the Gaza crisis, pointing out how, while on the one hand the Chinese authorities seem to support Palestinian struggles, on the other, Chinese investment in Israeli infrastructure projects and colonial policing means they cannot be too vocal. In the third, **Kexin Zhao** and **Pan Cheng** discuss the uneven media coverage of the case of Chinese feminist activist and independent journalist Huang Xueqin and labour activist Wang Jianbing. In the Work of Arts section, **Chenchen Zhang** explores how the theories, plot, and characters of the *Three-Body Problem* series, a bestselling sci-fi trilogy by Liu Cixin that is now also a major Netflix series, are employed in Chinese digital discourse to illustrate visions of authoritarian, conservative, and misogynistic politics and to interpret the nature of international relations.

We conclude the issue with a series of conversations with the authors of recently released books and podcasts that might be of interest to our readers.

Ivan Franceschini discusses with **Yangyang Cheng** *Dissident at the Doorstep* (Crooked Media, 2024), the podcast on Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng that she co-hosted. **Jenny Chan** engages **Huaiyin Li** about his *Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* (Stanford University Press, 2023). **Andrea E. Pia** and **Federico Picerni** talk to **Margaret Hillenbrand** about her *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Columbia University Press, 2023). **Christian Sorace** chats with **Alessandro Russo** about his *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* (Duke University Press, 2020). **Elisabeth Forster** interviews **Zhongping Chen** about his *Transpacific Reform and Revolution: The Chinese in North America 1898–1918* (Stanford University Press, 2023). **Brendan Galipeau** has a dialogue with **Timothy McLellan** about his *Science Interrupted: Rethinking Research Practice with Bureaucracy, Agroforestry, and Ethnography* (Cornell University Press, 2024). **A.C. Baecker** talks to **Jennifer Dorothy Lee** about her *Anxiety Aesthetics: Maoist Legacies in China, 1978–1985* (University of California Press, 2024). Finally, **Ghassan Moazzin** engages **Margherita Zanasi** about her *Economic Thought in Modern China: Market and Consumption, c. 1500–1937* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). ■

The Editors



OP-EDS



Rahile Dawut.
Source: Lisa Ross (CC).

Rahile Dawut

A Lifetime Passion That Ended with a Life Sentence

ANONYMOUS

It was a busy Thursday afternoon when I received a text message that a human rights group in the United States, the Duihua Foundation, had confirmed that Rahile Dawut had been given a life sentence by a court in China. When I saw the message, everything went silent for a moment, just as it had six years earlier when I received a message telling me that Rahile Dawut had disappeared. She had told her family that she was going on a business trip to Beijing; that was the last they heard from her.

It is hard for people to understand what it feels like when someone who is close to you suddenly disappears from your life. You know she is alive, but you don't know where she is. More precisely, you can't even question it. It creates a huge feeling of grief inside, but you have no choice but to live with it. And you must be very careful about what you say, what you write, and whom you meet. You can't scream from the mountain tops that it is unfair or that this person doesn't deserve such cruelty, since all your friends and family back in Xinjiang could suffer the same fate as Professor Dawut if you do so.

Over these years, whenever I talk about Rahile Dawut, the most frequent question I am asked is: Why? What is the reason for her arrest? I have never been able to find a clear and concise answer. This is because there is none.

A Lifelong Passion

Rahile Dawut was born in 1966 into an intellectual family. She was the first Uyghur woman to gain a PhD in folklore studies (民俗学) from Beijing Normal University, as well as the only Uyghur student of famous Chinese folklorist Zhong Jingwen, who mentored numerous students who later became famous figures in folklore studies in China. Under the supervision of Zhong, Dawut carried out fieldwork in Chinese temple fairs (庙会) in Beijing and other places in central China. Then she started to focus on shrines and pilgrimage sites in Xinjiang and, in 1998, completed her PhD dissertation on that topic. She later published her findings as a book in Chinese with the title *A Study on Uyghur Shrine Culture* (维吾尔族麻扎文化研究), published by Xinjiang University Press in 2001. After obtaining her PhD, she became a professor at Xinjiang University, where she later founded the Xinjiang Folklore Research Centre, which she directed until her disappearance in 2017.

Professor Dawut's passion for her research was lifelong. Unlike many Uyghur scholars, her interests were wideranging, encompassing Uyghur shrines, religious activities, daily life, and local knowledge. The topics she studied included ecological knowledge, farming, craftsmanship, and other livelihoods. Her book *Uyghur Shrines* (*Uyghur Mazarliri*, published by Xinjiang People's Press in 2001), written in Uyghur, became a pilgrimage guidebook for Uyghurs in rural southern Xinjiang, gaining her significant respect and acceptance from the locals, who were also impressed by her humble attitude while doing ethnographic research among them. She helped many performers of Uyghur oral epics (*Dastan*) earn official status as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors' (非物质文化遗产传承人) at both the provincial and the national levels. This official title might sound contrived to outsiders, but it changed the lives of many people in rural Xinjiang, allowing them to receive a stable income from the state and ensuring they had official permission to perform throughout northwest China. In other words, she was a bridge between the locals and the Chinese State.

However, this bridge was always under threat. From the start of the anti-extremism campaigns in 2011, tightening controls on religious practices and belief became the norm in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, shrine visitations by pilgrims started to be prohibited, only a few of the shrines remained open to locals, and even then, only under police control. Professor Dawut was worried that, after 2009, along with the global spread of Islamic revival movements, Uyghur traditions would also come under pressure as many Uyghurs embraced strains of Islam that rejected local traditions.

Professor Dawut tried to focus more on other aspects of Uyghur life, such as local knowledge. In 2013, she received funding from the National Social Science Foundation of China to conduct research on local knowledge in Xinjiang, including local people's farming techniques and craftsmanship, and their knowledge of the environment and local plants. For her, rather than shaping and generalising Uyghur identity, what was more valuable was detailed attention to all aspects

Rahile Dawut was born in 1966 into an intellectual family. She was the first Uyghur woman to gain a PhD in folklore studies (民俗学) from Beijing Normal University

of Uyghurs' daily lives. She argued that much of the scholarship on Uyghur traditions and culture was romanticised and lacked specificity. The real Uyghur traditions lived among the people in their daily lives, so ethnography remained her focus.

Her efforts to follow state guidance did not help her survive the rapid political changes that beset the region. In 2012, the newly anointed Chinese Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping launched a drive to boost the 'shared consciousness of the Chinese national community' (中华民族共同体意识)—a term that conveyed the idea that all Chinese citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, should feel a sense of belonging to a unified Chinese nation. The campaign began to be implemented seriously in Xinjiang in 2014 and reached its peak in 2016 and 2017. Professor Dawut's work on Uyghur culture and tradition had served the previous policy of promoting the 'unity of the Chinese nationalities' (中华民族团结), celebrating the richness of China's cultural diversity. However, that same work did not fit with the new policy, which emphasised the shared identity of the Chinese nation, not its cultural diversity.

Under the new policies, her research could be seen as emphasising the cultural differences between minorities and the Han majority, or even as encouraging 'cultural separatism'. Any academic scholarship related to minority identity or culture became politically sensitive, even dangerous. At Xinjiang University, scholars engaged in the study of Uyghur language, literature, and culture started to vanish. These included the university's rector, the geographer Tashpolat Tiyp, the linguist Arslan Abdulla, and the folklorist Abdukerim Rahman, who tragically died while in home detention in late 2020. In November 2017, Professor Dawut was told by the head of the Humanities Department at the university that she needed to accompany him to Beijing for a research conference. The department head never went to Beijing: he remained at the department, while Professor Dawut became one of the disappeared.

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More Than a Mentor

During her more than 25 years as a scholar of Uyghur culture and folklore, Professor Dawut trained dozens of Uyghur students. She was famous at the university for her close relationship with her students. Room 604 in the Technology Building, the Xinjiang Folklore Research Centre, was where Dawut and her students used to work together. Unlike many other professors, she encouraged her students to go out into the field to conduct ethnographic research and understand the situation through personal experience. Dawut and her students were like an extended family: she took care of their financial, emotional, and personal problems; she was a problem-solver for each of us. Her home on the university campus was a place for her students to have parties and celebrations, and a place for them to go whenever they had difficulties.

She also helped students to find jobs. In 2017, when the Department of Humanities at Xinjiang University suddenly changed its MA graduation requirements, stating that all students could only submit dissertations written in Chinese, she paid RMB6,000 for the dissertations of two of her MA students to be translated from Uyghur to Chinese. During the several years I worked with Professor Dawut, she provided financial support for my long-term fieldwork in southern Xinjiang. Her care and positivity during that period transformed Ürümqi into my second home, and she became my closest friend. She demonstrated how one person's assistance could profoundly impact another's life. Even in the summer of 2017, as the political situation in Xinjiang deteriorated, she managed to free some of her students from police stations. This was only a few months before her own disappearance. Regrettably, when it happened to her, no-one was able to come to her rescue.

The fate of Rahile Dawut illustrates how the very existence of minority cultures is vulnerable to political change. What was once permitted can suddenly be perceived as a threat to the state when there is a shift in ideology. Her work, which was supported and funded by the Chinese Government for more than two decades, became a symbol of 'separatism' almost overnight. Her case is an example of how minority identities came to be reframed as a threat to the Chinese State as the Chinese Communist Party began putting more emphasis on its one-nation ideology.

Today, we witness staged presentations of Uyghur culture for tourists, offering a portrayal of a safe and friendly Xinjiang, while the authentic culture is criminalised and its practitioners, along with individuals like Rahile Dawut, who researched it with great passion, remain incarcerated.

The plight of Rahile Dawut holds no promise for the future of Uyghur culture. Even if she is released one day, she will not have the opportunity to witness the same culture she meticulously documented. We, as Uyghur and Western scholars outside China, are unable to return to Xinjiang and continue our research. If we do manage to revisit the region one day, we will not encounter the culture that we have diligently documented and to which we have dedicated our efforts for decades. The research conducted by Professor Dawut and many others has already become part of history. Nonetheless, in the eyes of her students and colleagues, the Uyghur culture documented by those imprisoned scholars continues to represent the authentic essence of Uyghur culture, just as Rahile Dawut remains the steadfast pillar of Uyghur studies. ■

The anonymous author is a Uyghur scholar who lives outside China. The author wishes to thank Professor Rachel Harris for her helpful feedback on the previous draft of this article.



A training video for Hikvision Israel describes how the company's algorithmic tools were trained on immense datasets of images of human faces.

On the Travel of State Crimes by Algorithm

Chinese Camera Systems in Israel

Darren BYLER, Karissa KETTER

In one of the opening scenes of *Surveillance State*, Josh Chin and Liza Lin (2022: 41) describe how then Xinjiang party secretary Chen Quanguo tested the response time of local police in front of a market in the Ürümqi Uyghur neighbourhood of Dawan in early 2017. In less than 54 seconds, a team from the nearest People's Convenience Station responded to a threat alert. But Chen was not satisfied. 'With every second shaved off the arrival of decisive force, public safety improves another notch,' the *Xinjiang Daily* quoted him as saying. This is what inspired him to build more than 9,000 People's Convenience Stations across the region and to hire tens of thousands of new security workers to be always on alert, monitoring automation-assisted surveillance systems to apprehend any red-coded or yellow-coded individuals at a moment's notice. It was part of what Chen referred to as his effort to bury Uyghur 'terrorists' in 'a People's War of tsunami-like proportions' (quoted in Chin and Lin 2022: 40). But more than burying Uyghurs, he wanted to create a system of automated apartheid that mirrored and distilled policing systems that were being developed in other parts of the contemporary world in the wake of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which contributed to an acceleration of the deployment and evolution of these technologies on a global scale.

The history of the GWOT and the Chinese use of such technologies to target Muslims domestically also informs China's mixed response to Israel's invasion of Gaza. On the one hand, the Chinese authorities

seem to support Palestinian struggles for autonomy (Çalışkan 2023). But, like China's support of the Assad regime in Syria, it appears that doing so is strategic—a means of fostering international support for the mass internment of Uyghurs in exchange for promises of economic aid (Global Times 2021; AP 2023). This stance is ultimately about opposing US imperialism, which is what they see as a driving force of Israel's approaches towards Palestinians and other Chinese allies in the Middle East. At the same time, Chinese investment in Israeli infrastructure projects and, perhaps more importantly, colonial policing means that the Chinese Government cannot be too vocal in its support for Palestinians (Wakabayashi et al. 2023). And the obvious resonances between the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and Chinese colonisation of Uyghur lands are often present in Chinese policing theory and ethnic policy (Byler 2023b; Lu and Cao 2014).

Industry Leaders

The system Chen was testing in Ürümqi was built in part by the world's largest camera manufacturer, Hikvision, a colossus that today has a presence in more than 190 countries, and its parent company, China Electronics Technology Corporation (CETC), a Chinese military contractor. CETC was responsible for building the Xinjiang-wide Integrated Joint Operations Platform, which aggregated and assessed data streams from across the region, tracking patterns in movement and social networks to decide who should be detained and when. Hikvision was responsible for more than US\$275 million in contracts to build biometric surveillance Safe City systems that were integrated within the platform (Yang 2022). It was also one of the leading tech firms to pioneer software that would automate the detection of watch-listed individuals, placing all populations assessed in a colour-coded stop-light system. Moreover, it developed automated detection parameters such as a 'Uyghur alarm' that would read the phenotypes of Uyghur faces to predict their ethno-racial identity (Healy 2022). This type of automated policing is something that anthropologist Allen Feldman (2008) refers to as 'telling'—that is, drawing correlation between physical features to predict, at the scale of the targeted population, where detected individuals should be placed in relation to a colonial social order. As we will discuss below, this is precisely what Israel is attempting to do.

Since its battle-tested 'success' in the Xinjiang system in the late 2010s, Hikvision's international exports have expanded to the point that they now constitute more than 25 per cent of its revenue (Yang 2022). In many ways, Hikvision's international success is related to the quality and price of its products relative to those of its competitors. It sells facial-recognition camera systems more cheaply than Japanese and Euro-American manufacturers. But its market share is particularly notable in autocratic states where control of dissent and the colonised is prioritised, Israel included.

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Hikvision is perhaps best poised to meet Israel's intensifying drive to enclose Palestinian life. As of 2021, the company had more than 54,000 camera networks in Israel, with more than 35,000 in Tel Aviv alone (Migliano and Woodhams 2021). According to company sources, its products are used for the surveillance not only of Palestinians, but also of Israelis. For instance, the Israeli Government reportedly purchased 1,000 Hikvision cameras and another 1,000 from Go-Pro and Philips to photograph and monitor voting in their last general election (HVI 2022d). Israeli inspectors installed the discrete cameras on their uniform lapels to supervise voting and vote counting. But as a state contractor to the Israeli military, Hikvision places much of its focus on countering terrorism in the form of threats to critical infrastructure and, through the military's Red and Blue Wolf programs, identifying and tracking the faces of Palestinians themselves.

These programs are part of Israel's efforts to automatically assess the threat potential of Palestinians in real time. While the Blue Wolf program focuses on facial-recognition technology to identify individuals, its Red Wolf counterpart is reportedly a dataveillance system used for collecting and analysing a wide range of intelligence, including biometric data, to aid in security operations and decision-making. Essentially, both programs are integrated—like CETC's Integrated Joint Operations Platform and Hikvision's Safe City system in Xinjiang—and used to bind Palestinians in place, making them and their digital behaviour searchable in real time (Goodfriend 2023a).

For instance, Hikvision has reported that its cameras have been installed on railways throughout Israel to automate crowd control, monitor suspicious behaviour, and document the movements of certain individuals (HVI 2022b). Train drivers are also monitored for tiredness or distraction. All these systems, which are integrated into the Hikvision network and control centres, use colour-coded alert systems that can be remotely operated. To paraphrase Chen Judelevitz, the co-CEO of Hikvision's Israel-based distributor, HVI Israel, these alarm systems can be operated through mobile phone applications, integrate with closed-circuit television (CCTV), and alert officers to potential incidents within minutes (HVI 2022a).

A recent Amnesty International (2023: 57) report confirmed the presence of Hikvision cameras around Israeli checkpoints. In a subsequent report, *The New York Times* verified that the Blue Wolf system used a colour-coded stop-light alert system that was 'comparable' to the use of the system in north-west China (Satariano and Mozur 2023; Mozur 2023). Both reports expressed grave concerns that Hikvision's cameras were being used in combination with a Mabat 2000 system—an older system of non-automation-assisted surveillance cameras that blanket Muslim neighbourhoods in Jerusalem—to automate forms of apartheid across Israel/Palestine (Amnesty International 2023: 63). As HVI Israel noted, its AcuSense system, which is actively advertised to Israeli agencies and consumers, uses facial-recognition technology to identify people, behaviours, and vehicles (HVI 2022c). This technology—described in a manner eerily reminiscent of the imperative laid out by

To paraphrase Chen Judelevitz, the co-CEO of Hikvision's Israel-based distributor, HVI Israel, these alarm systems can be operated through mobile phone applications, integrate with closed-circuit television (CCTV), and alert officers to potential incidents within minutes.

Chen Quanguo in Xinjiang—drastically reduces the response time of authorities to any type of algorithm-predicted threat (HVI 2022c). As the anthropologist Sophia Goodfriend pointed out in a recent article, drawing on her research with the Israeli military and Palestinians in Hebron, what Israel is doing with its application of computer-vision surveillance systems is enacting many of the same terror-capitalism dynamics that Chinese companies such as Hikvision lobbied for in Xinjiang (Goodfriend 2023a).

Interdependence

The systems of automated apartheid control that are being used in Israel and Xinjiang are significant in at least two ways. First, at a macrolevel they show the interdependence, the *learning*, between contemporary colonial states in how to best colonise Muslim bodies and minds. Second, they speak to something that might be best described as a colonial uptake of 'digital resignation' that is manufactured by multinational corporations such as Hikvision (Draper and Turow 2019). This resignation means that military and police in both Israel and China hand over significant amounts of control of their borders, and their populations more generally, to the predictive capacities of non-thinking machines.

State violence by algorithm results in an overreliance on surveillance to offer settlers security in their dispossession of the colonised. This resulted most obviously in the delayed response to the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023, but even more importantly in the insulation of Israelis from the reality of colonial domination (Goodfriend 2023b). This distancing is part of what allows state violence by algorithm to be used to justify the brutalisation of entire populations—a normalisation of incarcerating, killing, and maiming Muslim bodies. In the case of Gaza, the use of predictive algorithms to determine targets for what was essentially the carpet bombing of Gaza produced mass civilian death—in what has aptly been called 'war crimes by algorithm' (Abraham 2023). In Xinjiang, a related brutality was expressed through the normalisation of the mass internment of regular Muslim citizens (Byler 2023b).

Over time, as the Israelis continue to mimic aspects of Chinese predictive policing tactics, Israeli Arab citizens are being deemed inherently threatening by Israeli police and subjected to arrest due to their online activity, including simple WhatsApp chats, as Israel's new expansion of its counterterrorism law—which criminalises consumption of 'terrorist materials'—comes into effect (Goodfriend 2023c). This directly mirrors the types of dataveillance that Chinese police use against Uyghurs. For more than a decade Palestinian movement has been tightly controlled through checkpoints and surveillance and, as Israeli security builds the capacity to assess at scale the encrypted messages of Palestinians, the intimacy and invasiveness of the digital enclosure will only intensify. Ultimately, as Neferti Tadiar (2022) describes in her writing on Palestine, disposable lifetimes are what such systems will produce—as they are intended to. ■

The authors wish to thank Dr Maya Wind for assistance with Hebrew texts used in this piece.



Montage of Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing. Source: Free XueBing Group.

On the Unbalanced Coverage of the XueBing Case

Kexin ZHAO, Pan CHENG

On 14 June 2024, the verdict in the case of Chinese feminist activist and independent journalist Huang Xueqin and labour activist Wang Jianbing (hereinafter referred to as the ‘XueBing case’) was finally announced. Both had been accused of ‘inciting subversion of state power’. After nearly 1,000 days of arbitrary detention, Huang was sentenced to five years in prison and Wang to three years and six months. Before being detained, Huang and Wang had organised regular gatherings and engaged deeply with activist communities in Guangzhou to rebuild civil society networks that had been suppressed for years. The authorities saw these efforts as a potential threat. The sudden arrest of the pair represented another major political crackdown by the Chinese Government on Guangzhou’s once vibrant civil society and highlights a shift in the focus of repression towards underground civil society networks.

Unfortunately, we have observed that there are significant imbalances and biases in media coverage of and solidarity campaigns surrounding the XueBing case that fail to accurately reflect the political significance of the case and the contributions of both individuals to social movements in China. After the verdict, several major international news outlets published stories about the case. For this op-ed, we conducted a systematic analysis of 20 original media reports in English and Japanese. Twelve of the selected reports feature direct interviews with the *Free XueBing* group, while the other eight are reports that rely on syndicated

material and statements from the group or human rights organisations. To avoid redundancy, we did not consider other articles that do not include original reporting. Given that reports in Chinese-language media (mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan for political reasons) often rely on syndicated material from other sources, it is reasonable to expect that coverage of the XueBing case in the Chinese-language press was significantly influenced by the reports from the major media outlets they reference, including the ones in our sample, but this is outside the scope of our analysis.

Our analysis reveals that none of the media reports in our sample mentioned both Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing in their headlines or in their featured images, even though both were co-defendants in the case. Overall, the media coverage was heavily skewed towards coverage of feminist activist Huang, with 12 reports making no mention of Wang other than his prison sentence; his name was mentioned only in passing. In the reports that covered both, the content on Huang took up far more space than that on Wang (more than three times as much on average). Even in the stories about Huang, the focus was exclusively on her role in advancing the #MeToo movement in China, while the important factors related to the charges against both individuals—such as their fight for freedom of speech and the right to organise community gatherings—were not mentioned at all by four foreign-language media outlets and glossed over by most of the others. Similar issues are also present in some of the solidarity campaigns.

This imbalance and skewed focus are both disheartening and deeply troubling, as they not only oversimplify or disregard the contributions of Chinese activists, but also highlight a lack of reflection in current discourse on the hierarchies embedded within social resistance. A similar situation can be observed in Hong Kong's '47-person case', in which the public discussions focused mainly on a few well-known activists involved in overtly political issues and neglected the others. This opinion piece takes the unbalanced coverage of the 'XueBing case' as a starting point to reflect on the problems that exist in the mainstream media's coverage of social resistance today.

Who Are XueBing and What Led to Their Arrest?

On 19 September 2021, Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing were taken from the latter's apartment by Guangzhou police and placed in solitary confinement. It was later reported that they were detained on suspicion of 'inciting subversion of state power'. Huang is known for her role in sparking the #MeToo movement in China by exposing a sexual harassment case involving a professor at Beihang University (Lin and Mai 2024). In 2019, she was placed under Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location (RSDL)—a coercive measure often used by the Chinese authorities to suppress human rights defenders, who are held

in secret solitary confinement and interrogated under torture, without access to lawyers or family members—for three months for her reporting on Hong Kong’s ‘Anti-Extradition Law Amendment’ movement. Wang is a low-profile, veteran non-profit worker and dedicated labour activist largely unknown to the public (Lin 2024). After graduating from university, he became involved in non-profit work, initially focusing on rural development and education for left-behind children in rural areas of northwest China. Later, he moved to Guangzhou to work on the development of civil society organisations and the empowerment of people with disabilities. Since 2018, he had been working on rights advocacy and community organising among migrant workers with occupational diseases—a politically sensitive issue in China even though it does not attract much public attention.

Before their arrests, Huang and Wang organised regular gatherings in Guangzhou to try to rebuild the civil society networks that had been suppressed for years. After several political crackdowns, Guangzhou’s once vibrant civil society community had become dormant and activists felt isolated and atomised. The gatherings the pair organised were meant to break this deadlock by providing a safe space for young activists and regrouping like-minded activists. However, the renewed vitality and activism of their efforts apparently caught the attention of the authorities. The indictment and verdict clearly show that the government framed the gatherings organised by Huang and Wang as attempts at creating a ‘non-violent movement’—a term that has long been vilified in the official discourse of the Chinese authorities because they see it as closely associated with colour revolutions—and their expressions on social media and at gatherings were classified as having ‘seditionary’ intentions (for the indictment, see Guangzhou Procuratorate 2022; for the verdict, see Guangzhou Intermediate Court 2024). Although the gatherings did not involve explicit political antagonists, the community network they fostered and the social criticism they spawned were seen by the authorities as destabilising factors that threatened national security.

Overlooked Contributions to Social Movements

As mentioned above, the weekly gatherings organised in Guangzhou were a significant political factor in the harsh sentencing of XueBing. These longstanding gatherings served as both an indirect response to the oppressive political environment and a new form of social resistance strategy. However, many reports have overlooked this crucial detail, disregarding the efforts of XueBing in rebuilding activist communities in China and omitting a very significant detail from the documentation of Chinese social resistance.

The criminalised weekly gatherings were initiated by Wang and later co-organised with Huang and another co-defendant surnamed Chen whose case is being handled separately. Wang recognised the necessity of creating a space where young people could support each other through challenging times and explore new forms of connection and activism. Therefore, he started the weekly gatherings in his living room, calling them ‘Night-Sailing Boat’ (夜航船) to symbolise how activists navigating through dark times could find direction and strength through mutual support—an ideal he shared with Huang. Wang had also tried to use this approach to organise a community for the support and empowerment of migrant workers suffering from pneumoconiosis.

Before the gatherings, Wang would be busy preparing fruit, snacks, and tea for the participants and he would clean up afterward. During the gatherings, Wang served as a facilitator, ensuring that each participant had the opportunity to express and discuss their concerns or ideas. Huang, meanwhile, focused more on theme planning and discussions. This strategy of empowerment, which focuses on underground, close-knit communities, can help reconnect China’s fragmented civil society. In fact, we saw the same organising strategy in the White Paper protests in late 2022, where the protesters who were later targeted by the government had rich underground support networks. Unfortunately, these community organising efforts received no media attention.

Aside from the dearth of coverage of Wang’s labour activism, most reports on Huang focused solely on her involvement in the #MeToo movement in China, thereby overlooking her personal efforts in advancing civil society networks, such as her pivotal role in the ‘Night-Sailing Boat’ gatherings and efforts to build activists’ capacity through initiatives such as the ‘Ten Lessons’ (十堂课) workshops, which were a series of online gatherings she started a year before her arrest to which she invited scholars and activists to discuss the hot topics of the day. The media’s coverage of Huang’s involvement in the #MeToo movement as the primary reason for government prosecution not only leads to a significant public misunderstanding of the case but also disregards her broader contributions to nurturing activist communities.

Devaluing Low-Profile and Behind-the-Scenes Contributions

The implication of this oversimplified coverage of social resistance is that low-profile grassroots efforts are merely supplements to or less important than high-profile activism—a narrative that devalues fundamental behind-the-scenes work.

Despite his low profile, Wang’s significance in community organising in this case should not be overlooked. His efforts to organise the weekly gatherings exemplify the often-unseen labour and care work

that is essential for the sustenance of social movements and paves the way for broader, more visible actions. To ignore Wang's pivotal role not only disregards the foundational efforts of less-visible activists, but also exposes a bias rooted in misogynistic and patriarchal norms; care work in activism is often socially gendered and undervalued. It is important to clarify that this does not mean that care work in activism is done only by women. Rather, it reveals the irony of coverage that highlights movements like #MeToo, while inadvertently replicating the very norms they seek to challenge.

A low profile should not be an excuse to deny activists social recognition and respect. However, the lack of balanced reporting perpetuates the mainstream narrative that only high-profile or well-known activists deserve acknowledgement. This phenomenon contradicts the media's goal of promoting social justice, which includes challenging the criminalisation and devaluation of social resistance by authoritarian governments and highlighting the value and contributions of activists facing unjust trials. This problem extends well beyond XueBing's case. Many forms of social resistance remain unseen, particularly those involving female activists or focusing on marginalised issues such as labour rights or disability. Additionally, the behind-the-scenes, grassroots work done by less-visible activists—the backbone of social movements—is often overshadowed by high-profile actions.

Identity Politics in Solidarity Campaigns

Furthermore, we notice an imbalance in the solidarity campaigns around the XueBing case. Some focus exclusively on Huang's involvement in the #MeToo movement, neglecting to acknowledge Wang as a co-defendant. While it is understandable that these campaigns are being conducted under the banner of feminist advocacy and that identity politics is an important tool for social mobilisation, Wang's history of supporting survivors of sexual harassment—despite being extremely low profile—has been overlooked in these efforts.

As advocates and activists, it is important to recognise that an attack on one is an attack on all, especially amid ongoing repression of human rights defenders, whether feminists or labour activists. When, as is often the case, issues involve clear diversity and intersectionality, prioritising certain identities over others in advocacy can inadvertently create divisions within the activist community and undermine the solidarity and collective power needed to challenge oppressive systems. Solidarity means respecting one another's dignity and integrity while addressing shared structural oppressions together, rather than competing for recognition or validating individual agendas. While leveraging campaigns to advance one's own agenda is a common strategy, it is crucial to avoid diminishing or neglecting other groups or behind-the-scenes work. Such oversights undermine the very solidarity that social movements seek to build and should be avoided in solidarity campaigns.



Activists demonstrate in support of Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing. Source: Free XueBing Group.

Reflecting on the Roles of the Media and Social Advocacy

Some may attribute the lack of media coverage about Wang and the criminalised gatherings to the low-profile nature of his activism and the limited information that is publicly available. However, both the media and campaigners have a responsibility to understand and communicate the complexity of resistance movements and to challenge oversimplified or distorted narratives of social resistance by those in power. It is certainly comprehensible why the media focuses on Huang given that she gained her prominence through her involvement in the #MeToo movement; it makes it easier to convey to readers the extent of the Chinese State's persecution of human rights defenders and requires less editorial work than uncovering Wang's story and building a narrative around the gatherings they organised. This approach, however, at least from an activist's perspective, is not conducive to presenting a complete narrative of resistance.

On the one hand, such reporting tends to oversimplify specific forms of social resistance in China, reducing them to mere instruments and reinforcing some readers' one-dimensional perceptions of Chinese politics. This oversimplification not only misrepresents social resistance but also undermines the agency of the subjects of this coverage. On the other hand, the media's market-oriented model and lack of comprehensive coverage of complex social resistance raise concerns about its

effectiveness in educating the public. XueBing's case highlights this issue, as its significance extends beyond the realms of feminism and labour rights to include new organising strategies, such as the formation of underground networks and the practice of community empowerment. The media's failure to document this represents a significant flattening of social resistance in China today.

In addressing the imbalance and skewed focus of the media coverage of the XueBing case, it is important to clarify that we do not intend to undermine the support and impact of the media and solidarity campaigns for these individuals and broader Chinese human rights struggles. Rather, our aim is to highlight how the lack of discussion of the politics behind their arrest and sentencing, the devaluation of low-profile activism, and the disproportionate attention on identity-politics-driven mobilisations do not do justice to the current landscape of social resistance in China. This imbalance also reflects a microcosm of embedded hierarchies that characterise social struggles in society. We call on the media to reflect on its educational role and adopt a more balanced and nuanced approach to documenting such cases, as these reports can serve as an important reference for future social resistance. Providing balanced and nuanced attention to activists and social struggles, regardless of their visibility or profile, is the first step towards building a more inclusive and progressive social movement for change in China. ■

Appendix: Statistical Analysis of Media Reports

News outlets	Names mentioned in the title	Featured image	Is there any mention of information about Wang other than the details of his sentence?	Whether the coverage indicates that the gatherings are one of the political reason for their arrest	Whether the media had a direct interview with the solidarity team
<u>SCMP</u>	Unspecified	Huang	Yes	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	Yes
<u>The Guardian</u>	Huang	Huang	Yes	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>The Times</u>	Huang	Huang	Yes	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>BBC</u>	Huang	Huang	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	Yes
<u>DW</u>	Huang	Huang	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	Yes
<u>The Washington Post</u>	Huang	Huang	Yes	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>Reuters</u>	Huang	Court Image	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	Yes
<u>AP</u>	Huang	Huang	No	No	Yes
<u>VOA English</u>	Huang & Wang	Huang	Yes	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>CNN</u>	Huang	Huang	No	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>New York Times</u>	Huang	Court Image	Yes	Yes, with details	Yes
<u>說亮新聞</u>	Huang	Others/Chinese flag	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	Yes
<u>AFP</u>	Huang	N/A (unable to confirm the featured image)	Yes	Yes, with details	No
<u>The Telegraph</u>	Huang	Huang	No	No	No
<u>The Independent</u>	Huang	Huang	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	No
<u>CBS NEWS</u>	Huang	Huang	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	No
<u>Al Jazeera</u>	Huang	Huang	Yes	No	No
<u>Business Standard</u>	Huang	Huang	No	No	No
<u>Times of India</u>	Huang	Court Image	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	No
<u>NHK NEWS</u>	Huang	Huang & Wang	No	Yes, but only mentioned in passing	No

COLUMNS



Protesters gather outside of the Reitz Union on Tuesday, March 26, 2024 to protest legislation blocking international students from Florida colleges and universities. Source: Armand Raichandani | The Independent Florida Alligator.

Troubling the Water

Yangyang CHENG

The concept of open science, like ‘free market’, is a depoliticising myth that conceals the uneven structures of power undergirding knowledge production and transmission. New restrictions from the US Government on scientific collaborations with China are not an aberration due to current geopolitical tensions, but the continuation of a decades-old effort to subject academic research to state and corporate interests, as reflected in the long history of US-China academic exchange. Knowledge flows across borders have always been conditional; the question is under whose conditions and what are the borders for.

The story begins with water. ‘How do we make sure that *that spigot* remains open and free?’ an audience member asked during a panel discussion on scientific collaboration between the United States and China. He pointed out that the ‘very, very best students’ recruited from around the world are the ‘secret sauce’ that makes the US education system ‘the wonder of the world’, and rising tensions between the two superpowers could cut off this precious stream.

The moderator directed the question to me, the only China-born person on the stage. In this picture, I was a coveted droplet who left her birth country to soak into the sumptuous US creation. The metaphor, expressed in earnest with a hint of flattery, unsettled me.

I came to the United States in 2009 to pursue my PhD in physics. My profoundly personal journey cannot be distilled into a sketch of inanimate transfer. I often wonder whether a younger version of myself in China could aspire to a similar path today. Florida has enacted a new law that prohibits universities from hiring Chinese researchers without special approval from the authorities (Mervis 2023c). Several other states and the Republican-led House of Representatives have pursued legislation that restricts academic collaboration with Chinese institutions and scientists (Haime 2024). Many Chinese students face bans on entering the United States based on the institution from which they graduated or their field of study; those fortunate enough to secure a visa still risk lengthy interrogations by customs agents or even deportation (Kuo and Cadell 2024).

‘The border is a place of terror for many of us,’ says Gang Chen, an engineering professor at MIT who was falsely accused of secretly aiding China before prosecutors dropped the charges (Gewin 2024). In public discussions and private conversations, many of my American colleagues have expressed bewilderment or even feelings of betrayal at recent developments. The discriminatory measures are antithetical to the cosmopolitan ideal of science; they also appear to be a reversal of decades-old US policy that encouraged academic exchange with other countries despite differences in governance.

The United States and China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement (STA), signed in 1979 and generally renewed every five years, is hanging by a second six-month extension as the two sides struggle to reach a deal (Hua 2024). Opponents of the STA argue that Beijing has violated the ‘basis’ of ‘reciprocity’ and that ‘the benefits of scientific cooperation have overwhelmingly flowed one way’—towards China to the detriment of the United States (Razdan 2024; Issa et al. 2023). The transactional logic belies a greater paradox: when the agreement was established in 1979 and in the many years after, both sides understood that Chinese scientists would be learning from the United States to try to catch up. Why is reciprocity pressed as a contractual obligation only with China’s rise, when the former student has become a peer?

The language of global commerce used to describe academic exchange obscures the fact that knowledge is local in its production and application. Institutions

have a history and exist in a place. Scientists live and work in a bordered world. Knowledge does not move by its own will or by the laws of physics; it is embodied in products and people and enabled to move by human agency and a web of social and political forces. As water is extracted from wells and lakes and pumped through pipes and taps, knowledge flow relies on an infrastructure ‘saturated with’ and often in service of power (Krige 2022). As China ascends the global order and contests US hegemony, this shift in power relations disrupts the myth of American largesse in spreading knowledge around the world.

By erasing the local origin, political motivation, and social production of science, the totalising ideology of science as a universal truth that naturally transcends borders conceals the uneven structures of power that compel inquiry and facilitate or restrict scientific exchange. In the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot: ‘The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots’ (1995: xxiii). To understand the present woes in scientific collaboration between the United States and China and to conceive of a better future, one must go back in time to trace the evolution of this transpacific relationship. The winding course maps a complex terrain shaped by the state and capital interests.

Imperial Beginnings

In 1872, 30 Chinese boys set sail for the United States on the first government-sponsored overseas education program in China, which was then ruled by the Qing Empire (Leibovitz and Miller 2011). Ninety more students joined in the following years. The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 had promised the freedom of travel and equal access to education between the two countries. Reform-minded Qing officials believed that Chinese tradition was the core on which Western technology could be grafted for practical use (Kuhn 2002: 52). But Yung Wing, the progenitor of the education mission and the first Chinese graduate from a US university, harboured a grander ambition. The beneficiary of American missionaries, Yung echoed his mentors in hoping that ‘through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful’ (2021: 27).

The transformative potential of a foreign education made it suspect to the Qing court. Facing conservative disapproval at home and racist backlash in the host country, the mission ended abruptly in 1881, the year before the passage of the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in the United States.

Writing in 1905, Edmund J. James, the President of the University of Illinois, lamented that failure. Had the United States succeeded ‘in turning the current of Chinese students to this country’ and ‘keeping that current large’, James expounded in a letter to the White House, ‘we should today be controlling the development of China in that most satisfactory and subtle of all ways—through the intellectual and spiritual domination of its leaders’. Nevertheless, it was not too late: ‘The nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation will be the nation which ... will reap the largest possible return in moral, intellectual, and commercial influence’ (James 1905).

China in James’s time was on ‘the verge of a revolution’, and it would not be the last. In the first half of the twentieth century, the US Government and private foundations helped provide an elite education for the selected few in China and offered technical support to the country with the aim of cultivating an ally and gaining an early foothold in a massive future market (Greene 2022). The communist victory in 1949, described by the American intelligentsia as ‘the loss of China’, shattered this plan. China’s entry into the Korean War cemented its enemy status. US authorities barred China-born scientists from returning to their native land for fear of technology transfer (Wang et al. 2013). The Iron Curtain also closed the waterways. Crossing was forbidden.

Science during the Cold War

The Cold War reordered US society and reshaped its research enterprise. Speaking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1950, Manhattan Project alumni and member of the Atomic Energy Commission Henry D. Smyth (1951) described scientists as assets of war who must be ‘stockpiled’ and ‘rationed’. When domestic production fell short, authorities looked overseas (Zulueta 2004). Geraldine Fitch (1956), the wife and daughter-in-law of

American missionaries in China, exalted Chinese refugee scientists who fled the communist takeover to Hong Kong as ‘brains at a bargain’, who could be resettled ‘in the free world at the amazingly low per capita cost of \$91’.

In the battle over hearts and minds, the US Government and affiliated organisations launched a concerted effort to define an idea of science as pure, objective, and free from political intervention—unlike the state-directed and ideologically driven Soviet science (Wolfe 2018). By this logic, if social problems such as poverty and food insecurity could be tackled through technical means with US assistance, the peoples of the developing world would be less likely to fall for communist propaganda and seek structural change that threatened American interests (Schmalzer 2016: 3).

With science portrayed as separate from politics, scientific exchange also lost its missionary zeal and became an instrument of diplomacy. In a 1971 congressional address entitled ‘U.S. Foreign Policy in a Technological Age’, secretary of state William P. Rogers proclaimed that activities to ‘promote scientific progress’ should be insulated ‘from the vagaries of international politics’ (Rogers 1971: 9). He went on to explain that ‘[b]ecause the problems dealt with by science usually have a low specific gravity in political terms, scientific cooperation is often possible where political cooperation is not’ (Rogers 1971: 15).

Science in Mao Zedong’s China was unapologetically political (Schmalzer 2016). With a common faith in the power of science and its transnational appeal, and adopting terms similar to their Western counterparts’ such as ‘progress’ and ‘objectivity’, communist leaders pushed for a radically different vision of proletarian mass science. From agriculture to medicine, the Chinese Government also promoted its findings abroad as proof of its ideological superiority. The emphasis on self-reliance and indigenous methods grew out of the Chinese Communist Party’s revolutionary roots; it also reflected a practical necessity, as the country confronted both isolation from the West and simmering hostilities with the Soviet Union (Schmalzer 2014).

Shared concern about Soviet aggression sparked the thaw between China and the United States. ‘Your handshake came over the vastest ocean in the world—25 years of no communication,’ premier Zhou Enlai uttered these iconic words to president

Richard Nixon in 1972 (Nixon Foundation 2013). The resulting Shanghai Communiqué placed science and technology first—before ‘culture, sports, and journalism’—on the list of areas in which ‘people-to-people contacts and exchanges’ would be ‘mutually beneficial’ (Wilson Center 1972).

After Nixon’s ice-breaking trip, a small but growing number of American scientists visited China. Switching from an earlier preference for leftist scholars and antiwar activists, Beijing rolled out the red carpet for the Western establishment elite (Millwood 2020). This gesture hinted at a more fundamental shift under way in China. Decades of political fanaticism had left the country in a shambles and exhausted the public’s faith in communism. Science was no longer hailed as a vehicle for proletarian revolution. Instead, a new generation of technocrats, who took charge after Mao’s death in 1976, embraced the ‘bourgeois’ science the Communist Party had denounced as they steered China towards modernisation and a market economy (Greenhalgh 2008). The alignment of priorities for research and development affirmed many Western scientists’ belief in the universality of their pursuit. For Chinese scientists who had endured waves of brutal persecution, the notion of a depoliticised science was a welcoming refuge from authoritarian control.

When Washington and Beijing formally established relations in 1979, the first major agreement signed by US president Jimmy Carter and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was the STA. A significant breakthrough had taken place the year before. Woken by a 3 am phone call from his science advisor in China, who relayed Deng’s request that 5,000 Chinese students be permitted to study in the United States, an irritated Carter replied: ‘Tell him to send a hundred thousand.’

‘Within five years, we had a hundred thousand Chinese students with us,’ Carter said as he recounted the story during a speech in 2013 (Carter 2013).

The Corporate University

In a 1986 report, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China assessed the first six years of exchange since the resumption of diplomatic ties. It laid out three perceptions of China in the United States: ‘a Third World nation

at a comparatively low technical level’, ‘a potential economic competitor’, or ‘a strategic military power’ (National Research Council 1986).

‘China, of course, has all of these dimensions,’ the report read. It cited Edmund James’s 1905 letter, written at a time when the American elite thought China was ‘malleable’, and went on to raise a series of prescient questions about US involvement in China’s development, including security interests, the impact of Chinese exports on Western industries, and the ‘proper’ relationship between academia and business. On concerns about technology transfer, the report emphasised the distinction between universities and ‘government and private research laboratories’: while the last two had legitimate needs to protect classified and proprietary information, the former ‘should remain as open as possible’.

This position was consistent with official policy, issued in 1985 as the National Security Decision Directive 189, that ‘to the maximum extent possible, the products of fundamental research remain unrestricted’ (NSDDs 1985). The administrative separation of fundamental versus classified work eludes the nature of the latter and normalises its harms. In the 1960s and 1970s, antiwar activists on campus successfully pressured major universities to cut research ties with weapons developers. Most US universities no longer conduct classified research on campus. Yet, the decision by school administrators to divest themselves of weapons laboratories instead of converting them into civilian research centres meant that the harmful work still went on in formally separate entities (Leslie 1994). The focus on classification also omits commercial factors that have had a broader impact on higher education in the United States since the 1980s.

For years after World War II, results from publicly funded work in the United States generally stayed in the public domain. This changed with the *Bayh-Dole Act* of 1980 that allows and, indeed, encourages universities to patent research products and license them for profit. The US Supreme Court ruled in the same year in *Diamond v. Chakrabarty* that life forms ‘made by man’ can be patented. Everything from seeds to pathogens could be considered intellectual property, and the burgeoning field of molecular biology became a particularly lucrative discipline (Lieberwitz 2005). Universities, including public systems in California and Texas, now rival the largest private

corporations in the annual number of patent applications, and regularly sue one another for exclusive access to knowledge (WIPO 2023).

Beyond statutory limitations, the privatisation and commodification of academic research have redefined the purpose and priorities of science and shifted its general perception. No longer seen as a public good that is created to be shared, scientific knowledge is increasingly cast as private property that can be owned, stolen, and traded under a price tag. The mechanisms of quantification and commercialisation also work to depoliticise. Uprooted from its social context and stripped of political connotations, information is atomised and converted into the most coveted, pristine form: capital that can flow seamlessly in the marketplace of ideas.

The desire to capitalise on scientific development was shared on both sides of the Pacific. Speaking in China in the mid-1980s, Chinese American physicist Tsung-Dao Lee came up with a set of metaphors: ‘Basic research is pure like water, applied research births the fish, and product development is the fish market; all three are essential’ (1999: 74). Despite continued disputes over security and human rights, China’s integration into the global market became the primary stabilising force in its relationship with the West (Hung 2022). After the bloody crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989, many academic associations in the United States halted collaborations with China. Some scientists called for a sustained boycott, but the engines of capital had little patience for moral deliberation. Lobbying from US businesses helped restore bilateral relations. A report in *Science* asked: ‘Will Profits Override Political Protests?’ (Marshall 1993).

The STA was renewed in 1991 with added provisions on intellectual property protection (US Department of State 2001). The emphasis on procedural fairness conceals structural injustices. Under a rules-based liberal order, individuals are discreet rights-bearers detached from community and devoid of history, hence equal before the law. But who wrote the laws and to whose benefit? In its early days, the United States was an unabashed thief of advanced technologies and skilled labour from Europe (Andreas 2013). The US Government strengthened intellectual property protection once the country reached a certain level of prosperity and exported its rules as it topped the global economic order. Since 1995, the

Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement) has forced all member states of the World Trade Organization (WTO) into a transnational intellectual property regime that disproportionately favours US businesses and burdens the developing world (Sell 2003). The game is rigged, and the house always wins.

Tensions between the United States and China boiled over again in the late 1990s, partly centred on fears of leaked nuclear and space technologies and fuelled by a Republican-led House of Representatives at war with the Clinton administration. A lengthy congressional investigation produced the Cox Report, which accused academic exchanges with China at US national laboratories of being conduits for espionage, and Taiwanese American scientist Wen Ho Lee was charged with stealing nuclear secrets for China (Stober and Hoffman 2001). Scholars have thoroughly refuted the Cox Report’s claims (Johnston et al 1999). Lee—never convicted of spying—eventually won a US\$1.6 million settlement in a civil suit against the US Government and the press. The vindication on legal and technical grounds nevertheless left the underlying political motivations unchallenged. Asian Americans rallied in support of Lee. By defending themselves as loyal citizens against racist suspicion, few questioned what loyalty entails, whom citizenship excludes, and what nuclear weapons actually protect.

Great Power Rivalry

The election of George W. Bush tamed the partisan rancour and China’s entry into the WTO in 2001 marked the highpoint of globalisation. Yet, unlike what Thomas L. Friedman extolled in his cleverly titled 2005 book *The World Is Flat*, the market is not an equalising force. Capitalism subsists on a hierarchy; value is extracted from an ever-expanding periphery to satiate the core.

The year Friedman’s volume was published, the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened a study at the urging of congress. Completed with ‘an unusual degree of urgency’, the resulting report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, sounded the alarm on the United States’ shrinking edge in science and technology, while ‘our

competitive advantage, our success in global markets, our economic growth, and our standard of living all depend on maintaining a leading position' (National Academies 2007: 218).

A follow-up study five years later bore a more ominous subtitle when assessing the strength of the 'gathering storm': *Rapidly Approaching Category 5*. The committee reached the unanimous view that 'our nation's outlook has worsened' (National Academies 2010: 4). The initial report had made general references to several developed and developing countries, but a single competitor stood out in 2010: China.

More than a decade has passed since the 'Category 5' forecast. China now ranks first among Republicans and independents as the United States' top foe, and second after Russia for Democrats (Saad 2024). In 2023, President Joe Biden declared a national emergency against the threat of 'advancement by countries of concern in sensitive technologies and products'. The only 'country of concern' listed is the People's Republic of China (The White House 2023).

The United States in Yung Wing's and Edmund James's times was an emerging power vying with European empires for influence. The cataclysms of the twentieth century catapulted the country to the pinnacle of global politics. This inherently unjust and unsustainable position has been normalised by so many whose personal fortunes, professional prospects, and sense of self depend on US hegemony that any change is seen as upsetting the cosmic order. Speaking at Harvard University in February, Congressman Mike Gallagher railed against China's ambition to be 'the sun'. As he put it, 'we would like to see a situation in which they are Jupiter', while the United States and its allies remain 'the centre of gravity' (Harvard IOP 2024).

Gallagher, a Republican, was joined on stage by Raja Krishnamoorthi, a Democrat, as the two headed the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. Containing the United States' greatest rival is one of the few areas of bipartisanship in US politics, though the two sides take a different approach. As reported in *Science*, Democrats 'think the best way for the United States to prevail is to run faster' through more research funding, while Republicans, worried about federal spending, favour 'hobbling China' by

denying it access to US-controlled technologies and tightening capital investment in China's development (Mervis 2023a).

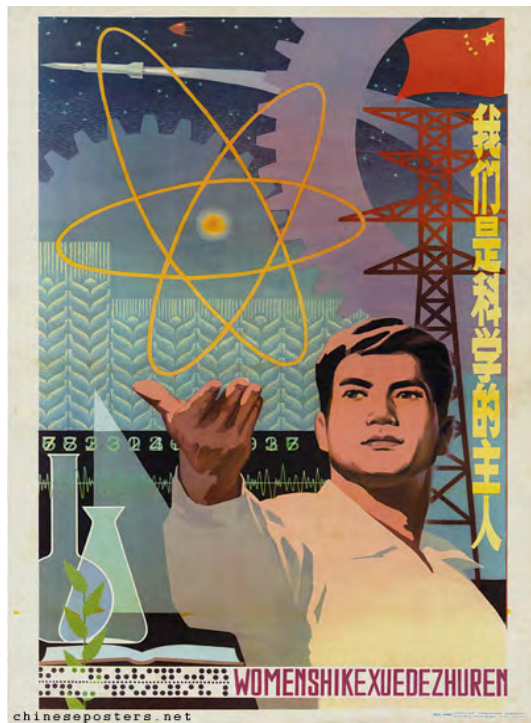
The seemingly contradictory positions of pushing sanctions and upholding free trade stem from a shared ethos, in which the freedom of the market means the freedom to exploit and the freedom to monopolise. The Chinese Government has regularly denied market freedoms to foreign and domestic entities alike, to secure key industries and maintain authoritarian rule. The country's new anti-espionage legislation further limits the flow of data overseas (Wong and Strumpf 2023), and the revised state secrets law places additional emphasis on safeguarding science and technology (Xinhua 2024).

Critics of US-China scientific exchange have pointed to Beijing's protectionist stance and dictatorial regression as breaking the promise of 'reciprocity' (Razdan 2024). The proposed responses from the US side, however, are alarmingly like the restrictions put in place by the Chinese State. US lawmakers and tech executives routinely decry China's use of new technologies to strengthen its military, expand state surveillance, and commit human rights abuses, while doubling down on similar developments and applications at home and with allied countries (AI Now Institute 2023). What they really care about, then, is not how science is used but who uses it. What they hope to protect are not the safety and wellbeing of humanity but their own privileges and power. By denying the Chinese people agency, they project their greed and bloodlust on to a faceless other. The national border offers a convenient demarcation and the contours of an enemy. The epithet of 'communism' erases the role of global capital as a contributor to and beneficiary of repression in China and elsewhere. The banner of liberal democracy is waved as a shield to excuse similar behaviour from the home team as justified and necessary to defeat the other side.

Freedom is a Constant Struggle

In the race for supremacy, answering 'to what end' is less important than the construct of a race itself. Competition rhymes with capitalism's need

for expansion and accumulation. The presence of a perpetual rival reconfigures society and reproduces the power relations that have set the race in motion. Emergency mobilisations during World War II hardened into a permanent national security apparatus at the onset of the Cold War, and quickly grew in the shadows of the Soviet Union. Competition with Japan in the 1980s and early 1990s enlarged the concept of ‘national security’ to incorporate ‘economic security’, in which a less prosperous opponent is a less threatening one (Daniels and Krige 2022). Since the 9/11 attacks, the US Government has habitually weaponised the global financial system and the digital infrastructure at its disposal to prevent adversaries from accessing critical resources (Farrell and Newman 2023). Having claimed everything from the military and law enforcement to civilian establishments such as industry and finance as tools in its arsenal, the national security state is clawing at unruly academia with a new formula: research security.



我们是科学的主人, 1978, July, Landsberger collection.
Source: chineseposters.net.

During his final days in office, president Donald Trump issued a memorandum. Kept in effect by his successor, the National Security Presidential Memorandum 33 demands actions to protect US Government-funded research from ‘foreign government interference and exploitation’ (The White House 2021). Once again, the only foreign government named in the memo is the People’s Republic of China. The US *CHIPS and Science Act* of 2022 devotes numerous sections to research security mandates. It requires funding agencies to maintain dedicated offices, bolster security protocols targeting ‘country of risk’, and provide relevant training to academic institutions and personnel.

Research security offices and staff are the latest additions to a ballooning bureaucracy at US universities. The drain on faculty time and administrative resources also exacerbates institutional disparity, meaning wealthier schools can better afford the cost of compliance, leading to more grants and opportunities.

Much more than a nuisance of extra paperwork, the advent of ‘research security’ is an affront to academic freedom. The reporting mechanisms normalise official monitoring of research activity. The risk assessments focus almost exclusively on country of origin and its relationship with the US Government: ‘foreign’ means suspect; transnational ties are condemned or redeemed by geopolitical interests. On its website, the National Science Foundation (NSF) celebrates the launch of its research security training modules as ‘a major first step in reconciling the needs of the research, law enforcement and intelligence communities’. At a recent roundtable, the NSF’s chief research security officer described the goal as shifting ‘from a culture of compliance to a culture of research security that is just as accepted [as] ... lab safety culture’ (National Academies 2024). This stunning statement reveals the deeply political mission couched in depoliticised, managerial language: if the risks of working with colleagues from a country the US Government does not like are as intrinsic as those from handling corrosive chemicals, a scientist has no choice but to accept the rules of the state as though they are the laws of nature.

The NSF chief described the role of her office as helping researchers access funding: to mitigate the risks to ‘get to yes’. This was echoed at the same roundtable by the chief compliance officer of the

University of California system, who said ‘the goal is to create a glide path to yes’. But what lies beyond that path? Are other paths available? The disciplinary power of ‘research security’ not only limits with whom a US-based scientist can work; it also affects what kind of science is favoured, how it is done, and to whose benefit. When knowledge is treated as commerce, the mechanisms of trade policy also creep into science policy: ‘small yard, high fence’. The belief that scientific advancements can be kept safe behind lock and key like family jewels mistakes a dynamic, social, and political process for an inanimate object. The very attempt to draw a border and put up a wall shifts the underlying conditions on which knowledge production relies. It poisons the water and forecloses alternative flowering.

On the growing list of ‘critical and emerging technologies’ published by the White House, the broad, vaguely defined, and often overlapping fields of research include everything from clean energy to artificial intelligence, from biotechnologies to quantum information (Ambrose 2024). The perceived threats are often based not on present capabilities but on a remote theoretical possibility hyped by speculative capital. The future-oriented discourse overlooks existing harms and narrows the public imagination. An unforgiving outlook in which any technology can become a weapon—or become a commodity wielded as a weapon in economic warfare—is presented not as a scenario to be resisted with collective action but as destiny, where the only option is to kill or be killed.

The rules of national security do not just determine what can or cannot move across borders. They also reproduce the injustices embodied by the border. It is not a coincidence that the US state and federal legislatures that have pursued prohibitions on academic exchanges with China have also tried to police gender, outlaw abortion, ban books, limit teachings on racism, and halt diversity and inclusion efforts at universities. These exclusionary measures emanate from a shared world view and advance a common aim: to uphold the United States’ position at the imperial core while preserving the myth of its innocence. The nation being secured is a white supremacist patriarchy. In this context, ‘China threat’ is another politically expedient catchphrase, like ‘Critical Race Theory’ or ‘wokeness’, coopted by powerful interests to encroach on the academy and manipulate scholarly inquiry.

Since the dawn of the modern university, academic freedom has been a generational struggle against the church, the state, and corporate forces. The heightened scrutiny of collaborations with Chinese counterparts has kindled a moment of political awakening for many US-based scientists—in particular, immigrants from China who are much like me. In their admirable, burgeoning advocacy, many have nevertheless resorted to the same state-centric, elitist language as their detractors. Both groups expound on US exceptionalism, immigrant excellence, and techno-utopianism. The only differences are how to best advance US interests and whether exchanges with China amount to a net gain or loss. For these scientists, the goal of political engagement is not to seize political agency in their work but to shield their work from the consequences of politics. In yearning for a return to a past ‘normal’ before present tensions, the scientists are yielding the future to the state’s terms.

The duty of the academy is not to simply understand the world as it is and align with existing powers; it is to interrogate power and imagine alternatives to exploitation and domination. To fulfil this obligation, scientists must recognise and embrace their identity as political actors and organise and leverage their power as knowledge workers in charge of the means of production. In the US National Institute of Health’s sweeping investigation into Chinese ties, more than 100 scientists, most of whom were tenured faculty, lost their jobs. Only one researcher was able to have her termination reversed thanks to her union’s collective bargaining agreement (Mervis 2023b). Beyond protecting one’s employment, the goal of labour organising is also to determine the terms and purpose of one’s labour: how the work is done and what it is for.

Scientific exchange, like science itself, is not unconditional or the more, the merrier. To pretend that science exists in a borderless world is to deny political reality and commit the same fallacy as those who believe a state can have monopoly over knowledge. The task, then, is to commit to the constant struggle, to not become cynical or complacent with power, to be deeply rooted in place and in touch with the local, and to forgo the confines of sovereignty and open one’s eyes to the water. Waves from distant shores bring whispers that a better world is possible—one where the ocean is not a battlefield and fish are not a commodity. ■



Families gather between the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church and the Alabama capitol building in a vigil for their loved ones, among the other 266 people who died in ADOC custody of the Alabama Department of Corrections in 2022 (the number grew to 325 in 2023). Seated is Lonnie Holley, world-renowned multimedia artist, himself incarcerated as a child at Mount Meigs and one of the figures the students at the centre of this essay studied in art history class. 10 March 2023, Montgomery, Alabama.

Teaching China in Alabama Prisons in Six Objects

Luke HEIN

I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks (2014: 12)

Scenes from the author's time teaching a general-interest class about China in Alabama State correctional facilities demonstrate that US prisons represent an underserved but fertile site for China Studies. It argues that China Studies can be stimulating in and of itself but can also be made relevant to students' lives and can act as a vehicle to pursue other holistic educational objectives, such as developing civic skills, forming community, and raising consciousness. Participating in prison education can also push China educators, provoking reassessments of curriculum, research interests, pedagogy, target audience, and metrics for measuring success as a scholar.

All kinds of contraband items were smuggled into the Alabama prisons where I worked as an educator and administrative assistant from June 2022 to January 2024 through Auburn University's Alabama Prison Arts + Education Program. Books, food, weapons, and drugs all made it inside. It seemed every week another correctional staff member or officer was being arrested for trafficking drugs (Darrington 2023; Harrell 2023; Rayburn 2024). With smuggled mobile phones, incarcerated individuals posted video updates on social media during an autumn 2022 state-wide prisoner work stoppage. Some incarcerated students with whom I worked told me this media, smuggled out of the prison, was



White school bus used to transport people incarcerated at Tutwiler Prison for Women to a clothing factory and educational facilities, 20 October 2023, Elmore County, Alabama.

why Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) Commissioner John Hamm announced that contraband mobile phones were one of the top two problems Alabama prisons faced (Cason 2023), rather than the many other problems identified by everyone else—from the US Department of Justice (2019) to students with whom I worked (Dowdell 2023; Johnson 2024)—which make Alabama prisons some of the worst in the country.

During my year and a half with the Auburn University program, I started to think of education as a kind of smuggling, too. Though I was ostensibly there as an administrative assistant and to teach a general interest course about China, the educational exchanges that occurred went far beyond this scope. My experiences convinced me that prison education can act as an institutionally legitimate package through which educators can bring knowledge, intellectual resources, perspectives, and opportunities sorely needed in prisons. For self-reflective educators, prison education offers the chance to co-pilot radical, life-affirming learning journeys with some of the most motivated but disinherited people in the United

States. Now is the time for educators to claim these people as students and reorient their vocation to align with the urgent goal of ending mass incarceration—the most brutal system our society currently wields to manage inequality within its borders.

While every educator regardless of field of study can contribute to transformative education in prisons, here I use my experiences leading three semesters of a general interest course on China to think through potential contributions China Studies educators can make.

This essay draws on anecdotes, students' work, qualitative assessments of the class, and my own weekly reports. I share several scenes from my time teaching in four Alabama State prisons. Each scene could be unpacked productively but endlessly to demonstrate how China Studies can be relevant. Instead, I allow classroom experiences to speak for themselves in ways I hope provoke curiosity and conversation. This essay seeks to encourage China Studies educators to realise that their knowledge, if packaged correctly, could carry value through the prison gates.

A Scroll, Part One

On the last day of what came to be called ‘the China class’ at Tutwiler Prison for Women, I arranged for a guest to teach *Qigong*. Inside the cafeteria, the teacher introduced the subject and showed students a scroll illustrating the poses comprising the ‘eight brocades’ (八段锦) series. I had been given the scroll while leading a study trip to Wudang Mountain and felt showing it would anchor our *Qigong* practice to its origin.

Correctional officers allowed us to practise the eight brocades outside in the prison yard. After a demonstration by the teacher, we walked through the movements together. Laughter and questions lit up the yard. Incarcerated women not in the class looked on, seemingly bewildered.

Once we had the moves down, we practised the series again in silence. The sound of a helicopter far in the distance started growing louder until, suddenly, it appeared over the pine trees and paused just overhead. It tipped slightly, and it was clear that whoever was inside was watching us.

As it hovered there, I fidgeted, examining the faces of the correctional officers for signs that we should stop. I looked at the students, some of whom waved to the helicopter. Despite this intense distraction, the teacher continued the moves calmly, as though the helicopter were not there. Eventually it leaned away and departed.

Though we never addressed the moment, it stuck with me. With her fluid movements and stoic composure, the teacher taught something essential about *Qigong*. She seemed to be saying: *Anything superfluous to what we’re doing right now may as well not exist*. It was a message I think these students understood better than I could. That class was one of their favourites.

A Broken Tooth

In all three sessions of ‘the China class’, I taught language skills. I hoped this would render foreign syllables more accessible and help students remember the names of places and people we would

be discussing. I also hoped this would encourage students who might have had negative experiences with schooling to realise that learning something that sounded as difficult as Chinese was within their abilities.

One day during language practice, Joe (all names in this essay are pseudonyms) said he simply could not pronounce Chinese. ‘Of course, you can!’ I said and launched into encouragements and critiques of typical language classes. ‘So, you see, you can learn it!’

Joe said: ‘No, I mean I really can’t pronounce these words.’ He opened his mouth and pointed to a broken front tooth. Joe had been trying to see a dentist for a while, he said, but Alabama prison doctors consider problems with the front teeth ‘aesthetic’ and they are thus excluded from health care. Other students agreed: you needed four missing molars to qualify for dental work.

Beside the prison’s gross indifference towards human wellbeing, another problem for language teaching was a lack of contact hours. Class time was not nearly enough to progress in language acquisition. It was a student I tutored at another prison who solved this problem. He pointed out that the Securus Technologies tablets available in Alabama prisons could access a Chinese-language podcast. He encouraged me to contact the company.

Coffee Break Languages was happy to send me a free PDF textbook to use with these students. Their email read: ‘We appreciate your patience and the commitment to your initiative, a very worthy cause!’ So, there it was: manufactured scarcity could be analysed and overcome through dialogue, creativity, and relationship-building. With this, I was able to plan lessons around audio and text resources that students could access outside class. They progressed rapidly.

‘The most researched and utilized metrics to evaluate the success of a higher education in prison program have been 1) recidivism rates and 2) improving employment outcomes,’ writes a former student, C.D. (2023: 5), in his undergraduate thesis. But the pleasure and validation students received from learning Mandarin demonstrate why prison education must go beyond these seemingly pragmatic goals. When asked whether ‘the China class’ would help him in the future, one student wrote: ‘Yes. All education is important’ (Feedback 1).



Cotton boll, 24 September 2023, Auburn, Alabama.



Cotton bales near Staton, Tutwiler, and Elmore prisons, 19 October 2023, Elmore County, Alabama.

A Cotton Boll

The drives from Auburn University to the prisons where I taught led through depressed rural towns and surrounding fields. On long commutes, I watched the cotton ripen and, for several weeks in the autumn, wisps of cotton dropped from trucks rolled along the road in the late afternoon sun. One day I stopped and picked one up.

I had been tutoring a Kazakh friend from China called Mubarak. Without knowing exactly why, that day I presented her with the piece of cotton. She said it was beautiful. Then she told me a story about accompanying her father, who was a public servant, to pick cotton as part of a government campaign. Once, to motivate his young daughter, Mubarak's father promised her a reward if she picked a certain amount by the end of the day. To hasten a conclusion to the work, Mubarak weighed down her bag with rocks. Her father discovered the ploy, but she still received her prize. She laughed at this memory.

Immediately, I recalled a story from the life of Fannie Lou Hamer. In a 1965 interview, Hamer recounts her own introduction to cotton:

I was six years old and I was playing beside the road and this plantation owner drove up to me and stopped and asked me 'could I pick cotton.' I told him I didn't know and he said, 'Yes, you can. I will give you things that you want from the commissary store' ... So I picked the 30 pounds

of cotton that week, but I found out what actually happened was he was trapping me into beginning the work I was to keep doing and I never did get out of his debt again. (O'Dell 1965)

Like the scroll, the cotton boll fastened two distant realities together: one in the US South and one in Xinjiang, China. Mubarak was applying for political asylum in the United States because of her experiences in Xinjiang—experiences echoed in Hamer's, Frantz Fanon's and any number of other accounts of colonised people, but also in those of my students and their ancestors. This is why I hoped to bring Mubarak into the prison as a guest lecturer. Ultimately, ADOC never cleared her, but I shared some of her experiences with the students and some of the students' experiences with her because I believed such traffic in testimony could be a powerful educational intervention. Shared sentiment can pry open space where empathy and understanding can amass and where solidarity can find fertile ground in which to root.

Socks

'If we are to have peace on earth ... our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective,' Martin Luther King, jr, wrote in 1967. In 'the China class', we tried to develop this world perspective in a few ways.



Women finishing socks in stands at a wholesale sock market, 7 August 2023, Datang, Zhuji, Zhejiang.

We addressed the origins of the anti-Asian racism and Sinophobia prevalent during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mae Ngai's (2021) work helped us review the anti-Asian laws, vigilante violence, and racist stereotypes during the California Goldrush. Responses to bubonic plague outbreaks in Honolulu and San Francisco demonstrated the racist association between Chinese and disease (Risse 2012; PBS 2022; Heinrich 2008). After the US Civil War, the aborted scheme to transport Chinese labourers to the cotton fields of the South to replace enslaved labour showed capital's tendency to use racism as a wedge between similarly situated people; the same was true in how white immigrant labour organisers used Chinese as bogeymen, ultimately preventing cross-racial organising and contributing motivation for emerging racist immigration regimes in the United States and Australia. We traced how those same stereotypes operated in the present, as with Donald Trump's 'China virus' slogan and the nearby 2021 Atlanta spa shootings.

Studying that history helped students disaggregate China, breaking their habit of seeing China and the Chinese as commutable, and engendering a new habit of seeing poor, labouring, incarcerated, or racially othered Chinese as similarly situated peers. Armed with that information, we could see that political

stances towards China other than Sinophobia were possible.

Another component of this 'world perspective' was the work we did on globalisation and responses to it—globalist, internationalist, nationalist. We needed to analyse the material ways—not just the sentimental ways—students' lives intersected with counterparts in China. I wanted to upset the assumption that life here occurs independently of life there, and that assumption's ethical corollary: that domestic 'countrymen' necessarily share our conditions and deserve our loyalty above foreigners. In place of Sinophobia, I wanted to propose a political cosmopolitanism informed by analyses of globalisation, class, race, and gender.

But first, demonstrating interconnectedness. If the students had taken off their shoes and had a look, they might have read the following label: 'Shoe Corp Style No. N194, Size: 13. Made in China. Order No. T946.' From the shoes and socks on their feet to the Securus Technologies tablets in their hands and the MICOYO-brand cotton surgical masks used during Covid-19 and tuberculosis outbreaks to the Bob Barker 'orange anti-shank razors'—most students' stuff had been manufactured in China. And these commodities materially connected the incarcerated students to the processes that produced them.

We took socks as an example. 'At the [hosiery] industry's peak in the 1990s, more than 120 mills employed roughly 7,500 workers' in Fort Payne, Alabama; then, '[s]eemingly overnight, the mills closed, and the new Fort Payne became a town in China called Datang' (Kurutz 2016). Students who did not come from Fort Payne came from places like it and could understand it. As for Datang, I decided to show them this new 'sock capital of the world' by visiting it myself. I hoped that showing the two places side by side would illuminate how the 'China economic miracle' and US deindustrialisation, which 'eliminated 9 out of 10 textile and apparel jobs in the south', were not independent developments (Bolden 2014: 16).

In Datang, the streets teemed with three-wheeled carts carrying huge spools of thread around the town. Semitrailer trucks parked in the road, loading and unloading. In front of restaurants and convenience stores, owners sat on small plastic stools finishing by hand pair after pair of socks to make some side



Small sock factory run by a man from Guizhou, 8 August 2023, Datang, Zhuji, Zhejiang.

money. I took pictures of factories, spoke to sock manufacturers and thread merchants, and toured a massive wholesale market.

I also asked about sourcing, and here is where that cotton boll comes back into the story. I heard that almost all Datang's cotton came from Xinjiang. Since the 1990s, Xinjiang has produced an increasing percentage of China's cotton. Official data calculate 5.2 million tonnes of cotton—more than 90 per cent of China's total for 2023—was produced in Xinjiang (Yin 2024). If that cotton was harvested and processed using coerced labour, as many studies claim, that would mean that any product my students wore made from that Chinese cotton likely involved coercion (Murphy 2021). That material connection between the socks on students' feet and the processes that produced them suddenly took on ethical and political dimensions—dimensions that incarcerated students understand in a different way than a typical college student because of their own experiences with the coerced labour regimes prisons rely on to exist.

After the US Civil War, the profit motive, which had always been present in Alabama's penitentiaries (Ward and Rogers 2003: 82), reached a brutal apogee in the system of arbitrary arrests, ubiquitous corrup-

tion of judges and sheriffs, and selling of imprisoned people to private companies—the convict lease system (Blackmon 2009). Although convict leasing—and the chain gangs labouring on public works—faded by the middle of the twentieth century, coerced labour continued: in prison plantations, factories, offsite work release centres, and the many tasks within prisons. Much of this labour is unpaid and all of it is subject to the potential coercion omnipresent wherever strong asymmetric power relations exist. Although Alabama voted in 2022 to remove the exception clause from the State Constitution's version of the federal Thirteenth Amendment—the notorious clause that allows slavery as a punishment for a crime—because the federal amendment still contains this clause, the ramifications of this change must be tested through litigation. Another former student writes in his undergraduate thesis: 'A yet-to-be-answered question the [2022 Alabama] amendment raises is whether it implies Alabama state prisoners are now eligible to receive living wages for the labour they currently perform for little or no compensation' (X 2023: 2). Lawsuits alleging slavery (McDowell and Mason 2024; Rocha 2024; US District Court 2023), illegal living conditions (US Department of



What shall we do with John Chinaman? Two illustrations: 1) An Irishman throwing a Chinese man over a cliff towards China; 2) A Southern plantation owner leading him to cotton fields. Source: Library of Congress.

Justice 2019), healthcare fraud (Fenne 2023), and even organ harvesting (Hrynkiw 2024) continuously emerge from Alabama prisons to push back against systemic brutality.

But these places are connected to northwestern China not only through supply chains and parallels in labour conditions and legal regimes but also through historical interaction. Cotton production first revved up in Central Asia as a response to the ‘cotton famine’ created by the US Civil War. ‘By the late 1850s, the United States accounted for ... as much as 92 percent of the 102 million pounds [of cotton] manufactured in Russia’ (Beckert 2004: 1408–9). When that supply was blocked by the Union, the Russian Empire redoubled its efforts to colonise Central Asia, turning it into a cotton-producing area where the empire would find

‘our Negroes’, according to an empire spokesperson (quoted in Beckert 2004: 1430)—much in the same way postbellum planters hoped Chinese could replace formerly enslaved African Americans.

This is what I call teaching *about* China and teaching *through* China. The deindustrialisation that plunged many of my students and their families into poverty and led in part to the opioid epidemic plaguing Alabama (and most of all its prisons) had its counterpart in the rapid industrialisation of China’s eastern seaboard, which lured millions of farmers into becoming precarious urban workers in export manufacturing, which was the same development that pushed Xinjiang away from subsistence farming and towards outsider-controlled industrialised farming of cash crops. The criminalisation of the entire



Right, armed police officer looking over the Kashgar livestock market, 7 October 2018, Kashgar, Xinjiang, China; left, correctional officer lowering keys from a guard tower, 27 March 2023, Staton Correctional Facility, Elmore County, Alabama.

population of southern Xinjiang and their transformation into devalued racialised workers means the logic of racial capitalism that has always haunted industrialised cotton production continues (Wong 2022).

By ‘de-invisibilising’ the supply chain, we began to see that supply chains were dispersed precisely to enable exploitation. If we then consume the products that are affordable because they rely on exploitation, do we incur an ethical debt? Whether students conceived of themselves as victims or perpetrators, I hoped they would think about how the socks on their feet could pull them into a relationship with distant people. But where to go from there?

A Little Red Book

We explored how empathy and the shared material entanglements produced by globalisation could motivate political solidarity through what Dr Keisha Brown calls Sino-Black relations. We began with a video of Huey Newton holding up a copy of *Quota-*

tions from Chairman Mao Tsetung as he spoke to a crowd and asked how Huey came to have that book and why he found power in it.

We used scholarship by Brown, Robin D.G. Kelley (2015), and Robeson Taj Frazier to lean into these connections between Black America and China. We studied post-World War II decolonisation, the Black Belt Thesis, and Mao’s letters to Black Americans in the 1960s. We discussed socialism and Leninism in the context of the Black Panthers’ Ten-Point Program and asked why Maoism appealed to revolutionaries globally.

We discussed the influence of kung-fu on Black cultural production. We watched Kareem Abdul-Jabbar kicking Bruce Lee’s arse in *Game of Death* (1978) and talked about the Wu-Tang Clan’s origin story and the lyrics of Oakland’s The Coup. A favourite during all three semesters was the class on music. We learned about American jazz’s influence on *shidaiqu* (时代曲, what we think of as Shanghai jazz age music), read *Roar China!* by Langston Hughes, and watched Black cultural and political icon Paul Robeson perform ‘March of the Volunteers’ (义勇军进行曲).

We listened to ‘Made in China’ by the Chinese rap group the Higher Brothers and discussed nationalism and whether artists who adopt Black musical forms have a responsibility to support Black political movements. We put Chinese hip-hop from the 88rising record label into conversation with Mao’s 1942 *Talks on Art and Literature at the Yan’an Forum* and asked whether hip-hop requires a political message to be hip-hop.

I hoped all this could give students a way to place the politics of racism in the United States in a global context and help them to see their ‘fate linked with that of colonised’ people elsewhere, as bell hooks (2014: 53) writes of Paulo Freire’s influence on her. This linked fate, so like King’s ‘world perspective’, certainly animated the figures we studied. In a 1939 interview, Robeson said:

I’ve learned that my people are not the only ones oppressed. That it is the same for Jews or Chinese as for Negroes ... I found that where forces have been the same, whether people weave, build, pick cotton, or dig in the mines, they understand each other in the common language of work, suffering and protest. (Robeson 1978: 131–32)



Break Every Chain rally on the state capitol steps, 6 March 2023, Montgomery, Alabama. Note the statue of Jefferson Davis at left. In the foreground is Sandy Ray, whose son was beaten to death by officers in Donaldson prison in 2019.

Hughes (1937) expresses a similar perspective:

Break the chains of the East, Child slaves in
the factories!

Smash the iron gates of the Concessions!
Smash the pious doors of the missionary
houses!

Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow
YMCA's.

Crush the enemies of land and bread and
freedom!

That same internationalism animating Hughes and Robeson continued through Huey Newton, the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State College, and is at work in former frontman of The Coup, Boots Riley. Because we studied all of this within the context of statewide work stoppages organised in Alabama prisons in the autumn of 2022 (Sainato 2022), our studies and our lives came into conversation, and we came to see how people in two very distant places

claimed one another as compatriots and intervened positively in one another's lives. Again, '[o]ur loyalties must transcend' (King 1967).

A Letter

I had my own agenda, limitations, and blindspots as a teacher, so I wanted students to hear from as many other people as possible. Struggling to gain approval for guest speakers, I instead asked friends in China to record videos. In video letters, they addressed the class and shared their daily lives: purchasing moon cakes, using public transportation, cooking, traveling, and touring a museum. I asked friends to think about what kinds of things they would like to share about China if they had the chance to communicate directly with incarcerated students.



Sunset on return trip from prison near site of shootout between Black Alabama communists, part of the Sharecroppers' Union, and white police and a vigilante mob in 1931, 8 December 2023, Camp Hill, Alabama.

The next semester, students drafted two boilerplate letters, one to Chinese locals and another to China scholars. These letters requested video contributions so future sessions of 'the China class' could access even more high-quality materials.

Their letter read:

As incarcerated individuals, resources for learning are not widely available to us. In the few instances where genuine education is available, topics are limited in breadth and scope. We are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to learn and take part in the larger movement to improve education everywhere.

It is obvious that many of society's ills could be remedied with better and more widespread information, especially in areas of study that connect deeply with contemporary issues. The aim of this class in particular is to help open more minds to China's strengths and weak-

nesses, and the things we can incorporate into our own lives for the better. This is where we could use your help.

We would be extremely grateful if you could compose a short, 2-8-minute video that we could use to introduce people to your area of study and perhaps interest them to look more deeply. We leave it to you to decide what exactly should be included but hope for the highlights you consider pivotal in your field.

Thank you for your time, attention, and involvement.

Other Chinas Class of _____
 _____ Prison
 _____, Alabama, USA

I continued to gather videos from friends in China and, with the students' letter, I reached out to China scholars. The response was overwhelming. Scholars gave suggestions and encouragement, shared experiences and pointed to good teaching materials, and many ended up recording videos.

The political kung-fu of this project is that I considered the people who contributed videos as a secondary, covert audience. Friends in China were pushed to think about prisons and education at home and abroad and had to think through what they wanted this demographic to know about China. Conversations on social media began. Professors and practitioners of traditional Chinese arts were introduced to prisons and prison education—some for the first time. Conversations on listservs began.

A Scroll, Part Two

Encouraged by the students' positive reaction to *Qigong*, during the final semester of 'the China class', we did much more. We began each session by following Mimi Kuo-Deemer's video of the eight brocades. The practice built a predictable structure, set a calm energy, and sufficient repetition allowed students to memorise the moves so they could take it forward.



Image 11: Eight brocades adapted from Hygiene Essentials by an anonymous student.

As with all activities, students could participate in any non-disruptive way they wanted or choose to sit it out. Some students jumped right in while others hesitated. Jokes abounded. One of the moves, 'Sway the Head and Shake the Tail to Eliminate Heart Fire' (摇头摆尾去心火), became known as 'The Beyoncé'.

Near the end of the semester, students led the series without the video. It was bumpy, but they helped one another by tagging in when whoever was leading became stuck. Even students who seemed checked out could surprise; one who never participated used illustrations taken from Pan Fei's (潘霏) 1858 *Hygiene Essentials* (卫生要术) to hand-illustrate the movements and placed this alongside detailed instructions he had transcribed from the video. I made copies for the class.

Later, I found an email address for Mimi Kuo-Deemer, whose video we had used, and showed her the student's illustration. She praised the resource and offered him suggestions to improve it further. She also agreed to record a video for future classes. There again, walls had been bypassed and manufactured scarcity overcome through dialogue, creativity, and relationship-building—that and a generosity of heart.

Smuggling as a Metaphor

I hope these scenes illustrate a few points. China Studies educators clearly can teach in ways

meaningful and relevant to students incarcerated in US prisons. They can do this by teaching *about* China and *through* China.

About the class, one student said their understanding of history had ‘drastically changed. I thought I knew, but I had no idea the part that China & its people have played throughout history’ (Feedback 2). Another student wrote: ‘To understand a different culture and be able to respect that culture will open doors that are shut due to ignorance, racism, and close-mindedness’ (Feedback 3). And another: ‘We would love to have a second China class. We only scratched the surface of such a diverse culture, and so much can be learned’ (Feedback 4).

China educators may also find prisons fertile ground for topics other than what they may typically choose. Working through anti-Asian bias and Sinophobia seems a worthwhile goal. Fraught topics such as race, socialism, and colonialism can also be taught productively in the Chinese context first, yielding insights that can then be transposed to the higher-stakes context of our own society. Postwar decolonisation is a undertaught yet crucial period that intertwines Chinese history with that of the United States. Globalisation in the United States cannot be understood without China.

Even students who had a more complex relationship with the class got something out of it: the student who stole pens to sell for tattoo ink, the student who goaded me by repeating anti-Chinese stereotypes, students who came to class high, students who slept through parts of the class, the student who one day screamed at demons the rest of us could not see. There is such an astounding need for compassionate, empowering teaching, and I have no doubt this can be smuggled in under the guise of China Studies just as well as any other subject.

Just as much may be smuggled out. The realities of teaching incarcerated students can push China scholars to radically reassess their own work. The need to connect with a different demographic inevitably pushes educators to familiarise themselves with new areas. Within their expertise, interacting with incarcerated students may push them to rethink less commonly taught topics or push scholars to expand the scope of future research.

Encounters in places of such great need pry open cracks in our lives. They leave us changed and desperate to change what is not right. Through

substantive interactions with people of vastly different experiences and circumstances, students and teachers grow in knowledge and compassion but also in their political vision. For reflective educators, opportunities for experiments in what bell hooks calls education for critical consciousness or liberatory education abound. With the right advice, sufficient caution, and a willingness to learn prison codes, educators can be part of an education but also a movement. Our teaching can affirm the right of every person to grow irrespective of their past, offer therapeutic value in non-invasive ways, and develop skills crucial for engaging in civic life.

A vibrant prison education ecology once existed until ‘tough-on-crime’ politicians decimated it by withdrawing from incarcerated people eligibility for Pell Grants (government education subsidies). By the early 1990s, 782 programs for higher education in prison existed but, by 1997, only about eight remained (C.D. 2023: 21). Recent changes to restore Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students mean we are on the verge of a renaissance in prison education. There has never been a better time to get involved.

As for my time teaching China in Alabama prisons, I am forever changed. I will always remember the sight of 12 women following a teacher through the flowing movements of the eight brocades while a helicopter watched from the sky above. This moment was one that easily could have never happened. Yet, we created it. Was it a showdown? If so, between what? Was it something else? Regardless, from that moment, I believe we all received some sense of our power to move in a place so defined by its power to arrest. At that moment, the students and the teachers were free. ■

Many of the lessons were developed in discussion with colleagues, students, and Chinese locals. Conversations with Jason Wren and Robert Sember of The New School were especially important. Likewise, conversations that spun off an initial email to the Critical China Scholars also proved to be a great help. Many people in the United States, China, and elsewhere lent time and energy to the projects described here. Thank you.



'A Houseful of Descendants', CCTV public service ad, Annual Spring Festival Festival, 2024.

The Biopolitics of the Three-Child Policy

Susan GREENHALGH

Since its introduction in 2021, the Three-Child Policy has provoked anxiety among educated young Chinese who, surveys suggest, value personal growth over marriage and childbearing. Examining population as a question of governance, this essay asks what the authorities are doing in the name of population, what is most significant, and what forms of resistance are possible. It argues that the Three-Child Policy is only the most visible element of a larger project the goal of which is to fix the nation's demography by bringing Chinese society, and especially women, under greater Communist Party control. The fearsome scope of the project and the growing concentration of power in the Party-State make effective resistance difficult.

Since the 1980 launch of the One-Child Policy, population has been a fraught domain of Chinese politics. An analysis of Weibo comments suggests that the announcement in the mid-2010s of the Two-Child Policy was met with excitement and hope—a sign that the government had heard the people's demands and opened the circle of freedom after a long winter of reproductive discontent (Yang et al. 2022). Five years later, the Three-Child Policy (一对夫妻可以生育三个子女政策) came as a gut punch. The public's concerns had been ignored. It was now clear that, instead of citizens having a voice in their own affairs, the people were merely passive objects of control by an authoritarian government concerned only about aggregate numbers.

Survey after survey has shown little interest in large families among young Chinese. Today, educated young people in the cities value personal growth, self-realisation, and freedom to enjoy life. They want to stabilise their careers before starting a family. They see marriage and childbearing as personal affairs, not matters of state (Wang 2023; Zhou 2018; Fudan Development Institute 2022). With public expression of discontent impossible, complaints and protests have erupted online, where communities of women share their frustrations about sexual abuse in relationships, the impossible costs of raising even one child, rampant gender discrimination at work, and much more (Wu and Dong 2019; Zhang 2023; Xie and Ying 2023).

With the rollout of the Three-Child Policy proceeding slowly and almost invisibly, anxieties have multiplied in private and online spaces. Will the three-child family be a permissible option (可以), as current policy states, or advocated (提倡, a term that can mean both encouraged and demanded, depending on the context), as the one-child and even two-child families were? Memories of state violence during the one-child years have stoked fears about how far the current regime will go in enforcing its reproductive will. In this fog of uncertainty, how can young women (and men) who wish to prioritise their work and self-development respond to this latest move by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to intervene deeply in their lives? Writing in this journal, the feminist activist Lü Pin urged passive resistance to the state through refusal to marry and have children (Lü 2023). But can opting out protect the young from the long arm of a powerful state determined to raise the birthrate to allay what it sees as an urgent population crisis preventing the realisation of the China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation?

Existing scholarship on the Three-Child Policy is limited and focused on demographics (Minzner 2022). While that is important work, it misses the larger biopolitical project of which the policy is a part and, in turn, the political stakes involved. Research on the One-Child Policy revealed the analytic productivity of broadly Foucauldian concepts of governance—the steering of conduct by ‘governors’ in the state and beyond—in revealing the larger biopolitical project of subject-making, nation-building, and Party-preserving of which the One-Child Policy was a part

(by biopolitics here I mean the field concerning the administration and optimisation of the vital attributes of human life, especially at the aggregate level; for a more detailed discussion, see Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). The one-child project remade China’s society, creating the highly educated, self-determining post-1980, post-1990, and post-2000 generations of subjects who are contending with the three-child demand today. Such dynamics suggest that we need to talk about this larger project, not just the policy on births that receives all the media attention.

Examining today’s population project through a governance framework, and using the One-Child Policy as a comparative baseline, in this essay, I ask three questions: what are the central authorities doing in the name of ‘population’—that is, what sort of project are they assembling; what is new and significant about it; and what kinds of resistance are possible and, more generally, what does the project mean for state–society relations? The analysis draws on my study of the Two-Child and Three-Child policies through document analysis, review of Chinese social research and social media, and informal conversations, as well as long research on the One-Child Policy. I will argue that in the past 10 years, the regime of President Xi Jinping has undertaken a major, largely uncharted project of reasserting Party-State control over population. The policy on births is only the most visible element of this larger initiative. Arguably bigger in scope than anything undertaken so far, the project’s aim is to engineer a new, stable, and harmonious family-centric society and family-friendly economy that will smooth out demographic irregularities in two main ways: by re-traditionalising family culture and by reconcentrating power over reproduction in the CCP and new or refurbished Party-led institutions and infrastructures.

I contend that the three-child norm is not so much a real aspiration as a signal of this more expansive goal of fixing the nation’s demography by bringing Chinese society, and especially Chinese women, under greater Party control. The fearsome scope of the new project, together with the concentration of power in the Party-State today, makes effective resistance very difficult. Since the state’s population project is a work-in-progress, my aim is to sketch out some of its main features, connecting the available dots into a set of provisional answers to these questions. My

hope is to arm young Chinese with knowledge of use in the coming struggles and, more generally, to spark fresh conversations about these vital matters.

A 'National Crisis' to Be Eased by Reinventing Neo-Confucian Families

The study of population governance in China starts with an analysis of how the problem and its solution are framed in official discourse. In the 1980s, the state discourse of 'population crisis' helped cement public support for the One-Child Policy, and it would come in handy again (Greenhalgh 2008).

Soon after Xi Jinping took the reins of power, the Chinese leadership began addressing the worrying fall in fertility under the late One-Child Policy. In 2015, the state officially ended this policy, introducing a universal Two-Child Policy to take effect in 2016. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, it was clear that the Party-State had lost control not only of the birthrate, but also of many key measures of population health. The number of births per woman was in freefall, sinking to 1.08 in 2022—far below the 2.1 needed to replace the population (Zhai and Jin 2023). Young people raised as little emperors and empresses during the one-child years were revelling in their freedom, pushing the age of first marriage ever closer to 30 and rejecting marriage and reproduction in growing numbers (Du 2023). To the Xi leadership, these demographic realities—ultra-low fertility, rapid ageing, a shrinking labour pool, shifts in family structure—posed major threats to the achievement of critical economic goals.

The state's response was to bundle all these concerns together and treat them as an urgent, multi-faceted population crisis—and especially a birth crisis—that threatened the nation's prosperity and the realisation of Xi's signature goal of the China Dream. Party leaders avoided the language of 'crisis' in public, but the shockingly rapid decline in the birthrate and their drastic, almost frantic responses (suddenly announcing a Three-Child Policy and eliminating for-profit tutoring virtually overnight) signalled the existence of a crisis in all but official name (Minzner 2022). In his larger program for the country, Xi argued that the nation's ancient Confucian ideals had made



'They will have a brother or sister.' Source: China Youth Daily.

China great in the past and they lived on in the CCP's plans for national revitalisation (Tsang and Cheung 2024: 86–89). Following that overarching logic, the solution to the population problem was to institute a Three-Child Policy and encourage the formation of large neo-Confucian families to support the young and the old. Other possible solutions to these problems (immigration for elder care, raising the retirement age to increase labour supply) were set aside in an all-hands-on-deck effort to promote three-child families through a broad campaign of ideological education and a set of sweeping socioeconomic incentives and disincentives labelled 'supporting measures' (生育支持措施).

The ideological core of what I call China's 'project on population for the new era' is Xi Jinping's vision for the restoration of a neo-traditional family order rooted in the Confucian fundamentals of hierarchy, respect for the old, women's responsibility for domestic roles, and harmony among the generations. (I use 'neo-traditional' and 'neo-Confucian' loosely—and interchangeably—as umbrella terms for the characteristics Xi calls 'Confucian'.) With several children and a multigenerational structure, these neo-traditional families would be major contributors to solving the nation's demographic problems, from low fertility and labour shortage to old-age support. Such a development would turn China's increasingly individualistic society into a more familistic one. Reproductive-age women, who would do the work of biological and social reproduction (childbirth and household labour and care), were to be valorised as good wives and mothers. In this scheme, their identity as independent agents would be subordinated as female identity was subsumed within the construct of the 'good neo-traditional family'.

The 2021 Central Committee and State Council Decision announcing the Three-Child Policy set out the core cultural themes to be advanced countrywide:

Promote the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation; respect the social value of childbirth; advocate marriage and childbirth at an appropriate age and better childbearing and rearing; encourage couples to share child-rearing responsibilities; break with outdated customs such as exorbitant betrothal gifts; and foster a new culture of marriage and childbearing. (CC&SC 2021: 9)

As Wang Pei'an, Executive Vice-President of the Party-led Birth Planning Association (BPA), explained: 'This is a systematic and comprehensive interpretation of the *marriage and childbearing culture in the new era*' (Wang 2023: 4, emphasis added). These familistic themes would form the ideological centrepiece of the three-child campaign.

The Party began propagandising the purported personal and national benefits of China's traditional family culture long before it launched the Three-Child Policy. Early in his tenure as Party chief, President Xi began calling for a revival of 'glorious Chinese traditions' and honouring women's roles as 'good

wives and mothers' (贤妻良母) (Xi 2021: 9; Xiao 2022). Xi's statement on the 'Three Irreplaceables' (三个不可替代) affirmed the unique role of women as the pivot of the family, which in turn plays a unique role as the basic cell of society and building block of national stability (Xi 2021). Nationwide publicity campaigns such as the poster collection 'Visualising Our Values' and the CCTV ad 'China-Dream Child' (中国梦娃) launched in 2013–14 have popularised not only the so-called core socialist values, but also a set of family values upholding the Confucian ideals of patriarchal authority, nation-family (家国), filial piety, unquestioned gender roles, and harmony (Miao 2021). Romanticised images of respectful children, self-sacrificing mothers, and other filial versions of the good citizen have served to illustrate the correct solution to the crises of sagging fertility and lack of old-age care. For a decade now, such images, which seamlessly reframe public issues as personal ones, have been a ubiquitous part of the public sphere in rural and urban China, permeating ordinary people's everyday lives (Miao 2021).

Agents of Population Governance: Co-Governance by Government, Society, and Citizens

Governance requires 'governors' to steer citizens' conduct along correct lines. The One-Child Policy sought to *prevent* births primarily through the exercise of Party-State power. The official governors of population were the birth planning agencies of the Party-State, as well as the Party-led mass organisations (the All-China Women's Federation, trade unions, Communist Youth League). Other, nonstate agents—professionals, parents, and children as governors of themselves—were called on to raise population quality (素质) but they had no official role in population governance (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

Now, to *stimulate second and third births* in a society that favours one or two, the state has ordered a national mobilisation of all social forces, along with a strengthened collaboration between government (here meaning the state administration) and society (NHC 2022: 5, item 20). The Three-Child

Policy has not only placed responsibility on the entire governing apparatus, the mass organisations, and the BPA; it has also expanded the array of governors to include the heads of organisations in more than a dozen fields—culture workers, employers (state and private sectors), educators, healthcare providers, heads of public interest and social organisations, families, and individuals (again, as self-governors)—assigning each specific duties under the direction of the CCP (CC&SC 2021; NHC 2022). This represents a profound shift in the way China has governed its population. In the words of the 2015 Decision on the Two-Child Policy, it is a shift ‘from relying mainly on government power to *co-governance by the government, society, and citizens*’ (CC&SC 2015: 3, emphasis added). With the government outsourcing to other parts of society much of the difficult work of raising the birthrate, those on the receiving end of all the pressure from employers, parents, healthcare providers, and so forth—young women—are likely to find it harder than ever to escape the net of surveillance and control.

As it was under the One-Child Policy, successful implementation of the Three-Child Policy and supporting measures is to be ensured by strengthening Party leadership. Party committees and governments at all levels are instructed to place population work on the agenda of important matters; ensure top leaders personally take charge and implement the (cadre) target responsibility system; and provide annual updates to the Central Committee and State Council (CC&SC 2021: 8, 9; NHC 2022: 5). Like other policy issues, population is a Party-State matter to be enforced by all means available—a stark reminder to citizens that reproduction is not personal, but political through and through.

A Comprehensive Social Infrastructure to Promote Births

How, then, should these governors boost the birthrate? This question of implementation occupies most of the space in the official documents on the Three-Child Policy. The 2021 decision identifies three concrete obstacles to raising the birthrate, then sets out detailed, multidimensional solutions to each (CC&SC 2021). These are the astronomical cost of

childrearing, the heavy childcare and education responsibilities faced by parents, and the difficulties women face combining work and family—precisely the obstacles young Chinese themselves cite.

The governors identified above are called on to create (or improve) multiple interlinked birth-enabling ‘systems’ that, working together, should help overcome the obstacles to higher-order childbearing, while achieving the state’s many other population goals (in health, quality, and so on). Stepping back from the astonishing scope and exhaustive detail in the documents, what we see here is an effort to build a *comprehensive social infrastructure* comprising a family-centric society and a family-friendly economy and social service sector (health, education, infant and elder care) to raise the birthrate while optimising childbirth, child care, education, and elder care. The 2021 decision uses the term ‘system’ loosely and liberally, mentioning it more than 30 times. Among the more overarching systems are:

- a. a *population service system* that covers not just reproduction, as under the One-Child Policy, but the entire life cycle, with a focus on the elderly and the young
- b. a *fertility support system* that uses government finance, tax collection, insurance, education, employment, and housing measures to stimulate childbearing and ensure the quality of services for childbearing and rearing
- c. a *birth-friendly working environment* that offers mothers flexible work schedules, generous maternity leave, improved maternity insurance systems, and re-employment training after childbirth; and safeguards women’s legal rights and interests in employment
- d. an *inclusive childcare service system* that vastly increases the quantity and quality of childcare services
- e. a *population monitoring system* that covers the entire population over the whole life cycle, and integrates information on population with that on education, public security, civil affairs, health, medical insurance, and social security. (CC&SC 2021; NHC 2022)

This list of infrastructure projects can be read as a masterplan that hints at a larger program the leadership has in mind. How much of this is accomplished will depend on political and economic matters (for instance, how much pressure the centre exerts, how much funding is allocated), which will change with the circumstances in which the Party-State finds itself.

The One-Child Policy sought to manage just two things: the number and the quality of children. As this list of systems suggests, the Three-Child Policy has a much larger set of goals for optimising the population (Xinhua 2021: Article 2, para. 2). This expanded array of concerns managed under the rubric of ‘population’, as well as the construction of the enabling systems (especially [b]–[d]), are mandated by the Population and Birth Planning Law amended in 2021, giving an already powerful state additional legal backing for enforcing its reproductive will (Xinhua 2021).

The political stakes here need underscoring. With the construction of this comprehensive social infrastructure, the scope for state surveillance of and intervention in family life has vastly increased. In the name of easing a multifaceted population crisis, even if only partly enacted, these systems and measures would extend the reach of government into virtually all domains of everyday life and manage individual conduct from cradle to grave, shrinking the space for individual autonomous action.

The implications for women and gender relations are equally concerning, if not more so. These have been spelled out with clarity by the feminist scholar Angela Xiao Wu. Instead of addressing the gender inequalities that largely produced the low birthrate in the first place, the new social and family infrastructure ‘essentially extracts unpaid, highly gendered labour to smooth [out] the country’s coming economic challenges’ (Wu, Email, 25 May 2024). Rather than changing discriminatory institutions, the CCP has opted to double down and strengthen them. This is likely to produce anger if not outrage among the many Chinese women who, especially in the past five years, have developed a heightened awareness of the gender disparities at the foundation of China’s society. In Wu’s words:

Against this expansive awareness ... any beneficial measures aimed at [the] family as a unit will have limited appeal to, if not [be] viewed

[as] outright insidious by, women themselves who are [already] shouldering most of the work within the family.

Implementation to Date

Clearly, enforcing the Three-Child Policy and its myriad supportive measures involves an ambitious agenda of changes that will take years to put in place, and more years still to produce effects. Nonetheless, by mining the media and social research, we can see some of the important actions now under way. The state has led with broad initiatives to instil new norms by creating a public culture celebrating and normalising larger families with two or three children (Qian and Robles 2024). While official street banners have declared the benefits of three-child families, CCTV has run public service ads featuring happy multigenerational families feasting together at Chinese New Year. Subtle reminders of official support for more traditional families have begun to appear in unexpected places. In late 2023, for example, a sculpture of a one-child family that had long adorned the riverbank in Wuhan suddenly had three children (He and Lü 2024). For many young people, these everyday reminders of the state’s desire for multi-child, multigenerational families are being internalised as societal pressure to conform to the new norm (He and Lü 2024; Qian and Robles 2024).

Tapped to take the lead in spreading the ‘culture of marriage and childbearing for the new era’, the Party-led BPA in 2022–23 launched pilot projects in 40 cities to spread public awareness of the newly prioritised family values. Innovative events such as beauty contests for pregnant women have drawn attention to the BPA’s work. The All-China Women’s Federation—once charged with advancing women’s interests—has been brought under tighter Party control and tasked with actively supporting the policy by spreading Xi Jinping Thought on family values and encouraging women to take on traditional maternal and caregiver roles (Zhou 2019, 2023). With two nationwide mass organisations pressing the cause, it would be hard for citizens to miss the message about the politically proper family today.

After propagandising the public, the next step is to introduce concrete measures to spark the desired changes. Like the One-Child Policy in 1980, the Three-Child Policy today is being rolled out in stages, starting with target populations most likely to comply (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005: 105). In September 2023, Xi Jinping, as Chairman of the Central Military Commission, signed an executive order charging the armed forces with taking the lead in carrying out the amended population law (Liu 2023; People's Daily 2023). The measures, to be enforced immediately, included 33 provisions that urge military couples to do their patriotic duty by marrying and having children 'at the right ages' and considering having three. Assuming the campaign takes root among the troops, we can expect another sector of society to be targeted soon.

For the general (civilian) public, media reports reveal piecemeal introduction of supportive measures in various localities. Among the more common inducements are matchmaking events, cash awards for those marrying 'at the right age', group weddings to curb 'exorbitant bride prices', childbirth allowances, childrearing subsidies, paternity leave, and income tax deductions for expenses related to caring for children under three (Wang 2023; Master 2023; Global Times 2023; Global Times Staff 2023). Some localities have pushed enforcement in the direction of hard (more forceful) birth planning, effectively closing off avenues of resistance. Tactics include refusing young men's requests for vasectomies, forbidding illegal (such as gender-selective) abortions, and maintaining a 30-day pre-divorce waiting period that strongly discourages marital breakups (Chen et al. 2021; Davidson 2021; CC&SC 2021). We can expect rapid growth in the number and variety of such measures over the next few years.

What Forms of Resistance Are Possible? What is Ultimately at Stake?

There is no doubt that China's leaders are serious about creating a more family-oriented society in which social welfare tasks (child care, elder care) that ideally would be handled by the state are being offloaded to the family, and especially women, to

accomplish. In this government-with-society initiative, all named parties are responsible for doing their part, and all owe allegiance to the CCP. Today enforcement appears to be proceeding slowly, as leaders continue to monitor public reactions. Reading the policy documents, though, we can discern potential for the resort to heavy-handed, probably technology-assisted, control. For example, it is a small step from stating, as the population law now does, that marriage and births should happen 'at the appropriate age' (适龄) to specifying the (younger) ages and using administrative tools to steer people to marrying and having children at those ages. Similarly, it would be fairly easy for the state to use its control over coveted public sector jobs as leverage in gradually gaining compliance.

The same goes for birth control. For example, unmarried couples now rely primarily on condoms, withdrawal, and the rhythm method (in that order) to avoid unwanted pregnancies (Wang et al. 2020). The high failure rate of these methods means that young and unmarried women, who are denied access to the reproductive services married women enjoy, have little choice but to use abortion, including repeat abortions, as a principal method of averting births. Simply restricting access to abortion—which has already begun in the name of 'limiting illegal abortions'—would force young, unmarried people to have children they do not want (Lau 2022). Such use of state-controlled resources and services to steer reproduction was everyday practice during the one-child era, and it is part of the *modus operandi* of the supporting measures that accompany today's policy.

What will happen when the state extends enforcement beyond the armed forces to sectors of society where the policy is deeply unpopular? How will Chinese feminists and other freedom-seeking young people respond when the pressures on them begin to grow? Will they be able to resist pronatalist and familist pressures from the state and perhaps also older family members who have effectively allied with the state to promote 'entrenched patriarchal family demands' (Singh and Zhou 2023: 34)? What form might that resistance take? The journalist and sociologist Leta Hong Fincher (2023) foresees a coming clash over reproductive control, in which excessively tough measures introduced by the CCP could provoke active protests and even uprisings,

effectively constraining the Party's options. Is such a clash likely? If today young women have no voice in the public sphere, no way to engage in advocacy (Lü Pin 2021–22), will they go into the streets, risking arrest and jail time, to engage in protests and uprisings against the Three-Child Policy? No-one can say, but after the 2015 lock-up of the Feminist Five, they are likely to exercise caution.

Open protest aside, what other forms might resistance take? Under the One-Child Policy, resistance was fierce but unorganised. Couples defied the policy largely on their own by concealing pregnancies, escaping to distant villages, bribing local cadres, and so forth. We can expect a similarly atomised resistance now, but on a new, more sophisticated level, enabled by the wealth and savvy of many young Chinese. Informal conversations suggest that for those with means, emigration is an option, and unknown numbers are taking it right now.

Young women (and men) may demand a voice in their reproductive decisions, but numerous factors are likely to work against successful large-scale opposition. Political realities present a major barrier. In the past decade, President Xi has concentrated unprecedented power in the Party and strengthened its control over society (Huang 2023). The Party-State controls highly effective tools of mass intervention, from administrative, financial, and personnel-related, to intrusive forms of digital surveillance and discipline that were not available in the age of one-child families (Pei 2024). The Party-State has the population law on its side. Xi's Party has silenced not only the Women's Federation but also virtually all critical voices—nongovernmental organisations, a relatively free press, public interest lawyers, critical intellectuals—depriving citizens wanting a different fertility policy of organised groups who might support them. The protesters are left isolated, with only short-lived online communities and a few feminist spaces in some cities to look to for ideas and support (Stevenson 2024).

Reflecting the nation's long tradition of paternalistic governance, in survey after survey, Chinese overwhelmingly support their government, regardless of its actions and their own grievances. In the most recent World Values Survey (conducted before the Covid pandemic), 94.6 per cent of Chinese questioned said they had significant confidence in their government (World Values Survey n.d.; Huang 2023: 110–17).

Will the young eventually succumb to pronatalist pressures and have more children than they want? Given the balance of power in Xi's China, and the desires of many older relatives, that may be more likely than an open clash.

The Three-Child Policy and the larger population project to which it belongs may have little short-term or mid-term impact on the birthrate, but that does not mean we should dismiss the policy as irrelevant, useless, or misconceived, as some have done. For what is at stake here is not so much the fertility rate as progress in realising the Party's vision of a society that is less individualistic and more amenable to Party discipline and demands. On this, nine years of the Two-Child and Three-Child policies have already made significant gains. In the process of gradually implementing these policies and supporting measures, the state has defined a set of fundamentally economic problems as demographic ones in good part solvable by 'the traditional family', spread an ideology of Confucian familism, mobilised large sectors of society to actively promote the new agenda, and placed the responsibility on women to (once again) save the nation by putting their own ambitions behind those of their country as defined by its leaders.

Like its famous predecessor, the Three-Child Policy will have unintended effects. The One-Child Policy touched every Chinese and produced vast, often wrenching changes in society, culture, and politics. Depending on how hard the state is willing to push—how much it is ready to invest in incentives, how prepared it is to resort to heavy-handed measures—the Three-Child Policy and the politics it has begun to unleash could remake China in ways we can scarcely imagine today. ■

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Spectres of Anticolonial Internationalism in Contemporary China

Observations during a Time of Global Struggle

Yawen LI

This essay excavates the role of internationalism as a key dimension of radical leftist thought in Chinese modern history, highlighting the impact of transnational connections on the country's anticolonial past while also demonstrating the approach's diminishing influence as the nation-state has gradually become a dominant framework within the Chinese left. By examining creative expressions of solidarity from mainland China to recent global social movements, it will offer insights into legacies of radical internationalism and anticolonial imagination in China today.

Rally in China during the Maoist era under the banner 'Firmly Support the Palestinian and Arab People's Struggle against US Imperialism and Zionism'.

On 1 March 2022, just one week after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an anonymous group of internationalists from mainland China composed a letter expressing their support for the Ukrainian people. The document, titled 'Sharing the Shame: A Letter from Internationalists in Mainland China' (与有耻焉: 来自中国大陆国际主义者的一封信), was subsequently published by Chuang, a website renowned for its coverage of China's capitalist development. In this letter, the Chinese internationalists critically assessed the actions of both Russia and the US-NATO alliance, as well as those of the Chinese Government, which at that time was

officially maintaining an ambiguous stance but in reality was tacitly supporting Russia by consistently censoring pro-Ukrainian voices.

Through their message, these Chinese internationalists declared their solidarity with the Ukrainian people and extended their support to antiwar advocates, especially those in Russia, who have similarly faced repression under an authoritarian regime. Less than one year earlier, in May 2021, one of the co-authors of the letter, a young journalist and activist named Wu Qin, had founded the independent journal *Tongshi* (同时 *hxotnongd*, literally ‘Meanwhile’). This publication actively promoted understandings of global protest cultures, focusing particularly on the complex dynamics of postcolonial struggles in the Global South. The topics it covered spanned neo-colonial governance, patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, settler colonialism, labour exploitation, land dispossession, resource extraction, and grassroots self-governance. These subjects were explored across diverse regions such as Palestine, Afghanistan, Iran, India, Cuba, Mexico, Indonesia, and within marginalised communities in Western societies.

As members of the journal’s board pointed out, non-Western scholars and activists seem to be predisposed to a limited scope of attention—one tied to their immediate geo-ethnic contexts, which is itself a manifestation of colonialism’s enduring grip (Guo 2022). This, as they further note, hampers the ability of different groups to perceive things connectively and structurally, as well as empathise with similarly situated people in the world. What they are trying to do in putting forward this type of critique is to re-establish an internationalist network and reopen the space for pedagogies of resistance and solidarity within the Global South. In this essay, I discuss how their coverage of anticolonial struggles in the Middle East demonstrates an internationalist spirit, addressing Islamophobia in contemporary China and furthering truly decolonial causes. In this context, I also show how a compelling piece of Chinese short fiction written by Wu Qin, ‘A Letter from a Tehran Prison’ (德黑兰狱中来信)—which also appeared in English in the pages of the *Made in China Journal* in late 2023—exemplifies an artistic form capable of forging connections between transnational activist movements.

Anticolonial Internationalism: Past and Present

First, let’s take a brief look at how an anticolonial imagination with a robust international dimension evolved in China, and how it eventually faded into an almost spectral existence, absorbed within a narrow framework centred on the nation-state. By paying attention to what I term ‘spectres of anticolonial internationalism’ in present-day China, I hope to complement existing scholarship that seeks to re-evaluate China’s complex colonial histories and postcolonial conditions in the context of its global rise (see, for instance, Zhang 2023; Byler et al. 2022; Cheah and Hau 2022; Tenzin 2022; Meinhof 2017, 2018).

These important accounts tend to focus on the persistence of past and emerging forms of domination. For example, in his introduction to a recent important volume titled *Siting Postcoloniality: Critical Perspectives from the East Asian Sinosphere*, Pheng Cheah (2022: 20) observes a certain continuity between China’s imperial past and its postsocialist postcoloniality, specifically the Party-State’s reappropriation of premodern Chinese imperial structures. What is missing, or often conflated with state nationalism, is the contemporary relevance of anticolonial imagination among the Chinese people. Here, I propose that it is important to distinguish the radical legacies of anticolonial movements in China from the limited and increasingly empty nationalist narrative of Han Chinese victimhood promoted and amplified by the Party-State—a discourse that is complicit in repressive state politics. Turning to Chinese people’s critical and creative expressions in the face of escalating colonial transgressions and protests worldwide, I attempt to resituate the anticolonial imagination in contemporary Chinese culture.

Throughout China’s modern history, the imaginary of revolutionary emancipation has been shaped by interactions with similarly oppressed peoples around the world. Two key periods that exemplify this dynamic are the late Qing era and Maoist China. For the former period, Rebecca Karl’s *Staging the World* (2002) charts the influence on anticolonial thought in late imperial China of Filipino nationalist struggles, the Boer War in South Africa, the Turkish revolution, and colonial conditions in India and Poland. Chinese nationalist intellectuals’ interpretations of

these events were not entirely impartial, and often bore vestiges of imperialist epistemologies that had been deeply internalised. However, the significance of the ‘initially expansive global or internationalist moment of identification (1895–1905)’ (Karl 2002: 3) lies in its potential to

permit the Pacific, Asia, and Africa to emerge into view, not as inert geographical designations diachronically ordered, but as material sites for the production of new global, national, and local meanings, practices, and histories on a synchronically understood world stage. (p. 147)

Jing Tsu’s *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature* (2005) highlights the impact of black slavery in America on the Chinese anticolonial imagination.

Early Chinese nationalists’ concern for the ‘oppressed of the world’ resurfaces in Mao’s Third-Worldist internationalism. Among many concrete manifestations of this feeling, it is particularly palpable in China’s participation in the Bandung Conference, its demonstrative support for Congolese independence, solidarity with the Algerian and Iraqi revolutions, financial backing of the Tanzania–Zambia railway project, and alignment with anti-US protests in Panama, even after the Sino-Soviet split (Lin 2018; Teng 2019). China’s fate was once again perceived as interconnected with global anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements. This was particularly clear in the realm of the arts and propaganda. Surveying Chinese dance culture of the 1950s and 1960s that incorporated aesthetic elements from the wider Third World, Emily Wilcox (2018: 787) argues that ‘Maoist China offered a particularly strong example for the merging of socialist and anticolonial movements’. Wilcox adds that this dynamic constitutes a ‘postcolonial blind spot in Anglophone scholarship on Maoist China’ due to Cold War legacies. Similarly, in his analysis of various propaganda forms, including broadcasting, traditional operas, and prints, Yin Zhiguang illustrates the role played by the Arab region, particularly Egypt and Palestine, with their significant anticolonial and anti-imperialist practices after World War II, in ‘creating a synchronically experienced internationalism for ordinary Chinese people. This synchronicity is further ingrained into

the common people’s world view through newspaper news and organised political study and discussions’ (Yin 2017; my translation).

Maoist Third-Worldist internationalism—albeit not without its own limitations (Shih 2013; Pang 2022)—transitioned towards nationalist principles in the early 1970s when China aligned with the United States to counterbalance the Soviet threat. During NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999, a resurgence of the anticolonial, anti-imperialist internationalist sentiment was seen in large-scale protests against US–NATO imperialism, accompanied by expressions of solidarity for the loss of Yugoslavia. However, the destruction of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the unfortunate deaths of three Chinese journalists arguably played a substantial role in shaping the context (Wu 2023a).

Existing scholarship often focuses on the assimilation of revolutionary internationalism into the narrow nation-state framework, or its transition into a Confucian-informed globalism. In her 2018 article ‘China’s New Globalism’, Lin Chun maps the rise and decline of socialist internationalism and anticolonial transnational solidarity in the People’s Republic of China. Lin highlights that China’s global participation since its economic reform reflects agendas radically different from internationalism, which she interprets through Confucian concepts of *tianxia* (天下), or ‘all under heaven’. Historians and scholars in international relations have demonstrated the limitations and risks of *tianxia*-ism as a culturalist approach in guiding realpolitik (Callahan 2008; Dirlik 2010; Hughes 2011; Krishna 2017; Gonzalez-Vicente 2021; Chu 2022). Chinese historian Ge Zhaoguang (2015: 54) even warns against it as ‘nationalism in internationalist guise’.

Chinese mainlanders’ responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reflected this tendency. With influential antiwar posts being removed, the distorted media landscape has led the majority of Chinese netizens to believe that supporting Russia in Ukraine aligns with China’s national interests, as noted by a public opinion survey conducted in April 2022 (US–China Perception Monitor 2022). Yet, even the censored antiwar comments replicate certain elements of the official nationalist discourse, frequently referencing China’s semicolonial history and its timeless victim

position. For instance, the following now-censored antiwar comment was left on the official account of the Russian Embassy in China on *Weibo*:

Russia is invading Ukraine. There are many excuses that the invaders can make to show that the invaded had it coming, but invasion is invasion. The Russian Government, which used violent means in the first place and initiated the war, is unjust, and everyone is watching. If the Russian government, which initiated the war through violent means, is defined as a 'liberator', then what about the Japanese Government's invasion of China? This is extremely important and cannot be ambiguous. The Russian Government is an invader, not a liberator, in the same way that the Japanese Government, which invaded China in the past, also claimed to be a liberator. You are not liberators; you are invading Ukraine, just as the Japanese Government invaded China. Those who cheer for Russia should think about it: if the Japanese Government invaded China in the name of liberation, and your loved ones were shedding blood and sacrificing their lives to resist Japanese aggression, and you were in grave danger, and people from other countries were applauding for the Japanese Government's invasion of China, how would you feel? Do not put yourselves in the shoes of invaders. Japan faced punishment, and so will Russia. (Screenshotted and archived by an anonymous user in the Telegram channel 'Chinese Cyberspace Graveyard' [简中赛博坟场] on 26 February 2022)

Five history professors from leading universities in mainland China and Hong Kong collaborated to write a collective antiwar statement (Sun et al. 2022). China's semicolonial history was brought up again:

In recent days, the internet has been livestreaming the real-time situation of the war: ruins, gunfire, and the wounds of Ukrainian refugees have deeply broken our hearts. As a country that has suffered greatly from war, with shattered homes, countless lives lost, famine across the land, and territorial concessions ... these suffer-

ings and humiliations have shaped our historical consciousness, and we empathise deeply with the pain of the Ukrainian people.

Emphasising shared experiences of suffering can indeed foster compassion and support. However, anticolonial solidarity seems to rely on making the suffering of others, like the Ukrainian people, our own, and on the premise that Chinese have been nothing but victims of colonialism and imperialism. Such solidarity obscures Chinese complicity in colonial injustices and is subject to appropriation and manipulation by official narratives. It also overlooks the fact that a significant number of Chinese people are not necessarily pro-Russia but rather anti-US (Repnikova and Zhou 2022). Invoking the semicolonial past might not achieve the desired effects.

Radical Legacies of Anticolonial Imagination in China Today

As internationalists, we are firmly against the invasion by Russia, to the same degree that we are against NATO's reckless expansion. What we're in support of is not the Ukrainian government, but the right of the Ukrainian people to be free from any imperialist interference.

—'Sharing the Shame' (Chuang 2022)

Now we return to the letter authored by the anonymous Chinese internationalists and what I earlier referred to as 'spectres of anticolonial internationalism' in contemporary China. In 'Sharing the Shame', the authors emphasise that supporting the Ukrainian people is not synonymous with endorsing NATO intervention, drawing an analogy with responsible internationalists who did not back the Soviet Union's participation in the Vietnam War against the United States. They avoid the trap of taking sides and instead advocate for a third path between the Russian and US superpowers—a path that involves uniting with all oppressed peoples, including antiwar activists and ordinary Russians who suffer the cost of Putin's war and economic sanctions imposed by

Western countries. This approach bears the imprints of Maoist Third-Worldist internationalism as seen in their revival of the anachronistic, if not outdated, designation of ‘internationalist’. While they did not overtly reference Mao, their stated solidarity with all oppressed peoples recalls Maoist China’s alignment not only with Third World nations but also with white workers and people of colour in the West (Duan 2024; Liu 2024). Their declaration in the letter that ‘[i]nternationalists have a basic duty to support those who are swept up into just wars of resistance to fight against the invaders’ (Chuang 2022) recalls Mao’s statement during a discussion with African representatives in 1963: ‘The people who have triumphed in their own revolution should help those still struggling for liberation. This is our internationalist duty’ (Mao 1990: 177–78).

Notably, these contemporary Chinese internationalists did not perceive themselves as having triumphed in their own revolution. Their critique of the Chinese State’s suppression of domestic voices regarding Russia’s invasion connects with a broader denunciation of the Chinese authorities’ lack of action on and stifling of protest against the rampant sexual trafficking and enslavement of women within the country:

Meanwhile, under the propaganda of the mainstream media and increasingly stronger censorship over many years, Chinese netizens are unfortunately seen at this time by the world as the biggest and loudest supporters of war and of Putin. Progressive anti-war voices are muted, and protesters are punished. Ashamed as we are, we strongly condemn the propaganda machine that, once again, ‘points to a deer and calls it a horse.’ At the time when the Russian invasion had just begun, our government was busy persecuting its own population in one of the biggest public opinion crises China has seen in recent years. The entire nation was shocked by revelations of countless cases of trafficked women, who had been tortured and treated as sex slaves for decades. These crimes had evolved into a social norm with the collusion of local governments. (Chuang 2022)

This juxtaposition exemplifies the principle of integrating internationalism with nationalism that Mao proposed. In this context, nationalism is delinked from the statism and Han chauvinism with which it has been increasingly associated in China, instead conveying a people-centred national consciousness, especially for those marginalised along gender, class, and ethnic lines. The intention was not to advocate for a nostalgic return to or restoration of Maoist Third-Worldist internationalism, but rather to resurrect its spirit and adapt its significance to the contemporary context. In addition to suggesting the provision of material support to the Ukrainian people for their self-defence, as China once did towards the Vietnamese people, the Chinese internationalists recognise that present-day warfare extends beyond physical battlegrounds to the digital realm. As they put it: ‘Hacker groups disrupting Russian government websites and mainstream media, online mapping sites interfering with the march of Russian ground troops, and public opinion arenas of solidarity with the invaded ... [shape] the cyber terrain of progressivism in this war’ (Chuang 2022). The battle of public opinion has been a consistent focus of their endeavours since the outbreak of the war.

In May 2021, when one of these Chinese internationalists, Wu Qin, founded the *Tongshi* journal, her initial motivation was to support the detained editors of *DOXA*, a Russian leftist publication, and create an alternative ‘news agency’ (通讯社). This agency would aim to uncover overlooked global news in the face of information overload and media attention disparities. Over time, its concerns went beyond media ethics and representational justice, and moved towards (re) building protest cultures and transnational activist networks in China. At a time when protests are often stigmatised as ‘white leftism’ or political correctness (Zhang 2023), with oppressed people in the Global South represented in Chinese popular discourses as voiceless victims, *Tongshi* continued to push the imaginative limits of how decentralised, grassroots, and empowering anticolonial resistance can manifest.

The subjects of their reportage spanned the ‘Palestine Action’ team halting Israeli weapons factories in the United Kingdom, imprisoned Palestinians escaping Israel’s surveillance via spoon-digging, indigenous land reclamation, and the invitation to watch the Belmarsh Tribunal demanding Julian Assange’s freedom. (The last is relevant to China as

WikiLeaks not only exposed US neo-colonial violence in Afghanistan, but also released censored footage of the 2008 unrest in Tibet.) *Tongshi* has also featured Chinese translations of *landays*, an oral art form employed mainly by illiterate Pashtun women in Afghanistan and Pakistan to express discontent with the Taliban, female desires, and yearning for freedom, alongside its reinterpretation by exiled Gansu-born writer Chai Chunya, who melds it with elements of the *hua'er* folk genre prevalent among Muslim women in northwestern China. This inspired Shanghai-based poet Zhai Minglei to rally friends, encouraging them to emulate the style and honour the Afghan literary tradition and women's creativity, therefore fostering a transnational, pan-ethnic connection. As a result, 101 poems from 29 contributors were collected in just six days.

The Letter from a Tehran Prison

In the interest of space, I want to focus on one example that demonstrates the radical legacies of anticolonial imagination in contemporary China and the potential of fiction to advance this cause. While managing *Tongshi*, Wu Qin also served as editor of the highly influential Chinese news media outlet *The Paper* (澎湃). Between the spring and summer of 2022, Wu was arrested in China for suspected involvement in a major protest. She wrote a short story based on this experience but chose to frame it as though it had occurred in Iran. The story was successfully published in the mainland platform *Artforum* (艺术论坛) in January 2023, under the title 'A Letter from a Tehran Prison'. That the negative depiction of the 'Iranian' Government at the centre of the story remained uncensored in China (at least for a while) was most likely because such a narrative aligned with state-sanctioned Islamophobia.

While very few people were aware that the piece essentially depicts a Chinese story and despite the richness of Iranian cultural specificities, the article resonated profoundly with readers in mainland China. Many comments pointed out the striking similarities between the experiences of Mahsa, the imprisoned Iranian protagonist, and those of protestors in mainland China, with demonstrators in both countries

witnessing anti-authoritarian protests that began as commemorative events and then took on pan-ethnic characteristics. The Chinese commentators were referring in particular to the 'A4 Protest', also known as the 'White Paper Revolution' (白纸革命), which was catalysed by a fire in November 2022 that claimed the lives of at least 10 Uyghurs in an apartment complex under long-term quarantine in Ürümqi, Xinjiang (Sorace and Loubere 2022; Connery 2022). The movement in opposition to the government's draconian Zero-Covid Policy then spread to streets and university campuses across China and abroad, leading to a wave of police warnings and arrests. While no direct causal link existed between the protests in Iran and those in China, which occurred just a few months apart, some slogans articulated by Chinese students overseas credited Iranian protestors as a source of inspiration.

After Wu Qin managed with great difficulty to leave China, she published an annotated version of the story, acknowledging that it is Chinese (this is the version that was published in the *Made in China Journal* in late 2023). In it, she clarifies that in the text 'Tehran' alludes to Beijing and, by implication, Sanandaj, a major city in the Kurdish region of Iran where the protagonist Mahsa is arrested, stands for Guangzhou, the city where Wu Qin was herself apprehended by Beijing police while she was preparing for an art exhibition. This annotated version was also shared by mainland Chinese netizens, who related it to their own experiences of being arrested, using the Iranian specificities embedded in the story as points of reference.

Wu Qin's choice of the name Mahsa seems deliberate. Mahsa Amini was a Kurdish woman who died in September 2022 after her arrest by the morality police in Tehran for not wearing a hijab, which led to widespread anti-government demonstrations in Iran. It appears that the literary artifice of using Iran as a stand-in for China went beyond mere narrative strategy or a means to circumvent censorship. It struck me that Wu's grief might extend not only to suppressed ethnic minority groups in China and their Han allies, including herself, but also to the loss of the young Kurdish woman and Iranian protestors. From this point of view, fiction emerges as an effective vehicle to build potential alliances among these radically different groups, based on shared aspects of oppression.

In a recent conversation, Wu confirmed my speculation that with her piece she was indeed trying to commemorate the death of Mahsa Amini. She explained that her integration of the Iranian context with the Chinese narrative was intended to explore an artistic form that can connect global activist movements. Following the tragic passing of Mahsa Amini, and the subsequent protests in Iran, Wu actively engaged in public discussions and events, providing contextualised interpretations, and inviting creative efforts to show solidarity with the Iranian protesters. Looking back, she reflects that this experience perhaps explains why Iran became the immediate ‘language’ available to her when the White Paper movement erupted in China a few months later and she decided to tell her own Chinese protest story:

I feel that at that time, we were going through the same history together. Until I was arrested, I had been promoting public awareness of protests in Iran, but much of it was, in fact, related to our own issues in the guise of Iran’s protests ... At that time, I was preoccupied with a question: why did the Iranian protestors overcome fear and proceed from fear to anger? It seemed like a process of moving forward, so when I began conceiving this [Chinese] story, it started from fear, adversity, and weakness ... In fact, before the outbreak of the White Paper movement, more and more overseas Chinese students were voicing support for Iranian protests ... These historical convergences, mutual understanding, and empathy touched me deeply ... [W]hen the coded version of the ‘A Letter from a Tehran Prison’ was first released, many who shared it would comment: ‘Iran seems just like China.’ At that time, no-one knew it was a Chinese story ... We identify with Iran because of what was happening here. We turned to external contexts, of course, largely due to the fact that our mouths were forced shut, but the energy given to us by this external influence was particularly significant. (Conversation notes, translated by the author translated by the author and published with Wu Qin’s permission)

In the story, the first-person narrator, Mahsa, describes how hearing police who showed up uninvited speaking with the Tehran accent has left her

traumatised. As Wu explains in her added annotation: ‘The Tehrani Persian accent referred to in the story is a metaphor for Beijing Mandarin.’ Read through this optic, this scene paints a picture of the hegemony of standard Mandarin and the traumatic effect of the masculine and Han chauvinism it represents. However, making an equivalence between herself, a Han Chinese woman born in Beijing, and a Kurdish woman in Iran is not unproblematic, given the latter’s subjection to multiple layers of marginalisation. I asked Wu how she navigated the tension that comes with the incommensurability of experiences of victimisation. She told me that she was aware of her own privileges, yet the Chinese protest story must be narrated from a minority point of view. For Wu, the significance of Iran’s protests extends beyond contextual resonance as a Chinese protester; they served as a source of hope for progressivism in China’s future. It is something she would not have anticipated a few years ago, as she observed that previous protests in Iran had displayed a distinct class focus and were often limited to either the underprivileged or the middle class.

The fact that in late 2022 people across different social strata were mobilised and risked their lives to demonstrate support for a young minority woman such as Mahsa Amini surprised Wu. Comparing China with Iran, she added that repressed groups in China tend to have divergent, often irreconcilable agendas and demands, which causes protesters to stand divided. Wu was also impressed by how the protest music during the demonstrations in Iran referenced numerous past protests and symbolic events since 2008. This conveyed a profound sense of continuity—a situation very different from the fragmented memories of resistance in China. Inspired by the protest practice in Iran, Wu infused her Chinese protest story with the sensibility of Iranian protesters towards the suffering of the most marginalised and oppressed groups. In addition, she also tried to make the story as multidirectional as possible, including connections to Xinjiang and Hong Kong, both framed through allusions to locations in the Balochistan region. Nevertheless, in her effort to show solidarity with ethnic minority groups facing language and cultural loss, Wu shared with me her struggles to find vocabularies that can adequately speak to the Uyghur experience.

We Still Can ...

Even though the work in which *Tongshi* and Wu have been engaged was short-lived—the journal’s official WeChat account was permanently banned—its resonance with ordinary Chinese suggests that anticolonial internationalism lingers like a spectre in mainland China.

This can be seen also in Chinese discussions about Gaza. In the face of the genocide unfolding in Palestine, the continued policing of pro-Palestinian voices everywhere reveals various forms of complicity with power. China is no exception. As stated on the Instagram account ‘pal_solidarity_zh’:

Censorship does not just remove specific content; it also creates an environment telling you what [is] worth sharing, what [isn’t], wanting you to believe you’re powerless even if you do care ... By censorship and suppression of constitutional rights, China and Israel stand together, making it impossible for those who want to stop the genocide to come together and turn their grief into strength.

At the same time, critiques of political apathy and support for Palestine on the Chinese internet have become more visible, especially given the injustices already witnessed in Ukraine and Iran. Expressions of solidarity have been conveyed through various mediums, including transcribing and translating reliable news sources, such as the Instagram account ‘pal_solidarity_zh’ itself and the official WeChat account *TyingKnots* (结绳志), podcasts, recommendations of relevant books and films, interviews with frontline reporters and protesters, anonymous artistic creations, and even an underground fund-raising theatrical performance of Mona Mansour’s Palestinian refugee story, *Urge for Going* (which I was fortunate to attend). These individuals, platforms, and decentralised groups persist in exploring and practising the actions that ordinary people *still can* take for Palestine, despite the apparatus of de-politicisation and suppression. From a spontaneous ‘one-star movement’ in Douban against Zionist Matti Friedman’s works, to aiding Palestinians’ evacuation and raising awareness about the situation in Palestine, the spectres of internationalism refuse to be laid to rest.

As Jacques Derrida (2006: 123) highlights in *Specters of Marx*, ‘a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back’. ■

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The Digital Yuan: Purpose, Progress, and Politics

Monique TAYLOR

This essay explores the purpose, progress, and strategic political motivations driving China's development of the digital yuan. This central bank digital currency is not merely a technological advancement or modernisation of a fiat currency, it also serves as a key instrument in the agenda of the People's Bank of China to consolidate monetary authority. The essay analyses the development of the digital yuan in the context of China's broader economic and political strategies, including enhancing financial inclusion, centralising the nation's payment ecosystem—currently dominated by private fintech players—and potentially challenging the US dollar's global dominance. It also assesses its possible impacts on international trade, while addressing the challenges it faces in gaining global acceptance.

Digital Yuan, Source: AsiaTimes (CC).

Millions of users in China now carry the e-CNY in their digital wallets, a digital version of China's fiat currency, the renminbi, which is colloquially known as the digital yuan. When accessing their balances through the e-CNY app, they are greeted with a portrait of Mao Zedong—the same one displayed on Chinese banknotes. This conveys a paradox: a pioneering digital currency, at the forefront of fintech innovation and representing the future of money, while remaining firmly under the watchful eye of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Despite relying on distributed ledger technology (DLT) and cryptographic methods, the digital yuan diverges sharply from its forebear, cryptocurrency, and was established partly as a countermeasure to it. Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum are underpinned by an anarcho-libertarian anti-government ethos and utilise blockchain technology to record all transactions on a peer-to-peer decentralised ledger. While supposedly safeguarding anonymity, this also presents new legal and regulatory challenges for traditional financial systems and central banks. Consequently, central banks the world over have been exploring Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) as a means of modernising their fiat money systems, each with differing norms around

regulatory oversight and user privacy. As of 2023, more than 20 countries, including Japan, Australia, and India, have initiated pilot programs for CBDCs. China was the first to implement its digital currency and remains the frontrunner in terms of its development and execution, with the largest CBDC pilot in the world in terms of the amount of currency in circulation and number of users. Now edging towards an official national launch, the digital yuan's design reflects the Chinese State's broader economic and political objectives.

Developing the Digital Yuan

China's central bank, the People's Bank of China (PBC), a non-independent institution guided by the State Council—that is, the Chinese Government—first discussed the creation of a digital fiat currency or Digital Currency Electronic Payment (DCEP) in 2014, and in 2016 established the Digital Currency Research Institute, which developed the first-generation prototype of digital fiat currency (PBC 2021: 1). The following year the PBC started collaborating with commercial banks, internet companies, and telecommunications players to develop and test the e-CNY (Bansal and Singh 2021: 4). Pilot programs for the digital yuan were rolled out in 2020 in several cities within 'representative regions', including Shenzhen, Suzhou, Xiong'an, and Chengdu (PBC 2021: 13). This places China ahead of other major economies such as Japan, which launched its CBDC pilot program in 2023 (Reuters 2023). Now operational across 23 cities in China mainly for domestic retail transactions, the digital yuan was also trialled at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Zhang 2022). In addition, it is being used to pay utility bills and the salaries of public sector and state-owned enterprise employees in some Chinese cities (Kawate 2023; Shen 2023). The digital yuan's scope of use continues to expand, with integration into wholesale banking transactions and cross-border payments constituting the next phase of its development (Greene 2023; PBC 2021: 5). This incremental implementation process is consistent with China's approach to economic policymaking, which is based on local-level experimentation, with successful experiments and models eventually being scaled up to the national level.

The digital yuan is issued by the PBC and serves as statutory digital cash in circulation, or 'M0' (the monetary base) in central bank parlance. The designation M0 implies direct liability from the PBC, meaning the currency is backed by sovereign credit, which confers on it risk-free status (PBC 2021: 3). Hence, the digital yuan offers an additional payment method for daily transactions in China alongside physical cash and electronic payment platforms, such as Alibaba's Alipay and Tencent's WeChat Pay. It operates on a two-tier system, where the PBC issues the currency to commercial banks, which in turn distribute it to users (PBC 2021: 3). There are currently seven commercial banks that provide e-CNY—the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China, Bank of China, China Construction Bank, Bank of Communications, Postal Savings Bank of China, and China Merchants Bank—and two online banks, WeBank (WeChat Pay) and MyBank (Alipay). Users can access digital yuan through commercial bank apps or the PBC's e-CNY app. There are significant differences between these apps and other payment platforms. Notably, the digital yuan operates within a state-controlled digital currency system, which contrasts with the privately managed infrastructure of Alipay and WeChat Pay. This distinction impacts how transaction data are handled and stored, with the digital yuan offering a higher level of government oversight and potentially different data privacy implications. There may also be differences in security and regulatory compliance as the digital yuan is more directly linked to the traditional banking system than are fintech companies.

Unlike cryptocurrencies, the digital yuan adopts 'controllable anonymity' or anonymity with oversight, providing transaction privacy from commercial players and between users while maintaining transparency for regulatory authorities (PBC 2021: 7). The technical framework combines various technologies to enhance functionality and scalability (the specifics of this have not been fully disclosed by the PBC), including but not limited to blockchain, and is embedded with rigorous security and cryptographic safeguards. The digital yuan also supports offline payments, including dual offline transactions, via near-field communication technology, which is especially beneficial for remote communities that lack internet access (Kshetri 2023: 104). Since it is still evolving through its pilot phases, the technical

capabilities of the currency continue to evolve, along with its legal and regulatory frameworks.

Beyond the basic imperative of adapting fiat money to the digital age, the drive to develop the digital yuan is also closely connected to Beijing's economic, technological, and geopolitical ambitions. The digital yuan would allow the Chinese Government to exert greater control over domestic money supply and circulation, with a view to minimising fraud, money laundering, and corruption, and offering a safer and more regulated digital payment alternative to cryptocurrencies. The latter were limited throughout the 2010s, culminating in a ban on Bitcoin mining and all cryptocurrency-related transactions in 2021, as these speculative assets were perceived as a threat to financial stability and government control of the financial system (PBC 2021: 2).

The digital yuan's centralised design enables government control over financial transaction data. In addition, big data is a powerful resource to possess when crafting economic policies and strategies. The PBC also sees the digital yuan as a tool for improving financial inclusion by making fiat money available to the unbanked population, especially by allowing for offline payments (PBC 2021: 4). Importantly, the digital yuan injects a government-backed alternative into an electronic payments market that is currently dominated by two private fintech giants, Alipay and WeChat Pay. The digital yuan operates under the PBC's purview, which not only strengthens regulatory oversight but also reduces the monopolistic hold of Alipay and WeChat Pay on consumer data and financial transactions. As users migrate to the digital yuan, the government can more effectively track and manage the flow of digital money in the economy, ensuring compliance with national financial policies and regulations. Over time the digital yuan could potentially displace the need for third-party payment services and directly connect consumers with the PBC's digital currency. This would result in a significant shift in the balance of power in China's digital financial sector, moving from private fintech giants to a state-controlled currency system.

There is also an international dimension to China's digital currency aspirations. The Chinese authorities' pioneering role in CBDCs aligns with their broader goal to become a 'world technology leader' in future or next-generation technologies, providing them with a first-mover advantage, especially when it comes to

setting global standards for digital fiat currency relative to other major economies that are considering CBDCs with far longer implementation processes. Due to its efficiency and technological innovation, there is potential for the digital yuan to be widely adopted for cross-border transactions, which could enhance China's economic power and its standing in the international financial system, and potentially challenge the dominance of the US dollar.

In particular, the digital yuan could provide an alternative to the US dollar in regions where China has substantial economic influence. For example, the promotion of the currency as the preferred medium for trade and financial transactions for projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would strengthen China's economic ties with partner countries and enhance its influence over their monetary systems, while at the same time reducing dependence on the US dollar and Western international payment systems such as SWIFT (Kshetri 2023: 95). Establishing the digital yuan as a viable alternative to the US dollar could also reduce the Chinese economy's vulnerability to US monetary policy (such as interest rate adjustments, which influence dollar-denominated trade and investments) and financial sanctions (The Economist 2022).

Domestic and International Adoption of the Digital Yuan

According to the PBC, 261 million people had set up an e-CNY wallet by the end of 2021. Transactions using the digital yuan reached CNY1.8 trillion (US\$250 billion), with a total of e-CNY16.5 billion (US\$2.25 billion) in circulation as of the end of June 2023 (Wee 2023). Digital yuan in circulation accounted for only 0.16 per cent of China's M0 money supply—a small balance with many transactions, which means that the 'velocity is high and more efficient' (Wee 2023). Yet, despite circulating through the economy quickly, thereby contributing to economic activity efficiently, the currency still accounts for only a tiny fraction of the total M0 supply. Uptake of the digital yuan has been slow, with the main obstacle being that the Chinese population is already accustomed to using private electronic payment platforms such as Alipay and WeChat Pay (Kawate and Maruyama

2022; Orcutt 2023). Although the currency introduces functionalities such as offline transaction capabilities and zero fees on digital yuan payments for retailers, the public has not yet been convinced to change their payment habits.

The relationship between the domestic fintech players and the PBC is characterised not only by competition but also by cooperation. The PBC is collaborating with Alibaba's and Tencent's fintech businesses to distribute the digital yuan. For instance, Alibaba's MyBank and Tencent's WeBank have helped to make the currency available to users by integrating digital yuan wallets and transactions into their platforms, creating a synergistic pathway for its dissemination and integration into the financial ecosystem. To give another example, the e-CNY app integrated a popular 'red packet' feature, facilitating cash gifts via WeChat and Alipay, leveraging their substantial user bases to promote the digital yuan during the Lunar New Year holiday in 2023 (Shen and Zuo 2023; Feng 2022). For the fintech companies, their involvement in the digital yuan's rollout is strategic, allowing them to adapt to changes proactively rather than simply react to disruption, thus ensuring that their platforms are interoperable with the new currency. Moreover, given the Party-State-centric nature of China's political and regulatory systems, which even requires private firms to align themselves closely with national interests and priorities, it is also likely that significant government pressure is being placed on these companies to support the development and dissemination of the digital yuan.

The PBC is pivoting its marketing strategy for the digital yuan towards institutional and wholesale transactions as a part of the next stage of the digital yuan's rollout. Although Singapore's DBS Bank already allows its corporate clients in mainland China to collect payments from their customers in digital yuan, Western financial institutions that have expressed interest in using the digital yuan, such as France's BNP Paribas SA, face scrutiny from their home countries. Such wariness reflects geopolitical concerns over support for a Chinese digital currency at a time of fraught US–China relations and when moves towards de-dollarisation are gaining momentum in some countries (DBS 2023; Choudhury et al. 2023). This leads to another set of opportunities and challenges for the digital yuan in cross-border payments.

It makes sense for China to build cross-border payment systems that use the digital yuan as this reduces the country's reliance on the US dollar. These methods are also easier, cheaper, and more efficient for its trading partners to use, as well as less vulnerable to sanctions implemented by the United States for geopolitical purposes (The Economist 2022). Such a system not only aligns with China's two-decades-long aspiration to internationalise the yuan, but also positions the digital yuan favourably for adoption among BRI countries where interconnected trade, investment, and political ties with China are strong.

However, there are significant challenges to the global adoption of the digital yuan for cross-border payments. First, there is the problem of insufficient levels of trust and confidence in the digital yuan—a situation compounded by the fact that, by virtue of its design and the PBC being not an independent central bank, the currency is subject to Beijing's political and regulatory machinations. Second, China maintains a closed capital account, which means that companies, banks, and individuals cannot move money in or out of the country, except in accordance with strict rules. These stringent capital controls are designed to curtail speculative activities and prevent capital flight, but concurrently restrict the yuan's global liquidity. Presumably, these restrictions will also apply to the digital yuan going forward, and the limited availability of the currency has the potential to create conversion challenges—that is, difficulties converting large sums of money into or out of it. This constrained supply could also impact the currency's exchange rate, leading to larger fluctuations in response to demand shifts, causing instability in global markets where the digital yuan will play a key role.

Successful currency internationalisation hinges upon trust in the currency's efficacy as a secure and reliable medium of exchange, store of value, and unit of account. This trust is tethered to confidence in the political and economic stability of the issuing country, alongside the robustness of its financial markets and the integrity of its legal and regulatory frameworks. In addition to relative economic stability and transparent economic policymaking, the United States boasts a governance system of checks and balances; deep, liquid, and transparent financial markets; and well-established legal and regulatory frameworks—all of which translate into trust in the dollar as the global reserve currency, despite recent

critiques of America's economic stewardship. China's political and economic system, on the other hand, is state-driven rather than market-driven, lacks transparency in policymaking, and is characterised by closely intertwined relationships between regulatory bodies and the CCP. Financial markets in China, while substantial and growing, are relatively shallow and illiquid compared with more mature markets such as those in Western Europe and North America (Cruz et al. 2014).

Integral to a currency achieving reserve status is the independence of its issuing country's central bank in setting monetary policy. Central bank independence is a prerequisite for ensuring currency stability since it allows the central bank to make decisions based on economic indicators rather than political pressures. The lack of PBC independence from the CCP is a significant impediment to the broad acceptance of the digital yuan as a basis for international settlements and currency reserves. Furthermore, given China's authoritarian governance model, the digital yuan faces a formidable challenge in acquiring global trust due to concerns about Beijing's political influence over, and potential interference in, the way it is organised. In addition, the overlay of growing geopolitical tensions between the US and its allies and China, especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, present major challenges, and some opportunities, for the digital yuan at the global level. Geopolitical tensions amplify the reservations of US allies and countries that favour the status quo about the adoption of the digital yuan for cross-border transactions. These countries are likely to avoid becoming excessively financially intertwined with China amid its increasing conflict with the West. On the other hand, geopolitical rifts provide openings for the digital yuan to serve as an alternative settlement currency for countries seeking to minimise their reliance on the US dollar, especially those currently under or fearing US sanctions.

The most likely catalyst for the internationalisation of the digital yuan is the BRI. The currency could be adopted for transactions within BRI projects, especially in Asia and Africa, due to the direct involvement of Chinese companies and banks. Furthermore, since the BRI encourages connectivity and cooperation among participating countries, it could foster an environment that uses the digital yuan as the shared transactional currency. If the digital yuan is adopted by BRI

countries and those that are economically, politically, or strategically aligned with China or simply want to reduce their reliance on the US dollar for whatever reason, this could result in a bifurcated international financial system in which one side is led by the US dollar and the other by the digital yuan. This would further intensify strategic competition between China and the United States and would also be a suboptimal development as it would create inefficiencies in global financial systems, disrupting trade and investment flows, and potentially fostering currency instability. While there are challenges to its uptake at home and adoption abroad, over the next decade it is possible that the digital yuan will gain some traction on both fronts given Beijing's resolve and concerted efforts to promote its usage.

Controllable Anonymity

By virtue of being digital and issued by central banks, CBDCs could potentially allow governments to trace and monitor all transactions. Striking the appropriate balance between user privacy and regulatory oversight and compliance is a core concern for digital currencies globally. The various CBDC design and implementation models that countries adopt will reflect their respective regulatory and legal environments, user expectations, and ideological perspectives on privacy and anonymity. The PBC employs the term 'controllable anonymity' (可控匿名) or 'managed anonymity' (in some translations) to articulate a digital currency model in which users' identities are protected and kept anonymous to a degree, while remaining accessible for tracing by the central bank or law enforcement when mandated (PBC 2021; MacKinnon 2022). If the digital yuan were to completely replace physical cash in China, one of the most significant consequences would be the capability of the PBC to monitor, trace, and block all transactions: 'Such a capacity would make financial crimes, such as money laundering, tax evasion, financing terrorism, and the purchasing of illicit goods, far easier to identify and prosecute' (Fullerton and Morgan 2022: 16). Given that tax evasion and corruption are pressing challenges in China, the transaction record provided by the digital yuan could significantly streamline the identification and prosecution of financial crimes

(Fullerton and Morgan 2022: 16; Kshetri 2023: 93).

The PBC maintains that the degree of anonymity experienced by the digital yuan user is dependent on the transaction size: ‘Small amounts are anonymous, big amounts are traceable’ (小额匿名, 大额可溯) being the slogan for this (PBC 2021; MacKinnon 2022). However, since digital wallets are linked to phone numbers and phone numbers are linked to a government-issued ID, even small transactions are likely not anonymous in practice (Orcutt 2023; MacKinnon 2022). While China’s data privacy laws ostensibly safeguard users’ personal data from third-party access, they carve out exceptions for government agencies on the broad grounds of ‘national security and the public interest’ (NPC 2021; Taylor 2022: 75). Hence, controllable anonymity raises ethical concerns about the surveillance capacity that the digital yuan grants to the CCP for monitoring and tracking individuals through their financial transactions (Fanusie and Jin 2021: 11).

The digital yuan could eventually become a profoundly important part of China’s authoritarian toolkit by providing the CCP with extensive insight into, and control over, the financial lives of individuals. Given the close relationship between regulatory bodies and the CCP, a lack of checks and balances in the Chinese political system, and the Party’s track record of utilising surveillance technology for social control and repression, this is a valid concern. For example, when it comes to political dissidents and human rights activists, the PBC—again, a non-independent central bank that is required to enact the policies of the CCP—could suspend their e-CNY wallets (Keram 2021; Fanusie and Jin 2021: 11). From an international perspective, the digital yuan, with its controllable anonymity, is likely to be met with scepticism or resistance by some countries, particularly when it comes to cross-border transactions.

CBDCs and the Digital Yuan Moving Forward

CBDCs are gaining momentum globally, offering potential benefits such as enhanced financial inclusion, streamlined payment systems, and crime prevention and detection, while also emerging as a novel instrument for implementing monetary policy.

However, there are significant risks associated with digital currencies—notably, cybersecurity threats and ethical dilemmas related to privacy and data protection. The digital yuan is ahead of the curve in navigating some of these opportunities and challenges, with outcomes that are strongly influenced by China’s specific political, economic, and regulatory environments. Through their leading role in digital currency development, the Chinese authorities are helping to establish the foundational principles and architecture of future digital currencies. The results of their digital yuan rollout to date have been mixed, with slow growth in use for domestic retail transactions, mainly due to competition from the popular extant payment platforms, Alipay and WeChat Pay. This has encouraged the PBC to promote the digital yuan’s use by engaging with these private fintech players to embed the digital yuan into their platforms.

The PBC has begun to strategically position the digital yuan to serve as a medium for cross-border foreign exchange payments, which would lower transaction costs and expedite settlement processes, and perhaps reduce China’s reliance on the US dollar. China recently took part in a cross-border CBDC project called Multiple CBDC Bridge or mBridge, coordinated by the Bank for International Settlements, which included Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and Hong Kong, to explore the possibilities and practicalities of CBDCs in facilitating efficient and secure wholesale international transactions (The Economist 2022). It is expected that mBridge will launch a viable product by mid 2024, offering an alternative to SWIFT (BIS 2022). Along with the potential for the digital yuan to be used as a preferred payment medium across BRI countries, this indicates an emerging trend towards payment fragmentation at the global level. However, given the extant trust deficits and liquidity concerns, it seems unlikely that the digital yuan could challenge the dominance of the US dollar in the global financial system any time soon. ■

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Figure 1: 'Our Decade', an example of 'Chinese Speed' imagery in Chinese official media. Source: People's Daily (2022).

Conceiving Chinese Speed

Sociotechnical Imaginaries of High-Speed Rail in Post-1978 China

Zhongxian XIAO

Since the 1980s, Chinese officials and technocrats have been presenting a rosy image of high-speed railway growth under the label of 'Chinese Speed'. In the twentieth-first century, however, a mounting social critique of high-speed rail in China demonstrated public distrust of this technocratic order. In response to these criticisms, after the Wenzhou train collision on 23 July 2011, the MoR refashioned a technological-determinist mentality of speed into a discourse highlighting techno-risk regulation and economic rationales. This move shows how the meaning of Chinese Speed is a multiply authored cultural idea that has been transformed through technocratic-civil contestation.

Since the introduction of high-speed rail (HSR) in China in the 2000s, the concept of 'speed' has been enshrined in ideas of Chinese nationhood (see Figure 1). Chinese government officials, technocrats, and experts have consistently disseminated a rosy image of 'Chinese Speed' (中国速度) through domestic and international media. However, despite the top-down and authoritarian nature of Chinese Speed, its sociotechnical and cultural meanings have been contested. Despite the appearance of immense enthusiasm for HSR in Chinese society, the public and railway engineers and technocrats hold changing visions of the concept. So, what exactly did speed mean to different Chinese actors in terms of



Figure 2. Deng Xiaoping on a Japanese Shinkansen, 26 October 1978. Source: Wu (2017).

technology, culture, and politics in recent history? A cultural and intellectual examination of China's fixation with 'speeding up' in the post-socialist era is a good starting point to answer this question. To capture how different actors have approached Chinese Speed and mobilised its symbolic meaning to serve their own interests, this essay investigates multiple sources, including official policy documents related to the Chinese railway system, technological reports, review articles in railway trade journals and other media articles. It reveals how Chinese Speed and the discourse of HSR in post-1978 China are a multiply authored cultural idea that has been transformed through a process of contestation.

Speed and the Techno-Politics of Railways in Socialist China

In 1978, then vice-premier Deng Xiaoping made a historic visit to Japan. As well as addressing crucial diplomatic issues and cementing bilateral economic cooperation, Deng travelled from Tokyo to Kyoto on the Shinkansen 'Hakkari', the new bullet train that symbolised postwar Japan's technological achievements. After the trip, Deng commented: 'I just felt it is so fast, as if someone was whipping at the back. It was just right for us' (see Figure 2). This moment

was memorable for many Chinese people who were eager for an open society and ready to embrace a technology-driven economy.

Why did leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) such as Deng celebrate 'speed' in the realm of public transportation and the national economy? And when did this start? Although the CCP's valuing of high speed can arguably be traced back to the high socialist period, especially the Great Leap Forward (GLF), the passion for high-speed development did not become popular within the transport policy of the Ministry of Railways (MoR) until the 1980s. As a strategic department under the planned economy and for national defence, the MoR had been under party-military control since its establishment in 1949. In addition to loyal party cadres and skilled technicians, the Railway Corps (铁道兵) of the People's Liberation Army played crucial roles in its ranks, working in both construction and administration. The MoR in socialist China was characterised by a hierarchical structure, semi-military organisation, and a relatively high level of professionalism.

On the one hand, the unique characteristics of the MoR insulated it from the catastrophic impact of radical politics during the GLF and the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the MoR's agenda in the socialist era made it incapable of embracing an approach aimed at achieving high speed. Elisabeth Köll (2019) has convincingly argued that during

the Mao era, China's rail system was troubled by declining quality of construction, neglect of necessary economic planning and vital safety measures, and political turmoil. Instead of working to accelerate train speeds, the MoR dedicated itself primarily to disciplining its own ranks, improving managerial and economic efficiency, and ensuring punctuality—a set of cultural symbols that Köll (2019: 247) has dubbed ‘a socialist metaphor of the Chinese society’. In fact, *Express Train* (特快列车), a famous 1965 film about accelerated speed during the GLF, also highlighted the importance of discipline and central coordination by portraying the acceleration of a train's speed only as an exception—in this case to save the life of an injured soldier of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by delivering him to a hospital (see Figure 3). In a sense, for the socialist railways, the pursuit of high speed was subjugated to other ideological preferences (though quite unsuccessfully during the Cultural Revolution), including the techno-politics of order, propaganda, and planning.

Technocracy of Acceleration En Route

With the demise of ‘high socialism’, pragmatic leaders such as Deng Xiaoping came to power and, after 1978, strove to establish a new socioeconomic order. Like Mao Zedong and his followers during the GLF, Deng associated the pursuit of rapid economic development and accumulation of social wealth with the legitimacy of socialism in the new era of Reform and Opening Up. Unlike Mao, however, Deng conceived of high-speed development not as the result of mass mobilisation, but as the manifestation of a technoscientific rationale. Deng insisted that only by mastering economics, science, technology, and management could the CCP lead a high level of socialist modernisation at high speed (Deng 1994: 153).

Applying the concept of technocracy to China in the reform era is both rewarding and tricky. Indeed, the provincial and central leaders of the CCP in the post-Mao period differed significantly from those of the older generations whose political lives were tied to their ideology and factions. Senior party cadres like



Figure 3: Still from the 1965 movie *Express Train*.

Li Peng, Jiang Zemin, and Ding Guangen (the railways minister from 1985 to 1988) ascended to higher leadership positions partly, if not decisively, due to their science and/or engineering backgrounds and successful experience running technocratic departments. Technocrats and their political patrons valued the superiority of scientific expertise and technological rationales (Cheng and White 1990; Zang 1991). With the end of radical politics in the late 1970s, the MoR also marched towards technocracy. The ministry started to recentralise control of the 14 regional and 41 branch railway bureaus, as well as to incorporate the PLA's Railway Corps into its civil system. The de-militarisation of the railways sector in the post-socialist era came with the rise of senior officials with engineering and other technical expertise. At the ministerial level, unlike Teng Daiyuan (in office from 1949 to 1965) and Lü Zhengcao (1965–70),

who were both top but less-educated military officers of the PLA, new ministers like Liu Jianzhang (1981–82), Ding Guangen (1985–88), and Fu Zhihuan (1998–2003) had either decades of experience in the technological operation of railways or college-level engineering training.

The technocratic structure and mentality were also underpinned by new engineering and railway-related trade journals under the supervision of the MoR's recently established China Academy of Railway Sciences (CARS, 中国铁道科学研究院) (Chen 2000). For instance, the journal *Railway Economics Research* (铁道经济研究)—which since 1992 has been under the supervision of the MoR's Economics Planning Institute (铁道部经济规划研究院), a ministerial think tank merging CARS' Transportation and Economics Institute and the MoR's Planning Institute—played an active role in promoting the economic analysis and technocratic imaginary of railway acceleration. Another relatively new but also influential journal supervised by CARS, *Railway Transport and Economy* (铁道运输与经济), was dedicated to publishing scholarly discussion and economic analyses of experimental and applied railway technologies. Established in 1979, this journal has published numerous articles on a wide range of research topics, including transport production and management, reporting on innovative achievements in transportation theory and organisation, economic research, managerial innovation, and urban rail transit. Many of its articles highlight how a cost–benefit analysis of railway acceleration proves its technological and economic feasibility and emphasise how such technological innovation has a very promising future (Zhang 1997; Ding and Li 2003; Chen et al. 2000). These articles have served to justify the MoR's decision to push for acceleration from an economic perspective.

From 1997 to 2007, the MoR initiated six rounds of 'increasing speed' (铁路大提速) through administrative simplification and technological advancement (China Daily 2018). For the first time since the Mao era, a passion for high-speed development came to the rail system. The acceleration of Chinese railways went through four major steps of technological advancement, the first of which was 'the acceleration of existing major lines' (既有干线提速). Starting in 1996, the MoR implemented measures such as strengthening rolling stock maintenance, replacing high-speed turnouts, and closing adjacent tracks.

These improvements increased train speeds from 140 km/h to 160 km/h. The second step took a more technologically advanced solution to increase speeds to 200km/h and even 300km/h: the construction of dedicated passenger lines (修建客运专线). Unlike the acceleration of existing lines, constructing new lines dedicated to passenger transport demanded specialised management. The third major step focused on improvement of the rolling stock—that is, the development of tilting trains (摆式列车). Initially designed in the United States in the 1930s, these trains can safely maintain their speed on a curve, which makes them particularly suitable for mountainous sections of line with numerous and small-radius curves, such as the Guangzhou–Shenzhen Railway, on which tilting trains have been used since 1994 (Hua 2003).

The fourth step was arguably the most high-tech: the development of HSR. By the early 2000s, the MoR had articulated the necessity for and advantage of developing HSR in China (Zang et al. 2000). Based on a series of comprehensive investigations into and experiments with the possible acceleration of the Beijing–Shanghai railway—the busiest line in China—MoR technocrats and officials were convinced that the construction of a high-speed Beijing–Shanghai railway (京沪高铁) was the most effective way to significantly improve transportation quality and meet the specific demands of this transport corridor (Jin 1999). The construction of HSR, including experimentation with two domestically designed and assembled high-speed trains, 'Blue Arrow' (蓝箭) in 2000 and 'China Star' (中华之星) in 2003, was already under way (Xinhua 2006), but it was only the launch of the sixth round of acceleration in 2007 that initiated large-scale international technology transfers and indigenisation of HSR. The implementation of the fourth step marked the culmination of Chinese railways' acceleration and the MoR's passion for speed.

It would, however, be incorrect to assume that technocracy in post-socialist China is less ideological than under Mao. As Joel Andreas (2009) has argued, the end of hostility towards intellectuals and bureaucrats after Mao's death gave rise to the leadership of 'red engineers' who possessed the double qualification of politics and expertise. The MoR's pursuit of technology-based high speed engendered a new set of railway cultural representations, which in turn boosted the legitimacy of the railways' technocracy in the post-Mao era. The acceleration of the

railways was conceived of as a ‘techno-fix’—the idea that advanced, efficient, and sometimes cheaper technology alone is enough to solve social, environmental, and economic problems (Rosner 2013). The concept of techno-fixes is itself inherently techno-optimistic as it tends to depict certain technology choices, like HSR and the expertise that falls under the jurisdiction of technologists, as the most effective solutions to thorny problems. In most cases, problems are identified, defined, and allegedly solved by technological experts and technocrats.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the MoR deemed multiple emerging issues posed particular threats to China’s railway system. For instance, market competition and population movements intensified in the post-socialist era. A mismatch arose between the loading capacity of trains and the demand for services. Railways operating at low speeds, therefore, created bottlenecks, restricting national economic development. In addition, poor management and ill-designed regulation damaged service quality, fare pricing, and the acceleration of train speeds. MoR officials and technocrats claimed that without the advantage of speed, the railways would lose their ability to attract passengers (Hua 2003). In this sense, the MoR’s technocrats conceived of railway acceleration as a fix for the ministry’s shrinking relevance within the national transportation sector and, by extension, for an array of entrenched social problems.

Unchecked Speed and Technocracy

By and large, the history of the acceleration of Chinese railways in the 1990s and 2000s was accompanied by the rise of a technocratic discourse that the MoR mobilised to legitimise its policies and sustain its own position in the post-socialist political order. However, despite its effectiveness and popularity, this discursive strategy, like the idea of techno-fixes, was not uncontested. In particular, in the wake of a sequence of railway accidents in the 2000s and 2010s, the policy of railway acceleration inevitably became the target of public critique.

In 2003, Liu Zhijun was promoted to minister at the MoR. As the successor of Fu Zhihuan, who had launched the bold experiment of developing China’s

independently designed bullet train, Liu was keen to promote HSR and the acceleration of China’s existing railways. Liu’s support for Chinese HSR, however, gave birth to a system in which unchecked technocratic rule by the MoR endangered the lives of many. The ‘4.28’ Jiaoji train accident of 2008 (胶济铁路列车相撞事故) first showcased the risks embedded in embracing a techno-fix—that is, railway acceleration without sophisticated scientific governance and public scrutiny. The accident occurred on the Jiaoji Railway linking Qingdao and Jinan in Shandong Province, killing 72 people, with 416 injured. As the deadliest rail disaster in China since a 1997 accident in Hunan, the event instigated a sizeable wave of public concern and media coverage. For instance, *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), a newspaper then known for its critical, liberal stance, openly questioned the governance of the MoR and insisted on holding the relevant officials accountable. Interestingly, its journalists pointed to the risks posed by the six railway acceleration campaigns. According to another report, in the *China Economic Weekly* (中国经济周刊), another liberal media outlet, railway acceleration led to longer transregional train routes, causing fatigue among train drivers.

The Jiaoji railway incident generated a wave of social and official concerns about the safety and administration of China’s rail system. The issue of accelerating Chinese train speeds while ensuring safety has since been at the centre of public debates in China. However, the intensity of social criticism that emerged in the wake of the Jiaoji tragedy paled in comparison with the response to a second disaster, in Wenzhou on 23 July 2011, when a high-speed train ran into the rear of a stationary train, killing 40 and injuring 192 people. In this case, new social media like Weibo offered Chinese netizens unprecedented power to challenge the lack of transparency in the railway administration and link their criticism to broader issues of corruption and ineffectiveness at the MoR (Liu 2015). Such criticism not only resisted state propaganda that portrayed high-speed transportation as a massive achievement, but also depicted the MoR as a monopolistic and dysfunctional technocratic agency.

For instance, three days after the Wenzhou incident, blogger and public intellectual Tong Dahuan (2011a) published his critique of the rate of HSR and other development in the post-1978 era:

China, please stop your flying pace, wait for your people, wait for your soul, wait for your morality, wait for your conscience! Don't let the train run out off track, don't let the bridges collapse, don't let the roads become traps, don't let houses become ruins. Walk slowly, allowing every life to have freedom and dignity. No-one should be left behind by our era.

By targeting the macrolevel by-products of rapid economic development and infrastructure-building, rather than merely condemning a specific government agency like the MoR, Tong's outcry reached a broader audience and successfully elicited broad social empathy with his critique. According to Tong, as a developmental state, post-Mao China had achieved impressive economic prosperity and technological advancement. However, he highlighted how, at the same time, the institutions of the Party-State had brought about multiple social ills that endangered the interests of the masses.

Tong lambasted the country's developmental state with poetic language. However, most critiques in the wake of the Wenzhou incident did not resort to elegant words, but rather directly denounced the malpractice and unaccountability of the MoR. For instance, public intellectual Shi Longhong (2011) posed several thorny questions to the Chinese Government: 'As a large-scale investment, a technically immature project concerning numerous lives and property safety, how could the scheme of HSR be pushed in the speed of the bullet train? Who authorised this speedy project without public scrutiny and debate?' By claiming that the relevant governmental agencies (including the MoR) had kept the masses in the dark, Shi steered the social critique of HSR towards a more palpable object: the state railway department—a formidable technocratic institution not accountable to the public.

In another commentary on the accident, a Wharton-trained economist and renowned public figure in China, Xianpin Lang (2011), provided an economic angle on China's railway technocracy. Lang was critical of the HSR project for transferring massive resources to the government and foreign investors. He claimed that this resource reallocation impoverished ordinary people and hit mass consumption severely. Lang called for reconsideration of the building of large-scale infrastructure and reorienting towards

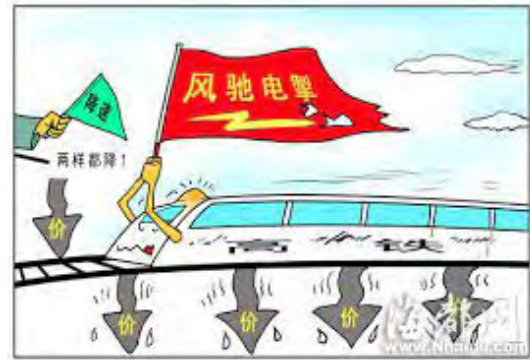


Figure 4: Vignette that appeared in the *China Daily* after the Wenzhou incident. Source: China Daily (2011).

intermediate technologies, such as regular-speed so-called green-skin trains (绿皮火车), which are not as fancy as HSR but are better suited to the interests of consumers, passengers, and private enterprises. Lang questioned the prevailing techno-utopia behind Chinese Speed. For Lang, Chinese Speed meant the misallocation of public resources and a mentality that defied economic rationales.

Defending and Reconfiguring Chinese Speed in Crisis

In contrast to the critiques coming from Chinese society, official media and committees set up by the Chinese State to investigate the Wenzhou tragedy attempted to shift attention away from the issue of technocracy. In its initial reactions to the crisis, the MoR focused on microlevel issues, such as administrative malpractice and technological mistakes. Additionally, in response to lingering public suspicion of the excessively high speed of HSR, the ministry and its technocrats began lowering the running speed on some routes—a policy initiative that had already been executed regionally and experimentally in 2011, before the Wenzhou incident. Instead of explaining this policy reorientation as the result of sociotechnical risk assessments or social critique after the tragedy, however, railway technocrats increasingly highlighted the importance of economic factors—a profit-seeking rationale underpinning state capitalism.

Scholars of science and technology studies and the history of science tend to interpret the adjustment of state-led infrastructural projects as a manifestation of the agency of non-experts (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). China's shifting HSR policy after—and largely in response to the critique arising from—the Wenzhou accident, however, shows us a different picture in that lowering speeds did not undermine but rather reconfigured and even strengthened Chinese technocratic rule of HSR.

According to the investigation report released by the State Council working group in December 2011, the Wenzhou train collision was 'a liability accident caused by critical defects in railway signal design, incautious safety examination, and ill-organised crisis management of lightning-led technical disfunction' (State Council 7.23 Investigation Team 2011). This report also put forth multiple policy initiatives based on lessons from the incident, including improved management of equipment and corporate research and development, scrutinising the quality of HSR equipment, and developing a system of transportation safety and labour education and training.

In response to the incident, the *People's Daily* (人民日报) published an editorial drawing on Ulrich Beck's (1992) theory of a risk society to justify the urgency of intensive technocratic intervention to take control of the risks of HSR. According to the editorial (People's Daily 2011), China found itself in a 'capsule of risk' (风险胶囊). Though the policy of developing HSR would remain unchanged, the increasing speed of trains, more new railways, and the intensification of train frequency in the high-speed era would unavoidably increase the risks to Chinese society, which would demand more delicate managerial skills and safety consciousness. In other words, Chinese officials were attempting to undo the fundamental challenge to the technocratic system by claiming that the technological risks of HSR could only be eliminated by more powerful scientific expertise and bureaucratic management.

As well as issues of stability and safety, railway bureaucrats and experts very soon turned again to the profit-seeking economic rationale—a developmentalist mindset that was well established in railway engineering academic circles in China during the 1990s and 2000s—to convince the public that lowering speed was economically reasonable. In the

2016 sessions of the National People's Congress and the National Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the CEO of China Railway (CR, 中国铁路总公司, the state-owned corporation that replaced the MoR in 2013, renamed 中国国家铁路集团 in 2019) Sheng Guangzu addressed the Chinese media about the speed of HSR. Selected by the CCP leadership to change policies championed by Liu Zhijun (the last minister in charge of the MoR, in office until 2011), Sheng explained that the decision to lower speeds had nothing to do with deficiencies in the technology. Rather, CR had decided to adjust speeds based mainly on economic considerations. According to Sheng, every 50 km/h of acceleration led to higher costs for equipment maintenance, which would lead to a surge in ticket prices (China Management Newspaper 2016).

This economic rationale for lowering speeds was also endorsed by many prominent railway experts. In a *Global Times* article, Wang Mengshu (2015), an academic at the Chinese Academy of Engineering, stressed the importance of economic efficiency. He insisted that any decisions about increasing or lowering speed would be completely grounded in science, based on the standard of design, and the practical demands of operation. Therefore, critiques and suspicions of the risks of HSR were needless. The techno-economic calculation had been widely used by technocrats in the railway acceleration campaign in the pre-Wenzhou era, but it was extensively mobilised as a public discourse only after the mid 2010s. By drawing on a technocratic discourse that put the rationale for lowering speed beyond dispute, Wang and other technocrats and officials intended to deprive non-experts, including critical voices in Chinese society, of the legitimacy to question the CR's decisions and policies.

Despite the backlash from the public after the Wenzhou accident, the MoR and CR continued to push this narrative of lowering speeds under the logic of technocratic rule. In fact, even this initiative did not last long. The pursuit of ever-higher-speed transportation, embodied by the research and development for the 'flying train' (ultra-high-speed, low-vacuum-tube maglev [magnetic levitation] transportation system, 超高速低真空管道磁浮交通系统) and the high-speed magnetic suspension train (高速磁悬, HS-magnetic), was reignited in the mid 2010s, when the shadow of the Wenzhou accident had receded.

As well as conventional ideas about the superiority and convenience of high-speed railways, Chinese engineers in charge of research and development again employed economic considerations to justify the HS-magnetic. According to Jin Chaohui, an engineering professor in charge of the HS-magnetic program, in terms of the whole life cycle (全寿命周期), the cost of HS-magnetic would be lower than HSR as the wear and tear on this technology is relatively small and slow to accumulate (Diyi Caijing 2023).

A Contested Process

This essay has highlighted how the techno-political meaning of railway speed in post-1978 China is a multiply authored cultural idea that has been transformed through public contestation. However, even though both the Chinese public and technocrats participated in this process, their impacts on policymaking and the formation of sociotechnical imaginaries of HSR were far from equal. In particular, we have seen how, from the 1980s to the 2010s, the logic behind the technocratic rule of HSR and the discourse of Chinese Speed have shifted from narratives of an optimistic techno-fix to techno-economic rationales—a process that accelerated in the wake of the Wenzhou accident of 2011. Ultimately, the technocratic structure of China's railway sector and its imagining of Chinese Speed have been not undermined but rather reconfigured by mounting social critiques since the reform era. ■



Pingxiang, Chongzuo, Guangxi, China
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Striking a Balance

How Did China Manage Its Guestworker Program?

Chuling (Adam) HUANG

Though not a conventional labour-importing country, China has experimented with receiving Vietnamese migrants in a guestworker program established in 2017 in the border city of Pingxiang, Guangxi Province. This essay examines migration governance in this large-scale labour migration scheme, paying attention to the local government's struggle to balance economic development goals with border security concerns. This struggle contributed to the extensive incorporation of labour dispatch agencies in governing guestworkers and the selective enforcement of regulations.

Most people would not consider China a typical migrant destination country even though over the past decades it has seen the growth of diverse communities of foreign populations, including African traders in Guangzhou and Yiwu (Wan 2023), intellectual migrants in its universities (Li et al. 2021), and European professionals in the major cities (Camenisch and Suter 2019). This perception could be because these individuals are highly skilled and/or entrepreneurs and therefore do not fit the common image of a 'migrant'. To further complicate matters, China's economic and demographic transformations have caused increasing labour shortages, particularly in the manufacturing sector, with many factories struggling to recruit workers relocating to inland regions or even abroad. A widely adopted solution to labour shortages in

advanced industrial countries has been to bring in ‘guestworkers’—that is, temporary labour migrants who are prevented from settlement (Martin and Miller 1980). This leads to the question: could China resort to the same means and become a destination for large-scale international labour migration?

In this essay, I discuss a guestworker program recently implemented in Pingxiang, a city in China’s Guangxi Province on the border with Vietnam. During its two-and-a-half years of operation (2017–19), until it was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this program—officially referred to as ‘cross-border employment cooperation’ (跨境劳务合作)—granted more than 378,000 work permits to Vietnamese workers, allowing them to work temporarily in a designated region near the border. Based on interview data collected in the winter of 2021, I discuss how the local government in charge of the program struggled to balance economic development goals with border security concerns during implementation. This struggle had important implications for how the initiative was managed on the ground, leading to the extensive involvement of labour dispatch agencies and the selective enforcement of regulations (Huang 2023).

A Brief History of the Guestworker Program

Located on the Sino–Vietnamese border, Pingxiang is a small city with a population of almost 130,000 people. For many residents, the presence of Vietnamese traders and workers is a normal part of life. Vietnamese border residents are allowed to stay in the city for 24 hours without a visa. However, many of them stay longer and become undocumented workers, driven by the wage differences on the two sides of the border. Importantly, the inflow of undocumented Vietnamese migrants fills the structural and persistent labour shortages in Pingxiang and nearby regions caused by the loss of workers to coastal China, where wages are higher. The agricultural sector, for example, has become dependent on seasonal Vietnamese labour.

Recognising the economic benefits of cheap migrant labour, the local government loosely enforced migration controls. However, the massive

cross-border movements caused security concerns related to criminal activities such as drug smuggling. Moreover, many Vietnamese migrants travelled beyond the border regions to coastal provinces where they did not have the formal right to stay, which raised further public security concerns. This is borne out by the fact that of the 3,400 court rulings on the illegal entrance of Vietnamese citizens published by the China Judgment Online database, about one-third of cases occurred outside of the border provinces—most in Guangdong Province. It was in this context of local labour shortages and increasing public security concerns that Pingxiang implemented its guestworker program.

The program was implemented following a series of policies released over two years in the mid-2010s. In December 2015, the State Council published the ‘Opinions of the State Council on Several Policies and Measures to Support the Development and Opening Up of Key Border Areas’, which provided guidelines for further opening several border regions to neighbouring countries for commercial transactions, tourism, and labour exchange (State Council 2016). Pingxiang was listed as one of 28 designated border cities and 17 border economic cooperation zones across China. In June 2016, a pilot program was carried out in Dongxing, another border city in Guangxi. Satisfied with the policy outcomes of the pilot program, in January 2017, the Guangxi provincial authorities approved a cross-border employment cooperation program to be implemented in Dongxing and Pingxiang. Two months later, the government of Chongzuo, a prefecture-level city under whose jurisdiction Pingxiang falls, followed up the provincial government’s decision with its own policy guidelines (People’s Government of Chongzuo City 2017). Within the next three months, the Pingxiang authorities and the county governments of surrounding regions all passed related policy documents, which added more detailed instructions. The guestworker program was officially launched in Pingxiang in August 2017, gradually gained momentum in the summer of 2018, and was brought to a sudden halt by the Covid-19 pandemic in January 2020. Vietnamese guestworkers were allowed to work anywhere within the boundaries of Chongzuo, except for Tiandeng County, resulting in 378,000 work permits granted for the duration of the initiative. At the program’s peak, more than 3,000 guestworkers entered Pingxiang

daily—a significant number considering the short window of operation and the small size of the population of Pingxiang.

What process did Vietnamese migrants need to go through to become guestworkers in Pingxiang? The first step was to obtain an Exit and Entry Permit—a document that the Vietnamese Government issues only to border residents. The permit allows workers to enter Pingxiang through the Friendship Pass, which is a border checkpoint 16 kilometres from the city. They could then apply to become guestworkers by obtaining three other essential documents: a Health Certificate, Foreign Worker Registration Card, and Foreign Residence Permit. Applications were processed in a new office building established specifically for handling guestworker paperwork. Besides application forms and associated fees, workers were required to submit a digital colour photo of themselves, a work contract, and proof of accident and work-related injury insurance. In practice, the application process was delegated to local labour dispatch agencies and the Vietnamese workers simply followed the instructions of the agency staff. Once workers obtained the four essential documents, they were dispatched to different employers in Pingxiang or other regions within Chongzuo.

The cross-border employment cooperation program resembled other guestworker schemes in its emphasis on the temporary nature of the migrant labour. To begin with, workers were required to physically return to Vietnam when their documents expired and reapply to renew their guestworker status. They were required to renew every 30 days—a much shorter timespan compared to the guestworker programs implemented in other countries. Furthermore, these migrants had few rights and were excluded from the provision of social services such as health care and housing. This proved very attractive to local businesses, with many of my employer interviewees speaking of the benefit of not having to make social security contributions for Vietnamese workers. Lastly, Vietnamese workers were discouraged from having social interactions with locals by policies that required employers to provide them with accommodation.

The Chinese guestworker program was distinctive in two other respects. First, guestworkers were only allowed to work in a designated region that included

Pingxiang and five surrounding counties. The practice of conducting policy experiments within geographic boundaries is not uncommon in China—a famous example being the special economic zones that piloted China's market reforms. Guestworker programs in foreign settings sometimes restrict workers' occupations, but they rarely place a geographic boundary on where they can work. Second, in China, guestworker governance was decentralised, with the local authorities of Pingxiang spearheading the program's design and execution. While the national government retained authority over important decisions such as the frequency of permit renewal, the local government had substantial autonomy over how the program should be regulated on the ground. As a policy experiment, the guestworker program was under evaluation by the central authorities, which placed considerable political constraints on the local government's governing strategies.

Balancing Economic Development and Border Security

Officials in Pingxiang faced the challenge of balancing the conflicting goals of economic development and border security (for a more detailed discussion, see Speelman 2022). While the local authorities valued the developmental benefits of the regularised supply of migrant workers, the national government prioritised maintaining border security and enforcing migration controls.

The guestworker program contributed significantly to the local economy through the supply of migrant workers and the spillover effects on businesses. Rather than migration policy, local officials emphasised the developmental nature of the guestworker program. As one of them told me: 'The centre provided the policies. Our job is to use them well to develop the economy.' While the local government worked hard to pressure existing employers to switch from undocumented migrants to legal guestworkers, it spent even more effort attracting external investments, mainly manufacturing firms from coastal cities. Besides offering these firms struggling with labour shortages and rising wages preferential industrial

policies and tax incentives, it promised them a steady supply of cheap guestworkers. This strategy seems to have been quite successful, if we consider that among the employers registered to hire guestworkers in Pingxiang, about 80 per cent were officially established after 2017, when the guestworker program was implemented.

At the same time, the local government received substantial political pressure from the centre to maintain social stability and border security. This is reflected in the design of the guestworker program, especially in the fact that guestworkers were geographically confined to the designated region. As we have seen, undocumented Vietnamese workers made their way to several coastal provinces, undermining the local government's claim of being able to maintain border security. In the words of a local official from Ningming County: 'Having workers running away means that we can't maintain control.' Another example of how security concerns have shaped the program is the 30-day time limit for the work permits, which was clearly too short and inconvenient for both employers and workers. Since 2017, local officials have persistently petitioned the higher levels for a longer work permit term; however, these efforts have been stonewalled due to the security concerns of the central government.

The conflicting goals of development and security are constantly negotiated on the ground. In the early months of the program, incidents of guestworkers 'running away' or overstaying raised concerns from the central authorities, forcing the local government to adjust its strategies. Yet, strictly enforcing regulations would hinder the development benefits of the program. Thus, the need to balance development and security became an ongoing challenge for local officials.

Outsourcing

How did the local government manage the guestworker program on the ground? One notable aspect is the extensive involvement of labour dispatch agencies in regulation. Before getting into the specifics of what these agencies do, it is useful to discuss who they are.

By the end of 2019, there were about 130 labour agencies in Pingxiang. With some exceptions, most were small companies founded after 2017. Scattered around the city centre, these agencies blended in with the surrounding shops. Establishing a labour agency requires registered capital of RMB2 million (roughly US\$280,000)—a manageable threshold for many locals with resources. Typically, one or two owners run the labour agencies with a few Chinese employees. Based on my observations, most owners had very little experience in labour dispatch or migration brokering. Instead, they came from a variety of backgrounds, including civil servants, businesspeople, or ordinary employees of local firms. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Boss Peng returned to his previous IT job while waiting for the guestworker program to resume. On the other hand, these owners shared the common characteristic of being well-connected with Vietnamese border residents and/or local officials. In the words of Boss Li, who claimed to be one of the few labour agency owners with no connections, the other owners 'either know people from Vietnam or know someone in the government'.



The shopfront of a labour dispatch agency.
Source: Chuling Huang.

During the implementation of the guestworker program, labour agencies experienced a drastic change in their roles from simple labour brokers to regulators of guestworkers. The initial policy guideline published in 2017 stated that ‘the employers hold the main responsibility for managing foreign workers’ (People’s Government of Chongzuo City 2017). While the document supported the development of labour agencies, it did not mention any regulatory tasks to be assigned to them. Throughout 2018, the guestworker program grew substantially, bringing in tens of thousands of migrant workers. Yet, the local authorities also encountered trouble regulating the flow, as many guestworkers overstayed their permits, ran away to other regions of China, or disappeared altogether. As mentioned, these incidents led to considerable pressure from the central authorities, who demanded that the local government control the situation and maintain border security (Speelman 2022). Local officials quickly discovered that employers were ineffective in managing their guestworkers, partly because they had the capacity to resist local state control and ignore its demands. As the local government struggled to fill the regulatory gap in the guestworker program, the labour agencies emerged as suitable alternatives.

Labour agencies were gradually tasked with guestworker governance and became accountable for any rule-breaking activities by workers they dispatched. These changes were formalised in a policy document released in early 2019 (People’s Government of Pingxiang City 2019), which included an evaluation system that ranked agencies based on their performance in ensuring that their workers followed the rules. Lower-ranked agencies were restricted in their business activities. The policy document also contained a list of activities forbidden to labour agencies. Interestingly, agencies were to be disciplined both for rules they violated directly and for rule violations committed by their guestworkers, such as street fights. The result was that agencies were compelled to proactively control their workers to avoid being sanctioned. Compared with employers, who held strong bargaining power, agencies were more easily regulated as their operations depended heavily on the local government.

Labour agencies deployed two strategies to manage guestworkers. First, they ‘appeased’ workers by pre-emptively addressing issues that could cause problems—for example, some agencies organised

entertainment events such as movie nights and happy hours in the factory compounds to keep guestworkers from entering the city centre in their leisure time. They also made efforts to match workers with suitable employers to prevent workers running away from their jobs. The second approach was close monitoring, which involved constant surveillance of guestworkers in and outside the workplace. While large labour agencies hired professional agents to carry out surveillance, others relied on third-party actors who worked with several agencies simultaneously. Occasionally, Vietnamese guestworkers themselves were recruited to monitor and report unusual behaviours by their peers. Thus, it was common to see delegates of labour agencies wandering in the workplaces and accommodation to check on guestworkers. When the permits of some workers were about to expire, labour agencies sent buses to transport them to the border checkpoints. The primary goal of these surveillance activities was to ensure that guestworkers did not cause trouble and abided by the regulations imposed by the local government.

Selective Implementation

Facing political pressure from the central government to maintain border security, local authorities established a stringent set of regulations. However, faithfully enforcing these rules would likely undermine the guestworker program’s developmental impacts. So, in practice, the local authorities selectively enforced the regulations most directly related to border security, while largely acquiescing to rule violations that were seen as less threatening to security.

In my conversations with agency owners, they occasionally mentioned activities that were clearly forbidden under the policy guidelines. When I pointed that out, one of them explained: ‘In principle, yes, it is against the rules. But it’s not a big deal, since we are not doing anything illegal.’ Some violations were perceived as ‘breaking the law’ (犯法), while others were described merely as ‘not following the rules’ (不按规定来). This distinction was reflected in the attitudes of local officials towards different violations. For example, Deputy Director Zhang of the local Bureau of Human Resources considered violations such as dispatching undocumented workers illegal

activities that would result in severe punishment. However, he held a more ambiguous attitude towards other violations, such as dispatching documented guestworkers to employers who did not meet the requirements: ‘We investigate as much as we can. The specific punishment will depend on the circumstances and the severity [of the violation].’

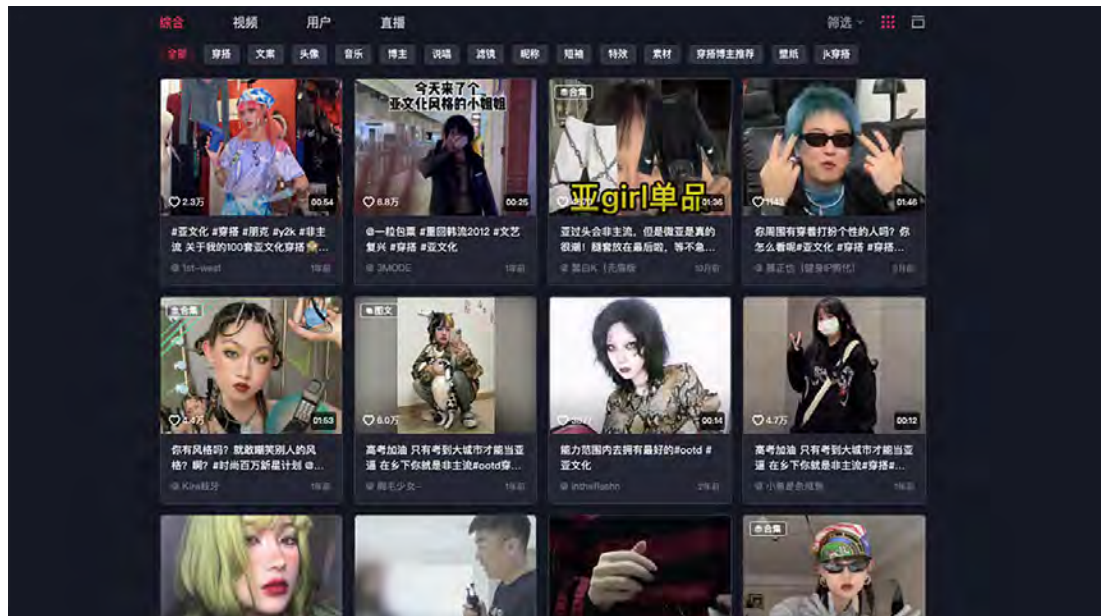
For instance, sugarcane farming contributes significantly to the local economy and employs many Vietnamese migrant workers. However, individual farmers were not considered employers and thus could not hire guestworkers. Labour agencies worked around this rule by registering guestworkers under qualified employers and then dispatching them to the farmers. This was a clear violation of the regulations but was tolerated by the local authorities given its beneficial effect on local development and its limited impact on border security. The selective enforcement of regulations and labour agencies’ strategic rule violations helped the local government balance the conflicting goals of economic development and border security.

began the process of forming an association to avoid undercutting each other. While this effort was halted by the pandemic, there was a clear tendency towards market consolidation by labour agencies, which would only make migration more costly.

At the time of writing in December 2023, one year after the Covid-19 lockdowns were lifted and the border reopened, the guestworker program was yet to resume. Local officials told me they were waiting for approval from higher levels of government. As it is likely that the guestworker program will re-emerge in Pingxiang soon, now is a good time for us to start contemplating the possibility of China becoming a destination country for labour migration. When that happens, what will employment relations, immigrant-native integration, and immigration policies look like? Some scholars have already begun exploring these questions (You and Romero 2022; Speelman 2020), but many more questions remain unanswered. ■

Concluding Thoughts

This essay has illustrated how the divergent policy priorities of the central government and local authorities shaped the ways the guestworker program was regulated on the ground. An important question that remains unexplored is what this means for the guestworkers. Since most of my interview participants were Chinese actors due to the border closure during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is very little I can say on this subject. However, one observation is worth mentioning. The extensive involvement of labour agencies in guestworker governance generated substantial costs that were eventually shouldered by the guestworkers. Labour agencies charged employers RMB300 to RMB400 (roughly US\$42 to US\$56) on top of the RMB140 (US\$20) application fee every month, which is a significant amount given that a typical guestworker earned about RMB3,000 (US\$420) per month. Some agencies even demanded additional brokerage fees from guestworkers. It was only fierce competition between them that temporarily prevented labour agencies from raising their fees. However, by the end of 2019, major agencies



A search for the term *yabi* on Douyin, 2023.

The Involution of Freedom in *Yabi* Subculture

Casey WEI

Yabi is a controversial subcultural phenomenon active in China since 2019. Like the Western ‘hipster’, the *yabi* mash-up appropriation of styles from the ‘global supermarket of culture’ is deemed messy, superficial, and shamelessly middle class by mainstream critics. Through a historical analysis, this essay argues that the *yabi* exemplify the return of the feminine supernatural—present throughout imperial and modern Chinese history—as a response to the challenges of the Anthropocene from the present-day involuted generation.

During the early reform era one could argue that a liberal proto-counterculture was developing in the cosmopolitan undergrounds of Beijing and Shanghai, as China converted to capitalism and university students tested the limits of Western democratic practices. In the decade of market transformation that followed the June Fourth Incident, such experiments did not have a chance to bloom, as it was a time when ‘money ruled everything, morals died, corruption burgeoned, [and] bribes were bartered’ (Nathan 2001: 48). Despite this turn of events, a plethora of subcultures (亚文化 *yawenhua*) gained traction with the proliferation of the internet after the turn of the millennium, attracting much academic attention. While overtly political activities such as protests, demonstrations, and other gatherings have

been strictly prohibited under the Xi Jinping administration, Chinese youth—particularly the post-1990 generations—have been able to find ‘like-minded people’ (同温层 *tongwengeng*) online, through chat groups, forums, and other social media spaces.

As the internet grew to become an essential service for everyday activities, subcultures began to flourish. This led to the ephemeral social media collective resistance of spoofing (恶搞 *egao*), through which netizens digitally satirised Chinese censors using clever homonyms (Nordin and Richaud 2014). However, the carnivalesque *egao* quickly devolved into dispirited viral meme-based hashtag subcultures such as ‘loser’ culture (屌丝 *diaosi*), ‘mourning’ culture (丧 *sang*), and the ‘lie-flat’ generation (躺平 *tangping*). Such online subcultures, without aesthetic communities through which to alleviate alienation, are a digital release valve for China’s ‘involved generation’ (Liu 2021), whose primary commonality is their disaffected spiritual ennui in an involuntary (内卷 *neijuan*) response to ‘an intense and fast-paced corporate and social culture in contemporary China’ (Zhang and Li 2023: 49). These *yawenhua* coalesce around cultural representations that are pessimistically masculine; *diaosi* literally translates as ‘penis hair’; and memes of Sad Toad (a reinterpretation of Pepe the Frog, which has come to be used as an alt-right symbol in the West) and Paralysed Geyou (an unemployed, broken character from the popular sitcom *I Love My Family* [我爱我家]) have become mainstream associations with dissatisfied youth (Voroneanu 2022).

Offline, *yawenhua* range from class-based aesthetic communities such as the *shamate* (杀马特)—a vibrant subculture (popular especially in northeast China) of migrant teenagers who dress up like anime-punk rockstars or what Americans would call ‘emo teenagers’—to trend-based *yawenhua* like ‘three traps’ (三坑 *sankeng*), referring to the Preppy, Lolita, and *Hanfu* (汉服, ancient Chinese) styles, as well as the ‘national-tide’ (国潮 *guochao*) appreciation of domestic brands. This essay focuses on the highly controversial *yabi* (亚逼) subculture, which originated in China’s urban club and underground music scenes in 2019. The term comprises the characters *ya* (亚 Asia, inferior)—that is, the ‘sub’ in subculture—and *bi* (逼 force), which is a derogatory, diminutively feminine curse often used in compound words like *shabi* (傻逼, idiot) and *zhuangbi* (装逼, poser, fake).

Together, *yabi* literally means ‘subcultural c*nts’—a contested term that is used by those supporting the status quo to identify and insult anything that appears threatening to mainstream culture, and on the flipside, as a signal of subcultural resistance under a heavily repressed authoritarian regime.

Aesthetically, *yabi* is a post-internet hotchpotch, influenced by (but not limited to) punk, *otaku*, e-girl, cybergoth, K-pop and J-pop, Asian babygirl, hip-hop, rave, and techno styles from across the globe. This essay seeks to elucidate the *yabi* phenomenon through the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to it, as well as to provide a historical analysis that traces a feminist genealogy of this subculture in its various incarnations throughout a heavily patriarchal imperial and modern China. I first provide analysis of how and why women have become the main defenders of the term, perceived as derogatory by the forces of the status quo. By situating the *yabi* within subcultural theory, I seek to illuminate how this subculture exercises subtle forms of resistance to China’s ‘positive energy’ (正能量) narrative through self-styling and musical taste. I expand on this resistance by tracing a lineage of supernatural femininity from which the *yabi* aesthetic implicitly draws, which has been present throughout imperial and modern Chinese history. Counter to critiques of the *yabi*’s incoherent and superficial style relative to their misunderstood position as middle-class urbanites, I propose that the *yabi* exemplify the feminine supernatural reborn digitally, as an attempt to heal the present-day involuted generation, who are caught by unrealistic, uninspiring, and untenable societal pressures.

In Defence of *Yabi*: Aesthetic Controversy as Public Debate

In the dense, murky, and 404-ed depths of the Chinese internet, causality and meaning have become increasingly unfixed and unpredictable as personal expression necessarily adapts to censorship. New homonyms are created every day to circumvent blocked words; recorded videos are edited to evade automated searches; fonts used for captioning are altered and skewed. The contemporary technoscape has drastically shifted modes of production and consumption and, following post-pandemic social fallout, many

youngsters across China live their corporeal existence mediated by online identities. As public discourse is permitted only when the topic is deemed non-political, controversy over *yabi* subculture can be understood as an exercise in public debate by China's youth in response to the conservative nationalist values of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Su 2023; Zhang and Li 2023).

Although, when questioned, many citizens would likely insist on the apolitical nature of their choices in just about every aspect of life, such insistence can be understood as self-defence against the potential consequences of inadvertently criticising the ruling party. For example, when asked about the political nature of the *shamate* subculture, Luo Fuxing (the godfather of *shamate*) responds:

Shamate might have been invented by workers, but exploitation isn't intrinsically related to aesthetics—we were never trying to wage class warfare ... Free speech can't be treated as a basic freedom. It's too difficult to realise in China, because speech has the power to harm people. (Zhang and Chang 2021)

Therefore, public displays of one's politics must be exercised non-verbally; with reservations about mainstream positive-energy narratives, the *yabi* express such rifts between expectations and reality aesthetically. In a 2022 article titled 'Yabi Is a Dream, Anyone Can Dream It' (亚逼是场梦, 谁都可以做) published in the online alternative culture magazine *Bie De* (别的), staff writer 'Randy' interviews Liang Qian, who grew up middle class in a first-tier city, surrounded by friends 'who had private jets at home'. Liang graduated top of her class but has since struggled to find a suitable career, bouncing from academia to nonprofit to corporate work. After her father died, her primary focus in life shifted to taking care of her mother. Beyond that, her outlook on life is typical of the *tangping* mindset: the country's dominant narratives of 'joining a big factory, earning a high salary, and buying a home in a first-tier city' are increasingly out of reach, resulting in the involuntary phenomena of *diaosi*, *sang*, and *tangping* youth cultures (Chang et al. 2021; Su 2023; Voroaneanu 2022; Witteborn and Huang 2016; Zhang and Li 2023). With the 'get rich quick' possibilities of the early reform period long over, the ambitions of what

was once the country's middle class have produced a consumer class 'lumped at the upper end of the spectrum' (Sethi 2018: 57)—those who were able to gain from Deng Xiaoping's 'let some people get rich first' blessing. The heirs of this limited intergenerational wealth now make up the *yabi*.

To identify oneself as belonging to a subculture, a group forms to resist, reappropriate, and redefine what has been deemed undesirable by the hegemonic order. Those who identify as *yabi* are not the first group of people to take on a previously offensive term in an act of counter-hegemony (Huang 2016: 42) and as 'resistance to imposed socioeconomic norms and expectations' (Witteborn and Huang 2016: 143). In their 2014 study of *egao*, Nordin and Richaud (2014: 49) note that 'repoliticization also involves depoliticization, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationships they negotiate'. To repoliticise oneself through depoliticisation explains the reappropriation of such a derogatory word as *bi* by a *yawenhua* activated by mostly feminine and androgynous presenting subjects. Although *yabi* is not gender specific, most *yabi* discourse online features women trying to provide a palatable definition, address the criticisms, and show off their unique take on the look. A basic search on the homepage of social media platform *Xiaohongshu* features 91 of 100 thumbnails of young female-presenting *yabi* and products geared towards a femme *yabi* consumer. The *yabi* aesthetic traverses not only a cultural but also a temporal and anthropomorphic supermarket of representation: *hanfu*, animal appendages, and throwback Y2K accessories combine perfectly to create a #ootd (outfit of the day). Their style becomes a method of alternative resistance turned inward, where, according to Luo Fuxing, 'aesthetic freedom is the starting point of all freedom' (Zhang and Chang 2021).

Through her examinations of culture via elemental cosmologies, media theorist Yukio Furuhashi notes how contemporary critical discourse has prompted cultural producers to revisit and remix myths as their spatiotemporal specificities have been unfixed throughout the recent discourse of the Anthropocene. According to Furuhashi, our present modernity collapses categorical distinctions between human and geological history, as humans have only recently become a significant environmental agent driving climate change. Requiring us to consider both Earth's natural history and the human history of



EVO collective, 2020. Source: Subtropical Asia (2020).

world-building together, Furuhata (2022: 73) argues that this collapse in distinction ‘prompts us to think about another temporality: that of mythology’. As the *yabi* aesthetic is not only reviving but also reinventing mythology in an aestheticisation of involutory tendencies, the *yabi* can be understood as a response to the Anthropocene’s challenges in the context of Chinese governmentality and censorship. Such collapsing of spatiotemporal signifiers and reinvention challenge ‘the categorical distinctions between the deep time of geology and the historic time of human civilizations, between geohistory and world history, and between nature and culture’ (Furuhata 2022: 73).

For example, Shanghai’s underground club scene is a community of artists, musicians, designers, producers, and influencers who gather regularly at hybrid events that are simultaneously performance

art, social practice, and nightlife. One prominent underground party collective is EVO, whose founding member, Wu Youyi, stated in a 2020 interview with *Subtropical Asia* that their aesthetic is inspired by visual *kei* (underground Japanese glam metal of the 1980s) as much as it is by classical Chinese aesthetics and literature, with contemporary manifestations of Chinese ‘traditional ghost culture’. EVO’s style is situated within a broader cultural trend of remixing that the collective has seen flourish in China since 2018, where youth cultures have been creating new visual systems made up of fragments, ‘yet to be defined’. With regards to the *yabi*, Wu believes that the initial reactionary responses to the term have led to misunderstandings and insincere adoptions of the look, while overshadowing any ‘rational discussion behind this phenomenon’. Another netizen, taoagou00, responded to the phenomenon and virulent backlash

in her 2021 vlog titled ‘I Am Yabi’ (我是亚逼). Stylised underneath a single spotlight with computer-generated filters to create a dark and misty internal world, she first itemises her #ootd: counterfeit high-street-style shirts, a mourning graffiti sweatshirt, spliced beggar-style wide-leg pants, distressed sneakers, Yamamoto-style fisherman’s hat, dyed hair, reflective *guochao* shoulder bag, and an Instagram-sought frog pendant. The camera swoops around to highlight her adornment while her voiceover narrates:

I’m a *yabi*, I embrace all kinds of niche and weird subcultures to make my own unique style. This is an expression of my thoughts. The point is not what I think, but how I am able to express it. Behind every metal chain is an imprisoned roar. I use photos to record my pain and struggles. What the camera records is just a concealment of my soul. My twisted limbs are an expression of my repression. The only antidote is music, but I never listen to hip-hop, only trap, because too many people are into hip-hop now. (taoagou00 2021)

Moving into the realm of music critique, she types a post into her phone that the viewer sees onscreen: ‘Hi everyone. Something bad happened, I don’t even want to talk about it. So annoying, I’m so numb, nevermind. Say no more, my life has taken a turn—’ only to be interrupted by a man’s voice: ‘Daft Punk has disbanded!’ ‘Daft Punk?’ she thinks, and quickly searches ‘What is Daft Punk?’ Her response to what seconds earlier was completely unknown is, ‘What! Daft Punk disbanded? My youth is over!’ and breaks into tears for a few seconds before moving on to text with friends, whose opinions on *yabi* are that the style is chaotic, messy, ugly, and tacky. Finally, she concludes that hip-hop and rock music are just distractions, that ‘folk music is the true music’, before signing off in a flash of wildly different #ootds.

Although taoagou00’s video is just over a minute long, she traverses various taboo subjects underneath consumer-class superficialities of clothing and popular music. Veering between sincerity and irony, she reveals that being *yabi* is a way of expressing her repressed, concealed soul; that traumatic life-altering experiences are not acceptable social media content; and, perhaps most profoundly, that folk music—in solidarity with the migrant class—is the ‘real music’

(民谣才是真正的音乐). While ‘I Am Yabi’ can be categorised as a lifestyle vlog, the subtleties it contains speak to how *yawenhua*, with *yabi* at the helm, are a collective act of resistance against the status quo. In another netizen’s 2020 vlog, ‘What Is Subculture? “Yabi” Isn’t “Crass/Unfashionable*”’ (什么是亚文化? ‘亚逼’不是‘土*’), BBQ-Qiu (BBQ秋) argues that *yabi* is a neutral word, that it means ‘subculture enthusiast’ (亚文化爱好者). As an enthusiast—or, more literally, a ‘subculture lover’—embracing other online alienated meme-based *yawenhua* who do not have such a prolific and fashionable aesthetic in the real world, the *yabi* are in effect signalling for others to join them in finding aesthetic freedom.

From Goddesses and Fox Spirits to Holding up Half the Sky

Reaching back to the ancient cosmographical text *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas*, in which the female gender was asymmetrically prestigious compared with its male counterpart (Birrell 2002: 29–32), the feminine supernatural can be traced throughout China’s formative epochs of state, nation, and revolutionary party-building. Although contemporary Chinese society still follows patriarchal neo-Confucian values in which women are subservient to men, studies of premodern China show that this was not always the case. Dating back to the Warring States period (476–221 BCE), *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas* is a cosmographic survey describing more than 500 mythical creatures, 550 mountains, 300 rivers, 95 foreign lands and tribes, and hundreds more flora, medicines, metals, and minerals (Strassberg 2002: 3). Iteratively and collaboratively written, it incorporates numerical, astronomical, geographical, and environmental systems, along with a bestiary of mythical creatures to create a totalising assemblage of the world before the practices of modern cartography. Empirical facts and myths are blended within a geographical framework to organise ‘diverse information about the world in an effort to define a more systematic pattern of totality as a model for a centrally unified China’ (Strassberg 2002: 9). In other words, various orders of knowledge are systematised to assimilate the unknown. Recalling Furuhashi’s claim



'Mother Queen of the West' (right) from *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas*. Source: Strassberg (2002).

of the Anthropogenic collapse of space and time, body and politics, the *yabi* remix and reinvent personal aesthetics that defy historical and spatial continuity as a means to 'challenge categorical distinctions' that govern the status quo in present-day China.

Historian Anne Birrell (2002: 2) notes how, compared with other classical texts to come, the inclusion in *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas* of many female goddesses and mythical creatures—notably, the Mother Goddess (女娲 *Nüwa*), the Spirit Guardian Goddess (精卫 *Jingwei*), and the Mother Queen of the West (西王母 *Xiawangmu*), who lived, ruled, and transformed with autonomy in the natural world—'implicitly constructs a gender asymmetry in which female is accorded a privileged status'. For instance, the Mother Queen of the West's power is revealed not through her relation to humankind, but through her design and control of the cosmos. Later Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE, 25–220 CE) texts, *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (列女傳) compiled by Liu Xiang and *Lessons for Women* (女誡) by Ban Zhao, both position women as subordinate to men.

Gender roles defined through patriarchal Confucian ideology became increasingly normalised when the Han Dynasty court officially adopted Confucianism into its education and political systems. As argued by Frederick Engels' ethnographic and historical reconstruction of Western feudalism (Sacks 1983) and applied to Chinese imperial society by Birrell (2002), it was the feudal class and property system

that eroded pre-class egalitarianism between genders. Compared with a Western biological gender binary, Chinese linguistic construction did not have an equivalent gender construct based on sex until the twentieth century; the term *funü* (妇女, woman) relayed a woman's personhood as a social construct via kinship and ritual—how she moved through the world in relation to men. As made clear through the practice of foot-binding, this movement was restricted and reflected in literature, in which men travelled as scholar-gentry and women played the roles of mother, wife, daughter, relative, maid, concubine, and prostitute.

Although the Confucian doctrine 'men are superior and women are inferior' (男尊女卑) restricted the role of women to not just earthly but also domestic realms, their affinity with the supernatural was maintained through literature. From the sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty classics *Journey to the West* (西游记) by Wu Cheng'en, an episodic *huaben* (话本, vernacular short story) following the journey of a Chinese monk's pilgrimage to India, and Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng's *The Golden Lotus* (金瓶梅), which chronicles the sexual exploits of three women around the lustful, corrupt merchant Ximen Qing, numerous female spirits, ghosts, and fairies serve as adversarial plot devices. In the succeeding and final Qing Dynasty of China's imperial history, sexualised and supernatural femininity became a paradigm through Pu Songling's 1679 collection of 500 supernatural short stories, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異), which repeatedly featured fox spirits (狐狸精) who assumed the guise of seductive temptresses. While some of the tales end happily with fox spirits falling in love with the man of the house, the typical story has an honourable man falling under the fox spirit's sexual spells, draining him of his life force.

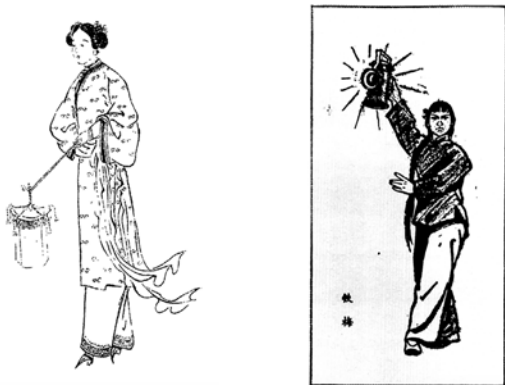
At the turn of the twentieth century, supernatural femininity moved off the page to play a prominent role in the patriotic but wildly superstitious Boxer Rebellion (Terrill 1984: 272–73). While male Boxers collectively took part in mass spiritual possession, martial arts, and *qigong* (气功, breathing exercises) believed to help achieve invulnerability against modern weaponry, their female auxiliary fighters, the young women and girls who made up the *hong-dengzhao* (红灯照, Red Lanterns), were said to be able to leave their bodies, fly, set fire by will, control the wind, heal wounds, and reanimate the dead. Their

prepubescence deemed them supernatural, while all other women were ostracised for their uncleanness; menstrual and foetal blood, urine, nakedness, and female pubic hair were all considered unclean, hindering the efficacy of the Boxers' magic powers during battle. Female skin, pubic hair, and even women themselves were hung up or nailed to the exterior of targeted buildings to ward off the Boxers' attacks (Cohen 1997: 132–39).

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the 1915 New Culture Movement's determination to move society forward away from the old culture sublimated the animistic feminine supernatural and sexuality into two new modern archetypes for a brave new Republican world: the *xin nüxing* (新女性, New Woman) and the *modeng gou'er* (摩登狗兒, Modern Girl). First appearing in the anti-imperial literature of the May Fourth Movement, the New Woman quickly became a symbol of the nation's anti-traditionalist revolution, making *funü* an outdated term. While the New Woman was 'educated, political, and intensely nationalistic', her counterpart, the Modern Girl, was 'a sinister and dangerous figure—a distant siren, luring the unwary and ill-prepared male subject to his ultimate demise' (Stevens 2003: 83–89). Along with literature, the burgeoning Shanghai-based film industry, as well as the proliferation of print media—particularly the popular 1930s women's magazine *Ling Long* (玲瓏, *Exquisite*)—disseminated this dialectical female fantasy into popular consciousness. *Ling Long* published articles and stories about the New Woman in the front and ran advertisements and movie show-times depicting the Modern Girl in the back. Films

such as *Labourer's Love* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1922), *Love and Duty* (dir. Bu Wancang, 1931), and *The New Woman* (dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935), contributed to the formation of 'Woman' as a symbol of modernity—a femme fatale, a praying mantis (Stevens 2003: 92)—to whom anxieties and fears could be ascribed. Akin to Western feminist critiques of the double productive and reproductive burden placed on women, the fact that such fears about modernisation, female emancipation, and foreign infiltration were exorcised through cultural production is not surprising during a period that included two world wars, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Civil War.

The history I have traced is one through which the feminine subject has been demonised, modernised, and instrumentalised in various myths up to the CCP's rise to power. Effective immediately in the People's Republic of China, *nüxing* was re-gendered back into *funü*, emphasising the female peasant-proletarian as revolutionary warrior (Kim 2020: 634; Li 2020: 76). In combining ancient elements of folk legend with proletarian communist propaganda, the feminine supernatural became sublimated into the selfhood of the masses as revolutionary supernatural fervour. Whatever divine attributes, animistic energies, and sensorial powers were previously bestowed on to women were now funnelled into the CCP's singular purpose. 'Women can hold up half the sky' is a well-known Maoist slogan popularised to activate 100 per cent of the workforce (Sun 1974; Zhong 2011). 'The White-Haired Girl' (百毛女), a legend from Hebei Province, is exemplary of a folktale turned feminist communist propaganda, passed on through short stories, songs, *yangge* (秧歌, folk dance), and stage plays, eventually reaching the Communist Party in Yan'an in 1944 (Kim 2020: 640). The protagonist, Xi'er, is a young woman who flees after being raped and impregnated by her landlord into the mountains, where she gives birth in a cave, only to lose her baby. Hair and skin white from malnutrition, she is discovered by villagers who believe her to be a goddess and champion her to lead a revolt against the landlord. After a successful uprising, the story ends with Xi'er restored to her pre-supernatural form, proudly back in the fields with the farmers. First performed during the Chinese Civil War, the story was adapted into a feature film in 1950 (dir. Wang Bin and Shui Hua), and as one of Jiang Qian's revolutionary model operas during the Cultural Revolution.



Red Lantern, c. 1900 and 1967. Source: Cohen (1997).

Re-emerging during the Cultural Revolution, the Boxer Rebellion's *hongdengzhao* now transformed into the *hongweibing* (Red Guards, 红卫兵). Symbolic resonances in their names, *hongdengzhao* and *hongweibing*, their self-styling (head-to-toe red), and their rebellious, youthful spirit were the perfect communist gimmicks to mobilise thousands of teenagers to cleanse society of 'the Four Olds'. Further radicalised in 1973 via the Anti-Confucian Campaign led by Jiang Zemin, the *hongdengzhao* were heralded as a symbol of female emancipation in a patriarchal society. The campaign targeted 'bureaucratism, abhorrence of physical labour, and the subordination of women' (Cohen 1997: 270), but it was undoubtedly a grasp for personal and ideological power by Jiang. In a subtle reference to *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas*, the legend of *hongdengzhao* leader Lin He'er reappropriated as propaganda during the Anti-Confucian Campaign reads: 'Mountains may be levelled and the seas may be emptied but the red lantern of revolution will never be extinguished!' (Liu and Xu 1975: 77).

An Involution of Aesthetic Freedom

In my historical tracing of the feminine supernatural throughout Chinese history, subcultures had not yet been conceptualised, recorded, and studied, as the country underwent many eras of instability and upheaval. As an academic discipline, subcultural studies has its roots in theorising by Chicago School sociologists in the 1920s; subcultural analysis was not used in the Chinese context before the advent of the internet. Instead, disenchanted youth who lived through Mao Zedong's reign and into the failures of the prodemocracy movement were conceptualised through the lens of popular culture (Link et al. 1989, 2002). Nevertheless, there are plenty of examples of what could arguably be considered subcultural activities in Maoist China—for example, in hand-copied 'underground' pulp fiction during the Cultural Revolution (Link 1989: 18–36) and, at the start of the reform era in 1979, when a group of painters who named themselves *Xingxing* (星星, Stars) unofficially exhibited oil paintings made in secret during the Mao years outside the National Art Museum in Beijing as a call for freedom of expression (Gladston 2013: 21–22).

These glimpses of rebellious cultural production signal to the subversive impulses of a counter-hegemonic 'bottom-up' subcultural perspective (Zhang 2022) ever present in the face of repression. They also portend a defining element of subculture: the desire of subalterns to demand a public appearance (Anderson 1994).

At its base, subculture has been defined as a group cultural identification with deviant behaviour due to social problems within society, in resistance to mainstream cultural values (Haenfler 2014: 2–5). The performance of subculture through self-styling is how one finds their chosen kin, while simultaneously rebelling against the status quo by way of aesthetics. During the Mao era, when revolutionary socialist realism depicted only one culture—the proletarian subject under Mao—anyone who was deemed a vagrant, counterrevolutionary, or member of the 'dangerous classes' was captured and subjected to forced labour and thought reform (Smith 2013). Thus, subculture was severely repressed until the 1990s, when China's transition into a market economy produced a consumer class who had extra income to spend and who could, via international trade, make contact with the rest of the world. With the internet, this contact not only provided access to a global *fenggechaoshi* (风格超市, cultural supermarket)—or the 'supermarket of style' in subcultural theory—but also created a virtual space where *yawenhua* could form digitally before gaining the courage to present publicly.

Recalling classical Chinese literature and aesthetics in which female figures like the snake-bodied *Nüwa*, her bird-daughter *Jingwei*, and the *Xiwangmu* (who had a human body, a leopard's tail, and tiger-like fangs) thrived, the *yabi* reactivates ancient cosmographical meaning-making in subtle resistance to the CCP's authoritarian hegemony. At first glance, such a predominance of women may speak to a female-targeted fashion industry controlled by the technological gaze, one that cannot but replicate the gender inequity of the real world as a manifestation of surplus male desire as *mengyan* (梦魇, incubus) energy, the feedback of China's One-Child Policy. However, I propose that a more nuanced reading of the *yabi*'s social function is necessary: the *yabi* cannot be understood and dismissed as simply young urbanites shopping and styling themselves through spiritual ennui. How does the slippery *yabi* aesthetic



Figure 5: Etsu Kinugawa, 'Am I Yabi? I'm So Yabi? Reflections of an OG Subculturalist' (2022).

function in contemporary Chinese society and, in the identification of their social function as *yawenhua*, what do the *yabi* want?

In 'A Quick, Dirty Guide to China's Controversial New Subculture: The Yabi' published by the popular online culture and lifestyle magazine *Radii* by Beatrice Tamagno in 2023, one young male-presenting Shanghaiese resident speaks for the mainstream, stating: 'Instead of thinking critically about society and forming their own opinions, *yabis* in Shanghai only worry about dressing themselves in exaggerated and colourful ways.' This is a common misconception, according to vlogger Etsu Kinugawa 鬼怒川悦. In her 2022 *Bilibili* vlog, 'Am I Yabi? I'm so Yabi? Reflections of an OG Subculturalist' (我是亚比/亚逼?我好亚b?老亚文化人的思考), Kinugawa claims that in the wake of *yabi* subculture over the past few years, 'outstanding' cultural production—music, fashion, literature, and even film—by *yabi* is now being recognised and its creators are being approached by multi-channel networking agencies. During her 13-minute video, she even suggests that the *yabi* aesthetic is rooted in punk, as a 'culture of the common people fighting for their rights, which

is a good thing'. Not only does this assertion resonate with taoagou00's statement that the only real music is folk music—that is, the music of the common people—Kinugawa also manages to communicate this message without using red-flag words like 'activism' or 'solidarity'.

That *yabi* came out of hip-hop or techno music scenes is telling, as both are cultural imports with their own vast genealogies across the globe, and long cycles of adaptation, appropriation, and transformation. There are different origin stories of the term, but all point to independent music scenes. In the most accredited version, one netizen recalls that it was during techno music label Cloak's one-year anniversary party in 2019 that a user named E'wen Xun (埃文薰) made insulting comments in the chatstream on *Bilibili*. Before being called out and booted off, he wrote: '*Yabi* [Asian c*nts] still rely on mocking social hierarchy to feel superior' (Suslik 2021). From there, the term went viral via the music community, crossing over from cyberspace into studios, concerts, clubs, and parties. Kinugawa advocates for a new term, as she believes *yabi* to have originated from Chinese hip-hop, where rappers used it

as a derogatory reference to other *yawenhua*. Music producer GG Lobster brings the term back to underground techno, where *yabi* was used to describe the ‘new-club’ genre DJs and producers, and also suggests laying the term to rest in favour of *xinbuzu* (新部族, neo-tribe)—a term he undoubtedly sourced from post-subcultural theory, which is defined as ‘diffuse collections of people that gather intermittently, primarily to have a good time, and share some sense of collective identity ... but do not share much in the way of an underlying identity or ideology’ (Haenfler 2014: 11). The *zu* (族) in Lobster’s *xinbuzu* is used in various compound words to mean clan, family, race, nationality, ethnic, and social group, circling back to a cosmographical application of identity construction in what sociologist Phil Cohen (2004: 71) calls a ‘magical’ expression and resolution ‘of the contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved in the parent culture’.

In such an iterative and continuous cycle of self-formation mediated by digital platforms, what the *yabi* want can be understood as an aggregation of many virtual selves against the actual other—the other-past of its origins and the *yabi*’s own projected otherness relative to the increasingly out-of-reach positive-energy narratives. By communicating through personal style what is impermissible through words, feelings of alienation expressed online by the ‘curling inward’ involutory *yawenhua*—*sang*, *diaosi*, *tangping*—can be transformed into offline communities of *tongwengceng*. Throughout the mythic genealogies traced in this article, the *yabi* aesthetic evokes a ‘subcultural enthusiast’ feminine supernatural in continuous flux—one that is in solidarity with the class politics of the common people, of whom they and the other *yawenhua* are a part. In the present Anthropogenic collapse where doomsday realities of climate disaster and warfare exist in the same space as green-tech miracles and space colonisation, in which positive-energy narratives of better material futures feel further and further out of reach, the *yabi* is a collective manifestation of mother goddesses and fox spirits signalling to one another that, through aesthetic freedom, there exists other freedoms. ■





FOCUS

Bending Chineseness



The Chinese army defeats the Khoja brothers (Burhān al-Dīn and Khwāja-i Jahān) in Yesil-Kol-Nor (present-day Yashil Kul, Tajikistan), 1759. Source: Wikipedia (CC).

Securitising History: Reimagining and Reshaping the ‘Imagined Community’ in China’s New Era

Juan QIAN

This essay delves into the recent critique of the New Qing History school of thought by the Chinese authorities and official historians. It explores the implications of historical disputes about the Qing Dynasty for China’s national identity and territorial claims, particularly given President Xi Jinping’s efforts to promote a unified ‘Chinese national community’. By examining these intersections, the article highlights the critical role of Qing history in shaping contemporary China’s ideological and territorial narratives.

In the summer of 2023, the British Museum hosted a major exhibition titled ‘China’s Hidden Century’ (British Museum 2023). This ambitious display aimed to present the political, economic, and social transformations of China under the late Qing Dynasty in the nineteenth century. On a microlevel, it aspired to show the creativity, diversity, and resilience of Chinese individuals during an era of rapid change and uncertainty through the careful curation of portraits, artisanship, and household items. On a macrolevel,

it sought to capture the changes and adaptations in the social structures of this multiethnic empire amid domestic turmoil and Western aggression.

Unexpectedly, ‘China’s Hidden Century’ drew a wave of harsh, combative criticism from Chinese academics. Most notably, Xia Chuntao and Cui Zhihai (2024), two prominent historians from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), published a strongly worded critique in *Modern Chinese History Studies* (近代史研究), one of China’s leading history journals. They wrote that the primary issue with the exhibition was its ‘wrong’ historiography and distorted interpretation of Chinese history. They argued that, instead of portraying the Qing as a Chinese dynasty defined by unambiguously Chinese characters, the display presented it as a multinational polity under Manchu rule that conquered and colonised diverse territories, including both Han-inhabited China proper and non-Han areas such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. The exhibition’s biggest historiographic mistake, according to Xia and Cui, was *framing China as part of the multinational Qing Empire*, rather than *viewing the Qing as a transient historical period of China*. They alleged that this distorted view could have serious political implications—undermining China’s territorial unity, separating ethnic minority territories from the rest of China, and legitimising efforts by anti-China forces to divide the country.

In their polemic, Xia and Cui attributed the origin of the exhibition’s ‘mistaken’ view to New Qing History (NQH), a school of thought led by Western scholars proposing an alternative interpretation of the Qing Empire. In recent years, NQH has become the target (sometimes the strawman) of concentrated criticism by Chinese authorities and official historians. According to Yale historian Zhang Taisu, the Chinese Government allegedly vetoed a draft of authoritative Qing history compiled by a team of government-appointed historians, partly because it was ‘overly influenced by NQH’ (Ji 2023). In April 2024, the *China Social Science Daily* (中国社会科学报), an official CASS newspaper, published a series of harsh critiques of NQH by Chinese historians under the title ‘Critiquing Historical Nihilism’ (批判历史虚无主义). One article accused NQH of ‘complete obliteration and distortion of Qing history’ (Guo 2024), while another outlined three ‘irremediable flaws’ of

NQH: a ‘misreading of five thousand years of Chinese history’, a ‘departure from the spirit of seeking truth’, and ‘the abuse of the practical functions of historical studies’ (Li 2024). These articles asserted that the critique of NQH is not merely an ‘optional’ scholarly debate, but also a political imperative for China’s territorial integrity, given that ‘the extent of their harm has become self-evident’ (Li 2024).

In this essay, I aim to explore a series of related questions: What is so important about the Qing and, from Beijing’s perspective, why is a ‘correct’ understanding of Qing history so crucial to justify its legitimacy and territorial claims over its vast non-Han ethnic frontier? How is the effort to shape modern Chinese history related to President Xi Jinping’s agenda to mould a ‘Chinese national community’? Without understanding these questions, one may find it puzzling why Chinese authorities and official historians are so anxious to control the interpretation of Qing history.

New Qing History: Revisionism, Innovation, or Threat?

The Qing Empire (1644–1912) has a complex relationship with modern China. On one hand, it largely defines the territorial reach and demographic characteristics of contemporary China. Unlike other multinational empires that disintegrated in the twentieth century—such as Tsarist Russia, Ottoman Turkey, and Austria–Hungary—the successor Chinese state to the Qing Empire retained most of its original land and population (except for Mongolia). In the words of Sinologist William Kirby (2005), the Qing shaped what we now recognise as modern China, marking the period ‘when China becomes China’. On the other hand, paradoxically, the Qing is larger than ‘China’ and more than ‘Chinese’ in the traditional sense. *China proper*—lands predominantly inhabited by Han Chinese and consistently ruled by previous Chinese dynasties—was only one part of the Qing Empire. The empire also governed Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet—non-Han-majority territories over which prior Chinese dynasties had only intermittent control at best*. Defining the nature of the Qing Dynasty from the perspective of modern Chinese rulers is

essential to their territorial claims and control over the vast non-Han frontier borderlands in Inner Asia. The question is thus not merely a scholarly one but also a political one: how is modern China entitled to inherit the entire territory of the Qing if the Qing was not even considered *China*?

The NQH school, particularly in the eyes of its critics, is perceived as challenging the presumed Chinese-ness of the Qing Empire. This loose group of historians—Mark Elliot, Evelyn Rawski, Pamela Crossley, and James Milward, among many others—rose to scholarly prominence starting in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than a unified school of thought with similar views, NQH is characterised more by the shared research approach and substantive interests of these scholars. In contrast to earlier generations of Sinologists, these academics are proficient in both Chinese and a non-Han language used within the empire such as Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, or Uyghur. Taking advantage of their multilingual skills, they extensively utilise non-Chinese documents and materials in their research, going beyond relying solely on Chinese historical sources. Furthermore, NQH scholars are interested in the *frontier* and *borderlands* of the empire. They explore how the non-Han borderlands were governed, their relationships and interactions with both China proper and broader Inner Asia. Relatedly, they examine how the Manchu rulers—themselves a non-Han group originating from the borderlands—identified and positioned themselves in governing the empire (for a more comprehensive summary of NQH, see Wu 2016).

Before the emergence of NQH, historians of modern China rarely challenged the notion that the Qing Empire was Chinese, or at least *Sinicised*. Canonical works tended to highlight the fact that, although the Manchus were a non-Han ethnic group, they largely assimilated into Chinese culture after conquering China proper, adopting Chinese political and administrative norms, identifying themselves as rulers of the Middle Kingdom, and using Confucian ideological concepts to justify their legitimacy to rule China (for examples of this traditional view, see Peterson 1978; Corradini 2002). Therefore, the Qing political order was often viewed more as a smooth continuation of, rather than a break from, preceding Han-Chinese dynasties, and the 300-year Manchu rule was treated as just another episode in China's cycle of dynastic succession (for a canonical work

reflecting this point of view, see Wakeman, jr, 1985). In traditional Qing scholarship, relatively less attention was given to areas beyond the Han-inhabited hinterland.

The NQH marked a break from this traditional, Sinocentric historiography. In the words of Evelyn Rawski (1996), historians in this group are committed to a bold 're-envisioning' of the Qing: what kind of empire it was, how it governed its diverse territories, and to what extent it was 'Chinese'. While this essay cannot provide an exhaustive review of this diverse group of historians, most NQH scholars share a common scepticism that 'Chinese' was the sole defining feature of the Qing (Ho 1998). The Manchu ruling class was not as 'Chinese' or Sinicised as previously thought, but retained distinctly Inner Asian, nomadic features that shaped their pattern of governance. The Manchus did not administer the empire solely in a Chinese manner, especially its non-Han frontiers. Many NQH works argue that, contrary to the conventional notion that the Qing was a centralised state with a one-size-fits-all bureaucracy, Manchu rulers governed different ethnic homelands in Inner Asia—Manchuria, Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet—with distinctive sets of institutions markedly different from those in China proper (for a representative book proposing this view, see Milward et al. 2004). Some NQH scholars point out that the Manchu rulers did not use the uniform title of 'Chinese Emperor' when asserting their rule over non-Han areas. Instead, they variably claimed titles such as 'Khagan', 'Boda Khan', or 'Emperor Manjushri', reflecting their efforts to establish legitimacy based on the political traditions of each ethnic group (Milward et al. 2004). Overall, NQH historians frame the Qing as a multicentric, multinational colonial empire governed by a Manchu elite with distinctly non-Chinese characteristics, and Han-inhabited China proper was just *one part* of this vast imperial polity.

There is little doubt that the NQH school's questioning of the Qing's Chinese identity is perceived as *politically threatening* by official historians in China. The modern Chinese State often justifies its territorial claims by invoking *historical rights*. According to this official narrative, China has the legitimacy to rule non-Han borderlands because those territories have been part of China *since ancient times* (for an in-depth analysis of China's use of history to justify

contemporary claims, see Wang 2008: 788; 2014). The expansive Qing Empire, as a formative period that united China proper with non-Han borderlands into one political entity, is used as key evidence to support this claim. The notion that the Qing was different from China undermines modern China's legitimacy to inherit the historical lands under Manchu rule. Consequently, it is no surprise that Professor Li Zhiting, a member of the official National Qing History Compilation Committee, denounced NQH as a 'neo-imperialist project' and a 'malicious attack on a sovereign country' because its views imply that 'separatism is legal' (Li 2016).

China's Evolving Battle with its Qing Legacy

In fact, the struggle for a 'righteous' interpretation of Qing history is nothing new. For subsequent Chinese rulers, the legacy of the Qing was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the Qing left behind a much larger territory for their successors in the twentieth century, expanding the border of the future Chinese State far beyond the traditional Han homeland. On the other hand, the larger territory also brought a more complex and heterogeneous ethnic landscape for their successors to manage. Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese elites and intellectuals grappled with the imperial legacy of the Qing in their projects of building a modern Chinese state.

Ironically, revolutionaries against the Qing in the early 1900s understood the empire in a way somewhat similar to NQH scholars. In pamphlets and publications, they claimed that China was an oppressed nation subjugated by the Qing and the goal of the revolution should be to 'rid the Manchus and revive the Han' (排满兴汉) (Leibold 2014). Zhang Taiyan, the renowned literati and revolutionary, held a seminar in Tokyo in 1902 to commemorate the '242nd anniversary of the fall of China', at which anti-Qing activists in exile lamented that the *real* China, represented by the Ming Dynasty, had long died under the yoke of the Manchus (for a more nuanced study of Zhang Taiyan's political thought, see Schneider 2017). In the vision of many early revolutionaries, the future China should be a Han nation-state covering the 18 Han-Chinese provinces in China proper that were

lost to the Manchus. This ideal was reflected in the '18-star flag' adopted during the Xinhai Revolution, where each star represented a province to be liberated.

After the Xinhai Revolution and the abdication of the Qing monarch in 1912, political leaders of the fledgling Republic of China (ROC) faced the urgent question of how to handle the non-Han ethnic territories previously under Qing control. Many republican-era political elites envisioned a Greater China extending beyond the borders of the 18 Han provinces, claiming that the ROC, as the Qing's successor, had the mandate to inherit all former Qing territories. The republican motto 'Five Races Under One Union' (五族共和)—referring to Han, Manchus, Mongols, Turkic Muslims, and Tibetans—reflected the political agenda to mould the former multiethnic empire into a modern nation-state. Early political thinkers of the republic, such as Liang Qichao, Yang Du, and Sun Yat-sen, proposed the idea of *Zhonghua Minzu* (中华民族, 'Chinese Nation') as an *inclusive national identity* that transcended ethnic differences (Leibold 2016). According to this narrative, all Han and non-Han citizens in China, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, constituted one Chinese nation (for a nuanced discussion of the early nation-building of modern China, see Dikötter 1996). In the early republican period, the concept of *Zhonghua Minzu* was proposed as a form of liberal *political nationhood*—under which members of the Chinese nation should be united by their political allegiance to the republic and its ideals, rather than shared cultural or ethnic traits (for a more focused discussion on how early republican state-builders defined *minzu*, see Murata 2001).

The Kuomintang party-state, which dominated the ROC between 1927 and 1949, advocated an assimilationist policy to address the Qing's legacy of ethnic fragmentation. Sun Yat-sen, the founding father who initially vowed to respect the rights of non-Han peoples, reversed his position in the 1920s and called for their acculturation into Han-Chinese culture (for a more nuanced discussion of the construction of the idea of *Zhonghua Minzu* in the Republican period, see Zheng 2014; for a non-technical commentary, see Li 2020). According to Sun, allowing distinctive ethnic groups to exist was harmful and contributed to China's division and weakness. Therefore, the goal was to eliminate interethnic differences and integrate non-Han peoples into the Han majority to

form a culturally homogeneous Chinese nation. Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, further insisted that there was only one *Zhonghua Minzu* and refused to recognise the existence of diverse ethnic identities in China. From Chiang's perspective, demographic categories like Han, Mongol, and Tibetan were merely subordinate lineage groups (宗族) within the Chinese nation, rather than distinct ethnic groups (Zheng 2014; DeShaw Rae and Wang 2016). This rejection of interethnic differences was reflected in the 1947 election for the first National Assembly: the Hui people, a Muslim ethnoreligious group in central and western China, were referred to merely as 'citizens with unique living habits' (内地生活习惯特殊之国民), rather than being recognised as a group distinct from the Han (for a focused discussion of the Hui's national identity, see Phelan 2020). However, throughout its 22-year rule, the Kuomintang never had the chance to truly implement its assimilationist policy in the ethnic frontier; Mongolia and Tibet were *de facto* independent, and Xinjiang was ruled by warlords outside central control.

The complete victory by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War marked the first time that most of the former Qing territory was under the control of a centralised Chinese regime. Unsurprisingly, the approach of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the Qing's legacy was heavily impacted by Leninist ideology (Wu 2019). The regime downplayed the multiethnic nature of the Qing Empire and instead viewed it through the lens of Marxist class struggle (Horesh 2021). According to official historians like Bai Shouyi, both the Han in China proper and non-Han peoples in the frontier were *fellow victims* suffering under the yoke of a Manchu feudal ruling class. Thus, the proletariat from all ethnic backgrounds were united by a shared class consciousness in their struggle for emancipation. In this way, the CCP presented itself as the liberator of oppressed ethnic minorities. The political narrative on Tibet exemplified this approach: by emphasising the immense suffering and enslavement of Tibetan peasants in the past, the Party justified its rule in Tibet by asserting that it had liberated Tibetans from feudal oppression and granted them the rights of free and equal PRC citizens under socialism (for a dissertation focusing on the PRC's ethnic narrative about Tibet, see Coleman 1998).

During the Mao Zedong era, the CCP's principle for governing non-Han ethnic borderlands was also shaped by Leninist ethnic views. Non-Han ethnic groups were granted the status of *nationalities* (民族) and promised self-rule to a limited degree in their homelands (for a focused discussion of the Maoist notion of ethnic self-determination, see Kryukov 1996). Under the official policy of 'Regional Ethnic Autonomy', ethnic minorities were entitled to certain rights related to their language and culture, provided they pledged political allegiance to the CCP's leadership. Accusing the preceding regimes of being 'Han chauvinists' (Mao 1953), the Mao-era Party leadership did not force ethnic minorities to assimilate culturally, but primarily demanded their *political conformity* with the CCP's socialist agenda and ideological campaigns (Weiner 2023). In other words, the Party sought to use a *shared communist vision and political objectives* as the unifying force to bind Han and non-Han peoples into one polity, thereby justifying its rule over non-Han borderlands (Csete 2001).

Securitising the Chinese Identity in the New Era

Under President Xi Jinping, ethnic policy in the PRC has undergone a significant shift from previous norms and practices. Existing PRC ethnic policy generally tolerated ethnic diversity and allowed cultural and linguistic expression by ethnic minorities to a certain degree—if they did not explicitly challenge the Party's political authority. In comparison, the ethnic policy of Xi's administration revolves around an assertive agenda to 'strengthen the consciousness of the Chinese national community' (Klimeš 2018). The authorities now view overt ethnic or religious expression as a challenge to national unity and non-Han citizens are demanded to acquire a Chinese cultural identity in their hearts and minds. Metaphorically, while the PRC's longstanding ethnic policy was 'anyone who is *not against me* is with me', the new era policy is 'anyone who is *not with me* is against me'.

The Chinese Government's shift in ethnic policy since the 2000s is driven by deep-seated insecurity over its ethnic borderlands. Waves of ethnic protests and rising separatist movements in places like Xinjiang and Tibet deeply concerned Beijing

(Bovingdon 2002). The government diagnosed the problem as stemming from a *lack of Chinese national identity* among minority populations (Wei and Chen 2009). The existing ethnic policy, from Beijing's perspective, prioritised ethnic autonomy over fostering a unified national identity. As minorities did not feel sufficiently connected to a Chinese identity, they would be more prone to anti-government agitation. The fall of the Soviet Union provided further support for this view. An analysis published by the CCP Party History and Literature Research Institute argues that the Leninist nationality policy created artificial divisions among the Soviet population and laid the foundation for its disintegration (Han 2014). Once the central power was weakened, there existed no *cultural affinity* that could continue to bind different ethnic groups together. Hence, identity is not merely a personal choice, but also an issue of *national security* crucial to regime survival (Zhou 2019).

Many ethnic policies in the Xi era reflect the view of ethnic identity through a national security lens. One example is the 'bilingual education' policy implemented in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia (Gupta and Ramachandran 2016; Baranovitch 2022; Atwood 2020). This policy mandated Mandarin as the primary language of instruction in schools, while gradually downplaying the role of ethnic languages in classroom instruction and exam schedules. Another significant campaign aimed at 'shaping a Chinese national community' was the Sinicisation of mosques. In this nationwide refurbishment project, all mosques with Arabic architectural features were modified to conform to traditional Chinese architectural styles (see Yuspov in this issue). These policies illustrate the regime's broader strategy to ensure national unity and security by imposing a uniform Chinese identity across diverse ethnic groups.

Revisiting the Qing Legacy

From this analysis, it is possible to understand why the Chinese authorities and official historians take such a combative posture in controlling the interpretation of Qing history. The Qing Dynasty's legacy plays a pivotal role in legitimising China's territorial claims and national identity, particularly over its vast

non-Han ethnic frontier. An orthodox, Sinocentric view of Qing history is crucial for national security—it allows Beijing to reinforce its narrative of historical continuity and unity, maintain internal cohesion, and counter challenges to China's territorial claims.

Moreover, the struggle over interpreting Qing history reflects a broader ideological agenda within China, including President Xi's priority to forge a cohesive 'Chinese national community' under a unified identity. Hence, the debate over NQH is not just a scholarly disagreement, but also a battleground for defining the PRC's demographic and territorial landscape. ■

* How much the Qing Empire exerted effective control over Tibet has long been subject to scholarly, and sometimes politicised, debate. Some scholars believe that the Qing exercised substantive control and sovereignty over Tibet, while others describe the Qing's relationship with Tibet as 'suzerainty' or a 'patron-priest relationship'.



Camels in front of a construction site in Inner Mongolia, China. Source: Thomas White.

The Beastly Politics of China's Margins

Thomas WHITE

In Chinese civilisational thinking, the peoples of the frontiers have long been linked derogatively with animals. In the twenty-first century, however, such associations have been reworked. Minority artists have used metaphorical connections between animals and minority peoples to explore politically sensitive themes; and, at China's pastoral margins, projects of cultural survival have been framed in terms of the conservation of charismatic breeds of livestock. In the process, however, the symbolism of animals has also been shaped by the nation-building and Belt and Road Initiative imaginaries characteristic of the Xi era.

Under Xi Jinping, China's policies towards minorities have taken an aggressively assimilationist turn. But even before the Xi era, for many of the ethnic minorities of China's borderlands, the early twenty-first century was a time of social upheaval that generated profound anxieties about culture loss. The 'Open Up the West' (西部大开发) development campaign, launched in 1999, was accompanied by environmental policies that upended traditional livelihoods, such as mobile pastoralism, and brought rapid urbanisation and intensified resource extraction to minority areas.

As intellectuals in China—both minority and some Han—have grappled with the rapid social, cultural, and ecological transformations of the country's peripheries, they have often turned to animals as a metaphorical resource for discussing the plight of ethnic minorities within the country. At the same time, for rural pastoralist minorities, the upheaval of the early twenty-first century has often entailed the loss of, or estrangement from, their animals (White 2021). In this essay, I analyse the role of animals in the politics of China's margins and suggest that this beastly politics illuminates fraught issues of minority agency, autonomy, and assimilation in contemporary China. I show how the association between minorities and animals has been variously deployed and contested by different actors and draw on my ethnography of western Inner Mongolia to explore the ambiguities and tensions of a politics of minority cultural survival framed in animal terms.

Beastly politics has a long history in China. In keeping with many other imperial formations around the world, the peoples of China's peripheries were for centuries imagined as 'barbarians', who were closer to animals than humans and in need of civilising by the political and cultural centre. Such bestial understandings of these peoples were reflected, for example, in Tang descriptions of their physiognomy (Abramson 2003: 130). For centuries, the association of these non-Han peoples with animals was even inscribed into the Chinese language itself. The characters representing these peoples often included a radical indicating an animal—notably, insect (虫) or dog (犬)—thus in effect classifying that particular people as a subset of that type of nonhuman being (Fiskesjö 2011).

In the twentieth century, the animal radicals in these characters, and the imperial chauvinism they implied, sat ill with formal declarations of equality among nationalities (民族) on the part of the modernising Chinese state, and their excision was finally announced in 1940 (Fiskesjö 2011). The anthropologist Magnus Fiskesjö (2011), however, argues that the association of non-Han peoples and animals has continued into the People's Republic of China, where minority nationalities (少数民族) are still regarded as 'backward' and 'closer to nature'. According to Fiskesjö (2011: 73), the survival of this

association is down to the fact that it allows the ruling elite to represent themselves to the majority of their subjects as 'the universal centre of an eternal order'.

The Representational Politics of Animals in the Early Twenty-First Century

In the realm of cultural production, the association of minorities and animals formed a continuity between the Maoist and reform eras, despite their very different policies towards minorities. For example, while representations of animals were largely absent from animations produced during the Cultural Revolution, animated films that featured minority nationalities were an exception (Du 2016). In the reform era, as ethnic otherness became increasingly commodified, it was often linked to youth, femininity, and animality: cards and bookmarks produced by the Nationalities Publishing House in Beijing, for instance, featured minority girls who 'occasionally appeared to be in direct communication with the animals who inhabited [their] environs' (Schein 1997). Birds, lambs, and butterflies predominated here.

In the early 2000s, however, the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and animality in Chinese cultural production shifted significantly. The 2004 novel by Jiang Rong (the pen-name of Lü Jiamin), *Wolf Totem* (狼图腾), quickly became a Chinese and then global publishing phenomenon, eventually being made into a film. The novel draws on the experiences of the Han Chinese writer himself, who was sent down to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. Contrasting the sheep-like Han and the wolf-like Mongols, the novel criticises the destruction of the Inner Mongolian environment that has accompanied the expansion of Han Chinese farming and celebrates the ecological role of wolves and Mongols in maintaining the grasslands. The extinction of the wolf functions as an allegory for the decline of Mongol nomadic power. Rather than seeing the Mongols as a threat to China, Jiang Rong suggested that they have historically constituted an important source of vitality and virility for the Chinese nation, and that China, faced with enemies abroad, now needed a reinfusion of this kind of wild animality from the peripheries.



A Tibetan mastiff. Source: @melanie_kuo (CC), Flickr.com.

In the wake of *Wolf Totem* several novels were published that dramatised China's ethnic politics using an animal cast, including Yang Zhijun's 2005 *Tibetan Mastiff* (藏獒). In this book, however, the wolfishness of the Mongols was contrasted negatively with the loyalty of the Tibetans-as-mastiffs. The tractability of domestic animals thus provided a useful way of portraying an ideal of faithful, obedient minorities—a trope also evident in recent media reports and films portraying the work of border patrols that still make use of animals for transportation (White 2023).

There have been numerous critiques of *Wolf Totem*, not least on the part of China's Mongols themselves. As Inner Mongolian anthropologist Nasan Bayar (2014) points out, it had the effect of reducing Mongols to 'Viagra for the Chinese'. Other Mongol scholars have criticised fundamental inaccuracies in the novel, including the very idea of the Mongols having a 'wolf totem'. According to the writer Guo Xuebo, 'Wolves were considered the natural enemies of Mongolians.' He goes on to lambast Jiang Rong's novel for its 'antihuman, fascist thought' (cited in Visser 2019: 337). Here, then, we can see how some minority intellectuals have contested certain dominant representations that identify minorities with animals. Indeed, in criticising the novel as 'antihuman' (反人), Guo seems to turn Jiang Rong's celebration of animality back at him.

However, in the early twenty-first century, minority intellectuals have in fact often reappropriated the association of minorities and animals, rather than contesting it. Despite declaring wolves 'natural enemies', Guo Xuebo (2001) has himself written novels that lament the extinction of these animals and associate it with the destruction of the environment. Through the care and respect for wild animals shown by his Mongol protagonists, Guo suggests that Mongolian culture is characterised by sympathy for animals (Baranovitch 2021). Tibetan writers and filmmakers have similarly foregrounded close relations between Tibetans and animals in their works (Vitali 2015; Baranovitch 2023).

This use of animals could be understood as a form of ethnic politics at the level of representation (Lo 2019). In an age in which the Chinese state trumpets the importance of environmental protection, these writers and filmmakers contrast minority compassion for animals with an environmental destructiveness that is associated with Han Chinese, thereby contesting longstanding representations of minority deficiency according to developmentalist logic. At the same time, stories of animals also work allegorically, with the extinction of certain species such as wolves, for example, gesturing at anxieties over the fate of minority peoples themselves in the face of assimilationist pressures in the twenty-first century. In the

context of the heightened political sensitivities that surround discussion of minorities in China, this allegorical mode enables the oblique criticism of developmentalist policies and the ecological and cultural destruction they have wrought (Baranovitch 2021).

Livestock Conservation in an Age of State Environmentalism

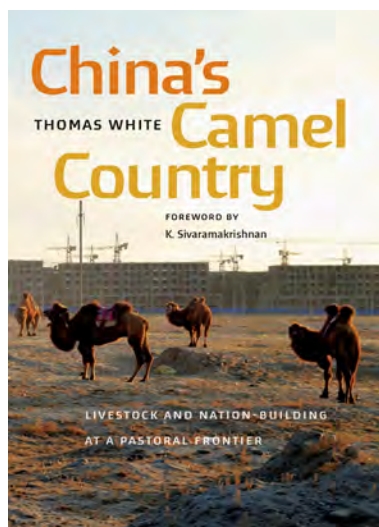
Beastly politics in twenty-first-century China has not been confined to the artistic realm. Minority actors have also pursued projects of cultural survival by invoking the endangerment of certain animals and mobilising around their conservation. In Inner Mongolia, the defence of Mongolian pastoralist traditions of land use came to be framed in terms of the protection of certain charismatic species of livestock. In addition to emphasising the benign ecological effects and potential economic value of these animals, this politics drew on, but also transformed, the symbolic associations of minorities and animals that circulated in Chinese culture in the early twenty-first century. This beastly politics illuminates some of the tensions between otherness and assimilation characteristic of nation-building in contemporary China.

If the Open Up the West strategy framed China's western regions as areas in need of rapid development, it also brought in its wake environmental policies that sought to address the perceived degradation of western landscapes. On China's vast grasslands, pastoralists (often minorities) and their animals were blamed for causing desertification, and a series of policies were implemented. These included the resettlement of herders away from the grasslands—known as 'ecological migration' (生态移民)—but also grazing bans and strict limits on the number of animals herders could keep. Some scholars have argued that these measures are as much about securing state control over ethnic minority borderlands as they are about environmental protection (Li and Shapiro 2020).

But these policies have not gone uncontested. In late-twentieth-century China, endangered species protection had become one of the earliest permitted

domains of civil society mobilisation, and these efforts were often focused on the charismatic megafauna of China's western regions, such as the Tibetan antelope (Yeh 2014). In certain parts of Inner Mongolia, local Mongol elites appropriated these discourses of species conservation to defend pastoralist land use, by focusing on endangered breeds of livestock associated with extensive pastoralism on unenclosed grasslands. In 2009 in the east of the region, local Mongols sought to protect the Mongolian horse, and the culture associated with it, by establishing a Horse Culture Society. Horse numbers had fallen precipitously, partly because of their obsolescence as a means of transport. This society formed alliances with Beijing-based environmental nongovernmental organisations and sought to encourage the local government to change its grassland management policies (Zhou 2010).

Given the centrality of the horse in Mongolian culture, the endangerment of this animal evocatively symbolised the perceived plight of the Mongol nationality at a time of rapid urbanisation, resource extraction, and state environmentalism. A few years earlier, *Season of the Horse* (季风中的马), a 2005 film by the Mongol filmmaker Ning Cai, had used its animal protagonist, an old and ponderous horse, to suggest the predicament of the Mongols in Inner Mongolia. Attempts to save the Mongolian horse were also a form of politics freighted with symbolism, in which the horse could stand as a synecdoche for Mongolian culture more broadly. What is more, in Inner Mongolia, Mongolian identity is spatialised, associated with extensive forms of movement and open landscapes, in binary opposition to the agrarian Han Chinese, who are associated with walls and enclosures (Williams 2002). Through its wide-ranging grazing habits, which were incompatible with recent grassland management policies such as privatisation and fencing, the horse embodied an extensive way of engaging with land that is regarded as characteristically Mongolian. The politically safe language of horse breed conservation thus enabled Mongols to mobilise in opposition to the restrictive policies of state environmentalism and to champion a Mongolian, 'nomadic' way of engaging with the land that has been stigmatised by the modernising Chinese state.



Front cover of *China's Camel Country*.

China's Camel Country

My new book, *China's Camel Country: Livestock and Nation-Building at a Pastoral Frontier* (White 2024), discusses another form of beastly politics in Inner Mongolia, and its relationship to shifting ideas of nationality, place, and culture. At the turn of the millennium the population of camels in Inner Mongolia's Alasha region was less than one-fifth of its size at the beginning of the reform era, and local and national media began to discuss their impending extinction. This rapid reduction in numbers was in part due to their obsolescence as a means of transportation and to the boom in cashmere that began in the 1980s that led to herders selling their camels to concentrate on goats. But it was also down to the state's destocking policies and a policy of grassland privatisation that has proven particularly ill-suited to this wide-ranging animal, which is herded in a highly extensive manner, being largely left to its own devices for much of the year. Around the turn of the millennium, prominent local officials derided the animal's backwardness and its lack of economic value. But as the state's environmental policies pushed many herders into the town, local Mongols saw in the declining population figures for the camel a clear index of culture loss.

In 2005 a group of local Mongol elites (retired and serving officials) founded the Alasha Camel Society, dedicated to the conservation of this animal. Officially a nongovernmental or 'popular' (民间) organisation, this society succeeded in gaining local exceptions from the destocking policies for the Alasha Bactrian camel and having this breed listed as a protected genetic resource at the national level. Certain camel-related practices have also been listed as part of China's national intangible cultural heritage. More recently, the camel has come to be promoted by the local government as a central pillar of its rural development strategy, which now emphasises the production of camel milk for sale to urban consumers across China.

In articulating a defence of camel husbandry through various reports and submissions to the local government, Mongols in Alasha made strategic use of long-established tropes linking minorities and animals. They contrasted the intense feeling (感情) that herders had for their camels with the labour of agriculture, where this intensity of feeling was said to be absent. Such was the extent of this feeling, they claimed, that if herders were deprived of these animals, there was the risk of social unrest. Here, these defenders of camel husbandry played on the state's fear of instability in a strategic borderland, as well as deep-rooted Chinese understandings of minority relations with animals. Even as camel dairying began to be mechanised in the mid 2010s, the affective bonds between Mongols and their animals were considered: camel-milking machines were designed with inbuilt speakers capable of playing a selection of the Mongolian 'long songs' (*urtiin duu*) that are supposed to encourage milk let-down in camels. Mongolian culture was thus understood as a more-than-human phenomenon (see also Hutchins 2020).

Interpretations of camel-related heritage were also shaped by the representations of minority-animal relations that were circulating in Chinese culture in the early twenty-first century. A fertility ritual involving camels was officially inscribed as heritage and came to be understood by Chinese anthropologists as an example of 'camel worship' (骆驼崇拜), which manifested local Mongols' 'simple philosophy of respect for nature' (崇尚自然的朴素哲理) (Wu and Sheng 2016). Such interpretations downplayed the Buddhist aspects of these rituals and their

relationship with a range of rituals directed at the increase of household fortune. Instead, the primitivist figure of the animal-worshipping minority was superimposed on these practices. While such interpretations worked to counter scientific discourses that stigmatised pastoralism as backward and environmentally destructive, they were often at odds with the understandings of local herders.

However, unlike the horse, the Alasha Bactrian camel cannot straightforwardly stand for the Mongol nationality. Camel herding is largely confined to Gobi regions and not all Mongols hold camels in high regard. The Alasha Bactrian camel thus had a distinctive *local* identity. This was reinforced by the convention of identifying breeds with certain places. Imagined as breeds, livestock biodiversity does not neatly map on to the diversity inscribed into the Chinese nationality classification system, with its 56 nationalities. Instead, it corresponds more with a political economy in which administrative subregions are encouraged to compete, particularly in terms of cultural branding (Oakes 1999). Such competition is evident in Inner Mongolia, where Mongols in Urad Rear Banner, which borders Alasha to the east, have mobilised around the conservation of what is said to be a locally distinctive ‘Gobi red camel’ (戈壁红驼) and its associated cultural forms.

Livestock conservation, which began as a project of minority cultural survival, was thus shaped by the spatial contours of the Chinese state and political economy. It was possible to gain a degree of local state support for camel husbandry because it could be made to fit with prevailing ideas of local cultural branding and comparative advantage. Local Mongol advocates for camel husbandry had to adapt their understandings of culture such that ‘Alasha camel culture’ was not the exclusively property of Mongols but was also practised by local Han Chinese (and Hui). According to one of those involved in camel conservation, culture consisted of the ‘survival skills’ (生存的技术) required in a particular environment and was not the mark (符号) of any particular nationality. Such understandings are in line with nation-building imaginaries in the Xi era. Recent anthropological work in China (see, for instance, He 2020) celebrates camel culture as an example of the ‘contact, exchange, and mingling’ (交往交流交融) between nationalities that is promulgated as part of ‘second-generation’ nationality policies (Roche and Leibold 2020).

The increasing circulation of ideas of the Silk Road (丝绸之路) in China, particularly in the wake of the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, has also strengthened the camel’s association with imaginaries of exchange and interaction between peoples. In the words of one local scholar, ‘It was camels that travelled the Silk Road, the Porcelain Road, the Tea Road, bringing agrarian and nomadic civilizations together and helping them to blend’ (Liu 2017).

The Post-Ethnic Animal

On the one hand, then, the defence of camel herding in Alasha involved the deployment of tropes that identify minorities with animals. Such tropes have a very long history in China and were once even built into the written language itself. Their continued resonance, however, is not simply the result of a political centre requiring a denigrated barbarism to burnish its claims to civilisation. Instead, the identification of minorities with animals in the twenty-first century has been used by both minority and Han Chinese writers and filmmakers to critique the ecologically and culturally destructive developmentalism espoused by that political centre, and to contest assimilatory logics.

However, nonhuman diversity is not isomorphic with the twentieth-century modernist scaling of culture represented by China’s nationality classification project. When it comes to minorities in China, animals are symbolically excessive. Alasha’s camels came to enjoy protection as a *local* breed and their conservation has reinforced emergent conceptions of a post-ethnic *local* culture, in which differences between nationalities are de-emphasised. This animal also has certain symbolic affordances that have become prominent in the age of the BRI. Where once camels were hallmarks of the backwardness of a remote minority region, now they are celebrated for enabling Eurasian connectivity and cultural intermingling. Camels remain in Alasha, but their associations have begun to shift. Animals, then, can be equivocal vehicles for projects of minority cultural survival in today’s China, transforming those cultures even as they are invoked to conserve them. ■



Video still, 2018. Source: Jenny Chio. Videos available online at: madeinchinajournal.com.

On the Spectacle of Being Our-(Miao)-Selves

Jenny CHIO

It is not particularly contentious to say that ethnic minority people in China are highly—sometimes painfully—aware of being looked at, of being a desired object to be seen. But the fact that visual presence is so central to Chinese multiculturalism does not really reveal anything about what the experience of being seen is like, or how it feels to be asked to be looked at. In this essay, the recollections of two Miao women illustrate why the most powerful aspect of Chinese multiculturalism today is how it functions on the assumption that it cannot be so difficult to be oneself.

As in many other rural villages across China, the 300 or so residents of Upper Jidao in Guizhou Province have been ‘living with tourism’ (to use Hazel Tucker’s 2003 book title) since the early 2000s, when rural tourism development was widely and enthusiastically promoted by the Chinese State as the path to rural poverty alleviation (Chio 2014; Yeh and Coggins 2014). Tourism was already a known phenomenon to Upper Jidao residents since the 1980s, based as they are between the long-established and nationally celebrated ethnic Miao villages of Upper Langde and Xijiang (see Oakes 1998; Schein 2000). Moreover, the fact that Upper Jidao and its surrounds are a majority ethnic minority area—demographically and administratively within Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture

(where 82 per cent of the population is registered as either Miao or Dong, see Baidu n.d.) and culturally practised through everyday lifeways and annual festivals (see Chio 2018, 2019; Kendall 2019)—means that, irrespective of one's individual ethnic identification, residents are well aware of the *place* of ethnic minorities in the Chinese State's (shifting) vision of multiculturalism.

In the post-reform era, China's tourism industry serves economic but also political purposes, effectively functioning as a national marketing campaign to sustain Chinese multiculturalism, at least as far as China's 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups are concerned (Han Chinese ethnic tourism is a different beast). To overstate the point just a bit, anyone who has even a marginal proximity to ethnic tourism by now has a clear understanding of the standard vision of how tourism works and what the work of tourism entails for minority peoples in China. This can be summed up as the 'song and dance' (歌舞表演): the practised, choreographed, staged spectacle in which everyone has a role as either performer or viewer and through which cultural otherness is to be appropriately appreciated.

The stage for such spectacles of Chinese multiculturalism can be highly produced and televised to serve overtly political goals of social engineering and control, as has been violently foisted on Uyghur communities (Anon. 2021; Harris 2020; Restrepo 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Or, the venue can be as perfunctory and *ad hoc* as the front door of a village home in Upper Jidao, where paying tourists request photos of, and sometimes with, women in their festival dress (盛装). In the latter instance, a song or two or a dance step might be desirable but is unnecessary; the patently visible otherness of the heavy, colourful festival clothes completed with a substantial silver headdress suffices. And there is also an in-between in Upper Jidao: the performance of Miao singing and dancing by village residents that continues to delight audiences with its combination of non-professionalism (read thusly as authentic) and obvious choreography (indicating their willingness to perform). The villagers' performance is booked in advance by tour groups and usually occurs in the main village square. From the fee charged to tour groups, each village participant is compensated based on their level of engagement (see Chio 2014: 68).

It is therefore not particularly contentious to say that ethnic minority people in China, from Upper Jidao to Ürümqi, are highly—sometimes painfully—aware of being looked at, of being a desired object to be seen. But the fact that visual presence is so central to Chinese tourism, and to Chinese multiculturalism more broadly, does not really reveal anything about what the experience of being seen is like, or how it feels to be asked to be looked at. The spectacle of being a Miao self is one that encompasses both the recognition of one's visual desirability and the navigation of the circumstances when one is seen as Miao.

To put this in more concrete ethnographic terms, while sometimes Upper Jidao women are asked to dress up for photos by tourists who come to the village (which they almost always agree to do for a small fee), they also are occasionally hired or invited to travel outside the village to wear their festival clothes as part of *someone else's* marketing or business campaign. The spectacle of oneself as Miao, in other words, is not limited to tourism contexts; for some women in Upper Jidao by the 2010s, being visibly Miao had also become a form of migrant labour, albeit occasional and frequently underpaid. What difference did it make to be spectacularly Miao outside the village, in places as far-flung as an exhibition centre in Chongqing or a fashion show in France? What was it like being seen under these conditions?

Multiculturalism is Good for Business

Chen has since the early 2000s been Upper Jidao's primary point person for hosting tourists, negotiating with government officials and tour guides, and promoting the village in the media, whether in national outlets or through her frequently updated social media accounts. The third floor of her home comprises guestrooms and shared facilities; the second-floor living room can host more than 60 guests at a time. A wall in Chen's house—the one immediately facing the doorway into the main living room from the kitchen where one enters—has long been covered with an assortment of photographs. Some are family photos, or at least feature members of her family, but most are what might be best described



Video still, 2018. Source: Jenny Chio. Videos available online at: madeinchinajournal.com.

as photos of Chen's work in Chinese multiculturalism: Chen in various types of visibly Miao ethnic dress posing with tourists, with other similarly dressed women from the village *in* the village, or in distinctively *other* places such as Paris.

Sometimes she and the other women are wearing full Miao festival dress, complete with the ornate, weighty silver headdresses; sometimes she is in what is locally referred to as simply 'Miao clothes' (苗衣服): a black velvet top with embroidered flower trim and knotted buttons and usually one's hair wound up in a top-knot decorated with a flower or two. Chen is in nearly every photograph on the wall; some of those that do not feature Chen are of professional fashion models who once came to Upper Jidao on a shoot for 'Miao-inspired' couture or celebrities who have visited the village. The images document her work in tourism, but also the vision of Chinese multiculturalism in which her visible Miao presence, her labour as a Miao female body, has brought her profit, international travel, and expanded socioeconomic networks.

The wall is itself an indication of just how cognisant Chen has become of her visual value; multiculturalism is, in its way, good for business. It is

good for her tourism business, to be sure, but also apparently for a hot-pot soup base business (Kaili Red Sour Soup, 凯里红酸汤), as she recounted to me in 2017. During her month-long recovery after giving birth that spring—a rare period when Chen was not busy hosting tourists or preparing to do so—she recuperated in bed as convention required. In lengthy conversations with me, she reflected on the state of the village's tourism, her ambitions, and her frustrations. What began as a question about what she had been up to other than thinking about tourism, and whether she had grown tired of living in the village, unearthed the story of her short stint working for a soup company in Kaili, the prefectural capital city approximately 25 kilometres from Upper Jidao, where Chen had attended school from a young age through to her vocational nursing training.

Ten years after the experience of working for the company, she retold it with some humour and the faintest touch of pride in her ability to negotiate disappointments and frustrations: her own and those of her fellow villagers who had also gone to Chongqing believing that they would be promoting their village's tourism. For the soup company's boss, Chen insinuated, bringing a group of *real* Miao women from a



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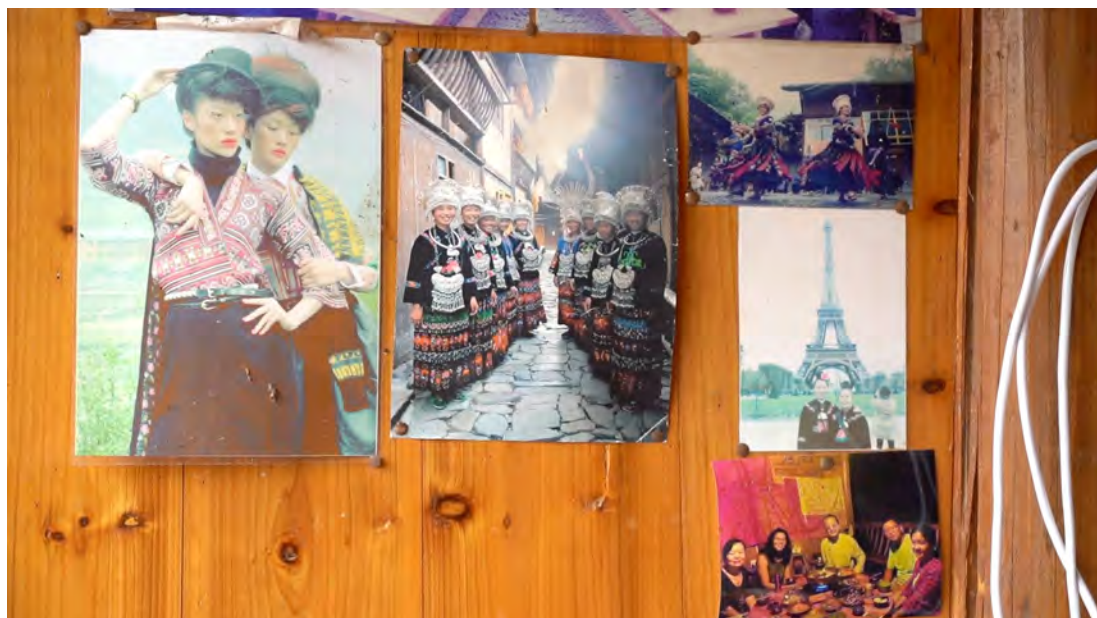
real Miao place to accompany his promotion of Red Sour Soup from Kaili, the capital of a *Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture*, made very good marketing sense. When the women complained that they had been deceived into promoting his soup, not their own village's tourism, the boss tried to justify their presence at the exhibition hall by saying they were promoting Miao *food*, which was a proxy for Miao *culture*, which was the core of ethnic tourism in Upper Jidao.

Proximity To and Proxy For

On the surface, this is how Chinese multiculturalism works, after all: the presence of visibly distinctive Miao women linked the product—hot-pot sour soup base—to an appreciably, appropriately cultural otherness that was safely ensconced within a consumable product. Advertising the safe consumption of otherness through food is, of course, a cornerstone of global tourism and of contemporary ideologies of race and racialisation (see, for instance, Alkon and Groszlik 2021; hooks 1992). It would require little

effort for a customer to enjoy multiculturalism in this form, but it is worth noting that the promotion of Kaili Red Sour Soup did not involve the Miao women engaging with the product. It was not so much about Miao food in the sense of Miao people who might cook, eat, or serve it to others, as about Miao proximity to the food product being promoted. Chen and her fellow villagers being there to be seen in their festival dress was, in many ways, no different than a version of song and dance: staged, with a clear division between who is to be seen and who is supposed to do the seeing, where the performers ultimately function in a supporting role for something else. In Chen's case, this was a tomato-based hot-pot soup, but it is not much of a stretch to describe the staged song-and-dance shows as proxies for the Chinese nation-state's unwavering, unquestionable unity.

The disappointment and anger of the women from Upper Jidao in discovering that they were there to promote something *other* than their own village, *other* than themselves, was therefore quite reasonable. In this instance, they did not consider themselves in the business of Kaili Red Sour Soup or even of a general idea of Miao food, let alone the broad notion of Chinese multiculturalism, and certainly not for the



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paltry price of RMB20 a day. They imagined being seen as something much more specific: themselves. When they threatened to leave, Chen convinced them to stay out of a sense of propriety and by likening their experience to tourism; why not just let them look at us, she suggested, while we enjoy our all expenses paid trip to Chongqing?

But why would people want to look at Miao women in festival dress, especially outside a tourism context? Or, more precisely from the perspective of a woman in Miao festival dress, why would people crowd around and stare for so long? What exactly are they looking at, or looking for? In another conversation, these questions did not emerge from a place of naivety about or unfamiliarity with the country's overwhelmingly Han Chinese majority. Rather, they came from the lived, felt experience of being stared at, of being seen. Wu, another woman from Upper Jidao who had been involved in the village's tourism for a few years in the early 2000s, recalled to me in 2015 what she remembered of the experience in Chongqing with a laugh and a slight scoff.

By this time, she was no longer living in the village, having moved to the outskirts of Kaili, where she sold soft tofu and sometimes vegetables as a street

vendor. The way people had crowded and stared at their festive clothes and headdresses, she said, was the same as when people stared at 'crazy' or mentally ill people. But this was obviously not why people stared, Wu said; rather, she figured, Miao silver headdresses were so beautiful that people could not help but stare. *Other* people, such as the bus passengers in Zhejiang Province on China's eastern coast where her sister-in-law once also was wearing festival dress, were not used to seeing such intricate and large silver headdresses (or any silver headdresses at all, arguably), Wu reasoned, so of course they would gawk and crowd around, even if it felt to the Miao women (and Wu's brother-in-law, as she recounted) that they were the ones who might be crazy.

The Discomfort of Being Oneself

These very short, off-the-cuff, and seemingly incomplete reflections by Chen and Wu illuminate two key turns in Chinese multiculturalism today. The first is the ongoing quest—manifest in state policies

and pronouncements—to determine just what rural and ethnic minority people in China are and should be doing in the post-reform period. In the 1980s, rural households were meant to transform themselves into enterprises; in the 1990s, rural Chinese became the rural-to-urban migrant labourers (农民工 or, when literally translated, ‘peasant workers’) propelling the country’s urbanisation and economic growth. In the 2000s, to reverse the outflow of rural migrants, the state promoted rural tourism, and rural ethnic tourism, to convince people to stay in place by being rural and ethnic for tourists. Throughout these decades, the common denominator was what to do with rural and ethnic minority people in China, where ‘rural’ and ‘ethnic’ function as the wide default categories of ‘other’ when positioned against the urban, culturally Han Chinese population posited as the desired norm.

The second turn is more affectively loaded. For Wu and Chen, out of their work in tourism emerged their experiences of Chinese multiculturalism: the heat and discomfort of wearing traditional clothes that are designed for winter festivals inside an exhibition centre, for example. Or the silent embarrassment and stubborn dignity of being the object of stares and reasoning with oneself to preserve a sense of self-confidence and self-worth. Or, for Chen and her sister-in-law, the excitement and thrill of travelling to Paris, being photographed under the Eiffel Tower and bright lights of a fashion show, where their purpose was to simply appear, to be seen, not as the centre of attention or the main attraction but, again, in a supporting role, offering through their visible presence the gentle reassurances of a multiculturalism that does not ask too much of the viewer.

This is, perhaps, the most salient and powerful aspect of Chinese multiculturalism today: that it presents itself as a consumable (a soup, a style, a song)—one that requires woefully little effort on the part of the consumer and pretends to ask nothing more of the performer than to simply ‘be yourself’. It functions on the assumption that it cannot be so difficult to be oneself. Be Miao, be female (mostly, but not always, the case; see Schein 2020), and be nearby, Wu and Chen are told. It is not all terrible and it can be rather amusing in retrospect, as both women insinuate in their retellings. But it is, as they say, sometimes quite uncomfortable. ■

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Figure 1: Meili Village from above, 2017. Source: Suvi Rautio.

Xi Jinping's Traditional Villages

Suvi RAUTIO

Over the past four decades in China's forward march to capitalist modernisation, the nation's vast urban expansion has been contingent on demolition and relocation. Since Xi Jinping came to power, projects such as the 'Traditional Village' heritage scheme have sought to gear development towards a new era in which Chinese heritage sits at the core. Ethnic minority villages across the country are transformed and reconfigured into sites enmeshed with the discourse on capital and profit, but also as mediums for discussing and lamenting lost traditions. This essay delves into how Xi's 'Traditional Village' heritage scheme validates statist views on tradition and Chinese civilisation while at the same time offering new ways of understanding discourse about ethnicity and multiculturalism.

For the past four decades, China has resolutely marched towards capitalist modernisation and rapid economic expansion. To reach its economic goals, demolition and relocation (拆迁) of neighbourhoods have been widespread, leading to unprecedented rates of forced evictions across the country. Somewhat ironically, at the same time that people are confronted with 'domicide', and old buildings and cultural landmarks have been demolished and shattered, questions about national heritage and tradition have gained traction (Bruckermann 2016, 2020). Since the outset of the Reform and Opening Up era, state discourse has refashioned and redefined the nation's values along the divided trajectories of tradition and modernity, strategically deploying 'civilisation' (文明) and 'culture' (文化) as the backbone of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political and ideological thought.

Marking a departure from the Maoist dogma of class struggle and socialist values, from the 1980s, public discourse about cultural heritage has been repurposed as a political tool to enhance a rigid ideological nationalism and univocal image of national identity to celebrate, value, and protect a prized heritage. In a past riven by deep political and social disruptions, the now century-old CCP ruled by Xi Jinping seeks continuity and stability through the persistence of ‘tradition’ (传统) in state-led campaigns invoking the commonly stated notion that China has 5,000 continuous years of history. This is a claim repeated in textbooks, mini-dramas, propaganda billboards and banners, and tourist sites across the People’s Republic of China to legitimate and serve the interests of the CCP and unify the nation.

The political significance of cultural heritage is particularly salient for non-Han heritage sites to reinforce China’s doctrine of itself as a multiethnic country. Today, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission recognises a single major nationality (民族), the Han, who make up 92 per cent of the Chinese population, and 55 ethnic minority (少数民族) nationalities. Ethnic minority autonomous regions cover approximately 60 per cent of the country’s geographical terrain and account for a population of 105 million people. Although the Chinese Constitution promises to respect and protect all ethnic minorities’ customs, traditions, and religious beliefs, heritage and tourism policies require heightened political control and surveillance in minority ethnic regions—especially those considered to pose a threat to the country’s border security. The tense relations between Tibetans and Xinjiang Uyghurs and the Chinese State provide a stark reminder of the assertive role that the heritage industry plays in redefining the cultural practices and value systems of China’s diverse ethnic minority populations, with officials weakening or removing grassroots access to cultural heritage and replacing it with state-approved, sanitised images of tradition and local ways of life.

Inland from the politically sensitive border regions, hegemonic representations promulgate images of friendly relations among southwestern China’s ethnic mix. Since Xi Jinping came to power, an integral part of the CCP’s statecraft has been the rigidification of public perceptions of multiculturalism in China, especially through notions of shared traditions. The discourse about tradition is stylised domestically

through imported cultural heritage legislation and charters to endorse political strategies that promote a joyous and pristine image of multiculturalism.

Tradition as Cultural Branding

Cultural heritage (文化遗产) and cultural protection (文化保护) have been pivotal to a long string of campaigns under the aegis of China’s state-led development schemes. Over the past decade, since Xi Jinping came to power, projects such as the ‘Traditional Village’ (传统村落) heritage scheme have been emerging across the country. Larger nationwide campaigns, such as the New Socialist Countryside (新农村建设)—a program developed by President Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, and his administration—were amended through the Rural Revitalisation (乡村振兴) program in 2017 under Xi to promote what the Nineteenth Congress of the CCP refer to as ‘urban–rural integration’ (城乡融合) by 2035. The ‘Traditional Village’ scheme aligns Xi’s programs with wider government policy initiatives to eradicate poverty and steer rural citizens working in the informal sector in the cities back to the countryside. As a result, ‘Traditional Village’ heritage sites have been sprouting up across China, promising to extend the national ‘Chinese Dream’ of a middle-class lifestyle to the country’s rural population of 491 million.

The ‘Traditional Village’ scheme attests to the explosive growth of China’s cultural heritage preservation programs in the ‘new era’ of rural revitalisation and modernisation under President Xi (Li 2016). In a country marked by urban expansion and the disappearance of local neighbourhoods, heritage personnel are confident that this ‘new era’ will protect the traditional essence of Chinese villages, while also introducing innovative approaches to minimise the divide between the urban and the rural.

Xi’s cultural heritage schemes are motivated by the economic and political imperatives of capitalism and the market economy. To uphold legible, marketable, and profitable cultural branding, heritage sites are reconfigured and promoted for their unique local speciality, which fits under the concept of ‘tradition’ (Bruckermann 2016; Luo 2018). Key actors such as the local state and market forces work to turn traditions into resources that are useful for both boosting

the local economy and strengthening political rule. Ideals about tradition trigger a sense of urgency in Chinese urbanites, who are fearful that China's serene natural and rural life will be swallowed up by the environmental and moral pollution of cities existing in a state of globalisation-induced disrepair. Heritage discourse promises solutions to such public anxieties.

In my research, I consider how rural heritage sites become mediums through which urban elites express their vision of the nation's recovery of a lost Chinese civilisation. I studied these processes over 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2017 in a place I call Meili, a Dong ethnic minority village in Guizhou Province, southwestern China. The Dong people are an ethnic minority of about three million people who refer to themselves as *Kam* in the Dong language. They tend to live along riverbanks of the ethnically diverse highlands of southwestern China, including Guizhou, and neighbouring Hunan and Guangxi—a region known for its ethnic diversity, rough terrain, and economic poverty. Guizhou has one of the lowest levels of gross domestic product per capita among China's provinces and autonomous regions and Meili is in a county labelled 'poverty-stricken' (贫困县). The village has over the years become a site for numerous pilot studies, projects, and campaigns to alleviate poverty through the identification and promotion of the area's uniqueness and efforts to gain heritage recognition.

Tradition from Above

Owing to its well-preserved architecture, Meili has over the past decade acquired acclaimed status, receiving multiple national and transnational cultural heritage protection merits, including being listed among Xi Jinping's model 'traditional villages'. Meili's acclaimed traditional architecture can be enjoyed when approaching down the narrow mountain paths to the village, which offer a bird's-eye view of the traditional architecture of the village. Enveloped by lush evergreen forest and folded clastic mountains that crowd together, the compact rural enclave sits in the middle of a deep valley along the banks of a river. From above, the peaks of grey-tiled gabled roofs along the river lift to the skies, resem-

bling a ruffled blanket of ocean waves. The architectural allure of Meili is enhanced by its covered 'wind and rain bridges' and a tall, pagoda-like drum tower, which is strategically located on a podium to orient the viewer's gaze. Marvelling at the symmetrical intactness of the village scene and the looming backdrop of mountains and rich forest, viewers cannot help but be taken in by Meili's beauty.

From a distance, Meili appears undamaged and intact and imparts an atmosphere that planners and tourists call *wanzheng* (完整). The 'integrity' of the village is enhanced by the skill of the crafting of the village pathways, drum tower, wooden pile houses, barns, and covered wind and rain bridges—all of which are valued by preservationists, who refer to them as *yuanshi* (原始), which is literally translatable as 'original' or 'historically primitive', or more generally, 'authentic' when applied in global heritage discourse. Similar to the more familiar term 'premodern' (原生态, *yuanshengtai*), *yuanshi* has become a popular phrase to epitomise the historical features of Chinese village architecture, including its material parts. *Yuanshi* has especially gained traction since the Chinese traditional villages protection model was first declared in 2012, when the soon-to-be President Xi Jinping made frequent references to protecting the 'authentic style' (原始风貌) of nominated sites as representations of China's vernacular architecture (Li 2016).

'Integrity' and 'authenticity' are key criteria used to evaluate potential sites for nomination under the esteemed UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Because of this, celebrating localities for their historical integrity has become common practice among Chinese cultural heritage experts and decision-makers. Plans, protocols, and charters manage how preservation is practised, how space is governed, and how local people access space. Like the issue of integrity, President Xi's focus on authenticity resonates with wider heritage discourse and international conventions. As historian and heritage critic David Lowenthal (1985) reminds us, within the realms of heritage protocols, the appraisal of innate heritage value is embedded in material forms and their properties. This becomes considerably more complicated in practice because 'authenticity' is rarely manifest in a single entity. In Meili, as in China more generally, the value of authenticity lies in rebuilding tradition—



Figure 2: Meili's wooden houses from above, 2016.
Source: Suvi Rautio.

in the rural aesthetics of material forms and their natural surrounds, such as the scenic panorama of Meili when viewed from above.

Rebuilding Tradition in Wooden Homes

When I first arrived in Meili in 2014 and discussed the heritage scheme with local people across different age groups, they rarely had positive opinions. Many residents expressed embarrassment, humiliation, and low self-esteem when referring to the features that heritage discourse saw as providing the village's charm. They saw the sea of wooden houses as a burden and a handicap to their everyday lives, while getting away from them was deemed an impossibility. Even before I entered a Meili resident's wooden home, I would hear the humiliation in people's voices as they informed me: 'I am sorry, we are poor.'

With preservation measures in place to maintain the integrity of their homes, Meili households are prohibited from altering the wooden exteriors. Key actors working on the preservation scheme reiterated time and again that brick contrasted with the traditional timber and its use should therefore be prohibited because it interfered with the national preservation guidelines.

In questioning the importance of the materiality of their wooden homes, many villagers whom I came to know directed their criticism to the conflict of values

between themselves and the heritage protocols. More implicitly, their criticisms echoed their frustration with the impositions of living in a heritage site that restricted them from obtaining modernity. This also echoed a broader critique of the dominant preservation ideology that prioritises the exterior form and substance of materiality and often overlooks the more intimate social, economic, historical, cultural, and political conditions that local people associate with that materiality.

Criticisms of heritage schemes stem from the scepticism and scorn many people in Meili feel towards the heritage practitioners and government officials driving these policies, suggesting that they begrudge these outsiders making decisions about authenticity on their behalf. Many locals are aware of the double standards of the project and in particular how practitioners working within the scheme find ways to navigate around heritage restrictions to craft their own impression of authenticity, or *yuanshi*. It is not uncommon for government officials and heritage practitioners to seek to maintain *yuanshi* through merely beautifying the village's exterior. In Meili and beyond, villages often 'get dressed and put on a hat' (穿衣戴帽) as part of the 'face projects' (面子工程) of development initiatives undertaken by local officials to please higher-level government officers and elites, especially their colleagues and superiors in the CCP (Chio 2014).

One common method of 'dressing' is covering brick and concrete exteriors with timber. Seen from afar, the timber appears to show the integrity of the place and therefore conveys the look of a Chinese traditional village. This is but one example of how powerful outsiders well-versed in both national and international heritage guidelines craft preservation measures to their own benefit without breaking the material integrity of the village. In many other instances, these opportunities can give rise to compromise or conflict (Rautio 2021, forthcoming) when values attached to tradition are continuously redefined, embraced, rejected, or transformed.

Beyond the desires of the inhabitants of Meili, villages continue to be dressed and staged as loci of traditional cultural identity where carefully selected items of ethnic life are compiled, packaged, and displayed as aesthetic objects. The aesthetics that uphold tradition, like Meili's integrity seen from above, are reproduced in the eyes of the beholder



Figure 3: A tourist's detailed illustration of Meili's vernacular architecture, 2017. Source: Suvi Rautio.

through a painting, photograph, or written poetry, to evoke a memory of a familiar place with no definite attachment to a fixed location. The constructed notion that the countryside represents tradition and retains an unchanging, timeless identity is a familiar point of attraction for tourists; as I heard one tourist declare on her arrival in Meili: 'Being here feels like I have returned to my childhood!' Meili thus becomes portable whereby the metaphorical and symbolic meanings carried by material forms can be infinitely imitated to provide a subjective experience for the viewer.

Tradition Serves Modernity

Since the founding of the CCP, ethnicity and multiculturalism have served a larger political agenda. Under Xi Jinping's rule, ethnic minorities are laden with universalising heritage concepts and protocols

that impose restrictions on their living conditions. Meili is just one example of the many ethnic minority villages in southwestern China that serve Xi's narrative of tradition. Recast into a medium for discussing and lamenting traditions that are considered lost or vanishing, Meili is celebrated for the ethnic aesthetics of its vernacular architecture that is yet to be engulfed by urbanisation. The deployment of villages to invoke nostalgia for tradition, whether invented or genuine, is not unique to President Xi's strategies for China's marginalised ethnic places, but is also integral to the wider project of modernity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Seeing the countryside and the ethnic as places and objects of nostalgic desire is a recurring ideal of modernity shared widely among the public in the European context, particularly since the Enlightenment. As a result of modernity, the dichotomy between the imagined rural identity—which appears as 'communal', 'traditional', and 'serene'—and the 'complex', 'heterogeneous', and 'diverse' urban society has become a normative way of seeing the world.



Figure 4: The other view from above, 2018.
Source: Suvi Rautio.

This dichotomy heightens the urban–rural divide, which in the Chinese context highlights the ironies of Xi Jinping’s urban integration policy: in its efforts to close the urban–rural gap, it is promulgating and reinforcing the conceptual divisions between the rural and the urban, tradition and modernity, and ethnic minorities and the Han majority.

As the Chinese State endeavours to portray the country’s multiculturalism in a positive light, it is inevitably solidifying ethnic minorities into categories that are perceived not relationally but through difference and ‘othering’. The representations of tradition that are imposed on ethnic minority villages like Meili and their inhabitants make them susceptible to outsiders envisioning rural life through rose-tinted glasses. Depictions that transform the quotidian into a sublime ideal inevitably gloss over the harsher realities of agrarian decline, underdevelopment, and the socioeconomic pressures that Meili residents—and a vast portion of China’s ethnic rural population—continue to face daily. Whether key

actors working in the heritage industry will recognise the systemic limitations that rural residents face—and what they will do if they examine it—will determine whether Xi Jinping’s traditional villages continue to be inhabited by local people in another 20 years. If the heritage industry and, by extension, the Chinese State were to start integrating and problematising categories of ‘the other’ through relational rather than binary terms, the ethnic minorities living in heritage sites might finally start to see the promises of the CCP fulfilled as it enters a ‘new era’ of rural revitalisation and modernisation. ■



Yi migrant workers in chili fields, Tacheng area, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, September 2023. Source: Ye Yang (CC).

The Double-Edged Sword of Modernisation

The Integration of Yi Migrant Workers into China's Labour Market

Ye YANG

This essay delves into the dynamics of the integration of the Liangshan Yi ethnic group into China's labour market. As their participation in migrant labour increases, they are confronted with major challenges, including precarious employment conditions, exploitation by intermediaries, and social marginalisation. Despite their efforts in social integration, the Yi's ongoing experience of marginalisation underscores the complex interplay between modernisation, cultural identity, and persistent social and economic disparities.

My ideal is barren on the assembly line,
my time is moaning on the sewing machine.

...

The city and I are separated by an insurmountable gully,
the beauty of the other shore seems only one
step away from me.

But when this step fails,
my dream will fall into the abyss.
Uneasy poems set off a thousand waves in my
heart,
yet I still can hardly blend into the night of the
city.

The lonely shadow lengthens my homesickness.
—Jike Ayou, 'The Upset of a Yi Migrant Worker'
(translation by the author)

Over the past decades, China has witnessed the world's largest internal labour migration, with approximately 300 million people leaving their hometowns to look for jobs elsewhere. Labour migration has become a significant factor in China's social development, serving both as a reflection of profound changes in the country's social structure and as a driver of social transformation. Integration into the Chinese mainstream society's labour market is also one of the core drivers of social change in ethnic minority regions.

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province is one of these regions. It is the home of the Liangshan Yi, who call themselves Nuosu (诺苏). Until the 1950s, the region was hardly accessible to outsiders, and insiders rarely ventured out. Until 2020, it was a nationally identified poverty-stricken area characterised by widespread absolute poverty. In the past few decades, however, Liangshan has undergone extremely rapid social modernisation, of which the integration of local Yi people into China's labour market has been one of the decisive drivers.

Yi people have increasingly joined the ranks of China's migrant workers, and indeed the poem above was penned by one of these Yi labourers, who wished to articulate the deep pain he felt in his life as a migrant (YPL 2015). Today, there are approximately 800,000 members of ethnic minorities from Liangshan, predominantly Yi, who have chosen to migrate (RACLYAP 2024). This represents more than one-third of the entire Yi population in Liangshan and a majority of adults. There are two overarching drivers of Yi entering the labour market. First, their increasing integration into Chinese mainstream society has heightened their need for cash incomes, which are difficult to earn at home. Second, the Liangshan Yi population is growing rapidly, while farmland has been scarce for decades, which has made it necessary for most young adults to seek other ways to secure a livelihood. It was not until the late 2000s that the Yi found opportunities to participate in the Chinese labour market on a large scale, especially in the factories in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) (Liu 2016: 122). They have since been taking advantage of and expanding these opportunities.

Besides the people's own motivation, national development policies aimed at promoting the modernisation of the region have also contributed

to labour migration. Among them, the recent Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) Program (精准扶贫) (2013–20) has had the greatest impact. It is an ambitious program designed to eradicate absolute poverty in all of China, especially targeting nationally identified poverty-stricken regions like Liangshan and, within them, those people who are identified as members of poor households (State Council 2016). In Liangshan, several measures have been implemented. Some directly promote labour migration to selected industrial centres, while others promote it indirectly. For example, the expansion of compulsory education has improved the Mandarin skills of the younger generation of Yi, which has significantly reduced the language barriers that previously hindered their entry into the job market (Rehamo 2016, 2018; Rehamo and Harrell 2018; Yang 2021). Furthermore, large-scale resettlement and local agricultural restructuring have made it difficult for traditional subsistence agriculture to continue, forcing locals to seek other livelihoods elsewhere (Harrell and Rehamo 2013).

A decade ago, there were at least 100,000 Yi employed as temporary workers in the factories of the PRD (Liu 2013: 203), making it the most important destination for Yi migratory flows. This remains the case today. To deal with their marginal position in the local labour market, a system of co-ethnic brokers organising groups of workers has emerged to provide Yi migrants with the necessary information and access to short-term and informal employment opportunities, as well as some degree of community and solidarity far from their home in Liangshan (Ma 2018; Ma and Haugen 2022).

Despite a sometimes-tense relationship with local employers, who were concerned about the potential for collective action by Yi worker groups in labour conflicts, the Yi were frequently needed to fulfill production orders during the boom years of the Guangdong-based labour-intensive export industry. However, the Yi migrant workers still face challenges, such as unstable employment, exploitation by labour brokers, and general prejudice—all of which prevent them from escaping the bottom of the labour market in China. Compared with Han migrant workers, Yi suffer not only from the stigma of their migrant worker identity, but also from negative stereotypes about Yi people.



Yi people, many in traditional attire, gather for a family branch meeting (家支会), Zhaojue County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, November 2023. Source: Ye Yang (CC).

The Crisis of Employment in Guangdong-Based Manufacturing

In recent years, structural changes have impacted labour-intensive manufacturing in the PRD region and the demand for low-skilled manual workers is decreasing. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated this trend, even though employment has rebounded since the lockdowns ended. Yi migrant workers were among the first groups to be affected by the drop in employment. In 2023, Yi labour brokers whom I interviewed in Dongguan estimated that the demand for Yi migrant workers in the city had decreased by at least two-thirds compared with the peak employment periods before the pandemic.

Today, even though the younger generation of Yi migrant workers has largely closed the gap in language skills and education compared with other groups of migrant workers, they remain a distinct subgroup in the factories and are regarded as troublemakers based on widely circulated stereotypes. Moreover, as labour demand has decreased, employers have expected more from their workforce. This has affected Yi workers disproportionately, as the limited job opportunities in the few factories that have long-

term cooperation with Yi labour agents are typically provided to young people with at least a junior high school education, which excludes most Yi migrants. Furthermore, the long-term trend of wage growth in manufacturing has reversed due to an oversupply of labour. Salaries in the low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors where Yi workers tend to find employment have now dropped to the level of a few years ago, fluctuating between RMB10 and RMB17 an hour.

Although employers prefer to hire young female Yi workers because they are perceived as easier to manage, male workers remain the majority. This is because an increasing number of young Yi women are turning to the entertainment industry, such as nightclubs and massage parlours, which is far more profitable. A young woman working in this industry usually earns six to 10 times the hourly wage of a factory worker. Among the Yi, this trend often leads to family problems as there is a strong moral critique against women who participate in this industry and the ability of women to generate comparatively high incomes challenges the established mechanisms of male dominance in traditional Yi relationships.

Following the state's enforcement of the Labour Contract Law in 2008 and its 2012 amendment (MHRSSC 2012; State Council 2008), a trend towards formalisation and specialisation has emerged in the

labour brokerage system (Liu 2016: 9, 73; Ma 2018: 83). The basis of such businesses in kinship relations among Yi ‘family branches’ (KK, or 家支) gradually disintegrated. Recruitment approaches have shifted to target the whole Yi community, without consideration of kinship connections. Concurrently, Yi labour brokers have started to assume the role of employers, transcending their previous status as ‘leading workers’ (领工)—a term referring to seasoned migrant labourers who were responsible for guiding their relatives and neighbours into the workforce (Liu 2016).

Today, most factories prefer to outsource the employment, management, and other responsibilities related to workers to labour agencies. The new employer–employee relationship makes it difficult for labour brokers to lead the workers in case of conflicts with factories as was common before (Ma 2018: 143). Thus, the brokerage system of Yi workers has lost most of its previous potential for collective action. Instead, it has been incorporated into the global outsourcing of production processes to subcontractors, shifting responsibilities downwards while maintaining control and profit margins at the top.

Though the status of the Yi labour agencies remains secure, more experienced and skilled Yi workers are increasingly able to find employment independently. For them, social media has become an effective way to access a wide range of employment information. Therefore, the dependence of workers on labour brokers is decreasing, resulting in a shift in the power dynamics between Yi workers and brokers. In response, while the older generation of Yi labour brokers laments the fading of their authority, the younger generation has already begun to transform into service providers for factories and migrant workers.

Periphery to Periphery Migration

The migrant worker population from Liangshan is growing in number, ageing, and diversifying. With employment opportunities and wages in manufacturing in the PRD dwindling, Yi workers and labour brokers are seeking new opportunities elsewhere. One typical alternative form of employment is

seasonal agricultural work on large farms. This means that a growing segment of the Yi migrant worker population now engages in periphery-to-periphery migration instead of periphery-to-centre migration, indicating a process of intensifying marginalisation. Currently, Yi migrants work on industrialised farms in northern and northwestern China, including in Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Shanxi, and Xinjiang.

Xinjiang is a good example to understand this trend. The labour shortage caused by the expansion of agricultural land in northwest China in the early 2000s led to the first influx of Liangshan Yi migrant labourers who were employed on cotton fields as resident farm workers (管地工). Between 2010 and 2015, there were about 100,000 Yi migrant long-term workers in Xinjiang’s cotton fields each year (Luo 2021a: 90). However, starting in about 2017, this seasonal migration of Yi workers was significantly limited by local governments’ perception of Yi as troublemakers and by the reduced demand for temporary workers due to the automation of cotton-picking (Luo 2021b).

After a period of absence, and especially since manufacturing employment in the PRD has deteriorated, Yi workers have now reappeared on farms in Xinjiang. Today, they arrive in three different seasons: the first group comes in spring for sowing; the second in May and June to remove weeds from the fields; and the last in the autumn to harvest crops such as chilies, safflowers, and sunflowers. Thus, many groups of Yi migrant workers constantly move from one farm to another under the leadership of a foreman, following the demand for seasonal work in different parts of Xinjiang.

Compared with jobs in manufacturing, farm work is accessible to all rural Yi people, allowing many unemployed and underemployed Yi migrants to find work. Among them, middle-aged women are the largest group, followed by older migrant workers, most of whom are illiterate and can barely speak Mandarin. Both groups rely heavily on agricultural work for their livelihood, as they rarely find other forms of employment. They are accompanied by some younger workers who follow their family members, take their children to work, or want to escape the strict discipline of the factories. Unlike in manufacturing, large groups of Yi workers are not seen as problematic by employers in Xinjiang, whose primary objective is to get the work on their vast plantations



Yi migrant workers on a Xinjiang farm prepare to relocate to their next destination, Tacheng area, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, October 2023. Source: Ye Yang (CC).

done as quickly as possible when the time is right. Therefore, Yi workers in Xinjiang usually live and work together, in a group comprising several small clusters of relatives under the leadership of one or more Yi labour brokers.

Like employers in manufacturing, farm managers shift the responsibilities related to the workers to labour brokers and avoid hiring workers directly. It is also more difficult for workers to work independently of labour brokers in Xinjiang because the workplaces are remote, far from each other, and employment information is almost inaccessible without the extensive informal networks available to labour brokers. This combination of workers' dependence, information gaps, and lack of supervision creates favourable conditions for brokers to increase their profits at the expense of their workers. According to a survey I conducted in 2023, Yi labour brokers extracted about one-third of the payments from farms in Xinjiang as gross profit for themselves, far exceeding the shares of 10–20 per cent common in manufacturing.

Compared with farm work in other areas of China, the working and living conditions in Xinjiang are especially challenging due to the area's extreme climate and the lack of access to even basic infrastructure on most agricultural estates, which are in remote areas with low population density. In addition,

the sensitive political situation in Xinjiang affects Yi workers, as they are regarded as potential troublemakers by local authorities, resulting in strict supervision and a limitation of their workplaces to selected subregions such as the Mongolian autonomous region of Xinjiang and places especially far from urban areas.

As a result, Yi workers in Xinjiang live a hard life, moving from place to place every two or three weeks, and often living in makeshift tents or uninhabited houses without basic facilities. However, the greater disappointment for workers is the realisation that the wages they were promised by the brokers—usually between RMB300 and RMB500 per day—were often exaggerated. Even when they realise they have been tricked, they cannot easily leave. In addition to the foremen's attempts to prevent them from leaving, the high travel costs for the 4,000-kilometre journey from Xinjiang to Liangshan leaves them no choice but to accept the unsatisfactory conditions. As a coping strategy, they work longer to earn more so that, despite much lower hourly wages, their daily income is similar to that of factory workers. Though most of the workers I interviewed in Xinjiang in the autumn of 2023 expressed dissatisfaction with their labour conditions, most still returned to Xinjiang the following spring. As their foreman told me over the

phone: ‘We have used up our money, and there are no alternatives anymore.’ A Yi scholar summarised the situation of farm workers in Xinjiang in these terms: ‘We imagine mobility as temporary, but it has become a permanent part of life in reality’ (Luo 2022).

Wandering and Homesickness

In the summer of 2023, I followed Yi workers from Liangshan to Dongguan, where many anxious migrants could no longer find work in the factories—a situation that forced them to follow the labour brokers to remote areas of Inner Mongolia, Hebei, and Xinjiang to work in agriculture. I found that even Yi brokers who had become successful entrepreneurs in the past were forced to participate in this labour migration, which is closely linked to changes in the global economy and China’s industrial transformation as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. This shows how far the integration of the formerly relatively isolated Liangshan Yi community has progressed, as they are now directly affected by the latest political and economic developments in both China and the world. Unfortunately, this integration has not led to equal participation in the benefits of modern Chinese society, and it has created new forms of dependency and marginalisation. The increasing educational and cultural integration of many Yi into Chinese mainstream society is not rewarded, with various constraints holding back their prospects for social mobility.

In their periphery-to-periphery migration, it becomes evident that Yi migrant workers often have significantly lower social status even than local farmers and herders. The last are often self-sufficient and can find other job opportunities in the cities, while Yi migrant workers are left with the hardest agricultural work that few locals are willing to do. Compared with other ethnic minorities with precarious participation in the labour market, such as the Mongolian herders in northern Xinjiang who live next to the workplaces of Yi migrant workers, the Yi lack viable means of obtaining a livelihood in their home area, which leaves them with no choice other than migrating with unfavourable terms. Moreover, the labour brokerage system hinders the upward mobility of workers because organising large numbers of

people to engage in temporary low-skilled jobs is the most profitable approach for labour agencies. To make things worse, the surplus extracted by brokers usually does not generate capital to be invested in Liangshan but is mainly used for maintaining social networks and for entertainment purposes, especially for face-saving activities that are typical in Yi society. Apart from a small group of labour brokers, only a few Yi college students who successfully pass the competitive state exams for the civil service are perceived as successful among their peers. Other options available to rural Yi aspiring to improve their lives are very limited and most often involve danger or moral stigma, as in the case of the entertainment workers mentioned above.

While the Yi are gradually leaving behind the abyss of misery caused by heroin and AIDS brought back by the Yi pioneers migrating to China’s urban areas in the 1980s (Liu 2010), the younger generation finds that they are still trapped between the yearning for adventure in the metropolis and the pain of homesickness (思乡)—a common feeling expressed by the Yi migrant workers I interviewed, trapped as they are between reverence for their ancestors and the promises of modernity. ■

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A mosque is destroyed while a 'Duck Neck Store' nearby remains untouched in Korla, YEAR?. The sign is in Chinese, with tiny Uyghur and Mongolian scripts above. Source: Mirshad Chalip.

Language Ideology as Identity in the Uyghur Diaspora

Mirshad GHALIP

This essay delves into the language ideologies of the Uyghur diaspora community in the United States and their efforts to maintain their heritage language. It argues that the language ideologies of these Uyghurs significantly influence their language maintenance practices, such as forming social connections with like-minded individuals and enforcing rules at home for language maintenance. Additionally, the ongoing settler-colonial process of eliminating Uyghur identity in the Uyghur homeland is fostering a transnational language ideology that views the Uyghur language as integral to Uyghur identity and speaking Uyghur as a form of resistance.

As the Uyghur homeland was inundated with Han settlers in the 1990s and 2000s, Uyghurs saw the limited autonomy of their education system upended by a so-called bilingual education (双语) policy that reduced Uyghur language to a supplementary element (Dwyer 2005; Schluessel 2007). Then, in the mid-2010s, Uyghur was eliminated altogether as a language of pedagogy (Byler 2019). In the face of this epistemic upheaval, in the early 2010s, Uyghurs began building their own 'mother tongue' (Uy: *Ana Til*) movement that strove to teach Uyghur youth to read, write, and speak their own language (Ayup 2024). Rather than becoming a people without a living history and knowledge system of their own, they built schools and social media movements that involved hundreds of thousands of people. And, one

by one, the leaders of this movement were detained and imprisoned on charges such as ‘disturbing the public order’ or ‘separatism’ (Shepherd 2019). In recent years, following the mass internment of what is likely more than one million Uyghurs, the Uyghur-language internet has been largely erased and replaced with Uyghurs speaking in Chinese. In China, only those who speak Mandarin—referred to as ‘the national language’ (国语)—can protect themselves and their loved ones. But the fight for Uyghur language goes on, even though its centre is now in the diaspora in Türkiye, Europe, and North America.

This essay focuses on the role of language attitudes and ideologies in Uyghur heritage language maintenance through the stories of four individuals based in one of those sites of struggle, the United States. While much scholarship on language maintenance explores language attitudes, the concept of language ideology is often underutilised in these analyses. As a linguistic anthropologist, I aim to bridge the gap between these concepts. The essay argues that the language ideologies of the Uyghur diaspora significantly influence their language maintenance practices—for instance, by leading them to form social connections with like-minded individuals and enforce rules in the home for heritage language maintenance. Additionally, the ongoing settler-colonial process of eliminating Uyghur identity in the Uyghur homeland is fostering a transnational language ideology that views the Uyghur language as integral to Uyghur identity and speaking Uyghur as a form of resistance. This ideology is also impacting the Uyghur diaspora’s heritage language maintenance efforts. As I will demonstrate in this essay, the policies of forced assimilation that Uyghurs are facing in China directly shape a transnational Uyghur language ideology that is experienced as a ‘cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’ (Irvine 1989: 255).

Muhtar Bökü: Language Ideology Moulded by Existential Threat

There were two different occasions when I explained to Muhtar the potential risks of speaking to me about Uyghur language ideology. One was at the beginning,

before I conducted the qualitative data collection, and the second was when I was in the process of writing my dissertation. On both occasions, Muhtar insisted on using his real name as a challenge to the global power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He says that the CCP fears the brave and only oppresses the timid. Moreover, he has made statements and been involved in matters with even greater ‘sensitivity’ than this study. So, for him, there is no reason to be scared of using his real name in contexts such as this.

At the time of our first meeting, Muhtar had joined the US Army and was stationed in North Carolina. Having attended Chinese-language schools when growing up in the Uyghur region, he felt that his own Uyghur proficiency was lacking. This perception fuelled his strong desire to raise his child in a ‘pure’ Uyghur-language environment, thereby contributing to the preservation of the language.

Muhtar’s language maintenance efforts were dictated heavily by his language ideology and his views on Uyghur identity. When I asked him about the importance of the Uyghur language for the Uyghur identity, he passionately said:

[The Uyghur language] is very important to us. In order to be an ethnic group, the first thing you need to have is a language. If you have your own language, you can be a standalone/unique ethnic group. Therefore, there is no need to reiterate the importance of it. If there is no language, there is no ethnic group, in my opinion. If the language is gone, the ethnic group is also finished. That is also why they [the CCP] started with our language. They [the CCP] started destroying our language at schools by introducing the Chinese language slowly. Everything is clear here. If you don’t have your language, even if you claim that you are Uyghur, you’d be the same as the Uyghurs in Hunan. None of us conceptualises them as ‘Uyghur’. Even if you call yourself ‘Uyghur’, you’re talking someone else’s tongue, you’re accepting another people’s culture. Now, here in America, we can see a lot of examples of people becoming more American. With the language of Americans, their thinking will also be adopted. After that, you adopt their behaviour and everything else gradually. And then, their affection towards here will be greater. And they would gradually say, ‘Well,

my parents are Uyghur. It's whatever. I just want to live my way.' That's it, done! The Uyghur will be gone with that. That's what I think. No matter [whether] back home or the Uyghurs in [the] diaspora. If they think they are Uyghur, they have the responsibility to study the language well and protect it. It's also a duty, in my opinion.

In this moment in the early 2020s, Uyghurs both in China and around the world keenly felt the existential threat posed by the mass internment and boarding school systems in the Uyghur homeland. This is a primary factor in Muhtar's language ideology. As he put it:

That's why I think language is very important, especially to people who don't have their own nation like us. If we lose our language, we are going to be finished. We don't have an army that can protect us; we don't have any legal representatives that can speak for us in the world. That is my answer to those who would raise the topic of ethnicity without language.

Muhtar's language ideology and maintenance efforts are deeply entangled with a reactive nationalism and attachment to ethnic identity. Indeed, Muhtar is currently trying his best to develop his Uyghur literacy and create an environment at home that is exclusively Uyghur. He consulted me a few times about whether this was the 'correct way' to raise his kids in the United States. I did not have an answer for him, but I told him that the research shows that children often dictate the language spoken at home (usually speaking the dominant language, in this case, English) and that this could be a source of great struggle for him and his family (Tuominen 1999). He responded: 'My wife and I agreed that we would pretend that we didn't understand them if our children speak English to us.'

Muhtar and his wife put a great deal of effort into creating a home in which only the Uyghur language is spoken. In 2019, when we went to San Francisco for the Uyghur American Cup—a soccer competition between different Uyghur diaspora communities—I noticed that he and his wife had modified their Google navigation system so that the directions were given in the Uyghur language. Of course, Google does not offer that function, but it seems to have one

that allows you to replace the pre-set voice assistant with your own recordings. So, Muhtar and his wife recorded their own voices and replaced the default English-speaking voice. I also learned in our interviews that Muhtar is purchasing books and other educational material from an Uyghur publishing house based in Türkiye for himself and his children. While he is reading Uyghur novels, his children are learning the Uyghur alphabet from cards. They also read Uyghur children's books.

Through their continuous efforts, Muhtar claims that their eldest son is speaking Uyghur as his first language despite being born in the United States. Muhtar wishes his eldest son to help balance the language spoken at home and manage his younger siblings in their language use. We can conclude that Muhtar's language maintenance efforts are strong. While it is too early to assess the result, what Muhtar and his wife are doing could bring a successful language maintenance outcome.

Bilig: Multilingualism from a Cosmopolitan Background

Bilig was born in the northern part of what he referred to as 'East Turkestan' in the late 1980s. He moved to Ürümqi when he was quite young and spent a few years there before his family relocated to Japan in the mid-1990s. Bilig's father had the opportunity to go to Japan and get his PhD in the mid-1980s, which allowed him to subsequently find employment in the country. Bilig finished his elementary school education in Japan. He said that, during this time, he would visit East Turkestan during every summer break. In 2001, Bilig's family moved to San Francisco and spent a year in the Bay Area. His father accepted a job opportunity soon after and the family moved again, to Maryland. They were aware of the Uyghur community in the area, which influenced Bilig's father's decision to take employment there. Bilig says that even though both his parents are highly educated, they had to work blue-collar jobs until they became proficient in English, which is when his father found employment in his field. Bilig finished his middle school, high school, college, and master's degree education in the Washington, DC, area.

Bilig's language ideology is like Muhtar's. Bilig views the Uyghur language as a huge part of the Uyghur identity and culture. 'Our mother tongue is important. If it disappears, a major part of Uyghur culture and our identity will be lost,' he explained. 'Even though I'd like to say Islam is important to being an Uyghur myself, I don't think that is the case, because there are people with different faiths in our community. Therefore, you need to know the language and culture to be an Uyghur.' Bilig also ranked language as the most important aspect of the Uyghur identity. 'I think knowing the language is more important than knowing the culture. If you can speak a little and understand most of the Uyghur language, that's fine. But it is difficult for me to consider someone [an Uyghur] if they don't know the Uyghur language.' I pressed Bilig by asking about a person who is not ethnically Uyghur but speaks Uyghur like a native. He answered, 'I would consider that person Uyghur.'

This language ideology also seems to direct his language maintenance efforts at home. Bilig and his wife decided Uyghur would be the dominant language in their household. At the time of the interview, Bilig's wife worked from home and was taking care of their daughter, only speaking to her in Uyghur. They are planning to teach their daughter English when she is a little older. Bilig and his wife's plan is that when they teach the Uyghur alphabet to their daughter, they will also teach her the English alphabet. Essentially, they would like to raise their children in a bilingual environment. At the time of the interview, Bilig and his wife's child was still young and they had not made the change to a bilingual household.

When I spoke with him, Bilig was working at a hospital. Bilig's mother tongue is Uyghur, his English is native-like, and he also has high proficiency in Japanese and Spanish. Bilig's background not only helped him acquire many languages but also has given him an opportunity to meet different communities. Bilig's encounter with the Turkish American community left him impressed because those he met maintained strong proficiency in Turkish, which made him realise that even someone born in the United States can retain their heritage language well.

However, compared with his multilingual life experience, his observations of the Uyghur diaspora community reveal Uyghurs giving up their language and raising their children in an English-speaking

environment, because they fear their children will be left behind when they enter school. The Uyghur parents he has encountered worry that their children might not be able to integrate into US society. Bilig mentioned that these Uyghur parents are happy if their children are 'culturally Uyghur' and can 'do something for the Uyghur people politically'. He stressed that language maintenance in the United States for the Uyghurs is an individual choice and, from his perspective, it is up to them how they raise their children. Bilig remarked: 'Let me raise my children with Uyghur and English, maybe we can become an example. The others can see us and see that we are setting an example.'

Luckily, Bilig has found a few like-minded individuals and formed a close social circle. They often come together and discuss how they would like to teach their children the Uyghur language. One of Bilig's close friends married an Uyghur woman from the European Uyghur diaspora, and they first lived in Europe for a few years before moving to the Washington, DC, area. Bilig was amazed when he visited them in Europe because he saw that every child in that diaspora community spoke fluent Uyghur. 'It was like I was back in the *weten*,' he remarked, using the term for 'homeland'. Bilig explained that the Uyghur children in Europe went to kindergarten and learnt the local dominant language and English. Then, they spoke Uyghur when they came home, which surprised him. 'They can do it in Europe, why can't we in the US? What is the difference?'

Out of curiosity, Bilig asked many parents how they were raising their kids to speak Uyghur so well. 'They told me that they're speaking Uyghur to their kids since they were born, and they did not care whether they understood or not.' He was also impressed that the weekend schools in Europe are much more serious than the ones in the United States and the parents also have a part to play in the homework that is assigned to their children. 'That is the example they have set,' he said.

Bilig seems to have more involvement in the community than Muhtar, partly due to Muhtar's military career and the fact that Bilig arrived in the United States a lot earlier. Bilig wishes to create an environment that fosters language maintenance, but he is aware that there are Uyghurs with different language preferences. 'You can often see people being divided with language if you go to an Uyghur social

gathering. There are people who prefer to speak Uyghur when they're together, there are people who prefer to speak English, and there are also some Chinese speakers.'

It would have been ideal to explore the different subgroups through the linguistic anthropological lens of 'speech communities' (Gumperz 1968); however, it would be difficult to learn the social context and norms of each subgroup, in addition to their language and political ideologies without in-depth, in-person qualitative research. Bilig seems to gravitate towards the speech community that predominantly uses Uyghur. This is also why his close social circle comprises people who wish to engage in Uyghur language maintenance effectively. On the surface, this can be attributed to their language ideologies aligning with each other to a certain degree and enabling them to knit together a tighter social group. Nonetheless, there could be many underlying factors that connect Bilig's close social group beyond their language ideology. Therefore, along with the linguistic anthropological analysis above, in-person fieldwork and a chance to learn about Bilig's social group in-depth might allow for analysis in terms of the concept of 'communities of action' (Wenger 1999).

Nisa: Cultural Practice as the Expression of Identity

Nisa was the only woman I interviewed as part of this case study, and she was also the youngest, just starting her university education when the interview was conducted. She also comes from a family of intellectuals who moved to Japan and then to the United States. Nisa was born in Japan and her family moved to the United States soon after she was born. Unlike Bilig, Nisa's exposure to the Uyghur diaspora community was limited as her family was living in Georgia. Even after moving to a city with more Uyghur people for her university education, Nisa's connection to the community seemed limited. However, it is worth noting that Nisa's exposure to the Uyghur diaspora community could have changed after the interviews, given that she was new to the city and the pandemic had prevented her from meeting people and exploring the city.

When I asked Nisa about languages spoken at home, she explained how her father initially spoke English at home during her early childhood, then became more Uyghur dominant. Nisa says that her parents were also learning English, which is why her father chose to speak it at home, while her mother always spoke Uyghur to her. This continued until Nisa was about 10 years old. Nisa's father, by this point, realised that everyone's English was good and they didn't need to practise at home anymore. However, by the time Nisa's father started to speak more Uyghur at home, English had already become Nisa's dominant language. Nisa's mother was adamant about her speaking Uyghur: 'My mother would yell at me if I responded to her in English,' she recalled. Because of this, Nisa and her mother use Uyghur when they communicate. However, English is still the dominant language when the whole family is communicating. Nisa also explained that her father still has a desire to perfect his English; therefore, he speaks English with her. And between Nisa and her brother, they speak English due to the ease and comfort they have with the language. It would seem unnatural and uncomfortable for them to speak Uyghur, or any other language for that matter.

When discussing her Uyghur identity, Nisa demonstrated significant difference from Muhtar and Bilig. Nisa's attitude is more aligned with the traditional immigrant experience of linking her identity with culture, food, and other symbolic aspects of the Uyghur identity with which her parents raised her. If we describe Muhtar's and Bilig's sense of identity as language-centric, Nisa's would be centred on culture. Nisa mentioned that it is definitely interesting and rare to be an Uyghur because people generally do not know the Uyghurs, but she also faces the confusion of explaining her identity to people. Many people confuse Turkic peoples with Türkiye as a country.

Nisa's language ideology seems to gravitate towards seeing Uyghur language as a means to connect the group. To Nisa, being Uyghur is rare, unique, and innately special such that she would have an instant connection with another Uyghur speaker. While this is a simple and straightforward notion, it is worth considering further, as the field of linguistic anthropology traditionally has been interested in language as a group-defining notion, which focuses more on exclusivity and borders than on a code and set of knowledge that form connection.

Nisa sees the Uyghur language as part of Uyghur culture, and she would not say language has greater importance to her than other aspects of Uyghur culture. She explains that this could be because she did not grow up within a diaspora community with tight social connections among whom Uyghur is spoken. Therefore, she sees the cultural practices as being just as important as the language as a way of being part of the Uyghur community and maintaining her identity. Nisa's two trips back to what she also referred to as 'East Turkestan' were also significant because she was a participant in the broader cultural environment, as well as the cultural practices and rituals.

Nisa's views on religion and Uyghur identity are similar to those of Muhtar and Bilig. She doesn't see being Muslim as an essential part of the Uyghur identity. However, the fact that Nisa places less importance on language in her identity than Muhtar and Bilig might have influenced her language maintenance practices. Although she says that, since 2017, she has been realising that her identity is under substantial threat and she has been trying to learn more Uyghur, her language ideology is not a significant factor in her Uyghur identity. Nisa also sees language maintenance as a practice of community because she thinks the Uyghur language should survive and thrive where there is a substantial Uyghur diaspora community, such as the Washington, DC, area, Central Asia, and Türkiye. This is in stark contrast to Bilig, who sees language maintenance as an individual choice. Hudyma (2011) provides an analysis of Ukrainian Canadians who shifted their ethnic marker from language to cultural rituals among the younger generations. We can see that Nisa's ethnic marker is consistent with this type of shift. But as ethnic markers and language ideology are dynamic, it is not possible to say whether Nisa's could change down the road.

Makan: Identity, Pride, and Change of Language Ideology

Makan was born in Illinois and grew up in Massachusetts. At the time of the interviews, he was a second-year university student. Makan's parents are well-educated Uyghur intellectuals just like the other

Uyghurs who immigrated to the United States two or three decades ago. Makan has been to what he also referred to as 'East Turkestan' four times. Even though he does not feel like it is his homeland, he describes each trip as being full of fond memories. Just like Nisa, Makan's exposure to the Uyghur diaspora community is rather limited.

Makan characterised his household as bilingual; however, he stated that his parents were deliberate in their attempt to make sure that Makan and his sister understood the Uyghur language. Makan explains that there were no rules and his parents did not care whether Makan and his sister replied in English. But Makan says that his parents made sure they at least had a good understanding of the Uyghur language. Makan recalls that they had a few Uyghur families with whom to socialise when he was a child, but eventually they drifted apart and he did not categorise himself as an active member of the Uyghur diaspora community at the time of the interview. However, he expressed a desire to engage more and become an active member in the future. I told him about the Uyghur American Cup and recruited him to join the team of which I was part in the hope that he would establish connection through our annual tournament.

Makan is proud to be an Uyghur, and he states Uyghurs are prideful, and some are even arrogant, which he says is 'not a bad thing'. Makan's parents are very well educated, just like most of the early Uyghur immigrants to the United States. Makan describes his father as very proud of his Uyghur identity and that he has a grasp of Uyghur history. Makan mentions that his father regularly engages with other Uyghur intellectuals in the United States online, participating in their discussions on many topics. Makan's impression is that his father deeply cares for his people. Makan says his father wanted to help the Uyghur people always and in any way possible, big or small.

Makan's father taught him from an early age that the Uyghur people are an ethnic group with a long history and rich culture. This education has shaped Makan's Uyghur identity and the pride he feels in it. Even though his father never taught him the history of the Uyghur people in detail, Makan was curious and took history classes of his own accord. This helped him imagine and conceptualise his heritage, which seemed to make him more confident in Uyghurness. Indeed, his Uyghur identity seems to shape his

self-worth. 'Who would I be if I am not Uyghur? Just some Joe Shmo on the street? No, I am not that,' he explained with a smile.

Makan says he and his father started to talk more about the fate of the Uyghur people as he grew up and understood more. 'My father says that the Uyghur people have had the most tragic fate in the last century. I am not sure that I can agree with it, but our fate is still pretty sad,' he explained. I asked which language mediates discussion of this sort between Makan and his father. Makan says that it is mainly in English, but not strictly so, because his father would say some things in Uyghur.

Makan's pride in his Uyghur identity is certainly impressive for someone who was born and grew up in the United States. As explained, his father played a big role in this. Nevertheless, it is worth considering that his pride was instilled without being an active member of the diaspora community or going through an Uyghur education system. He has a sense of pride in his Uyghur identity without having an excellent command of the Uyghur language. One could argue that to some extent this is a facet of his personality because he is also proud to be a US citizen. However, one can easily be proud of being a US citizen and not proud of being Uyghur.

Makan also places the Uyghur language at the centre of the Uyghur identity. However, compared with Muhtar and Bilig, Makan sees cultural practices as equally important as the language when it comes to ethnic markers. Makan emphasises that Uyghur people are a group who care a lot about community and solidarity, in addition to the history, art, food, music, and other aspects of the culture of which he is proud.

Makan has been back to the Uyghur homeland more often than Nisa, and each time he has spent at least a month in the region. He explained that his parents prepared Makan and his sister each time in the cultural rituals and correct manners as they didn't want them to break cultural norms. That is probably why Makan considers the cultural aspects of Uyghur identity to be as important as the language. This emphasis on the culture indicates that Makan's perception of the Uyghur identity is like Nisa's.

When I asked about the Uyghur language preparation for Makan's family's trip to the Uyghur homeland, Makan said his parents did not focus on the language at all, despite Makan's interest in learning more. But Makan learned more Uyghur each time he visited. The problem was that the time between each trip was so significant that he would forget most of what he had learned. Makan claims that his Uyghur was at its peak during a trip when he was 12 years old.

While Makan explained the importance of the cultural aspect of the Uyghur identity, he has an increasing desire to learn more Uyghur. Makan expressed immense guilt for not being able to speak the language well and he was setting learning goals for himself, which he had not considered before. 'I envision myself speaking fluent *Uyghurche* by the time I graduate college,' he explained. This is also partly due to the helplessness he has felt since the start of the genocide in 2017. 'It is pretty clear that there is not much we can do to stop the Chinese Government,' he said. The way for him to resist is to continue being Uyghur. And one of the ways to do that is to learn more Uyghur language. We can see that the genocidal policies of the Chinese Government are shaping Makan's language ideology and making him centralise the language in the expression of his Uyghur identity.

The Contours of a Transnational Uyghur Language Ideology

By placing these four differently positioned Uyghur diaspora members in conversation with each other, this essay has begun to sketch the contours of a transnational Uyghur language ideology. In each case it is clear that language ideology, particularly in relation to moral and political interests, plays a significant role in language maintenance. Muhtar and Bilig have rather strong language ideologies that place the Uyghur language at the centre of their Uyghur identity. On the other hand, Nisa's and Makan's language ideologies, which do not place the Uyghur language at

the centre of their identity, contribute to a different outcome when it comes to language maintenance efforts, although Makan is changing in this regard and it seems he will increase his Uyghur language competence as a result of a shift in his language ideology.

Looking at the younger generation in the Uyghur diaspora, Nisa and Makan are both proud to be Uyghur and are fond of the ‘uniqueness’ of their identities. As discussed above, the genocide in their homeland has certainly strengthened their Uyghur identity; however, both were able to develop a strong sense of Uyghur identity without growing up in the Uyghur diaspora community. If their experiences are representative of the generation who were born and grew up in the diaspora, this would mean that the sole factor for language maintenance would be language ideology—placing the Uyghur language at the centre of Uyghur identity and making it the ethnic marker. This creates a rather straightforward, though difficult, task for the Uyghur diaspora when it comes to language maintenance. If they want to maintain their language as a vibrant aspect of the diaspora life, in addition to educating the next generation about Uyghur culture, history, art, and politics, the Uyghur language must also be considered an ethnic marker. This would entail a significant effort in teaching the next generation the language and require building educational institutions. Without institutional support and a critical mass of community supporters, belief in the moral and political value of a Uyghur language ideology remains one of the only means to make the language maintenance equation work. ■

*All the Uyghurs I interviewed for this article used ‘East Turkestan’ to refer to what the Chinese State has named the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). For a discussion of the rise of the use of the term ‘East Turkestan’ among diaspora Uyghurs, see Saskia Witteborn’s recent book *Unruly Speech* (2023).



The Grand Mosque of Shadian in 2015. Source: Ruslan Yusupov (CC).

Sinicising Islam in China

The Story of a Mosque

Ruslan YUSUPOV

Since 2018, the Chinese Government's nationwide campaign to 'Sinicise Islam' has resulted in architectural changes to hundreds of mosques across the country, as well as mosque destruction in the name of 'consolidation'. This essay revisits the fate of some high profile mosques, illustrating the ways in which local religious communities need to negotiate and position themselves amid a broader trend to assimilate, or render invisible, religious and ethnic differences that do not conform to Xi's ethnonationalist vision of Chinese civilisation.

Laohuasi (清真老华寺) is a Sufi mosque in Linxia, a city in China's Gansu Province. Standing on a raised platform the length and breadth of a football field, it has four floors and two large prayer halls that can accommodate more than 6,000 worshippers. A colour image of it in a book titled *Chinese Islamic Architectural Art* also shows five green domes—four small and one large—arranged on its rooftop in a quincunx pattern (Bai 2016: 385). Five more mosques with similar architectural features can be seen dotting the city skyline in the background.

Snapshots of Laohuasi taken by Han Chinese tourists in the summer of 2023, however, reveal that those domes are gone. Instead, a large hip-and-gable roof with corners projecting beyond the walls now sits atop the mosque's prayer halls. Two minarets standing by the gate to the courtyard have also lost height. These architectural changes are due to the nationwide



Laohuasi as it used to be, left, and right, a recent image of the site in a video blog. Source: Shidian Baike; Bajunshijie blog.

campaign to ‘Sinicise Islam’ (伊斯兰教中国化) in China, which has been undertaken by the Chinese authorities in the belief that the religion in the country is undergoing so-called Arabisation (阿化) and Saudi-isation (沙化).

The details of the campaign were discussed in 2017 at a meeting of the Chinese Islamic Association, the state-led representative organ for Islamic affairs in the country. In 2018, the association circulated a five-year plan—later deleted from its official website—which stated that ‘some places blindly imitate foreign styles of mosque architecture’ and proceeded to advise that the ‘renovation, construction, and expansion of mosques’ should be ‘suited to China’s characteristics, highlighting Chinese elements’ (China Law Translate 2019). Hundreds of mosques across the country have since had their domes and minarets amputated. In addition, recent reports by human rights groups suggest many mosques have been destroyed as the authorities aim to decrease their number in the name of ‘consolidation’ (HRW 2023).

The campaign was launched in the wake of a meeting on religious work chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2016. In his speech, Xi instructed religious groups to ‘adhere to the leadership’ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and merge their doctrines with Chinese culture (Xinhua 2016). The problematisation of mosques’ architectural styles should thus be seen as part of a larger trend to assimilate, or render invisible, religious and ethnic differ-

ences that do not conform to Xi’s ethnonationalist vision of Chinese civilisation. In Xinjiang, this vision has been used to justify the mass incarceration of Turkic Muslim minorities and the demolition of their religious sites (Byler 2021; Thum 2020). In Tibet, children are separated from their families and sent to boarding schools to learn what it means to be Chinese, while youths in Inner Mongolia are progressively restricted from learning their language (OHCHR 2023; Atwood 2020; Kashgar 2023). Meanwhile, a recent campaign to strip churches of their crosses (Johnson 2016) has reportedly been followed by officials demanding people replace images of Jesus in their homes with photos of CCP leaders (Gan 2017).

This is not the first time that mosques have fallen victim to state power in China. The photo of Laohuasi in the book mentioned above, for example, is accompanied by the following description:

This mosque was constructed circa 1380. It was expanded in 1775 ... It was burned down by the Republican army in 1928. It was rebuilt in 1930. It was burned down again during the Cultural Revolution. It was rebuilt in 1981 and constantly expanded since then. In 2004, when the old prayer hall was no longer able to accommodate the worshippers, the mosque was reconstructed anew with donations from Muslims. Its design blends Arabic style with Chinese traditional style. (Bai 2016: 385)

The painful history of this mosque—which continues with the recent ‘renovation’ in the name of Sinicisation—vividly, if tragically, illustrates the precarious condition of organised religion in a totalising state.

As I describe in my book manuscript project, the aspects of Chinese Islam targeted by the authorities today are the very elements that local governments authorised in their respective localities until very recently. Much of the previous permissiveness was because the CCP wanted to distance itself from the destructive tumult of the Cultural Revolution and explore the extent to which it could administer religious and ethnic differences in ways conducive to the market economy. The town of Shadian in Yunnan Province where I did my fieldwork, for example, is infamous for a state-sponsored massacre of Chinese Muslims in 1975. Religious activities in town resumed when the incident was redressed in 1979: not only did the government rebuild the Ming-era Grand Mosque of Shadian that it had bombed just four years earlier, but it also paid for the construction of four more mosques in the town. The community was given a set of preferential policies to develop the economy and, at the turn of the century, Shadian Muslims who grew rich through tin mining proposed funding the renovation of the government-built Grand Mosque according to a new design that emulated the iconic look of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. Opened to the public in 2010, the building rose from the shadows of the Cultural Revolution with three prayer halls that could accommodate 10,000 people and a large green dome flanked by four minarets as high as 70 metres.

The construction of mosques in Arabic style, then, was truly a sign of the times. In 1982, the CCP issued Document No. 19 (translated in full in MacInnis 1989: 8–26), in which it renewed its interaction with religion as an administrative category. Seeking to benefit from this policy, members of recognised religions across China invested in the revival of their rituals, practices, and traditions. Constructing places of worship—quite often on the sites once occupied by religious buildings destroyed during the Cultural Revolution—or negotiating with the authorities for an expansion of existing ones was central to this process. After all, these were not only spaces of the sacred but also sacred spaces through which the state could exercise its control. In a newly published ethnography of one Buddhist temple in the coastal

city of Xiamen, for example, Ashiwa and Wank (2023) show how, during the Reform Era, the building served as a source of political legitimacy that extended both ways: officials gained political capital by approving its rebuilding and expansion, and the faithful gained a religious space relatively free from political interference.

The national drive to amputate mosque minarets and domes, therefore, should be understood within the politics of religious freedom that led to the construction of these structures in the first place. Local communities in China have little power to stop the authorities from going after their mosques. The political situation in the country now is such that defending their architecture in terms of policies sidelined by Xi’s ethnonationalist vision could push the faithful and the clergy to the wrong side of the law. However, this does not mean that local religious communities are entirely powerless. Even though this usually goes unnoticed by outside observers, many manage to enter negotiations with the authorities to secure a measure of advantage for themselves if they feel they can read the political script of current religious politics ‘correctly’.

Photos of the ‘renovated’ Dongguan Mosque complex in Xining City, Qinghai Province, for example, show that the building has gained two more floors for religious activity, housed under the hip-and-gable roof that replaced the previous onion-shaped dome. People in Shadian also claim that three local mosques emerged from the alteration work with their ablution rooms fixed and renovated, and their kitchen spaces expanded. The Sinicisation of the Grand Mosque that began in the summer of 2023, on the other hand, is said to have come after officials finally agreed to register another mosque in the neighbourhood. That one was opened in the early 2000s and was operational at the time of my fieldwork, but the manager told me that it lacked proper documents because the land on which it stood was not registered ‘for religious use’.

These idiosyncratic bargains occur between the authorities who approve the designs and the religious communities who find themselves in a precarious condition—a situation that suggests the top-down nature of the campaign. In such a context, attempts to seek benefit from the policy become a hallmark characteristic of the power dynamics in the field of religious freedom in Xi Jinping’s China. Following



The Grand Mosque of Shadian in November 2023.
Source: Anonymous.

the closure of the Grand Mosque for renovation, Shadian was visited by Chen Ruifeng, the head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs and a Vice-Minister of the Central United Front Work Department. People with whom I spoke told me that Chen gazed on the dismantled minarets and praised the religious representatives for their ‘cooperation’. They quoted him instructing local officials to turn the alteration of the Grand Mosque into a ‘model project’ (精品工程) and ensure that the new design is ‘more beautiful than the previous one’. As a result, people now hear the government speaking about \$21-million renovation expenses—a sum that, ironically, is several million higher than the initial construction costs of the mosque.

The fact that such a high-ranking official came to witness ‘the progress’ of the campaign in Shadian illustrates the continued political importance the central government is giving to this place. The Chinese leadership in the Reform Era showcased its commitment to multiculturalism against the backdrop of state violence and oppression by allowing

the rebuilding of the Grand Mosque, but the religious policies of Xi Jinping have effectively rendered its design ‘outdated’. Meanwhile, what Chen Ruifeng praises is the idea of Chinese Muslims as a ‘model minority’ insofar as they acquiesce to the means of their own subjugation. After all, is this not what Sinicisation is about? ■



(Left) Sioux youth from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. (Right) Tibetan protester in Paris. Source: @Joe Catron (CC), @Philippe Leroyer (CC), , Flickr.com.

Are Tibetans Indigenous? The Political Stakes and Potentiality of the Translation of Indigeneity

Dawa LOKYITSANG

How does settler-colonial imperialism operate in Asia, and what are the ways in which Asian Indigeneities become mobilised? To address this question, in 2017, I brought together scholars who are observing various settler-colonial and imperial dynamics and developments across Asia for a panel discussion titled 'Asian Settler-Colonialisms and Indigeneities' at the 116th annual American Anthropological Association conference. At that time, scholarly consid-

erations about Asian land and resource extraction emphasised capitalism, development, and governmentality, with scant consideration of settler colonialism, even though the last remains a vital framework for understanding the structural nature of imperial projects (Wolfe 2006). Even the literature that adopted this frame drew its analysis primarily from Euro-American-centred examples, implicitly suggesting that settler colonialism is an innately Western phenomenon (Pels 1997). Yet, capitalist developments with imperial consequences continue to impact Asia at varying scales

(Tsing 2005). Such contemporary developments, alongside long Asian imperial histories, including those of China, Japan, and India, complicate this assumption. This provokes questions such as: How does settler domination work when those involved in it are neither white nor from the West? How can we critically engage with this while not Orientalising this history as a cultural peculiarity or delinking it from the deep influence of Western empires?

With these questions in mind, I drew from recent innovative scholarship in anthropology, Native studies, and ethnic studies to bring attention to the potential of interdisciplinary approaches for rethinking Asian settler colonialisms and indigeneities. For example, how might North American-centred settler-colonialism literature complicate relationships between Asian nation-states and their 'Indigenous' populations, especially when the latter, for a multitude of reasons, often do not identify as, nor are categorised as, Indigenous?

In my intervention on that panel I focused on the question: 'Are Tibetans Indigenous?' Since I made this article available to the public on the popular online Tibetan platform Lhakar Diaries in 2017, my intervention has influenced other scholars to ask similar questions, including regarding Uyghurs (Musapir and Roberts 2022). Settler colonialism as a topic of interest was even raised at the 2024 Asian American Studies conference.

While these developments are encouraging, the central critique I raised in my 2017 article remains valid. As researchers, we should not concern ourselves with whether a group of people do or do not identify as Indigenous. Instead, scholars must highlight the political stakes as well as the potentiality of why a group of people would or would not identify as Indigenous. Doing so will allow researchers to highlight indigeneity as a political concept constructed and contested between settler-colonial governmentalities and Indigenous anticolonial sovereignty movements.

As I stated in my 2017 article, the stakes and potentialities of indigeneity as a political category are what concern Tibetans. I highlight why Tibetans in exile rejected and later accepted identification with indigeneity due to the concept's changing political meanings. Such contestations over the political translation and meaning of indigeneity between settler states and First Nations' anticolonial land-return movements highlight legal arguments over sovereignty. This is what my article stresses: that although indigeneity as a racial

terminology was invented by settler-colonial imperial governmentalities in North America to take possession of First Nations territories and govern their bodies, Indigenous sovereignty movements have redefined and decolonised such racialised renderings to highlight their political potentiality regarding regaining sovereignty. This contestation is what I argue highlights the politicised nature of translating indigeneity.

Hopefully, this clarification will serve as a reminder to those presently considering indigeneity and settler colonialism as an analytic for certain dynamics in Asia to highlight the political stakes and potentialities of translating indigeneity. The terminology of indigeneity may serve as a signifier for 'the native' but its political mobilisation between settler-colonial imperial governmentalities and Indigenous anticolonial sovereignty movements highlights how this contestation involves the right to define territorial sovereignty. With this interest in mind, I reintroduce this article for the broader audience of the *Made in China Journal*.

Indigeneity in the Tibetan Context

Are Tibetans *Indigenous*? It depends on whom you ask. Although the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) recognised the rights of Indigenous peoples by voting in favour of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2007 (United Nations General Assembly 2007), it also claims there are no Indigenous populations in China. Rather, Tibetans are categorised as *minzu* (民族, 'ethnic nationality/minority') within the PRC. Tibetans have often been framed as Indigenous by non-Tibetan photographers, writers, or journalists in popular print media. But what about Tibetans? Do they identify as such?

In Emily Yeh's 2007 article 'Tibetan Indigeneity', she engages with the question in the Tibetan context. She argues that the framing of Tibetans as Indigenous has largely been imposed by Western and Chinese environmentalists due to Tibetan assertions of environmental stewardship and ecological wisdom. However, Tibetans in exile, according to Yeh, have largely rejected identification with indigeneity due to the term's limitations, as they understood it as 'sovereignty without separate statehood or national

inclusion in a multicultural nation' (Yeh 2007: 79), which limited the possibility of a future separation from China. For Tibetans living in the PRC, the limitation of indigeneity manifests as their classification as *minzu* under the Chinese State. According to the PRC Government, the Chinese population comprises 56 *minzu* groups. These include both Han Chinese and Tibetans, which makes it legally impossible for Tibetans in Tibet to identify as Indigenous. However, Yeh does not dismiss the possibility of a change in the Tibetan stance on indigeneity as she acknowledges shifts in the category.

In this essay, I will emphasise such shifts to propose indigeneity as an evolving terminology with translations that fluctuate through time and with political consequences depending on who is doing the defining. I use Tibetan rejection of indigeneity in the late 1990s to illustrate this fact. This will involve an analysis of indigeneity as a legal and theoretical concept defined and contested between settler states and Indigenous movements.

Tibetan Rejection of Indigeneity: Rights versus Sovereignty

If the terms 'Indigenous', 'Native', or 'Indian' emerged in tandem with settler colonialism in North America, they were a colonial construct. This is stressed by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), who argues that the category of 'Indian' was invented by the settler government during colonial invasion of native territories. According to mainstream Indigenous discourse, before colonial invasion, no-one introduced themselves to another as 'native'. Rather, many identified and continue to identify based intersectionally on the names of their familial clans, tribes, and/or homelands. Similarly, before the Chinese invasion and annexation of Tibet, Tibetans identified themselves based on their family clan names, hometowns, or regions. No-one went around introducing themselves as *native*.

The word 'indigene' is Portuguese and means 'native' to the land. However, under settler invasion of Indigenous lands, the category of the 'native' or 'Indian' assumed new meanings with legal and discursive consequences, argues Moreton-Robinson

(2015). Settler states framed Indigenous peoples as backward and incapable of producing surplus value from their land, thus presenting them as *primitive* and/or *other* in need of modern civilising interventions. These reformulations are what, according to Moreton-Robinson, provided settler states with the legal and discursive bases for taking native territories.

In other words, these reformulations of Indigenous peoples as racialised, backwards 'native' or 'Indian' subjects by settler invading states had no real implication for how tribes identified themselves and did not acknowledge their longstanding histories as sovereign territorial nations. Rather, the construction of this racial category in the colonies provided settler states with the legal justification for taking possession of native lands and bodies in the interest of European empires. Thus, early political concepts of indigeneity revolved around settler-state definitions, which were themselves informed by doctrinal debates within the Catholic Church. Such definitions sought to racially define and accord new meanings to Indigenous peoples within settler-state hierarchies that granted Indigenous populations *rights* to their own previously *sovereign* lands and lifeways.

In Tibet, Tibetans were racialised as a backward 'other' under the late Qing Empire. However, after the revolution, the Republican government constructed Tibetans in the national imagination of China as 'primitive' Chinese to justify the territorial incorporation of Tibet (Lokyitsang 2020). Unlike imperial Qing, who did not identify with Tibetans, the Nationalist government identified Tibetans as Chinese but as a backward group in need of modernising interventions. These nationalist reimagining of Tibetans as Chinese were not based on how Tibetans themselves identify and barely engaged Tibetan historical accounts of themselves as a distinct people separate from the Chinese. Nonetheless, this reinvention of Tibetans as 'primitive Chinese' was later adopted by the Communist government after it won the Civil War. Currently, racialising Tibetans under the Tibet 'autonomous' settler territorial governance of the current Communist government as a backward minority in need of Chinese modern civilising development provides the legal and discursive framework to justify Chinese settler elimination and/or assimilation of Tibetan lands and bodies.

As Yeh (2007) stressed, it was the confusion surrounding *rights* versus *sovereignty* that Tibetan organisational heads in exile found perplexing. For them, the political movement for Tibet seeks sovereignty through self-determination frameworks, not (settler-given) rights. According to Kahnawake Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014), a rights-based politics seeks recognition from the settler-colonial state. Indigenous sovereignty *refuses* settler-state recognition, and instead is orientated towards Indigenous systems of authority and recognition. In other words, sovereignty becomes the basis through which Indigenous communities refuse the settler state.

To understand why Tibetans from Yeh's discussion refused the categorisation of indigeneity, it is essential to consider how they understood the term. The Tibetan diaspora, including their government in exile—on which Yeh chose to focus—is based in India. Their understanding of indigeneity is thus partially influenced by how their host country defines the concept. To explain this, I turn to Sara Shneiderman's 2009 'Rituals of Ethnicity', in which she considers Thangmi performances of indigeneity in Darjeeling, India, in accordance with the Indian State's definition. In particular, Shneiderman explores the ways in which Thangmi leaders struggled to perform a version of Thangminess that would qualify them under India's category of 'Other Backwards Classes' (OBC) in the 1990s.

India's OBC category is inherited from the British Raj and is reserved for groups that consider themselves 'native' to a province. State recognition as OBC allows groups to access certain state-given rights reserved for groups that the state identifies as *Indigenous*. For Thangmis to qualify as OBC, they must also accept being classified as 'backwards' (Shneiderman 2009: 143). Alongside performing traditional and ritual versions of themselves, Thangmis felt compelled to perform forms of backwardness that they thought would help their OBC qualification. For example, during their bid for OBC status, Thangmi leaders asked community members to begin consuming rats because an early ethnographic book on Thangmis stressed how rats were considered a staple in traditional Thangmi food. This was despite Thangmi ethnologists who debunked this assumption

by pointing out that rats were consumed not because of tradition but because of a particularly bad time when crops failed and starvation prevailed.

Alongside the OBC category, India also classifies specific groups under the Schedule Tribe category. For instance, ethnic Tibetan groups living along the current border between Tibet and India are recognised officially by India as 'Bhutias', who, in turn, are categorised as a 'Scheduled Tribe'. On the one hand, the OBC category stresses indigeneity as backwards; on the other, the Scheduled Tribe category recognises groups as tribes rather than sovereign entities. For the Tibetan leadership in exile, both definitions were unacceptable. Alongside considering Indian definitions, Tibetans were also thinking about indigeneity as a legal terminology trafficked in the international arena.

The United Nations declared 1994 the 'International Year of Indigenous Peoples' to recognise Indigenous peoples' 'human rights'. According to Carole McGranahan (2016), this was the first time such a group, 'Indigenous peoples', was internationally named and recognised. In accordance with UN actions in the ensuing years, the Tibetan government in exile understood Indigenous peoples as tribal rather than peoples with their own sovereign territories. At the time, McGranahan was told by Tibetan government officials not to use the term 'indigeneity' when describing Tibetans due to this limitation.

From this vantage point, it becomes clear why the Tibetan leadership in exile rejected this terminology in the 1990s. Accepting such definitions meant acquiescing to a classification of themselves as inferior. It also degraded the Tibetan political goal of sovereignty. Rather than rejecting current understandings of indigeneity as defined by Indigenous sovereignty movements rooted in claims of sovereignty and decolonisation, Tibetans in exile were refusing indigeneity as defined by institutions such as the United Nations and modern governments, which framed indigeneity as backwards and tribal and rooted their politics in terms of rights rather than nationhood. This is what major Indigenous sovereignty movements stress: that their activism is often misconstrued as seeking civil rights from the settler state rather than challenging settler-state violations of national territorial treaties signed with First Nations peoples during the inception of settler-colonial states.

The Tibetan example demonstrates that the term indigeneity operates under different discursive frameworks depending on who is doing the defining, whether modern settler states or Indigenous nations and movements. As such, Indigenous groups' rejection or acceptance of indigeneity as an identification depends largely on whether such definitions exclude or include sovereignty.

Indigenous Sovereignty Movements: Decolonising Indigeneity

While the term indigeneity has been defined by settler-colonial states since its inception, Indigenous movements have consistently challenged such definitions in both the discursive and the legal arenas. In so doing, they have decolonised the term to mobilise possible alliances and Indigenous anticolonial sovereignty movements that circumvent settler states and other capitalist institutions. Because the terminology was produced during settler-colonial invasion, it has become useful for Indigenous scholars to challenge the attempts by settler states to hide them under neoliberal discourses that erase settler-colonial identity and histories.

In the current era, Glen Coulthard (2014: 15) argues that articulations of settler colonialism have moved on from colonial domination to modern governmentality. In particular, he argues that the emergence of

[i]ndigenous anticolonial nationalism ... force[s] colonial power to modify itself from a structure that ... explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize our recognition and accommodation.

Regardless of this modification ... the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained colonial to its foundation. (Coulthard 2014: 6; emphasis added)

The result is that you have two opposing forces. On the one hand, there are settler states that seek to constantly change their systems while remaining steadfast in their original goals of eliminating indigeneity. On the other are Indigenous activists and scholars who seek to challenge such structural changes through decolonial legal and discursive interventions. Because settler-state institutions continue to use and define the terminology of indigeneity to serve their own goals, Indigenous peoples have challenged such use with their own decolonised definitions through the interrogations of treaties signed between Native Nations and settler states.

This back and forth suggests that the terminology cannot be tossed out so easily; rather, it has become a discursive site for legal contestations between common law settler states and Indigenous nations. It is a high-stakes game that involves the right to define sovereignty—a concept that Michelle H. Raheja (2015: 30) describes 'as an open-ended process that involves critical and kinetic contemplations of what sovereignty means at different historical and paradigmatic junctures'. For Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005: 124), '[a]t the heart of Indigenous peoples' realities, then, is nationhood. Their very survival depends on it.' Indigeneity described from this vantage point is not about identification but about sovereignty.

Tibetan Acceptance of Indigeneity: Addressing Settler Colonialism

Another reason Indigenous movements and scholars have not completely thrown out the terminology is due to its salience in generating global solidarities between native peoples and their anticolonial stance against settler-state encroachment. Judging from its evolutionary trajectory, indigeneity has gone from being a colonial construct to a terminology operationalised by global Indigenous movements to advance solidarities and sovereignty claims against settler nations and capitalist institutions in cahoots.

In 'Analytics of Indigeneity', Maile Arvin's (2015: 121) articulation of indigeneity 'refers to the historical and contemporary effects of colonial and anticolonial demands and desires related to a certain land or

territory and the various displacements of that place's original or longtime inhabitants'. Arvin's concept of indigeneity stresses colonial histories and territorial expulsion of native inhabitants—a framework Tibetan political movements in exile also stress through their insistence on Tibetan sovereignty.

It could be argued that Tibetans can identify as Indigenous; however, my purpose is not to insist whether Tibetans are in fact Indigenous. Rather, recent trends among Tibetans in exile suggest that indigeneity, as defined by Indigenous nations and movements against further encroachments on their territories by settler-colonial and imperial states and capitalist corporations, has become an important framework for considering the Tibetan political movement for sovereignty in the current moment.

Tibetans living in North America, for example, have contemplated these possible solidarities by promoting Indigenous movements such as the Idle No More in Canada and, recently, the No Dakota Access Pipeline campaign in communal spaces in the United States. These movements also became avenues for Tibetans like me to reflect on indigeneity as a decolonial praxis that could prove useful for Tibetans in addressing settler colonialisms, sovereignties, refusals, and potential solidarities.

So, can we assume Tibetans should in fact identify as Indigenous? It depends on the politics of such re/definitions. My point, however, is not to argue whether Tibetans do or do not identify this way. A more interesting question is to ask where, when, and why Tibetans do or do not identify as such. As I have shown, indigeneity is not just about categorising people symbolically, but also about leveraging international movements and creating strategic solidarities for native nations mobilising against the mechanics of settler governmentality. It is this political potential of indigeneity that civilian Tibetans are presently considering. ■

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Indigeneity and its Political Possibilities

While the Tibetan leadership in exile in the recent past has turned away from the settler-state construct of indigeneity due to its limitations when it comes to sovereignty, non-organisationally based Tibetan individuals in North America are presently considering indigeneity as defined by Indigenous movements. These inspiring movements have thus become the basis for Tibetans to address Tibet's recent history of Communist China's settler-colonial occupation and ongoing histories of Tibetan nationhood. This suggests indigeneity as a political terminology has been experiencing shifting re/definitions and, because of such shifts, Tibetans have in the past rejected it while they consider accepting it in the present.

FORUM



The Globality of Antiblackness

Jene Highstein, *Black Sphere*,
Installation View, 1980. Source: The
Renaissance Society.

Mingwei HUANG

This essay explores contemporary formations of Chinese antiblackness by staging a conversation between Africa–China studies and theories of anti-blackness—namely, Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism posits Blackness as ‘Slaveness’—an ontological condition that emerges from the afterlife of slavery. Chinese antiblackness—with its formulation of the ‘black slave race’ and specific antiblack logics—offers a counterexample for considering Afro-pessimism’s universal terms. The essay asks what happens when the paradigmatic universalism of Afro-pessimism is brought to bear on the historical specificity of Sino-African dynamics? What does antiblackness mean when Blackness (黑, hei) and race are in translation? What new inquiries and understandings of antiblackness as a global phenomenon might surface?

Since the turn of the millennium, the proliferation of Africa–China encounters—Chinese investment in and migration to Africa and African migration to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—has spurred new global racial discourses. In the 2010s, numerous high-profile incidents of anti-African, antiblack racism in the PRC made international headlines. For instance, in the infamous 2016 Qiaobi laundry detergent commercial, an African man enters the apartment of a fair-skinned Chinese woman. After rebuffing his sexual advances, she pushes him into a washing machine, and out pops a light-skinned Chinese man—a suitable object of desire. For the 2018 Spring Festival Gala, Chinese actors donned blackface on Chinese state television. The skit was intended to celebrate China–Africa cooperation but was a spectacle of African stereotypes. The same year, Chinese audiences negatively reacted to the Afro-futuristic

blockbuster film *Black Panther*, with many viewers complaining that the movie was ‘too black’ (Huang 2018). As black (黑, *hei*) is a colour and a racial category, the comment ambiguously refers to both the all-Black cast and the dark colour palette of the film.

In China, African nationals face visa restrictions, police harassment, housing discrimination, and cultural and linguistic barriers (Adebayo 2023; Cissé 2021; Lan 2017; Marsh 2014)—all situations well documented by the African diasporic organisation Black Livity China. Everything came to a head in 2020. As Covid-19 spread in Wuhan, African nationals in Guangzhou were systematically removed from their homes and forced into quarantine—a singling out that African leaders and nongovernmental organisations denounced as xenophobic and racist (HRW 2020). On Twitter, users called for a boycott of Chinese businesses and similar treatment of Chinese nationals in African countries. Others linked the mistreatment of African migrants in China with the recent white vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery in the United States, connecting the events in Guangzhou to antiblack violence worldwide. By 2020, Chinese antiblackness had a name and was trending on Twitter: #RacismInChina, #ChinaMustExplain, #ChinaMustFall (a riff on #RhodesMustFall), and #BlackLivesMatter-China (Ouassini et al. 2021).

In the field of Africa–China studies, critical scholarship on race rightfully cautions against grafting Euro-American concepts of race onto Chinese ones and equating racism across historical contexts (Castillo 2020; Huynh and Park 2018; Yoon 2023). Yet, much work stops short of naming antiblack racism and antiblackness. Instead, scholars tend to comparatively examine how Chinese and Africans are racialised, which makes equivalent antiblack and anti-Asian racisms under white supremacy and flattens relations of power between non-white groups. With these concerns in mind, I aim to zero in on the specificity of antiblackness without collapsing historical and discursive differences. Antiblackness is more than individual ignorance, attitudes, and cultural norms or a variation of racism. It names a specific violence and global system with distinct logics in which everyone, including China, is embedded. Black (黑 *hei*) may be specific to Chinese racial epistemes but it is nevertheless implicated in reproducing antiblackness in global discursive contexts (Sheridan 2022).

In this essay, I stage a conversation between Africa–China studies and theories of antiblackness aligned with Afro-pessimism—a prominent theory in the Northern/Anglophone academy from where I write. In so doing, I hope to bring one of the most transformative approaches to Black studies to bear on one of the storied global developments of the twenty-first century. Afro-pessimism takes slavery and its afterlife as the constitutive condition of Western modernity, positing the Black as Slave outside the Human. Black existence is one of abjection, fungibility, and property, an ontological state of nonbeing irreconcilable with humanity. Antiblackness saturates our world, one made by five centuries of Euro-American empire and racial capitalism. Chinese antiblackness offers a counterexample for considering Afro-pessimism’s transhistorical, universal terms. In Chinese racial thought, Africans have long been characterised as the ‘slave race’, even as China has a relatively limited history of slavery compared with the West. China, too, has long been the West’s paradigmatic Other (Eng et al. 2011). What happens when the paradigmatic universalism of Afro-pessimism is brought to bear on the historical specificity of Sino-African dynamics? What does antiblackness mean in this historical context, and when does Chineseness depart (categorically, exceptionally) from Western modernity? How does antiblackness manifest when Blackness and race are in translation? Do the core ideas of Afro-pessimism hold? What new inquiries and understandings of antiblackness as a global phenomenon might surface? I work through these disparate intellectual traditions and conceptual vocabularies as one part of the broader project of thinking through the theories, methodologies, and political stakes of Black studies in China. In what follows, I give an overview of Afro-pessimist ideas and Chinese discourses of Blackness, then consider how antiblackness manifests across Global China today.

Afro-Pessimism and Its Critics

Credited with the ontological turn in Black studies, Afro-pessimism posits Black as Slave in the protracted afterlife of slavery. Slavery names a relational dynamic and structure of violence, not a historical era or event. The slave relation, as Frank B. Wilderson III (2020,

2021) contends, is the essential antagonism between Black and non-Black, Human and Slave. As Jared Sexton (2010: 36) writes, ‘slaves are paradigmatically black ... blackness serves as the basis of enslavement’. Afro-pessimism shifts the axis from Black/white to Black/non-Black, subsuming white supremacy under antiblackness. Accordingly, although Chinese people have been oppressed by imperialism and white supremacy, they ally with white and other non-Black people to perpetuate antiblackness. Antiblackness stands apart from racism, imperialism, and colonialism because of the singular, non-analogous experience of slavery. On the exceptionality of antiblackness, Charles Mills (2021: 35) states:

The position of Blacks is unique among all the groups racialized as nonwhite by the modern West. For no other nonwhite group has race been so enduringly constitutive of their identity, so foundational for racial capitalism, and so lastingly central to white racial consciousness and global racial consciousness in general.

Afro-pessimism has vitally renewed attention to antiblackness and generated critical dissensus over its theoretical assumptions and political implications. As Iyko Day (2015) has problematised, Afro-pessimism’s insistence on the exceptionality of slavery tends to foreclose historical, relational, and dialectical analysis of slavery, settler colonialism, and capitalism. Singularity entrenches intellectual and political siloes and impedes coalitions forged from overlapping but varied historical oppressions. In a searing critique of Afro-pessimism’s canonical works, Annie Olaloku-Teriba (2018: 105) takes up the assumption that Black is a stable, coherent category with global generalisability. Afro-pessimism abstracts and mystifies Blackness with the unintended effect of essentialising it as a phenotype. ‘Black’, ‘Africa’, and ‘Slave’ lose their historical specificity in ontological terms: ‘[T]o be racialised as black and to be a slave are treated as one and the same’ (Olaloku-Teriba 2018: 100). This is not a polemical interpretation of Afro-pessimism but a critical restatement of its core principles.

The contingency of Blackness is key to conceptualising Chinese antiblackness. In an early essay entitled ‘Facts of Blackness’, Denise Ferreira da Silva (1998) problematises the transposition of US-centric racial formation theory to global ‘elsewheres’. She

presciently points out the problem of assuming ‘the universal (ontological) character of the categories employed in their analysis’ (Ferreira da Silva 1998: 204). Instead, the ‘intrinsically multiple quality of black subjectivity demands attention to the specific historical and discursive developments informing a society’s strategies of racial subordination’ (Ferreira da Silva 1998: 230–31). Afro-pessimism fails to contend with ‘the divergent processes of racialisation and ethnicisation in colonial and slave contexts’ that differentially incorporated Africans—along with Asian and Indigenous peoples—into capitalism (Olaloku-Teriba 2018: 115). Antiblackness is produced through specific historical conditions, global locations, and epistemologies. Investigating Chinese antiblackness requires locating it in histories of race, empire, slavery, and capitalism, none of which is discrete, and across multiple conceptual vocabularies of race and Blackness.

If antiblackness is a condition of Western modernity, it is also global in scale. But if antiblackness, like modernity, is not universal, what makes it global? Antiblackness achieves its illusory global totality as the sum of its different local forms, each grounded in place-specific histories and genealogies of race; together they achieve ‘global’ coherence. Here, I build on Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright’s (2019: 18) framing of global antiblackness and global capitalism as enmeshed in a web: ‘Empirical examples from across the world demonstrate that while localized relations remain distinct, global capital accumulation and anti-Blackness remain fundamentally interconnected.’ Although antiblackness is historically rooted in Euro-American colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy, as capitalism’s centre shifts to the PRC, its ever-expanding structure incorporates Chinese subjects into local racial projects.

Blackness in Translation

In their introduction to the book *Antiblackness*, João H. Costa Vargas and Moon-Kie Jung (2021: 4) raise the global scope of antiblackness across the Western and non-Western worlds: ‘Since the dawn of modernity, Black people have been progressively, singularly positioned—materially and symbolically—as the “slave race” around the globe.’ This is the case in

China, where ‘Black’, ‘African’, and ‘Slave’ have gone together, albeit in quite different ways from in the United States. Black, which signifies both colour and race, is associated with the dark, shadowy, sinister, immoral, illegal, and undocumented (Sautman 1994). Only recently did Black become a racial category linked to Africa and Africans. Initially, Blackness was an internal concept to China insofar as the antecedents of its modern meanings and associations were formed before European contact.

The concept of Blackness became primarily associated with slavery through the premodern figure of the dark-skinned *kunlun* slave (崑崙). In premodern times, *kunlun*, named after the Kunlun Mountains on the western edge of China, referred to dark-complexioned Chinese, Khmers, and Malays. The term designated the geographic otherness of frontier peoples and signified dark-skinned individuals and was established well before documented encounters between Chinese and Africans. In premodern and modern encounters, African peoples were incorporated into the term *kunlun* and its associations with magic, bestiality, and slavery. These contacts were sporadic, but literary depictions of African ‘foreign slaves’, ‘devil slaves’, and ‘*kunlun* slaves’ were nevertheless lasting (Dikötter 2015; Snow 1988; Wyatt 2010).

In addition to the figuration of slavery, there is a history of Chinese slavery and encounters with enslaved Africans in China. During the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) periods, Arab traders brought African slaves to Canton (Guangzhou) to serve the cosmopolitan class. Whether they were treated as chattel remains unknown (Wyatt 2010: 70). Chinese encountered enslaved Africans aboard European ships and when European merchants arrived in China with slaves between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Wyatt 2010: 8). Until the 1920s, Africans were categorised as the ‘black slave race’ (Dikötter 2015: 93). In the Han Chinese imaginary, Blackness has always signified enslavement (Shih 2013: 157). These premodern ideas have a long afterlife and constitute an alternative genealogy of antiblackness—one that begins in the Kunlun Mountains, not the Atlantic Ocean.

Chinese ideas of race emerge from distinct constellations of knowledge and the global historical conditions that produced them. In modern Chinese thought, race combines colour, class, and lineage and indexes China’s position in the world. The invention

of Han Chinese identity and race was a nationalist response to Japanese and Western imperialism in the late Qing and Republican eras. Race became equated with nation through the term *minzu* (民族): a people (氏, *min*) of common patrilineal descent (族, *zu*). Han people were envisioned as descendants of the Yellow Emperor—a mythology that united Han Chinese through a common patrilineal line and territorial soil against foreign ‘white devils’ and ‘black devils’ (Dikötter 2015; Driscoll 2020). Chinese thinkers who were exposed to Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary theories through British missionaries and Japanese translations turned consciousness of skin colour, protonationalist sentiment, and genealogical thinking into a systemic theory of race as a ‘breed of lineage’ (种族)—the closest translation of ‘race’ (Fennel 2013). They divided the world into four or five ‘breeds of lineage’—black, white, yellow, red, and/or brown—with white and yellow at the top and black at the bottom (Dikötter 2015).

Offering a complementary case, Jae Kyun Kim and Moon-Kie Jung (2021) trace contemporary antiblackness in Korea to the emergence of ideas of Blackness vis-à-vis Japanese and European imperialism. Before a Korean racial identity took hold, Blackness entered Korean imaginaries through how intellectuals metaphorised slavery. They equated the loss of sovereignty to foreign states with enslavement—the fate of a presumably inferior people to be avoided. Likewise, in the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals saw Africa as the ‘truly last unhistorical space of the modern world’. The continent was peopled by slaves, giving way to a binary of historical/ahistorical space and people/slave (Karl 2002: 121–22). Chinese thinkers followed the Second Boer War (1899–1902) between the British and Dutch-descended Afrikaners, which consolidated two competing white settler-colonial projects into a single nation-state. Chinese intellectuals did not side with the Africans dispossessed of their land and exploited as labour, whom they deemed culturally inferior. Instead, they sympathised with Afrikaners, who, like them, were subjugated under British rule (Karl 2002).

Blackness and its association with Africa and slavery have been a cornerstone of Chinese antiblackness. In contemporary popular Chinese discourses, ‘Black’ and ‘African’ are used interchangeably (Huang 2020). Chinese antiblackness draws on antiblack ideas through the cross-pollination of Euro-American

discourses, but it departs from the history of transatlantic slavery that underpins prevailing theories of antiblackness. Slavery was more figurative than material in China, a spectral presence, not a lasting institution, and indeterminately racial or chattel in character. Other histories are also at play. Chinese antiblackness emerged alongside the constitution of a radicalised Chinese national identity in the historical encounter with Western and Japanese imperialisms. An anti-imperial invention, race located vis-à-vis the white/West and Black/Africa in a global racial hierarchy that animates antiblackness across Global China today.

Antiblackness Across Global China

To return to the beginning of this essay, given increased Africa–China engagements, the twinned ideas of Africa and Blackness have re-entered Chinese popular imaginations. In this context, to speak of race is to invoke racial, civilisational, and developmental hierarchies that index China's position in the world. In the twenty-first century and Global China's extension to Africa and Latin America, the PRC has taken up the 'yellow man's burden' of modernising the formerly colonised world (Nyíri 2006). Nowhere is this clearer than in the 2017 blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior 2*, set in a generic African country, which contrasts China's promise for the continent's future against well-worn Western and Chinese stereotypes of Africa out of time (Liu and Rofel 2018).

In the Global South, Chinese migrants compare the quality (素质, *suzhi*) of themselves with local people and the level of economic development of the PRC with their new host countries, recasting old civilisational hierarchies of white and yellow at the top and black at the bottom into developmental ones. As I observed in my fieldwork in South Africa, my Chinese interlocutors sealed themselves off from the perceived dangers of the African city, living in securitised enclaves, avoiding 'black areas', and distancing themselves from African employees. They disparaged the 'backwardness' of Africa and attributed economic development to British colonialism. African workers

were called 'black labour' (黑工)—a term associated with undocumented labour in China that denoted their location at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. Some Chinese migrants characterised Africans as less-than-human 'brutes' and 'black devils'. Enduring ideas of the 'black slave race' devalue Black labour and life today.

Antiblackness plays out on Chinese online forums and microblogs. Scholars have analysed a litany of instances in which Africans and African migrants are described as parasites, primates, and predators of Chinese women, which I do not reproduce here (Cheng 2011; Frazier and Zhan 2014; Pfafman et al. 2015). African migrants in Chinese cities are often called 'triple illegal Black people' (三非黑人), lacking legal documentation of entrance, residence, and work. They are scapegoated, along with rural–urban migrants, for urban decay and crime. Contemporary Chinese antiblackness goes back to the 1980s campus protests and the backlash against Maoist support for decolonising African nations that was incited by Chinese fears of African male sexuality (Cheng 2011; Sautman 1994). Chinese antiblackness expresses resentment towards Africans seeking entrepreneurial opportunities in China and the PRC's aid to African nations.

As before, moral panic over interracial relationships, mixed-race children, and Chinese women's sexuality is a flashpoint for antiblackness. The emphasis on racial purity reflects the popularisation of eugenicist thinking in the 1990s and contemporary heteropatriarchal racial nationalism in which Han patrilineage is reproduced through the endogamous family (Dikötter 2015; Huang 2020). One netizen makes explicit the latent antiblackness of Han racial nationalism: 'It's okay if you want to marry, just don't leave your children/descendants in China. I don't want future Chinese people to be like those half-black half-yellow people in Latin American countries' (Pfafman et al. 2015: 544). As racialised migrants arrive in China and Chinese diasporas expand across the Global South, older civilisational hierarchies are recast into developmental ones and biopolitical imperatives with gendered antiblack features. Chinese antiblackness remakes what Ferreira da Silva (2015: 36) called a twentieth-century *racial grammar of development* that naturalised the scientific, tech-

nological, and economic developmental capacities of the white West and the incapacity of the racialised non-West.

As evident in China's 'win-win development' and humanitarianism in Africa and the Global South, China positions itself as the leader of the continent and former Third World. As Black studies scholars have importantly argued, the afterlife of slavery animates antiblackness. Additionally, a Sinocentric racial grammar of Chinese developmental capacity—and its corollary, Black/African lack thereof—is part of twenty-first-century antiblackness.

Antiblackness Beyond the Atlantic

In a 2016 *Zhihu* forum on international reactions to the Qiaobi laundry detergent commercial, most commentators balked at Western political correctness and raised the issue of anti-Asian racism, equating them as a deflection strategy. One commentator advocated respect and reciprocity while citing Confucian principles and contrasting China with the United States: 'We Chinese have never bought or sold black slaves, and we have never had black blood on our hands. This is a fact.' This comment, while in the spirit of equality, positions Chinese as outside histories of slavery and Western epistemes. An amnesiac act, it disavows the history of slavery in China and the symbolic role slavery played in the formation of Han racial identity. The commentator poses my conundrum: how to think about antiblackness when Blackness is in translation, and when the transatlantic history of slavery, taken to be constitutive of antiblackness, is one of many animating forces. Chinese antiblackness is informed by slavery but not of the same kind.

Despite these differences, Chinese antiblackness resonates, sometimes uncannily, with universalised Western antiblackness. We might consider other logics and relations that shape Chinese antiblackness, including a Sinocentric racial grammar of development and conception of race that emerge from colonial subjugation, which is coeval but not analogous with slavery. Global antiblackness achieves its illusory global totality through its myriad localised forms that reinforce and multiply each other when they overlap.

More than twenty years into the twenty-first century—which many see as the 'Chinese Century'—Chinese racial formations and antiblackness are increasingly salient in and beyond the PRC and worthy of critical examination beyond the siloes of China studies and Black studies. In writing this essay, my intention is not to engage in 'whataboutism' by reading two bodies of ideas to point out their myopias, nor to catalogue local expressions of antiblackness, which is necessary to a degree but can inflict its own order of epistemic violence. My hope is to question divisions of knowledge and the presumed universality of categories and relations of Black/non-Black, West/non-West, Black/white, Human/non-Human as a springboard for further inquiry.

Ferreira da Silva's (1998: 230–31) essay is still urgent more than two decades later:

[T]he study of any specific strategy of racial subordination must account for its placing in the global historical and discursive context in which the histories of modern societies and the biographies of racialised subjects have been written. Only then will we be able to formulate insurgent counterdiscourses, which will be at the same time truly non-ethnocentric theoretical and political interventions.

There is much work ahead for thinking through antiblackness across Global China to understand and dismantle it, which will necessarily be relational and coalitional. ■

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Heiren. Source: *Made in China Journal*; original photo by Mark Fischer (CC), Flickr.com.

Asymmetries, Heiren Discourses, and the Geopolitics of Studying Race in Africa-China Relations

Derek SHERIDAN

Writing about race in Africa-China relations is contentious. On the one hand, there is an audience which assumes anti-Black racism in China to be self-evident and regards efforts to contextualise if not downplay it to be puzzling and problematic. On the other hand, there are those who consider discussions of anti-Black racism in China to be unreflectively imposing Western frameworks and contexts on a distinctively Chinese context. This essay argues that this tension is related to other contentions about the nature of political economic asymmetries in Africa-China relations, and the politics of knowledge production regarding who is speaking about whom.

Race is a contentious topic for Africa-China studies. As a white American anthropologist who did ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Tanzania and who currently works in a Taiwanese research institution, my positionality cannot be isolated from the geopolitics of knowledge production in Africa-China relations. In writing about ‘other people’s racism’, recounting Chinese discourses about *Heiren* (黑人, ‘Black Africans’) and African discourses about ‘the Chinese’, it is too easy to unwittingly reproduce anti-Black racism and anti-Chinese racism while erasing the discursive complicity of one’s positionality both

within the academy and during fieldwork. This makes participating in a series on ‘Blackness’ particularly fraught.

I have struggled with how to write about how my Chinese interlocutors talked about Tanzanians. On the one hand, I could not ignore the presence and significance of anti-Black racist discourses, but on the other, I was uncomfortable with voyeuristically reproducing a litany of ‘Chinese’ anti-Black statements. In a published article, I decided to focus on how my Chinese interlocutors talked about *Heiren* in everyday conversation (Sheridan 2022). The ubiquitous use of this term—which I translate as ‘Black person’ or ‘Black people’—by Chinese speakers to refer to both individuals and a generalised Other seemed conspicuously ‘racialised’ to me. However, I also considered how my discomfort with the phrase implicated my own white liberalism.

My instinct was supported by the findings of another study that, while American migrant entrepreneurs in Kenya shared similar discourses with Chinese migrant entrepreneurs regarding local governance, they, unlike the Chinese, refrained from talking about it through a discourse about ‘Black people’ (Rounds and Huang 2017). As the late Jane Hill (2008) argued, one of the features of what she called white speech is the reproduction of racist discourses while denying that one is racist. The use of ‘*Heiren*’ by Chinese speakers was more complicated than the mere fact that it was used. Nonetheless, my Chinese interlocutors often seemed to generalise their experiences with Tanzanians of varied backgrounds through the collaborative discursive construction of an ethno-racial Other. In the article I eventually wrote, I wanted to persuade two kinds of audiences to recognise two arguments: those who consider anti-Black racism in China to be self-evident to be more reflective about their epistemologies, and those who argue against unreflectively applying Western theories of racism to Africa–China relations to recognise that racialisation is still relevant. In this piece, I elaborate on the divergence between these audiences and the implications for understanding race and anti-Blackness in Africa–China relations.

The Geopolitics of Knowledge Production about ‘Race’ in Africa–China Relations

While international media coverage has long amplified examples of anti-Black racism in China and among Chinese communities in Africa, Africa–China scholars were slow to seriously address ‘race’ (Celina and Mhango 2022; Al Jazeera 2020; Daly and Lee 2021; BBC 2018; Bromwich 2016; McKirdy 2015; Huang 2021; Lan 2017; Castillo 2020; Adebayo 2021; Fennell 2013; Ke-Schutte 2023; Huang 2020). Earlier ethnographic accounts of racialised interactions between Chinese and Africans either reduced them to intercultural prejudice or ignored them entirely. On the other hand, anti-African or anti-Black attitudes and practices among Chinese individuals are popularly glossed as ‘racism’ without interrogating what race means in these contexts other than a vague sense that any discourse about Africans must *ipso facto* be a discourse about race. Castillo (2020: 311) observes that the insistence that China–Africa relations must be interpreted through the lens of race is particularly pronounced among ‘Western audiences [who] often racialize conversations about Africa and China’, although African and diaspora audiences also play a significant role.

When Africa–China researchers first discussed race in Africa–China relations, it was often reactive, triggered by specific incidents and scandals—for example, the recurrent use of blackface in Chinese media, including even skits intended to celebrate the Africa–China relationship (BBC 2018). As transnational media events, these scandals have a lifecycle that moves from ‘condemnation’ to ‘contextualisation’ (Schmitz 2021a), especially on the social media platforms used by scholars. When first reported by international—usually Western—media outlets, these incidents are interpreted as revealing the hidden truth of endemic anti-Black racism in China otherwise dissimulated by state narratives of Sino-African friendship. Even scholars who regularly defend Sino-African relations against Western media coverage initially express condemnation and acknowledge there is a problem that must be addressed for the healthy development of the relationship between Chinese and African peoples and economies. This is shortly followed, however, by

a stream of commentary contextualising the incident and deconstructing how it has been (mis)represented in Western media (Xu 2018). While these may be more subtle than Chinese media commentaries that racism absolutely played no role in these incidents and that these scandals have been exaggerated by hostile forces, the conclusion is nonetheless very similar: these incidents ‘may not be as racist as you think’ (Castillo 2016; Maya and Ma 2020).

The premise of these critiques is the role of Western knowledge production in mediating Africa–China relations. For example, Xu Wei (2018) argued that calling the use of blackface by Chinese performers during a 2018 New Year gala skit celebrating China–Africa relations ‘racist’ was based on interpreting the performance within the historical context of Western anti-Black racism, and that blackface did not have the same meanings within a Chinese context. Along similar lines, but in the context of Chinese migration to Africa, Barry Sautman and Hairong Yan (2014, 2016) have cautioned against assuming that denigrating discourses among Chinese migrants about African work ethics are a one-to-one reproduction of white settler-colonial discourse about racial essentialism. Instead, they draw attention to Chinese discourses about *suzhi* (素质) informed by the Chinese development experience—a point further elaborated by Lan (2017). While scholars making these arguments do not deny the presence of racial discourses in Chinese, they caution against the assumption of a homogeneous discourse that fails to consider the different context. Chinese scholars, as described by Schmitz (2021a), ‘take up crucial translational roles, moving cautiously between global critiques of racism and particularist explanations of past Chinese engagements with Africa’.

However, these arguments can also be problematic for several reasons. The first is that they frequently reduce racism to beliefs and intentions that shape behaviour. The second is that contextualising incidents, rather than debunking the role of racism, can ironically become racist themselves, such as explaining how actions by African actors led to particular Chinese actions. Notwithstanding the Chinese context, the pattern is still uncannily like denials of racist intent in Western countries with explicit histories of anti-Black racism. The most serious problem with arguments about incommensurability, however, is that the provincialisation of

Western racism, no matter how erudite and informed by critical theories, externalises race and racism as problems incompatible with China’s history. Externalising ‘race’ and ‘racism’ as alien to the national character is not distinct to China but is found even in European countries where these problems are often externalised as distinctively ‘American’. In the postcolonial United Kingdom, as Stuart Hall (2017) and Hazel Carby (2021) argued, the appearance of anti-Black racism was even attributed to the arrival of migrants from former colonies. In arguing that racialised migrants ‘brought’ the problem of race to the United Kingdom, the history of imperialism and race in the formation of contemporary British society is erased. In any case, the consequence is apologism for the ‘unintended’ reproduction of racist images and discourses. Gloria Wekker (2016), writing in the Dutch context of the Black Pete controversy, calls this phenomenon ‘white innocence’.

China did not play a constitutive or direct role in the development of the Atlantic trade system, nor was it a participant in the ‘scramble for Africa’. Furthermore, China was itself a victim of European imperialism during the same period. China’s present wealth also cannot be directly tied to the primitive accumulation of modern capitalism, although one might argue there is still an indirect complicity through the fact that China was dependent on Western capital inflows after 1980. Nonetheless, even excluding that kind of argument, while China may have a more credible claim to ‘postcolonial innocence’ in the Global South, the practical effect of contextualisation is banal and similar to European justifications of the use of blackface.

Notwithstanding debates about whether concepts analogous to ‘race’ and ‘anti-Blackness’ have lineages in traditional Chinese thought, racial nationalism has been a constitutive element within modern Chinese nationalism and anti-Blackness suffused the writings of the earliest modern nationalist intellectuals (Huang 2020; Wyatt 2010; Cheng 2019; Dikötter 1992). While Maoist solidarity with African and African American liberation movements may have also imbued Blackness with revolutionary meanings, especially in Chinese state discourses, an undercurrent of racial nationalism policing the boundaries of the Chinese body politic, particularly at the level of heterosexual intimacy and marital exogamy, was never absent and has remained conspicuous in China’s online Han

nationalist communities (Brown 2016; Fennell 2013; Liu 2013; Huang 2020; Cheng 2019). Even if this racial nationalist discourse represents a particular elite stratum of the Chinese public and has been unfairly generalised as the singular ‘Chinese’ discourse, it nonetheless constitutes a significant Chinese discursive context for the racial media events that critiques of Western misreadings of the Chinese context leave out in their construction of a Chinese alterity.

The reticence of Africa–China scholars to discuss race, nuance, is often confounding for non-specialists. As a graduate student, while my Chinese studies advisers understood my caution, my African studies adviser was confused; it seemed ‘obvious’ the interlocutors I was quoting in my dissertation were racist towards Africans. Pushing the other way, Chinese and Sinologist colleagues have questioned the focus on race, considering the topic a peculiar preoccupation of Western scholars.

Fundamentally, the argument that non-Chinese scholars can see the relevance of race where Chinese scholars cannot is itself a colonial expression of representational power; non-Chinese can see Chinese realities that Chinese cannot, due to ideology or censorship. As Huynh and Park (2018: 163) argue, the discourse about “‘Chinese racism’ ... is part of a broader discourse about the asymmetry of power—specifically, who gets to make statements about whom’. However, there is a fundamental difference between witnessing Chinese anti-Black racism as a white person and experiencing it as a Black person. In calling out ‘Chinese racism’, white people may situate themselves as enlightened ‘post-racial’ liberal subjects and project ‘racial nationalism’ on to China as evidence of its atavism, but Black people’s experiences of being racialised in Chinese contexts cannot be reduced to the former. As the Senegalese scholar Ibrahima Niang (2017) describes, it was not until he went to China for study that he experienced himself as a ‘Black person’. On the other hand, Africans who have spent time in Europe sometimes describe Chinese attitudes to be based more on curiosity and less overtly racist than in Europe. The Tanzanian traders I know occasionally described Chinese attitudes towards them, particularly suspicion and the refusal of romantic intimacy, to be motivated by what they considered to be the fact that Chinese did not like ‘black skin’. The lack of consensus does not indicate absence. The philosopher Alberto Urquidez

(2020) has argued that the ‘victim’s perspective’ should be privileged in defining ‘racism’, shifting the focus from intentions to effects.

Racialisation and the Interpretation of Political Economy

The relationship between racism and victimisation, furthermore, points to a deeper issue. Underlying the debate is a fundamental disagreement about the nature of asymmetry or inequality in Africa–China relations. The controversy concerning ‘race’, like the controversy concerning ‘neocolonialism’, is premised on the assumption that the relationship is unequal. Chinese anti-Black racism is especially problematic to the extent that Africa–China relations more generally are asymmetrical, and the discourse about Chinese anti-Black racism is problematic to the extent that Western knowledge production about Africa–China is asymmetrical, but the nature of the asymmetries in Africa–China relations are themselves contested.

The dominant assumption is that in Africa–China relations, Chinese actors have power, African actors lack power, and racialisation is something that powerful actors do to less powerful actors. This may partially explain why African anti-Chinese discourses are more commonly examined through the lens of anti-Chinese ‘sentiment’ or ‘Sinophobia’ rather than through the lens of racialisation (Castillo 2020). The implicit assumption is that a political economy hierarchy favouring the Chinese is reinforced by ideologies of racial hierarchy. However, ethnographies and case studies of Africa–China relations have consistently complicated dominant assumptions about the nature of the asymmetries (Driessen 2019; Schmitz 2021b). Chinese migrants in African countries are frequently vulnerable and dependent on their African hosts who can make their lives and enterprises easy or difficult. Even in Tanzania—an ‘old friend’ of China—Chinese residents are keenly aware that their passports from the People’s Republic of China attract greater scrutiny from local officials than do the passports of *bairén* (白人, ‘white people’) (Sheridan 2019). Sautman and Yan (2016: 2151) go so far as to argue that even if Chinese migrants in Africa occasionally express anti-Black racist sentiments,

they nonetheless lack ‘political power’ or ‘cultural hegemony’ over their African hosts, unlike African governments, which ‘can regulate, racialize or even expel Chinese’.

The conclusion is problematically partial, however, because Africa–China relations are diverse and non-isomorphic. The power of Chinese bosses over African workers is not isomorphic to the power of African bureaucrats over Chinese migrants, and neither one maps in any one-to-one fashion on to the relationship between China and African states in either geopolitical or economic terms. Significantly, while Chinese migrants are often (relatively) economically privileged, owning more capital than locals, they are also legally and politically vulnerable. When Chinese migrants talk in generalising or negative ways about *Heiren*, they may be talking about the people they employ or they may be talking about the government officials who regularly visit them to collect ‘tips’.

These distinctions matter to the discussion of racialisation and anti-Blackness because they involve distinct power relations, and it is the interpretation of these power relations that motivates much of the normative contention over the discussion of race. Chinese migrants racialise Africans, but Africans also racialise Chinese. Several scholars have proposed the concept of ‘South–South racialisation’ to capture these dynamics and distinguish them from whiteness that nevertheless shapes the backdrop (Sautman and Yan 2016; Ke-Schutte 2023). As Shanshan Lan (2017) argues, the racialisation of Africa–China relations is ‘uneven’ and unfolds within a triangular relationship vis-a-vis the West.

This situation is not distinct to contemporary Africa–China relations, but is like the historical experience of ‘middleman minorities’ (Bonacich 1973). The contradictory position of middleman minorities in the Global South—economically privileged but politically vulnerable—is the product of European colonialism. Chinese migrant communities in Southeast Asia, like South Asian migrant communities in East Africa, through both colonial legislation and governmentality and their exploitation of opportunities in the colonial economy, became structurally situated between European colonial states and a ‘native’ population. Anticolonial nationalism was often as much directed at these communities as it was at the Europeans (Brennan 2012). Following independence, these communities

often remained economically dominant alongside political marginalisation, legal disenfranchisement, and even populist violence.

While a voluminous literature exists vindicating the experiences and identities of these communities as victims of racialisation and state violence, critical political economy perspectives have also been sensitive to interpreting postcolonial racial nationalism through a critique of racialised class formation (Aminzade 2013). For example, challenging duelling critiques of Han Chinese racism and anti-Chinese racism in postcolonial Malaysia, Fiona Lee (2019: 235) emphasises the inherent doubleness of postcolonial racialisation, where Chinese can be ‘beneficiaries of inequality in one moment and targets of violence the next, or even both all at once’. Applied to understanding the relationship between Chinese anti-Black racism and African anti-Chinese racism, these may be productively understood not simply in terms of mutual misunderstandings, but also in terms of mutually constructed racialisations shaped by imperial and colonial histories that continue to shape the contemporary uneven global economy (Lowe 2015). Notwithstanding the complexities and nuances of the Chinese migrant experience in Africa, the political economy of Africa–China relations within the global context is still defined by an asymmetry of capital accumulation and an asymmetry of wealth (as measured by gross domestic product per capita).

However, it was not always this way. During the Maoist era, Africa–China cooperation involved the ‘poor helping the poor’ in both word and deed (Monson 2009). Even after the reform period, during the 1980s, the GDP per capita of several African countries exceeded that of China. The ‘Great Divergence’ between Africa and China is only several decades old, within the lifetime of even the millennial generation. These facts make discussions of asymmetries and racialisation between Africa and China very different from those about Africa and the Global North. Among Chinese and African officials, as well as some Chinese and African entrepreneurs, Africa can be ‘the next factory of the world’, catching up to China as China has done with the Four Asian Tigers, and as the Four Asian Tigers once did with Japan. This is the source of the mainstream developmental optimism that leads writers like Irene Yuan Sun (2017) to dismiss the anti-Black statements of her Chinese migrant interlocutors in Africa as less consequential than what

Chinese migrants may contribute in terms of capital and knowledge transfer. Seeing today's Africans as yesterday's Chinese implies convergence.

On the other hand, the same divergence between Africa and China since the 1980s that affords developmental optimism among some people also affords vernacular theorisations among other Chinese migrants regarding fundamental differences in 'culture' that reproduce the same ideologies of racial hierarchies. In either case, the discourse of South–South cooperation is premised on modernisation. Notwithstanding Chinese development discourses that suggest the Chinese experience is not replicable in an African context, except for the insight about the relevance of local versus Western solutions, lessons from China rather than lessons from Africa are what are predominantly privileged in South–South cooperation. As Kimari and Ernstson (2020) suggest, the discourse of South–South cooperation is still based on dichotomies of development/underdevelopment, which they argue are fundamentally anti-Black: Africa as the undeveloped remainder of the rising Global South.

In any case, whatever view Chinese migrants may hold regarding the future of Africa, the short-term attraction to migrate is often based on the profitability of uneven development. At best, this means an opportunity for them to profit in an environment that reminds them of 1980s China—a situation that is win-win based on the expectation of future convergence. At worst, it assumes that Africa is a space where Chinese but not African individuals can succeed based on their relative skills and resources—a situation in which the conceit of convergence is itself abandoned and economic inequality is again justified by its winners according to theories of racial-cultural hierarchy. Both views can be found among Chinese migrant entrepreneurs.

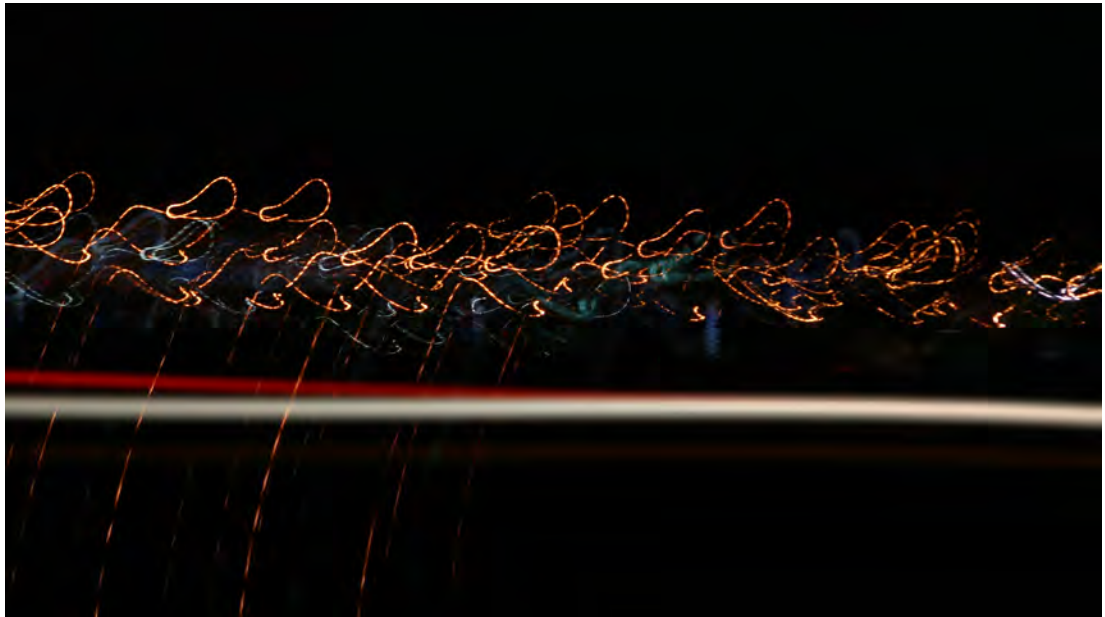
Situating *Heiren* Discourse

I have tried to keep all this in mind when making sense of how Chinese migrants in Tanzania talk about *Heiren*. Rather than arguing for the presence or absence of a distinctive 'Chinese' racial ideology, I take the position that racial concepts are produced

relationally through discourse. While the impressive scholarship of Johanna Hood (2011) elucidated the semiotics of *Hei*, Blackness, and African-ness in contemporary Chinese media discourse, I believe efforts to explicate a singular Chinese racial discourse about Blackness may overlook the more innocuous and maybe more insidious workings of everyday discourse.

For me, what makes the term *Heiren* problematic is less the meaning of the word itself, and more how the word is used in everyday discourse. Among Chinese migrants, '*Heiren*' are constructed in conversation as a particular kind of ethno-racial type through stories Chinese migrants share about difficult experiences with Tanzanians. These conversations united individuals I considered to hold explicitly racist views with individuals who otherwise expressed relatively nuanced perspectives about intercultural frictions by reflecting shared experiences. These experiences are rooted in the situations in which Chinese most commonly interact with Tanzanians, as employers managing employees and as migrants dealing with government officials—situations exemplifying the situation of Chinese migrants being economically privileged and politically vulnerable.

Despite the anti-racist possibilities of South–South cooperation, it is through the collaborative construction of '*Heiren*' between Chinese speakers in conversation about these relational dilemmas with Africans that ethno-racial difference is constructed. In validating each other's experiences with the pithy phrase '*Heiren* are like this', the heterogeneity of experiences and possibilities is flattened. Furthermore, it is through the resonance between these and global anti-Black discourses that these discussions become discursively complicit with anti-Black racism. By discursive complicity, I mean how individual discourses contribute to other problematic ones independent of the intentions of the speaker (Pagliai 2011). Africa–China relations are embedded within global capitalism and its histories, and there are limits to relativising the racial discourses produced by Chinese speakers. Rather than debating the difference between 'Chinese' and 'Western' racial ideologies, the more immediate concern is whether the practices and discourses of South–South relations in the present reproduce or can transform Africa's position in the world. ■



Counter Parallax. Source: Dan Zen (CC), Flickr.com.

Afro-Asian Parallax

The Harlem Renaissance,
Literary Blackness, and Chinese
Left-Wing Translations

Kun HUANG

Just as China emerged as a revolutionary trope in interwar Black internationalist imaginaries, Shanghai-based journals started to introduce African American writing to Chinese readers. This essay traces early translations of Black literature in Republican-era China and unpacks the parallaxic visions as the Harlem Renaissance travelled across the Pacific. Literary Blackness built on and expanded the discourse of ‘minor nations’ and mediated the convergence of transnational left-wing cultures. Chinese translators and critics also reshaped Black literature’s political valency through textual practices, revealing situated differences that conditioned early encounters of Black internationalism and the Chinese left wing.

In 1934, the literary journal *Wenxue* (文學, *Literature*) introduced a group of poems written by African American writers in a special issue dedicated to the literature of ‘weak and small nations’ (弱小民族文學專號). Titled ‘Black Wreath’ (黑的花環), this collection of poems takes up the singular heading of ‘Blackness’ (黑人, *Heiren*) in the journal’s otherwise coherent mapping of the literature of minor nations. In its table of contents, the journal presents a wide range of translated works divided into distinct ethno-national categories, such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, Brazil, and India, putting an emphasis on small and emerging nations in Eastern Europe and West Asia as well as current or former European colonies. This special issue of *Wenxue*

represents one of the earliest attempts to translate African American literature into the Chinese language. The singularity of Blackness in *Wenxue's* cartography of minor nations raises a series of questions: What does including Blackness in 'weak and small nations' (弱小民族, *ruoxiao minzu*) mean for the articulation of literary nationhood of the time? How does conceptualising Blackness as a 'weak and small nation' suggest new configurations of race, nation, and the task of literature in Republican-era China?

Wenxue's formulation of literary Blackness should not be conflated with the contemporaneous racial discourse that infused the soundscape, literary experiments, and visual iconography of semicolonial Shanghai. While prominent African American jazz musicians—including Teddy Weatherford, Buck Clayton, Earl Whaley, and Valaida Snow—were in high demand in opulent ballrooms in the city's French and International quarters, Blackness also became commodified, fragmentary, and primitivised through modernist aesthetic practices and media technologies such as sound films, print commercials, and phonograph records that defined the experience of being modern in Shanghai (Presswood 2020; Schaefer 2017).

In contrast to the sensorial experiences privileged by the entertainment industry, literary translations appeared to present Black voices in their own words and made them legible and accessible to the Chinese reading public. Yet, in so doing, they also removed them from the original context and embroiled them in new meaning-making systems. This essay unpacks the discursive lineage, social formations, and textual practices that rendered the literature of the Harlem Renaissance into *Heiren wenxue* (黑人文學, 'Black literature') in 1930s China. It argues that the articulation of literary Blackness by Chinese left-wing intellectuals built on and expanded the discourse of 'minor nations'—a development that bears witness to submerged connections between Black America and the Chinese left obliquely via the Soviet Union. Situating Chinese translations of Black literature in their historical context also reveals fissures between the originals and the translations, between authorship and reception. These differences point to unfinished tasks of solidarity-building as Black and Chinese activists and intellectuals envisioned liberation and pursued justice alongside and in relation to each other.



Cover of *Wenxue's* special issue on the literature of *Ruoxiao Minzu*, 1934.

Minor and Injured Nations

Wenxue's 1934 special issue reconfigured a decades-long tradition of translating the literature of 'minor nations' to modernise China. Literary translation was closely tied to 'the concern with the oppressed' that increasingly preoccupied Chinese intellectuals' global focus in the early twentieth century. The desire for world literature, as Jing Tsu (2010: 297) points out, cannot be separated from 'nationalism's identification with the weak', which sought literary alliance in terms of not so much prestige as 'oppression and survival'. This preoccupation can be seen in the activities of a wide range of translators since the late Qing. For example, *A Collection of Fiction from Abroad* (域外小說集, 1909), translated by the Zhou brothers (Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun), primarily focuses on short stories written by Russian, Eastern European, and Northern European writers. The specific wording of *ruoxiao minzu* gained traction around the May Fourth

Movement. Chen Duxiu popularised the term with his essay ‘The Pacific Conference and the Weak and Small Nations of the Pacific’ (太平洋會議與太平洋弱小民族) published in *Xin Qingnian* (新青年, *New Youth*) in 1921 (Song 2007: 12–13). In parallel to its sociopolitical usage, the literary category of *ruoxiao minzu* serves as an antithesis to ‘Western literature’ or the literature of the ‘Great Powers’. It was a gesture of naming that was highly self-referential: ‘The weak seen from the eyes of the weak’ (Song 2007: 17–18).

The evolving formulations of ‘minor nations’ reveal not only the expansion of geographical and knowledge scope but also significant conceptual shifts. In a special issue on the literature of ‘injured nations’ (被損害的民族) published by the influential literary journal *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* (小說月報, *Fiction Monthly*) in 1921, which covers Polish, Czech, Greek, and Jewish literature, the editor bases the concept of ‘injured nations’ partially on racialist notions of national character. The introductory essay suggests that to understand the characteristics of the literature of ‘injured nations’, one must pay attention to: ‘1. Which race a nation belongs to (its hereditary features); 2. The particularities produced by the injuries it bears; 3. The natural environment and social circumstances its people inhabit’ (Mao 1921: 2). In contrast, the opening editorial of *Wenxue*’s 1934 special issue, written by the activist intellectual Hu Yuzhi under the pen-name Hua Lu, steers away from positivist approaches to racial and national difference and instead defines *ruoxiao minzu* as an identity and positionality indexing power relations. *Wenxue*’s new definition comprises three distinct categories (Hu 1934):

- 1) Oppressed nations (被壓迫民族): native populations in a colony or semicolony and people of colour under white rule. Examples in this category include Indians (South Asians), ‘nations of the Black race’, Malays, Jews, and Koreans.
- 2) Minority nationalities (少數民族): non-majority national groups that are not politically independent but maintain a certain degree of economic and cultural autonomy within an independent state. Examples include the Irish, Flemish, Catalans, and Armenians.

- 3) Small-state nations (小國民族): nations that have nominally achieved independence but remain economically and culturally dominated by powerful states. This is the largest category, encompassing most of the formerly known minor nations on which Chinese translators focused their attention.

Categorising the totality of ‘the Black race’ as an ‘oppressed nation’, *Wenxue* espouses a concept of Blackness that transcends geographical and state borders, yet also renders insignificant the different historical experiences of Africans and the African diaspora—in particular, those shaped by the violent aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While this understanding shares similarities with strands of Black nationalist and pan-African thought, ‘nation’ here remains the principal category of identification and underpins a teleology of global struggles. ‘Oppressed nations’, ‘minority nationalities’, and ‘small-state nations’, in other words, not only name a present state, but also announce the stages of progression towards formal equality within the family of nations. Modern state sovereignty and national autonomy become both the instrument and the objective that unite the pursuits of ‘weak and small nations’.

Left-Wing Convergence and Reorientation

If the ‘minor’ or ‘injured’ nation serves as a recurrent rallying point for Chinese intellectuals to chart the evolving contours of politically conscious literary world maps, *Wenxue*’s updated framework was also a product of the convergence and strategic orientation of left-wing cultures in Shanghai in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, *Wenxue* can be viewed as a reincarnation of *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* under the support of writers connected to the League of Left-Wing Writers (左聯), an association of progressive writers founded under the support of the Chinese Communist Party. The confluence of left-leaning intellectuals at *Wenxue* was the outcome of and response to the increasingly repressive political climate. After Mao Dun took over as the new chief editor in the early 1920s, *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* transformed itself from a largely commercial

venture into a platform for ‘the reform and progress of Chinese literature’ (Chen 2018: 117). Its progressive visions were met with increased pressure from its publisher and the journal was discontinued after the bombing of the Commercial Press by the Japanese during the Shanghai Incident. Editors from the Commercial Press, such as Zheng Zhenduo, Mao Dun, and Hu Yuzhi, were looking for a new publication venue over which they could exercise greater autonomy (Huang 2010: 374).

At the same time, writers and publications suspected of communist leanings came under heightened scrutiny, especially after the Nationalist Party intensified censorship of ‘proletarian literature’ (普羅文學) from 1930 to 1933 (Lu 2014: 109). Periodicals officially published by the League of Left-Wing Writers, such as *Mengya Yuekan* (萌芽月刊, *Blossoms Monthly*), *Beidou* (北斗, *North Stars*), and *Wenxue Yuebao* (文學月報, *Literary Monthly*), were banned from publication. Writers affiliated with the league not only faced obstacles in getting their works published. Politically active members had also been arrested, imprisoned, and executed. Publications that had supported left-wing critiques of the Nationalist government would also put their editor’s life at risk. To mention just one instance, Shi Liangcai, the owner and editor-in-chief of *Shen Bao* (申報), which had published a series of articles by Lu Xun and others criticising Nationalist policies, was assassinated in 1934 (Wakeman 2003: 179–82).

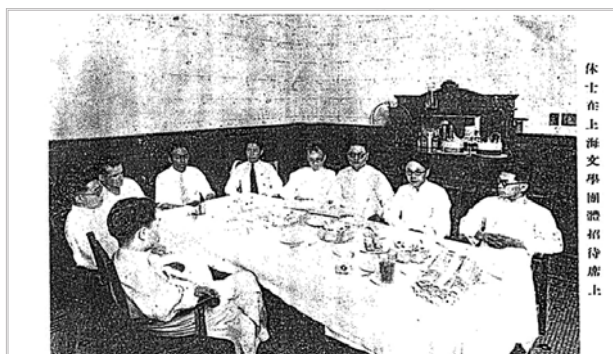
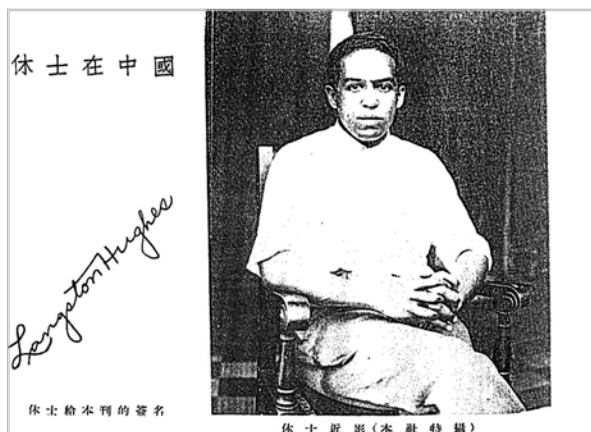
Wenxue avoided an open affiliation with the Communist Party by putting non-league translator Fu Donghua and editor Huang Yuan in the chief editorial positions (Huang 2010: 375–77). The journal thus provided left-wing writers, including many league members—such as Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Ding Ling, Sha Ting, Bai Wei, and Ai Wu, many of whom were already under surveillance—with a less conspicuous platform from which to navigate the intensified censorship. Yet, the new journal still received warnings from the censors less than one year after its initiation for introducing Soviet literature. The Nationalist Party demanded *Wenxue* remove ‘left-wing publications’ and contribute to ‘nationalist literature and arts’ (Lu 2014: 111). Translated literature, especially from ‘weak and small nations’, proved less politically sensitive than Soviet literature and original works by Chinese writers with a strong proletarian stance. This is because pro-Nationalist intellectuals were

also turning to *ruoxiao minzu* and Black literature during the same period, but used them to advocate for the party line’s *minzu wenyi* (民族文藝, ‘nationalist literature and arts’) in periodicals founded to counter leftist influences (Ji 2021: 46; Song 2007: 54). Art critic Zhu Yingpeng, for example, systemically introduced literary works from ‘weak and small nations’ in *Qianfeng Yuekan* (前鋒月刊, *Vanguard Monthly*) (Lu 2014: 112). In promoting *ruoxiao minzu*, the Nationalists sought to interpret literary and artistic creations as embodiments of national spirit and tended to highlight the universal appeal of nationalism (Chen 2015: 108). That is, the literature of ‘weak and small nations’ became a cultural battlefield with heightened political stakes, where left-wing and right-wing forces competed for interpretative power and mass influence under ostensibly the same banner.

Communist Networks and Proletarian Critique

If the Nationalist censors strove to eradicate radical voices from the left by banning proletarian works and reinterpreting the literature of minor nations, leftist writers sought to embed class critiques and communist connections in their translation and critical practices. *Wenxue*’s inclusion of Black literature in its literary cartography is a case in point. One of the writers introduced in the 1934 special issue was Langston Hughes, a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes visited Shanghai in July 1933 after being invited to the Soviet Union to contribute to the production of a film on ‘Negro life in America’ (Lee 2015: 185). As the first African American intellectual to set foot in China, Hughes was warmly received by the literary circles in Shanghai and embraced as a ‘revolutionary Black writer’ (Gao 2021: 252–57). Although Hughes eventually distanced himself and removed many details of his communist connections from his autobiography, the significance of his presence in Shanghai and the appraisal of his literary output in the eyes of his Chinese contemporaries were closely tied to his involvement and reputation in the transnational communist networks.

In unpublished drafts of his memoir, Hughes recounts the arrangements the radical American journalists Agnes Smedley and Harold R. Isaacs made



Wenxue's photo coverage of Hughes' visit in Shanghai, 1933.

for him to meet with Madame Sun Yat-sen and the writer Lu Xun, both of whom were under heightened surveillance due to their politics and influence (Taketani 2014: 126–28). The underground nature of these meetings led to unfair criticism of Lu Xun's absence from Hughes's public appearances (Cheung 2020). Hughes's associations with Chinese leftists, on the other hand, entangled him in the Japanese police dragnet and resulted in his deportation by the Japanese authority after he departed Shanghai for Tokyo (Hughes 2001: 259–71). The Chinese writers and journalists with whom Hughes publicly met were aware of and showed keen interest in his Soviet connections. In fact, among the five questions they posed to Hughes during a high-profile lunch featured in *Wenxue*, three focused on Soviet policies and the cultural scene, one pertained to US proletarian culture, and only one addressed Black American literature (Hughes 2001: 257–58).

Wenxue appraises Hughes's literary output and the accomplishments of Black American literature primarily through the lens of proletarian culture. Its second 1933 issue spotlights Hughes's meeting with Chinese writers and journalists along with printed photographs, an introductory essay by Fu Donghua (Wu Shi), and Fu's translation of Hughes's travel essay 'People Without Shoes'. Not among Hughes's best-known works, 'People Without Shoes' focuses on the shoeless Haitian peasant class as a critique of the entrenched racial capitalist conditions epitomised by the light-skinned elites' obsession with and privileged access to formal attire. Translated into Chinese, the essay can be read as a borrowed commentary on the semicolonial conditions of Shanghai and a proletarian critique of the ruling Nationalist Party. This piece was originally published in the Marxist cultural magazine *New Masses*, a 'dynamic center' of the American literary and political left in the 1930s

(Peck 1978: 387). Written in the style of reportage, it reflects Hughes's 'leftward shift in his thinking towards a greater emphasis on class' (White 2011: 110).

In other words, the debut and legibility of Black literature on the leftist Chinese literary scene were predicated on the perceived radical turn of Black writers and their endorsement within the transnational communist and leftist cultural networks. The purview and priorities of Soviet and US critics and publications played an important role in Chinese left-wing writers' reception of Black literature. For example, it was only after Hughes's novel *Not Without Laughter* was celebrated in *New Masses* and translated into Russian that it gained visibility and started to circulate in China (Ji 2021: 36; Gao 2021: 266). Chinese critics' assessment of Hughes's works also heavily draws on review articles and original works published in the Comintern-affiliated *International Literature* (Ji 2021: 44). Fu Donghua's (1933: 254) introductory essay, for instance, cites the Soviet critic Lydia Filatova in celebrating Hughes as 'the only established Black writer to have parted ways with the beaten tracks of petit bourgeois and bourgeois literature'. In line with Soviet and American leftist critics, Fu portrays Hughes's literary trajectory as one of growth, marked by a laudable turn away from the 'bourgeois aestheticism' that characterises much of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes's first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), is then criticised as an 'escapist' attempt that glosses over the harsh realities of racial oppression with 'romantic delusions' (Fu 1933: 255). The commentator further suggests that, though *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) pays more attention to the Black working class, it was not until his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), that Hughes became a writer 'fully committed to realism', capable of grasping the 'realities of Black life with the determination to protest and rebel' (Fu 1933: 256).

If self-imposed repression and critical neglect of Hughes's radical poetry and proletarian aesthetics continue to haunt his literary legacy in America (Dawahare 1998; Young 2007), his Chinese textual presence prioritised the 'red' Hughes from the very start, almost to the exclusion of his earlier works. Indeed, according to Fu (1933: 256), it is through the 'complete repudiation of his former creative approach' that Hughes established himself as a 'revolutionary artist'. Elevating the political Hughes, Republican-era left-wing discourse championed Black writers' depar-

ture from the perceived bourgeois modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. Chinese translations and literary criticism thus participated in adjudicating the proper *form* of Blackness by privileging radicalisation over aestheticisation. This polarising tendency infused literary Blackness with enduring tensions between aesthetic style and political content.

'Heiren Wenxue' between Black and Red

Hughes's Shanghai visit gave rise to a new wave of translation of Black literature in China (for an extensive survey of Chinese translations and reception of Hughes's writing, see Gao 2021). Following Hughes's recommendation, *Wenxue* translated an excerpt from Walter White's novel *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) in its fourth issue published in October 1933. While the novel follows the political awakening of Kenneth Harper, a Black veteran and physician returning to the American South, this translated excerpt zooms in on the violent encounter between a white mob and the protagonist's brother Bob Harper, an impassioned youth determined to avenge their sister's rape. In contrast to Kenneth's moderate leanings towards racial uplift, Bob, a 'natural rebel, represents "the militant approach" among southern Blacks' (Piep 2009: 266). By focusing on Bob's actions and the tragedy that ensued—he was ultimately lynched by the mob—the translation highlights the irreconcilable nature of racial antagonism and embraces armed revolt against anti-Black violence. Also noteworthy is the fact that *Wenxue* started to identify Walter White as a 'Black' writer in this issue—and hence the category of 'Black literature' (*Heiren wenxue*) in the subsequent translations—as opposed to Hughes being first introduced as an 'American' writer. In other words, Blackness became legible in left-wing publications through translational strategies of radicalisation.

The theme of lynching and violence against Black women recurred in Hughes's 'Song for a Dark Girl' (1927), translated as 'For a Black Girl' (給黑人女郎) in the May 1934 special issue on 'weak and small nations'. Notable in this translation are the removal of the musical reference from the title and its anti-religious theme. Lamenting the death of their brutalised 'black young lover', the speaker 'asked the white

Lord Jesus/What was the use of prayer'. These albeit minor revisions mirrored the left-wing scepticism of, if not antipathy towards, religion and Black musical practices as revolutionary vehicles (Jones 2001; Presswood 2020). In contrast, Hughes's literary oeuvre takes a rather sophisticated approach to religion and music (Rampersad 2019). His poetic innovations deeply engage with not only the content but also the form of blues, spirituals, and jazz, connecting vernacular culture to radical critique of structural oppression (Hernton 1993; Gargallo 2021; Young 2007)

The tendency to secularise religious content is further illustrated in the translation of 'An Appeal to My Countrywomen' (1896) written by the poet and abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who was an important precursor to the African American women poets of the Harlem Renaissance (Kemp 2013: 789). A prominent leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Harper embeds multiple references to God—God's judgement, retribution, and justice—and sin in the 14-stanza poem. The Chinese translation in *Wenxue*, however, retains only four stanzas and constricts the traces of religiosity to the mere 'one line of prayer', significantly shortening the original through a process of secular rewriting. The translation also changed the title to 'To Women' (給女人們). The revised title transposes the original appeal to white American women, who would 'sigh o'er the sad-eyed Armenian' and 'mourn o'er the exile of Russia' but neglect the 'Sobs of anguish, murmurs of pain' from Black mothers of the South, to a broadened plea for revolutionary sisterhood potentially applicable in the Chinese context.

As a whole, *Wenxue*'s translation of Black poems prioritises secular visions of revolution and proletarian solidarity through the exposure and condemnation of anti-Black racial violence, attention to the Black working-class condition, and the call to end oppression by armed rebellion. The rest of the poetry collection consists of Claude McKay's 'If We Must Die' (1919), written in response to the violent incidents during Red Summer; Hughes's 'Share-Croppers', translated as '長工' *changgong*—a familiar figure in the works of left-wing Chinese writers; and Hughes's 'October 16', which commemorates the white abolitionist John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry in an attempt to start an armed rebellion of freed slaves. The motifs of racial antagonism, class oppression, and revolutionary violence thus thread through

Wenxue's collections of Black literature. These motifs prefigure the postwar socialist literary world system that continues to draw on and adapt cultural expressions of Black radicalism despite the paradigmatic shift away from engagements with 'capitalist countries' (Gao 2021: 287–91; Volland 2017: 181).

Heiren wenxue thus names a cultural regime of translation strained by textual and political ambivalences. While literary Blackness acquires conceptual coherence and political clarity through the radicalisation of the Harlem Renaissance, the 'nationalisation' of Blackness—that is, categorising *Heiren* as a subgroup of *ruoxiao minzu*—delimits the horizon of Black liberation. The logic of formal equivalence underpinning the 'family of nations' separates comparable and related struggles into discrete geopolitical units, hindering reflexive critiques of racial modernity that cut across state and ideological borders. It undermines the transgressive and transformative power of radical critiques of racial capitalism and anti-Blackness that had similarly affected China. Furthermore, the cartography of 'minor nations' presents a teleological vision of global struggles, whose constituent units were susceptible to the prevailing political priorities and ideological criteria. Its emphasis on totality and inclusion downplays the tensions and discrepancies not only between the designated national traditions but even among the writers themselves. As Yunxiang Gao (2021: 287) points out, while Hughes turned away from radical politics in the face of increased censorship and persecution under McCarthyism, China's official press continued to champion the radical Hughes from the 1930s 'as if he were preserved in a time capsule'. In this case, the valorisation of radical Blackness in Chinese left-wing discourse—which became state-sponsored in the postwar years—was ironically indifferent to the complex realities that shaped Black life on the ground.

Parallactic Visions and the Cartography of Possibilities

If *Heiren wenxue* or literary Blackness in left-wing Chinese discourse remained largely textually mediated encounters, Hughes's sojourn in Shanghai gave rise to a different Afro-Asian poetics on the other side of the Pacific. In poems such as 'Roar, China!'

(1937), ‘Song of the Refugee Road’ (1940), ‘Consider Me’ (1951–52), and ‘In Explanation of Our Times’ (1955), Hughes invokes China as a metonym for the global colour line (Lai-Henderson 2020: 91; Luo 2012). Hughes transformed what he saw in Shanghai—the indignities suffered by the rickshaw boys, the racially segregated space of the International Settlement, and the fascist suppression of the communist underground—into verses calling for ‘Little coolie boy’ and ‘Red generals’ to ‘Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.’s’ and ‘Break the chains of the East’ (Hughes 1995: 199–200). By protesting not only ‘the impudence of white foreigners in drawing a color line against the Chinese in China itself’ (Hughes 2001: 250), but also the ‘the yellow men’ who came ‘To take what the white men/Hadn’t already taken’ in reference to Japan (Hughes 1995: 199), Hughes incorporates anti-imperialist critique to remap the global colour line—a line that extends ‘From China/By way of Arkansas/To Lenox Avenue’ (p. 386).

Drawing on lived experience to rework Orientalist tropes, Hughes’s China poems sketch an Afro-Asian cartography that connects Black America and China through comparable experiences of oppression and humiliation. Despite Hughes’s formal renunciation of communist commitments in public, China remains a figurative anchor for his poetic visions of a shared future of liberation. In ‘In Explanation of Our Times’, the speaker announces that ‘The folks with no titles in front of their names’, like Negroes in Dixie and coolies in China, ‘are raring up and talking back/to the folks called Mister’ (Hughes 1995: 449). The revolutionary appeal of a distant China is palpable in poems that address momentous events of the civil rights movement. ‘Undertow’, for example, juxtaposes Selma and Peking to ‘The solid citizens/Of the country club set’ (Hughes 1995: 561). In ‘Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)’, the girls killed in the church bombing ‘await/The dynamite that might ignite/The fuse of centuries of Dragon Kings’ and might be awakened by songs ‘yet unfelt among magnolia trees’ (Hughes 1995: 557).

Approaching China as a collective subject and revolutionary metonym, Hughes’s Afro-Asian poetics shares differences and similarities with the discourse of literary Blackness to which his presence and translated works contributed in interwar Shanghai. Whereas the latter relies on systems of literary circulation and textual mediation for trans-

national left-wing and proletarian cultural formations, the former draws from the embodied experiences of the travelling Black subject to expand the purview of anti-racist and anti-imperialist critique beyond the United States. Both ‘Blackness’ and ‘China’, in this sense, initiate a break from dominant epistemic frameworks and state-centred political concerns, enabling different strategies of disruption in response to different yet interconnected contexts of suppression—anti-communist, fascist, and racially segregated—across the Pacific.

These cultural practices also have their own share of historical limitations. If Chinese leftists reshaped the Harlem Renaissance through selective inclusion and textual modification, the imagery of China in Hughes’s poetics underwent processes of romanticisation and abstraction. Furthermore, neither enjoyed the benefits of sustained dialogue or mutual critique due to the structural separation of discursive genealogies and the mediated nature of these encounters. *Heiren wenxue* and Black internationalism can thus be seen as constituting a disarticulated unity, whose contingent convergence at the site of interwar Shanghai gestures towards a plurality of liberatory visions, still very much kept apart by ‘the departmentalization of historical and theoretical work along national and supraregional lines’ (Jones and Singh 2003: 3). Attending to these parallaxic visions would entail revamping ‘Afro-Asia’ not only as a corrective to ethnonationalist historiography or disciplinary insularity, but more importantly as shared dreams of freedom that remain dormant, untranslated, and unheard in the interstices of the archive. ■

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Figure 1: Lewis Michaux at the African National Memorial Bookstore he owned in Harlem, New York City, in 1970. Source: Jack Garofalo—Paris Match/Getty Images.

Black Nationalism and Maoism

Revisiting the Relationship

Ruodi DUAN

This essay deconstructs the high tide of encounter between China and African American liberation movements. While Chinese narratives in the 1960s promoted a linear vision of Black militancy that would join forces with the white working class, Black Power activists engaged with Maoism as a framework for a politics of racial nationalism that did not always aspire to interracial and anticapitalist coalition-building as its goal. As the project of Afro-Chinese solidarity lost political importance in the post-Mao era, state representatives and official channels within China no longer championed anti-racism to counter potential popular expressions of prejudice.

In October 1964, the People's Republic of China announced its successful detonation of an atomic bomb. From political exile in Havana, Robert F. Williams—a civil rights activist from Monroe, North Carolina, and among the earliest advocates of Black armed self-defence—celebrated the event as a victory for Afro-Asian racial fraternity:

China's dehumanization of the past, like the Negro's today, was based on a system of exploitation master-minded by the same racist savages ... [China's bomb is] the Afro-American's bomb, because the Chinese people are blood brothers to the Afro-American and all those who fight against racism and imperialism. (Williams 1964: 9)

When Malcolm X met with Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere in Dar es Salaam that same month, they bonded over their pride that a non-white nation could acquire so powerful and symbolic a weapon. In Malcolm's recollection, this three-hour conversation marked a personal turning point, inspiring him to consider 'socialism as a viable economic strategy of liberation and China as a potentially powerful Third World ally' (Markle 2017: 35–37). Claudia Jones, a Trinidadian American feminist and communist activist, further endorsed China's bomb as a major step forward in the global struggle against white supremacy (Liu 2019). And in his memoir, Amiri Baraka, who would go on to galvanise the beginnings of the Black Arts Movement in 1965, categorised the occasion alongside Ghanaian independence as two cataclysmic victories for 'colored peoples' (Kelley and Esch 1999: 12–13).

The year 1964 marked the height of synchronicity between Chinese engagements with Black liberation and African American adaptations of Maoism: the year of the bomb also saw the publication of Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*—a spiritual atomic bomb—and, within the United States, the crystallisation of calls for armed self-defence and systemic transformation that would soon galvanise the Black Power Movement. The symbolic power that the African American struggle commanded in Chinese rhetoric had been most significant in the early 1960s, when US imperialism figured as China's greatest foe. But the hold of Chinese socialism on the African American left peaked in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, corresponding with the rise of Black Power. The unevenness of this encounter did not detract from the relationship because it was precisely the revolutionary ideal—whether of socialism fully realised in the Afro-Asian world or of prospective guerilla struggle in the 'belly of the beast'—that rendered each so appealing to the other.

A Paradoxical Relationship

The confluence of Maoism and Black nationalism had a powerful resonance but also generated ambivalence. Rather than any abiding conviction in Marxism-Leninism, African American support for China in the 1960s and 1970s tended to derive from long-

standing commitments to Black nationalism. The principles inherent to Maoism—the righteousness of violent resistance, the urgency of change, and cultural revolution—spoke to Black nationalists as few other political ideologies had done. Moreover, the carefully curated appearance of autonomy and self-determination granted to China's ethnic minorities heightened the pull of Maoism for Black nationalists, who centred land, space, and power in their visions for liberation. This included cultural nationalists like Ron Karenga, best known for establishing the pan-African holiday of Kwanzaa. In 1977, Karenga travelled to China alongside 20 other organisers of independent Black schools (The Black Scholar 1977). The group especially admired Chinese policies on minority equality and governance, and, at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, Karenga delivered a lecture about Black education in the United States as a function of African American liberation. After the visit, Karenga noted: 'When we argued the dual character of our oppression ... the Chinese did not deny the racial factor, only stressed that in the final analysis, class was determinative' (Rickford 2016: 255).

China's own ambivalence about class struggle and national self-determination was reflected in the interpretation of these issues among African American radical thinkers. In effect, the racial rhetoric that the Chinese State intended to form a pathway towards class struggle served as an end in itself, attracting Black nationalists who sought a non-white model of political defiance.

To legitimate Maoism's ultimate emphasis on class-based solutions to racial oppression, Chinese discourses in the early 1960s—in the form of news reports, public lectures, performances, art installations, and more—sought to demonstrate a deep understanding of the nuances of racism, highlighting China's own past of colonial exploitation and dispossession in contrast to the negligence of the Soviet Union and Cuba to address the same questions. The unfolding struggle for civil rights received widespread coverage in local, regional, and national newspapers. A documentary film titled 支持美国黑人斗争 (*Support the African American Struggle*) premiered to great fanfare in Beijing in August 1963. It continued to show around the world, with Malcolm X reportedly attending a viewing held at the Chinese Embassy in Accra, Ghana (Marable 2011: 317).

As I have written about previously (Duan 2019: 1372–78), on the first anniversary of Mao's August 1963 statement declaring support for US civil rights, everyday Chinese citizens, under the auspices of municipal unions and other civil organisations, gathered for vocal enunciations of solidarity with African Americans. Speakers at these gatherings compared the contemporary social and economic oppression of African Americans to Chinese suffering in semicolonial turn-of-the-century China: both groups of people confronted the twin foes of racial discrimination and capitalist exploitation. Given the temporal sequence of their linked fates, as the Chinese historical experience demonstrated, only a militant class-based revolution could overturn longstanding patterns of race-based oppression. During a time of tremendous political anxiety and upheaval within China, the prospect of African American liberation unfolding in this manner became an important didactic tool for Chinese officials, laying bare to domestic audiences what such a revolution could look like in Maoist terms.

Even if these campaigns carried an instrumental aim in the Chinese context, they often resonated with Black audiences outside China. Reflecting on his second month-long tour of the country—on which he embarked in the autumn of 1964 alongside his wife, Mabel, and their two teenage sons—Robert Williams singled out China's understanding of race as uniquely praiseworthy, even more so than the concurrent economic and technological advancements he witnessed. Williams cited the increase in road traffic, the rapid move away from natural gas and towards gasoline as fuel for vehicles, and the wide availability of consumer goods. Yet, none of this left as profound an impression on him as the expressions of solidarity from the Chinese people. As he recalled: 'Even the most isolated peasants in the remotest reaches ... keep abreast of current affairs ... They display a great insight into the U.S. race issue and express great sympathy for their oppressed Afro-American brothers' (Williams 1965: 6). This presented an explicit contrast to his travels in the Soviet Union, about which Williams had this to say to his Chinese hosts back in 1963:

The people there knew very little about [our] struggle, and in speaking with the African students [there], we found that they hadn't heard of [the 16th Street Baptist Church

bombing] in Birmingham. The Soviets had moved news of this struggle to the backburner. (Shanghai Commission of the Chinese People's Association for World Peace 1963)

Discursive Shifts

In 1966, the entire Williams family relocated to Beijing, with their decision to depart Cuba facilitated by open disagreements with Cuban perspectives on race and Black nationalist resistance (Cohen 1972: 282–318). But Chinese narratives, by this time, had also begun to downplay the racial particularities of African American freedom movements, opting instead for the formulation of a broad-based anti-imperialist and anticapitalist front in the United States. The statement that Mao Zedong released after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968 mirrored this trend. In the declaration, Mao commended African American activists for 'winning sympathy and support from increasing numbers of white working people and progressives in the United States', predicting that the African American struggle 'is bound to merge with the American workers' movement, and this will eventually end the criminal rule of the US monopoly capitalist class' (People's Daily 1968). In this interpretation, African Americans were no longer regarded as the vanguard of an impending revolution—a position that allowed overlaps with calls for Black nationalism and Black Power—but only as a participatory element in a generalised working-class formation.

Few photographs capture the paradox of African American and Afro-diasporic activists taking inspiration from Maoism as Chinese engagement with African American radicalism waned as effectively as an image of the African National Memorial Bookstore in Harlem, New York, taken in 1970 (see Figure 1). Essentially one of the most famous reading rooms of the civil rights movement, the bookshop once hosted W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Kwame Nkrumah. That the definitive relevance of China lay in its emphasis on racial and cultural nationalism is embodied by the placement of Mao's portrait next to those of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—iconic figures in genealogies of pan-Africanism. For a generation of Black radical

activists in the United States, Maoism was attractive as a third way because it spoke to enduring desires for racial self-determination.

By the late 1970s, the high tide of political solidarity between African Americans and China had retreated. Clashes between African and Chinese students roiled Chinese university campuses beginning in 1979, culminating in mass anti-African protests in 1988–89 in cities including Nanjing, Hangzhou, Beijing, and Wuhan. Triggering factors for these altercations included Chinese student outrage that their African counterparts dated Chinese women and jealousy at the economic privileges they received from the Chinese State. Chinese students at Zhejiang Agricultural University hurled the insult that their African peers were carriers of AIDS (Sautman 1994: 415–29). At Hehai University, in Nanjing, Chinese students marched to chants of ‘Beat the black devils!’ after a false rumour spread that a Chinese man had been killed by Africans. Two years earlier, in 1986, African embassies in Beijing had received a letter from an unidentified Chinese ‘student association’ decrying the allocation of national resources to educate ‘backwards’ races rather than being used to help China catch up with the West, complete with a call to learn from US history valuable lessons in about how to ‘curb’ its Black citizens (Sullivan 1994: 445–50).

The shift is due to the fact that political, ideological, and discursive priorities had changed. They were no longer about the liberation of people and races, but about the liberation of productive forces and material development. The project of racial solidarity as part of a broader internationalism and Third-World solidarity was a thing of the past, and Chinese representatives and official channels no longer championed anti-racism to counter popular expressions of prejudice, as they once did with vigour in such varied ways. In fact, in 1956, after reports had surfaced that some citizens refused to shake hands with and kept their children away from Black visitors to Shanghai, a municipal memorandum had circulated to implore civilians to act in a respectful manner, reminding them of the history of Black oppression under colonialism (Liu 2013: 136).

Deconstructing the Encounter

Race and racism remain controversial within China today, especially as new patterns of migration and investment between China and Africa take hold. Popular conversations about Afro-Chinese connections often lean either of two ways: recalling a romanticised past of anticolonial and anti-racist alliance or referring to anti-Blackness in Chinese society as a decontextualised and ahistorical phenomenon. But neither set of discourses reflects the full truth. Histories of Third-Worldism are always more complex than they seem. In the 1960s, Chinese narratives promulgated a linear vision of Black militancy that would join forces with the white working class, while Black Power activists engaged with Maoism as a theoretical framework for a Black nationalist—and sometimes separatist—politics that did not necessarily aspire to interracial and anticapitalist coalition-building as its goal. To deconstruct the terms of this encounter, however, can lend insight into processes through which Maoism and, by extension, contemporary Chinese politics and identities have been constructed in relation to ideas and visions of Black nationalist and pan-African resistance across the Pacific. ■



Robert and Mabel Williams pictured in Cuban exile.
Source: Freedom Archives.

Tracing the Chinese Arc of Black Internationalist Feminism

An Archive Story

Zifeng LIU

This essay attempts to recover Mabel Robinson Williams, an African American radical woman, as a key figure in the history of Black internationalism in China. In reconstructing her travels to China it reveals and interrogates the gendered and sexualised terms under which she appears in the Chinese archive of Afro-Asian solidarity. While Robinson Williams' own vision of alternatives to global racial capitalism can be gleaned from those records, her overall archival representation as the wife and help-mate of a bombastic, better-known male activist diminishes her role.

Ranging from the personal, political, and intellectual affinities between W.E.B. Du Bois and Mao Zedong to multiracial groups of muscular male revolutionaries on the front lines of the global charge against US imperialism, the iconographic and historiographical representations of Afro-Asian solidarity prioritise men's internationalist activism and homosocial bonds, rarely question the long-normalised link of heteromascularity with radical coalition-building, and often diminish and simplify women's role in weaving together those radical traditions (Reddy and Sudhakar 2018; Huang 2018). While

such masculinist accounts of Afro-Asian internationalism remain dominant, the recent growth of scholarship on Black left feminism has not only highlighted African and African diasporic women's contributions to global movements against colonialism and imperialism but also incorporated gender and sexuality as key categories of analysis (Blain and Gill 2019). My current book manuscript stages a conversation between these two bodies of literature to foreground African American women radicals' engagements with Mao's China.

Moving Black radical women to the centre of the history of Black internationalism in China has required thoughtful and innovative approaches to existing accessible archival materials. Some Black left feminists spoke prolifically and managed to have their papers and memorabilia preserved in publicly accessible libraries and archives, even though the 'disorderly distribution' of their records renders such traditional manuscript collections incomplete (Farmer 2022). But the intellectual activism of others did not primarily take the form of delivering speeches, publishing political commentaries and theoretical writings, or giving interviews, so they did not leave many tangible traces of their lives and ideas, or the collecting and processing of their surviving records has not been completed. Mabel Robinson Williams (1925–96), a central figure in my manuscript, belonged to the latter group. In what follows I offer a brief reflection on my attempt to reconstruct her internationalist activism in China.

Where Were the Black Women in the Afro-Asian Movement?

The forging of Black–Chinese solidarities was a central theme of Mabel Robinson Williams' radical activism. Travelling to socialist China in 1963 and 1964 and residing there during the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution enabled her to harness the Chinese Government's anti-imperialist commitments and resources and, in that process, refine and refashion her ideas, while at the same time making it more difficult to disentangle her vision of radical change from that of Beijing. Despite her extensive and complex interactions with Chinese government officials and ordinary people, Robinson Williams

is known primarily as the wife and, occasionally, a collaborator of Robert Williams, an African American militant whose internationalist activities in China have enjoyed considerable attention in the growing scholarship on Afro-Asian radical connections (see Frazier 2015: 117–58). Although her friend African American feminist and educator Vicki Garvin (1991) described Robinson Williams as an activist 'in her own right', indicating that she and her husband sometimes had divergent experiences and analyses, and several scholars have recognised in passing her leading involvement in some of the most important Black internationalist and Afro-Asian initiatives, thus far only one scholarly article has foregrounded her voice, perspective, and experiences to show that she 'clearly distinguished herself as a freedom fighter and social reformer' (Dagbovie 2013: 73). But Dagbovie's primarily biographical essay on Robinson Williams focuses on documenting her sacrifices, community-based advocacy work, and media activism, especially her crucial role in maintaining *The Crusader* and *Radio Free Dixie*, and only scratches the surface of her contributions to the global struggle against white supremacy and imperialism. Her own Afro-Asian internationalist activism in China begs further analysis.

In addition to the persistent scholarly neglect of Black women's radical activism, the scarcity of archival records relating to Mabel Robinson Williams' ideas and activities in the 1960s presents a daunting challenge for efforts to situate her within a tradition of Black radical solidarity with China. Indeed, overshadowed by the spotlight on her prolific and media-savvy husband, Robinson Williams' activist efforts have been viewed as embedded in his political and intellectual activities even before their marriage and after his death. Not unlike the personal papers of many Black women best known as the wives of charismatic leaders, Robinson Williams' archive is subsumed in that of her husband. The documents in the John C. Williams collection of Robert F. and Mabel Williams Papers, which were added to the Robert F. Williams Papers at the University of Michigan in 2011, contain only limited information about her life after the 1960s. Most of her oral histories emphasise her husband's radical activism. Perhaps she titled her unpublished memoir 'Walking in His Shadow' to indicate how her voice is muffled in the records (Dagbovie 2013: 73). And her memoir, whose



Figure 1: The Williamses studying Mao Zedong's works, 12 March 1967.
Source: People's Daily.

forthcoming publication is the result of a collaborative effort involving the Freedom Archives, late historian John Bracey, Jr., and others, offers few details about her experiences in China. Robinson Williams may have been reluctant to disclose the thoughts and feelings she had while in China and to reveal intimate details of her personal life out of a justifiable concern for her and her husband's public images.

Unearthing a Radical Life

Often confronted with this challenge of archival lack, previous feminist and queer studies scholars have mined cultural works for information about non-heteronormative lives and ideas (Reddy and Sudhakar 2018). Indeed, despite the dearth of primary sources and academic studies about her, a ringing poem, 'Transition', cited in its entirety in the biographical article mentioned above indicates Robinson Williams' belief in the possibilities of Afro-Asian unity (Dagbovie 2013: 83). Composed almost as a battle cry a few weeks after her relocation to China in 1966, 'Transition' urges diasporic Black people and particularly African American activists to draw inspiration and guidance from Africa and enlist in the emerging global crusade against white supremacy: 'Oh Black and lovely creatures of the earth Mother Africa ... Oh Whose hearts that beat in unison at the Sound of the drums of Mighty Africa Rise up and throw off the heavy yoke of bondage ... merge with the Mighty tide of history'

Given that Mabel Williams now called China home, her appeal to her Black comrades to ride 'the Mighty tide of history' also reflects, perhaps implicitly, her enthusiasm about the possibilities of Afro-Asian solidarities that would wash away racism and imperialism. In other words, given her own intellectual-activist trajectory and the sociopolitical milieu in which she sounded this call to arms, the voice that emerges from this poem is that of a radical who was abreast of the revolutionary currents swirling around the globe at that time and at the centre of conjoining radical Black internationalism and Maoism. Robinson Williams' poetic affirmation of her own commitment to pan-African liberation and Afro-Asian solidarity thus points to the usefulness of the expressive and the aesthetic as sites at which to uncover insurgent connections and radical visions of those absent from official archives.

The poem's clear articulation of Robinson Williams' radical politics also sparked my interest in finding out whether all evidence of her explicit attempt to link Chinese and Black radical movements had eluded history workers. While she did leave some traces in the interstices of her husband's processed, mostly masculinist archive, very little information on her travels and relocation to China can be gleaned. To fill this gap, I primarily used recently declassified documents from Chinese state archives and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda material to assemble a transnational, multilingual archive. Although her husband's activities still dominate such source material, I was able to read against the grain to centre and piece together, at least partially, Robinson

Williams' experiences enlisting her hosts in the global struggle against white supremacy within a radicalising political landscape. Additionally, bearing in mind the limitations of archival documentation and how the historical record structures and is structured by racial, gender, and sexual power hierarchies, I viewed the available evidence as containing not only clues to her engagement with Chinese history and politics but also hints of the gendering and sexualising strategies necessary for fostering a certain internationalist common sense among a transnational public. Thus, in tracing Robinson Williams' appearances in the primary sources, I interrogate the gender and sexual terms on which she entered and was erased from the archive.

That is, through reading the government reports and news media texts separately and alongside each other, I not only brought to light Robinson Williams' internationalist activities in China and explored how, in formulating her own blueprint for forging Afro-Asian solidarities, she matched and diverged from her husband and the CCP. I also exposed the silencing mechanisms in the Chinese-language documents that rendered Robinson Williams visible only in certain ways and examined what visions of world order were enabled by her depiction therein—in particular, showing that her archival representations reveal that both the Chinese Party-State and Robert Williams sought to normalise masculinist conceptions of anti-imperialist solidarity. Ultimately, I sought to suggest that Robinson Williams' contributions to Afro-Asian internationalism cannot be contained by the masculinist archive and exceed its boundaries through challenging assumptions that reify international politics as a sphere of male action. I thus attempted—to use Saidiya Hartman's (2008: 12) words—to emphasise 'the incommensurability between the prevailing discourses and the event' and amplify 'the instability and discrepancy of the archive'.

Mabel Robinson Williams in the Chinese Public Sphere

In 1961, Mabel Robinson, Robert Franklin Williams, and their two children were forced into exile. The Williamses' insistence on retributive violence and

commitment to militant politics led to them becoming targets of white terror and racist injustice in their hometown of Monroe, North Carolina. Ultimately, a trumped-up charge of kidnapping prompted the Williamses to leave the United States and relocate, first, to Castro's Cuba and then to Mao's China (Rucker 2006; see also Tyson 1999). While exile hampered Robinson Williams' direct involvement in the intensifying Black freedom struggle in the United States, the promise of transnational mobility and expanded networks offered hope for exploring alternatives to the civil rights mainstream's liberal and nation-centred reformism and fostering internationalist solidarities. Visiting and moving to China allowed her to more effectively link the country's socialist construction projects with anti-imperialist, anti-white supremacist struggles in the United States and globally and to promote the merits of her revolutionary politics, including the strategy of armed resistance.

As the CCP's official mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, reported, the Williamses made their first visit to China in the autumn of 1963 amid unprecedented global fanfare (see NCNA 1963a). Intensive coverage by national and local Chinese media of their participation in a series of political and cultural activities enabled me to reconstruct Robinson Williams' itinerary. A week before China's National Day on 1 October, they landed at the Beijing airport as state guests to a grand welcome from leaders of the Chinese Peace Committee and other CCP-led mass organisations, representatives of ordinary Beijingers, and US exiles in the capital (NCNA 1963a). Robinson Williams and her husband were then launched on a seven-week whirlwind of banquets, receptions, meetings, rallies, and tours of schools, factories, museums, and historical sites. The Chinese press closely followed the couple's tour, which took them to Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Wuhan. This flurry of activities enabled them to establish contacts and friendships with not only Chinese politicians and intellectuals but also revolutionaries from the decolonising world stationed in or also visiting China. They were thus able to gain a better understanding of China's social construction and global anti-imperialist movements and more effectively forge radical transnational solidarities (NCNA 1963b, 1963c, 1963d, 1963f, 1963g, 1963i; SMA 1963b).

Chinese archival and media representations of Mabel Robinson Williams exemplified a heteromasculinist notion of political struggle. For instance, a day before the couple's arrival in Beijing in late September 1963, Chinese Peace Committee officials cobbled together a biography of her husband with details of his civil rights radicalism and view of the CCP, but perfunctorily introduced Robinson Williams as a 'housewife' in the plan for receiving them (SMA 1963a). Furthermore, while Robert Williams' speeches and conversations with China's national and local leaders were given prominent media attention, Robinson Williams' perspectives were subsumed under her husband's. Her efforts to steer Chinese deliberations on world revolution towards forging an alliance with African American radicals were largely sidelined, if not completely unacknowledged. At the same time as her husband was profiled as a bona fide revolutionary and one of the most committed and influential leaders of the US civil rights movement, she was cast in supporting roles as his wife, assistant, helpmate, secretary, and proxy.

The *People's Daily* and other news outlets broke the news of her participation in a series of meetings at which Robert Williams and Chinese male leaders expressed mutual admiration and forged Afro-Asian bonds of comradeship, whereas she and other women remained silent or silenced. For example, in *People's Daily* coverage of a mass gathering in Shanghai attended by the couple, local leaders, and more than 1,000 residents from all walks of life, only the words of Robert Williams and Jin Zhonghua, president of the Shanghai chapter of the Chinese People's Committee for World Peace, found their way into print and were used to highlight the homosocial bonds between the two men; Robinson Williams was not given a voice (NCNA 1963h). As we read in the article, Jin, 'along with the people of Shanghai, pledges resolute support for the Black American freedom struggle' and Robert Williams 'resolves to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese people in the struggle against US imperialism'.

Meticulously staged photographs of the Williamses conversing with top Chinese leaders, circulated via the *People's Daily*, presented Afro-Asian internationalism in similarly gendered ways. In many of these photographs, Robert Williams and Chinese male leaders, discussing world revolution, are highlighted front and centre, whereas Mabel stands in the back-



Figure 2: The Williamses meet Mao on 2 October 1963. Source: NCNA (1963f).

ground listening attentively. For example, the picture of the couple's audience with Mao Zedong, in which Robinson Williams stands behind her husband while Mao and Robert exchange solidarity handshakes, visually reflected a gendered hierarchical relationship of authority that often structured expressions of African American–Chinese solidarity (see Figure 2; NCNA 1963f). This and other images indicate the Party-State's normalisation of the gendered—and unequal—division of roles in revolutionary struggles that positioned men as powerful and effective leaders and relegated women to secondary and supplementary tasks.

During her second tour of China in the autumn of 1964, Mabel Robinson Williams' previous and current participation in building Afro-Asian solidarities received little Chinese media attention. The Williamses' growing rapport with the Party-State since their 1963 visit, as evidenced by the increasing frequency of Chinese media quotations, translations, and circulations of Robert Williams' writings and remarks (but not Mabel Williams'), was strengthened as Chinese government leaders and ordinary citizens again met with, feted, wined, dined, and eulogised them. Although Robinson Williams' presence at the receptions, meetings, mass rallies, and visits to state socialist institutions at which discussions of Afro-Asian alliances took place was confirmed by Chinese newspaper accounts, she entered China's print-centred public sphere only as the wife of Robert

Williams; her involvement in forging solidarities was reduced to accompanying her husband and her words were lost to readers (NCNA 1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1964d, 1964e, 1964f). In October 1964, the working group tasked with receiving the couple in Shanghai, having known Robinson Williams for about a year, noted that she had ‘served as president of the Monroe branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People when Robert Williams was suspended’, but still identified her as a ‘housewife’ and, more implicitly, as her husband’s secretary (SMA 1964a).

These and other highly publicised narratives, images, and performances of Afro-Asian brotherhood revealed the often heteropatriarchal underpinnings of Afro-Asian internationalism. The Chinese media’s and state archives’ limiting of Mabel Robinson Williams to her roles as the wife and helpmate of Robert Williams reinforced the link between the normalisation of heteronormative couplehood and sexist divisions of labour in liberation movements and the forging of Afro-Asian solidarities. Robinson Williams’ virtual invisibility in discourses about Black internationalism and Afro-Asian solidarity in part derives from her conscious deployment of dissemblance and acceptance of masculinist assumptions embedded in the Black radical tradition (for more on the politics of dissemblance, see Clark Hine 1994: 37). Nevertheless, the fact that Robinson Williams’ analysis of the dialectic between race and class, which was largely drawn from her activist experiences in the United States, and her efforts to cultivate Sino-African American solidarity were not completely lost on the Party-State—information that I gleaned from recently declassified Chinese government documents—indicates that her disappearance from the pages of the *People’s Daily* and other Chinese publications had more to do with the Party-State’s intentional reinforcement of heteromasculinist notions of political struggle than her own self-erasure.

The Silencing of Black Radical Female Voices

Although still overwhelmingly privileging her husband’s ideas and activities, classified reports—within which the couple’s tour companions,

guides, and interpreters occasionally recorded and commented on the details of her observations and responses to China’s socialist nation-building and her attempts to secure the Chinese Government’s commitment to supporting Black freedom struggles—revealed Robinson Williams as a vocal activist committed to Afro-Asian solidarity and a close political collaborator with her husband. Therefore, aware that simply drawing on the Chinese news media’s coverage of the couple’s visits would limit my efforts to restore her to the history of Afro-Asian solidarity to broad-brushstroke descriptions of her and her husband’s shared itineraries, I turned to those government documents to excavate and centre Robinson Williams’ voice and perspective as much as possible.

A closer perusal of her travel companions’ reports revealed that Chinese officials clearly recognised her political acumen. According to one report, compared with her husband, who was ‘not familiar with diplomatic etiquette’ and ‘not a skilled public speaker’, Robinson Williams was more ‘cultured and articulate’ (SMA 1963c). The fragments of Robinson Williams’ words and experiences culled from declassified government documents also demonstrated that she at times articulated political and ideological positions diverging from Maoist lines. Working groups tasked with receiving the Williamses in Beijing and Shanghai noted how she disagreed with Mao’s privileging of economic class over race as the fundamental axis of exploitation and solidarity. Their superiors then instructed them to raise her class consciousness by taking the couple ‘on tours and conversing with them sincerely and patiently’ to ‘convince them that national struggle, in the final analysis, is a matter of class struggle’ (SMA 1964a).

Generally, however, the erasure of Robinson Williams’ voice and subsumption of her political activism in that of her husband were threaded throughout both the news media texts and the government reports. Her archival representation indicated the Party-State’s persistent inscription of a heteropatriarchal conceptualisation of revolution and of women’s responsibilities and roles in the common social imaginary of socialist progress and world revolution. As Wang Zheng (2017: 18) shows, even Chinese state feminists had to fit their agendas with and never openly challenge the dominant gender and sexual norms that ‘extolled the womanly virtues of modesty, hard work, self-effacement, self-sacri-

fice, and a lack of desire for power and fame'. Mabel Robinson Williams' relative obscurity thus reflected and reproduced the gendered hierarchies in China, which were deemed an essential part of the socialist common sense.

The Party-State's silencing of Robinson Williams' voice in the creation of the archive of Afro-Asian solidarity was matched by her husband's frequent trivialisation and dismissal of her concerns and activism during their visits. As the couple toured Shanghai, Robinson Williams' husband often relegated her to a subordinate role in their patriarchal family and Afro-Asian solidarity projects. For example, according to the Shanghai working group's report, Robert Williams suggested '*sending* his wife to represent him at international conferences if he could not attend' (SMA 1964b emphasis added), assigning Mabel Williams a subordinate role as proxy for him. In another instance, her husband ridiculed Robinson Williams for wanting to buy a silk umbrella. As their tour guide reported, he asked her 'to only buy things not available in Cuba' and jokingly commented to the Chinese official that 'women don't know how to save money' (SMA 1963b). These trivial manifestations of familial patriarchy, if considered in relation to the radical political purposes of their visits, also reflected Robert Williams' heteromasculinist assumptions about Black revolutionary struggle.

The transnational and transracial alliances that radical internationalists sought to forge were often stratified along gender and sexual lines. A feminist consideration of Mabel Robinson Williams' representation in China's media and state archives illuminated the reinforcement of heteropatriarchy in the production of archival records, which inevitably leads to the circumscription of the radical potential of Afro-Asian solidarity in historical accounts. Reading against the archival grain to centre the contributions of Black women like Mabel Robinson Williams not only contributes to addressing this blind spot in the processes of coalition-building and historical knowledge production but also helps us better appreciate how difficult it was for Black radical women to break out of the dominant epistemic and political straitjacket. They bumped up against prevailing notions of gender and sexuality, even as they were often complicit in reinforcing normative, masculinist discourses and power structures. The study of Black internationalism in China can thus benefit

from an interrogation of the gendered and sexual ways in which even radical solidarities have been structured both historically and historiographically and a centring of women's and feminist concerns. ■



Broken Windows

Maya SINGHAL

Scholarship on Black and Asian solidarity tends to focus on explicit political activism. However, community ties are developed more frequently in smaller moments. Drawing from Saidiya Hartman's theory of 'revolution in a minor key', this essay explores Black and Chinese collaborations in quality-of-life crimes—fare evasion and illegal street vending of counterfeit designer goods—in New York City's Chinatown to consider how these minor crimes and everyday activities might be sites in which to develop working-class, anti-state solidarities.

On Canal Street, New York.
Source: @marcelamcgreal (CC),
Flickr.com.

I was leaving New York City's Chinatown one day after fieldwork when a friend pointed to a subway entrance off Canal Street. 'You're writing about Black and Chinese stuff, right? This is a perfect example,' they said as we descended into the station. 'These Black men hold the emergency exit open for the Chinese aunties, who only pay them a dollar instead of using a MetroCard swipe [now worth US\$2.75].' We walked through the emergency exit, thanking the man holding the door open and putting our one-dollar bills into his outstretched cup. My friend goes out of their way to use that subway entrance to avoid paying the full fare. As anyone familiar with New York City knows, there is an expertise to knowing which subway entrances are unstaffed and available for undetected turnstile-hopping. However, particularly in Chinatown, there is a whole

policing was one of the most important changes in both approaches to policing and understandings of ‘the socially marginal’ in the twentieth century (Vitale 2008: 1). In a 1982 *Atlantic* article, George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson argue that middle-class fears of crime are not only of violence but also of harassment by strangers and ‘disorder’ in the streets, which police officers should work to control, even if it does not result in ‘crime’ reduction. In fact, they (now infamously) claim that ‘at the community level, disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked in a kind of developmental sequence’ (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Kelling and Wilson stray from their own argument here: they wind up focusing on alleviating middle-class *fears* of crime rather than preventing real crimes. Broken windows theory has been widely denounced by social scientists ever since, but that has not prevented police departments in cities around the United States adopting such policies.

Alex Vitale explains that, as a kind of backlash against ‘urban liberalism’, which sought to address disorder through social and economic programs, the quality-of-life agenda shifted the focus of city government away from trying to improve people’s lives to instead attempting to restore social order. Rather than seeing unhoused people and other street hustlers as symptoms of ‘urban decline’, it viewed them as the source and responded with ‘new aggressive policing tactics and punitive social policies’ (Vitale 2008: 1–2). In New York City, Vitale argues, it was not primarily the 1993 mayoral election of Rudolph Giuliani and his appointment of William Bratton as police commissioner that ushered in the era of quality-of-life or ‘broken windows’ policing, but rather conflicts between primarily ‘commercial elites’ or even ‘urban liberals’ and the ‘socially marginal’ as the former felt their control over public space threatened and called for the New York Police Department (NYPD) to address low-level crime (Vitale 2008: 124–25).

In reality, quality-of-life policing was carried out through discriminatory practices like stop-and-frisk, illegal seizures of property (Duneier 1999), and increased surveillance, since ‘[u]nlike misdemeanor and felony complaints, summonses for many Quality of Life offenses can only be issued on the basis of observed conduct, not on a report of a violation’ (Erzen 2001: 26). Many conflicts over gentrification and who has the ‘right’ to be in a neighbourhood

play out around quality-of-life issues, as both the public and the police often connect minor offences to broader concerns about safety, crime, and disorder in the city.

Bag Ladies (and Gentlemen)

In November 2022, police seized an estimated US\$10 million worth of counterfeit designer goods from Canal Street and arrested 17 people, charging some with felony trademark counterfeiting. In a press conference after the seizures, NYPD Chief of Patrol Jeff Maddy declared: ‘Sidewalks are blocked, there’s property everywhere, merchandise everywhere. This really impacts local businesses in a negative manner, as well as reduces the quality of life’ (Brown and McCarthy 2022). Photos in the *New York Post* show predominantly white officers hauling away carts and trays full of merchandise, from bracelets to sunglasses and handbags. In another photo, eight officers, most with their backs to the camera, stand in front of seven Black men who have their arms handcuffed behind them. Six of the handcuffed men look towards one of the officers, who must be speaking to them. One of the men, sitting on a folding chair in a brown sweatsuit with a white Nike logo on the front and clean, white Nike Air Force 1s, stares down the *Post*’s camera, defying the photographer to capture this violence unnoticed (Brown and McCarthy 2022).

The Chinese and West African merchants who dominate Canal Street’s counterfeit trade sell rather differently. Most of the Chinese merchants are women, who often hold only a handful of wallets or a small grocery cart containing clutches and crossbody bags, with their offerings advertised on laminated menus. Once the customer makes their selection, another person—usually a Chinese man—disappears to a nearby apartment or minivan and returns with the merchandise wrapped in a discreet black plastic bag. Most of the African sellers are men, who set out their goods on tarps, which puts them at greater risk of being arrested for blocking the sidewalk and makes them less mobile if they need to escape police. They often store overflow in carts and rubbish bags, into which they pack their wares when word goes out about a police patrol. Unlike most of

economy made up mostly of Black men hustling in the subway stations, assisting with fare evasion and ticket purchases in exchange for small fees. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, tensions have been high between older Chinese people fearful of increasing anti-Asian violence and unhoused Black men, whom the media has portrayed as the face of these attacks. On the other hand, in a working-class neighbourhood like Chinatown, these illicit money-saving ventures can be sites for unlikely collaborations and even what Saidiya Hartman has called ‘revolution in a minor key’.

Hartman’s ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner’ ends with descriptions of riots at a women’s reformatory in New York in the early twentieth century, but it begins with similar tales of more subtle rebellions. Through what she describes as ‘critical fabulation’, Hartman (2018: 470) recounts the life of Esther Brown, an African American woman who hated work, rebelled against marriage, and generally embraced her own pleasures and whims. Brown never wrote a radical manifesto, yet Hartman imagines her wayward political stances from things written about her alleged moral and personal failings in court and reformatory archives:

It is not surprising that a *negress* would be guilty of conflating idleness with resistance or exalt the struggle for mere survival or confuse petty acts for insurrection or imagine a minor figure might be capable of some significant shit or mistake laziness and inefficiency for a general strike or recast theft as a kind of cheap socialism for too fast girls and questionable women or esteem wild ideas as radical thought. (Hartman 2018: 466–67)

Hartman contrasts Brown’s small rebellions with the prevailing scholarship on radicalism from which these Black women are largely absent: ‘A revolution in a minor key was hardly noticeable before the spirit of Bolshevism or the nationalist vision of a Black Empire or the glamour of wealthy libertines, fashionable socialists, and self-declared New Negroes’ (Hartman 2018: 467). In other words, Black women’s minor revolutions—notably, criminal acts—are just as important as the much larger, more public, and more ‘respectable’ struggles against racism, capitalism, and colonialism:

For the most part, the history of Esther and her friends and the potentiality of their lives has remained unthought because no one could imagine young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the world in which these acts took place. This latent history has yet to emerge: *A revolution in a minor key* unfolded in the city and young black women were its vehicle. It was driven not by uplift or the struggle for recognition or citizenship, but by the vision of a world *that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations*. (Hartman 2018: 470–71; emphasis in the original)

For Hartman, Black women living and loving how they wanted, acting in ways that were sometimes criminal and always criminalised expressed a more revolutionary vision than conventional efforts towards African American inclusion. In this essay, I consider the Black and Chinese people collaborating in quality-of-life crimes in Chinatown through Hartman’s theory of minor revolution to examine how criminal acts articulate ‘vision[s] of a world *that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations*’.

Scholarship on Black and Asian solidarity often centres on explicit political activism. However, community ties are developed more frequently in smaller moments. This essay explores quality-of-life crimes—fare evasion and illegal street vending of counterfeit designer goods—to ask whether these minor crimes and everyday activities might be sites where people develop working-class, anti-state mutual aid.

Quality of Life

Scholars characterise ‘quality-of-life’ crimes—vandalism, turnstile-hopping, vending without a licence, loitering, etcetera—as minor offences that inevitably arise from being without income or assets, particularly in expensive urban centres. However, the shift towards what is often called ‘broken windows’

the Chinese merchants, they often sell bulkier items like sneakers—fake Off-Whites and Dior Jordans—in addition to handbags.

I am not sure whether any Chinese merchants were arrested in the November 2022 bust, but the fact that only African merchants are visible in the *New York Post* photo suggests both their vulnerability to arrest and the way they seem to embody the ‘quality of life’ threat in the neighbourhood for police and readers of this conservative rag. In another article a few days before the bust, the *New York Post* had focused more on photographing the Chinese sellers and highlighted a Change.org petition started by a non-Chinese man, who ‘implore[d] any and all relevant law enforcement bodies and commands to assist [the First Precinct’s] efforts in the name of public safety and quality of life for [the neighbourhood’s] residents, workers, and visitors’ (Balsamini and Seidman 2022; A. 2022). None of the people who left comments on the petition appeared to be Chinese. In fact, one lifelong Chinatown resident told me he thought Chinese neighbourhood residents do not mind the sellers as they empathise with the hustlers.

According to Chief of Patrol Maddrey, however, ‘There’s [*sic*] layers of victims when you look at this. There are people buying these bags thinking they’re real when they’re not real’ (McNicholas 2022). On a sunny Saturday in the spring after the US\$10-million bust, I went to Canal Street to look at some bags. Despite having frequented the street countless times, I was struck by the sheer amount of merchandise lining the sidewalks: red Hermes Birkins, Louis Vuitton Speedys, and Dior saddlebags. All around me, a chorus of voices haggled over the wares. The most common remark, though, seemed almost to hang in the air over the market, picked up by buyers up and down the street: ‘This looks *so* fake.’

‘Yes, but it’s still good quality. *Excellent* quality,’ the merchants assured tourists and regulars alike.

‘It just looks *too* fake, though—\$40.’

‘For you—okay.’

At one tarp, I stopped to look at a bag, chatting with a vendor and another customer. ‘How can there be so many bags out here?’ I asked. ‘Aren’t you worried about the police?’

‘Yes, the police harass us,’ the merchant said. ‘They harass us for no reason.’

As early as 2001, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) raised concerns about the NYPD’s haphazard raids and illegal property seizures in Chinatown:

On any given day, one can witness a Midtown South Task Force van parked in plain view outside a watch- or perfume-vending stall, which, vendors say, the police indiscriminately raid, confiscating merchandise and cash. The NYPD justified these raids under the pretext that Canal Street vendors violate trademark laws by selling counterfeit items under such brand names as Guess, Gucci, and Ralph Lauren. While there are few, if any, New Yorkers or Chinatown tourists who actually believe they are buying a genuine brand-name item, the police routinely raid vending stalls. According to the Canal Street vendors, the police simply come into the stalls with garbage bags and confiscate merchandise and cash. No vouchers are made out for goods that are seized; and after the raid is complete, the vendors are never told what happens to the merchandise. (CAA AV 2001: 233)

In his book *Sidewalk* (1999), Mitchell Duneier similarly claims that police find it too tedious to catalogue seized items as they are legally obliged to, preferring instead to discard illicit wares when they are left unattended.

It is true that many fashion brands have complained about counterfeits. More frequently, some have embraced the knockoff aesthetic, creating sanctioned items that resemble counterfeits through misspelled brand names and askew logos (Schneier 2018). Police concerns over counterfeits thus have less to do with violations of intellectual property and more to do with the idea that sellers create hazardous sidewalks and that these quality-of-life offences might be ‘linked’ to crime ‘in a kind of developmental sequence’ (Kelling and Wilson 1982). In fact, the first mention of Canal Street’s counterfeit trade that I can find in newspaper archives comes from a report about the infamous Vietnamese ‘Born to Kill’ (BTK) gang in Chinatown in March 1989. The article alleges that, in the summer of 1988 when it was founded, BTK ‘threw a bomb loaded with .22-caliber bullets at a police car on Canal

Street, slightly injuring two officers. The bomb was retaliation for the arrest of several local merchants for selling counterfeit Rolex watches' (Butterfield 1989). Courtroom reports later suggested that BTK founder David Thai was manufacturing these watches in the basement of his Long Island home (Kocieniewski 1991; Hurtado 1992).

As counterfeit handbags rose in popularity through the early 2000s, broader connections were made between these sales and other crime. In 2007, an opinion piece in *The New York Times* alleged that

counterfeiting rackets are run by crime syndicates that also deal in narcotics, weapons, child prostitution, human trafficking and terrorism.

... Ronald K. Noble, the secretary general of Interpol, told the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations that profits from the sale of counterfeit goods have gone to groups associated with Hezbollah, the Shiite terrorist group, paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland and FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Sales of counterfeit T-shirts may have helped finance the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, according to the International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition. 'Profits from counterfeiting are one of three main sources of income supporting international terrorism,' said Mangus Ranstorp, a terrorism expert at the University of St Andrews, in Scotland. (Thomas 2007)

Somewhat more vaguely, at a press conference after a US\$2-million counterfeiting bust on Canal Street in August 2022, Deputy Chief of Patrol Benjamin Gurley alleged: '[T]he money that is raised by the sale of these counterfeit goods is used to further other crimes throughout the city. We know it goes to fund criminal enterprise throughout New York City' (NYPD News 2022a). It is not clear what kinds of 'criminal enterprise' in the city are funded by counterfeit sales. However, it is notable that these claims raise the spectre of 'real crime' with 'real victims', whom the public may find more sympathetic than the multi-billion-dollar luxury fashion industry.

Despite the threat of police crackdowns, sellers of counterfeit designer goods persist in Chinatown and elsewhere in the city. Most of the time when I walk down Canal Street, it seems that the Chinese and African sellers have designated sections of the street. East of Broadway is almost all Chinese women and west is almost all African men. However, the longer I have watched the sellers, the more I see that the distinctions are not so stark. African and Chinese men help each other carry bushels of merchandise into their minivans. They set up tarps and tables next to each other down Broadway and watch one another's merchandise when they have to step away. One of the sunglasses stalls on Canal seems to be co-owned by Black and Chinese men. These are not grand acts of solidarity but minor acts of mutual aid—mutual aid 'in a minor key', perhaps. By helping one another to break the law as part of their hustles, and even by working side-by-side, these sellers offer a modest vision of Black and Chinese collaborations in the face of state violence and a dearth of legal means of earning an income. Of course, these merchants do not arrive on Canal Street on equal footing. They may have very different experiences with their suppliers, customers, and the law. However, as they work together on Canal, they embody the kinds of everyday interactions, from mere tolerance to active protection and investment, that bridge and connect Black and Chinese communities.

Subway Hustlers

Not everyone finds the Black men who hold open the Chinatown subway emergency exits as charming as does my friend. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), for one, claims it lost US\$500 million in 2022 to fare evasion. As a counterargument to these concerns, many New Yorkers on X (formerly Twitter) have pointed out that the MTA is spending US\$1 million every month on private security to stop fare evaders in addition to the hundreds of millions of dollars the NYPD is spending on additional overtime for officers stationed in the subways, most of whom spend their time talking to each other or playing games on their phones (Donaldson 2022). According to Michael Kemper, who, as of December 2022, was acting chief of the NYPD Transit Bureau:

[S]topping fare evasion is an important part of the city's plan to reduce subway crime ... [because] [t]here can't be signs of lawlessness the second someone walks into a subway system ... Think about the perception that gives the average citizen that's paying their fare walking in, when their first minute into their journey is observing an atmosphere that is a free for all, it's lawlessness. (Donaldson 2022)

Even the NYPD Transit Bureau's Anti-Terrorism Unit has been conducting fare evasion stops, which they allege have helped them to apprehend people with outstanding warrants for violent offences (NYPD News 2022b).

Some community organisations have also voiced concerns about the subway hustlers. Every few weeks, one organisation conducts what it calls 'subway support' for an hour or two at the Grand Street station in Chinatown. Like the NYPD officers stationed in the subways, these volunteers try to stay vigilant against people who might do others harm on the platform. Unlike the police officers, the volunteers also try to help Chinatown subway users in other ways. They are posted throughout the station, particularly at every staircase, to help people carry their heavy grocery carts up and down the stairs. Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking volunteers give directions to people who are not fluent in English and help them purchase MetroCards. Volunteers also hand out flyers in Chinese and English with situational awareness and self-defence tips to help people stay safe in the subway.

At my first subway support session, I asked a long-time volunteer what concerns they had about subway activity.

'Mostly these guys who harass the old people,' he told me. 'They hold the doors open or help them buy MetroCards, and then they harass them for money.' He pointed men out to me as they walked in and out of the station—mostly Black men, who looked like they might be unhoused. 'That guy is here a lot,' he said. 'And we've had trouble with that guy, too.'

'Harass' is a strong word. These men are unofficial fixtures in the subway, who provide regular, if extralegal, services and expect payment in return. However, particularly since unhoused, non-Asian men of colour have been heavily featured in the news reports of attacks on Asian people since the beginning

of the Covid-19 pandemic, many in Chinatown seem to feel an added wariness during interactions with them. The very different perspectives on the subway hustlers between my friend and the subway support volunteer beg the questions: Can we describe practices as mutual aid if they have coercive aspects? Can marginalised people helping each other to break the law for mutual financial benefit—rather than, say, out of a political or moral commitment to each other—be considered mutual aid?

In his account of Malcolm X's 'Detroit Red' hustler days, Robin D.G. Kelley writes:

[I]t seems that many hustlers of the 1940s shared a very limited culture of mutuality that militated against accumulation. On more than one occasion, Malcolm gave away or loaned money to friends when he himself was short of cash, and in at least one case 'he pawned his suit for a friend who had pawned a watch for him when he had needed a loan.'

Nevertheless, acts of mutuality hardly translated into a radical collective identity; hustling by nature was a predatory act which did not discriminate by color. (Kelley 1996: 174–75)

Still, Kelley argues that Malcolm X's experiences as a hustler and a thief

offered important lessons that ultimately shaped his later political perspectives.

... Unlike nearly all of his contemporaries during the 1960s, he was fond of comparing capitalism with organized crime and refused to characterize looting by black working people as criminal acts ... Indeed, Malcolm insisted that dominant notions of criminality and private property only obscure the real nature of social relations: 'Instead of the sociologists analyzing it as it actually is ... again they cover up the real issue, and they use the press to make it appear that these people are thieves, hoodlums. No! They are the victims of organized thievery.' (Kelley 1996: 178)

Similarly, Elizabeth Hinton has recently characterised African American ‘violent rebellion’ in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as ‘a means for people of color to express collective solidarity in the face of exploitation, political exclusion, and criminalization’ (2021: 14). Following these logics, it is not clear to me what the difference is between ‘looting’ and ‘hustling’. Both seem to be part of the ‘revolutions in a minor key’ that Hartman describes: the ways in which marginalised people, excluded from dignified work—or even from undignified but legal work—claim the resources they need to eke out a living in the face of a system designed to make that as difficult as possible.

According to Dean Spade, there are three key elements of mutual aid:

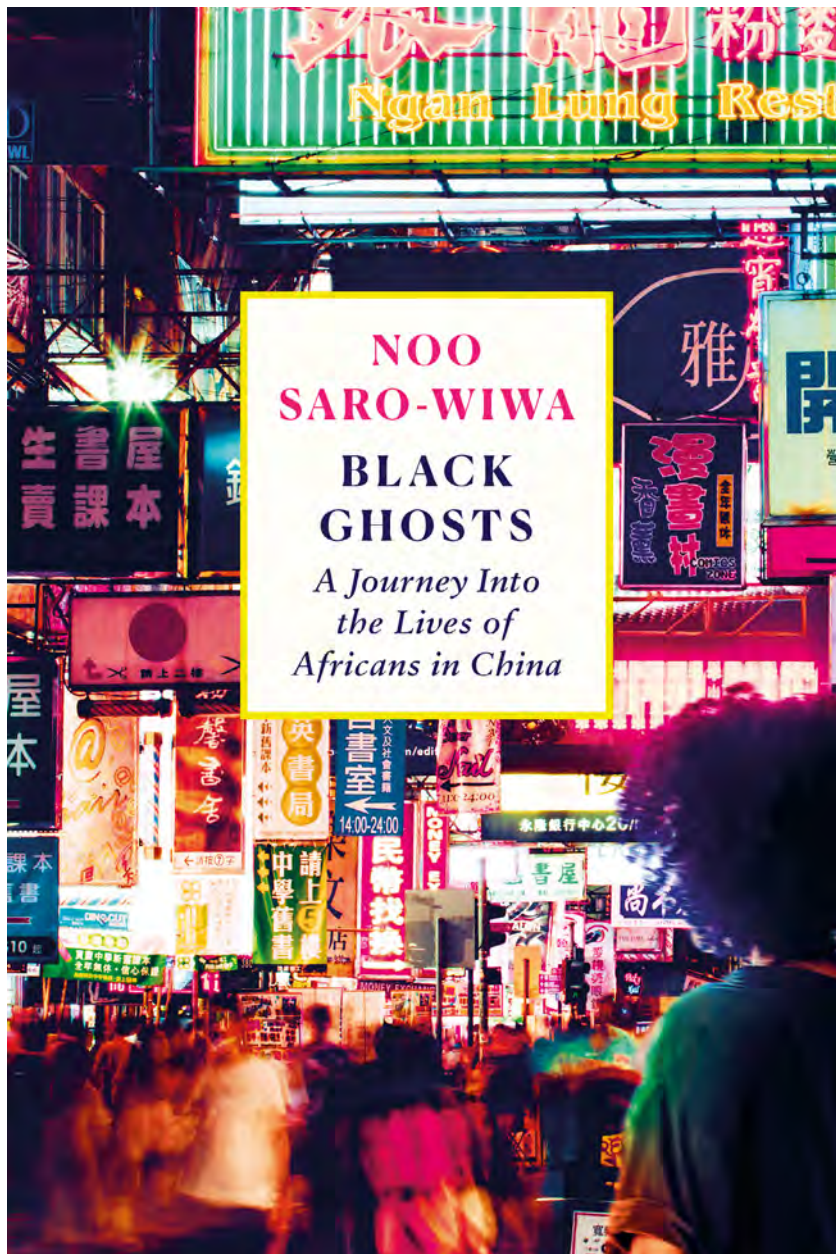
One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need. (Spade 2020: 9)

Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements. (p. 12)

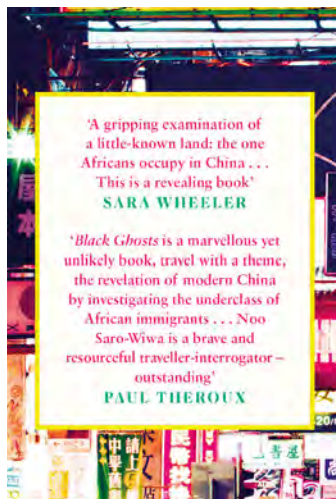
Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors. (p. 16)

Chinatown’s subway hustlers work to address survival needs and financial concerns for themselves and others in their neighbourhood by illegally offering services more conveniently or cheaply than does the government. Holding emergency exit doors is work these men can do without needing much, and the door is certainly an easier way to enter the subway with a grocery cart than through the turnstiles. To some, these hustlers are exploitative of the people who use their services, which they imagine could or should be offered for free. On the other hand, in the face of concerns about the many homeless shelters in Chinatown and violent interactions between unhoused non-Asian people of colour and the Asian population in the neighbourhood, these mutually beneficial acts of law-breaking offer opportunities for interactions in which Black and Asian people are allied against the state, the police, and the law.

While these illegal collaborations may not explicitly work to build shared understandings and movements between these populations, they are starting points for collaboration and worth considering in the face of arguments about the disparate needs of Black and Asian groups and their different social, political, and economic positions. In opposition to the state and in the effort to secure resources, what forms of Black and Asian collaborations might be possible? Despite potential prejudices, how might acts of law-breaking work as a site to develop more pragmatic connections that can help to bridge larger differences? ■



Black Ghosts (Canongate Books, 2023)



Black Ghosts

A Conversation with Noo Saro-Wiwa

Qidi FENG, Fred LAI, Noo SARO-WIWA

In *Black Ghosts: A Journey into the Lives of Africans in China* (Canongate Books, 2023), Noo Saro-Wiwa investigates the experiences of economic migrants from Africa in today's China. While the countries of Europe and North America and others in the Global North have established substantial roadblocks to commerce with African nations and African people, China has emerged as a land of opportunity and has become a hub of trade for Africans from diverse backgrounds. China is, however, also a place where Africans face racism, prejudice, and discrimination in a variety of ways. Through a series of encounters with different African migrants, Saro-Wiwa illuminates the human entanglements that emerge from this intersection of cultures.

Qidi Feng and Fred Lai: You chose as your title 'Black Ghosts'—a term with racist and discriminatory undertones. Could you elaborate on the reasons for the selection of this title? More specifically, our question draws on the multiplicity of foreignness and alienness captured by the term, and how it may come through in the book. The term evokes an image of wandering ghosts in a foreign land. Yet, it also denotes a sensation of estrangement and 'errantry' that could be seen as generative. In some cases, you also became the 'black ghost', especially when you recall travelling to other provinces where the sight of African people is rare. How does focusing on the multiplicity of 'black ghost' experiences further our understanding of Africans living in China?

Noo Saro-Wiwa: Although 'black ghosts' is a derogatory term in Chinese, the literal English translation, which has a non-pejorative meaning, is what interests me. 'Black ghosts' aptly describes the weak foothold that Africans have in China—the fact that someone can still be on a one-year visa despite living in China for a decade, having a Chinese spouse and half-Chinese children. There is a precariousness to their lives. Also, during the research for the book, I heard that the Chinese authorities sometimes turn a blind eye to African drug dealing providing the consumers are also African. This bespoke application of laws adds to the sense that Africans (and other foreigners) are treated very differently.

QF and FL: I was reading your book at Tongtong Mall in Sanyuanli, Guangzhou, while doing fieldwork, and an Igbo interlocuter named Mercy came to chat with me. She flipped through it briefly, before taking a phone call and heading to another mall for her shoe accessories order. On our way back to Tongtong, at the mention of the book, she asked me loudly: 'Why do Chinese hate blacks so much?' She thought the hatred was caused by Chinese people's ignorance about people elsewhere, even though I was not entirely sure that was right (or wrong). 'China never colonised Africa, but this country is still giving us *mafan* [trouble],' she added. One way that another informant dealt with such hatred and *mafan* was to escape from Guangzhou and go to Shanghai every weekend. As my informant explained: 'Because here, I am a black

trader. But in Shanghai, I am a foreigner.’ The question of hate and racism came across in your series of encounters in Guangzhou and across China. Sometimes it was hard to discern the line between insensitivity and discrimination, and the ambiguity was such that it even made one wonder whether there was such a line. How do you interpret this ambiguity and what do you think it means for the experiences of Black people in China compared with other places where they face bigotry?

NSW: China doesn’t have colonial guilt or a long-term Black citizenry that has fought racism. This means the Chinese are perhaps less introspective about their racism compared with Westerners. But they are more honest about it, too; they haven’t learned how to mask it the way Westerners do.

As a non-Chinese person who has never lived in the country, I can’t say I understand the psychology of Chinese racism. The frankness and crudity of it can seem innocent at times, born of ignorance and a lack of exposure—situations that can be rectified. Their definition of who is Chinese is not as broad or inclusive as the definitions of being American or British. This, coupled with the language barrier, makes it harder for Africans to integrate into Chinese society compared with the West (as we saw with the Chinese reaction towards a half-Black contestant on *Chinese Pop Idol*). The African diaspora has a stronger cultural currency in the West. And, of course, the Chinese Government can act out its racism in much more devastating and effective ways than in the West, as we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic when Africans were singled out by the authorities for prejudicial treatment.

Then again, I spoke to a Black cardiac surgeon who said he was eventually respected by his patients. He believed that Chinese people are meritocratic and can be won over if they see you doing your job well.

QF and FL: When reading the book, one question constantly arises: Are Africans coming to and/or staying in China for business only? You met different people coming to China for different reasons: better education, self-liberation, cosmopolitan life, or just to let loose. We are interested in your thoughts on the aspirations of African migrants coming to and/or staying in China.

NSW: Like migration anywhere in the world, their motivations are varied. I met Africans who have an affinity with Chinese culture and language and have professional skills that they can practise more easily over there. They have found their own niche—a good job, marriage, and a strong circle of friends. Then I met people who come to China purely to buy products that Africa no longer manufactures; they like China’s reliable infrastructure and power supply, and the business opportunities, but they would much prefer to live in Africa if they could. Their presence in China reflects a failure of African governments to provide a desired standard of living. Many African expats gain knowledge and skills in China but can’t always apply them at home, which is a shame. But overall, migration anywhere in the world is, on balance, a good thing because it helps break down barriers.

QF: During the Covid-19 pandemic, when all my African friends bid farewell to me and headed home, there were rumours about the possible demolition of Sanyuanli. I was constantly filled with anxiety about the possibility that most Africans—traders, students, families, even African corporations—might leave China for good. In hindsight, these fears now seem overblown, as Guangzhou has recovered as a site of bustling trade. Nevertheless, as you also discuss in your book, Africans in China often live a kind of parallel life with the Chinese locals. Thinking beyond just trade and economic life, can you discuss the importance of the African community to the cultural milieu of places like Guangzhou. And do you think the pandemic has changed the African community in China in any lasting way?

NSW: Proximity to outsiders can breed contempt but also affection, as well as reducing the native population's fear of the unknown. Exposure is always good. Even though Africans have an unfair reputation for drug dealing, those Chinese who live near them see Africans defying those stereotypes. That must seep into those Chinese people's consciousness in some way.

I don't know whether the pandemic has changed the African community in China in a lasting way, partly because I'm not living there and partly because it's too early to tell. I was last in Guangzhou in October 2023. At that time, many of the pre-pandemic shops had gone and Sanyuanli felt less crowded than before. But people told me that things were gradually recovering. For Nigerians, the currency weakness makes the import-export business even more difficult than before, so whether things will continue to recover to pre-pandemic levels, I don't know.

QF and FL: To some extent, this is not just a book about the experiences of Africans in Guangzhou, but more broadly a book about the imagination of China, and how it may land on the experiential reality of living in China. Who was your imagined audience when you were writing the book? What do you expect them to take away from it?

NSW: I simply wanted to take readers on a journey with me and give them a (partial) insight into a world with which both they and I are unfamiliar. I'm very curious about the world and will read about anybody anywhere; I write for people who have that similar level of curiosity and an internationalist outlook, whoever they may be. I don't have a specific audience in mind.

Africa needs to rise and rely less on China as the relationship between the two is highly imbalanced. The African foothold in China is weak compared with the Chinese hold over Africa. ■



Yvonne Owour with Dr Mwamaka Sharifu and her mother in their home, receiving a copy of the book their lives inspired. Source: Yvonne A. Owuor (CC).

World, Meet World

Yvonne A. OWUOR

World, Meet World is the title of this brief intervention. When considering what to call this, I was thinking of that quip I heard retold by a weary African thinker leaving a forum: ‘China comes to Africa to talk about trade, culture, and investment. The West comes to Africa to talk about China.’ I enter this Africa–China dance through my work in a coming-of-age novel *The Dragonfly Sea*, which situates itself in a sliver of older, deeper, more complex Africa–Asia, Africa–China relationships linked to our global monsoon complex and the Silk Road—both imaginative and maritime—an exploration of transoceanic belonging, identities, and intersections, or what a friend, the scholar Alvin Pang, has defined as ‘confluences’.

The novel is a *Bildungsroman*. An isolated little girl, Ayaana, growing up on an island in the Swahili Sea, is selected to travel to China as a figurative emissary of a lost history: the mystery of the sailors who survived the storm that destroyed one-third of Admiral Zheng He’s fleet. It is based on a 2005 event, when a young girl from Pate Island, Mwamaka Sharifu, was selected for a scholarship to study in China based on DNA analyses that revealed she had a person of Chinese origin among her ancestors.

The book itself, as with my other works, is also about African worlds in dialogue with worlds: Global Africa, or rather Pluriversal Africa. Pluriversal, as defined by Walter D. Mignolo, entails the coexistence of worlds, worlds within worlds, the epistemological grandmother of multipolarity, multilocality, and pluricentrism. All of this is rooted in Africa’s

immense and deep history; I say ‘history’, not the ‘past’, referring to transtemporal, trans-spatial, and transboundary history. Pluriversal Africa speaks to itself and then to other pluriversal worlds—primarily, Global and Pluriversal Asia—in an exchange that is mediated by our pluriversal waters, those Swahili Seas, or *Ziwa Kuu*, Afrasian waters, Western–Eastern Ocean, temporarily still known as the ‘Indian’ Ocean.

One day in 2005, I stood in one of Moscow’s metro stations surrounded by people and noise, aware of both my blindness and my muteness although I could see and speak. The destinations were spelled out in Russian Cyrillic in shapes of words I did not recognise, sounds of words I did not know. There was no-one to whom I could turn in a place where even the idea of English felt alien. So, I waited, aware of my foreignness, yet not afraid of it. I was there. A new experience of lostness waiting to be found. To be surrounded by the shape, sense, and sound of words and not be able to understand anything. Isn’t this similar to the world and time in which we find ourselves now, particularly with regard to the re-emergence of China as an intergalactic pluriversal power? (As you can see, I am overtly not saying ‘Global China’.) This is the epoch of a new dispensation, a new hermeneutics of our being, a summons to another lexicon of the world and of geopolitics, of struggling (and waiting) to understand the character of what is slowly emerging as the old order reluctantly retreats. This is the context in which I make this intervention: in the consciousness of not knowing, of waiting for the patterns to make themselves coherent.

A European interviewer once asked me whether *The Dragonfly Sea* was a nod to the figurative return of Admiral Zheng He and the host fleet as emissaries to the nations. ‘Mhh,’ I replied. I should have said, not a return, but a navigational correction by a people who made a fatal mistake in turning their backs on the seas and the world and creating room for an occupation of the world by others. A historical correction—this is what I would say now with certainty and a touch of *schadenfreude*.

The Asia–Africa, China–Africa re-engagement is not a new phenomenon. Discoveries like those by Kenyan underwater archaeologist Caesar Bitu remind us how a major portion of our shared history lies within our underwater wreckages. The myriad forces of this age have expedited so much of the fascinating recovery work happening through East

Africa–Asia collaborations, yielding some important finds that affirm the depth, complexities, and reach of Eastern African peoples into the world before the great European invasion of the area, and the subsequent amputations and erasures. In so many of these new conversations, the impact of Pluriversal Africa on China is rarely mentioned. Cases in point: the 2017 Chinese ban on ivory and trade in elephant products, the caravans of Chinese students who travel to Kenya as part of their curriculum in understanding wildlife conservation, and our wilderness ethos, the Chinese-owned safari camps and outfitters, and conservation filmmakers and photographers, the cultural and artistic influences, the technology engagement particularly in Fin-Tech, where Kenya is a global leader.

The story in *The Dragonfly Sea* was motivated by multiple factors. It inserts a figurative East African stake into the space of emerging Africa–Asia narratives that try so very hard to frame the effect of the growing closeness between these worlds, which for a certain portion of the world only about geopolitical competition and the consolidation of power and wealth, as a threat. The anxious posturing we now see is all about who owns the future, isn’t it? Who gets to control the levers of imagination, energy, transportation, technology, food, and security. The *Dragonfly Sea* centres on the Swahili Seas, those ‘Indian’ oceans, because as before, so today, the area has become the centre among centres where global futures are being fought over, negotiated, and decided in this epoch in flux—an unravelling, a time of foment, integrating the new forces of technology, when our beliefs and assumptions about the world and what it is are subject to drastic transformation.

The Kenyan and African perspectives are so very disparate, complex, and nuanced; there is much that inspires in the story of the ascendance of China. And in most Global South/majority world spaces the hope of a twenty-first-century Bandung Redux often makes its presence felt.

I remember when Kenya was sending donations of tea to China after an earthquake in the 1970s. And to think that in 1999 my very worthy social development class almost travelled to China to do that helping/empowerment thing. The area we targeted is now a grand technopolis. We had Chinese playmates in our Nairobi neighbourhood; it did not occur to us that they were anything other than rivals in our game of marbles. In class, there were students

of mixed African and Chinese heritage. We felt that everyone was just part of the complicated, mercurial and mixed ecology that was our city. We would fight the way children fight, with our casual prejudices, which we delivered and received without too much consciousness. But we were also in awe of those who could legitimately lay claim to China because of their proximity to the monks of the Shaolin temple, kung-fu, and Bruce Lee. To this day, the mythology attracts attention, affection.. So many of our youthful super-power stories were predicated on our imitation of the superlative Bruce Lee, and not Superman or Batman, versions of which were lurking on the fringes of the imagination at the same time.

The looming figure of Mao Zedong was a feature in our news cycles. His death in 1976 was televised in Kenya. We received regular updates on the developments of the Tanzania–Zambia railway, which was a topic in our geography classes. On weekends, we contemplated treats in the many Chinese restaurants in our city, which we thought of not as Chinese but as Nairobiian.

Later, living in Zanzibar, I was confronted with the long resonance of East African entanglement with Asia and China, and the tangibility of untold stories. In this port city with its seaward gaze, stories abound like that of Zanzibari Howingkao Howa, whose multigeneration Sino-Zanzibari family is the

custodian of some of Zanzibar's China-influenced culinary delights. Haji Gora Haji, the late de facto poet laureate of Zanzibar, who inspired a character in my novel, once reminded me: tides ebb and flow, what is new about the flow of water? What is new about China–Africa encounters?

Why *Dragonfly Sea*? Our Afrasian seas are a greatly contested site subject to the violence of others' interpretations. There's a daft neologism doing the rounds, 'Indo-Pacific', into which a certain hegemonic force is pushing itself as a main protagonist of our ancient waters. Dragonflies are one of the oldest of Earth's creatures; they predate the dinosaurs. Their traverse of those seas precedes our politics, and few can dispute their figurative authority over our waters.

In 2005, Mwamaka Sharifu, the young Kenyan who descends from one of the surviving sailors who washed ashore after Zheng He's ship capsized, was selected to go to China almost as an emissary from lost worlds and was received as such. The character of Ayaana in my book is modelled after her story, although it is not her story. Mwamaka's story is far more compelling, dramatic, and beautiful, as is her meeting of those with whom she shared DNA. She was received in many places in China as one who had finally brought a lost ancestor home—but that is her story, which I hope you get to hear one day.

Now, here are two excerpts from *The Dragonfly Sea*.

Chapter 1: 2-7

To cross the vast western ocean, water-chasing dragonflies with forebears in Northern India had hitched a ride on a sedate October matlai, the ‘in-between seasons’ morning wind, one of the monsoon’s introits. Under dark blue-purplish clouds, these fleeting beings settled on the mangrove-fringed south-west coast of a little girl’s island. The matlai conspired with a shimmering white full moon to charge the island, its fishermen, prophets, traders, seamen, seawomen, seafarers, healers, ship builders, dreamers, merchants, tailors, madmen, teachers, mothers and fathers with a fretfulness that mirrored the slow churning turquoise sea. A storm-dimmed dusk stalked the Lamu Archipelago’s largest and sullenest island, trudging from Siyu on the North coast, upending the fishing fleets of Kizingitini before swooping into a Pate town that was already mouldering in that malaise of unrequited yearnings. Frayed in its old soul, bone weary of cobwebbed memories, robbed of a succession of keepers by endless deeds of guile, siege, war and seduction, Pate town, like the island that contained it, marked melancholic time. A leaden sky poured dull red light over a mob of petulant ghosts, dormant feuds, forfeited glories, invisible roads, festering amnesia, history’s debts, and congealing millennia-old conspiracies. Weaker light leached into crevices, tombs and ruins, and signalled to a people who were always willing to cohabit with tragedy, trusting that time transformed cataclysms into whispers.

Deep within Pate, a cock crowed, and elsewhere a summons, the Adhan, crescendoed. Sea winds tugged at a little girl’s lemon green headscarf revealing dense, black curly hair that blew into her eyes. The scrawny six-year old, wearing an oversized blue-yellow-pink floral dress that she was supposed to grow into, from within her mangrove hideout, watched dark clouds surge inland. A rumble. She decided that these were a monster’s footsteps, a monster whose strides created pink streaks of light on the sky. Seawater lapped at her knees, and her bare feet sank into the black sand as she clutched onto another scrawny being, a dirt-white purring kitten. She was betting that the storm—her monster—would reach land before a passenger-laden dau muddling its way towards the cracked wharf in front of her.

She held her breath.

‘*Home comers*’, she called all passengers. *Wajio*. The child could rely on home comers like these to be jolted like marionettes whenever there was a hint of rain. She giggled as the mid-sized dau, ‘*Bi Kidude*’ painted in flaking yellow on its side, eased into the creek in synchrony with the grumble of thunder.

Scattered, soft rain drops. The extended thunder rumble caused every home comer to raise his or her eyes skyward, and squawk like startled hornbills. The watching girl sniggered and she stroked her kitten, pinching its fur in her thrill. It mewled.

“Shhh.” She whispered.

As she peered through her mangrove hideout to better study the passengers’ rain-blurred faces—a child looking for and collecting words, images, sounds, moods, colours, conversations, and shapes, which she could store in one of the shelves of her soul, to later retrieve and reflect upon in quieter moments. Everyday, in secret, she went to and stood by the portals of her sea.

She was waiting for Some One.

Her home was steeped in vast eloquent silences transformed by her imagination into garbled idioms that would one day merge to make sense. She stuck words into whatever structures of language and dialects she encountered and tried to guess why on seeing her, many shivered. Others’ eyes would glint and their mutterings would evaporate as she approached, and she would read the pity in their gazes, she might hear the sigh, “Ahh, maskini.” *Poor thing*. Nothing was ever actually said to her and she knew not to ask.

The girl moved the kitten from her right to her left shoulder. Its extra-large, slanted blue eyes followed the dance of eight golden dragonflies hovering close by.

Thunder.

The dau drew parallel to the girl, and she fixated on a man with a burgundy-tinged face and a cream suit who was slumped over the vessel’s edge. She was about to cackle at his discomfort when a high and harried voice intruded:

“Ayaaaaan!”

Her surveillance of the man was interrupted as lightning split the sky.

“Ayaaaaan!”

It was her mother.

“Ayaaaaan!”

At first, the little girl froze. Then she crouched low and stroked the kitten. She whispered, “Haidhuru.” Don’t mind. “She can’t see us.”

Ayaan was supposed to be recovering from a dawn asthmatic fit. Bi Munira, her mother, had rubbed clove oil over her tightened chest and stuffed the all-ailment-treating black kalonji seeds into her mouth. They had sat together naked under a blanket while a pot of steaming herbs, which included eucalyptus and mint, decongested their lungs. Ayaan had tried hard. She had gulped down air and blocked her breath to swallow six full tablespoons of cod-liver oil. She had gurgled a bitter concoction and been lulled to sleep by her mother’s dulcet ‘do-do-do.’ She had woken up to the sounds of her mother at work: the tinkle of glass, brass, and ceramic; the smells of rose, langilangi, and night jasmine; and the lilts in women’s voices inside her mother’s rudimentary home-based beauty salon. Sensing Ayaan was awake, Bi Munira had served her a chicken biryani lunch. Ayaan had pecked at her rice and consumed half a chicken leg. “Sleep, *lulu*,” her mother had murmured before returning to pamper, paint and gild her clients.

Ayaan had tried.

She had pinned herself to the bed until the persistent beckon of far-off thunder proved irresistible. She had rolled out of bed, arranged extra pillows to simulate a body, and covered these with her sheets. She then squeezed out of a high window and shimmied down drainpipes clamped to the crumbling coral wall. On the ground, she found the kitten she had rescued from a muddy drain several days ago stretched out on their doorstep. She picked it up. Planting it on her right shoulder, she had dashed off to the sea front before swinging north to the mangrove section of the creek from where she could spy on the world unseen.

“Ayaaaaan!”

The wind cooled her down. The kitten purred. Ayaan watched the *dau*. A cream-suited elderly stranger lifted his head.

Their eyes connected.

Ayaan ducked, pressing into mangrove shadows, her heart racing. How had that happened?

“Ayaaaaan!” Her mother’s voice was closer. “Where’s that child? Ayaaan? Ah! Must I talk to God?”

Ayaan looked towards the boat and again at the blackening skies. She would never know what landed first, the boat or the storm. She remembered the eyes that had struck hers. Would their owner tell on her? She scanned the passageway, looking for those eyes again. The kitten on her shoulder pressed its face into her neck.

“Ayaaaaan! As God is my witness ... that child ... when I find you ...! A threat-drenched sing-song contralto that came from the bushes to the left of the mangroves.

The little girl abandoned her mangrove cover. She splashed through the low-tide water to reach the beach area that was opposite to the direction her mother was headed. She scrambled over jagged brown rocks, leaping from stone to stone with the kitten clinging to her neck.

And Ayaan dropped out of sight.

The passenger was an elder, a visitor from China. He glimpsed the small creature whose eyes had earlier unsettled him. He saw her soar against a black sky backdrop, hover and then fall like a broken-off bough.

A chortle tumbled out of him.

His fellow passengers, already sympathetic about the chronic seasickness that had afflicted him on this boat journey, glanced at him. They were nervous about him now. It was not uncommon that seasickness had turned previously sane persons into cackling lunatics. But the elder was focused on the land. The cataracts of his right eye gave it a blue-ish luminosity. His face was set off by a balding head on a tendon-lined neck that perched on a medium height body that was scraggly, as a former muscle man on a late-life ascetic path might come to look.

The boat docked.

He listened as a woman's voice sang, from inside the island, *Ayaaaaan! Ayaaaaan!*

Minutes later, ill-fitting clothes flutter in a storm wind, the man stepped off the boat to wade through shallow water to reach the black-sand shore. Anonymous hands urged him forward. He stumbled. He touched the soil. He gulped down air. All his senses sizzled as if intoxicated by the fresh air, and they were, but there was more. Here was the beckon of home-country ghosts he had travelled so far to console. Here did he hear humming of those who had lived and died far from home, and waited six hundred years for someone to acknowledge them.

Then, laughter.

A hand dangled in front of his face.

He took it.

It was the boat's navigator helping him up, handing over his single, grey bag. "*Itifaki imezingatiwa.*" The seaman said, faking solemnity, but then he laughed. And the elder laughed with him.

His next footstep into Pate.

He was assailed by redolent evening scents, an incense spattered enchantment. He caught his breath. Vanilla, musk, sweet balsamic and sea sweat in the thickening air. He inhaled. He tilted his head towards the hubbub; human arrivals. He listened to the familiar music of a rolling cobalt tide. He glanced upward, wondering if the sky was as it was back home. Like the child in the mangroves, he saw the storm surging in. In his will, he urged it to break. Thunder.

Human mumbling.

But what was that scent; its flavour touched his tongue.

What was this place?

He turned. He ambled forward, heels rotating as if his toes had acquired roving eyes. Pale light shone on a pink petal falling from a brown-stemmed, solitary and slender wild rose bush that popped from the place where black sand became dark red soil. The man faltered. He watched the petal settle on the ground. Only after, did he reach for it. He lifted it to his lips. He would enclose it in one hand while the other adjusted the condensed contents of a life that now fit into the grey canvas bag dangling from his shoulder.

Chapter 62: 286–90

There were seventeen others in her class in the nautical science studies program, and they represented different maritime countries. Chinese and Malaysians, two Indians, two Pakistanis, one from Singapore, two from the Philippines, one Turk, the rest from Indonesia. There were two other women, both Chinese, one of them from Hong Kong. Ayaana was the only Kenyan and African. With her "Descendant" tag, her lanky height—she was taller than most of the men—and her dark-skinned but Chinese looks, she had to contend with extra curiosity. She shrugged this off, focused on her work, and passed her continuous assessment tests with good marks.

Ayaana was surveying the longest line on the globe's three-dimensional grid, the equator, the first line of latitude. Her special point zero, 40,075 kilometers long; 78.7 percent across water, 21.3 percent over land, zero degrees, all the Kenya equator places she had never imagined to claim as her own: Nanyuki, Mount Kenya. The invisible equator line crossed only thirteen countries—Kenya, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Maldives, Indonesia, and Kiribati—thirteen countries that were the center of the world, and hers was one of them. She vowed she would one day go and walk the spaces for herself. Ayaana turned her gaze to the blue area on the globe, to the 78.7 percent of equator that she was supposed to reflect on. Deluged, and at sea. Far too many forces to contend with. Yesterday's celestial navigation session had introduced her to quasars, those remote,

energy-producing constants from which GPS devices framed their reference. The week before, the class had focused on active and passive sonars. The sea had many sources of noise, she had learned; she had been surprised that something so obvious was treated as news.

Today Ayaana scowled at an enhanced image of the oceans. Earlier, the class had been reviewing electronic navigation systems while she had been daydreaming about Mehdi's and Muhidin's stars, or night boat rides from Pate to Lamu with a nahodha who watched skies, monitored winds, and read sea surfaces. She blinked and returned to the work at hand, disappointed to imagine that getting from point A to point Z now required so many beeping and burping units that governed the waters on behalf of real navigators. She was studying the data from her Geographic Information System readings and toying with other buttons to try to make a map of her own imagining of the seas. Ayaana moved the navigational computer's cursor before pushing a button that revealed the latitude and longitude of a longed-for waypoint: "Pate Island: 2.1000°S, 41.0500°E." Ayaana would learn that there seemed to be no absolutes in the world, only codes and questions and a guarantee of storms. In realizing this, she excavated echoes of a childhood conversation: She had asked Muhidin, "What is good about water?" Muhidin had said, "Storms." She then asked, "What is bad about water?" He had answered, "Storms again." Now, in class, Ayaana stared miserably at her accumulation of the technical instruments with which she would analyze and eviscerate the unknowable sea. She raised her hand. She lowered it. What had she been about to ask? A matter of distances, the place of intimacy: What was the story of a human being within the epic that was the sea? She chewed on a finger and looked around and chose silence. She would have to relinquish her feeling for water to the power of numbers, navigational compasses, Napier's Rules, coordinates, and geopolitics. She watched her lecturer. Could she propose that the sea sweats differently depending on the time and flavor of day and night? That there are doorways within the sea and portals in the wind? That she had heard the earth and moon and sea converge to sing as a single storm-borne wind, and these had called her to dance, and that she had danced at night with them under a fecund moon? A secret grin. She would be deported.

A shuffle of papers, a different image on the projector. The lecture on sea routes was proceeding with another elaboration of "the One Belt, One Road." They were reviewing the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Suddenly the lecturer called out Ayaana's name: "Baadawi xiao jie." Ayaana jumped as the lecturer gestured. "Shared future destiny, yes?" The class turned to gaze at Ayaana. Ayaana shrank into her seat, focusing on the sound of the slogans: "Honor in trade, prosperity for all." The lecturer continued, "Our Western Ocean is our gateway to mutual greatness." In the retelling of the life of her sea, Ayaana saw that the Maritime Silk Road initiative had gobbled into Pate's place in the Global Monsoon Complex. By her very presence, Ayaana felt implicated, as if she were betraying her soul. She sank into her seat, also overwhelmed by this infinite land of infinite armies and infinite words, and the machinery that at a signal could roll over skies, waters, and earth to reach her home and cause it to disappear. She had come to school wanting to enter into the language of the seas through a people she was to imagine were her own. Instead, she was learning how the world was reshaping itself and her sea with words that only meant energy, communications, infrastructure, and transportation. Storm warning. Neither Pate nor the Kenya she had rarely thought about had acquired a vast enough imagination to engulf the cosmos that was writing itself into their center. Ayaana suppressed a sigh and eavesdropped on the snipings of the other foreign students, who had resorted to petty territorial snipings that changed nothing, her thoughts in turmoil.

One hot and humid day, Ari, a student of marine engineering from India, observed that the Maritime Silk Road initiative ceded the Indian Ocean—he had emphasized "Indian"—to "others." "It is not for nothing that the ocean is called Indian," he noted.

Ayaana retorted, "Ziwa Kuu?"

Ari turned to her. "Oogle Boogle?"

"Ziwa Kuu." Ayaana refused to cede territory.

Ari said, "We'll discuss that with your good self the day your country acquires a motorboat to start a navy."

Ayaana said, "Ziwa Kuu, and we have a navy."

"Doubtless its fish bounties are commendable, but what else?"

Titters.

“Ratnakara,” said an Indonesian.

“*Indian* Ocean,” emphasized Ari.

“Ziwa Kuu,” repeated Ayaana.

“*Indian* Ocean.”

Two Pakistani students chimed in: “Ziwa Kuu!”

The class slipped into an uproar that did not change Chinese foreign policy. The lecturer, who had watched the disintegration of order in his class in disbelief, his face becoming blotchy, at last screamed, “The Western Ocean! You are in China.”

“Western Ocean,” murmured Ayaana, looking at Ari from beneath her fringe as she doodled the words “Ziwa Kuu” on her notepad, thinking about a Kipate toponym, her heart pleased about the meaningless skirmish she had stirred.

The lecturer was shouting out his points. Ayaana returned to jotting down notes of another nation’s imagination for her sea. “One belt, one road,” she wrote. She would have to ask Muhidin what the different Kipate names for her sea were. The debate re-emerged outside, and more positions were taken, which then split into nation-states and cultural attachments. Ayaana was in the middle of the argument, standing on the shifting water of history, her memory, and the silences of men like Mehdi. She was still astounded by the delusions built over the debris of the lives of her people, stories razed and reacquired by others, the strangenesses—that, for example the *dau* belonged elsewhere. She did not have the lexicon, and she knew the fear of an inability to explain, reclaim, and possess. She tried to speak of the poetry of sea lives, of the ceaseless ebb and flow of her people to other worlds—as traders, seekers, and teachers; as navigators, shipbuilders, archivists, and explorers—and their return.

“Slaves,” Ari added.

Ayaana glared at Ari. She had never spoken so much to her classmates. In slow-drip mischief, she told Ari, “We want our maharaja back.” Ari gestured at her. “Sardar Singh of Jodhpur, Ari.” Her voice was cool.

Ari spluttered.

Then, just as quickly as her ire had risen, Ayaana was overcome by the languageless-ness of the present, the silenced and ruined who inhabited the present, the terror that there would be nobody left to salvage the ocean’s Kipate name.

She walked away. What was the point?

In this country, they spoke of the sea’s future in Mandarin and English, not in Kiswahili, or Gujarati or Malay or Kipate. Ayaana walked toward the shimmering water, scanning for patterns. Dark blue clouds in southwestern skies—a cold front was approaching. ■

WORK OF ARTS



The 'Three-Body Problem', the Imperative of Survival, and the Misogyny of Reactionary Rhetoric

Chenchen ZHANG

This essay explores how the theories, plot, and characters of the Three-Body Problem series, a best-selling sci-fi trilogy by Liu Cixin, are employed in Chinese digital discourse to illustrate visions of authoritarian, conservative, and misogynistic politics and to interpretate the nature of international relations. By revisiting the key theoretical and plot developments of the series, I suggest that the totalising and reductive dualism of (feminised) morality, democracy, and destruction versus (masculinised) reason, autocracy, and survival constructed in the context of a permanent existential threat can provide compelling rhetorical resources for articulating an authoritarian and misogynistic politics of survival.

Source: andrewliptak.com.

Liu Cixin's the *Three-Body Problem* book trilogy is one of the world's bestselling Chinese sci-fi series, being read and endorsed by figures such as George R.R. Martin and Barack Obama. In Chinese public debates, however, critics highlight the series' social Darwinist, misogynistic, and totalitarian tendencies, raising concerns about how the trilogy has been used by authoritarian-minded techno-nationalists—known as the 'industrial party' (工业党, *gongye dang*) in digital culture—to dismiss morality and delegitimate progressive social change (see, for example, Xu 2019; Cicero by the Sea 2022). Granted, a novel that depicts a world ruled by the law of the jungle does not necessarily equate to a novel that

advocates for such a world. After all, no-one would read George Orwell's *1984* as an endorsement of totalitarianism. It is also beyond a writer's control how their work is interpreted and used. However, if we take a closer look at the theoretical endeavours and narrative structures of the series, it becomes clear why it holds such appeal for the techno-nationalists, international relations realists, and opponents of social justice struggles.

In the first part of the essay, I revisit the key theoretical and plot developments of the series, noting the striking similarities between its 'cosmic sociology' and neorealism in International Relations (IR) theory. I then look at how the theories, storylines, and characters of the trilogy are employed in digital discourse as metaphors and parables through which to bolster reactionary narratives and interpret international relations. I conclude by putting the derivative discursive world of the *Three-Body* series into a global perspective.

Cosmic Realism and the Polarities of Reason and Morality

The basic premise of the series is the imminent invasion of Earth by the Trisolarans, a race of technologically hyper-advanced beings themselves in a state of permanent existential crisis due to their unstable tri-solar system. For a certain period, humans and Trisolarans maintain a relatively stable mutual deterrence system based on a theory formulated by 'cosmic sociologist' Luo Ji, the protagonist of the second book. The thrust of the theory is as follows.

Luo Ji was inspired by astrophysicist Ye Wenjie, protagonist of the first book, who told him two 'self-evident' axioms: 1) 'Survival is the primary need of all civilisations'; and 2) 'Civilisations continuously grow and expand, but the total matter in the universe remains constant' (Liu 2016). On this basis, Luo develops the idea of the 'chain of suspicion' (猜疑链) and the infamous 'dark forest' theory (黑暗森林). According to the former, one civilisation (A) cannot determine whether another (B) is benevolent or malicious. Furthermore, A cannot determine whether B thinks A is benevolent or malicious. A cannot determine whether B thinks A thinks B is benevolent or

malicious—and the 'chain of suspicion' goes on. Given this ultimate uncertainty and the spatiotemporal scale of the universe—which, according to Luo Ji, means that the difference in capabilities between civilisations is likely to be enormous and unpredictable—the 'dark forest' theory posits that every civilisation is like a hunter with a gun stalking in a dark forest. They must hide themselves and strike at the first sign of other life.

In many aspects the cosmic sociology of the *Three-Body* series is an interstellar version of neorealist IR theory, which also starts from a series of supposedly self-evident assumptions such as survival is a state's highest need and the uncertainty about others' intentions is a permanent, defining feature of the international system (for a detailed comparison of Liu's cosmic sociology and Kenneth Waltz's IR theory, see Dyson 2019). The dark forest theory is a more extreme version of the security dilemma due to the enormity of the universe: the stakes of uncertainty are so high that civilisations must not contact any other, must hide their own location, and must destroy anyone whose coordinates have been exposed. Like neorealism, Luo Ji's cosmic sociology holds that each civilisation's internal social structure and moral system do not matter. The only thing that matters at the interstellar level (or international level for the neorealists) is the structure of the system of which the chain of suspicion is an inherent attribute. 'They're all identical,' says Luo Ji. This could have been taken straight from an academic book on structural realism, which, for example, would state that the units in the international system 'are functionally undifferentiated states that seek survival' (James 2022: 358). Based on this theory, Luo threatens the Trisolarans with mutually assured destruction—a deterrence strategy that neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz consider effective for maintaining international stability. Luo declares that if the Trisolarans launch an assault, he will immediately broadcast the location of Trisolaris to the universe, exposing both Trisolaris and Earth, anticipating the destruction of both.

Throughout the books, Liu appears to be highly conscious of the question of how 'external threats' and the need to survive under harsh conditions influence the organisation of society. The constant threat of planetary destruction on Trisolaris led to a totalitarian society, which is depicted in the books in ways that are evidently reminiscent of Fascism

and Nazism in Earth's twentieth century. When the Trisolarians' invasion plan becomes known, humans on Earth first undergo a period of 'great recession' because of militarism, environmental degradation (as resources are exhausted for the development of military technology) and authoritarianism. This leads to depopulation and revolutions, which found new governments which reverse the previous trends. No longer obsessed with survival, humans are now seemingly guided by a new principle: 'humanism comes first, and perpetuating civilisation comes second' (Liu 2016). Culture as well as technological progress flourish because of the 'emancipation of human nature' (Liu 2016). At this point, one might expect this storyline to become a critique of emergency politics; however, all the progress made in this period is swept away when it is revealed that the Trisolarians are so technologically advanced that Earth does not stand a chance in the 'Doomsday Battle' between its entire space force fleet and a Trisolaran 'droplet'.

Three characters (apart from Luo Ji) are crucial to the survival of human civilisation in the events following the defeat of the human fleet and occupy the polarities of 'reason' and 'morality' in the narrative structure of the books. Zhang Beihai, a political commissar in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and a space force officer, is one of the most popular characters among *Three-Body* fans. Known as a man of reason, patience, and determination, he was the only one in the era of optimism to predict that Earth does not stand a chance against Trisolarians and he withholds his plans from both humans and Trisolarians. Driven by the belief that the only way to sustain human civilisation is to escape Earth, Zhang hijacks a spaceship (appropriately named *Natural Selection* [自然选择]) on the eve of the Doomsday Battle and journeys to space. Together with four other spaceships that are initially sent to capture him but instead join him after the defeat of Earth's space force, they form 'Starship Earth'. However, a 'dark battle' soon breaks out between the five ships, each with some 2,000 crew onboard. The commanders of the ships come to the realisation that to maximise their chances of survival, they must attack the others, and they become subject to the 'chain of suspicion', not knowing the others' intentions. Zhang Beihai's *Natural Selection* is struck a few seconds before he

was about to attack the others, but he smiles as his life ends, believing that regardless of his own death, the battle signals the birth of the 'new human'.

In contrast to Zhang Beihai, Cheng Xin, a female aerospace engineer and protagonist of the third book, is one of the most hated *Three-Body* characters in online communities—loathed as someone whose moral self-righteousness destroys human civilisation. Based on the 'black forest' theory mentioned earlier, Luo Ji puts in place a deterrence system of mutually assured destruction after the Doomsday Battle and acts as the first 'Swordholder'—namely, the one authorised to press the nuclear button. As time goes by, however, humans begin to take peace for granted, become 'feminised' (I will get to the misogynistic aspect of the series later), and start to worry about Luo's unchecked power. Cheng Xin is selected as the new Swordholder. For a deterrence system to work, apparently, the other party must believe that you have the willpower to execute mutual destruction. The Trisolarians study the personalities of the Swordholders and estimate that Luo Ji's 'degree of deterrence' is about 90 per cent, whereas Cheng Xin's is only 10 per cent. They are convinced that Cheng Xin will not press the button, and therefore launch their attack immediately after Cheng takes on the role. As predicted, Cheng abandons mutual destruction out of moral concern and Earth becomes subjugated to Trisolaran rule. However, members of Starship Earth in outer space broadcast the location of Trisolarians, which leads to its destruction by another hyper-advanced civilisation acting on 'dark forest' principles. Earth, located close to Trisolarians, is now facing the threat of 'dark forest' attacks from unknown aliens.

Humans come up with different plans. One is to develop light-speed travel technologies enabling some humans to escape from a potential 'photoid' strike. Research into this, however, is soon outlawed because of fears it could be abused by the super-rich. There are also concerns about what wandering in space could do to humanity itself, as Earth learns about the 'dark battles'. In fact, humans trick one of the spaceships into returning to Earth and immediately arrest everyone onboard when it lands. In his trial, one of the commanders famously says: 'When humans are lost in space, it takes only five minutes to reach totalitarianism' (Liu 2017)—more evidence that Liu is

deeply concerned about the question of survival and political regimes, convinced that looming external threats inevitably necessitate totalitarian rule.

The third key character here is Thomas Wade, a man of ‘absolute reason’ whose degree of deterrence the Trisolarians estimate to be 100 per cent. He leads secret research on light-speed travel and reveals his plan to the human world after a breakthrough is made. The United Nations decides this is illegal. Wade’s space city is on the verge of war with the UN fleet and Cheng Xin is asked to make the final decision. It is here that Wade delivers one of his signature quotes: ‘If we lose our human nature, we lose much, but if we lose our bestial nature, we lose everything’ (Liu 2017). Cheng Xin declares she chooses human nature and asks him to surrender. Wade is executed.

In the final series of events, Luo Ji gathers formerly arrested scientists from Wade’s company and successfully continues the research into light-speed travel. The solar system is destroyed in a ‘dimensional strike’ (reducing it to two dimensions). The entirety of human civilisation within the solar system is erased, except Cheng Xin and her friend, AA, who escape from the collapse wave on one of the light-speed craft—a legacy of Wade’s program.

The Industrial Party, the Imperative of Survival, and the Misogyny of Reactionary Rhetoric

Readers familiar with Chinese digital culture may immediately recognise how the themes of the trilogy are well aligned with the concerns of an online discursive and ideological formation known as ‘the industrial party’ (工业党 *gongye dang*). It is characterised by a firm belief in technological determinism, a social Darwinist view of the international system in which the survival of the technologically underdeveloped is perpetually threatened by the technologically advanced, and a contempt for anything the techno-nationalists find ‘sentimentalist’, ‘idealistic’, or ‘moralistic’ (for a sympathetic introduction to the *gongye dang* discourse, see Lu and Wu 2018). From this perspective, the main narrative arc of the *Three-*

Body Problem can be easily summarised as humans repeatedly undermining efforts to ensure their own civilisational survival out of concern for morality and democracy. But eventually, the sustaining of civilisation depends on the ‘rogue figures’ who prioritise rationality and the determination to pursue survival over moral or democratic principles.

The problem with the series is not that it endorses totalitarianism, which it does not. The problem lies in the totalising, reductive, and potentially dangerous dualism of humanity/morality/democracy/destruction versus animality/reason/autocracy/survival on which the plot and character development rest. Liu constructs an ultimate, definitive existential threat to human civilisation—a threat rooted in the assumed dark forest nature of the universe—and builds his characters around these polarities: humaneness leads to self-destruction and survival depends on ruthlessness. When external threats are imminent, law and order are of the utmost importance, as we see with Trisolarians, the occupied Earth, and the society of spaceships. While the science of the series is admirably imaginative, its sociopolitical imagination is impoverished, unlike, for example, one of Liu’s earlier works, *The Village Teacher* (an English translation of this short story is included in Liu 2020). In this short story, Earth, again, is about to be wiped out by a hyper-advanced civilisation engaged in some kind of existential struggle. Aliens test the knowledge of randomly selected candidates on a target planet to determine whether to spare it. A village teacher in rural China, tortured by chronic disease and extreme poverty, insists on his students memorising Newton’s laws of motion before his death. It is this ordinary, heroic, yet unknown act that saves Earth from annihilation. The world of the *Three-Body Problem*, in contrast, is one in a permanent state of exception, suffocated by moral dilemmas and devoid of politics, insofar as politics is about possibilities for action and the plurality of social relations.

It goes without saying that no-one should take one of the most pessimistic interpretations of the universe in a sci-fi series as a guide for thinking about social reality. However, many readers on social media cite the dark forest theory or Thomas Wade’s saying about humanity and bestiality as self-evident truths. In a way, the trilogy has offered a creative language and

set of symbolic resources for right-wing nationalists to enhance and articulate pre-existing beliefs about the imperative of survival and the dangers of whatever they consider detrimental to that imperative, such as ‘moral sentiment’ or ‘liberalism’. Given most readers are sympathetic to the idea of human survival, Cheng Xin’s character—who is often labelled a *baizuo* (白左, ‘white left’, a pejorative slang term and rhetorical device used mainly to ridicule progressive liberalism) and a *shengmu* (圣母, ‘holy mother’, a pejorative slang term used to ridicule those seen as overly compassionate towards the disadvantaged)—is invoked as a particularly convincing case for the argument that ethical concerns and moral values are self-serving and can potentially lead to self-destruction. The widespread denunciation of Cheng overlaps with the anti-*baizuo* discourse on Chinese social media—a form of reactionary rhetoric similar to the ‘anti-woke’ discourse in the Anglo-American context (Zhang 2020). These narratives combine a rejection or ‘abnormalisation of social justice’ (Cammaerts 2022) with articulations of white supremacy and racial nationalism. For example, an essay by a *Sohu* columnist claims that Cheng Xin’s character, who ended human civilisation ‘in the name of love and equality’, is a most pertinent satire of equal rights advocates, LGBTQ+ activists, and feminists. They assert that Liu Cixin’s trilogy warns about the ‘feminisation’ and ‘*shengmu*-isation’ of society, and ‘the triumph of political correctness’, which lead to human extinction in his books, and are already happening in the real world (Taotao Studies History 2020).

A similar essay on *Zhihu*, a platform popular among *gongye dang* techno-nationalists, looks to Norway for an analogy of the ‘feminised’ human society during the period of deterrence-induced peace (Meiri Yijian 2022). With some 100,000 followers on the platform, the columnist’s depiction of Norway is reminiscent of what researchers of the far right have identified as an imaginary of the ‘Swedish dystopia’ (Thorleifsson 2019; Åkerlund 2023). Under the title ‘This is Not Trisolaris, This is Europe’, the essay asserts that Norway has become the most *baizuo* and *shengmu* (or ‘woke’, as the Anglophone alt-right might say) country in the world because of long periods of prosperity and peace. They claim that the country has abolished all the ‘masculine’ (阳刚) social policies of the past and opened its doors to refugees, to

the extent that Norwegians will become a minority in their homeland. Through a metaphor immediately recognisable to *Three-Body* fans, they compare far-right mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik to Thomas Wade and Norwegian politicians to Cheng Xin. In other words, they suggest Breivik was forced to sacrifice himself to rescue his nation from liberal self-destruction.

Liu Cixin will most likely be disturbed by the way his books are used for the rendition of far-right tropes. However, his own comments about Cheng Xin also show that these worrying trends may not be entirely based on misinterpretations of the character:

She would think she was great, not selfish at all, believing that her values and moral principles were universal and correct. She does not care about the consequences of following these principles, but only the peace of her own conscience ... [T]he real selfless people with ‘bigger love’ [大爱] in the novels would think for humanity as a whole. Sacrificing one’s conscience is much harder than sacrificing one’s life. (Cited in Chen 2016)

Here again we see the false dichotomy of morality or conscience versus survival or ‘humanity as a whole’ and how it limits the sociopolitical imagination of the *Three-Body* world. Liu’s preoccupation with this dichotomy is also reflected in an infamous thought experiment he proposed during a public event. In conversation with historian Jiang Xiaoyuan, Liu asked him whether, if he, Liu, and the woman chairing the event were the last humans in the world and the two men had to eat the woman to survive, ‘Would you eat her?’ Jiang said no. Liu said that was irresponsible, and that ‘only if you choose inhumanity now, humanity will have a chance to be reborn in the future’ (Wang 2007). Thought experiments about an ‘extreme’ situation like this usually tell us more about our understanding of social realities than the imagined scenario itself. Given his totalising logic of survival, which depends on the perpetual presence and reproduction of images of destruction, defeat, and chaos, it is unsurprising that he defended the current Chinese regime with the justification that ‘if you were to loosen up the country a bit, the consequences would be terrifying’ (Fan 2019).



Three-Body, the Chinese TV adaptation of Liu Cixin's sci-fi novel. Source: Tencent Video.

It has become clear that the narrative structure of the *Three-Bodies* series, just like the *gongye dang* techno-nationalist discourse, is masculinist and misogynistic. Liu explicitly depicts human society under deterrence peace as 'feminised', noting the physical as well as mental feminisation of the 'new era' men. The qualities conventionally associated with femininity, such as love, compassion, and moral sentiments, are blamed for the extinction of human civilisation, whereas qualities associated with masculinity, such as rationality, determination, and aggression, are framed as key to civilisational survival. The reactionary rhetoric adopts a similar strategy, which is not only evidently anti-feminist, but also *feminises* social justice issues 'as a prelude to devaluing and subduing them' (Kaul 2021: 1624). By labelling anyone with any concerns about human rights or equality a *shengmu*, this rhetoric constructs certain ideas and political agendas as feminine as a way of delegitimizing them:

they are either hopelessly idealistic or dangerously undermine stability, growth, and 'national interests'. If we come back to the trilogy itself, it is no surprise that the original text is so imbued with sexist language that, according to the writer himself, the 'feminist editor' of the English edition made more than 1,000 edits to the second book (The Paper 2015). For the anti-feminist fans of the series, this anecdote serves as another piece of evidence that 'Western culture' has been taken over by political correctness. The 'thought experiment' mentioned earlier becomes even darker when seen from a gender perspective: the only woman in the conversation (the host) was objectified to be part of the moral dilemma, while only the two male speakers had the agency to make a choice.

Another theme in the discourse about the *Three-Body* series among techno-nationalists is Chinese international relations, with the relationship between Earth and the Trisolarans interpreted as a metaphor

for Sino-American relations. A popular question-and-answer thread on *Zhihu* about ‘why humans chose Cheng Xin as a Swordholder’ provides us with ample examples in this regard (Zhihu 2020). The most upvoted answers, including one from the official account of the Communist Youth League, which received more than 80,000 votes, all compare Earth to China and Trisolaris to the United States. Users draw parallels between Luo Ji’s deterrence theory and Mao Zedong’s nuclear thought, suggesting that humans’ underappreciation of Luo Ji and support for Cheng Xin is a result of the Trisolaran cultural hegemony and their strategy of ‘peaceful evolution’. In an answer with more than 15,000 upvotes, one influencer writes sarcastically about how humans became convinced that the Trisolarans were the ‘beacon of civilisation’ and the ‘conscience of the universe’, referring to the tendency among some Chinese liberals to view the United States as the ‘beacon of civilisation’ (Lin 2021), and believed that the idea that ‘the will of the Trisolarans to destroy us will never die’ (a reference to Mao saying ‘the will of the imperialists to destroy us will never die’) was a lie made up by dictators to justify their rule. The gist of these comments, which can at times be quite entertaining to read, is that the nation should never take peace for granted, should always prioritise developing military strength, and should always look out for the technologically superior and culturally hegemonic enemy that seeks to destroy us.

Elsewhere I have characterised the ideological orientation of *gongye dang* techno-nationalists as realist authoritarianism (Zhang 2020), where the opposition to progressive social and political change is based less on any adherence to ‘traditional’ or religious values than on a seemingly pragmatic preoccupation with development and survival in a perceived social Darwinist world. This approach makes their reactionary rhetoric against social justice both resonate with and differ from the far right elsewhere, who may draw on different ideological resources such as traditionalism and individualism. One similarity between Chinese and American right-wing nationalists, apart from the tropes mentioned earlier, is how the image of external threat is employed to delegitimise social justice struggles. Whereas in China

feminists and rights activists are attacked as victims of the influence of ‘Western’ values, US conservatives connect their ‘enemies’ such as critical race theory, so-called gender ideology, or more recently, ‘wokeism’ to communism and the ‘Cultural Revolution’, conveniently invoking the enduring image of the China threat.

The *Three-Body* Discursive Universe in Global Perspective

This brings me to my final point. Although reading the series and the discussions around it sheds lights on how certain political imaginations take shape in Chinese popular culture, they should not be mistaken for representing some uniquely ‘Chinese view of the world’. Neorealism, after all, is an IR theory that originated in the United States and has much in common with the cosmic sociology of the *Three-Body* world. Criticisms of the trilogy and Liu’s other works for their social Darwinist and misogynistic themes are not uncommon in domestic debates, as I mentioned at the beginning. Furthermore, the delegitimising of social justice struggles, which are perceived as an attack on (white) masculinity, is a globally resonant feature of contemporary reactionary discourses.

The *Three-Body* readers who see the greatest threat to civilisational survival in the ‘feminisation’ of society may find sympathetic views among far-right figures like Jordan Peterson, who argues that order is symbolically and ‘mythically male’ and chaos is ‘associated with the feminine’ (Mishra 2018), and Marc Jongen. Jongen’s concern about Germany’s forgetfulness of ‘the importance of the military, the police, [and] warrior virtues’ because of postwar peace and security (Müller 2016) resonates precisely with the *Three-Body* plotline that its militarist readers like to invoke as a parable—namely, that taking peace for granted in a ‘feminised’ society leads to self-destruction. In a less discussed chapter of *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama (2006), one of the best-known advocates of liberalism, worries over the fate of democracy in a world of the ‘last

man’—a world that has become ‘too’ prosperous and peaceful and in which people’s desire for greatness goes unfulfilled. Interestingly, in an academic paper on the *Three-Body* trilogy, legal scholar Chen Qi uses Fukuyama’s terminology to interpret the ‘feminised’ society of Cheng Xin’s era as a society of ‘last men’, in which people believe they have found ‘universal values’ and their moralism results in the erasure of human civilisation, or the ‘end of history’ (Chen 2016). Chen thus builds on the idea of the last man to the degree that it turns the original triumphalist thesis on liberal universalism into a critique of it, by drawing on the narrative resources of the *Three-Body* series. These transnational and translingual linkages and appropriations around the problematics and reactionary rhetoric associated with the trilogy would be a fruitful venue for future exploration. ■

CONVERSATIONS



Dissident at the Doorstep a podcast by Alison Klayman, Colin Jones, and Yangyang Cheng.

Dissident at the Doorstep

A Conversation with Yangyang Cheng

Ivan FRANCESCHINI, Yangyang CHENG

In the 2000s, a blind Chinese barefoot lawyer named Chen Guangcheng became a global icon of freedom and democracy for suffering years of unlawful imprisonment because of his fight against China's draconian One-Child Policy. When, one night in 2012, he staged a daring escape from the house where he was being detained and eventually managed to reach the US Embassy in Beijing, people all over the world held their breath wondering what would happen to him and his family. Would the Chinese Government let them leave the country? Would the US take them in? After much diplomatic wrangling, the whole family eventually landed in the United States, where Chen received a hero's welcome in progressive and conservative circles alike. Then, there was a twist: in the following years, as his star began to fade, Chen would return to the spotlight as an enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump and a MAGA (Make America Great Again) fanatic. In the podcast *Dissident at the Doorstep* (crooked.com/podcast-series/dissident), Alison Klayman, Colin Jones, and Yangyang Cheng look at the trajectory of Chen's life, trying to answer the questions: How could this happen? What do we make of the legacy of one of the most influential Chinese human rights activists of the early twenty-first century? In this conversation, we discuss the podcast with Yangyang Cheng.

Ivan Franceschini: Can you tell us how this project started and how you came to be a part of it?

Yangyang Cheng: My co-hosts, Alison Klayman and Colin Jones, initially came up with the story idea and pitched it to Crooked Media. They had made the award-winning documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* in 2012. At first, I thought I was only going to be a story consultant, but when the project formally took off in the spring of 2022, I was invited to be a co-host and take an equal part in the creative process. It felt like a rather daunting undertaking. I was not very familiar with narrative podcasting as a medium and was much more comfortable working on the page. But I recognised the potential of audio storytelling to create a sense of intimacy with the listener and an immersive experience, while also maintaining the beauty and rigour of the written word. It was a tantalising challenge.

And, more importantly, in addition to the medium, I felt a deep, personal affinity with the subject: I think that's the main reason I was approached for the project in the first place. My proximity to the topic, as a fellow Chinese person living in the United States and severed from

my native land by the forces of politics, also translated into a sense of responsibility: I can tell this story in a way that others from different backgrounds probably cannot.

And a distinct strength of our show is the diverse perspectives of the hosts, how we each wove our own experiences into the story, and how we complemented each other. We also worked with an amazing team, and I learned so much from everyone. Everything from series outline, episode outline, and episode script, down to titles and show art—all went through many drafts and revisions. It was a real team effort. It was a labour of love and of trust.

IF: In the first episode, you present Chen Guangcheng's trajectory as 'the subversion of a fairytale; instead of happily ever after, the story ends in heartbreak and betrayal', which 'encapsulates much of what happened in my birth country and my adopted home [the United States] in my lifetime'. You also say that by tracing Chen's experience you hope to 'relive the years of reform and regression in China which as a witness I was too young to understand'. Can you elaborate on this parallel between Chen's life and the broader picture?

YC: One thing I hope the show conveys, especially in Episode 2, is that Chen Guangcheng did not set out to be an enemy of the Chinese State. In the late 1990s to the early 2000s, when he was working on issues such as rural taxation, water pollution, and free access to the subway for disabled people, Chen's actions irritated some local officials, but, like many legal activists at the time, he was also celebrated in China. As the Chinese Government was formalising and expanding its legal system to achieve more effective governance and facilitate the country's integration into global capitalism, this period also created an opening for Chinese citizens to use the law and the courts as a new avenue to advocate for and defend their rights.

I remember the Sun Zhigang case in early 2003, when a migrant worker died in detention under China's then custody and repatriation (收容 *shourong*) system. I was buried deep in prep books for the high school entrance exam at the time, but the media reports and editorials were impossible to miss. Notably, three legal scholars petitioned China's top legislature, calling for the abusive system to be abolished. Weeks later, the State Council formally ended the *shourong* policy. It was a stunning victory, and my adolescent self was very encouraged by it!

One of the three scholar-petitioners was Teng Biao, who also worked closely with Chen on the One-Child Policy case and is a significant character in our show. Two decades later, he lives in exile in the United States. Another, Xu Zhiyong, is currently serving a 14-year sentence in China on sedition charges. Were the activists betrayed by the Chinese system or did their plight reveal the limits of the law as a vehicle for social change—a lesson that applies not just to China?

Many in the United States are beginning to recognise the injustices in their own country's justice system and the unforgiving nature of law as a tool of power over the past few years. Of course, that the United States has never lived up to its venerated ideals is not a revelation to those who have experienced at first hand the brutality of American

power and should not be a revelation to anyone who is curious and honest about American history. So, when Chen took to the stage at the 2020 Republican National Convention to endorse Trump, and joined the crowd on 6 January the following year seeking to overturn the election, why did he do so? What does America mean to an exiled Chinese human rights activist like Chen, and what do human rights mean to him? These were some of the questions we hoped to explore through the show. It's much more than the story of one man, one country, one political system, or bilateral relations between two superpowers. It probes fundamental questions about freedom and power.

IF: Throughout the podcast you also make clear how Chen's story feels very personal to you. For instance, you mention how his advocacy against forced abortion prompted you to think about your own position as a daughter born under the One-Child Policy; how his departure from China and arrival in the United States made you think about your own experience of moving to Chicago in the late 2000s; and how people discussing Chen's linguistic abilities triggered memories of similar criticisms you received in the past, both during your time in China and as an immigrant to the United States. You also take personal issue with the patronising attitude shown by some of Chen's hosts, who seem to have thought they knew best about how to take care of him and his family and expected compliance and gratitude. For me, your reflections are among the most poignant parts of the whole podcast. In what ways does Chen's experience of international migration resonate the most with you and in what other ways is it a radical departure from your own?

YC: One moment in the show that really stood out to me—and it's one I still reflect on often—is in Episode 7, when Chen was reluctant to answer my question of whether he still considers himself 'Chinese'. This episode centres on language and translation, and Chen's inability to answer my question was really the inability to find the right words, in Chinese, to describe his Chinese-ness. It is easier in English, at least for me, when I say I'm Chinese, but my Chinese-ness is a cultural identity and a linguistic belonging; it's not about citizenship. Of course, all cultures and languages are shaped by political power, but they can also contest and transcend forces of the state. Both Chen and I were reluctant to use vocabulary that foregrounds the Chinese State to describe our Chinese-ness, but what other words are available? If you listen to the recording, it sounds like we were arguing. I was pressing him hard for an answer. I both wished he had an answer to the question I could not answer for myself and knew deep down that it was an impossible demand.

I do not want to project too much on to Chen, but I believe this sense of loss and longing is shared between us, and different people find different ways to cope with it. Chen had a radically different upbringing in China from mine: he was born during the Cultural Revolution, grew up in rural poverty, and was denied access to much formal education because of his disability. This also meant we came to the United States in radically different ways: he and his young family were uprooted from China in such an abrupt and dramatic fashion, which I don't want to spoil by revealing it here but encourage everyone to listen to the show.

I moved here to pursue my PhD in physics and it was after graduation and with a series of deliberate choices made given the deteriorating political conditions in China that the possibility of return, even for a short visit, became increasingly elusive. My precarity is also conditioned by my privilege.

Depending on one's politics, it might be very easy, even gratifying, to criticise Chen for some of his views and actions in the United States. But one thing I hope the show does is remind listeners to place things in context, to remember the trauma and humanity that underlie all these experiences. To dismiss Chen as a bigot is easy, but what can one learn from such a dismissal?

IF: Reflecting on the activism of those *weiquan* lawyers in the 2000s and 2010s, in the second episode, long-term China correspondent Philip Pan muses: 'Looking back at it now, it almost seems naive for me to have thought as a correspondent that they could succeed. It was even nuttier for them to think they could succeed, because they knew how difficult that would be.' He continues: 'That was part of the whole time, everybody there was optimistic, even the guys who were losing, even the guys who were thrown in jail, they thought time was on their side.' I also have a clear memory of that time in China as a moment of great optimism. While I haven't forgotten the harsh side of it all—arrests and state violence were pretty much the order of the day even then—compared with today that period does feel like something of a golden age for political and social activism in China. In hindsight, do you agree with Pan's assessment that it was naive to think those activists could succeed? Might it be, rather, that the social movements of that time were proving too successful, which prompted the harsh backlash in the following years?

YC: I touched on this in answer to an earlier question but, to follow up, this also depends on how one defines 'success'. The law is an instrument of state power: if one is using the law and the courts as the primary vehicle for social change, one is inevitably working on the state's terms, so there is a limit to what one can achieve. What did Audre Lorde (2007) say about the master's tool and the master's house? The path to revolution is not paved with legal statutes.

In the case of China, one must also recognise that the reason the Chinese State pushed for legal reform and allowed a degree of social activism was not to empower the people; it was to empower the state and facilitate the flow of capital. The last, of course, was also a primary reason the US Government facilitated legal reform in China at the time and in many other countries in the developing world—to facilitate their integration into the global market. The interests of states and those of global capital in these instances were aligned. And if one looks at the history of capitalism, one can see that the 'free market' not only does not bring democracy but also is often insulated from democratic demands by the law (Slobodian 2018), and democratic rights were won against, not alongside, the forces of capital (Mitchell 2011).

It is also very important to note that most legal activists in China at the time were not revolutionaries, at least not explicitly so. They were seeking not to radically change the system, but to work within the system to make it a bit more honest, a bit more predictable, and, in the best circumstances, a bit more humane. To that end, many did succeed—

on the state's terms, which were also their terms. It is heartbreaking to witness the regression and crackdowns in recent years, but that does not give one permission to be cynical. It is good, even necessary, to retain some naivety. That the activists acted is itself a form of success because it proved a possibility. It kept hope alive. With the knowledge of the tremendous sacrifices they made, who are we to lose hope?

IF: In the eighth and final episode, your co-host Alison Klayman says that with this show you thought you could find a way to balance the good and bad sides of Chen's story—to quote her words, 'we thought we could do it all: draw a beautiful picture and keep the shit in the frame'—but as you approached the end of the story, you 'learned how hard that really is'. The final two episodes make harrowing listening, as you reflect on how Chen's trajectory from social activist in China to Trump supporter in the United States is not an exception but rather a typical occurrence among exiles from China, or as you discuss how Chen's backwards views on women's reproductive rights or LGBTQ issues are common in Chinese society, to the point that even your own mother might find herself in agreement with some of them.

It also makes for a painful experience to listen to you and your co-hosts enumerating the increasingly outlandish views expressed by Chen, including him taking personal credit for ending China's One-Child Policy. But the real nail in the coffin of your optimism seems to come towards the very end, when you discuss the sexual assault allegations against Teng Biao, the human rights activist and former friend of Chen's whom your co-hosts had initially chosen as a 'refreshing' counterpart to Chen's trajectory given the progressive politics he maintained even after moving to the United States. These allegations emerged while the podcast production was nearly complete and, rather than dropping him from the series, you chose to keep him in and address the situation head-on. In so doing, you ignored the calls of those who say that misbehaviour by human rights activists should be hushed up because of the 'big picture'. How do you feel about these actions by individuals we once idolised? And, to quote your co-host Colin Jones from the show, '[H]ow [can we] move forward in a world without heroes?'

YC: As I mentioned earlier, it is easy to criticise—either Chen's bigotry or Teng Biao's sexual assault allegations—but it is also *too* easy, hence tempting, at the risk of absolving ourselves and shirking collective responsibility. I shared on the show, which you also reference in your question, that my own mother holds many of the same views as Chen on social issues, on race, gender, and sexuality. I also have people close to me who voted for Trump. I do not know Teng Biao well, but growing up, I have known intimately people on both sides of sexual assaults and gendered violence. It is easy to condemn or cast aside one or two public figures, but what do you do with people whom you've known your entire life, people who have taught you or raised you?

Hence, as I also express on the show, I cannot say I'm disappointed by certain views or behaviours, because that would imply an expectation that another person should be how I would like them to be, to make the world a little easier for me to comprehend and move through, and that is ultimately a selfish expectation. Heroes are not born; they are made. Why do people create heroes out of men—and it is usually men? Why is being human not enough? Who needs heroes, and why?

Ella Baker famously said that strong people don't need strong leaders. What she meant was not that leadership, or organisation, is unnecessary in struggle, but that collective liberation cannot be carried on the backs of a handful of messianic figures. In the context in which she was speaking, Baker was also critiquing certain elements of the US civil rights movement that appeared to be dominated by a select few 'strong' male leaders and was challenging people to rethink the meaning of strength and recognise that true, lasting power lies with the masses, not at the top.

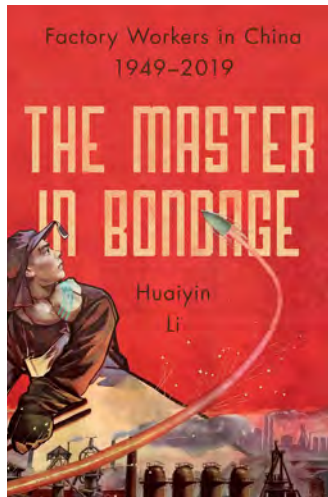
IF: To conclude on a less bleak note, towards the end of the final episode you say that 'hope comes from the new generation' and specifically mention the A4 Movement of 2022. What are the legacies of that movement today and the prospects for the future?

YC: I do not want to make this too much of a generational thing, because what is more important than age is perspective, and what we know about the past has been filtered by structures of power.

For the 'White Paper' protests that erupted in China at the end of 2022, mainly against the draconian Covid-19 lockdowns that had become a symbol of the Chinese Government's dictatorial power, the most important legacy is that they happened. For many inside and outside China, it marked a moment of political awaking. Like the legal activism in the 2000s that we just discussed, the existence of the White Paper movement proved a possibility. And alongside the earlier legal activism and other social movements in contemporary China, big or small, it is now part of the genealogy of struggle, part of the path that must be walked to have a chance to exist.

On the show, I also brought up some of the more hopeful elements of the White Paper movement, including a fledgling cross-racial and interethnic consciousness, prominent participation by feminist and queer activists, and its transnational reach. The spark, quenched by authorities in China, has been sustained by a young generation of overseas Chinese, many of whom are new to activism, and it is often connected with other local organisations and diasporic communities with shared aspirations.

The show is called *Dissident at the Doorstep* and the images of a doorstep and a blank sheet of paper are both immensely hopeful symbols: they do not provide a set path, a map, or an answer. What they do signal is an opening and the promise of possibilities. One must take a step or pick up a pen. ■



The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019
(Stanford University Press, 2023)

The Master in Bondage

A Conversation with Huaiyin Li

Jenny CHAN, Huaiyin LI

In *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* (Stanford University Press, 2023), Huaiyin Li reconstructs the realities of worker performance and factory governance under Mao Zedong and after. Drawing from fresh data collected through oral histories, he reassesses the extent to which Chinese workers were becoming ‘the masters’ in the People’s Republic of China. On the one hand, their position as lifetime employees in a planned economy set urban workers apart from the peasantry and other classes in Maoist China. ‘Treat the factory as home’ (以厂为家) was not merely a rhetorical device of Chinese state propaganda, Li argues; on the contrary, many workers—particularly ‘Model Labourers’ and ‘Advanced Producers’—sought to contribute to industrial production and the advancement of the socialist nation, which gave them a sense of moral superiority and political distinction that made them feel empowered as ‘masters’. Through an array of formal institutions and informal practices, rank and file workers were likewise disciplined to work diligently to achieve collective goals.

On the other hand, Li highlights how, despite the official discourse of ‘democratic’ enterprise management, workers lacked supervisory power over factory cadres and government officials during the Mao era. He also shows that the situation has become significantly worse since the onset of the reform era. From the late 1970s, when Chinese leaders introduced a series of market reforms, the socialist work ecosystem and its labour relations began to drastically change. Clientelism and patronage spread in the 1980s and 1990s as managers gained autonomy in recruitment and promotion. Demoralisation and disappointment became common among the adversely affected workers, especially as tens of millions of state-sector workers lost their jobs in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With the end of lifetime employment and the rise of a competitive job market, younger contract workers became the ‘masters of their own labour’ only.

Jenny Chan: To begin with, let’s discuss your intellectual interest and research trajectory. You have examined the great transformation of rural China across different regimes from the 1870s to the present. How did you decide to write about workers?

Huaiyin Li: In my research on the social history of modern China, I have long focused on how ordinary people lived their everyday lives in the community at times of historical change. For instance, if we consider a village, a production team, a factory, or a workshop, my research has highlighted how people’s personal experiences differed from what organisations or movements imposed on them, and from what the master

A propaganda poster shows the bright future of a post-Maoist China with a modern consumer society and a one-child family, 1982. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



narratives told us about those events. Before writing about factory workers, I published two books on peasant communities and agrarian changes in China before and after 1949—namely, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford University Press, 2005) and *Village China under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948–2008* (Stanford University Press, 2009). In those two books, I was interested not so much in the formal, visible institutions operating in local communities, but rather in how such externally imposed institutions interplayed with the less visible, less formal institutions embedded in the village community to shape villagers' day-to-day experiences.

In *The Master in Bondage*, I adopted a similar approach to studying factory workers. The book pays equal attention to both formal institutions and subtle, less visible workplace practices. Its goal is not to assess whether the formal factory institutions succeeded or failed in executing the official functions assigned to them by the state. Instead, it aims to explain how the imposed policies, systems, regulations, or organisations interacted with local practices and social relations to dictate worker performance in everyday production and factory politics.

Therefore, the approach I employed in this book can be termed as 'substantivist', as it seeks to contextualise formal legal systems within the broader framework of informal relations and practices. It is a departure from the formalist approach that we often find in previous studies, which focuses primarily on formal institutions and interprets individual behaviours as derived from such institutions. For example, the 'egalitarian' nature of the wage system in state-owned factories in the Maoist era has led many to believe that worker performance in production was necessarily subpar and inefficient. Similarly, cadres' extensive power in factory management has led many to deduce that their relationship with workers was one of domination and subordination, with workers either powerless and susceptible to cadre abuses or seeking favouritism from the powerful. I do not deny the existence of

issues such as production inefficiency or favouritism in cadre–worker relations; these situations did indeed exist, varying in intensity across different factories and periods. My point is that factory life was much more complex and multifaceted than the formalist perspective suggests. Factory workers inhabited a social environment in which a diverse range of formal institutions and informal practices intermingled, both constraining and motivating them as individuals and as a group; their strategies and actions were far more varied and adaptable than what one would find in the formalist literature or in the discourse prevalent in mainstream media in post-Mao China, which was often influenced by recently imported neoclassical economic theories.

JC: In 2012 and 2013, you led a team to interview 97 retired workers and cadres from numerous state-owned enterprises across major industrial sectors. Some of the informants were already in their eighties. Looking back, they inevitably see the past through their present lives. Forgetting and remembering are a complex process mediated by sociopolitical, economic, and personal factors. You corroborate oral narratives with factory archives and government reports. How did you evaluate the twin sources of information: worker memory and official narratives of the state and the corporation? What difficulties did you encounter in the collection and analysis of biographical and official data?

HL: This book is based primarily on interviews with 97 retirees from mostly large state-owned factories in different parts of China (the few exceptions being former workers at locally owned ‘collective firms’), which my collaborators and I conducted in 2012–13. The use of workers’ oral accounts for studying factory politics in contemporary China can be traced to the 1970s and early 1980s, or even earlier, when the availability of refugees and émigrés from mainland China made it possible for researchers to interview them in Hong Kong. In comparison, doing interviews three decades later has its own merits and shortcomings. The shortcomings are obvious: for our informants, factory life under Mao is a remote past, and many details about their experiences on the shop floor have faded from memory and become increasingly inaccurate as time passes. The merit is that, as they have experienced enterprise reforms and restructuring in the post-Mao years, bringing both improvements in living conditions and unprecedented frustrations because of unemployment or livelihood insecurity, some workers hold ambivalent attitudes towards the Maoist past. Their memories are imbued with a mix of nostalgia and resentment. Overall, however, we can expect a more balanced account of their life in state firms in the mainland in comparison with the views expressed by the émigrés of the 1970s and early 1980s, who witnessed huge contrasts between mainland China and Hong Kong, and whose accounts of their recent past tended to be highly selective and dismissive.

This book also draws on documents on factory governance preserved at the Nanjing Municipal Archives. Similar issues of presentation and omission exist with the archives of the Mao era. Most of the files were produced by the management or ‘mass organisations’—such as the trade unions, staff and workers’ congresses (SWCs), and the youth

leagues—of state firms. While these documents provide interesting details about the implementation of state policies and the firms' own initiatives, or about the activities of the mass organisations, they were written primarily to prove the necessity for and effectiveness of certain policies or measures, and the examples included in these reports were often highly selective and one-sided. Therefore, we need to be very cautious when we use these files.

Despite the various flaws in oral histories and official archives, these sources turned out to be immensely valuable and informative for forming a well-rounded interpretation of factory politics in Maoist China and afterwards.

JC: The term 'substantive governance', in your words, 'best characterises the realities in which the institutions governing labour relations and factory production actually operated' (p. 100). Can you tell us how the SWCs and trade unions worked to facilitate, or to limit, workers' participation in enterprise management in the Mao era and beyond?

HL: My interpretation in this book revolves around the concept of 'substantive governance' that I initially conceived in *Village Governance in North China*. Instead of focusing on the officially defined goals and functions of factory institutions, and evaluating their effectiveness by looking at how the operational realities of those institutions met their officially stated objectives, this concept instead emphasises the real purposes of factory institutions and how their everyday operations fulfilled the factory's needs in maintaining its functionality. Take the trade unions and the SWCs. By official definition, these two organs were intended to be tools for workers to exercise their rights as the 'masters' of the factory, enabling them to participate in the factory's decision-making process and supervise enterprise management; post-Mao reformers further hailed these two organs as mechanisms of 'grassroots democracy', presumably leading China to the future of political democratisation at higher levels. But a close examination of the functioning of these two institutions shows that their only purpose was to satisfy workers' everyday needs in production and subsistence to ensure the factory's smooth operation. They had little to do with promoting workers' social standing or political rights. Thus, while those institutions appeared to be a failure in the eyes of people aspiring to be the masters of the factory or promoting democracy in China, they worked quite effectively in satisfying the real-world needs of both the workers and the factory.

JC: In Maoist China there was generally an equilibrium in labour relations between management and workers, except for moments of economic hardship and political chaos. Cadres faced group pressure to exercise discretion in promotion and the distribution of public goods. Workers were incentivised and surveilled to maintain a decent level of job performance. Rather than attributing it to workers' simple-mindedness or selflessness, how do you make sense of their conformity at work?

HL: At the core of the concept of substantive governance lies my analysis of the mechanisms of dual equilibrium in regulating worker performance in everyday production and power relations. Contrary to the prevailing narrative in China's mainstream media that assumes widespread inefficiency of production in state firms because of egalitarianism in labour remuneration, most workers were neither fully dedicated to production, as suggested by the Maoist representation of them as masters of the factory, nor as slack and negligent as the pro-reform elite made people believe after Mao's death. In fact, how workers performed in production was subject to the functioning of two distinct sets of interwoven factors that constrained as well as motivated them. On one side were the formal institutions of lifetime employment guarantees, the wage system, labour discipline, workshop regulations, supervision by group leaders, daily political study meetings, and the appointment of advanced producers and model labourers, among others; on the other side were informal structures on the shop floor, such as peer pressure, group identity, and work norms among co-workers. These two sets of factors converged to form a social context in which workers developed their strategies for everyday production.

As our interviewees repeatedly confirmed, those who aspired to be model labourers and those who overtly shirked their duties were few; rather, most worked hard enough to meet the minimum requirements of factory regulations and discipline to avoid being openly censured or criticised by supervisors. At the same time, they also managed to conform to the informal norms and attitudes that prevailed on the shop floor to avoid being ridiculed or maligned by their peers. An equilibrium thus prevailed in labour relations, which explains why industrial production at the micro level was neither as terrible as portrayed in the post-Mao discourse nor as efficient as the Mao-era state propaganda claimed.

JC: Your book shows that clientelism was far less prevalent in the Mao era than has previously been assumed. Ordinary workers did not strongly feel the need to cultivate patron-client networks as they received wages, health care, and retirement benefits in accordance with state standards and factory regulations. In the post-Mao era, cadre-worker relations changed fundamentally. How would you explain the increase in cadre corruption and favouritism during enterprise restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s?

HL: Before explaining the shift in the reform era, let's attend to the equilibrium that had long prevailed in power relations between cadres and workers in state-owned factories. Here again two sets of factors worked together to dictate their relationship, giving rise to an equilibrium. On one side were the formal institutions of the SWCs, trade unions, the petition system, as well as the factory management's lack of power to fire workers and change their wage grades, workers' guaranteed lifetime employment and wage grades pegged to seniority, workers' superiority in political discourse, and the recurrent political movements that targeted corrupt cadres. On the other side were informal practices such as personal loyalty and friendship, cadres' concern about personal reputation among subordinates, their dependence on

Mao-era propaganda poster from 1956 featuring a Chinese typist. The poster reads: 'Whatever Work Aims to Complete and Not to Fail the Five-Year Plan, All That Work is Glorious!' Source: Wikimedia Commons.



worker collaboration to fulfill production targets, and workers' taken-for-granted rights to subsistence. It was in this context of both formal and informal institutions that workers defined who they were and how they dealt with cadres.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that assumed the predominance of patron–client networks in factory politics, cadres' favouritism was limited in nominating workers for honorary titles or recruiting new Party members, and even more difficult in determining wage rises, bonus distribution, and housing allocation. In fact, not only was it difficult for the cadres to openly practice favouritism, given the huge risk of doing so under immense pressure from both above and below, but also most of our interviewees believed it was unnecessary to seek cadres' favour and protection given the security of their jobs and livelihoods. Instead of workers' personal dependence on cadres, what prevailed between the two sides was a balanced relationship, each having their own strengths and leverage in dealing with the other.

This equilibrium in production and power relations suffered severe damage and, in many state firms, disappeared altogether during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, due to the chaos in or stoppage of production and the paralysis of factory management as workers engaged in Red Guard rebellions and most factory leaders stepped down. It emerged again in the early 1970s when political disorder subsided, and most factories rebuilt their leadership, restored production, and reinforced labour discipline. It eventually collapsed in the 1980s and early 1990s as a result of economic reforms, which granted individual enterprises the power to hire and lay off workers and increase their wages or bonus payments. It was during this period of enterprise transformation, rather than in the years before it, as many of our informants observed, that cadres' favouritism became prevalent due to their greatly increased power in labour management and workers' weakened position in relation to them. Similarly, it was also at this time—not before—that

workers' slacking off and negligence in production became a severe problem, as many of them began to seek opportunities outside the factory for extra income and as bonus payments became the only tool to incentivise them.

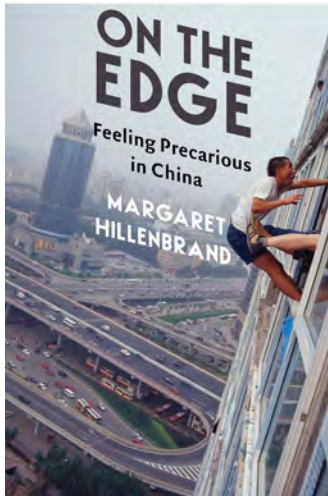
JC: Reform-minded leaders criticised the old generation of workers as 'inefficient' and 'unmotivated' to work. But the fact was that between 1953 and 1978, the state-owned and collectively owned sectors were responsible for the 12 per cent growth rate in Chinese industry (p. 20). Anti-privatisation protests by aggrieved workers in the 1990s and 2000s failed. Can you give an example to illustrate this contestation among protestors, managerial elites, and government officials?

HL: The equilibriums in production and power relations were completely gone in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when most state-owned factories were incorporated and turned into private businesses. Instead of being the masters of their factory—a political status that they had enjoyed in the Maoist past, at least rhetorically—workers became the vulnerable 'master' of only their own labour, subject to enterprise management's complete control and reckless abuses in the absence of an effective labour law and the protection of autonomous trade unions. Interestingly, it was during the privatisation of state firms, when workers were confronted with the immediate danger of losing their privileges of lifetime employment and security of livelihood, that for the first time they used the SWCs as a legal weapon to defend their rights—as best seen in the case of the Zhengzhou Paper Mill. In October 1999, when the mill was to be sold to a private firm, workers occupied factory buildings. They convened an SWC meeting to pass a resolution that demanded the termination of the merger. On that occasion, the workers succeeded as the city government stopped the merger to prevent the situation escalating, even though the authorities had refused to restore the paper mill to a state-owned enterprise as the workers had originally requested. Instead, the mill was eventually transformed into a shareholding company, with its management board members elected by the company's SWC.

But such cases of successful resistance were rare. Millions of workers of former state firms suffered unemployment after their factories were privatised and they were compensated with only a one-time payment by the new owners of the factories to 'buy out' their seniority and the pension plan that came with it. Those who were lucky enough to be re-employed in the newly restructured firm became simple wage workers, and the trade union and the SWC became further marginalised, if not non-existent. Even more miserable were the millions of migrant workers who were hired as an informal and temporary labour force and lacked the protection of the labour law and any welfare benefits. While enterprise reforms propelled China's industrial expansion and economic growth, workers' income levels and living conditions, while improving over time, lagged steadily behind the growth of the wealth they created.

JC: On reflection, what was the significance of 'socialism' and 'democracy' in the workplace and what is their legacy in China today?

HL: In recent years, China has made huge efforts to upgrade its manufacturing industry and narrow its technological gap with advanced industrial nations. Key to this task, as many in China believe, is to maintain a large, stable rank of skilled workers. Cultivating 'the spirit of craftsmanship' (工匠精神) among the workers thus has been a popular slogan that the Party-State has vigorously promoted in its quest for China's rise as an 'advanced manufacturing power' (制造业强国). Increasing workers' wages and providing them with legal protection are no doubt effective tools to incentivise the workers. However, to make them not only technically competent but also fully dedicated to the workplace, the new generation of the Chinese working class must be instilled with a shared sense of belonging to the workplace and pride over their workmanship. Only when workers are treated more as members of a community than as simple wage-earners will there be the potential for a new type of equilibrium to surface on Chinese shop floors—even though there is still a long way to go before this happens. ■



On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China (Columbia University Press, 2023)

On the Edge

A Conversation with Margaret Hillenbrand

Andrea E. PIA, Federico PICERNI, and Margaret HILLENBRAND

In *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), Margaret Hillenbrand probes precarity in contemporary China through the lens of the dark and angry cultural forms that chronic uncertainty has generated. She argues that a vast underclass of Chinese workers exist in a state of ‘zombie citizenship’—a condition of dehumanising exile from the law and its safeguards. Many others also feel their lives are precarious, sensing that they live on the edge of a precipice, with the constant fear of falling into an abyss of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and dislocation. Examining the volatile aesthetic forms that embody stifled social tensions and surging anxiety over zombie citizenship, Hillenbrand traces how people use culture to vent taboo feelings of rage, resentment, distrust, and disdain in scenarios rife with cross-class antagonism.

Andrea E. Pia: In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978) famously proposes four figures of sexuality—the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, and the perverse adult—to explain the transition in the Western discourse of sovereign authority towards a form of disciplinary power that aims not at obedience but at the total normalisation (or *harmonisation*) of both private and collective life through the shaping of feelings, desires, and their expression in the ordinary conduct of individual bodies. In *On the Edge*, you seem to be after a similar analytical move—although *à rebours*—when looking at contemporary Chinese society through five figures of social and economic precarity: the delegators, the ragpickers, the ventriloquists, the cliffhangers, and the microcelebrities. You argue that these fractious figures enable the voicing of anger against the normalisation of social inequalities and allow members of the increasingly disenfranchised urban lower classes to stake claims to a richer form of citizenship. Can you tell us about the process that led you to centre your research on these figures, and what you think they accomplish for the study of contemporary China?

Margaret Hillenbrand: When I began working on this book, I planned to explore precarity in China through the lens of genre: poetry, performance art, short video, folk song, and so on. There’s a vast quantity of cultural material out there that grapples with precarious experience and, in the early stages of the project, I thought genre or medium would be the most enlightening and efficient prism through which to survey it. But as I dug deeper, I realised that I was looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope. As I began working on this material, what struck me repeatedly was the high-voltage intersubjectivity, the electric current of personal antagonism, that seems to crackle across these cultural forms. There’s always some kind of abrasive stand-off going on here: between avant-garde artists and the indigent people they

recruit for humiliating performance pieces; between unpaid construction workers threatening to jump from a rooftop and their wicked bosses on the street; between livestreamers who flout taboos and their so-called social betters who lecture them for being vulgar. This sense of the furious face-to-face was so strong it made me realise I needed to make a shift from *medium* as the organising principle of the book to *makers*, from genre to people. This is because it's in this space of bristling social tension that these cultural forms come into being. They're born in the crucible of anger, dread, and contempt.

Another reason I focused on these human figures stems from the core premise of *On the Edge*. In the book, I argue that the ranks of the immiserated in China—the largest underclass in human history—endure far more than inequality and insecure work. Their experiences are much better understood through the idiom of expulsion. They suffer this banishment on multiple fronts: from forced eviction to life-altering workplace injuries to the extraction of hard labour without pay. It seems to me that these experiences of expulsion have created an aberrant socio-legal condition. I call this 'zombie citizenship': a state of abject exile from the shelter of the law in which a substantial minority of Chinese workers—as many as 300 million people—currently languish, even though they theoretically enjoy full, even privileged, personhood under the law of the land in an example of what you've described elsewhere as a 'legal fiction' (Pia 2020).

The term 'zombie citizenship' seemed necessary because it captures the sense in which many working people in China are chained by toil yet simultaneously cut loose from the safeguards of the law. This is a paradox full of threat. It makes these workers real-world symbols of the unjustly wronged, whose mutiny is always around the corner. At the same time, civic zombiehood symbolises the fear—the fact—that no-one is safe from harm in a system where both the spirit and the letter of the law are applied inconsistently. But using the term zombie citizenship has to come with a crucial caveat—and this relates directly to my use of the five figures. Zombie is a provocative term. Zombies are sepulchral creatures, raised grotesquely from the grave: they have no power of speech, thought, or independent deed. So, I should say emphatically that I don't use this term in the book as an epithet for actual people. Instead, it's a coinage to describe the state of civic half-life into which some people are pitched in our current precarious moment. But the five figures I explore in *On the Edge*, and the cultural practices they create, offer vivid proof that people do not surrender to this fate tamely. Unlike the zombie, whose agency has been voodooed, the five figures show that citizenship—full life, in Giorgio Agamben's words—is worth going into heated battle for, even if that means taking the fight to those closest to hand. I'll say something a bit more about that in response to one of Federico's questions later.

But to get back to your question, I should make it clear that the five figures I explore in *On the Edge* do not—could never—constitute anything close to the full horizon of precarious experience in China. As case studies, I hope they're exemplary, even paradigmatic; but they're

also a long way from exhaustive. To treat this theme comprehensively (if that were even possible), I would also have needed to cover folk song, fashion, migrant worker museums, and much more. So, I had to make some choices. In part, that selection was directed by what was already out there in the field—for example, scholars such as Junxi Qian, Junwan'guo Guo, and Eric Florence have done fantastic work on migrant worker museums. But I also wanted to choose people-driven themes that would help to build a picture of precarity as a lifeworld. And with that in mind, I tried to match each figure with a keyword emblematic of life under siege, life without surety, as I scoped out the book. So, although the chapters crisscross densely in terms of theme, each is also shaped by a singular motif that has salience for that case study. Moving chronologically through the chapters, these emblems are 'exploitation', 'waste', 'grind', 'protest', and 'hustle'. Each emblem drives its own chapter, but they also cohere, alongside the five figures themselves, into a kind of affective assemblage for precarious experience both in China and elsewhere—a dark charter, as it were.

In terms of what these figures offer for the study of contemporary China, I hope above all that they can lend crucial humanist colouration to our understanding of precarious experience. As I argue in the book, precarity is a universal keyword for our times, but academic studies of the condition have mostly overlooked China until quite recently. What's more, the work that has investigated precarity in China tends to focus on contingent, casualised labour and does so from mostly social science perspectives (though there are, of course, some important exceptions, especially in the field of migrant worker poetry, where scholars like Federico, Maghiel van Crevel, Eleanor Goodman, Wanning Sun, Justyna Jaguścik, and others have done excellent work; there's also a superb special issue of *positions: asia cultures critique*, edited by Paola Iovene and entitled 'Cultures of Labor in Contemporary China', which came out earlier in 2023). In this sense, the five figures are a critical move intended to put flesh on the bones—personhood—of an approach to precarity that is grounded in the humanities and in cultural studies especially.

AEP: The central question of your book is, 'What might it mean to feel precarious in contemporary China?' To answer this, you conjure another powerful image, that of the *cliff edge*. It is at the cliff edge that marginal, surplus segments of contemporary Chinese society—rural migrants, factory workers, but also the educated unemployed, and the squeezed middle classes—come to reckon with their own progressive destitution. It is here that they experience at first hand the powerful counterforce of social gravity—gravity that by breaking with the post-socialist promises of upward mobility and generalised small affluence, drags the underclasses continuously down and forecloses the attainment of those status markers deemed by the Party-State a prerequisite for rightful citizenship and national belonging. You name this situation *zombie citizenship*. Yet, the cliff edge is for you also a conveyor belt of sorts, on which an increasingly larger portion of the Chinese populace is carried forth to experience social exclusion. And this experience ends up reinforcing the political principle that in contemporary China one should live according to the standards one might be able to achieve by one's own effort alone. After all, social gravity affects individuals and social groups differently, and an analysis of class composition would suggest that

within the Chinese precariat itself, there are certainly those who would be broken by a fall from the cliff edge, while others, better resourced, would manage to keep themselves ‘suspended’, to say it with Xiang Biao (2021), by frantically vibrating their wings to sustain themselves in the air.

I want to take issue with the *cliff edge* as a figuration of precarity and suggest an alternative image that, to me, appears more fitting of the brand of capitalist society in which Chinese citizens are made to dwell today. In *Economies of Abandonment*, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) draws on Ursula Le Guin’s ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’ (1975) to argue that the surplus populations produced by late capitalism are a little like the small child in Le Guin’s short story, held forever captive in a broom closet and regularly abused by a group of strangers with the tacit consent of the entire population of Omelas. ‘They all understand,’ writes Le Guin (1975: 98), ‘that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.’ This image has the double merit of, first, individuating what you call the ‘internal exile’ of the growing ranks of the Chinese precariat (through the continuous denial of a stable home, a safe place to work, a steady means of subsistence). Second, it highlights the interclass complicities attending to the reproduction of economic and social inequality in China—complicities that are entertained in the effort of keeping the same inequality at bay for some. Therefore, to rephrase your own question: What might it mean to be rendered not precarious but ‘abject’ in contemporary China? What might it mean for the prospect of overt class antagonism in the country? Are you perhaps purposefully avoiding the more rigid language of class exploitation and, if so, why?

MH: I very much agree that Le Guin’s allegory of the broom closet is in many ways horribly apposite for contemporary Chinese capitalism, not least because it conveys social abjection as a grubby but open secret. I’m not convinced, though, that the metaphor of the closet, which hinges after all on the idea of containment, is capacious enough to serve as a catch-all metaphor for precarious China. One of the points I make in the book is about the *failure* of containment—by which I mean the reality that abjection can’t be confined to specific social cohorts in a world rife with precarity. And the attempt to box it in fails because chronic uncertainty doesn’t simply unravel the social contract; it also starts to dissolve the lines of demarcation between social classes.

The analogy of the cliff edge captures this uncontainability: the precipice is by its nature narrow and squeezed, unlike the abyss that yawns below. So, its very topography exposes containability as a myth. The cliff edge also offers an answer to the question ‘What might it mean to be rendered not precarious but “abject” in contemporary China?’. This is because the cliff edge is a two-part formation: it’s composed of both the shelf and the drop, and the former induces vertigo only in proportion to the steepness of the latter. And in the same way, precarity is so gut-churning because it is only the smallest misstep away from abjection. Last, the cliff edge is perhaps a bit like the gladiatorial arena. It’s a place where the hardy few survive if, and only if, they can dispatch their weaker others. It’s a metaphorical site in which overt class antagonism is hardwired, where those who possess comparatively more social advantage can maintain their toehold only by leveraging that upper hand to shove others over the brink. Indeed, the fear of this short, sharp tumble from precarity to abjection is the propulsive

force behind many of the cultural forms at which I look in the book and the hostility that seethes within them. So, rather than avoiding the ‘rigid language of class exploitation’, the metaphor of the cliff edge addresses it head-on.

Ultimately, though, there’s something bigger at work here. Over the past few years, memes and metaphors about corrosive unease and deadened opportunity in Chinese society have followed hot on each other’s heels: ‘lying flat’ (躺平), ‘involution’ (内卷), ‘Kong Yiji literature’ (孔乙己文学), the ‘youth of four nos’ (四不青年), ‘*sang* culture’ (丧文化). Each uses the language of analogy to gain some sort of purchase on what is both a pervasive and an elusive structure of feeling. This proliferation of descriptors makes it clear that this structure of feeling resists neat naming; it refuses containment, to use that word again. So, I offer the cliff edge as a heuristic tool very much in awareness of the fact that it’s no more capable of nailing down this structure of feeling in its every shade of nuance than any other of the terms that have circulated in recent years. Probably the more tools we have at our disposal here, the better.

Federico Picerni: I very much agree with the book’s core intent to show that class antagonisms continue to exist in contemporary China, and therefore to recentre the category of class. But what about the *underclasses*? The book considers ‘laid-off workers dismissed from state-owned enterprises; landless peasants; those with disabilities and unable to work; unpensioned retirees; others who have fallen into homelessness or indigence, including recipients of the minimum livelihood allowance (*dibao* 低保); and, perhaps most important, the rural-to-urban migrants who work in factories, on construction sites, and in various branches of the service industry’ (p. 7). Yet, some may argue your underclass is more a mix of different classes. For instance, if we adopted Lenin’s criteria, we could divide classes based on the social division of labour. While I take your point that underclass works ‘not because of empirical or theoretical accuracy’ but thanks to its analytical value to capture ‘the affective tenor’ clustering together diverse disadvantaged groups (p. 11), this aspect is worth considering if we want to tackle the related issue of class consciousness. Do cultural practices reaffirm or dissolve the internal boundaries that exist between the social groups composing your underclass? What space is there for *intra*class solidarity among these groups?

MH: I very much take the point that China’s underclass is heterogeneous, and I discuss this in some detail in the book’s introduction. I note there that one key problem with the term ‘underclass’ is that it can perform ‘a blanket homogenization of marginalized groups who are too disparate to group meaningfully together’ (p. 9), and I cite examples such as the variegation between different groups of migrant workers and the divide between long-term urban denizens and newcomers to the city (as well as their second and even third-generation descendants). That said, I think it’s worth saying again that I’m all too aware of the limits and liabilities of ‘underclass’ as a descriptive category. I’m sticking my head above the parapet with this term because it seems that if the necessary, normative, relatively neutral word ‘class’ is now off-limits—presumably because the socioeconomic differentials it



From Li Jikai 李继开: *The Waste Pickers* (Shihuangzhe 拾荒者, 2014).

denotes have become a runaway problem—then the term ‘underclass’ is almost certainly a blazing truth-teller about the state of things right now. So, using the term is worth the risks.

Moving on to class consciousness, I entirely agree that the question of *intra*class solidarity is a crucial one, and in many ways my book is written in direct dialogue with an important and inspiring body of work that explores this theme, as well as the equally vital question of *inter*class camaraderie in precarious times. Over the past few years, scholars working inside and outside China studies have shown not only that shared experiences of precarity can foster resilience and repair amid fragility, but also that culture—the making of culture—is often where that process happens. A lodestar for solidarity until its devastating recent closure was the Migrant Workers Home (工友之家), a multilateral nongovernmental organisation based in Picun urban village on the outskirts of Beijing. As a site of kinship, the home enabled both *intra*class and *inter*class solidarity: it showed that cultural practices can serve as a salve for social friction. The Picun home proved that cultural practices can, as you put it, ‘dissolve the internal boundaries’ that divide members of China’s diverse underclass, as people pushed to the limit find solace in writing, reading, and performing together. My book is indebted to the pioneering research that other scholars have done on this theme of solidarity. In fact, my expectation when I started the project was that I would build quite directly on their work.

But ultimately my findings took me in the opposite direction. What I found was that solidarity—transformational and visionary though it may be—is a quantity in diminishing supply as precarity bites, and in the book I refer to Picun as the ‘charismatic exception that proves the rule’. As I explored a large corpus of cultural texts—poetry, migrant worker magazines, social media posts, short videos, performance art, documentary film, installations, interviews—what emerged was a picture in which culture is more often a space where bleak, fierce, tamped-down feelings run amok. Which is to say, I don’t see these cultural forms as ‘merely’ representational; they don’t offer an aestheticised refraction of social realities. I don’t even think they exemplify Oscar Wilde’s point that ‘Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life’. I ended up thinking of them not as artforms so much as lifeforms in their own right, sites through which repressed feeling is brought kicking and screaming into the world.

And the binding catalyst for this process is the strength and depth of fear and fury, not the balm of solidarity. We’re conditioned to recoil from the rank irrationality of violent emotions, and rightly so for the most part. But the texts at which I looked in my book also display their own kind of hard logic: they show that antagonistic agency can work as a circuit board that conducts an essential electricity from person to person. I’m not disputing for a moment that camaraderie is a far healthier mode of intersubjectivity. But in times and places where solidarity cannot thrive—because people are atomised from one another, because political togetherness is taboo—antagonism can sometimes be another way of creating points of contact, of bringing about the face-to-face. I guess the key point is that vulnerability is a condition that people share in precarious times, even when they experience it along a wide continuum, and this state of commonality always harbours the potential for relationality.

The cultural practices I look at in the book are all about moments when people who are dislocated from others within their own class, or from people in other social groups, experience a hostile coming together. So, in answer to your question ‘Do cultural practices reaffirm or dissolve the internal boundaries that exist between the social groups composing your underclass?’, they can do both and, in addition, they may sometimes create a third state, one in which boundaries are neither reaffirmed nor dissolved, but in which people are thrust into tight, tense proximity across the divide—and that closeness can be transformative.

FP: Vital and productive experiences such as precarity, radicalism, and class struggle can be emptied of their content and turned into mere simulacra for the enjoyment of upper-class intellectuals, disconnected from real issues and movements. At the same time, having such an audience can help lower-class or counter-trend cultural creators acquire visibility. The recent demolition of the Museum of Workers’ Culture and Arts (打工文化艺术博物馆) in Picun—which was part of the Migrant Workers Home you mentioned—should force us to rethink the pros and cons of interclass visibility in contemporary China. Let’s take the exponents of *tuwei* culture (土味文化)—a term that you point out is untranslatable, which denotes a style of ‘provocative’ art based on the opposite of what is considered aesthetically, socially, or even hygienically accept-

able. Aren't they in fact consciously targeting upper-class viewers? And in so doing, couldn't they be seen as striving to demonstrate that they can conform to the dominant conception of the positive characteristics that the good citizen should possess to perform and fit into society—what usually goes by the name of *suzhi* (素质, usually translated as 'human quality')—rather than questioning the concept altogether? Contemporary worker-poets, by contrast, are sometimes engaged in the rekindling of the 'speak bitterness' (诉苦, *suku*) tradition. This practice originated in the revolutionary era and consisted of collectively venting one's rage and indignation at the abuses perpetrated by the oppressors and, by so doing, forcing ties of solidarity and political community. Worker-poets who do something similar today may be congratulated for escaping upper-class cooptation and reigniting older solidarities by voicing shared pains and pointing out the common (class) enemy. Could you elaborate on these shifting social geometries and the prospects for and limits of these cultural practices for radical politics in China?

MH: I entirely agree with you that any reading of these cultural practices has to remain open-ended. In the case of *suzhi* as a social protocol, many people enduring socioeconomic disadvantage in China do strive to 'better' themselves according to these assigned behavioural diktats. But on Kuaishou, the short video and livestreaming app that I explored in my discussion of *suzhi*, I found exactly the opposite. There, striving for high *suzhi* was a game for fools and following both the money and the fun meant being as performatively crass as possible. Similarly, the worker-poets who resuscitate the Maoist tradition of *suku* certainly open paths for lateral solidarity, and in ways that recall the class bonds of the socialist past. But there, too, my own case study—the poetry of Zheng Xiaoqiong—seemed to demonstrate the opposite momentum, as Zheng's later verse seems to want to 'level up', to tone down her earlier plaintive sounds of *suku* in favour of something a bit more socially emollient. In a way, these counterexamples simply corroborate the point you're making—namely, that interclass visibility has pros and cons and 'counter-trend cultural creators', to use your term, have to carry out a careful cost-benefit analysis if they want to pursue it.

Moving to the second part of your comment, these shifting social geometries do indeed tell us quite a lot about 'the prospects for and limits of these cultural practices for radical politics in China'. At first sight, the practitioners of *tuwei*, who revel in earthiness, seem at odds with the practitioners of *suku*, whose leitmotif is earnestness. They're counter-trend cultural creators who take ostensibly opposing stances on what it means to achieve interclass visibility. But on the structural plane, the two exist in a closely horizontal relationship with each other—and in a vertical one with those who are determined to set the cultural tone and thus shore up their own increasingly shaky position. On one level, these 'counter-trend cultural creators' can and do communicate richly and meaningfully within their class. The provocateurs of Kuaishou act in solidarity with one another as they heckle uptight *suzhi* protocols, while the poetic warriors on the factory floor are united in their mission to call out the injustices of the labor regime. But these are still practices mobilised 'from below', whose driving impetus is to remonstrate with a more powerful interlocutor.



From Li Jikai 李继开: *The Waste Pickers* (Shihuangzhe 拾荒者, 2014).

This cultural hierarchy, which is rooted in differential citizenship—in the *doxa* that some are more ‘civic’ or ‘citizenly’ than others—determines the ‘prospects for and limits of these practices for radical politics’. In one sense, these cultural practices do show a shift towards ‘class for itself’ in Marxian terms, and that may harbour radical potential. But as part of that same process, this intraclass solidarity takes as its prime target more advantaged social others who are themselves just as fearful of the quicksand as those already deeper in the mire. In other words, a shared (if far from equal) state of precarity means that all class interests end up more antagonistically trained on each other than they are on attempting to rework the system *per se*. The core question for the future is whether or not these antagonistic encounters can also seed new ways of being together within a society where the state’s grip on the system seems unassailable.

AEP and FP: Last, in exploring the figures of performance artists who appropriate the suffering and desperation of the underclasses by staging them in their haute-art interventions, the gentrification of working-class poetry in the hands of middle-class cultural brokers, or the microblogging celebrities who embrace and commodify their so-called social untouchability in exchange for online visibility, your book restages and dramatises the very familiar dynamic of neoliberal academia whereby subaltern lifeworlds and lifeways are reified and consumed, often by classed others, giving little back. Similar to Erin Huang’s (2020: 193) analysis of Tsai Ming-liang’s

movie *Stray Dogs*, your book invites us to question how we should feel about these characters and their torquing and bending of interclass responsibilities and self-exploitation into a novel ethical regime. It also invites us to consider our own ethical outlook as viewers and readers of such imponderable class-crossing acts. We would like to push you a bit further on this point. Writing about class voyeurism in the new Chinese social documentary tradition, Sun Wanning (2014: 129) has claimed that ‘camera work can be a cruel means of storytelling, inviting people to reflect on their own miseries’ without offering a way to change or improve their condition. What is at stake in such three-way encounters across class lines (the exploited, the exploiters, and the onlookers—that is, us)? Can we write books that are at once helpfully ‘cruel’ in exposing social exclusion but also potentially life-affirming and liberating for the subjects of exclusion?

MH: This is a vital question and I’m grateful to you for asking it because I didn’t address it fully enough in the book and I should have. There are, of course, lots of ways of being a bystander. One can be lazily complicit; one can be craven; one can be gloating; one can be too far removed in time and space to intervene in the stand-off between aggressor and victim in any meaningful way. But one can also be the bystander whose own fate is foretold in that primary encounter between the exploited and the exploiter. This fact of premonition really guided my thinking as I worked on this book: the idea that the very ontology of the bystander—the notion that there are some people who have the luxury of looking on and standing back—is under terminal threat in our contemporary moment. My book is principally about precarity as an affective condition whose roots lie in the legal-economic-governmental nexus; but in a very real sense, this mode of precarity is also a messy dress rehearsal for the planetary precarity that is already lapping at our shores.

I allude to this point in the book’s conclusion, which explores ‘viral precarity’ during Covid-19: the wild accelerant that the pandemic poured on already-chronic insecurity. But viral precarity should be understood as a contagion that is spreading not simply between people and social classes, but also between conditions of plight: from the legal-economic-governmental nexus to the still more fundamental matter of liveability in our world, a menaced state of being in which space for the so-called bystander is shrinking at speed. I don’t delude myself that a book like this could ever bring anything ‘life-affirming or liberating’ to the subjects of exclusion. But I do think that reflecting on how people respond to precarity on a range of scales, and outside the soothing narrative of solidarity, is worth doing—and not simply in terms of alarmism or panic-mongering. Fury and fear, even when we direct those feelings at each other, may prove to be catalysts for new kinds of action at a time when simply standing by is becoming ever more impossible. ■



Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture (Duke University Press, 2020)

Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture

A Conversation with Alessandro Russo

Christian SORACE, Alessandro RUSSO

Alessandro Russo's groundbreaking work *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* (Duke University Press, 2020) revisits the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—a revolutionary process the inheritance of which is still open, even though most of the world, and China in particular, has all but disowned it. In his book, Russo excavates the unfinished work, theoretical debates, and possibilities of the movement. In this conversation, we talk with him about why lessons from the Cultural Revolution could help us think through how to reinvent mass democracy in an age of nationalism, limitless capitalism, and globalised war.

Christian Sorace: In your response to a recent review by Chris Connery (2023), you talked about the need for a 're-assessment of communist exceptions to capitalism'. While I am in complete agreement about this imperative, why do you consider the Cultural Revolution 'the only opening available for an assessment of twentieth-century communism'? It seems that there should be other openings.

Alessandro Russo: There have been various communist exceptions to capitalist rule and I agree that one must consider them all to take stock of twentieth-century communism. The Cultural Revolution's uniqueness lies in positing such a stocktaking and, more generally, the re-examination of Marxism's whole theoretical and practical experience as the compass of the revolutionary process.

Not that one can view the revolutionary decade with the yardstick of a linear and progressive academic re-examination of the problem. It was a great mass political laboratory with a very tortuous, inevitably tumultuous course, in which, nevertheless, the restless questioning of the foundations of the twentieth-century communist experience was always on the horizon. It was even more so when that restlessness was symptomatically covered by the most obsessively dogmatic statements about the 'absolute authority of Mao's thought'.

The final years of the revolutionary decade, in which Mao Zedong stubbornly tried to promote a political assessment of events, are animated by the anguish of the question: 'What really is the dictatorship of the proletariat?' Mao even launched a mass political campaign for the theoretical study of this problem. He went so far as to say that 'this problem must be clarified' and 'the whole country must be aware of it' because a failure to clarify it would inevitably lead to the restoration of capitalist rule. This was an exact prediction, which confirms the essentials of his convictions in the last two decades of his life and finally condenses the deepest motivations of the Cultural Revolution.

The theme of ‘probable defeat’, which Mao reiterated more and more strongly from the early 1960s, constituted a decisive alteration of the perspective established in the Soviet Union, where in the 1930s Stalin proclaimed that he had achieved a ‘final victory’ over capitalism. The problem for Mao was what could be the political experimentation of an exception to capitalism that not only had no historical guarantee but also took place during a time when failure was the ‘most likely’ outcome. How to continue such experimentation without capitulating in the face of the capitalist rule of the modern world that was poised to reassert itself?

I can nuance my statement. The Cultural Revolution is the main opening point for a political assessment of modern communism because it is situated on the final edge of twentieth-century state communism and, at the same time, because it poses in advance the urgency of thinking critically about its end. It is the theme of ‘probable defeat’ that allows us to consider the political content of the Cultural Revolution beyond its ultimate defeat.

CS: In the last chapters of the book, you write about how Mao in 1975 called for a ‘mass debate’ and ‘critical reappraisal’ of the Cultural Revolution, which Deng Xiaoping categorically opposed. Instead, the dominant narrative that emerged in China and the West was that the Cultural Revolution was a ‘decade of turmoil’. What do you think the ‘mass debate’ would have said otherwise?

AR: The judgement of the Cultural Revolution as ‘a decade of turmoil’ corresponds to the ‘thorough negation’ decreed by Deng Xiaoping. However, the ‘turmoil’, in the sense of anarchic and uncontrolled disorder, was limited, as extensively documented, mainly to the period from the spring of 1967 to the summer of 1968—that is, the factionalist involution of the independent organisations that came into being in mid-1966. An unsolved problem for Chinese revolutionaries throughout the subsequent period was how to take stock of that powerful self-destructive motion.

Mao proposed in the autumn of 1975 launching a mass debate, not so much on the Cultural Revolution in general, but specifically on its inadequacies (有所不足), what had not worked, and what had not lived up to the intentions. Indeed, it was a risky debate, perhaps the boldest and most daring political campaign Mao had ever imagined. It is impossible to speculate about the results to which it would have led. Indeed, it would have involved everyone, including Mao, who would have had to question his own inadequacies. That mass debate would undoubtedly have reopened huge issues, such as the role and methods of the People’s Liberation Army in suppressing the Red Guards and, likewise, the processes of mutual self-destruction of independent organisations.

It would inevitably have been a very open debate, equally embarrassing for everyone. Perhaps it was precisely this awkwardness that Mao wanted to bring out as a driving factor for political clarification. Deng flatly refused Mao’s repeated invitations to direct that mass campaign. His official biographers, including his daughter, do not explain this refusal, not least because they attest that Mao treated

Deng generously on that occasion and his position would certainly have been very influential. Mao not only put what had gone wrong first but also included the difficulty of distinguishing between those who had been ‘mistreated’ and those who wanted to ‘settle the score’ with the Cultural Revolution.

Deng was not among those who had been ‘mistreated’. On the contrary, he had been carefully protected (as were most major Party leaders overthrown in 1966, many of whom returned to their posts as early as 1972). From late 1966 until his return to the political scene, Deng lived in a village in the countryside, but in conditions appropriate to his bureaucratic status, and had constant contact with the Party centre. However, Deng was among those who wanted to ‘settle accounts’ with the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, at the bottom was a negative assessment of the revolutionary decade, even though Deng had solemnly promised ‘not to overturn the verdict’. That had been the condition for his return to the scene, but Deng undoubtedly had prepared not to keep that promise from the beginning. In this sense, Deng embodies a figure of political betrayal that has a long tradition in Chinese history (and beyond).

Ultimately, however, the deepest point of divergence between Mao and Deng concerned the role of the masses in politics. When Mao proposed that debate on what had gone wrong in the Cultural Revolution, he was manifesting his deep ‘confidence in the masses’. As he had said at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, ‘the masses are capable of liberating themselves, and no-one has to act on their behalf’. Being capable of liberating themselves included learning from their mistakes. Deng, on the contrary, always regarded the involvement of the masses in political debates not only as an unnecessary waste of time but also as highly detrimental to the supreme political value of ‘stability’. His fundamental thesis was—as is well known—‘stability must prevail over everything’. The logic of ‘reforms’, even before establishing capitalism (capitalism of a particular kind, but still capitalism), was to radically expel the masses from political life. Politics has reverted to being the prerogative of Party-State officials who pursue the goal of integral stability, while ordinary people are left with the task of becoming integrally stabilised.

The real point of disagreement concerned precisely this. For Mao, the popular masses had a decisive role to play. This role should have been unreservedly encouraged and, in that particular case, should have served to rectify a series of mistakes made at the mass level. Mao’s last battle was over mass democracy, which would have entailed coming to terms with the mistakes made during China’s unprecedented experiments with mass political activism.

Conversely, Deng’s categorical rejection of that debate was the precondition for ‘thorough negation’. To prevent revolutionaries from coming to terms with their inadequacies was to prevent them from the possibility of overcoming and rectifying them. For Deng, the judgement of those events could not be debated at the mass level because it had

to be the prerogative of the coalition of Party-State leaders who were reassembling themselves around the settlement of accounts with the Cultural Revolution.

CS: Recently, you have argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made the aspiration of internationalism even more remote by reducing the Soviet Union to a colonial apparatus. Is there anything in the theoretical debates and political experiments of the Cultural Revolution that could offer lessons for collective existence beyond the national form? Or, is the nation-state an internal limit of twentieth-century communist experiments?

AR: You are referring to the text that I co-authored with Claudia Pozzana on ‘WW4’ (Pozzana and Russo 2023). We did not offer an analysis of Putin’s Russia but rather of the structural causes of the emergence of a globalised state of war. We argued that the Cold War had undoubtedly been a ‘Third World War’, which did not become ‘hot’ because it was constrained by the existence of a limit to capitalism, constituted by communist exceptions. Today, the unlimited extension of capitalism is the condition for limitless war.

The second part of your question touches on two crucial points, both particularly thorny: whether the nation-state was one of the main obstacles to communism in the twentieth century and whether other avenues were sought in the Cultural Revolution that might have contemporary value.

On the subject of the nation-state, it should be remembered that in the communist perspective of Marx and Lenin, overcoming both nation and state was essential. ‘Proletarians have no fatherland,’ Marx said; as for the state, the problem was how to organise its decay until its final abolition. The value of national liberation struggles was to be measured by the yardstick of internationalism. The establishment of a socialist state was conditional on overcoming the separateness from society of the bureaucratic and military apparatuses characteristic of bourgeois states and, ultimately, of all state forms in history. This vision that guided Lenin in *State and Revolution*—a very articulate text—was formulated right at the beginning of World War I, when all the major European social-democratic parties expressed loyalty to the nation-state, fully adhering to supporting their respective states in the great carnage of the war.

From Stalin onward, the question of the state takes an entirely different path. The consolidation of bureaucratic-military apparatuses becomes the central task of the communists. Yes, the national question continued to be articulated in terms of internationalism, but this was conceived of as a network of state relations. Especially after World War II, proletarian internationalism becomes an interstatism with the Soviet Union at its centre.

This path produced a twofold effect. On the one hand, the existence of a ‘socialist camp’—that is, a large part of the world where, in principle, an alternative path to capitalism was being tried out—was the main factor that prevented the Cold War from becoming an open war. The Cold War can be considered fully global. However, it did not become

a full-scale military confrontation precisely because of the existence of civil stakes in the confrontation between the two blocs around the issue of which form of state was more just.

On the other hand, in the ‘socialist bloc’, the national theme was firmly embedded in a framework of interstate relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the situation reversed into its exact opposite: fictitious internationalism, which had frozen the national theme without resolving it, turned into unbridled nationalism. In all the states that were part of the Soviet Bloc and had just become independent, a nationalist identitarianism took hold, feeding, as we see in the clash between Russia and Ukraine, the worst warmongering tendencies.

Judging from the Chinese Government’s insistence today on the value of national identity, one might think that this is the inevitable result of an earlier, cosmetic internationalism that masked a statist conception of the nation. However, I believe that until recently, there was a fairly open debate in China on this issue, which ended drastically more or less 10 years ago. I give an example that I think is significant. In 2009, the long introduction to Wang Hui’s book *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, recently translated in its entirety into English, was anticipated in Italian in a volume with the title, chosen by the author himself, ‘Empire or Nation-State?’ (*Impero o stato-nazione?*). Five years later, the US edition of the same introduction bore the title ‘From Empire to Nation-State’. Removing the question mark signals a shift that is not unique to this author. The prospect that the nation-state had been an open question in China, which had characterised modern intellectuality, was obscured by a fully statist turn that again merged the two terms.

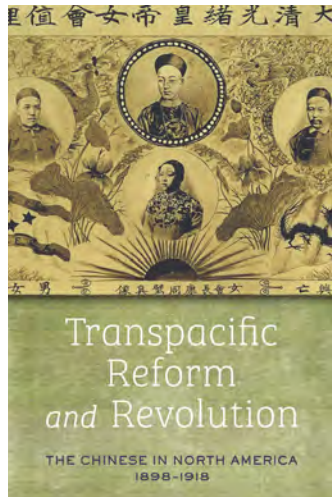
Indeed, throughout Chinese political thought since the late nineteenth century, the question of what a Chinese ‘nation’ could be after the collapse of the imperial state and what state form could correspond to it has been decisive. This probing animates the ‘New Culture’ of the late 1910s. Even the Cultural Revolution, if one rereads it outside the obscurantist anathemas that have covered it for decades, was shot through with a critical rethinking of national identity, which took neither ‘Chineseness’ nor modern statehood—even that of twentieth-century communism—for granted. Consider how many critical points of this question were touched on by a political movement (today among the most vituperated and least studied) such as the ‘critique of Confucianism and reappraisal of Legalism’. Unsurprisingly, it was followed by a radical questioning of the foundations of socialist statehood—that is, the abovementioned movement of theoretical study on the dictatorship of the proletariat.

I believe important lessons can be learned from different moments in modern Chinese history in which the dialectical tension of state and nation has been kept open in search of new ways forward.

CS: You write: 'The world must be reinvented politically.' Where does China today stand in relation to this reinvention?

AR: The Chinese Government is among the biggest obstacles to political reinvention today. The fact that it continues to proclaim itself communist, Marxist-Leninist, and even Maoist is decisively disorienting. As for possible political novelties coming from Chinese society, one would have to make inquiries in the field. I have not had a chance to go to China in four years; what comes from there is filtered through obsessive censorship. Judging from what is allowed to be published 'officially', one can well understand how Chris Connery writes that in China any form of 'critical' thinking, in whatever sense one might understand it, is at its lowest level in 130 years. The situation is indeed reminiscent of the decades following the Taiping crackdown in the mid-nineteenth century.

On the other hand, there are undoubtedly underground currents of thought and individual thinkers who are looking for something politically new, including a new way of rethinking Chinese politics in the past century. However, given the situation, they seem scattered or careful not to reveal too much. At the official level, there is a generalised homogenisation of the intellectual world. What were until a decade ago more or less differentiated, and sometimes even conflicting, currents of thought are now flattened into a single chorus. The 'neo-Confucian' wing, the 'neoliberal' wing, and the former 'new left' wing (the saddest voices in this chorus) sing more or less the same song in honour of the 'rejuvenation of the nation'. At this moment, blind faith in 'state capacity' and complacency about a cultural and even 'moral' superiority of the Chinese tradition, all seasoned in 'Marxist-Leninist-Maoist' sauce, are to thinking in China like the Enchantment of the Golden Hoop (紧箍咒) used by the monk in the novel *Pilgrimage to the West* to keep the Monkey King under control. ■



Transpacific Reform and Revolution: The Chinese in North America 1898-1918
(Stanford University Press, 2023)

Transpacific Reform and Revolution

A Conversation with Zhongping Chen

Elisabeth FORSTER, Zhongping CHEN

In *Transpacific Reform and Revolution: The Chinese in North America 1898-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2023), Zhongping Chen traces the networks in which reformers around Kang Youwei and revolutionaries around Sun Yat-sen operated. Chen focuses mostly on Canada and the United States. His time frame is the period between the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898 and 1918, a time when, as he writes, Sun Yat-sen 'and his followers turned to the militant fight for a single-party state' (p. 14). This is a fascinating study that shows Chinese reformers and revolutionaries of the period in an entirely new, much more pragmatic light. Chen discusses the status Kang and Sun had in their networks and the way these networks operated—from business activities and funding through membership fees, to the lawsuits they levelled against each other, and even assassinations. Chen also shows how they clashed with other Chinese communities, such as Chinese Christians or others living in Chinatowns, over ideology and business, and how they negotiated a tricky relationship with the West (both its politics and its different social groups). *Transpacific Reform and Revolution* forces us to rethink not merely reform and revolution, but also reformers and revolutionaries, as well as the political parties that emerged from their activities in the early republic.

Elisabeth Forster: I was surprised by the extent to which violence—especially assassination—was part of the repertoire of the late Qing. You write about how Kang Youwei had to hide from Qing assassins and how he had himself planned to dispatch anti-Qing assassins. I have also always been surprised by how common a tool assassination was in the early republic and later under Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. Of course, Song Jiaoren was famously assassinated. Given your very interesting discussion of how the various societies and associations of the late Qing transformed into political parties after 1911, should we trace these republican-era assassinations as a political tool back to the practices of the late Qing? Or is this a different tradition?

Zhongping Chen: This question hits a vital point of my book because the project started with an investigation into mysteries around the assassination of the well-known late Qing reformer and statesman of early republican China, Tang Hualong (1874-1918) in Victoria, Canada, by Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary partisans in 1918, and its historical narrative ends with my attempts to solve these mysteries. But the book treats such violent assassinations merely as one key reflection of historical change in modern Chinese political culture at home and abroad between 1898 and 1918.

As the US National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence indicated in its detailed report more than half a century ago, political assassinations occurred in China, Japan, and in the West. But in some Western democratic countries like the United States, domestic assassinations in mainstream society were usually the product of individual passion or derangement rather than the planned actions of leading politicians, political parties, or ruling governments. For example, most assassins of American presidents exhibited mental illness, but not necessarily political motives (Kirkham et al. 1970: 2–6).

However, in modern China and the Chinese diaspora, political assassinations happened for different reasons. Previous studies have demonstrated how republican revolutionaries used assassination in their fights against Qing officials from 1903 to 1907, and especially in the period from 1910 to 1912. They were inspired by the ‘roving knights’ (遊俠) in Chinese history, anti-authoritarian Russian anarchists, militant nationalism, revolutionary heroism, and so on. Most scholars are also familiar with the stories of assassination of political opponents by the ruling governments in the republican period, ranging from Yuan Shikai’s military regime in the early 1910s to the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek’s control from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Compared with these previous studies, my book shows that revolutionary parties and the ruling governments from the late Qing to the early republican period were not the only ones who used assassinations to deal with their political enemies. In fact, late Qing reformers like Kang Youwei and revolutionary partisans under Sun Yat-sen’s leadership also used assassinations to deal with one another. Tang Hualong’s assassination in 1918 is just one of several cases discussed in the book, although my study mainly reveals the interpersonal, institutional, and ideological interconnections between the two political factions.

The employment of assassinations by these different political forces in modern China and the Chinese diaspora not only reflected the serious ideological divergences among these groups but also exposed the lack of political pluralism or tolerance of different opinions among them. Modern China failed to produce a stable parliament (except for a short-lived one in 1913) or other public sphere in which the ruling government, reformist parties, and revolutionary partisans could engage in peaceful discussion and rational debate. Thus, each of these political forces would tend to use assassinations and other violence to silence and even remove their political opponents or competitors. The Qing government tried to assassinate reformers like Kang Youwei or kidnapped revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen in foreign lands mainly because these political dissidents entered transnational worlds beyond its direct control. Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek’s regimes in the republican period chose to assassinate domestic dissidents because they could not arrest and execute them under the institutional format of the republican system, as the Qing Dynasty could do within its national borders.

So, certainly, this violent tendency started with the autocratic rulers of the Qing government and the ruling regimes in the republican period. It naturally provoked the same kind of violent responses from the anti-state revolutionaries and reformist dissidents, and its impacts even affected the interactions between reformers and revolutionaries.

EF: I was fascinated by the fact that both Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen were just two among many, even in their own organisations. You describe how Kang Youwei was given a less than central appointment by the Guangxu Emperor during the Hundred Days' Reform. You write that in 1899 Kang's own secretary warned Chinese merchants in Victoria that Kang's cause was a failure. In the early republican era, as you discuss, some people refused to swear loyalty to Sun Yat-sen personally as part of their membership of the Chinese Revolutionary Party. Simultaneously, however, both Kang and Sun had what almost amounts to a cult of personality in their own lifetimes. How did these contradictory phenomena occur? And why were Kang and Sun, rather than others, made the symbolic figureheads of their respective movements?

ZPC: This is an important question about the sad paradox in my book's discussion of the political history of modern China and the Chinese diaspora. Both Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen were new leaders of modern Chinese politics and they promoted, respectively, political reform towards a constitutional monarchy and a revolutionary movement towards the establishment of the Republic of China. They introduced and promoted Western ideals, such as human rights, gender equality, constitutionalism, republicanism, and even democracy, to modern China. But they also tried hard to build their personal power and even a personal cult in their respective parties, and to pursue their partisan hegemony in Chinese politics at home and abroad.

Because both Kang and Sun were the major initiators, agitators, and organisers, they naturally became the symbolic or actual heads of their respective movements. Certainly, my book also discusses how Kang's and Sun's interactions with other political leaders and especially overseas Chinese activists were crucial for the development or decline of their movements.

It is important to note that both Kang and Sun fought hard for constitutional reforms or the republican revolution in China and overseas Chinese communities. But inside their respective parties, neither had built an institutional check on their own power or that of other leaders, such as periodic elections and term limits. As Lord Acton (John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton) wrote in 1887, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Kang Youwei evidently embezzled the overseas Chinese investment in his reformist organisation's business ventures to finance his luxury travels and lifestyle because there was no check on his power within his own party.

More importantly, modern China and the Chinese diaspora from the late Qing to the early republican period faced increasingly serious crises in domestic politics and in the face of foreign threats and mounting racism. Thus, all Chinese at home and abroad hoped to save and strengthen China under a strong leader, a strong party, and a strong state. This helped push political leaders like Sun Yat-sen to build their

personal power and partisan hegemony. After the Republic of China was established in 1912 and then usurped by military strongman Yuan Shikai and his succeeding generals, Sun led his revolutionary party in a continual fight for the restoration of the 1912 Provisional Constitution and the 1913 Parliament. But by 1918, after the failure of his previous political efforts, he finally turned to building his one-party state through military methods, including assassinations of political opponents, and China entered the worst phase of its modern history: the warlord period that lasted from 1916 to 1928.

EF: The economic dimension of the activities of reformers and revolutionaries was incredibly interesting to me. For what was the money Sun Yat-sen acquired through his extensive fund-raising specifically used? Was it for propaganda? Or for hiring military personnel? Moreover, you write: 'The leaders of the American CKT [Chee Kung Tong, *Zhigongtang* 致公堂, literally "Active Justice Society"] headquarters in San Francisco' harboured an 'old grudge over Sun Yat-sen's failure to reward them for their anti-Qing actions' (pp. 177–78). What kinds of rewards did they have in mind? The transactional nature of these revolutionary activities is intriguing.

ZPC: The economic dimensions that I highlight in the book are not only about the financial foundation of both movements, but also relate closely to their political ends and military means.

In terms of the reformist movement under the leadership of Kang Youwei, he used overseas Chinese investments to develop business ventures, including firms, banks, and even a railway company in Hong Kong, New York, Mexico, and other places. Kang used these businesses both as the financial sources for his political movement and to unite transnationally dispersed migrants from China. Such overseas Chinese investments enabled him to plan an abortive military rescue of the reformist Guangxu Emperor in southern China in 1900, to sponsor many reformist newspapers and other institutions in China and throughout the world, to bribe Qing officials for the domestic legalisation of his party, and even to support his global travels. The eventual failure of these business ventures also contributed to the internal strife and final collapse of Kang's reformist organisations and movement.

As for the revolutionary movement under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, he relied mostly on secret societies and occasionally the cooperative Qing armies for his 10 failed anti-Qing uprisings between 1895 and 1911. He urgently needed to raise funds from overseas Chinese for military expenditure, including payments to the members of the secret societies and cooperative soldiers, to support newspapers for political propaganda, and for the operation of his party machine. In North America, he tried to get both political and financial support mainly from the America-based Chee Kung Tong, which was also called the Chinese Freemasons. Even after Sun Yat-sen became the provisional president of the newly founded Republic of China in early 1912, he still needed overseas Chinese financial support in his fight against military strongman Yuan Shikai and the future warlords.

When Sun founded his first anti-Qing revolutionary organisation in Honolulu in November 1894, he had promised a \$100 return for a \$10 investment in his revolutionary cause. Rather than the financial rewards, however, the Chee Kung Tong was more interested in achieving mainstream political legitimacy and aimed to register as a political party after the Republic of China was founded in 1912. Sun Yat-sen promised to endorse the attempt, but his revolutionary governments never fulfilled his promise. As a result, his party later split with the North American Chee Kung Tong, as my book details in its final chapter.

EF: Connected to the previous question, I wonder about the level of commitment of the majority of members of the Chinese Empire Reform Association (CERA, 保皇会) and Sun Yat-sen's various organisations. Were some coaxed into this by, as you write, their networks, so that they were perhaps members in name and membership fees, rather than in activity and spirit? Were some more attracted by CERA's business empire than its reformist cause?

ZPC: My book uses the network approach to analyse both CERA and revolutionary parties under Sun Yat-sen's leadership because both types of political associations recruited their members not only through the influence of their patriotic and progressive ideologies and organised activities—as previous studies have stressed—but also through kinship, friendship, native-place fellowship, and other interpersonal ties. However, from the reformist to the revolutionary parties, their networks demonstrated a continual tendency towards a higher level of institutional development. Any Chinese migrant could join CERA by adding their name to its membership roll, and they were not required to pay membership fees at the beginning. They joined CERA because of the influence of Kang Youwei's propaganda for patriotism, progressive reform, and the promise of rewards and even high official positions after the success of the reformist cause.

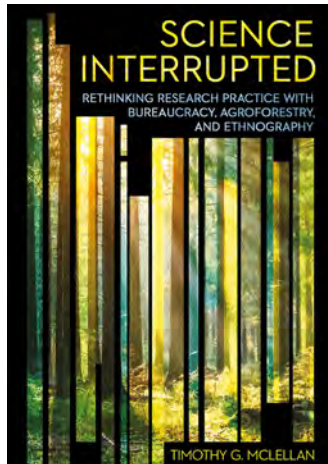
Compared with CERA, the successive revolutionary parties under Sun Yat-sen's leadership had stricter requirements for their members from the beginning. Their members were required to complete admission forms and take oaths of loyalty to the revolutionary cause by holding the Bible or swearing to Heaven. They were later required to write a pledge of obedience to Sun Yat-sen's leadership, to affix their thumbprint to the pledge, and to pay regular membership fees, and so on.

Although previous studies by scholars like Joseph W. Esherick and Marie-Claire Bergère have proven that Sun Yat-sen and his Revolutionary Alliance did not play a major role in the Republican Revolution around 1911, Sun was finally able to defeat his political opponents and competitors, including the late Qing reformers, largely because of the careful and continuous construction of his parties towards a higher level of institutionalisation, such as the development of central leadership, a stable membership, and so on.

EF: I wonder what it meant to be 'Chinese' to overseas Chinese (to use this term, even though you discuss how the term is contested in your preface) in North America? One aspect that stood out to me here was class, specifically the different treatment received by members of the working classes and members of the elite (like Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen) from both Westerners and the Chinese communities themselves. For example, you describe how labourers were banned from entering the United States through the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882. But Sun Yat-sen, of course, could visit the United States in 1896 because he had student (that is non-labourer) status. Moreover, Kang Youwei seemed to be living a very privileged life most of the time and interacted with high-ranking American figures. Meanwhile, people living in Chinatowns were the victims of discrimination and riots. Another aspect in the context of what it meant to be Chinese are the disagreements you describe between Kang Youwei and Chinese Christians in the United States, during which the latter rejected Kang's slogan of 'Protect the Confucian religion'. Did being 'Chinese' mean the same thing to all these different groups?

ZPC: In my book, the conceptual discussion about the Chinese diaspora stresses not only its members' transnational dispersal from China but also their cross-cultural hybridity, including their interactive relations with homeland politics, host-country culture, and co-ethnic communities across the world. Certainly, they also demonstrated cross-ethnic or sub-ethnic diversities in terms of their different native-place origins in China, disparate class and socioeconomic backgrounds, dissimilar religious beliefs, and, especially, divergent political ideologies along reformist and revolutionary lines.

Nonetheless, my book uses network analysis of the heterogeneous Chinese diaspora to demonstrate how its members developed their transnational and cross-cultural connections through their reformist and revolutionary associations and movements, including Chinese Christian churches, newspapers, and political drives. They also developed such diasporic networks through their closer attachments to reformist or revolutionary politics in the homeland, and through identification with Western culture, ranging from constitutional monarchism to republicanism in Canada and the United States. This kind of unprecedented level of relational development is what I call a 'network revolution in the transpacific Chinese diaspora'. ■



Science Interrupted: Rethinking Research Practice with Bureaucracy, Agroforestry, and Ethnography (Cornell University Press, 2024)

Science Interrupted

A Conversation with Timothy G. McLellan

Brendan A. GALIPEAU, Timothy G. McLELLAN

In *Science Interrupted: Rethinking Research Practice with Bureaucracy, Agroforestry, and Ethnography* (Cornell University Press, 2024), anthropologist Timothy G. McLellan investigates and breaks down audit cultures and the practice of dealing with bureaucracy within scientific research. The book takes place within a transnational agroforestry research institute in southwest China, the Institute for Farms and Forests (IFF), but rather than choosing to centre his analysis on China, McLellan uses his field site and his experience of being embedded within the institute for more than two years to make broader observations about interruptions and problematics within today's scientific practice in academia and beyond. McLellan then provides many ideas and aspirations for how science might be reformed to adjust to and work better with vulnerability and interruption, showing how these challenges could be used to benefit research for environmental change.

Brendan A. Galipeau: You mention early in the book that you don't necessarily take issue with the problem of bureaucracy per se and that you believe bureaucracy does have its place and usefulness, even though perhaps more flexibility (what you call interruption and vulnerability) within and against bureaucratic apparatuses is needed for researchers who seek to create environmental change and a better world. This certainly goes against most scholarship, ethnographic or otherwise, on this topic, especially in China, where, as you state on multiple occasions, bureaucracy causes a lot of *mafan* (麻烦) for researchers (including yourself) to deal with. Can you elaborate on how you came to view bureaucracy as something that we should learn to work with and around and how this novel approach informs your thinking throughout the book?

Timothy G. McLellan: A key thread that runs through the book is what I call 'thinking ethnographically with bureaucracy'. That's a kind of thinking in which I take some of the logics of bureaucracy and of IFF colleagues' encounters with bureaucracy and repurpose them as tools for thinking about research practice. An example is the inspiration I take from a planning and evaluation tool called 'Theory of Change'. From a certain perspective, Theory of Change is just one more *mafan* or bureaucratic headache with which scientists at IFF must deal. But from another, Theory of Change is a provocative way of thinking about and challenging what motivates scientific research and how it is we imagine our research shaping the world around us. It prompts us to ask, for instance: 'Whose behaviour is our research going to change and how?' When that question is tied to a bureaucratic evaluation regime, it tends to become a demand for scientists to demonstrate their power to mould the world to a preconceived vision—to demonstrate what contemporary research institutions refer to as 'impact'. But borrowing

and reworking Theory of Change as a theoretical framework for anthropology, we can gain a lot by asking that kind of question of scientists and of ourselves. Asking Theory of Change-inspired questions of IFF colleagues helped me to understand their commitments to social and environmental knowledge and transformation. Importantly, it also helped me to appreciate how their commitments subvert the hubris and Machiavellianism attached to institutionalised expectations for impact. In this respect, thinking with bureaucracy can mean asking a version of the questions that bureaucracies already ask, but it means doing so in a way that opens a very different set of responses to the ones that bureaucracies themselves anticipate.

In terms of where that approach comes from, this is a classic anthropological approach to ethnography. As I describe in the book, to many anthropologists, ethnography is not simply a mode of data collection but also a practice through which we develop theories and concepts. It is perhaps a little unusual to apply this method to something so hated as bureaucracy, but I have tried to show that even in this context it can be generative. Thinking ethnographically with bureaucracy helped me gain a perspective on research practices and research institutes, and it helped me to think about questions that are important to me and hopefully to others, too—not least: what practices and institutions might allow us as scientists and academics to contribute better to the building of a more just and more liveable world?

I do, however, distinguish this method of thinking ethnographically with bureaucracy from an argument in favour of bureaucracies as we find them today. Maybe we can work with existing bureaucracies and maybe we must, but I would be happy to tear them all down tomorrow. At the same time, I am suspicious of a line of argument that assumes that what comes after tearing bureaucracy down is a return to some golden age of scientific autonomy. This is a way of thinking that I have encountered among academics in China and elsewhere, and I can empathise with it: bureaucracy is exhausting and the call to reclaim autonomy is an intuitive response. But the past is no model for the research practices we should want to build and a generalised notion of autonomy is the wrong goal. Yes, we must resist and dismantle audit cultures, but instead of seeking renewed autonomy, our goal should be to increase meaningful opportunities for engagement with and entanglement in the world around us.

In the book, I talk about such opportunities in terms of ‘interruptions’ and ‘vulnerability’. These are concepts that I build out of IFF colleagues’ experiences and frustrations with bureaucracy—including their conceptualisation of bureaucracy as a *‘mafan’* or ‘headache’. I would sum up an ‘interruption’ as a stoppage or hiatus during which scientists surrender control of their research. When it comes to encounters with bureaucracy, interruptions are often as meaningless as they are infuriating. But there are also many times when momentarily surrendering control of a research project is extremely generative. In this respect, I think about the destructive and creative potential of being interrupted alongside Erinn Gilson’s (2011: 310) ambivalent definition of ‘vulnerability’ as ‘a

condition that limits us but one that can enable us ... [too, as] a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn'. Ultimately, I draw lessons from my fieldwork in China about what it might take for us to get better at being interrupted by and vulnerable to communities beyond the academy. We will probably need some form of bureaucracy to help us do that. But a bureaucracy that fosters meaningful interruption and vulnerability would look very different to the audit cultures we know today—and not just in the degree of flexibility they allow.

BG: Why did you decide to move the book away from China Studies and dialogues about China to focus more on the topics of science and research at large? A lot of the ideas and situations you discuss in your ethnography can certainly be applied elsewhere, as you state with increasing audit cultures from funders and other actors in places such as the United States and the United Kingdom, but bureaucracy and audit cultures in China are unique, as those of us who have worked there know well. What things about China's audit culture helped you to frame a more universal argument?

TM: One reason I foreground literature on science and universities elsewhere in the world is the reactions I received when I began to describe my research findings to colleagues and mentors in UK universities (not least at the University of Manchester, where I was fortunate to find a wonderful intellectual environment in which to begin writing the dissertation-turned-book back in 2016). Very often, academics I met in the United Kingdom, and later elsewhere, would compare what I was describing in China with their own experiences as academics buried in bureaucracy. They drew my attention also to resonances between the evaluation of research 'impact' that I had encountered in China and the emphasis on impact within the United Kingdom's notorious Research Excellence Framework. Those conversations inspired me to relate my ethnography to critical university studies and audit cultures literatures. Notwithstanding the fact that (as is the case for many fields) much of those literatures focus on Europe and the Anglophone world, these are fields with which China Studies scholars can and should engage.

A second reason I decided to foreground engagement with literature and themes beyond China Studies is the relationship between Science and Technology Studies (STS) and China—and perhaps between STS and Asian Studies more broadly. I was driven by frustration with an assumption that I kept coming up against: that scholars of science in China should necessarily focus on the distinctly or uniquely 'Chinese' aspects of the cultures they observe. (Kenji Ito's 2017 chapter, 'Cultural Difference and Sameness', offers an excellent critique of a parallel expectation for historians of Japanese science.) One of many problems with this expectation is its lopsidedness as it relates to STS: the Americanness of a lab in the United States can be a legitimate object of STS analysis, but it is certainly not an obligatory one in the way that many imagine it to be for Asianness or Chineseness. Where Chinese scientists must be marked by their nationality, US scientists need not be. One reason this Othering matters is its connection to a prejudice held by many of us in the academy that scientists and academics from the

Global South need not be taken quite as seriously as their counterparts in the Global North. This is evident at IFF where a common pattern of transnational collaborations differentiates the implicitly junior ‘local research partners’ from the more esteemed ‘international’ or unmarked researcher. (A similar dynamic is brilliantly captured by Crystal Biruk in their 2018 book, *Cooking Data*.)

Rather than develop an explicit critique of that Othering (though there are aspects of one in Chapter 5), I wanted to try to disrupt this hierarchy through the book’s ethnography. One part of doing that was to consciously frame science at IFF in relation to a global rather than specifically China-focused STS literature. Jiaolong, for example, is an IFF scientist whose ideas and practices I frame in relation to feminist STS and feminist science. I try to do justice to the specific context of Jiaolong’s journey as a scientist—I describe, for example, the connection between her scientific aspirations and her upbringing in one of the rural communities that IFF research is meant to serve—but I place that context in relation to the ways in which feminists have brought the personal and the scientific into relation elsewhere in the world. I felt that this would be the best way to get readers to take Jiaolong seriously, not as evidence for what might or might not be unique to Chinese science, but as a feminist scientist whom any one of us with aspirations to transform research practices might learn from and with.

BG: Can you also talk more about your interesting role with the IFF and how you came to this position for your fieldwork. It appears you essentially wore two different hats for two years, observing and learning about the inside workings of this agroforestry research institute. As you took part in various research projects, survey administration, and other tasks, you were simultaneously trying to write about the research in which you were taking part as an observer. What was this balancing act like, especially with all the bureaucracy that working within China presents to foreign researchers?

TM: ‘Two hats’ is a good way of putting it. As I would explain to my colleagues at IFF, this is a pretty common mode of anthropological fieldwork. If I had instead wanted to study rubber farmers, for example, I might have embedded myself in a rubber farming community and done my best to take part in rubber cultivation and other aspects of day-to-day life. Of course, that kind of approach isn’t always possible—or necessarily desirable. But I was fortunate enough that IFF had use for a social scientist like me and that IFF colleagues were generous enough to let me wear those two hats at once.

From a bureaucratic point of view, working for IFF probably made life easier. I owe a lot to IFF colleagues who ran around on my behalf fixing visas and the like. But there were still plenty of headaches and plenty of times things didn’t go to plan. Those bureaucratic headaches were of course data for my research, but I still found them infuriating to deal with. I remember one particularly frustrating episode when a colleague tried to cheer me up by saying: ‘At least you have another chapter for your dissertation.’ He had a point.

Rural South West China.
Source: Timothy G. McLellan.



I do, nevertheless, have some reservations about my two-hats approach. When I conducted work on behalf of IFF, I usually did the best I could to satisfy what IFF expected from social science. That's something quite different from the mode of anthropology in which I was trained. I often wonder what my role would have looked like if I had been more assertive in pushing for and experimenting with my own ideas of what anthropological collaboration with the sciences should look like. I don't have a clear answer to that question, but it's something I am trying to grapple with a little more deliberately in my new ethnographic research with landscape architects.

BG: I was especially struck by your observation that there is both innate flexibility for dealing with bureaucratic problems—such as securing proper funding for hosting a conference in China or using *guanxi* (关系, 'relationships')—and extreme difficulty because of the vulnerability that public officials and civil servants face when they don't follow rules properly. This resonates with my own experience, as I have dealt with similar situations over the years. Can you talk a bit more about this contradiction and how it informs your overall analysis and thinking about improving audit cultures for better scientific practice and planetary change?

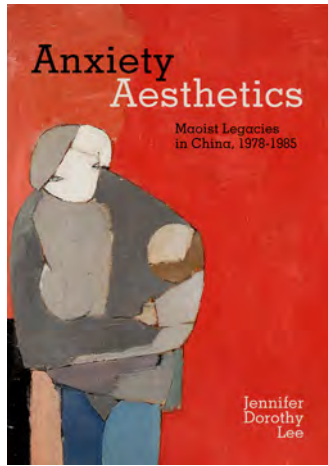
TM: There is of course an enormous amount written about the role of *guanxi* in creating flexibility and wiggle room in bureaucracy. At IFF, however, *guanxi* is a relatively marginal strategy for navigating bureaucracy. One thing I wanted to do therefore was to focus on cases where people generate flexibility in the system without resorting to *guanxi*. One example is the conference funding you mentioned. Under the guise of preventing the extravagant liquor-fuelled banqueting for which civil servants are notorious, public research institutes in China have imposed impossibly frugal limits on how much scientists are allowed to spend hosting conferences. To get around that, you don't rely on *guanxi*. Instead, you fudge the reporting documents: you

produce documents to show you are working within the rules even when you are not. One thing that is striking about this kind of trickery is how transparent it is. Everyone knows that everyone is doing this. What was most surprising to me, however, was that in some instances bureaucrats seemed to prefer a fudge to honest paperwork. There was one case where a bureaucrat rejected an expense report that was truthful and within the rules, but then accepted a subsequent report with fabricated receipts for the same expense.

In retrospect, that was a surprising situation only because I am used to placing value on the veracity and accuracy of what a document tells me. What my colleagues at IFF helped me to appreciate, however, was that for bureaucrats the veracity or substance of information contained in a document is not a priority. What really matters to bureaucrats is the ability of a document to shield them from potential harm—from vulnerability. A bureaucrat looking at an expense report is not asking: ‘Do I believe what the applicant is telling me in this document?’ Rather, they are asking something like: ‘What are the chances this document is going to raise suspicions in the event of an audit? What are the chances that a superior will question my decision to approve this expense? If the applicant is up to anything untoward, what are the chances that approving their paperwork would get me on the hook, too?’ This anxiety and the associated desire to evade vulnerability are important for understanding the practice and experience of bureaucracy in China.

As you mention though, I also take this perspective on bureaucracy as a starting point for thinking about research practices. In that respect, the idea of bureaucracy as a systematic evasion of vulnerability is reminiscent of how many academics (in China and elsewhere) themselves engage with audit cultures. In the book, I relate this to IFF colleagues’ experiences with their own grant reporting, but here I’ll share a story from a North American colleague. This colleague had just won a tax-funded research grant when they received a phone call from the grant officer instructing them to rewrite their abstract. The new abstract, they were told, must remove anything that might be a red flag to right-wing legislators looking for research projects to lampoon as examples of wasted public funds. It strikes me that this grant officer was playing a similar game to the anxious bureaucrats that I encountered at IFF: the grant abstract and the expense report are both documents crafted to evade vulnerability.

Obviously, I’m not in favour of right-wing legislators defunding research grants, but there was also something discomfiting to me about the parallel. It got me thinking about moments when scientists not only evade vulnerability—such as in a grant abstract or grant report—but also actively embrace it, such as in peer review or a participatory workshop. Indeed, that is a big focus of the second half of the book. I explore the ideas and activities of IFF colleagues in a way that points both to how vulnerability is crucial to research and to what making our research practices more vulnerable might entail. ■



Anxiety Aesthetics: Maoist Legacies in China, 1978–1985
(University of California Press, 2024)

Anxiety Aesthetics

A Conversation with Jennifer Dorothy Lee

A.C. BAECKER, Jennifer Dorothy LEE

How do revolutions end? In *Anxiety Aesthetics: Maoist Legacies in China, 1978–1985* (University of California Press, 2024), Jennifer Dorothy Lee asks how the aesthetic and cultural projects of the socialist period should be understood in the immediate aftermath of Mao Zedong's death. Focusing on the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, Lee argues that the activist practices of the socialist period persisted through a crisis consciousness that expressed itself through an aesthetic of anxiety. Where others narrate the early reform era as a time of dismantling the intellectual projects of the socialist period, Lee instead sees surprising continuities with the Maoist era—even a defiance of periodisation. Crisis consciousness underwrites events such as the first outdoor art exhibition of the Stars Art Group, which Lee narrates as an aesthetic intervention into public space through the social practices of the revolutionary mass campaign. In her telling, anxiety is a reaction to deferred closure that facilitates the internal transformations of the visual and political expressions of the revolutionary period. It can explain how, in the 1980s, the Marxist theoretician Liu Zaifu could compare the artist's labour to an automated process of computer processing, or how the artist Wu Guanzhong could resurrect abstraction as a project of Maoist scientism. By the book's end, Lee makes a compelling case for understanding the emergent cultural and intellectual transformations of the early 1980s as the groundwork for the sense of global contemporaneity that continues to define China today.

A. C. Baecker: In your book you write against a cultural history of contemporary China defined by ruptures with the Maoist past. You argue that the reform era should be understood in continuity with the experience of the socialist period through a framework of 'anxiety aesthetics'. What is anxiety aesthetics and how did you develop this idea?

Jenny Dorothy Lee: I'll start by breaking the term into two, 'anxiety' and 'aesthetics'. When I was living and studying in China in the 2000s and 2010s, I was exposed to the emerging art scenes and was interested in how people, mainly intellectuals and students, were talking about the idea of contemporaneity (当代性) in China. People were talking endlessly about what makes something contemporary, and I was drawn to it because it clearly seemed to be a problem. Ai Weiwei, for example, wrote an exhibition review in 2012 for *The Guardian* in which he declared that China's art world does not exist. It's a short and strange read. Ai essentially says: look at these artists from China—people like Duan Yingmei, Xu Zhen, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu—who are being accepted into this global contemporary art sphere in London, but their art has no authenticity.

ACB: Would you say that Ai Weiwei's statement about there being no art world in China is a paramount example of the anxiety aesthetic?

JDL: Absolutely. He probably wanted to see a trace of a commitment to political ideals or maybe even a sense of a certain Maoist dedication or drive—things that might reflect the concerns of his generation or even those of a previous generation. And not seeing that seemed to annoy or anger him enough to write off the very contemporaneity of Chinese artists. So, I see him articulating some facet of the anxiety aesthetic or this sense that contemporary art in China is always flawed. I took that idea to heart in my own project of trying to understand the periodisation of contemporary art in the country. By taking seriously the idea that there is a flaw, a perceived problem, or a struggle at the core of the contemporary in China, I began to see it as something that could only be formed or understood through a lens of worried consciousness, crisis consciousness, or anxious consciousness—anxiety being the term on which I landed.

Of course, many scholars have written about worried consciousness (忧患意识). But in my research, I was finding clues that this worried consciousness was present as early as the founding of socialist art institutions like the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, which was established in 1938 in Yan'an. Its first slogan—and there are several different versions floating around—was 'tension, seriousness, assiduousness, humility' (紧张、严肃、刻苦、虚心). Of course, only a Maoist slogan would sound like this, with the idea of tension built into the linguistic, institutional foundations. It is the most counterintuitive slogan you will hear for an art school. But when I found this, I felt it was a grounding and a rationale for something I had been noticing for a while: this idea that Maoist anxiety provided a way of talking about contemporaneity in art-making. And that's where the idea of anxiety aesthetics came from.

ACB: I guess I had not appreciated how much the anxious way of thinking doesn't just define the art of the reform period but is a holdover from the Maoist era.

JDL: Absolutely. It's really about a specifically Maoist anxiety as opposed to the anxiety of melancholia, for example, or a condition of despair that belongs more to a bourgeois sensitivity. I remember being warned by others that if I brought up anxiety, people were going to assume that I was talking about Freud or Lacan and expect to see a psychoanalytic framework. So, I wanted to make clear that I was not pursuing psychoanalysis. This is more about a sense of anxiety that presents an alternative to certain paradigms, including the idea of the romantic hero. Cui Shuqin and Jason McGrath have written about looking at the poses and expressions of revolutionary heroes in Maoist cinema and how you are not meant to fall in love with them so much as to sublimate their fervour and recognise their political commitment (see Cui 2003: esp. Ch. 4; McGrath 2022: Ch. 4). In those films, the narrative culmination is usually ascending to the Communist Party, like

in *The Red Detachment of Women*. That is the structure of consciousness I'm talking about. It is very much driven by a sense of anxiety, of tension—the tautness of self-preparation.

ACB: What is it about anxiety and moments of historical rupture that you think is productive for thinking about the cultures of historical transition?

JDL: I write about rupture as a trigger point. It's this idea that you have been pursuing or participating in something for a long time, whether that's a state project or promises that were made about the future, or something more mundane. Regardless of what it is, there is a feeling of having the rug pulled out from under you when something so finite as an ending is imposed. And there is an endpoint here. We can point to Mao Zedong's death, the arrest of the Gang of Four, or the Tangshan earthquake, all of which occurred in 1976, as events that punctuate the Maoist era as a historical period. At the same time, it's very much the case that people are going to keep living the way they have been living. So, I think about how the imposition of a conclusion is as much a formality as it is a reality.

People are never going to live the way that is narrativised in the dominant media. If you look at the Beijing Spring, for example, the participants were exercising almost a habituated way of living their lives and expressing themselves, participating in civil society in the way they did before, whether that was participating in mass campaigns, making wall postings, staging protests, or organising mass gatherings. These moments of historical conclusion are imposed without offering any closure, and this creates conditions for precisely this kind of spillage or excess of energy. The creative practices that result from it are very much stamped with the hallmarks of Maoist anxiety.

ACB: I am connecting this with two chapters in particular—the first of course on the Democracy Wall of 1979 and how so many of the social practices of the Beijing Spring came out of Maoist forms of agitation. But I am also thinking about your chapter on Liu Zaifu and how changes to Marxist epistemology were shifting the very ways of knowing the self. I thought of your book's subjects as broadly belonging to either a group you call 'worker-artists'—like Huang Rui, Qu Leilei, and other artists from early independent artist groups like the Stars—or a group that we could call state-employed intellectuals, which includes thinkers like Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou, or even academy painters like Wu Guanzhong. Do you think these groups are differently anxious? Or are they working through the same questions and in the spaces of possibility?

JDL: I wouldn't lump them all together, but I would say that there are crossovers. They are from different generations, so there are always going to be tensions between them. It is rare to find primary or even secondary materials that bring them together, but there are brief moments where the dots connect. For example, Huang Rui and Wu Guanzhong belong to very different cohorts, but when I read Huang Rui talking about how he had enough money to buy Wu Guanzhong's works in the 1980s but didn't because he thought his own work was better, little traces like that always make me very happy.

ACB: They show that these artists were existing in the same lifeworld.

JDL: Exactly. Another thing I discovered was Li Zehou writing about his experience of going to see the second Stars exhibition. Li is rarely talked about in the same breath as the outdoor exhibitions of the late 1970s, and most of his writing from this period is very dry stuff about ‘image thought’ (形象思维) or a critique of some Confucian text. But when I found writing from his visit to the second Stars exhibition, it opened this whole conversation about the crossovers between state-employed intellectuals and worker-artists. These crossovers show that they occupied a shared space, but experienced it differently.

They connect in the notion of the aesthetic. When we talk about Maoist aesthetics, there is always the temptation to say that it is a leftist, communist, or even Zizekian version of aesthetics. But the way I present it in the book is to say that rather than seeing Maoist China strictly through the lens of ideology, it is more generative to pull back from that leap to ideology and think instead about the implicit aesthetic vision. What that aesthetic offers is a consciousness that is always already collective. It is structured in ways that are both wilful and operating below the level of conscious thought. That is what these two groups, the worker-artists—who were in their twenties and thirties at the time—and the older generation of more securely employed intellectuals, have in common. They both operate from a shared structure of consciousness, and that is what ultimately links them in the fabric of the book.

ACB: In the conclusion, you link the Beijing Spring and Democracy Wall—things with which you started the book—with the Lennon walls of the 2019 protest movement in Hong Kong. What connections do you see between the two?

JDL: I started thinking about this question as early as 2014 with the Umbrella Movement, when I started teaching full-time. My classes attracted a lot of students who were born and raised in China, and then large numbers of Asian and Pacific Islander students, many of whom were also diasporic. Some were very sensitive to the dynamics that were unfolding in Hong Kong, and others were very activated by what was happening and thinking about what they wanted to do from afar. Balancing the dynamics in the classroom was a challenge. Together with my students, I started working through the format of democracy walls—also called Lennon walls—as a way of linking these phenomena and of getting away from seeing things through a fixed political position. The tricky part is getting students to start thinking about these through medium, whether through the idea of social space or the activation of public space, or the idea of mediality in general. How is it that one encounters things like graffiti, street art, or actions and performances in civic space? Getting folks, including myself, to think about what is happening in terms of space, form, and medium is a way of enticing us to shift the fixity of a preconception or position—and maybe even a national position—and that is what I brought into the conclusion of the book. ■

Economic Thought in Modern China

A Conversation with Margherita Zanasi

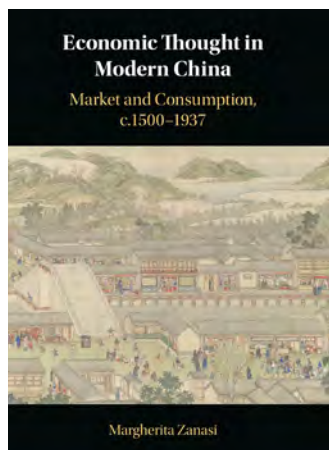
Ghassan MOAZZIN, Margherita ZANASI

In *Economic Thought in Modern China: Market and Consumption, c. 1500–1937* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Margherita Zanasi skilfully marshals a wide range of primary sources and secondary literature in several languages to take readers on a fascinating journey through several hundred years of Chinese economic thought.

Ghassan Moazzin: Your first book, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), focused on economic modernisation during the first half of the twentieth century and particularly the Nanjing Decade (1927–37). What are the connections between your earlier work and your new book?

Margherita Zanasi: Both books are the product of the same desire to explore Chinese economic thought—a still underdeveloped area of study in the field of Chinese history. When I started researching *Saving the Nation*, I felt that we often rely on Western-centred economic theories and models when examining the Chinese economy because we lack an understanding of how Chinese leaders and reformers perceived the economic conditions of their country. This approach hinders a proper understanding of the policies they implemented because it ignores their real objectives, which are rooted in distinctive local circumstances. In this vein, *Saving the Nation* explores the domestic debate in the 1930s on economic nation-building, revealing the extent to which it was dominated by anti-imperialist objectives. While industrialisation was a commonly recognised priority, different views on what kind of industrial growth would best serve these objectives remained a contentious issue, creating momentous political divisions. The economic nation-building strategies implemented by the Republican government, therefore, followed a distinctive logic in pursuit of goals that did not necessarily adhere to Western theories of economic development.

Writing *Saving the Nation* inspired me to expand my research further into Chinese economic thought. I decided to focus my next book on the ideas of market and consumption because changes in the perception of those ideas in late eighteenth-century Europe are considered to be at the very core of economic modernisation. My goal was to examine Chinese thinkers' understanding of these two economic functions before the arrival of Western economic ideology in the late nineteenth century and then evaluate the changes caused by the impact of Western ideas. It soon became clear, however, that the arrival of Western thought did not mark a significant shift in the Chinese understanding of the roles that market and consumption played in the economy. Their views were



Economic Thought in Modern China: Market and Consumption, c. 1500–1937 (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

quite sophisticated, and the introduction of Western theories did not lead to significant re-conceptualisation, although it led to the adoption of Western economic terminology (as I discuss in Chapter 4). The Opium Wars certainly imposed new political and economic priorities, but the Chinese leaders' understanding of China's economic circumstances heavily influenced their reception of Western economic theories.

At this point, I decided to go back in time to trace the origins of the notions of market and consumption circulating during the Qing. I soon realised that they were the product of an evolution in economic thought that had started with the beginning of the Commercial Revolution (Song Dynasty, 960–1279) as Chinese thinkers observed the changing conditions in the economy of the empire brought about by the new high level of commercialisation—something I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. Beginning in this period, Chinese scholars formulated theories of the self-regulating market (Song) and of the positive effect of luxury consumption on the economy (mid-Ming, ca. 1500).

For this reason, I chose to adopt a *longue durée* approach. This allowed me to trace long-term transformations and highlight the interrelation of, on the one side, evolving economic circumstances and political objectives and, on the other, innovative intellectual interpretations of market and consumption. This interrelation convinced me of one more reason it is important to bring to light Chinese economic thought. Through the Chinese scholars' commentaries, we can, in fact, acquire a better understanding of the nature and workings of the economy of the empire. The many Ming–Qing writers I researched showed remarkable clarity and pragmatism in observing local circumstances. Despite often using the established philosophical language and tropes, they very rarely used ideological or moralist lenses to interpret what they observed.

GM: Given the long time span the book covers, collecting and assembling the sources for this study must have been especially challenging. Could you talk about the sources you used for the book and how you went about collecting them?

MZ: Finding sources was indeed a challenge. Locating relevant essays and treatises among the large volume of writings produced by many authors in the four centuries covered in the book was a daunting task. Locating commentaries on market and consumption was especially complicated since they tend to be woven within discussions of seemingly unrelated matters and are not neatly organised in dedicated chapters—as might be the case for discussions of taxation and land tenure. Printed collections of primary sources were initially very useful but tended to confine research to a small group of well-known economic thinkers. What really allowed me to understand how widely economic issues were discussed among Chinese scholars at large were electronic databases such as the *China Text Project* and various collections of primary sources produced by Academia Sinica. I can hardly express my gratitude to those who invested so much time and expertise in creating them. It was through these databases that I was able to discover the importance of economic issues to Chinese scholars who are generally

not associated with economic thought. These collections of electronic sources make possible a project like mine that attempts to understand long-term trends on a specific theme through the writings of many thinkers, rather than focusing on one philosopher or a school of thought in a delimited period.

The use of electronic databases brought up two issues. The first was the accuracy of the optical character recognition scanning process and the possibility of mistakes in the online version of documents. It was crucial, therefore, to always go back to the printed version. This proved to be important for reasons beyond just double-checking the accuracy of the texts. Consulting the paper volume of collected essays also allowed for a better understanding of the text's wider context and, at times, for the discovery of additional relevant passages.

The second challenge of this research method was terminology. Searches in online databases revealed the inadequacy of thinking about Chinese economic ideas in the late-imperial period by using contemporary Western terminology. As I explain in the introduction to the book, searches using the two contemporary terms 'market' (市場) and 'consumption' (消費) would have yielded very few results. It was important to break down these terms into different concepts that reflected how their functions were conceptualised by Chinese thinkers. For example, to locate late-imperial writings on consumption, I ended up using mostly Chinese characters associated with the ideas of 'frugality' and 'luxury', indicating two different lifestyles and modes of consumption. Discovering the proper Chinese terminology was a much-needed first step in delinking our understanding of economic thought in late-imperial China from Western economic theories. Above all, it was important for illustrating how distinctive and innovative economic ideas could have been formulated outside contemporary Western-centred terminology.

GM: *Economic Thought in Modern China* identifies an important shift away from supportive attitudes towards *laissez-faire* economics and consumption in the nineteenth century. What brought about this change?

MZ: I am reluctant to apply the term *laissez-faire* economics to late-imperial China, where an increased reliance on the free market and expanded modes of consumption did not automatically translate into a Western-style liberal ideology. These ideas were not inexorably linked to the development of European-style economic liberalism. There is not an inexorable linear development in economic thought that rigidly ties one concept to one political and economic system. This book illustrates that a similar understanding of an economic function can lead to the development of different systems, reflecting circumstances specific to a particular region and historical period. In China, the ideas of a self-regulating market and luxury consumption did not develop into an overarching ideology but rather became tools to be deployed for achieving specific objectives.

For example, as I discuss in Chapter 1, as early as the Song Dynasty—at the beginning of the commercial revolution—Chinese officials observed the market's new interregional reach and self-regulating power. Based on these observations, they argued that the state could now rely on private merchants to help solve the problem of circulating resources through the empire (a crucial objective for famine prevention and a main concern of the state) or to take over other tasks that had previously been relegated to the imperial administration. With the maturation of the commercial revolution in the mid-Ming period, Chinese scholars and officials came to believe that China was experiencing a new economy of plenty, especially in the Jiangnan region. In this context, luxury consumption no longer appeared to be a waste of limited resources, causing scarcity among the population, but instead represented a positive development contributing to improving the living standards of the people. The idea of an economy of plenty led to a redefinition of luxury consumption and to the idea that it could support economic prosperity. This acceptance of luxury consumption, however, mostly influenced the state's attitude towards the Jiangnan economy and did not become a fully fledged economic ideology supporting policies to be applied to the entire empire.

GM: You explain that two major interventions the book makes are that it 'locates in China, rather than in Europe, the earliest formulations of the ideas of a self-regulating market and consumption-driven economy' and 'challenges the neoliberal narrative of economic modernization as a march toward increased reliance on an unregulated market'. Could you elaborate on how your book complicates our understanding of the development of global economic thought?

MZ: I first want to emphasise that the argument that the idea of a self-regulating market emerged earlier in China than in Europe is not intended to start a competition over who thought what first. Rather, I intend to illustrate that this idea was not unique to the development of economic liberalism in eighteenth-century Europe. Economic thinkers in other regions and contexts could also develop this concept by observing highly commercialised economies, as was the case in China, where the commercial revolution pre-dated that of Europe.

Going back to your question, we first need to consider what we mean by 'global economic thought'. In the case of Western economic liberalism, we are talking about an ideology that supported the Western imperialist expansion rather than a set of policies consistently applied by Western countries domestically or in the territories they controlled. Britain, for example, generally departed from liberal economic policies in the colonies. There was never a moment in which an economic theory or model was even close to being 'global', apart from when it was imposed by post-World War II developmental agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, economic liberalism might have assumed a global dimension as an ideology of conquest, but its application around the world always was mediated by local circumstances and the reality on the ground—which often made liberal policies impracticable—or was

outright ignored. As I discuss in Chapter 4 of my book, in China since the late nineteenth century, domestic priorities influenced the acceptance of newly introduced European economic ideas, indicating the limit of the globalising power of Western economic liberalism. What became global was the adoption of Western economic terminology, which created a language that allowed for conversations on the economy to become understandable globally. If we want to identify a truly global force that shaped the modern period, we must turn to capitalism, which is not directly or exclusively associated with liberalism.

The challenge the Chinese case poses to the Western liberal narrative of development is twofold. First, it challenges the narrative of the Western Europe of the Enlightenment as the only region and cultural environment possessing the unique ability to break with ‘traditional’ (whatever that means) thought. Other regions were similarly innovative, as the Chinese attitude towards market and consumption discussed above demonstrates. This point is already widely accepted in Asian Studies, although still mostly ignored in European and US history.

The second challenge is that posed by the rise of the developmental state to the liberal narrative of development, which posits lack of government intervention as the prerequisite for economic growth—even though we could debate whether neoliberalism really argued for a lack of government intervention, as a more accurate description would be a strictly pro-business lack of intervention in selected areas accompanied by pro-business actions in others. The more statist policies adopted by Chinese leaders in the nineteenth century could be seen as foreshadowing the developmental state of Japan and, after World War II, the Four Little Tigers. This shift was not ideologically inspired but was prompted by observations of changes in the economy, as had been the case for the earlier pro-market shift. In the early nineteenth century, economic decline and the pressure on resources caused by unprecedented population growth generated the idea that China’s age of prosperity was over and the empire was now facing an economy of scarcity. Although Chinese scholars and officials still recognised the crucial role played by the free market in the empire’s economy, they came to believe that the new circumstances required an attempt to make it work in support of the state’s goals in fighting poverty. For example, they envisioned rechannelling the power of demand in support of daily-need goods—while discouraging demand for luxury items—to stimulate the national production of goods essential for improving the living standards of the Chinese population. These schemes went in the opposite direction from the late-Qing and Republican plans that instead focused on developing the industrial production of luxury products (such as tea and silk) destined mostly for export.

In other words, in the changing circumstances of the nineteenth century, letting consumption trends and the market shape production appeared not to serve the objectives of the Chinese State as well as it had done before. This does not mean that Chinese officials turned to outright control over the market or suddenly underestimated the importance of consumption. Rather, they tried to manipulate both to

make them serve their goals. In other words, they began to envision the creation of a hybrid economy that anticipated the developmental state of the Republican period.

GM: In your book, you introduce readers to a wide range of Chinese economic thinkers. While we of course encounter well-known figures like Ma Yinchu and Sun Yat-sen, I also learned about many thinkers of whom I had not been aware before. Is there any economic thinker you met in your research whose work and life you found particularly interesting or surprising?

MZ: I indeed found a few surprises. Above all, I had not imagined that scholars of the *Kaozheng* School of Confucianism, which emerged in the late Ming, had developed such innovative views of the economy. It makes sense, however, considering their preference for practical studies and their critique of the neo-Confucian stress on morality. The *Kaozheng* scholars' focus on all things related to state administration and their pragmatic approach would inevitably create an interest in the historically all-important issue of managing the resources of the empire.

While I was aware of the economic thought of Huang Zongxi (黃宗義) through the work of William T. Rowe (2002), I was surprised by Wang Fuzhi's study of the early Qing economy. I was particularly intrigued by his characterisation of state control over the market as a form of despotism—a position shared almost a century later by Adam Smith and other early European proponents of economic liberalism. It was not a surprise to find that Wang's notion of economic despotism varied vastly from that of the liberal economists. Above all, it rested on his understanding of the relationship between the state and China's 'natural economy', which was local in scope and based on small-scale markets. Wang denounced the Qing's special trade licences—especially monopolies—and price manipulation as hindering the regular working of the 'natural economy', which he considered to be the very foundation of the empire. He also criticised the state's cooperation with big merchants engaged in the silver-based interregional market for extracting resources from local economies due to the unfavourable exchange rate between silver and local copper currencies. Wang's critique of interregional trade revealed a new economic dynamic brought about by the commercial revolution. His denunciation of monopolies, trade licences, and price manipulation, however, echoed longstanding Confucian concerns about state predatory economic policies dating back to the Debate on Salt and Iron and the debate surrounding Wang Anshi's policies (which I discuss in Chapter 1). While Wang's deep-rooted anti-Manchu sentiment did indeed tinge his idea of Qing economic despotism—which he defined as an expression of their 'barbarian' nature—ignoring the complex economic views that supported his position would be an oversimplification.

But my favourite character in this book is undoubtedly Lu Ji (陸楫). He personifies the kind of Jiangnan *Kaozheng* scholar who favoured a free-market economy fuelled by luxury consumption. Like other scholars in his area, he devoted himself to practical studies and decided not to pursue the examination, which required focusing on

the neo-Confucian texts criticised by Kaozheng practitioners. A keen observer of the society of his time, Lu Ji brings to life the ‘floating world’ of Hangzhou’s West Lake in his brief but informative treatise ‘A Critique of the Ban on Extravagance’ (禁奢辨), describing lively scenes of leisure and luxury consumption populated with crowds of shoppers, sightseers, and participants in temple fairs. In other words, Lu Ji’s writings were essential to understanding the social, economic, and cultural background of the Jiangnan pro-market thought.

GM: The analysis in your book largely ends with the 1930s but you also hint at continuities beyond that decade. Could you talk about the main implications of your findings for our understanding of economic thought and development in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 1949?

MZ: The main implication of highlighting continuities with the PRC period involves complicating the common compartmentalisation of academic disciplines into time bands delineated by political watersheds. It is true that both the 1911 and 1949 revolutions brought dramatic and far-reaching transformations, and I do not object to using them to demarcate the Republican China area of studies. However, this kind of historical demarcation, which prioritises political changes, tends to overshadow other, less visible defining moments of change. My book highlights one of these overshadowed watersheds and its implications for drawing alternative historical time bands. I refer to the nineteenth century as the end of the ‘prosperous age’ (盛世) and the beginning of a new economy of scarcity that plagued China across both the 1911 and the 1949 divides. In other words, the problems that had surfaced in the nineteenth century and led to a shift towards more statist policies continued to impact economic decision-making throughout the Republican and the PRC periods. I am arguing not that the late-Qing, Republican, and PRC governments pursued the same policies—although we do find some similarities—but that they faced similar problems and tried to find solutions for them. Fighting economic scarcity remained a unifying feature for the era spanning the long nineteenth century through the PRC period.

The rural–urban gap is another feature of this proposed new time band in Chinese history crossing over the two revolutions. Today a main concern of the Chinese Communist Government, this gap emerged as an issue worthy of notice as early as the period of the Ming–Qing transition (as I discuss in Chapter 2). We can speculate that the problem originated in the very nature of the ‘prosperous age’, which was fuelled by the growth of a maritime trade that propelled the coastal areas into unprecedented commercialisation and economic growth but left the hinterland behind.

I have recently started a small research project tentatively titled ‘*Qinjian jianguo* (勤俭建国): Frugality and Nation-Building Across 1949’. In this project, I explore continuities in the deployment of frugality, as a mode of minimal consumption, in the plans for economic development of the Republican and early PRC governments. In both cases, frugality was presented as a solution to overcome China’s economy of scarcity

and fight poverty. The promotion of frugal consumption, however, was primarily motivated by the choice to pursue a model of development that prioritised the state-led heavy-industry sector over improving the living standards of the people through a focus on consumer industries. The Republican government's attempts to promote frugality were hardly successful since it did not possess the PRC's power for mass mobilisation. The communist state-controlled economy allowed for new and more effective ways of deploying frugality in support of state goals. As frugality campaigns swept the country, the 'frugal and diligent' behaviour of the individual became an expression of ardent nationalism and commitment to the revolution, as well as the foundation of a Maoist path to socialist nation-building. ■

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Teaching China in Alabama Prisons in Six Objects (LUKE HEIN)

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