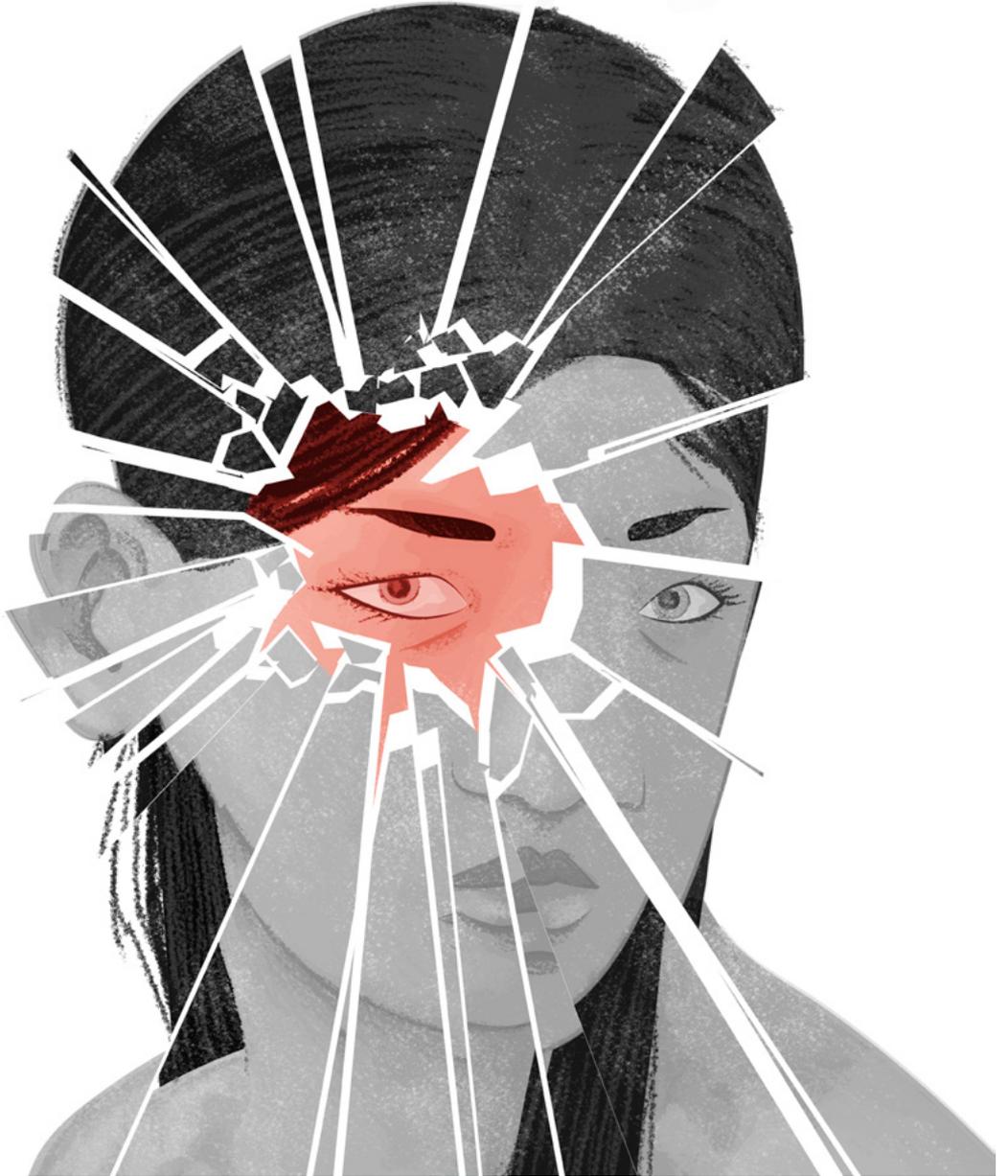


MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 4, ISSUE 1, JAN-MAR 2019

SMASHING THE BELL JAR

Shades of Gender in China



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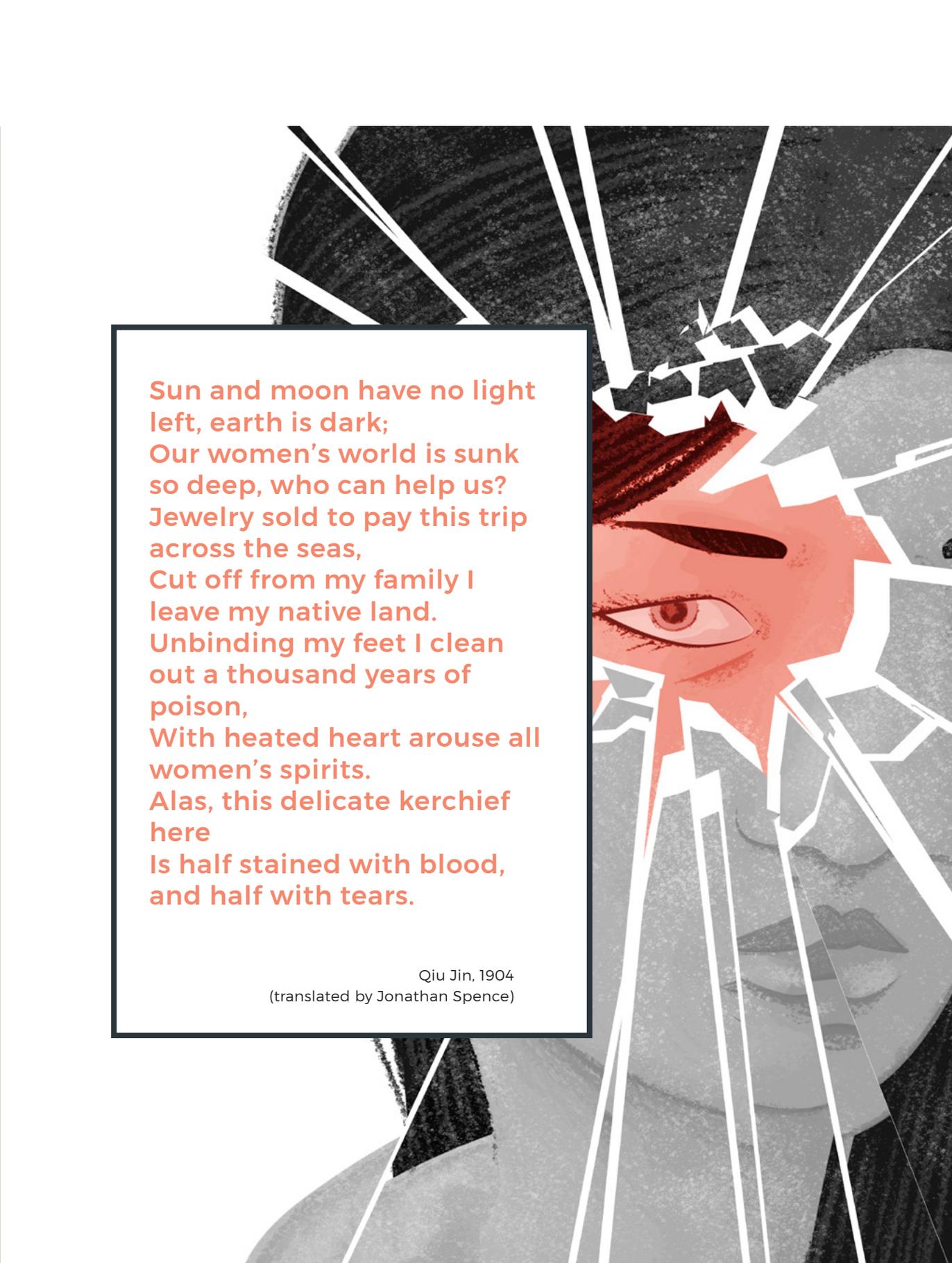
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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON
CHINA IN THE WORLD



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Sun and moon have no light
left, earth is dark;
Our women's world is sunk
so deep, who can help us?
Jewelry sold to pay this trip
across the seas,
Cut off from my family I
leave my native land.
Unbinding my feet I clean
out a thousand years of
poison,
With heated heart arouse all
women's spirits.
Alas, this delicate kerchief
here
Is half stained with blood,
and half with tears.

Qiu Jin, 1904
(translated by Jonathan Spence)



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Smashing the Bell Jar

Shades of Gender in China



Sun and moon have no light left, earth is dark;
Our women's world is sunk so deep, who can
help us?

Jewelry sold to pay this trip across the seas,
Cut off from my family I leave my native land.
Unbinding my feet I clean out a thousand
years of poison,

With heated heart arouse all women's spirits.
Alas, this delicate kerchief here
Is half stained with blood, and half with tears.

Qiu Jin, 1904
(translated by Jonathan Spence)

As she bode farewell to China in the summer of 1904, early revolutionary Qiu Jin penned these words to bemoan the fate of herself and of uncountable Chinese women. She was leaving behind her husband—whom she had married out of obligation—and two young children to go to study in Japan. Having returned to China, she

would continue to engage in revolutionary activities, and was ultimately beheaded by the Qing authorities in July 1907 at the age of 31. Martyrdom made her into a legend. More than a century later, bound feet belong to another age and kerchieves stained with blood and tears have become an overused trope in revolutionary literature. Still, Qiu Jin's spirit is more alive than ever in a whole new generation of Chinese feminists who are fighting for women's rights—a renewed attempt to smash the bell jar of China's patriarchal society.

This issue of the *Made in China Journal* offers a series of perspectives on the plight and struggles of women and sexual minorities in today's China. In the special section, **Dušica Ristivojević** reflects on how Anglophone media have been reporting on women's activism in China over the past three decades and the implications of such coverage for our understanding of the phenomenon. **Yige Dong** considers the class composition of the Young Feminist Activism in China, asking whether this movement is really an elitarian urban project or if it represents a feminist movement from the left. **Nuala Gathercole Lam** in conversation with feminist activist **Zhang Leilei** discusses the dynamics that led to the emergence of a #MeToo movement in China, as well as the shortcomings of the campaign. **Séagh Kehoe** argues for increased attention and social mobilisation to address the complex and often brutal ways in which gender and ethnicity overlap in China, in particular in the borderland areas of Tibet and Xinjiang. Feminist activist **Zheng Churan** recounts her relationship with her husband Wei Zhili, detained at the end of March for assisting migrant workers affected by pneumoconiosis. **Tiantian Zheng** looks back at the plight of sex workers in China since the beginning of the economic reforms,

highlighting the tragic consequences of the existing repressive policies. **Nicola Macbean** describes the ‘accidental’ activism of the wives of rights protection lawyers arrested in the crackdown of July 2015. Finally, **Bao Hongwei** in conversation with leading queer feminist filmmaker **He Xiaopei** talks about the formation of queer identities, communities, and activism in China since the 1990s.

The issue includes op-eds on the rise of transnational carceral capitalism in Xinjiang by **Gerald Roche**; the latest crackdown on labour activists by **Kevin Lin**; the implications of the recent detention of the former Interpol chief Meng Hongwei by **Maya Wang**; the ethical and practical risks that Western universities face in dealing with China by **James Darrowby**; and the role of ideology in Xi Jinping’s China by **Christian Sorace**. In the China columns section, **Jie Yang** looks into the workings of ‘hidden norms’ in the Chinese bureaucracy and how they affect the psychological well-being of Chinese officials. **Jude Blanchette** traces the history of the policies adopted by the Chinese Communist Party to exert influence within private companies in China. Finally, **Robert Walker** and **Yang Lichao** analyse a recent official report that offers an assessment of progress in poverty reduction and candidly discusses contradictions within the current strategy.

The Window on Asia section offers two essays. **Milford Bateman**, **Nithya Natarajan**, **Katherine Brickell**, and **Laurie Parsons** discuss the consequences of the expansion of Cambodia’s microcredit sector, where indebted people have been forced to accept exploitative labour conditions in the garment and construction industries and, in the worst cases, have been forced to sell themselves as bonded labour to brick kilns owners. **Yi Xiaocuo** analyses a new Sino-Kazakh coproduction that recounts the time that celebrated Chinese musician Xian Xinghai spent in Kazakhstan in early 1942, shedding light on the dark side of the cooperation between China and Kazakhstan under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative. In the cultural

section, **Martina Caschera** reanimates the artistic production of Lu Zhixiang, a master cartoonist whose work offered insight into the plight of the underclasses in Shanghai in the 1930s, and **Zeng Jinyan** and **Tan Jia** talk with director **Wang Nanfu** about her documentary *Hooligan Sparrow*.

We wrap up the issue with a conversation with **Daniel Vukovich** about *Illiberal China*, his latest book on the ideological challenges that China poses to liberal values and ideas.

The Editors

BRIEFS

Jan-Mar 2019

JAN/MAR 2019

China to Address Gender-based Discrimination

The first quarter of 2019 has seen important steps taken to strengthen protection of women's rights. In December 2018, the ACWF lobbied the SPC to take into account the interests of women in judicial interpretation, develop a gender equality assessment mechanism, promote the legalisation of women's rights protection in cooperation with the ACWF itself, and protect rural women's land rights. In February 2019, nine ministries and mass organisations—including the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the Ministry of Education, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women Federation (ACWF), the Ministry of Justice, and the Supreme People's Court (SPC)—jointly released a document targeting gender-based discrimination in the hiring process and promoting women's participation in the workforce. According to the document, prospective employers must not restrict employment based on gender, nor inquire about the marital or childbearing status of the candidate. To enforce compliance, when a worker files a complaint the authorities now have a duty to meet with employers to rectify the discriminatory practice. In a setback, despite earlier positive reception of the policy recommendation, China's legislators failed once again to abolish the rules on the 'Detention and Reeducation for Those Involved in Prostitution', which allow the police to arbitrarily detain sex workers and send them to 'rehabilitation centres' without trial for up to two years (see Tiantian Zheng's essay in this issue). *KL*

(Sources: Caixin; China Court; China News; The New York Times; Voice of America)

Crackdown on Labour Activism Intensifies

In the first quarter of 2019, many of the Maoist students and activists at the centre of the Jasic struggle—including Yue Xin, Shen Mengyu, Gu Jiayue, Zheng Yongming, and He Pengchao—appeared in forced confession videos screened privately to student activists at Peking University. According to students who secretly recorded the audio, in the taped confessions the activists expressed regret for their beliefs and actions. The authorities hinted that those in the videos might soon go on trial. In a sign of widening repression, on 20 January five labour NGO activists—including prominent labour NGO leaders Wu Guijun and Zhang Zhiru—were arrested in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Changsha on charges of 'gathering a crowd to disturb public order' (see Lin's op-ed in this issue). The five activists were neither directly involved in the Jasic struggle, nor were they working together at the time of their arrests, leaving open the question of why they were targeted. In late March, Wei Zhili, an editor of the labour news portal 'New Generation' (新生代) and an activist for the rights of migrant workers affected by pneumoconiosis, was picked up by the police (see Zheng Churan's essay in this issue). Another two editors of the same platform also appear to be in trouble: Ke Chengbing, who at the moment of writing is still reported missing, and Yang Zhengjun, who was placed under residential surveillance in February. In this case, detention appears connected to these activists' support for migrant workers, who in late 2018 protested against the Shenzhen government and demanded compensation for having contracted pneumoconiosis, a deadly labour-related disease. In late March, the local authorities stopped a group of about one hundred pneumoconiosis workers from Hunan who were planning on travelling to Shenzhen to express solidarity with Wei Zhili. *KL*

(Sources: China Labour Bulletin; Hong Kong Free Press 1; Hong Kong Free Press 2; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The New York Times)

Forced Labour in Xinjiang and Uyghur #MeToo

The year 2019 has not brought any positive changes to the state of affairs in Xinjiang. Official state policy has repeatedly asserted that Muslim ‘reeducation camps’ assume a crucial role in China’s fight against terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang, as the Chinese authorities claim to have arrested over 13,000 ‘terrorists’. However, there is now mounting evidence to suggest that such camps are institutionalising a system of forced labour. Comprised of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minority groups, detainees at these camps are reportedly being moved to factories where they provide forced labour for free or at a very low-cost. On 9 February Turkey issued a statement denouncing China for ‘violating the fundamental human rights’ of its Muslim communities, deeming the nation’s actions ‘a great embarrassment for humanity’ and singling out the case of Abdurehim Heyit, a Uyghur musician who disappeared in 2017 and was rumoured to be dead. In an attempt to dispel such criticisms, China released a video of the man, who was very much alive. However, such efforts backfired, as this video inspired other Uyghurs to take to social media to demand that the Chinese government disclose the conditions of their loved ones. To do so, they coopted the hashtag #MeToo. At the same time, a petition calling for the release Uyghur professor Ilham Tohti five years after his arrest in 2014 was circulated. In another setback for the Chinese authorities, in February ethical hacker Victor Gevers exposed a data breach, which revealed that China has been closely tracking the location and identities of almost 2.6 million people in Xinjiang. This is yet more proof that the region has become a significant testing ground for facial recognition and surveillance technologies that have the potential to drastically reshape China’s domestic security apparatus. All of this led to condemnation from several Western governments, while the Swedish authorities have decided to grant refugee status to all Uyghurs from Xinjiang. *TS*

(Sources: Financial Times; Forbes; The Diplomat; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times; South China Morning Post)

Human Rights on Trial

The first quarter of 2019 has seen the continued repression of human rights advocates, lawyers, and civil society groups. On 14 January, blogger Huang Qi was tried for leaking state secrets. In a sad turn of events, his mother was detained after approaching foreign embassies in Beijing for assistance in obtaining the release of her son. Likewise, in the days that followed, lawyer Chen Wuquan was found guilty of ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’, and sentenced to five years in prison. On 25 January, activist Liu Feiyue was handed a five-year sentence for ‘inciting state subversion’. This sentence came one day after human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang was sentenced to four and a half years’ imprisonment on similar subversion charges. Worryingly, Wang’s appeal was reportedly erased from the Tianjin court system where it was expected to be held. To end the month, blogger Liu Yanli also stood trial for similar charges after ‘insulting’ Mao Zedong and CCP leaders in a series of WeChat posts in September 2016. At the time of writing, a verdict has not been handed down, however it is understood that the prosecution has pressed for a three- or four-year jail term. In early March, Lu Tingge, a human rights lawyer based in Shijiazhuang, went missing after posting an online petition asking for constitutional changes. Repression does not spare even foreign citizens. On 19 January, writer and former diplomat Yang Hengjun, an Australian citizen, was detained while travelling in China pending an investigation for ‘endangering state security’. In February, lawyers hired by Yang’s wife were denied access to him. On a more positive note, in February human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong was released from prison after serving a two-year sentence for inciting state subversion. Jiang has since returned to his parents’ home in Henan province, although he is reportedly kept under close watch by the authorities. *TS*

(Sources: Financial Review; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; Radio Free Asia 4; South China Morning Post; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times)

China Goes to War with Academia

In the first quarter of 2019, the Chinese government's growing international assertiveness and influence have escalated tensions with the international academic community. On 22 January, China lashed out at 143 foreign academics and former diplomats who signed an open letter to President Xi Jinping demanding the release of two Canadians detained for 'endangering China's national security'. It is widely believed that the two were arrested as a reprisal for the decision of the Canadian judiciary to arrest Huawei's deputy chairwoman and CFO Meng Wanzhou in response to an extradition request from the United States. Hua Chunying, spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called the letter a 'great disrespect' that interfered with China's sovereignty and judicial procedures. In mid-February, Chami Lhamo, a Canadian citizen of Tibetan origin active in the Free Tibet movement, was bombarded with online hate messages after being elected as student president at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus. The strong pro-China sentiment in the messages led to the suspicion that the Chinese government was behind this. Meanwhile, Rukiye Turdush, a Uyghur-Canadian activist, was videotaped and interrupted by a group of Chinese students while delivering a speech on China's mass internments of Uyghurs in Xinjiang at McMaster University, Canada. This group of Chinese students was believed to have been asked by the Chinese Consulate to collect information about Turdush and the organisers of her talk, and to observe whether any Chinese nationals attended her speech. In the meantime, several scholars in Chinese academic institutions were purged for having advanced views critical of the Chinese authorities. In the most notable instance, Xu Zhangrun, a law professor at Tsinghua University, was suspended and put under investigation for having published essays in which he rebuked the most recent policy shifts under Xi's leadership. *NLiu*

(Sources: ABC News; China Digital Times; Hong Kong Free Press; Radio Free Asia; The New York Times; The Straits Times; Tibetan Review)

Factory Explosions in Jiangsu

In March 2019, workplace safety issues came under the spotlight again in China. On 21 March, a deadly explosion occurred at the Jiangsu Tianjiayi Chemical Company, in Yancheng city, Jiangsu province, killing at least 64 people and injuring ten times as many. The explosion, as powerful as a 2.2 magnitude tremor, flattened the factory, destroyed 16 neighbouring plants, and rocked several nearby schools. Following the blast, police in Yancheng took its executives into custody, and officials relocated more than 4,000 workers and residents to safer areas, while ordering an inspection of all factories dealing with hazardous chemicals and demanding severe punishment for those found to have broken the rules. President Xi Jinping, who at the time of the explosion was visiting Italy, ordered an expeditious investigation into the incident and demanded that governments at all levels strengthen safety inspection procedures. Still, ten days later, on 31 March, a second explosion at metal-moulding plant in the city of Kunshan, also in Jiangsu province, claimed the lives of another seven victims. Chinese authorities have called for enhanced workplace safety for years, but large-scale industrial disasters remain prevalent in the country. The gravest incident in recent years occurred at a chemical storage warehouse in the port city of Tianjin in August 2015: on that occasion, massive explosions at the warehouse resulted not only in hundreds of casualties, but also in severe disruptions to industrial production and port operations. Other recent fatal accidents include the collapse of a power plant in Fengcheng, Jiangxi province, in November 2016; the explosion of a natural gas pipeline in Qinglong, Guizhou province, in June 2018; and the blast at a chemical plant in Zhangjiakou, Hebei province, in November 2018. The recurrence of industrial tragedies, due largely to weak regulatory enforcement, underscores the daunting challenges in ensuring workplace safety faced by the Chinese government. *NLiu*

(Sources: Caixin; CCTV; China Labour Bulletin; NetEase; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Wall Street Journal)

OP-EDS



PC: videoblocks.com

Transnational Carceral Capitalism in Xinjiang and Beyond

Gerald ROCHE

On 22 January, the innocuously-named ‘Frontier Services Group’ (FSG) announced plans to open a ‘training centre’ in Xinjiang, where approximately one million people are currently being held in concentration camps (Shepherd 2019). This announcement highlights a vital and underexplored element in the story of Xinjiang’s camps—the role of private paramilitary companies and transnational circulations.

Frontier Services Group is a private security firm, run by Blackwater founder Erik Prince (Ciralsky 2009). And although Prince publically expressed surprise at the 22 January announcement, FSG was in fact already deeply embedded in Xinjiang well before then (Stevenson and Buckley 2019).

FSG first announced plans to open an office in Xinjiang in March 2017 (Fan 2017), and in November of that year, they appointed Lü Chaohai as Head of their northwest regional operations (Bloomberg 2019; FSG 2017). Previously, Lü was the Vice-president of the Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps, the paramilitary-cum-commercial organisation tasked by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with developing Xinjiang’s economy.

Beyond these clear linkages between FSG and Xinjiang, other plausible but less obvious connections link the company to the region and its camps. For example, since acquiring a stake in Beijing’s International Security and Defence College in May 2017, FSG has been working to train private anti-terrorism personnel in China (Martina 2017). And although no explicit links between the College and Xinjiang are apparent, its anti-terrorist mandate makes these likely.

In addition to working within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Prince and FSG are also following China’s commercial interests abroad. The company has unambiguously positioned itself as a security provider for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, in December 2018, FSG obtained a license to operate in Cambodia, an enthusiastic supporter of the BRI, and a recent recipient of 600 million USD in aid from China (FSG 2018b; Mech 2019). And, as we will see below, FSG is also setting up in Myanmar.

These connections highlight how not just FSG and Prince, but the private paramilitary industry more generally, act as conduits between state actors. So we should not be surprised to learn that while FSG works for China, Prince is simultaneously attempting to exert influence on US policy. In 2016, he addressed newly-elected President Trump in a *South China Morning Post* op-ed, advocating for the United States to become involved with the BRI (Prince 2016).

But Prince has closer ties to Trump than your average op-ed writer. In addition to having donated a quarter of a million dollars to Trump's presidential campaign, Prince is also the brother of the current US State Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos (Kirsch 2018). It should not be surprising, then, that he has recently met with Trump to pitch the privatisation of US operations in Afghanistan and Syria (Hall 2019; Roston 2017). Tellingly, he refers to this strategy as an 'East India Company' approach.

So, Erik Prince is advocating for the United States to roll out mercantile colonialism from Afghanistan to Nigeria, while also helping train anti-terrorism personnel in the PRC, employing political elites from Xinjiang, and opening operations along the BRI. This entanglement of state and private interests across borders has important implications for how we think about, and act against, the Xinjiang camps.

First of all, it makes clear that we should be paying more attention to private, transnational actors—not just Prince and FSG, but also the entire private paramilitary industry. The Xinjiang camps are built and maintained not only by state colonialism, but also transnational carceral capitalism (Wang 2018). What other connections exist between Xinjiang and security providers from outside the PRC?

Understanding this is important because it will shed light on what techniques are being exchanged and circulated between carceral institutions around the world. This might provide insights into what is going on in Xinjiang when we have such limited access to the realities of the camps.

Researchers have already learnt much about the Xinjiang camps by tracing their evolution from trials elsewhere inside the PRC. Adrian Zenz and James Leibold (2017) have showed how securitisation techniques road-tested in Tibet are now applied in Xinjiang, and Sarah Cook (2019) has recently shown how the techniques of 'mental transformation' being used in Xinjiang were first tested on members of the Falun Gong.

First of all, it makes clear that we should be paying more attention to private, transnational actors—not just Prince and FSG, but also the entire private paramilitary industry. The Xinjiang camps are built and maintained not only by state colonialism, but also transnational carceral capitalism.

So, we should be asking, beyond sources within the PRC, what are the transnational precursors to the Xinjiang camps? What current models might the camps' architects be drawing on? What role might private security and logistic companies play in linking these diverse examples, and accelerating the circulation of carceral expertise?

But missing from this story of the internal circulation of methods and technologies of control within China is the exchange of these things transnationally. Take the camps themselves. We know that concentration camps as a carceral form were first deployed in Cuba by Spain during the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98) (Mühlhahn 2010). They were then developed through their global circulation and iterative tweaking by a variety of states across the twentieth century (Pitzer 2017).

So, we should be asking, beyond sources within the PRC, what are the transnational precursors to the Xinjiang camps? What current models might the camps' architects be drawing on? What role might private security and logistic companies play in linking these diverse examples, and accelerating the circulation of carceral expertise?

Given the way these technologies circulate transnationally, and considering FSG's role as a BRI private security force, we should be concerned with the possibility that camps might spread across borders. FSG has recently started advertising to recruit personnel in Myanmar, and its website lists news about the recent MoU between Myanmar and the PRC to establish a transnational economic corridor (FSG 2018a). This corridor starts in Yunnan, where FSG has an office, and ends in the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone in Rakhine state, the province where the Rohingya ethnic cleansing is being carried out. We need to worry about how PRC money and private paramilitary expertise might be used to 'help' nations on the BRI solve their domestic problems.

Beyond these concerns, the transnational privatisation of mass detention gives us two good reasons to be sceptical about the effectiveness of lobbying state actors to intervene in the Xinjiang camps. First, most major state players today have an interest in honing their carceral techniques and technologies, and private security firms enable liberal democracies to learn from authoritarian states, where the latitude for trial and error is much greater. Secondly, although the BRI has become a source of geopolitical friction, such divisions are worn away by the flow of transnational capital, and the commercial stakes associated with the BRI are vast. It seems unlikely that any states will work against their own political and economic interests to intervene in Xinjiang.

Rather than lobbying states, a more effective strategy would be to address the struggle against the Xinjiang concentration camps to actors that have no vested interests in the camps being maintained: anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and prison abolitionist movements. ■



Jasic workers young and old.
PC: Jasic Worker Solidarity

State Repression in the Jasic Aftermath

From Punishment to Preemption

Kevin LIN

Although several months have passed since the Jasic struggle (Zhang 2019), in the aftermath of the mobilisation labour activism remains under assault in China. On 20 January, five activists involved in various labour NGOs in Shenzhen were unexpectedly arrested (Elmer 2019). They were picked up by Shenzhen police in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Changsha. Among them, both Wu Guijun and Zhang Zhiru had established their own organisations to promote labour rights in the Pearl River Delta; Jian Hui had previously worked for Zhang's organisation but then split to establish his own group, which he was still heading at the time of his arrest; and He Yuancheng had worked for many years at a law firm known for its trainings of worker representatives and advocacy for collective bargaining (Hernández 2016; Elfstrom 2019). The last activist, Song Jiahui, had started as a worker representative and became a regular member of staff at Zhang's organisation, but had already left and relocated to Guangzhou long before her arrest.

These arrests pose a puzzle. Why them? At the time of the crackdown, they were not part of any single labour organisation, nor were they active in the same city. While three of them worked at different times for the same labour NGO, two had long left the organisation: one later set up his own group, while the other left labour activism entirely. Nor were they collaborating on any joint project or assisting workers in the same labour cases. Even before these arrests, because of the increased restrictions on labour NGO activities in the last couple of years, labour groups had already become considerably more cautious and supported far fewer labour disputes than before. No recent labour case, can be pinpointed to implicate any of them.

Are they connected to Jasic? As far as we can tell, none of them were participants in the Jasic case. In fact, at the height of the Jasic struggle in July 2018, the Jasic worker organisers and student supporters purposefully excluded labour NGOs from getting involved due to political differences and security concerns over linking up with this kind of organisations. As a result, labour NGOs decided to stay away, with the exception of the Migrant Workers Centre (打工者中心), an organisation based in Shenzhen. Fu Changguo, who worked for the Centre,

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The latest arrests invite comparison with the last major crackdown on labour NGOs in 2015, the first time that labour NGO activists were detained at such scale. There are many similarities.

was arrested and remains detained to this day, allegedly due to his support for Jasic workers. However, he appears to have been minimally involved in the solidarity campaign, and is widely seen as having been scapegoated to provide substance to the allegations—raised by an editorial published by the Xinhua News Agency weeks after his arrest—that ‘hostile forces’ from Hong Kong were involved in the Jasic case (Xinhua 2018).

The latest arrests invite comparison with the last major crackdown on labour NGOs in 2015, the first time that labour NGO activists were detained at such scale. There are many similarities. First, the arrests of labour NGO activists on 3 December 2015 in Guangzhou were similarly highly coordinated, targeting multiple groups and rounding up dozens of NGO staff. Second, in both instances there was much confusion, and the reason for the arrests was not given until weeks later. In 2015, those who were not released in the following weeks were charged and eventually put on trial for their role in support of worker mobilisation at the Lide footwear factory. This time, it also seems highly likely that the detained activists will be imprisoned. Finally, the breadth of the arrests in both 2015 and 2019 suggested that the target was a network, however loosely defined and connected, with broadly shared missions and goals centred around the idea of collective bargaining.

However, there is a key difference. The 2015 crackdown took place following a period of upturn in labour organising that began around 2010, in which labour NGOs played a role in amplifying the voices of striking workers. Prior to the crackdown, the Yue Yuan strike of over 40,000 workers in 2014 and the Lide strike of 2014–15 were landmark mobilisations that had impact beyond their locality. In the case of Lide, workers kept up their organising efforts over many months from late 2014 to early 2015, and led successful strike actions, rounds of bargaining, and even a factory occupation (Franceschini and Lin 2019). Workers secured their key demands of social insurance and layoff compensation, and the outcome boasted confidence in organising and in bargaining collectively. A Guangzhou-based labour NGO, Zeng Feiyang’s Migrant Workers Centre (打工族), was involved in advising workers in bargaining, for which it became the main target of the crackdown in 2015. At that time, a small number of labour NGOs in both Shenzhen and Guangzhou were experimenting with supporting workers in bargaining in a time when collective bargaining was not only being taken up by workers, but also promoted by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) as a mechanism to resolve and preempt strikes.

The 2019 crackdown, however, came at a different period. While the Jasic case attracted significant attention, it did not happen within the context of an upturn in labour organising comparable to the period prior to 2015.

The 2019 crackdown, however, came at a different period. While the Jasic case attracted significant attention, it did not happen within the context of an upturn in labour organising comparable to the period prior to 2015. Workers' organising in the past four years has been at a lower point, and labour NGOs have been much less active. It is possible that the arrest of the labour NGO activists in 2019 may be related to their past involvement in collective labour cases prior to 2015, when these individuals might have worked separately or together in promoting collective bargaining.

Thus, their arrest may be due to their potential, as people associated with the few remaining rights-based labour NGOs, to keep supporting workers in their struggle. If so, the arrests demonstrate an increasing sense of panic and crisis on the part of the Chinese Party-state, which anticipates the possibility of labour and other social unrest arising from the economic downturn, and decides to eliminate potential threats by arresting those who may assist workers' actions.

In late February 2019, one month after the arrest of the five activists, the public prosecutors charged them with 'gathering a crowd to disturb social order'—a catchall charge used regularly to target activists. There is little pretence of due process. The requests of family members and lawyers to meet with the arrested activists were repeatedly denied. Some of the families have even been pressured to withdraw their lawyers. This will not come as a surprise to anyone who has witnessed how activists have been treated in China in recent years. So, where does all this leave us?

First, as the repression widens, it is becoming increasingly arbitrary. Previously, if labour activists were harassed, questioned, or arrested, it was usually in relation to a recent and specific action they had taken part in. This did not mean that the boundaries of what was acceptable to the authorities were always clear—quite the opposite—but there was some clarity about the reasons for the repression. This time the authorities have not provided any explanation, nor are they even pretending to have a serious legal case against the arrested activists.

Second, the increasing arbitrariness in the widening repression is underlined by a decisive turn from punitive—where people are arrested as a response to their specific actions—to preemptive, where arrested activists may not be currently or recently engaged in any activism on a significant scale. Instead, the potential for their activism based on their past history is sufficient grounds for the Party-state to criminalise them.

Across China today, very few of the remaining labour NGOs continue to engage in rights-based work. The very few that are still operating are now scattered, atomised, and starved of resources.

To be sure, repression is almost always a mix of punitive and preemptive measures, but of late we seem to be seeing a strong shift to the latter as a strategy to preempt activism. If this is the case, then we are likely to see more arrests of labour activists in the coming months.

Third, the implications of the latest repression are dire for labour and other rights-based NGOs. We may even be witnessing the end of ‘labour NGOs’ as an actor of change for the labour movement in China. While there has been debate about the extent to which they have been able to affect social change, it is impossible to dismiss their contribution entirely, as year after year they have been assisting workers with their legal cases on a daily basis, offering guidance to employees in collective negotiations, and transmitting experiences of labour organising (Franceschini and Lin 2019b). However, after the targeting of groups first in Guangzhou in 2015 and now Shenzhen in 2019, most of the active groups in the Pearl River Delta have ceased operation. In between, some others that were not targeted nevertheless closed their doors due to mounting pressure from the authorities.

Across China today, very few of the remaining labour NGOs continue to engage in rights-based work. Those that are still operating are now scattered, atomised, and starved of resources (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018). Others have, in the last couple of years, chosen to move away from rights-based work and have transformed themselves into social work and community organisations that may be more acceptable to authorities. Is this a viable route to survival for some groups? Perhaps, and some will make contributions in their new roles. But it is difficult to not see that the kind of rights-based activism of labour NGOs in China, which has existed for 20 years, is now at an end.

The disappearance of rights-based labour NGOs will not only deprive many workers of free or affordable legal assistance. More crucially, it will deprive the labour movement of its organisational basis, however limited it might be since these organisations are non-membership-based groups. It is even harder to envision what may emerge out of the ashes of the recent repression. However, repression alone cannot prevent workers from launching organised actions on their own. While the amplifying and solidarity-building role played by labour NGOs will be missing, workers will undoubtedly continue to organise autonomously. ■



Former China's Interpol
Chief Meng Hongwei.
PC: Crimerussia.com

Where Is China's Interpol Chief?

Maya WANG

In March 2018, the Chinese government ostensibly strengthened its fight against corruption by consolidating anti-graft efforts in a new 'super agency', the National Supervisory Commission (国家监察委员会, NSC). The NSC is part of President Xi Jinping's signature campaign against corruption, which he describes as a matter of 'life and death for the Party' (The Economist 2012).

One of its highest-profile detainees—as far as we know—is Meng Hongwei, the former chief of Interpol, the international police organisation, and China's former Vice-minister of Public Security. Meng vanished after returning to China from Interpol's headquarters in France on 25 September 2018. That the world's top cop had been forcibly disappeared made headlines across the world. But Meng is only one of many who have been ensnared and secretly detained in Xi's anti-corruption campaign.

While a lack of transparency is common for Chinese government institutions, the NSC is particularly shrouded in secrecy. On paper, it is supposed to report to the National People's Congress. Yet unlike the other institutions that also report to China's rubberstamp legislature, the NSC is not required to submit any report to Congress for its annual meetings.

The NSC runs a detention system called *liuzhi* (留置), which can forcibly disappear anyone exercising public authority into undisclosed locations for up to six months without access to lawyers or family. Little is known about *liuzhi*—including how many people have been detained or the treatment of those held.

On the day he disappeared, Meng sent his wife a WhatsApp message with a knife emoji, indicating that he was in danger. In an unusual move for family members of high-ranking Chinese government officials, Grace Meng went public with a news conference and appealed for assistance. Ms Meng and her family remain under protection and have requested asylum in France (AFP 2019). She fears that Chinese agents may have tried to kidnap her.

Following Meng's disappearance, Chinese authorities were silent for two weeks. The NSC finally issued a one-line statement on its website acknowledging that it had detained Meng for an investigation into his having 'violated the law'

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The fact that Xi's campaign depends on such an abusive system has attracted growing criticism that the campaign is, in part, a convenient way for Xi to purge political rivals and to consolidate his personal control over the government bureaucracy.

(NSC 2018). Since then, no details have emerged as to whether he has been charged with a crime, if he has a lawyer, or anything about his whereabouts or well-being.

In December 2016, Human Rights Watch published a report detailing the abuses in *shuanggui* (双规)—a predecessor of *liuzhi*—including prolonged sleep deprivation, forced stress positions for extended periods, deprivation of water and food, severe beatings, and denial of access to family and lawyers. After ‘confessing’ to corruption, suspects were typically brought into the criminal justice system, convicted, and often sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Shuanggui was run by the Chinese Communist Party's disciplinary agency, the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection (中国共产党中央纪律检查委员会, CCDI), and inflicted upon Party members. There was no specific legal framework for the system, and the practice contravened China's Law on Legislation, which requires that any ‘mandatory measures and penalties involving deprivation of citizens of their political rights or restriction of the freedom of their person’ must be governed by law.

Bo Xilai, a former member of the Party's powerful Politburo, was, according to media reports, held under *shuanggui*. Bo said later he had confessed under ‘improper pressure’; he was sentenced to life in prison. The fact that Xi's campaign depends on such an abusive system has attracted growing criticism that the campaign is, in part, a convenient way for Xi to purge political rivals and to consolidate his personal control over the government bureaucracy.

In 2017, the Chinese government abolished *shuanggui*, and replaced it with *liuzhi* (HRW 2017). *Liuzhi* is now codified in law and run by the NSC. However, the NSC shares space and personnel with the CCDI and is, in practice, under its control. While the authorities claim that *liuzhi* offers improvements over *shuanggui*, these limited measures are unlikely to deter abuses. For example, while *liuzhi* interrogators are required to videotape the interrogations, they are not obligated to disclose them to the detainees, making it difficult for them to seek redress. But these optical distinctions are apparently designed to convince an international audience, as well as the domestic audience, that the anti-corruption campaign has been improved.

The Chinese government says some of the corruption fugitives it wants are hiding in foreign countries, and it has actively lobbied foreign governments for their return in a campaign called ‘Operation Fox Hunt’. Some governments—such as France, Cyprus, and Greece—have complied (Eder and Lang 2017). Others, including Australia, Canada, and the United States, do not have extradition treaties with China, partly due to concerns about the treatment of those sent back, given China’s abuses in detention, unfair trials, and the death penalty.

In these countries, the Chinese government has resorted to other means to ‘persuade’ suspects to return, including sending undercover agents to these countries without notification or permission (Garnaut and Wen 2015; Phillips 2015), publishing the suspects’ home addresses (Shepherd 2017), and harassing and detaining their family members back in China (HRW 2018). The Chinese government’s repackaging of its anti-corruption campaign in more legal terms may have been seen as necessary to secure the cooperation of these foreign governments.

The official online magazine of the NSC celebrated its first anniversary by listing among its ‘milestones’ the return of fugitives living abroad in the United States and Bulgaria—the former ‘persuaded’ to return and the latter through extradition—and its signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman (NSC 2019).

Left out of this list was the death of a 45-year-old local government driver after 26 days in secret detention in May 2018—the first reported death in *liuzhi* (Cui 2018). His family, who said his body was ‘black and blue’, demanded to see videotapes of his interrogation. The authorities declined. The family has since been silenced, according to an activist following the case. The media report has also been scrubbed from the Internet. This kind of ill treatment of detainees and lack of accountability for that treatment is disturbingly common across China. The family will face a far more difficult fight for justice because of *liuzhi*’s opacity.

Some of the people who have been subjected to torture and wrongful conviction under Xi’s anti-corruption campaign—and their families—are standing up for their rights.

Some of the people who have been subjected to torture and wrongful conviction under Xi’s anti-corruption campaign—and their families—are standing up for their rights. On 15 February 2019, more than 100 of them issued a public letter to the authorities ahead of the National People’s Congress’s annual meeting, seeking a reexamination of their cases. So far, there is little indication that the authorities are going to respond and the police have continued to harass members of the group over the years.

Meng Hongwei's six-month detention without charge was up on 25 March 2019. Two days later, the CCDI issued a statement expelling Meng from the Party 'for confronting the Party' and having 'pilfered government money to support his family's luxurious lifestyle'. But the Chinese government has not charged him with a recognisable crime, nor mentioned if he remains under incommunicado detention. Either way, we can be sure that whatever Meng is accused of, he will not be held accountable for the crimes the police force under his leadership committed against activists, lawyers, and ethnic and religious minorities.

The Chinese authorities' reliance on disappearances and arbitrary detention as a tool of punishment stands in stark contrast to their incessant rhetoric that the government supports the rule of law. The Chinese government has long maintained tight control over the country, but prior to Xi's ascent to power, it had occasionally tolerated modest reforms, such as measures to curb torture in the formal criminal justice system (HRW 2015). But Xi has turned that idea on its head, and has instead sought to adopt laws and policies that give a veneer of legitimacy to what are manifestly serious human rights violations. That *liuzhi* has been in some way codified under Chinese law does not make it any less of an abuse. That the leadership resorts to it is a powerful indictment of the naked politicisation of the legal system.

In 2015 President Xi described the law in China as being like 'knife' with a 'handle ... firmly in the hands of the Party' (Lubman 2015). As long as the Party envisions the law primarily as means to exert control rather than to deliver genuine justice, and as long as China's anti-corruption campaign relies on arbitrary detention and torture, no government should endorse it by cooperating with the NSC. ■



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Intellectual Property, Artificial Intelligence, and Ethical Dilemmas

China and the New Frontiers of Academic Integrity

James DARROWBY

Recent media headlines in Australia and the United States have highlighted the threat of intellectual property (IP) theft by Chinese actors. This reporting has placed particular emphasis on Chinese hackers, as well as military technology or economically-competitive IP developed by Australian/US universities—either through local funds or sponsored by Chinese companies and government—before being transferred to China.

In the wake of the shifting relations between China and the United States, changing strategic interests, and the ongoing trade war, the threat of IP theft and foreign interference has triggered diverse political responses, ranging from contextualised discussions about the actual extent of the issue and its bilateral implications, to localised outright bans of any form of academic engagement with China (see, for instance, US Senate Committee on the Judiciary 2018; Eftimiades 2018; Puko and O’Keeffe 2019). In the extreme, it is not difficult to envisage a descent into a soft form of witch-hunting targeting individual students or academics who may simply be *believed* to have links to foreign governments (Redden 2018; Walsh and Fang 2019).

Still, in spite of all the alarmism, to this day no clear government policies or guidelines have been developed and implemented in either Australia or the United States, leaving many universities and research institutions second guessing at how to best align with the demands from their governments and national security officials in order to ensure that they do not lose their competitiveness and eligibility to attract government funding (Knaus 2019).

This is a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, the critical need to prevent the unscrutinised transfer of sensitive IP and technologies—be it through cyberattacks, or openly funded projects—cannot be underestimated; on the other, an overly restrictive and discriminating approach could result in the loss of any remaining advantage in science and technology for

Critics in the United States and Australia cite instances of IP theft and controversial technology transfers as the clearest indication that universities cannot be trusted as recipients of funding from state sources for sensitive projects.

both the United States and Australia. This has the potential to unleash a domino effect jeopardising all forms of international collaboration.

Critics in the United States and Australia cite instances of IP theft and controversial technology transfers as the clearest indication that universities cannot be trusted as recipients of funding from state sources for sensitive projects. What such analysis omits, however, is how the problem stems directly from successive government policies which have continuously reduced the amount of domestic research and development funding available to universities, while increasing political interference in the funding process.

In this context, universities have been forced to seek and accept funds from any available source, often sidestepping due-diligence procedures associated with national security frameworks. As thresholds and oversight have been lowered under the weight of increasing financial and performance pressures, matters such as the nature of research affiliations with foreign institutions, conflicts of interest, undisclosed double appointments, and the dissemination and application of sensitive project outputs have been buried or gone unnoticed. In this environment, legitimate concerns are frequently brushed aside and framed as being nothing more than conspiracy theories.

Universities have hence become easy soft targets for the development and transfer of sensitive technologies. This is particularly the case in those fields that do not fall under existing frameworks—for example, the Australian Defence Trade Control Acts or the United States National Defense Authorization Act—and whose full applications and developments were not envisaged in different contexts, such as the potential uses of surveillance technologies by autocratic regimes.

It is in this context that China looms large. While it can be reasonably argued that the Chinese authorities may have identified and exploited these loopholes with more savvy than anyone else—and it must equally be stressed that a number of concerns are entirely legitimate—a more constructive approach to the problem would be to cease to treat these matters with politically-driven sensationalism, and rather see them as symptoms of a broader set of issues.

One particular area where serious security and ethical concerns can be raised, and where China is investing massively both domestically and abroad—not least to facilitate its emerging surveillance state—is the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools and their diverse applications, with an emphasis on spyware and surveillance technology.

In industrial and academic settings, international collaborations are critical for development in all areas. There is significant risk of jeopardising long-term benefits and losing major player status in the global research arena because of the adoption of a blanket ban or the imposition of unnecessarily restrictive measures. Most of the projects and collaborations with China that have hit the headlines for the wrong reasons seem to share two common traits: a) a gap in the universities' vetting framework to identify and accordingly manage matters of national interest and security; and b) the absence of multidisciplinary review panels able to detect issues of ethical relevance that reach beyond the strict boundaries of the subject matter.

The last point is particularly reinforced by the fact that many areas of scientific research are siloed behind the bulwark of their respective disciplines. This indicates that universities often lack the ability to facilitate information sharing between academic departments within the same organisation, with the flow of information becoming stuck in myriad structural bottlenecks, making it difficult to gain a holistic understanding of the full implications of many research partnerships.

One particular area where serious security and ethical concerns can be raised, and where China is investing massively both domestically and abroad—not least to facilitate its emerging surveillance state—is the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools and their diverse applications, with an emphasis on spyware and surveillance technology.

Several confidential instances have recently surfaced of Chinese companies approaching foreign universities either directly or through their shadow subsidiaries, and offering funds under the generic banner of 'supporting collaboration between academia and industry'. However, scrutiny of the key areas for proposed collaboration highlights how the research has focussed on the development of the next generation of audio-visual tracking tools, which represent significant potential for military and domestic surveillance applications. For instance, the Tencent AI Lab recently advertised its Rhino-Bird Focused Research Program 'to identify and support world-class faculties pursuing innovative research in areas of mutual interests in Artificial Intelligence' (Tencent UR 2018).

Research topics such as 'recognition technology' focus on multi-camera detection and tracking; video-based facial detection, alignment, and recognition; 3D facial anti-spoofing; and facial recognition with low-resolution or occluded faces. 'Far-field signal processing' seeks to identify, isolate, and enhance speech and speaker recognition, while tracking multiple moving speakers with auditory and visual information in noisy environments. The development of AI tools that have

the potential to be used for mass surveillance is in itself a topic replete with major ethical dilemmas. This is only exacerbated when these tools are developed for, and provided to, an authoritarian regime that controls its population in highly-coercive ways.

In parallel, such collaborative technology development is inherently a national security threat, as it could conceivably be used by the Chinese government to track and monitor both Chinese and non-Chinese citizens and officials. Further, the geographical applications of these technologies would not be confined within the limits of China's borders, but could easily be exported to other countries through investments such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

If the pace of the development of AI tools is now occurring so quickly that it cannot be entirely controlled or prevented, it is equally true that—as for any other risk—it can and should be accordingly mitigated.

As mentioned above, an informed vetting framework necessitates considering both the technical inputs and the specific contexts in which the technologies will most likely be applied. With the case of AI, the gap in the ethical review and evaluation framework appears to be quite significant—a shortcoming that goes well beyond the boundaries of the higher education sector.

The European Union has recently established a High-level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence (AI HLEG) tasked with the drafting of 'Ethical Guidelines for Trustworthy AI' (European Commission 2019). In the first draft of the document, the authors emphasised that: 'Trustworthy AI has two components: (1) it should respect fundamental rights, applicable regulation and core principles and values, ensuring an "ethical purpose" and (2) it should be technically robust and reliable since, even with good intentions, a lack of technological mastery can cause unintentional harm' (AI HLEG 2018).

The Declaration on Ethics and Data Protection in Artificial Intelligence adopted at the 40th International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners, held on 23 October 2018 in Brussels, notes that: 'Many stakeholders in the field of artificial intelligence have expressed their concerns about the risks of malicious use of artificial intelligence ... pointing out for example that the development of artificial intelligence in combination with mass surveillance raises concerns about their possible use to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms' (ICDPPC 2018). The Declaration also endorsed the principle that 'artificial intelligence and machine learning

'Many stakeholders in the field of artificial intelligence have expressed their concerns about the risks of malicious use of artificial intelligence ... pointing out for example that the development of artificial intelligence in combination with mass surveillance raises concerns about their possible use to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms' (ICDPPC 2018).

technologies should be designed, developed and used in respect of fundamental human rights and in accordance with the fairness principle, in particular by ... ensuring that artificial intelligence systems are developed in a way that facilitates human development and does not obstruct or endanger it, thus recognising the need for delineation and boundaries on certain uses.’

While neither of these organisations make any relevant mention of the otherwise concrete issues of national security, the higher education sector could easily add to these perspectives and embrace the same principles through a transparent, independent, and robust framework (Avin and Belfield 2019).

Internal multidisciplinary AI Ethical Committees would provide the most appropriate tool to make a fully-contextualised risk assessment and review the suitability of funded projects aimed at developing AI tools that are either contrary to national security/interests and/or established human rights principles, regardless of the location or proposed scope of the application of said technology.

This could be a small, yet critical first step towards our need to increase awareness of the many unanticipated risks inherent in a rapidly changing ‘artificially-intelligent world’. In this modern era, our higher education institutions face a twofold task. First, they need to ensure that their governance and research integrity frameworks are fully aligned with their founding principles of academic excellence while addressing—not compounding—global challenges. Second, they must guarantee that the solutions implemented are not out of step with the technologies developed and collectively deployed on populations around the world. ■



PC: *Blind Line* (盲行), Deng Cheng Wen, Oil on Canvas.

From the Outside Looking In

A Response to John Garnaut's Primer on Ideology

Christian SORACE

For China's leader, Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) future depends, to a large degree, on the revitalisation of ideology. In his works, Xi repeatedly stresses the importance of ideological 'belief' (信仰) as the key ingredient of the Party organisation's cohesion and discipline. Xi's words are not empty declarations; under his leadership, the CCP has tightened control over the public sphere, and defended itself against the 'infiltration' of Western ideology.

The Party's renewed emphasis on ideology has not gone unnoticed by China watchers. Over the past years there has been an endless stream of opinion pieces and pontifications about the latest alleged 'ideological turn', with the broad consensus being that China has abandoned the non-ideological pragmatism that made it more rational and prosperous in the reform period to return to the irrational communist ideology of the Mao era. These accounts, however, rest on an unexamined notion of ideology as a form of brainwashing that is fundamentally different from the Chinese conception of ideology, a misunderstanding that ultimately serves to cloud our vision of how power works, both in China and more generally.

In ordinary English usage, the word ideology has a pathological quality to it; it is what we diagnose in others but do not admit to having ourselves. To accuse someone of being ideological implies that they are *imposing* their own beliefs on the world. Moreover, such beliefs are resistant to reason, derided as 'false consciousness'. It would seem self-evident that this is the not the definition of ideology that Xi has in mind.

In the Chinese language, the word for ideology (意识形态) means consciousness (意识) of patterns and forms (形态). One learns how to act like a human (做人) by following rituals and norms of social behaviour. In this conception, ideology is not imposed on the world from the outside, but consists in the practices and patterns of political, social, and cultural life. These do not just occur 'naturally' or 'spontaneously' but originate from a locus of authority. In China, intellectual historian Timothy Cheek suggests, 'the [Communist] party is civil society and its propaganda system is the public sphere' (Cheek 1998,

237). The CCP claims the authority to shape the public sphere, which consists not only of words, but also of attitudes and emotions.

In this editorial, I take a different approach and propose that ideology is the inescapable air we breathe as political and social beings. We are never above, beyond, or outside ideology. For that reason, we should not project as ideology that which takes place elsewhere, something that happens to other, 'passive' minds. Understanding ideology requires self-reflexivity, and attunement to historical and political contexts. When one believes that one is free of ideology, all other attempts to politically order the world appear the same, and dissolve into 'the night in which all cows are black'. They become the fever dreams of dictators; silhouettes of power; incursions into liberal timelessness.

In the age of Xi, China pundits have been asked to become overnight experts on ideology. But which definition of ideology do they reach for?

In August 2017, former journalist and policy advisor on China John Garnaut gave a seminar to the Australian government called 'Engineers of the Soul: What Australia Needs to Know About Ideology in Xi Jinping's China'. The speech, circulated in January 2019 in the *Sinocism* newsletter, is a warning to the Australian government (and the rest of us) to sober up about Xi and the direction he is taking China. And that direction is the frightening world of 'ideology'.

For Garnaut, following in the footsteps of 'Lenin, Stalin, and Mao', Xi Jinping is driven by the 'totalitarian aspiration of engineering the human soul'. In this one sentence, Garnaut positions Xi in an unbroken lineage of communist dictators. History falls out of the picture. Ideological battles that raged and divided the communist world during the twentieth-century are collapsed into a monolithic, totalitarian communist ideology: 'Elite politics from Mao's death to the Tiananmen massacres was a genuine contest of ideas. But ideology won that context.' The implication of this passage is that China lost the opportunity to become a liberal democracy and free itself from the grip of ideology. Perhaps Garnaut genuinely believes that he is speaking from a place of 'ideas' free of 'ideology', as he recites Cold War scripts as if they were second nature.

The disavowal of ideological difference results in not just impoverished politics, but also bad history. Take the following example of how Garnaut treats the problem of language in communist revolutions and states during the twentieth century: 'For Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Xi, words are not vehicles

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of reason and persuasion. They are bullets.’ Before reading on, ask yourself: are Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Xi genuinely the same authoritarian personality like a set of Russian nesting dolls? Are the historical moments they exist(ed) in and political visions they pursue(d) entirely the same? Were Lenin’s polemics aimed at mobilising workers to join in revolution the same language as confessions during Stalin’s show trials? Was Mao’s folksy vernacular of class struggle the same as Xi Jinping’s turgid civilisational discourse of harmony and prosperity? Was the Mao-era practice of writing big character posters (大字报) replicated anywhere else in the communist world (even in China, Deng Xiaoping banned them in the 1980s)? For Garnaut, these differences are erased under the ahistorical notion of ‘total ideological control’.

In addition to folding all history into a pancake-like concept of ideology, Garnaut’s speech is also littered with historical errors. For example, the claim that ‘Mao’s men first coined the term “brainwashing” . . . in 1942’ overlooks the fact that the term *xiniao* (洗脑)—literally, washing the brain—actually originated in the late Qing period. For example, according to an unpublished manuscript by Ryan Mitchell, in the work of Chinese scholar and translator Yan Fu (1854–1921), the term was positively associated with Enlightenment, and remained that way until it was taken up by Western reporters during the Cold War. The purpose of Garnaut’s speech, however, is not to confront the latent potentials, revolutionary ruptures, and continuities in ways of being and speaking, but to paint Chinese history with a brush of oriental despotism, and sooth an anxious Cold War mentality that condemns any alternative to capitalist hegemony as unnatural ‘ideology’. Garnaut shows his hand in the astonishing claim that Xi is ‘pushing communist ideology at a time when the idea of “communism” is as unattractive as it has been at any time in the past 100 years.’ To argue on the centenary of the October Revolution that the idea of communism has never been attractive is wilful ignorance and self-delusion. But beyond that, the idea that Xi is pushing communist ideology may come as a surprise to many Chinese people, especially the group of Maoist students who were recently detained and forced to give confessions for taking Mao and Marx at their word, and daring to see class struggle and inequality in the world around them. Xi is about as far from Mao on the ideological spectrum that he might as well be standing on the North Pole.

Garnaut insists, however, that Xi and Mao are the same because for him ideology is simply another word for power/dictatorship/control: ‘For Xi, as with Stalin and Mao, there is no endpoint in the perpetual quest for unity and regime preservation.’ By Mao, is Garnaut referring to the same person who launched the Cultural Revolution, which nearly toppled

China's political system? The one who called on the masses to 'bombard the headquarters' (炮打司令部) and sanctified the 'right to rebel' (造反有理)? The only possible way to describe Maoist politics as a part of a 'perpetual quest for unity and regime preservation' is by disavowing the complex political significance of the Cultural Revolution.

Garnaut is correct at least that under Xi, China is vigorously pursuing 'ideological control' within and beyond its borders, and is becoming intolerant of critical voices that present China's stories in a negative light. But is increased control evidence that China is returning to the Mao era? Is there a role for mass politics in Xi Jinping's China? Is there a role for class struggle in Xi's China? If the answers to the above questions are 'NO', then Xi is not returning China to the Mao era.

Garnaut's lecture on ideology avoids actually thinking about ideology. This matters because Garnaut's opinion on China is well respected and listened to in the policy community; he has the ear of the Australian government. Fashionable clichés, such as 'Xi has reinvigorated ideology to an extent we have not seen since the Cultural Revolution', lull people into believing that China is aberrantly ideological. It is an old fable about capitalism's origins in human nature, as if Australians or Americans, or any of us, are not the product of ideological conditioning, habit formation, and coercion. In a time when policy analysts are debating a low-intensity revival of the Cold War, Garnaut's speech is an attempt to rekindle the fire. People like Garnaut and his target-audience of hawkish policymakers need the spectre of a 'brainwashed' China to defend their own ideological platform. Perhaps more perniciously is the fact that such Cold War rhetoric directly feeds into the CCP's persecution complex. China's leaders are able to deflect meaningful and well-intentioned criticisms by labelling them as part of a Western conspiracy to humiliate their country. Garnaut calls this out in his essay but does not see how he himself is a part of it.

My purpose in writing this editorial is not to attack or defend Xi Jinping's China, but to reclaim the concept of ideology as a permanently open political question. The issue here is not to deny that there are serious problems but to reflect on the framework in which these problems are discussed. What kind of world do we want to live in? For me, the problem with China is not that it poses an ideological threat to global capitalism but that it has abandoned its revolutionary potential and failed to open up an alternative future to capitalism. In the words of theorist Dai Jinhua (2018, 20): 'If a Chinese model exists, then it

seems to be inevitably a capitalist model and not an alternative to capitalism.’ Dai adds that without such an alternative, the future of humanity is at stake: ‘For China, this topic is especially urgent, because China must be a China of the future, or there will be no future’ (2018, 22). Within capitalist ideology, that question is foreclosed; all one can do is ‘watch the fires burning across the river’ (隔岸观火) and hope that they do not spread. ■



CHINA COLUMNS





Hidden Rules and the ‘Heartache’ of Chinese Government Officials

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Jie YANG

The rate of suicides among Chinese officials has been growing in recent years. According to media reports, these officials decide to end their lives because they suffer from psychomedical conditions, including excessive pressure, anxiety, and depression. Still, medical causes might not be enough to explain such a disturbing phenomenon. In this essay, Jie Yang argues that Chinese bureaucratic culture, particularly the workings of ‘hidden rules’, as well as complex power struggles and gender norms, play a fundamental role in causing these deaths.

In recent years, the suicide rate among Chinese officials has been on the rise. These officials vary widely by rank and location, from cabinet-level dignitaries to township cadres and from Party chiefs in government agencies to officials in charge of finance, taxation, and public security. Yet, the cases also share common threads: most of them involve men, the victims are between 40 and 60, and most of the time the cause of suicide is quickly ascertained. According to state media reports, these officials are victims of psychomedical conditions, including excessive

pressure (压力过大), anxiety (焦虑), or, most predominantly, depression (抑郁症) (Fang et al. 2011). For me, these accounts do not ring true. Starting in 2009, when I first encountered the phenomenon of ‘officials’ heartache’ (官心病), I felt there was more at play than isolated and individual cases of mental illness. In this essay, I use ethnographic data from my research among mid-ranking officials in Zhangqiu, Shandong province, to consider the social and political contexts in which officials experience distress. Specifically, I argue that Chinese bureaucratic culture, particularly the workings of ‘hidden rules’ (潜规则), as well as complex power struggles and gender norms, contribute to this distress. Within this culture, women officials are confined to acting as confidantes or temptresses to men who, while ostensibly more mobile, nevertheless feel trapped in hierarchical binds, often with no way out.

Hidden Rules

A 2009 survey conducted by *People’s Forum* (人民论坛), an offshoot of China’s state-sanctioned *People’s Daily* (人民日报) newspaper, showed that out of 5,800 officials surveyed, 64.65 percent believed that pressure felt by officials was mainly due to the impact of ‘hidden rules’ on one’s political prospects (Liu 2014). Yet, to date, there has been no systematic study of these rules. What they are and how they operate remains mysterious. One mid-ranking official in charge of the road system in Zhangqiu tried to capture the hidden rules by describing the task of conforming to the shifting demands of higher-ups at work:

The most difficult task is to understand what superiors think [They’re] evil and fickle. They don’t say directly [what they want] to enhance the secrecy of their power. You have to interpret them accurately and speak accordingly. Everyday you walk on thin ice; if you are not careful you will fall into deep waters, wasting all

your efforts at pretentiously humbling yourself. No matter how healthy you are, you will sooner or later become *depressed* as it’s so important to twist yourself to fit the system.

This sense of precarity leading to distress dominates accounts of hidden rules among my informants for good reason—this instability has historical roots. The term ‘hidden rules’ was coined by Chinese journalist-turned-historian Wu Si in the late 1990s. In a book published in 2001, Wu examines behind-the-scenes practices of ancient Chinese officialdom to illustrate how established rules were undermined by hidden alternatives, suggesting that backdoor wrangling has always characterised the Chinese bureaucracy.

The difference today, according to one of my informants, may lie in the proliferation of ways to get ahead informally. From soliciting extra funds, to cultivating favouritism or factionalism, intensified striving within officialdom creates pain and frustration for many. Hidden rules shadow formal procedures, attaching to, complementing, bypassing, or twisting the operation of formal, established rules in Chinese institutions. They can be a deeper set of unjust principles underlying the way that crime, punishment, and power are handled. To fall victim to them is to be, in Chinese, ‘hidden ruled’ (被潜规则).

These rules constitute informal codes of behaviour that range from prescriptions for proper demeanour, to minor rule-bending, to more serious transgressions aimed at amassing wealth or benefits, including the cultivation of nepotism and factionalism, flattery, and bribery. These are interest-based strategies defining access to resources, including career advancement and pay raises. Hidden rules underpin what amounts to an autocracy—the idiosyncratic rule of individuals rather than the predictable rule of law. By their very nature, hidden rules are elusive, highly contextual, and unpredictable; their fluidity and the uncertainty surrounding them can consume people cognitively and affectively, turning

officials into, in their own words, ‘patients of power’ and triggering anxiety, distress, and even suicide (He 2011).

Most of my informants have told me that navigating the hidden rules of the bureaucracy requires ‘embodied understanding’ (体会). This means they must be able to read body language and what it implies. At work, a look, a wink, or a pat on one’s shoulder can signal particular intentions, depending on context. Important information may be expressed in a pause in conversation, requiring subordinates to fill in the silence with the correct meaning. Failure to understand this physical aspect of hidden rules leads to unexpected consequences.

And yet, for all the effort it involves and the high cost to officials’ mental health, following hidden rules does not always equal success. Indeed, hidden rules are an idiom invoked by many to interpret widespread injustice—for example, based on increasingly commercialised human relations—and as a means of filling in the gap resulting from part of the system being unobservable and unfathomable. In my interviews, officials often deployed the term ‘depressed’ (抑郁) and other psychomedical terminology to describe the psychological effects of the practice of hidden rules.

There is another important facet of hidden rules that increases the distress of officials: they operate based on essentialised gender norms. According to my female informants, they are effectively excluded from many aspects of this opaque system, unable to use hidden rules to their own benefit. Instead, these rules leave only minor roles for them in relation to male colleagues. A deputy director in her early forties at the local education bureau once stated:

They [male colleagues] are well connected with one another as they have time to socialise after work at dinners and drinks. Those occasions are informal but very important to exchange opinions and form cliques. But we are seldom considered as suitable for such [masculine] occasions; we are also busy with children and family.

They invited me to such meetings when they needed me to help them achieve certain purposes at work; otherwise I’m not invited.

Within the bureaucracy, women reflect, deny, or enhance male power, but cannot, except in rare cases, accumulate or enhance their own. In rare cases when women do have power, they are often perceived to have ‘slept up’ or have powerful family background.

Hidden rules thus cause widespread strife in the bureaucracy: from top to bottom within its hierarchies, between men and women, and from peer to peer. These rules therefore counter a longstanding emphasis on the part of the Chinese state to achieve ‘social harmony’ (社会和谐). In this way, we can think of hidden rules through the lens of deviance. Lu Xiaobo (2010, 22) defines official deviance as ‘behaviours that deviate from the prescribed norms of a regime, in which individuals or groups exploit the formal organisation instead of working for it, and in which personal roles take precedence over organisational roles.’ Lu suggests that such deviance is derived from involutory change within a postrevolutionary regime, a process whereby a revolutionary party, while adopting ‘modern’ (i.e., rational, impersonal, harmonious) structures, fails to adapt to the routinisation that characterises such modern bureaucracy, and is thus unable to maintain its original revolutionary identity. In the case of China, then, there is a conflict between modernisation and a bureaucratic culture that has remained largely unchanged since before the reform era.

Yet, recall that according to most media accounts, officials’ suicides are blamed on psychological problems. Why this failure to see the bigger picture of bureaucratic culture? To answer this question, it is useful to compare Chinese hidden rules to other painful bureaucratic practices that exist elsewhere, such as ‘mobbing’ in the Italian context (Molé 2012). Molé describes ‘mobbing’ as psychological and emotional workplace harassment. While mobbing is linked with



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neoliberal policies and organisational coercive pathology, through Molé's ethnographic study, we see that these broad economic, social, and historical structures are made visible in the day-to-day injustices, frustrations, and suffering of workers. Like hidden rules in China, mobbing is imagined, experienced, and treated as a health problem and a form of psychological violence with dire consequences. While we know that hidden rules have shaped Chinese officialdom for thousands of years, reports of officials' suicides mostly ignore this context. That these hidden rules have become increasingly entangled with neoliberal market practices, intensifying the precariousness and ethical conflicts Chinese officials experience, also goes unsaid. Like in the case of mobbing, the focus of the analysis remains narrowly limited to individual mental health problems, rather than the intractable issue of reforming China's gigantic bureaucracy.

Binding Effects

Hidden rules have a number of consequences that my informants described in detail. I have noted that these consequences can be thought of as irresolvable conflicting positions—what Gregory Bateson (1972) called 'double binds'. Bateson used the term to refer to social relationships that are subject to chronic invalidation through paradoxical practices, and that require permanent management of contradictions. No matter what a person does, he/she cannot win. Existing scholarship shows that double binds are pathogenic (Bateson et al. 1956). A person caught in constant double binds may develop schizophrenic symptoms. Double-bind conditions produce anger and negatively affect people's ability to find meaning in life (Watzlawick et al. 1967). I believe this is what happens among Chinese officials, culminating in widespread 'existential crises' (生存危机) among them.

For example, many of my informants stated outright that they must behave like a 'two-faced person' (双面人) in order to survive their work life. That is, due to the demands of the hidden rules, they are caught between contradictory roles: claiming to serve 'the people' through their work while attending to their own personal interests. Being two-faced helps them balance sacrifices (anxiety, distress, humiliation) and gains. In this sense, they are masters of themselves in the guise of public servants. However, their contradictory roles engender distress. One informant in Zhangqiu described the psychological toll of this double bind: 'You have to be cautious and calculating whenever you're at work to avoid pits and traps. At some point, you feel so exhausted and so frustrated that you want to end it all.'

Another double bind created by the hidden rules involves the contradiction between doing a good job and serving superiors. In the absence of strong checks and balances in China's system of one-party rule, the cost of breaching established laws and following one's own rules is generally low. This lack of

accountability can transform ‘public power’—delegated through formal mechanisms of institutions to serve state interests—into ‘private power’ for achieving individual agendas. Once an official is an ‘insider’, he spares no effort to maximise economic and social benefits for himself. I say ‘he’ because rarely is a woman able to accrue such private power. Thus, activities in the bureaucracy flow from the personal preferences of insider men. Leaders tend to prefer subservient rather than competent subordinates. Those who are reluctant to give up pride and character to curry favour with higher-ups are marginalised. Such ‘reverse elimination’ (逆淘汰) fosters injustice and causes distress and anger in China’s bureaucracy. Even worse, those who do not submit to the power of higher-ups are often given ‘smaller shoes’ (小鞋) to wear, through which they are intentionally made uncomfortable or demoted.

Further, the system of appointing officials from top down rather than electing cadres from bottom up makes officials responsible to superiors more than to subordinates. Many officials take up a negative ethos of not causing trouble or giving superiors extra work. They thus dislike innovative ideas that would disrupt the status quo. They transfer the pressure at work to subordinates and keep pressure and conflicts at the bottom, pacifying their subordinates in various ways so that they will not go over them to report to their superiors.

My ethnography provides a good example of this double bind related to superiors, flowing from the workings of hidden rules, and leading to reverse elimination. At a local broadcasting bureau in Zhangqiu a few years ago, two competitive candidates were up for the job of departmental director. Neither of them got the job. Instead, a man surnamed Wei, who had connections with the company president, was appointed. Yet, ironically, the new position and associated pressure pushed the new director into a downward spiral. Wei was not good at his job and largely relied on one of his subordinates, a young, capable colleague surnamed Liu, to assist him. Because Liu was so

young and new to the company, Wei was able to use many of his work and research findings to impress senior leaders. This strategy eventually backfired, however, when, during face-to-face meetings with important clients, Liu’s excellent performance outshined Wei, who became not only jealous of his younger protégé, but also suspected that Liu had betrayed him by directly interacting with and impressing the senior leadership. Trapped between this capable subordinate and senior leadership, Wei transferred Liu to another department.

Interestingly, Liu himself later expressed relief to me about his transfer. He too faced great pressure to help Wei hide his incompetence. At the same time, he was also being constantly monitored, as Wei was paranoid about his interactions with superiors and peers alike. Liu suspected that Wei was exhausted from his daily performance of (fake) competence, and the never-ending effort of exploiting subordinates while fooling his superiors. Yet, Wei maintained his position in order to hold onto the power and privilege he enjoyed as director. In fact, there is no real way for him to go back in this case without completely losing ‘face’ and destroying his career. Both Wei and Liu were in binding situations. The man promoted through hidden rules and his subordinates both suffered from the effects of reverse elimination, and consequential double binds and distress.

Between Pathological and Therapeutic

Far from emerging spontaneously from someone’s unhealthy mind or uncontrollable impulses, distress and depression among Chinese officials result from deep cultural, historical, and institutional realities that reinforce hierarchy and gender norms. The hidden rules of the bureaucracy are contextual, vague, and ambivalent, yet powerful and instrumental in a bureaucracy with an

incomplete, inefficient legal framework. As a result, these rules become passwords for accessing resources and an expression of unspoken social injustices.

Hidden rules create subjects who oscillate between formal and informal rulebooks, public and private arenas, words said and unsaid, and potential and manifest power. A desire for security and protection may lead officials to cultivate paternalistic relations with superiors and seek to become ‘insiders’ themselves, all the while anticipating precariousness, uncertainty, and flux. Hidden rules turn workplaces into an arena for volatile interdependency. People see others as extensions of themselves, using them or bypassing them to achieve their own goals. Such dynamics have become an important source of uncertainty and anxiety, contributing to the moral and ethical conflicts among mid-ranking government officials, and thus to anger, distress, and even suicide.

In my research, I have discovered that, ironically, hidden rules are both pathological and therapeutic, depending on the person and the instance. While most of my informants resent these rules, as they suffer within them, such resentment is mitigated once they benefit from the system. It is thus less workplace hierarchies as such that trigger depression, than the shock of these rules turning against them. The positionality of mid-ranking officials—both sufferers and contributors of hidden rules—results in precarity, binds, and frequently personal defeat. Lagging bureaucratic reform in a period of officially-sanctioned ‘harmony’, as China seeks global preeminence by becoming fully integrating into the global economy, silently sets the stage for these experiences. Those who do not understand or use hidden rules do not benefit from relative freedom or mobility and have no control over their promotion or prospects. Officials I interviewed in general felt that they have no sense of control over their job and work environment in a workplace where the practice of hidden rules predominates.

These practices are subtle forms of oppression that may transcend class and kinship. China scholars have recently focussed on the class stratification intensified by economic restructuring, but a focus purely on class dimensions tends to obscure personal power and its other significant dimensions. In this essay, I draw attention to the culturally-specific and subtle forms of personal submission, humiliation, degradation, coercive incorporation, and existential crises that are not tied to class-based hierarchies and that can contribute to people’s distress and suffering in China. ■



Against Atrophy Party Organisations in Private Firms

Eighteenth National
Congress of the
Chinese Communist
Party. PC: Dong Fang

Jude BLANCHETTE

Since 2015, the Chinese Communist Party has stepped up its presence within the day-to-day activities of foreign companies operating in China. At the same time, Chinese private firms were facing a similar situation. In this essay, Jude Blanchette argues that the campaign to enlarge the reach of the Party into private companies cannot be separated from its much wider campaign to increase the Party's governance over all institutions under its purview, in an attempt to arrest the organisational atrophy that accompanied the post-Mao economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s.

Beginning in 2015, foreign companies operating in China began to notice—some for the first time—the increasing presence of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organisations within the day-to-day activities of their firms. Companies in joint-ventures (JV) with Chinese private firms and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) reported demands to revise the articles of association to give the Party organisation (党组织) legal standing within the JV's corporate governance structure, while others grew alarmed after Party representatives within the foreign firms demanded input to personnel decisions, including layoffs and promotions.

This development was met with deep scepticism by the foreign business community. In November 2017, the Delegation of German Industry and Commerce issued a statement warning: ‘Should ... attempts to influence foreign invested companies continue, it cannot be ruled out that German companies might retreat from the Chinese market or reconsider investment strategies’ (He 2017). Similarly, the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China declared: ‘This development is of great concern to foreign JV partners as it significantly changes the governance of the JV and undermines the authority of the JV Board’ (EU Chamber of Commerce 2017).

Foreign companies need not have feared that they were alone in being targeted: Chinese private firms were similarly coming to grips with a newly-energised Party apparatus demanding increased involvement in enterprise decision-making. As reported by the Asian Corporate Governance Association, between the 2015 and the summer of 2017, more than 180 Chinese companies amended their articles of association to give the Party a formal company role (Allen and Li 2018). In September 2018, the China Securities Regulatory Commission released the Code of Corporate Governance for Listed Companies, which mandated the establishment of a Party organisation in domestically-listed firms and required that companies provide the ‘necessary conditions’ for Party activities.

Chinese authorities painted this development as wholly benign. One official from the CCP’s Organisation Department stated: ‘Most investors welcome and support the Party organisations to carry out activities inside their enterprises’ (State Council Information Office 2017). The State Council Information Office told *Reuters* that the Party was ‘widely welcomed within companies’ (Martina 2018). Some Chinese firms seemed to concur. According to a public statement issued by the bike-sharing firm Ofo, which established a Party committee (党委) in 2017: ‘What Ofo has achieved so far is based on the CCP and the government’s policy guidance and support

of Internet companies and entrepreneurship, which is beneficial to the healthy development of enterprises’ (Zhang 2017).

Why did the CCP leadership suddenly push for the expansion of Party organisations within the private sector? In this brief essay, I argue that the campaign to enlarge the reach of the CCP into private companies cannot be separated from its much wider campaign to increase the Party’s governance over *all* institutions under its purview, be they state-owned enterprises, law firms, educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, and even within government bureaucracies. This development, in turn, is closely related to the Party’s decades-long campaign to arrest the organisational atrophy that accompanied the post-Mao economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s. Seen in this light, the expansion of Party organisations within private firms is not a discrete effort to infiltrate the private sector *per se*, but rather is a manifestation of the CCP’s desire to have insight and input into *all* economic, civil, and political activity within the country.

Looking Back

To understand the current role of Party organisations, it is helpful to briefly trace their evolution since the 1980s. Crucially, throughout the first decade of the economic reforms, Beijing paid relatively little attention to the CCP *as an organisation*, a result of the overwhelming focus on boosting economic growth and reestablishing political stability after decades of misrule under Mao Zedong. With the economic reforms introduced in the late 1970s, however, issues pertaining to the quality of Party applicants, the maintenance of a robust and accurate cadre evaluation system, and oversight of the regular participation in Party activities by the existing membership fell by the wayside.

The Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 sent shockwaves through the Party's leadership, exposing the fragilities of China's own political system, but also the limits of resiliency for Marxist-Leninist systems around the world. In the wake of this political instability, the CCP turned, with renewed vigour, towards shoring up its basic organisational and ideological underpinnings. Newly-installed CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin told a group of assembled cadres in late 1989: 'We must make sure that the leading authority of all party and state organs is in the hands of loyal Marxists' (Dickson 2003, 35). As a result, private entrepreneurs were banned from joining the CCP in 1989. At the same time, a concerted effort was made to increase the Party's penetration into educational institutions—a logical move given the prominent role students had played in the demonstrations in Beijing and around China. By 1990, there were only 16,000 university student Party members (down from 23,000 in 1982), but within just five years this number had risen to 70,000 (Dickson 2003, 36).

But reasserting the Party's control proved difficult, owing to the dynamism and unpredictability introduced by China's own economic modernisation project. After Deng Xiaoping's celebrated 'Southern Tour' in 1992—and the consequent reinvigoration of the reform agenda after a short-lived conservative retrenchment—the Party's ability to enforce organisational and ideological discipline was tested as countless cadres and government officials 'leaped into the sea' (下海) and entered the burgeoning market economy. During the Mao era, when private businesses had been virtually non-existent and Party members tended to stay in one fixed location, it had been relatively easy for the CCP to ensure that members did not stray from their Party organisations. With Party members now moving about the country in search of new opportunities, the CCP Organisation Department—often likened to the

Party's human resourced department—found it increasingly difficult to keep tabs on these 'floating' Party members.

But it was not due to lack of effort. In August 1993, the Organisation Department released the Opinions on Further Strengthening Party Work in Foreign Firms, which mandated that 'all foreign ventures with more than three full party members should establish party organisations in accordance with the provisions of the party constitution' (Yan and Huang 2017, 43). That same year, the State Council promulgated the Company Law, which required all companies operating in China—both foreign and domestic—to permit the establishment of a Party organisation 'to carry out the activities of the Party in accordance with the [CCP] Constitution', and to provide the 'necessary conditions' for said Party organisation's activities. This was as much a move to shore-up the CCP's ideological control as it was intended to buttress its organisational foundation, as indicated by a 1993 Organisation Department document that declared the principal function of Party organisations in foreign firms was to 'educate Chinese employees in the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Party's basic line, patriotism and the importance of a collective spirit, and help them to resist the corruption of various decadent ideas' (Yan and Huang 2017, 44).

These efforts proved largely ineffective, however, and by the turn of the century, the CCP was facing an acute organisational crisis. As Bruce Dickson observed in 2000: 'Large numbers of party members are abandoning their party responsibilities to pursue economic opportunities. The nonstate sector of the economy is growing so fast that most enterprises do not have party organisations within them, and few new members are being recruited from their workforce' (Dickson 2000, 4). Jiang Zemin attempted to address some of these concerns by reversing the ban on capitalists joining the Party with his 'Three Represents Theory' (三个代表理论), which

was formally ratified at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002. These efforts aside, the organisational integrity of the CCP continued to deteriorate throughout the 2000s, despite the appearance of several (half-hearted) efforts at ‘Party building’ (党的建设) initiated under the leadership of General Secretary Hu Jintao.

Ensuring ‘Comprehensive Coverage’

With the political accession of Xi Jinping in late 2012, however, the issue of the Party’s governance capacity and organisational integrity took on a new importance, especially with regard to the Party’s control over, and integration with, the increasingly globalised and innovating private economy. A campaign to ensure that Party organisations had reached ‘comprehensive coverage’ (全面覆盖) within private firms was first raised by Xi in March 2012, months before he was installed as General Secretary (Yan and Huang 2017). By 2015, these efforts had borne significant fruit, so much so that fears began to spread within both the foreign business community as well as for domestic entrepreneurs that the presence of Party organisations might turn firms into political, rather than economic, institutions.

While it is certainly possible—indeed likely—that Party organisations will expand in scope to become more actively involved in the day-to-day operations and strategy of companies (reassuring language from Beijing notwithstanding), the driving impetus behind the current campaign is not to centrally plan the economy. Rather, it is intended to ensure that CCP members are fulfilling their political obligations, and to fend off the possibility that the private sector becomes independent from, and antagonistic to, the Party-state.

In the end, however, this may be a distinction without a difference. As it struggles to arrest the spread of organisational atrophy, the CCP feels increasingly compelled to insert itself into all corners of civic, economic, and political life. Xi Jinping outlined his vision for the Party in a declaration at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017: ‘Government, the military, society, and schools, north, south, east, and west—the Party leads them all.’ Or as one Chinese academic at the Beijing Foreign Studies University put it in more evocative language: ‘The Communist party in China is like God for Christians, and the party committee in a company is like a church’ (Gu 2019).

Embedding Leninist political institutions within China’s private sector will undoubtedly undermine the capacity of the country’s economy to innovate. We should expect strategic decisions within private companies—especially domestic Chinese firms—to become increasingly mindful of the Party’s objectives. Firms in China understand that the CCP is now calling the shots, and the level of political ‘awareness’ by Chinese entrepreneurs must necessarily increase if they are to remain within the bounds of Party-approved activities. Political decisions-making will compete with, and eventually crowd out, economic considerations. So while the Party may eventually achieve ‘comprehensive coverage’ over the private sector, and thus win its war on organisational atrophy, this victory will come at a significant cost for China and the Chinese people. ■



Anti-poverty Policies and Discourses of Blame in China

Chinese President Xi Jinping addresses the 2015 Global Poverty Reduction and Development Forum in Beijing, 16 October 2015. PC: Xinhua

Robert WALKER
YANG Lichao

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese authorities have promised to eradicate rural poverty in the country by 2020. Since it was first announced, this goal has entered the popular imagination, becoming a major engine of policy innovation. A new report prepared by a special group within the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the occasion of its 2019 session offers an assessment of progress in poverty reduction, providing up-to-date targets and candidly discussing contradictions within the poverty alleviation strategy

History comes early in China, such is the speed of development. Precisely when the goal of eradicating rural poverty by 2020 was established is lost in the fog of history, but Xi Jinping's speech to the 2015 Global Poverty Reduction and Development Forum—where he committed China to lifting 70 million above the poverty threshold at the rate of over 36,000 per day—is as good a date as any.

Since this speech, the goal has entered the popular imagination, being repeated countless times. In this process, the goal has become a

major engine of policy innovation, as described in a 2019 Report prepared by a special group within the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC). This document is important for its assessment of progress, its focus on strategy with up-to-date targets, and its candid discussion of contradictions within the poverty alleviation strategy that echo those already familiar in the policies found in the West.

The Report, initiated at the highest level by Congress Chairman Wang Chen, is underpinned by field research in 16 provinces and autonomous regions, site visits to Sichuan and Qinghai, and presentations from relevant state bodies. The document is, therefore, possibly better characterised as a rapid evidence assessment than in-depth research. As such, it inevitably begins with a record of success—such as the assertion that poverty fell from 98.9 million in 2012 to 16.6 million at the end of 2018, with 13.8 million being ‘lifted out of poverty’ (脱贫) in the past year alone—before identifying more contentious issues.

A Multi-faceted Assault on Poverty

Xi's assault on poverty is multi-faceted, with investment in infrastructure and economic development aimed at addressing deficiencies in demand in order to ‘revitalise’ rural areas (农村复兴), human capital investment to enhance labour supply, and social assistance to meet subsistence needs. Complementing regional with household targeting in 2014, a registry of all people in poverty was completed in 2016 and 775,000 officials were assigned to ‘resident task-forces’ (驻点干部) in every ‘poor village’ (贫困村), with a ‘person-in-charge’ (扶贫干部) allocated to each household in poverty. 188,000 Communist Party officials were similarly sent to build grassroots Party support, while 267 developed cities and counties in the wealthier eastern region supported 400 poor counties in

the west, state-owned enterprises organised poverty-relief programmes covering 10,000 villages, and 22,000 private enterprises were mobilised to assist 10,000 rural enterprises in as many villages. Additionally, 250 billion yuan were allocated over five years for relocating impoverished populations on an unprecedented scale.

No other country has reduced poverty as rapidly as China, and few have the infrastructure to engage in such an ambitious project of completely eliminating penury. But there are some caveats that must be considered. First, the official poverty line, set in 2011, is 2,300 yuan per year, which in 2017 purchasing parity (1.78 USD/day) equates to less than the World Bank's international poverty line of 1.90 USD/day. Moreover, China has been classified as an upper middle-income country since 2012 and the corresponding poverty threshold set by the World Bank is therefore considerably higher: 5.50 USD/day. Furthermore, the statistics are based on the registry compiled in 2016, thus they precisely account for the numbers lifted out of poverty, but fail to count persons becoming poor since 2016.

Present and Future Challenges

The NPC Report documents the political support and administrative energy devoted to enhancing policy design, strengthening policy measures, and improving implementation. This was given further impetus by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, with ten ministries, including the State Council, publishing new strategies in 2018. Provinces have the principal responsibility for delivering on the poverty eradication target. Their financial contribution to poverty alleviation has increased by over 30 percent annually, topping 100 billion yuan in 2018, while the annual rise in central government funding has exceeded 20 percent.



Farmer in a rural Chinese village.
PC: Samuel Vigier

The Report hints, though, at the challenges of managing so many policy initiatives. In particular it highlights the need to integrate some schemes; to ensure coordination of poverty alleviation and industrial development policies; to provide adequate follow-up assistance measures for relocated households; to increase supervision and auditing; and to implement anti-corruption measures with spot-checks and unannounced visits. At the same time, the Report also reiterates core components of the overall strategy, including spatial targeting at both macro and micro levels, identifying 169 counties designated as being in ‘deep poverty’ (深度贫困); the promotion of rural industry to create employment; and policies to provide the ‘two no worries, three guarantees’ (两不愁、三保障), aimed at eliminating worry about food and clothes, and

guaranteeing decent housing, good education (to inhibit ‘intergenerational transmission’ of poverty), and medical security.

Of most interest, though, are the future challenges identified by the Report. The Report acknowledges that eradicating rural poverty is difficult and that the difficulty is increasing—whether this is a product of analytic reflection or the desire ‘to raise awareness of the significance of winning the battle against poverty’ (坚决打赢脱贫攻坚战) is up for debate. Not only are 30,000 villages still ‘poverty-stricken’, but the 16.6 million people remaining poor are also particularly disadvantaged, often unable to work due to old age, disability, or chronic sickness. For instance, 72 percent of people in poverty in Henan have health problems, with 47 per cent of the total designated as being impoverished also being unable to work. Moreover, the deep

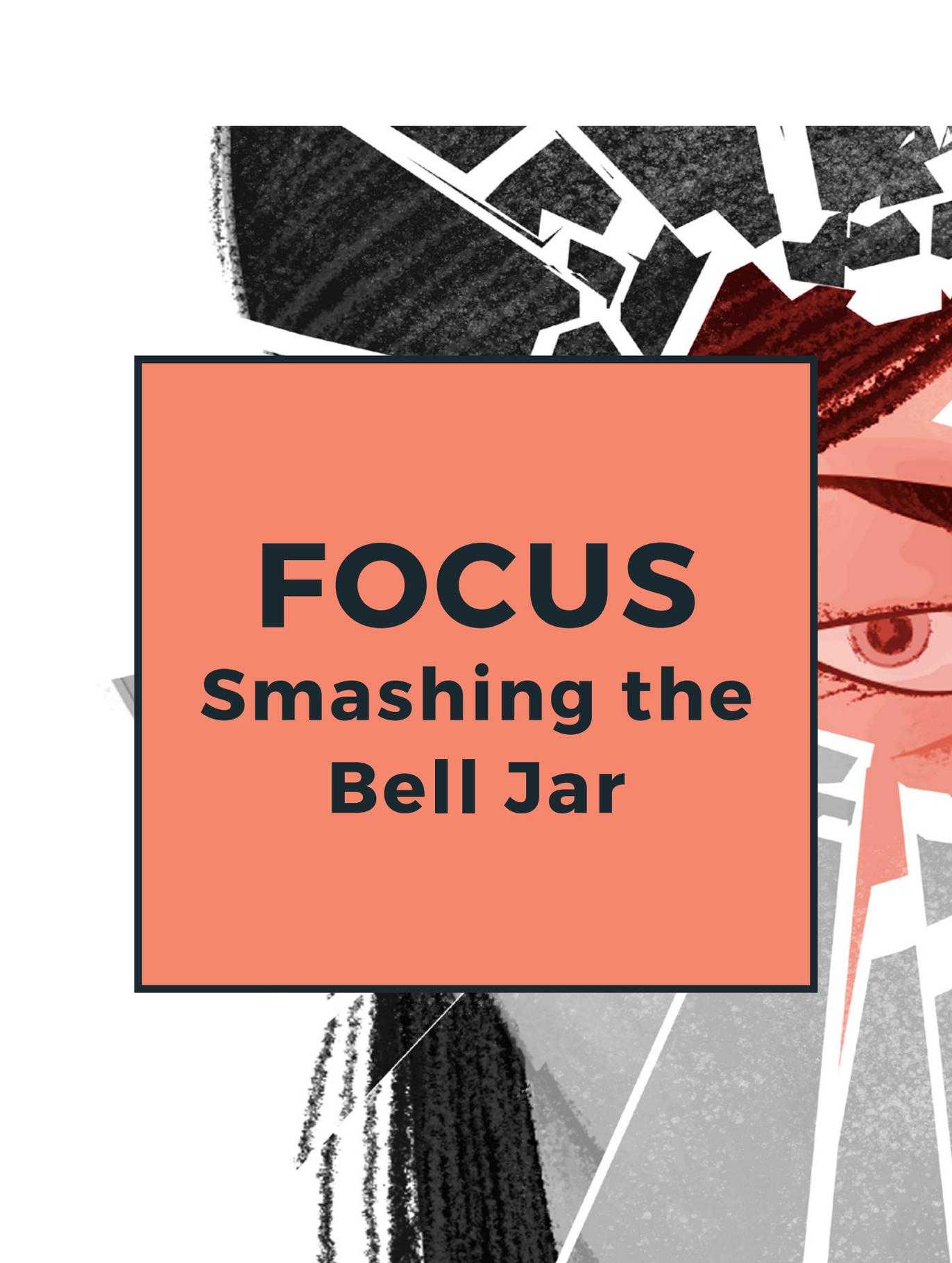
poverty that remains is spatially concentrated, reaching 25 percent in some counties, and often located in the ‘three districts and three states’ (Tibet, Xinjiang, southern Xinjiang, and the prefectures of Linxia [Gansu], Liangshan [Sichuan], and Nujiang [Yunnan]) that lack infrastructure and basic services. Efforts to stimulate industry are critiqued as being typically small-scale, focussed on primary processing that generates little added value and few multiplier effects, poorly organised, and often susceptible to oversupply and falling market prices. The Report also notes failures in education and health-care, including the difficulty of attracting skilled staff to live in poverty-stricken areas. Local cadres are criticised for a failure of leadership and initiative in some areas, handing out cash payments rather than promoting sustainable development.

Blaming ‘the Poor’

Without being prescriptive—the NPC usually approves rather than initiates policy—the Report responds to these issues by listing 24 policy aspirations grouped into seven clusters. The seventh cluster includes a fascinating glimpse of a post-2020 world in which the goal of reducing urban poverty is added to that of eradicating rural poverty, and a ‘comprehensively coordinated urban and rural poverty management system’ (全面统筹的城乡贫困治理体系) is proposed. As well as suggesting a major change in focus that reflects China’s rapid urbanisation, an additional implication is acceptance either that rural poverty will not be eradicated by 2020, or that one or more thresholds more comparable with international standards are to be introduced (there is currently no national definition of urban poverty). Huang Chenwei (2019), of the State Council, has subsequently acknowledged that ‘although absolute poverty is eliminated, relative poverty will persist for a long time’ (绝对贫困虽消除, 但相对贫困会长期存在).

Contradicting its own analysis of the importance of structural determinants of poverty and the personal challenges confronting those remaining in deep poverty, the Report engages with ideas that mirror Western anxieties about dependency, the culture of poverty, and the underclass. It expresses concern that increasing sums of money are being given to ever-larger numbers of people. It notes high levels of transfer income—accounting for 60 percent of the income of farmers and herders in parts of Qinghai—that undermine initiative and risk-taking. It refers to old customs and habits in Tibet and elsewhere that are difficult to change, and to persons unwilling to work in Jiangxi and Qinghai. Tellingly, the Report repeats complaints from people not receiving help that benefits are going to the idle and lazy, and that poverty is caused by gambling, bride-price, and lack of family support for the elderly. The Report responds by proposing ideological and cultural education, cuts in benefits for people unwilling to work, and punishment to eliminate undesirable attitudes that hinder the eradication of poverty. The risk, given that 58 percent of the Chinese population already believes laziness to be the main cause of poverty, is that this strategy becomes divisive, triggering the process of pauperisation in which people in poverty are deemed to be the cause of their own poverty and blamed for policy failures.

It is politically inconceivable that Chairman Xi’s battle to eradicate rural poverty by 2020 will be lost, but China’s war against poverty will continue. The Report foresees radical new policy agendas including measures to prevent people from reentering poverty, strategies to reach people in poverty who live outside areas designated as poor, and legislation to provide a legal guarantee of poverty alleviation. However, there is an imminent danger that, if the discourse of blame predominates, the war could increasingly be directed against people experiencing poverty rather than against the structural processes that make them poor. ■



FOCUS

Smashing the Bell Jar



Artwork by Marc Verdugo.



Chinese Feminism as We Know It

Public Pedagogies of the
Anglophone Media Space

Dušica RISTIVOJEVIĆ

Anglophone media have been reporting about women's activism in China since the mid-1990s. While sympathetic media coverage of the public performances of young Chinese feminists in the early 2010s gradually built up popular knowledge, interest, and support among the global audience for grassroots feminist activism in China, the arrest of the 'Feminist Five' in 2015 brought forward a new set of narratives.

PC: Dušica Ristivojević

We are intellectually and emotionally children of our era, with commitments and loyalties which come from our involvement in the struggles of the time. Since we cannot view our own century with the same detachment as the Mauryan Empire or the European wars of religion, we need to make a special mental effort to apply to it the same analysis as we have to the past: retaining our convictions but recognising that others, and especially future generations, will question them and be puzzled by the importance which we attach to them.

Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (1992)

If the Anglophone media are conceived as a main site of creation and global dissemination of knowledge and meanings, transmitted to both specialist and non-specialist audience, what does an examination of the international press tell us about the lessons we are learning about Chinese feminism?

Writing in 1997 about the media landscape in the United States, Noam Chomsky explained that there are two sectors of the media: the media sources which address and direct the mass audience, and ‘the big guys’, the ones with the big resources which set the framework in which everyone else operates (Chomsky 1997). To maintain its institutional structure and ideological doctrines, the elite media has been relying on an audience of mostly privileged people operating in the political, business, and educational spheres. In other words, on us.

Fast forward to the present. Technological development and the popularisation of social media may have diversified audiences, but this has not decreased the critical role of big media players in organising the way we think, feel, and look at the world. Quite the opposite: the spread of the Internet as a ‘technology of global democracy’ (Guldi and Armitage 2014), and the emergence of an increasingly global communicative sphere in which English-language media play an unprecedentedly authoritative role, have arguably positioned ‘the big players’ as a crucial site of global public pedagogy. This is due not only to the fact that the reports reach a broad, English-speaking audience located all over the world, but also because the local media in economically-disadvantaged and non-English speaking parts of the world consult, translate, and further circulate the information produced by the Anglophone agenda-setting media outlets.

So, what have the Anglophone media been telling us about Chinese feminism?

Selective Attention

Human rights scholar Caroline Fleay (2011) pointed out that, although since 1949 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had repeatedly abused human rights of Chinese citizens, before the violent crackdown of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations there was no significant international criticism of human rights abuses in the country. In her own words: ‘In the wake of the massacre, international human rights organisations, some domestic and exiled Chinese human rights actors and various UN human rights agencies continued to investigate and report on human rights abuses in China [T]his transnational network of human rights actors had proven powerful enough to define what were the most important human rights abuses in China’ (Fleay 2011, 111). And, I would add, this network has been doing so with the significant—if not straightforwardly pivotal—assistance of the Anglophone media.

The importance of 1989 as a turning point in the international criticism of China’s human rights record is magnified if the textual and visual content of the influential Anglophone media is observed. Being closely linked to, and cutting across, three intersecting layers—the dynamics of China’s (re)positioning in the modern world order; the operation of human rights as global symbolic norms; and the unfolding of transnationally-embedded Chinese social activism—the events of 1989 have been serving as a defining moment for media narratives that intertwined criticism of the CCP and support for Chinese pro-democracy forces within and outside of China. Still, interestingly and importantly, the Anglophone media’s introduction of Chinese feminism to a global audience follows a different temporality and modality.

There were some early examples of reporting on Chinese feminism. Anglophone media reports on the Fourth World Conference on Women organised by the United Nations in Beijing in 1995 discussed women’s activism in



China's Feminist Five.
PC: 3cr.org.au

China. Also, sympathetic media coverage of the public performances of a group of young Chinese feminists in the early 2010s has been gradually and systematically building up popular knowledge, interest, and support among the global audience for the stream of Chinese feminism not organised under the auspices of the Chinese state. Yet, similar to the way in which the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and the associated representations and meanings generated and disseminated by the Anglophone media became a constitutive trope of global narratives about China and China's dissent, the detention of five young feminists in the spring of 2015 came to be the main reference for succeeding media narratives on feminism in China, and also the starting point for an intensive and forceful creation and dissemination of popular knowledge about Chinese feminism. In the rest of this essay, I will briefly discuss the momentum of the 2015

discursive explosion through which a global non-specialist audience has become familiar with what has often been termed 'young' or 'independent' Chinese feminism.

2015 as a Turning Point

On 7 March 2015, women's rights activists located in several Chinese cities were taken in for questioning about a series of actions against sexual harassment on public transportation that they were planning for the next day. Five young women—Li Tingting (Li Maizi), Wu Rongrong, Zheng Churan, Wei Tingting, and Wang Man—were detained for five weeks, after which they were released on bail. Online Anglophone media outlets—from globally influential media corporations to the ones which target Chinese educated elites and the expat communities—

dedicated remarkable attention to the detained Chinese feminists. Big players—*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *The Associated Press*, *Deutsche Welle*—all regularly fed a global non-specialist audience with interwoven information about the imprisoned women, their transnational support, and China more generally.

On a few occasions before the detention of the Feminist Five, the activities of young Chinese feminists independent from the Party-state had received considerable attention in the Anglophone media. The reports that introduced young feminists to the English-speaking audience—especially the texts about the activists participating in the Bloody Brides street performance (Beijing, February 2012) and Occupy the Men's Toilets actions (Guangzhou and Beijing, February 2012)—had a similar structure. The articles usually opened with a description of what the journalist defined as the 'imaginative stunts' of young feminists; this was occasionally accompanied by a brief recapitulation of the continuous tradition of indigenous feminism in China since the turn of the twentieth century, and followed by a long list of disadvantages facing women in contemporary China—including lower wages, the gender gap at birth, problematic media representations, discrimination in the workplace, low number of Chinese women reaching the top positions in politics, etc. These pre-2015 articles generally ended with an optimistic tone and with enthusiastic statements about the members of these feminist groups. The texts disseminated in March and April 2015 had a different tone and structure.

The transnational links established between Chinese feminists and international journalists, activists, and scholars may be one of the reasons why the response of the media to the detention of the Feminist Five was rapid and sustained. Right from the beginning, the media highlighted the mistreatment that the activists were enduring in prison and univocally advocated for the appropriateness of the feminists' actions and, therefore, their innocence and release. As these reports

pointed out, the imprisoned women were just planning to disseminate leaflets and stickers, and they should not have been persecuted for this unthreatening mode of activism.

The detained activists came to be known among English-speaking audiences as the 'Feminist Five'. However, the attention that the individual activists received was not equal. Wang Man was probably the activist that we heard the least of, even though her work with women in poor and remote areas was publicly detailed in a letter sent by her family members to the People's Procuratorate of Haidian district, Beijing. Similarly, Wu Rongrong's appeals for the educational rights of migrant workers—information that was also disclosed in the same letter—largely fell outside the scope of media's attention, which instead focussed on her emotional distress and near collapse. Zheng Churan's labour rights activities—her support for strikes, her demands for companies and the government to stop gender discrimination in the employment process—were also very rarely mentioned in popular media outlets.

In contrast, Wei Tingting was introduced to the global public with references to her participation in the women's rights street performances of 2012 mentioned above, but it was her activism related to LGBT issues and AIDS that received most attention from the media. Even more coverage was dedicated to Li Maizi, who was at the centre of emotionally-coloured media reports, with numerous articles disseminating information not only about her activism, but also about her intimate life: about her abusive father, her loving lesbian partner, and her mischievous and fearless character.

In addition to details about the appealing personalities of the imprisoned feminists and their ill treatment in prison, significant space in the reports was reserved for the international mobilisation of feminists. Texts and images related to the massive mobilisation of women's rights supporters, their petitions, demonstrations, and social media activity were regular during this period. Special emphasis was put on informing and reminding the audience of the support that the detained

activists received from foreign governments and officials: almost every media outlet reported on the statements made by the European Union Delegation to China and the United Kingdom Foreign Office, the messages sent by Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the US Vice-president Joe Biden, as well as on the comments by Ambassador Samantha Power, the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Missing Tassels

One actor has been nearly absent from the media representations of Chinese feminism initiated in the 2010s: the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), the official, state-sponsored mass organisation in charge of representing the interests of Chinese women. Only very brief references to the ACWF were generally included, mainly creating a clear-cut antagonistic binary between the ACWF and the detained activists. This was mostly accomplished through the media portrayals of Li Maizi, which repeatedly raised the Federation's efforts to silence her by offering her a job on the condition that she ceases her protests and social media work—an offer that she refused.

A notable contrast can be seen in the media narratives of 2015. While in and through their narratives about the Feminist Five the Anglophone media downplayed and deprived the ACWF of its feminist legacy and leanings, the image of Hillary Clinton as a global feminist icon was conspicuously inflated through a persistent emphasis on her support for the detained Chinese feminists. Clinton's tweets about the Feminist Five received considerable media attention and directly placed the case at the core of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, contributing to the media constructions of Clinton as an internationally-acclaimed feminist fighter. Knowing in retrospect that soon after her tweets about the Feminist Five, Clinton announced her

presidential bid, the media emphasis on her support for the detained activists may be interpreted as both authentic care for the Chinese feminists, and as the beginning of a media discourse about Clinton's long-lasting feminist engagement at both the national and international levels that would become central to her candidacy.



Hillary Clinton during the presidential campaign of 2016.
PC: Gage Skidmore

Yet another rather transparent political clue can be found in the ways in which the Anglophone media adjoined the criticism of Xi Jinping, the Chinese government, and the CCP to the narratives about Chinese feminism. In writing about the detention of the feminists, the articles consistently educated the Anglophone reader about the 'milestone' events, organisations, and people who suffered at the hands of the communist regime. Through these discursive moves, the Feminist Five case was, on the one hand, turned into the foundation for increasing support for persecuted activists, journalists, academics, and organisations; on the other hand, it became a thorough indictment of the abusive power of China's repressive state apparatus. Through both of these processes, it may be argued, the Chinese feminist movement has, for the first time, been firmly placed into a genealogy of unjust and

cruel treatment of pro-democracy and human rights activists linked by an invisible thread to the iconic 1989 Tiananmen protests.

By Way of Conclusion

What do the Chinese feminists themselves publicly say about these media narratives of their own endeavours?

Let's listen carefully and attentively to Lü Pin, an experienced and internationally active Chinese feminist activist who founded *Feminist Voices* in 2009—the largest and most influential digital platform focussed on women's issues in China before being shut down by the Chinese government in 2018. Lü currently resides in the United States, where she publicly talks about Chinese women's rights and continues to follow the feminist movement in China closely.

In a tweet on 2 April 2018, Lü (@pinerpiner) referred to the text on China's #MeToo movement written by the Chinese feminist Xiao Meili and published by *China Change* (Xiao 2018). Lü wrote: 'Precious article. One wish of my young feminist friends this year is to elaborate our movement more rather than being represented by others.' What her words point to is not only the feminists' determination to obtain more control over globally-circulating narratives about their activism. They also hint at the feminists' unease with the operating discourses that constitute, and are constituted by, the popular knowledge produced and disseminated by the Anglophone media.

More recently, on the occasion of the 2019 International Women's Day, Lü was interviewed by Siodhbhra Parkin and Jiayun Feng for the online platform *SupChina*. Replying to a question about her views on the Western media coverage of Chinese feminism, Lü was quoted as saying that the news outlets in the West tend to portray Chinese feminists as victims of government suppression, and that 'using this angle to tell every story about Chinese feminism is boring and actually oversimplifies the situation.' She added that

Western media 'have a tendency of looking at Chinese problems through the lens of politics, but need to understand that oppression is never the core incentive for activists. In China, there is a wide spectrum of protests. Some are political, and some are not ... [Y]ou can't generalise Chinese activists and associate all of them with politics.' Nonetheless, Lü was not too harsh with the media: while remarking that the Western media's coverage of Chinese feminism 'often seems superficial', she acknowledged the significance of getting the Chinese feminist message out to the English-speaking audience and the possibility and need to learn, improve, and solve problems through increased communication.

While bearing in mind that Chinese feminism does not have one face, these learning processes may include the employment of new ways of engagements with feminist narratives that would allow the activists themselves to disseminate their own discourses of Chinese feminism. ■



Does China Have a Feminist Movement from the Left?

A 2012 protest against domestic violence in Beijing. PC: Media Monitor for Women Network

Yige DONG

While most international media have applauded the latest waves of feminist activism in China, some observers have pointed out that these women's voices and actions are biased towards urban middle-class interests and out of touch with the suffering of women in the migrant workforce or other lower social strata. But is the Young Feminist Activism phenomenon in China really a largely elite urban project? In this essay, Yige Dong argues that while the feminist upsurge in China shares the common anti-authoritarian features of many urban, middle-class-oriented movements, it is by no means confined within the urban elite sphere. Moreover, the present gender-cum-class structure in China is more than ever conducive to feminist forces from the left.

The detention of the 'Feminist Five' in March 2015 and the subsequent international campaign to free them marked a watershed moment for contemporary feminist movements in China (Wang 2015; Li 2017; see also Ristivojević's essay in this issue). While Chinese women joined global feminist movements as early as the turn of the twentieth century, when the 'first wave' of feminism swept the world, most of their endeavours have remained marginal, if not totally ignored, in the public memory (Liu et al. 2013; Wang 1999; Wang and Zhang 2010; Wang 2016). To many, it was the 'Feminist Five' and the Young Feminist Activism (青年女权行动派, YFA) they represent that introduced the world to a new

generation of Chinese women—outspoken, innovative, and fearlessly standing up to one of the most powerful authoritarian regimes in history.

While most media outside China reported this high-profile case positively and applauded the accompanying tidal wave of feminist awakening in China, some observers have pointed out that, as it is most visible on the Internet, these women's voices and actions are biased towards urban middle-class interests and out of touch with the suffering of women in the migrant workforce or other lower social strata (Bai 2015; Dong 2016).

Is the YFA really a largely elite urban project? Does China have a feminist movement from the left? How do we think about the intersectionality between class and gender in the political-economic context of today's China? To answer these questions, it is important to first and foremost ask those feminists who are fighting on the ground to define, narrate, and reflect on their activism. But as a sympathetic observer, I would like to discuss these questions here in order to highlight the connections between Chinese feminism and the 'feminism for the 99 percent', a new global movement in the making.

Inspired by mass movements for class justice, such as Occupy, the recently emerging 'feminism for the 99 percent' serves as a powerful critique of 'neoliberal feminism' or 'corporate feminism', pointing out that some legacies of the 'second-wave' feminism that started half a century ago have been appropriated by business elites and politicians for their personal advancement (Jaffe 2017). 'Feminism for the 99 percent' calls for a renewed struggle that goes beyond identity politics to address deep-seated structural problems, including forms of class and racial oppression that intersect with gender inequalities (Arruzza et al. 2019; see also Kehoe's essay in this issue). At this historical conjuncture, with the increasing visibility of women's power from China, it would be inspiring to see how contemporary

Chinese feminism can not only contribute to, but also possibly transform, this new global wave.

Drawing on my observation and personal engagement in Chinese feminist movements over the last decade, in this essay I will argue that while the feminist upsurge in China shares the common anti-authoritarian features of many urban, middle-class-oriented movements, it is by no means confined within the urban elite sphere. Moreover, the present gender-cum-class structure in China is more than ever conducive to feminist forces from the left, as worsening class inequalities have made struggles for gender justice in most social spheres simultaneously intersectional with questions of economic justice.

Deconstructing the Myth of Privilege

Before delving into the question of gender-cum-class structure, it is first necessary to deconstruct the myth that members of the YFA are privileged urban college graduates and thus blind to class injustice—a common assertion found among observers who are too quick to apply the established critique of corporate feminism—which is derived from the Global North—to the Chinese context. One immediate counterpoint is that, right after the arrest of the 'Feminist Five', labour activists based in Guangdong and Hong Kong weighed in, maintaining that they were standing in solidarity with these feminists because when labour activists had been previously threatened by the authorities, those feminists had stood with the workers (China Citizens Movement 2015; Gongpingshe 2015).

A careful reading of the biographies of key members of the YFA quickly reveals that a substantial number of them are from rural and working-class backgrounds. For example, three of the five detainees, Li Maizi, Wei Tingting, and Wu Rongrong, grew up in the countryside. While going to college in top-tier cities like

Beijing, Guangzhou, and Xi'an has exposed them to cosmopolitan feminist ideas, they do not have the economic and social capital a typical middle-class, white-collar urbanite would have. In fact, according to Lü Pin, a prominent figure in the YFA, it was exactly due to the lack of resources and access to the established system that the young feminists had to rely on 'drama and visuality'—such as the ingenious 'bloody bride' protest in a main street in Beijing in 2012—to draw public attention to the absence of legislation against domestic violence (Lü 2016).

Beyond individual class background, many of the social services and advocacy activities undertaken by YFA are for people at the margins of society, including migrants, sex workers, domestic workers, and peasant women. For example, the same group of young feminists who did the 'bloody bride' protest also campaigned for equal economic rights for rural women. On 12 December 2013, with the help of the YFA, He Zhuqing and other seven peasant women who had lost their land after marriage or divorce gathered in front of the office of the Zhejiang Provincial Government in Hangzhou. They laid down on the street and formed a 'human pyramid', with slogans covering their bodies: 'Married-out women are like thrown-out water' and 'The tyranny of valuing men highly and women lightly' (Gender Watch 2014).

Furthermore, many of the YFA's battles have actually dealt with the livelihoods of women coming from lower social strata. Take a widely reported case for example. In January 2015, Ma Hu, a 25-year-old lesbian feminist, sued China Post, the state-owned enterprise that monopolises postal services. Coming from a village in northeast China and having a college degree in fine arts, Ma struggled to stay in Beijing and was attempting to get a job in express delivery to make ends meet. China Post denied her application because, as she was repeatedly told by the managers, 'only men would suit the job'. After a court in Beijing ruled in her favour, her case became the first successful employment gender-discrimination

lawsuit against a state-owned enterprise (Xiao 2018). This was preceded by a similar case in 2014, in which Huang Rong, another activist connected to the YFA, sued the New Oriental Culinary School in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, after her job application there had been denied. It is believed that this was the first time a job-seeker won a gender discrimination case in China (Stauffer 2018).

It is notable that both Ma Hu and Huang Rong grew up in rural China. To fight for feminist causes, they chose to start with gender justice in employment, which is hardly an 'elitist' concept. Their relatively low socioeconomic status reflects the fact that many aspects of gender-related injustice in today's China are closely tied to women's overall class disadvantage and their fewer chances for



Construction worker in Xi'an.
PC: Kevin Schoenmakers

upward mobility—a structural problem in which gender and class vulnerabilities are mutually reinforced.

Gender and Class in Today's China

This leads into a structural analysis of gender/class intersectionality in contemporary China. Over the last four decades, the country's reintegration into global capitalism has brought forth unprecedented class discrepancies. The government's turn away from state feminism—which used to be part of the socialist project before the reform—has given rise to a new gender order that has restored the essentialist perception of women as sexual objects and primary caregivers. These two sources of inequality, namely class and gender, are strongly correlated.

Consistent with global trends, the gender gap in education in China has been almost eliminated, with women now outnumbering men at every stage of schooling. According to data from the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), as of 2010, 30 percent of Chinese women under 30 years old had a college degree, compared to only 26 percent of men (ACWF 2010). However, attainment in education has not translated into economic parity. While Chinese women's average income has been steadily increasing since the beginning of the market reforms, the gender pay gap has also widened. Between 1990 to 2010, the average income of Chinese urban women relative to men had decreased from 78 to 67 percent, while for their rural counterparts this ratio had decreased from 79 to 60 percent (ACWF 2000; 2010). In general, the majority of Chinese women in their prime working age (18–64) belong to low or lower-middle income groups. In all types of enterprises and government offices, women only account for 2 percent of the leadership positions.

In addition to income, wealth accumulation is another avenue where Chinese women are left behind. Whereas housing is the most

important and valuable private property a Chinese family can possess, due to patriarchal norms, in most Chinese families it is the husband who holds the property title (Fincher 2014). For all housing properties nationwide, only 38 percent have women as the owner or joint-owner (ACWF 2010). Only 13 percent of married women in China have housing property under their own name, and 28 percent share the ownership with their husbands, while half of the married men have property under their own name. As of 2010, 21 percent of rural women in China did not have the rights to any land, 9 percent higher than that of men. Compared to men, women are more likely to lose their rights to land as a result of marriage or divorce (ACWF 2010).

Furthermore, if we look at the breakdown of gender composition by occupation, it is clear that men dominate jobs at the middle and upper strata in terms of social and/or economic prestige—such as doctors, engineers, logistics, and other high-skilled, high value-added jobs. For example, the IT industry has one of the greatest gender imbalances: for every 100 programmers, there are only 6 women (CNNIC 2018).

While the high-growth, high-income industries are male dominated, a mirroring gender division of labour defines the service sector. Having surpassed industrial manufacturing, services have recently become the largest labour market in China, which includes low-end service jobs such as domestic servants, hotel workers, and retail personnel (Wu 2015). As a highly feminised sector, the service labour market is also highly informalised, with few regulations and labour protections. For example, 90 percent of the 21.62 million paid domestic workers in China are women who are either laid-off workers or rural migrants (Oxfam Hong Kong 2016). Despite recent efforts to standardise the quality of services—meant as a measure to satisfy the consumer—there are not yet any regulations or laws to protect service workers' rights (Li 2015).

The exacerbating gender discrepancies and the strict gender division of labour between ‘high-end technology’ and ‘low-end service’ will also shape the future possibilities of labour organising: to organise workers in those informal, low-end sectors—an ever more urgent task as manufacturing jobs are leaving China—would mean to organise a highly-feminised labour force. In this context, addressing women’s rights would require engaging with issues of labour protection, social welfare, land rights, and the redistributive politics in general.

Unintended Conjunctions

In addition to changing gender and class structures, the current dire political situation in China is also playing a role in shaping the relationship between the feminist and labour

movements. Since the government crackdown on the YFA in 2015, more than a hundred human rights lawyers, labour activists, and NGO organisers have been harassed and detained, with dozens of them being charged, tried, and sentenced (Gan 2018). As the state tightens its grip on political activism and resources for civic mobilisation dry up, an unintended conjuncture seems to be emerging where social forces that used to fight for different causes are joining together. On the ground, we have seen the convergence of struggles against gender injustice and labour oppression.

For instance, *Jianjiao Buluo* (尖椒部落), an Internet platform established recently, has been publishing content that addresses issues at the intersection of gender and labour, including stories written by women workers themselves. A recent example is an essay published in 2018 under the pen name ‘a female Foxconn worker’, requesting the enterprise to establish regulations against workplace sexual harassment.



Jianjiao Buluo (尖椒部落), an Internet platform that publishes stories written by women workers themselves.

January 2018 was the same month that the global #MeToo campaign started gaining momentum on the Chinese Internet (see Gathercole Lam's conversation with Zhang Leilei in this issue). To be sure, many Chinese people had started campaigning against sexual harassment and assault in workplace and academic setting years before the #MeToo movement. As early as 2014, 256 Chinese scholars and students signed an open letter urging the Ministry of Education to create anti-sexual harassment policies for university campuses (Liang 2018). In April 2018, Yue Xin, a senior at Peking University, and other student activists held demonstrations on campus, demanding that the university administration release the case file of Shen Yang, a professor facing allegations of raping a student 20 years ago and possibly causing her suicide. Long before emerging as a leading voice in the Chinese #MeToo movement, for years Yue Xin had been an active member in the Peking University Marxist Society—a leftist organisation fighting for social justice including for the rights of dispatched workers on campus. Later in July, Yue Xin and students from various universities travelled to Shenzhen to support workers who were on strike, protesting against low pay, long hours, and the undemocratic election of the trade union leaders in Jasic Technology (Shephard 2018; Zhang 2019).

Another female activist who stood out in the Jasic incident was Sheng Mengyu. After graduating from Sun Yat-Sen University with a STEM master's degree in 2015, she started a job on the assembly line, hoping to get in touch with workers and to help improve their situation (Zheng 2018). Her activism has specifically focussed on protecting the rights of female workers, especially their maternity health and benefits. This is not a coincidence. The history of labour movements, including that of the early Chinese Communist Party, has taught us that female activists and organisers have more access to women and more insight into women's particular disadvantages and needs.

While we have to wait and see whether and how the labour and feminist movements can break the siege and move forward, given the gender-cum-class condition and the already connected networks between labour and feminist activists, stronger solidarity between the two—as well as other social forces—is highly plausible. It is in this light that I believe contemporary Chinese feminism can play a vital role in shaping the 'feminism for the 99 percent' on a global scale, as many of the gender and class patterns in China, as well as the grim political situation, can also be found in other parts of the world. ■

This essay was revised on 9 August 2019 because it contained incorrect information about the editorship of *Jianjiao Buluo*. The author and the editors apologise for any confusion caused by their mistake.



Beyond #MeToo in China:

A Conversation with
Zhang Leilei

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Beyond #MeToo in China

A Conversation with Zhang Leilei

Nuala GATHERCOLE LAM

Zhang Leilei is an activist for gender equality and LGBTQ rights in China. She was part of the group who planned to hand out stickers with an anti-sexual harassment message on the eve of International Women’s Day 2015, though not one of those arrested who later came to be known as the ‘Feminist Five’. Since then, Zhang has gone on to work on a number of high-profile campaigns against sexual harassment, most notably the effort to have anti-sexual harassment billboards placed in the subway in Guangzhou.

Nuala Gathercole Lam: Feminist consciousness among young women in China has grown in recent years. What do you think has driven this change?

Zhang Leilei: Around 2012, a new wave of feminist activism dedicated its efforts to launching feminist voices into the public discourse. In so doing they broke free from the small social circles which had previously characterised the movement, and brought discussions of feminism to a broader segment of Chinese society.

A key aspect of this change took place around 2010, when a few individuals—scholars, people employed within the system (体制内), and journalists—realised that much of the efforts of feminists in China were being directed at top-down initiatives. They understood that the seemingly never-ending lobbying and the small-scale reforms taking place within the system were wholly inadequate and that the public had a very minimal understanding of feminism. At the same time, these people also came into contact with a number of anti-discrimination and advocacy NGOs that were having great success using public advocacy methods, for example on the issue of hepatitis B. Performance art, media stunts, utilising current events and celebrities, as well as legal methods, were invaluable tools in the early stages of the feminist movement’s development.

While social media in China in recent years has become increasingly tightly controlled, it has still provided a dynamic large-scale platform to debate feminist issues and organise groups—the most powerful example being the #MeToo movement which was initiated, spread, and expanded on



Zhang Leilei

social media in 2018. In the early days of the movement, the mainstream media was afraid to speak up, but after the topic of sexual harassment exploded on social media they started, one by one, to cover the issue. The #MeToo movement in China has always been subject to official investigations and related posts on social media are frequently deleted, but at its height this interference was not sufficient to prevent the movement from taking off.

Another example is the so-called ‘Naked Anti-domestic Violence Action’ (裸身反家暴) of 2012. The traditional media would not cover it because it was considered extreme, but it got a lot of shares on social media and within a short space of time gathered thousands of signatures calling for an anti-domestic violence law to be enforced. Of course, Weibo has been seriously sanitised, but over the last few years there have been many big and small accounts devoted to publishing information on feminist issues. WeChat is another gathering place for Chinese feminists. The online world has become home to a pretty substantial feminist community in China.

Added to that, the general educational level of Chinese women has risen and more than half of students in higher education in China are now female. This is to some extent a result of the one child policy—women with financial resources have benefitted and this has increased their chances of coming into contact with feminist ideas, making them more likely to act to change their own situation.

NGL: In 2012, a group of feminists launched a campaign with the slogan ‘I can be slutty, but you cannot harass me’ (我可以骚，你不能扰). The campaign was launched in response to a Weibo post by Shanghai Metro Company, which asserted that women wearing revealing clothing on public transport should expect to be harassed. Since then, feminist activists have consistently focussed on the issue of sexual harassment on public transport. The action planned on the eve of International Women’s Day in 2015 by the women who would later be dubbed the ‘Feminist Five’ would have involved handing out stickers to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transport and, somewhat sarcastically, direct victims of harassment to call the All China Women’s Federation Hotline. Later campaigns sought to purchase billboard space in Guangzhou to display a poster sending a warning to would-be harassers. Why was sexual harassment on public transport chosen as the focus of so many of the feminist campaigns in recent years?

ZL: The main reason is because sexual harassment is so prevalent on public transport and in public places in China—and there is a great deal of statistics to support this. For instance, in 2017 the Guangzhou Survey of Female University and College Students shocked people with the revelation that almost 90 percent of female students said that women close to them, classmates or friends, had experienced sexual harassment.

Public transport—including the subway and the bus—was found to be a high incidence area for sexual harassment. In September 2014, the Canton Public Opinion Research Centre published the results of research carried out the previous August, which showed that 40 percent of women aged 19 to 30 saw sexual harassment as a common problem on the subway. That is more or less one in four people saying it is a common problem.

Members of the public in China also commonly hold misconceptions about sexual harassment in public spaces and tend to blame victims for their own harassment. For example, the performance piece that started the ‘I can be slutty, but you cannot harass me’ campaign originated after the Shanghai Metro Company posted on Weibo a picture of a female passenger wearing see-through clothing, with the comment ‘dressed like that it would be a wonder if you were not harassed’. Many public discussions centre around the relationship between women wearing ‘revealing’ clothing and being harassed. Yet in these conversations we do not hear a word about public policy to fight sexual harassment, and that is despite the fact that in many cases a few friendly policies could prevent instances of sexual harassment from occurring, and make women safer. In spite of this, the government rarely comes through in this area and so advocacy is very important. The numbers of people affected are huge, meaning that the issue serves as a kind of entry point into the feminist movement.

NGL: Feminist activists and rights lawyers were engaged in exposing sexual abuse in schools before the advent of #MeToo. For example, Ye Haiyan’s work drew attention to the case of schoolgirls in Hainan, and in particular to the loophole in the law which encourages perpetrators to cast underage victims as prostitutes. Can you describe the anti-sexual harassment movement in China in recent years? What is the relationship between this movement and #MeToo?

ZL: The anti-sexual harassment movement in China over the last few years laid much of the groundwork for the 2018 #MeToo movement. Previously, specific incidents were the driving force for discussion around sexual harassment. There was the ‘I can be slutty, but you can’t harass me’ campaign of 2012, and then the Human Billboard campaign of 2017, when Guangzhou city government’s refusal to allow activists to buy advertising space on the city’s subway culminated in the design of wearable ‘billboards’ which were eventually used by feminist groups across China. There was also the Wu Chunming incident of 2012 at Xiamen University, when Wu, formerly a professor at that institution was dismissed for sexually harassing students, but was later found to have been kept on by the university as a librarian. Between 2012 and 2017, there was a huge increase in the public awareness of sexual harassment, but the scope and

continuity of the discussion had not reached the point where it could be called an anti-sexual harassment movement. In the months running up to the explosion of #MeToo in June 2018, large scale mobilisations of students and young people began to take place, starting with anti-sexual harassment activities in schools and colleges. These mobilisations in turn affected the formulation of policy, raised awareness, and formed a broad community and public foundation for the #MeToo movement. It was precisely on this foundation that in June and July 2018 the large-scale movement spread into other spheres: the third sector, media, religion, and entertainment circles. What is more, the level of understanding and approval from the public increased and the public discussion became far more nuanced.

NGL: How have you, and other gender equality activists, worked with the #MeToo movement that came out of the United States? Has it changed your activism?

ZL: The movement in the United States motivated a lot of women, including normal women who are not feminist activists. Many celebrities became role models as they told their stories, including Luo Xixi, a former PhD student at Beijing's Beihang University who became a key figure in China's #MeToo movement after she revealed on Chinese social media that her former professor at the university tried to have sex with her. Luo said explicitly that she had been influenced by the movement in the States. As far as I am concerned, I found the unfolding of #MeToo in the United States profoundly encouraging. It gave me a feeling that women all over the world were standing together. That is what motivates my work as a feminist activist: oppression, resistance, and standing together as women.

NGL: Critics have said that it is inaccurate to claim that there is a #MeToo movement in China. Some have questioned the extent to which it can be called a 'movement' given the periodic censorship of the hashtag on Weibo. Others question the scope of #MeToo in China, arguing that it has spread predominantly among those studying abroad or with professional or personal contacts outside China. How do you think we should assess the #MeToo movement in China?

ZL: Much of the media attention for #MeToo originated with the deletion of the hashtag on Weibo, as many of the household names in Western media noted at that time. If you just look at the hashtag, then the number of people involved in the movement in China is not that significant. Evaluating it from that angle would lead to the misconception that the breadth has been very limited. However, the reach of a movement cannot simply be measured by the reproduction and spread of a hashtag. The movement in China was highly concentrated from the start, with a great many men being accused and women

coming forward each day in the month of July 2018. It was each individual case which caught the public's attention and gave rise to debate on social media, not the spread of the hashtag.

The social media that I follow—including the entertainment media, which have nothing to do with politics or social issues—discussed and supported the anti-sexual harassment movement. Even to the extent that people like my parents, living in rural villages whose channels of information are normally comparatively narrow, followed situations such as the sexual harassment case that involved Zhu Jun, a well-known Chinese TV host and actor. Even more important, the mood of the discussion did not tend towards defending people like Zhu. This was probably not because of the words 'me too', but because the level of awareness around sexual harassment in China has increased—pretty much anyone who was paying attention to current affairs knew about it. There was also a high degree of diversity among the activists involved: many of the women who stood up were not feminists, and the same could be said for many of the supporters, but they were willing to personally speak up on the issue.

As for women workers, several NGOs investigated the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace and undertook some actions, but the current movement still has limitations in terms of social class. The living arrangements of women workers and the limited available channels of communication may affect their chances of coming into contact with information about the movement. I myself do not have a full picture of whether or not women workers are broadly aware of #MeToo, nor how this varies across sectors and occupations, but a group was set up which published some articles on the topic. The public social media accounts which republished these articles—specifically *Jianjiao Buluo* (尖椒部落), *Tudou Gongshe* (土豆公社), and Xiao Meili's (肖美丽) public WeChat account were subsequently banned. So, the issue of women workers, and workers in general, is very particular: not only is it a question of class differentiation, neglect, and stigma, it is also one of government control.

NGL: A further criticism is that #MeToo in China has focussed largely on members of civil society and those in unofficial circles, staying away from officialdom or people with real power.

ZL: The most powerful people to be accused under the #MeToo movement were Zhu Jun and the abbot and former chairman of the Buddhist Association of China, Xuecheng. In their own circles they were very powerful, including a degree of political power. However, those in higher positions of power never had accusations made against them. That is not to say

that they were not guilty. I am convinced that these powerful people are even more likely to use their power to exploit women, but accusing high-level officials in China would be immeasurably politically sensitive. As well as being very frightened of those with political power, everyone is also aware that such accusations would not go anywhere, that they would be ‘harmonised’ immediately. Perhaps there have already been accusations that no one knows about, we will never know.

NGL: Feminist activism in China is often publicly dismissed as being under the influence of ‘hostile foreign forces’. How has this impacted your work?

ZL: Well, for instance I do not want the name of the NGO I work for to be made public. The Chinese government’s stigmatisation and marginalisation of NGOs has forced many of them to operate underground. We rely on constantly recreating our identity, using individual cases and current affairs as the pretext for our advocacy work—the organisation itself being unable to act publicly. This became particularly apparent after the Foreign NGO Management Law came into force and many organisations lost their sources of funding. Many did not want to be labelled as being under foreign influence and voluntarily cut off foreign funding sources, rendering their continued existence extremely difficult. Added to all of this, many members of the public, influenced by this discourse, are now suspicious and hostile towards NGOs.

NGL: Do such accusations impact your interest in joining forces with movements like #MeToo which originate in the West?

ZL: I think the starting point for most Chinese feminist activists is fighting sexual harassment, combining the real situation on the ground and the complexities of the situation in China to launch their own initiatives. Borrowing from the impact of movements in the West to spread the word about the cause, while also assuming responsibility for the risks that ensue is a part of that.

NGL: Article 48 of the Chinese Constitution states that ‘Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life’ and that ‘the state protects the rights and interests of women’. How have you used the Communist Party’s stated commitment to gender equality in your work?

ZL: Writing to delegates at the annual sessions of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is something we continue to do each year in the hope that through this we can slowly change the opinions of policymakers. Sometimes, owing to strategic

considerations, we also use the fundamental national policy of equality between men and women to publicise our cause. However, equality of the sexes is more like an oath than a substantive slogan. We decide based on the situation on the ground whether or not we want to use this type of language—for instance, sometimes we use the government’s own discourse to emphasise the legality of our actions. Appealing to the government to address feminist issues through legislation is something we have always done.

NGL: You talk about the importance of being ‘hard core’ (硬核) in the process of growing the feminist movement in China. Can you explain what you mean by this?

ZL: The identity of a ‘hard core’ feminist activist is probably adopted only by a very limited number of feminists in China. As far as I am concerned, it means forever raising problems and trying by any means to solve those problems, maintaining independence, and being reflexive and defiant. It means breaking ground on issues that others are not raising and following up on unresolved ones. At the same time, it also requires a willingness to maintain open discussions and mobilise people in an attempt to change the entire system and culture of gender in China.

NGL: You are currently producing *VaChina*, a Mandarin rewriting of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*, with Chinese students in London. Is this part of a strategy to build capacity for the feminist movement in China with Chinese students abroad?

ZL: The *Our Vaginas, Our Selves* show is primarily intended to bring together Chinese students interested in women’s issues through doing activities and performing together to raise consciousness and increase the conversations occurring around these problems. It could be considered a form of training for the community of new feminists and activists, and also a tool to raise awareness about the Chinese feminist movement and gender issues in the country more broadly. ■



Global Connections

Chinese Feminism, Tibet, and Xinjiang

Uyghur women in Kashgar. PC: @psit, Flickr.com

Séagh KEHOE

While the Chinese feminist movement is good at making international connections and is characterised by an explicit concern for intersectionality, it generally overlooks how experiences of gender and ethnicity in China overlap in complex and often brutal ways. In this essay, Séagh Kehoe looks into the plight of women and ethnic minorities in the borderland areas of Tibet and Xinjiang, and argues for increased attention and social mobilisation from abroad to address these issues.

Chinese feminists are good at making global connections. From showing solidarity with the Stanford Survivor (Phillips 2016), to Zheng Churan’s public letter to Trump on ‘straight man cancer’ (BBC 2016), to supporting the Irish movement for abortion rights (Li 2017), feminists in China have worked hard to reach out, identify shared experiences of oppression, and forge alliances with feminists around the world. More recently, China’s #MeToo campaign showed feminists locating their own struggle within an international discourse and joining the international fight against sexual harassment. While the last few years have seen increasing government crackdown on discussions of

feminism and civil society more broadly, a commitment to ‘walking with women from all over the world’ (和全世界的女人一起散步) remains (Feng 2017).

The activists behind China’s ‘New Feminist Movement’ (新女权运动) are largely young, urban-based, middle-class, and university-educated women, a number of whom have studied abroad. They are social media savvy and imaginative in bringing campaigns for gender equality to a broader audience. Alongside transnational exchange and a resistance to being anchored in state feminism’s conception of women’s rights, this movement is also characterised by an explicit concern for intersectionality.

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the ways in which various structures of power converge to produce systems of interlocking oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1989). By focussing on the experiences of Black women, Crenshaw argued that a single-axis analysis of either feminist theory or anti-racist politics tends to distort and even erase the complexity of their experiences. In contrast, taking an intersectional approach allows us to think through the ways in which power works across different institutions and social categories, such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, nationality, ability/disability, faith (or lack thereof), and so on.

In China, gender and class constitute one example of how feminists have engaged with intersectional analysis. Organising around class and developing critiques of exploitation under global capitalism is officially frowned upon in post-socialist China, but that has not prevented the online platform Pepper Tribe (尖椒部落) from doing so. The website bears the slogan ‘we don’t sell pepper, but we make female workers scream louder for their rights’ and features stories from female workers across China where they describe their life in the city, work, and experiences of sexual harassment (Tang and Huang 2018). Before being ‘harmonised’ in July 2018 for ‘violating relevant regulations’, it had over 20,000 followers on Weibo, and to this day it continues to maintain an active

account on WeChat. Feminists in different parts of the country have also held workshops with female migrant workers to discuss various issues about their work experiences, advising them on how to access social services and build support networks. A Beijing-based feminist quartet named Jiu Ye has even been travelling the country performing songs written hand-in-hand with female migrant labourers (Yin 2017). All these examples demonstrate a shift away from thinking about power and oppression in single-issue terms.

Intersectionality has been more explicitly applied elsewhere. Feminist Voices (女权之声), one of the most influential online feminist platforms in China, was particularly vocal in problematising notions of universal experiences of womanhood. They often posted essays on the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect, particularly for queer women, and what this means for marriage and having children, as well as critiques of family life more broadly. Gender was also sometimes discussed in terms of class, disability, age, and *hukou* status. Sadly, Feminist Voices was deleted from both Weibo and WeChat around International Women’s Day in 2018 for violating ‘temporary regulations on the development and management of accounts offering public information service on instant messaging programs’ (Feng 2018).

Across these various discussions, attention to the convergence of different forms of power and oppression, and the importance of global connections are clearly evident in Chinese feminist practice. However, considerably less visible has been the issue of how gender and ethnicity intersect.

Gender and Ethnicity in Tibet and Xinjiang

China has 56 officially recognised *minzu* (民族), loosely translated as ‘nationalities’ or ‘ethnic groups’. The Han, making up more than 90 percent of the overall population, dominate

politically and culturally. They are regularly depicted as the ‘big brother’, selflessly ‘bringing modernity’ to ‘ethnic minorities’ (少数民族) such as the Tibetans and Uyghurs. Han superiority is a long-standing narrative reproduced across official propaganda, popular media, and even in educational materials, with the aim of naturalising and legitimising Han hegemony across the country. Indeed, the very language of *minzu* itself plays into this process of flattening disputes about Tibet and Xinjiang’s place within China’s national and historical imagination into a question of ethnicity (Lokyitsang, 2012).

Though differing in many important ways, Tibet and Xinjiang are broadly similar in their colonial and contested status within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), strong religious and cultural practices, and strategic value as borderland regions. All of these factors mark them out as points of particular sensitivity for the Chinese authorities. Since the early 2000s, the Party-state has attempted to resolve ongoing issues of ethnic unrest and marginalisation across the regions through a whole range of economic development policies. While this shift has created opportunities for some, it has also led to more inward migration, greater competition for employment, economic disparity, and environmental degradation, all of which have fuelled further ethnic discontent, alienation, and resentment. Particularly in the case of Xinjiang, these new policies coincided with the state’s adoption of the discourse of ‘Global War of Terror’ and the recasting of Uyghurs as a ‘terrorist threat’ in 2001 (Roberts 2017). Since the Tibet protests in the spring of 2008 and the Urumqi riots of the summer of 2009, and coupled with an ‘ideological turn’ within the Chinese Communist Party emphasising the consolidation of overall political security (Smith Finley 2018), both regions have experienced even greater cultural and religious repression, pressure to assimilate, heightened state security, and widespread and arbitrary detention of people from all walks of life.

As in many Western countries, the Internet in China has also had a decisive role to play in fuelling a politics of fear and facilitating the rise of Islamophobia. While Han supremacism, nationalism, and racism are certainly not new across online spaces in China (Leibold 2010), these discourses have become increasingly informed by the global circulation of extremist rhetoric. Similar to the ideologies and vocabulary emanating from right-wing populism in Europe and North America, discourses of ‘Islamisation’ have gained momentum across Chinese social media as a critique of what they perceive to be the excessive ‘political correctness’ of Western liberals. Echoing anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and White nationalist discourses in the West, Muslims across China have become identified as an existential threat to the Chinese nation (Zhang 2017). Feminism and LGBTQ+ rights are also targeted as part of these discourses, further silencing dissent and consolidating the legitimacy of the Party-state.

Under these current conditions, most criticism of the various forms of discrimination against ‘ethnic minorities’ across China face in their everyday lives is generally swiftly silenced. Even in those rare moments when critical Tibetan and Uyghur voices are not immediately erased by censors or attacked by extremists, they are sure to be overwhelmed by calls to maintain ‘ethnic harmony’ and ‘ethnic unity’, obsessive deflections referring to Western hypocrisy and conspiracies to divide China, and denials that any problem exists at all.

For Tibetan and Uyghur women, living under a state that is both Han-centric and patriarchal entails a double burden, and their bodies have often become an important locus in the state’s push for social regulation and control. One example of this includes the launch of ‘Project Beauty’ (靓丽工程), a five-year campaign encouraging Uyghur women to remove their veils in an effort to look ‘modern’. Since then, we have seen various iterations of this campaign punishing Uyghur women for looking ‘too Islamic’. On World Hijab Day in

February 2015, a full ban on the veil in public places was enforced across Urumqi. Similar draconian regulations were later rolled out for men with ‘abnormally’ long beards (Grose and Leibold 2015).

Experiences of gender and ethnicity overlap in complex and often brutal ways, and it is important to think about the structures of power that produce this, as well as the kind of work that is necessary to dismantle them. Indeed, gender injustice is always part and parcel of broader forms of injustice. Since 2009 there have been over 150 cases of self-immolation in Tibet. This has taken an enormous toll on Tibetan society, marked through, as Tashi Rabgey recently described, a collective ‘silent mourning’ (SupChina 2019). Much of this happened under the intense securitisation and policing strategies of Chen Quanguo, the Party Secretary in the Tibetan Autonomous Region between 2011 and 2016. In August 2016, Chen took up the same role for Xinjiang and since his arrival the situation across the region has deteriorated significantly (Smith Finley 2018). The mass internment of approximately one and a half million Uyghurs in ‘reeducation’ camps as part of the Party-state’s efforts in ‘deextremification’ has left few lives untouched. Camp survivor Mihrigul Tursun has described her own experiences of internment, during which time one of her young triplets died under mysterious circumstances while the other two developed health problems (Cockburn 2018). She has detailed how women were forced to take pills that made them faint, and to drink a white liquid that caused bleeding in some women and loss of menstruation in others. Her account mirrors those of Gulbahar Jelil, another Uyghur woman who has described her experiences of being forced to share a 14-square-meter space with 30 other women and restricted to a starvation diet of 600 calories a day (Byler 2018). Forced marriages between Uyghur women and Han men, state intrusion into private homes through surveillance by civilian Han ‘relatives’, disappearances of entire families, separation of children from parents, and reports of torture

and death within the camps all reflect the ongoing horror and trauma of everyday state violence in Xinjiang today (Beydoun 2018).

Disconnection in the Chinese Feminist Movement?

In my conversations with Han feminist activist friends over the years, I have learned that the ways in which gender and ethnicity intersect are rarely, if ever, discussed as a feminist issue within their own circles.

Given the heavy censorship in media coverage about life in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the steady stream of propaganda celebrating state subsidies and preferential policies enabling ethnic minorities to ‘reach modernity’, it is perhaps not surprising that Tibet and Xinjiang have become a blind spot in intersectional practices among Han feminists. Indeed, Chinese state media regularly celebrates the state’s ‘liberation’ of Tibetan and Uyghur women. Last year, for example, the *Global Times* reported that, under the careful guidance of the state, Uyghur women had gained ‘respect and self-recognition’, while Uyghur men had learned how to ‘respect women and admire their contributions to the family’ (Li 2019). In Tibet, stories of women achieving ‘empowerment’ through the state’s various social, economic and ecological policies are another regular feature in state media (Global Times 2019b). These examples demonstrate how the Chinese state regularly tries to repackage its ongoing violence against both Tibetan and Uyghur societies as a project of social progress. As such, the silence within Han Chinese feminist groups surrounding the specific issues faced by Tibetan and Uyghur women, as well as Tibet and Xinjiang more broadly, in many ways reflects the wider culture of state propaganda, censorship and Han normativity that pervades Chinese officialdom, education, and media.

There are, however, some Han feminists who are thinking about the place (or lack thereof) of *minzu* politics within China's feminist movement. Should Tibetan and Uyghur feminists and women's rights activists be incorporated under the banner of 'Chinese feminism'? Who gets to decide that? I have also heard a few Han feminists ask how such a cross-cultural feminist solidarity across the PRC could be crafted without reinforcing the hegemony of Han 'Chineseness'.

While these are important questions that demand conversation across different *minzu* groups, the gravity of the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang also requires urgent action. But building feminist solidarity and coalitions is far from simple. Amidst the ever-intensifying crackdowns across the country in the name of stability, security, and unity, there is a level of fear that can be difficult to fully comprehend for those of us who are not Chinese citizens. Many Han feminists are all too aware of the risks involved in speaking out against state violence. Since 2015, they themselves have faced surveillance, intimidation, and even detention for simply speaking out against sexual harassment on public transport, and know very well what criticising the Party-state's actions in Tibet and Xinjiang invariably lead to.

The (Im)possibility of Resistance?

While many might hope that something akin to the #MeTooUyghur movement on Twitter and Facebook would also grace WeChat and Weibo timelines, such a thing is simply impossible to imagine right now. Although there are some who are speaking up—and whose messages are promptly 'harmonised' by censors—to conceive of a broader movement, there would need to be so much groundwork done to reverse the decades of endless scaremongering, distortion, and wilful erasure of Tibetan and Uyghur dissent. There would

need to be so much done to change the terms of public debate about 'ethnic relations' in China, and to challenge the dehumanising discourses that have enabled the pervasive violence against Tibetans and Uyghurs. But currently, the greatest obstacle to any possibility in this sense is that any form of public opposition to what is happening in either Tibet or Xinjiang has become extremely dangerous for anyone in China.

The impossibility of speaking out in China makes it all the more important for those of us outside of China to do so. The support of



A Tibetan farmer.
PC: @zanzo, Flickr.com

Chinese citizens abroad is crucial. Despite being afraid and knowing the risks, some of them are already speaking out on social media. Others are educating themselves by going to public talks on what is happening in Xinjiang, asking what they can do to help, and challenging the views of their own friends and family members. Moreover, recently, the Independent Federation of Chinese Students

and Scholars, a US-based network founded in response to Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, condemned the actions of Chinese students who harassed, abused, and threatened Uyghur and Tibetan students at Duke, University of Toronto, University College Dublin, University of Strasbourg, and elsewhere, criticising all efforts to ‘suppress the truth about the ongoing genocidal crimes’ (RFA 2019).

Non-Chinese citizens can also do a lot. We should remember how influential the international response to the detention of the Feminist Five was in determining their eventual release. Indeed, we have already seen the impact of global pressure in the case of Xinjiang. The diffusion of media reports and satellite images of the ‘reeducation’ camps have forced the Party-state to shift from a position of totally denying the very existence of the camps to trying to justify them. To continue the fight, we must contact our government officials, our embassies and consulates in China, and our local Chinese embassies to firmly express our opposition and call for an immediate halt to the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs. We must contact the long list of companies who continue to do business in Xinjiang and ask them why they do so, knowing full well the widespread injustice and suffering across the region (China File 2018). We must join the #MeTooUyghur campaign, donate to the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), organise public talks, and start campaigns at our schools and universities to show solidarity with Uyghurs and to increase public awareness about what is happening in Xinjiang today (see UHRP for more).

These are all small but vital steps we can take to keep the pressure on and stop the violence against Tibetans and Uyghurs, but everyone must also challenge Islamophobia, racism, state authoritarianism, the securitisation of borders, the rise of private security firms, and the prison industrial complex within our own communities. We must insist, as Angela Davis (2011) has long argued, on seeing the intersections and interconnectedness of ‘local’ practices of injustice and what is happening across Xinjiang and Tibet. Without this, there

will be no getting to the root of what is in many ways a global problem. Many recognise the intensification of Chinese state patriarchy as part of a growing nationalist strongman politics around the world, but we must also recognise how the same politics, alongside transnational online right-wing extremism and carceral capitalism (see Roche’s op-ed in this issue), are fuelling state terror across China. We must also see the struggle for liberation in Xinjiang and Tibet as part of the struggle for liberation everywhere. ■



Separated Again by a High Wall

Zheng Churan and Wei Zhili. PC: Hong Kong Free Press

ZHENG Churan

On 20 March 2019, Wei Zhili, a labour activist and editor of the pro-labour social media group ‘New Generation’ (新生代), was arrested at his home in Guangzhou. Two of his coworkers, Yang Zhengjun and Ke Chengbing, have also gone missing. In the preceding months, Wei—or, as friends call him, ‘Xiaowei’—had been assisting workers with pneumoconiosis with legal claims. In a desperate attempt to claim compensation, these workers organised a protest in Shenzhen in November 2018 and were suppressed by police. Wei is among the latest activists who have been swept up in the ever-widening net of repression in the aftermath of the Jasic labour struggle. The author of this piece, Zheng Churan, more

widely known as ‘Datu’ (大兔), is Wei’s wife and a long-term feminist activist. In 2015, she herself was arrested along with four other activists, collectively known as the ‘Feminist Five’ for attempting to organise a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. In this beautifully written and moving piece, penned days after Wei’s arrest, Datu recounts how Xiaowei became a labour activist and their love story. In her words: ‘Perhaps this will be censored or deleted. But I will make my utmost effort to let the world know Wei Zhili’s story, to not let the world forget him. This is Datu and Xiaowei’s love story.’

Wei Zhili pursued me for a very long time. But after he finally succeeded, one time he happened to get very angry with me.

On one summer night—I was still a young punk then—we were strolling in an industrial park, holding hands and smoking. Without much thought, I finished the cigarette and threw it onto the ground.

The smile immediately disappeared on his face. He was shocked, and his eyes widened: ‘How could you possibly do this? The sanitation workers are exhausted every day.’

Although he didn’t say it very loudly, I could tell he was extremely annoyed at me. Before I got a chance to react, he had already bent over to pick up the cigarette butt soaked in sewage, crossed the street and threw it into the garbage bin.

I was so ashamed at that moment that I wanted to chop my hand off, especially because he once called me a ‘Goddess’ (女神). Since then, I’ve never littered anytime or anywhere and I have stopped many others from littering as well.

That was 2013. We have been together for six years.

A Very Special Love Story

This is a very special love story. It involves the growing together of a very critical feminist and a gentle labour activist who never quarrelled with anyone. It also involves two criminal detentions, many painful farewells, nonsensical humour, and the great friendship and wisdom of many activists.

It was 2013 when I first met Zhili. At that time, he was working for the Hand-in-Hand Workers Centre (手牵手工友活动中心) in Shenzhen. He was wearing a discoloured T-shirt with a hole in it, and a pair of slippers. He had long curly hair casually pulled back by a headband sitting on top of his head. Wei is 5 feet 11 inches tall and has long limbs. His face resembles a dragon because he has a high forehead and big eyes.

He was not really slovenly dressed, but I felt it was a waste that he dressed like that given how good-looking he was.

Six years later, because he assisted workers affected by pneumoconiosis in claiming compensation, he was detained by the Shenzhen police. When workers talked about him on their social media, they would always say: ‘His clothes were quite shabby. We wanted to send him money to buy new clothes whenever we saw him.’

In fact, Zhili’s family is not that poor: they can afford to buy decent clothes. His mother has been doing administrative work at a port for 30 years. His father has had a bumpy career, working as a worker, a taxi driver, and a nurse at a psychiatric hospital. Obviously the family is not wealthy, but Zhili doesn’t really fancy a rich lifestyle. He has always lived a frugal life and hardly ever spends money on new things.

However, his parents always tried their best to provide him with quality education and proper guidance. For instance, they were never stingy when it came to buying him books, asking him to explore life’s meaning in literature. Therefore, when other kids were happily purchasing tokens for game machines, he was reading masterpieces such as Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* and Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. He came across *Das Kapital* by accident during middle school and found it very interesting, but the book was too expensive, so his mother bought him a simplified version. After he finished reading it, he went and found the full version—which was as thick as a brick—in the school library and read it from cover to cover. He read whatever he could get his hands on. And the books taught him about exploitation, social structure, freedom, democracy, and how to care about the underclass.

Zhili’s grandfather was a worker at a port before 1949. He later became a ship loader and was awarded the title of ‘model worker’ (劳动模范) by the government. The workload at the port was heavy, but the workers were like brothers and helped each other out.



Zheng Churan.
PC: Sinosphere

Zhili grew up at the port, and saw elderly workers become ill because of the physically-demanding work. When they had a herniated disc, it would hurt them so much that they just lay there expressionless. But at the same time, Zhili also saw how they were genuine to each other. At work, they were like a family supporting each other through the heavy workload, helping move goods, and sharing food. Although Zhili had not done any demanding work himself, the situation of workers was deeply rooted in his heart.

Since I was young, I have not been through many hardships as my family was relatively affluent. Before I knew Zhili, I hardly came across the problems of the workers. However, he would speak to me every day about the living conditions of the different workers we came across, and he made me think about why sanitation and construction workers had to work so hard, but were still very poor.

They are not lazy or stupid, it is that society has structural problems that allow the rich to become richer while the poor become poorer.

In today's China, young workers perhaps have more opportunities to make a living, but the older ones can only work in the dirtiest and most tiring jobs. Although we would praise sanitation workers as the 'beauticians' of the city, they live a precarious existence in informal villages within the city. If they strain a muscle in their back, they don't have any medical insurance and can only purchase some ointment to help with the pain. The next day, they still get up at 4am to go out and sweep the streets.

Zhili forced me to think about all these issues that I rarely considered. If he wasn't my boyfriend, I probably would have kicked him in the face to make him stop talking. But he was so persistent! Every day, he would talk to me about three cases, and with my patience growing like



Wei Zhili during an activity at the Hand-in-Hand Workers Centre.

a piece of chewing gum that has been stretched two meters in length, I eventually became a feminist who also focussed on workers' rights. I suppose he used this kind of persistence to educate other workers.

A Pure-hearted Boy

Just as many people come and ask me how I became a feminist, I would also ask Zhili how he became interested in worker rights. His story is very simple and, you could say, quite logical.

That year, he was 20.

People like Zhili who sympathise with the vulnerable have a habit of donating blood regularly. One day, while standing in line at the

school's blood donation station, he happened to skim through a booklet left on the bulletin board.

The booklet was aimed at promoting occupational health and safety, and that specific issue happened to be about the tragic lives of workers affected by pneumoconiosis.

The soil of Shenzhen, Guangdong, is mainly composed by lightly weathered granite with a hard texture. Once it is drilled into, the granite beneath the ground's surface breaks down into a fine dust that is deposited in the lungs of workers digging in caves. Inhaling a large amount of dust, workers' lungs thus become black, and they begin experiencing extreme chest pain each time they breathe. Pneumoconiosis is a terminal illness. Victims can only wait for their death, coughing up black phlegm and becoming weaker by the day as they look after their children and elderly parents at home.

'It frightened me, seeing those lungs looking like blackened honeycombs. The photo of an old man holding a crying child in his arms made me feel like I had pneumoconiosis myself, and for a few seconds I couldn't even breathe.' As Zhili recalled that moment, he clutched his chest with his hand.

That time he saw the booklet about workers with pneumoconiosis was like a kick in his guts. He started going out more instead of staying in the library all day. He enrolled in the journalism major at Guangzhou University for four years, but skipped countless classes. His college roommate recalled: 'Everyone was skipping classes to play video games in the dorm at the time, but Zhili would always skip class to go to Sun Yat-sen University for lectures, which was bizarre to us.'

At Sun Yat-sen, he made friends with some teachers and students in the Sociology Department. During his senior year, he joined the research team of the well-known sociologist Pun Ngai to conduct research on the living conditions of workers who suffered from pneumoconiosis in several provinces. Pun Ngai is his idol. The fact that young scholars internalised a deep concern for the underclass

while doing research inside factories aligned with Wei's eagerness to change the world around him. I don't know what he witnessed during those field trips, but I do know that he made his career decision of assisting workers after he returned. He has never looked back.

We've been together for six years. I am confident to say that I know him well. At least well enough to tell you that he would sacrifice anything to help others fight for their rights.

He is a soft person but he is very persistent and sometimes can be even a little bit stubborn and single minded. He can play a football video game for five years just because he loves it; he can read through *Crime and Punishment* from cover to cover over ten times because it's one of his favourites books. He loves playing street basketball and he told me back in middle school that he would go to the court between classes just to practice those graceful moves. He would practice in front of the mirror as well, and even move his arms in the air to practice dribbling without the ball. His best friend told me that Zhili always bragged about how he'd wear out a pair of shoes every month because of the effort he put into practicing basketball.

It's the same stubborn guy who once he had decided that helping out vulnerable workers fight for their rights was the meaning of his life never backed down. I am the same. I am also an activist myself and I've never experienced any form of gender discrimination, but I will always fight for equality and justice. I just cannot stand seeing others being treated unfairly.

People sometimes use the term 'knight-errants' (一身侠气) to describe us. It's not an exaggeration at all. Both of us grew up in middle class families in the 1990s with a culture of 'heroes and warriors' (仙侠文化). Since our youth, we were influenced by education and mainstream media: 'At the sight of injustice, draw a sword and render help.' In other words, we had to help others who are treated unfairly, and speak up for them or else we wouldn't be able to become our ideal selves.

The way we think about the meaning of life is very different from many of our peers. I think the meaning of life is not limited to

the happiness of oneself, or the well-being of one's family. It is more about using one's limited ability and power to change the world, especially to address injustice and inequality and to ensure that each person lives free from oppression.

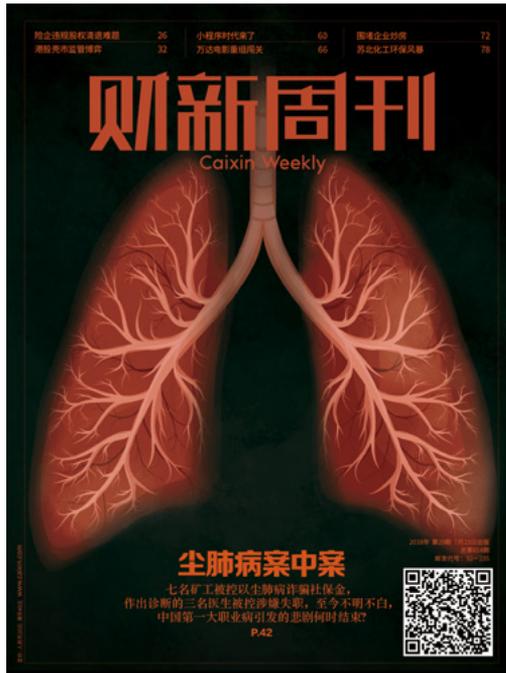
In fact, with my limited power, I have been able to change the fate of some individuals. In 2012, we used performance art to call on the Supreme Court to waive the death penalty of a domestic violence survivor. We wrapped our bodies with white gauze as a metaphor for women who had suffered domestic violence and abuse, and went to the entrance of eight city courts to silently protest. The story was picked up and widely reported by the media and eventually the Supreme Court appealed the decision.

Zhili and I have always been encouraging each other along the way. The little changes and differences we were able to make each day helped to numb the fear of the consequences related to our work. Our love for each other goes beyond passionate sex, casual activities, and everyday life. This little bit of social responsibility has ensured that our hands have remained tightly held.

Detained for Assisting Workers with Pneumoconiosis

Zhili joined the Hand-in-Hand Workers Centre right after his graduation. After the Centre was forced to shut down, he started doing something related to his college major: he became an editor for *New Generation*, a social media platform that provides information for workers.

His writing style is unique. He likes using screenshots from Hong Kong movies when describing workers' lives. They often use Marxism as a framework to analyse labour relations, so their pen names are all preceded by the surname 'Ma' (马, the first character



Cover of the weekly magazine *Caixin* about the plight of workers with pneumoconiosis.

in Marx's name in Chinese, 马克思). His favourite pen name is 'Ma Xiaoling' (马小玲), which actually comes from the name of the protagonist of a Hong Kong TV drama 'My Date with a Vampire'. He isn't a Marxist who shouts slogans and waves flags, as many would imagine Marxists to be. Rather, he is an interesting advocate who writes articles in a way that workers love to read.

I haven't read many of their articles but I'm a fan of his 'Women's Weekly' (妇女周报) column, in which they often discuss issues regarding female workers: menstrual leave, sexual harassment in the workplace, maternity leave, domestic violence, familial burdens, etc. I know that workers like to read his articles and discuss them with him.

Sometimes he went out and met up workers who had become his friends. Quite often, some older ladies told him that he looked very skinny, and loved giving him fruit and snacks. They asked him to bring the food back and share it with his family. Once, when I was suffering from serious diarrhoea, he went out to see an older lady who was working at a store. The lady gave him medicine, carefully explaining to him how I should be taking it.

If he didn't treat others with such care, I'm sure he wouldn't have so many friends concerned about his daily life and his family's health.

In November 2018, some workers from Hunan affected by pneumoconiosis went to Shenzhen to defend their rights. This issue always touches the deepest part of his heart. He knew clearly that it would be risky to help them considering that the police had treated them with violence and many labour activists were being detained one by one, but he couldn't merely stand by watching their struggle without doing anything.

He told me: 'I have to help them no matter what.'

Almost everyone from that village in Hunan had come to Shenzhen to work as a driller. The labour protection equipment was terrible. Some workers washed their masks every day after work and wore the same mask to work underground the next day. That's how their lungs were destroyed by the dust. At first, they were unaware of this and the hospitals treated them as tuberculosis patients. Later, most of the workers were diagnosed with this 'unknown' disease.

They built skyscrapers for Shenzhen but lost their health. They asked for compensation, but some doctors refused to provide them with the proof of their diagnosis and their employers refused to verify their employment relationship. So they kept coughing up black phlegm while standing in the concrete jungle they built, asking for compensation.

Zhili seldom cries. But he cried when he talked about the life of a worker's family. The worker passed away because of pneumoconiosis. In the

time leading up to his death, he was in so much pain that he stopped breathing. His older and younger brothers also passed away because of the same disease. Now only his mother is left, and she is in her eighties with her youngest son who also has pneumoconiosis. His health is getting worse by the day. The old mother looks at him helplessly: lung cleansing only works for some people and the only surviving brother cannot ease his pain in this way.

He didn't cry when he was making arrangements for his grandpa's memorial service; he didn't cry when I was detained because of the anti-sexual harassment protest; he didn't cry when he broke his arm during a basketball game. That was the only time that he cried.

He knows of course that merely crying and sympathising is useless, so he constantly publishes and updates news on workers' rights protection on *New Generation*. He posted the same articles over and over again when they were deleted by the authorities, treating every word as if it were extracted from the blood of the workers.

In January this year, his colleague Yang Zhengjun (also known as 'Baozi') was detained by the police for helping workers with pneumoconiosis. I was very worried. There were a few times when I wanted to open my mouth to tell Zhili to give up and stop publishing articles, but in the end I couldn't say those words because the workers were in so much misery. Reports from the scene of the workers' protest show that not only were workers brutalised by the police, but their families and even pregnant women were pushed and shoved. The old, weak, sick, and pregnant: what a desolate scene!

How could I tell my husband to stop helping them? But I was afraid. I was afraid that he would also be detained for doing things that the government does not like. Life in the detention centre is hard and I did not want my loved one to experience the difficulties that I have been through.

Actually, he was afraid too. I think no one can avoid the fear of leaving family behind, losing freedom, and being imprisoned. We turned to words that we had always used to encourage one another: 'My feet are trembling with fear, but how can I not do it?'

In the early hours of 20 March, Zhili was taken away from his home in Guangzhou by the police. After he disappeared for five days, neither his parents nor I had any news about him, nor had we received any official notification about his detention. I visited three public security bureaus and two local police stations, crying the entire time. I petitioned. I called 12389, which is the police reporting line; I called 110, which is the general police line, to report his disappearance; I called 12345, which is the public administration service line, to complain. My Weibo post was forwarded more than 6,000 times. I comforted his and my own parents. I coughed up blood. I could not fall asleep. I was hungry but had no appetite, while also experiencing diarrhoea. I would wake up after only ten minutes of sleep and check my phone to see if there was any news about him. When your beloved one has disappeared and the people in power refuse to tell you where he is, how is it any different from tearing out a love story from its middle?

Perhaps, the attention of the people online and my complaints worked. On 26 March, as I was on my way to ask every detention centre in Shenzhen about my husband, the police called me to inform that Zhili was detained by the Shenzhen Pingshan Public Security Office at the No. 2 Detention Centre for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'.

The police said that they had sent the notice of detention, but had no idea why I did not receive it.

I have never been this happy for receiving a detention notice call. At least I know that he has been formally arrested, not simply disappeared and abused. I immediately hired a lawyer who applied for an appointment. The police told the lawyer that this is a sensitive case so the meeting could only take place 48 hours after the appointment.

I felt restless again since I knew that Yang Zhengjun was never allowed to meet with his lawyer. Fortunately, on 28 March the lawyer told me: ‘We are lucky. I almost couldn’t see Wei Zhili, but in the end we could meet.’

It turns out that the bureau in charge of the case has various ways to prevent lawyers from meeting their clients, such as setting an arraignment at the time of the meeting or simply not allowing the client to schedule an appointment, so our lawyer smiled. He said that Zhili had shaved off his curly hair and changed his clothes to the grey detention centre uniform, but he is in good condition. He confirmed that the three editors of *New Generation*—Yang Zhengjun, Wei Zhili, and Ke Chengbing—are all being detained in the same detention centre for helping the pneumoconiosis workers.

Zhili told the lawyer that he was not tortured to make forced confession, but the police kept scolding him, saying that he was not filial to his parents and was manipulated by workers. I remembered that on the day Zhili was taken away, the police said to Wei’s mother: ‘Your son graduated from a good university, but did not buy a house, does not have children, does not have a proper job. We need to take him away to reeducate him.’

‘We should help the weak. In the face of injustice, we should stand up and resist.’ We were educated with these words when we were children. This sort of behaviour has always been praised by the mainstream society. However, when we grew up and began help others, they became afraid. They undermine us by saying that we are being manipulated, and they think that working in an NGO is not a real job.

Some of the workers affected by pneumoconiosis that they had been helping cried when they learned about the arrests. They immediately tried to go to Shenzhen to demand an explanation, but they were intercepted by the police and could not reach their destination.

The three arrested men may be viewed as not having a proper job in the eyes of mainstream society, but they are the most kind-hearted

people in the eyes of workers. In a society where it is a ‘crime’ not to buy a house or have children, it is ironic that helping others can lead to accusations of picking quarrels and provoking trouble.

They laugh at our kindness and naiveté. They laugh at the fact that we cannot tolerate seeing others suffer. They laugh because we hope to solve a problem, but in the end we ourselves have become a problem in need of a solution. ■

The original Chinese version of this text can be found at [this link](#).



The Plight of Sex Workers in China

From Criminalisation and Abuse to Activism

Prostitute in Shanghai.
PC: @Leihan, Flickr.com

Tiantian ZHENG

To this day, the Chinese Party-state perceives sex work as a violation of the human rights of women. Therefore, the Chinese authorities believe that sex workers need to be rescued and reeducated, and regularly subject them to periodic crackdowns and long spells of detention in ‘rehabilitation education centres’. In this essay, Tiantian Zheng highlights how policies of this kind have not only fuelled violence, exploitation, abuse, and health risks among Chinese sex workers, but have also had terrible consequences for public health in China.

Maoist China boasted of its eradication of sex work through state policies such as the stringent household registration system, isolation of the peasants in the countryside, and the near prohibition of rural-to-urban migration. However, in the post-Mao era, the market economy and pro-consumption policy relaxed these restrictions, producing an explosion of the entertainment industry in major cities. In the 1980s and 1990s, the dire poverty and desperation of people in the rural areas, accompanied by increasing social inequality, led peasants to break the floodgates and stream into the cities, resulting in an influx of an estimated six million sex workers. The resurgence of sex work took place in establishments such as nightclubs, saunas,

hotels, hair salons, disco and other dance halls, parks, video rooms, and karaoke bars. On average, in the early 2000s, sex workers could earn more than 6,000 yuan a month, three times the monthly income of a person without special labour expertise, education, or skills (Jie 2014).

Adopting a feminist standpoint, the communist state perceives sex work as a violation of the human rights of women, an exploitation of their body, and a degradation of their status. In the official view, sex work reduces women to the status of sexual objects, humiliated playthings, and exchangeable commodities, rather than respectable human beings. From such a perspective, women's social and political positions cannot be advanced unless sex work is outlawed. Since the ideology contends that no woman would voluntarily or willingly choose sex work in violation of her own legal rights, it is considered a forced occupation. Therefore, it is believed that sex workers need to be reeducated, rescued, and rehabilitated.

Rooted in this set of ideas, in the reform era the Chinese government continued the Maoist abolitionist policy to prohibit all aspects of sex work, including solicitation, sale, and purchase. To do so, it adopted a wide array of laws and regulations, including the first Criminal Law of 1979, the Regulations on Strictly Prohibiting Sale and Purchase of Sex of 1986, the Regulations on Eradicating Prostitution and Detaining Sex Workers for Labour Reeducation of 1987, the Criminal Law of 1984, the Decision on Strictly Forbidding the Selling and Buying of Sex of 1991, the Decision on the Severe Punishment of Criminals Who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap Women and Children of 1991, the Law on Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women (Women's Law) of 1992, the Revised Criminal Law of 1997, and the Entertainment Regulations of 1999. These legal documents stipulate that it is forbidden to sell or purchase sex and that it is illegal to introduce people into sex work, offer venues for sex work, organise or force people into sex

work. People who transgress risk five to ten years of imprisonment, or the death penalty in severe situations.

Since 1989, local public security bureaus have been enforcing these laws and regulations through comprehensive, periodic 'strike hard' (严打) campaigns. These police raids target sex work as a 'social evil' (社会邪恶的东西) or 'ugly social phenomenon' (丑恶的社会现象) that is at odds with the 'socialist spiritual civilisation' (社会主义精神文明). Police raids usually last about three months at a time and often occur more than once a year. Adopting techniques perfected during the communist revolution, raids are often unexpected, sudden, and unannounced—coming as a shock to the sex workers. Aside from these attacks, policemen also masquerade as plain-clothed customers, awaiting evidence to arrest sex workers.

Elaine Jeffreys has argued that such crackdowns have successfully redressed the 'deteriorating' social order and that fines and detentions of sex workers in the wake of these raids are 'soft' and 'lenient', resulting in an 'amicable' relationship between local police and veteran sex workers (Jeffreys 2004, 151 and 157). As I will explain in this essay, my previous ethnographic fieldwork and recent research on this topic indicate that the opposite is the case. Police raids have not only fuelled violence, exploitation, abuse, and health risks among sex workers, but have also exacerbated public health and facilitated the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse

Due to police raids and the criminalisation of sex work, sex workers live in constant fear of arrest and are unable to pursue police protection in case of violence. These women are at the mercy of both policemen and male customers who feel that they can inflict violence and abuse on them with impunity. Since it is the public security apparatus that

wields the ultimate power to fine, arrest, and detain sex workers without any due process, the police frequently abuse their arbitrary power, resulting in sex workers' mistrust of, and antagonistic relationships with, authority figures.

Legally and socially vulnerable, sex workers use fake names, fake IDs, fake family backgrounds, and fake identities in the cities where they work, making them easy victims of rape, violence, robbery, blackmail, as well as murder. In one shocking case in 2005, two male customers in Shenzhen not only beat and raped two sex workers, but also burned their breasts and vaginas with cigarette lighters. They dipped needles into ink and tattooed the words 'No 1. Sex Worker' and 'Slut' on the women's foreheads, breasts, and backs (Xu 2012). From 2004 to 2006, the bodies of over 60 sex workers were discovered in Beijing alone, their identities unknown until family members reported them missing (Li 2007). Since 2007, every week there have been at least one to two incidents of rape and murder of sex workers (Xu 2012). In the past decade, it was reported that 40 percent of the unresolved murder cases in Beijing involved sex workers as victims (Li 2007).

Police raids and criminalisation subject sex workers not only to violence from male customers, but also to police abuse. In 2010, during a police raid in Dongyuan, Guangzhou, several sex workers were paraded barefoot on the street and photographed in order to subject them to public humiliation (Xie 2010). Elsewhere, sex workers reported being cruelly beaten by the police and forced to take nude pictures with male customers (Jie 2014; Gray 2013). In a city in South China, a journalist witnessed policemen charging at sex workers on a street with iron batons, beating them up, and swearing obscene words at them (Xu 2012). Over the ensuing nights during the crackdown, the streets were periodically filled with the piercing screams of sex workers, because of the mistreatment inflicted by the police. Some policemen sprayed black ink or paint onto the hair and faces of the women, before driving

off whistling songs. One sex worker told the reporter that her roommate, fleeing to avoid being beaten by a policeman, was hit by a car and died on the spot. The policeman bore no responsibility for this incident (Xu 2012).

Because the police have the arbitrary power to arrest, fine, and detain them, sex workers are also compelled to comply with sexual exploitation at the hand of policemen. As they seek immunity from arrests and fines, some sex workers are kept by police officials as their personal harem to spy on others. My previous research showed that sex workers were petrified when plain-clothed customers revealed themselves as policemen. To avoid arrests and fines, they were compliant with their sexual demands and exploitation.

In the absence of police protection and legal recourse, to ward off customer violence, sex workers are forced to look for protection from gangsters or establish long-term relationships with regular clients. In exchange for the protection provided by gangsters, sex workers once again have to provide free sexual services. Some sex workers are able to cultivate intimate relationships with regular customers, thus entering into contractual relationships with them. Living with a regular customer like a couple in a rented apartment, a sex worker is protected against police raids, police arrests, and customer violence. However, since non-condom use is a prerequisite for such a relationship, sex workers are not protected against risks of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS (Zheng 2009b).

Fines and Abuses in the Rehabilitation Education Centres

Police raids often end in severe fines, arrests, and the detention of sex workers. Indeed, the 'strike hard' campaigns have become one of the ways in which police officials extort sex workers as well as owners of entertainment

establishments (Zheng 2009; Xiao 2013). During my own ethnographic fieldwork in karaoke bars, the police arrested many sex workers (Zheng 2009). If sex workers wanted to avoid being detained at a rehabilitation centre for up to two years, hefty fines immediately ensued. Over the years, fines have been arbitrarily imposed from as low as 5,000 yuan (around 800 USD) to as high as 70,000 yuan (around 10,000 USD) in some special extortion cases (Pan and Huang 2011; Kuo 2013). Owners of entertainment establishments also find it necessary to regularly bribe the police in order to avoid—or be notified of—upcoming police raids.

Every year, over 28,000 sex workers are arrested by the police or detained in about 200 rehabilitation education centres (Xiao 2013). Established in 1991 and managed by the local public security authorities, these centres house sex workers for a period that ranges from six months to two years, offering them ‘reeducation’ (再教育). Sex workers detained in these establishments are often forced to engage in hard labour for many hours a day seven days a week, without payment (Jie 2014; Kuo 2013). Forced labour includes producing commodities such as toys and disposable chopsticks, some of which are for export. Women are not allowed to use the bathroom at night, are required to request bathroom breaks during work hours, and are forbidden to use their local dialects when talking to their family members (Jie 2014; Kuo 2013). Often, they have to endure physical abuse such as heavy beating (Di 2014). They are also required to pay for all the costs incurred by the centre, including daily food, regular STI tests, bed sheets and pillows, bathroom necessities such as soaps, towels, and toilet paper. Each family member also needs to pay 200 yuan for every visit. Most sex workers end up spending 2,400 yuan during their six-month period of detention at a centre (Jie 2014). Having ‘learned nothing’, these women usually continue to engage in sex work after the completion of their ‘rehabilitation education’ (Jie 2014; Kuo 2013).

Mistreatment by Public Health Officials

Criminalisation of sex work engenders discriminatory public health policies. Sex workers are subjected to coerced HIV testing, their privacy is violated through the public release or withholding of the results of their medical tests, and they are mistreated by public health officials (Gray 2013). With the permission of the Ministry of Health, the centres for disease control (CDC) test sex workers’ HIV/AIDS status without their consent and, at times, without their knowledge. The CDCs also conduct HIV testing on all sex workers at a particular entertainment establishment after the health officials have established a relationship with the owners. Under such circumstances, sex workers feel compelled to comply with the business owners’ orders in order to continue working there. Test results, however, are either released to the public or withheld from the sex workers themselves (Gray 2013).

Sex workers have reported prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment by health officials in the CDCs (Gray 2013). They fear going to CDC clinics due to the poor treatment they receive by health officials and the possible cooperation between health officials and the police. As a result of this glaring rift between official public health and sex work, the health needs of sex workers are not met, while they are also humiliated and deprived of any privacy.

Health Risks

Police raids harm the health of sex workers. In addition to the police violence and abuse mentioned above, police officials routinely confiscate condoms to use as evidence. During my research, sex workers, upon arrest, were searched for condoms, the presence of which was deemed as being hard evidence to impose charges. This continued practice

directly violates two Chinese laws: the 2006 Law on AIDS Prevention that instructs that condoms should not be used as the evidence for arrest and a 2012 State Council document that mandates that condoms should be made available at public places (Wen 2006; Office of State Council 2012). This police practice discourages sex workers from carrying condoms or using condoms during their sexual services, making them vulnerable to health risks related to unprotected sex, such as abortion and the transmission of diseases.

Police raids also drive sex workers to clandestine, removed, and isolated regions to conduct their activities. These unfamiliar areas make them helpless, thus augmenting the likelihood of customer violence and non-condom use. Some sex workers are also forced into hiding, waiting for police raids lasting several months to be over. When they return to work after long spells of forced inactivity and financial constraint, they sometimes feel compelled to accept condomless sex with customers for immediate financial relief.

Sex workers in my previous research employed a variety of methods to mitigate the risks associated with unprotected sex, including emergency contraceptive pills, ineffective liquid condoms, cleansing liquids, and pre-sex antibiotic shots (Zheng 2009b). The overuse of these mediums, however, resulted in long-term physical suffering such as abdominal pain, vomiting, frequent pregnancies and abortions, infections, and infertility.

As mentioned above, sex workers avoid seeking help from health officials who are regularly judgemental and have connections with the police (Gray 2013). They also tend to stay away from major hospitals unless they are in need of serious surgery or treatment for fear of high financial costs and potential arrest. As a result, they often seek temporary relief of symptoms from low-quality, unlicensed, and low-cost clinics, managed by unqualified practitioners without professional training. As a result of police raids, sex workers are thus

excluded from access to essential healthcare services and are forced to face a wide array of health risks.

Activism

Calls for the legalisation of sex work and the abolition of the rehabilitation education system have proliferated in recent years in China. At every session of the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference from 2003 to 2011, National People's Congress Representative Chi Susheng proposed legalising sex work. In her proposal, Chi enumerated the problems with criminalising sex work, including police corruption, murder, abuse, heavy fines, an alarming HIV/AIDS transmission rate, and social discrimination. She advocated for the establishment of red light districts, registration of sex workers, and regulation to ameliorate public health problems and increase national tax revenue. However, all her proposals were rejected.

In 2012, a group of NGOs came together under the name Coalition of Chinese Sex Worker Organisations and published an online petition titled 'Sign On to End Violence against Sex Workers in China'. The 12 organisations listed at the end of the petition include Beijing Zuoyou Centre, Shenzhen Xiyan, Shanghai Xinsheng, and Tianjin Xinai Culture and Media Centre. Some of these organisations are AIDS and LGBT activist groups. The letter cited 218 violent incidents against female, male, and transgender sex workers, including eight murders. Deploring the lack of protection for sex workers, the letter called for an end to violence, stigma, discrimination, and abuse of the people in this line of work. These organisations have a marginal status in China, with only a few of them being able to register as companies (Long 2010; Zheng 2015). These kinds of grassroots organisations and the state operate in a regime of 'contingent symbiosis', whereby the survival of the organisations

hinges upon their ability to benefit the state, a situation that constrains their activities (Spires 2011).

In 2006, activist Ye Haiyan created Hong Chen Wang (红尘网), the first website that provided sex workers with a platform to share their experiences and exchange information (Xie 2010). The website was blocked in 2010. One year earlier, Ye had organised the Chinese Folk Women's Rights Working Group (中国民间女权工作室), an NGO intended to galvanise support from civil society to extend assistance to all kinds of marginalised women, including sex workers, and proposed 3 August as the 'Sex Workers' Day'. In 2010, her NGO members and volunteers staged events on the main street of Wuhan to appeal for legalisation of sex work. A couple of days later, Ye was taken away by the police for a 'trip' (Xie 2010). Her organisation was also forced out of Wuhan and is currently located in a remote town in Guangxi province. Over the following years, Ye was arrested and detained on several occasions.

Although the Chinese government abolished the 'labour reeducation system' (劳动教养体制) in 2013, this reform has not impacted sex workers. In 2014, over 100 lawyers, scholars, and retired Party members signed a petition letter, appealing for the abolition of the rehabilitation education system for sex workers (Di 2014). The letter, which declared that this system violates the Constitution and rule of law, was sent to the National People's Congress. Four years later, on 24 December 2018, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress also proposed the abolition of the rehabilitation education system for sex workers (Peng 2018).

These recent developments look very promising and suggest that the rehabilitation education system will be abolished within the next few years (Lin 2015). With this system gone, the goal of decriminalising sex work is probably within reach. Although the system currently remains very active in major cities such as Beijing, certain areas such as Anhui province have already closed

their rehabilitation centres (Lin 2015). In these areas, sex workers are either detained at police stations or fined, but are not sent to rehabilitation centres anymore (Lin 2015).

The criminalisation of sex work not only spawns violence, abuse, stigmatisation, and the exploitation of sex workers by the police and customers, but also dismisses the economic and social factors that lead these women to engage in this line of work. Decriminalisation would mean respecting sex work as a legitimate profession, protecting workers from violence, ensuring workers' access to basic health services and justice, and promoting public health. Research around the world has shown that areas where sex work has been decriminalised have experienced a lower HIV transmission rate thanks to the sex workers' insistence on condom use in collaboration with public health officials (Dewey, Zheng, and Orchard 2016). Embodying the spirit of the international movement for the rights of sex workers, the rising activism in the Chinese civil society has lit a beacon of hope that decriminalisation of sex work is not too far in China. ■



Accidental Activists

The Resistance of the '709' Wives

Nicola MACBEAN

The crackdown of 9 July 2015 saw hundreds of lawyers and legal activists called in by the police or official lawyers' associations for questioning. While many were released in a matter of hours or days, a number disappeared into China's system of 'residential surveillance in a designated location'. In this essay, Nicola Macbean details how the wives of these lawyers have coped with the detention of their husbands and how they have been experimenting with new forms of campaigning that draw strength from Chinese tradition.

Three women brandishing red buckets made for a striking image. The picture spoke of determination, confidence, and solidarity. In other photographs they wore red dresses or were depicted with the names of their detained husbands painted in red on their summer clothes. There was no intended message in the choice of colour or decision to carry buckets. Red was a 'happy colour' and the buckets would 'come in useful afterwards'. Probably it was just a coincidence, but the photographs of the women carried echoes of the white headscarves worn by Argentina's mothers of the disappeared.

The women in red are wives of lawyers detained in the '709' crackdown of 2015. Named after the date of the first detentions (9

Wives and advocates of detained rights lawyers mount a peaceful protest in support of the detainees on Monday. The buckets are covered in messages of support. PC: SCMP Pictures

July), this attack saw hundreds of lawyers and legal activists called in by the police or official lawyers' associations for questioning. Many were briefly detained and released in a matter of hours or days, while a number disappeared into China's system of 'residential surveillance in a designated location' (RSDL) to be later charged or released on bail.

The year 2015 was pivotal for human rights activism in China, as a series of targeted detentions signalled a new harsher climate under Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The day before International Women's Day, 8 March, five women activists were detained (see Ristivojević's essay in this issue). They were held for 37 days to prevent them from staging a modest campaign against sexual harassment on public transport. The 'Feminist Five', as they became known, were mostly young women in their twenties who had been mounting a range of small-scale protests against the unequal treatment of women in all areas of life, from access to public toilets to higher education. In June, two staff of the NGO Yirenping were detained for a month for alleged 'illegal business operations' and their organisation was shuttered (Front Line Defenders 2015; Yang 2016). On 9 July, Chinese rights defence (维权) lawyers woke to the news that lawyer Wang Yu and her husband, Bao Longjun, had been detained. In the days that followed, their colleagues were rounded up or lived in fear they would be next.

Accidental Activists

Although their husbands had been at the forefront of legal activism in China, the wives of these detained lawyers were not activists. Indeed, they were often critical of their husbands for the way their outspokenness was disrupting family life. Husbands, too, tried to protect their families by sharing as little as possible about their work. In the immediate aftermath of lawyer Li Heping's detention

on 10 July 2015, his wife, Wang Qiaoling, was reluctant to speak out publicly. Protective of their children and her work for a house church, she believed, like many observers, that he would be home in a matter of days. It was, after all, not the first time he had disappeared (Barboza 2007).

It was soon clear that the detention of Li Heping would be no ordinary case. The first challenge was to find out where he was being held, as the police provided no official notification. His wife appointed lawyers, but with the use of RSDL, the police could use Chinese law to deny access to counsel. Criticised by the United Nations Committee Against Torture as a form of incommunicado detention, RSDL allows the police to hold persons suspected of national security offences in unknown and unregistered detention facilities and without access to lawyers, family members, or any independent monitors. Despite being warned to keep silent, Wang Qiaoling decided first to mount a legal case against the *Xinhua News Agency* and the *People's Daily*, among other official media, for the way they slandered her husband in their reports about the crackdown.

In early 2016, six months after being first detained, Li Heping and other lawyers were formally charged and transferred to a pre-trial detention centre in Tianjin. From this point on, the law should have allowed the detainees access to their lawyers. Nevertheless, after several fruitless applications by lawyers to meet with their clients, families started to lose hope. A committed Christian, Wang Qiaoling asked herself what God wanted her to do. The answer was clear and she started to reach out to the other 'suffering' wives (China Change 2017). As the lawyers' efforts to represent their clients were endlessly obstructed by the authorities, the '709' wives took on a new role. Advised by their lawyers, the women used every legal avenue they could identify to seek information or to put pressure on the authorities by filing complaints and open government information requests. Overcoming feelings of powerlessness and their own lack of

knowledge and experience, the wives started to share information online of each attempt they made to meet the police, procuratorate, and court officials.

Novel Acts of Resistance

The wives chose to interpret the authorities' failure to abide by provisions in the law as evidence that officials knew there was no legal basis for the detentions. The red bucket protest outside the Tianjin Procuratorate in June 2016 resulted in the women being detained overnight. Rather than deter them, such actions only seemed to spur them on. Often wearing brightly coloured dresses and red sashes with their husbands' names, the women wanted to convey a mood of confidence and energy. Reminiscent of actions by the Feminist Five, clothes had become small acts of resistance.

As months passed, some of the legal activists and lawyers were released, and others were convicted in show trials and sentenced. In May 2017, Li Heping was released following a secret trial but there was still no information about fellow lawyer Wang Quanzhang. His wife, Li Wenzu, often accompanied by her sister-in-law and the wives of some of the released lawyers, began to make visits, each Friday, to the Supreme People's Court. Wearing pictures of Wang Quanzhang on their t-shirts, the women repeatedly sought information and court oversight of his case.

Frustration and newfound confidence brought novel acts of protest. Marking 1,000 days since her husband had disappeared, Li Wenzu attempted to walk the 100 kilometres from Beijing to the No. 2 Detention Centre in Tianjin, where officials had last informed her that Wang was being detained (AFP 2018). On the fifth day of the march, she was intercepted by plainclothes police and taken into temporary custody.

In December 2018, in one of the most recent and symbolic protests, four wives took turns, in a Beijing park, to shave each other's heads

and place their hair in buckets labelled with the names of their husbands. This theatrical gesture to protest the persecution of their husbands was photographed and widely disseminated online. Playing on the Chinese homonym for baldness (无发), the image of the women's shaved heads was presented as a powerful visual metaphor of a country 'without law' (无法).

Drawing Strength from Tradition

The '709' wives' actions were carefully calibrated to take place within the law and to highlight the failings of the legal system. Using their status as wives, the women emphasised in interviews that they had no choice but to speak up for their husbands (Sudworth 2015). Their efforts were acknowledged by the international community with stories in the international media, and access to Western diplomats and politicians (Buckley and Tatlow 2017). In 2018, Li Wenzu was the laureate of the Swedish Edelstam Prize for her 'outstanding contributions and exceptional courage' in defence of human rights (Edelstam Foundation 2018).

Yet, the '709' wives were largely wary of accepting the label of human rights defender. China, they knew, rejected the entire concept and would not feel constrained by well-meaning global commitments to protect the rights of human rights defenders. The women, instead, drew on the limited protection provided by their role as wives. Despite the political sensitivity of their husbands' detention, the '709' wives knew they had a degree of freedom to act within the traditional norms of a patriarchal society that places a strong value on the assigned roles in the family. The women also knew to keep their activism within bounds, to avoid feeding police anxieties about mobilisation and strategic organising.



A protest in Hong Kong on the 709 anniversary. PC: PH Yang

While traditional norms of wives defending their husbands may have helped the '709' women largely avoid punishment, they, their families, and their children have endured relentless pressure. The collective punishment of families has deep roots in China, and the authorities show few scruples in preventing the children of human rights defenders from attending public schools while, also under police pressure, landlords force families to move home. Life has been lived under the continuous surveillance of the domestic security police (国保). The support of each other, and wider family and friends, has been essential in helping to resist the isolation and fear, as well as cope with the practical demands of being single mothers. Most relatives of detainees are told early on by the police that speaking out will only harm their case. Time after time, relatives learn that remaining silent in political cases is not rewarded. Speaking out may provide some protection from the worst abuse and, at least, it brings a degree of self-respect.

Post-release Challenges

Even when '709' husbands are released, new sets of challenges emerge. In detention, the lawyers were tortured and it takes time to heal.

Yet families are rarely allowed the peace and space to come to terms with their traumatic experiences (Macbean 2018). Licenses to practice law have been taken away from the convicted '709' lawyers, adding to the challenge of securing their livelihoods while they remain under surveillance. Family life may never be normal again.

The world of rights defence lawyers has largely been a man's world, with lawyer Wang Yu, featured in the documentary *Hooligan Sparrow*, being one of the few exceptions (see Zeng Jinyan's conversation with director Wang Nanfu in this issue). The pioneering work of these lawyers demands frequent travel and often bruising encounters with the police. As most saw it, this was not a life for women and encouraging the participation of women was not a priority. Rights defence lawyers sought to protect their wives and children by trying to keep their two worlds apart.

Feminist activism and China's #MeToo movement suggest a growing awareness among Chinese women of the impact of the authoritarian state on their lives as women (see also Lam's interview with Zhang Leilei in this issue). The activism of the '709' wives has brought new respect for the role of women in the rights defence movement. The actions of these women will likely inspire other family members of detainees and help ensure other families are better prepared for withstanding the onslaught of police repression.

In his February 2019 Report on Women Human Rights Defenders, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, describes how rising authoritarianism and misogyny have contributed to increased pressures on women defenders (OHCHR 2019). He expresses concern at the hostility towards them and the persistence of gender stereotypes, even within their communities. Yet, in the highly authoritarian environment in which Chinese human rights defenders operate, exploiting public and police acceptance of traditional gender roles provides women with a small space for resistance. ■



Queer History, Culture, and Activism in China

A Conversation with He Xiaopei

BAO Hongwei

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BAO Hongwei

He Xiaopei is a leading queer feminist filmmaker, activist, and director of *Pink Space* (粉色空间), a Beijing-based NGO dedicated to promoting sexual rights and gender equality. Her films include *The Lucky One* (宠儿, 2012), *Our Marriages: Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (奇缘一生, 2013), *Yvo and Chrissy* (如此生活, 2017), and *Playmates* (玩伴, 2019). As one of China's leading feminist and queer activists since the 1990s, He's experiences and perspectives are valuable for understanding the formation of queer identities, communities, and activism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the past three decades.

Bao Hongwei: You have been an active participant in China's feminist and queer movements since the 1990s. How did you get involved in China's queer activism at that time? Was there a queer community back then?

He Xiaopei: Yes, there was. It started with Gary (Wu Chunsheng, a gay activist) and Susie (a queer activist from the United Kingdom), organising gay and lesbian meetings in Beijing's Sanlitun Bar Street in the early 1990s. There were usually ten guys who regularly attended these meetings. Susie also invited people to her flat for breakfasts and parties. There were not many female participants at the time.

These were mostly private gatherings. Things were very different in public. In the early 1990s there were no gay bars. Then City Bar opened in Sanlitun—a place where foreigners often hooked up with sex workers. Gay men also regularly met at the bar on Wednesday evenings. When the bar owner realised who they were, he was not particularly welcoming to these 'weird-looking' guys. So we had to keep changing meeting places.

We then organised a Stonewall celebration party in Beijing, but I was away in Tibet climbing the Himalayas. When I called Susie, she said that there would be eight lesbians coming to the party. I said that I did not believe it. Eight was an astronomical number at the time; I had never heard of eight lesbians gathering in one place in Beijing. So I cut my trip short, left the mountain climbing team and returned to Beijing. Gary had found an artist bar in a small alley. It was quite empty. The bar



He Xiaopei



The Lucky One (宠儿, 2012)

owner was happy for us to hold a party there, but we did not tell him what kind of party it was. We told the participants that it was a birthday party. On that day, many people turned up, including eight women. It was after the Fourth UN Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995. Gary had already been arrested and expelled from Beijing during the Conference, but he secretly returned to the city. After he had entered the bar, he told me that there were plainclothes policemen inside. He said that he could not say anything because he was not allowed to stay in Beijing, and asked me to host the party instead. I agreed. I told everyone that it was a birthday party and I asked people to guess whose birthday it was. People whispered in each other's ears, one after another. One cute guy ran up to me and said he knew whose birthday this was: it was 'our' birthday because it was the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. The word went around the room in whispers and people got extremely excited. It was a very touching moment. We cut cakes and had a great time. After that day, people just went there, and the bar eventually became the very first gay bar. It was called Half & Half.

BH: Half & Half was quite well known in Beijing at that time.

HX: Yes. There were three well-known gay bars: Half & Half, On & Off, and the Dragon. They did not say 'Dragon': they said 'Drag-On', because the bar had drag shows. The three bars were all on the Sanlitun Bar Street and they were all about a ten-minute walk from each other. People would walk out of one bar and into another. When they met on the way, they would ask one another where they were going. I asked one of the managers: 'Aren't you afraid of business competition?' He answered: 'I wish the whole street was full of gay bars.' He did not care about business; he cared about the community and wanted the community to grow. There was a strong sense of community at the time, and it was really good.

BH: Were all the bar owners gay-identified?

HX: Not at Half & Half, it was never gay-owned. They wanted business but they did not like us. Once they even beat up a gay guy who was a waiter at another gay bar. After that, some people started to boycott Half & Half. But the bar was too famous, so despite the ownership situation, many people still went there.

After the bars had been established, there came gay and lesbian hotlines. One of the members of the community left China and donated his pager to us so that we could start a pager hotline. We began talking about how to run it. We needed a phone to call back and it was not safe back then. Another

question was how to promote the hotline number. Cui Zi'en (a queer writer, filmmaker, and activist) found a magazine. It was called *Life*, I think. They put the advert for the gay pager hotline in the advert column between the pages, so it was well hidden. As soon as the hotline number was publicised, the pager got so busy that it didn't stop beeping.

BH: Did the advert actually say that it was a gay and lesbian pager hotline?

HX: They used the term homosexual (同性恋), I think.

BH: How did you call people back without having a landline?

HX: A number of us worked as volunteers for the hotline. We took turns carrying the pager for a few days or a week. I made phone calls using Susie's landline and others called from home phones. We received lots of calls from people. One day a young man called the pager hotline. He was a policeman but was discovered to be gay, so he had been forced to leave the police force. He was very upset and called the pager hotline quite a few times. I listened quietly without giving him much advice. A few years later, we ran into each other at a meeting and he recognised my name. He is Geng Le, CEO of the gay dating app company Blued.

BH: I guess the pager probably only ran for a few years before it was taken over by mobile phones, or *dageda* (大哥大, a bulky type of mobile phone).

HX: No, mobile phones were used at the same time. I remember one gay guy worked for the hotline and he called people back with his *dageda*. At a weekly debriefing meeting, he told us that his phone bill was as high as 600 yuan per week and that he could not afford it. People then began to discuss what to do and what else we could do. We usually went to bars in the evenings for fun. We wanted to have community meetings and cultural activities in the afternoons. We therefore organised weekly gatherings and discussions at a teahouse called the Lemon Tree. Chou Wah-shan, a gay activist from Hong Kong, was a very active organiser at the time. At first there were only gay guys; later more and more lesbians joined in. We organised parties, discussions, sightseeing tours, sports, and evening gatherings. We even had weekly discussion sessions for lesbians. Some gay men said: 'You lesbians are very united; I wish we gay men could be as united as you are.' Lesbians were indeed quite organised at the time and we did a lot of interesting things together. Then I left China to study in the United Kingdom. Shortly afterwards, the group got some funding. They rented



He Xiaopei

an office and published a lesbian magazine called *Sky* (天空). The group, which was called Beijing Sisters (北京姐妹小组), disintegrated after a few years.

After that, Xian (a lesbian activist) founded the Common Language (同语). Xian was also a founding member of the Beijing LGBT Centre and the Beijing Lesbian Centre. I went back to China after my study in the UK and founded Pink Space. Then a lesbian magazine, *Les+*, came out, and it was quite popular. They hosted a huge donation party, where people placed very high bids for a complete collection of the magazine.

On the part of gay organisations, Bing Lan (a gay activist) founded Aibai (爱白) a gay NGO. At an LGBT leader training meeting, Bing Lan suggested that we need to come out of the Internet and go into real life. Lesbian leaders said that we should go online and become our 'true' selves. Lesbian groups and gay groups were very different. They were talking about the same thing (of 'coming out'), but in very different ways. It was an interesting time.

Bing Lan later collaborated with Xing Xing (Damien Lu), an American-Chinese guy who had certain specific ideas about what it was to be gay (as he was a firm believer in the Western type of gay identity politics). Aibai was very much influenced by him. On their website, Xing Xing had a special column, denouncing bisexuality and non-monogamy. Aibai grew very fast. At one time, the organisation rented a whole floor of a building in Xintiandi, but they all work from home now. We had community leader training programmes, and at the time I worked with Guo Yaqi (founder of the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute 北京纪安德健康教育研究所), Bing Lan, Ma Tiecheng (founder of Aizhiyuanzhu 爱之援助, a gay organisation that has been running for over twenty years), and Tan Qin (founder of Yunnan Tonghuashe 云南同话舍, a lesbian group). We had different ideas about community work and its priorities. The AIDS Alliance decided that the best strategy to tackle HIV/AIDS was to work with at-risk communities. It wanted to focus only on gay men, as they believed that only gay men were affected by HIV/AIDS; it did not think that women could also be affected. But I always tried to include lesbian activists in our trainings.



Yvo and Chrissy
(如此生活, 2017)

BH: There were also other gay organisations and pioneers, can you talk about some of them?

HX: In the late 1990s, when there were almost no 'out' gay people in China, the activist Wan Yanhai invited psychiatrists to talk to members of the gay community. This helped to depathologise homosexuality which eventually led to the removal of homosexuality from the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3) in 2001. In May 1990, the World

Health Organisation (WHO) removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. Later that year, some Chinese doctors were sent to gay bars to disseminate questionnaires. The doctors asked gay people to complete surveys. Some survey questions were: ‘Do you like partying?’ or ‘What colour is your stool?’ These were stupid questions. But this was the way they worked: they thought they were experts, and you had to follow their instructions and work with them. The depathologisation was more a top-down process rather than taking place at the grassroots level. The psychiatrists came and met gay people because the authority wanted to follow the WHO guidelines. Dr Zhang Beichuan (a medical doctor with expertise in homosexuality) also did similar surveys.

BH: Dr Zhang Beichuan also played a significant role in China's LGBT history. Recently he has made some controversial remarks in the media about how gay dating apps spread HIV/AIDS. Could you talk about his role in the queer communities?

HX: In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were no hotlines or the Internet. As a medical doctor, Zhang Beichuan appeared on the midnight radio programme. He talked about homosexuality on the radio, so he got a lot of letters from gay listeners. That was how he got involved in queer communities as a straight-identified medical doctor. He is against gay sex and is very moralistic about it. He is a caring person and tries to do the things he considers right. But he is from that generation and he was never able to get over a conservative sexual morality.

Zhang was also the one who introduced the homowife (同妻, wife of a gay man) issue to the community and the public. At a Pink Space meeting, I also invited Li Yinhe, a sociologist and translator of queer theory, and Meng Lin, a gay activist, to our homowives meetings. I suggested that they write about the phenomenon to raise public awareness of the issue, and they both blogged about the topic. The homowife subsequently became an identity, and a huge topic in the community and across society. It was reported on by several English and Chinese newspapers. It was in this way that the homowife identity emerged. Although no official media could mention homosexuality (because of media censorship), journalists could however talk about the lives of homowives. So, in a way, the word homosexuality could appear in public.

BH: Some people blamed the media construction of the homowife identity for giving people the impression that this was the fault of gay men instead of the fault of the society.

HX: That's true. Li Yinhe and Meng Lin also clarified that this was not gay men's fault but a wider societal issue. It was the society that pushed gay people into heterosexual marriages. But I was also thinking about challenging marriage as a social institution. This was why in 2013 I made the film *Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men* to reflect on the social institution of marriage.

BH: *Our Marriages* is about 'contract marriages' (形式婚姻) between lesbians and gay men. Some people call them 'fake' marriages; others call them 'cooperative' or 'mutual-help' marriages.

HX: There was a lot of criticism about contract marriages at the time, and it was framed as a form of cheating yourself and cheating your parents. The PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China (同性恋亲友会) refused to show my film at their meetings. A critic of the film talked about the downsides of filial piety. I accept their argument, but you cannot expect all the gay people to continuously fight against their parents. Most people love their parents and do not want to fight with them. Ordinary gay people generally like my film. Some gay people even proudly show my film to their parents to achieve a better understanding between the two generations.

BH: I guess we are talking about the cultural specificity of queer cultures in China.



Our Marriages (奇缘一生, 2013), by He Xiaopei.

HX: Fei Xiaotong, the renowned Chinese sociologist, said that Western culture is individual-based and Chinese culture is family- and kinship-based. I take his point. Also, there are geographical differences. I only looked at four lesbians' lives in my film. They really have a good relationship with their parents. The four lesbians can marry gay men and live a happy life because of their social environment. In some big cities, people are becoming more Westernised and individualistic. Children's lives are increasingly cut off from the lives of their parents. They can live without thinking about their parents' needs. But in smaller cities, people have to think about their parents because your life is not yours; your life belongs to your family as well. An AIDS activist told me that even after his father passed away, he couldn't come out as HIV positive. He feared that people would point at his father's grave and say that your son gave the family a bad name. He would never let this happen. He had more concerns about his father's reputation than his own. So he had to hide his HIV status from his family. Coming out is a difficult issue even for a very famous AIDS activist.

BH: I know a lot of queer activists who cannot come out as gay or lesbian in front of their parents. This is very different from what PFLAG China advocates.

HX: People have different ways of thinking and engaging in advocacy. The PFLAG's way of coming out is very successful, but it should not be the only way. People live in different ways—and each parent is different—so they should be allowed to explore their own family relationships. I used this film to open up discussions about family, marriage, and different types of social relations in China's queer communities. Those lesbians who married gay men spent the Spring Festival together. They travelled together as a big family, including their same sex partners, their parents and grandparents. It was an alternative family. The lesbians and gay men still regularly call each other's parents and wish them happy New Year. As long as they are happy, why can't they get married to each other?

BH: What other queer organisations are active in China? What is queer activism in China like today?

HX: Although most organisations use the term LGBTQ, they primarily work on lesbian and gay issues. Queer activism in China is still largely lesbian- and gay-led. However, transgender issues, as well as intersex and asexual issues, have been picked up recently. The Beijing LGBT Centre and Tongyu both work on transgender issues now.

BH: Another form of queer activism is litigation; that is, taking government ministries to court, such as Fan Popo's legal case against the State Administration of Radio Film and Television over censorship of gay films, and Yanzi (aka Peng Yanhui)'s case against hospitals over gay conversion therapy. Is this an effective form of queer activism?

HX: Yes, it is. Without these cases the issues would not be in the public domain, and the government could just do whatever it wants to do. It is quite effective to present the issues to the public by using the law, although I also think that the process is very stressful for the individuals involved, as they have to face all the pressures themselves. I wish there were more community and organisational support given to these activists.

BH: Are there any other ways of engaging in queer activism?

HX: I think that there is space for queer activism in modern art. Films send very direct messages, but modern art can be very subtle, conceptual, and creative. There are so many things we can do with modern art. Also, modern artists can think deeply and critically about social issues. No one can stop a person from thinking and experimenting. One can use different art forms to

express ideas. It is the ideas behind these forms that matter. I want to express my ideas in a way that speaks to the audience. Therefore, the stories have to be interesting. In this case it should be more visually acceptable, not in terms of being pretty, but in terms of being more audience-friendly.

BH: What do you think is the future of queer China? Are you optimistic?

HX: It is easier to live as an individual than before, and it is also easier to be gay and to organise in China today. But I do not necessarily think that coming out has to be the only strategy, or gay marriage has to be the only form of queer kinship. Coming out is not easy for most gay people in China. Diversity is more important. I hope that in the future there will be more diversity rather than simply one way of being.

BH: Film obviously plays an important role in queer community building and activism. How did you get into filmmaking?

HX: I accidentally got into filmmaking by getting to know a woman living with HIV/AIDS. My PhD thesis at the University of Westminster was on HIV/AIDS in China, and I founded the organisation Pink Space after I finished my PhD. The very first meeting of Pink Space was to arrange lesbian and bisexual women to meet HIV positive women to talk about positive sex. Participants either did not know about lesbianism or had never met women living with HIV/AIDS. The meeting was to share their sexual desires and practices. People had a good laugh together and the conclusion was that there were no differences between lesbians and women with HIV. We all have desires and we all want good sex: this was a nice discovery. At one other meeting with wives of gay men, HIV positive women, and lesbians, I asked people whose life was more difficult. Each group said that the other group's life was more difficult, unlike at gay meetings where gay people thought they were the most oppressed group.

Each Pink Space meeting had a newsletter, but I did not know where to distribute them. I met this woman who was living with HIV/AIDS and liver cancer with only three months to live. She came to Pink Space meetings regularly. She asked me what she could do with her limited time left. I gave her a digital voice recorder and a video camera and told her to tell her life stories. I also went to see her every day after work and started to film her life. I found out that she had not told her son that she was HIV positive or dying of cancer. I felt that it was my job to persuade her to tell her son that she was dying. But she said that

she could not tell him the truth because of the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and to death itself. She had to sacrifice herself to protect her son.

After she had passed away, I found out that she did not have a son. I did not know what to do with her life story, or how to treat the footage she left. So I went to an independent film school and worked on the material. This was my first film—*The Lucky One* (2012)—and it was well received. It went to independent film festivals and even entered a competition for the best documentary film. The film also went online and had more than 100,000 hits. This gave me the idea that film is a great way to convey my ideas and to tell people something. After that, I couldn't stop making films. I carried on doing it. Luckily there were so many queer film festivals and universities that are happy to show my films. Films can reach a wide audience. I also like communicating with the audience through post-screening Q&As, and I can learn a lot from audience feedback. ■



WINDOW ON ASIA

Brick kiln in the Cambodian
countryside. PC: Thomas Cristofolletti



Descending into Debt in Cambodia

Milford BATEMAN, Nithya NATARAJAN,
Katherine BRICKELL,
and Laurie PARSONS

Cambodia today is the site of one of the world's largest microcredit sectors. While it is widely believed that the extension of microcredit to Cambodia's poor should be cause for all-round celebration, this essay reveals disquieting evidence of a deeply problematic development intervention. Indebted to microcredit institutions, increasing numbers of Cambodia's poor population have been forced to accept exploitative labour conditions in the garment and construction industry, driven to despair due to the loss of their land, and, in the worst cases, had no choice but to 'sell' themselves as bonded labour to brick kilns owners.

A worker in a brick kiln in the Cambodian countryside. PC: Thomas Cristofolletti

The Cambodian economy has undoubtedly been on a roll over the last decade. It has enjoyed several years of rapid growth, exports have risen dramatically, and quite significant progress has been made in reducing poverty (ADB 2018). These important gains might suggest that the country will eventually join the elite club of East Asian 'miracle economies'. An equally remarkable observation, however, relates to the policy model that underpins this apparent success. Given that we know that proactive 'developmental state' policies lie behind the massive economic and social improvements evidenced in East Asia since the end of the Second World War (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Wade 1990), what is so surprising about Cambodia's recent success, especially in terms

of poverty reduction, is that it appears to have been created by adhering to almost the exact *opposite* of this ‘developmental state’ approach: that is, Cambodia appears to have done well in spite of having adopted the standard neoliberal policy model promoted by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Since the neoliberal policy package is widely associated with economic and social reversals in almost all adopting countries in the Global South (Chang and Grabel 2014)—and is responsible for having piloted the global economy into a wall on Wall Street in 2008 (Mirowski 2013)—this apparent paradox demands an explanation. One must ask how come Cambodia seems to have succeeded with such a problematic, if not fatally flawed, policy model. In fact, the answer is pretty straightforward: Cambodia’s much-trumpeted economic success is not quite as sustainable as we think it is, particularly with regard to the issues of Chinese investments in real estate and construction, and free access to markets for Cambodia’s garment exports, both of which are in some danger of heading into reverse (World Bank 2018).

The purpose of this essay is to further underline the precariousness of Cambodia’s recent economic success through an examination of the most important *local* neoliberal policy intervention deployed in the country: microcredit. Cambodia’s microcredit movement was first established in the early 1990s as a way of integrating demobilised soldiers back into civilian life. Further growth and, from 2010 onwards, growing injections of foreign investment, have meant that today Cambodia is the site of one of the world’s largest microcredit sectors (Bateman 2019a). The Cambodian Microfinance Association’s latest data shows, for example, that by April 2018 the total volume of microcredit disbursed stood at more than 4.6 billion USD (CMA 2019), which represents one of the world’s highest levels of microcredit penetration per capita.



A worker in a brick kiln in the Cambodian countryside. PC: Thomas Cristofolletti

A Cause for Celebration?

By all accounts, the insertion of microcredit into the ordinary lives of Cambodia’s poor over the last 20 or so years should be cause for all-round celebration. As famously argued by Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi economist and co-recipient of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, Cambodia’s poor and unemployed should have been rapidly escaping poverty thanks to their own entrepreneurial efforts and the creation of many informal microenterprise and self-employment ventures (Yunus 1989). But this has clearly not happened. Instead, the rise of the microcredit sector in Cambodia has actually created an almost entirely deleterious trajectory for the country’s poor. Leaving aside the handful of untypical successful microcredit-funded business projects, looking behind the hype and spin surrounding the

microcredit industry in Cambodia reveals a mountain of disquieting evidence of a deeply problematic financial intervention.

Let us look first at the fundamentals of microcredit as they apply in Cambodia (and everywhere else, see Bateman 2010). The leading microcredit institutions (hereafter MCIs) in Cambodia consciously adhere to the global microcredit industry's required narrative that an individual's attempt at self-employment will virtually always succeed. Some of Cambodia's MCIs go so far as to suggest that using their services will allow almost anyone to be successful in some petty business area—as easy as simply picking money from your own money tree! So what can go wrong?



Prasac Microfinance and its 'money tree' advertisement.
PC: Billi Glover

There is a flaw in the microcredit model, which has been especially in evidence in Cambodia. This flaw relates to the basic lack of local demand that exists by definition

in poor communities (see Bateman 2019b). When virtually everyone in a location is in poverty, instructing poor individuals to escape their own poverty predicament by becoming a microentrepreneur selling something to others in the community makes little sense. This guidance rests on the false assumption that local demand is infinitely elastic and will stretch to cover almost *any* programmed increase in the local supply of simple goods and services. Economists call this 'Say's Law'—the fallacy that supply will create its own demand. Many economists, most notably Alice Amsden (2010), have argued that it is the basic misunderstanding of this fallacy that ensured almost all anti-poverty programmes in the Global South that attempt to improve the supply-side of the local economy—e.g. through the supply of more credit, more education, more training, etc.—were doomed to failure.

Accordingly, the most visible result of a microcredit programme is that the new microenterprises assisted into operation will find it very tough to find customers. As a consequence, very many will simply fail after a short period of time. Our recent fieldwork in Kampong Cham, for example, found that accounts of unsuccessful business ventures, and repeated unsuccessful attempts to locate 'something that worked', far outweighed the few accounts we heard of successful businesses being formed. Moreover, most of the 'success stories' originated in households with higher levels of wealth and more assets to begin with. Furthermore, even if an individual is one of the very few able to succeed in scraping together enough clients to keep their business going, they inevitably end up eating into the incomes and jobs of the already existing microenterprises in the community with which they enter into competition. That is, jobs and incomes in already struggling incumbent microenterprises are displaced by new entrants.

Economists call this entry and exit phenomenon 'job churn' and in Cambodia it represents an almost unsurpassable barrier to the real creation of additional jobs and incomes. When the level of competition for the

limited demand for simple items and services in most rural areas is now simply off the scale, encouraging others to enter the very same markets has little to recommend it. The rows of street stalls attracting very few passersby, woefully under-used tuk tuks, and eerily vacant food outlets all testify to the programmed over-supply of such services in so many of the villages in rural Cambodia.

Seriously compounding this problem is the fact that small-scale agriculture in Cambodia is now so unproductive that very few of those accessing microcredit to develop an agricultural enterprise can repay the loans. The absence of irrigation, extension services support, storage facilities, marketing programmes, and other forms of important infrastructure in the rural areas of Cambodia—infrastructure that everywhere else in East Asia enabled small-scale farming to flourish (see Studwell 2013, 1–56)—has inevitably led to a seriously unproductive agricultural sector in the country. As reported by Aleem (2018), rather than remaining in the village to work on a wholly unprofitable agricultural venture, the young—representing a demographic dividend in the current era with 60 percent of the country’s population aged 30 or under (Phnom Penh Post 2019)—are increasingly forced to move into the main Cambodian urban areas and cities, or even further afield, in search of a living. It is either that, Aleem goes on to argue, or the taking out of many more microloans by the farming community in a desperate effort to survive for a few more years, which is one of the principal causes of the high levels of rural debt.

In fact, the phenomenon of labour wages being used to repay a microloan has become so ubiquitous that MCIs are lending even to those villagers without any agricultural land. We certainly saw widespread evidence of this during recent fieldwork in Kampong Cham. Numerous households had used the land title of the small plot on which their family house—a structure representing particular significance given Cambodians’ strong ties to their natal villages—was built as collateral for microloans

of 1,000 USD, 2,000 USD, and even more. As such, households were stretching themselves beyond belief to repay these microloans, given the terrifying possibility of losing their family house upon default, and the phenomenon of grandparents caring for grandchildren whilst parents laboured for months or years elsewhere was not uncommon.

Growing Worries

With virtually all possibilities to realise a decent living from a microenterprise or from small-scale agriculture now choked off, resulting in the poor purposely taking out microloans for other purposes entirely—e.g. for healthcare costs (see also below)—it is not surprising that so many of the poor in Cambodia have descended into quite dramatic levels of debt. This development is seen in almost all local communities outside of the capital Phnom Penh. Liv (2013) was one of the first to report on the serious rise in household indebtedness in several locations. The ADB (2014,14–15) was also forced to report on the ‘high and potentially underreported level of indebtedness among the poor and the significant share of loans of an unproductive nature [which] suggest that the issue of vulnerability is more significant than existing poverty analyses recognise’.

Most recently, growing worries about the sustainability of their hugely profitable investments into Cambodia’s microcredit sector has led a number of leading ‘social impact’ investors to seek out their own data on the industry’s over-indebtedness problem (MFC et al. 2017). This initially confidential report, later widely leaked to local journalists, essentially confirmed almost all of the most deleterious trends openly raised by other analysts (for example, Bateman 2017a). While repeatedly claiming that ‘market saturation has not yet been reached’, the report nevertheless painted a very bleak picture of the impact of microcredit. Notably, it underlined the myriad of ways the poor in Cambodia are desperately

trying to repay their growing debts. On page 9, for example, it pointed out that: ‘Borrowers use different strategies to repay loans such as depleting their savings, asking their families for financial help, working overtime or adjusting food consumption.’ This effectively means that the poor are doing anything *other* than using the income from a functioning microenterprise to repay their microloan, thus contravening the entire rationale behind the microcredit model.

An even more worrying aspect highlighted in the report is the dramatic rise in what is known on Wall Street as ‘extend and pretend’—the trick of keeping poor clients on an indefinite debt treadmill, always reoffering a new microloan or rescheduling an existing one, but maintaining the repayment at the current level by simply lengthening the terms of the microloan. On page 33, it is reported that ‘46% of active borrowers renewed loans from the same institution at maturity’. And then on page 41 we find that ‘66% of ... borrowers who pre-paid their loans, that is 15.5% of all borrowers, took another one within the next 30 days’ and that ‘[in] most cases, the new loan was larger, especially when it was taken right after the early repayment (next disbursement within 30 days).’ This means that the leading MCIs are encouraging their poor clients not just to take on microcredit in perpetuity, but to refinance a microloan even *before* an existing microloan is repaid. As presumably intended, this allows the MCI to apply the usual charges associated with refinancing a microloan (fees, document charges, etc.) but also—crucially—it allows for the loan value to increase over a longer time period so that the client goes into even deeper debt to the MCI. In our fieldwork, we found many of those signing up for a new loan did so because the monthly repayment stayed the same and they got some cash in hand all without even realising that the length of the microloan had increased.

Thanks to all of these negative trends, the dominant method of repaying microloans in Cambodia today is not through the profits earned by microentrepreneurs through their own microcredit-assisted microenterprise,

but increasingly thanks to the labour of other family members. Two such categories are predominant. First, family members working in the garment factories in Phnom Penh are often required to remit substantial amounts to their family members so they can repay microloans. In many cases, the initial capital required to obtain a position in one of the factories itself necessitates the obtaining of microcredit. Second, as extensively detailed by Bylander (2015), a growing number of over-indebted individuals in Cambodia are forced to migrate to neighbouring Thailand to work in the informal sector in order to generate the funds to repay their microloans.

Those that fail to generate funds through migration are forced to seek out funds from other even less beneficial sources. Pointedly, given that formal microcredit was supposed to displace traditional moneylending (Yunus and Jolis 1998), many poor individuals have been forced to return to local moneylenders in their communities to obtain funds to keep a microcredit repayment schedule intact (see Ovesen and Trankell 2014), a phenomenon that we noted in our recent fieldwork. Contrary to the views of many microcredit advocates and lobbyists (for example, Rozas 2017), the rapid growth of formal microcredit, and subsequent mass over-indebtedness of the poor population, has provided a major shot in the arm for local moneylenders.

Landlessness and Debt Bondage

One other important question then comes to mind here: why are the leading MCIs indulging in so much reckless lending that surely risks a wave of defaults? The answer to this lies in the fact that the MCIs make sure to obtain collateral in the form of a land certificate. Unlike any other country in the Global South, where microcredit has been premised on joint-liability loan groups rather than physical collateral, Cambodian microloans

are underwritten by the poor's single most valuable asset—their land. Furthermore, as noted earlier, this is not only agricultural land but also the very land on which their house sits. Losing one's land anywhere in the Global South all too often means a descent into irretrievable poverty and destitution, so the incentive to avoid default at all cost is naturally significant.

In extreme cases, recent evidence from Cambodia highlights how indebted rural households will even choose to become debt-bonded labourers on one of Cambodia's proliferating brick kilns in order to avoid default and the concomitant land loss (Brickell et al. 2018). This involves approaching a kiln owner and asking them to pay-off MCI and informal lender debts in the village in exchange for a consolidated debt bond. The whole nuclear family then moves to live—and undertake gruelling and unsafe work—on the site of a brick kiln, with their mobility restricted until the debt is repaid. The existence and even increasing use of this strategy by indebted rural households certainly speaks to the lengths they will go to in order to avoid default, and the power MCIs hold over them in using household land as collateral.

Notwithstanding, it seems that many poor individuals do *not* succeed in repaying their microloans and, as a result, a number have ended up losing their family land. While the legality of land transfer in Cambodia is complicated—and it is seemingly difficult for an MCI to obtain land for on-sale through the default route—the actual practice is that informal transfers of land are very common. Often the MCI's loan officer simply brings the village chief, the debtor, and a willing buyer for the debtor's land together and (usually for a fee) he encourages a private sale without too much fuss. At other times the process is carried out at a larger scale with poor populations being seriously disadvantaged. For example, Kurczyk (2009) reported from a village in Kampt province in southern Cambodia where a bad harvest meant that a large group of villagers risked losing their land to the local MCIs from which they had obtained microcredit using

their land certificate as collateral. In order to avoid default, an attempt was made by the villagers to keep repaying at least part of what they owed by tapping into funds from the local informal moneylender. But when this tactic proved unworkable, all of the land plots were eventually seized by the MCIs.

Anecdotes aside, overall figures for such land loss are hard to come by. Given the political sensitivity of financial institutions exploiting the poor in such a manner, this is not unexpected. However, Steptoe (2013)—quoting a leading expert on the legalities of rural development, Mounh Sarath—writes that until 2012 perhaps as much 10–15 percent of Cambodia's rural land had been seized from the poor through this process. Moreover, this adverse trend appears to have continued in recent years, as land is increasingly demanded for a number of commercial purposes and land titles are now far more common than before. For example, Grimsditch and Schoenberger (2015) point out that the land-loss process has been significantly accelerated in recent years as a result of a land titling project begun in 2012 with the aim of providing land titles to as many as 400,000 families living on state land. At any rate, the land-loss issue remains a sensitive one and it is likely to continue seriously undermining the already precarious lives of Cambodia's poor.

To Whose Advantage?

The final issue to consider here relates to the crucial question of who has *really* benefitted from the growth of the microcredit sector in Cambodia, which is now probably the world's most profitable. Initially structured as NGOs, it only really became clear how much profit could be made in the microcredit sector when ACLEDA, then Cambodia's largest MCI (it is now the country's largest commercial bank), hived off a portion of its equity (12.25 percent) to a major Hong Kong-based investment house, Jardine Matheson Holdings, for 34 million USD.

When this equity stake was sold for 166 million USD just six year later, realising a massive 30 percent annual rate of return, the die was cast (Bateman 2017a). Since then all of Cambodia's leading MCIs have been bought up by foreign investors. In terms of yearly dividends and the eventual capital appreciation, the amount of capital transferred to these new foreign owners has been quite considerable.

Indeed, it was precisely the fear of losing just a small part of their massive profit flow that spooked the leading foreign-owned MCIs into an aggressive fight back against the Cambodian government's proposed imposition of an 18 percent interest rate cap on new and refinanced microloans beginning on 1 April 2017. Fearing their profits would be reduced, local MCIs, investors, and many others began working frantically to lobby the authorities to change this new regulation. Some even argued that a widespread microcredit shortage would ensue if the proposed interest rate cap was imposed (Rozas 2017). However, events quickly proved these claims to be no more than scare tactics: the supply of microcredit actually continued to rise, while profits at the largest MCIs have been largely unaffected (Bateman 2017b).

However, with significant value continuing to flow out of Cambodia in the form of dividends and capital appreciation, it is clear that the country is losing a considerable amount of local spending power. As a result, an entirely quixotic situation has arisen: at a time when the international donor community is supporting so many 'buy Cambodian goods' initiatives targeted at wealthier local Cambodians and wealthy foreign tourists aimed at keeping capital within the country, the foreign investors that today own and manage the most important MCIs are extracting stratospheric returns from those same communities. An hour or so spent at the 'Made in Cambodia' market in Siem Reap, for example, shows that many of the local businesses operating there have been supported by various international development community programmes, which all encourage visitors to 'help the poor by buying something made locally by the poor'.

But there are no such signs asking the MCIs to consider not taking their massive financial gains out of Cambodia and instead spend this largesse on local businesses operated by the poor.

As elsewhere in the Global South today (Bateman et al. 2019), the failure of Cambodia's microcredit sector to genuinely address the country's poverty and development problems is a disaster for the country's poor, as well as a very serious indictment of the neoliberal local policy model that has been impressed upon successive Cambodian governments since the 1980s. A litany of negative impacts associated with the microcredit model have combined to seriously offset the other more positive, but still transient, gains registered of late. Worse, there are few optimistic portents pointing to a coming reversal of the negative trends. ■



A Road to Forgetting

Friendship and Memory
in China's Belt and Road
Initiative

YI Xiaocuo

A new Sino-Kazakh coproduction recounts the time that celebrated Chinese musician Xian Xinghai spent in Kazakhstan in the early 1940s, focussing on the friendship between the artist and a local composer named Bakhitzhan Baykadamov. While the movie intends to celebrate the renewed friendship between China and the former Soviet republic under the auspices of Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative, it also serves a darker purpose: to obfuscate the reality of the mass detention of ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz in 'reeducation camps' in Xinjiang.

Actor Hu Jun plays the role of Xian Xinghai in the film *The Composer* (2018).

In the midst of the mass detention of ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz in the so-called 'reeducation camps' in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a Sino-Kazakh coproduction based on the life of Chinese musician Xian Xinghai is close to release. *The Composer* portrays the friendship between Xian—the mind behind the *Yellow River Cantata* and *On the Taihang Mountains*, classic patriotic 'red' songs that every middle school student in China learns to sing—and a Kazakh composer named Bakhitzhan Baykadamov.

It is not the first time that the life of Xian has been depicted on the silver screen. Previous iterations include a film directed by Wang Hengli in 1994 and a TV drama directed by Duan Guoping in 2005, both of which were entitled *Xian Xinghai* and mostly depicted his years studying in Paris and his transformation

into a ‘people’s musician’ (人民音乐家). Now that Kazakhstan is one of the most strategic partners of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is not surprising that *The Composer* focuses instead on Xian’s life in Kazakhstan. The film was originally inspired by Xi Jinping’s 2013 keynote speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, when he launched the BRI. During this speech Xi told a touching story of Xian in distress receiving help from Baykadamov in Almaty. When Xi visited Kazakhstan again in June 2017, both sides signed a coproduction agreement setting *The Composer* as their first joint venture (Zhou 2018).

There has been a flowering of Sino-Kazakh ‘cultural exchanges’ in the name of national friendship over the last few years. In 2015, China erected a monument to Kazakh philosopher Abay Qunanbayev in Beijing; in 2017, the heartthrob Kazakh singer Dimash Kudaibergen won top accolades on the Chinese TV show *I am a Singer*, inspiring many Chinese fangirls to study the Kazakh language (Rednet 2017); and the following year, Chinese singer Lin Bao won the second-place prize with a Kazakh song at the international contest *Voice of Astana* in Kazakhstan. Still, while the Chinese public and media started to gain a better understanding of Kazakhstan, the fact that over one million ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang are living in hellish conditions is met with silence in Chinese media and public discussion.

Breakup to Friendship

The relationship between China and Kazakhstan has always been dramatic. Before Kazakhstan became a part of the Soviet Union in 1936, there were numerous historical conflicts between the Chinese and Russian empires over the Kazakh border. The Soviet Union maintained interests in Xinjiang while it was allied with China throughout World War II. In the 1940s, Moscow cultivated Uyghur nationalism, aligned with Soviet interests, but

eventually terminated its support in the wake of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Brophy 2016, 166–247). In its early years, the PRC enjoyed a brief honeymoon with the Soviet government because of their alliance in the Korean War and the latter’s technical support for China’s industrialisation. However, Mao and Khrushchev’s divergent ideological views led to a split beginning in the early 1960s.

At the grassroots, native people in Xinjiang have always been wary of the influx of Han settlers into their ancestral homeland, but such concerns were exacerbated in the wake of Mao’s Great Leap Forward (1958–62). Around the same period, the Soviet Union, short of labour forces after the onslaughts of the Second World War, began to promise better job opportunities and life conditions in its territories to inhabitants of Xinjiang willing to move into Soviet territories. In response, in 1962 around 60,000 Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and former Soviet citizens left China, crossing the border in Ili and Tarbagatai despite the armed border patrol and increased security (Shen and Li 2011). Immediately after, the border was closed and was not reopened until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic became the independent nation-state of Kazakhstan, resuming diplomatic relations with China.

After the 1962 exodus, instead of self-reflection on local policies, the Chinese Party-state used this incident to justify central control and de-Sovietisation in Xinjiang (Benson and Svanberg 1997, 104; McMillen 1979, 160–62). The Chinese authorities condemned the Kazakhs who left China as well as Kazakhs living along the border as ‘Soviet revisionists’ and in 1963 commenced a ‘directive for opposing revisionism’. Northern Xinjiang was transformed into a veritable military colony and buttress against the Soviet Union. The central government immediately deployed regiments of the Xinjiang Production Construction Corps (XPCC, also known as *bingtuan* or 兵团 in Chinese) to the border regions that had been Kazakh pasturelands. These places, which

China claimed as its own territory, became contested zones in border negotiations. Up to this day, the 1962 exodus remains a taboo topic in Xinjiang—Kazakhs of the younger generation are unaware that it ever happened, while for the elderly population it still is an unspeakable scar. Older Kazakhs remember how Tacheng city emptied overnight, and how some came back from college in Ürümchi and found that their families were long gone. Many people who had been left behind not only suffered due to the separation from their families but were also considered to be spies and sent to labour camps, while their children were discriminated against in both education and work (Chen 2010).

This complicated history has set the stage for a contested, and often militarised, border zone, with local identities that confound the imperatives of nationalism. Tom Cliff (2009) points out that, with the unfolding of the state's campaign to 'develop the West', the twenty-first-century *bingtuan* has transformed into a corporation, becoming more effective at appropriating land for further urbanisation, thereby maintaining political control and surveillance in the region. The ensuing introduction of BRI into Central Asia gave birth to new colonial euphemisms such as 'anti-terrorism' and 'friendship'. Today, the transnational identity and cultural ties of Chinese Kazakhs to Kazakhstan are once again grounds for suspicion, and many of these men and women have been criminalised for harbouring 'terrorist' or 'separatist' ideas, with their passports being confiscated. Once again, numerous families are being separated along the border. On the surface, the BRI, with its billions of dollars of investments and movie coproduction projects, is extolling the 'friendship' between the two countries—and not hesitating to manipulate history in this regard. In practice, the situation on the ground could not be more different.

In the past few months, more testimonies about arbitrary detainment and torture in reeducation camps in Xinjiang have emerged from the Kazakh diaspora in Kazakhstan. This

has been followed by more overseas Uyghurs and members of the Kyrgyz diaspora speaking up (Shih 2018; Vanderklippe 2018 and 2019; see also the testimony database *Shahiz.biz*). In spite of this, as Catherine Putz points out, Kazakhstan cannot afford to push Beijing too hard on this matter, due to the benefits it stands to gain from China's BRI trade agenda (Putz 2018). Significantly, China also uses the narrative of 'friendship' to shape public debate and prevent the emergence of alternative voices that might challenge its hegemonic claims in the area. For instance, Zhang Wei, the Consul General of China in Almaty, said in an interview:

We warn everyone harboring ill wishes and intentions: stop trying to reap personal benefits and cease actions that both interfere in China's internal affairs and cause harm to China-Kazakhstan relations, destroying the centuries-long friendship between the Kazakh and Chinese peoples. We also hope that our Kazakh compatriots who have temporarily been misled will be able to open their eyes and insist on justice, defending the friendship and relations between China and Kazakhstan as a cherished treasure. (Tengrinews 2018)

The 'friendship' discourse showed its true colours when China came under increasing pressure after international news media outlets exposed the scale of the internment camps, and international human rights groups began intervening. On 10 March 2019, Kazakhstan police suddenly arrested Serikzhan Bilash, a prominent activist dedicated to collecting testimonies from victims of the camps, charging him with 'inciting hatred' (Ramzy 2019).

Selective Memory

In his time, Xian Xinghai was, after all, a displaced person and a war refugee. In 1940, he had to conceal his identity as the Nationalist

Party of China was purging members and sympathisers of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1941, the CCP sent Xian to the Soviet Union to compose music for the documentary *Yan'an and the Eighth Route Army*, the first film ever produced by the Yan'an Film Group (Xinhua 2017). Much of the original footage was lost in the chaos of the Second World War and the project had to be aborted, but Xian remained stranded in the Soviet Union for years. He desperately tried to return to China via Xinjiang but failed because the region was under the tyranny of warlord Sheng Shicai. It was when he was stuck in Almaty in 1942 that he finally received some help from the Kazakh musician Baykadamov.

Baykadamov's daughter Baldyrgan Baikadamova reminisced: 'My father saw this skinny, completely worn-out man sitting on his suitcase on the street. He probably pitied him. It was really cold in the middle of December. He didn't even have an overcoat and was shivering' (KazInform 2018). Baykadamov saw Xian's violin and thought that he had to be a musician. He asked about his situation, but Xian spoke neither Russian nor Kazakh, only a bit of English and French, neither of which Baykadamov was able to speak. Eventually he decided to take Xian home and help him. Baldyrgan continued: 'What risk my father took to rescue Xian! He was the son of Baykalam Karaldin, one of the Alash-Orda activists that were denounced by the Soviet state as 'enemies of the people' in 1930. Because of this, my father was almost kicked out of the Institute and never became a Young Pioneer or a Komsomol member.'

Xian stayed with Baykadamov's family for a year before the Kazakh musician introduced him to a job in the Kostanay region, in northern Kazakhstan. However, years of life in exile took a toll on his health, and in 1945 he died at 40 from malnutrition and tuberculosis in Moscow. As a Chinese idiom puts it, he 'died as a guest in someone else's homeland' (客死他乡).

The identity of Xian as a displaced person has been forgotten. He is remembered as a 'people's musician', after Mao wrote a eulogy for him in

Yan'an and Zhou Enlai ordered the collection and publication of his works. Now, through the BRI, he has become a timely symbol of 'Sino-Kazakhstan friendship'. This is not a one-sided display. In Kazakhstan, Baykadamov's museum was opened only in 2000 at a time when the country was increasingly celebrating its intellectuals, writers, and musicians after the purges of the harsh Soviet years.

The politics of memory in both China and Kazakhstan aims at making citizens into patriotic, nationalistic subjects, and implicitly silences the suffering of displaced people. The 'friendship' narrative tells a harmonious story of mutual aid and struggle against foreign imperial powers but at the same time justifies internal colonialism and censorship. In this telling, the stories of displaced peoples, whether Uyghurs, Kazakhs, or Xian Xinghai, are made invisible through cultural production and superficial cultural exchanges that mobilise nationalistic emotions.

Cultural critic Edward Said could not have said it better:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (Said 2000, 137).

Within one year, Kazakhstan has shifted from keeping one eye closed to China's internment camps to openly supporting such measures. Thanking Kazakhstan for 'understanding', in March 2019 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi swore: 'We will never allow anyone, any force, to undermine China-Kazakhstan friendship and mutual trust' (HKFP 2019). ■



一分精神

安安
財之獲
基於神
世神經
藥片專
足胃呆



無麗
有美皆備

美

麗



WORK OF ARTS

Once Upon a Time in China

Lu Zhixiang's Sketches of Shanghai's Society in the 1930s

Martina CASCHERA

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Sketches by Lu Zhixiang

Once Upon a Time in China

Lu Zhixiang's Sketches of Shanghai's Society in the 1930s

Martina CASCHERA

Cartoon master Lu Zhixiang's artistic production offers notable glimpses into timeless aspects of Shanghai's metropolitan modernisation in the 1930s, providing particular insight into the plight of the underclasses. In this essay, Martina Caschera argues that Lu's work is not only particularly representative of the ideal approach to artistic creation strongly upheld by leftist intellectuals in that epoch, but can also be useful as we reflect on the social dynamics of present-day China.

Migrant workers crowding together into metropolitan landscapes. Coming mainly from the countryside, they float in the streets looking for decent housing, a reliable job, maybe a purpose. Today's China? Not at all. I am describing Shanghai in the 1930s.

The present essay focuses on Lu Zhixiang (1910–92)—a cartoon master committed to the representation of these timeless aspects of Shanghai's metropolitan modernisation. In it, I argue that the cartoonist's work, despite not receiving much scholarly attention, is particularly representative of the ideal approach to artistic creation strongly upheld by leftist intellectuals at that time. In particular, I propose an analysis of selected cartoons from his two collections *Zhixiang's Collected Sketches* (志序素描集) and *Society Sketches* (社会素描)—both published in 1936—in order

to illustrate some distinctive communicative choices that represent the complexity of 1930s society from a sociopolitical stance. Ultimately, the essay aims to illustrate how these artworks, which belong to another era, can be useful as we reflect on present-day dynamics.

Cartoons as Social Criticism

There is not much information about Lu Zhixiang's early life. We know that he was born in Suzhou, where he received formal artistic education, and that he caught a severe cold when he was still a child, lost his hearing and, gradually, the ability to speak. In his early twenties, Lu had already started publishing drawings and cartoons in a number of local and national magazines, and was soon befriended by Lu Shaofei, Ye Qianyu, and Hu Kao (Bevan 2016; Bi and Huang 2006; Wei 1994), members of the *manhua* circle (漫画界), a group of influential intellectuals and artists involved in almost every activity related to the creation and dissemination of *manhua* (cartoons) during the 1930s. Although Bi and Huang (2006) do not mention Lu's name among the founders of the Shanghai Cartoon Society—the first organisation explicitly dedicated to cartoons, established in 1926—recent research demonstrates that he was one of them (Bevan 2016).

During the 1930s, Lu Zhixiang was art director for *Modern Miscellany* (时代), an influential pictorial produced by the artist and patron Shao Xunmei. 1936 was a crucial year in his life, as he joined the National Association of Chinese Cartoonists, took part in the organisation of the first National Exhibition of Chinese Cartoons, and published the two collections of *manhua* sketches mentioned above: *Zhixiang's Collected Sketches* and *Society Sketches* (Huang et al. 2010, 188). Both works were enthusiastically received by one of the leading authors in the *manhua* circle, Ye Qianyu. 'With a sharp sight and a thoughtful

brush,' he commented, '[Lu Zhixiang] borrows social phenomena and expresses people's sufferings, desolation, difficulties, and poverty, winning aesthetical and mindful appreciation' (Huang et al. 2010, 189).

Although Lu was considerably less influential (and sociable) than Ye, the two had something in common: they were both famous for a style called the 'cartoon sketch' (速写漫画), which employed exaggeration as an expressive technique and focussed mainly on social phenomena. If we consider cartoons as metaphorical constructs that synthesise complex concepts and function as *instructional texts* in times of crisis (Wagner 2011), these cartoon sketches can be seen as portraying reality by programmatically focussing on specific exemplary figures and settings, and by exaggerating shapes and expressions in order to highlight particular social phenomena that defined the era. Although interest in cartoons had been already flourishing for some time in China by the mid-1930s, the social component in this style of sketches meant that they became particularly representative of the leftist sociopolitical discourse. To have a rough idea of the diffusion of this artistic form, one just has to think that of the 16,000 newspaper articles about *manhua* and *manhua*-related events published from the late nineteenth century through to the 1940s and now collected in the Shanghai Digital Library—around 10,000 of which were published between 1934 and 1939 alone.

Short Essays and Cartoons (小品文和漫画), a special issue of the leftist magazine *Venus* (太白), is particularly representative of how progressive intellectual circles came to look upon *manhua* in the mid-1930s. In these short essays, socially- and politically-aware writers and critics—such as Lu Xun, Wu Zuxiang, Ma Guoliang, and Ye Zi—defined cartoonists as being charged with the historical mission to *construct* a *manhua* that could metaphorically represent and effectively synthesise the contradictions of the era. From an analysis of their discourses, the cartoon artist emerged as the subject of an heuristic process articulated

in a few steps, with the first one being 'observation' (观察). According to artist and critic Huang Miaozi, the artist had to 'observe carefully', 'open the eyes and run into society', because those who work 'behind a closed door cannot produce anything valuable' (Chen 1935). Wu Zuxiang further elaborated on the necessity of personal involvement as a further step, rooting it in the critical situation China was experiencing at that time. 'Everything I see or hear every day is terribly serious. Since I face these things, I cannot humour up (幽默不起来),' he wrote, stressing the importance of avoiding humorous 'detachment' (超脱风度).

The last essential step was representing the 'deepest' (深刻) aspects of reality. Ma Guoliang wrote that it was 'really difficult to make a deep *manhua*.' 'There are only two kinds of *manhua*,' he maintained, the 'lyrical' (抒情) and the 'satirical' (讽刺). The former 'is like a poem without words'; the latter 'is like a dissertation without words'. In his opinion, if a cartoon did not outshine a poem or a dissertation, it could not have been good. He then moved on to criticise contemporary 'leftist' cartoonists for being lazy and shallow in representing society, and therefore unable to powerfully 'seize the era' (雄据时代). For instance, he complained about how, in order to criticise the female 'cult of money' (拜金主义), they just focussed on women's eyelashes and legs, and they merely juxtaposed the characters for 'rich' and 'poor' to point out social inequalities.

The contributors to the issue also touched upon the political nature of *manhua* and its pertinence in the debate about the role of art and artistic freedom. Huang Shiyong's opinion that 'modern *manhua* is undoubtedly a work of mass art' was shared by two other contributors (Chen 1935). At the same time, although they did not employ such explicit terms as 'mass' (大众 or 民众) or 'majority' (大多数), other authors still referred either directly or indirectly to the 'lowest strata of the population' (下层 or 底层).

In sum, according to the contributors of this special issue, the ideal leftist cartoonist should have been able to observe and delve into

societal conditions, express deep humanity, and display a preference for the masses, while also possessing unique communicative skills and a recognisable style. They were profiling Lu Zhixiang.

A Young Old Master

In the late 1930s, Lu Zhixiang was already described by his colleagues as an ‘old’ master who had reached a considerable maturity in the field of *manhua* (Lian 1937). According to Bevan (2016, 135), Lu Zhixiang, Cai Ruohong, and the other younger cartoonists ‘responsible for the shift to the left’ that took place in the mid-1930s, were all tied together by a common model, the German artist George Grosz (1893–1959), who was mostly famous for his sociopolitically-charged cartoons and caricatures.

As a matter of fact, cartoon historians and even Lu Zhixiang’s contemporaries stress that in the 1930s Lu had already evolved from a mostly imitative initial phase, when his works showed a resemblance first to Symbolist and Decadent taste and then to the works of the German artist and cartoonist George Grosz. By that time, he had reached a personal style characterised by ‘bold’ (苍劲) and ‘fluid’ (流畅) lines mainly using pencils and pens, which gave his works a ‘fresh and clumsy’ impression (Huang et al. 2010, 188).

Lu had also inherited and fully processed Grosz’s special interest in the ‘working masses’ (劳苦大众), and especially in the ‘working people of the lowest social strata’ (社会下层的劳动人民) (Huang et al. 2010; Bi and Huang 2006). For this reason, his work shows a great correspondence with the ‘call’ launched by the left-wing intelligentsia. Both this discursive link and the peculiarity of Lu’s discourse are better expressed by the choice of representing society as a whole, and not through a rough juxtaposition of poor/rich characters. The *wholesomeness* of his works underpinned by his unique capacity for observation, often

described as connected to his deafness. From an iconographical perspective, this is rendered by the combination of selected components, each one of them charged with the same intensity.

Lu himself, when introducing his first collection in 1936, stressed his intention to grasp ‘the all-encompassing features’ (包罗万象的面目), while also highlighting his interest for ‘extremes’ (e.g. ‘the edge’ 尖端 or ‘the extremity’ 尽头) and the central role that the masses played in his view of society. In the same introduction, he explained the physical bonds between the works included in the collection and the real world: ‘This is the record of a bunch of *real* (真实) social situations that I encountered in the process of living.’ This honesty unravelled in the subsequent description of the modern city as a combination of places—fancy restaurants, skyscrapers, dancing halls, roads as ‘arteries’ for cars as well as piers and crowded alleys—and characters—from ‘prettified’ (涂脂抹粉) women who just want have fun to the men and women who sell their bodies (出售身体的男女) (Lu 1998b, i–ii).

By reading these lines, we immediately notice the imaginative power of Lu’s writings. His cartoons also exhibit a peculiar *multimodal quality*: long, descriptive titles (verbal component), and dialogue with lines and shapes (iconic component), in order to both preserve the literary value of the text and build a complex metaphorical construction that draws on more than one semiotic code. In many occasions, the author shows his talent in exploiting the power of relay by managing the iconic and verbal components as if they were ‘fragments of a more general syntagm’ (Barthes 1977, 41), as exemplified in figure 1.

In this lyrical *manhua* (figure 1), the words help to further illustrate not just the action of the scene, but also the ideological reference to unbalanced power dynamics. Lu is not overemphasising some typical characteristics or showing objective disadvantage, he is portraying the desire and pleasure through the depiction of their ‘gaze’ (what Lacan calls *le regard*). According to the psychoanalytic

approach in visual studies, the ‘practices of looking’ are crucial in the formation of subjects and their social relationships (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). In this case, the voyeuristic gaze, usually charged with negative connotation, expresses the disadvantaged ‘viewing relationship’ characteristic of semicolonial societies. The involvement of the reader—to whom the actual scenery behind the fence is precluded—in this desiring gaze is aimed at obtaining deep emotional response, even empathy for those subjects whose life is defined by contrast.

The centrality of the concept of ‘human body’ (身体) in Lu’s discourse is proven by both the recurrence of the term and the indirect references to it. Figures 2 and 3 exemplify this point. In the first image, some prostitutes are portrayed exposing themselves with dignity to men’s—as well as the viewer’s—

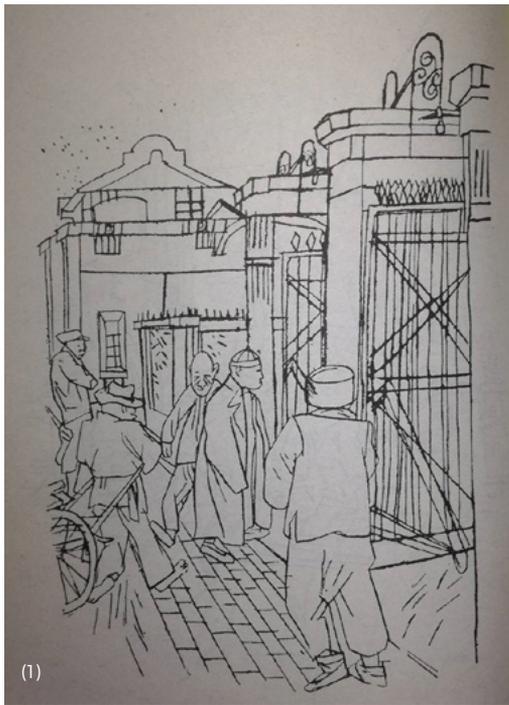


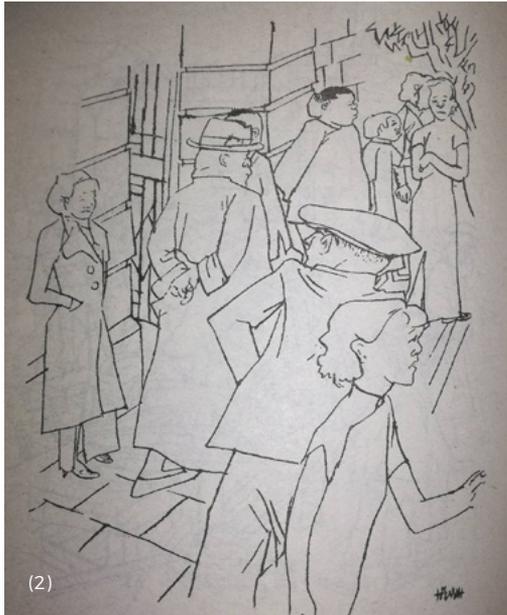
Figure 1: ‘The difference between the foreign and the Chinese border’ (租界与华界的区别).

desire. Two of them have serious faces, one looks sad. Although the title indirectly implies a chauvinist reference to modern women’s ‘cult of money’, a classic subject in leftist visual propaganda, here the moral stance is not based on the vilification of women but rather on praise: prostitutes are not sexually charged nor described by exaggerated dramatic details. They are provided with a morally valuable agency.

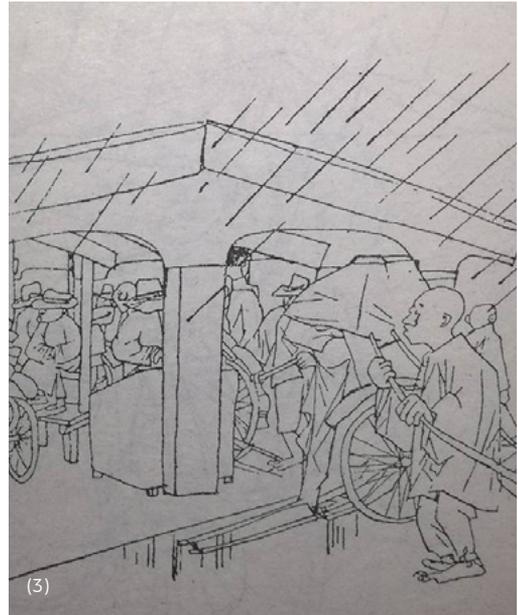
In ‘Every labour demands the contribution of our own body’ (figure 3), the human body is directly mentioned to further illustrate the ideological charge of the image. Here, a group of workers is caught resting or trying to take refuge from the rain. The ‘safe’ space portrayed as shrinking, stuffed by people and objects—mainly rickshaws—gives the viewer a sense of precariousness and pressure.

Besides representing the working class ‘on duty’, many cartoons are also dedicated to people who ‘do nothing’. On one side of the moral spectrum, there are those whose lifestyle is based on exploiting the working class, usually portrayed while having fun in flamboyant social activities or wasting time and money gambling. The *manhua* in figure 4 is a case in point: the men in the first row seem bored, caught lazily looking at their objects of desire while they wait for their turn. Rather than exaggerating negative details, Lu prefers to convey detachment by arranging a setting where not only would the viewer feel like an outsider, ignored by everybody and excluded from the fun, but also the depiction of the men themselves also conveys the same feeling.

On the opposite side of the moral spectrum, Lu Zhixiang places the neglected category of *migrants*. In semicolonial Shanghai, the term ‘migrant’ (流民) defined a specific category of people, i.e. those who ‘did not have a stable housing and [who] live in an extremely temporary or unstable employment condition’ (Ma 1996, 46). Such a definition included a wide range of city dwellers, spanning from beggars to different kind of *coolies* (苦力). Lu employs it especially to address the condition of extreme precariousness and uncertainty



(2)



(3)



(4)

Figure 2: 'Women who don't sell their soul' (不售灵魂的女人). Figure 3: 'Every labour demands the contribution of our own body' (没有一个劳力不贡献自己的身体). Figure 4: 'These ones rely on the blood of common people to preserve this consumption of life' (这些人依赖平民的膏血去维持这种生活消费).

these people were enduring. As we can see in figure 5, a group of young unemployed migrants is caught in a timeless moment. Two characters look at the viewer, bringing him/her into the scene, while the other three just drape themselves over the railings—we can imagine their eyes lost in the river waves.

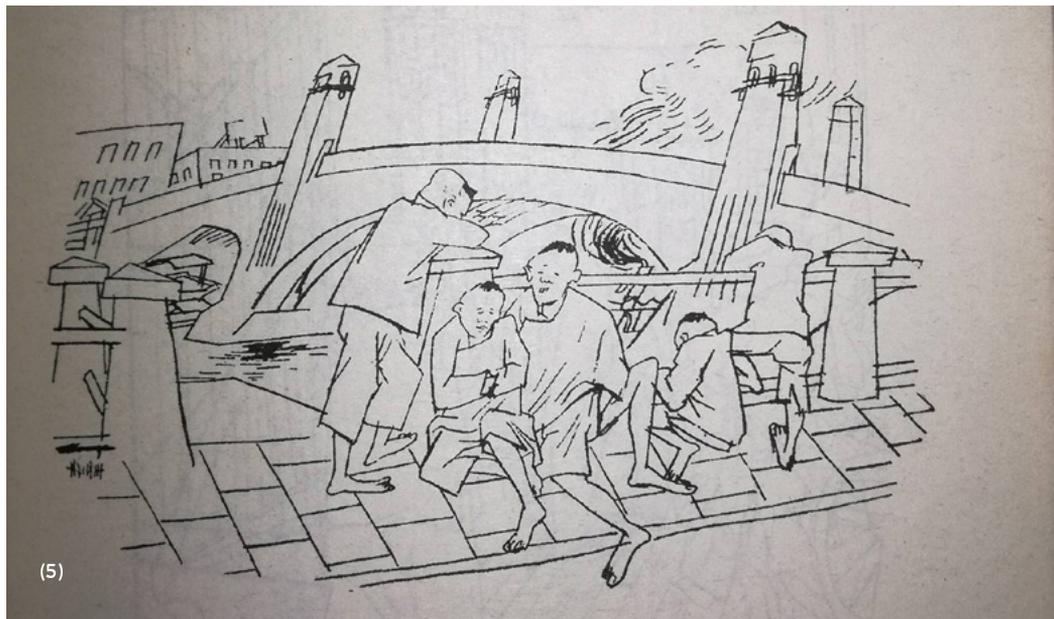
The stillness of the migrants in figure 5 contrasts with the ongoing action caught in ‘The door between city and countryside’ (figure 6). Here, some migrants, the majority of which came from the surrounding countryside, are depicted as passing through a threshold in order to grasp the opportunities offered by modernity. It looks like an ordinary scene: two are going to bring their things through, while another comes towards the viewer, who is included in the flow of people and objects, but is too far removed to be considered one of them.

To conclude this excursus, I selected a cartoon that represents the dichotomy between the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ axes, a common trope of the era. The opposition—i.e. the uneven competition—between the representatives of different social classes envisioned the superior one as owning the vertical dimension of the skyscrapers, and the inferior as roaming horizontally in the streets. In ‘Ups and downs of life’, Lu shows sympathy for the people who live on the river, arranging a setting that gives the viewer the perspective of a middle class wanderer who catches all the contradictions of a metropolis in one glance. Nice architectures and blank space fill the higher half of the images, chaotic and unstable ‘dwellings’ and overlapping shapes the lower. More generally, the contrast is rendered by the density of lines, which influences the overall *modality* and increases the emotional involvement. This last aspect is addressed also by the presence of two human beings captured as looking ever more downward.

A Sensitivity That Transcends the Age

These social sketches published in 1936 aimed at introducing to the reader a specific construction of reality. As an ideal leftist cartoonist, Lu Zhixiang was able to enlarge his view to catch every detail—maybe also as a result of the isolation due to his hearing loss—while delving into the contradictions and conditions of his contemporary society. He then cut, rearranged, and paired the images with long descriptive and often provocative titles, requiring the involvement of both the hearts and minds of the viewers.

His works are not easily digestible, neither during his time nor today. However, despite the sociopolitical charge, the artist retained a sort of lightness, a desire to sustain the less fortunate while representing nuanced contradictions, which was rooted in a peculiar sensitivity and ensured both deep sympathy and aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, and maybe even more importantly, Lu’s art is worth considering in the context of present-day China. The socioeconomic inequalities expressed by—and through—physical exploitation, the problematic relationship between city and countryside, as well as the desire and disenchantment of the subjects portrayed in Lu’s works, all appear useful to reflect on how, or if, society has really changed over the past century. ■



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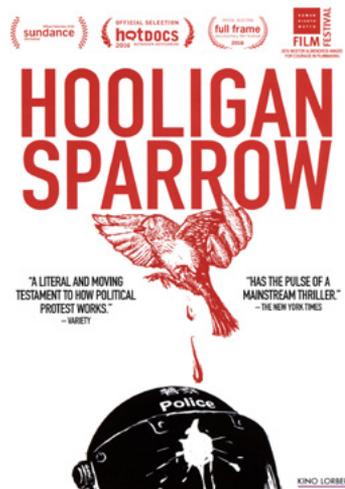


(6)



(7)

Figure 5: 'Migrants who drift aimlessly' (漂泊来的流民). Figure 6: 'The door between city and countryside' (城里和乡下的门户). Figure 7: 'Ups and downs of life' (生活的高下).



Hooligan Sparrow
(2016) and Wang Nanfu



Hooligan Sparrow

A Conversation with Wang Nanfu

ZENG Jinyan, TAN Jia

After her return to China in June 2013, Wang Nanfu, a postgraduate from New York University, trained her camera on Ye Haiyan, an activist for sex workers (see Tiantian Zheng's essay in this issue). In Hainan province, she filmed Ye's protests against the sexual assault of several primary school girls by their principal, and the ensuing repression. The local government went out of its way to silence the relatives of the victims, their lawyers, and activists who had mobilised in support. Human rights lawyer Wang Yu—who had accompanied Ye Haiyan to Hainan—was even arrested for alleged subversion of state power. The film captured the whole story, from the moment when Ye and her daughter were chased, threatened, monitored, and eventually expelled by plain-clothes police until their return to their hometown, a small village by the Yangtze River.

Born in the 1980s in Jiangxi province, director Wang Nanfu holds three master's degrees conferred by New York University, Ohio University, and Shanghai University. Her first documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* debuted at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, won numerous awards at human rights film festivals, and made the shortlist for the 2017 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. This article is an excerpt from a Q&A session that took place during the *Desiring China* movie-screening series curated by Zeng Jinyan in 2016.

Q: The soundtrack of the director's video diaries and the voice-over in the film are both currently in English. Is this because the film initially targeted an international audience? Previously entitled *On the Way to Hainan*, an earlier version of the film was screened and discussed on different occasions. What were the considerations behind the major revisions of *Hooligan Sparrow*, resulting in the final version of the film?

A: When I first started filming *Hooligan Sparrow*, I had no idea that the movie would develop in its current direction. At that time, I was studying in New York, making several short videos about sex workers in the city. Many of them were proud of their work, and incredibly open and happy to tell stories about their relationships with clients. At that time, I only knew of Ye Haiyan from social media. I had heard that in the past she worked at a shop offering sexual services to migrant workers for 10 yuan. Growing up in a village in Jiangxi province, I also saw many uneducated women going to the city, not being able to find work, and becoming sex workers, only to be looked down on and discriminated against when they returned to their home villages. I wanted to return to China and look into the living conditions of sex workers, but I did not have a clear idea that I would be making a film about women's rights.

When I contacted Ye Haiyan, I hoped that she could introduce me to her sex-worker friends, and that through her I could obtain their trust and maybe even interview or film them. When I returned to China, I immediately got in touch with her. She told me that she was currently working on the case of the Hainan elementary school students who had been sexually assaulted by their school principal and government officials. The case had already been covered widely by the media, both new and traditional, but I instinctively thought that there would definitely be stories that had not been reported. So I told her that I would follow her to Hainan. From that moment, many things changed and it was no longer the story that I had initially envisioned.

Regarding the different versions of the film, each work of art has to go through a process of countless revisions. In early September 2013, after I finished filming, I returned to New York. It took about seven months of editing—from September 2013 until February 2014—to complete the initial version, which was rather rough. I showed it to many people including friends, classmates, teachers, and people with experience working in film, and asked them for feedback. Taking into account their opinions, I began reediting it. At that time, I had a full-time and part-time job, so I could only edit at night or in the hours when I was not working. Overall, I spent another year to prepare the final version of the film.

Between the different versions of the film, I remember facing several large challenges. The story was rather complicated; it was not only about the Hainan case, not only about Ye Haiyan, and not only about the protest, but rather about a series of interconnected things that had been triggered by the revelations of sexual assault. The entire government attempted to stifle the voices of everyone involved in the case, including myself. The challenges I faced were how to tell this story clearly, in a way that would not make people confused and wonder about the whole point of the movie.

Another issue was that it did not occur to me that I would actually put myself into the narrative of the film when I was filming. This changed during the editing process. The things that happened to me and the story that I was trying to tell about Ye Haiyan were the same, and a good example to elaborate the subject of the film. In the past, I was never involved in ‘rights defense’ incidents. I was also not very politicised. None of my family members and no one in the environment in which I grew up were involved with politics. But in a short period of under a week when I was filming Ye Haiyan’s campaign ‘Principal, get a room with me, and leave the school girls alone’ (校长, 开房找我, 放过小学生), the State Security Bureau started to call my family members and interrogate my friends. Going through this, I realised how fast the reaction was to constrain the influence of people speaking out, and finally decided to include my own story in the movie. My story could embody the complicated structure of the larger narrative. In short, I was faced with the question of how should I grasp my own role in the film, and how much of myself should be in it, while ensuring that my own role would not eclipse the focus of the film but would not be too trivial either?

You mentioned video diaries, which is actually very interesting. The first time I held a video camera was after I arrived in the United States in October 2011 for graduate studies. Probably everyone who studies abroad has this kind of experience—feelings of loneliness, hardship, and other complex emotions. At that time, I did not know anyone, I was just one person in a new country, studying what was for me an entirely new profession as I had no previous experience with filming and editing. I did not know where my future would be. In the United States, even high school students probably understood more than me; they would have been more familiar with the media, seen more movies, been more skilled with video cameras, and been more fluent in English than I was. At that time, I felt uncertain and insecure. But studying film was for me a new mode of expression. When I was in China, I worked hard at writing, and enjoyed expressing my innermost thoughts. But after I came to America, the channels for telling stories and

expressing myself suddenly became fewer and narrower. When I discovered the video camera, I felt that this was perfect, I could look at the world through the camera lens, and convey my own acute and sensitive discoveries. During that time of loneliness when I was studying for more than 18 hours a day, the camera was my only companion. As long as I was awake, I would be filming and I would use this form to record my life. As soon as I got home, I would put the camera on the tripod, and if I had any large emotional conflicts, I might record them. From this, I cultivated the habit of talking to the camera. Later when I started to make films, it was a natural continuation of that habit.

When I was filming *Hooligan Sparrow*, I made several video diaries because I felt very perplexed and astonished by what was happening. I would frequently ask them 'how could it be like this' and often would feel emotional ups and downs. At that time, the phone was monitored, and I also could not talk with many family members and friends; in the end, I could use these video diaries in the film. I was speaking both English and Chinese, maybe because I lived in the United States for several years and was in the habit of speaking English, and also because I was in a situation in which I could not communicate with anyone, it was a way to maintain distance and have a conversation with myself. The film narrative is in English because I realised that it would be difficult, extremely difficult, to screen the film in mainland China, and the only way that Chinese-speaking people from mainland China, Hong Kong, and other places could see the film would be if it had some impact and exposure in the Western world. If some people from the Western mainstream media and film circles reported on and discussed the film, one day maybe Chinese audiences would become curious about it, and want a chance to see it. This was my original intention when I was editing it.

At that time, what I was most worried about was not my personal safety but the film material. My camera and footage made me the most nervous. At some level, I thought that if I recorded, and had footage, then I had a weapon, and a means of resistance. I even thought that if they arrested me and locked me in prison, as long as I could film the process, at some level, I would still win. But the moment that they snatched away my footage, I would truly have no power to resist, and no value whatsoever. For this reason, I felt at that time that nothing was more important than the footage. I also made backup plans, and sent some material to friends in the United States and told them that if I was arrested, they needed to edit and share what I filmed.

So far this film has been screened hundreds of times in 20 countries and on public television in the United States. And slowly Chinese audiences are starting to express a desire to see it, and asking: ‘Where is it possible to see this film?’ Now I am thinking about how it can reach China. Although it would be very difficult to publicly screen it, finding other channels for people to watch it would still be good enough, including downloading it from the Internet. For this reason, I made another version a few months ago in which I changed the narrative from English into Chinese but the content is exactly the same.

Q: The creative process behind making *Hooligan Sparrow* is really interesting. It could be said that you are a very young new generation female director. Your ‘authorial consciousness’ comes across strongly in the video diaries. The audience could see many film scenes that did not happen to take place in front of you but were instead consciously chosen by you to use in the film. *Hooligan Sparrow* was your first movie, and in the credits we saw that your list of team members mentions several names of people who are internationally famous in the film industry. When did these people become involved in the film? What role did they play?

A: No movie is ever made by one person alone. It is possible to film or edit independently, but in the end, for the film to be seen by an audience requires the strength of a team. This was my first movie. Up until that point, I had no qualifications, no background, I did not even know anyone in the United States, and even if I had known someone, it would still have been difficult to find a team. Apart from the creative process, this was my largest difficulty. When I graduated from New York University, it was a struggle to find work; after I finally found a job, I started to slowly edit the film and I gradually realised that even if everyone told me that this was an excellent story and also a great film, if I did not find a channel and way for audiences to see it, it would just be gathering dust at home. So I began to realise that I needed to find help, including financial help, and help from people with experience, and that is how I finished making the movie.

My solution was to look for successful documentaries, and then find out who were in their production teams, who provided support behind the scenes and whether their topics were relevant to mine. For example, I knew that my film was about politics, human rights, and China, so I began to find details about similar films that were hugely successful in Western countries.

Q: *Hooligan Sparrow* does not focus solely on Ye Haiyan but instead tells a story about the network dynamics of the ‘rights defense’ movement—a group of people that includes both those at the forefront of the movement and those behind the scenes. The film depicts what happened after they finished their protests on the beaches in

Hainan, as well as their everyday realities. If I recall correctly, the initial version of the film even included scenes in which they went to local night markets and karaoke. These scenes left a deep impression on me [Zeng Jinyan] because they shattered the stereotypical image of activists as inflexible people who only chant slogans on the streets; I was deeply attracted by the richness displayed in these scenes. I do not know why you decided to cut these scenes, so this is my first question. As for the second question, the latter part of the film includes a scene about a village funeral. I personally cannot connect this scene to the theme of *Hooligan Sparrow*, and would thus like to ask what were your considerations when editing this part of the film.

A: The first scene that you mention is one of all of the women going out after their protests to karaoke and night markets near the beaches in Sanya, Hainan province. It was about one or two minutes. I kept a small fraction of the night markets scene but omitted the karaoke scene. The reason for cutting this is that the people who I asked for feedback on early versions of the film usually referred to these scenes as being slow or confusing. They would ask: ‘Why did we see these women going to karaoke?’ ‘What did they do in karaoke bars?’ Perhaps going to karaoke is a very common type of entertainment in China, but the karaoke scenes always gave rise to all kinds of questions and made it impossible for other people to follow the story. ‘Did they go to karaoke to enjoy themselves?’ ‘What is the connection between their going to karaoke and the story in the film?’ All in all, the karaoke scenes slowed down the pace of the story rather than drive the story forward. A very important principle for film editing is that each scene should be a bridge and stepping stone for the next scene. For this reason I cut many scenes from the film.

There were also lots of discussions about the funeral scene, whether it should be kept in the film or left out. Just as you did, many people wondered what was the connection between the funeral and the story; after all, it was not a funeral for her family. The funeral is one of my favourite scenes; as for whether it should be kept in the film, some people like it, whereas others do not. The reason why I like the funeral scene is that when I was filming this part, it was one or two days before I left Ye Haiyan’s home and, at that time, witnessing death and seeing things come to an end echoed my innermost feelings. During the full three months of filming all kinds of things happened, and life changed a lot for everyone. At the end of the process, the feeling of desolation when witnessing death moved me personally in myriad ways. After all, this movie also would come to an end, so I decided to include the scene. Some people told me that they could feel and understand the symbolic meaning of funeral in the movie. I therefore decided to keep it.

Q: You said that having made the film, you obtained a new understanding of China, the place where you grew up. How did the filmmaking process change your perspective?

A: I met many people during my studies who grew up in China but, in the end, decided to study in the United States. And by chance, one of them had a stopover in Hong Kong on his way to the United States, and bought some books at the airport in Hong Kong, only to find out stories about the Tiananmen Square Incident and many other events that he had never heard of before. It was this experience that transformed him. I feel that for many people who were born and grew up in mainland China, there must be a moment or event that has reshaped their understanding of the entire society.

I, however, also encountered many other friends who studied abroad and had a different reaction. Having become aware of my film and experiences, these people usually said to me: 'Why did you decide to reveal such negative events?' I told them that this is how it is, and that I was only documenting what really happened. They would say: 'Your decision to make the film will only further damage the image of China. As a Chinese person, you should strive to forge a positive image of China. Even if something negative happened, you should solve it within China rather than expose it internationally.' This is one line of thought that is rather prevalent.

I was at a public screening in New York once. Halfway through the screening, a student who was studying filmmaking in New York noticed that I was outside the door. He then ran to me and asked: 'Director, I want to talk with you one moment about a question I have.' I said to him: 'You don't want to finish watching the film?' He said: 'I can watch the film later. I want to chat with you first.' I replied: 'Okay, then what is your question?' He said: 'I know that politically-themed films are the ones that mostly win international awards. Is winning such an award the foremost motivation behind your choice of the theme of your film?' I replied: 'If you look at me in the film, do you think that I knew at that time I could win an award for making the film?' He said: 'Maybe you didn't, but still is it because you believed you could win an award that you selected this topic as the theme of your film?' This is a second line of thought.

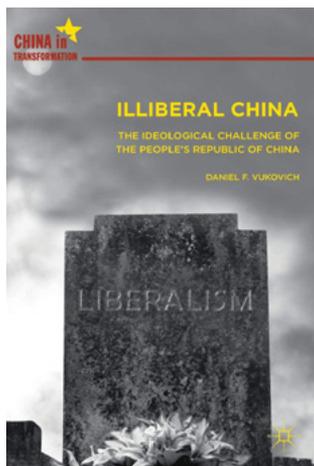
The third line of thought I have encountered also came from my friends. These friends would say: 'Yes, I admit that many negative events have been happening in China, and I know some of them. But I still think that maintaining security should be prioritised. You don't want to see China plunge into wars and people's livelihoods become difficult, do you?'

These lines of thought make me feel that a person's way of thinking does not necessarily change simply because of their surroundings. Of course surroundings may facilitate change,

because there are more channels of information and access to books, films, articles, and people that were previously unavailable. That said, the kind of thoughts, worldviews, and philosophy you have still depends on your own thinking. It depends on whether you have always thought independently and reflected on what has happened rather than blindly believing what you saw, heard, and were taught. All of these factors will shape a person's way of thinking.

When I finished *Hooligan Sparrow* and looked again at my country, my emotions became very complicated. Because I am Chinese—a fact that I can never change—I love China, my entire family is still there, and I hope that I will see the country become a much better place. At the same time, I also realise that the road ahead is long. These mixed feelings of love and hatred echo what has recently happened worldwide, including how many Americans felt despondent after Trump became president. Can it be that this represents a type of universal condition? When you feel this kind of shock, I think that your way of looking at the entire world will change to some extent. ■

(Translated and adapted by Christian SORACE and Nan LIU)



Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China (Palgrave MacMillan 2019).

Illiberal China

A Conversation with
Daniel Vukovich
Christian SORACE

Over the past decade, Western depictions of China have either held up the country's political culture as a model or demonised it as a danger to liberal societies. But how do mainland politics and discourses challenge 'our' own, chiefly liberal and anti-'statist' political frameworks? To what extent is China paradoxically intertwined with a liberal economism? How can one understand its general refusal of liberalism, as well as its frequent, direct responses to electoral democracy, universalism, Western media, and other normative forces? These and other questions are at the core of Daniel Vukovich's latest book, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

Christian Sorace: In your book, you argue that the People's Republic of China 'takes the power of ideas, policies, and ideologies far more seriously than other "normal" or "free" societies'. And that this not only explains why the state often overreacts and censors, but also why *politics is more alive* there than it is in places where speech may be guaranteed but entirely ignored as a matter of private opinion. Can you explain why this is the case and the consequences this has for how one should approach the study of China?

Daniel Vukovich: It must have a number of roots (e.g. a long tradition of moralism), but I would also index the seriousness attributed to political speech and ideology within the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition, which after all does say that 'theory as well as its absence' can be motor forces in history when seized upon by the masses (or by a big enough chunk of the populace or power-elite). Think of all those academics, researchers, and think tanks who—gasp!—want to be read by, and do research for, 'the state', and some are indeed used. So speech and ideas matter, beyond the obvious fact that the Party-state believes in the projects of propaganda and censorship. If you, the individual or citizen, the intellectual or worker or protestor, as well as your state/system believe in this power of words and ideas, then there are some real stakes involved. The state responds, too often repressively to be sure—increasingly so under Xi—but also productively and more positively in many instances. Can we adapt a line from *The Wire* and say 'the game is the game'? But it is not one for cowards.

As for consequences, it means we should not merely debunk citizens who use what some deride as ‘Maospeak’, or who ‘righteously’ appeal to their own state for redress, or who take official Marxism or national propaganda seriously, or who are into ‘essentialist’ traditions (e.g. Confucianism, ethnic fashion) and so on. We can assume they, the people we are writing about and whom we are supposed to be answerable to, do not care about ‘our’ *a priori* distinctions between official/unofficial, and so on. We can take a break from the search for a hidden civil society/public sphere along the lines of some pure/fantastic European model, and instead ponder the one China has in its own positivity. What if politics is not about individual rights or (negative) freedoms but something more collective, general, or material? Liberalism is just one form that politics or intellectual-political culture can take, a form that is mostly absent from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The historical ‘rejection’ of liberalism offers some resources for hope about a return to statist politics and the primacy of economics and ‘livelihood’. If a state’s legitimacy turns on these things—or can improve them—then that is a good thing.

CS: You argue that part of what drives the anti-China sentiment that is pervasive in the West is the fear of a strong state, and you show how this anti-statism cuts across the political spectrum from neoliberal doctrine to the anarchistic/libertarian tendencies in Foucault. But how does China challenge, rather than play into, such a deeply engrained anti-statist framework?

DV: In part just by its persistence, and its success—the Party line about ‘lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty’ since the 1980s is propaganda and tendentious, but it is also a truth. The state-owned enterprises, all those jobs and the state control of those sectors of the economy, are an obvious, anti-neoliberal case in point. The state has been willing to tolerate their inefficiencies in some cases, just as it can tolerate the ‘ghost cities’ when they occur. These market-planning failures have not mattered because they are explicable by the scale of the planning, and because the Party-state draws on a different, ‘illiberal’ logic. The ‘commanding heights of the economy’—i.e. ambitious macro planning—are still achieved through the huge party apparatus. In the rush to demonise the state, there has not been adequate critical appreciation of the rationality and justness of planning and command.

One of the New Left’s most salient points is that there is *too little* state in China, if the goal is, as it should be, to move the system towards social democracy, what with revolution being off the table (and having already happened). We have to think through the *legitimacy* of the so-called statist system—it would be an exaggeration though not wrong to say the state is

everywhere and involved in everything. But if this same system is legitimate or consistently achieves consent (or assent) then the anti-statist doxa is wrong and mostly useless. Unless you want to claim that the majority are brainwashed or irrational. Most people do not hate the state in China, or elsewhere. The PRC reminds us that the state is the very terrain of politics and the political, and something that you cannot not want.

CS: You dedicate two chapters of the book to the 2014 Umbrella Protests in Hong Kong and the 2011 Wukan Uprising in Guangdong. What are the main political differences between these two movements?

DV: The short answer would be the liberalism and occidentalism of Hong Kong, as well as an uninterrogated faith in procedural democracy within the ‘opposition’. In contrast, Wukan represented a more pragmatic, economic, and greater social-justice orientation movement. Wukan was more ‘statist’, drawing on the tradition of a righteous/rightful resistance, and resulted in new elections, at least a partial restoration of land and resources, and more recognition from the government. There can be a progressive and not just a reactionary illiberalism. Wukan illustrated both, in the end—a radically ‘democratic’ and then intolerant state when the protesters returned years later again to challenge the old land theft issues. Hong Kong’s movement resulted in nothing practical and if anything has set back political-electoral reform for years. It became depoliticised due to zealous attachment to an ideal of autonomy and the ‘real’ meaning of the Basic Law. But it is/was significant as a semiotic or imaginary movement (*not false* but imagined), a welcome eruption of protest and participation, and a dénouement of the 1980s liberal-democracy movement. Hong Kong people (like everyone else) are practical and will find a way to make demands over the terms of integration and consent, rather than decrying a loss of autonomy in what is historically a Thatcher-esque, laissez-faire ‘society’.

Elections are nice, but neither the main enemy nor saviour. That is the lesson from both protests: total commodification—via ‘free’ markets and property speculation—of the countryside, or of the city, is what needs to be confronted. Otherwise *both* places will become unliveable. It will take more protest, not less, but ones aimed at inclusion- or state-action, not at autonomy or individual liberty. The main issue should be political economy.

CS: Despite its flaws, China under Mao provided inspiration to anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and anti-racist struggles throughout the world. In the book, you praise today’s China for its willingness to exert its ‘difference’ and ‘exercise its voice’. While this made

sense as a description of Mao's foreign policy, does it still hold true today? In light of China's promotion of 'economic globalisation' and controversial investments abroad, can China really be said to offer an 'anti-imperial' position today?

Belt and Road, China in Africa, and so on, follow Adam Smith far more than Mao. The break is clear. Yet China offers better business deals than say the World Bank or the United States with their 'extra' demands. That's not anti-imperialist, but it seems more fair and even 'liberal' in a good way. All these projects and loans have yet to play out in real time, so it is a stretch to claim they reveal Chinese imperialism and colonialism, as opposed to a 'consensual' capitalism and/or investment.

If despite its flaws the Soviet Union's presence in the world system was good for, say, Palestine, then can China's rise be good today for other places? It is an open question at any rate. China will resist US hegemony, and act according to its own, perceived self-interest. This can lead to imperialistic bullying (in the south Pacific) but also to opportunities for others to productively triangulate their relationship with the United States and the West. Others, even common people, can benefit from the Chinese economy, and China's approach to trade at least holds the *possibility* of less dictatorial relations within the global system.

As for difference and voice—more my actual concern in the book—the rise of New Left discourse and other forms of 'knowledge power' are happening. These take many forms, for example neo-Confucianism; the booming academic sphere with its own protocols and publications; the official and unofficial anti-liberalisms and anti-universalisms; and what is often called the growing 'cultural awareness' and 'confidence' of the people and the state. These phenomena are often disparaged as mere nationalism, but they all point to a certain 'writing back' to the dominant liberalisms and from universalist codings of politics, economics, and culture. I am not arguing this is all anti-imperialist in some radical, left-wing sense; but it is a countermovement against (Western) universalism and 'our' political norms and values.

Let's see what flows from this, as politics and thinking continue to change in China and elsewhere in our bleak, bleak times. The state is going to have to be a major, renewed concern, and made to triumph over the market and capital (it has never stopped being a central concern on the mainland but even *liberal economism* is reaching its limits). Liberalism is a degraded failure, politically and intellectually. It does not even explain Chinese dissidence. The planet is in crisis. The commons (their theft), the communist horizon, the general intellect and will—these things are back on the (theoretical) agenda. ■

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Yi Xiaocuo is a doctoral researcher who has lived in China and is now based in North America. The phrase *yi xiao cuo* in Chinese originally means ‘a small bunch.’ It is a recurring term in the Chinese Communist Party’s historical discourse to denigrate critical voices. Writing on a wide range of topics such as the politics and history of China and borderlands, Yi Xiaocuo uses this pen name to reclaim the political stance of social justice that is often underrepresented and stigmatised by the state’s propaganda machine.

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Zeng Jinyan writer, scholar, and documentary filmmaker, was the 2017 Oak Fellow at Colby College. She earned her PhD at the University of Hong Kong in 2017. Her book *Feminism and Genesis of the Citizen Intelligentsia in China* (City University of Hong Kong Press 2016) received a Publishing Award in the Social Science category of the 2017 Hong Kong Publishing Biennial Awards. Zeng co-directed the documentary film *Prisoners in Freedom City* with Hu Jia (2007), wrote the script for the animation short *A Poem to Liu Xia* (Trish McAdam 2015), and produced the feature documentary film *We The Workers* (2017).

ZHANG Leilei

Zhang Leilei is an activist for gender equality and LGBTQ rights in China. She was part of the group who planned to hand out stickers with an anti-sexual harassment message on the eve of International Women’s Day 2015, though not one of those arrested who later came to be known as the feminist five. Zhang has gone on

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Zheng Churan (also known as ‘Datu’) is a Chinese feminist activist who has been campaigning against gender discrimination and sexual harassment in China. In 2015, she was arrested along with four other feminist activists, collectively known as the ‘Feminist Five’, for organising a public campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. In 2016 she was selected by BBC as one of the 100 Women of the Year.

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