

MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



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**ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE
BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE**



MADE IN CHINA
JOURNAL

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Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere

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The *Made in China Journal* (MIC) is a publication focussing on labour, civil society, and human rights in China. It is founded on the belief that spreading awareness of the complexities and nuances underpinning socioeconomic change in contemporary Chinese society is important, especially considering how in today's globalised world Chinese labour issues have reverberations that go well beyond national borders. MIC rests on two pillars: the conviction that today, more than ever, it is necessary to bridge the gap between the scholarly community and the general public, and the related belief that open access publishing is necessary to ethically reappropriate academic research from commercial publishers who restrict the free circulation of ideas.

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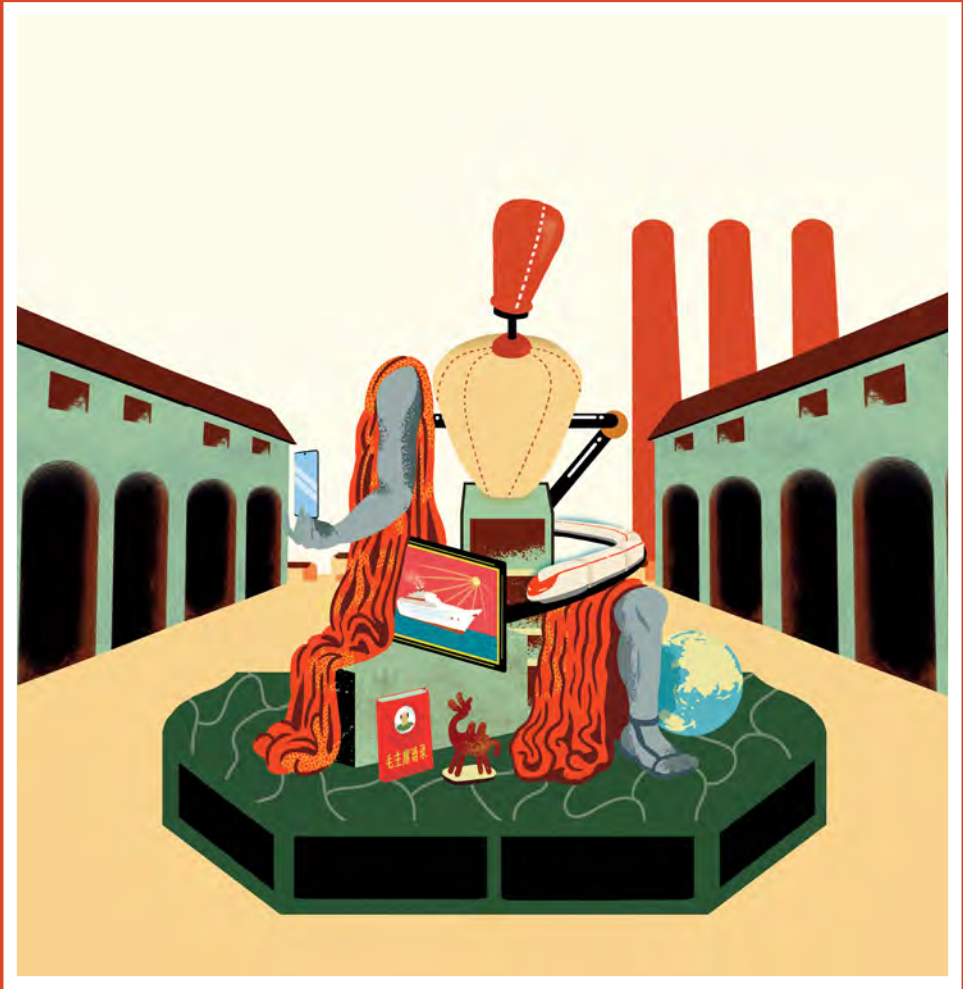
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EDITORIAL

Archaeologies of the Belt and Road Initiative

Since its announcement in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the main lens through which both observers and stakeholders trace China's global footprint. Whether cheered on as a new engine of economic development in a fraught and increasingly unequal world or frowned on as a masterplan through which the Chinese authorities are attempting to establish global hegemony, the infrastructure component of the BRI has become such an important frame in discussions of Global China that less tangible aspects that are not in its purview tend to be lost or overlooked. One of these neglected dimensions is China's long history of international engagement aimed at building economic, political, social, and cultural ties in both the Global North and the Global South. Frequently, we tend to forget how the international presence of Chinese actors we are currently observing did not just happen overnight but is, rather, built on decades of experience of China's interaction with the rest of the world. In the belief that examining these historical precedents can help us shed light on both the continuities and the discontinuities in the practices of today and that only by digging into the dirt of history can we excavate the roots of the dynamics we are witnessing, we chose to dedicate this issue to the 'archaeologies of the BRI'.

The special section of this issue includes 11 essays. **Maria Adele Carrai** opens with an analysis of China's political use of history and heritage in the context of the BRI, with particular attention to the risks and geopolitical implications of this type of 'chronopolitics'. **Marina Rudyak** looks at Chinese discourses of foreign aid, tracing the origins of certain declared principles at the centre of China's current practices—that is, political non-interference and aid for independent development—to the early days of the People's Republic

and highlighting how historical memory continues to play a significant role in China's interactions with developing countries. **Hong Zhang** traces the history of China's international contracting industry, explaining how it mirrors China's shifting role in the global economy from a labour exporter to a capital and technology exporter, and now serving to project Chinese state capitalism in the global economic periphery. **Jamie Monson** describes the lived reality of Chinese and African workers on the construction sites of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway in the 1970s to provide insight into the significance and long-term impact of infrastructure development in China–Africa engagements across time and space. **Taomo Zhou** tells the backstory of the BRI by tracing the voyages of a ship that, during the Mao period, functioned as a vessel not only for passengers and commodities, but also for Maoist ideology, before being retired and turned into a dynamic field experiment for the market economy in Shenzhen. **Matthew Galway** examines China's cultural engagements with Mexico, Ghana, and Italy during the Mao era as historical precedents for the 'people-to-people exchanges' the Chinese authorities are pursuing today through the BRI. **Covell Meyskens**, interviewed by **Matthew Galway**, discusses how the often-overlooked Third Front Campaign of the 1960s and 1970s shares some uncanny similarities with today's BRI, both in its emphasis on infrastructure and in the way in which this mobilisation has ensconced industrial society in China's hinterland. **James Gethyn Evans** presents the case of the Black Panther Party in the United States and its connections with the Chinese Communist Party in the Mao era to show how Maoism was received by organisations within the First World that considered themselves part of the global Third-World struggle against oppression. **Matthew Erie** uses the history of legal relations between Pakistan and China as a window on to the question of how small states hedge different yet overlapping international legal orders. **Greg Raymond** shifts the attention to Southeast Asia, illustrating how the BRI builds on plans that were first laid out by the Greater Mekong Subregion program, but at the same time mark a transition from an era of liberal economics to one of geoeconomics. Finally, **Andrea Braun**

Střelcová examines the recent phenomenon of Chinese universities ‘going global’ through the lens of the BRI in Central and Eastern Europe, unearthing the colonial origins of Chinese universities and contextualising the ongoing tension between the global and local dimensions of China’s higher education system.

The issue opens with five op-eds. In the first, **Kevin Lin** tackles the recent policy innovations aimed at protecting labour rights in the gig economy in China, explaining why we should not put too much faith in the promises of the official trade union. In the second, **Fabio Lanza** discusses the fascination with China for many on the left in the long 1960s as well as today. In the third, **Ling Li** argues that Xi Jinping could choose to revive the office of the Party Chairman to stay in power after the end of his second mandate. In the fourth, **Natalie Bugalski** and **Mark Grimsditch** look into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank’s practices to ensure that its clients operating in high-risk countries implement international environmental and social standards in their infrastructure projects. Finally, **Matthew Galway** looks back at the life and political career of the late Abimael Guzmán, also known as Presidente Gonzalo, the leader of the infamous Partido Comunista del Perú–Sendero Luminoso (Communist Party of Peru—Shining Path). In the China Columns section, **Changhao Wei** analyses recent changes in the ‘recording and review’ process that China’s national legislature uses to ensure that major categories of legislation enacted by other governmental bodies conform to national law and policy. **Mary Ann O’Donnell** reconstructs the experience of Shenzhen over past decades, putting urban villages in their historical context and unpacking the unacknowledged moral judgements that often underlie our understanding of these places. **Guangzhi Huang** examines the representations of foreigners of different ethnicities and backgrounds on *China Central Television* and argues that, while the state may be relaxing permanent residency restrictions, it favours white foreigners because of racialised assumptions about the high levels of education and expertise that supposedly come with their whiteness.

The issue also includes a forum on Chinese feminism and (self-)censorship edited by **Zeng Jinyan**, in which five prominent feminist scholars and activists—**Wang Zheng**, **Ye Haiyan**, **Xianzi**, **Feng Yuan**, **Dušica Ristivojević**, and **Huang Yun**—explore the problem of how to deal with the impact of ideological conflicts between China and the West, and to develop strategies for dealing with local and international (self-)censorship of Chinese feminism. The Global China Pulse section features four pieces. In the first, **Irna Hofman** delves into the reality of personal and labour relations in Chinese agribusinesses in Tajikistan, focusing on the interactions between Chinese men and Tajik women. In the second, **Mark Grimsditch** discusses the implications of President Xi Jinping’s recent announcement that China will no longer build new coal-fired power plants abroad through a thorough examination of what this means in the case of Cambodia. Finally, in the last two pieces, **Sarah Milne** and **Sango Mahanty** provide us with some insights into the human tragedy unfolding in the wake of the construction of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam in Cambodia. They do so through an essay accompanied by the photos of **Thomas Cristofolletti** and an interview, conducted in collaboration with **Soksophea Suong**, with Cambodian artist **Sreymao Sao**.

The cultural section of the journal includes a review essay by **Ivan Franceschini** about neoliberal academia and the corruption of language in our universities today. **James Flath** then considers the emergence of a post-industrial China through an examination of the ‘social’ and ‘antisocial’ lives of an industrial glass-forming machine in Shanghai. We conclude the issue with two conversations about mass internment in Xinjiang, the first between **Sean Roberts** and **Matthew Robertson** and the second between **Darren Byler** and **Ivan Franceschini**. ■

The Editors

BRIEFS

May-Aug 2021

MAY-AUG 2021

More Arrests and Trials

In the spring and summer of 2021, China continued its heavy-handed approach to activists and dissidents. Having pled guilty on 11 May to ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’, Chen Mei and Cai Wei, who had archived censored articles on the COVID-19 pandemic in China, were sentenced to 15 months in prison on 13 August, but released two days later after their time in the detention centre was taken into account. On 27 May, imprisoned Australian writer Yang Hengjun was tried for espionage behind closed doors. In a letter released before his trial, Yang claimed that China was ‘taking revenge’ on him and vowed to ‘face suffering and torture with resilience’. Having also faced secret trials, the three Changsha Funeng NGO workers Cheng Yuan, Wuge Jianxiong, and Liu Dazhi were sentenced in late July to five years, three years, and two years in jail, respectively, with Liu Dazhi reportedly released from prison on 22 July. Also in late July, Chinese billionaire Sun Dawu, who was outspoken about human rights and other politically sensitive topics, was sentenced to 18 years in prison. And dissident poet Li Huizhi committed suicide amid ongoing police surveillance. In late August, citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was reported to be in ill health due to her ongoing hunger strike in prison, and Fang Ran, a PhD student at a Hong Kong university whose research focuses on China’s labour issues, was reportedly put under residential surveillance at a designated location for ‘inciting subversion of state power’. *JL*

(Sources: ABC News; AP News; BBC News; Deutsche Welle; Front Line Defenders; Practice Source)

Latest Wars of Words about Xinjiang

In the spring and summer of 2021, China’s treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang remained an international flashpoint. During a virtual UN meeting on 12 May, Western countries led by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, along with human rights groups, accused China of committing grave human rights abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang and demanded unimpeded access to the region be granted to UN experts. In response, China denounced the meeting as being ‘based on lies and political prejudice’. A report published by Sheffield Hallam University on 14 May provided evidence that components needed to build solar panels might be produced by forced labour in Xinjiang. While this finding was dismissed by China as ‘an outrageous lie’, US authorities decided to ban imports of some Xinjiang-produced solar panel materials and restrict exports to several Chinese companies implicated in human rights abuses in Xinjiang. On 20 May, the European Parliament passed a motion to freeze the ratification of a massive investment deal with China until the Chinese Government lifted its Xinjiang-related countersanctions on European politicians, researchers, and organisations. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Parliament became the latest legislature to declare China’s treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang ‘genocide’. In late July, following strong criticism from Chinese netizens, Kodak deleted from its Instagram page a series of landscape photos of Xinjiang taken by a French photographer who described the region as an ‘Orwellian dystopia’; it also apologised on its WeChat account, stating that it ‘respects the Chinese government and Chinese laws’. On 27 July, Moroccan authorities said a Chinese Uyghur activist had been arrested on his arrival in the country, based on a terrorism warrant issued by Interpol at the request of China; the arrest, perceived by activists as politically driven, sparked fears that the Uyghur activist would be extradited to China. *JL*

(Sources: African News; AP News; CNBC; CNN; Global Times; Hong Kong Free Press; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC; Reuters)

Repression in Hong Kong

In the spring and summer of 2021, new waves of repression swept through Hong Kong. In late May, imprisoned media tycoon Jimmy Lai was given an additional sentence of 14 months in prison for ‘organising illegal protests’, two weeks after his assets were frozen by authorities. On 4 June, the vigil for the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests was banned for a second consecutive year, and vigil organiser and activist Chow Hang Tung was arrested by Hong Kong police. A museum commemorating the Tiananmen protests was also closed amid official investigation. In late June, following the retroactive application of the National Security Law (NSL), five editors of Jimmy Lai’s newspaper, *Apple Daily*, were detained, and the newspaper shut down. Hong Kong police also arrested five people on suspicion of publishing ‘seditious’ children’s books. On 30 July, the first verdict under the NSL was issued against protestor Tong Ying-kit, who was sentenced to nine years in jail on terrorism and secession charges. Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s Education Bureau severed all ties with the city’s largest teachers’ union after Chinese state media labelled it a ‘malignant tumour’; the union disbanded several days later. Having been arrested on corruption charges relating to his performances at a political rally three years ago, singer and activist Anthony Wong was released in early August after prosecutors dropped the charges. On 15 August, the prodemocracy group Civil Human Rights Front disbanded, citing government pressure. Adding to the growing list of arrestees were four student leaders from the University of Hong Kong, who were accused of ‘advocating terrorism’. After announcing in June that future movies in Hong Kong would be checked against the NSL, authorities stated in August that past films would also be scrutinised. *JL*

(Sources: ABC News; Al Jazeera; AP News 1; AP News 2; BBC News; CNN; The New York Times; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; South China Morning Post; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The Guardian 3)

Underwhelming 2020 Census Sparks Three-Child Policy

In early May, China’s National Bureau of Statistics released the results of the 2020 census. Official numbers show China’s population grew to more than 1.4 billion, increasing more than 5 per cent from the previous decade. The results reveal a slowing growth rate: only 12 million babies were born in 2020, which was an 18 per cent decline from 2019 and the lowest number since 1961. As a result, China’s fertility rate is now 1.3, which is well below the 2.1 needed to maintain a stable population. In addition, the proportion of citizens aged over 65 increased almost 5 per cent in the past decade—indicating a rapidly ageing population. Chinese authorities may have inflated the official numbers to avoid falling below 1.4 billion, as some media outlets reported, which may explain the government’s month-long delay in publishing the census results. Attempting to diffuse the looming demographic crisis, in late May, the Chinese authorities introduced a ‘three-child policy’. This replaces the ‘two-child policy’ from 2016, which itself replaced the ‘one-child policy’ from 1979, both of which were created to cap exploding birth rates. The previous policies were ruthlessly enforced through financial penalties, forced contraception, and forced abortions inflicted on millions of women. Now desperate to reverse the tide, the government announced numerous measures to incentivise childbearing, promising to abolish ‘social upbringing fees’, increase parental leave, expand childcare services, and create more playgrounds. However, very few people are ready to buy into the new policy. A *Xinhua* poll asked whether people wanted to have more children, and 90 per cent of the 30,000 respondents replied that they would ‘never think of it’. The poll was later deleted. The increasingly high cost of raising children and their burden on women’s career prospects remain overwhelming impediments to bigger families. *AK*

(Sources: China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; NPC Observer; Reuters; South China Morning Post; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; The Financial Times; The Guardian; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; The Wall Street Journal)

Regulatory Crackdown Raises Hopes for Delivery Workers

A flurry of regulatory scrutiny and new government policies rocked the Chinese delivery industry in the spring and summer of 2021. In April, the government antitrust watchdog launched an investigation into Meituan, sending its stock plummeting by US\$60 billion over two days. In July, the government ordered Meituan to pay its workers the minimum wage, further tanking its stock, which is now down 50 per cent from its peak in February. In August, various ministries met with delivery platform companies Meituan and Ele.me to demand they improve safety and labour rights protections, specifically by guaranteeing insurance, income above minimum pay, and lighter delivery deadlines for their workers. Soon after, the People's Supreme Court released a memo declaring the infamous '996' work practice—working from 9 am to 9 pm six days a week—'a serious violation of the law pertaining to maximum work hours'. The law permits 36 hours of overtime a month, but in practice the number can reach 128 hours. Regulations struck from yet another front, as the Cyberspace Administration of China released new policies forcing delivery companies to change their algorithms to improve 'platform order distribution, remuneration, working hours, rewards and punishments, [to] protect workers' rights'. In response to these measures, six major delivery companies vowed to increase customer delivery fees to boost their couriers' incomes. Other companies also bent to President Xi Jinping's worker agenda, as JD and Didi became the first big tech companies to establish company-wide unions. While the move was hailed as unprecedented, these unions will be subsumed under the government-backed All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which typically focuses on alleviating employee grievances and promoting work safety rather than directly challenging companies' treatment of workers. *AK*

(Sources: **Bloomberg 1; Bloomberg 2; China Daily; China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Nikkei; NPR; Pekingology; Protocol; QQ; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The Wall Street Journal**)

LGBTQ+ Groups Under Assault


In the second quarter of 2021, worsening conditions for women and LGBTQ+ people in China were again in the spotlight. In July, WeChat deleted dozens of LGBTQ+ accounts run by Chinese university students without warning, sparking concerns over worsening intolerance of sexual and gender minorities in China. The clampdown on the community continued in August, as a leaked document circulating on Chinese social media revealed the high-ranking Shanghai University had ordered its colleges to compile lists of all students who identified as LGBTQ+ and report on their state of mind and psychological condition. On 9 August, *Jianjiao Buluo* (尖椒部落), an online platform created in 2014 on which female Chinese workers could share and discuss their experiences, announced it was shutting after receiving heavy pressure from the authorities. When, in early August, Gong Lijiao gained a historic victory in the women's shotput at the Tokyo Olympics, a reporter for a state-run broadcaster called her a 'manly woman' and asked about her plans for 'a woman's life'. These remarks were widely criticised on Chinese social media and set off a heated debate about the stereotypical portrayal of women in China. Also in August, Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu was arrested on suspicion of rape after sexual abuse allegations, raising hopes for a resurgence of the #MeToo movement in China. However, as the authorities rapidly erased the online presence of Wu from Chinese internet platforms, commentators became concerned that the focus might be related more to the government's moves to crack down on online fame culture and the entertainment industry than to addressing sexual violence. A week after the arrest of Wu, rape accusations against a manager at Chinese tech giant Alibaba brought the #MeToo movement back into the spotlight again. Amid a social media outcry, Alibaba fired the manager accused of rape, who was then detained by police. Nevertheless, soon after, Alibaba also fired 10 employees for leaking sexual assault accusations. (*LL & DG*)

(Sources: **China Digital Times; Quartz; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; South China Morning Post; Sports.163.com; SupChina 1; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The Guardian 3; The New York Times 1; VICE**)



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OP-ED

The Chinese Trade Union to the Rescue: A Real Solution to Platform Workers' Woes?

Kevin LIN

During a conversation we had a few years ago, an international trade unionist shared with me an anecdote from a recent encounter with a Chinese trade union. A delegation of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) had travelled overseas and met with his organisation as part of semi-regular exchanges. This was at a time when such international meetings between trade unionists in China and elsewhere were frequent, and when there was much mutual interest in learning about each other's labour development and trade union activities (Quan 2017). In their meeting, among other topics, the ACFTU delegation inquired about organising truck drivers, which the said trade union was known for. Why would the ACFTU delegation be interested in this? The encounter took place not long after a truck drivers' strike across multiple cities in China, in June 2018. During the period of militant strikes by factory workers in the early 2010s, strikes by truck drivers were rare, and even rarer were strikes coordinated across the country. This must have concerned the ACFTU, especially considering its inability to grasp how to address the grievances of truck drivers.

The ACFTU did not have much experience with truck drivers, and not just because they did not protest as much as their counterparts in factories. As often happens, such a shortcoming was also shaped by the institutional structure of the ACFTU, which, from the national headquarters all the way down to its provincial, municipal, and district levels, mirrors that of the government—that is, primarily based on administrative regions. Even though it does have some affiliates organised along sectoral lines, the ACFTU is for the most part not structured according to industries and sectors like most traditional trade unions around the world. Typically, trade unions emerge from organising at the workplace level and then federate along industrial lines; in addition, you might see city and

regional-level trade union councils and federations that coordinate industrial unions within their region. This is not the case with the ACFTU, which is organised on the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, in a vertical structure mirroring the layers of the Party-State. So, when workers in the same industry but in different workplaces across multiple cities have a common grievance, the ACFTU finds itself ill-equipped to deal with the situation.

It turns out that the striking Chinese truck drivers were protesting high petrol prices and arbitrary traffic fines, as well as the unfair practices of the platform companies that hired them as independent contractors. Just as the platform economy has now subsumed ride-hailing and delivery in China, it has also penetrated the long-haul transportation industry that supports China's e-commerce logistics infrastructure (Lin and Pun 2021). The platform in question was operated by Manbang, a conglomerate that operates in much the same way as Didi or Uber, by sending out orders and getting truck drivers to compete for them. Following a pattern common to platform capital elsewhere, before the strikes, Manbang had executed a merger of two transportation platforms to secure a near monopolistic position in the industry. Its monopolistic practices put downward pressure on the truck drivers' incomes by compelling them to lower their rates. This situation thus presented a new set of challenges from the more traditional employment relations most familiar to the ACFTU.

Deja Vu

Recent official announcements by Chinese ministries such as the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Supreme People's Court regarding the illegality of the tech companies' working-hour practices—the so-called 996 culture of working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week—and orders for tech companies to establish trade unions represent the latest attempts by the Chinese authorities to address labour rights violations in the platform economy (Supreme People's Court 2021). Previous calls by the ACFTU to unionise delivery and other platform workers, in 2015 and 2018, reportedly increased union membership by more than 6 million, but it is unclear to what extent these unions protected workers' rights (China National Radio 2020). In response to these latest developments, in early September, big names in the platform economy such as Didi and JD announced that they had established unions (Toh 2021). However, the very fact they made such an announcement should be reason for caution and even scepticism. To observers of Chinese labour relations over the past few decades, a lot of this feels like *deja vu*. Only a decade ago, in the wake of the dislocation caused by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and a historic strike by workers at a Honda plant in Guangdong in 2010, we heard similar calls by the authorities for companies to rectify labour rights violations and

Previous calls by the ACFTU to unionise delivery and other platform workers, in 2015 and 2018, reportedly increased union membership by more than 6 million, but it is unclear to what extent these unions protected workers' rights

establish unions (Worker Daily 2010). Then, as now, labour unrest concerned the authorities, and the ACFTU was called in to undertake the unionising of workers in previously non-unionised sectors.

Even before that, highly publicised unionisation campaigns had focused on transnational companies such as Walmart and Foxconn. In the mid to late 2000s, one of the most notorious anti-union companies in the world, Walmart, became a target of the ACFTU as it sought to establish a degree of control in foreign-owned businesses. Workplace unions were established with considerable and sometimes direct ACFTU support at Walmart stores in China (Chan 2007), even though management would later thwart these unions through targeted firings and by getting their own people to compete for election (Unger et al. 2011). And, in the early 2010s, trade unions were similarly established in Foxconn after public pressure to improve workers' conditions following a string of employee suicides in 2010. The union at Foxconn went as far as to hold a supposedly democratic election for union leadership, even though the records of these trade unions were less than impressive, with the company seeming to have shunned the development of the trade union in its mega-facilities from the very beginning, as evidenced by the fact that many workers were not aware of and did not participate in the union election (Chan 2017).

Restarting from Scratch

It seems that Chinese workers are now having to start from scratch again. It is by design that workers in the platform economy are being recommodified in the sense of being denied legal protections associated with employment relations. As most platform workers are classified as independent contractors, the gains in legal protection and a more balanced labour–management relationship brought by factory workers and labour activists over the past three decades do not much apply to them and they have once again had to rediscover how to protect themselves from blatant rights violations and managerial abuses. However, they seem to be learning fast, if recent waves of protest are any indication (Liu and Friedman 2021).

The situation looked rather different a decade ago, towards the end of the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao era. Fundamental labour and trade union reforms were in the air, and discussions of worker representation and collective bargaining were all the rage at academic conferences and labour NGO gatherings (Franceschini and Lin 2019). Policymakers openly recognised the need for such reforms. In retrospect, the foundation of worker representation and collective bargaining in the experiments that took place at the time was still weak and limited to certain regions and workplaces, and the reforms had powerful opponents within the ACFTU. However, it is undeniable that there was a real yearning for and momentum towards the formalisation of union representation that accepted a growing

degree of worker participation through the democratic election of trade union representatives. This was to incorporate workers into the emerging industrial relations system and counter growing workers' strength through institutionalisation. Even with this rather moderate goal, it was widely pointed out by scholars and activists that any trade union imposed from above by either the ACFTU or employers would be unlikely to represent and involve workers.

At that time, the broader circumstances were much more favourable for the trade unions to play a meaningful, if still constrained, role. While most factory workers were primarily concerned with wage issues and uninterested in unions, there were many workers who were genuinely looking to create membership-run unions because they realised that, without worker representation, the problems they had to deal with would recur. Moreover, momentum for better labour protection at the national level under the 'Harmonious Society' agenda created space at the local level to experiment with trade union reforms that allowed limited worker participation (Pringle 2011). In that context, all kinds of local trade union experiments took place, however uneven in their degree of worker participation and success.

These factors are largely missing today. The recent protests by delivery workers in China have not generated any strong demands for trade union representation despite the emergence of informal networks among platform workers across the country that served as mutual aid and organising tools. Chen Guojiang, commonly known as Mengzhu, led the most noticeable effort to create a semi-formal structure for workers to make their demands explicit (Mengzhu 2020). For this, he was detained, along with several other delivery workers, in February 2021. In this sense, these mobilisations are part of a global pattern that sees platform workers in some countries seeking better pay directly, while in others, focusing more of their organising on legal recognition of their employee status and union representation (Joyce et al. 2020). The pattern is, of course, not absolute, may vary over time, and is contingent on the local industrial relations system and trade union movement. However, without grassroots demands for trade union representation, there is a near certainty that any union established by companies will end up being controlled and manipulated by employers. In addition, the ACFTU's internal momentum for reforms has retreated significantly since the 2000s. While it may still talk about unionising workers, the momentum and space for reforms to increase worker representation are simply not there anymore.

Common Prosperity?

While genuine worker representation remains elusive, many still have some hope that the broader regulatory crackdown will put enough pressure on companies to make much needed changes as

part of the ‘Common Prosperity’ (共同富裕) agenda. There are signs that companies have been complying better with the law. For instance, the reduction of working hours is already happening in some tech companies under regulatory pressure, but the government is performing a delicate balancing act, too. At the same time as it tightened regulation over tech companies, a *People’s Daily* (2021) front-page article sought to reassure the commercial sector that private business interests were still respected. It emphasised that

the status and role of [the] non-public economy in our national economic and social development have not changed! The policy of unwavering encouragement, support, and guidance of non-public economic development has not changed! The policy of creating a favourable environment and more opportunities for non-public economic development has not changed! (People’s Daily 2021)

This rather pessimistic assessment can perhaps be balanced by the fact that the issues of working hours and overwork are a much more mainstream concern than a decade ago. This is largely because these issues have been afflicting white and blue-collar workers alike—that is, a large percentage of the working population. This means the problem can no longer be relegated to the side, out of public view, seen as relevant only to migrant factory workers. It also cannot be dismissed as the unreasonable demands of a few individual labour activists, labour lawyers, or academics. As a society-wide conversation about work has already taken off, even setting up unions in a couple of big companies or holding them legally accountable may be too little, too late in addressing concerns that are deeply rooted in the labour recommodification brought about by the platforming of work.

If the global pattern of platform workers organising across all sorts of political and economic systems is any guide, when workers cannot depend on established trade unions to channel their grievances, they may opt to start their own informal networks and organise grassroots unions of their own, as we have witnessed in China and elsewhere. This is despite all the (mis)conceptions about platform workers lacking the power of factory workers. Such global momentum towards labour organising in the platform economy is unmistakable and shows no sign of slowing, even recognising that Chinese workers face considerable constraints on their ability to mobilise. There is no shortcut. We are and should be moving back to the basics of labour interest representation. Only authentic worker participation and representation will ensure that workers’ rights are properly protected. ■



'Awakened peoples, you will certainly attain the ultimate victory!' Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1963.
PC: Landsberger Collection.

Of Rose-Coloured Glasses, Old and New

Fabio LANZA

*Qualcuno era comunista
perché vedeva la Russia come una promessa
la Cina come una poesia,
il comunismo come il paradiso terrestre.*

— Giorgio Gaber

On 18 September 2021, the Qiao Collective co-organised an all-day conference on the topic of 'China and the Left: A Socialist Forum' (The People's Forum 2021). The speakers, who participated either in person or via Zoom, included scholars of China but also noted 'leftist' intellectuals, from Vijay Prashad to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Radhika Desai. The forum was co-sponsored by the *Monthly Review*, the People's Forum, and Codepink. The Qiao Collective (2021)—a 'volunteer-run group of diaspora Chinese writers, artists, and researchers working to challenge escalating Western imperialism on China'—has in the past two years evolved from a Twitter account to a full-blown online publication and has become a loud pro-China voice in the United States and in global political discourse. While the various presenters at the forum took different approaches, and some arguments were more nuanced than others, the overall tone was very supportive of the current regime in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and extremely critical of US policies in Asia as well as of Western media coverage of China.

Events like this exemplify what seems to be an increasingly visible and vocal presence of pro-PRC positions within the so-called left, in the United States but also worldwide.

These positions, often subsumed under the disparaging moniker ‘tankie’—a term that was originally used to describe leftists who supported the line of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, with specific reference to those who supported the deployment of Soviet tanks to suppress the Hungarian revolution of 1956—present historians with the second instance in which ‘China’ has featured as a politically significant conceptual category for activists around the world. The first such instance was, of course, the long 1960s, when, as Italian actor, singer, and songwriter Giorgio Gaber jokingly remembered in the epigraph above, ‘some were communists because they saw Russia as promise, China as poetry, and communism as heaven on earth’. Then, as today, sympathy for the People’s Republic was inspired by and inextricably connected to an anti-imperialist stance—specifically, US imperialism. In the 1960s, US imperial policy manifested its most brutal and evident expression in Asia, with the Indochina War. In that context, the position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in support of Vietnam, and the very constitutive character of the PRC as an anticolonial state, made it possible for anti-imperialist radicals around the world to see China as a viable, peaceful alternative not only to the United States but also to the Cold War duopoly in general. Today, when a ‘new Cold War’ has been all but declared and the US Government aims to complete its long-heralded ‘pivot to Asia’, the PRC, soon to be the largest economy in the world, has come to represent for some the only possible adversary to US imperial domination—the only power capable of resisting and perhaps thwarting American plans. For many on the left, the fascination with China, in the long 1960s as well as today, originated in what were very much US-centric concerns.

Reappraising Global Maoism

For radicals in the 1960s, however, and for the tankie left of our day, anti-imperialism was and is only the initial step, and only one facet of a ‘leftist’ political positioning. The long 1960s witnessed the emergence of what is usually called ‘Global Maoism’, when French students called themselves *Chinois* and the Black Panthers hawked copies of the *Little Red Book* on Telegraph Avenue (Lanza 2019; Evans 2021). Today, in the analysis of the Qiao Collective, US imperialism is the main perpetrator of mass murders and human rights violations (an argument with which one could easily agree), and the PRC is the only significant bulwark against it. In Qiao’s view, China is not just an economic competitor in the global capitalist system, but also represents an existing socialist alternative, ‘an anti-imperialist, socialist nation’, whose true nature Westerners are prevented

from seeing clearly because of ideological blinders—a kind of false consciousness caused by US global hegemony (Qiao Collective 2021). China, in this perspective, was, is, and has always been socialist and Deng Xiaoping’s marketisation did not configure a deviation from Mao Zedong’s socialist policies but rather an innovative step on the road to achieving socialism (Hioe 2020).

In recent years, the experiences of those who looked at China in the 1960s with a hopeful if overly rosy gaze have been objects of historical reappraisal. But the dominant assessment of Global Maoism maintains it was nothing more than an infantile, romantic fascination, which was, at best, productively outgrown and, at worst, reneged on (Wolin 2017; Lovell 2019). One could be tempted to dismiss today’s tankie approach to China in the same way—as an echo of that history. I have argued (along with several others) that we should take Maoism (and Global Maoism) seriously, meaning we should consider it a *politics* that people embraced not as a pure mirage, but as a theory and a praxis that responded to both universal and localised issues (Lanza 2017). I would also argue that we should take the current pro-China stance seriously, even though I believe it is wrong and possibly delusional. It nevertheless reveals something about the current situation and the possibilities for a global leftist movement. Yet these two pro-China stances—that of the 1960s and that of today—are not similar in any meaningful way. This is not just because they developed under very different historical and political contingencies, which they did, but also because they embody radically different (or rather antithetical) political positions. That the pro-China stance is now embraced by intellectuals and activists who have a direct connection to the longer history of the global left—Prashad’s Tricontinental Institute links back to the history of the Non-Aligned Movement, while Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s own history of activism dates back to the 1960s—is revelatory of a crisis on the left and the general collapse of its sets of references, more than of any actual similarity between this moment and that of the 1960s.

Maoism was central to and foundational in shaping the global activism of the long 1960s, because the experience of the Maoist revolution ‘made sense’ to intellectuals, students, revolutionaries, and rebels within their own historical circumstances.

At the Roots of the Fascination with Maoist China

Let’s first look at what made Maoist China, especially the China of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, attractive to anticolonial fighters in Africa, students in Turin and San Francisco, and workers in Paris. This is, of course, a story of rose-coloured glasses, wilful credulity, Potemkin villages, and very well-arranged trips to promised lands; there was plenty of illusion and delusion. That said, however, I have argued—along with Fredric Jameson (1984) and others—that Maoism was central to and foundational in shaping the global activism of the long 1960s, because the experience of the Maoist revolution ‘made sense’ to intellectuals, students, revolutionaries, and rebels *within their own historical circumstances*. First and foremost, China offered the example of a revolution among

a non-European, non-white people who were avowedly anticolonial and anti-imperialist (at least until 1972 and the Nixon rapprochement). It was a revolution waged by peasants who triumphed despite adverse political, strategic, and historical conditions. In that, the Chinese Communist Revolution offered inspiration to anticolonial movements globally, including Black Liberation activists in the United States, who saw themselves as part of the global struggle of the colonised against the (white) colonisers (Kelley and Esch 1999; Frazier 2015).

At a time when capitalism was undergoing its first postwar crisis and Soviet developmentalism looked much less promising, Maoist China also seemed to be experimenting with an alternative economic model—one in which industrialisation and enrichment could be pursued in a more humane and more equalitarian fashion. That search for an economic alternative failed, and it failed tragically, as the disaster following the Great Leap showed. But it was a sincere, shared, and stubborn quest nonetheless—one that engaged with crucial problems of socialist political economy (wages, the law of value, forms of ownerships) through both theoretical debate and practical experimentation. This was also connected to a more general and radical critique of the production of knowledge. Since the Yan'an period (1935–47) and especially through the principle of the 'mass line', Maoism embodied a new epistemology, based on the principle of radical equality vis-a-vis knowledge, which ultimately claimed for the peasant, the worker, and the illiterate revolutionary the prerogative to engage in literature, art, science, management, and politics—a prerogative no longer reserved for the artist, the intellectual, the expert, or the politician (Smith 2021). The Cultural Revolution, then, represented just the most radical and direct attack by students on the established locations of the production of knowledge: the school system, its stultifying effects, its lingering class bias, its inherent inequality. Students around the world, from Berkeley to Nanterre, recognised the struggle of their Chinese peers and adopted the moniker of 'red guards' in their own radical critique.

Finally, the Cultural Revolution challenged the position of the Communist Party itself. When independent organisations were allowed to rise outside the CCP (to stage an attack against the establishment) and workers took over directly (if briefly) the government of Shanghai, that signalled that the party was not any more the privileged location for politics nor was it the true and sole representative of the 'working class'. That crisis inspired and was refracted in the crisis of 'leftist' parties and workers' organisation all over the world, to the point that, by the end of the 1970s, any political project based on a unified working class and its organised representation seemed to have been completely exhausted.

In all these (and other) ways, Maoism was at the centre of the political upheaval and the radical criticism of the long 1960s, but

it did not function as a model to be pedantically followed or an example to be imitated, in part because Maoism itself was predicated on a flexible and continuous adaptation of Marxist principles to the local and historical contingencies of and in China. Rather, Maoism provided people in different situations a common vocabulary to describe what was possible and to imagine alternatives to the existent—a vocabulary that also connected specific struggles to a longer thread of Marxist and revolutionary experiments (Karl 2010).

Capitalist China

Today we face a completely different situation. While the CCP—or, rather, the Communist Party of China (CPC), which is its new, preferred appellation—claims not only organisational but also uninterrupted ideological continuity from the times of Yan’an, the reality of the Chinese socioeconomic system and the history of the post-Mao period challenge and fundamentally invalidate that claim. Since 1978 and the beginning of the reform period, the Party-State has moved to systematically and progressively demolish the most important forms of collective organisation, collective ownership, and collective welfare that were developed during the Mao era. This manifested itself first in the dismantling of the communes and the de facto privatisation of land use rights, with the indirect result of freeing up an enormous amount of cheap migrant labour for urban production. Then, by the mid-1980s, the very form that had characterised urban life in the PRC, the work unit (*danwei*), came under attack, leading to the end of what sociologist Joel Andreas (2019) has labelled ‘industrial citizenship’. At almost every step over the past 40 years, the CCP has embraced policies that have radically transformed the socioeconomic structure of the country, and today it is simply tendentious—I find it impossible—to describe the existing social relations of production (and reproduction) as anything but ‘capitalist’ (Friedman 2020). To argue for any straightforward continuity from Mao to Xi Jinping, one would have to ignore not only any historical evidence, but also the political lessons of Maoism and the long 1980s.

Since the 1980s, it is patently true that China has succeeded in lifting millions of people out of abject poverty, but this success has been premised on an embrace of a specific form of capitalism; as Marx himself noted, capitalism is the best way to produce wealth at astonishing speed.

Since the 1980s, it is patently true that China has succeeded in lifting millions of people out of abject poverty, but this success has been premised on an embrace of a specific form of capitalism; as Marx himself noted, capitalism is the best way to produce wealth at astonishing speed. It has come with massive environmental costs (as capitalist development does) and has led to the transformation of a largely equal society into a very unequal one (China’s Gini coefficient is very close to that of the United States). We certainly can argue about whether it was worth it, but that is a different debate than whether we should call it ‘socialism’. Unlike in the 1960s, China now is firmly inserted in the global (capitalist) supply chain, so much so that any talk of ‘decoupling’ the Chinese and US economies

seems incredibly far-fetched (Weber 2020). The Chinese state still holds control over major economic levers and direct ownership of large sectors of the economy, but, as Marx again reminds us, what is important is not who the capitalists are but how capitalist relationships are structured and how capital works.

As for the ideological positioning of the CCP and its claims about ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era’, I do not think we should dismiss them at all. The CCP’s discourse should be taken seriously—today, as in the Mao era—but that does not mean it should be taken at face value. This does not mean, as Prashad, Qiao, and others often claim, that we ignore ‘what Chinese people say’, but simply that we critically and carefully evaluate what Communist Party officials and high-level cadres say (and do). There has been a long-term effort within and around the party to think about the socialist economy, social organisation, and so on under the specific historical conditions of a neoliberal order, and we should not take that lightly. We do not have to believe that China is socialist, but we must examine what it means, at all levels, to declare oneself socialist under those conditions. There is, to be sure, much to be learned about socialism from the Chinese example.

An Alternative to the Neoliberal State

Finally, there is one thing on which the ‘tankie’ left is absolutely right, and that is how incredibly biased, belligerent, and often racist is the Euro-American discourse on China. Confronting that discourse (as we all should) does not mean, however, that we thus need to embrace China’s discourse about itself. It means, perhaps, that we should be open to learning from China, or rather with China. But it seems that what we can learn today is not so much how to shape a socialist society, but how to manage a capitalist one. The ‘successes’ that China supporters tout, from wealth creation to infrastructure to the restrictions imposed on billionaires, are all part of the functioning of a specific form of capitalism. As the Chuang Collective has recently remarked, the Chinese state is not—and does not aim to be—simply a replica of the neoliberal state; even if it presides over a capitalist economy and society, it does indeed have different characteristics (Smith and Lanza 2021; Chuang 2021). So, perhaps in that respect, the PRC offers an alternative, not to capitalism, but to the form of the neoliberal state: it might be an alternative path we do not want to follow, but it is one we must examine. We can therefore learn with China, and with Chinese people, not because we are both engaged in a search for radical futures (as in the long 1960s), but because we are all experiencing both the commonalities and the localised contingencies of late capitalism. ■

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Crossroads. PC: (CC) Mitya Ilyinov.

The Third Road

Where Will Xi Jinping Go in 2022?

Ling Li

Earlier this year, two veteran analysts of Chinese politics, Richard McGregor and Jude Blanchette (2021), published a comprehensive report, laying out four possible scenarios for the next leadership succession in China's new era. In two of these scenarios, Xi Jinping is out of the picture as the result of either a coup or 'unexpected death or incapacitation'. In the other two, he stays in power either by extending his tenure as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to a third term or by retiring from that office but continuing to rule behind the scenes.

Below I outline a third path Xi could take to stay in power: reactivating the office of the Chairman of the Party Central Committee (hereinafter Party Chairman) at the twentieth CCP Congress in 2022. The reasons for taking this path are threefold. First, the office would not be new, created from scratch, but would be based on precedent. This would not only help to build legitimacy but also draw a roadmap of how to get there. Second, the office would provide Xi with the best solution to deal with the succession issue. Third, two developments signal that the Party is geared towards this political move. I will explain them in turn.

Historical Precedent

In the centenary of CCP history, the Party Chairman is *de facto* the only office of power that is held by an individual who is not bound by the founding organisational principle of the Party—that is, collective decision-making. So far, three CCP leaders have held that position:

The CCP's Charter has never specified the scope of power the Party Chairman can wield, but records of Party documents reveal that Mao enjoyed final decision-making power (Politburo 1943).

Mao Zedong (1945–76), Hua Guofeng (1977–81), and Hu Yaobang (1981–82). The office was created for Mao in 1945 at the seventh Party Congress. It was passed on to Hua after Mao's death, following a decisive coup against the 'Gang of Four' led by Hua himself and a few other Party leaders. Having obtained the supreme leadership, Hua, however, did little to strengthen his power base. Hence, when the opposition rallied against him, he resigned without putting up much of a fight, unable to finish even one term. The office was subsequently passed on to Hu, for the sake of continuity, only to be dissolved one year later when the eleventh Party Congress was held in 1982.

The CCP's Charter has never specified the scope of power the Party Chairman can wield, but records of Party documents reveal that Mao enjoyed final decision-making power (Politburo 1943). Before Mao took that office in 1945, he had already been elected as the chairman of the Central Party Secretariat based on a proposal presented to the Politburo by Liu Shaoqi in 1943 (Li 2007). The Central Secretariat at that time was nominally an office operating under the Politburo, but in effect it functioned more like an executive committee of the latter and like the Politburo Standing Committee of today.

Two years later, after Mao was inaugurated as the Party Chairman, the office of the Central Secretariat Chairman ceased to exist. As Party Chairman, Mao made it clear that final decision-making power would stay with him. This is revealed in a written instruction he sent to Liu Shaoqi and Yang Shangkun in 1953—a document included in the fifth volume of *Mao Zedong's Selected Works*. It reads: 'From now on, all documents and telegraphs that are issued under the name of the Party Centre have to be reviewed by me first before circulation. Otherwise, they are invalid. Please bear it in mind' (Mao 1977).

A Solution for Succession

One can be worried about the vision Xi Jinping has for China's future and question its virtue and intentions, but no-one can deny he has a vision. He has a blueprint for the Party to lead the country to material prosperity and civilisational rejuvenation by 2049. It is difficult to imagine that Xi, an exceptionally shrewd political ruler who projects the future in centenary terms, would let the succession issue somehow slip his mind. Succession must happen at some point. The question is, what is the best way to administer it?

The reactivation of the Party chairmanship would seem to provide the best solution for Xi, as it would allow him to achieve two goals simultaneously: to continue to rule and to micromanage the succession process. For the first goal, there is no term limit on the office of Party Chairman—either in written rules or in unwritten conventions. The Party chairmanship is part of the 'trinity' of offices—an

For the second goal, the new office would allow Xi to set in motion the search for, and grooming of, an heir. The successor could be coronated at a pace and in a manner that Xi finds most comfortable, thanks to the many options the reactivated office would open to him.

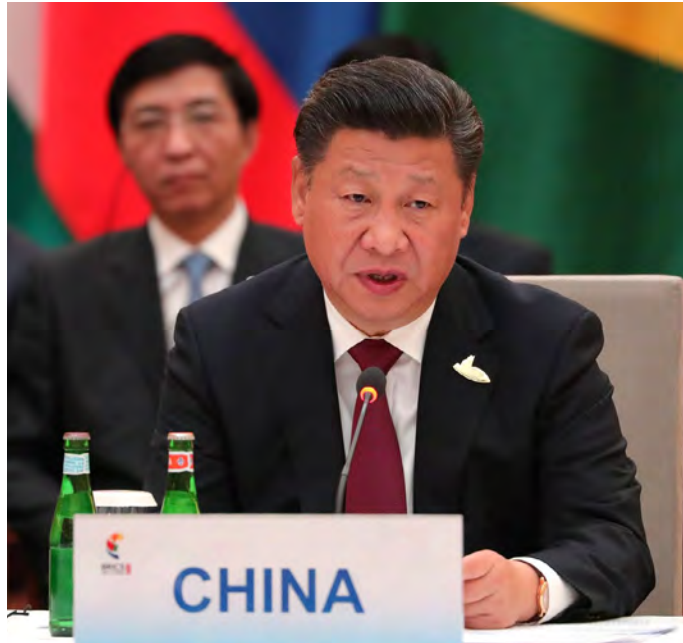
arrangement presented as an established CCP ‘convention’ by Jiang Shigong (2008), a Schmidtian constitutional scholar who seems to have the ear of the Party’s decision-makers (Buckley 2020).

For the second goal, the new office would allow Xi to set in motion the search for, and grooming of, an heir. The successor could be coronated at a pace and in a manner that Xi finds most comfortable, thanks to the many options the reactivated office would open to him. To start with, the general secretary’s position would be vacant. As such, it could be used to groom the heir-designate under the direct watch of the chairman. If the chairman wanted to prolong the search, he could revoke the position of general secretary so that a few equal candidates could compete within the Politburo Standing Committee. In addition, he may also consider nominating a heir when he was ready by appointing a Deputy Party Chairman, as Mao did.

Granted, the reactivation of the Party chairmanship cannot guarantee a stable transition of power. As demonstrated by Mao himself, the successor may be deposed and replaced later by the chairman because he has changed his mind. Alternatively, the successor could be ousted by some two-faced acolyte whose ambition outweighs their loyalty and is waiting to bounce as soon as the chairman is out of the picture. But, in an autocratic regime with no genuine commitment to constitutionalism and the rule of law, nothing can guarantee a secure tenure, let alone life tenure, for any leader or his successor, no matter how the succession process is designed. The reactivation of the office of Party Chairman would, however, provide a convenient structure that allows the incumbent leader to control the succession process and accommodate trial and error.

Signs of Preparatory Moves

The first sign of Xi’s intention to stay in power after 2022 is, of course, the constitutional amendment made in 2018, which lifted the term limit for the head of the state—that is, the Chairman of the People’s Republic of China. This move was Xi’s first overt preparatory measure to stay in power after his second term. It indicates either or both of two things: first, that he greatly values the ceremonial role of the head of the state; and second, that he has concerns about the possibility that an overambitious occupant of this office, if it must be passed from him to someone else due to the term limit, could turn its ceremonial functions—for instance, promulgating laws, appointing and dismissing leaders of state institutions, signing treaties with foreign countries (Li 2019b)—into veto powers, thereby significantly weakening the political dominance of Xi himself as the head of the Party.



Xi Jinping in 2017.
PC: (CC) Kremlin.ru.

While this does not necessarily signal an intention to resurrect the Party chairmanship, a truly compelling signal that this might be the plan is the unfolding of an exceptionally intensive and vigorous national ideological campaign to establish ‘Xi Jinping Thought’. The effort the Party has taken to push this campaign bears great resemblance to the playbook Mao used before the same office was first created for him at the seventh Party Congress in 1945.

A memoir by He Fang (2019) entitled *Notes on Party History: From Zunyi Conference to Yan’an Rectification* (党史笔记—从遵义会议到延安整风) revealed that to have a namesake ideology is not only a means to canonise policies, orient actions, and identify and dispel heretics, but also an end in and of itself. According to He, who participated in the Yan’an Rectification Campaign (1941–45) and later became political secretary to Zhang Wentian (who was the CCP General Secretary from 1938 to 1943 and a target of the campaign), there is a tradition observed by communist movements with regard to the elevation of a supreme leader. According to He, to become the supreme leader of a communist party, one needs not only to prove one’s political, military, and administrative skills, but also to demonstrate one’s intellectual capacity and establish oneself as a Marxist theorist.

Mao was not considered a theorist before the rectification campaign was launched (He 2019: 140). According to He’s fine-brushed account, at that time, Mao had been dismissed by his colleagues as only a ‘doer’ (实干家) and not a ‘theorist’ (理论家).

The Yan'an campaign completely changed that. In the first phase of the campaign, the Party enforced mandatory study sessions of Party classics, of which Mao's own works formed a predominant portion (He 2019; Tan 2014), and criticism and self-criticism were mainly used for indoctrination. Not long after, 'enhanced measures' were added to compel self-incriminating confessions and to establish guilt in the name of 'rescuing' those who had slipped (Gao 2019).

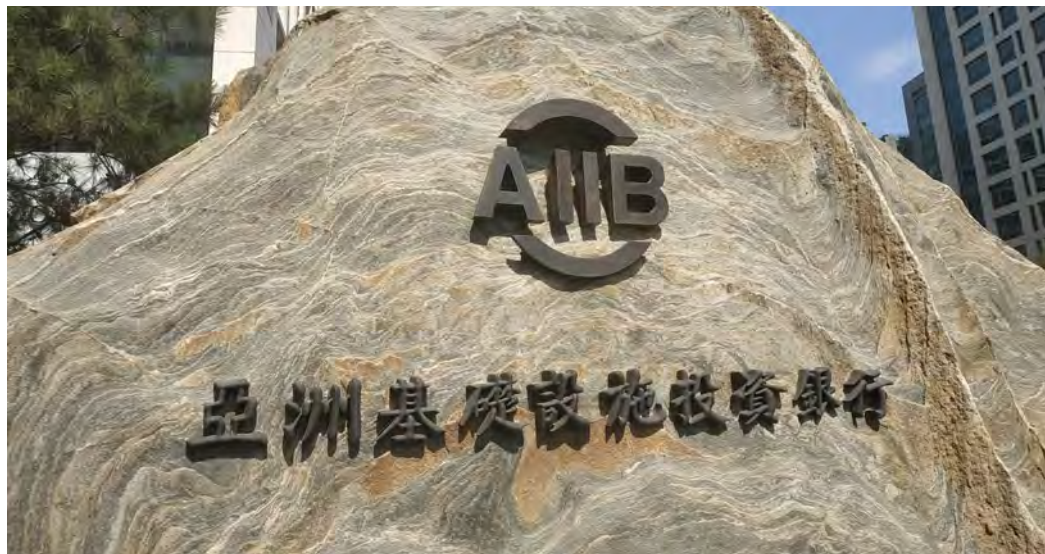
At the end of the campaign, Mao emerged as a Chinese Marxist theorist, credited with the unparalleled achievement of having Sinicised Marxism (He 2005). The campaign culminated with the 'Resolution of Several Historical Issues' (关于若干历史问题的决议) passed by the last plenum leading up to the seventh Party Congress. This elaborate account of CCP history rendered Mao as an infallible political leader and established his absolute authority over all aspects of Party affairs. It also sealed the position of Party Chairman for Mao immediately after.

Xi Jinping's Moves

Xi's ideological campaign started at the beginning of his first term. As I have analysed elsewhere (Li 2019a), the campaign was synchronised in speed and content with his signature anticorruption campaign. During that campaign, Party members were required to study a collection of Xi's ideological works, which at that time were tentatively labelled the 'Spirit of Important Speech Series by the Party General-Secretary Xi Jinping' (习近平总书记系列重要讲话精神). After Xi had consolidated power at the end of his first term, Party propaganda outlets started to refer to the growing volume of his ideological works as 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era' (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, or 'Xi Jinping Thought'), which was introduced into the CCP's Charter at the nineteenth Party Congress.

Since 2017, the Party-State's propaganda machine has been running at full throttle to canonise Xi's words and deeds and to substantiate the theory of Xi Jinping Thought. At the time of writing, Xi Jinping Thought has covered close to 20 public policy fields and is presented as the 'latest achievement of the Sinification of Marxism' (马克思主义中国化最新成果; see He 2020). It has been turned into textbooks and training materials for mandatory study by schoolchildren, college students, politicians, and civil servants. In at least 10 elite universities, research institutes have been established that are solely dedicated to advancing this new discipline (Chen et al. 2018). According to its online database, the National Social Sciences Fund, the most generous and prestigious funding body for social sciences in China, sponsored over 370 research projects with Xi Jinping's name in the title between 2014 and 2020.

It is likely no coincidence that at the time of writing in mid-October 2021, the Party has just announced that a resolution on an updated narrative of the Party's history will be delivered by the current Central Committee at its Sixth Plenum, which will convene in early November. It took Mao less than two months from being heralded the master of Sinicised Marxism to being inaugurated as the Party Chairman. Time is on Xi's side because the twentieth Party Congress is still one year away. The Party believes history is a mirror. Is the mirror also a crystal ball? Only time will tell. ■



Stone bearing the name of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank outside the bank's headquarters in Beijing. PC: (CC) Yan Han.

Is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank a Responsible Investor?

Natalie BUGALSKI and Mark GRIMSDITCH

When the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was first announced by China in 2013, a flurry of speculation erupted around which countries would join and how closely the new institution would follow the path trodden by traditional multilateral development banks such as the World Bank. Human rights advocates and environmentalists were particularly concerned that the gains they had made in accountability in development finance over the past decades would be shunned by the AIIB, generating a new race to the bottom in social and environmental standards.

From the outset, the secretary-general and later president of the bank, Jin Liqun, proclaimed the AIIB would be 'lean, clean, and green' (Zheng 2015). But the slogan contained an inherent conflict: how would a lean bank, with a small staff, be equipped to conduct the rigorous due diligence necessary to ensure that its clients operating in high-risk countries implement international environmental and social standards in their infrastructure projects?

Power generation, transport, telecommunications, and water infrastructure are badly needed across Asia and beyond, but their development comes with risks to people and the environment, including forced displacement, destruction of forests and biodiversity, and pollution of air and waterways. In many countries, those who raise concerns or objections regarding investment projects that threaten the rights of communities face reprisals (Coalition for Human Rights in Development 2019). Since the 1980s, development banks such as the World Bank have required governments and companies to agree to a set of environmental and social standards to secure financing to develop infrastructure projects. While they are not perfect, when applied properly, they help mitigate the harm that infrastructure projects can cause.

In 2015, a few months before becoming operational, the AIIB began to develop its own environmental and social framework to guide its investments. To the surprise of some pundits who anticipated that it would reject the approaches of Western-led development banks, the AIIB brought on board seasoned veterans from established institutions. Jin Liqun himself was previously vice-president at the Asian Development Bank, the AIIB's general counsel and chief financial officer both previously worked with the World Bank Group, and development of the AIIB's Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) was led by an advisor who had worked for more than 25 years at the World Bank, where he also developed institutional safeguard policies. Following a contentious initial drafting process in 2015, the ESF adopted in 2016 was ultimately a scaled-back version of the environmental and social policies of the World Bank and other multilateral development banks (Humphrey and Chen 2021). This was reviewed and updated over the past year, and a revised version came into force in October 2021 (AIIB 2021).

The World Bank's environmental and social framework, like that of most other development finance institutions, contains a broad set of standards to which clients must adhere to avoid and manage risks their operations pose. These standards include tailored requirements on labour and working conditions, resource efficiency and pollution prevention, community health and safety, land acquisition and involuntary resettlement, biodiversity conservation, protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples, cultural heritage, and stakeholder engagement. In contrast, the AIIB chose to impose specific requirements on its clients only in relation to two areas: resettlement and Indigenous peoples. Both frameworks contain a general 'catch-all' standard on environmental and social management, but the generalised nature of the requirements, which apply to all types of risk, means that much discretion is left to the bank's clients to decide which types of risks to consider (and which ones to ignore) and how precisely to manage those risks. This is likely to result in weaker protections on the ground and ultimately an increased risk of harm to communities and the environment.

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Financial Intermediaries

One area where the AIIB has adopted a robust policy relative to other development banks is in its financial intermediary investments. As the bank's lending has expanded, financial intermediary investments have begun to occupy a significant portion of its portfolio. This form of lending, which has previously been described as 'outsourcing development', has become increasingly popular in development finance (Roasa 2016)—a trend that started in the 2000s, when institutions like the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector arm of the World Bank Group, began to redirect much of its financing away from direct investment in projects and towards commercial banks and private investment funds. These intermediaries then on-lend this financing to end users.

While this 'financial intermediary' approach is justified as a way to broaden the reach of development banks to small and medium-sized businesses, it also makes it much more difficult to trace funds and ensure that institutional environmental and social standards are met where the rubber hits the road. For instance, investigations by our organisation, Inclusive Development International (IDI), revealed that the IFC was exposed to a host of harmful projects via its financial intermediary investments. This included projects linked to land rights abuses, state violence, deforestation, pollution, and a vast expansion of climate-wrecking coal-fired power plants, among others (IDI 2020).

The AIIB did not originally envision a large financial intermediary portfolio, but by October 2021, these types of investments made up almost one-quarter of the bank's approved projects. This increased investment in commercial banks and funds came with attendant risk: civil society groups have raised concerns regarding intermediary investments through which the AIIB is exposed to problematic projects in countries including Myanmar (BIC Europe et al. 2018) and Bangladesh (BIC Europe et al. 2019), and the risk of the bank supporting fossil fuels via the 'back door' (BIC Europe and IDI 2018).

With its revised environmental and social framework, the bank should in theory be able to avoid indirectly backing these types of harmful projects. The framework expands the AIIB's role in reviewing and approving—or excluding—the highest-risk projects from intermediary portfolios and adds important requirements for clients to develop environmental and social management systems (AIIB 2021). Whether or not the 'lean' AIIB will have the capacity to rigorously assess and monitor the potential investments of its clients and reject projects that will violate human rights or damage the environment is yet to be seen.

Capital Markets

While progress has been made in the way financial intermediary lending is handled under the AIIB's ESF, the bank is now piloting an entirely new form of financing in capital markets. In 2019, the AIIB launched a series of new operations aimed at attracting institutional investors to finance infrastructure development in Asia (AIIB 2019). These operations delegate portfolios to a third-party asset manager, which makes decisions about investments in securities (for example, bonds) traded through capital markets.

As we have previously written (Bugalski and Grimsditch 2021), the AIIB's new ESF expressly excludes capital market operations from its application, meaning that even its truncated standards on environmental and social management, resettlement, and indigenous peoples do not apply to these investments.

The AIIB argues that capital market operations cannot be subject to its regular environmental and social accountability system. Instead, it uses nebulous 'Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Frameworks' to guide external asset managers. ESG began as a rudimentary way for investors to exclude from their portfolios companies that operate in controversial industries, such as tobacco and weapons, and has grown into a complex ecosystem in which dozens of ratings firms score companies using proprietary, big-data methodologies.

But as we articulated in our earlier article (Bugalski and Grimsditch 2021), ESG tools do not function as a risk-assessment and management system; they essentially help investors channel money towards companies that rate well across a range of criteria and limit investment in those that do not. While this may be an important goal for private investors, it is no substitute for the environmental and social safeguards that prevent harms from infrastructure development on the ground.

Although at present the AIIB has only approved four such projects, their total value is US\$1.1 billion, and the approach seeks to crowd in additional finance from the private sector. The bank is also in the 'proof of concept' stage, in which it is piloting the projects with a view to potential future expansion. AIIB's capital market operations seek to advance the bank's 'lean, clean, and green' strategy. This represents an attempt at a non-bureaucratic, efficient mode of investment that mobilises private capital for infrastructure. But while it may be lean, its clean and green credentials are questionable: the public is still in the dark about what is in the AIIB's capital market operations portfolio. With no public disclosure of portfolios by the bank, and no information published on how the bank interacts with fund managers, these projects effectively operate in a transparency and accountability void.

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Safeguarding the Rights of Those Impacted by AIIB Projects

With the new ESF now in effect, attention must turn to implementation and ensuring accountability for noncompliance. The AIIB has expressed a commitment to learning as it grows, and nowhere is this as important as environmental and social protection. The bank's portfolio has expanded to almost 150 projects worth close to US\$30 billion (as of October 2021), and the bank is increasingly financing projects alone—rather than co-financing with other established banks. When the AIIB co-finances projects with other banks, the policies of the co-financier are generally applied, rather than those of the AIIB (Geary and Schäfer 2021). Going forward, the AIIB's environmental and social standards will need to be interpreted and applied by its clients in an increasing number of projects across Asia and beyond.

Adequate disclosure is crucial to ensure that the public is informed when the AIIB is involved in a project—both directly and indirectly. This will require full transparency about projects and companies that receive AIIB support, as well as the recipients of its intermediary lending. A major question mark remains around the bank's capital market projects. At present, with minimal information available, there is no way for the public to assess the effectiveness of their ESG frameworks. What's more, because there has been extremely limited disclosure of specific portfolio investments, it is currently next to impossible for the public to trace where funds from these projects are flowing.

Another crucial test of the AIIB's commitment to responsible and sustainable investment will be the independence and effectiveness of the bank's accountability office, the Project-affected People's Mechanism (PPM). As its name suggests, the mechanism's mandate is to receive and address complaints from people affected by AIIB-backed projects who are seeking redress for harms. The office, which is yet to receive a complaint, has commenced outreach activities in several countries (World Bank Inspection Panel 2021), but remains relatively unknown. In several areas, it also falls short of the operating standards of the accountability mechanism of other development finance institutions (Pike 2019). Worryingly, the AIIB's capital market operations are immune from accountability through the PPM. Nonetheless, the office may ultimately play a central role in interpreting how the ESF should be implemented on the ground and whether the AIIB's standards are effective at protecting local people from the risks of development projects.

The AIIB's membership has now swelled from its 57 founding members to more than 100 countries, with membership expanding beyond Asia to include most EU countries, Australia, Canada, and others from Latin America and Africa. Policy developments at the AIIB reflect the fact that the bank's shareholding is structured in a way that gives Asian countries, including borrowing nations, a

much larger voting share than European countries (which, when combined, account for around 25 per cent of the votes). The lean approach of the bank and the stripped-back nature of its policies are likely welcomed by many borrowing members, who see bureaucracy at established institutions as cumbersome and imposing unwelcome conditions on them. However, if the AIIB is to build a reputation as a responsible infrastructure investor, it will ultimately have to reckon with the fact that high-risk infrastructure projects must have in place the strongest possible safeguards and corresponding mechanisms for addressing harms when they occur. The jury is still out on whether its policies and systems are yet up to the task. ■



Allegorical painting of the First Shining Path Military Academy, with Abimael Guzmán delivering the day's lesson (ca. 1980). PC: Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain).

The Final Sheathing of *La Cuarta Espada*

Matthew GALWAY

Abimael Guzmán liked to present himself as a studious man who dedicated himself, body and soul, to learning and teaching Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, a doctrine that he held aloft as insurmountable truth. In this sense, he was more of a prophet, or messiah, than a scientist. He was someone who felt that he was called, due to his exceptional intellectual gifts, to lead the socialist revolution in Perú. Thus, he assumed the mantle of representing the poor, strongly condemned the social order, and cried out for justice. His statement was categorical. From his in-depth knowledge of Marxism, it was impossible to be wrong. There was no room for doubt. And this sense of his convictions gave him a poise and security that enhanced his power to convince others, even more so because Guzmán said what people wanted to hear. Children starve and people suffer while the powerful exploit and monopolise the fruits of everyone's efforts. Only a radical revolution could change this abject situation.

— Gonzalo Portocarrero,

Profetas del Odio [Prophets of Hate], 2012

The future lies in guns and cannons! The armed revolution has begun! Glory to the Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought! Let us initiate the armed struggle!' (Guzmán 2005: 330). So concluded Abimael Guzmán's famous 'We Are the Initiators' speech at the conclusion of the First Military School of the Partido

Comunista del Perú–Sendero Luminoso (Communist Party of Perú–Shining Path, hereinafter CPP-SP) on 19 April 1980, signalling the beginning of the party’s move from theory to practice. Barely a few months after the fall of the Maoist Communist Party of Kampuchea (the so-called Khmer Rouge), as the world was taking toll of the tragedy that had enfolded Cambodia, Guzmán was putting Perú, Latin America, and the world on notice (Degregori 2012: 4). Guzmán (2005: 327) continued:

Marxism, reaching the great pinnacle of Mao Zedong Thought, has brought us a new moment: the powerful international workers’ movement, the foaming waves of national liberation movements, the development of communist parties. We are entering the strategic offensive of the World Revolution.

Less than one month later, young CPP-SP guerillas (known as Senderistas) would burn ballot boxes and voting lists in the public square of the Ayacucho *pueblo* of Chuschi. In the decade that followed, Guzmán ‘obtained an indisputable national presence that transcended party lines, and he kept his organization united until his capture’ (Hinojosa 1998: 67–68) while ushering in an era of violence during which between 48,000 and 70,000 people were killed and 600,000 more were displaced (CVR 2001–03; Rendon 2019a, 2019b).

Manuel Rubén Abimael Guzmán Reynoso was born on 3 December 1934 in the southern Peruvian port town of Mollendo, Islay Province, Arequipa Region. The man who would adopt the nom de guerre Presidente Gonzalo, around which he built a cult of personality, and who would regard himself as the inheritor of Mao’s revolution and who viewed his own ‘Gonzalo Thought’ (*pensamiento Gonzalo*) or *Gonzaloismo* as the ‘Fourth Sword of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism’ (*La cuarta espada del marxismo-leninismo-pensamiento Mao Tse-tung*), came from a middle-class background. His family broke apart when he was very young. In 1942, when Abimael was eight years old, his mother, Berenice Reynoso, left. Abimael lived with an uncle in El Callao (near Lima) and, in 1945, returned to Arequipa to live with his father and study at the private Catholic Colegio De La Salle (Roncagliolo 2007: 44, 249; Degregori 2012: 200–1). After graduating in 1953, Guzmán attended the National University of San Agustín (Universidad Nacional de San Agustín) to study philosophy and law.

At university, Guzmán gravitated towards charismatic thinkers within his immediate orbit. Two scholars at the university left a lasting impression on Guzmán: philosophy professor Miguel Angel Rodríguez Rivas and ‘Stalinist painter’ Carlos de la Riva. Rodríguez Rivas influenced Guzmán’s decision to write his thesis on the Kantian theory of space, whereas de la Riva’s shift from Stalinism to Maoism during the Soviet Union’s de-Stalinisation

The future lies in guns and cannons! The armed revolution has begun! Glory to the Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought! Let us initiate the armed struggle!

inspired a similar shift in Guzmán's ideological affinity (La Serna 2012: 140). But undoubtedly, the strongest influence on Guzmán at this stage—and the one who facilitated his appreciation of Maoism—was Marxist intellectual and Peruvian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Peruano, PCP) founder, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930). Mariátegui's 1928 'Seven Essays on the Interpretation of the Peruvian Reality' (*Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana*) struck a sympathetic chord with, and left a lasting imprint on, Guzmán (Portocarrero 2012: 33). As historian Gonzalo Portocarrero (2012: 34) recounts, Guzmán's writings reflected the role played by Mariátegui in shaping his world view:

Guzmán tried to fashion the image of a monolithic Mariátegui of whom he was the true follower. That is, a Mariátegui who was functional to his expectations of leadership and power ... Anyone who read Mariátegui, from a position of sensitivity to social change and with a minimal knowledge of Marxism, would reach the same conclusions. Guzmán's supposed honesty was, however, relevant because there were comic and manipulative undertones to his emphasis [on Mariátegui] ... For Guzmán, Mariátegui represented a 'prophet' who had hitherto been maliciously understood.

Most importantly, Mariátegui's writings provided Guzmán with a local reference with which to interpret Maoism. 'In Mariátegui', Guzmán averred in a 1988 interview,

we find similar theses to those that President Mao has established at the universal level. For me specifically, Mariátegui would be Marxist-Leninist-Maoist today; and this is not speculation, it is simply a product of the understanding of the life and work of José Carlos Mariátegui. (CCPCP 1988: 11)

Mao's emphasis on creative adaptation of Marxism-Leninism, Guzmán noted, led him to value Mariátegui as a 'first rate Marxist-Leninist who had thoroughly analysed our society' (CCPCP 1988: 132–33; see also de la Cadena 1998: 53).

On completing his studies, Guzmán shifted from theory to practice. The 'reserved yet self-confident' Guzmán, who, according to Orin Starn (1995: 404) 'favored the conservative suit of an Andean intellectual', relocated to Huamanga (now Ayacucho) in 1962 to take up a position as philosophy professor at the recently reopened San Cristóbal of Huamanga National University (Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga) (see also Roncagliolo 2007: 47–48). While he taught classes in philosophy, Guzmán linked up with Peruvian communists and worked towards earning his revolutionary bona fides. An avowed Marxist who held Marxism as something of 'grandiose importance and transcendence' (CCPCP 1988: 11),

Although Guzmán echoed Mao's emphasis on a proletarian-led revolution, CPP-SP recruitment efforts drew largely young and impressionable university and secondary school students who believed Guzmán's self-representation as the 'Fourth Sword of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought'.

Guzmán devoted this stage of his life to 'fighting for the ideology of the proletariat, for Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, as it was said (and that our Party defined as Maoism in 1981)' (Guzmán and Iparraguirre 2013: 25). Indeed, as historian Iván Hinojosa (1998: 65) recounts, Guzmán found in Marxism 'the answer to any question, even questions about daily life'.

Guzmán joined the Mariátegui-founded PCP and visited China between 1965 and 1967 on trips that affirmed his affinity for Maoism and the Chinese revolution. In Beijing, he stayed at the Asia, Africa, and Latin America Training Centre (亚非拉培训中心), 'studied Mao's works closely', trained in Chinese military tactics, and 'received small arms training at a Chinese cadre school' in Nanjing (Galway 2019: 185; see also Rothwell 2020: 116–18). On his return to Perú, Guzmán left the PCP to become a leader of its splinter party, the pro-Beijing Communist Party of Perú–Red Flag (Partido Comunista Peruano–Bandera Roja), only to leave 'over issues of political line, strategy, and revisionism of leftist currents in Perú' (Galway 2019: 186). He founded the Maoist Communist Party of Perú–Shining Path, the name for which he drew from Mariátegui's axiom that 'Marxism-Leninism will open the shining path to revolution [*El Marxismo-Leninismo abrirá el sendero luminoso hacia la revolución*]'.

Although Guzmán echoed Mao's emphasis on a proletarian-led revolution, CPP-SP recruitment efforts drew largely young and impressionable university and secondary school students who believed Guzmán's self-representation as the 'Fourth Sword of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought'. As Starn (1999: 7) describes, the recruits' 'absolute commitment to revolution made them ready to kill and die to cross what Guzmán announced would be "a river of blood" to the promised land of a Communist utopia'. But the CPP-SP did not draw solely from universities and high schools. Peruvian anthropologist Stefano Varese once described the Shining Path's war as one 'waged by the children of indigenous peasants, by proletarianized rural peoples, and by provincial "mestizos" against the creole and urbanized mestizos perceived as part of the oppressive bourgeois system and state'. It was '[u]ndoubtedly a class struggle in the most orthodox Marxist tradition', he continues, but it was 'nonetheless a class struggle permeated, shaped, and mobilized by ethnic grievances' (Varese 1996: 65; see also Portocarrero 2012: 133–34; Berg 1986–87).

Despite this broad recruitment, the leadership of the CPP-SP Central Committee was almost exclusively white Peruvians—Guzmán included (Galway 2019: 187). Also, in contravention of Guzmán's 1980 declaration that the party would 'lift up the peasantry under the infallible banners of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought' (Guzmán 2005: 325–326), the Peruvian military's response pushed the CPP-SP revolution to intensify its violence towards 'impoverished villagers and respected local leaders' (Galway 2019: 187). By Guzmán's assessment, Perú's capitalist system was to

The CPP-SP people's war spearheaded by Guzmán began with the burning of ballot boxes in Chuschi to protest the first Peruvian election since 1964. This was the first of hundreds of CPP-SP guerrilla actions in 1980.

blame for intraparty and revolutionary violence. The state, Guzmán charged, sent '60,000 infants a year to death before the age of one' (CCPCP 1988: 71). The 'blood cost' (*un costo de sangre*) or 'quota of blood' was a necessary sacrifice, in his view, to realise a more equitable, egalitarian Perú (CCPCP 1988: 48; La Serna 2012: 143; see also Smith 1994: 42). The result, Starn (1999: 144) intimates, was that Perú's rural poor were 'the Peruvians to suffer most from the revolution waged in their name'.

The CPP-SP people's war spearheaded by Guzmán began with the burning of ballot boxes in Chuschi to protest the first Peruvian election since 1964. This was the first of hundreds of CPP-SP guerrilla actions in 1980. From the get-go, Guzmán called for the arrest and punishment of corrupt government officials, whereas party militants targeted, and killed, figures whom the party leadership had deemed representatives of the old order: elected officials, police officers, village leaders, and clergymen. As Miguel La Serna (2012: 142–43) describes:

Most of these attacks involved the use of explosives, as the insurgents confiscated dynamite and detonated specific targets. The day after the Chuschi incident, Senderistas destroyed the air control tower in Ayacucho City. A month later, they attacked the departmental capital's police station, a tourist hotel, and the headquarters of a rival political party ... On 16 June as many as 200 rebels surrounded the municipal building in Lima's San Martín de Porras district. After crying, 'People's War—From the Country to the City!' the rebels hurled Molotov cocktails at the building and watched it burn to the ground. Much of the guerrilla activity during these months was designed to raise awareness about the insurgency. In Ayacucho and elsewhere, rebels painted party slogans on public buildings and circulated communist pamphlets announcing the birth of the insurgency and exalting Presidente Gonzalo.

'In Lima', La Serna continues, 'party militants hung the corpses of dead dogs from lampposts with signs attached to their necks that read, "Deng Xiaoping, Son of a Bitch!" [*Teng Siao Ping hijo de perra*]' a reference to the CPP-SP's rejection of the Chinese leader's move away from hard-line Maoism' (La Serna 2012: 143). The CPP-SP had announced its arrival to Perú and, soon, the world.

Over the course of the following decade of protracted warfare, the CPP-SP people's war expanded gradually from its Andean base in Ayacucho. The Peruvian military matched—and, one scholar has argued, even exceeded—the Maoists' brutality towards peasants and non-combatants (Rendon 2019a, 2019b). By 1989, CPP-SP guerrillas were in position to launch a final assault on Lima. The cult of personality around Guzmán—now going by his *nom du guerre*,



Imprisoned CPP-SP women guerillas salute Presidente Gonzalo in Canto Grande Prison, 1992. Author's Photograph. Museo de la Nación, 2 August 2018.

Presidente Gonzalo—was at its height. Guzmán encouraged his devoted followers to commit themselves fully to the violent revolution: ‘He who speaks of war speaks of sacrifice, he who speaks of sacrifice speaks of the quota [a commitment of one’s life to the party’s vision for Perú]’ (La Serna 2012: 143). Yet Guzmán’s capture in 1992 and the Peruvian military-backed rural resistance to the CPP-SP—as the Maoists were making their final push to seize the capital—effectively ended momentum and the Maoists never came close to capturing Lima again. Although the war was effectively over, Starn (1999: 144) writes: ‘There were no winners in what would go down as one of Latin America’s crudest twentieth-century wars.’

As for the movement’s charismatic leader, Abimael Guzmán spent the next 29 years serving two life sentences for terrorism and treason in a dungeon on San Lorenzo Island, off the coast of Lima. He died on 11 September 2021 at the Maximum Safety Centre of Callao Naval Base (Arango 2021). After his arrest, the Peruvian Government branded Guzmán a terrorist and immortalised him as such in ‘Yuyanapaq. Para Recordar’, the only permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Nation (Museo de la Nación) in Lima. The exhibition documents the internal conflict in Perú and portrays Guzmán as the *capo di tutti capi* (chief of all chiefs) of Peruvian terrorist leaders. While such a portrayal wilfully neglects how, in his time, Guzmán invigorated a previously disjointed base of disaffected indigenous and *mestizo* peasants, as well as left-curious students, inspiring them to rally behind him and his utopian vision for Perú, it is as a bloodthirsty terrorist that he is often remembered in Perú today (Arango 2021). This is also how he is represented in most commentaries that have appeared in the wake of his passing—the ideals of yore and the root causes that prompted the uprising obfuscated by the tragedy of decades of violent struggle. ■



CHINA COLUMNS





Reining in Rogue Legislation

An Overview of China's Invigoration of the 'Recording and Review' Process

Changhao WEI

China's national legislature uses a process known as 'recording and review' (R&R) to ensure that major categories of legislation enacted by other governmental bodies conform to national law and policy. Long criticised for being ineffective and opaque, recently R&R has grown more robust, transparent, and accessible to the public, and has become the legislature's main vehicle for cautiously pushing ahead with constitutional review. This essay provides an overview of the recent developments surrounding R&R.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese Government created two forms of administrative detention to combat perceived social ills. The first, 'custody and repatriation' (C&R, 收容遣送), was used 'as a coercive measure to manage the flow of migrant workers and undesirables into China's urban centers' (Hand 2006: 120). The other, known as 'custody and education' (C&E, 收容教育), targeted sex workers and their clients (He 2015: 440). Corruption and abuse pervaded both systems (Hand 2006: 121; He 2015: 453–54; Zheng 2019: 89), and they were separately challenged by legal activists for violating China's Constitution and national laws through a process called 'recording and review' (R&R, 备案审查).

Great Hall of The People, Beijing, China. PC: TCLY, Shutterstock Standard License.

Rooted in the Chinese Constitution, R&R was fully operationalised for the first time in 2000, with the enactment of the landmark Legislation Law (立法法). In short, R&R is an oversight tool employed by China's top legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC), to ensure that sub-statutory legislation—ranked below national statutes as to legal force, such as local legislation—conforms to national statutes and policy. R&R is also China's sole mechanism for bringing constitutional challenges to enacted legislation; courts are not empowered to perform constitutional review. In practice, the NPCSC Legislative Affairs Commission (LAC, 法制工作委员会), a 200-strong professional support body under the NPCSC, conducts review and enforces its decisions on the legislature's behalf.

While both challenges to the two detention systems, brought 15 years apart, ultimately succeeded, the NPCSC handled them in drastically different ways. Using them as the starting point, I will provide an account of China's recent invigoration of the R&R process.

A Tale of Two Challenges

The demise of C&R was precipitated by a series of tragic events in 2003, when 27-year-old Sun Zhigang moved to Guangzhou for a new job¹. One night in mid-March, Sun was detained by police after he failed to produce a temporary resident permit—something for which he had not yet had time to apply. The police suspected he was an illegal migrant, so held him in a C&R centre. Three days later, Sun died; an autopsy revealed he had been tortured in custody. His death exposed the abuses within the C&R system and soon sparked a national outcry. Amid intense public outrage, in May 2003, three legal scholars requested that the NPCSC activate its R&R process and review the constitutionality and legality of the State Council regulations that created C&R.

¹The following account of what came to be known as the 'Sun Zhigang Incident' is drawn from Hand (2006; see also Froissart 2022).

Widely reported to be the first citizen request to invoke the R&R process, the scholars' efforts fell short of creating a precedent for NPCSC review, however. The NPCSC did acknowledge receipt of the request, but never responded further. A month later, the State Council repealed its C&R regulations, seemingly of its own volition. Commentators speculate that the repeal was the result of behind-the-scenes consultations between the two institutions. Such secrecy and emphasis on consultation were common at the time, due to an entrenched political norm of governmental bodies not publicly rebuking one another (Hand 2013: 202, 215). The NPCSC, moreover, lacked the political capacity to decide on major political or legal issues, so had to resort to encouraging consensus-building and self-correction (Hand 2013: 215–16). It thus could not directly and publicly annul the State Council's regulations.

Fifteen years after the NPCSC's unceremonious handling of the scholars' request for review during the Sun Zhigang incident, a similar request was made. Zhu Zhengfu, a lawyer and member of China's top political advisory body, put forward almost identical arguments against the constitutionality and legality of C&E. This time, however, the LAC publicly recommended abolishing the detention system, which occurred a year later (Wei 2018c). What had changed?

A Brief Overview of R&R

Before answering that question, it might be helpful to provide a sketch of the R&R system today. At its inception, R&R was envisioned as no more than a mechanism to maintain the uniformity of China's legislative system (Gu 2000: 134). As China's legislative hierarchy became more complex, conflicts inevitably arose between different categories of legislation—conflicts which R&R was designed to resolve. The R&R system's mandate today, however, reaches beyond that original purpose. As memorialised in the new 'Working Measures for the Recording and Review of Regulations and Judicial Interpretations' ('Working Measures', 法规、司法解释备案审查工作办法), adopted in

2019, the system now is above all a tool to ‘ensure that the Communist Party Central Committee’s orders and prohibitions are strictly enforced’ (Art. 3). It also serves to guarantee the implementation of the Constitution and national laws and to protect private entities’ lawful rights and interests (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Art. 3).

Broadly speaking, the NPCSC’s R&R process covers four categories of sub-statutory legislation: the State Council’s administrative regulations, the judicial interpretations of the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the State Supervision Commission’s supervisory regulations, and legislation enacted by local people’s congresses and their standing committees (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Art. 2). These types of legislation must be recorded with the NPCSC to allow for any subsequent review. Other categories of legislation, such as rules issued by central ministries, do not fall within the NPCSC’s purview, but are filed with and reviewable by other governmental organs (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Art. 26).

NPCSC review can be triggered in four ways (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Arts. 18–22, 24–25). The body may, and does, actively review new pieces of legislation as they are filed. It may also initiate review when requested by a third party—most often a citizen. The remaining two modes of review are variations of the first two. ‘Targeted review’ (专项审查) functions like active review, but rather than examine newly recorded legislation, the NPCSC reviews all legislation already filed in a certain area to effectuate the Party’s and its own priorities. Finally, the review process may be activated when a wrongly addressed request for review is forwarded to the NPCSC by another governmental body.

To survive NPCSC review, a piece of sub-statutory legislation must pass muster on four grounds (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Arts. 36–39): it must not contravene the Constitution or national statutes; it must not be inconsistent with the Party leadership’s ‘major decisions and deployments’ or ‘the direction of the country’s major reforms’; and it must not otherwise be ‘clearly inappropriate’ (明显不适当), such as when it no longer suits a significantly changed reality. After deciding that a legal document has failed review, the NPCSC has at its

disposal a series of progressively more coercive methods to demand compliance with its decision (‘Working Measures’ 2019: Arts. 41–44).

R&R as a Governance Tool

Since its Third Plenum in late 2013, the Communist Party has repeatedly outlined reforms of the once-obscure R&R system in high-profile policy documents, including the recent ‘Plan on Building the Rule of Law in China (2020–2025)’ (Wei 2021a). It has thereby markedly elevated the political status of R&R, in the hope of increasing its authority in the eyes of citizens and state organs alike. Recent developments on the ground suggest that the Party views R&R as a useful governance tool in two ways.

First and foremost, the Party uses R&R to monitor and achieve compliance with its decisions—whether embodied in policy documents or enacted statutes—particularly by local governments. To that end, authorities have instituted three key changes to R&R. First, the NPCSC has expanded the recording requirement. Now all acts of local legislatures—whether styled as formal legislation or not—must be filed if they affect private rights and obligations or the duties of governmental organs (Shen 2019). Second, the NPCSC has begun carrying out ‘targeted reviews’—often in conjunction with legislative ‘clean-up’ campaigns. In 2018–19, for instance, the NPCSC directed all provinces to comprehensively review their environmental legislation to support the Party’s war on pollution. That year-long campaign resulted in the updating or repealing of more than 1,000 local regulations that conflicted with national environmental laws (Shen 2019). Finally, and most crucially, the NPCSC now reviews sub-statutory legislation for inconsistency with the Party’s major policies—even before these policies are enacted into law. Last year, it asked a province to stop requiring taxi drivers to have a local *hukou*, considering a central policy document calling for the elimination of ‘identity-based discrimination in employment’ (Shen 2021).



Great Hall of The People, Beijing, China. PC: TCLY, Shutterstock Standard License.

Second, the Party has also recognised the value of increasing the public use of R&R. Not only do citizen requests for review ‘provide a channel for identifying legislative conflicts that are generating public anger’—that is, act as a kind of ‘pressure release valve’ (Hand 2013: 215)—but they can also be leveraged to serve the Party’s own goal of ensuring the implementation of national law and policy. The NPCSC’s routine, abstract review of new legislation is unlikely to be thorough or to identify issues that would arise only in enforcement. Citizen requests therefore serve as a crucial ‘information channel’ for central authorities (Hand 2013: 214).

The NPCSC has implemented several measures to facilitate public use of the process. Most visibly, in late 2019, it launched an online platform where citizens could request review of specific sub-statutory legislation and then track the progress of each request (Wei 2019b). And, in stark contrast with its earlier practice, the NPCSC has been steadily increasing its rate of feedback to citizens who have

requested review. In 2020, it provided individual responses to all 3,378 properly submitted requests (Shen 2020).

A More Assertive LAC

The Party’s endorsement of a more authoritative and inclusive R&R process has consequently changed the institutional dynamics seen in the Sun Zhigang case. What has emerged is an LAC that appears much less constrained by the political taboo of publicly calling out other governmental bodies’ problematic legislation and more emboldened to make the hard calls in contentious cases.

The R&R process, to be sure, still relies heavily on consultation and self-correction to resolve identified legislative conflicts. After deciding that a piece of legislation has failed review, the LAC will first notify the enacting body informally, for example, in a phone call. The goal is to motivate

the latter to fix the conflicting legislation on its own and to promote efficiency (R&R Office 2020a: 118). Only after the enacting body refuses to self-correct after the informal communication will the LAC then formally issue a written opinion and demand corrections ('Working Measures' 2019: Art. 41). If the enacting body remains recalcitrant, the LAC has other tools at its disposal, including recommending that the NPCSC annul the legislation in question.

The NPCSC still has not yet used that drastic measure, but the review and rectification process has quietly grown more rigorous in recent years. Since 2017, the LAC has been publicly disclosing instances of legislation failing review. While the enacting bodies are not always named, the LAC's reports often provide enough clues for curious readers to identify them. This 'public shaming' and potential scrutiny from the public put pressure on the enacting bodies to follow the LAC's decisions. In addition, the LAC now routinely performs follow-up reviews, urging the relevant enacting bodies to change or repeal the legislation that has failed review. To amplify their impact, it also notes these 'second looks' and their outcomes in public reports. Last, as the Party has made the maxim 'every mistake must be corrected' (有错必纠) a core principle of R&R ('Working Measures' 2019: Art. 4), NPCSC annulment may no longer be the empty threat it once was.

In contrast to its continued reliance on consultation and self-correction, the LAC appears to have deemphasised consensus-building and become more assertive in deciding controversial cases. Consider, for instance, four labour law scholars' 2017 challenge to seven provinces' regulations that required private employers to fire any employee who exceeded the birth quota (Xing 2017). They argued that the regulations conflicted with both national labour law and the Party's gradual relaxation of national birth-control policy (R&R Office 2020c: 47). Among the provinces that disagreed with the scholars' arguments, Guangdong mounted the most aggressive defence. It warned the LAC that if the longstanding penalty was declared unlawful, those who had been fired for flouting birth restrictions would seek to reopen their cases, thereby 'affecting social stability' (R&R Office

2020c: 48). Central government agencies were also divided and unable to reach a consensus view on the legal question (Xing 2017).

In the end, both sides had plausible legal arguments; the LAC acknowledged as much (R&R Office 2020c: 49–50). Rather than resolve the dispute over the legality of the provinces' mandatory-firing penalties, it chose to adopt the scholars' policy-based argument, explaining that the penalties, though once proper, were no longer compatible with the Party's embrace of 'balanced population development' as a 'national strategy' (R&R Office 2020c: 50). It thus directed all seven provinces to amend their regulations accordingly. Here, the LAC took advantage of the fact that the Party's major policies have become bases for review and plausibly interpreted that broad policy statement as a bar to the continued validity of the penalties at issue. By resolving this contentious case on a firm political basis, the LAC managed to shield its decision from further criticism while also preserving its own authority in the R&R process.

Increased Engagement with Constitutional Issues

As part of its general efforts to elevate the importance of R&R, the Party has placed particular emphasis on developing one component of the process: constitutional review. Since 2017, it has repeatedly vowed to 'advance constitutional review' in policy documents (Xi 2017). And one recent official LAC article characterises R&R as the 'basis of a constitutional enforcement system with Chinese characteristics' (R&R Office 2021). Likely because of these developments, the LAC has grown increasingly willing to engage with the constitutional issues that arise in R&R—something the scholars were hoping to achieve in the Sun Zhigang case.

The LAC was initially cautious and timid in its approach to constitutional questions. Zhu Zhengfu's 2018 challenge to C&E was the first request disclosed in a public report that raised a consti-

tutional issue. But the LAC neither identified the specific basis of Zhu’s constitutional objection nor rested its decision to recommend abolishing C&E on the Constitution (Shen 2018). It only commented vaguely that the system no longer suited China’s changed social circumstances. Similarly in 2019, the LAC only obliquely referenced the Constitution in a case involving local legislation that authorised traffic police to examine the phone records of drivers involved in accidents (Wei 2019a). The LAC concluded that the legislation violated citizens’ ‘freedom and privacy of correspondence’, without noting that it was a constitutional right (Shen 2019).

The real breakthrough occurred in 2020, when the LAC publicly identified several constitutional issues arising from R&R and addressed them head-on. In a new request for review, Zhu Zhengfu challenged the Ministry of Finance’s ‘levy’ (征收) of a ticket surcharge on air travellers, arguing that it amounted to an unconstitutional ‘expropriation’ (征收) of private property (Liang 2021: 175). The LAC concluded, however, that despite the identical language, a ‘levy’ of the surcharge did not fall within the scope of the Constitution’s ‘expropriation’ provision (Liang 2021: 175–76). An LAC official has cited this case as a ‘ground-breaking’ constitutional review ‘in a substantive sense’ (Liang 2021: 176).

In another instance, the LAC reviewed two local regulations adopted, respectively, by Inner Mongolia and the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in northeastern Jilin Province, which regulated the medium of instruction in ‘ethnic schools’—schools that primarily serve ethnic minority students (Shen 2021). The regulations required those schools to use the relevant ethnic language as the sole medium of instruction, except in Mandarin classes (Wei 2021b). But according to the LAC, those requirements violated China’s constitutional policy of ‘promoting the nationwide use of Putonghua’ (Shen 2021). It seems to have read that constitutional provision as requiring ethnic schools to not only teach Mandarin itself, but to also teach some classes *in Mandarin* (Wei 2021b). It did so likely to support the Party’s push in the autumn of 2020 to relegate ethnic languages to, at most, a topic of instruction at ethnic schools

in Inner Mongolia and northeastern China (Atwood 2020; Gao 2020). Troublingly, the LAC has not publicly provided any reasoning behind that aggressive reading.

A More Transparent Process

With strong policy endorsement from the Party, the LAC has gained greater political capacity to exercise its authority to conduct review and to demand corrections. Accordingly, it now has the political capital to make the R&R process more transparent.

As alluded to earlier, the NPCSC has been hearing the LAC’s annual reports on its R&R work since 2017. These reports disclose, among other information, the number of each type of sub-statutory legislation filed, the number of citizen requests received (including the number of each type of legislation challenged), summaries of selected R&R cases, and the LAC’s priorities relating to R&R in the coming year. As a supplement to these annual reports, the LAC has also been disclosing additional information on its decisions in extensive press interviews, academic journal articles, as well as a compilation of selected R&R cases it published itself in 2020 (Liang 2019, 2020, 2021; R&R Office 2020c).

To individual citizens who request review, the NPCSC no longer operates entirely in a black box. In 2020, it for the first time published its complete internal R&R rules, the ‘Working Measures’ adopted in 2019. These rules explain the types of legislation subject to NPCSC review, the various grounds and sub-grounds on which the LAC conducts review, as well as its procedures for processing citizen requests, conducting review, and ordering rectifications. The rules also reiterate the requirement first introduced by the 2015 amendment to the Legislation Law that the LAC provide feedback on each citizen request.

There is, of course, room and a need for further improvement. Based on statistics in the LAC’s R&R reports, it has disclosed only a small percentage of the decisions it makes each year. Even for those it does disclose, it often provides little reasoning.

Similarly, the LAC typically provides little to no reasoning in its responses to individual citizen requests (R&R Office 2020b: 176–77). This is especially lamentable when other state organs like courts are giving fuller reasoning for their decisions to help educate the public and persuade the parties involved (Finder 2020). In addition, the bulk of the LAC’s review process still takes place in complete secrecy. It does not hold public hearings, even though it is often asked to address complex and far-reaching legal and policy issues. But the recent improvement in the transparency of R&R is a laudable step in the right direction.

Increased Public Use

As a result of the substantive and procedural reforms of R&R discussed so far, there has been a sea change in public use of the process, not just by legal scholars, but also by the general Chinese public.

The LAC’s continued disclosure and extensive media coverage of R&R cases have likely raised the Chinese public’s awareness of the process and its functions. During the decade after the Sun Zhigang incident, the NPCSC received just over 1,000 citizen requests in total (Hand 2013: 180). In 2017, the year the LAC began disclosing R&R cases, that number surged to 1,084 in a single year (Shen 2017). And then in 2020, the first full year after the NPCSC launched its online platform for requesting review, the volume of citizen requests skyrocketed to 5,146, with 3,229 (63 per cent) of them submitted online (Shen 2020; Liang 2021: 173).

The online platform likely has also helped reduce the number of procedurally defective citizen requests. It requires users to select specific legislation that is reviewable by the NPCSC (Wei 2019b), thereby ensuring that the citizen requests submitted online are properly addressed to the NPCSC. In 2020, the percentage of properly submitted requests was 65.6 per cent—a considerable improvement from the 36.2 per cent in 2019 and only 9 per cent in 2018 (Shen 2018, 2019, 2020).

Legal professionals continue to use R&R to push for general rule-of-law reforms in China. But, likely due to the greater accessibility of R&R, there have been more and more reported cases of lay citizens using the process to seek redress for personal grievances. During 2016–17, for instance, divorcees flooded the NPCSC with close to 1,000 requests challenging the legality of a Supreme People’s Court interpretation on community debt (Shen 2017). That rule presumed that the debt incurred by one spouse alone is a community debt for which both spouses are liable. Many divorcees, after they had failed to rebut that presumption in court, were thus ordered to pay the (usually massive) debts their ex-spouses had incurred during the marriage without their knowledge. Under pressure from the public and the LAC, in early 2018, the Court issued a new interpretation that more reasonably defined the scope of community debt and allocated the parties’ burden of proof (R&R Office 2020c: 95–96). There have also been cases where criminal defence lawyers used R&R to challenge rules issued by China’s top criminal justice authorities, with varying degrees of success (Wei 2018a, 2018b).

A Long but Promising Path Forward

The ongoing reforms of the R&R system are complex, and here I outline only some broad trends. Functionally, the reforms have focused on developing R&R’s key role in policing rogue local legislation and in ensuring the uniformity of China’s legislative system. But one must not overlook the crucial—even if incidental—progressive changes to Chinese law that legal professionals and lay citizens have been able to achieve through a more robust R&R process. That said, R&R remains incomplete and flawed. The disclosure of the LAC’s decisions and underlying reasoning, for instance, remains inadequate. The much hyped—and most anticipated—part of R&R, constitutional review, is yet to get off the ground; authorities are still studying such basic issues as the standards for

deciding constitutional claims. And, as some of the examples discussed above show, ultimately, all decision-making in the R&R process must succumb to politics. Further developments of the R&R system would require the right combination of political will, institutional capacity, and doctrinal advancements. But from what I am reading in official discourse and my interactions with Chinese scholars, the authorities appear determined to turn R&R into an effective mechanism for reining in rogue legislation. Hopefully, we need not wait another 15 years for the next breakthrough. ■

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The End of an Era?

Two Decades of Shenzhen Urban Villages

Mary Ann O'DONNELL

Discussions of 'urban villages' tend to refer to this term as if it had had a universal and fixed meaning. In this way, the phrase comes to implicitly refer to the present moment, telescoping our understanding of rural and urban relations to the present. By looking back at the experience of Shenzhen over the past decades, this essay restores urban villages to their historicity and unpacks the unacknowledged moral judgments that often underlie our understanding of these places.

We speak of 'urban villages' (城中村) as though the term had a universal and unchanging definition. However, when we visit any such place in Shenzhen, we quickly realise that differences abound. In the inner districts, for example, the dominant village structure is a six to eight-storey rental tenement or 'handshake building'. In contrast, the handshake buildings that define urban village spaces in collective manufacturing areas along national expressway G107—the first highway to connect Shenzhen to Guangzhou via Dongguan—are often 16 to 18 storeys high. The layouts of inner and outer urban villages are also recognisably different. Those in inner districts are smaller and denser than those in outer districts. Patterns of use further distinguish urban villages from one another. At this

Baishizhou aerial view.
Camera is pointing north
across Shennan Road.
PC: Luo Kanglin 罗康林.

finer level of analysis, we discover, for example, that villages in Bantian provide low-priced housing and shops for Huawei workers, while, in contrast, the fashionable restaurants and coffee shops of Futian urban villages offer tasty experiences for young white-collar workers in the downtown area. If that were not enough, when we look at urban villages from a longer historical perspective, even more differences become salient. The compounds that make the Longgang Hakka villages distinctive, for example, were built during the late Qing period, while local ancestral halls in Shajing and Fuyong trace village history back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). Indeed, the Longjin Pagoda in Shajing is one of the city’s oldest landmarks located above ground—and, yes, we need to specify ‘above ground’ because below ground there are even older settlements throughout Shenzhen. Roughly 1 kilometre east of Nantou Ancient City, near Honghua Estates on the Nantou peninsula, for example, nine Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) graves were discovered, while artefacts discovered at the Xiantouling Neolithic site on the Dapeng Peninsula have been dated to 7,000 years before the present (Peng 2015).

Using the term ‘urban village’ without specifying a historical era is misleading. Without temporal qualification, the phrase implicitly refers to the present moment, telescoping our understanding of rural and urban relations to the present. The history of urban villages is thus converted into a comparison of two kinds of urban environments: urban villages versus planned communities. In this comparative scheme, the implied research question is straightforwardly developmental: how do we transform villages into communities? In turn, this interrogative idea leads to technical questions such as: are handshake buildings more or less modern than steel and glass towers? Are wide streets more or less convenient than narrow streets? How necessary are landscaped parks to a comfortable lifestyle? Consequently, the lack of historical specification leads to an unacknowledged moral judgement: if planned communities are superior to urban villages, the people who live in planned communities are also superior to the people who live in urban villages. This unacknowledged moral judgement is then simplified into

‘commonsense’ action: transforming rural places and people into urban places and people through ‘rural urbanisation’ (农村城市化).

In Shenzhen, rural urbanisation must be understood as successive forms of administrative restructuring, reflecting both the historical legacy of urban–rural inequality under the *hukou* system and contemporary efforts of differently situated agents to reform and open the planned economy (Wang 2005; Young 2013). In 1979, Guangdong Province first elevated Bao’an County to Shenzhen municipality and only subsequently, in 1980, did the central government approve the designation of Shenzhen as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). This is an important, but often overlooked, point: urban status preceded special economic status. Also overlooked is the fact that the elevation of Bao’an County to Shenzhen City did not mean Bao’an residents became citizens of Shenzhen City. Instead, Bao’an residents continued to hold rural *hukou* within their natal villages. In contrast, official migrants received Shenzhen urban *hukou* via their Shenzhen work unit. Moreover, unofficial migrants to the city carried their hometown or home village status, which in turn determined their ability to obtain a Shenzhen *hukou*. Crudely speaking, urban *hukou* could be transferred to Shenzhen, while rural *hukou* could only be transferred to Shenzhen via another city. In practice, this meant that rural migrants had to first transfer their village *hukou* to the town or city that oversaw their village and only then could they apply for Shenzhen *hukou*.

Shenzhen’s cultural geography became even more complicated in 1981, when Bao’an County was reinstated and Shenzhen City was partitioned into the SEZ and Bao’an County, with only sections of the SEZ designated urban and Bao’an County demoted to rural status. The internal border between the SEZ and Bao’an was known as ‘the Second Line’ (二线)—a reference to the First Line: the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. A wall was built between the urban and rural sections of the city and non-Shenzhen residents needed travel passes to cross from Bao’an into the SEZ. Although border regulation eased around 2003–04, the presence of this barrier lingers in everyday conversation and today the original SEZ is known

as the inner districts (关内, literally, ‘inside the gate’), while the area that was reinstated as Bao’an County and now comprises six city districts is known as the outer districts (关外, ‘outside the gate’). Rural urbanisation also refers to a two-step policy through which remnant rural land was transferred to the city and people with Bao’an *hukou* were given Shenzhen *hukou*. The inner districts completed rural urbanisation in 1996 and the outer districts in 2004, when Shenzhen officially became the first Chinese city without villages.

The unacknowledged moral judgement that urban people and places are superior to rural people and places is also misleading at a second level, because rural urbanisation has not only oriented policy, but also shaped community, family, and individual aspirations beyond official urban borders. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, communes, townships, and villages built peri-urban spaces within their borders that have been understood as a Chinese variant of the *desakota*—a hybrid rural–urban space that characterised urbanisation in Indonesia during the 1980s (Guldin 1996). In Shenzhen specifically, rural subjects worked within and against Shenzhen’s *hukou* system to achieve different levels and differently recognised forms of urbanisation. The ‘new village’ (新村) was the local form that *desakota* urbanisation took in Shenzhen. After the completion of the rural urbanisation process, however, when the city turned its gaze to the new villages, it found them to be ‘dirty, chaotic, and substandard’ (脏乱差). New villages, which had been celebrated as examples of the success of Reform and Opening Up, were suddenly downgraded to ‘urban villages’, which were seen as urban blight. In the rest of this essay, I track the transition from new village to urban village, arguing that the moral judgement that infused the original rural urbanisation policy was repurposed to justify official renovation of the city’s villages. Indeed, this prejudice legitimated what was otherwise recognised as a blatant land grab. After all, the villages were located not only in key areas of the city, but also technically outside the official urban plan, which made them vulnerable

to large-scale demolition and redevelopment or ‘demolition and eviction’ (拆迁), as the process is referred to in everyday conversation.

Desakotasation with Shenzhen Characteristics: The Era of New Villages, 1979–2004

Before the promulgation of the 1986 Special Zone Master Plan, there were only two designated urban areas in the Shenzhen SEZ, Luohu and Shekou. The Luohu urban area extended from the train station to Shanghai Hotel, while the Shekou urban area was concentrated around Chiwan Port and the Sea World area (see also Zhou’s essay in the present issue). These newly formed urban areas were designated for manufacturing, while the remaining rural area was designated for agricultural production. This understanding of specific urban and rural functions had at least two effects on the shape of the city in the 1980s. First, in planned places, commercial agriculture became an important feature of the landscape. In the inner districts, in addition to the Rural Research Institute, Chegongmiao became a poultry farm, while in the outer districts, Guangming Overseas Chinese Farm specialised in producing milk for export to the SEZ and Hong Kong. Second, villages immediately adjacent to these new urban spaces had commercial opportunities that drew from their ‘food source’ designation. Traditional housing and public spaces quickly became sites for markets and restaurants—important centres for everyday transactions. These village marketing spaces also became sites where people could purchase everyday ‘Hong Kong’ goods, such as umbrellas, blue jeans, and small electronics, as well as the video and audio tapes that introduced mainland residents to Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture. The contribution of extant rural society to the construction of the new city was even more obvious in the outer districts. The new Bao’an County seat was situated just past the Second Line in Fanshen District, which had only been settled

during the so-called Fishing Reform (c. 1950–57) (A. Du 2020). In contrast, the main urban area was at Xixiang, which had a vibrant market and, during the 1980s and well into the 1990s, was the ‘centre’ of urban life in Bao’an.

During the 1980s, this commercial activity allowed rural collectives to build ‘new villages’. At first, new villages comprised housing, marketing, and industrial spaces. The most common form of housing was a 2.5-storey home for individual families. Markets and restaurants were conveniently located, while collective industrial parks were built on nearby farmland. Of course, as the urban areas of Luohu, Shekou, and Bao’an expanded at Shenzhen speed, neighbouring new villages adapted to the changing environment. By 1992, however, when the city began integrating collectives into its apparatus, new villages were already undergoing site-specific transformations that were related to their location. Luohu, Shangbu, and nearby Futian villages, for example, were already providing housing for unofficial immigrants, while along G107, collectives were building the large industrial parks that would provide the backbone of Shenzhen’s manufacturing boom during the 1990s. These economic functions further intensified commercial urbanisation in the villages. Handshake buildings quickly became the most common building type, as villagers took advantage of the lack of housing for migrants in the city proper. The first floor of handshake buildings was dedicated to commercial functions, while the second to sixth floors were dedicated to housing. There was further differentiation in the inner and outer districts. In the inner districts, villages offered urban amenities for migrants who worked in formal areas of the city. For example, many of the migrants who transformed Shangbu Industrial Park into Huaqiangbei Electronics Street lived in Gangxia Village, while the workers who made Chegongmiao an important manufacturing centre lived in Shangsha and Xiasha villages (after the chickens had left, of course!).

During the 1990s, as Shenzhen transitioned from being a special zone with two urban centres into a metropolis with dispersed urban functions, new villages provided spatial solutions to the interrelated problems that arose from both

planned urbanisation and unplanned immigration to the city. On the one hand, new villages afforded marketing opportunities to all migrants. When we look at early housing estates, for example, we discover that they were built only for housing. Many workers who lived in official housing could eat in work-unit canteens. However, families who wished to cook at home generally had to shop at a new-village market. In addition, when we look at questions of economic opportunity in the city, we also discover that new villages afforded opportunities that were unavailable in the formal city. At the individual level, these villages offered manufacturing employment to rural migrants as well as investment opportunities for migrants who had some capital. For example, many handshake buildings and shops were built and opened by first-generation migrants. At the collective level, new villages were the spatial form through which the local area urbanised in the absence of formal investment. In fact, during the first decades of the SEZ, most immigrants lived either in or near a village, relying on it to meet their everyday needs. Moreover, by 2000, more than half of the city’s population lived in a new village, not including those who had already transitioned from residing in one of these villages to living in ‘mainstream’ housing.

Restructuring Peri-Urban Shenzhen: Tianmian to Gangxia, 2004–2009

Tianmian was the first village along the Shennan Road, the city’s main thoroughfare, to be renovated. The construction of Shennan Road—a modern, landscaped boulevard—was also central to the young city’s self-presentation both at home and abroad and, in 2004, it was named one of the city’s ‘eight sights’. The village’s location at the border between the ‘old’ city centre in Luohu and the proposed city centre in Futian meant Tianmian was an important symbol of the transition from ‘new’ to ‘urban’ villages in Shenzhen (O’Donnell 2018). In the early 1980s, when the

Futian Commune restructured as a subdistrict under Shangbu Management Area, one of the teams of the commune, Gangxia, separated into Tianmian and Gangxia villages. Tianmian was on the northern side of Shennan Road, while Gangxia was further west on the southern side of the road. When the 1986 urban masterplan was promulgated, it extended planned urbanisation in the city through five clusters, which were separated by greenbelts. When the border between Luohu-Shangbu and Futian was designated, Tianmian was located within the greenbelt, while Gangxia was to its west. In the 1980s and 1990s, both Tianmian and Gangxia took advantage of their location to build factories. Finished products—electronics and toys, for example—were loaded on to pallets and into containers and initially shipped abroad via the Wenjingdu checkpoint and subsequently via the Huanggang checkpoint. Individual villagers accumulated the capital necessary to build private homes by working in factories, operating small shops, and smuggling goods from Hong Kong to sell in Shenzhen markets. They also acquired investment capital from Hong Kong relatives and investors. In 1996, the same year rural urbanisation was completed in the inner districts, the city promulgated its second masterplan, with its focus on building a new city centre in Futian. The centrepiece of this development was a corridor comprising the main government building, the Civic Centre (市民中心), a library, symphony hall, as well as a park and elegant high-rises, extending south from the Deng Xiaoping sculpture atop Lianhua Mountain to the Shenzhen Convention and Exhibition Centre near the Hong Kong border. As part of this process, in 1998, the greenbelt that separated Luohu-Shangbu from Futian was upgraded to become ‘Central Park’ (中心公园). Suddenly, Tianmian was next to the city’s most iconic park, while Gangxia was across the street from the city’s proposed new government complex. Consequently, the 2004 renovation of Tianmian indicated that the city intended to complete the formal urbanisation process, remaking extant new villages as legitimate communities.

Five years later, in 2009, Shenzhen began renovating Gangxia Village. The differences between the levels of investment in the renovation of Tian-

mian and Gangxia suggest that, between 2004 and 2009, the city’s imagining of how the rural would fit into Shenzhen’s future had changed. Unlike in Tianmian, which included at least three classes of housing and locations for mum-and-pop commercial activities, redevelopment in Gangxia entailed massive compensation packages and replacement of the dense, multi-use urban village environment with an upscale, gated community, office buildings, and a mall. Indeed, the renovation of Gangxia reputedly created 20 billionaires in a drawn-out negotiation that was staged directly south of the Civic Centre, solidifying class antagonisms that had been present but not dominant in Tianmian-style renovations (Shi and Peng 2009). In the Tianmian renovation, the urban village comprised four general areas: high-end commercial, high-end residential, mid-range commercial and residential, and low-end commercial and residential. This layout has allowed for a diverse spectrum of residents and livelihoods within the village, suggesting an inclusive understanding of rural urbanisation. In contrast, the redevelopment of Gangxia entailed only the construction of high-end commercial and residential buildings. When Gangxia Village was demolished, an estimated 100,000 people were evicted. Only villagers who had equity in the old village received compensation and could afford to move back to the area, while the majority of Gangxia residents relocated to other urban villages that were not as conveniently located.

What changed between 2004 and 2009? The simple answer is the city’s view of itself and the place of urban villages therein. In 2004, the relationship between new villages and the city shifted when the last of the rural areas in the outer districts was formally incorporated into the city apparatus, making Shenzhen China’s ‘first city without villages’. This unification was not only administrative, but also infrastructural. From 2004, the city provided new villages with water and electricity as well as increased urban management. The incorporation of villages into the urban apparatus initiated a new discussion about these spaces. When villages were separated from the city by function, the discussion focused on what kind of ‘rural’ space ‘new villages’ were. In this discussion of rural urbanisation, the conversation

emphasised the ‘newness’ of this form of rural space, and new villages were held up as successful examples. In contrast, once villages were incorporated into the city proper, the conversation emphasised ‘urban’ standards. In this discussion, urban villages appeared as failed or incomplete urbanisation, initiating efforts to renew ‘dirty, chaotic, and substandard’ urban spaces into planned communities.

In 2009, Shenzhen promulgated the Shenzhen Urban Renewal Method (深圳市城市更新办法), encouraging developers to draw up renovation plans that would bring urban villages into alignment with the city’s view of itself as a world city. That year, 93 village renewal projects were approved citywide, tripling investment in redevelopment, from 672.3 million RMB in 2009 to 2.51 billion RMB in 2010 (Liu and Lin 2015). This large-scale project to transform the city had inter-related material and social effects. On the one hand, the city was increasingly integrated. Redevelopment of Shenzhen’s urban villages began along Shennan Road and in the older sections of the city. In addition to Gangxia, the most famous of the Shennan Road renewals from the 2010s included Caiwuwei and Dachong, while throughout the inner districts, urban renewal began with urban villages near Luohu and Shekou, the ‘old’ city centres. On the other hand, as displaced residents left demolished villages, unplanned urbanisation in remaining urban villages intensified. Increasing population density in these remaining villages led to both a higher cost of living and more capital investment in the built environment. Coffee shops and breweries that targeted young white-collar workers exemplified this new form of investment and expenditure.

The End of an Era? Baishizhou, 2010–2019

Throughout the 2010s, Baishizhou prospered as an unrenovated urban village (see, for instance, Chen 2017: 223–63; Du Juan 2020: Ch. 8; O’Donnell and Bolchover 2014). Located on Shennan Road, Baishizhou absorbed the excess population

displaced from Gangxia and Dachong in addition to other inner district urban villages. Three classes of displacement characterised movement into Baishizhou. First, start-up companies that no longer had access to cheap and convenient spaces moved into the village’s factories. These companies included graphic design, clothing design, and IT prototypes. Second, families who wanted their children to continue their schooling in the inner districts also moved into the village. Third, restaurant entrepreneurs opened sites in Baishizhou. The most popular restaurants were located on ‘Beer Street’—a converted commercial area in the middle of the village. In turn, these displacements made Baishizhou one of the most economically diverse neighbourhoods in the inner districts, attracting working-class families, young architects, and innovative entrepreneurs. Moreover, the village’s convenient location meant it remained an important destination for new migrants to the city, who temporarily stayed in its many motels and hostels while looking for work or more permanent housing.

In 2013, Handshake 302 Art Space—an independent art collective that creates site-specific public art—rented a 12-square-metre efficiency apartment in Baishizhou. Like other renters, we chose this ‘base’ because it was cheap and convenient. Indeed, there was no other place along Shennan Road where it was possible to jump-start a non-traditional art practice as cheaply as in Baishizhou. One of our earliest projects was ‘Discover Baishizhou’ (发现白石洲), which treated the urban village as a ‘tourist destination’ or a ‘museum’. During the tour, we introduced visitors to seven micro-environments in the village, emphasising how our bodies interact with the city. The tour started at Baishizhou metro exit A, where the neighbourhood is connected to mainstream Shenzhen by metro train or bus. As a transportation hub, Baishizhou connected the urban village to the rest of Guangdong and southern China. Indeed, many visitors from the Huizhou, Meizhou, and Chaoshan areas jokingly said: ‘When my hometown bus comes to Shenzhen, the first stop is Baishizhou!’ The tour then entered the village through a small alley, walking past a coffee shop, bikes, and buildings to a Y-shaped intersec-



Roof top view of Baishizhou, demolished western section of the Shahe Industrial Park in the foreground, still occupied eastern section of the Shahe Industrial Park in the middle ground, and OCT residential towers in the background.
PC: Mary Ann O'Donnell.

tion. Motorbikes and small trucks zipped past us as we entered a small plaza where during the day children played while vendors set up mobile kiosks that at night became busy restaurants. At the southern edge of the plaza was a well, where migrant women could wash clothing, and a narrow alley that served as a marketing street. Behind the plaza were 10 row houses, built in 1958–59 when several dozen families were relocated from a village flooded by the creation of the Tiegang Reservoir in Longhua. We then followed an alley to the wall that separated Baishizhou from Shenzhen's most expensive housing development, 'Portofino', and then turned into another alley, which led us to the Bo Gong shrine. Next, we visited a vibrant public area near the Jiangnan Department Store. In front of the supermarket was an exercise area, while to its north was a public plaza and stage. We then entered the eastern section of the Shahe Industrial Park, where we ended the tour at a local

brewery, chatting, drinking home-brewed beer, and eating cheap but delicious barbecue. Participants in the Discover Baishizhou project who had never been to Baishizhou were impressed by the diversity and prosperity of the urban village's micro-environments, while those who had lived in Baishizhou during the 1990s and 2000s were able to rekindle childhood memories among the kiosks and alleyways.

Handshake 302 was in residence in Baishizhou from the autumn of 2013 to the summer of 2019, during which we created original artwork that grew out of our exploration. These reflections on the meaning and importance of 'urban villages' to Shenzhen intensified in 2016, when the destruction of Baishizhou began with the demolition of the western section of the Shahe Industrial Park. At the end of 2017, entrepreneurs in the eastern section of Shahe Industrial Park were evicted, although the buildings were not demolished. To



Xinzhou Village, Futian. Early ‘village renewal’ projects focused on removing old village settlements. In the picture foreground are ‘farmer housing’ that were built during the Mao era, while the 2.5-storey concrete house was one of the first ‘new farmer houses’ that were built during the 1980s. In the middle ground are 1990s-era handshake buildings and a village-operated hotel, while in the background is a Futian housing development, c. 2000. PC: Mary Ann O’Donnell.

ensure people moved out, water and electricity were cut off in January 2018. About 18 months later, in the summer of 2019, entrepreneurs and residents were evicted from neighbouring handshake buildings and, by early 2020, most businesses had closed. Until the mass evictions of 2019, Baishizhou was one of the most vibrant spaces in the inner districts, representing for many Shenzheners the ideal ‘urban village’.

From Urban Villages to Low-Income Suburbs?

A brief comparison of inner and outer district villages makes salient how special inner district villages were—first, as ‘new villages’ (1979–2004) and then as ‘urban villages’ (2004 – c. 2019). During the 1990s era of new villages, for example, resi-

dents of villages in and around Luohu and Shekou could not only walk or ride bikes to their jobs, but also take advantage of city-level cultural resources, such as libraries, theatres, and museums. Inner district new villages became de facto destinations because they provided services and goods that were not yet available in the SEZ. Once these amenities were available, urban villages offered cheaper access to services and goods in the formal city. Moreover, as the 2000s transitioned into the 2010s, inner district urban villages increasingly became sites for entrepreneurial creativity and fashionable consumption. After the completion of administrative rural urbanisation in 2004, planned cultural investment in the inner districts made inner district villages even more attractive as destinations. The construction of the Civic Centre exemplified this trend as residents in Tianmian, Gangxia, and other Futian urban villages could now easily visit the city’s main museum, library, and performance hall.

At the same time, Nanshan emerged as home to Shenzhen University, the national-level museums of Overseas Chinese Town, and the Hi-Tech Park, further enhancing cultural opportunities in the inner districts. Consequently, during the 2010s, Baishizhou was not the only urban village to emerge as a consumer destination for young people. Villages in Luohu and Futian districts also became ‘playgrounds’, offering tasty meals, tea and coffee shops, and vibrant streets for window-shopping, while Shenzhen University’s ‘backyard’, Guimiao, saw the rise of various creative industries. Thus, during the 2010s, residents of Baishizhou lived within walking distance of or a short trip on public transport from some of the city’s best creative jobs and cultural resources.

In contrast to the social and cultural opportunities symbolised by inner district villages, outer district villages have represented different forms of exclusion. On the one hand, before 2003–04, enforcement of the Second Line meant that, if migrants arrived in Bao’an without first securing a travel pass, they could not work in the SEZ, let alone visit its urban areas, cultural institutions, and famous tourist spots. On the other hand, in the outer districts, except for investment in a library, theatre, and park near the new county seat, there was limited investment in cultural resources. Even on national highway G107, the trip from a Shajing Village industrial park to the county seat took at least two hours, while a trip from the eastern reaches of the outer districts could take more than five hours. This geography meant that, in practice, outer district village residents could only access cultural resources through the village that owned and managed the industrial park where they worked. Wanfeng Village, for example, established a Cantonese Opera Troupe, but most villages simply provided outdoor film screenings and ad hoc ping pong tables. Moreover, although outer district cultural policies since 2004 have focused on building schools, libraries, and museums, these resources offer neither the variety nor the quality of inner district institutions. The history of the Pingshan Art Museum illustrates the conundrum of locating cultural resources in the outer districts. Construction of the museum began in 2010 and, in 2011, it began offering summer art programs.

Since then, a cutting-edge art program has been introduced, making the museum one of the city’s more interesting cultural resources. However, it is not easily accessible. On the high-speed train, for example, the trip from Futian to the museum takes 45 minutes, while from anywhere else, a one-way trip on public transport to Pingshan Art Museum can take 2.5 to three hours. Local residents do not fare any better since, as part of its upgrading, Pingshan is building commuter estates in thinly populated areas of the city, which in practice means the audience for these new resources is limited to the city’s car-owners.

When viewed from the perspective of the development of urban villages within Shenzhen, it seems the 2019 evictions from Baishizhou were a watershed moment. Small enclave villages remain in Luohu, Futian, and Nanshan, but these are neither as large nor as diverse as Baishizhou was. Moreover, they no longer represent affordable housing. Instead, these inner district urban villages thrive to the extent that they can become consumer destinations. Within walking distance of the Civic Centre and nearby office complexes, Futian villages like Shuiwei and Xiasha, for example, have become well-known foodie hangouts. Similarly, villages in Luohu and Nanshan have thrived as consumer destinations for creative, tech, and managerial workers. In contrast, there are limited high-end jobs available in the outer districts. Instead, outer district urban villages still primarily provide affordable housing options to workers in the service and manufacturing industries. The city and its districts have continued to invest in upgrading these villages, increasing urban amenities, including reliable water and electrical connections as well as sanitation services. These improvements have made living in these villages more comfortable. Moreover, investment in nearby schools and clinics has meant that working families are better able to access city services. Nevertheless, this level of investment is oriented to serving the residential population of a village rather than attracting entrepreneurial investment. In this geography of relative segregation, outer district urban villages end up functioning much like a housing development—residents return home to sleep, while working and consuming elsewhere. Consequently, outer district

villages have not evolved into consumer destinations in the same way as inner district villages, but have instead remained relatively isolated, low-cost neighbourhoods, suggesting their future may be as low-income suburbs rather than vibrant urban villages.

Legacies of Rural Urbanisation

The moral judgement that urban places and people are superior to rural places and people was built into Shenzhen's cultural geography. During the first decade of the SEZ, the construction of the Second Line and the designation of urban versus rural areas within the city proper transposed the inequalities of the *hukou* system on to Bao'an County. In turn, this led to the unequal distribution of institutional resources, as schools, hospitals, and cultural centres were built, first, in designated urban areas and, subsequently, throughout the SEZ. I have argued that this unequal access to institutional resources was one concrete expression of valuing urban places and people more than rural places and people. By virtue of their physical location, urban residents were able to care for their bodies (in hospitals), their children (in schools), and take advantage of adult learning opportunities (in libraries and museums). This care gap has widened over time, defining class differences between the children born to people with Shenzhen *hukou*, local Bao'an residents, and unofficial migrants to the city.

Importantly, even as planned urbanisation proceeded, so, too, did unofficial rural urbanisation (*desakotasation*) and the emergence of new villages as sites of urban possibility. In practice, the location of new villages within the SEZ meant their residents (unofficial or otherwise) had access to the city's institutions with important exceptions, such as educational opportunities and subsidised medical care. That said, commercial treatment in Shenzhen's hospitals and private schools quickly emerged as market alternatives to *hukou* subsidies. These residents also had access to better-paying jobs in the city's emergent creative, tech,

and managerial sectors. In contrast, in the outer districts, access to high-end jobs and social services has remained a feature of official urban centres, which have been built along metro lines. Moreover, many of the residents of these outer district urban centres work in the inner districts. Consequently, while inner district urban villages afforded opportunities for taking advantage of the city's institutions and cultural resources, outer district urban villages remained relatively isolated from them.

The 15 years from 2004 to 2019 were in many ways a golden era for Shenzhen's urban villages. During the era of new villages (1979–2004), villages were not treated as part of the city proper, which meant the city did not provide residents with public water, electricity, and sanitation services. After the completion of rural urbanisation in 2004, the city not only provided urban villages with these resources, but also began actively integrating them into medical and educational networks. In many ways, access to public services jumpstarted what, in retrospect, could be called the era of urban villages (2004–19). Moreover, as the city's economy diversified, young creatives and managers discovered new forms of consumption in the urban villages, while working-class families were able to take advantage of low-cost housing to provide educational opportunities for their children. In other words, these urban villages afforded pathways to urban belonging (Bach 2010). The 2019 evictions from Baishizhou not only marked the end of this kind of urban village in the inner districts, but also challenged the implicit promise of overcoming rural–urban inequality via the SEZ. Instead, what remain are consumption-oriented villages in the inner districts and affordable housing options in the larger, less central urban villages of the outer districts. What comes next is still unclear, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns and increasingly regulated mobility between Shenzhen and the rest of the country as well as within the city itself. Nevertheless, it seems we need to move beyond a simplistic discussion of 'urban villages' and turn our gaze to the problems brought about by planned urbanisation. What happens in the absence of liminal spaces, where unexpected solutions to urban inequality might emerge? ■



Foreigner in China

Economic Transition and the Chinese State's Vision of Immigration and Race

Guangzhi HUANG

China's recently proposed immigration reforms highlight the country's need for foreign talent in its transition to a knowledge-intensive economy. The state's vision, however, seems to be coloured by issues of race. Examining the representations of foreigners of different ethnicities and backgrounds on Chinese Central Television, this essay argues that while the state may be relaxing permanent residency restrictions, it favours white foreigners because of the racialised assumptions about the high levels of education and expertise that supposedly come with their whiteness.

Lin Huayou calls Nio Gioacchini 'dad' during the birthday party Gioacchini plans for him. Screenshot from *Foreigner in China*.

In a 2019 episode of *Foreigner in China* (外国人在中国), a program made by Chinese Central Television (CCTV), the audience is introduced to an unconventional father-and-son relationship (CCTV 2019). In 2016, Lin Huayou, a Zhejiang entrepreneur, hired Nilo Gioacchini, an Italian industrial designer, to design his bathroom fixtures. In the following years, their relationship blossomed, becoming family-like in nature. The end of the episode makes this closeness very clear, by showing a surprise birthday party Gioacchini has planned for Lin. On that occasion, the Italian man learns to say 'Happy birthday, child' in Chinese, while Lin, in tears, kneels and embraces Gioacchini as he exclaims: 'Dad!' This anecdote is interesting because the embedded power dynamics associated with Gioacchini's whiteness and technical expertise reveal which foreigners the Chinese state considers to be desirable additions to a Chinese family, which, in turn, functions as a metaphor for the nation.

In this essay, I examine representations on Chinese state television of foreigners living in China to understand both the state's vision for the country's future and its attitude towards immigration. Currently, even foreigners like Gioacchini find it difficult to live in China because of the country's highly exclusive policies on permanent residency, but immigration reforms are on the way. Underlying such reforms are China's transition towards a knowledge-intensive economy and the related growing demand for international talent. As illustrated by Gioacchini's story, the state seems to associate such talent with whiteness—a bias that may privilege white people in landing those high-paying technical jobs necessary to qualify foreigners for permanent residency.

Drawing mostly from CCTV Channel 4's *Foreigner in China*, this essay compares the show's representations of foreigners of different ethnicities and backgrounds. I focus on the program's association of whiteness with technical expertise and its naturalisation of white agency. These aspects are accentuated by the show's portrayals of African women, which link them with rural life. Although all the stories are based on real experiences and interviews, I contend that these stories are also heavily scripted in the selection of featured protagonists and the aspects of their lives that are highlighted. According to its official description, the show reflects the Chinese spirit of openness and tolerance (CCTV n.d.), but different foreigners receive very different treatment. Examining these scripted stories thus sheds light on how the state envisions a future that is becoming increasingly diverse.

China's Economic Transition and Immigration Future

In the past few years, much has been written about China's economic transition, with many Chinese scholars and government representatives arguing that technological advancement and creativity are poised to replace labour-intensive manufac-

turing to become the main drivers of the country's economic growth (Sun et al. 2017). This is due to China's increasing demand for high-quality products and services, and the gradual depletion of the 'reserve army' of young rural migrants who have kept Chinese factories running for the past decades. This transition, however, will require a new army of highly educated experts with advanced technical skills. Aware of this, Chinese authorities have been creating programs to develop such talent domestically and to woo global elites to China. The country's immigration laws, however, are lagging and the government has until recently maintained that China is not a country of immigration (Eastday 2004).

Currently, China's immigration regulations do not provide a practical route to permanent residency for most foreigners. To qualify, one must make significant investments, hold key titles (such as deputy director of a factory or associate professor), or have made major contributions to the country (China Consular Affairs 2006). A family reunion provision does exist, which in theory qualifies those with direct family members who are Chinese citizens or permanent residents for permanent residency, but very few, if any at all, have been able to secure permanent residency through this provision alone. Considering this, a 2014 news report even called China's permanent residency the 'most exclusive green card in the world' (Yangzi Evening Post 2014). To work in such a system, foreigners in China generally need to seek a work permit that is tied to their employer—an inconvenient measure as every change of job requires an arduous application process. In some cases, a foreigner must even exit and re-enter the country when reapplying. On top of this, foreigners also need to renew their residence permit—a separate document—usually on an annual basis.

However, policies are changing. In February 2020, two years after the establishment of the National Immigration Administration (NIA), the Ministry of Justice released draft 'Regulations on the Administration of Foreigners' Permanent Residency' to gauge public opinion. Compared with the current regulations, which were issued in 2004, the new proposal provides more routes for employment-based applications and eliminates

outdated qualifications such as ‘factory director’. Whereas investment is the number-one qualification under the current law, the new version prioritises contributions to science and technology, education, and culture. Although many people, including Hu Xijin (2020a), the Chief Editor of *Global Times*, have criticised the new threshold as being too low and inclusive, the updated proposal remains highly exclusive and targets those with graduate degrees and high salaries. For example, the minimum salary requirement for an employment-based residency applicant must be three times the average salary of local workers in the same position. In fact, some of the requirements in the new proposal are based on a special immigration program announced a year earlier with the aim of hiring highly educated foreign experts for the development of new free-trade zones (自贸区) in major cities (State Council 2019).

For Hu Xijin, one of the most controversial aspects of the draft is a new family reunion provision, which he believes would open the door to chain migration and cheap imported labour (Hu Xijin 2020b). However, it is still too early to tell whether the acquisition of a new low-cost workforce is part of the state’s long-term plan, especially considering that, as mentioned before, such a provision already exists in the current law and, so far, few, if any, have obtained permanent residency through this route alone. As contended by Tabitha Speelman (2020), the draft and the NIA’s establishment should be interpreted as the state’s acknowledgement of China as an immigrant destination country, rather than an immigration country. Indeed, the trend of low birth rates may mean that labour demand cannot be satisfied by Chinese workers and, to date, there has been at least one state program to legally import Vietnamese workers (Hu 2019). But it seems that rather than betting on immigration reforms, many manufacturers are turning to automation and robotics to solve the labour shortage (Xu 2020), which further fuels the demand for technical expertise. It is in this context that we should interpret CCTV’s representations of foreigners in China.

White Expertise

Foreigner in China is a long-running series of short documentaries that started in 2013. It includes a wide range of foreigners’ experiences in China, but episodes featuring non-whites are relatively rare and often focus on their cultural identities and assimilation. Episodes featuring white foreigners, on the other hand, are both predominant and more varied. White foreigners are also more likely to be portrayed as modern individuals with knowledge and technical skills. For example, most of the distinguished experts featured in the programs are white. A representative episode interviews Dave Cote, the former CEO of Honeywell, an aerospace technology company. Another tells the story of Yves Tiberghien, a professor of political science and the Director Emeritus of the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia.

But the program’s association of whiteness with knowledge and technical expertise is usually more subtle. Mike, for example, is a Canadian pizza restaurateur in Chengdu (CCTV 2018a). Formerly an aerospace engineer, Mike requires all the ingredients to be blemish-free and correctly labelled with purchase dates. Any food prepared improperly must be thrown away—a rule that has angered his Chinese in-laws, who think it is wasteful. Despite their disagreements, the in-laws try their best to meet Mike’s standards, and the narrator compliments Mike for treating cooking with the precision of aircraft manufacturing. Sometimes, the authority of white expertise can manifest in more mundane ways. Jos is a Dutch writer who has lived in Dali, Yunnan Province, for more than 30 years and is said to know more about Chinese history than his Chinese wife (CCTV 2018b). The couple used to disagree about how to educate their children. While Jos advocates embedding education in fun activities and would let their daughters miss school for a trip to the countryside, his wife is a believer in strict discipline. Eventually, Jos compromises and agrees not to encourage their children to miss classes, but his wife also admits that Jos’s approach is superior because he has a degree in developmental psychology.



[Top Left] Abohoui explains how he plans to convince the local master to teach him the art of the dragon lantern dance. [Top Right] Tina carries cabbages over her head, surprising both her husband and her mother-in-law. [Bottom Left] Dev Raturi decides to use Indian culture to attract customers to his restaurant. [Bottom Right] Sandra explains that she married her Chinese husband out of love and that she does not care if he is a farmer. Screenshots from *Foreigner in China*.

Now compare Mike's story with Dev Raturi's (CCTV 2014b). Like Mike, Raturi is a restaurateur, but he runs an Indian restaurant in Xi'an. While the story depicts Raturi as a devoted and meticulous owner with good business acumen, it also attributes his success to the historical ties between India and Xi'an. According to the narrator, Xi'an, the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, was the gateway through which Indian culture was introduced to China. To market this history to tourists, the Xi'an Government has built a multicultural commercial district on the original site of ancient Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Seeing the area's potential, Raturi chooses to locate his restaurant there and 'play the Indian culture card'. In other words, Dev's success is not so much the outcome of his individual skills and expertise, as it is the result of him acting out his ethnic identity in a space designated by the state.

White Agency

Assimilation is a main theme of the program. Experiencing the Chinese New Year, having a traditional Chinese wedding, learning to cook regional dishes, and mastering an ancient craft are all common topics. Due to their education and knowledge, however, white foreigners have more power in demanding accommodations, whereas non-whites face stronger expectations to assimilate.

Natasha, for example, is a Ukrainian woman with a doctoral degree in music (CCTV 2018c). She gave up her well-respected job at the University of Luhansk to be with her husband in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province. Her mother-in-law is an ethnic Tujia and a renowned folk singer who wants to teach Natasha Tujia singing. Natasha, however, keeps rejecting her offer because she cannot get

along with her. The root of their conflict, according to Natasha's husband, is the difference in their educations. Because Natasha is highly educated and has high 'quality' (素质), the husband's family, as mountain people, cannot live up to her standards. Although the episode ends with Natasha agreeing to learn Tujia singing for her wedding, it also reaffirms white foreigners' agency that comes with their education and allows them to express their independence vis-a-vis Chinese cultural traditions.

On the other hand, assimilation is expected of non-whites and is portrayed as something aspirational for them. Abohoui is a trader from Benin who, like Natasha, is also living in Hunan Province (CCTV 2017). Unlike Natasha, who barely speaks Chinese, he speaks both Mandarin and the Hunan dialect fluently. While Natasha refuses to learn Tujia singing, Abohoui's story is a two-part saga about his quest to learn the Tujia dragon lantern dance from a local master. To prove his worthiness, Abohoui must demonstrate his good character and complete assimilation by participating in various traditional rituals and performances. Thanks to his talent in singing and dancing, he successfully passes all the tests and becomes an official apprentice of the master. In both Natasha's and Abohoui's stories, Tujia tradition is embodied by a cultural authority—the mother-in-law and the local master. Whereas Natasha holds the power to challenge this authority because of her education, Abohoui submits to it and humbly receives its teachings. Like Gioacchini, Natasha is someone a Chinese family pursues; Abohoui is not.

African Women's Rural Ties

The countryside figures prominently in the program, usually as the ultimate testing ground of foreigners' assimilation. In most cases, foreigners' stays in the countryside are brief and enjoyable, but for African women, there is generally an additional expectation that they stay there and completely assimilate into rural life. Lin Huayou, for example, takes Gioacchini to his home village in Zhejiang

Province, where the Italian man experiences the harvesting of grapefruit—a local specialty—and learns about the life of local fishermen. It is a fun sojourn and Gioacchini is received as a distinguished guest.

African women's relationship with rural China, however, is very different. The program implicitly presents them as the solution to rural problems such as a lack of farmhands, caregivers for the elderly, and educational resources. Tina, a Zimbabwean English teacher in Beijing, for example, moves to her husband's hometown in rural Henan to support his plan of starting an English school there (CCTV 2016). While she displays little interest in living in the countryside, her efficiency in farmwork becomes the focus of the episode. We see her lift 25 kg of cabbages over her head—which both shocks and pleases her mother-in-law—and complete her work on the chicken farm while enduring pungent smells and feeling unwell. Linda, a Kenyan who married into a rural family in northeastern China, on the other hand, wins the hearts of her in-laws by washing their feet for five years—a ritual that epitomises filial piety (CCTV 2014a).

The program also implies that African women may be the solution to the glut of rural Chinese bachelors. Currently, many men in the countryside are struggling to find a spouse due to the gender imbalance created by the one-child policy and poverty (Brant 2016). The problem is so serious that recently a senior think tank official caused an uproar by proposing to matchmake single women in cities with rural bachelors (Yan 2021). In the program, African women are seen as not only suitable for rural life, but also indiscriminate in choosing husbands. They marry men who are much older than them and do not have much money. Representations like these may encourage more rural men to seek out African women as potential spouses, if the family reunion provision of the new regulations is indeed put into practice. But regardless of whether this is the program's intention, there is a stark and noticeable contrast between the depictions of African women and those of white foreigners, who are shown as educated urban professionals with the potential to bring positive changes to Chinese society through their modern expertise.

A More Diverse China

As a program produced for a global audience, *Foreigner in China* represents the Chinese Government's attempt to present a more diverse face to the world. It is also a step towards a future Chinese society where citizenship is separated from Chinese racial identity. In this vision, even an Italian can become the father figure—a role filled with symbolic and political meaning in Chinese tradition. This relatively liberal attitude is the result of China's transition towards a knowledge-intensive economy that is supported by highly educated professionals and experts. To attract such talent, China is reforming its immigration regulations, and programs like *Foreigner in China* are paving the way for such reforms.

However, as the program shows, the state seems to associate the talent it is seeking with whiteness. White foreigners, who appear most often in the program, are likely to be modern professionals with tertiary education or postgraduate degrees. Their expertise gives them more power to defy expectations about assimilation and challenge social norms. Their quirks and demands, as in Mike's case, are also more likely to be accommodated because their professional expertise is perceived to be what China needs. Non-whites, however, cannot offer such expertise and do not command the same kind of agency and respect.

The difference in portrayals not only reflects how race colours the state's vision, but also sheds light on some of the reasons white foreigners may receive more opportunities for high-paying technical jobs and preferential treatment in applications for permanent residency. Non-whites, by contrast, may be confined to niche professions based on their ethnic or racial identities. Indeed, in addition to Dev, the program also features a tea-seller from Sri Lanka, a black singer from the Bahamas, and a South Korean restaurant owner. Such success stories, however, are all contingent on help from powerful individuals. In other words, they are extremely difficult to replicate and not a practical route to permanent residency. The situation may look particularly grim for African women, with the state seemingly envisioning a more rural

role for them. This hints at the likelihood that, should the state eventually relax its measures on permanent residency, white foreigners will remain the privileged target of such policies because of racialised assumptions about high levels of education and expertise that supposedly come with their whiteness. ■

FOCUS

**Archaeologies
of the Belt and
Road Initiative**





The Chronopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative and Its Reinvented Histories

Maria Adele CARRAI

Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Chinese official discourse has emphasised the Initiative's continuity with the past. The reinvention of Eurasian history and heritage have become key aspects of both the promotion of the BRI and China's chronopolitics. This essay examines China's political use of history and heritage in the context of the BRI, along with the related risks and geopolitical implications.

Zheng He Statue at Sam Poo Kong Temple, Java.
PC: (CC) Siska Maria Eveline, Flickr.com.

Since the struggle for control over territory is part of history, so too is the struggle over historical and social meaning.

— Edward Said, 1994

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 一带一路) in 2013, discussions about it have become ubiquitous and heightened interest in Silk Road histories, archaeology, and heritage. China celebrates the ancient Silk Road and the imagined future one through conferences, exhibitions, and

events that evoke ancient histories of connectivity and brotherhood. However, this phenomenon is not limited to China; the BRI has also become a recurring theme in heritage sites, museum exhibits, expositions, and film festivals across Eurasia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. Countries aspiring to receive lucrative Chinese investments have promptly adopted Beijing's rhetoric claiming ancient trade and cultural ties, while adding new layers of meaning, geographies, and histories (Yang 2020).

Since the inauguration of the BRI, President Xi and other Chinese officials have used the idea of shared Eurasian history and heritage as an integral part of the metanarrative of connectivity ostensibly embodied in the BRI. In the speech he gave in 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Astana to launch the initiative, Xi described how the BRI is revitalising ancient routes:

Over the past 20 years and more, the relations between China and Eurasian countries have developed rapidly, and the ancient Silk Road has gained fresh vitality. In a new way, it is taking the mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Eurasian countries to a new height. (Xi 2013)

He also declared that the BRI reflects continuity with the past:

Throughout the millennia, the people of various countries along the ancient Silk Road have jointly written a chapter of friendship that has been passed on to this very day ... This is the valuable inspiration we have drawn from the ancient Silk Road. (Xi 2013)

The BRI, in Xi's words, has become an aspirational world of peaceful connectivity and friendship—free from all violence. It supports China's 'Great Rejuvenation' (中华民族伟大复兴) as both a world power and a great historical civilisation that can benevolently unify through 'win-win' cooperation among many disparate countries and peoples under a 'community with a shared future' (人类命运共同体) (State Council 2019). While the United States cannot rely on a multi-millennium history for its

global expansion and instead looks to the future—using 'manifest destiny' to justify its hegemony—China is looking backwards in the new global context. It is using its imagined historical continuity and a reinvented heritage of Eurasia as an endless repertoire for whatever argument it wants to make. In particular, it wants to promote Eurasia as a place of 'solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning, and win-win cooperation, [where] countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds [have been] fully capable of sharing peace and development' (Xi 2013).

China's political use of history is neither new nor unique to it (Igarashi 2000). History in different forms has always played a vital role in legitimising China's governing elites, for they saw their rule as inevitably linked to dynastic continuity. Giving the BRI historical foundations has become part of China's chronopolitics. Chronopolitics is the politics of time, and it can be understood as a discursive structure that operates within China's geopolitical narratives of the BRI. Geography is only one tool of geopolitics; the others are history and time—the former an interpretation of the latter. Chronopolitics involves simplifying time, collapsing complex historical developments into clear and neat temporal categories, figures, and analogies. History is carved up in the same way as geopolitical slices of world territory. This essay examines how political time operates in China's BRI geopolitical discourse and its chronopolitical assumptions. While China is constructing new geopolitical spaces in Eurasia and around the world, it is also remapping our understandings of time and heritage (Klinke 2013).

Evoking the Ancient Silk Road

The BRI has two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (丝绸之路经济带) and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road (21世纪海上丝绸之路). However, the infrastructure policy also includes many other initiatives, such as the Digital Silk Road, the Arctic Silk Road, and the Health Silk Road. Broadly defined, the BRI is a develop-

ment strategy promoted by the People's Republic of China according to stated goals of policy coordination and facilitating connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (NDRC and SOA 2017). After the BRI was announced in Astana, it evolved quickly, and its official status was sealed via formal incorporation into the Chinese Communist Party's constitution in 2017 (NDRC and SOA 2017). Its roots can be found in China's Going Out Strategy (走出去战略), which was formulated by then President Jiang Zemin in the late 1990s. Existing investments and projects were then rebranded under the BRI and helped bolster Xi's image as a great rejuvenator.

Originally translated as 'One Belt, One Road', the BRI was later officially referred to as an 'initiative' (倡议), in the singular. The decision was made to emphasise how the BRI should be an open call for voluntary action in service of the public good rather than a self-interested, China-oriented plan that could imply inducement and intimidation (Xie 2015). Official Chinese documents described the BRI as a vision for achieving 'harmony, peace, and prosperity', not a Chinese plot to counter America's 'pivot' to Asia or a stratagem to expand Beijing's geopolitical influence worldwide (Xie 2015). The change in wording did not decrease the extent of suspicion around China's intentions. If one looks through the official documents, it becomes clear that the BRI aims primarily to benefit China (Swaine 2015). Its ultimate goal is to create a more secure environment for China's global rise. History and heritage are tools that contribute to reinforcing China's new grand narrative of Sinocentric connectivity.

The BRI, as Xi declared, revitalises the ancient Silk Road—a name that resonates with ideas about camel caravans, long-distance trade, exoticism, and describes commercial, cultural, and religious exchanges across Asia in the past. 'Silk Road' usually refers to the set of land and maritime routes that linked the West and the East in ancient times and had Rome and the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an (today Xi'an) as ideal points of origin, but which also spread throughout Central Asia and the Middle East. However, the use of the name evokes an origin of dubious historical accuracy. The mythical title Silk Road was, in fact, coined

only in 1877 by Ferdinand von Richthofen, a prominent German geographer and geologist. He used the term *Seidenstraße* to describe the ancient trade routes he followed during his travels. However, a Silk Road with a single origin and endpoint has never existed (Chin 2013; Tseng 2019). The notion of the Silk Road(s) is indeed arbitrary, both as a concept and as a physical geographic construct. The Silk Road was not a single great road in ancient times but rather a network of roads, rivers, and sea routes. Its many routes changed over time, and the Silk Road has since been invented and reinvented (Chin 2013; Tseng 2019).

Before the BRI was announced, other ideas for rehabilitating the Silk Road had circulated, and Xi Jinping was not the first Chinese leader to use the term. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) used the idea to ameliorate East–West divisions at the end of the Cold War. In 1988, the agency launched the *Integral Study of the Silk Roads, the Roads of Dialogue* (1988–1997) to highlight the cultural interactions between different peoples. More recently, UNESCO created the Silk Roads Online Platform for Dialogue, Diversity and Development to increase awareness of shared cultural heritage and encourage intercultural dialogue between people living along Silk Road routes (UNESCO 2017, 2021). In China, before Xi, leaders like Premier Zhou Enlai spoke about the Silk Roads and suggested reopening 'an ancient trade route ... lost to modern times, not only for trade but for strategic purposes as well' (Khalid 2009; Frankopan 2020).

These reinventions of the Silk Roads evoke an almost mythical Eurasia, comprising great civilisations interconnected by ancient routes that have supported economic, religious, cultural, and social exchanges for millennia. The BRI has also become a 'metanarrative of connectivity' that reunites the historically integrated territories of Eurasia (Winter 2021). However, there are two differences between the Silk Roads as reimagined by UNESCO and by China's BRI. First, the BRI has expanded to include states such as the Americas and different economic initiatives like the Arctic and the Digital Silk Roads. Second, and more importantly, the BRI appears to be born of China's alleged goodwill rather than emerging spontaneously from

a plurality of countries. Through the BRI, the Chinese Government has deliberately sought to remind the world that the initiative has historical and archaeological foundations in a shared heritage of prosperous and thriving networks connecting Asia to Europe. The BRI is based on a highly stylised, romanticised vision of Eurasian history that ignores wars and imperialism. Most importantly, it creates a past in which China and its historical figures were leaders at the centre of this connectivity (Winter 2021).

The Legends of Chinese History

Given the relevance of history, it is unsurprising that certain historical figures have suddenly acquired newfound significance in China's grand BRI narrative. The Chinese imperial envoy to the outside world during the Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian (164–113 BCE); the Chinese Buddhist monk and translator who travelled by foot from ancient China to ancient India, Faxian (337–422); the Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller, and translator Xuanzang (602–64); and the Chinese admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) have all become intertwined in the new grand narrative of peaceful connectivity and brotherhood. They have become symbols of premodern cosmopolitanism and commercial, religious, and cultural exchanges. While many other historical figures have been associated with the BRI, Zhang Qian and Zheng He stand out as illustrious predecessors who introduced China to foreign peoples and established lasting bonds of mutual benefit—'win-win cooperation', in current parlance. While Zhang traversed the antecedent of the land-based route of the Silk Road, Zheng sailed the forerunner of the maritime BRI.

President Xi's 2013 speech in Astana identified Zhang Qian as the Chinese discoverer of the Silk Road. In Xi's words:

Over 2,100 years ago during China's Han Dynasty, a Chinese envoy, Zhang Qian, was sent to Central Asia twice with a mission of peace and friendship. His journeys opened

the door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries as well as the Silk Roads linking East and West, Asia and Europe.

In the second century BC, the Xiongnu tribe troubled various peoples of Central Asia with continuous raids, according to official accounts. In 138 BCE, the court of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty sent Zhang Qian on a secret mission to western regions in search of a defensive alliance. Zhang failed, was taken prisoner, and was held by the 'barbarian' Xiongnu for more than a decade. When he later returned to his homeland, he provided the emperor with a series of descriptions of previously unknown cities and kingdoms, as well as routes and trades that already involved the empire but of which the court was not yet aware. These discoveries led to the construction of roads, trade in commodities such as silk, and exchanges between China and Central Asia (Wang 2016).

President Xi used Admiral Zheng He's heroic narrative of maritime explorations in a speech to the Indonesian Parliament to present the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road. Zheng was a eunuch commander of the army at the court of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (r. 1402–24). He was appointed admiral and led seven naval expeditions between 1405 and 1433, which earned him recognition as the greatest navigator, admiral, and Chinese ambassador. The voyages he undertook to collect tributes and find new countries with which to establish commercial relations took him to Southeast Asia, the Red Sea, and all the way to the Persian Gulf. According to the official narrative, he negotiated trade deals with African leaders on equal terms without exploiting their resources. Described as an envoy of peace and friendship, Zheng is depicted as symbolising China's openness to the world. As former Chinese state councillor Dai Bingguo (2010) said: 'Zheng He, a great Chinese navigator, led the world's strongest fleet to the Western Seas on seven voyages, taking with him not bloodshed or war, pillage or colonization but porcelain, silk and tea.' However, there is evidence that Zheng also operated as an agent of Chinese expansionism who would not hesitate to use force when countries refused to recognise China's hegemony: '[I]magine the effects upon the leaders of

minor coastal states along Zheng's routes at the sight of an arriving fleet of two hundred immense and well-armed ships suddenly filling the horizon' (French 2017: 99–103). China's neighbours would think otherwise about Chinese claims of pacifism, and the Chinese century of humiliation corresponds to 1,000 years of Chinese domination in Vietnam. Looking at Chinese history, the scholar Victoria Tin-bor Hui (2015) notes that China was far from pacifist. There was a prevalence of civil wars and armed rebellions, and Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1711–99) was an expansionist. All the land included within China's sovereign borders had been incorporated through imperialist and colonial tactics (Carrai 2019).

References to Zhang Qian and Zheng He are supposed to evoke the age-old friendship and goodwill of an allegedly benign Chinese empire that cultivated equal and mutually beneficial relations with its neighbours. They testify to the solidity of the relations between China and the countries along the BRI. Xi's speech in Astana, in addition to discussing the Silk Road and Zhang Qian, cited stories of Chinese and Kazakh characters to demonstrate the friendship and trust that united both peoples (Yi 2019). Per the Chinese foreign policy playbook, such references to the Silk Road clearly function to present the BRI as an exemplification of brotherhood and shared benefits between peoples. Again, such rhetoric dismisses the complexity of history and its many conflicts; it simplifies and collapses time into mythicised temporal categories and figures.

The Archaeology

The BRI derives support from more than just sources that retell and reinvent history. More recently, the material culture of the past unearthed by state-sponsored archaeological excavations has been used to support the metanarrative of Sino-centric connectivity. Through the BRI, China has become increasingly interested in its cultural heritage. The government has collaborated with Greece, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia to search for shipwrecks and artefacts (Zhong 2020). Findings

of Chinese material culture along the ancient Silk Roads help connect the past with the present and place China at the centre of trade, connectivity, and innovation in the region—all while confirming the existence of ancient historical relations with countries along the BRI (Storozum and Yuqi 2020; Xinhua 2020). Increased Chinese investments are framed within a reconstructed history of friendship and peaceful trade that such archaeological findings purport to prove. The so-called archaeological Silk Road or Silk Road Archaeology (丝绸之路考古) helps foster China's national rejuvenation at home and abroad, promoting the nation as an engine of connectivity, unity, and prosperity. It also contributes to restoring China's cultural prominence by developing a deep sense of historical ownership of cultural artefacts that construct national identity through collective memory (Wang 2014).

Examples of new Sino-foreign ventures include the Sino-Uzbek Mingtepa project that emphasises China's cultural and economic ties along the 'Belt' portion of the Belt and Road. Archaeological work at these sites can embed the history of the Silk Road within a narrative of progress and economic opportunity that Chinese commercialism previously helped sponsor. On Africa's Swahili Coast, there have been attempts to establish a historical and material connection with Admiral Zheng He. A team of archaeologists sent by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage found evidence on Kenya's coast—in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya—of possible descendants related to Zheng's mission and ancient China–Africa ties. While these excavations provide evidence of China's presence on the Swahili Coast, forced inscriptions into the grand narrative can once again be seen as chronopolitics: an attempt to use history and its material remains in a narrative that serves to highlight China's centrality (Storozum and Yuqi 2020).

Chinese archaeological expeditions and joint ventures with foreign countries will likely increase in the coming years due to the vast resources the Chinese Government is dedicating to archaeological excavations (particularly maritime ones) and the manifold port cities in Asia and Africa that contain evidence of Chinese trade and exchange

(Global Times 2017; Gardner 2016). Casting such material culture and archaeological findings into a reinvented history can lead indirectly to a perception of China as a ‘historical driver of prosperity, peace, and political stability’ (Storozum and Yuqi 2020: 284). Chinese archaeologists are actively discovering and writing their history. Still, they also seek to rewrite other countries’ pasts and weave such histories into a more Sinocentric narrative (Storozum and Yuqi 2020: 285; Wang 2017). While archaeological missions are a positive development, these can also lead to the re-creation of heritage driven by Chinese foreign policy and soft-power projection.

The Chronopolitics of the BRI

The BRI comprises reinvented traditions in which history, ancient figures, and archaeology serve China’s chronopolitics. For Xi Jinping, the Silk Road is the ‘great heritage of human civilisation’, a legacy of ‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’ (Xi 2017). China portrays the BRI as an open initiative that fosters mutual benefit and a peaceful community of shared destiny. The BRI is expected to give ‘fresh vitality’ to the ancient routes and historical spirit based on peace and cooperation, openness and inclusivity, and mutual learning and benefit. The reinvented and reimagined ancient Silk Road symbolises the enduring strength of the Chinese civilisation and its ability to create unity. According to the official rhetoric, Zhang Qian and Zheng He were the pioneers of the Silk Roads, or the Columbuses of the East, who connected China with the world and delivered benefits to all.

The BRI perpetuates a romanticised and simplified version of Eurasian history. While the metanarrative of connectivity can help China’s domestic nationalism, it is unclear whether it will be successful in boosting the idea of a ‘rejuvenated’ Sinocentric Eurasian civilisation abroad. Despite significant Chinese investments, other countries retain competing narratives about the Silk Road, its origins, and its geography. Still, China’s histor-

ical reinvention of Eurasia and the Silk Road and the casting of archaeological findings within its metanarrative of connectivity can impact on the identity processes of these countries, their paths of development, the way their museums and heritage are constructed, and the way the histories of these lands are reimagined (Murton and Lord 2020; Winter 2021). History and time are not distinct from space and geopolitics but rather integral parts of it. The chronopolitics of the BRI reinvents a history of peaceful connections and brotherhood and reorganises the rest of the world in accordance with a vision that places China at the centre. As such, China’s BRI chronopolitics challenges the current geopolitical order. It calls for a more critical approach to geopolitics capable of deconstructing the chronopolitical framing and the hidden politics of time—beyond one that centres on China. ■



The Past in the Present of Chinese International Development Cooperation

Marina RUDYAK

Tracing the origins of the core principles of China's foreign aid—political non-interference and aid for independent development—to the early days of the People's Republic of China, this essay shows how historical memory continues to play a significant role in China's interactions with developing countries today. It also argues that China's foreign aid from the past to the present has to be understood as an externalisation of China's quest for development, modernisation, and independence.

How can China still claim to be a developing country when it is one of the biggest contributors to international development cooperation? I am asked this question a lot, most recently by a German parliamentarian. It appears that in the imaginative geographies of the West, a country is either a donor and thus *developed* or a recipient because it is *developing* (and poor). It is still generally overlooked that the origins of China's international development cooperation date back to the early days of the People's Republic of China (PRC). For most of its existence, the PRC—like India, for that matter—was simultaneously donor and recipient. Despite often being called a 'new'

Then-premier and foreign minister Zhou Enlai signs autographs for admirers on the sidelines of the Asian-African Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference, Bandung, Indonesia in April 1955. PC: Xinhua.

or ‘emerging’ donor, China has a longer history of aid giving than many of the so-called traditional donors—the common name for higher-income economies organised in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which together provide the largest share of globally available aid.

The PRC started delivering aid in 1950, first providing military and economic assistance to the communist forces in North Korea and North Vietnam (Shi 1989: 23–30). Also, from 1950, communist China was a recipient of Soviet economic aid: concessional loans tied to the purchase of war materials, daily necessities, and equipment from the Soviet Union. After the Bandung Conference of 1955, aid was extended to a steadily increasing number of countries in Southeast Asia and the newly decolonised sub-Saharan Africa. From the beginning, aid served as a tool for the PRC to break through its international isolation due to the US-led economic embargo and its exclusion from the United Nations, where the China seat was held by the Nationalist Party in Taiwan. Framed in terms of ‘mutual benefit’, while catering to the recipients’ economic needs, foreign aid facilitated the PRC’s diplomatic recognition and was instrumental in securing communist China the UN seat in 1971.

It may come as a surprise to many today that throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese aid, particularly to Africa, received a fair amount of attention in the West. Wolfgang Bartke (1975) and John F. Copper (1976) provided detailed overviews of Chinese aid projects. Others wrote that China won praise from African nations for providing aid free of political strings, particularly through the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway in the early 1970s (Hutchinson 1976; see also Monson’s essay in the present issue), and that the United States, and even to some extent the Soviet Union, perceived China as an actor that could share the burden of providing aid to developing states (Weinstein 1975). In short, Chinese aid was an acknowledged part of China’s global interactions. However, once China became a recipient of Western development aid after 1978, the West, to quote Deborah Bräutigam (2009: 54),

‘stopped looking’. But China never stopped giving. Throughout the 1980s, it remained among the 10 largest donors to sub-Saharan Africa (OECD 1987: 8). It was only in 2005 that China came again under the spotlight when Angola chose a Chinese loan for which it could pay with oil exploration rights over an International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid package that was conditioned on governance reforms (Schmitz 2021). DAC countries began to worry that China’s ‘no-strings-attached’ aid might undercut DAC’s insistence on high requirements for good governance, environmental standards, or linking aid with poverty reduction indicators (Manning 2006). The issue of (non-)conditionality remains a key point of friction between China and the DAC.

Historical Memory

When the chair of the DAC, Richard Manning, visited Beijing in February 2007 as part of the DAC’s effort to socialise China into the existing aid regime, he raised the issue of non-conditionality of Chinese aid. The Chinese side responded that China would not give up non-conditionality because of the principle of non-interference, which was linked to the memory in China of the Western embargo after 1949 (OECD 2007).

Historical memory is very much present in today’s Chinese discourses on aid and development cooperation. Chinese leaders often invoke an image of a shared past of joint anti-imperial and anticolonial struggle with other developing countries, when China, despite its poverty, supported others to the best of its ability—and without any political conditions (except for the One-China Principle). Euro-American debates often dismiss such references to historical memory as ‘propaganda’. Undoubtedly, the Chinese Government employs them strategically, but it would be wrong to infer that historical memory has no significance. In a language in which verbs do not have a past tense, the past is never gone. The constant quasi-ritual repetition and referencing of sites of historical memory—a concept French historian Pierre Nora (1989) popularised as *‘lieux de mémoire’*—imply that

the realms of memory are ingrained into collective political consciousness as something that (still) ‘is’.

The white paper on *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era* (新时代的中国国际发展合作) of January 2021 (SCIO 2021) may talk about the ‘new ideas and initiatives such as the global community of the Shared Future of Mankind and the Belt and Road Initiative’ proposed by President Xi Jinping. However, the core of the development cooperation policy set out in the document essentially corresponds to what Zhou Enlai—whom I would call the father of Chinese aid—set out in 1964 in the Eight Principles of China’s Economic and Technical Foreign Aid (中国政府对外经济技术援助的八项原则), including equality and mutual benefit, political non-interference, improving people’s livelihoods, supporting the recipient countries’ capacity for independent development, and a technology-centred outlook on modernisation. The Eight Principles were spelled out by Zhou during his visit to 10 African countries (Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia) between 24 December 1963 and 29 February 1964, which was described by contemporaries as ‘Peking’s greatest diplomatic effort to date outside the Communist world’ (Adie 1964: 174) and laid the foundations for China’s continuous engagement with Africa. The Eight Principles could be considered the offshoot of a long chain of ideas about international relations and development, some of which emerged during the Civil War and can even be traced back to Sun Yat-sen. All were rooted in China’s own perspective and experiences as an aid supplicant and recipient. Therefore, by and large, foreign aid can be understood as an externalisation of China’s quest for development, modernisation, and independence.

Non-Interference

Aid based on principles of non-interference and no political conditionality (except the One-China Principle) emerged as a countermodel to US President Harry S. Truman’s Point Four Program—a technical assistance program for ‘underdeveloped

areas’, which promised they could benefit from the United States’ advanced industrial and scientific position to overcome their poverty (Truman 1949).

John F. Copper (1976), who wrote one of the earliest works about Chinese aid, has argued that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the very beginning denounced aid provided by the United States and other Western countries for ideological reasons (Copper 2016: 88–89). However, lesser-known primary sources indicate that the CCP’s leaders were less ideological than often assumed in the literature (Copper 2016; Brazinsky 2017). US diplomatic cables declassified in 1969 document implicit and explicit requests for US economic aid by the Chinese communists between 1945 and 1949. The first major foreign policy document of the CCP Central Committee (CCPCC), ‘Instructions of the CCPCC on Diplomatic Work’ (中共中央关于外交工作的指示), published in August 1944 (a month after the Bretton Woods Conference that established the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), stated that the CCP would ‘welcome international investment and technical co-operation under the principle of mutual benefit’ (NAAC 1992: 317). In January 1945, Mao Zedong and Zhou secretly tried approaching US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to ask for US economic assistance. According to US Embassy cables, Mao explained his request by stating that ‘China’s greatest post-war need [was] economic development’, but it lacked ‘the capitalistic foundation necessary to carry this out alone’. He saw the United States as the only country with the economic capacity to meet China’s needs (FRUS 1945). Such a statement appears to contradict Mao’s known general scepticism of the United States, but this apparently did not extend to Roosevelt. Mao reportedly praised Roosevelt’s policies towards China and viewed him as a representative of progressive forces in the US Government, even comparing him positively to Sun Yat-sen (Westad 1993: 61–69). Mao offered raw materials and agricultural products in exchange for capital to build up light industry, and promised in exchange that China, for the time being, would not pursue socialism or collectivisation:

Neither the farmers nor the Chinese people as a whole are ready for socialism. They will not be ready for a long time to come. It will be necessary to go through a long period of private enterprise, democratically regulated. To talk of immediate socialism is 'counter-revolutionary' because it is impractical and attempts to carry it out would be self-defeating. (FRUS 1945)

Whether Mao meant what he said is open to debate, as his wish never materialised. Roosevelt died in March 1945 and his successor, Truman, declared unconditional support for the Nationalist Party. Mao declared in Yan'an on 13 August 1945 that the communists would pursue *zili gengsheng* (自力更生)—a term that is typically translated as 'self-reliance' but rather means regeneration through one's own effort. The idea of self-reliance was originally introduced by Mao during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), when the communists had to cope with the economic isolation of their bases in various parts of rural China, and would become not only a principle of domestic development but also a goal of China's foreign aid from the 1950s—that is, to help other developing countries become 'self-reliant' (Yang 2019).

Before that, nonetheless, the US diplomatic cables document that after the launch of Truman's Point Four Program, there was another attempt to secure US aid. On 31 May 1949, one month before Mao announced that the new republic he envisioned would 'lean to one side' (一边倒) towards the Soviet Union in its foreign policy, the US Consulate in Beijing (now Beijing) received a secret oral message passed on from Zhou. The message said Zhou did not trust the Soviet Union and did not believe it could provide the help China needed; only the United States could. China, in his eyes, was on the brink of collapse, 'in such bad shape that [the] most pressing need [was] reconstruction without regard [to] political theories'. China would accept aid in the form of loans, technical assistance, or other help of Marshall Plan nature from the United States or Britain, 'if presented on the basis of equality with no strings detrimental to Chinese sovereignty attached' (FRUS 1949). The authenticity and sincerity of Zhou's message,

which is known as the 'Zhou Démarche', have been widely debated in the literature and remain one of the great unresolved questions in China studies to this day (see, for example, Shaw 1982; Westad 1993; Zhang 2001; Heinzig 2015). However, given the similarities to Mao's request to Roosevelt in 1945, it appears plausible that there had been a general preference for US assistance, but Mao shifted his position during the Civil War.

Like the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, 'Point Four' was part of American Cold War policy, aimed at containing the expansion of Soviet influence. If Zhou had envisioned China as one of the 'undeveloped areas' to benefit from the program's resources, the final response was that China stood on the wrong side. Therefore, Zhou's subsequent sharp criticism of US aid as 'so-called aid' (所谓援助)—that is, aid that was conditional on political alignment and not primarily oriented towards the economic needs of the recipients—was arguably not just ideological but also rooted in US refusal to provide economic assistance for political reasons. Speaking to Party cadres in December 1949, on the eve of China's first aid program, Zhou painted a contradiction between the United States, which only granted aid to those who politically aligned with it by 'surrendering to US imperialism' (向美帝国主义屈服), and China's idea of 'equality and mutual assistance' (平等互助) for 'self-reliance' (Zhou 1949).

Its experience as a recipient of Soviet aid may also have played its part in the formation of China's non-interference policy, even though it rarely features in China's official historical memory today. Archival sources suggest that early Soviet aid to China was conditional on China's involvement in the Korean War. Chinese historian Shen Zhihua (2003: 398) maintains that about 48 per cent of all Soviet loans between 1950 and 1953 were rechannelled to North Korea, making the war highly expensive for China. According to Soviet sources, Zhou Enlai travelled to Moscow in 1952 to propose to Joseph Stalin a strategy to end the Korean War (Stanley 2009: 73). Stalin, however, made clear that the Soviet Union would only provide further economic assistance to China on the condition that China continued its involvement in the war (Stanley 2009: 73). Quite possibly to show its

moral superiority over the Soviet Union, China announced in 1953 that it would forgive North Korea all the loans (People's Daily 1953: 1)—which was remarkable considering they were financed with Soviet concessional loans that China itself had to repay.

Joint Self-Strengthening

When giving his welcoming address at the South–South Cooperation Roundtable hosted by China during the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Summit in 2015, President Xi Jinping started by invoking historical memories:

South–South Cooperation started in the days when we fought together against imperialism and colonialism and flourished in the era of economic globalisation. It is the great endeavour of developing countries of joint self-strengthening and opens a new path towards common development and prosperity. (Xi 2015)

The purpose of Chinese aid was to ‘help developing countries to develop their economies and to improve the people’s livelihood’ (帮助发展中国家发展经济, 改善民生) and to ‘enhance their capacities for independent development’ (提高自身发展的能力). Here, Xi’s linking of anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle with joint self-strengthening (联合自强) and independent development echoes both Mao’s ideology of ‘self-reliance’ and the anti-colonial Self-Strengthening Movement (自强运动) of 1861–95. His understanding of development primarily as a technocratic modernisation process, which is the basic prerequisite for improving people’s livelihoods, on the other hand, can be traced back to Sun Yat-sen and his *minsheng* (民生) philosophy (sometimes translated as ‘well-being’).

Minsheng was part of Sun’s Three Principles of the People (三民主义) (Linebarger 1937). The realisation of *minsheng* by means of economic and industrial development programs was seen by Sun as a necessary prerequisite for the other

two principles: ‘nationalism’ (民族主义), which meant opposition to foreign imperialism, and the ‘right to self-determination’ (自决权) (Linebarger 1937: 243). *Minsheng* was also the centrepiece of Sun’s 1918 book, *The International Development of China* (Sun 1920; originally published in English and later translated into Chinese with the title 实业计划 [*Industry Plan*]), which the development economist William Easterly (2014: 53) termed ‘the world’s first development plan’. Sun, Easterly (2014: 53) argues, ‘was one of the first to present the idea of technocratic development in its modern form’. Sun proposed the creation of a new form of international organisation (国际组织) that would facilitate China’s development by introducing into the country foreign capital, technology, and expertise; the world would benefit from China’s resources, while China would, in exchange, get the means for its economic and industrial revolution (Sun 1920: v). Although he held no official position at that time, Sun was hoping to mobilise international assistance for his development goals and sent his proposal to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference as well as to the US, British, and Italian governments (Helleiner 2014: 377). Even though he ultimately failed to get the support of the League of Nations, his ideas remained influential and were channelled by Chiang Kai-shek’s government into the Bretton Woods agreement in 1944 (Helleiner 2014: 377). Much later, the model he proposed was reflected in the main pattern of China’s engagement with other developing countries, including what became known as the ‘Angola model’ where China finances the infrastructure development of the country in exchange for access to its resources.

The Chinese official discourse today draws a link between Sun’s ideas and China’s relations with developing countries. Specifically, Chinese aid scholars frequently point to a quote from an essay written by Mao in 1956 to commemorate Sun—‘China should make a greater contribution to mankind’ (Mao 1977)—to explain the long-held sense of internationalist responsibility that guided China’s aid giving (Zhou 2009; Liu 2015). Hereby, the domestic quest for modernisation and independence was extended to all ‘underdeveloped’ (不发达) countries. In an interview with American journalist Anna Louise Strong in Yan’an in

1946, Liu Shaoqi, who was among the CCP's core leadership, linked China's transition to a more industrialised economy with national independence, arguing that the course chosen by China would influence Southeast Asian countries facing similar conditions (Strong 1947: 182). After the 1955 Bandung Conference, Zhou Enlai (1956) explained to the National People's Congress that the reason China wanted to support the economic development of other countries was its own recognition that political independence depended on economic independence:

China is a country that just recently has been liberated. Our economy is still very backward; we still haven't achieved full economic independence ... But we have understood that economic independence is of major significance for consolidating political independence. Therefore, while we advance the building up of our own economy, we wish, within the bounds of our possibilities, to contribute our meagre forces to help the economic development of other countries.

Similarly, the Chinese official discourse today is extending the Chinese Dream (中国梦) to a 'World's Dream' (世界梦) and a 'Community of Common Destiny' (命运共同体) (SCIO 2014) in which China is depicted as ready to share its unique development lessons with other developing countries. However, joint self-strengthening is not only an objective but also a precondition for development: it is only through joint self-strengthening that China (or any country) can truly develop. For Zhou, aid was a tool for China to develop its foreign relations and to pursue an 'independent and peaceful foreign policy' (独立自主和平外交政策) (Lin 1987). In 1979, Deng Xiaoping elaborated that China needed a peaceful international environment for development and therefore, no matter whether it was poor or rich, it had to give aid as aid was 'an indispensable strategic expenditure' (不可缺少的战略支出) (PLRC 1982). Similarly, Yang Jiechi, then State Councillor and China's top diplomat, stressed in 2013 that 'since the "Chinese dream" is closely linked with the dreams of other peoples around the world, China is committed to

helping other countries' (Yang 2013). Therefore, from the Mao era until today, China's aid giving can be seen as shaped by the objective to gain relational security and increase relational power, and guided by an underlying assumption that aid, by and large, will ultimately be reciprocated with political allegiance (Qin 2018).

The Centre is Still West

The Chinese Government has long rejected the normative centrality of Western donors. Instead, it argues for a legitimately different mode of South-South cooperation—one, as President Xi noted in his 2015 UN SDG Summit speech, that is in line with China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则) and is based on 'non-interference in internal affairs' and 'respect for independent choice of development paths and social systems' (Xi 2015). Yet, only a few moments later in the same speech, Xi presented a clearcut vision of how the 'joint self-strengthening' is supposed to happen:

South-South Cooperation in the new era should aim at promoting the alignment of national development strategies ... We need to identify priority areas for cooperation, and promote cooperation in the areas of trade, finance, investment, infrastructure, and green environment protection, in order to improve the overall competitiveness of developing countries ... We need to make connectivity and production capacity cooperation a priority and focus on implementing landmark projects of strategic significance. We need to build our own financing platforms, and make full use of new mechanisms including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank of BRICS countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] to provide stronger impetus for South-South Cooperation. (Xi 2015)

The path outlined by Xi is both technology-centred and China-led. Xi's outlook may leave space for other countries to choose alternative *social* systems, but his imagining of how *economic* development should happen seems hardly different from what the West has championed. In the economic realm, the West continues to be the benchmark when it comes to the meaning of being 'developed' (admittedly, as the ongoing COVID-19 crisis reveals, this may be shifting, too).

Thus, China's development cooperation policy—both in foreign aid and in the Belt and Road Initiative—may rhetorically challenge the Western development paradigm, its benchmarks for defining development, and its prevalent exclusion of the possibility of learning from each other (Campbell 2008: 98–99). But China never contests the notions of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', even though the implicit assumption in these concepts of the unity and superiority of Western-style modernity has been severely criticised by postcolonial theorists (see, for instance, Escobar 1995; Wainwright 2008). Nor is there critical discussion of the fact that building roads, developing raw materials, and modernising agriculture bring not only benefits but also costs—particularly to indigenous peoples, small farmers, forest-reliant people, and the poorest (Mawdsley 2012: 265). In that, China's international development cooperation policy appears to be an externalisation of its domestic development and modernisation ideology. In the Party-State's official discourse, China had to make development and economic modernisation a state ideology after suffering 'semi-colonialism' and a 'century of national humiliation' to ensure its political independence and ultimately realise the Chinese Dream of returning to the centre. This imagination leads to the assumption that other developing countries will want to follow the same development path as China. And thus, development becomes not merely a right but also a duty, while the benchmarks of the desirable state of being 'developed' are still modelled on the West. ■



Builders from China

From Third-World Solidarity to Globalised State Capitalism

Hong ZHANG

China's international contracting deserves more analytical attention, as Chinese companies in this sector have emerged as some of the world's largest, and their activities undergird China's global infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative. Tracing the history of this industry since the 1970s, this essay shows that its phenomenal rise exemplifies China's strategic approach to globalisation and its state capitalist economic structure. Nowadays, this industry serves to incorporate economic peripheries into global capitalism with the Chinese state playing a prominent role.

China-Laos Railway, project site of China Railway No. 8 Engineering Group, in Luang Prabang Province, Laos, 2019. PC: Jessica DiCarlo.

When thinking about China's integration with the global economy, the usual landmarks referred to are the 'Going Global' (走出去) strategy launched in the late 1990s and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. China's overseas economic activities before these events tend to be overlooked, as though they did not exist. But as this essay will show, the actual 'going global' of Chinese economic actors took place long before these watershed moments. If these important activities have escaped analytical attention, it is because they are not captured by the statistical categories conventionally used to measure international economic activities, such as outward

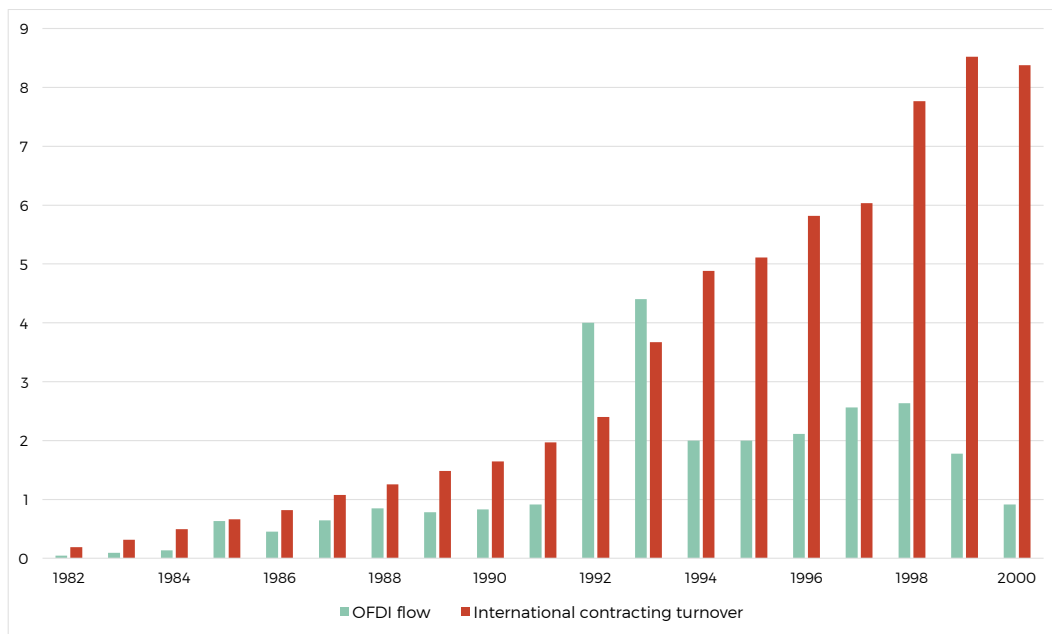


Figure 1 Comparison of international contracting and outward FDI (US\$ billions), 1982–2000. Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and Chinese Ministry of Commerce.

foreign direct investment (OFDI), despite the fact the Chinese authorities routinely document these activities and publish statistics about them.

International contracting (对外承包) is the main activity that has been largely overlooked by external observers. Since the late 1970s, Chinese companies have been hired for overseas projects to provide construction and engineering services, or sometimes as designers, consultants, or operators. In terms of economic accounting, international contracting is a form of trade in services. But in China, it is given the term ‘international economic cooperation’ (对外经济合作) and has been reported alongside OFDI (MofCOM n.d.). The framing as ‘cooperation’ reflects a specific outlook of China’s, which has been shaped by its domestic political and economic context, as will be explained later.

Measured by its volume, international contracting as an overseas economic activity is arguably more important than OFDI. As Figures 1 and 2 show, while both international contracting and OFDI

grew dramatically in the past four decades, international contracting enjoyed a substantial lead over OFDI, especially in the pre-2000 period while OFDI started to decline since 2016, international contracting has held steady.

Today, China’s international contracting industry has some of the most globalised companies with the longest histories of overseas operation and the largest numbers of overseas subsidiaries and foreign employees. In 2020, 78 of the world’s 250 largest international contractors were from China (ENR 2021); among them, Chinese contractors received the largest share (25.6 per cent) of revenue in overseas markets—more than 10 percentage points higher than the next country in line, Spain. Chinese companies are particularly dominant in Africa and Asia, taking up 61 per cent and 49 per cent of their international contracting market share in 2020, respectively. Thirteen companies in the construction and engineering sector made it on to the Global Fortune 500 list in 2020, nine of them Chinese (Caifuzhongwen 2021).

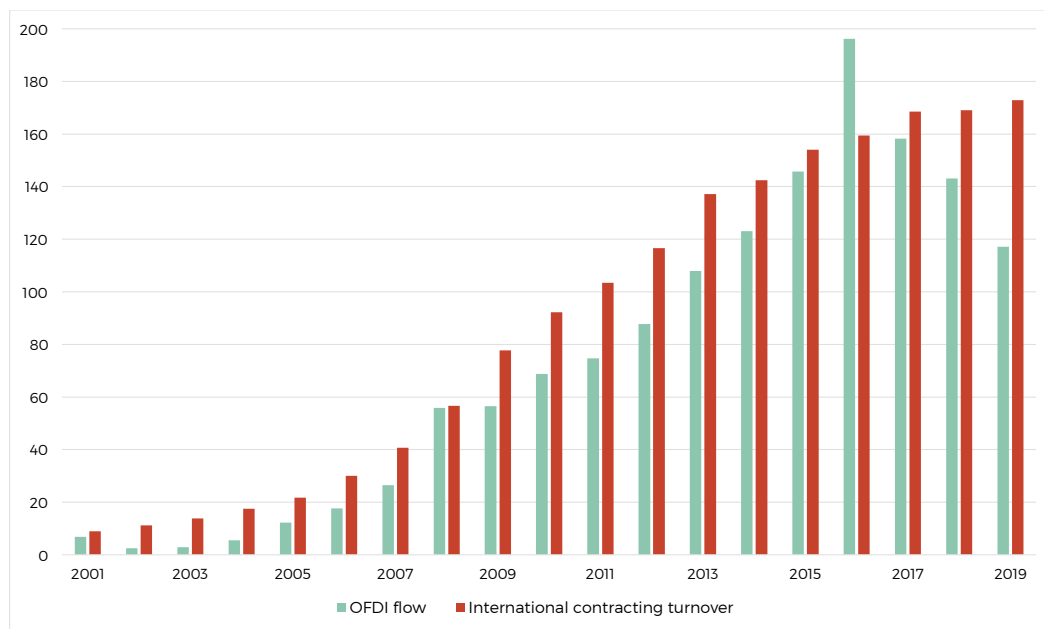


Figure 2 Comparison of international contracting and outward FDI (US\$ billions), 2001–2019. Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and Chinese Ministry of Commerce.

International contracting deserves more analytical attention also because it covers most of China's current overseas infrastructure development—the kind of activities closely associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While much policy and media attention is fixed on China's *financing* of overseas projects, often neglected is the fact that China is also *building* these projects. In fact, it is the capacity to *build* these projects—the engineering prowess demonstrated through such endeavours—that domestic Chinese narratives tend to highlight. 'Builder', rather than 'financier', is more reflective of the kind of image China seeks to project globally.

In the rest of this essay, I will trace the history of China's international contracting industry, explaining how it mirrors China's shifting role in the global economy, from being primarily a labour exporter to a capital and technology exporter, and now aspiring to be a technical standard setter. I will explain why international contracting has been closely intertwined with Chinese diplomacy, and

how it epitomises China's state capitalist economic structure.

From Aid Workers to Labourers

China almost missed out on what was considered the first wave of globalisation of the construction industry: the construction boom in the Middle East in the 1970s. Following the 1973 oil crisis, massive petrodollar incomes in the oil-exporting countries saw them engage in a construction project spending spree. At this time, however, China was caught up in the Cultural Revolution, which repulsed profit-seeking activities both at home and overseas. China turned down a few hiring offers from Kuwait and Iran, on the basis that 'we are no contractors' (Liu et al. 1987: 9). Meanwhile, Mao Zedong's foreign policy required that China present itself as a selfless provider of assistance to

the Third World's infrastructure construction—most famously, the Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA; see Monson's and Rudyak's essays in the present issue)—for which China not only sent engineers and workers to work alongside locals, but also provided grants or interest-free loans (many of which were later forgiven) to finance the costs. The combined effect was that China was starved of foreign exchange while bleeding fiscally; as an impoverished country, it spent 5.88 per cent of its fiscal budget on foreign aid during the period 1971–75 (Sun 1993: 10).

Mao's death in 1976 opened room for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to rethink their resistance to international commerce. As the December 1978 Third Plenum of the CCP's 11th Congress officially affirmed the centrality of economic development instead of class struggle, three companies were established with a mandate to engage in international contracting: the China State Construction and Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), and China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), which were under the aegis of the State Construction Commission, Ministry of Railways, and Ministry of Transport, respectively.

These companies built on the foreign aid offices previously set up in the respective ministries to coordinate matters related to aid provision, as they were virtually the only ones with any experience in international economic management. They were considered 'windows' for their respective sectors to seek overseas contracts. A similar 'window company' model was then replicated in the following years in other line ministries such as aviation, hydropower, machinery, petroleum, metallurgical, and chemical industries, as well as in dozens of provinces and municipalities. These companies often shared a suffix of 'international economic and technological cooperation company' (国际经济技术合作公司) in their names, and they were given the prerogative to engage in international contracting and trade-related activities. These ministry and regional government-affiliated 'window companies' can be understood as a controlled experiment to expose China's indus-

trial economy to the international market, organised through the state's grid-like (条块) system of administration.

These companies had a modest start. The CCECC, for example, was founded in 1979 with two loans of RMB1 million and US\$30,000 from the Ministry of Railways and Ministry of Foreign Economy and Trade (CCECC 2009). Compared with the other 'window companies', CCECC perhaps had the most experience organising domestic resources for overseas engineering projects, given that its predecessor oversaw the construction of TAZARA in the previous decade, which drew manpower and technical input from a total of 43 entities across China (Shen 2009: 96). Indeed, one of the CCP leaders' motivations to engage in such a demanding project was to showcase China's engineering capacity and to spur the technological progress of Chinese industries; in Zhou Enlai's words, 'implementing foreign aid to promote domestic [development]' (抓援外, 促国内) (Shen 2009: 153; for the pragmatism in China's foreign aid in the Maoist era, see also Rudyak's essay in this issue).

The companies immediately looked to the Middle East for their initial market exploration. Knowing they were already late to the party, they started as subcontractors providing labour for other international companies. CCECC's first contract, for example, was to supply 400 workers to a Japanese company for a highway project in Iraq in 1979, which was followed by more labour-supply contracts with companies from West Germany, Italy, and Brazil in the next few years. Between 1979 and 1985, CCECC sent more than 20,000 Chinese workers to Iraq alone to fulfill 41 labour contracts (Wang 1996). Such a focus on labour supply characterised the initial business strategies of all 'window companies' in the 1980s, as they enjoyed the double advantage of low labour costs and highly disciplined state-organised labour—a result of the fact that, unlike other international migrant workers, the Chinese workers were largely drawn from the state *danwei* system and were expected to return to their work units—to which their lifelong welfare provision was tied—after the contracts were completed.



China–Laos Railway, project site of China Railway No. 5 Engineering Group, in Oudomxay province, Laos, 2020. PC: Jessica DiCarlo.

While this seems a natural move now, labour contracting was not easily accepted in China back then, as the country was still reeling from the ideological fervour of the previous decades. During the first national conference on international contracting in 1982, concerns were still being voiced that such activities resembled the indentured labour of the ‘old China’ (Liu et al. 1987: 11). It took Hu Yaobang, then General Secretary of the CCP, to affirm the legitimacy of labour contracting in an important speech in 1982 for China to explore participation in the international economy (People’s Daily Online 2007).

Such a context also explained why Chinese policymakers opted for the frame of ‘international economic cooperation’ to encapsulate contracting and other international economic activities, which was meant to invoke a more equal exchange of resources to be distinguished from the deeds of

‘capitalist countries’. As I have explained elsewhere (Zhang 2020), the initial contracting companies built on their experience in Maoist foreign aid projects to continue in subsequent decades as commercial contractors in China’s aid projects (which often took the form of infrastructure projects and public facility construction). In fact, competing for Chinese aid contracts has been a common strategy for the contracting companies to expand into new foreign markets, while the Chinese Government has also explicitly tapped into mechanisms and ties established through foreign aid to promote international contracting as part of its ‘strategy of broadly based foreign trade and economic cooperation’ (大经贸战略), which it started pursuing in the mid-1990s (Ministry of Foreign Economy and Trade et al. 2000). In short, framing these activities as ‘cooperation’ signifies the intertwined relationship between China’s foreign aid and international

contracting, and between China's diplomacy and commercial pursuits. This continues in the era of the BRI.

Becoming 'National Champions'

While labour contracting proved an easy way to reap profits, from the outset, Chinese policymakers pushed for a greater leveraging role in international contracting to support China's exports. In the very first national conference on international contracting in 1982, Chinese authorities urged companies to 'bring out our equipment and materials by all means' (Liu et al. 1987: 13). This would require Chinese companies to take on more sophisticated contracts that involved responsibilities beyond supplying labour and, to do so, they would need to build their capacity in construction and engineering.

The state was actively guiding this process (Zhang 2021). Starting in the 1990s, policies encouraged leading industrial firms to directly engage in international contracting, and they were no longer required to go through the 'window companies' representing their sector to approach foreign clients. State authorities gave large industrial firms priority when granting licences for international contracting (Li 1993), while smaller firms affiliated with lower-level governments (prefecture and county level), as well as non-state-owned firms, were kept from entering this business (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation 1999). State-affiliated engineering design institutes were pushed to commercialise and compete internationally for engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contracts and, to prepare for such undertakings, they were given privileged access to state-invested projects at home (Ministry of Construction 1999). Essentially, the state controlled the level of competition to ensure profit levels for larger firms, most of which were state-owned during the 1990s.

As China prepared to join the WTO, Beijing further elevated international contracting as a strategic sector that must be supported by all levels of

government. Six ministerial bodies with authority over China's economy, trade, foreign affairs, planning, and finance jointly issued a directive in 2000, urging 'full recognition' of the importance of international contracting 'from a political height'. The directive exalted international contracting's potential to help China become a 'trading power', to transfer surplus engineering and construction capacity abroad, to foster homegrown multinational companies, and to improve China's political and economic ties, especially with developing countries (Ministry of Foreign Economy and Trade et al. 2000). In the following years, a slew of policy measures was put in place to support the sector, particularly financial resources (Zhang 2020: 21).

Meanwhile, as China's state-owned enterprise (SOE) governance reached a new level of institutionalisation with the establishment of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) in 2003, the state gained greater control over the SOE reform process. A wave of SOE consolidation saw the rise of some 'super' contractors. To illustrate this trend, one could look at CCECC's merger with China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) in 2003, as part of the state-directed SOE restructuring to create stronger enterprises.

As mentioned earlier, CCECC was one of the first three 'window companies' established in 1979 to venture into international contracting. Starting off primarily as a labour contractor in the Middle East, it gradually built up its portfolio and developed in-house construction and engineering capacities. In 1995, CCECC achieved a milestone for Chinese international contracting by securing a US\$520-million contract to repair one of Nigeria's railways (Yao 2009). At that time, it was the largest overseas contract won by any Chinese company, which also marked the start of the company's rise as a leading contractor in the African market. By 2003, CCECC had overseas branches in more than 20 countries and experience of working in more than 40 (CRCC 2004: 377).

By comparison, CRCC was a gargantuan SOE with special significance in the national political economy, but with more limited international exposure. It was previously known as the Construction

Headquarters of the Ministry of Railways (铁道部工程指挥部), which itself was formed by absorbing nearly 150,000 former Railway Troops (Cai 2021). During the Maoist era, these soldiers played a big role in the Third Front Campaign, building railways into the country's inland provinces, but they were demobilised by 1984 as Deng Xiaoping moved to cut China's military spending (on the Third Front, see Galway's interview with Meyskens in this issue). The 10 divisions of Railway Troops in various parts of China were then converted into 10 'engineering bureaus' to be administered by the Ministry of Railways. They continued to carry out construction missions for the country's expanding railway networks, although now as civilians rather than soldiers. As part of China's 1980s reforms to separate companies from the administrative system, the Construction Headquarters was stripped from the Ministry of Railways and incorporated as CRCC in 1989, and the 10 engineering bureaus became 10 subsidiaries of CRCC. However, in the early 2000s, the CRCC system still appeared less like a corporation and more like a cumbersome administrative hierarchy, with more than 3,000 units structured by bureaucratic rank, and unaccustomed to market competition (CRCC 2003: 62). In 2002, its annual overseas contracting revenue was only about US\$100 million (CRCC 2002: 130).

In this context, the merger of CCECC into CRCC was expected to stimulate the latter's marketisation and internationalisation. Meanwhile, backed up by CRCC's greater engineering capacity, accumulated through decades of railway construction in China, CCECC could now compete for more technically demanding projects. This strategy seems to have worked. A few years after the merger, CRCC and CCECC were jointly winning record-breaking contracts, including a US\$8.3-billion railway project in Nigeria in 2006 (which was later scaled down), a US\$2.31-billion highway project in Algeria in 2006, and a US\$1.27-billion high-speed railway project in Turkey in 2008 (CRCC 2006, 2008).

These major overseas advances took place against the backdrop of a top-down drive from China's SOE regulator to 'go big or go down'. China had a five-year transition period after its accession to the WTO in 2001 to remove entry barriers for foreign

investment, and industries including construction were anticipating an influx of foreign competitors after 2006 that could threaten their survival. 'All sheep are now exposed in front of the lions ... We must strengthen ourselves and become a lion ourselves fast. What is "fast"? We have four years to become a strong enterprise,' CRCC's Chairman and Party Secretary Li Guorui urged in a 2007 executive meeting, as SASAC gave the deadline of 2010 to become a 'world-class' construction company (CRCC 2007: 4). The company needed to demonstrate that it could compete in the global market and had to step up internationalisation. It was also responding to the political leadership's call for the formation of China's own multinational companies, given the country's greater exposure to the global economy (Jiang 2002).

The decades of pushing by the state to develop international contracting as well as SOE restructuring have established a hierarchical ecosystem in this sector. At the top is a small number of central SOE groups that dominate a specific sector: railways (CRCC and China Railway Group), general construction (China State Construction Engineering Corporation), transportation (China Communications Construction Company), electricity (Power Construction Corporation of China, China Energy Engineering Corporation), and metallurgical industry (Metallurgical Corporation of China)—to name some of the largest. These groups can be seen as a reincarnation of the socialist state-run industrial systems, and they continue to control extensive networks of subsidiaries across China that were previously subordinate to the line ministries, in which these gigantic SOE groups used to be part of the administrative structure. Commanding 'national' industrial capacity, these major SOE groups are at the forefront of securing the largest overseas contracts, many of them high-profile infrastructure projects financed by Chinese policy banks that are now associated with the BRI. They also represent China's technological frontier (such as in high-speed railways) and have been exporting Chinese technical standards to overseas projects. The middle tier includes some of the more specialised central SOEs, as well as provincial and municipal SOEs and some private firms, which often

work with the top-tier SOEs as minor partners or subcontractors on mega-contracts but may also independently win mid-sized contracts. At the bottom are the even smaller firms, often privately run, which supply labour, materials, and equipment to the larger firms.

Projecting Chinese State Capitalism

Studying the history of the international construction industry from the nineteenth-century British Empire to the postwar expansion of US companies, Linder (1994: 6) shed light on the ‘crucial but neglected historically changing role that multinational construction firms have played as creators of the physical skeleton of the international economy and as agents of the incorporation of the economic periphery into internationalized capital circuits’. Thus, he argues, that multinational construction firms have served to ‘project capitalism’ to countries on the periphery of the international economic system. In this light, the rise of Chinese contractors we are witnessing today is but a repetition of the history of capitalism.

The difference, of course, is that in this current iteration, the Chinese state plays a particularly prominent role in providing the vision for and coordinating the actions of the construction firms. The agents—the construction and engineering firms—have emerged less from market competition than from the state’s top-down ambition to preserve and grow the nation’s industrial system, which is considered a key source of national power. These firms’ approach to overseas markets has been guided by the various structural needs of the Chinese economy, from exporting labour and industrial products in the early years, to obtaining resources as China became the ‘world’s factory’—as seen in the ‘infrastructure for resources’ deals in Africa (Alves 2013)—to facilitating the relocation of China’s excess industrial capacity, and the propaga-

tion of Chinese technology and technical standards in more recent years, as seen, for instance, in the construction of overseas industrial zones, telecommunication networks, and railways applying Chinese standards.

The question is, therefore, whether the prominence of the Chinese contractors will soon fade as their national economy moves towards post-industrialisation, as occurred with their US, Japanese, and South Korean predecessors. Or whether, given the vast size of the Chinese economy and uneven development of its regions, China’s industrialisation process will be much prolonged, and therefore will allow the Chinese contractors to have a more sustained impact on the global economic periphery they have been penetrating. In any case, given the close ties between the Chinese contracting industry and the state, they have introduced a different mixture of politics and economics to global capitalism—one that is a source of both intellectual curiosity and controversy. ■



Learning by Heart

Training for Self-Reliance on the TAZARA Railway, 1968-1976

Jamie MONSON

During construction of the TAZARA railway between 1968 and 1975, most African workers learned skills on the job. A smaller number were selected to participate in specialised training, initially in makeshift classrooms and later in more structured institutes. Like today's China-Africa infrastructure projects, TAZARA embodied an intersection of political and economic motivations that belies the artificial binary of socialism/capitalism, or ideology/practicality, that is often projected on the history of this Cold War era. By understanding the ways in which often contradictory development priorities came together—including how they shaped, and were shaped by, the workers themselves—we gain a much deeper understanding of the significance and long-term impact of infrastructure development in China-Africa engagements across time and space.

Learning to operate the machinery in Tanzania, c. 1972. Source: Private Collection.

Giving the instructions carefully over and over again,
Teaching hand-in-hand.

Old Qiao took up a pile of mud
And molded it into a few machine parts as examples.

— 'Snapshots of Workplace Lessons',
友谊的彩虹 [The Rainbow of Friendship],
Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, Shanghai
(1976)

In the summer of 2010, I stayed for several weeks in the Tanzanian town of Mang'ula, a centre for railway construction and worker training during the building of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA) from 1968 to 1976. I wanted to know more about the process of learning in

the machine workshop—specifically, the method known in Chinese as *shou ba shou* (手把手, ‘hand holding hand’) instruction, or what the Tanzanian workers called learning *kwa vitendo* (‘by doing’) in Kiswahili.

One evening, I was sitting with two of the retired machinists, Gerald Masangula and his best friend Hoza, at a small outdoor restaurant for a meal. I asked Masangula if he could explain what it had been like to learn from his Chinese instructor as he began to master handling the drills and lathes. Masangula asked me to place my hands on the table, and then he reached out and grasped them. With his hands covering mine, he demonstrated to me in the same way his Chinese mentors had demonstrated to him—literally grasping his hands in theirs to guide him through the machine work. I could sense the bodily experience of hands placed on hands and imagine those sets of hands in turn grasping the machines.

Timothy Ingold (2011: 60–62) believes that machine-tool knowledge, or skill, is learned through ‘the development of sensory perception in a world of materials’. For skills to be learned in the body of the worker, they must be felt: ‘[I]t is the coupling of movement and perception that is the key to skilled practice.’ Thus, the practice of machine work is not a process of mimicking mindlessly what is already known. Skilled work is, rather, a continuous reconfiguration—a process of improvisation in which ‘practitioners are able to disassemble the constructions of technology and creatively to reincorporate the pieces’, not once, but over and over.

Ingold’s description of the transmission of skill from one generation to the next as a combination of perception or feeling and a ‘world of materials’ helps me understand the Chinese approach to technology transfer during TAZARA’s construction, through *shou ba shou*. This method of teaching did not transmit knowledge through the passive observation of demonstrations by experts, nor through the reading of textbooks, but rather constituted teaching through embodied practice. It was one part of a specific pedagogical approach to railway construction in China–Africa development assistance, shaped by the intersecting historical contexts of revolutionary China, postcolonial East

Africa, and the global Cold War. It also resonated with earlier forms of intergenerational apprenticeship that were familiar in both China and East Africa.

Chinese teachers during TAZARA’s construction were continually taking things apart and asking their student workers to put them back together in the kind of creative reconfiguration that Ingold describes. Tanzanian workers remember being given engineering problems or puzzles (*vitendawili*, pl., Swahili), as their teachers put machines in front of them that were disassembled or had parts mismatched. They were then asked to put the pieces back together correctly. ‘The Chinese know how to teach,’ remembered Maxwell Mubi in Zambia. They would deliberately cause a fault in the system, then challenge the students to solve it, asking them: ‘What happened?’ (Interview with Maxwell Mubi, Mpika, Zambia, 2010). During an interview in Chengdu in 2013, retired mechanical engineer Wang Zhenzhong picked up his tea flask to show us the way he had tested his African apprentices in the motor vehicle workshop at Mbeya in Tanzania. He removed and reattached the lid of the flask several times to demonstrate the way he taught them by first disassembling, then reassembling the vehicle parts.

The workers had to perfect their skills to get them right, and their Chinese teachers tested them repeatedly to be sure they had correctly grasped both theory and practice. Hoza described it this way:

The Chinese expert would first set up the task to be done. He used to stand over there on the side, until the student was finished, smoking a cigarette. After the student finished, he would examine the work. If it was done properly, he would say *sawa* [‘good’/‘fine’] or, if very well done, *sawa sawa*. If it was not done properly, he would say *si sawa* [‘not good’; the equivalent of 不行 or *bu xing* in Chinese] and take it apart, and the student would have to do the task again. (Interview, Mang’ula, Tanzania, 21 July 2014)

These repeated tasks within the relationship of *shou ba shou* became a form of ‘learning by heart’, not in the Western sense of rote memorisation but learning through the practice of repetition through a relationship between a mentor and his apprentice, or *tudi* (徒弟) (Wu 2014). Workers who participated in the construction of TAZARA recalled this form of instruction in great detail and, like Wang Zhenzhong, often reenacted the relationship between teacher, student, and material object during our conversations with them.

Thick Solidarity

Over the past two decades, as China has expanded its economic engagement with Africa, it has become commonplace to compare the current era of China’s global capitalist expansion with an earlier period of engagement that is characterised as ideological. This ‘juncture narrative’ positions China’s Reform and Opening Up after 1978 as the dividing line between a time of politics (post-1949 revolutionary China) and a time of economic rationality (today’s neoliberalism). As I have written elsewhere (Monson 2020: 22), looking back from today’s vantage point, the revolutionary past becomes a reference point for today’s realities: ‘History ... becomes retrospective from contemporary political positions; the complexities of historical experience are lost as increasingly polarized versions of the past solidify its content.’

Scholars of African history and global Maoism have begun to interrogate their fields’ reduction of revolutionary pasts into one-dimensional caricatures that cast the African revolutionary as ‘lacking in any noteworthy capacities of imagination, reflection, or synthesis’—in the case of Africa, therefore, dependent on outside forces such as Maoism to develop ‘any form of dynamism or meaningful change’ (Straker 2009: 208–9). African interest in Maoism within Afro-Asian solidarity thus becomes one form of what has been dismissed as a ‘youthful phase’ of naive orientalism, precluding scholarly engagement with the politics themselves and the ways they were expressed in practice (Lanza 2017).

A similar flattening of historical experience has taken place for Afro-Asian solidarity projects like the TAZARA Railway. TAZARA’s history unfolded in a revolutionary and anti-imperial context that deeply influenced its construction process as well as its outcomes, with consequences for the workers who built it. Yet, like the revolutionary intellectuals in Africa who embraced Maoism, the revolutionary projects of this era have been cast as ideological, naive, and impractical. Already at the time of its construction, TAZARA was called the ‘great steel arm of China’, a ‘bamboo railway’, and an ill-conceived dream of pan-Africanism at the time of independence. Listening closely to the lived experience of railway workers provides an alternative reading of TAZARA’s history, a multilayered analysis along the lines of what Liu and Shange (2018) called ‘thick solidarity’—a complex imbrication of everyday experience, state mobilisation, and internationalist mobilities (see also Bayly 2013; Monson 2020).

In my earlier work on the railway, I demonstrated that TAZARA led to unexpected rural development outcomes that transformed the lives and livelihoods of those living in the TAZARA corridor (Monson 2009). In my current project, I document the way training impacted on the railway workers from Africa and China—both teachers and students—who built and operated TAZARA (Liu and Monson 2011; Monson and Ru 2021). Most railway workers learned on the job during construction through *shou ba shou* practices. A smaller number was selected to participate in specialised training, initially in makeshift classrooms and later in more structured institutes. Both forms of worker education were affected by the politics of the time, including the revolutionary pedagogy favoured by Chairman Mao Zedong, the scale and speed of construction under conditions of acceleration, and the emphasis on self-reliance following completion. Workers and teachers alike remember the ways they negotiated these often-contradictory working conditions.



TAZARA students learning through practice in Dalian, China, c. 1972. Source: Private collection.

Freedom Railway

TAZARA was created between 1968 and 1976, in the context of both Mao-era China and newly independent Tanzania and Zambia, just after Tanzania's Arusha Declaration of *ujamaa* socialism (in 1967). It was a large-scale, state-led project created through the labour of tens of thousands of workers from the three countries. The revolutionary moment that surrounded TAZARA's construction affected the project in important ways, including in the emphasis placed on the education and training of the workforce. African workers required training in railway construction and especially, as the project neared completion, in railway operations. Chinese workers also received training, not only in technical aspects of railway work in the East African context, but also in the political implications of development assistance in the context of Third World and anti-imperialist solidarity. They were instructed to follow the Eight Principles of Foreign Assistance put forward by Chinese Premier Zhou

Enlai (Monson 2009: 155–56; see also Rudyak's essay in this issue).

Chinese instructors faced several contradictions as they approached worker training and instruction. As part of their anti-imperialist mission, they were tasked with preparing the railway teams for self-reliance, including a full handover of responsibility for the railway after the Chinese departure. While this full handover did not happen—more than 1,000 Chinese experts stayed on for several years, technical cooperation protocols continued well into the 2000s (Liu and Monson 2011), and Tanzanian and Zambian workers and managers have been trained in Chinese railway universities from the 1980s through to the present—the intention of building an independent African railway labour force and future operations team was always in the foreground.

At the same time, however, revolutionary and anticolonial imperatives required that the railway construction take place at an urgent pace. The solution was to train workers on the job, so they could initiate construction rapidly and, at the same



TAZARA students arriving on the campus of Beijing Jiaotong University, 1972. Source: Private collection.

time, acquire skills that would ultimately lead to self-reliance. Learning through practice—rather than taking time for classroom learning—was one way to accomplish this. It was also consistent with Chinese approaches to education in the 1960s that stressed education through experience as the model for transformation (People's Daily 1966).

Tanzanian workers remember their relations with the Chinese railway experts who came to work alongside them: 'They were the leaders who explained to us what we should do and how to do it', Hezron Mtulu recalled, and stated that the Chinese joined in work tasks '100 per cent, for every kind of work without any prejudice. They taught us by their own actions' (Interview with Hezron Mtulu, Mbarali, Tanzania, 2010). Mtulu recalled that 'truly, learning through *vitendo* from the Chinese taught me a great deal and I understood a great deal. Until today I still remember so much, and that knowledge still helps me in my life today.' Another worker said the amount of learning obtained through 'doing' was so great, it far surpassed what others learned at university.

In the end, a cohort of railway workers were trained on the job during construction and in the training schools at Mang'ula and Mpika in Zambia. Young men who showed talent in simple construction jobs were quickly selected for further training and promoted, especially those who had learned Chinese (Interview with Miraj Salum Mlela, Mang'ula, Tanzania, 2010). Miraj Salum Mlela became a fluent Chinese speaker and remembers his training experience this way:

Really, I did not spend much time in construction, only from May to October. After October, the Chinese began preparing the experts who would operate the railway. So, they recruited people, beginning with Tanzania and Zambia. They recruited me and brought me to Mang'ula ... I was to work learning how to be a pointsman, the one who opens the track. I only did this job for two weeks. When the Chinese saw that I was learning well, I was made station foreman, and I was given on-the-job training as station foreman.

I learned and I practised with hard concentration and hard work. The Chinese saw that I was a good worker ... They decided to teach students for different categories: foremen, pointsmen, shunters, people to fix the bridges, to fix the tunnels, there were many sections ... train examiners and loco[motive] drivers, and telephone people. The Chinese taught us all of these skills in that year. (Interview with Miraj Salum Mlela, Mang'ula, Tanzania, 2010)

A smaller cohort of railway engineering students—200 in total—were trained in China at the Beijing Jiaotong University. They went on to become engineers and several returned to China in the 1980s for further study, attaining master's degrees in mechanical engineering. Chinese advisors continued to come to Africa in successive waves during the 1980s and 1990s, yet the construction generation of TAZARA continued to provide a core of experienced and trained workers despite many challenges including layoffs, retrenchments, and retirements (Monson 2009; Liu and Monson 2011).

Countryside

The TAZARA project took place during the time of the Cultural Revolution in China, and this shaped the railway workers' education, especially for the Chinese instructors. Their working conditions were also influenced by a lesser-known project of Maoist China: the Third Front campaign (三线建设), which took place from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s and involved China shifting industry from its coastal areas and building up infrastructure and industry in remote areas in the inland provinces in anticipation of war (Naughton 1988; Meyskens 2020; see also the interview with Covell Meyskens in the present issue). Workers who had participated in Third Front construction in Sichuan Province were recruited for TAZARA directly after completing the Chengdu–Kunming Railway in 1971. They were highly valued because they had direct experience of tunnel and bridge construc-

tion and railway operations in mountainous terrain, including locomotive driving.

Chinese technical instructors from Beijing Jiaotong University who created the TAZARA worker training program were also impacted by the Third Front. They were transferred from Beijing to the countryside in the late 1960s to participate in the construction of Third Front infrastructure; their headquarters was shifted to Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province. Professor Li Xiaoping (a pseudonym) was one of the professors from Beijing Jiaotong University who was assigned to the Third Front. He was working on a Third Front project in Luoyang, Henan Province, in 1970 when he was told he had been selected for a special assignment of overseas foreign assistance. When he arrived back at headquarters, he learned he would be responsible for developing the training curriculum for the African workers during the construction of TAZARA.

Curriculum

From the beginning, Professor Li and his team had to work through the complex technical and political dilemmas of educating foreign students during the Cultural Revolution. At this time in China, education had been transformed in such a way that classroom-based teaching, book learning, diplomas, and even the basic principles that had guided technical training were all out of favour (People's Daily 1966). Professor Li was told the training course should be shortened to a length that he and his colleagues feared would not be adequate to prepare his students. He worried that, without diplomas that reflected an international technical standard, his African students would be at a disadvantage in their own country once TAZARA was completed.

Professor Li found himself torn by the contradictions between Maoist revolutionary pedagogy and urgency, on the one hand, and the anti-imperialist goal of self-reliance on the other. Not only did he have to train a cadre of African railway workers quickly for accelerated railway construction, but

he also had to see to it that they would be able to operate the train and use their training and experience productively afterwards in the development of Tanzania and Zambia. This was the true meaning of *self-reliance* and liberation from Western forms of neo-imperialism, he stated. In the end, Professor Li and his team decided to ensure that the basic principles of railway training would be maintained in the curriculum, arguing that this was most appropriate for a project of foreign assistance. He put together a mid-level technical course that incorporated all the necessary components to meet the international standards, as this was needed most in the African context.

Classroom

The very first TAZARA classrooms in Tanzania had woven reed mats for walls and dirt floors. The classrooms were draughty, but the coolness

of the breeze was welcome during the heat of the day. They had simple desks, Professor Li remembers: ‘We just dug some poles into the ground, and we put a platform on to it to make a desk for the TAZARA students.’ At the Mang’ula training site, conditions were slightly better as the teachers were able to repurpose structures used by the construction teams that had already moved eastwards. Even so, these rooms with wooden slats for walls and iron roofing were ‘really, really shabby’, according to Professor Li. ‘Our desks were of bad quality. Our leaders criticised us for fooling around with “*Kang Da Shi*” [抗大式] education [that is, extremely rustic conditions of education during wartime, here referring to the Sino-Japanese War]. They said, “Why are you doing *Kang Da Shi* education here?” So gradually, we tried to make things better. We found ways to make real desks, one for each student.’

Professor Li and his colleagues believed they successfully balanced the demands of teaching their students the fundamentals of engineering

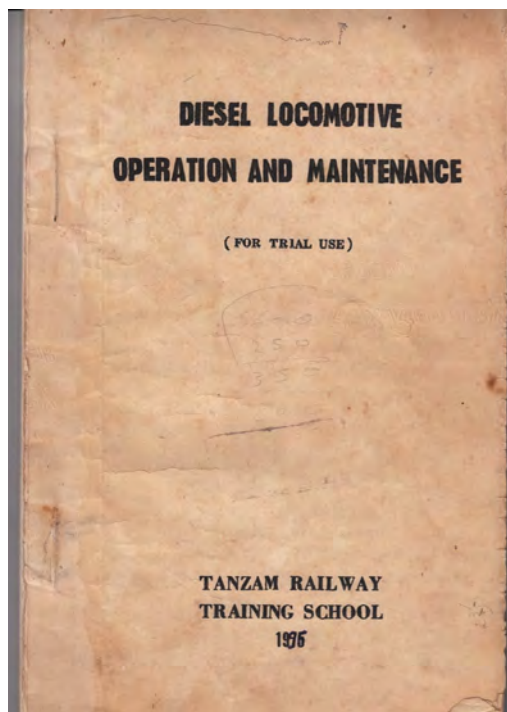


TAZARA training classroom in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1971. Source: Private collection.

technology and railway operations with the expectations of revolutionary education in China. Many of the techniques they used were not new inventions but reflected older traditions of mentoring and practical learning that were established in China. And these relations between teacher and pupil resonated with East African understandings of knowledge transmission between older and younger generations (Grace 2012, 2021). The African railway workers who were trained by the Chinese experts remember most clearly the one-on-one relationships and the ‘teaching by example’ when they reminisce about their first days working on TAZARA.

A Unique Project in a Unique Time

The workplaces and classrooms where Chinese experts and African workers came together in the secluded mountain base of Mang’ula connected two frontline landscapes of railway building during the Cold War: the frontiers of Sichuan and Yunnan and the rugged escarpment of the Udzungwa Mountains in Tanzania. Within the Mang’ula workshops and factories, hundreds of Chinese technicians took young Africans under their wing as the ‘*tudi*’ who were being prepared to take over operations of the train once the Chinese departed and the Africans could become ‘self-reliant’. Learning hand in hand at the time of construction, then promoted to the rustic classrooms of the training school and



Training manual from Mpika Training School, 1976. Source: Mpika Training School Library. Mpika, Zambia.



Signalling instruction in training manual, p. 27. Mpika Training School, Zambia, 1976. Source: Mpika Training School Library. Mpika, Zambia.

into the machine workshops and switching yards of TAZARA, some especially talented individuals like Gerald Masangula and Salum Mlela were elevated through one-on-one training to become skilled machinists, foremen, and mentors to the next generation of workers.

In an interview with him in Tianjin in 2008, TAZARA historian Zhang Tieshan said the railway was a ‘unique project in a unique time’, and he reflected on the conjuncture between China’s revolutionary years and the newly independent African states of Tanzania and Zambia. Like today’s China–Africa infrastructure projects, TAZARA embodied an intersection of political and economic motivations that belie the artificial binary of socialism/capitalism or ideology/practicality that is often projected on the history of the Cold War. Complex entanglements of overlapping (and contradictory) priorities were carried out not only at the level of the state, but also through the activities of real people on the ground. Concepts like ‘self-reliance’ were not merely Chinese revolutionary slogans or African independence visions but were put into practice by Africans and Chinese in TAZARA classrooms and railway stations. By deeply understanding the ways often contradictory development priorities came together—including how they shaped, and were shaped by, the workers themselves—we gain a much deeper understanding of the significance and long-term impact of infrastructure development in China–Africa engagement across time and space. ■



Revolution Offshore, Capitalism Onshore

Ships and the Changing
Relationship between China
and the World

Taomo ZHOU

This essay tells a backstory of the Belt and Road Initiative by tracing the voyages of the Minghua and two other ships managed by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau—both as mobile vessels at sea and as a permanent presence on land. When mobile at sea in the Mao period, these ships functioned as vessels not only for passengers and commodities, but also for Maoist ideology. The Minghua’s retirement to Shenzhen then coincided with China’s transition from the Mao to the Deng era. Having bid farewell to the sea, the ship became part of the city’s landscape and was turned into a dynamic experiment field for the market economy and a medium through which ideas travel and identities shift

The *Minghua* ship in 1989.
PC: Zhang Xinmin (in Di
2018: 72).

I grew up in a migrant family in Shenzhen, so the *Sea World* (海上世界) had a special place in my childhood memories. The iconic *Minghua* (明华轮, which means ‘to enlighten China’)—a cruise ship transformed into a hotel, bars, and restaurants all in one—was a ‘must-see’ tourist destination for visiting relatives and a popular backdrop for family photos. The spacious plaza adjacent to the *Minghua* was a frequented spot for weekend strolls. Following the trend among ‘the cool kids’ of the early 1990s, I had birthday parties at the *Sea World* McDonald’s—one of the fast food chain’s first restaurants in China.



The author and visiting cousins at the *Minghua* Ship, 1996. PC: Taomo Zhou.



The author and parents at the *Sea World* McDonalds, Shekou, 1994. PC: Taomo Zhou.

Little did I realise at that time that the *Minghua*, like my parents and millions of other citizens in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, was itself a migrant that in China's not-so-distant socialist past had a completely different identity. Purchased by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau (中国远洋运输局) from France in 1973, the ship transported materials and engineers from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to East Africa for the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway in 1973–76 and facilitated the repatriation of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam and Chinese aid workers from Cambodia in the aftermath of the Third Indochina War, before docking permanently in Shenzhen in 1983. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reform, boarded the *Minghua* and gifted the ship with a calligraphy inscription of its new name, the '*Sea World*'—a significant political gesture that affirmed the place of market-oriented practices in Shenzhen.

A global connector, ships are one of the oldest transport technologies and have linked different parts of the world 'through trade, colonialism, migration and tourism' (Anim-Addo et al. 2014: 338). Before the COVID-19 crisis, modern ships serving different purposes—from warships to oil tankers, from floating campuses of the Semester-at-Sea program to hospital ships—traversed the maritime world (Reyes 2018; Khalili 2020). Even though the cruise industry was hard hit by the pandemic, the importance of merchant vessels

only increased. Many of us anxiously monitored the recent blockage of the Suez Canal, worrying about the potential delays of our online orders. Yet beyond the Ming Dynasty junks that played an important role in the South China Sea trade but probably did not 'discover the world', we know surprisingly little about modern Chinese ships (Wang 1998; Menzies 2002).

Ships like the *Minghua* symbolise China's transformation and its changing position in the world. If contemporary maritime trade flows under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate China's engagement with global capitalism, the early history of the *Minghua* reminds us of China's past commitment to revolutionary internationalism. This essay is a preliminary attempt to understand Chinese ships as social spaces remotely serving but temporarily disconnected from the PRC state. It tells a backstory of the BRI by tracing the voyages of the *Minghua* and two other ships managed by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau—both as mobile vessels at sea and as a permanent presence on land.

Socialist Spaces at Sea

In 1958, the PRC's Ministry of Transportation established an office in Guangzhou in the hope of developing maritime trade and circumventing a US-led embargo. In its early years, the Guangzhou

Office of the China Ocean Shipping Bureau assembled a fleet comprising ships such as *Heping* (和平轮, 'peace'), which was transferred from Shanghai, and *Guanghua* (光华轮, 'to revive China'), which was purchased from Britain. In the early 1960s, the *Heping* and *Guanghua* made regular trips to major Southeast Asian ports, including Jakarta, Medan, Rangoon, Singapore, and Surabaya, carrying passengers as well as goods such as rice, pepper, and rubber—the last of which had been placed high on the international embargo list by the United States. Besides trade, the ships also carried out political missions. The *Guanghua* facilitated the repatriation of ethnic Chinese from Indonesia during the 1959–60 anti-Chinese movement and the 1965–66 mass political violence; it was also in charge of the transportation of Chinese, Vietnamese, and North Korean athletes to Indonesia to attend the 1963 Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF), an international sporting event held among the radically anti-imperialist countries in opposition to the Olympic Games (Zhou 2019: 132–33).

Crossing the South China Sea during the Cold War, the *Heping* and *Guanghua*—cut off from the broader Chinese society and exposed to encounters with capitalist vessels and port workers—were isolated and vulnerable socialist spaces. When entering the Port of Tanjung Priok in Jakarta in 1962, the *Heping's* captain noted the 'arrogant' gaze from an American captain perched on the deck of his ship with arms folded over his bare chest (GPA, 291-1-105). When unloading goods in Singapore, the *Guanghua's* captain recorded that some local Chinese Singaporean porters scribbled 'bad slogans' inside the cabins—such as 'down with the People's Commune' and 'there is no rice, no clothes, no bicycle and no watch in China'—and told the PRC sailors lurid tales about prostitutes (GPA, 291-1-112-23-36). Besides the lure of 'corrosive capitalist thinking', the crew's loyalty to the Party-State was also weakened by labour disputes. For instance, sailors on the *Guanghua* who had worked as People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy officers were dissatisfied with the decrease in their income and passively resisted the captain's orders by foot-dragging (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112).

Sociologist Victoria Reyes characterises the ship as a 'transient total institution' because the personnel's clothing, movements, sleeping schedules, food consumption, morality, and sexuality are often strictly regulated (Reyes 2018: 1100, 1103). On the socialist ships *Heping* and *Guanghua*, 'thought work' (思想工作) was rigorously conducted to protect the crew from 'provocations from imperialists and international counterrevolutionaries' (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112). During one of *Guanghua's* journeys in 1964 between China and Indonesia, the crew had to spend a mandatory 4.5 hours per week on collective political study sessions, with a focus on the three important essays (老三篇) written by Mao Zedong: 'Serve the People', 'Commemorating Norman Bethune', and 'The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains'. In addition, everyone was required to write a 'study diary' (学习日记), which was inspected by the study group leaders on board (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112).

For the Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia, *Heping* and *Guanghua* symbolised the 'new socialist China' and served as vehicles for the PRC's international propaganda. On summer evenings in Rangoon in 1961, the captain of *Heping* felt 'deeply touched' when seeing crowds gathering on top of the Sule Pagoda, trying to catch a glimpse of the gigantic red star on the ship's chimney. An 'elderly Chinese granny who had lived many years in Burma' hired a sampan boat to take her around *Heping*. She 'caressed the ship's gangway ladder' and was 'reluctant to leave' (GPA, 291-1-105). When transporting diasporic Chinese affected by Indonesia's nationalist economic legislation in 1959–60, *Guanghua* organised intensive ideological indoctrination programs for the passengers during their time at sea. Political messages about the glorious progress of New China were presented through newsletters on the noticeboards, the screening of movies and documentaries, and even makeshift theatrical shows. One passenger recalled attending revolutionary music lessons every day at 8 am on the deck, learning songs such as 'Socialism Is Good'. Yet the crew on the *Guanghua* avoided talking about the economic difficulties caused by the Great Leap Forward, leading to heartbreaking disillusionment among the migrants after their arrival in the PRC (Zhou 2019: 200).



'Sportsmen from Foreign Countries to the First Game of New Emerging Forces Warmly Welcomed at Djakarta's Tandang Priok.' *China Pictorial*, Special Supplement, December 1963.

Ironically, the *Guanghua* and *Heping* also facilitated public diplomacy in non-socialist ways. At most of the harbours these ships visited, cocktail parties were hosted with assistance from the PRC embassies and consulates as well as business leaders from the Chinese diasporic communities. The guests at these occasions were mostly officials from foreign immigration and customs offices, ministries of trade and commerce, and the navy. The captains would usually give gifts in exchange for favourable treatment through customs clearance and other procedures (Zhou 2019: 200). In June 1961, on arrival at the Port of Tanjung Priok, the *Heping's* captain invited Indonesian officials onboard for a fancy dinner and presented them with Chungwa cigarettes—a premium brand produced in Shanghai—and bottles of brandy. The next day, he 'did not know whether he should laugh or cry' when reading the local newspaper,

which reported that the hospitable Indonesians had welcomed the visiting Chinese ship by organising a banquet in its honour (GPA, 291-1-105).

A Capitalist Experiment Field on Land

The *Minghua's* last journeys before its retirement reflected a reorientation of the PRC's diplomacy in the late 1970s. In June 1978, on its way home from Africa, the *Minghua* received instructions to prepare for a trip to Vietnam to evacuate local ethnic Chinese who were being persecuted due to the escalating geopolitical rivalry between the once 'brothers plus comrades' Hanoi and Beijing (Zhang 2015: 1; FBIS, 7 June 1978). Before its departure, the *Minghua's* crewmen held rallies at the Huangpu port of Guangzhou, expressing 'great indignation' at the Vietnamese authorities for 'returning good with evil' considering past Chinese aid to Vietnam's anticolonial, anti-imperialist struggles (FBIS, 11 June 1978). Despite the publicity it received, the evacuation operation failed and the *Minghua* returned with 'no victimized Chinese national' onboard (FBIS, 2 August 1978). Bilateral relations continued to deteriorate and reached their lowest point when Deng Xiaoping launched an attack 'to teach Vietnam a lesson' in 1979 (Ang 2018: 179). Under Deng, economic growth gained priority over ideological campaigns. In his calculation, military actions against Vietnam and its Soviet backers would help China in its approaches to the capitalist world for investment and technology transfers (Zhang 2015: 6–9).

The *Minghua* bore witness to the collapse of Beijing's partnership with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as well as the deepening of Beijing's ties with capitalist Japan. In October 1978, Deng made a historic trip to Japan—a country he believed had important lessons the PRC should learn to realise its Four Modernisations (Vogel 2011: 294). In the summer of 1979, the *Minghua* sailed around Japan as a 'Sino-Japanese friendship ship'. Tokyo-born Liao Chengzhi, the director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office under the PRC State Council, headed a delegation of 600 'friendship



The Minghua ship in 2009. PC: (CC) @Flickrmarcus.

emissaries', including the wife and daughter of the deceased PLA general and vice-premier He Long (FBIS, 12 July 1979; Tu 2008: 391). Diplomacy between China and Japan continued on the *Minghua* after it made Shenzhen its home. In 1986, a Sino-Japanese 'Go' tournament was held in the renovated captain's lounge on the *Sea World*, attracting the attention of board game enthusiasts and high-profile spectators such as the top representative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong, Xu Jiatus (STB, 25 June; 10 July: 186).

The Go tournament sparked public curiosity in Japan about China's Reform and Opening-Up. Japan's most prestigious newspaper, *The Asahi Shimbun*, published a series of reports on Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone, and the Shekou Industrial Zone, 'a special zone within a special zone' (STB, 10 July 1986). This 2.14-square-kilometre enclave on the west coast of Shenzhen was managed by the Hong Kong office of China Merchants Group (CMG), an important modern shipping enterprise originally established by Qing Dynasty official Li Hongzhang, which in the 1970s came under the leadership of Yuan Geng.

Yuan, a guerilla fighter and military commander during the Second Sino-Japanese War, had worked in Southeast Asia as an intelligence agent in the 1950s and 1960s (Du 2020: 125). He named his children—both born in Indonesia—Zhongyin (中印, 'China-Indonesia') and Niya (尼亚, a transliteration of '-nesia' from 'Indonesia') (Tu 2008: 394). With his rich overseas experiences and familiarity with the commercial culture in the Asia-Pacific, Yuan was well positioned to supervise China's first 'test tube' that accepted foreign investment. Yet in the early 1980s, Shekou lacked the tourism facilities to accommodate the increasing number of investors from Hong Kong and beyond. Yuan, who escorted the Chinese Indonesian refugees on the *Guanghua* in the 1960s, came up with the idea of repurposing its 'sister ship', the *Minghua*. With 263 guest rooms as well as swimming pools, restaurants, and bars, all meeting international hospitality standards, the *Minghua* was a ready-made five-star hotel. In August 1983, the CMG purchased the retired cruiser and, within four months, transformed it into a one-stop entertainment centre (Tu 2008: 366–67).

The first general manager of the reincarnated *Minghua* was Wang Chaoliang, a reinvented ‘red engineer’ trained in aerodynamics who had worked in a military industrial complex in the northern Chinese hinterland. To make up for his lack of knowledge in the hospitality industry, Wang hired an experienced hotel manager from Hong Kong at more than 30 times his own monthly salary. The first batch of housekeepers, waiters, and bartenders was recruited from across Guangdong Province via hypercompetitive examinations and interviews (Chen 2009). Around Christmas 1983, Wang received orders to prepare for the visit of a VIP who loved spicy food. Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the *Minghua* reaffirmed his conviction for China to continue economic reform. Three days later, he wrote: ‘The development and experience of Shenzhen has proven that our policy to establish the special economic zone is correct’ (Di 2018: 70). At the PRC’s National Day parade in 1984, a scaled-down float in the shape of the *Minghua* bearing Yuan Geng’s famous slogan ‘Time is money, efficiency is life’ (时间就是金钱, 效率就是生命) appeared on Tiananmen Square, making the *Sea World* a household name in China (He 2018: 290).

Although immobile, the retired *Minghua* became a lively public space for cultural exchanges, social interaction, and conviviality. The managers of the Shekou Industrial Zone organised a ‘city flower exhibition’ and a ‘folk culture exhibition’, both of which became nationally famous, with the latter attracting more than two million tourists and becoming the prototype for the hugely successful tourist site Splendid China Folk Village (*STB*, 25 September 1986; 1 October 1990). Catering to the needs of the large number of young migrant workers in the Shekou Industrial Zone, the *Minghua* provided low-cost, high-quality leisure activities, from waltz and samba lessons to Sichuan-flavour late-night snacks (*STB*, 11 September 1989; 26 November 1990). Interestingly, the ballroom and restaurants onboard offered special discounts to Communist Youth League members (*STB*, 25 March 1986).

Voyages from Mao to Deng

As Paul Gilroy (1993: 4) shows in his study of the ‘Black Atlantic’, the ship should be understood as a ‘living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’. The PRC’s ships functioned as a distinctive type of state space in international waters, contributing to the geostrategic and economic goals of the Chinese Government. When mobile at sea, these ships functioned as vessels not only for passengers and commodities, but also for Maoist ideology; upon arrival in foreign ports, the ships became floating venues for public diplomacy where local officials, PRC diplomats, and Chinese diasporic communities mingled. The *Minghua*’s retirement coincided with China’s transition from the Mao to the Deng era. Having bid farewell to the sea and become part of the city’s landscape, the ship was turned into a dynamic experiment field (试验场) for the market economy and a medium through which ideas travel and identities shift.

The *Minghua* lives on after more than two decades at sea and almost four decades on land. Having weathered land reclamation and the closure of the adjacent bathing beach due to pollution, the *Minghua* narrowly escaped being dismantled several times in the 1990s (Di 2018: 73). After the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis, the local authorities successfully restructured Shekou with the *Sea World* at its centre (Di 2018: 75). Today’s *Sea World* still offers a free public square and urban green spaces, but the Brazilian barbecue, German bar, and boutique coffee shops cater largely to expats and upper-middle-class consumers. In the supersonic-speed urban development in Shenzhen, *Minghua* is a legend. But compared with the 1980s, it is no longer a leisure-oriented public space for young workers and provides few opportunities for upward social mobility to migrants. The ship has witnessed the decline of Mao-era revolutionary diplomacy, the rise of the Deng-era market economy, and the wealth and inequality it created. ■



Who Are Our Friends?

Maoist Cultural Diplomacy and the Origins of the People's Republic of China's Global Turn

Matthew GALWAY

Even before formal diplomatic recognition, efforts by the Chinese Communist Party and cultural mediators such as friendship associations, ideological allies, and luminaries with a keenness to explore New China paved the way for formal state-to-state relations. This essay focuses on the three important case studies of Mexico, Ghana, and Italy to highlight the global reach of Maoist cultural diplomacy across three continents. Each case represents a rich example of different modes of cultural diplomatic engagement between China and these countries at different stages of development, with a view to painting a fuller picture of Maoist China's global turn.

Diego Rivera, *Pesadilla de guerra, sueño de paz* (*The Nightmare of War, Dream of Peace*), 1952, reproduced in Mary Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 58–59.

At the thirtieth Politburo Central Committee Collective Study Session on 31 May 2021, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, delivered a speech to Party officials. In the face of international condemnation of the Party's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and its suppression of protests in Hong Kong, Xi stressed to CCP officials the importance of projecting a favourable image of China. Xi (2021) averred: 'We must understand deeply the importance and necessity of strengthening and improving international communication in the new situation and make great efforts to strengthen our international communication capacity.' This type of call is hardly new terrain for the CCP. In fact, since the PRC's inception, it seems, the CCP has committed itself to an almost cyclical endeavour of damage control, image revamp, and international outreach.

After its foundation on 1 October 1949, the PRC did not have many international friends, but it had many enemies. How did the CCP boost relationships with its friends? How did the Party forge new ties with countries that condemned its authoritarian leadership? Somewhat similar to President Xi's emphasis on 'actively promoting Chinese culture to go global' (积极推动中华文化走出去), Mao Zedong intimated that culture and art might serve to this end. 'Before the revolution', he urged, 'revolutionary culture is the ideological preparation for revolution; in the revolution, it is a necessary, and indeed important, front in the general revolutionary front, and revolutionary cultural workers are commanders of the various levels on this cultural front' (Mao 1971: 199). Only a few years later, in his famous Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao stressed that the CCP could, and indeed must, harness cultural expression and mobilise art and literature in service to national aims. In his words:

Art for art's sake, art that stands above class and party, and fellow-traveling or politically independent art do not exist in reality. In a society composed of classes and parties, art obeys both class and party, and it must, of course, obey the political demands of its class and party, and the revolutionary task of a given revolutionary age: any deviation is a deviation from the masses' basic needs. Proletarian literature and art are a part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; as Lenin said, they are 'a screw in the whole machine,' and therefore, the Party's work in literature and art occupies a definite, assigned position within the Party's revolutionary work as a whole. (Mao 2015: 121)

This essay examines important historical precedents in China's international engagements and their manifestations in the form of a triptych in which three important sites—Mexico, Ghana, and Italy—were host to hallmark examples of CCP outreach. Present-day 'people-to-people diplomacy' (民间外交)—one of the five pillars of the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—often builds on these earlier experiences of cultural diplomacy and friendly exchange. Here, an analysis of past CCP propaganda, cultural diplomatic endeavours, and China-curious cultural mediators offers us new perspectives about debates surrounding 'Global China' today, allowing us to track the antecedents of the BRI. The goal is to provide historical context to Mao-era CCP diplomatic efforts that, ultimately, provide us with a precursor to current discussions of Beijing's methods of international appeal and attraction.

Historical Precedents of CCP International Engagement

The ambitions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to establish Soviet authority over Marxist-Leninist organisation and ideology globally via its 'two camps' strategy were influential on CCP approaches during the PRC's early years (1949–53) (Garver 1993: 118). In a secret agreement between CPSU General Secretary Joseph Stalin and CCP Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi on the "division of labour" for waging world revolution', both resolved that Moscow must guide the global proletarian revolution whereas Beijing must promote 'Eastern revolution' (Chen 2001: 3; 1994: 74–75). An insular first stage of consolidating Party-State rule within China overlapped with PRC intervention against US and UN command forces in the Korean War (1950–53), after which the PRC endured harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions and embargoes. To break from its isolation from nations outside the socialist bloc, CCP leaders embraced the de-Stalinising Soviet Union's relaxation of international tensions. Between 1953 and 1957, Beijing launched a 'peace offensive' in which the CCP initiated a global outreach campaign. The Party hinged this effort on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处五项原则)—essentially, a commitment to 'non-interference in internal affairs' and

‘respect for independent choice of development paths and social systems’—which Chinese and Indian representatives codified and then signed, in Beijing on 28 April 1954, as the Panchsheel Treaty. The CCP formalised the Five Principles as China’s official foreign policy in 1954. But, by the following year, Chinese policymakers’ designs shifted gradually to a foreign policy of extending rhetorical and material support for nations that were socialist or hosted socialist organisations yet maintained relations with the United States or the de-Stalinising Soviet Union (Garver 2016: 92–112; Tan and Acharya 2008: 134–35).

By the time of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, however, the CCP leadership broke from Moscow by not pressing the reception and adaptation of its ideology in foreign countries, and developed its ‘peace offensive’ into a global cultural diplomatic offensive. To do this, the Party-State built on organisations it had created over the previous decade. As early as 1954, the CCP had established the Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Exchanges (中国人民对外文化协会) to ‘improve China’s international image’, ‘facilitate non-official contact with other countries’, and ‘expedite the development of international relations’ (Brady 2003: 90; Han 1994: 53). Also at the ‘non-official’ (非官方) end of Chinese diplomatic endeavours was the Party’s founding, and then mobilisation, of the affiliated Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会, or 对外友协; CPAFFC), which was established in 1954 (Brady 2003: 8, 13–18). Initially, these associations were created in socialist bloc countries, but over time, they became more commonplace in non-communist states as well—often founded by local people with no government ties (Han 1994: 52). For instance, one association explored below, the Mexico–China Friendship Society, was founded in Mexico in 1957 even though no Latin American nation had yet formally recognised the PRC (Rothwell 2013: 19–20, 29; Soldatenko 2018: 176–77).

Another important feature of this diplomatic masterstroke was a hosting program whereby the CCP welcomed ‘foreign guests’ (外宾) to guided tours of China that portrayed the country in an overwhelmingly positive light (Lovell 2015: 141).

From non-communist leaders like Cambodian head of state Norodom Sihanouk (a frequent visitor between 1956 and 1970) to ideological allies such as Cuban industry and finance leader Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara (who visited in 1961 and 1965), foreign guests arrived to grandiose receptions for highly publicised visits (Cheng 2007: 80n.4, 82, 88, 94–95; People’s Daily 1958). CCP hosting duties ‘underscore[d] at home the triumph of the revolution’, as one scholar so described it (Lovell 2015: 135). Soon, the PRC opened its doors to activists like members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence from the United States (see Evans’ essay in the present issue) and likeminded artists and luminaries, including French existentialist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in 1955, Italian writer-filmmaker Curzio Malaparte in 1956, and Italian novelist Alberto Moravia in 1967, for ‘extended tours and to observe China’s road to socialist modernisation’ (Frazier 2014: 30). A select group even received offers to ‘contribute to the Chinese Communist Revolution’ as lecturers, doctors, and translators, among other professions (Frazier 2014: 30).

At the other end of this diplomatic effort, leaders of the CCP often travelled abroad to newly independent non-aligned countries across the Global South. For instance, in 1956, the CCP sent Zhou Enlai on a highly publicised visit to neutral Cambodia, where he arrived at Phnom Penh’s Pochentong Airport to raucous applause from overseas Chinese (华侨) (Sino-Khmer Daily 1956), and on a ‘very visible’ tour of African nations between December 1963 and February 1964 (Bräutigam 2009: 32). Zhou’s African tour, in particular, recalls yet another dimension of the CCP’s diplomatic turn: exporting Mao Zedong Thought and the Chinese revolutionary experience globally.

A few years before Zhou’s highly publicised tour to Africa, Mao had observed: ‘We [the CCP] don’t have a clear understanding of African history, geography and the present situation’ (Li 2005: 62). As a corrective, in July 1961, the CCP Central Committee International Liaison Department (中国共产党中央委员会对外联络部) directed research outlets in China to collect information and produce official briefings on Latin American, African, and Asian nations. The September 1961

Non-Aligned Movement conference in Belgrade served as the backdrop for the CCP's establishment of the Research Institute for Latin American Issues (拉美问题研究所) and the Research Institute for Afro-Asian Issues (亚非问题研究所). Both institutes served as precursors to CCP relations with non-aligned and newly independent nations across the Global South, which represented fecund ground for stirring radicalism (Shambaugh 2002: 577; Large 2008: 46).

Indeed, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, CCP propagandists had initiated a global campaign to posit China as 'an example with applications in other parts of the world' (Xu 2014: 76). As part of the prevailing Mao-centric maelstrom, CCP leaders fixed their collective gaze on accelerating anti-imperial revolution globally through the mass translation and dissemination of Mao's works. The Foreign Languages Press (外文出版社) translated Mao's works for a global readership, and the International Bookstore (国际图书) distributed these translations via embassy personnel, progressive bookstores, and private collectors at virtually no cost (Cao 1989: 17, 39). Between October 1966 and May 1967, for instance, the International Bookstore sent copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* to more than 100 countries (Xu 2014: 76). *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (毛主席语录), most famously known as the *Little Red Book*, even influenced a range of progressive leaders to design versions of their own (Lal 2014: 108), from Tanzanian Vice-President Abeid Karuma (*The Little Blue Book*, 1967) and Libyan revolutionary leader Muammar Gaddafi (*The Green Book*, 1975) to Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (*Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah*, 1965).

As part of this export initiative, the CCP also sent art troupes to perform in friendly countries. In the early Cold War, 'ballet emerged as an important artistic medium for international competitions of influence and legitimacy' (Wilcox 2019: 140). Eager to place the PRC at the forefront of socialist culture globally, the CCP sent acrobatic troupes and dance delegations to captivate foreign spectators. 'New China', Khmer Rouge intellectual Suong Sikœun reflected, 'occupied a special place in our hearts and in our thoughts, symbolised by Mao, the graceful dancers of the Beijing Opera, the

fantastic acrobats of the Sheng Yang circus, or the fabulous magicians of Shanghai' (Suong 2013: 57). A 1957 performance in Ghana by Chinese acrobats (examined below) underscored the extent to which CCP cultural planners played an active role in situating the fine arts as a constituent part of the PRC's diplomatic endeavours in the Mao years (Wilcox 2018: 798–800).

This essay focuses on the three important case studies of Mexico, Ghana, and Italy to highlight the global reach of Maoist cultural diplomacy across three continents. Even before formal diplomatic recognition, efforts by the CCP and cultural mediators such as friendship associations, ideological allies, and luminaries with a keenness to explore New China paved the way for formal state-to-state relations. Each case represents a rich example of different modes of cultural diplomatic engagement between China and these countries at different stages of development, with a view to painting a fuller picture of Maoist China's global turn.

Return of the China Galleon to the Port of Acapulco: The Mexico–China Friendship Society

I toast a new period of fraternal friendship between China and Mexico. I remember that the only country on the American continent that had relations with China for many years, starting in the 17th century, was Mexico ... Let me end by voting for the return of the China galleon to the port of Acapulco ... to communicate to Mexico the ideals of the People's Republic of China and pick up the highest aspirations of the Mexican people.

— Vicente Lombardo Toledano's toast at a banquet held by Zhou Enlai in Beijing (Lombardo Toledano 1950: 108–109)

No story of the Mexico–China Friendship Society (Sociedad Mexicana de Amistad con China Popular, SMACP) can begin without mentioning Vicente Lombardo Toledano (1894–1966), one of the foremost twentieth-century Mexican labour leaders and founder of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación de Trabajadores de México) (Pensado 2013: 24; Mabry 1982: 112; Burke 1977: 268). An outspoken public figure who called for radical wealth redistribution and socialist education in Mexico, Lombardo Toledano visited the PRC in 1949 as a member of the executive bureau of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), an international federation of unions primarily affiliated with or allegedly sympathetic to communist parties. His memoir, *A Travel*



Vicente Lombardo Toledano on 2 May 1938.
PC: Harris & Ewing Collection. Library of Congress.

Diary to New China (1950), a ‘curious pamphlet filled with ardent praise for the land of Maoism’, introduced Mao and Maoist China to a curious Mexican readership (Gallo 2006: 67).

Lombardo Toledano’s visit to the WFTU-organised Union Conference of the Countries of Asia and Australasia, held in Beijing between 15 November and 1 December 1949, led him to admire Mao and the Chinese revolution—an approbation he conveyed vividly in his writing. Maoist China captured Lombardo Toledano’s imagination principally because it ‘demonstrated how a third world country could break the paradigm of economic dependence’ (Toledo Brückman 2016: 121). His enthusiasm for what he witnessed on his visit permeated his memoir. ‘Just as the sun travels from East to West, so, before long, will the Chinese Revolution bring light to the peoples of the West’, Lombardo Toledano wrote with praise for the CCP’s revolutionary victory. Mao Zedong, he urged, was ‘the leader of the greatest national anti-imperialist revolution of history, the liberator of the Chinese people who make up a quarter of the planet’s population’. ‘I have witnessed’, he exclaimed, ‘how a long past of man’s exploitation of man, of ignorance, enslavement, and grief is dying, and how a new world of energy, creative spirit, social justice, economic progress, popular education, and heightened political awareness is being born’ (Lombardo Toledano 1950: 132; also quoted in Gallo 2006: 67).

His glowing review of Maoist China coincided with a post-World War II ‘Sinophilia’ that had emerged among leftist Mexican intellectuals. Many prominent Mexican figures, from avant-garde artists to student activists, developed a nascent China-curiosity. Famous muralist and communist Diego Rivera included portraits of Chairman Mao in several murals. As Rubén Gallo (2006: 67) intimates, Rivera was also ‘fond of suggesting parallels among the Mexican, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, events which he saw as paving the way to a not-so distant communist utopia’.

Lombardo Toledano also promoted his fascination with the Chinese revolutionary experience through his political party, the Popular Socialist Party (Partido Popular Socialista, PPS), established in 1948, which then set the stage for the

1957 foundation of the Maoist SMACP (Soldatenko 2018: 176–77). Economist Luis Torres Ordoñez, a PPS member, founded the SMACP to disseminate Maoist literature and arrange trips to China by Mexican intellectuals and leftists. SMACP's 'Declaration of Principles and Statutes' reinforces Ordoñez's precis of its principal aims: to establish 'cultural and fraternal ties' between Mexico and the PRC, spread news about economic and cultural developments there, and advocate for the PRC to occupy China's seat at the United Nations (Rothwell 2013: 37). SMACP-organised trips to China linked Mexican visitors to 'professional counterparts' there and fostered transnational bonds. SMACP tourists often recounted their wonderful travel experiences in China on their return to Mexico. As for cultural exchanges, SMACP meetings often mixed

admiration for Chinese art and culture in general with particular admiration for socialist art or science and the alleged ability of socialist society to make new and rapid breakthroughs on these fronts (with the clear implication that, were Mexico to become socialist, or at least adopt more socialistic policies, similar breakthroughs could be made in Mexico). (Rothwell 2013: 35–36)

SMACP's commitment to proselytising about Maoist China, its direct contact with the CCP in Beijing, and its overtly Maoist meetings established it as the 'main conduit for Chinese propaganda entering Mexico' (Rothwell 2013: 36; see also Ruilova 1978: 136).

Because most of SMACP's activities 'focused on organizing presentations by activists who visited China and the distribution of Chinese publications', one of its successes was that it brought Mao's most famous writings into the orbit of China-curious Mexican students (Soldatenko 2018: 176–77). At the time, Mexico was

one of the Latin American countries in which the free circulation and sale of Chinese propaganda was permitted, and there was even a specialised

bookstore dedicated exclusively to the sale of material published in the People's Republic of China at reduced prices. (Ruilova 1978: 136–37)

Campuses with communist student organisations such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Autónoma de México) were fecund ground from which China-curiosity sprouted (Sloan 2009: 4; Mabry 1982: 215, 290–92). This China-curiosity developed gradually into Maoist student groups in Mexico's radical 1960s. By mid-decade, a small number of student groups that 'broadly self-identified' as 'Maoist', 'Trotskyite', and 'Guevarist' and which practised 'self-criticism' and 'ideological experimentation' had emerged on university campuses in the Mexican capital. Members of these organisations, Jaime Pensado (2013: 159–60) notes, hosted

heated debates [on] a variety of issues that ranged from the Cuban Revolution, to the writings and ideas of Jose Revueltas, Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, and Regis Debray, to the merits and errors of international and national models of resistance.

Although the Mexican Dirty War of the 1960s and 1970s made radical student groups targets of the US-backed Mexican Government, Mexico–China relations nevertheless developed in a positive direction. Domestically, the Mexican Government made unfounded claims that foreign influence, particularly from Maoist China, was behind the mounting Mexican Student Movement of 1968 (Kriza 2019: 93). Government officials used such heinous charges as justification for the Tlatelolco Massacres. One Mexican deputy, Adrian Tiburcio Gonzalez, claimed in December 1968 that the student protestors were not students at all, but in fact 'traitors' and 'professional terrorists' who employed 'Maoist Communist tactics' to sabotage the Mexico City Olympic Games (Brewster 2002: 175n.10). Internationally, by contrast, Mexican leaders were keen to formalise diplomatic relations with the PRC, which they did on 14 February 1972. Mexican President Luis Alvarez Echeverría even visited China in 1973 and met personally with Mao and Zhou Enlai (González 2017: 177).



Top: A Chinese acrobatic troupe performs for teachers, students, and parents at a middle school near Mexico City. *China Pictorial*, no. 6 (1973): 35. PC: Public Domain. Bottom Left: Mexican musicians performing folk music from Michoacán in the Tarascan (Purepecha) language. Bottom Right: President of Mexico, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, at a banquet in China. PC: *China Pictorial*, no. 7 (1973): 4.



President Echeverría's official state visit to China in 1973. PC: *China Pictorial*, no. 7 (1973): 1.

The Forefront of Struggle: Maoist Cultural Diplomacy in Ghana

China is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. China is colored and knows to what a colored skin in this modern world subjects its owner. But China knows more, much more than this: she knows what to do about it ... China has been in hell too long, not to believe in a heaven of her own making. This she is doing. Come to China, Africa, and look around.

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *New World Review*, April 1959

‘Africa is the forefront of struggle’—Mao made this powerful statement in April 1961, in a speech in which he stressed unity, Africa’s large population,

and the record of accomplishment of anticolonial movements (Mao 1998: 355). Such shows of rhetorical support were the norm rather than the exception. For decades, CCP leaders and propagandists held aloft the banner of a unified struggle of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Mao delivered impassioned speeches in which he decried colonialism and lauded the prodigious and just struggles of African revolutionary movements.

One example of Maoist rhetorical support and cultural diplomatic outreach was China’s relationship with the Republic of Ghana, which was an early recipient of Chinese aid and the second sub-Saharan African state to recognise the PRC officially. The CCP established formal diplomatic relations with the country on 5 July 1960. It was a strategic choice, as Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah was avowedly socialist. ‘In contrast to the “revolutionary performance and culture” dispatched to socialist countries’, historian Liu Haifang (2008: 19–20) notes, ‘the content of Chinese cultural diplomacy towards African,



Zhou Ruizhuang, 'Vigorous support the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America' (坚决支持亚洲非洲拉丁美洲人民的反帝斗争), Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe (c. 1964). PC: Image courtesy of the IISH/Stefan Landsberger Collection.

Asian, and Latin American countries tended to be traditional cultures and performances with local colour'. In line with this approach, the CCP sought to initiate friendly relations in a 'strategically significant region' and, in particular, in the 'politically active nation-state' of Ghana on its independence from British rule in 1957 (Chau 2014: 73).

Chinese art troupes were important conduits of the CCP's cultural diplomatic endeavours and often paved the way for formal diplomatic relations where they did not exist previously. As Zhou Enlai urged at the 1955 Afro-Asia Solidarity Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, the Afro-Asian nations of the world must 'develop economic and cultural cooperation with each other to eliminate the under-developed status caused by long-term colonialist exploitation and oppression' (Song and Li 1997: 314). Just two years later, the CPAFFC sent a Chinese acrobatic delegation to North Africa and Ghana with the aim to 'prepar[e] public opinion' for the formalisation of such relations between

China and several newly independent nation-states on the continent (Liu 2008: 19). A Chinese arts troupe visited Ghana again on 6 March 1958 to commemorate the country's first anniversary of independence, with the Chinese acrobatic delegation scheduled to perform several times in the Ghanaian capital of Accra to coincide with the ongoing Conference of Independent African States (Peking Review 1958: 22). The troupe also 'gave a special performance' attended by Prime Minister Nkrumah and other major Ghanaian Government officials (Chau 2014: 77; Peking Review 1958: 20).

Further cultural diplomatic endeavours provided the *mise en scène* for Beijing's geopolitical designs. 'As a means of influence', Donovan Chau (2014: 77) notes, the CCP (via the CPAFFC) 'used the troupe to shape the perception of China in the minds of African leaders, particularly Nkrumah, as well as to gain knowledge of the local environment'. Instrumental to this aim was the China-Africa People's Friendship Association (CAPFA), which

was established in April 1960 under the aegis of the CPAFFC. As two of the six main CAPFA mandates stipulated, its goals were to establish and develop 'cooperation with friendship-with-China organisations, social communities and personages ... in Africa to increase mutual understanding and develop friendship through exchanges of visits, commemorative meetings, lectures, seminars, bilateral and multi-lateral meetings, exchange of publications, etc' and 'China–Africa nongovernmental cultural exchanges' (CPAFFC n.d.).

An additional aim was to win support from newly independent nations for the PRC to take China's seat at the United Nations, which until 1971 was held by Taiwan. A mere nine months after the first Chinese acrobatic delegation visited Ghana, Ghanaian Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Labour and Cooperatives, Ebenezer Ako-Adjei, led a Ghanaian delegation to the United Nations, where he voiced his unequivocal support for the PRC to occupy China's seat (Chau 2014: 6; Anderson 1958: 6). 'If China joins the United Nations', President Nkrumah noted in conversation with Zhou Enlai, 'the situation will be easier. Ghana will do its utmost to educate African countries in the United Nations to vote according to their own conscience, rather than that of others' (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 7).

But perhaps the most important moment in contemporary China–Ghana relations occurred when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai embarked on his African tour between December 1963 and February 1964. On the Ghanaian leg of his tour, Zhou sat down for a conversation with President Nkrumah during which he announced his Eight Principles of Chinese Foreign Aid (that it should be provided interest-free or with low interest; see also Rudyak's essay in the present issue), which he framed on the earlier Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 23–24; Bräutigam 2009: 313–14). Zhou also stressed the primacy Beijing placed on Ghana's position on the continent and lauded its leadership in spear-heading the pan-African anti-imperial movement:

Our visit to Black Africa starts with Ghana, which shows that our relations are good and that we respect Ghana's position in Africa ...

We regard Ghana as the first country in visiting Black Africa. Your country makes us know the spirit of the great African people who are demanding freedom and liberation. (Zhou and Nkrumah 1964: 4, 25)

This inspiration went both ways. Nkrumah first visited China in August 1961 and 'was increasingly friendly to China ... as his pan-African aims became frustrated' (Ismael 1971: 507). He was impressed with China's development, though he questioned whether such a development model had total applicability in Ghana or Africa more broadly (Nkrumah 1963: 37, 54–55, 164–65; Ismael 1971: 527). He nevertheless shared Mao's zeal for workers' potential and revolutionary willpower: 'African workers, once they are liberated from colonialism, will soon show the world what they are capable of the same way as workers in Russia and China' (Nkrumah 1963: 37). Most of all, Nkrumah clearly drew inspiration from Mao in packaging his own thoughts for a broader readership in his homeland. The booklet *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah*, which comprised nearly 90 select quotations from Nkrumah's writings, was published in 1965, less than a year after *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* went into broader circulation within China and globally (Lal 2014: 108).

Although much has changed in both countries since the eras of Mao (who died in 1976) and Nkrumah (who was deposed in 1966), many of these earlier cultural diplomatic exchanges between China and Ghana paved the way for contemporary Chinese investment in cultural diplomatic exchanges between Beijing and African nations. Liu (2008: 20) references a January 2007 interview with then Chinese Ministry of Culture official Xie Fei, who noted that the CCP was devoting an annual allotment of 5–6 million RMB to facilitate such endeavours, with half of the total budget funding people-to-people exchanges. A 2019 art exhibition in Accra is one such example of recent China–Ghana cultural diplomacy at work (Mu 2019). At the state-to-state level, in 2018, President Xi hosted Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo on an official state visit at the Great Hall of the People. Both leaders met in advance of the Beijing summit of the Forum on China–Africa

Cooperation to discuss revitalising bilateral relations (Boateng 2020; Xinhua 2018). But for this meeting and those since, the focus in Ghana–China relations has shifted primarily to what is at stake for both nations vis-a-vis infrastructural development within the BRI in coastal Africa.

Useful Foreigners: Italian Cultural Mediators and the Image of Maoist China

Friendships are not chosen by chance, but according to the passions that dominate us.

— Alberto Moravia, quoted by Xi Jinping in an article for Italy's *Corriere della Sera*, 23 March 2019

It may not have been until November 1970 that Italy recognised the PRC and initiated formal diplomatic relations, but unlike elsewhere in Europe, Italian society was receptive to curiosity about the PRC. After World War II, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) was the second-largest political party in the country and one of the largest communist parties in the Euro-American world. The prominence of like-minded socialist parties, too, played no small role in enabling a curiosity about Maoist China to grow organically among Italian progressives (Schaufelbuehl et al. 2019: 9). But in the 1960s, one major push for Italian leftists to turn to Maoism was that the PCI and another major leftist party, the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano), both recalibrated their strategies along arguably ‘revisionist’ and reformist lines, respectively.

‘Italian Maoism’ grew gradually as Padua-based communists broke with the PCI in 1962 and ‘began publishing a Maoist periodical, *Long Live Leninism!* (*Viva il Leninismo!*)’ (Galimberti 2020: 215).



PRC Premier Zhou Enlai joins Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah for dinner in Accra during the Chinese statesman's African tour in January 1964. Nkrumah visited China twice (in 1961 and 1966). PC: *People's Pictorial* (人民画报), no. 4 (April 1964).

The following year, Italian Sinologist Giuseppe Regis established the Eastern Editions (Edizioni d'Oriente) publishing house, which 'translated several texts by Mao and edited a monthly magazine, *New Unity (Nuova Unità)*', which was an allusion to PCI newspaper *Unity (L'Unità)*. By the end of the decade, avowedly Maoist publications also included *Wind from the East (Vento dell'Est)* and *Political Work (Lavoro Politico)* (Galimberti 2020: 215–16).

What antedated this spread of China-curiosity and interest in Maoism? In the 1950s and 1960s, Maoist China 'fascinated grassroots activists' and 'high-profile left-wing intellectuals' alike (Galimberti 2020: 216). Italian delegations of leftist intellectuals, including luminary Curzio Malaparte and socialist politician Pietro Nenni (both of whom visited China in 1955), as well as author Alberto Moravia (who visited in 1967), journeyed to Maoist China on official visits (Fu and Indelicato 2017: 52). All three important Italian cultural mediators occupied important roles in spurring further China-curiosity in their homelands and had a hand in normalising Italy–PRC relations through their artistic mediums and personal diplomacy.

Tuscany-born writer-journalist Curzio Malaparte (born Kurt Erich Suckert, 1898–1957) represents a perplexing case of an Italian cultural mediator who helped to bridge the gap between Italy and the PRC. His political allegiance oscillated from far right to far left. In the 1920s, Malaparte was a pro-fascist intellectual who participated in the March on Rome that led to the rise of the fascist regime in 1922. But over the course of three decades, he reestablished himself as a vocal anti-fascist and China-curious luminary (DeGrand 1972: 73). In his dying days, he left his estate to Maoist China. 'In his last will, incorrigible contrarian to the end', writes David Spina (2016: 17), Malaparte 'bequeathed his house on Capri to the government of the People's Republic of China' so that it may one day serve as a meeting ground for Chinese intellectuals (Liu 2014: 26).

Curious about China's radical social transformation under Mao, Malaparte received, and accepted, a formal invitation to visit Beijing in 1956 to observe in person the commemoration day of

influential Chinese writer Lu Xun. Although he was not the first leftist Italian intellectual to visit Maoist China (De Giorgi 2020: 81–94), Malaparte may have been the first with profile and celebrity (Beyer 2018; Lin 2020: 59). As a representative of the Italian Communist Party weekly, *New Ways (Vie Nuove)*, Malaparte arrived in Beijing to begin his sojourn. Though his visit ended abruptly due to illness, Malaparte met with Mao and wrote favourably about his experiences in China. His journal *Me, in Russia and China (Io, in Russia e in Cina)*, which was published in 1958 after his death, captured his 'affection for China and Chinese people' and expressed his deep-seated faith in 'China's immense revolutionary vitality' (Liu 2014: 26).

Malaparte died from lung cancer a few months after his return to Italy, but the long shadow cast by his unremitting praise of Maoist China in *Me, in Russia and China*, alongside similar works by Italian leftists Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola, had a much wider impact. Indeed, a 1966 Goffredo Parise interview with an officer of the People's Liberation Army revealed that even a decade after his visit, Malaparte remained an important symbol of friendship between the two countries. In all, Malaparte's visit, reportage, and likeminded works that cast China in a positive light ultimately shifted the paradigm away from *othering* China to 'provid[ing] an alternative model that challenged Italy to reappraise and reform its indigenous institutions and thought systems' (Liu 2014: 26).

On the political and economic fronts, there was Pietro Sandro Nenni (1891–1980), a leader of the Italian Socialist Party whose personal diplomacy paved the way for Rome's formal recognition of the PRC (Tamburrano 2000: 366; Rostagni: 2017: 107). As Italian foreign minister (1946–47), Nenni had pursued a 'policy of equidistance' between the Soviet Union and the United States, but on opposing his country's joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), he devoted himself fully to 'détente, neutrality, and peace' (Rostagni 2017: 109). In the realisation of the first of these, China figured prominently. Détente, Nenni averred, was imaginable 'if finally one decided to recognise or one resigned oneself to recognising the reality of what had happened in China' (Nenni



Photo of Curzio Malaparte on the Great Wall of China from his book *Io, in Russia e in Cina* (*Me, in Russia and China*) (1956). PC: Wikimedia Commons.

1981: 538; Rostagni 2017: 109, 113–14). Nenni was also acutely aware that other prominent US-allied countries like the United Kingdom and France had approached Beijing. In September 1955, he wrote to Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gaetano Martino (1900–67) to urge Rome to send an economic mission to Asia. He held that the

Italian economic crisis, in particular in the industrial sector, and the deficit in the balance of payments made it necessary to access the markets of Eastern Europe, the Middle and Far East, and not let precious opportunities for Italy fade away, especially as other [Euro-American] states already had initiatives under way. (Rostagni 2017: 113–14)

Nenni thus determined that Rome must strike while the iron was hot.

In 1955, Nenni seized on the opportunity to visit Maoist China on receipt of a formal invitation from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. He made his visit

‘in an official government capacity’, albeit absent Rome’s stamp of approval (*sub rosa*), to establish an Italian trade office in Beijing (Rostagni 2017: 115). Nenni’s visit to Beijing and meetings with high-ranking CCP leaders were a great success. He met with Zhou and Mao to discuss ‘Sino-Italian problems’ and the prevailing circumstances in global politics. In Nenni’s discussion with Zhou, the Chinese Premier ‘expressed the PRC’s willingness to “deal with the problems of organizing peace on all levels” by claiming a permanent seat on the [UN] Security Council, and indicated that the attitude of the United States was China’s main problem’ (Rostagni 2017: 115). However, to normalise commercial relations between Rome and Beijing, Zhou had one major caveat: Rome must cease relations with Taipei. ‘On this point Beijing was intransigent’, says Rostagni (2017: 115). As Nenni recalled, the CCP clearly wanted to negotiate, ‘but was not in a position of one who is about to drown’. His visit nonetheless yielded an important discovery: Maoist China’s ‘immense



Photograph of Alberto Moravia in 1982. PC: Paolo Monti. Servizio fotografico, BEIC 6361580.

possibilities for development’ and the possibility of the country becoming ‘one of the factors that would influence the future of Asia and balance of world power’ (Rostagni 2017: 115; Nenni 1981: 703).

Although on Nenni’s return to Rome he discovered that his visit ‘had taken on a political tone in Italy’, it was nevertheless a watershed moment in postwar Sino-Italian relations (Rostagni 2017: 115; Nenni 1981: 694). In January 1969, Nenni proposed that Rome formally recognise the PRC. This was far from a *fait accompli*, and certainly not the product solely of his own work and invention, but Nenni’s personal diplomacy and meetings with Zhou and Mao set in motion a chain of events that normalised Sino-Italian relations and contributed to Rome’s recognition of the PRC on 6 November 1970.

Finally, the last of the three Italian cultural mediators under analysis to visit China was Malaparte’s friend and occasional critic (he once intimated that Malaparte was ‘not an intellectual’ because ‘he did not believe in ideas’), novelist Alberto Moravia (Spina 2016: 12–13; Lambron 1989). The legacy

of Moravia’s effect on Sino-Italian relations was evident as recently as March 2019 in an article by Chinese President Xi Jinping in advance of his official state visit to Rome. In the article, Xi (2019) quoted Moravia directly: ‘Friendships are not chosen by chance, but according to the passions that dominate us.’

Not unlike Malaparte’s reportage more than a decade earlier, Moravia’s 1967 book, *The Red Book and the Great Wall: An Impression of Mao’s China* (*La rivoluzione culturale in Cina. Ovvero il Convitato di pietra*), provided an early account of the radically iconoclastic Cultural Revolution for Italian readers. Through Moravia’s writing, ‘Italians could catch a glimpse of what was happening beyond the Great Wall’ (Galimberti 2020: 221). In this travelogue, Moravia, who was an ardent critic of consumerist society, provides a critical yet nonetheless positive take on Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution. In the opening chapter, for example, Moravia indicates that he prefers the standard of living in China to that in Italy or elsewhere in Euro-America. The Chinese people, Moravia idealised, have attained a certain type of utopia in their pursuit only of that which they need, rather than what they purely desire.

Subsequent sections explore the maelstrom of Mao-centric iconoclasm of the era, particularly the phenomenon of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, the Red Guards, and the Mao personality cult. In terms of content, Moravia described *Quotations* as the quintessence of the ‘Confucianisation of Marx’s thought’ and ‘the Confucianisation of Maoism’. But in terms of form, in one telling description, Moravia describes *Quotations* as

a substitute for conscience and at the same time the axis of a system of ritual behavior ... The book is carried around to show that one has it, thus we have demonstration ... It is waved in the air at meetings, parades, and gatherings, thus we have exultation of the book, or threat and challenge by means of the book. It is opened and glanced at, and thus we have consultation. It is read aloud in answer to someone, and thus we have citation, communication. Closed it is caressed with the hand or pressed to the heart, and

thus we have affection. It is held in the hand during dances, songs, propaganda, recitals, and thus we have symbolization. (Moravia 1968: 36–37)

He also made rather explicit allusions to religion at different points of his journey. Moravia referred to the airplane on which he travelled from Guangzhou to Beijing as ‘a flying chapel’ and compared the Red Guards to the 1212 CE ‘Children’s Crusade’ by European Christians to establish a Latin kingdom of Jerusalem in the Holy Land (Moravia 1968: 31, 72). These semiotically loaded allusions serve to highlight the reverence for Mao that the Chinese held, and capture Moravia’s own recognition, albeit not uncritically, of an alternative modernity taking shape under the Great Helmsman’s leadership. Moravia, of course, did not see the Cultural Revolution’s worst excesses, including mass violence, public displays of humiliation, and rampant killings.

Ultimately, each of these three cultural mediators played an important role in stoking the fires of China-curiosity among prospective readers. Writings by Malaparte and Moravia cast Maoist China in an unremittingly positive light, while Nenni’s diplomatic efforts helped bridge the gap between the two countries and initiated the process whereby Rome would recognise the PRC.

A Longer Historical Continuum

Present-day friendly exchanges between Chinese leaders and representatives from Mexico, Ghana, and Italy do not happen in a void, but are part of a longer historical continuum. They did not start smoothly or with the pomp and circumstance that are commonplace in state-to-state visits or arts exhibitions in lavish centres. Decades ago, cultural diplomacy between China and the Global South was a gradual process—one that was fostered occasionally in the China-curious country first. In the Mexican case, Vicente Lombardo Toledano’s memoir of his travels spirited the foundation of the Mexico–China Friendship Society, which

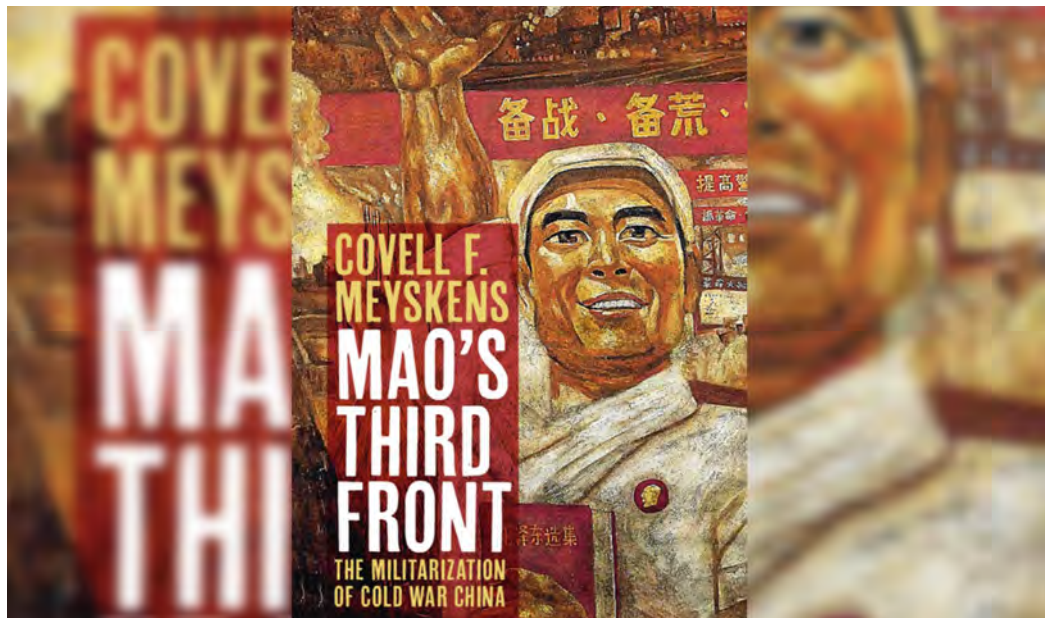
then propagated Maoism and the CCP’s radical socialist project to a generation of China-curious Mexican progressives. Mexican students, avant-garde artists, and activists visited China years before formal relations had begun or drew inspiration from the Maoist vision to the point of drawing the Mexican Government’s ire domestically even as international ties between Mexico and Beijing warmed.

Similar methods of cultural diplomatic exchange also facilitated the formalisation of friendly relations between China and Ghana. Chinese arts troupes at first and then a friendship association laid the groundwork for Ghana to become the second sub-Saharan African nation to recognise the PRC. Leading Ghanaian politicians also drew inspiration from Mao in popularising their own socialist ideals nationally. The CCP’s strategic use of cultural diplomacy won Accra’s voice of support in Beijing’s quest to occupy China’s UN seat as the CCP sought to establish a foothold among newly independent nations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Much like the Mexican case, Italian cultural mediators took the initiative to grease the diplomatic wheels through travel writing and face-to-face meetings. Visitors who ranged from members of the leftist intelligentsia to card-carrying politicians marshalled their visits to Beijing into rich opportunities to link Beijing to Rome. Whether by dint of Curzio Malaparte’s or Alberto Moravia’s popular travelogues or Pietro Nenni’s personal diplomacy in meetings with Mao and Zhou, such efforts played their respective parts in demystifying Maoist China for people and politicians in NATO-aligned Italy.

National leaders from Ghana and Italy recently feted their nations reaching a milestone in their diplomatic relations with the PRC. Ghana celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of its formal relations with the PRC in June 2020 via an online symposium (Liu 2020). In November of that year, Italian President Sergio Mattarella celebrated the half-century of formal ties with a phone call with Xi Jinping (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). Mexico will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its relations in February 2022. Now that the CCP has all but traded in the grand Maoist global vision for

a more economically driven worldwide infrastructure project (the BRI), will these nations remain 'friends' of China? Will their 'friendships', forged in the crucible of those earlier cultural diplomatic exchanges, remain equally as fraternal, or become contingent on their accession to Beijing's economic interests vis-a-vis the BRI or prevailing geopolitics? As China continues to rise to global superpowerdom, might these 'friends' of yesteryear merely slip into the background so as to not disrupt the *grande vedette* of the PRC as it pursues its new global vision? ■



Cover of Covell Meyskens' *Mao's Third Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

From Mao's Third Front to Xi's Belt and Road Initiative

A Conversation with Covell Meyskens

Matthew GALWAY
Covell MEYSKENS

In the early 1960s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began investing large sums of capital in the interior of the country with the stated goal of building up military and civilian infrastructure to safeguard China from a potential American or Soviet military threat. Often neglected in histories of contemporary China, this so-called Third Front campaign presents some uncanny similarities with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of today, both in its emphasis on infrastructure and in the way in which this mobilisation ensconced industrial society in China's hinterland. In this conversation, we discuss what the Third Front can tell us in terms of 'archaeologies of the BRI' with Covell Meyskens, Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and author of the pioneering study *Mao's Third Front: Militarization of Cold War China* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).



Going to build Shuicheng Steel
in 1966. PC: maosthirdfront.com.

Matthew Galway: Can you please tell us what was Mao's 'Third Front'? What inspired your interest in this campaign?

Covell Meyskens: The short story is that in the early 1960s, China's leaders believed there was a possibility that either the United States or the Soviet Union might invade or attack China in some capacity. In response, the CCP leadership decided to move a significant portion of industry inland to central China. They not only moved industry there, but also shifted investment in infrastructure to prioritise those areas. This pattern lasted from 1964 to 1980—a period during which nearly 40 per cent of all investment in capital construction occurred in the provinces of central China.

As for the second part of your question, I knew that I wanted to study the Cold War period in China, so I looked through John Fairbank's book *China: A New History* in an attempt to find topics that were relevant to the Cold War. There was a page in the book right before Fairbank discusses the Cultural Revolution where he mentions the Third Front. I had never read about this campaign in scholarship, so this spurred my interest. The Third Front lined up with the Cold War, and it had a political economy aspect that also piqued my interest. Later on, I thought numerous times as I was



Housing at Shuicheng Steel in the late 1960s.
PC: maosthirdfront.com.

writing the book that I was a tad too ambitious in focusing on such a big topic as it was a very arduous process of refining my focus into a more manageable product.

MG: Labour is a paramount issue in discussions of the Third Front. What methods did the CCP use to recruit, mobilise, and, on occasion, force workers to move into China's hinterland and the Third Front?

CM: That's a complicated issue. Mao had to recruit other members of the CCP leadership on to the project because they were initially hesitant about the Third Front. After the Great Leap Forward [GLF] of 1958–60, Mao was dissatisfied with Liu Shaoqi's reforms, which he thought would lead to revisionist tendencies, such as more emphasis on expertise and high-level administrators, and an acceptance of social stratification and inequalities. He associated these negative features with the Soviet Union and considered them illegitimate, incorrect forms of socialism that the CCP should work to avoid. Thus, Mao pushed back against these policies. At the same time in 1964 that Mao accused CCP leaders of losing touch with their revolutionary ways and becoming revisionist like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he also discussed how socialist China's security was in peril because of rising tensions with the Soviet

Union and the United States increasing its military engagement in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam. Initially, Mao pushed for only a few Third Front projects, but over time, his vision expanded and developed into a matter of leaders supporting the Third Front or being a revisionist.

My interpretation is that Mao was seeking to regain control of the policymaking apparatus and the direction of reforms, and what resulted was a second GLF, in a sense. It was similar to the GLF in terms of what its architects sought to achieve: a massive burst of economic activity that heavily relied on the mass mobilisation of militarised labour to quickly build up industrial infrastructure. However, this ‘second’ GLF differed in three important ways. One, it was a top-secret campaign. Two, it was run by the central government, and local officials could not start Third Front projects on their own. And three, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi, among others, insisted that the Third Front must not squeeze the rural areas too much for the sake of rapid industrialisation. Instead, the Party had to ensure that people had enough food to eat. Leaders stressed this point because they still had the hardships of the GLF fresh on their minds. So initially, Mao moved to recruit the CCP leadership. Even after the campaign had begun, Liu Shaoqi continued to voice concerns that the Party might be heading towards another GLF, of overheating the economy and attempting to build too much too quickly. However, that did not change the fact that, under Mao’s pressure, the Party had, with the launch of the Third Front, ended the moratorium on massive-scale infrastructure projects that had been in effect since the end of the Great Leap. The Third Front reasserted, once again, the Maoist way of development that occurred during the GLF.

If we go beyond central Party leaders and look at provincial and city governments, unsurprisingly, those from big industrial cities on the coast were less inclined to send their industrial apparatus inland, while provincial leaders in inland areas were more interested in the Third Front. Often, the big projects undertaken were recycled from the GLF, and some were even recycled from Sun Yat-sen’s plans or the Guomindang’s plans from the Republican period. Lower down at the level of factories, the CCP Central Committee sent central government documents down to the provincial and municipal levels, and then those filtered down to specific companies through the ministries that were in control of the companies. Thereafter, meetings often followed. If there were many people who moved to work on the Third Front, there was a large meeting in which leading Party representatives explained to people what the Third Front was. CCP convenors used set phrases, as with most campaigns in Mao’s China, to describe what the Third Front was.

In the course of my research, I found a few propaganda documents in which they explain what was said at a mobilisation meeting. The most famous saying was: ‘If we do not build the Third Front, then Chairman Mao will not sleep well.’ Thus, it was partly about the

ardency of ‘we have to do this for the leader, and we have to do it for him to be at ease, for him to feel like the country is safe’. This was the nationalist, leader-centred aspect of motivations to work on the Third Front. Mobilisation meetings also highlighted the threat of the Soviet Union, the threat of the United States in Southeast Asia, and the greater American arc of bases that extended from South Korea all the way down into Southeast Asia through Japan and Taiwan. Another related discussion was about the internal threat, of the people who were not cooperating with the Third Front program and were promoting revisionist tendencies. These different ideas were all brought into Third Front mobilisation discourse, thereby weaving together into a shared discursive framework the multiple threats posed to China’s socialist project by both internal and external enemies.

For Party members, there was the much more coercive motivating aspect. If you were a Party member and you did not go to the Third Front, you risked losing your membership or your job. Other Third Front recruits also risked losing their jobs. Because the Party-State provided a wide range of material benefits to industrial workers through their workplace, losing those benefits was a really hard constraint that was tantamount to a significant socioeconomic step down in the hierarchy of workplaces in socialist China.

MG: What were the motivations for these workers to go to the Third Front?

CM: At the elite level, the CCP had the ideal that building a socialist economy was to be a nationwide process that occurred throughout its territory. It was not a process focused solely on a single region. The Third Front was one of the biggest manifestations of this ideological tendency in the Mao era. At the elite level and lower, there was also the objective of ‘wanting a modern China’. What did a modern China mean? One big pillar was endowing China with a large industrial base, which was linked to another key component of the dream of making China modern—that is, ensuring that socialist China could industrially protect itself from outside threats. The Third Front was intimately linked to both these objectives. The Third Front was also a better job placement than other possibilities given that it gave someone a job in a state-owned enterprise, which had much better access to the welfare state. Depending on where one went, one might even maintain their original urban *hukou* [户口]. Those were some of the more practical reasons why workers went to the Third Front. Still, others were motivated by careerism. They attended school to learn how to build dams, and they wanted to use their knowledge and skills to actually build dams and contribute electricity to China’s industrialisation. Others were socialist workaholics and wanted to devote all their energy to building a socialist China. This tendency was especially prominent among young people



Building an airplane factory in Hunan in 1969.
PC: maosthirdfront.com.

who grew up ‘under the Red Flag’, as the saying goes, and long-time CCP members whose social lives had already long been intertwined with the Party’s mission of building socialism in China.

MG: What does the fact that the CCP kept such a massive campaign secret well into the late 1970s tell us about its capacity for social control?

CM: Vivienne Shue’s concept of the honeycomb state in her 1988 book *The Reach of the State* is useful to understand this phenomenon. She examines how the Maoist society–state relationship worked through the creation of cells. Everything was very cellular, and the connections between the different cells—different work units, institutes, or villages—were tightly controlled. Most of these relationships, in theory, were mediated through some form of the state, whether central or local. The Third Front was an extreme version of this relationship. For instance, a factory was placed by the Party-State in a gorge in the middle of the mountains of Guizhou far away from any major city. These people were not free to go out into the city or gain access to resources from their surroundings, which of course doesn’t mean that they didn’t do so—unsanctioned market exchanges and trips did occur—but they were not supposed to, as connections of this sort between different cells were required to be regulated



Eating a meal at Liupanshui.
PC: maosthirdfront.com.

by the state. In these isolated alpine locations, Third Fronters were quite dependent on the state. They had their food, health care, and lodging provided by the state, and there were hard constraints on them obtaining these items from any source besides the state. This was especially the case because most people in the Mao era earned very little cash, and so had tight limits on what they could purchase annually. One also had to obtain passes to move around. Everyone in the Third Front was quite insulated. That was part of the reason why the Third Front remained a secret: because of the cellular composition of the Maoist state, its ability to control basic material resources and the information flows between these ‘cells’.

Another reason why the Third Front remained a secret was because most of it was out in the middle of nowhere, and the cellular character of Maoist society helped the Party to keep it out of public awareness. Some of the Front was in cities. A part of Chengdu, for instance, had Front factories but they were top secret, and people were paid to keep them secret, and their employees had state-mandated cards to enter the work units. This process reinforced the cellular state. In my interviews with people even 30 years after the fact, respondents still thought of me in the language of the Mao era as an ‘American imperialist’ (美帝). This perspective made them especially skittish about talking openly with me. Some of them maintained ties to their factory and it was still conducting classified

work. But even if they were not doing so, they still had a national security mindset that it was their political responsibility to keep national secrets safe from outsiders.

One question that I had early on about the Third Front was: was the campaign a secret or did US intelligence know about it? I conducted research in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] archives and what became apparent from their files was that US intelligence knew about the big Third Front projects. They saw newly emerging cities, factories, and railways with spy planes and satellites, and they followed the construction of some places over time and estimated what they made based on visible infrastructure. But I have yet to find evidence that proves that US intelligence knew that the CCP was undertaking a large-scale defensive industrialisation campaign called the Third Front. As of yet, I have only had access to low-level surveillance reports about satellites and planes that flew over, took pictures, and charted out what they saw in those flyovers. But it remains unclear to me if they understood that this was a massive project that the CCP designed to prepare the country for guerrilla war.

What the US Government did know about China was that it had a military strategy for handling nuclear war that was quite different than other great powers at the time. After World War II, all great powers came up with different military methods to combat the threat of nuclear war and extensive air bombing. Cold War China never had a significant navy, so it was incapable of defending its coasts if the United States attacked in the way that Japan had done in World War II and the United States had done in Korea in the early 1950s. Cold War China also never had a significant air force, so it was incapable of stopping massive American or Soviet air-raids—a fact brought brutally home to Chinese military leaders in the Korean War, when building underground structures became a major way of avoiding American aerial attacks.

China developed a nuclear weapon in 1964, and then it built out other parts of its nuclear arsenal in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. However, it was incapable of hitting Moscow until 1971 and was unable to hit the eastern coast of the United States until 1981. Simply put, China did not have a nuclear deterrent. It could have attacked US allies in Asia, but that was hardly an effective nuclear deterrent. So, what did the CCP do to deal with the threat of nuclear war? Its nuclear strategy was, essentially, ‘We’re going to let you come into our country and we’re going to militarise everything and have militias everywhere and so we will just bleed you out of our country in a very long guerrilla war’. This was very different from other countries’ approach to nuclear war. This point is worth remembering because it helps to explain some of the militarisation in terms of speech, military training, and widespread distribution of weapons to work units in China, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. These facets of Maoist society are often described in the context

of the domestic battles of factions during the Cultural Revolution, but it is important to remember that the CCP gave this militaristic bent to Maoist society in preparation for protecting socialist China from a potential American or Soviet invasion.

MG: The Third Front was, and I quote from your book here, ‘the sole economic policy that Party leaders formulated at the time to develop inland areas ... [and which] helped to lessen regional economic differences’. In what ways did the Third Front campaign’s industrialisation drive in inland China lay the groundwork for post-Mao Chinese economic growth?

CM: I made this argument as a critique of Barry Naughton, who posited in his seminal articles on the Third Front that there were other ways of having comparable development in inland areas and still carrying out development on the coast. But in all the documentary records that I encountered in my research, these alternatives were never considered by the CCP leadership. There was never a discussion of ‘how about we do a light version of the Third Front and continue to invest in coastal development?’. It was very much this or that. The Third Front represented the only example of large-scale development of the Chinese interior that I have seen Party leaders consider in the 1960s and 1970s.

In terms of how the Front contributed to long-term development, one way was that it installed industrial society in inland areas. It built up the basic building blocks of industrial infrastructure. As scholars have noted, industrial systems have historically functioned through three specific forms of energy—oil, coal, and electricity—all of which have associated industries, such as steel and the railway for coal, the automobile and petrochemicals for oil, and power lines and electronics for electricity. Production of these three energy sources in inland China as well as the major industries associated with them were massively expanded during the Third Front and became a permanent part of the economy of inland areas. The Third Front also helped with levelling economic development between the coastal areas and inland areas, and industrial society became hardwired into the entire country, not just the coast and the Northeast, where it had primarily existed before. In addition, the pursuit of further industrial projects did not just draw on this physical infrastructure, but also on all the people who were involved in these projects and who learned and put to use technical and administrative skills as part of the Third Front’s campaign of building up industrial society in inland China. This bolstering of human capital also had long-term implications for how the CCP considered China’s future development.

MG: What legacy of the Third Front campaign, if any, continued to play a role in the later Western Development Campaign (西部大开发) or with regard to the BRI, which is partly motivated by the need to speed up the development of western China?

CM: There are a couple of different levels here. One is that this industrial base established in inland China became a magnet for further investment later on. Big cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing were built up, and the connections between them were also expanded. But there are also third-tier cities—to speak in the language of the state in China—that were developed. If one visits places like Zigong in Sichuan or Zunyi in Guizhou, much of their original industrial apparatus was an outgrowth of the Third Front. Investments accumulated over time and places thus became magnets for further investment and accumulation of resources. Taken as a whole, the Third Front's entrenchment of industrial society in inland China also significantly contributed to the expansion of the Chinese economy's ever-growing appetite for hydrocarbons and other raw materials—an economic feature that was at the centre of the Western Development Campaign and is now at the core of the BRI.

Another aspect is security. If one examines where portions of China's military industrial complex are today, a substantial portion is in inland areas. Some of it has been left in remote locations, but much of it has been relocated and centralised in big cities like Chengdu, Wuhan, and Xi'an over the past few decades. China's military complex is still spread out in inland regions for strategic reasons because the Party wants part of its industrial defences to be deep in the country rather than on the coast. If one examines where the CCP has recently been building nuclear silos, this pattern repeats itself: they are in inland areas where the Third Front once was. In short, China's military industrial geography still has a significant footprint in inland areas.

Another feature of the Third Front that lives on in more recent CCP policies is the concern for the penetration of frontier regions by foreign forces. For instance, Xinjiang did not host many Third Front factories because the Soviet Union was nearby geographically, and the Party was concerned about Moscow gaining hold of a big piece of China's industrial base. In fact, reversing the trend of the Chinese and Soviet economy becoming more integrated in the 1950s as part of the larger project of creating a socialist world economy, northern China in its entirety was underdeveloped during the 1960s and 1970s for the same geopolitical reason. Even though there are big coal deposits in Inner Mongolia and northern Shaanxi, these areas were not mined extensively by the CCP because of concerns about Soviet forces invading and seizing these territories and their infrastructure. However, Xinjiang, like most other provinces in China, did receive small Third Front complexes in mountainous frontier areas, and they produced arms that a combination of guerrilla and conventional military forces could have used to fight off a foreign

invasion. As I show in my book, this strategy of militarising frontier regions in nearly every single Chinese province was an outgrowth of the CCP's experience of establishing revolutionary base areas in similar areas to fight the Nationalists and the Japanese in the early twentieth century.

Because of the fear of foreign penetration, Xinjiang's economy was also militarised in other ways. Most notably, the Party formed the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, also known as Bingtuan (兵团), out of People's Liberation Army units to head up local economic development. While today's CCP has abandoned the Third Front's strategy of militarising the frontier regions of nearly all provinces, the securitisation of frontier regions, nonetheless, lives on in a different form—Xinjiang being the most well-known example, but also in Inner Mongolia and Tibet. Cases such as these show that there remains a tendency towards militarisation and securitising the local population to protect against penetration by foreign threats.

MG: The Third Front is a rich case in which international politics, specifically Cold War power dynamics, directly shaped the inner workings of the Chinese political economy. Do you think we could also adopt a similar lens for the BRI—that is, President Xi's reassessment of international politics in reshaping China's domestic political economy, and international political economy, writ large?

CM: Yes, this is another legacy of the Third Front, but it is also a legacy of the Cold War. Many forget that the United States never really stopped fighting the Cold War. How did the United States respond to the Cold War in East Asia? It built up economic networks with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and parts of Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Southern Vietnam, Thailand, etc. The United States also developed security partnerships, or at least established connections with many of the aforementioned places and set up military bases there. Those never went away when the Cold War ended; rather, they became part of America's military unconscious and remain in place to this day, still having tens of thousands of troops and a lot of high-powered weaponry. From the 1990s, Chinese leaders have become more concerned about the military and economic structures that the US Government set up during the Cold War to fight communism and which are still in place today. These military-economic containment structures are a driving reason behind why CCP leaders launched the Belt and Road Initiative shortly after the Obama administration's strategic pivot in 2011 away from the War on Terror in the Middle East and Central Asia towards pushing back against China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific.

But there are a few important differences between the Third Front and the BRI. One is how the Third Front was constructed. It was constructed through domestic resources and the mass mobilisation

of militarised labour. This is very different from the present-day situation in China. With the end of the Mao era, the CCP dramatically changed its views of China's geopolitical situation, giving up the idea that a massive 'hot' war between socialism and capitalist imperialism was on the horizon and instead thinking that the Cold War would remain cold. With this geostrategic shift, Party leaders abandoned the security practice of militarising the economy and society in preparation for a nationwide battle to defend socialist China from a Soviet or American invasion. The Party instead professionalised national defence and made it primarily the People's Liberation Army's responsibility. As part of this demilitarisation of China, the Party also abandoned the developmental practice of mobilising huge regiments of labour to rapidly expand China's industrial base. Taking the place of the masses as the core of the Party's developmental strategy from the 1980s forward was the figure of the technical and administrative expert. In this post-Maoist ideological configuration, as the technical and administrative expert became the subject of the Party's praise, increasing the numbers of such experts became a national need, and countless cultural products came to centre their narratives on how technicians and experts heroically employed their technoscientific acumen for the sake of bettering the nation, their family, and themselves. In the post-Mao era, the masses were still integral to the Party's developmental policies, but their labour was no longer the subject of countless tales of militarised socialist heroism, as it was in the Mao era; rather, it was relegated to where it typically resides in capitalist societies—that is, in the shadows of society, or what Marx called the hidden abode of production.

Over the past few decades, China has also developed into a leading position in the global economy and the BRI is a reflection of China's new geopolitical status, as it extends the country's economic influence all across the world through the purchase of raw materials, expansion of Chinese companies' global market share, and the exporting of Chinese manufactured goods, finance, administrative, and technical expertise. The BRI also exports the CCP's developmental practice of using special economic zones to bring in foreign capital, upgrade local industry, and create an export-based economic growth engine, with the crucial difference that in the case of the BRI it is Chinese companies that are playing the leading role in other countries' development. Now, the Chinese state and Chinese corporations are going to other countries and helping to build their industrial base. But the BRI is also a response to the larger geopolitical framework that Chinese leaders are facing now, especially over the past few years, with increasing pressure from the United States. Party leaders are concerned that China will be shut out of international markets, and their response has been to strive to build Chinese companies into these markets.

The BRI is about building Chinese corporations into the economic fabric of the global economy. The Party envisions this process as beginning with, first, building basic infrastructure, just like with the Third Front. Eventually, BRI countries will also acquire manufacturing bases, which will spur a middle class and, accordingly, create a demand for Chinese goods. In this way, China will be able to gain a higher position on global value chains, while at the same time receiving raw materials and lower-tech goods from BRI nations. Ultimately, the utopian story that the CCP foresees is that all BRI nations will developmentally rise up, obtain a significant middle class and a big consumer society, and they will all live harmoniously—like people in China supposedly have, thanks to the Party’s development of the country.

MG: Do you think the CCP today possesses the same level of extraordinary mobilisation capacity?

CM: Well, Chinese society is definitely not cellular anymore, like it was to a significant degree in the Mao era. Chinese society, as Vivienne Shue has argued, is now based on the webs and networks of market exchanges. In Maoist society, people were closed off in their own cells. This cellular character was still noticeable a decade ago in Chinese cities, where walled-off work units dominated the urban landscape. Today, the state is less central to social and economic life, as the Party over the past few decades has gradually marketised more parts of the economy, permitting and at times even encouraging the forging of connections with social and economic actors around the world. In this new stage of China’s globalisation, the Party does not manage information and resource flows the same way. It still has the aspiration to channel information and material flows to achieve its political objectives, but this is a much different task today as China’s economy and society are no longer cellular and militarised as they were in the Mao era, but are rather demilitarised and interconnected in innumerable ways with regions around the world. The challenge the CCP faces today is how to regulate Chinese society in such a way that both maintains support for the Party and promotes international connections that advance national development, while at the same time ensuring the defence of national interests around the world without provoking too much push back from an apprehensive United States that in the new millennium has found a renewed sense of geopolitical mission in containing Chinese communist expansion worldwide. ■



Maoism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Third World

The Case of China and the Black Panthers

James Gethyn EVANS

At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Maoist China became a symbol for anti-imperialist movements throughout an imagined 'Third World'. While scholarly attention has been paid to Third-World Maoism in countries of the Global South, fewer scholars have considered how Maoism was received by organisations within the 'First World' that considered themselves part of the global Third-World struggle against oppression. This essay helps to address this gap by examining how the Black Panther Party in the United States was inspired by Mao Zedong's writings and formed connections with the Chinese Communist Party.

Black Panther Party (BPP) delegation visits Beijing, 1971. PC: Black Panther Community News Service, 1971.

Peking is a tremendous city. I believe there's a population of about 6 or 7 million. That's almost the population of New York, and yet, it's not like New York because the people are not squashed into housing ... When you're in China, everything is clear, everything is beautiful.

— Elaine Brown (Black Panther Community News Service 1970)

Reporting on her visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1970, Elaine Brown, a high-ranking member of the Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party (known

colloquially as the Panthers) described her state of enamour with Beijing. What Brown saw on her visit—a cityscape characterised by wide streets, countless bicycles, and grey ‘Mao jackets’—was a carefully controlled propaganda effort by Chinese officials to present the country in a positive light to its foreign visitor (Brady 2003). But for Brown, it reflected the utopian potential of a socialist society and struck a sharp contrast to her experiences as a black woman in America. Brown’s visit to China was part of the Panthers’ ‘anti-imperialist’ delegation to the PRC, which was arranged by the organisation’s then Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, at a time when diplomatic relations between the US and PRC governments were still formally severed. The Panthers’ visit to Beijing, and to other socialist countries including North Korea, Vietnam, and Algeria in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Wu 2013), was in purposeful defiance of the US Government’s bans on civilian travel to these states at the height of the Cold War.

During their repeated visits to the PRC, Black Panther delegation members toured key sites, interacted with (carefully handpicked) locals, and met high-ranking officials. On her return to Beijing the following year, for example, Brown was accompanied by Huey P. Newton, the organisation’s co-founder, to meet with the PRC’s Premier, Zhou Enlai, and Chairman Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, to discuss Chinese Communist Party (CCP) support for African-American activists. While Brown and Newton were not granted the highest honour of an audience with Mao himself—unlike previous African-American visitors to the PRC like W.E.B. du Bois and Robert F. Williams—they were invited to participate in the PRC’s National Day celebrations on 1 October 1971, which was a privilege shared by few Americans.

The Panthers’ courting of the CCP is one of the many ‘unanticipated alignments’—to borrow the historian Arif Dirlik’s (1989) term—of the Cold War. China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—an intensely violent period in which Mao unleashed the masses against the bureaucracy and incited revolutionary fervour—coincided with the mobilisation of myriad social movements around the world, including America’s civil rights movement and the more radical Black Power move-

ment (Qin 2011). In contrast to Martin Luther King Jr.’s preaching of nonviolence, radical activists in the Black Power movement, such as Black Panthers co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, incorporated ideas from black nationalism, Marxism, and Maoism into a political organisation capable of supporting their words with action, including violence if necessary (Gong 1968[?]). For some participants in the Black Power movement, the CCP provided not only a potential partner, but also an ideological guide for how to conduct successful revolution against a capitalist and imperialist state. To the Panthers, visits to the PRC were therefore activities in relationship-building with the CCP—a potentially powerful ally that could provide international support, legitimacy, and guidance for their organisation’s struggle against the US Government. From the CCP’s perspective, its support for the Panthers and other African-American activists represented concrete actions meant to affirm and demonstrate their support for global revolution, particularly against US capitalism and imperialism on America’s own soil.



Cao Youcheng, ‘Firmly Support US Black People’s Just Struggle against Racial Discrimination [坚决支持美国黑人反对种族歧视的正义斗争]’, People’s Fine Art Publishing House, Shanghai, 1963. PC: Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Harvard University.

This arrangement between the CCP and African-American activists in the 1960s and 1970s—described by Keisha A. Brown (2015) as ‘Sino-Black Relations’ and by Hongshan Li (2018) as a trans-Pacific ‘Black Bridge’—highlights the degree to which the CCP interacted with nonstate actors and organisations in not only what is more traditionally considered the Third World, but also with individuals and organisations within the First World who considered themselves among the globally oppressed. By centring on citizens, groups, societies, and collectives as pivotal players in the internationalisation of Maoism and African-American activism, an alternative picture of trans-Pacific connections and US–China relations emerges—one that contrasts sharply with what is largely considered to be a period of isolation between the two states.

How Did Maoism Become a Global Phenomenon?

The founding of the PRC in 1949 coincided with two dramatic changes in the global order. First, the great imperial powers of Europe and Japan found themselves in a state of ruin after World War II. The colonies that had sustained their empires, both economically and symbolically, were too costly to maintain for geographically distant European capitals. Local independence and anticolonial movements gathered momentum, drawing inspiration from global calls for an end to imperialism in the new postwar order. One after another, former colonies in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas declared independence either peacefully or by force to create new states out of the ashes of empire. The CCP, whose successful revolution had emerged from the previous regime’s inability to expel foreign powers, saw clear connections between their own fight against imperialism and the pro-independence movements waged in many states that had become independent or were in the process of winning their independence (Friedman 2015).

Second, the PRC’s decision to align with the Soviet Union in the Cold War was soon thrown into question with the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953. Tensions between the PRC’s emphasis on anti-imperialism and the Soviet Union’s stressing of anti-capitalism as the main driver of socialist revolution had been largely put to one side in the early days of the PRC. But Stalin’s replacement, Nikita Khrushchev, decided that Stalin’s extreme style of governing was leading the Soviet Union down the wrong path; a new ‘de-Stalinisation’ of the Soviet Union was required to correct Stalin’s violent cult-like personal rule (Lüthi 2008). Unfortunately for Mao, Stalin’s style of governing was precisely what he had hoped to replicate: a cult of personality, with the leader indivisible from the party-state system (Leese 2011). Mao’s belief in Stalinism was therefore not just about what he believed was in China’s best interests; it was also crucial to ensuring his unchallenged leadership of the CCP. Mao’s dedication to Stalinist rule and Khrushchev’s commitment to de-Stalinisation meant relations between the two Eurasian giants dramatically shifted from dedicated co-revolutionaries to suspicious competitors in a process known as the Sino-Soviet split (1956–66).

By 1960, relations between the erstwhile allies, Moscow and Beijing, had become so tense they had taken to publicly denouncing each other, often through proxies like socialist Albania. The PRC’s objections to Khrushchev’s calls for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist bloc cleft the socialist camp into pro-Khrushchev and pro-Stalinist factions, with existing fissures widening between individuals, party factions, and even states. As the champion of Stalin’s legacy, and in contrast to Khrushchev’s ‘revisionist’ path, the PRC assumed leadership of the radical ‘anti-revisionist’ faction within global socialism. The Sino-Soviet split reverberated across the world as communist parties in countries as disparate as India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom divided into ‘pro-Soviet’ and ‘pro-PRC’ factions, and eventually split into separate parties. The anti-revisionist camp—consisting of the PRC, Albania, and a handful of splinter Marxist-Leninist parties—therefore faced

the unenviable position of being simultaneously against *both* the US-led capitalist bloc and the Soviet-led socialist bloc.

Under these tense conditions, the CCP leant into Mao's writings—collectively known as Mao Zedong Thought (or Maoism), to differentiate the PRC's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union's revisionism. Maoism is an ideology of complex contradictions based on Mao's writings about Marxism, Leninism, and the CCP's revolutionary experience (Lovell 2019). For example, Mao's essay 'On Democracy', published in 1940, applied Lenin's classification of imperialism as the highest form of capitalism to China's history of unequal treaties with foreign powers and semi-colonialism for the purpose of tying Marxism-Leninism to the CCP's 'anti-imperialist' position. While Mao would never have claimed that his Thought was distinct from Marxism-Leninism—he saw his interpretation as the 'correct', orthodox version of Marxism-Leninism—the infusion of the CCP's revolutionary experiences into Lenin's ideas arguably created an adaptation of Marxism-Leninism according to Mao's world view.

Anti-Imperialism and Mao's Three Worlds

With the Sino-Soviet split, the CCP needed to distinguish the PRC from the Soviet Union as an alternative world leader. Key to the CCP's anti-Soviet campaign was the leveraging of race and empire; it was not a huge leap to emphasise that the Soviet Union was racially a majority-white imperial power, in stark comparison with the non-white PRC with its history of suffering at the hands of foreign empires. Through efforts like the 'Three Fights and One Increase' (三斗一多) campaign to combat imperialism, revisionism, and reactionaries, Mao intertwined ideas of race, anti-imperialism, and his new stance against the Soviet Union into a division of three separate 'worlds', of which the PRC was firmly part of the 'Third World' (第三世界) (Li and Xia 2014).

When most people think of the Third World (a now somewhat outdated phrase), they generally think in economic terms—that is, of poorer states in the Global South that stand in contrast to wealthier states in the Global North. During the Cold War, this framework—coined by the French academic Alfred Sauvy in the 1950s—categorised countries not just in terms of economic development, but also according to which bloc each country aligned with: the capitalist First World, the socialist Second World, or the non-aligned Third World. In splitting from the Soviet Union, Mao's declaration that China was part of the Third World—and not the Second—was therefore significant. But for Mao, the 'Third World' meant more than economic development; it stood as a relational term between imperialism and anti-imperialism, between oppressor and oppressed. Mao's theory of Three Worlds argued for a First World of colonisers (including the United States and the Soviet Union), a Third World of the colonised (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), and an intermediate Second World (Europe and Japan) that simultaneously played both roles. As Teng Wei (2019: 285) notes of Mao's theory: 'The Third World is not necessarily located only in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but may be close at hand—as every place of poverty and every destitute person is the Third World.'

By framing the world into oppressors and oppressed, Mao recast China as the leader of the oppressed in its global revolutionary struggle against US and Soviet imperial designs. But Mao's Three Worlds were malleable and subjective, which meant that categories could apply not just to states, but also to societies and even to individuals according to their state of oppression. Moreover, this malleability meant Mao could change who and where was included or excluded from each of the three categories as he saw fit—a feature that became particularly useful as states aligned or fell out of alignment with the PRC in the following decade.

The oppressor–oppressed dichotomy was most clearly articulated in terms of race. By casting white people as the global oppressors and non-white people as the global oppressed, Maoism transformed the 'white' Soviets from allies into oppressors and as analogous to the United States. This,

in turn, was used as a litmus test for constructing Maoist ideology and its revolutionary world view. But much in the same way the Third World was a flexible category, so, too, was race. Even white supporters of Mao, like the Albanians, were considered honorary non-whites, and antagonists like the Japanese were, by contrast, considered white. Race was therefore conceptualised not just in terms of skin colour, although that certainly played a large role, but also in terms of one's relationship to oppression.

Mao's message of struggle against oppression resonated loudly with states, governments, communities, and individuals all over the world. From newly independent states trying to establish postcolonial systems of governance to groups fighting racial injustice, Mao became a symbol of inspiration and victory. Maoist texts like the *Little Red Book* were readily translated into major world languages and reprinted both by the CCP in China (San 2004) and by groups around the world. As Mao's message circulated globally, it took on new meanings and interpretations, with groups and individuals adapting and interpreting the call for world revolution according to their local conditions. Students in Paris took to the streets to protest global inequality; guerrilla fighters in Peru armed themselves in the name of revolutionary war against the Peruvian state; and African Americans in Oakland, California, brandished Mao's writings as proof that their fight against racism was part of a global movement against oppression (Cook 2010; Christiansen and Scarlett 2012). What began as a way for Mao to distinguish China from the Soviet Union took on new significance as Maoism coincided with local grievances to ignite revolutionary fervour around the globe. The struggle against oppression felt by so many individuals in the mid-twentieth century now had a broader calling in Maoism; no longer was the fight local; it was now a part of a global revolutionary moment.

Maoism not only served as a guide for how the CCP had successfully conducted a revolution and established a socialist state; it also provided a syntax for how organisations and individuals could participate in a global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement. Maoism became a rallying cry, a revolutionary grammar for the oppressed, the

disadvantaged, and the downtrodden in an interconnected contest against empire, dependency, and suppression. Through understanding these connections during the Cold War, a globalised image emerges of Mao and the PRC's central role in constructing a worldwide anticolonial and anti-imperial solidarity that provided direct transnational links between local social movements and global power structures.

Why Was Maoism Appealing to the Black Panthers?

The combination of Maoism's anti-US platform and the potential for solidarity with an imagined Maoist Third World centred on race and racial oppression made it an appealing and malleable framework for the Panthers. A global anti-imperialist movement provided a lexicon for them to link



The Black Panther, October 1970.



Header of the 'Intercommunal News' section of the Black Panthers' newspaper, 30 January 1971, page 12, depicting revolutionary leaders including Mao Zedong (second from right).

their local and national efforts to something bigger. It also helped the Panthers' leaders to legitimise their goals to their members. By leaning on Mao's framing of the United States as a (white) imperial power, the Panthers tied their championing of antiracism, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism to an interconnected revolutionary network. Mao's image, among others, became a shorthand for a plethora of complex, diverse, and competing goals among otherwise disparate revolutionary groups. Mao was not the only symbol for revolution, however, and the banner running across the 'international section' of the Panthers' party newspaper shows that he was but one of several leaders who collectively served as icons for anti-imperialism, including Cuba's Che Guevara, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and North Korea's Kim Il-sung. But Mao—alongside Che—was perhaps the most recognisable of the group, aided in large part by the CCP's active translation, printing, dissemination, and promotion of Mao's writings and image.

How did the Panthers interpret Maoism for a US context? Maoism was not just a set of ideals; it also provided a handbook for how to act. The Panthers fused Maoist ideological tenets—specifically, Mao's calls to adapt Marxism-Leninism for different times and locations, his emphasis on revolution

as issuing from the masses, and his promotion of guerilla warfare tactics—with their own experiences in the United States, in addition to examples from other Third World revolutionaries. As Huey P. Newton wrote about those who influenced his own understanding of revolution:

Mao and [Frantz] Fanon and [Che] Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by a philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint ... for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. (Newton and Blake 1973: 70)

Force was indeed one component of how Mao's messaging was weaponised by the Black Power movement. Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch (1999: 13) for example, point to Black Power advocate Robert Williams' promotion of self-defence groups for African Americans in North Carolina, and his advocacy to 'meet force with force', as evidence of a Maoist-inspired theory of guerrilla warfare in the United States. Invoking the Chinese 'Red Guards' who formed an integral part of the Cultural Revolution, a guide written in the early 1970s by Muhammad Ahmad (1971), a leader of a Black



The Black Panther, 1971.

Power organisation called the Radical Action Movement, detailed how African-American activists should build their own 'Black Guards'. The Black Guards—somewhat ironically named given the counter-revolutionary connotation of 'black' in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution—were proposed as a black People's Liberation Army, although this aim appears to have not gathered widespread support among the movement's members.

Maoism also influenced the Panthers' establishment of community programs—named 'Serve the People' programs to echo the title of Mao's 1944 speech—which catered to the needs of African-American communities. Mao's calls to 'serve the people' (为人民服务) were taken quite literally by the Panthers, who expanded commu-



'Declaration of Support for the Black People's Struggle against Violence in the United States', People's Daily, 1968.

nity programs at local schools and churches to include a 'Free Breakfast for Children Program', the 'Oakland Community School', and free sickle-cell anaemia testing. Breakfast programs were considered a key part of the Panthers' appeal, with some less-radical members arguing that the breakfast program could even attract the support of the establishment (Jeffries 2006: 193). While conciliatory views towards the establishment were not shared by most of the Panthers' membership, they underscore the real benefits the Panthers' Maoist-infused programs brought to some of the most marginalised members of US society. Rather than being solely a driver for violence, Maoism's calls for a revolution of the oppressed also inspired service provision where the state had failed to support vulnerable communities.

Third World Maoism and Black Power: A Reimagining of China Studies

The CCP's support for the Black Panthers was short-lived. Just a few years after the Panthers' visit to Beijing, Mao's meeting with US President Richard Nixon catalysed a dramatic realignment of the PRC's foreign policy towards the United States. The Panthers' anti-US stance, inspired in no small part by Mao himself, became an inconvenient thorn in the side of the PRC's attempts to forge a new friendship with Washington. As engagement with the US Government increased, the utility of African-American activists to the CCP declined. Organisations like the Panthers were useful to the CCP only insofar as they could be co-opted for the CCP's own goals and, by the mid-1970s, their utility had passed.

As scholars reassess the global connections forged by the CCP during the Cold War, a new picture is emerging of the vast network of connections forged between the PRC and a diverse array of actors across the world. In the case of the Panthers' interactions with the CCP, scholars like Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch (1999), Matthew Johnson (2013), Robeson Taj Frazier (2015), Keisha A. Brown (2015, 2016), Hongshan Li (2018), Zifeng Liu (2019), Ruodi Duan (2019), and Yunxiang Gao (2021), to name a few, are at the forefront of expanding the field of China Studies to include perspectives from African-American history, Black Internationalism, and global history. Understanding how Maoism attracted such diverse actors across an imagined Third World space provides a window on to understanding not only how ideas travel, are adapted, and are retransmitted between states and nonstate actors, but also how we might diversify our understanding of US–China relations beyond the elite narratives of the White House and Zhongnanhai that are so often prioritised. ■



A Brief History of Pakistan-China Legal Relations

Matthew S. ERIE

Much scholarly attention to China's positions toward international law in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) suggests a 'big bang' approach, given the amount of activity generated by Chinese legal organs in relation to the BRI. While this attention is warranted, it may elide some of the deeper histories between China and the Global South. In such a context, this essay takes the legal relations between Pakistan and China as a window into exploring the question of how small states hedge different yet overlapping international legal orders.

Khunjerab Pass is the highest paved border crossing in the world and the highest point on the Karakoram Highway. PC: @KeithTan (CC).

One of the meta questions in the study of contemporary China is whether the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is building its own international legal order. Some experts argue China is causing a turn to 'authoritarian international law' (Ginsburg 2020). Others, however, contend that while China is introducing change to the international legal order, it is mainly doing so within preexisting frameworks—namely, those of multilateralism, which may limit the nature of that change (Alter, forthcoming). The question about China and the

international legal order is particularly regnant at the intersection of law and the study of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where scholars view a ‘big bang’ Chinese approach to international law through an explosion of soft-law agreements and memorandums of understanding between member states coupled with China’s promotion of its international commercial arbitration, the training of judges on cross-border dispute issues, and even construction of bespoke courts to take on international disputes. Yet, like much BRI scholarship, observations may illustrate the problem of presentism that can elide the deeper histories of the PRC and what used to be called the ‘Third World’ and is, more currently, known as the ‘Global South’, including their legal dimensions.

The question of the archaeology of the BRI as proposed by this issue of the *Made in China Journal* is an important one, especially when one considers talk of a ‘new Cold War’ between the United States and China, recalling that small dependent states, in particular, were once the specific theatres for the drawn-out competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War analogy is potentially forced—the contemporary stage of global economic interdependence may prevent complete decoupling despite de-listings and tariffs—but the perspective of small states is a helpful starting point in contemplating the PRC’s longer histories of involvement in such states, and how such histories may shape contemporary legal orders. This brief essay uses the history of Pakistan–China legal relations as a window on to ‘international law as hedging’ (Nguyen 2020), to unearth some of the strata below the surface of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—the feature that today attracts most attention concerning the two countries’ relations. A short legal history of bilateral relations demonstrates how Pakistan, like many small states, may gravitate towards powerful capital-exporting countries, such as China, as epicentres of international law orders, yet remain a participant in other, overlapping orders to mitigate overdependence and increase optionality. This insight may help us understand more clearly the broader picture of multiple and competing international legal orders.

The Establishment of Diplomatic Ties

On 20 May 2021, Li Keqiang, Premier of the PRC, telephoned Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Imran Khan, on the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2021). The two sides pledged to work together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic as part of their ‘all-weather strategic partnership’ (全天候战略合作伙伴关系)—a catch-all expression coined in the late 1970s that has since come to define the Pakistan–China relationship. Experts agree that, along with North Korea, this is one of the PRC’s most enduring relationships, which has weathered periodic ups and downs (Garver 2016: 736). The reasons for this endurance are manifold, including, centrally, the geostrategic position of Pakistan as India’s neighbour and rival, but also commercial factors such as investment and trade, and concerns about national security and terrorism. International law has been one ingredient of this enduring relationship.

Despite contemporary political oratory concerning the ancient friendship between Pakistan and China—allegedly hearkening back to the historic Silk Road of the Tang Dynasty—the relationship as understood today is largely a modern creation. Both Pakistan and the PRC were formed by contemporaneous violent movements, including decolonisation and civil war. The concurrence of the emergence of the modern state in both cases seemed to initiate mutual recognition. In 1947, when Pakistan was still a dominion and China was governed by the Nationalists of the Guomindang (GMD), Pakistan established a consulate in Kashgar, China’s westernmost city (Wang 1981: 4). Chiang Kai-shek, then leader of the GMD and the Republic of China, did not, however, support Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. On the defeat of the Nationalists and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party, India recognised the newly founded PRC, on 30 December 1949, and Pakistan

followed a week later, on 6 January 1950—the first Muslim state and third non-communist state to do so (Ghulam 2017: 10–12).

The two countries officially established diplomatic relations on 21 May 1951. This implicit recognition of the other's sovereignty was not just a policy decision but also an affirmation of international law (see, for example, Lauterpacht 1944: 386). It is through state recognition that the rights of states attach under international law. Thus, while not to be overstated, even at the genesis of relations between them, the two states—which have traditionally been seen as outliers in the international legal system—recognised core principles of public international law in relation to each other. As such, the building blocks of the Pakistan–China relationship are consistent with international law—the rules that govern interstate relations—and the two countries would build on this foundation, mainly through bilateral treaties but also through multilateral agreements.

The Cold War

Recognition and use of the principles of international law do not equate to political unity within that system, however, and the Cold War demonstrated how treaty alliances could be the means to Balkanise that system, including occasionally putting Pakistan and China in opposing blocs. Divergence was highlighted by the states' behaviour in the United Nations. Whereas Pakistan had previously supported the PRC's efforts to replace the Republic of China in the United Nations, by 1953, Pakistan began voting with the United States against the PRC's UN seat—commensurate with increasing Pakistani reliance on US aid (Syed 1974: 54). Eventually, Pakistan would enter into four defence pacts with the United States and its allies, including some that were anti-Chinese (Ghulam 2017: 19).

One of these, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), was criticised by the PRC on legal grounds. Specifically, the PRC Government argued that SEATO failed to meet the requirements for a

regional organisation within the meaning of the UN Charter (Articles 51–54), and did not conform to the requirements in the Treaty of Bandung (Syed 1974: 55). Specifically, the Chinese Government claimed that the United States was using SEATO to sow discord in East Asia and to ring-fence the PRC (Syed 1974: 55). In this sense, SEATO is perhaps one of the first examples of the Chinese Government using a 'lawfare' argument against the United States (see Cai 2019). The 1962 Sino-Indian War, however, forced a wedge between the United States and Pakistan, as the former increasingly allied itself with India (Chaudhuri 2018: 42). Subsequently, Pakistan and China increasingly sought to support each other; in exchange for Chinese loans and China's pro-Pakistan stance on Kashmir, Pakistan backed China's nuclearisation and maintained silence on its treatment of Uyghurs (Boni 2020).

Cross-Border Trade and Investment

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, Pakistan and China's relationship became tighter through growing yet still moderate economic activity, although Pakistan also sought aid from the United States and its allies. The Sino-Pakistani entente began in 1964 and saw the countries moving in parallel on policy matters ranging from Taiwan to India. In 1966, Pakistan and China signed an agreement for the sale of military hardware totalling US\$120 million, as China became one of Pakistan's main suppliers for such equipment—a supply that, remarkably, continued unabated even during the '10 years of calamity' of the Cultural Revolution (Ghulam 2017: 61).

Following a brief US–China–Pakistan pact to contest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan continued to draw on aid from both China and the United States and its allies. The specific legal form of Chinese aid to Pakistan changed during the late 1970s from grants to loans (Ghulam 2017: 100). Consequently, commercial elements entered the relationship, although a non-commercial logic still undergirded many of

these loans. Loans nonetheless enabled nascent cooperation in the fields of agriculture, energy, and industry.

In parallel, the two countries entered standard economic treaties. On 12 February 1989, for instance, the two countries signed a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) ('Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Reciprocal Encouragement and Protection of Investments'). The BIT contains standard clauses including investment in accordance with local law (Art. 2), equitable treatment and most-favoured-nation clauses (Art. 3), expropriation (Art. 4), and tiered dispute settlement through diplomatic channels and ad hoc arbitration (Art. 9). Significantly, the BIT, which remains in force today, does not contain the standard language of more modern BITs, such as the right to regulate, sustainable development, and social investment, suggesting that despite the entente, the two countries have not been able to procure the political will to update and amend the BIT—a problem seen in many of China's other outdated BITs.

Security and Anti-Terrorism

Pakistan has become a major client of both the United States and China for the purchase of military equipment, generating relationships that typify the country's hedging strategy. In the wake of 9/11, Pakistan became an indispensable ally in the US Global War on Terror. In June 2004, US President George W. Bush designated Pakistan a 'major non-NATO ally' and, two years later, signed arms transfer agreements with Pakistan worth more than US\$3.5 billion, making Pakistan first among all arms clients of the United States that year (Grimmett 2009: 1–2). The United States has not signed the Arms Trade Treaty, which came into force on 24 December 2014, meaning its arms sales are not governed by that international agreement.

The Chinese Government has built up Pakistan's military capability mainly to check India, but its arms sales are also part of an ongoing negotiation

regarding the PRC's concerns about Xinjiang. From 1993 to 1997, Pakistan bought 51 per cent of all the PRC's arms exports, effectively building the modern Pakistani war machine (Garver 2016: 739). Interestingly, China did sign and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty, on 20 June 2020, which will require the compliance of its domestic laws on arms export, as well as mandate reporting requirements.

Currently, China also spearheads an alternative framework for regional security and source of international law in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is often cited as a key example of a China-led 'authoritarian international law' (Ginsburg 2020: 247). The SCO has been viewed, in particular, as the externalisation of China's Strike Hard campaign against terrorists in Xinjiang (Small 2015: 76). In 2017, both Pakistan and India joined the SCO. Although there is no direct clash, it remains to be seen how Pakistan will balance its duties as a member state of the SCO with its obligations under the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF), a body organised by the G-7 to combat money-laundering for the financing of terrorism. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the quickly evolving events in that country may put some of Pakistan's legal obligations to the test.

A Legal History of Superimposed or Buckling Layers?

While geopolitics remains integral to Pakistani–Chinese relations, and economic ties have grown over time, law is also one source of norms in the relationship—and one that may undergird the foregoing. Pakistan–China relations show a layering of multiple sources of international law: mutual assistance treaties, investment treaties and sundry private contracts, free-trade agreements, soft loans, concessional financing and other forms of lending, and industrial, agricultural, and military agreements. Collectively, these sources of law form a latticework of legal norms and obligations between the two countries. At the same time, this

latticework intermeshes with other legal arrangements that Pakistan has sought with other powers, including the United States.

Consistent with the notion that smaller states ‘hedge’ international law (Nguyen 2020), Pakistan continues to seek to embrace pluralist notions of international law to optimise its material and other benefits. A question remains, however, about whether different orders of international law are harmonious in terms of the obligations they impose on members, particularly smaller states. Pakistan benefits from these competing arrangements, but it may also be constrained by them. Anyone in the legal industry in Pakistan is familiar with the infamous 2019 *Reko Diq* case, in which the World Bank’s International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes awarded an Australian mining company damages worth US\$5.84 billion against the Pakistani Government. The case revealed some of the country’s shortcomings in meeting its obligations under an existing bilateral investment treaty with Australia. Pakistan’s agreements with China under CPEC and its commitments to the International Monetary Fund’s Extended Fund Facility are just the most recent strata lying atop a thicker stratigraphy of such legal relations. This cursory overview suggests that while there may be different values towards and interpretations of international law underpinning the established order and the Chinese alternative (for instance, regarding the presence of conditionalities in lending, the role of national security in development, the relationship between business and human rights, etc.), in some ways, the relationship between the two is less antagonistic than additive. Layers upon layers. All of this will keep Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and related offices that track the country’s commitments under international law, quite busy. ■



From Neoliberalism to Goeconomics

The Greater Mekong
Subregion and the
Archaeology of the Belt and
Road Initiative in Mainland
Southeast Asia

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Gregory V. RAYMOND

In mainland Southeast Asia, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) builds on plans and routes that the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program laid down over the last few decades. While the BRI is likely to continue alongside various other national and regional development plans, schemes, and programs in the GMS for years to come, this essay argues that the establishment of the BRI marks the transition between the era of liberal economics and that of goeconomics.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) markets itself as the re-creation of the ancient Silk Road that linked Europe and Central Asia hundreds of years ago. In mainland Southeast Asia, the archaeology of the BRI is somewhat more recent. Here, the Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor of the BRI is being built on plans and routes laid down just a few decades ago. In particular, the BRI is integrating with the five subcorridors of the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) of the Greater Mekong Subre-

gion (GMS) program (GMS Secretariat and ADB 2018). Today the GMS, a multilateral infrastructure program, and the BRI, an expression of China's heft as the world's second-largest economy, appear to come together productively enough. But below the surface geopolitical tensions are developing. While the BRI is likely to continue alongside various other national and regional development plans, schemes, and programs for years to come, future observers looking back may see the establishment of the BRI as a faultline marking a transition between the post-Cold War and post-Global Financial Crisis periods: the eras of, respectively, liberal economics and geoeconomics. In what follows, I first sketch out the origins and challenges of the GMS, before situating the BRI as a new dynamic in the story of the increasing connectedness of mainland Southeast Asian states and southern China.

The Greater Mekong Subregion program

In October 1992, Noritada Morita, Director General of the Programs Department (West) of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), held a gathering of Mekong officials at the bank's headquarters in Manila. It was, he later recalled, 'probably the first meeting where all the countries previously in conflict in the subregion got together in a room to talk about cooperation for common development' (McCawley 2017: 186). Connectivity through physical infrastructure and economic corridors was a key objective, along with improving competitiveness through cross-border movement, and creating an enhanced sense of community (McCawley 2017: 278).

Like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) itself, the GMS was an economic route to peace. In the aftermath of the Cold War, many institutions were founded to promote peace, substituting US military presence with institutions promoting economic integration, enmeshing countries further in the US-led regional order. The fact that China, Laos, and Vietnam embraced market-based economic policies in the early 1990s made this vision feasible. Moving away from the Cold

War-era ideological struggle, China's Reform and Opening-Up and Vietnam's *Doi Moi* (translated literally as 'restoration') reform policies launched in 1986 meant there was more harmony in outlook, and more interest in subregional economic cooperation to achieve national goals of development. There was also a need to recover from the Indochina wars, from which Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia had emerged devastated. Statistics give some sense of the legacies of this conflict: in one year of its secret war between 1963 to 1974, the United States dropped more ordnance on Laos than it did on Japan in the whole of World War II (Kurlantzick 2016: 177). This left a massive burden, with accidental detonation of unexploded ordnance killing 8,000 people and injuring 12,000 since that time (Ounmany and Andriess 2018). There are still around 100 such deaths annually.

Technically, the GMS was a multilateral regulatory dialogue comprising the five Mekong states—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand—and China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces. While it coordinated rather than financed infrastructure projects, it was and probably remains the most important program for improving transport connectivity in the subregion. The member states signed on to the theory that increasing transport connectivity would attract private capital investment in tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing, thereby reducing poverty. China, for its part, saw the GMS as a means to develop its poorer western provinces—a goal written into the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–05) (Siriluk 2004: 306). Adopted in 1998, the flagships of the GMS program were three economic corridors: the NSEC, running from southern China through to coastal ports in mainland Southeast Asia; the East–West Economic Corridor, running from Vietnam to Myanmar; and the Southern Economic Corridor, also joining Vietnam and Myanmar but at a lower latitude (GMS Secretariat and ADB 2018: 1). These zones were intended to facilitate the movement of people, goods, services, capital, and information within and across borders.

Finding the resources to fund the infrastructure was, however, challenging. In the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the ASEAN states established an infrastructure fund, but at US\$485.3

million, it represented less than 0.1 per cent of the amount needed (ADB 2019). It was hoped that other donors, such as the World Bank and the ADB, together with development with capital markets and private investment, might offer an answer. But private investors are generally unwilling to accept the risks of infrastructure investments, and public-private partnerships have disappointed, as additional costs are shouldered by governments and users (Elek 2018). At the same time, both the ADB and the World Bank were gradually withdrawing from funding infrastructure, more by default than design, as their need to ensure that projects met high social and environmental standards restricted their capacity to invest (Dollar 2020: 3). When first established, the World Bank had devoted, for example, some 70 per cent of its funding to infrastructure, but this had reduced to 29 per cent by the second decade of the twenty-first century (Dollar 2020: 3). Some GMS projects did progress, however, and changed China-Southeast Asia connectivity fundamentally.

For centuries, the borderlands of China and mainland Southeast Asia lay at the fringes of states and empires. Mountainous topography and complex ethnic makeup made the borderlands difficult to incorporate into either Chinese or Southeast Asian states. In his 2009 book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, American anthropologist James C. Scott named the region 'Zomia'. He argued that the hill tribes who populated Zomia—like the Akha, the Lahu, the Lisu, and the Hmong—were anarchists who refused to submit to the authority of the lowland rice-growing states. Because of the difficulty of sending armies into the mountainous terrain, they remained out of reach, including from the Qing Empire. It was mainly Buddhist monks who travelled between what is now China and Southeast Asia, using old routes of pilgrimage from Sipsongbanna to northern Thailand (Davis 2003: 182). Indeed, in the nineteenth century, it was quicker to sail from Saigon to Paris than to travel overland from Saigon to Luang Prabang in Laos (Eyler 2019: 8).

As decolonisation and the twentieth century progressed, the emerging states built infrastructure connecting the outlying parts of their territory with their capital cities. But road and rail did

not link states so much as segment them, with new transportation routes leading away from the Mekong, reflecting the divisions of the bipolar world of the Cold War (Acker 2001 182). So, when China and Thailand decided to jointly fund, as part of the GMS, the R3 Highway linking Yunnan Province with Thailand via Laos, it was a momentous occasion, and a nail in Zomia's coffin. Thailand loaned Laos US\$28.5 million for the construction of 85 kilometres of the 228-kilometre road between Huay Xai on the Mekong River and Boten on the China-Laos border, while China funded the remainder (Pasuwat 2015: 208). Finished in 2008, the road connected to a bridge across the Mekong, which opened in 2013. In 2015, 300,000 Chinese tourists drove into northern Thailand (Lei 2017: 1).

Nonetheless, the lingering effects of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis continued to slow progress. By 2003, for example, after 12 GMS conferences, few of the GMS land transport projects had been rolled out (Siriluk 2004: 303).

Enter China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI, the announcement of which in September 2013 promised a new means of propelling GMS connectivity. Some of the AIIB's lending was allocated to GMS projects, such as road improvements in Laos (Xinhuanet 2018). Moreover, China regarded all five subcorridors of the GMS's NSEC as opportunities for advancing the Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor of the BRI (GMS Secretariat and ADB 2018). This, in theory, gave the NSEC access to the resources available for funding BRI projects.

From Liberal Economics to Geoeconomics?

As the principal means by which the state penetrates the lives of its citizens and enforces its will, infrastructure is never only about economics. Infrastructure endows the state with the power to obtain and store information about its citizenry, as well as the power to affect the built environment to deliver services (Mann 1984). The rulers of China and the more powerful Mekong states, like Thailand, have always known this. In the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Thailand pursued railway building to incorporate its outlying provinces, seeking to ‘centralize the country’s communications while the Ministry of the Interior was centralizing its provincial administration’ (Bunnag 1968: 391). In 2001, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin answered critics of the Qinghai–Tibet railway, saying: ‘Some people advised me not to go ahead with this project because it is not commercially viable. I said: “This is a political decision”’ (Amighini 2020: 103).

Control, of course, is paramount to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). And so is economics. The CCP leaders today are set on China becoming a superpower by occupying strategic, structurally advantageous positions in the global economy. China’s aim will be to ensure that it commands the heights of this increasingly integrated economy envisaged through the BRI, including through its production of standards and ownership of intellectual property (Mações 2018: 138).

Observers of international politics argue that with this intent and its economic size, China is ushering in an era of geoeconomics, in which the logic of war is expressed through the tools of commerce (Luttwak 1990: 19). There is, increasingly, the ‘securitisation of economic policy’, in which fewer trade and investment decisions will be taken purely on economic grounds (Wesley 2016: 4). For American observers Blackwill and Harris (2016: 111), China’s size and proximity mean Southeast Asia is one of the first regions where economics will nakedly serve geopolitical goals and where geoeconomics will be the cardinal principle.

Today, China’s BRI drive is accelerating GMS projects—most prominently, in Laos. There is an impressive pace and speed in China’s construction of roads, buildings, and infrastructure. As one Cambodian observer noted, ‘nobody has been able to match China in terms of development intensity, certainty and speed’ (Eng 2020). In 2021, the Laos–China Railway will commence operations and will be one of the most significant BRI projects to be completed in mainland Southeast Asia (Global Times 2021). Linked directly to China’s internal rail network, trains will run 414 kilometres from Boten in northern Laos to the capital, Vientiane, at

speeds between 120 and 160 km/h, passing over 67 bridges and through 10 passenger stations. Meanwhile, a Lao and a Chinese company from Yunnan are currently building a 460-kilometre four-lane expressway between Vientiane and Boten, under a build–operate–transfer model. Laos will hold a 5 per cent stake while the Chinese company holds a 95 per cent share and a 50-year concession (Somsack 2020).

The rapidity and scale of the BRI, as well as the expansion of China’s presence and influence more generally in Laos, are creating nervousness in Vietnam and Thailand—powerful states that have each held their own aspirations for subregional dominance at various times. Le Duan, the principal leader of Vietnam in the postwar era, advised the Soviet Union in 1975:

In peace we want to make Vietnam into the centre of socialism in Southeast Asia. That is the direction of our political and economic policy. Southeast Asia with more than a hundred million people is a large area. In this region, besides Japan, no other country is [as powerful] as Vietnam. (Vu 2019: 28)

Thailand had its own aspirations and was an early mover on regional integration. Thai officials spoke of creating a Thailand-centred region, a *Suvarnabhumi* (‘Golden Land’) in which Thailand helped its neighbours develop and the Thai baht became the regional currency (The New York Times 1989).

But relatively speaking, both Thailand and Vietnam have been shrinking in economic power, making these aspirations increasingly unattainable. In 1990, the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of China’s Guangxi and Yunnan provinces was about one-fifth the size of Thailand’s economy (Thailand, US\$243 billion; Guangxi, US\$27 billion; Yunnan, US\$27 billion, at purchasing power parity, or PPP). By 2017, their combined GDP was roughly equal: Thailand, US\$1,233 billion; Guangxi, US\$575 billion; and Yunnan, US\$465 billion at PPP (GMS Statistical Database 2020). Vietnam has experienced a similar relative decline. In 1990, Guangxi and Yunnan were together smaller than the Vietnamese economy (US\$64 billion, PPP). In 2017,



Cranes, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. PC: (CC) Lex Kravetski, Flickr.com.

they were almost double, with Vietnam at US\$647 billion (GMS Statistical Database 2020). By 2008, a Thai diplomat was prophesising Beijing's rising influence among Thailand's neighbours, as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar turned to China for infrastructure investment, aid, knowledge, and technology (Distagul 2007: 123).

Thailand and Vietnam were not the only states concerned. There was also an external power alarmed by the rapid progress of the GMS corridors most conducive to a China-centred regional economy. This was a state with the wherewithal to do something about it: Japan.

Japan, Geoeconomics, and the GMS

The lineage of the GMS traces back to Japan. It was the brainchild of the ADB, and the ADB has generally reflected the interests of its primary proponents, Japan and the United States. The President of the ADB has always been Japanese, and many

of the ADB's staff have been drawn from Japan's Ministry of Finance (Glassman 2010: 42). This has allowed the transmission of many of Japan's policy preferences.

A cable from the US Embassy in Japan published in 2009 by WikiLeaks provided insight into the content of those policy inclinations. 'Japan's outreach to Mekong countries, and to Southeast Asia in general, is aimed in part to counter what the Japanese perceive as China's growing presence in the region,' the cable noted (Wikileaks 2009). The dispatch further stressed Japanese 'concern about the prospect for these countries to fall within China's "orb of influence"'. Hence, it was not surprising that, when Japan held its first Mekong-Japan foreign ministers' meeting, funding announcements were for the East-West Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridor, but not the NSEC (Yoshimatsu 2010: 97). According to Japanese scholar Hidetaka Yoshimatsu (2010: 99), Japan was seeking to retain influence 'by pushing forward the horizontal economic corridors against China-initiated vertical economic corridors'.

Considering Japan is the most significant funder of infrastructure in Southeast Asia other than China (Jamrisko 2019), this is not without significance. Japanese investment can help Vietnam and Thailand to push ahead with transport corridors other than those running north to Beijing. Furthermore, while weaker economically, Mekong states can still leverage their geography. Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), at the junction of the three GMS economic corridors, is an example (GMS Secretariat 2017). The EEC, comprising high-speed rail linking its Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, and Utapao airports, will develop Thailand's industrial heartland. At the same time, it will link the EEC to the East–West Economic Corridor of the GMS. This will allow Thailand to leverage its geographical location to produce an 'ASEAN sea transportation hub': an east–west arc of development stretching from Vietnam, through Cambodia and Thailand, to Myanmar (UOB Global Economics & Market Research 2017).

From Neoliberalism to Geoeconomics

Integration in the new era of geoeconomics means something different to what it did in the era that is now ending: the era of neoliberal globalisation (Roberts et al. 2019: 655). The so-called Washington Consensus envisaged integration as the free movement of goods, services, and global capital in a global community of democracies. Reducing barriers and borders and increasing the connectivity of both information and borders would realise this vision and would be an unmitigated good for the world's peace and prosperity.

This was the mythology of the GMS. Critics would counter that the GMS was perhaps never as much about integrating the countries of the Mekong and southern China as it was about integrating GMS countries into the East Asian regional economy, connecting nodes like Singapore and Beijing. Of Vietnam's exports between 1998 and 2005, only 6 per cent went to GMS countries, for example, compared with 18 per cent to ASEAN

states overall and 28 per cent to East Asian countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea (Glassman 2010: 51).

As China seeks to build its BRI on the foundations of the GMS, it is meeting an occasionally chilly reception, mostly in the West but also, from time to time, in the Global South. While China's BRI may employ similar rhetoric to that of the US-led liberal trade order, the strictures the Party-State imposes on China's private sector make this claim less credible. The nature of the Party-State, as well as China's ambition to scale the heights of new technologies, has resulted in the revival of an old school of international relations thought: geoeconomics. The fracturing of the global economy, as China's Party-State sees Western states retreat from globalisation, appears to offer China a new route to control and dominance. But Japan and the strong states of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand and Vietnam, have different interests and the capacity to protect them. The GMS will not be buried under the BRI as it rolls out; both will continue to coexist, even if uneasily. ■



Growing Up and Going Global

Chinese Universities in the Belt and Road Initiative

Andrea BRAUN STŘELCOVÁ

This essay looks at the recent phenomenon of Chinese universities ‘going global’ through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). By examining the colonial origins of Chinese universities and contextualising the ongoing tension between the global and local dimensions of China’s higher education system, the author argues that Chinese universities ‘going global’ is part of their process of ‘growing up’, and discusses how this phenomenon interacts with the BRI in CEE, as well as with a wider recalibration of the European Union’s relationship with China.

In the spring of 2019, while working in administration for a Czech university, I attended a conference titled ‘First Belt and Road Physical Education Forum’ in Croatia. Organised jointly by local and Chinese universities, its objective was to explore opportunities in sport science alongside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. What struck me as I arrived at the event, which took place downtown in a large five-star business hotel, were the enormous flags of Croatia, the United States, and the European Union at the entrance. I made my way to the large, buzzing conference room and found a free seat just in time for the Chinese keynote presentation on the selection of contestants for the 2022

First Belt and Road Physical Education Forum, in Croatia. PC: Andrea Braun Střelcová.

Winter Olympics. In a show of Chinese innovative prowess, the speaker lauded the predictive power of biomarkers to assess the athletes' 'probability of success, performance potential, and possibility of injury' for an increased medal count in the upcoming Beijing games. Consequently, two dozen university representatives, mainly from CEE countries and China, pitched their international programs, exchanges, and scholarships, in an almost speed-dating-like manner. At the end of the day, the organisers launched the China–Europe Belt and Road Cooperation Centre in Physical Education by unveiling a trophy in the shape of a golden soccer ball.

In the pre-pandemic days, attending such events was not unusual for university administrators. Gradually, these events ushered in a plethora of new 'Belt and Road centres' started by Chinese universities. Of particular interest to me was the centre set up under the auspices of a Chinese–Croatian partnership at an event that involved mostly universities from post-communist Europe. It demonstrated new trends and characteristics of Chinese universities 'going global'. In this essay, I offer my perspectives on the internationalisation of Chinese higher education both as a researcher and as a practitioner, with a special focus on the BRI in CEE. First, I place the international dimension of several Chinese universities in a historical context. Then, considering the evolving balance between the global and the local in Chinese higher education, I argue that Chinese universities 'going global' is part of their process of 'growing up'. Finally, I discuss how this phenomenon interacts with the implementation of the BRI in CEE, as well as the wider trend within the European Union of recalibrating its relationship with China.

International Origins of Chinese Higher Education

The modern university is a European invention. Higher education institutions across the globe operate on principles derived from the original

model, first put forward by universities in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In China, modern education was based on international foundations (Yang et al. 2019). During the late Qing Dynasty, elements of foreign education systems were adopted as a pragmatic means to strengthen China. Acquiring Western knowledge was encouraged as long as the 'Chinese essence' remained as the cultural core—a philosophy also known as 'Chinese essence, Western application' (中体西用), which remains a central concept in Chinese education to this day, despite its inherent tensions (Cai 2012). In the late days of the empire, new institutions began to flourish and replaced the traditional places of higher learning for scholar-officials, such as the national academy (国子监) (Hayhoe 1996). The new learning bodies were often sponsored by foreign governments or religious societies since actors from Britain, Japan, Germany, France, and the United States carried out humanitarian, educational, or medical assistance, with the ultimate objective to spread political influence and Christianity (Hayhoe 1996: 39).

The Imperial University of Peking was born in such circumstances, in 1898. One of its many Western missionaries-teachers, William A.P. Parsons, also became the university's first head (Hao 2013). In 1917, Cai Yuanpei became the first chancellor of the institution under its new name, Peking University (PKU). Having just returned from Germany, Cai was strongly inspired by what is today Humboldt University, which connected teaching with research, and focused on academic freedom and internal autonomy. He introduced democratic governance and attracted a diverse group of staff (or 'world-class talents', as one would say today). By so doing, he transformed PKU into one of the most influential institutions in China, academically, culturally, and socially.

Another significant educator of the era was Ma Xiangbo, who was also Cai's mentor. The French-educated Jesuit was instrumental in creating another prestigious educational institution, Fudan University. Unlike Cai, Ma was convinced that the French model best suited China's needs (Hayhoe 1996: 44). Due to a leadership conflict, Ma resigned from his post as the president of Aurora (震旦大學), a French univer-

sity in Shanghai (Hayhoe and Lu 1996). He then proceeded to start a new university, with the name of Fudan (复旦), alluding to the revival of Aurora. Hinting at a new dawn, he wanted Fudan to become a liberal place integrating both Western and Chinese thought systems.

Around the same time, in another part of Shanghai, Tongji University was established by the German Government and doctors in 1907. Its name phonetically corresponding to *'deutsche'* in the Shanghai dialect, the project was supported not only by the Chinese and German states, but also by the German private sector and professional associations. Despite the cultural mission, it was hardly devoid of politics in an atmosphere in which 'supposedly pure science, both on [the] German and Chinese side, was integrated into the political framework ... in the guise of culture and science transfer' (Dinçkal and Mares 2012). Tongji was therefore also considered a 'cultural invasion' (Eckart 1989: 143) despite the purported humanitarian, public health, and educational reasons for its founding. Today, Tongji stands as one of the most internationalised Chinese institutions, with several Sino-foreign institutes on its Shanghai campus, and it remains a significant channel especially for Sino-German academic cooperation.

Dancing in a Cage

Let's fast forward to the 2020s, more than seven decades after the establishment of the People's Republic. China has now developed one of the most robust higher education systems in the world. According to the classic sociological theory of education, access to higher education in a particular age cohort in society undergoes a gradual transition from an 'elite' to a 'mass' stage, and eventually becomes 'universal' (Trow 1973). Since 1978, China has leaped from the first to the second phase and is now at the third, universal stage. Education is no longer for the privileged elite; the number of students in bachelor, master, or doctoral programs has grown tremendously. Chinese institutions 'produce' 50,000 doctoral graduates a year (Huang 2019), and this pipeline

also fuels the country's scientific ambitions as the world's second-biggest spender on research and development (R&D) (OECD 2020).

In China, higher education institutions have been under strong state regulation, both with regards to their domestic and international affairs. After 1978, and especially since the 1990s, the Chinese Government has incentivised universities to grow international networks, student and staff mobility, exchanges, research cooperation, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, projects, and joint research and education institutes, both inside China and beyond its shores (Wu and Zha 2018). A few Chinese institutions are now recognised as 'world-class', getting ahead in the worldwide university classifications such as the 2022 *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (Times Higher Education 2021). PKU, Tsinghua, and others now gauge themselves against their global counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. Such an impressive rise undoubtedly is significantly reshaping the global higher education landscape.

In many ways, the expansion of higher education in China reflects the sector's *global* developments. In the twenty-first century, successful universities are expected to contribute to national economic growth by building a knowledge-based society. Consequently, their relationships with the private sector, the government, and civil society have profoundly changed. In line with the sector's marketisation or 'academic capitalism', universities increasingly adopt a management style similar to that of private corporations (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). Their public funding is never sufficient, so they are constantly hard-pressed to raise money from other sources. Universities to some extent replicate each other's behaviour, in a mixture of both cooperation and competition for students, staff, funding, or positions in global rankings. All these stimulate an increase in non-academic staff in academia: administrators, managers, and coordinators. Along with these changes, internationalisation—a process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, function, and delivery of higher education (Knight 2008)—has emerged as another global phenomenon.

Each global trend develops its local subspecies, and the balance between the global and the local is particularly delicate in China. Since a strong state regulation has always been a feature of higher education, Chinese universities ‘dance in a cage’ to strike a balance between the national policies and institutional autonomy (Yang et al. 2007). They are adopting Western elements but imbuing them with local features: the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the more traditional (Confucian-scholarly) logic. Yet, universities function also in the global academic field, which is a semi-autonomous, self-referencing system with its own norms set by the standards of the academic profession (Marginson 2021). As such, they are deeply infused by international practices in terms of their organisational divisions (into schools, institutes, and departments) and performance indicators (such as research excellence, funding track record, or publication output). As a result, China’s higher education is rigidly controlled by the Party-State, while coexisting with the sector’s international underpinnings (Huang 2019). The universities’ double governance structure means it is not the university president, but the Party committee and the secretary, who preside over political affairs, and the CCP is firmly nested within the university’s administration (Huang 2017). This characteristic, although shared with former and contemporary communist countries, is easily overlooked by foreign researchers and administrators. They rarely meet CCP officials when visiting a Chinese university, and seldom are briefed on university management in China.

The more recent phenomenon of Chinese universities ‘going global’ is an extension of these developments. China—in particular, its top-tier universities, concentrated in several Chinese cities—has become a significant node in the global flow of people and knowledge. This happens in an environment in which the domestic ideological control over higher education is increasing—a trend that is likely to continue with Xi Jinping at the helm. Therefore, Western countries ask questions regarding the potential ethical, political, or national security implications of their China-related academic partnerships. The European Union is taking steps to limit areas of research cooperation between Euro-

pean and Chinese institutes, after it labelled China ‘a strategic partner and a systemic rival’ back in 2019. European policymakers have emphasised the need for research and educational exchanges, but also acknowledged the difficulties arising from the clash of interests and values between China and Europe. Given the link between Chinese science and its national objectives, articulated in key policy documents such as the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, the unease is most tangible in cutting-edge science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) fields such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing, but also in social sciences. Naturally, each European country has a different perception of the level of risk when working with China, and their capacities to deal with such risk also vary. For example, the German Ministry of Education and Research has stressed the need to build ‘China competencies’ and earmarked funding to support domestic China expertise. But the smaller, less wealthy countries in CEE often do not have the necessary resources—human or financial—to do the same.

‘Serving the BRI’

Using Jeremy Garlick’s (2019: 159) conceptualisation of the BRI as ‘an ideational as well as material construct within which an increasingly complex network of institutional practices take[s] shape and intersect[s]’, let us take a glimpse at the BRI’s implications for universities in the CEE. China perceives CEE under the BRI framework as a homogeneous group of post-communist countries that are trying to catch up with the West (Garlick 2019). Unlike some countries in the West, where universities have been catering to incoming Chinese students for decades and have established entire adjacent industries, CEE universities were latecomers, overlooking (and overlooked by) China in higher education. After all, they have been scarcely visible in the global university rankings; located in small countries or linguistic regions of marginal interest to China, they do not possess as much economic or cultural capital as their Western counterparts. Therefore, they only began to be considered as

interesting to engage with for Chinese universities relatively recently, and the rollout of the BRI has played an important role in the process.

Chinese higher education has used the BRI to promote international cooperation in the sector and vice versa (d’Hooghe 2021). In fact, Chinese universities are expected to *serve* the BRI proactively (Gao 2020: 21). New proposals are encouraged by government policies, such as the Chinese Ministry of Education’s BRI 2016 ‘Action Plan’ (Ministry of Education 2016). The financing of BRI projects—including research and higher education centres—is tied to China’s political agenda and guided by the country’s geopolitical aspirations rather than serious research questions (van der Wende et al. 2020: 29).

What Vangeli (2018: 679) observed as ‘ritualistic repetition’ of narratives such as win-win cooperation and common destiny, which, over time, have been ‘internalised as legitimate principles’ in China–CEE think tank cooperation, I witnessed unfolding in higher education. As a university administrator, I suddenly saw cooperation increasing rapidly from a base of next to zero. Various new initiatives were proposed by the Chinese universities themselves, containing phrases such as ‘Belt and Road’ and ‘Silk Road’. Such words became common additions to the names of new university alliances, partnerships, scholarships schemes, cooperative centres, master’s degrees, as well as language or area studies programs. Ten years ago, two Czech-language undergraduate programs existed in China; in 2019, there were nine (Zídková 2019). These programs were established to provide training for several hundred students in Czech studies every year. I was thankful for all initiatives that increased the knowledge about my home country in China. Nonetheless, I could see that our Chinese partner universities were answering a political call rather than a genuine societal need, and I wondered whether creating new degrees tailored to top-down incentives would be enough to ensure the programs’ quality and sustainability.

In the CEE countries themselves, the public response to the emerging presence of China has ranged from enthusiasm to angst. The recent proposal by Fudan University to open a branch



Promotional poster of Tongji University. PC: Andrea Braun Střelcová.

in Budapest—the first Chinese offshore campus in Europe—presents us with a clear instance of this clash. On the one hand, the idea was strongly supported by the Hungarian Government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a hallmark of Chinese–Hungarian strategic partnerships, highlighting the project’s potential educational and financial benefits. On the other hand, the idea of a Chinese university (albeit one of the most liberal ones) setting up in the country triggered a negative response on other parts of the political spectrum, as well as much of the public. The criticism went in two main directions. First, concerns were raised about the project’s transparency and the feasibility of its financing model. Second, anxieties emerged about the potential influence of the CCP. As of

October 2021, the liberal Mayor of Budapest, a city of 1.8 million, including 30,000 Chinese, triggered a request for a referendum on the project, delaying further implementation.

Symbiosis of the BRI and Higher Education

Chinese universities have used the BRI to expand their international exposure, including to places previously less travelled, such as the CEE countries. It has been a mutually beneficial relationship since the Chinese state is expecting its higher education institutions to contribute to the BRI's geopolitical objectives. In the West, the development has generated concerns since it is evident that even in noble causes such as education, a complex set of other interests is involved. The unease is justified also in light of China's overall political trend, which is becoming increasingly inward-looking. Amid the heightened political tensions, the European Union and member countries such as Germany are recalibrating their positions on cooperation with Chinese universities. At the same time, however, they also stress the need for such cooperation, especially in areas of global concern such as climate change, and emphasise the urgency of increasing general knowledge about China, without which managing a more reciprocal relationship with the country will not be possible.

Based on my observations in Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, this process has its peculiarities in CEE. The CEE countries—at least those who are members of the European Union—respond to what is happening in Europe and in China from a different position than their Western European counterparts. Unlike the latter, the former's education and research budgets are smaller, as is the volume of their exchanges with China; most CEE universities have not worked with China for decades. Therefore, for them, the BRI is a window of opportunity to create links to China and develop experience of teaching Chinese students and working with Chinese universities.

Given China's impressive growth in higher education and research, the country's universities will continue to expand their footprints in the world. Any assessment of the BRI's implications for higher education can so far be only preliminary, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to constrain development in this area. However, even if concerns about the risks of working with Chinese institutions are valid, to limit such exchange is hardly the right answer to move forward. Higher education as a field is built on international exchange and the flow of people, knowledge, and ideas. Universities exemplify some of the most globalised institutions in the world and, in this way, Chinese institutions going global is a natural next step in their development. Still, it is wise to keep in mind that their international activities are, primarily, aimed at strengthening their own capacity and advancing China's interests. Higher education is embedded in national frameworks and, once it travels abroad, it can also become an instrument of foreign policy. This is evident in the colonial heritage of some of the first Chinese universities. It is still true today, when those same universities—now confident and affluent—go out from China into the world, under the auspices of the BRI. ■

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FORUM



PC: (CC) Chiara Stevani.

Chinese Feminism under (Self-)Censorship

Practice and Knowledge Production

ZENG Jinyan

This collection of six essays is developed from a webinar titled ‘(Self-)Censorship, Social Activism, and Chinese Feminist Scholarship’, which was held on 10 July 2020. Chinese feminism today faces increasing pressure for (self-)censorship at both domestic and international levels, on issues of social activism, the politics of identity, and the politics of representation. The webinar aimed to explore the problem of how to deal with the impact of ideological conflicts between China and the West, and to develop strategies for dealing with local and international (self-)censorship of Chinese feminism. Meanwhile, we hoped to update our understandings of ‘what Chinese feminism is’ from conceptual, historical, organisational, and activist perspectives.

Some of the participants—Ye Haiyan (an online writer who advocates for sexual liberation and the rights of sex-workers, women, and, in particular, children), Xianzi (a young feminist and survivor of sexual harassment), Feng Yuan (an important women’s rights and gender equality activist and former professor of women’s studies), the historians and socially engaged scholars Wang Zheng and Dušica Ristivojević, and Huang Yun (a scholar of political philosophy)—respond here to three questions that were raised during the webinar:

How do you see yourself as a Chinese feminist activist/scholar?

Have you experienced or studied local and international (self-)censorship in your activism or work? If yes: 1) How do you deal with it? What kind of strategies do you use

in your activism or work? And 2) What are your research findings and recommendations regarding (self-)censorship and Chinese feminism?

How should Chinese feminism be represented? What are the differences between Chinese and non-Chinese forms of communication and discourse on feminism?

Censorship presents itself as a form of monopoly and hegemony over discourse and practice—against feminism in general, and within the feminist community as well. Both repressive powers and resistance struggles use (self-)censorship as a strategy to advance their own agendas. This complexity of (self-)censorship requires feminists to be aware of the mechanisms that reproduce power and the collusion of repressive powers in our own feminist knowledge production and practices. The experiences of all the participants invite us to think about why individual women, #MeToo activism, or feminism in general are targeted in China. Considering the closure of independent film festivals, village library projects, and various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in 2012 (Zeng 2016b), as well as the detention in 2015 of the ‘Feminist Five’, I used to argue that censorship practices are more tolerant of individual critique than of (potential) collective expression or action (King et al. 2013; Karl et al. 2015). Feminism has shown the potential to become a leading force in activist networking in China’s fragmented world of social activism over the past decade. This has resulted in it being placed at the front line of suppression, accused of aiding foreign powers and of acting as a subversive force (discussed in Wang Zheng’s and Huang Yun’s essays; see also Zeng 2016b). My own gender-specific explanation of state censorship is that women’s bodies are perceived as part of the field of socioeconomic production—as labourers (both in workspaces and as dominated labour in the domestic sphere), as agents of reproduction, and as consumers. As a result, censoring, filtering, and redirecting women’s bodies, desires, and subjectivities are at the centre of China’s political and social engineering agenda, regardless of its socialist rationale or the exploit-

ative and capitalist nature of the market economy in the wave of Confucian revival (Greenhalgh 2005, 2008, 2010; Rofel 2007; Xiao 2014; Ho et al. 2018).

In this collection, each response provides a unique and intimate personal account (sometimes with contradictory perspectives) of the experience of (self-)censorship in relation to Chinese feminism. Each represents the author's specific reflections and strategies for advancing feminist practice and scholarship. The combination of empirical testimony, ideas, and theoretical thinking from activists and scholars found here highlights the self as method and an approach to knowledge production for feminist studies based on lived experiences.

Wang Zheng, a professor of modern Chinese history at the University of Michigan, situates her experiences in both temporal (1989–2020) and spatial (China–US/global) dimensions, and reflects on her identity as a 'diaspora activist'. In this brief biographical essay, Wang recalls that she publicly called herself a feminist (女权主义者) in Chinese settings when others called themselves 'women researchers' or 'women's work cadres'. Wang was the leading figure in launching women's and gender studies in higher education in China in the 1990s. She highlights self-censorship as a strategy for feminist networking in China while also noting that this strategy isolates and limits feminist work by detaching it from politically 'sensitive' issues, such as the labour movement and the defence of human rights (Wang 2010; see also Yu 2015). Wang's identities as a diasporic Chinese activist and a professor at a prestigious US university have mediated the critical translation of feminism (for instance, on the question of the terminology of 'class' versus that of 'stratification') in both directions between China and the English-speaking world. Multiple power dynamics within feminist translation projects and activism are described in her analysis. In particular, Wang critiques the use of 'othering' language to devalue others in discussions of the complexity of feminist activism and feminist knowledge production in an authoritarian political context. The problem of 'othering' invites us to consider further how to form feminist solidarities at both local and international levels, and within the feminist community and beyond. Recently, Wang launched the website

Chinese Feminism (女权学论) to create an online space for Chinese feminism in the context of the tightening political control of civil society that is occurring in China.

The activist Ye Haiyan, also known as Hooligan Sparrow, became a popular and controversial online writer in the 2000s. She recounts her feminist experiences and activism from the perspective of female sexual liberation. She shares her experiences of encountering censorship and violence because of her nude photos and discusses understanding women as the targets of social discipline, violence, and punishment. In Ye's view, she, a liberated woman, has been censored by both established powers and the public because of her gender, class identity, lack of qualifications (for speaking out), and the 'value' of her discourse. Censorship has weakened Ye's voice. To break through that censorship, Ye has also adopted self-censorship as a strategy, with a kind of bottom line based on 'speaking out according to common sense'. Meanwhile, she also describes how representing herself in terms of a subaltern social status has operated as a strategy to protect her from mass violence. Her experiences show us how a feminist activist from the grassroots or from 'among the people' (民间, *minjian*), and with an anti-elitist standpoint, can break through the hegemony of discourse by speaking out using online publishing (of text, audio, and visual materials), street performance, and showing the process of one woman's liberation of herself (for a detailed discussion of Ye's work, see Wang 2016; Zeng 2016a; on the practice and meaning of *minjian* 'speaking out', see Veg 2019).

When she was an intern in documentary journalism at *China Central Television (CCTV)*, the young feminist Xianzi accused host Zhu Jun of sexual harassment. Her contribution describes how the state endorsed Zhu Jun for its own sake (and later unendorsed him), and how the market-based mass media reported her and other similar cases. Such reportage is not simply about 'public interest', but also brings commercial benefits, in terms of online traffic, to these media companies. I would like to underline this unique perspective on the media from Xianzi, who is both a media practitioner and a feminist activist. The combination of market forces and the power of tradi-

tional culture has driven the spectacle of sexual violence and #MeToo cases in both mass and social media discourses, thus complicating, twisting, and censoring feminist efforts. In addition, Xianzi describes how, while #MeToo is a last resort for desperate survivors of sexual violence—due to the lack of normalised channels through which to pursue justice—supporters work tirelessly and anonymously to support survivors, who in some cases display complicated traumatic responses to their experiences. Xianzi notes how the members of her feminist online network actively cooperate with each other and survivors and how they have used encrypted software (for example, Signal) for campaign communication. Meanwhile, the network is careful to avoid targeting state authorities (the police and university administrators, for instance) and to focus its efforts on the sexual violators and rape culture. Discussing factional debates about feminism on Chinese social media and the challenges of dealing with the activist-survivor relationship, Xianzi asks what kind of feminist solidarity we should forge and seeks to develop a non-exclusive attitude to dealing with the relationship between feminist activists and survivors of sexual violence.

As one of the earliest feminist activists in China, the journalist, former scholar, and NGO founder Feng Yuan notes that anti-sexual harassment activism has achieved great progress in China thanks to the ‘coming out’ of survivors, the development of support networks, and the improvements in the political and social environments in which it operates (legal definitions of sexual harassment, cases going through legal processes, increasing media reportage, and mutually evolving discourses) (for a more comprehensive review of the anti-sexual harassment movement in China, see Feng 2019). Indeed, even while the Chinese Government refuses to acknowledge the claims of ‘radical’ feminist activism, it integrates legislative and policy recommendations from feminist voices. In contrast to the strategy used by feminists of avoiding ‘politically sensitive’ issues as a form of (self-)censorship, rendering anti-sexual harassment activism politically sensitive is a strategy used by censors and violators to silence anti-sexual

harassment voices. Thus, Feng promotes a ‘desensitising’ approach to anti-sexual harassment work, to represent women’s subjectivities, and to achieve feminist goals in practice.

Huang Yun’s choice of career as a scholar of political philosophy is at least partially a result of (self-)censorship, while at the same time, negotiating the terrain of (self-)censorship is essential to her career survival in China. Huang describes herself as ‘intervening in present reality by means of taking a step back to do research and developing scholarly reflection as an activist’ (以后退一步的研究介入当下的现实, 作为行动者展开学术思考). Her involvement in #MeToo activism at Peking University in 2018 resulted in Huang being forced to quit her job. In Huang’s view, women’s rights and feminism are largely ignored in the discipline of political philosophy. Thus, in thinking about liberalism, she turns to the field of feminism and everyday life as an entry point to shaking the fundamental paradigm of male-centred domination. Huang develops a contextualised liberal feminism for China, while critiquing Chinese forms of Marxism and postmodernism, both of which have strong connections to, or have identified themselves with, the Chinese state. This contextualised liberal feminism—based on Amartya Sen’s and Martha C. Nussbaum’s studies of poor Indian women—seeks to integrate gender issues, human rights discourses, and theories of justice to develop a Chinese version of the capability approach.

Dušica Ristivojević, a researcher in modern Chinese history born in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in what is today Serbia, describes her personal and research experiences from the perspective of post-socialism in the global community. She interprets different levels of (self-)censorship in feminism through the word ‘silence’—that is, ‘the act of not publicly articulating and displaying our thoughts, feelings, and actions’. Such silence results from pressures both within China (the risk of endangering research informants or losing collaborators because of critical feminist inquiries, on the issue of Xinjiang, for example) and in the international academic community (accusations of being a ‘Chinese nationalist’ for holding the view that China’s subjectivity in international

politics is framed exclusively in terms of its human rights record). Ristivojević keeps silent until she can formulate a position that is critical of *both* Western neo-imperialism and Cold War logic and rhetoric, on the one hand, *and* China's nationalist, xenophobic, neo-imperialist discourses and practices on the other. Her decision to adopt this standpoint reflects a desire to investigate critical feminist thought and practice as though she is embedded in Chinese society rather than being a 'Western' or 'academic' observer, even though Ristivojević self-identifies as an 'outsider' to Chinese feminism. Somehow, she must find an alternative method—to not publish her research on women's and regional activism in China to protect those within it from political danger, until a safer situation arises. Some of Ristivojević's experiences are also felt more generally among early-career Sinologists and critical China scholars.

The individual and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards (self-)censorship found here are also useful for us to explore the issue of authenticity, in philosophy and in the arts, in feminist understandings of self (including that of activists, research informants, and researchers), in practice, and in knowledge production in China. This authenticity in representing Chinese feminism contrasts with the Chinese Marxist representation of women and feminism, which occurs in terms of a grand narrative of the representation of class in an epic movement, and their determination by the socioeconomic foundation and historical inevitability. What we try to bring out in this collection about the representation of Chinese feminism is discursive, individual, and disruptive in terms of non-totalising contingency. Meanwhile, interpretative dichotomies found in some Western scholarship—such as victim/survivor, oppression/resistance, or 'big brother' versus 'small potato turned heroine'—have simplified the diversity and complexity of Chinese feminism in conditions of (self-)censorship, and feminist meaning-making in Chinese discussions of intersectionality (for more discussions of Chinese intersectionality, see Wang 2017; Greenhalgh and Wang 2019). The question of authenticity might guide us through ideological conflicts and political whirlpools, as well as

tensions between theory and practice within the existing constraints. Thus, authenticity, which describes a way of representing Chinese feminism, leads us faithfully towards feminist solidarity and a feminist future. ■



(Self-)Censorship and Chinese Feminist Networking in a Global Perspective

Faces. PC: (CC) Tyler
Lowmiller.

WANG Zheng

In this essay, I will examine the relationship between the Chinese feminist movement and self-censorship in its temporal and spatial dimensions. Temporally, my analysis will take into account the period from 1989 up to the time of writing in July 2020. This temporal frame covers the Chinese political vicissitudes from the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989 to the passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020—three decades that have also witnessed my conscious engagement in feminist activities in China and beyond. Regardless of whether or not individual feminists have paid attention to politics, every step of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement has been embedded in this political ecology and, for one reason or another, all people involved have

experienced some degree of self-censorship. Here, I will offer a brief summary of the political control and self-censorship in this particular period of Chinese history.

Although we all live in the same time frame, we are all situated in different spaces. There are differences between living at home and abroad; regional differences in China; differences between, in, and outside the official system; and differences among diverse social positions. Differences in geographical and social locations condition our experiences, concerns, and feminist actions and strategies in the same historical process. Therefore, my summary necessarily only expresses my experiences and concerns derived from my specific spatial locations over the years.

A Brief Review of Self-Censorship in My Personal Experience

The Chinese Society for Women's Studies (海外中华妇女学会, CSWS) was founded in the summer of 1989, right after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) brutally suppressed the student movement in China. At that time, I was a PhD student at the University of California, Davis, and had returned to Beijing to participate in the student movement because of my passion for China's political reforms. Exactly because of that experience, I saw clearly that the space for promoting political reform in China was completely sealed off after 4 June and we overseas Chinese students had an obligation to organise meaningful political activities to continue the struggle that had been violently suppressed in China. In particular, through my close interaction with male prodemocracy activists in 1989, I realised that these supposed fighters for democracy were actually full of patriarchal ideas and deeply saturated in Chinese hierarchical power relations, with no capacity for self-reflection.

From my perspective as a PhD student researching the history of modern China, I saw no sign of progress among the young male intellectuals from the men in the early CCP in terms of their masculinist mindsets. It was clear to me that, at the end of the twentieth century, Chinese feminists should no longer regard male intellectuals as natural leaders, but instead should begin an independent feminist movement articulating critical feminist voices as a way to participate in China's political, social, and cultural transformations. At that time, I had not yet read the sharp criticism by the late Qing feminist He Yinzheng of her contemporary male elites, but from historical research and personal experience, I realised that eradicating China's patriarchal foundation would be critical to developing political democracy in China. In this sense, the founding of the CSWS, for me, was an opportunity to utilise my own spatial advantage to break domestic political constraints in China as well as to materialise my feminist vision of political transformation in the country.

This conscious rejection of political control changed, however, once the geographical scene changed. In 1993, the CSWS organised a two-week feminist workshop in collaboration with scholars at Tianjin Normal University. We imposed strong self-censorship on ourselves because we did not have a clear sense of how severe political taboos were in China after 4 June. I dared not directly comment on domestic issues, but only introduced the history of the American feminist movement and the core concepts of feminism and gender in a very circumspect way. However, in our exchanges with scholars and officials from the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), we found there was actually a lot of room for discussion, especially in private settings. Those of us studying in the United States were the ones constrained by our overseas identities. We were afraid we would be labelled 'Western bourgeois feminists'. In fact, Chinese women researchers who participated in the workshop did not share our worries. Rather, they expressed great interest in the development of various feminist thought and theories in the world. This made me see that we could translate feminist works as a way to expand the space for feminist discourse in China. At the same time, I also began to reflect on my self-censorship and to consciously pay attention to the feasibility of breaking political taboos in different social spaces and on different fronts.

In my personal actions, I have consciously challenged taboos in two aspects. First, in a minor manner, I have been proudly labelling myself a 'feminist' (女权主义) in various public settings in China, staging individual performances to counter the mainstream discourse that stigmatises and demonises feminism. I was probably the first person to 'come out' as a feminist at a time when feminists in China generally called themselves 'women researchers' (妇女研究者) or 'women-work cadres' (妇女工作干部). Second, I collaborated with scholars in China to launch the development of women's and gender studies in Chinese higher education. In my view, colleges and universities could be institutional spaces in which to achieve breakthroughs—that is, for us to

create feminist academic fields and build a feminist discourse, and to transform patriarchal power relations through feminist knowledge production.

The degree of political control has fluctuated over the past three decades. International sanctions after the brutal crackdown on the student movement in 1989 made the Chinese Government desperate to find an entry point to return to the global community. The United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 presented such an opportunity. This UN-sponsored conference also ushered in a forum for nongovernmental organisations (NGOs)—a venue open to women’s NGOs from all over the world. The UN conference and the NGO forum were the result of decades of operations by global feminists. Feminists within the official Chinese system swiftly seized this historic opportunity to mobilise public opinion for Chinese women’s NGOs to participate in the forum, and in this way gained political legitimacy for Chinese NGOs after 1989.

The legitimate social space for women’s NGOs was soon expanded by other social movements in the decade following the UN Conference on Women. It was only in this historical setting—as the slogans ‘connecting the rails with the world’ (与世界接轨) and ‘connecting the rails with the international women’s movement’ (与国际妇女运动接轨) were widely circulating in the official media—that the CSWS, an overseas Chinese feminist organisation, was able to carry out feminist activities in China. And my work to promote the development of women’s and gender studies in China was possible also because of the political space for NGO activism that existed for a while following the UN Conference on Women.

Self-Censorship within the Feminist Movement

The political space in the first decade following the UN Conference on Women was nonetheless limited. I quickly learned from my collaborators in China which areas or issues were taboo. There was no need for police intervention; the organisers of feminist activities within the system knew

intimately where the boundaries were drawn and took the initiative to self-censor and make sure no activities crossed the line. Having gained space for women’s NGO activities, every Chinese feminist activist knew that labour movement and human rights issues were taboo. To protect the space for feminist activities, feminist NGO organisers would consciously stay within the political boundaries and not touch these ‘sensitive issues’. In the initial stage of collaborations with scholars in China, I went along with this type of self-censorship out of strategic considerations as I fully understood the difficulty of opening up a space for feminist activities, as well as the various practical considerations needed to survive within the system. But, after a period of observing, I saw the limitations of such strategies and their negative effects on the feminist movement. The following passage is an excerpt from an article I wrote in 2006 reflecting on Chinese feminist NGOs in the decade after the Fourth World Conference on Women:

To critically examine Chinese feminist NGO activism, it is necessary to ask not only what has been accomplished by feminist activists but also what has been neglected or omitted. In sharp contrast to transnational feminist emphasis on multiple systems of oppression and intersectionality of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, the absence of ‘class’ in Chinese feminist articulation is glaring. The rapid ascendance of the analytical category ‘gender’ is, in a sense, at the expense of erasing the analytical category ‘class’ in China. Feminists in China have voraciously embraced gender exactly at the moment when the term ‘class’ has turned into a new political taboo ... In the post-Mao market economy, the state, with complicit help from elite intellectuals, has conveniently abandoned Marxist class analysis in the aftermath of critiquing the Maoist definition of class. Gone also were the previous socialist principles of socialist justice and equality. In their place we have witnessed the rise of neo-liberalism and stark class polarization over the past two decades. And the state has placed severe surveillance on spontaneous

organizational activities around class issues. However, class and gender often intersect, resulting in large female populations with little resources both in urban and rural societies. In this context, the ascendance and centrality of 'gender' in the past decade functions both as a feminist tactic to promote the value of social justice against a dominant social Darwinist ideology amid rampant capitalism and a feminist evasion of sensitive issues like class ...

A focus on gender could, theoretically, include class issues as well. And feminist projects generally are already conceptually oriented towards the disadvantaged and marginalized, including laid-off women workers, migrant workers, and domestic helpers. However, without the freedom to articulate a clear critical framework that addresses multiple hierarchies and inequalities, Chinese feminists run the risk of being co-opted by the state. Their success in engaging the state via the official [Women's Federation] and their discursive legitimacy to pursue gender equality as part of full modernity have been made possible largely because most feminists consciously operate within the parameters of the current political culture ... Tactful cautiousness is sometimes hard to separate from a desire to be accepted by the official system.

Now that another decade has passed, it is clear to me that the range of regulated activities undertaken by the previous generation of feminists out of their tactful concerns has gradually become the perception of what feminism is about among many young Chinese feminists. It appears that feminist activities can focus only on fighting for women's equal rights, while challenging and criticising the male-dominated political structure, political ideology, and economic systems have nothing to do with feminism. This phenomenon is precisely the result of political taboos and the long-term consequence of Chinese feminist self-censorship. I worry that the decades-long political bondage may see practitioners accept taboos as the norm, confine their thinking to the limits of the state's permission,

and lose the ability to question taboos, and the courage to challenge disciplinary mechanisms. It is absolutely necessary for every Chinese feminist to consciously analyse the effects of political control at a conceptual level and to reflexively examine manifestations of our own self-censorship so as to gain the ability to reject the dictator's mental foot-binding, which is practised on a daily basis. Among generations of Chinese feminists there have always been wise and brave warriors who soberly rejected spiritual and intellectual bondage. I have deep respect for them and, because of their existence, I always have confidence in the future of Chinese feminism.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Being a Diaspora Activist

My teaching position at the University of Michigan allows me to be financially free of the control of the official system in China. Conducting feminist activism in China, I am far less concerned about possible punishment for breaking political taboos than are my collaborators, who worry about being able to continue making a living in China. What concerns me most is whether my actions will negatively impact on my collaborators. In the two decades prior to Xi Jinping's rise to power and the subsequent deterioration of China's political climate, Chinese universities had encouraged scholarly exchange with academic institutions abroad and my position at the University of Michigan was a plus for my academic feminist activism. Before the ascendance of the discourse of 'hostile foreign forces' (境外敌对势力), and when the official slogan 'connecting the rails with the world' still had currency, a scholar from a prestigious university in the United States with grants was welcomed, even though Chinese university administrators did not care about feminist scholarship. Deliberately breaking political taboos in the relatively 'free' academic space, I ran many seminars and workshops to introduce young faculty and graduate students in Chinese universities to femi-

nist texts critical of global capitalism and neoliberalism, highlighting feminist analyses of multiple oppressive systems and the intersection of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other power relations. Introducing and translating feminist texts became my way of ‘smuggling’ critical concepts such as ‘class’ into Chinese academia, where a whole generation of young scholars had not encountered the Marxist term ‘class’ (阶级), being taught only about the Weberian concept of ‘stratification’ (阶层).

When proofreading translated texts by scholars in China, I had to repeatedly correct their Chinese rendition of ‘class’ in the original English feminist texts into ‘stratification’. The erasure of ‘class’ as a critical concept was a material reality in a state where Chinese intellectuals were largely complicit in the statist scheme. I prepared participants in my seminars and workshops for my ‘hearsays’ by emphasising that my goal was to offer what they normally were unable to get in China. I advocated creating a no-taboo academic space in which to learn critical thinking and analytical tools of feminism, and to freely discuss issues related to Chinese politics and society. My goal has been to form a feminist critical discourse that challenges the dominant neoliberal and social Darwinist discourse in China and hopefully shapes the emergence of a new type of feminist subjectivity.

Aside from working in China’s higher education system to promote feminist curriculum transformation, my scholarly research is also part of my feminist action. My two English monographs excavate the rich heritage of Chinese feminism. The purpose of producing these history books was to construct a genealogy of Chinese feminism so that younger generations may be inspired by their brave and intelligent feminist predecessors, learn from their insights and lessons, and carry forward their unfinished struggles. Feminist historical knowledge production also challenges mainstream history and master narratives.

Some young feminists in China intend to draw a line between academic and activist groups; I do not know into which category they would put me. I have always been in universities in the United States and China, and the institution of

higher education is where I engage in feminist action. Those who try to use the term ‘academic’ to devalue people engaged in feminist knowledge production and the dissemination of feminist knowledge need to read some of Foucault’s expositions on knowledge production to understand the close relationship between feminist knowledge production and feminist social, cultural, and political transformations. Young Chinese feminists urgently need to learn critical analytical frameworks to see through the various myths created by the dominant discourse so as not to be controlled by the ruling power.

Of course, there are also elite scholars who use feminist academic theories as a tool to climb the social ladder. For them, practising what they preach is not their concern. There are such people in all countries, let alone the Chinese intellectuals who are under the double trap of carrot and stick. But such people should not be seen as representative of scholars who have been working tirelessly in feminist academic settings and classrooms. Exactly because of feminist scholars’ hard work, feminist theories and critical concepts have slowly entered Chinese universities and academic circles. Compared with my generation, many young Chinese students today have some knowledge of critical feminist concepts—way more than we had when we were young.

I would also like to emphasise that feminists are not supposed to adopt devaluing ‘othering’ schemes. Feminist movements worldwide always involve diverse groups of people without a centre, and with no unified leadership under an authoritative figure. The development of a movement on the margin of society depends on every practitioner respecting other people in different social positions and engaging in various practices to the best of their ability and conditioned by their environment. It is the sum of each individual’s initiative and creative practice that promises to make the movement a driving force for social change. Chinese feminists who, under tight political control and surveillance, lack open channels for communication and free space for discussion and debate often have little understanding of the efforts of other feminists. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid acting

on assumptions rather than on facts so as not to manufacture fractures in feminist communities in an already intense political environment.

My cross-cultural identity also puts me in a position of adversity. In the second decade following the UN women's conference, the political trend of the Chinese Party-State shifted from 'connecting the rails with international standards' to 'warning against hostile foreign forces'. One social movement after another was suppressed on charges of colluding with 'hostile foreign forces'. In 2017, this political stick finally officially hit feminism. The following passage is an excerpt from an official speech by the ACWF's top leader, Song Xiuyan, that year:

At present, our Party is uniting and leading the whole Party and the people to a decisive victory over the building of a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way. Western hostile forces are stepping up their Westernisation and dividing strategy against China. They attack the Marxist theory on women and our fundamental state policy of equality between men and women, and actively sell Western 'feminism' and 'feminist supremacy'. Some under the banner of so-called 'rights protection', 'poverty alleviation', and 'charity', directly intervene in China's women's affairs in an attempt to find and open gaps in the women's field.

To me, a historian of modern China, this political stick of 'Western hostile forces' is no different from the 'class struggle' stick of the Mao era. As long as the political power struggle needs it, the opponent can be labelled a 'capitalist roader', 'party traitor', 'bourgeois academic authority', 'revisionist', 'collaborator with foreign countries', and so on. Various framings could be imposed on someone for the purpose of beating the opponent dead for fear they might threaten their power. All these schemes have nothing to do with the welfare of the people. Now, because I work at an American university and my feminist knowledge production and cultural transformation activities take place in China, I will be classified as an 'overseas hostile force'. In 2018, in a public speech in China, I specifically

made a critical association between Mao Zedong's scheme of class struggle and the current discursive scheme of invoking the term 'hostile foreign forces' while revisiting the mistakes the CCP has made in history. The plain-clothes police present at my lecture reported me to the top administrator of the university. A feminist colleague commented: 'Just as they wanted to frame you as an overseas hostile force, you would criticise them publicly. Of course, they are angry.' Such ridiculous and sad situations are a reality that feminist scholars living abroad must now face.

In fact, a similar version of this phrase was first used against feminists after the crackdown on the Feminist Five in 2015. At that time, I wrote a short piece entitled 'What Is a Foreign Political Force?' to expose the insidious implications of this political discourse. The spatial position I occupy and the historical knowledge I possess allow me to openly reject the political suppression of feminism. I also call on all readers who are concerned about the development of feminism in China to expose and reject any political stigma and framing of feminism according to the conditions permitted by one's specific location. We should prevent ourselves from becoming victims of political persecution and be wary of anyone who may become a conspirator in the process of political framing. With the rapid changes in geopolitical terrain today, my diaspora identity will further complicate my transnational feminist practices, but it is all the more urgent to continue the struggle.

Creating a Cyber Space for Transnational Chinese Feminist Networking

Confronting drastically compressed political space and increased surveillance in China, a group of feminist scholars at home and abroad has created a new website, chinesefeminism.org, which provides a digital forum as well as an archive. Interested people may look for updates on Chinese feminist activities, recent feminist analyses of ongoing

political, social, and cultural events, and academic resources that are useful to feminist academics as well as to a general readership interested in feminist scholarship and histories. The website also provides a space for feminists to articulate critical voices without self-censorship. Authors have the option to remain anonymous by using pen-names. Organising various sections for the website, Chinese feminists situated in diverse transnational locations are able to form a virtual network for feminist action as well as for supporting one another in a precarious political moment. The organisers are considering adding English versions of the major Chinese texts on the website to inform the Anglophone world of the difficult battles brave Chinese feminists are fighting in this critical historical juncture. The website illustrates vividly how Chinese feminists are not succumbing to adversity but are instead actively exploring various spaces and creating new venues to advance the feminist cause. ■

Sexuality, Feminism, Censorship

YE Haiyan

My own awakening began with the awakening of my awareness of sexual rights. The instinctive demands of sexuality drove my desire for individual rights. The most powerful motivation behind wanting to know about and understand rights was my desire to be able to have sex with dignity—to be respected during and after sex.

I went through a divorce when I was very young, just when my sexual desire was at its strongest. It was a very brutal affair, but there are horny men all over the place. However, the repression of female sexuality by this male-dominated society has occurred for thousands of years, so that today it forms a kind of invisible net. This society scrutinises women's private lives like a kind of Skynet. And not just concerning sex, but also the 'frivolousness' of their speech and behaviour around men. This censorship of women starts when they begin to develop sexually. Women themselves are imprisoned in this self-censorship of virtue to the point that they cannot move. So even though I wanted to fuck men like crazy every day, I had to pretend not to care about sex.



(Left) *Myself in the Mirror* (镜中的自己); (Right) *The Horse's Lover* (马的爱人). Paintings by Ye Haiyan.

I really wanted to go to bed with the men around me then, but I was afraid that they would make me feel cheap and make a big deal out of it. So, even though I knew clearly that having sex is very pleasurable, I didn't dare to do it. I endured the torment of sexual restraint for a very long time. Sexual repression is the greatest agony I have experienced in my life. I've even thought about having these words engraved on my tombstone. I always hoped that this pain inside me would come to an end. That's why I write about sex so boldly online and encourage women to pursue sexual happiness.

I happened on the 'Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights' on the internet in 2005. At the time, I didn't even know that the Declaration of Human Rights existed, so I learned about the right to make love before I learned about any other rights I have as a human. The Declaration of Sexual Rights laid a very good foundation for my transformation into an 'unrepentant slut'. Afterwards, I never found 'love' (sexual partners). I didn't want love; I just wanted a man with a strong body, but we all used 'love' as a pretext. I had a few one-night stands, and these experiences filled me with more and more interest in everything about sex. Later, I got to know some teachers from the field of sexuality studies. Then I abruptly came on the subject of 'sex-workers'. As it happens, this topic was also discussed in sexuality studies. It was the subject of sex-workers that enabled me to understand the situation of Chinese women—what they endure, the burdens they carry, and the needless injuries they confront.

A sex-worker, for example, generally sends most of the money she earns back home. It doesn't matter whether she's married; she doesn't receive even the slightest recognition or respect for her sacrifice and contributions. This is unjust. And aren't all women like sex-workers, contributing their labour?

When I first learned about all this, I thought of sex-workers as the most miserable women, and I wanted to help them. I tried to help them in many ways. It's different now. Now I think of them as the happiest women. Their incomes are high and they have a rich and abundant sex life.

The development of my women's consciousness began with oppression. In 2005, a nude photo of me was posted online and this led to a massive outpouring of verbal violence against me. People attacked me from all sides, attacking my looks, my age, my experience of divorce—for no reason other than I'd posted a few dimly lit nude photos of myself on the internet. When others abused and insulted me, this went unnoticed by site administrators and my complaints were ignored. But when I responded to the abuse in kind, my online ID was censored and blocked. This inequality in the right to speak made me aware of my own vulnerability. The internet is great for allowing reality to present itself. It was only then that I really understood and thought about relationships of power at the centre of the social environment.

In the middle of all this violence, I slowly began to realise that people place so many controls on women; as though everyone in society—not just men, but other women as well—feels entitled to correct women, to give them advice, to try to educate and lecture every woman they meet. So, I realised that I wasn't alone, but that I was a member of a disadvantaged group; I was just an ordinary Chinese woman. It was only at this point that I could start to consciously observe cases of violence against women, and then to understand the relationship between women and this society.

I realised I was in an extremely disadvantaged position. Even more than gender inequalities, I came to recognise inequalities of class, which are a problem that concerns the national system. So, I became very angry and wanted to change my situation. If I was to get what I wanted, I had to become socially engaged. This was the period in which I was transformed from an excluded, rootless *dagongmei* ('working girl') into a woman who follows social and public affairs. I wasn't yet aware of how great a change this was. I had no idea what a great stage I'd stepped on to. Even in the face of direct attacks, I still see reality clearly and stand firm against the oncoming winds. I am firmly convinced of the existence of the gender and class inequalities that I see with my own eyes. They must be changed.

Speaking out is what I do the most. Every day, I express my opinions online, and I've been doing this for 20 years. Because I am insignificant and ordinary, people have been very suspicious of me, even to the point of rejecting me outright. But, after all, the internet is an open space and, even if they resent me, they can't stop me from going online. They always scrutinise and censor me, though, and keep demanding that I act in the way they want me to.

What they say the most is: 'Why would a woman care about these things?' They demand that women stay in their place and only do what they think women should do. And then they say, 'Such a common person should mind their own business.' They also say, 'What do you know about women's rights? Why don't you go and read more books?' And they say, 'Who are you to discuss women's rights?' or 'It's pointless to speak out!' There are also friendly and well-intentioned people who speak warmly and tenderly and say, 'Wait until you become powerful and then you do all the things you want to do and say what you want to say.'

I've experienced scrutiny and censorship from millions of people, and even now they still debate whether I can be considered a feminist. These censors include ordinary internet users, website administrators, and internet administrators (that is, state internet police). First, they interrogate my gender, then my (class) status, then my qualifications and experience (my right to speak), and finally, the value of what I say. My words, my opinions, even my way of expressing myself have all been censored by countless eyes hidden in the dark. This censorship has gone on for years and, through it all, I have only continued to define my own new territories for speaking out. In the past few years, this territory has become smaller and smaller, and I can say less and less.

What causes me pain even today is this: there are no standards to their scrutiny, no specific criteria or examples to follow, and no clear instructions for implementing their suggestions. It's like this mysterious, ghostly, and invisible thing that exists only in the thoughts of our rulers and the will of officialdom. Your posts will be inexplicably deleted

and your ID will be cancelled. I hate that so many of my official accounts have been cancelled, making my voice fainter and fainter.

To preserve my channels of communication, all I can do is constantly feel around to find my way until I touch on some sensitive area, and then I engage in constant self-censorship.¹ In the process of doing that, though, I have a line I won't cross; I can't succumb completely. I can refrain from speaking about sensitive topics, but I've also never said things that violate common sense. In general, then, the line I won't cross in my self-censorship is trampling common sense.

There was a time when I thought that gender equality and women's rights were perfectly legal. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the equality of men and women has been a fundamental national policy. However, the banning of feminist self-publishing on the internet made me realise that the rules of censorship are different according to who is speaking. China is a typical society in the sense that the state is governed by controlling the people.

You can't always get everything you want. As one netizen reminded me, 'I can only eat one dish.' I can't please everyone. When I was a poor woman from an ordinary rural family, people would usually be sympathetic and cut me some slack when they would try to censor me. After all, my 'ingredients' were good. But if I'm a vulnerable woman from the subaltern lower classes and I refuse to submit to that vulnerable status, more formidable violence will come crashing down on my head. This means that if I want to protect myself, I must behave as they expect me to. Even though I'm poor and fat and saddled with debt, regardless of the difficulties I've been through, I still display filial piety, industriousness, love of family, and all the other meritorious virtues.

But this isn't the kind of 'female character' I want at all. I want to be a woman who is calm and comfortable. I want to not care about poverty, and I don't want to care about being fat. In my daily life, I want to be indolent and lazy, and I want to have a keen sense of observation and the ability to analyse things with care and to express myself with

uncommon maturity. But to cope with the pressure of this kind of censorship, I can only hide myself. I am like a woman who is hiding inside a shell, trying everything to seem mediocre and ignorant. The less exceptional a woman is, the more virtuous she is.

But every cell in my body is waiting, dreaming that one day I will be able to step calmly on to the podium. I may be fat, but I'm not clumsy. I may come from the lower classes, but I'm confident in myself and patient. I have short hair, neatly tucked behind my ears, a soft and gentle laugh, and a bold way of speaking. This is me. I'm a woman, uncensored, uncorrected, surrounded by encouragement and support and protection, openly living her own life.

I would like to thank Jinyan for giving me this platform today. I've certainly come one step closer to my dream. ■

Translated by Dušica RISTIVOJEVIĆ, edited by Malcolm THOMPSON.

¹Note by Zeng Jinyan: According to my study of the censorship of Ye Haiyan's public WeChat account @yehaiyan38 in 2016, 31.7 per cent of her posts were banned before they were published, 40 per cent of her 'top 10' posts and 50 per cent of her 'top 10 most read' posts were deleted by censors. All the censored posts were feminist commentaries by Ye on current social and political issues. The public WeChat account @yehaiyan38 had 8,217 subscribers and received more than RMB10,000/month in contributions from readers during the period of study. After this study, the account was deleted by censors. Over the past decade, Ye Haiyan has been prohibited from travelling abroad and repeatedly evicted from her rental residences in Guangxi, Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, Beijing, and other places where she has tried to settle down to develop her social activism (through nongovernmental organisations) and creativity (through online writing, street performance art, painting, and so on).



Chinese presenter Zhu Jun. PC: 维基小霸王, Wikimedia Commons.

Online (Self-) Censorship on Feminist Topics

Testimony of a #MeToo Survivor

Xianzi

From the start of the Chinese #MeToo movement in 2018 to the present, victims of sexual assault have used public attention to seek resolution for individual cases. They have gone through a process of first being silenced to gradually being allowed to make their voices partially heard. The most important reason for this shift is the scattered nature of sexual harassment cases and the randomness of their occurrence. However, this does not mean that victims and their supporters do not need to bring any pressure to bear, nor does

it mean that those of us with personal experience of #MeToo have not paid a price for the current situation.

When the #MeToo movement was in full swing in 2018, my accusation against CCTV host Zhu Jun brought discussion of #MeToo to its high point, but it soon caused all discussion of sexual harassment cases to be officially banned. Only two relatively powerful media outlets, *Tencent* and *Caixin*, published interviews, which were quickly deleted. In addition, no media was allowed to report on any sexual harassment cases going forward, especially ones involving public #MeToo accusations; this also resulted in the cases involving [activist] Lei Chuang and [journalist] Zhang Wen, among others, being forced out of the public spotlight.

#MeToo was banned mainly because of Zhu Jun's powerful connections within the system, and my accusation against him very likely involved a higher-level coverup; this is something that those in the system do not want revealed. However, the gradual relaxing of censorship surrounding the #MeToo topic was also related to the Zhu Jun case. In August 2018, Zhu Jun sued me and Mai

Shao, who spoke on social media on my behalf when I first publicly came forward with my experience in July, for defamation. According to Wang Zhi'an, a former host who left *CCTV*, this changed the nature of the event from a #MeToo-inspired accusation to a judicial case, or even entertainment news. As such, both serious media outlets and those focused on entertainment found it newsworthy. After all, the authorities cannot stop the media from reporting on an active lawsuit.

As far as I know, Zhu Jun did not report his lawsuit to his superiors, who were then unhappy about him attracting more public attention to the incident. Because of this, after Zhu sued me, *CCTV* quickly abandoned the protection they had given him. Accordingly, I also had more room to speak out on social media. After this, I and other feminists worked together to explore possible ways to speak out about sexual harassment issues. In the post-#MeToo period, the cases of Liu Jingyao, who accused the founder and CEO of Jingdong, Liu Qiangdong, of rape in the summer of 2018 and sued him for damages, and Professor Qian Fengsheng of Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, who was fired for sexually assaulting a student, as well as other high-profile incidents, also helped sexual harassment issues to garner widespread attention from the general public.

In my experience, to avoid certain accusations—that we are being manipulated by ‘foreign forces’ or engaging in ‘premeditated #MeToo accusations’—and the risks that come with them, feminists must emphasise that all they are doing is providing support. They should also avoid having too much social media contact with the person involved. We often receive written submissions from victims of sexual assault, but we encourage them to register for an online ID themselves and to post their own appeals, after which we can repost and spread the word. At the same time, if we establish private contacts with a party involved in a sexual assault case and provide legal and voluntary assistance, it is necessary to keep this confidential, even to the point that we only communicate

via Signal or other secure platforms. In short, we cannot give the impression that feminists, and especially activists, are personally connected to the victims of sexual assault.

On social media, we also take care not to make accusations against powerful agencies such as the police and universities—especially on issues related to ineffective enforcement by police departments—as content related to this often crosses the red line for investigation, which is very dangerous. Most of the time, our accusations focus on the perpetrator of the sexual assault and on exposing the harm done to victims by the wider rape culture after an incident is exposed. Liu Qiangdong, for example, used edited videos to smear his accuser, Liu Jingyao. For things like this, in addition to writing articles ourselves, we also create various hashtags to encourage everyone to participate in internet discussions, which can also help to bring together posts that are scattered across social media.

Although many media outlets are willing to report on sexual assault cases because of the huge amount of traffic these types of stories generate, the attention has brought new challenges to #MeToo this year. It is already the case that the topic is no longer one that feminists control but is one in which men's rights groups, populist forces, and other groups participate so that discussions of sexual assault cases can end up facing anti-publicity and anti-feminist backlashes at any time, which is counter to the original intention of #MeToo.

And, after two years of #MeToo cases appearing one after another, another inescapable issue was the constantly rising attention threshold for cases of sexual assault. From inappropriate power relations in universities to the kind of Stockholm syndrome mentality experienced by the victims of sexual assault—popularised in Fang Siqu's novel *First Love Paradise* (房思琪的初恋乐园)—the public has become increasingly numb to a certain kind of sexual assault narrative and instead tends to focus on cases with more sensational plots. This

has resulted in demands for women to provide more shocking private details; otherwise, the public does not pay enough attention.

That there is this kind of attention threshold has posed a huge challenge to #MeToo. Even though we do not want to see it, we must admit that there have been public accusations in #MeToo cases that are seriously inconsistent with the facts. For example, in the recent case of Liang Ying's accusation of date rape, there were many details, including about forced abortion and betrothal gifts, for which no evidence could be produced. Such accusations are not only most likely false, but also the arguments are anti-sex and irrelevant to feminism. The Liang Ying case initially received overwhelming support in online discussions, but when no evidence could be provided, online opinion reversed its verdict. What prompted the accuser to make such unfounded allegations? In addition to the accuser's situation and individual character, there is another important reason we all know well: only more and more sensational stories can arouse the public's interest.

However, when levelled at feminists participating in #MeToo, the use of this term, 'reversal', is unfair, and is often a deliberate setup by men's rights and populist forces. There are many reasons why the #MeToo wave has risen worldwide. One is that there is often not enough evidence in sexual harassment and sexual assault cases to meet the evidentiary standards of existing legal procedures. Another is that the public security organs fail to intervene immediately when cases are reported, resulting in evidence being lost or becoming no longer usable. It is precisely because of this kind of insufficiency of evidence that those bringing forward cases have resorted to online appeals for a solution. Because of this, all the cases we encounter related to #MeToo are invariably lacking in evidence. Because of the absence of law enforcement on issues involving sexual harassment and sexual assault, feminists and #MeToo participants are doing the work of the judicial authorities. This is the value, but also the predicament, of #MeToo: that the participants in individual cases have no choice but to take on the work of the legal system or the media. But, in a situation where feminist

organisations are suppressed and banned, this becomes an almost completely uncompensated and voluntary form of labour and emotional support, with extremely limited resources.

As I mentioned earlier, to avoid orchestrated accusations, feminists' help to victims of sexual assault must not be out in the open, which also puts #MeToo at risk of stagnation. Activists who work on #MeToo cases cannot tell the public about their participation. This means the public has a very limited understanding of the complexities of sexual assault. After all, sexual assault cases and the #MeToo movement are by no means the same thing.

In fact, #MeToo is the last resort for victims of sexual assault, because it represents the failure of the judicial system and of individual confrontation, and it means that the people involved must use methods that are injurious to themselves to save themselves. Before this step is taken, supporters who decide to intervene in a case need to do a lot of work to assist the victim. For example, they first need to explore all the possible paths to get justice or compensation, which requires a lot of offline activity and experience. At the same time, the complexity of sexual assault often causes the person involved to be in a state of long-term stress, and the rigorous examination of the sexual assault accusation becomes the responsibility and the challenge of those supporting her. Feminists' involvement in individual cases requires understanding and tolerance of the individual, as well as sincerity and responsibility when dealing with public discussions. There are no shortcuts when it comes to these two aspects. The only way to get there is to expend a large amount of thankless labour and emotional engagement; personal restraint is also necessary. Understanding of the complexities of sexual assault comes through the process of conducting this work and, if we cannot find an outlet for our frustrations and reflections when participating in individual cases, we will not be able to make the public truly understand this

complexity. Nor will we be able to put our feminist beliefs into practice, which is the only way #MeToo can be pushed further.

As the public demands for #MeToo stories remain at the level of the resolution of individual cases, and the space for public advocacy is extremely limited, it is possible that #MeToo may be reduced to a slogan. Capital and the public authorities are in the process of gradually suppressing #MeToo's previous achievements. When the people involved have no choice but to fight each other and run over each other for attention, #MeToo's original advocacy of fairness and democracy is transformed into the idea that feminists should take full responsibility for the movement, as a way of neutralising it.

#MeToo's predicament derives from censorship by public authorities, and censorship pressure on feminists continues to intensify. Feminists on social media are clearly divided into two groups based on whether they pay attention to issues relating to sexual minorities and keep in mind the importance of class analysis. Feminists who do focus on these issues are judged by feminists who do not and are labelled 'egalitarian' and 'the university crowd'—two terms that are clearly stigmatised on the Chinese internet. The idea is that you are sympathising with men and you are not qualified to be a feminist.

Feminists on Weibo have invented many insulting words to use against other women. For example, they refer to married women as 'married donkeys' (婚驴) and lesbians who fight for marriage equality as 'donkeys in preparation' (预备驴). And if you object to this kind of insulting language, your status as a feminist will also be called into question.

The discussion about whether to attack married women or sexual minorities has, to a large extent, turned into an internal struggle among feminists. In the face of arguments like 'same-sex marriage will lead to surrogacy, so we must oppose same-sex marriage', that male to female trans people 'want to take safe spaces away from women', or 'trans

people can't really change their gender', and other false statements, the opposing side has to do a lot of work to refute these rumours, while also being subjected to attacks from those who accuse them of betraying feminism. Recently, these attacks have risen in prominence, with more conservative feminists believing the reason current feminist discussions have been suppressed by the government is because of the well-known feminist activists who have been the victims of repression. This section of the movement takes an extremely patriarchal standpoint and accuses Feminist Voices (女权之声, 2009–18) [a vocal feminist organisation in China whose founder, Lü Pin, was forced into exile in the United States after the detention of the Feminist Five in 2015] of taking a political standpoint because it discussed the topic of women's rights for Muslim women. And the accusation of taking a political standpoint is currently a very serious, and possibly irrefutable, one on social media platforms, which can result in the accused being unable to rebut the charges or even being permanently banned.

However, it must be pointed out that #MeToo has made feminist issues more prominent on social networks. It is also the case that the large number of women on Weibo who pay attention to feminist issues makes our support for sexual assault cases even stronger. The presence within feminist discussions of the discrimination faced by other disadvantaged groups and the false charges of 'taking a political standpoint' very likely originate in some general characteristics of contemporary young people: regardless of their attitude towards feminism, they are well aware that these kinds of accusations can have a lot of damaging power and that, given the state's censorship of political standpoints, such false charges have become another kind of learned violence. In a situation like this, the appearance of such contradictions among feminists is regrettable, but it is also inevitable. What's more, all feminists, no matter their position, feel that women suffer from structural oppression in all aspects of society, and feminists must confront attacks from both the state and social media platforms, such as women's rights cases remaining unresolved, being prohibited from speaking, or having social media accounts suddenly deleted.

In a situation like this, there is understandably considerable anxiety among feminists, which often leads one group to feel that the other is causing trouble, while at the same time stressing the power of unity to an excessive degree, even to the point of demanding that feminists be unified in word and deed and considering women who violate this rule to be traitors. All we can do is to face this anxiety directly and realise that it comes from their predicament. If we exclude others because their remarks are not beautiful enough, this also violates the demands we place on ourselves as feminists.

No-one can deny that from speaking out as a participant in #MeToo to acting offline or speaking online, we have always faced censorship or self-censorship. And all we can do is confront it directly and break it down into specific problems. In the process of dealing with each specific problem, we must preserve our confidence in ourselves and not give up. ■

Translated by Scott SAVITT, edited by Malcolm THOMPSON.



Free Falling.
PC: (CC) Sodanie Chea.

Overcoming the Conundrum of Being Made 'Politically Sensitive'

Anti-Sexual Harassment
Movements and (Self-)
Censorship

FENG Yuan

More than 30 years ago, when my family introduced me to their friends in Australia as a 'feminist', their friends told me that many people didn't think of this word as a compliment, even in Australia. At the time, though, I didn't consider myself very conscious of women's rights, let alone as a 'feminist', which is a status I feel can only be reached through an accumulation of attainments. Perhaps this was also a kind of self-censorship proper to that time and place.

Around 20 years ago a male intellectual asked me: 'Are you a feminist?' 'Actually, you are also a feminist,' I replied, looking right into his eyes, 'because I believe you would agree that women and men should have equal rights.' Back then, I often read global news on the English-language website *Feminist Majority*. This website was supposedly named after an American survey that found that more than 70 per cent of respondents supported gender equality. I once wrote that I only attained my triple role as someone who engages in feminist practice, theory, and observation after the 1995

World Conference on Women in Beijing. Before that, I had always found it hard to define my identity using established labels.

Experiencing Chinese Feminism

When thinking through the questions raised during the webinar related to my identity and experience as a feminist in China, I see myself as a sailor without navigational markers to plot the way forward and burdened with all kinds of constraints. (Self-)censorship, visible and invisible, is everywhere; in both our actions and our discussions, it is like dancing in shackles. Different languages and contexts will give rise to different ways of thinking and forms of expression, which embody differing potentials for either disempowerment or empowerment. In terms of strategy, it is only when everyone tries their best to speak out that the possibility of overcoming varying forms of censorship can emerge, and the original abundance of action and reflection can be traced from its origins to serve as a historical mirror for the future.

In recent years, the anti-sexual harassment movement in China has been enveloped in ever more layers of censorship and self-censorship. The movement is driven first and foremost by the efforts of victims, aided by their supporters and the emergence of favourable conditions. Victims often no longer simply accept harassment, make compromises against their will, blame themselves, or attempt to suppress or just forget their experiences of being sexually harassed. Instead, they connect with others who have spoken out about their suffering, they support each other and move forward together, in greater and greater numbers. Long-term advocacy both domestically and abroad has resulted in an accumulation of favourable factors in the broader environment. For example, national policy and legislation on sexual harassment have been gradually put in place; a number of cases have been heard in legal proceedings; in media reportage and in general discussions, the discourse on sexual harassment has gradually

developed and become more widespread. This has helped more people to acquire an accurate understanding of the issue—that determination of sexual harassment should be based on the experience and situation of the victim rather than the intention of the perpetrator or the so-called seriousness of the conduct.

In this way, because of the efforts of survivors, assistance from their supporters, and the emergence of favourable conditions, the anti-sexual harassment movement has slowly developed from the irregular revelation of a handful of individual cases into a movement with its own momentum. Victims demand explanations and seek justice; news reports and discussions of the topic magnify the impact of specific cases and broaden people's understandings; suggestions for policies, laws, and measures are pushing public authorities to face sexual harassment issues head-on and to make them a priority. The anti-sexual harassment movement has emerged and developed inexorably. But obstacles continue to impede it, and one of the major obstacles is censorship. This includes the internalisation of the censorship system as manifested in self-censorship.

Censorship through Sensitisation

Making things 'politically sensitive' is one way the censorship system exerts its influence. The mechanisms of this 'sensitisation' include forcing victims to delete their posts on social media and silencing their supporters. A typical example is the 'Hou Liangping incident' at the Beijing Film Academy (a female student alleged she had been sexually abused by a professor at the academy), which disappeared from the internet so completely it was as though it had never happened. The mechanisms of sensitisation also work through the use of euphemisms when dealing with perpetrators—vague terms like 'unethical conduct', or phrases that can serve to defame the victims, like 'inappropriate sexual relations'. Such terms obscure the basic problem of sexual harassment.

The most devastating mechanism of sensitisation is linking sexual harassment issues in China to ‘foreign powers’, which transforms people who are interested in this topic and who advocate for reform from positive elements in society into suspects and even enemies. By making things politically sensitive, censorship mechanisms transform sexual harassment from a worthwhile and necessary topic of discussion into a term that can hardly even appear directly in the media. Even #MeToo and its homophone in Chinese, ‘Rice-Rabbit’ (*mi-tu*), can barely exist in any sustained way, which turns existing reports and commentaries into articles susceptible of being ‘harmonised’ and easily removed. This increases the worry that media organisations feel about providing follow-up coverage, as well as the cost of doing so, which in turn makes it more difficult for individual cases and victims to gain media coverage and public attention. This then reduces the amount of public discussion and limits its quality in terms of the breadth and depth of the discussion, but also in terms of mobilisation and public participation in the process of improving policies and systems.

change at the levels of the individual, institutions, social attitudes, and national conduct. At the same time, the advantages and disadvantages of laws and institutions themselves should also be understood and, after recognising their limitations, we should move beyond the narrow mindset of punishment to advocating equal gender relationships and realising women’s subjectivity. ■

Translated by Jamie LIU, edited by Malcolm THOMPSON.

Escaping Sensitisation

The process of sensitisation of the topic of sexual harassment has forced victims, media professionals, supporters, people who follow the issue, and advocates of reform to limit themselves. This has made it impossible for individual cases and discussions to be disseminated, which makes it very hard to generate any kind of ‘butterfly effect’. Therefore, it is essential to escape this process of sensitisation. Methods of desensitisation include the normalisation of appeals. This allows information to be disseminated, allows incidents and topics in the process of development to continue to be developed, turns the ‘indifferent masses’ into active observers, and allows everyone involved—victims, followers, supporters, and advocates—to overcome their self-censorship and, by speaking out, facilitate



On Silence and the Reestablishment of Non-Western Connections

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on Flickr.com.

Dušica RISTIVOJEVIĆ

I was born in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in present-day Serbia, just in time to live through and remember the final years of Yugoslav socialism and the many faces of its afterlife. What I want to be very open about is the central role my personal experiences and academic knowledge about three key issues have played in what I do, think, and feel about Chinese social activism, self/censorship, and feminist scholarship. These issues are democratisation and post-socialist transformations; problems related to the creation and dissemination of popular and academic knowledge in and on socialist and post-socialist contexts;

and the ways in which many layers of unequal power relations emerge from and influence transnational academic and activist encounters.

I see myself as a socially engaged researcher, teacher, and activist who analyses and experiences the ways in which global political currents influence social organising in China and other post-socialist spaces. I also see myself as someone who prefers to stay out of the spotlight while using the spaces made possible through academia to help organise and facilitate activist meetings and events. In both efforts, I am a relative latecomer to anglophone Western academia and its canonised

knowledge in Chinese and gender studies, which makes me very conscious of and very cautious about the inclusionary and exclusionary processes in these fields.

My research on Chinese activism and feminism starts in late-Qing China and comes up to the present, mostly focusing on the visions and actions of transnationally linked Chinese actors and their international allies during two ground-shaking periods of China's repositioning in the modern world order: the late-Qing reforms and the post-1989 period. For several years, I have also been collecting material about the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), especially its engagements in global feminist networks and its role in China's foreign policy and diplomacy. In all this work, silence, in various guises, has been prevalent and as important as utterance.

Silences

Much of the discussion about self-censorship in Chinese studies implies, in a rather critical way, that we all—as learning, writing, speaking, and acting subjects—are succumbing either to the requests from a controlling power or to our own opportunistic calculations. In my view, these insinuations do not sufficiently engage with the ways in which we are not all fully and equally unconditioned individuals; our agency is formed and practised in several different ways, and we do not all possess the same space for action and resistance. From where I stand, it is clear our silences are related in much more complex ways to our different positions within the academic, activist, ideological, or sociopolitical contexts we inhabit. When it comes to my research, there have been many different reasons to be silent.

I decided, for instance, not to write an article about the dynamics of organising and conducting an international collaborative workshop because I could not figure out how to include in the analysis several critical situations without endangering the affective and professional relations among the scholars and activists who participated in the

workshop, who were exceptionally important in the feminist academic and activist community. At the same time, I was a junior scholar in a precarious academic position, just entering a relatively well-established, tightly knit, and closed Nordic-based China-related gender research community, and I worried that writing on this topic would quickly close various slightly open doors for future collaboration.

Another kind of silence has been linked to the theoretical aspect of my academic engagement. The best example is my decision not to publish an article I had written after I received a review in which I was called a 'Chinese nationalist' because my analysis supposedly implied that I think China should have more power in international politics, regardless of its violation of human rights. This evaluation was completely devoid of merit as my paper was using empirical evidence to clearly and simply point out how reports of five young imprisoned Chinese activists became part of a critical discursive repertoire on the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government, and how this inclusion of Chinese feminism accelerated the ongoing struggles over the dominance of global geopolitical, economic, and symbolic structures by Western political actors. To this day, being labelled a 'Chinese nationalist' has prompted me to remain silent until I feel I am able to respond and articulate more clearly my criticisms of both Western neo-imperialist and Cold War-resonant logic and approaches and China's nationalist, xenophobic, neo-imperialist discourses and undertakings. Unfortunately, the current high-voltage polarisation and rendering of black and white positioning have made it impossible for me to think through my own critical stances openly and in dialogue with others.

Yet, the recurrent and perhaps most important reason for my silence has been a common politics and the joint agreement between me, my collaborators and friends, and the actors I am writing about in my research projects. Here I am thinking about what has been addressed in anthropology as ethnographic refusal as a research method (see, for example, Tuck and Yang 2014). This method asks for our responsible engagement with the politics

of how data are represented, strongly emphasising the importance of keeping certain types of research data out of the public gaze.

This line of thinking about the consequences of revealing research findings is the main reason I decided, for example, not to write about the findings related to the regional support networks of activists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. As one of my closest collaborators and friends warned me at the end of one year of ethnographic and archival work, if I published my research findings and publicly talked about where, what, and how the activists from the region worked together, my work could easily be used for nefarious purposes. One example of this, I was warned, was a report produced by a Taiwanese citizen who worked for the Chinese Government by collecting publicly available information about the activities and connections between Taiwanese activists and their China-based collaborators. This report, my collaborator insisted, was then used in a Chinese court case as proof of the criminal activities of a Chinese activist who was visiting Taiwan.

This was the way my collaborator conveyed to me the content of a much-referenced statement by Eeling Chiu, General Secretary of the Taiwan Association for Human Rights. Commemorating the third anniversary of the 709 Crackdown—a nationwide action by Chinese police that started on 9 July 2015 and saw human rights lawyers and activists jailed, disbarred, or placed under surveillance—Ms Chiu stated that several Taiwanese people

are suspected of being attracted and gathered by the Chinese authorities to collect records of the words and activities of the members of Chinese civil society visiting Taiwan. [These Taiwanese citizens] participated in the conference activities of Chinese overseas civil movement organisations in Taiwan, recorded the contents of the event, and handed over the recordings to the Chinese authorities. (Chiu 2018)

As Ms Chiu asserted, in a case related to the 709 Crackdown, these records were used as ‘the prosecution evidence of the Chinese authorities,

resulting in lawyer Zhou Shifeng and Mr Hu Shigen being sentenced to seven years and seven and a half years of heavy punishment for the crime of “subversion of the state power” (Chiu 2018).

My collaborator—himself a well-known initiator of and participant in meetings between Taiwanese and Chinese civil society organisations—suggested I not use any of the data I gathered through my participation in their meetings and private and public discussions. I was aware that scholars whose research focuses on Chinese nongovernmental organisations active in sensitive fields employ various methods to overcome the risks to research subjects, such as providing anonymisation of research findings and discussion of the issues related to Chinese civil society beyond the regulatory/policy dimension. However, I could not find an effective way to anonymise the activities of well-known organisations and individuals whose public work would be easily identified. Cases such as these highlight the ethical imperative of silence in certain situations.

The Silent Academy

Silence in academia has a high price, both for the scholar who does not put her knowledge and activities on public display and in terms of the threat of erasure of unrecorded, unanalysed, and unacknowledged actors, situations, and processes.

Despite its numerous downsides, hypocrisies, and confines, academia offers respectability, connections, and symbolic, cultural, and social capital, which may be used not only for developing and practising socially transformative pedagogies, but also for obtaining and delegating space for activists to use for their causes. If academia is understood and practised in this way, a position in the academy is worth fighting for; but to acquire an academic position without publications and publicity for one’s actions is very hard. Hence, while I focus on small-scale public talks, lectures, and closed discussions when it comes to activism research, I am also working simultaneously on several additional research topics and trying to

build my publication record. This is not a sustainable situation but is one potentially worth the effort to be able to facilitate crucial spaces for my activist collaborators.

At the same time, the threat that a present-day scholar's silence poses of burying and obliterating activist interventions is particularly disturbing. As a researcher of history, I often think about the distinct respect and weight that history writing has in Chinese cultural contexts, as well as the admirable and at times deeply moving devotion of Chinese women and feminists to recording and recognising their past and present struggles and accomplishments. Current limitations on access to archives, as well as numerous obstacles to engaging with socially concerned scholars and activists in China, make it very important to think about work-arounds for gathering and preserving knowledge about the past and present, which may be politically useful for feminists and activists.

For a great part of my research on Chinese feminist and activist networks, the best way to proceed is to collect the sources and wait. With the support of senior feminist scholars and activists who have been pivotal in bringing together Chinese and internationally based feminists in collaborative networks, I have been collecting published and unpublished written sources, interviews, and textual and visual ethnographic notes. Ethically, all I can do is wait for the right time to publicly relate the history of the events and persons I am following—a history that must be told. However, there are parts of my research that may tease out our thinking about what can be done now. What kind of engagements with 'big politics' are possible and what spaces for manoeuvring may be opened if we look at contemporary politics through the lens of feminist history?

Working through the Present Moment

As I learned through my research, long-term historical observation of feminism in China reveals not only its strong interdependence on, and deep embeddedness in, local intellectual, social, and

political traditions and experiments, but also its persistent openness, curiosity, engagement, and commitment to transnational and transcultural feminist connections, solidarity, and support networks. These networks—since their earliest formations in the late Qing period, through the socialist internationalist connections that peaked in the 1950s, to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and its aftermath—have been heavily influenced by international politics. At present, escalated tensions between China, the United States, and Western European countries arguably complicate not only the local dynamics of Chinese feminist spaces, but also transnational feminist support and solidarity networks and collaborative endeavours. Transnational feminist and women's rights networks created in the wake of the 1995 Women's Conference and actively supported by international foundations and governmental and nongovernmental organisations have been playing a decisive role in informing and directing both transnational and domestic engagements with Chinese feminisms in recent decades. But new opportunities for collaborations with Chinese feminism may be offered by decentering and moving beyond China–West relations, as well as the establishment—or, in a longer historical frame, the reestablishment—of the connections between Chinese and non-Western feminists. For lack of a better term, I use here 'non-Western' to include what is addressed today as the Global South as well as the former Central and Eastern European socialist 'Second World' and the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The revival of and focus on the former Second World and Non-Aligned Movement links play a substantial role in the processes of China's geopolitical, economic, and symbolic repositioning in global politics and the global economy. China increasingly directs its capital and its soft power to the regions that had or have discontent with the West. Within this globally diverse process, China often approaches post-socialist areas in particularly intelligent, friendly, and respectful ways, and places 'people-to-people exchange' at the core of its proclaimed values and diplomatic aims. The unassuming space of this exchange may offer the opportunity for feminists to come together.

The state-sanctioned women's rights space inhabited by the ACWF and its public narratives on transnational and transcultural links point to this non-Western space, which is allowed and even encouraged. At the end of 2019, I conducted a set of ethnographic visits to the state-funded Chinese Museum of Women and Children in Beijing, which was established in 2010 and curated by the ACWF. I was interested to read the way in which the ACWF curated the space and interpreted it as a unique insight into what is possible, what is achievable, and what is allowed to be said about the past and women's lived realities in contemporary China.

I was especially interested in the Hall of International Friendships—the space where a narrative about the international engagements of Chinese women has been created through several mediums. Especially telling is the choice of gifts displayed. Mostly handicrafts and artefacts, received from all over the world, these gifts are intended to symbolise the mutual respect and close connections between China and the gifting countries, whereas the selection of items for display may be read as signalling the international connections Chinese women are permitted or encouraged to enjoy and foster. The gifts, as well as textual and visual messages, mirror the wider geopolitical picture: the West is not the location of desired relations. Instead, links with African, Asian, and former Soviet and post-socialist European countries dominate the material 'friendship' narrative.

In a way, to connect and reconnect with non-Western feminists would be a continuation of historically documented but insufficiently analysed truly global Chinese feminist exchanges. In June 2019, Professors Wang Zheng, Elisabeth Armstrong, and Kristen Ghodsee—three scholars who are researching post-socialist women's movements—organised the Global Socialist Feminism Symposium at the University of Michigan. During the four days of the symposium, scholars and activists from and/or working on histories of post/socialist women's organisations in China, India, Bulgaria, Zambia, Poland, Vietnam, the former Yugoslavia, and Algeria discussed the erasure of rich histories of the experiences of women from the Second World and their unrecorded and therefore un-theorised collaborations with and

contributions to the improvement of women's lives globally from the canon of transnational feminist literature. Our conversations stressed the need for more complex reflections on the marginalisation of socialist-state feminisms in Western/Northern academia and the relations of these processes to what Francisca de Haan (2010) called 'continued Cold War paradigms'.

The dynamics of the continued or renewed Cold War relationalities—with their ensuing logic, sentiments, and unequal access to resources—have been significantly influencing the ways in which activists and academics come together. It is a great irony that the Chinese state's increased use of national and international power to influence, control, and restrict the activist space also offers immense potential for activating and reactivating overlooked and neglected communicative and collaborative activist and academic venues outside the Western and Northern centre. These spaces may be used not only to address the largely unfamiliar commonalities of the experiences and strategies of non-Western activists and feminists from different yet similarly burdened locations, but also to set the stage for long overdue work on equalising the power relations among feminists globally. ■



Three Women.
PC: (CC) Matt Ming.

Taking a Step Back to Conduct Research and Liberal Feminism as a Theory of Action

HUANG Yun

I was born into a rural Chinese family which had only one child for three generations. I pursued studies in the field of political philosophy. The discipline of philosophy, and especially that of political philosophy, is a disaster area when it comes to sexism across the world. Thus, as one of only a very few female scholars in the field of political philosophy in China, I was already aware of some feminist theories that had been introduced into China before the 'Feminist Five' incident and had already reflected on what my identity as a

woman could bring to my research. Nevertheless, before that incident I had never formally incorporated feminism into my field of research. There are two kinds of feminist theory most prevalent in China today: the critique of capital in Western Marxist feminism and the analysis of structures of micropower in postmodern feminism. In contemporary China, where political transformation is yet to be achieved, these two theories can permit discourse among people to occur on condition it does not directly contradict the ideology of the

Party-State (to the extent that it can even constitute a kind of collusion). Theorists are thus able to access some relatively tolerant space for action and to facilitate the awakening of women's consciousness of their own autonomy. As a political scientist, though, I strongly believe that women's rights, as a part of human rights and perhaps also as (at least in certain respects) the gravest part of the human rights disaster, cannot be improved in isolation from the overall institutional environment in China. Before the 'Feminist Five' incident, the seriousness and urgency of the question of women's rights were less prominent than other topics in the field of human rights in China. Because of this, I was not in any great hurry to develop an alternative feminist theory.

Doing Something

On the eve of International Women's Day in 2015, the Chinese Government suddenly began to take a heavy-handed approach to the issue, arresting and detaining five feminists simultaneously in multiple provinces and cities. I was horrified and shocked by this. We could not understand how a few young women taking to the street to protest sexual harassment on public transport could be seen as politically inflammatory or subversive. But the way the government handled the situation implied that this was precisely how the officials in charge saw it. I was also deeply irritated by the collective silence in the sphere of public opinion, which was still very active back then, as though young women being severely punished for no reason, their rights trampled by the public authorities, were not worthy of being helped and supported. I felt obligated to do something for them.

A style of intervention through research would allow me to embed my awareness of problems in highly specialised topics, so that my reflections on the pain and anxieties that result from my personal experiences could resonate with more general contemporary perplexities. As a scholar engaged in philosophical research, this is how I have consistently put my concern for reality into practice. Thus, after the 'Feminist Five' incident,

I changed the direction of my research and began to think seriously about and respond to problems of women's rights in China. But, of course, this is not necessarily a result of self-censorship.

Before this, as an alumnus of Peking University (PKU), I had initiated and participated in a number of protests directed at the leadership of PKU, and I was extremely lucky to get away with it without being punished. These experiences have provided me with more space for expression than other feminist activists and researchers in China, which allows me to discuss most feminist issues with a reasonable degree of safety. It is probably because of this, though, that my actions have been more restricted than those of others. During the storm around the Shen Yang case at PKU in 2018 [when multiple students at the university used their verified social media accounts to denounce Professor Shen Yang for sexually assaulting and causing the suicide of a female student in the 1990s], the former student who had initiated the request for disclosure of information about the case put me on speakerphone when she answered my call while she was being interviewed by the authorities. This led to a sudden, overnight escalation of the PKU authorities' assessment of the incident.

The university authorities interviewed many of the students who participated in the request for the disclosure of information multiple times, vigorously pursued what they called 'forces beyond the campus and foreign powers', and called the students things like 'subversive', 'treasonous', and 'secessionist'. They also forced the students to sever all ties with me and to withdraw from the anti-sexual harassment movement. Other students, who had no direct contact with me, blamed my involvement for the change in the nature of the movement, believing the sensitivity of my status in the eyes of the authorities had been responsible for its transformation into a politically sensitive incident, which in turn endangered other participants. At that point, the anti-sexual harassment movement at PKU, which had at one point attracted nationwide attention, died out, having achieved nothing concrete. I was also compelled to write a series of articles to clarify the ins and outs of my involvement in the affair, to avoid being framed as the 'behind-the-scenes manipulator' of the PKU

movement, which could have been disastrous. The institution I was working for at the time could not wait to get rid of me, and I was forced to look for another job.

Thinking Rather Than Action

Although I have had a lot of experience in public participation, I am aware that my strengths lie in thinking rather than action. Breaking out of an iron room requires more than courage; to act recklessly is to sacrifice yourself for nothing. I do not wish to be a martyr, nor do I encourage anyone else to be one. Instead, I expect to take a step back when faced with a reality that seems completely hopeless and to reflect on the possibilities of taking a broader approach to breaking through. In a totalitarian society, free thinking itself is dangerous. I feel the best way for me to contribute to women's rights in China is to keep my focus on the field of action while utilising any influence I have previously accumulated and the advantages of my interdisciplinary research to bring gender issues to bear on a variety of disciplines, so that scholars from different backgrounds can approach gender issues from their own perspectives. This will increase the presence of these issues within the intellectual world in China.

However, when I began to use the means available to me to try to promote, to the best of my ability, attention to gender issues among my peers in China and to advocate 'heforsche' [a solidarity movement for the advancement of gender equality] in a male-dominated world, I came to realise I had not only stepped into a cutting-edge field of inquiry, but also attracted quite widespread hostility from people I had thought of as fellow liberal scholars. I gradually became aware that because men have long maintained a monopoly on the discipline of philosophy both in China and elsewhere, and because philosophy, and especially political philosophy, has been a disaster in terms of sexism even outside China, these men who advocate and spread ideas of liberalism and equality in mainland China have failed to take account of the

criticisms of the gender discrimination embedded in Western philosophical traditions, and especially political philosophy, which have been advanced by feminist scholars since the 1980s.

They have also underestimated the difficulty of establishing gender justice in a patriarchal society. Despite paying lip-service to the idea of gender equality, most regard gender discrimination as simply a problem of the personal moral character of others. They can discern neither the structural gender discrimination that is sustained by both culture and custom nor how the subtle influences of culture and custom on the formation of their personalities, their habits, and their patterns of interpersonal interaction shape gender inequality. They are even more reluctant to acknowledge or lose all the tangible and intangible benefits they, as men, receive from unjust cultural, customary, and social structures. To avoid having their sense of their own goodness undermined by me and to be able to continue enjoying the 'gender dividends' that patriarchal society has offered them in comfort, some colleagues whom I used to respect, including teachers and friends, have jumped on me in exasperation and ordered me to shut my mouth; some have even kicked me out of their communities. I can only feel regretful about this.

But it has also prompted me to reflect on these phenomena. It helped me realise that the lack of gender consciousness among liberals in contemporary mainland China is a longstanding, chronic problem that has pushed a new generation of feminists away from liberalism, and this in turn may have produced fatal obstacles to the cause of liberalism. Perhaps, though, as a scholar of political philosophy who identifies with both liberalism and feminism, my thinking and research may serve as an effective remedy for this chronic problem.

An Incomplete Liberalism

Allow me to try to explain my views as succinctly as possible.

Since the beginning of the period of Reform and Opening Up, Chinese liberals, while demanding the

modernisation of the political system, have at the same time mostly advocated a return to tradition when it comes to gender issues. This is a form of collective unconsciousness that has never yet been seriously reflected on. Tiananmen activist Yuan Zhiming's sexual assault of fellow activist Chai Ling in 1990, poet Gu Cheng murdering his wife 25 years ago, dissident Wei Jingsheng sexually assaulting *Singtao Daily* reporter Liu Huaizhao 20 years ago, and the many cases of sexual harassment that were revealed in the not-for-profit sector in 2018—all these cases represent only the tip of the iceberg. Accordingly, when Western liberalism was introduced to China, liberal feminism was often ignored, whether intentionally or not. As a result, the new generation of feminists in China who emerged after the 1995 World Conference on Women were unable to draw on the intellectual resources of the liberalism that had been introduced to mainland China and thus were compelled to turn to Marxist and postmodernist feminist theories, which were rather inappropriate in the circumstances. This is certainly a loss for the feminist movement in China, but it has also deprived liberals in mainland China of an invaluable ally (Li 2013; Zeng 2016).

As discussed above, in China, where political transformation is yet to be completed, the demand for women's rights must go hand in hand with demands for other human rights like freedom of speech, freedom of association, and universal suffrage. This is not only because the demand for women's rights requires changes at the levels of law and policy, but also to empower women, who are relatively disadvantaged in every social stratum, so women in unequal power relationships can say no to nonconsensual intimacy, sexual contact, and reproductive activity rather than having to compromise out of concern for their livelihoods. It is also because the demand for women's rights requires men to change longstanding patterns of behaviour, to learn to respect women's desires and freedom, to work together with women to comprehensively reshape the social structure as well as public culture, to ensure that every individual is treated with equal respect, and the care of the disadvantaged and marginalised is prioritised.

This last point is undoubtedly also the goal of liberals; in fact, the series of crackdowns following the 'Feminist Five' incident has contributed to an awakening of political consciousness in some activists in feminist circles that had previously been politically apathetic. Therefore, when hopes of top-down reform were dashed, the feminist movement—with its emphasis on mental rather than physical strength, brought about by industrialisation, and with the theoretical and practical support of liberals—could have, by addressing numerous minor but pragmatic issues, nurtured a social constituency involving both sexes that was broad enough and sufficiently equipped with the spirit of autonomy to implement a spirit of liberalism in daily life, thereby propelling the political transformation of Chinese society from the bottom up.

But liberals in male-dominated China thought too highly of themselves, so they did not realise the feminist movement's potential to mobilise. They were even more unable to realise that returning to tradition and reestablishing the system in which men were noble and women were base, in which men worked outside and women remained inside, and in which men ruled and women obeyed would be like climbing trees to catch fish when it came to their political aims. In the *I Ching*, it says: 'The relationship between husband and wife is the starting point of human relations.' Gender inequality was both the prerequisite and the basis of the social hierarchy in China under Confucianism. Every revolution in China since 1911 has failed to fundamentally shake this foundation and, as a result, new hierarchical structures could ceaselessly be reborn from it. As an aside, the political regression in recent years has marched in step with the revival of Confucianism as well as the popularisation of classes of 'female morality'. To eradicate the idea of hierarchy from Chinese people's minds and destroy the social foundation for the reemergence of hierarchical systems, it is necessary to continue the unfinished revolution in the family and society that began with the May Fourth Movement, and to see the gender revolution through to its conclusion.

In view of this, my recent research on women's rights can be divided into two aspects. One is to explain the fundamental role of gender politics in

Confucian political philosophy and its continuing influence on the Han in contemporary China from a historical and comparative perspective. The other aspect seeks to fully integrate gender issues, human rights discourse, and theories of justice by building on Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum's research on Indian women's experiences of poverty and thereby to construct a feminist political theory grounded in the Chinese context. Conclusions from the first part of my research have already been mentioned here, so in the following I will focus on the findings of the second part.

Reinvigorating Liberalism and Feminism

I call the feminist political theory I have attempted to construct 'Rawlsian feminism', because it does not use intuitions from the theories of Marx and Aristotle to propose core capabilities, as the work of Martha Nussbaum does. Rather, the selection of the principles of justice by representatives in the original position is placed in the context of global migration, and the set of basic social facts that people under the veil of ignorance ought to know is revised. Reproduction and the physiological differences between the sexes are placed at the centre. According to Rawls' minimax criterion, then, a list of core interests for the most disadvantaged group—women—is selected as a plan acceptable to everyone. The core interests selected in this way include:

(1) The opportunity to be born. This concerns the issue of foetal sex selection rather than opposition to abortion.

(2) The capacity to be in good health. This includes access to sufficient nutrition and nurturing (especially in infancy and early childhood) as well as proper medical treatment and health care.

(3) The capacity to control one's own body. This capacity protects women from sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, and other forms of sexual violence in their pursuit of sexual satisfaction and ensures their right to make decisions about reproductive matters (including the right to abortion). It also ensures women's right to modify

their bodies through surgery or other means (such as tattoos, gender reassignment surgery, and using oral contraceptive pills to stop menstruation), and their right to practice sexual abstinence. It also includes other rights relating to privacy (such as rights over images of oneself). The capacity to control one's own body requires a series of supporting capacities and legal rights and freedoms, as detailed in items (4) to (6).

(4) The capacity to exercise practical reason. This is one of the supporting capacities related to the capacity to control one's own body. Having this ability, women can plan every aspect of their lives, including their views on sex, love, intimacy, marriage, family, and other issues, and can deal with all the practical problems associated with these issues. The development and use of the capacity to exercise practical reason also require a series of supporting rights and freedoms, at the core of which are freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, freedom of speech and of the press, and freedom of association. On the one hand, these rights and freedoms allow women to plan their own lives with autonomy, including what they do with their bodies; on the other hand, they also help women to identify nonconsensual sex and unwanted pregnancy and provide them with both the desire to seek assistance when they experience sexual violence and the avenues to do so.

(5) The capacity to be economically independent. This is another supporting capacity related to the capacity to control one's own body. The ability to practise this also requires a series of supporting rights, such as the right to own property, the right to inherit, to education, to work, to choose one's occupation, to migrate, and so on. Having and exercising these rights allow women to say no to sex and intimacy that they do not want and give them the capacity to break away from acquaintances (bosses, husbands, boyfriends, and so on) who are sexually violent towards them rather than being compelled to submit out of fear for their livelihood.

(6) Other rights and freedoms of a protective nature: These include legal systems and judicial practices that can provide institutional guarantees for the aforementioned capacities and rights, and mechanisms of public participation that make such legal systems and judicial practices both possible

and stable (such as equal civil freedoms, equal political freedoms, an environment characterised by the rule of law, and the right to civil disobedience). These also include mechanisms of exit as a remedy of last resort (such as the freedom to learn foreign languages, the freedom to communicate with people in other countries, the freedom to travel abroad, the freedom to exchange foreign currencies, and so on).

(7) The capacity to access care. This includes both pregnancy checkups and postpartum care paid for by the state, paid maternity leave, and paid paternity leave, as well as childcare subsidies, the provision of medical insurance to low-income earners, and the use of public funds to support disabled children, orphans, and elderly people on low incomes. It also includes the prohibition of sexual relations with women who cannot give sexual consent independently due to mental incapacity.

Although each item in this list was selected based on women's lived experiences, clearly none of them is solely applicable to women. Rather, because women are in a relatively disadvantaged position in every group and social stratum, a list of core interests that provides protections for women can also extend to the needs of men.

The opportunity to be born is given as the first and most important item on this list because it is based primarily on the experiences of Chinese and Indians, even though it is incompatible with existing systems of discourse concerning capacities and rights. It is also for this reason that I call the items on this list core interests rather than core capabilities, as Nussbaum does.

Feminist Liberalism

Certainly, this theory is a type of liberal feminism, but it can also be described as a feminist liberalism. In placing the issue of reproduction and the physiological differences between the sexes at the centre, and stipulating control over one's own body as the most important core interest, this theory establishes connections between feminism and liberalism and makes what some anti-feminist

theorists call 'the dilemma of difference versus equality' a false problem. Moreover, this theory follows in the tradition of Benjamin Constant and Isaiah Berlin in treating the value of political life as a second-class value, although this does not mean it disregards the protective functions provided by political freedoms.

This research is still in its early stages, but I have already received feedback from some feminists who have told me that they are very inspired by it. I hope that as this research moves forward and is improved, it will compel male liberals who have consistently ignored gender issues, whether intentionally or not, to acknowledge their theoretical blind spots and to seek actively to form alliances with the feminist movement. This would also mean that I could live and work in a more friendly environment. At that point, my two identities—'researcher' and 'activist'—would be fully reconciled. ■

Translated by Jamie LIU, edited by Malcolm THOMPSON.



**GLOBAL
CHINA
PULSE**



'A Chinese husband: has the husband crisis been solved?' Image accompanying an article in a popular newspaper in 2012 (Ilhom 2012).

'What do you want? Shall I give you some cotton? Here!' the young woman said to the Chinese worker, who passed by the fields to check the progress of cotton picking. 'No, no. You, come, tonight, tonight,' the man answered, using Tajik words. She smiled and shouted: 'With whom? What would my husband think?'

— Fieldwork observations, southwest Tajikistan, 25 October 2020

In the Interstices of Patriarchal Order

Spaces of Female Agency in Chinese–Tajik Labour Encounters

Irna HOFMAN

Although there has been an increasing focus on actor agency in the context of China's growing global presence, encounters between Chinese and local people in Central Asia are still relatively unexplored, and even when they are in the spotlight, the focus is often on the agency of local elites. To fill this gap, this essay examines personal and labour relations in Chinese agribusinesses in Tajikistan, focusing in particular on the interactions between Chinese men and Tajik women.

Although actor agency in the context of China's growing global presence is now the centre of considerable academic attention, China–Central Asia encounters, particularly with regard to local dynamics, remain relatively unexplored. It is a delicate field involving large Chinese loans and investments, debt, the Uyghur question, and complicated elite networks. Tajikistan offers a good example of these dynamics. With their numbers growing since the past decade, a huge variety of Chinese actors are now navigating their way in the country. They mingle, coalesce, or conflict and compete with local societal actors in various ways, triggering responses of various kinds and demonstrating the uneven ability to exercise agency by all involved.

In this essay, I draw attention to female agency and the modes of subversion undertaken by women working for Chinese agribusinesses in Tajikistan.¹ Notably, the agricultural sector is one of the few sectors in rural Tajikistan with Chinese investment in which Chinese men regularly interact with Tajik women. This contrasts with construction or road-building sites in which women are usually not actively engaged—at least not beyond what is often seen as typical women's work. I reveal female agency in highly asymmetric labour and gender relations by demonstrating how agency is exercised in different ways: a) to challenge the domestic

patriarchal order; and b) to express discontent regarding labour conditions. In so doing, I also shed light on the multiplicity of perceptions of 'China' in Tajikistan, while not neglecting the fact that anxiety concerning the presence of Chinese actors surfaces, and segregated work and living patterns continue, all while the China discourse becomes more differentiated by increased personal connections and individual interdependencies.

The China Discourse in Tajikistan

In the wake of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, China's relationship with Tajikistan deepened, solidifying further after the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative in the mid-2010s. As a result, a plethora of Chinese actors have settled and started working in the country, involving and triggering various kinds of distant and intimate interconnections. Increasing personalised contacts have meant shifts in the way Chinese people are seen and result in affection as well as antipathy (see also Peyrouse 2016).

Perceptions of China in Tajikistan are shaped by various dynamics that were at play over the past decade: a border shift, land acquisitions, mineral exploration, an influx of Chinese consumer goods, and the arrival of predominantly male migrants, triggering fears of a loss or even extinction of Tajik and Muslim identities in the case of sexual intercourse and marriages. While all these circumstances have boosted anti-Chinese sentiment, this is not the entire story and there are other, more positive perceptions that cannot be solely attributed to the Chinese state's attempts at enhancing its soft power. Whereas the Chinese state provides generous grants to the Tajik state, scholarships to local youth, and medical supplies to society at large in the context of Beijing's 'health diplomacy', face-to-face interactions in various locales are what result in a patchwork of perceptions.

This nuance is often missing in discussions of the Chinese presence in the country. Attention to agency in China-Tajikistan relations tends to

concentrate on state and elite actors. When it comes to the grassroots, it is generally assumed that ordinary citizens have little choice but to passively accept the Chinese presence and have no alternative to taking on jobs in Chinese-run companies. Such assumptions, however, neglect local agency, as well as the fact that the agency of Tajik actors is, to a large extent, shaped by domestic state-society relations.

Social Networks and Labour Relations on Chinese-Run Farm Holdings

The countryside in Tajikistan is a microcosm where it is possible to see these encounters between Chinese and local actors play out. In most of rural Tajikistan, social networks fulfil controlling roles, and also function as ways to solve disputes and discipline labour. Authorities and chairmen of large farm holdings tend to instrumentalise local social networks to mobilise labourers, particularly at peak moments of the agricultural season. Inserting themselves in this context, Chinese companies have also figured out that local social networks in rural Tajikistan constitute an efficient way to guarantee labour supply.

Relations and tasks on these farms are highly gendered. Most male teams tend to be formed by a relatively permanent group of men in technical positions who work and often also reside together throughout the agricultural season. In contrast, women primarily deal with the manual weeding and harvesting of crops, and their work is most often casual and group membership fluctuates. As a result, different dynamics take shape in female and male work brigades, which, in turn, affects intra-group solidarity (for similar observations in Ethiopia, see Fei 2020). In the case of women's groups, it is often only their brigadier (usually also female) who has a long-term, though always seasonal, labour contract with the enterprise, which invariably includes some quite abstract clauses detailing

labour conditions that are generally absent in most local labour arrangements.

At first sight, labour recruitment and interactions in fields belonging to Chinese companies are not that different from those that can be found among local farmers. As on local farms, there is a hierarchy in the management. At the lowest level, a female brigadier is recruited as an intermediary who mobilises and manages labourers. These female leaders are also responsible for administering labour and paying out wages. Local male managers then supervise a few female brigadiers and are, in turn, supervised by one or two Chinese male managers. While the hierarchy may be effective for the employers to procure and control workers, it also puts workers at risk of fraud. Although farmers and farm labourers maintain that Chinese companies pay up every cent (*tin*) for raw cotton or work (unlike some local farmers and companies), I observed that, lower in the hierarchy, brigadiers sometimes withhold part of the payment to their brigade members. In such cases, individual women cannot easily address Chinese superiors—a situation that points to the way in which reliance on local networks can serve to reaffirm power hierarchies.

On local as well as Chinese farm fields, masculinity dominates, as men control the physical labour of women. However, interactions and power dynamics are different in the two settings. On locally owned farms, an elder male farm chairman tends to be present to maintain patriarchal order and supervise women's work. In contrast, on Chinese fields, local male elders are absent and young Tajik men, aged mostly in their twenties or early thirties, guard the fields, sometimes accompanied by one or two Chinese workers. The presence of non-local male translators may put pressure on the women at work, but the absence of seniority impacts on gender interactions in the fields and in a way that reverberates out to local society at large.

Honour and Pride

In Tajikistan, seniority is particularly articulated in relation to family honour (*nomus*), which is consid-

ered a fundamental value (Harris 2004; Behzadi 2019). The ingrained importance of honour and pride, in tandem with patriarchal order and social control, disciplines women's private and public behaviour. This includes interactions with strangers, such as non-local Tajik and Chinese men. In most families, Tajik women are fated to undertake the roles of mothers, and carers, responsible for household chores. The way in which they act outside the home can affect a family's possibilities to marry off their offspring and thus has a real impact on the family's future prosperity. While divorce is becoming more common, separating still stigmatises both the woman involved and her family. Many consider marriage to be essential for both women's identity and their protection. It is also worth noting that for many men and women, marriage is seen as a means of protection.

However, as Negar Elodie Behzadi (2019) has described, women's exclusion from the public sphere can, to an extent, be attributed to the importance of male honour in society. Not all women gain permission from their family to work outside the home, where they might interact with unknown men. As a result, women engaged in work outside the home have to walk a tightrope between shame and pride, exploitation and remuneration, and family honour and stigmatisation. Sometimes women taking the lead, such as female farm brigadiers, gain local respect as strong and active women, but they may also be condemned or disrespected for their liberal way of engaging with men, by both female and male neighbours. Rumours often circulate about women working in public spaces—including not only in Chinese companies but also in Tajik teahouses—being divorced or widows, both of which are translated into *beva* in Tajik language—a term that carries a negative connotation.

Single women in Tajikistan may enjoy more autonomy in choosing how they earn an income, but in many cases their extended family still exerts substantial social control due to the considerations for the family's prosperity mentioned above. For married young women and unmarried daughters, the negotiating, bargaining, and decision-making over female labour and fieldwork take place in the private realm, over or after dinner. Whether or

not women are allowed to work outside the home depends often not only on their husbands (present or abroad), but also on the parents-in-law. Women's public engagement and their ability to do so are also related to one's life stage, as are modalities of agency. When women, either married or unmarried, are permitted to engage in the labour market, out of perceived financial necessity or otherwise, the farm work—which is outside the private sphere and outside direct patriarchal control—allows them a space in which to socialise. They can enjoy time among other female workers to gossip, chat, talk about the latest village news, last night's TV soap series, children, and men. Some may even flirt, as the vignette at the beginning of this essay illustrates. Some women can and do choose to do this despite exploitative labour relations.

Whereas some women prefer to stay at home to engage in caring and unpaid domestic work, work other than household chores is also valued highly as it allows women to experience an identity other than that of mother and carer, breaking them out of their isolated position. Their identity changes from wife, daughter, or sister-in-law, to independent worker. However, in so doing, they must strike a balance, as noted above, between shame and honour, agency, and self-respect. By acknowledging this and discerning the more refined ways in which agency—and sometimes contestation and resistance—are expressed, we can, instead of solely addressing the vulnerability of women, also recognise and appreciate their dignity and modalities of agency other than those commonly attended to. Women are not only or always passive actors subject to the power plays of a male authority. Their wishes and desires shape their actions and choices, even if their ability to chase their goals is restricted.

Intermarriages

Working for Chinese companies exposes women to intercultural interactions that make clear the cultural differences in gender and power relationships. Vis-a-vis foreign men, particularly when relationships of dependency are reversed

such as in the interaction between Tajik female translators and Chinese men, Tajik women may come to appreciate a sense of self-esteem more strongly. Intercultural interactions may also trigger interest, curiosity, and desire, in spite of all the possible negative repercussions this might have for a woman's status. There exist great obstacles to personal relationships between Tajik women and Chinese men, which go well beyond cultural differences and language barriers. Tajik women may find themselves having to contest patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti 1988), as there is a strong social resistance to them having personal relationships with Chinese men.

As such, relationships and labour encounters between Tajik women and Chinese men offer a glimpse of the resistance of local patriarchal society to these interactions. As most Chinese actors in Tajikistan are male, female Tajik translators—who most often have studied for a year or more in China—translate for and interact predominantly with male Chinese colleagues and bosses. While the potential financial rewards of working for a Chinese company may convince parents and/or partners to support this type of work, these workers are often the recipients of attention in the public sphere. Intermarriages between Tajik women and Chinese men are even more controversial. This type of marriage is rare and mostly confined to urban areas. While the limited number of marriages between Chinese and Tajik individuals is partially due to the limited interaction between the two groups, stigmatisation is a more important factor inhibiting this type of relationship. As one Chinese friend married to a Tajik woman recently told me: 'If a Tajik woman and a Chinese man are married, it is very embarrassing for them to walk on the street.'

Only sporadically does one hear of personal relationships between Chinese men and Tajik women in the countryside. Indeed, such cases are so rare and controversial they become widely discussed topics. For instance, when I raised the taboo around Tajik-Chinese romantic relations in a conversation with a Tajik female friend and her husband, my friend commented: 'The divorced woman living next door was close with one of the Chinese labourers of the Chinese agribusiness

nearby, Mr Bean.’ ‘Mr Bean?’ I asked, raising my eyebrows. ‘Yes, Mr Bean, that’s the man’s name, it’s a Chinese name.’ ‘No, I don’t think so,’ I answered, and referred to Rowan Atkinson’s popular character. My friend’s husband started laughing. ‘Well, never mind,’ my friend continued, as she did not know who had come up with the name. She explained that the divorced female neighbour, who lived with her elderly father and the family of her older brother, had been forced to stop working in the fields of the Chinese agribusiness after this older brother—aged in his fifties and living in Russia—was informed about the gossip about his younger sister.

The issue of relationships and marriages between Tajik women and Chinese men continues to spark substantial debates also at the national level. Given the sex ratio resulting from male outbound labour migration, some fear that single women will opt for marrying a Chinese male labour migrant in the absence of Tajik men and the discourse of a ‘husband crisis’ has emerged. Marriages between Tajik women and Chinese men are perceived as more problematic than other intercultural relationships, particularly with regard to a feared loss of Tajik identity and Muslimhood, and the idea that most contact concerns prostitution. To prevent Tajik women from engaging with Chinese men, as well as to prevent prostitution, voices in Tajik society call for legalisation of polygyny (on polygyny, see also Thibault 2018).

The controversies concerning prostitution and Chinese–Tajik relationships recently came to the fore after two incidents. First, a Chinese smallholder farmer, living in solitude next to his farm fields in a peri-urban area close to the Tajik capital city, Dushanbe, and whom I had visited earlier in 2020, was killed. The news came as a great shock to some within the Chinese resident community in Tajikistan. Because there was no meaningful support from the Chinese Embassy, some in the Chinese community mobilised to take care of the funeral and communicate with the man’s relatives back in China. According to local media and authorities, the man was killed by a young Tajik woman who worked in his fields and with whom he used to have sexual intercourse. It was said that one night she had refused and, in a fight,

hit him with a heavy item, eventually causing his death. While Tajik people in the vicinity remained relatively silent, the case provoked debate in the Tajik media. That the woman was engaged in sexual intercourse out of financial need was taken for granted in local reactions on social media and the news triggered outspoken expressions of anti-China sentiment, as well as accusations against the woman’s family for their supposed lack of care that led to her bedding her boss. And, again, it was suggested to legalise polygyny, as it would offer protection against prostitution and/or marriages to Chinese men. The second incident happened more recently and concerned an article posted online by Chinese media about alleged details on prostitution in various countries, including Tajikistan (see Muhammadi 2021). The fact that it was taken up and received quite some attention exemplify that Chinese–Tajik relationships are contentious, more so than other intercultural relationships, and that a part of Tajik society considers the growing presence of Chinese actors in Tajikistan as a threat to Tajik women, in addition to other perceptions.’

Challenging Labour Relations

Going back to the farms described earlier in this essay, Tajik women in rural areas also find ways to exert their agency when working for Chinese-owned agribusinesses. Interactions between Chinese men and Tajik women in rural Tajikistan have increased since Chinese agribusinesses started farming in the country’s southwest. Women in poverty-stricken rural areas of the country often have little choice but to engage in manual farm work, which is locally understood as typical women’s work, and the cotton fields of Chinese-run farm holdings offer them an opportunity. The wage they receive is necessary for family survival and, in most localities, the Chinese agribusinesses pay slightly more than do local farmers. Although the work is perceived as tough, protests or demands remain limited. People rarely resign, simply because of the need to make a living. After all, protests might result in layoffs.

However, female workers do express discontent—and demonstrate sometimes effective forms of agency—in other ways. First, silent but very effective forms of protest that women in Tajikistan have been using are voting with their feet and foot dragging—two instances of Scottian ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott 1985). One group of women in the locality in which I resided refused to work on the Chinese farm fields until the company management met their demands. As one of them told me:

We are not going to work until they raise the payment and construct a shaded place for lunch time ... It is terribly hot out there, and there is also no clean drinking water. We discussed this in our brigade and agreed all together to stay away.

In this case, the refusal to work did not last long, as the workers stood to lose too much because their employer used a system of delayed remuneration (they were paid only every five or 10 working days), which binds labourers and enforces commitment—a method also usually applied by locally owned businesses. In fact, delayed remuneration and piece-rate payments as means to control the quality of labour severely constrain the ability of workers to resort to this method of protest. In particular, foot dragging may eventually put the women on the losing end. For instance, when Chinese workers were not satisfied with the quality of work on the cotton fields, they demanded a brigade redo the work.

Besides voting with their feet and foot dragging, another way in which Tajik female workers exert their agency is pilfering. When it comes to male labourers, small-scale theft is of agricultural inputs, such as small amounts of precious cotton seed. In the case of women, pilfering of raw cotton in the evenings or during regular picking hours appears to be a frequent act. Women hide it in separate bags or under their *kurta* (dress) during work. When pilferers are caught in the act, local men or women may protect their fellow villagers, but Chinese management may fine a brigadier by withholding a day payment. To prevent pilfering, Chinese companies have been forced to intensify surveillance around harvest time, day and night. During regular

work hours, many young men patrol the fields. According to my interviewees, this frequent small-scale theft of cotton—a phenomenon I observed in different localities in southwest Tajikistan—is something relatively new, which has increased since the arrival of mini-factories (imported from China) enabling the processing of small volumes of cotton. As a result, cotton theft in both Chinese and locally owned fields is more pervasive now than it was under Soviet rule. However, while social networks may hinder theft on locally owned farms, things are different in a setting with less social control, such as on the fields of Chinese agribusinesses, which are often more remote.

While it might be easy for local men to correct, discipline, or warn women, Chinese men face more challenges in doing so. In one locality, local male translators told me their Chinese company had introduced a curfew for its expatriate employees after some of them had been arguing with women in the fields. Instead, the male translators and local male villagers were instructed to patrol the fields in the evenings. Tajik workers told me that Chinese workers—perhaps due to their high turnover rate—are not always well informed about local customs, as arguing with an unknown woman, or even touching her, is not acceptable in Tajikistan.

The language barrier hampers detailed guidance and mutual understanding in the workplace, and the fact that local translators tend to lack experience in farming creates an additional obstacle—at least at the outset. As a result, the verbal contact between Tajik workers (male and female alike) and their Chinese counterparts is limited to fragmented sentences and single terms in a mixture of languages. In one locality, as a Tajik female labourer told me, Chinese workers addressed all women with the Tajik name ‘Mariam’. In turn, Tajik women had started calling Chinese men ‘Bakha’ (the short version of the Tajik name Bakh-tiyor). One farmer in another locality explained to me that when Chinese workers are not satisfied with the quality of cotton delivered by local farmers, they say ‘*khona, khona*’ (‘home, home’), indicating that they find the cotton of inferior quality and will not accept it.



A Tajik female brigade working in the cotton fields of a Chinese-Tajik agribusiness, August 2020. PC: Irna Hofman.

Despite these barriers, workers (both Tajik and Chinese) can also express discontent through their speech. On Chinese company bases, to indicate good work, or bad work, or fixed or broken items, both Chinese and Tajik workers use simple Russian terms, such as *‘Plokho, plokho’* (‘bad, bad’) or *‘khorosho, khorosho’* (‘good, good’), with thumbs up or down. In some teams, these words have taken on some ironic connotations. In two instances, when a Chinese man seemed unhappy, or after two Chinese argued with each other, the Tajik workers commented: *‘Plokho, plokho, vodka? Vodka?!’* This kind of interaction in broken and mixed languages seems reminiscent of the observations of Driessen (2020), who closely interrogated the use of language (pidgin) on Chinese–Ethiopian road-building sites. I also noticed that wordplay and references to cultural differences were common, including nicknames, such as the naming of ‘Mr Bean’, mentioned earlier; in another locality, local male workers nicknamed a Chinese manager ‘the thick’ (*ghafs*) because of his physical appearance. The selective use of such terms and words—presumably not understood by the foreign counterpart—point to wordplay and covert agency.

Rarely do women (or, in fact, workers in general) protest overtly, but local discussions are quite common. Only in one case did I hear about women who mobilised to protest the alleged high levels of pesticides applied by a Chinese company, reporting illnesses, allergies, and even fertility problems. On that occasion, they managed to bring their concerns to the local procurator but were eventually silenced due to elite pressure. Women thereupon refused to continue working. Such a collective protest is rarely seen when the local patriarchal order and social networks are in place, and it contrasts with the more common subtle forms of subversion described earlier.

Probing the Dominant Rhetoric

Tajik–Chinese gendered encounters take on a blend of characteristics. There is empathy, affection, as well as indifference, fear, and condemnation, but the positive dimensions of appreciation of, and desire for, Chinese individuals and Chinese people

are often overlooked and downplayed in both rural and urban Tajikistan. Whereas Chinese companies in the country emphasise the win-win of cooperation and investment, most rhetoric as well as literature on China in Central Asia suggests and presumes widespread anti-China sentiment and relegates local actors to the role of passive victims of exploitation. While fully aware of the hardships faced by workers in the fields of rural Tajikistan, I aimed in this essay to probe their agency vis-a-vis their Chinese colleagues and superiors. What I found is that ‘the advent of new investors transforms local identities’ (Behzadi 2019: 151), albeit in highly diverse ways. There is more ambivalence than often is acknowledged. As Tajik elites reap benefits from Chinese diplomatic initiatives and investment, others attempt to take advantage in various ways, too. This includes Tajik women, who can find subtle ways to challenge domination both in the realm of the extended family and from Chinese employers. Whereas the Soviet and Tajik civil war legacies and contemporary politics partially explain the near voiceless forms of resistance they employ, these women are never entirely powerless (see also Harris 2004).

Tajik women’s agency in the interstices of patriarchal order remains overlooked. We need to attend to different forms of agency and the diversity in desires. Yet no-one is completely powerless or unable to gain some self-respect in entanglement. Resistance and agency are expressed and demonstrated for different reasons and in a plethora of ways—sometimes subtle, sometimes outspoken and tangible. While anti-China protests are reported and even tracked nowadays, ethnographic interaction is essential to study the ways in which less-connected and less-privileged actors navigate their environment and express themselves. Furthermore, female empowerment in rural Central Asia has been at the core of the international donor community’s activities for many years. While through grants and training women may perceive opportunities to spur their individual household economy, donors’ approaches tend to be paternalistic. While I do not ignore the often-exploitative nature of women’s work for Chinese agribusinesses, pronounced paternalistic attitudes are absent on the work floor—a situation

that may, make women aware of their collective strength and ability to protest exploitative farm work in Tajikistan. ■

The agribusinesses described in this essay are officially Chinese-Tajik joint ventures, but in practice they are run by the Chinese side and locally referred to as Chinese. For that reason, I refer to these companies as ‘Chinese’ in this essay.

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China's Overseas Coal Pledge

What Next for Cambodia's Energy Development?

Stung Hav coal power plants.
PC: (CC) Dmitry Makeev.

Mark GRIMSDITCH

For over a decade, the development of Cambodia's energy infrastructure has been dependent on investment, financing, and construction from Chinese companies and banks. With hydropower proving highly susceptible to recent droughts, Cambodia sought to diversify generation sources and approved a number of coal-fired power plants. All but one of Cambodia's proposed, under construction, and operational coal plants have some level of involvement from Chinese stakeholders. However, Xi Jinping's announcement that China would cease building overseas coal plants could again result in Cambodia shifting focus to other energy-generation options.

In September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced in a speech to the UN General Assembly that China aimed to hit peak carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 (Xi 2020). The statement focused on China's domestic emissions, but in the months that followed, there was much speculation about what it would mean for China's involvement in overseas coal power plants. Just short of one year later—again, in a speech to the General Assembly—President Xi addressed this speculation, stating that China would no longer build new coal-fired power plants abroad (Xi 2021). This section of the speech is worth quoting in full:

We need to improve global environmental governance, actively respond to climate change and create a community of life for

man and nature. We need to accelerate transition to a green and low-carbon economy and achieve green recovery and development. China will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. This requires tremendous hard work, and we will make every effort to meet these goals. *China will step up support for other developing countries in developing green and low-carbon energy, and will not build new coal-fired power projects abroad.* (Xi 2021; emphasis added)

After years of campaigning by local and international civil society groups to bring an end to the construction of new coal plants, this statement was welcomed, but a number of questions remain. What does ‘build’ mean? Which projects will be regarded as ‘new’? When will this come into effect?

As documented in various project profiles on *The People’s Map of Global China*, Chinese energy projects often involve a diverse range of actors, all of which, in their own ways, contribute to the ‘building’ of coal power plants. While public attention often falls on the project developer, Chinese policy and commercial banks provide financing, insurers such as Sinosure provide risk guarantees, and (usually state-owned) Chinese firms are brought on board as engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contractors. Subcontracts are then awarded to other firms for survey and design work, inspection and monitoring, equipment supply, and construction of components for the plant and supporting infrastructure (Zhang 2021). If Xi’s statement is interpreted broadly, the interests of a huge number of actors are potentially at stake.

The question of which projects will be regarded as ‘new’ is crucial. A conservative interpretation could exclude projects that are already under discussion, whereas a broader reading, and one that climate campaigners, including my organisation Inclusive Development International, and affected communities are pushing for, is all projects that have not yet reached financial close—that is, signed a binding financing agreement. Complex and expensive energy projects may sit in the pipeline for years as they are studied, discussed,

restudied, and shepherded through host-country approval processes. Even when EPC contracts are signed, they often stipulate the contract will come into effect only when the project reaches financial close and secures insurance. Because of this protracted project cycle, many Chinese-linked coal plants around the world are now in a state of limbo as developers wait to see how state agencies, banks, and insurers formalise their positions in light of Xi’s announcement.

While we wait for a clearer signal on how President Xi’s speech will be interpreted, a few actors have taken the initiative and publicly set out their own positions. One of the first movers was the Bank of China. Just three days after the General Assembly speech, the bank announced that, from 1 October 2021, except for projects for which an agreement is already signed, it would no longer provide financing for new overseas coal mining and coal power projects (Bank of China 2021). Private steel company Tsingshan Holding Group was even faster to react and, within 24 hours, issued a statement saying it would ‘proactively implement the spirit’ of the announcement by moving away from overseas coal power projects and prioritise hydro-power, wind, and solar (Tsingshan 2021).

Both announcements are significant. Bank of China is one of the largest financiers of coal plants in the world (Bank of Coal 2021) and, although a commercial bank, it is majority state-owned. Importantly, the bank’s statement goes a step further than Xi’s by excluding coal mining and may also give an indication of how ‘new’ will be interpreted by other financial institutions. The move by Tsingshan could also have major impacts, as it is the world’s largest steel producer and the driving force behind the huge steel and nickel production complex Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (Ginting and Moore forthcoming). The park has its own dedicated power stations, with 1.26 GW generated from coal. There were plans to expand this capacity, but these may now be reassessed. Just the month prior, the Tsingshan announcement, the company signed a contract with China Energy Engineering Corporation to build three 380 MW coal power units in Morowali. It is unclear whether this contract will be affected by Tsingshan’s new commitment (Seetao 2021).

Amid such uncertainty, countries that have included new coal plants in their near-term national energy planning—such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Pakistan—may find themselves having to rapidly adjust these plans (Yu 2021). Another country that could feel the impacts of this shift in both the near and the long term is Cambodia. Chinese capital has played a huge role in developing the country’s energy infrastructure and, in addition to operational plants and those under construction, Cambodia is depending on as-yet-unrealised coal projects to meet the power demands predicted by its energy planners. Looking at the Cambodian case, therefore, can yield some insights into the challenges ahead as China shifts away from coal.

China’s Role in Developing Cambodian Coal Power Plants

As I discussed in another essay earlier this year (Grimsditch 2021), all but one of Cambodia’s proposed, under construction, and operational coal plants have some level of involvement from Chinese stakeholders. Chinese investment, finance, and aid have played an indispensable role in drastically expanding Cambodia’s energy-generation and transmission infrastructure and boosting domestic generation capacity. The role of Chinese companies

| Project | Chinese Developer | Financing | Project status | Installed capacity |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| CIIDG Erdos Hongjun Sihanoukville Coal Power Plant | Erdos Group | Bank of China | Operational | 405 MW |
| CIIDG-Huadian Sihanoukville Coal Power Plant | Huadian Group | ICBC | Under construction | 700 MW |
| Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone Coal Power Plant | Wuxi Guolian | ICBC, Bank of China | Under construction | 100 MW |
| Oddar Meanchey Coal Power Plant | Guodian Kangneng | Unknown | Under construction | 265 MW |
| Botum Sakor Coal Power Plant | Sinosteel | Unknown | Under preparation | 700 MW |
| Total | | | | 2,170 MW |

Table 1: Cambodian Coal Plants Developed by Chinese Companies.

is so extensive that, by 2018, almost three-quarters of Cambodia's domestic power supply came from Chinese-built and financed power plants (Mao and Nguon 2018). Much of the power generated reaches businesses and homes via transmission lines that, in many cases, are also Chinese funded and built; according to the then Chinese Ambassador, as of mid-2019, about 8,000 kilometres of transmission lines had been built by Chinese companies (Huang 2019).

Chinese companies are the driving force behind five coal plants, one of which is operational, three under construction, and one in the stage of clearing and preparing land (see Table 1).

The development of these projects came in response to the Cambodian Government's drive to expand energy-generating capacity and ensure stable and affordable power. While Chinese investment in power projects initially focused on hydro-power, the precarity of Cambodia's reliance on dams for close to 50 per cent of its power was laid bare during recent droughts. This resulted in the fast-tracking of approval for the Botum Sakor and Oddar Meanchey plants (Grimsditch 2021).

The expansion of coal power in Cambodia has alarmed not only environmentalists, but also private sector actors, principally manufacturers who produce or source products from Cambodia and who have made pledges to green their supply chains (Grimsditch 2021; Turton 2020). Some estimates suggest that current energy planning puts Cambodia on track to an energy mix that is more than 75 per cent dependent on fossil fuels by 2030 (Zein 2020)—a huge jump from the 51 per cent in 2019 (Electricity Authority of Cambodia 2020). This shift could push companies with public commitments to move towards 100 per cent renewable supply chains to take their business elsewhere (Ford 2020). Vietnam has committed to a target of 30 per cent renewables in its energy mix by 2030 (Tachev 2021) and is moving towards allowing companies to buy power directly from renewable energy producers, which will likely create further competition for Cambodia (Nguyen 2021).

On the ground, the full impacts of Cambodia's already operational coal plants are not well understood. Most have not made their environmental impact assessments widely available and, if there

is monitoring being conducted of air and water pollution, it is not being published. Cambodia now has three operational coal plants and one under construction, with this coal power concentrated along a stretch of Preah Sihanouk Province's coastline, and one plant under preparation across the Bay of Kampong Som in Koh Kong Province. This is an important marine fishery for local people and no studies have been published that examine the impacts of industrialisation of this coastline.

One of the most immediate impacts on those living in the vicinity of the existing plants in Stung Hav District, Preah Sihanouk Province, has been pollution from coal ash waste. Companies purchase the waste ash and process it for use in products such as cement. For years, media have reported on the plight of villagers close to the ash-processing factories, who reported suffering rashes, sores, hair loss, and breathing problems because of the ash falling on their homes (Pike 2019; Sony and Keeton-Olsen 2021). The largest ash-processing factory in the area was finally closed in 2021 after years of warnings from local government (Soth 2019; Ouch and Keeton-Olsen 2021). However, as more coal plants come online, the amount of ash and other types of waste will increase, as will associated harms to local communities, inevitably testing the already stretched regulatory capacities of provincial and environmental authorities.

How Might Xi's Statement Impact Cambodia's Coal Power Plants?

While noting that there is still a lack of clarity around how President Xi's statement will be interpreted and implemented, given the centrality of Chinese investment and finance to Cambodia's energy sector, it is important to assess the impact this may have on the country's power development. Of the projects currently under construction, the 700 MW CIIDG–Huadian plant and 100 MW Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SEZ) plants are well advanced and have received financing from



Power lines running through Cambodia's countryside. PC: Dmitry Makeev (CC).

Chinese commercial banks (Ham 2021a, 2021b). These projects are unlikely to be affected by Xi's statement.

The situation for the Oddar Meanchey and Botum Sakor plants is less clear. The 265 MW Oddar Meanchey plant is under construction, but this has been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ham 2021c). The lead EPC contractor of the Cambodian-Chinese joint venture, Guodian Kang-neng Technology, reports that the project will be financed 25 per cent by the developers' equity and 75 per cent through bank financing. It provides no information on which bank(s), and no information could be found indicating the project had reached financial close. The Botum Sakor plant has a similar equity-finance structure (IDI 2021). In November 2020, local company Royal Group signed an EPC contract for the project with Sinosteel, and one of the conditions for the contract to become effective was the project reaching financial close (Sinosteel International 2020). Again, no further information is accessible confirming whether financial close was achieved. If the two projects are not yet fully financed, Xi's no-coal pledge could have serious impacts for the developers.

The statement could also have potential impacts beyond Cambodia's borders that will have to be reckoned with. Cambodia still imports power from neighbouring countries to meet domestic demand and, in September 2019, signed an agreement with Laos to purchase 2,400 MW of electricity over 30 years (Khan 2019). These purchases were set to begin in 2024, with power coming from two as-yet unbuilt coal power plants in Xekong Province (Xinhua 2019). Cambodia approved a new US\$330-million 500 kV transmission line linking Phnom Penh to the Laos border to facilitate this power transfer (Thou 2020). This raised serious concerns among conservation groups, as the powerlines will run directly through the heart of Prey Lang Forest, a wildlife sanctuary and the largest of Southeast Asia's few remaining major lowland forests (Keeton-Olsen 2020). There is limited transparency around the status of these plants and who is developing them, but Chinese companies are connected to at least one of them (MofCOM 2013). If they have not yet reached financial close, they could also be in jeopardy.

While we can only speculate on whether the projects in Cambodia and Laos will be impacted by China's move away from overseas coal, if these projects are indeed dropped by Chinese firms and banks, it could leave a sizeable hole in Cambodia's power development plan. To date, Cambodia's strong reliance on Chinese energy infrastructure investment has been a boon in terms of enhancing domestic generation capacity, but also leaves the country exposed to policy shifts within China. With the global coal power industry on the rocks, various countries including key coal financiers South Korea and Japan have moved to stop public finance flowing to overseas coal projects, followed by several key commercial banks (IDI 2020). While these commitments vary in terms of their comprehensiveness, the pool of coal financing available is drying up, and the likelihood that non-Chinese actors will step in to finance coal power around the world is increasingly slim.

Developing Green and Low-Carbon Energy

While committing to stop building new overseas coal plants, President Xi also said: 'China will step up support for other developing countries in developing green and low-carbon energy.' Even though no concrete measures in this sense have been announced yet, in 2019, China was described by the International Renewable Energy Agency as 'the world's largest producer, exporter and installer of solar panels, wind turbines, batteries and electric vehicles, placing it at the forefront of the global energy transition' (IRENA 2019: 40). As such, it is well placed to make such a commitment a reality.

Both China and countries that heavily rely on Chinese-backed coal plants now find themselves at a crossroads and, once again, Cambodia is a good example of this dilemma. Even if all existing

| Company | Role | Province | Status | Installed capacity |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| JinkoSolar | Provide solar panels | Kampong Speu | Operational | 60 MW |
| Risen Energy | Developer | Battambang | Operational | 60 MW |
| China Energy Engineering Group | EPC contractor | Banteay Meanchey | Operational | 39 MW |
| JA Solar Technology | Provide solar panels | | | |
| JinkoSolar | Provide solar panels | Kampong Chhnang | Operational | 60 MW |
| JinkoSolar | Provide solar panels | Pursat | Under construction | 30 MW |
| China CACS Engineering | EPC contractor | Kampong Chhnang | Under construction | 60 MW |
| Total | | | | 309 MW |

Table 2: Cambodian Solar Power Projects with Chinese Involvement.

coal power projects in Cambodia move forward as planned, there is unlikely to be financing to cover new plants in the future, yet power demand will continue to grow. Although China views hydropower as green technology, such projects often come with extensive environmental and social impacts and in some cases have proved highly controversial in Cambodia (see, for instance, Mahanty 2021, on the Lower Sesan 2 Dam). There are plans to increase imports of natural gas and develop national infrastructure for its distribution, but this will not address the worsening climate crisis.

Cambodia's renewable energy industry is nascent and growing slowly, but China's move away from overseas coal could represent an important catalyst for its development. Cambodia has now approved at least 11 solar power projects; Chinese actors are involved in more than half of these.

As can be seen in table 2, the installed capacity from Chinese-linked solar projects is a little more than one-tenth of that of Chinese coal plants. However, there is much potential for Cambodia's solar industry to grow. In September 2021, a Chinese company received approval for a US\$30-million solar panel factory, which could further improve the competitiveness of the solar market (Phal 2021). Cambodia does not yet have any wind farms, but a Chinese firm is currently studying a US\$200-million 100 MW wind farm in eastern Mondulkiri Province (Hin 2021).

For the past few years, there has been a gradual shift in Chinese overseas energy investment, with renewables on the rise (Springer 2020). However, Chinese renewable energy companies face challenges expanding globally and have been less likely to receive state financing than firms involved in traditional energy. It is important to consider here the 'pull' and 'push' factors at play (Kong and Gallagher 2021). On the one hand, Chinese investment is generally market and demand driven. If a country does not actively seek financing for renewables and if local market circumstances are not favourable, it is much less likely to attract investors. On the other hand, China's policy banks often view overseas renewables as unattractive as they have less experience financing such projects, which are

often small in scale and distributed (rather than grid-based), and of much lower value. Financing multiple smaller projects creates more work for bank investment managers and makes it harder to hit lending targets.

Meanwhile, Cambodian energy planners have been reluctant to move decisively towards renewables, often presenting the technology as unproven or unable to meet demand. A recent *Nikkei Asian Review* article quoted a director-general from Cambodia's Ministry of Mines and Energy defending the fast-tracking of fossil fuel projects as a necessary balance between 'green' and 'the economy' (Turton 2021). However, renewable energy advocates challenge this calculation. Local nongovernmental organisation (NGO) EnergyLab Cambodia argues that current modelling shows solar, wind, and storage can build on the already operational fossil and hydropower output and meet demand, and at a lower overall system cost (McIntosh 2021). The economic argument for shifting to renewables has been bolstered by the recent rocketing price of coal, which in the past 12 months has almost quadrupled (Duguet 2021). Cambodia's shift to coal was in part motivated by a desire to increase energy security and reduce dependence on imports, yet operational plants are 100 per cent fuelled by imported coal—almost all of which comes from Indonesia. This means Cambodia is exposed to both price volatility in the coal market and the risk of supply chain disruptions.

The above calculation does not consider the economic costs of the health impacts of polluting energy projects or the costs associated with decommissioning plants when they reach the end of their operating life. Nor does it consider the millions of dollars that could be generated by nurturing a local renewable energy industry, with parts of the production based in Cambodia, generating revenue and jobs, and providing economic stimulus to support the country through the post-COVID-19 economic contraction. NGOs are not the only ones championing renewables for Cambodia. In an interview with *The Third Pole*, Pou Sothirak, an academic and former Minister for Industry, Mines and Energy, National Assembly member, and Cambodian Ambassador to Japan, stated:

Solar energy represents a viable prospect for meeting energy demand in Cambodia and diversifies renewable power. For a nation that counts on large dams, fossil fuels and coal power to meet increased energy demand, solar energy in Cambodia has potential to be a significant step toward a lower-carbon electricity grid. Solar is a renewable energy that allows Cambodia to opt away from controversial hydropower that could adversely affect the Mekong River and it reduces Cambodia's dependence on fossil fuel-generated power. (Roney 2021)

A New Chapter in 'Greening' the Belt and Road?

President Xi's statement came as a surprise to many, perhaps including stakeholders who have significant interests in the construction of overseas coal plants. In particular, state-owned construction companies that have 'gone global' have benefited hugely from coal plant contracts, and they could take a significant hit. With coal plants representing such a large portion of China's global energy portfolio, it will not be a simple task to shift focus, but countries like Cambodia, with still developing energy infrastructure, present promising testing grounds for an invigorated push into renewable energy development. In Cambodia and beyond, excluding the most polluting forms of overseas energy projects could represent a major shift towards the 'Green Belt and Road' China has been promoting. ■

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam, Cambodia

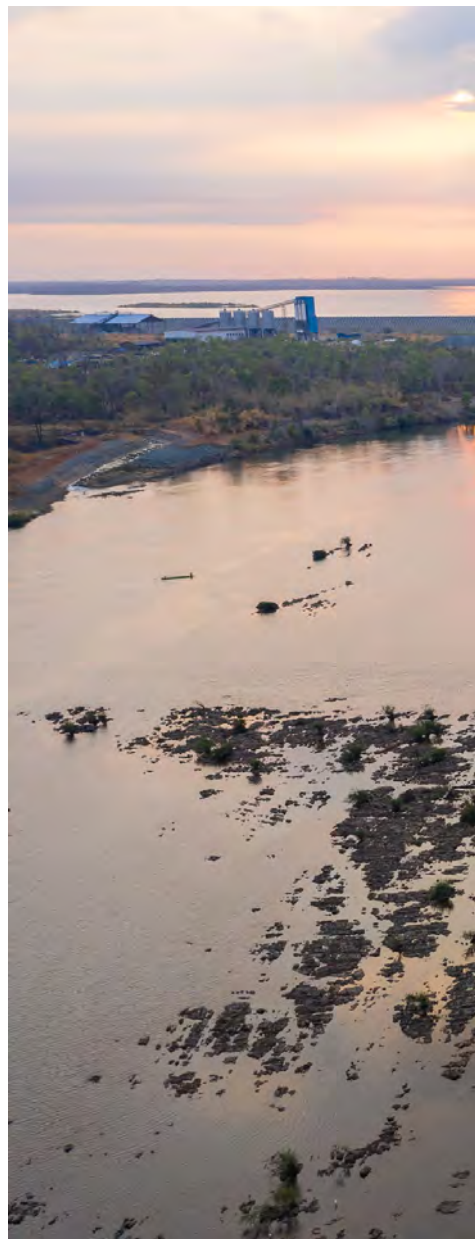
Ruptured Worlds

A Photo Essay on the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, Cambodia

Text by Sarah MILNE and Sango MAHANTY,
Photos by Thomas CRISTOFOLETTI

Infrastructure is often introduced using basic facts. For instance, the Lower Sesan 2 Dam is Cambodia's largest dam, located on the Sesan River, which is a major tributary of the Mekong. Other key pieces of information are that the project was approved in 2012, became operational in 2018, and has since directly displaced some 5,000 local villagers from their homelands and flooded more than 30,000 hectares. The 400-megawatt facility is now owned by a Chinese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese joint venture and, although plans for the project long pre-date the existence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is now labelled a BRI project (Mahanty 2021).

Yet, the numbers we use to describe a dam's impact—hectares under water, number of people displaced, tonnes of fish lost—are often inadequate or 'flat' (Sousanis 2015). Numbers cannot convey the enormity and complexity of transformation that is wrought by megaprojects such as the Lower Sesan 2 Dam. Nor can they convey how contestation continues over this dam, in relation to indigenous resettlement, livelihoods, resources, human rights violations, and cumulative environmental impacts (HRW 2021). Take, for instance, the terrifying failure of the Tonle Sap flood pulse in recent years (Fawthrop 2020). This floodplain lake is Asia's largest freshwater fishery, and it depends on monsoonal inflows from rivers like the Sesan and Mekong. The Lower Sesan 2 Dam has contributed to this emerging crisis.





Dry-season aerial view of Lower Sesan 2 Dam, where reduced downstream flows are changing aquatic systems and squeezing livelihoods. Photo taken on 6 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



Two workers survey the dam wall. Of the 150 technical staff on site, about half are Cambodian; the rest are Chinese (Asia Vision Institute 2020). Photo taken on 6 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



So, if ‘the numbers’ are insufficient, how can we understand Cambodia’s Lower Sesan 2 Dam and the magnitude of its impacts? As Emily Raboteau suggests (2021), in discussing the climate crisis, perhaps art can provide a soft pathway into this dark subject.

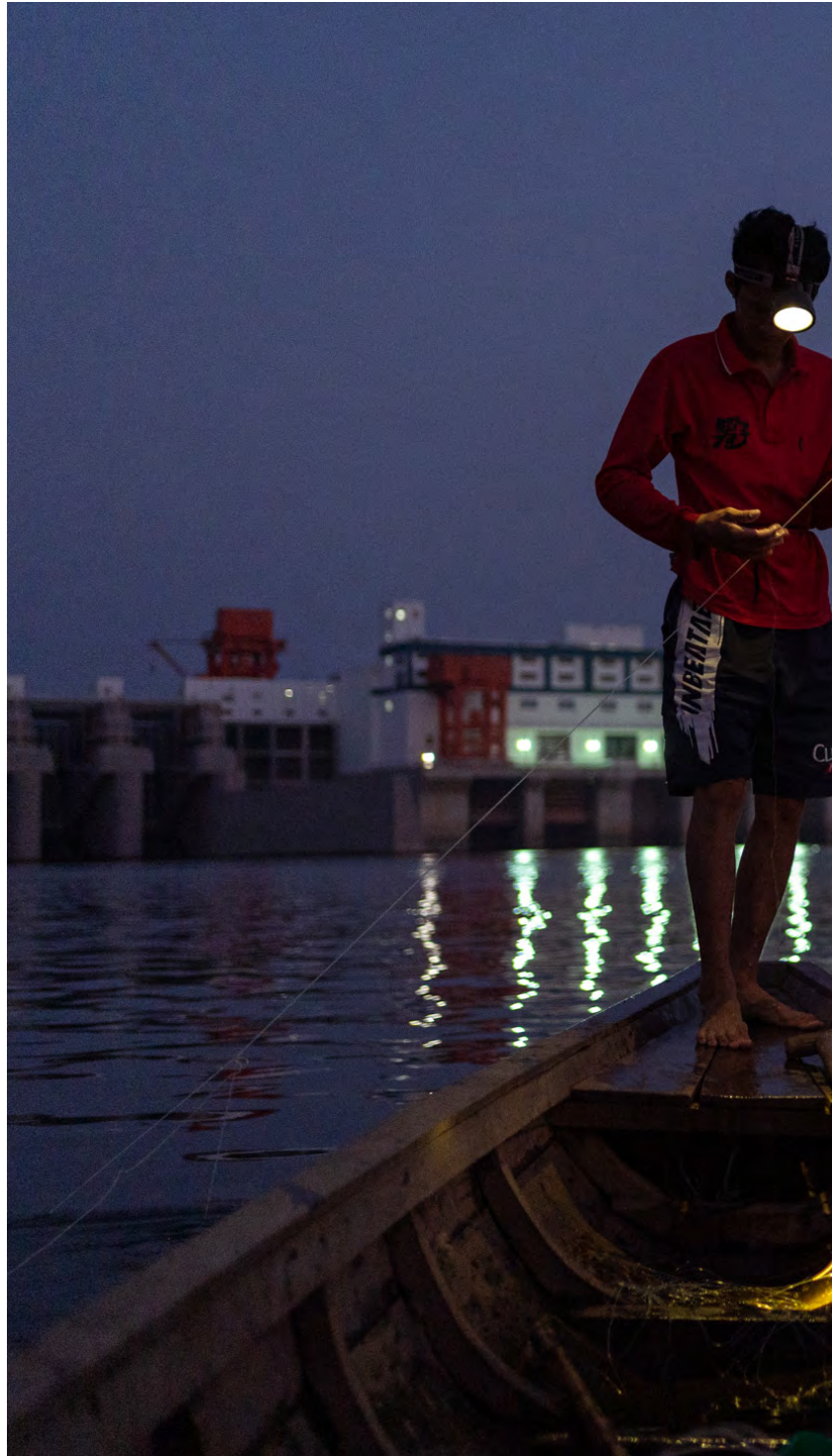
Art does provide a powerful medium for interpreting what is confronting or unfathomable. It can therefore apply to the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, which showcases how mega-infrastructure projects can send ripple effects across time and space, often in ways that are beyond ordinary human perception. Given this, mega-infrastructure projects may be classified as what Timothy Morton (2013) termed ‘hyperobjects’—entities, like climate change or plastic pollution, which cannot easily be grasped because of their vast spatial and temporal dimensions. This notion resonates with our research on ‘rupture’ (Mahanty and Milne 2020), which shows how dams can create ‘open moments’ (Lund 2016) when society and nature are reworked in unpredictable ways. Traditional impact studies cannot capture the gravity of such processes.

Nick Sousanis’ (2015) work on ‘unflattening’ is helpful here: he proposes the use of multiple visual viewpoints to produce new forms of knowledge. Unflattening is therefore a kind of visual reasoning, which can powerfully counteract overly narrow or bounded viewpoints. Sousanis argues that this approach can give rise to new modes of understanding, beyond what we normally perceive—a potentially vital tool for apprehending hyperobjects or ruptures.

The work of photographer Thomas Cristofolletti conveys the power of ‘unflattening’ in the case of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam and its devastating impacts. Cristofolletti initially went to the dam site in 2015 to document indigenous resistance to the project. Since then, his multiple visits have produced remarkable images of human life and landscapes after the dam’s construction, as depicted in this photo essay.

The images play with our perceptions of space and time. For example, using drones, Cristofolletti captures expansive aerial views of the dam site that take us far beyond what we might see from the ground. Juxtaposed with this are intimate portraits of people’s daily lives around the dam, which convey the human dimensions of this tragedy. For these closer shots, Cristofolletti insists on using a 35-millimetre lens. ‘It’s like the human eye, there is no zoom, it forces you to get up close to people,’ he says.

The combination of granular detail, expansive scale, and temporal range in this photo essay provides a visual archaeology of the infrastructure and its effects. While there is a temptation to see beauty in the vast expanses of water and in the skeletal remains of dead forests, Cristofolletti’s intention is clear. This work is about bearing witness or drawing attention to the very real grassroots struggles and human–ecological tragedies that lie beneath sweeping narratives about infrastructure as progress and development.



A man untangles his fishing line below the dam gates. After the dam was built, fishermen from the downstream village of Phluk reported a dramatic fall in their catch. Photo taken on 5 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofletti/Ruom.







[Previous Page, Top] Srae Kor village, submerged by the reservoir since 2017. Villagers who remained on customary lands nearby pass this ghostly sight every time they catch the local ferry. Photo taken on 8 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



[Previous Page, Bottom] Still grieving his lost home, a former Srae Kor resident recalls his community's struggle against the dam. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Top] Rejecting the dam resettlement package, 72 ethnic Lao families rebuilt their homes on customary lands at the edge of the reservoir. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Bottom] With a span of 800 metres, this bridge was made by ethnic Lao villagers to connect two parts of their new settlement, after they relocated from the now inundated Srae Kor village. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Top] An ethnic Lao woman and her son harvest cashew fruits on their small farm near the reservoir. They were among the families who refused the government's relocation package. Photo taken on 7 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



[Bottom] Ghostly remnants of trees near the Srae Kor resettlement village. During the dam construction period, timber extraction was extensive and new settlers came in search of land and resources. Photo taken on 10 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



[Next Page, Top] Upstream from the dam, Lao and Khmer families from Ksach Thmey village lost 30 per cent of their farmlands to the reservoir, and their remaining land is now prone to flooding. No compensation was provided to them. Photo taken on 10 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Bottom] Cattle roam across land that is now uncultivable due to periodic water infiltration and flooding, near Ksach Thmey village. Photo taken on 10 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.







Signs of protest in Kbal Romeas village, before it was flooded. Here, 52 indigenous Bunong families refused the resettlement package and remained nearby on their customary lands after losing their village. Photo taken on 17 August 2016. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



[Top] One-third of the Kbal Romeas resettlement village consists of empty houses, because 52 families refused to take the resettlement package. The process caused rifts within families and across the community. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



[Bottom] When the dam gates closed, a fish boom occurred in the reservoir. Invasive species of fish and shellfish also began to appear. Ethnic Cham settlers from Kampong Cham Province, many of whom were landless or land-poor, moved in to take advantage of the fishery (depicted here), causing conflict with Bunong families from Kbal Romeas. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Top] Settlers from Kampong Cham near New Kbal Romeas cut fish to prepare *prahok*—a kind of fermented fish—for sale. Photo taken on 11 March 2020. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.

[Next Page, Bottom] A young man steers his ferry through stormy waters, transporting goods and people across the new reservoir. Photo taken on 27 April 2018. PC: © Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom.



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Dam, Cambodia



Figure 1: In Koh Phdao, elders watch their children leave to find work outside the village, leaving grandchildren behind in their care. PC: © Sreymao Sao, 2018.

Under the Water

Cambodian Artist Sreymao Sao on the Lived Experience of Hydropower Dams

Soksophea SUONG, Sango MAHANTY,
and Sarah MILNE

In this article, we continue to explore how art can ‘unflatten’ our understanding of mega-infrastructure like the Lower Sesan 2 Dam (see Milne, Mahanty, and Cristofolletti’s essay in this issue). We focus on the remarkable work of Cambodian artist Sreymao Sao, who explores the lived experiences of communities displaced by the Lower Sesan 2 Dam—some 5,000 indigenous and ethnic-minority people from four villages (Mahanty 2021)—as well as those living upstream and downstream.

Sreymao Sao’s work—as seen in her exhibition ‘Under the Water’, a collaboration with Sa Sa Art Projects, shown at the MIRAGE Contemporary Art Space in Siem Reap, Cambodia, from 11 January to 11 February 2019—explores villagers’ changing experience of their rivers, lands, and lives. The title refers both to the villages submerged by the Lower Sesan 2 Dam and to downstream villages along the Mekong River who are geographically ‘under’ this and other dams.

The work resonates with what is now termed ‘socially engaged art’, which is a rising feature of art this century (Coombs 2021). It involves an artistic practice that engages with social contexts through collaborative activities and critical inquiries, stemming from a desire to make a difference, and to address pressing issues like climate change and displacement.

Sreymao’s inspiration for this exhibition came from her previous work with communities along the Mekong River. After graduating in 2006 from Phare, a school for the creative arts in Battambang, Sreymao worked with various nongovernmental organisations on visual arts projects that aimed to explore environmental and social change. This included a community arts project in 2008 in Kratie and Stung Treng provinces, which took her to Koh Phdao—a village on an island in the Mekong River. There, she learned about the power of community arts and developed deep relationships with local families.

When she returned a decade later, Sreymao observed disturbing transformations in Koh Phdao, where local villagers were contending with diminished water flows and reduced fish stocks. She also witnessed villagers’ acute uncertainty about the proposed Sambor Dam, which the government placed on hold in 2020 due to ongoing protests and widespread concerns about its impacts.



In our interview, Sreymao reflects on her exhibition and, more specifically, four of her works. She contrasts the violent disruption that dams impose on flooded villages, through the case of Srae Kor on the Sesan River, with the plight of downstream communities such as Koh Phdao, where change is more incremental. Sreymao's wax sculptures and photographic images overlaid with drawings offer a haunting and emotional archaeology of the lived experience of dams across the riverscape.

Soksophea: Can you tell us how this exhibition came about?

Sreymao: In 2018, my friend and I took a motorbike trip to Koh Phdao, a place I remembered from 2008 as one of the most beautiful I had ever seen. As we drove up, a group of children were playing volleyball in a dusty and smoky field. I was stunned. This was not the village I remembered. There were far fewer people, and many houses were locked up and seemed abandoned. I felt sad when I saw a man sitting alone, silently, in front of his neglected house, which I remembered as once being beautiful, organised, and tidy. He was a 'model farmer' when I knew him before, but his life had been transformed by a visual impairment. A couple who used to cook me meals when I worked there in 2008 had passed away. I felt heartbroken by the changes I observed; some of this may have been due to the dry season, but not all of it.

When I worked in Koh Phdao in 2008, the issue of hydropower dams—both upstream and downstream—was being talked about and was already seen as a problem. Yet, the village was beautiful and people seemed content with their lives. I remember their daily routines. Villagers woke up around 5 am and, as the day progressed, the village became noisier. There were mobile street vendors on bicycles who sold vegetables, meat, and other goods in the village, while other vendors came along the river, calling out to villagers to buy their products. Children prepared for school. I heard cowbells at dawn and, after some time, I could even recognise which cowbells belonged to which family in the village. I could guess that this uncle was passing the house or that person was coming because of the specific sound of their cowbells. The pagoda's bell in the freshness of the morning breeze and mist is the other sound I recall.

In 2018, it was so different. The soil was dried and cracked. The dirt road was dusty when it used to be moist. The whole village was quiet. I learned that many people had migrated, and I believe this was because they could not find the fish they used to rely on before—a result of the upstream Lower Sesan 2 Dam.

Witnessing all of this, we decided to go to Stung Treng to explore the source of the changes. Even though communities were heavily impacted around the dam site, the changes in Kratie deeply affected me at an emotional level. I started thinking of how to share these stories about dam impacts.

Soksophea: What was your experience when you visited the communities at Lower Sesan 2?

Sreymao: We had to be careful because villagers resisting the dam were accused of siding with the opposition party [the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which gained more than 44 per cent of the vote in the 2013 national election and was dissolved on order of the Cambodian Supreme Court in 2017]. There were two parts of Srae Kor that were forced to resettle: Srae Kor 1 and Srae Kor 2. When I thought about people leaving their village in Srae Kor, compared with those leaving Koh Phdao, I felt there was a difference. In Koh Phdao, they had to leave for survival, and it was people's own decision to leave—nobody forced them. But in Srae Kor 1 and Srae Kor 2, people were forced to leave against their wishes—even though they still could sometimes sneak back to their old village that had been flooded. I felt very sorry for them. I especially felt sad that they needed to leave their burial sites and many other things behind. I was sad that outsiders could not see how important it was to the villagers to take care of those burial sites, where their ancestors were buried.

At the new resettlement village, these indigenous villagers were living just like Khmer people. The living cost was high compared with their old village because they needed to buy all their supplies from the market, whereas in the old village they could feed themselves from the river and the forest without cash. Even the house designs and construction processes in the resettlement village were different from their former traditional housing.

Soksophea: Sreymao, let's turn now to some selected pieces from your exhibition, starting with this first image (see Figure 1), which represents Koh Phdao. Can you tell us a bit about what you were showing in this work?

Sreymao: This image shows the past, the present, and the future coming together in one place. The elders represent the past that is left behind in the village, as they silently watch their children leave. Their leaving the village is the present reality. But what about the future of the young children in the photo? Will they eventually need to leave their hometown, too?

The elders are left behind to take care of the village and young children. But ultimately, those young children could become like their parents, sisters, brothers, and friends who are leaving on the boat. Their future is uncertain because people cannot currently survive in the village. I wanted the audience to understand this and to reflect on what they can contribute to improve this situation.



Figure 2: Moving homes in Srae Kor. PC: © Sreymao Sao, 2018.

Soksophea: What about these other two images representing Srae Kor (see Figures 2 and 3)?

Sreymao: The first image (Figure 2) represents resettlement from Srae Kor. Villagers here were forced to move to a new place and many were unwilling. I used red here to represent their bloodline, to show that they not only move their physical house, but they are also uprooting themselves from their ancestors, their memories, and their childhoods; this is an emotional loss as well as a physical one. It represents everything that they wanted to take and hold close during their unwilling resettlement.

The next image (Figure 3) is of the resettlement village for people from Srae Kor, where villagers found that their lives and livelihoods were completely different from their old village. Their spirits and souls were unwell, but this was hard for them to describe and speak about. The sketch in this image represents their loss. They said that at the old village, they could easily go fishing for meals and did not need cash to survive. In the new place, they could only survive with



Figure 3. Loss and grief at Srae Kor resettlement village. PC: © Sreymao Sao, 2018.

cash, and the cost of living was very high. Everything they needed had to be bought from the market. Some families said their improved access to main roads meant their children were getting into trouble. Some had accidents from riding too fast on their motorcycles, and there was a problem with drugs and substance abuse. Their spirits and souls were not healthy after leaving their old riverbank village.

Soksophea: Your images give the sense of the past living on through the present, as though ghosts of the village remain, even while the original village is underwater. Were you thinking of ghosts in this work?

Sreymao: Well, the images are not literally ghosts. They represent what has been lost and show that only memories remain. They speak to questions about the past, present, and future. I want people to reflect on whether the benefits of these dams are worth the costs. That was what motivated me to create 'Under the Water'.

Soksophea: Can you tell us about your wax sculpture of Srae Kor, which was a centrepiece of the exhibition (see Figure 4)?

Sreymao: I created the village from wax and installed it on a mirror. The mirror represented the water and the submerging of the affected villages. Later, when I burned this wax village, the fire was like the electricity from the dam, generated at the expense of these villagers. The melted wax was like the flooding caused by the dam.

Amazingly, when I burned the wax village at the end of my exhibition, I hadn't predicted that the fire and the heat would make the mirror underneath the village crack. The sound of the cracking mirror was a very chaotic and violent moment. It was like a flashback. I thought back to what happened in those submerged villages.



Figure 4: A wax sculpture of Srae Kor Village, burned at the end of the exhibition, echoes the pain and loss inflicted when the village was submerged by the dam reservoir. PC: © Sreymao Sao, 2018.

The very painful and violent process of resettlement for these villagers was hard for me or other outsiders to grasp fully. There are many things that we cannot feel and understand by just looking with our eyes, or through words. It can be hard to walk in these villagers' shoes if these events have not directly happened to us.

But when I had to burn my beloved artwork and I heard the mirror crack, it gave me a small sense of their suffering and pain. It also reminded me of the collapse of the Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy Dam in Laos that happened around that time [on this, see *Inclusive Development International and International Rivers 2020*]. ■

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WORK OF ARTS



From the Dark to Light. PC: (CC) Gauthier Delecroix.

The Work of Culture

Of Barons, Dark Academia, and the Corruption of Language in the Neoliberal University

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Two recent books shed light on the functioning of different types of university. In his novel Italian Life (2020), Tim Parks describes the baronial university of yore, while the now predominant neoliberal university is at the centre of Peter Fleming's Dark Academia (2021). This essay argues that the two models of academia are actually far more similar than we generally think.

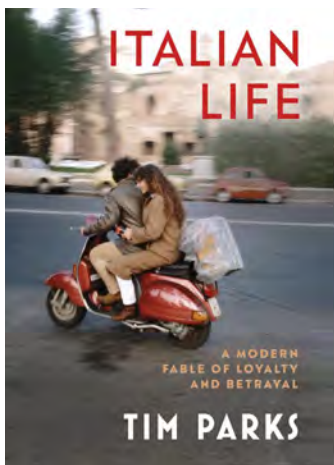
There was a time when academia was society's refuge for the eccentric, brilliant, and impractical. No longer. It is now the domain of professional self-marketers. As for the eccentric, brilliant, and impractical: it would seem society now has no place for them at all.

— David Graeber (2015: 134–35)

Much has been written in recent years about the degeneration of neoliberal academia, which makes for odd and discomfiting reading when you are part—as both victim and accomplice—of that system, but few writers have been able to describe the perversion of the system in terms as vivid and inventive as the late anthropologist David Graeber. According to Graeber (2015: 141), the commercialisation and bureaucratisation of academia have led to a shift from 'poetic technologies' to 'bureaucratic technologies', which is one of the reasons why today we do not go around on those flying cars promised in

the science fiction of the past century. As universities are bloated with ‘bullshit jobs’ and run by a managerial class that pits researchers against each other through countless rankings and evaluations, the very idea of academia as a place for pursuing groundbreaking ideas dies (Graeber 2015: 135; 2018). As conformity and predictability come to be extolled as cardinal virtues, the purpose of the university increasingly becomes simply to confirm the obvious, develop technologies and knowledge of immediate relevance for the market, and exact astronomically high fees from students under the pretence of providing them with vocational training (hence the general attack on the humanities). But is that all there is to it?

In this essay, I will look at two recent books that shed light on two ideal types of university: the baronial university of yore, described by Tim Parks in his novel *Italian Life: A Modern Fable of Loyalty and Betrayal* (2020); and the now predominant neoliberal university, which, in theory, should have signalled the demise of this old model, as discussed by Peter Fleming in *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (2021). Based on my reading of these two books and my personal experiences in various universities over the past decade or so, I will argue that the two models of academia are far more similar than we generally think.



Cover of Tim Parks' *Italian Life*, published by Harvill Secker in 2020.

Italian Life

Drawing from his four decades of experience in Italy, Tim Parks in *Italian Life* takes readers into the labyrinth of Italian academic life. Read from the standpoint of the neoliberal model of academia that has taken root today, the novel is like a trip back in time—a feeling of temporal dislocation that is reinforced by the geographical displacement experienced by the two protagonists of the story: the mature James, who comes from England, marries an Italian woman, and enters Italian academia as an English-language and literature teacher; and Valeria, a young woman from a small town in Italy's far south who moves to Milan for her studies. Their paths do not intersect until late in the novel, but their converging life trajectories offer a perfect opportunity for the author to explore the oddities of Italian academic life from the perspective of two insiders/outsideers.

For this essay, I will focus on James's experience. He has studied literature at Oxford and Yale, so he feels more than qualified to become a professor at some point. Still, after a few years spent teaching English to university students in a provincial university in northern Italy, the intricacies of Italian academia still elude him. He talks to the powers that be about his chances of landing a proper professorial job, but they are sceptical. It has nothing to do with his skills, they say. It is just that, even if Italy has a system of obligatory and open public *concorsi* for research grants and academic positions, 'the candidates who come out on top are almost always those who have worked closely with the local professor who sits on the interviewing board' (p. 10). They tell him that in 99 out of 100 cases, it will be the internal candidate who will win the *concorso*, regardless of their competence. As a puzzled James wonders why external candidates would ever bother applying for a job they know they have no chance of getting, his colleagues explain that it is a way for them to 'indicate their submission to the system': 'They play the game, as if it was fair. They show themselves around. Perhaps they will impress someone on the commission who might then, in the future, invent a *concorso* for them without an internal

candidate' (p. 11). To 'show himself around', James sends his CV to 30 universities, but only one institution, in Milan, replies, offering to let him teach a literature course on a contract basis, paid by the hour. This gig lasts seven years, until the institution opens a researcher position—the first step for James to become a tenured professor. After he overcomes formidable bureaucratic hurdles, he eventually manages to get the job. From that moment on, he basically does the same things as before, but with better pay.

The very procedures of Italian academia are confusing to James. Having been educated in British and American universities, he feels Italian students have a rather easy life. The oral exam is the norm, and it is administered by a student's own teacher, so Italian students 'study [their own] teacher as much as [their subject], the way a public speaker studies his audience as much as his brief' (p. 36). He notices that some students even go as far as to dress the way they expect their teacher would like them to dress. There are seven *appelli* every year—that is, seven chances to take one exam before having to take a class all over again, which is a nightmare for the professors who find the same students taking their chances over and over without ever bothering to properly prepare. Even the marking system looks weird to James's eyes: exams are evaluated in thirtieths, with 18 being the lowest mark to pass, while the final grade for an Italian degree is expressed in one hundred and tenths. The language is also odd, childish almost. For instance, students are never said to *fail*:

Bocciare is the word most commonly used for fail, in the context of exams. Oddly, the idea seems to have come from the game of bowls, *bocce*, where *bocciare* means to use your ball to push an opponent's ball away from the objective. It's a sneaky, aggressive move that prevents another person from winning. *Sono stato bocciato*. I've been pushed away. I've been, if not actually excluded, then distanced. *Mandato via*, sent away, is another expression for failing an exam. Or *respinto*, rejected. I've been rejected. In all these expressions there is the suggestion of an agent—a professor, a teacher, a commission—

who has done this unkind thing to you. One never says, as in English, the simple, intransitive, I failed. (p. 39)

Idiosyncrasies like this seem to suggest that the Italian former minister who called Italian youths *bamboccioni* ('big babies') back in 2009 may have had a point. But Parks takes care to also show us the other side of Italian academic life through the eyes of Valeria, who finds herself having to navigate the intrusiveness of her family, the inappropriate behaviour of some of her professors, and the incompetence of others. Reading Valeria's side of the story, we cannot but realise that life is not all roses for these students, especially those who, like Valeria, want to pursue an academic career after graduation.

The big beast of Italian academic life, though, is the figure of the *baroni*—powerful senior academics who manage to carve out their own fiefdoms within the university. *Baroni* always demand loyalty and perceive any minor slight as a betrayal to be met with retaliation (hence the subtitle of Park's novel, 'A Modern Fable of Loyalty and Betrayal'). One day, 18 months after winning his *concorso*, James receives a phone call from the secretary of the university's rector, who asks him to meet the big man in his home. Full of expectations, James goes to the meeting only to discover that the rector wants him to translate into English his 437-page book—a pointless treatise on popular philosophy. He naively refuses and, for the next three years, the *barone* completely ignores him, until he is ousted in an academic coup d'état. Still, despite all this, Parks has some kind words for the Italian universities of those years:

The university back then, in the nineties, the early noughties, was certainly a quarrelsome place, sometimes a childish place and always a frustrating place, but, in the end, functional, in the end, benign. If learning did not flourish quite as one might have hoped, still it wasn't altogether blighted or systematically sabotaged. The limitations were those of ordinary people jockeying for position within the framework of a national system apparently designed to make everything as difficult as

possible for everyone and in every regard. Rectors and Heads of Department were regularly elected or not elected and generally accepted the verdicts of their peers. Hiring was never strictly meritocratic, but nor did it entirely ignore merit. Gripe as you might, you could think of this place as your home, your family, albeit a slightly dysfunctional one. (pp. 168–69)

As Italian universities discover the Anglo-American model of ‘fundraising’, they also realise that for cultural reasons it is very unlikely that former students, however successful, would ever donate to the university, so they resort to the only alternative: recruiting people with powerful contacts who will be able to attract funds from outside. This shift opens the door for the arrival of Professor Beppe Ottone, a Freemason who sat on the board of several banks and insurance companies, a former senator with powerful political connections. He arrives with his right-hand woman, Professor Bettina Modesto, an inept academic who throughout the book is as much feared as laughed at (always behind her back, of course). The following passage about a keynote speech she gives at the inauguration of the new academic year builds Professor Modesto up into the perfect stereotype of the vacuous academic who will soon fill the managerial ranks of the bureaucratic, neoliberal university:

Modesto sipped some more water, shifted her weight from one high heel to the other, announced, ‘and hence in conclusion’ for the third time, then launched into another sentence as long as it was formless and meaningless. The words ‘Lacanian mise-en-scène’ ... flashed by. James was lost, but also awed ... Had the audience been made up of independent agents they would have been laughing their collective head off. As it was, quite a number of students were now slipping away. The heavy black curtain over the rear exit twitched every few seconds as eager hands pushed it aside. But the professors were obliged to sit in solemn silence, as

Modesto now announced her conclusion for the fourth time. (p. 205)

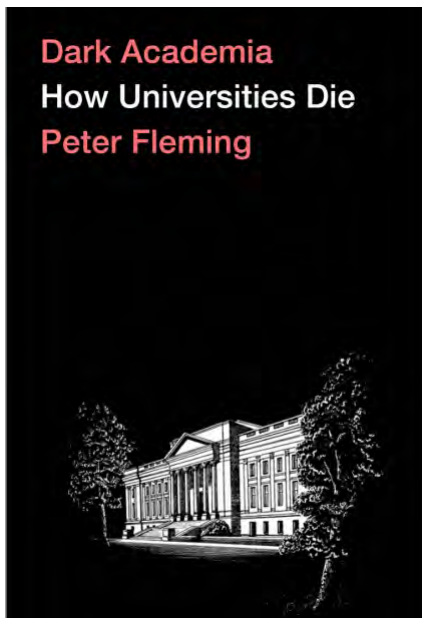
The arrival of Ottone and Modesto is a landmark event that signals the passage from the old baronial university, which still had some semblance of collegiality, to a more openly authoritarian model. As the two new arrivals take over the university, James and his colleagues begin to feel ‘how unwise it would be, in department meetings and PhD commissions, to contest the opinions of Ottone and Modesto’ (p. 179). A new culture of *unanimity* quickly takes root, taking most academics unaware, including James: ‘[O]nly much later, far too late, did James understand that an organisation in which all decisions are unanimous is an organisation whose members live in fear’ (p. 172). Should you displease them, the new *baroni* not only ignore you—as had the philosopher rector after James refused to translate his oeuvre—they do their utmost to destroy you, as both James and Valeria will soon discover (as this is a novel, I will not spoil the story by providing more details here).

Dark Academia

While Tim Parks’ *Italian Life* gives us some insight into the baronial model of university, in *Dark Academia*, Peter Fleming takes us on a tour of the neoliberal university with which it is being replaced. What is ‘dark academia’ according to Peter Fleming? On one side, the term reflects the mood of resignation that dominates among academics today, at least those who still believe the main purpose of universities should be the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. Fleming tells us that we are now at a stage when corporatisation ‘has been so exhaustive (on a financial, organisational, individual and subjective level) that reversing it in the current context feels nearly impossible. Rather than fighting back, most academics have merely found ways to dwell in the ruins’ (p. 5). This purely capitalist realism—the Jamesonian idea that it is easier to imagine the end

of the world than the end of capitalism—is what characterises academic life today, leading to widespread dark feelings of powerlessness and resignation. On the other side, ‘dark academia’ reflects the fact that over the past couple of decades, not only has the neoliberal university seen an increase in the number of bureaucrats in positions of power, to a point where they now most often outnumber academic staff, but also this regular bureaucracy is shadowed by a ‘troubling twin’ in the form of this ‘darkocracy’ that has ‘converted universities into factories of sadness’. According to Fleming, these are

power networks controlled by functionaries in these institutions. Although some in their ranks may look like academics, many have been trained elsewhere or are career administrators. And those who were once scholars are now better labelled as *para-academics*, since they’ve acquired the ‘boss syndrome’ and find themselves looking down on their erstwhile colleagues with mild disdain. (p. 53)



Cover of Peter Fleming's *Dark Academia*, published by Pluto Books in 2021.

Instead of discussing in detail the political, economic, and philosophical sides of the transition to this darker mode of academia, Fleming chooses to focus on the subjective dimension of how neoliberal academia affects the mental health of those who take part in it. Drawing from Oliver James's work positing a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism, Mark Fisher (2009: 19) once argued that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress and distress in capitalist societies not as a private issue but as a structural one. Mirroring this analysis in the context of academia, throughout the book, Fleming repeatedly delves into how academic life impacts the mental health of university staff and students, leading to suicide, self-harm, depression, chronic stress, and anxiety. Lecturers, we are told,

are tacitly expected to overperform in all parts of their job like some modern day *uomo universal*, excelling in teaching, publishing, research grants, administrative service, public engagement and so forth. That they are subsequently overwhelmed, both mentally and physically, is to be expected, with burnout an endemic occupational hazard, exacerbated by unhealthy lifestyles and unhappy relationships. (p. 27)

Students do not fare any better: far from being treated with kid gloves and pampered, they are drowning in debt, under immense pressure to complete their degrees, and often holding down part-time jobs.

Atomisation and isolation are the inevitable consequences. Fleming points out that while some have compared the obsession with target performance outputs of contemporary university administration to the Stakhanovite movement in Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, the parallel is somehow misleading because at least the Soviets ranked *teams* rather than *individuals*, unlike the neoliberal university. According to Fleming, it is this 'individualising tendency blended with the blind abstractions of quantifications that allows the Edu-Factory to hone its own unique brand of "terror"' (p. 71). This extreme atomisation emerges clearly from tragic stories like that of Thea Hunter,

an adjunct professor in the United States whose health deteriorated due to her stressful and peripatetic life, constantly driving from one campus to another to deliver lecture after lecture, with no health insurance or other benefit whatsoever. When her health failed, she was unable to afford medical care and, when she died, nobody claimed her corpse for three weeks, until the hospital managed to track down a former colleague whom she had befriended years earlier. Or the death of Mason Pendrous, a 19-year-old University of Canterbury (New Zealand) student, who was found dead in his campus dormitory room in 2019. He died of natural causes, but it took one month for other people in the dormitory to notice the smell and realise that something was horribly wrong behind the door that never opened.

And this isolation leads not only to depression, but also to suicide after suicide. *Dark Academia* cites universities where the suicide rate among students and staff is higher even than those recorded among Foxconn workers in the early 2010s, when the Taiwanese electronics manufacturer made headlines for a series of suicides among its young employees in southern China. And while all suicides are shocking, they do not always make for stories as sensational as the self-immolation of an undergraduate student in France in November 2019 or the suicide in September 2019 of a counsellor at the University of Pennsylvania whose job it was to prevent students from acts of self-harm. It is the silence that surrounds the phenomenon, despite its pervasiveness, that is striking, and which Fleming points out. The reason these situations seldom make headlines is that, adopting a strategy that was also in Foxconn's playbook a decade ago, universities attempt to deflect attention from the root structural causes of these actions towards supposed pre-existing psychological conditions and/or the personal situations of the victims, or by emphasising that modern society as a whole is to blame. Meanwhile, HR departments churn out platitude after platitude about work-life balance, partly in a futile attempt to prevent their staff from suffering from (expensive) burnout, partly so that, when something inevitably happens, the university can be protected from compensation claims.

Along with academic friends, I often tinkered with the idea of writing a 'bestiary' of the contemporary university. In this booklet, we would describe the most common 'types' of academics you are likely to meet in the corridors of the neoliberal university, describing them in the fashion of medieval catalogues of imaginary beasts. Fleming does just that. In discussing the academic star complex in the neoliberal university, he distinguishes between academic superstars, wannabe starlets, and failed starlets, pointing out that all types are part of the same social field. He shows how academic stardom is enabled by the exploitation of the lowest rungs of the academic workforce (in particular, casual workers) and how university managers make active use of starlets to sow division among their workforces. He singles out failed academic starlets for particular scorn:

While most failed academic starlets remain harmless, retreating into the shadows of mass academia, some decide to enter middle-management instead. Given the aforementioned umbrage, this can spell trouble for those under their charge. These failed starlets often seek revenge and can easily become Hitler-like taskmasters in the process. (p. 123)

Of course, the targets of this revenge are always those below and never those above. It is telling that Fleming's categorisation does not include academics who reject the mechanisms of the academic star complex and 'embrace failure'—to quote from Halberstam (2011)—that is, scholars who actively refuse to participate in the rat race of contemporary academia, neglecting rankings and scores, and prioritising intellectual projects that they actually find meaningful regardless of how they will impact their career. Is dark academia so pervasive that this category does not exist at all?

The Decay of Language in Neoliberal Academia

Based on my experience in various universities and innumerable conversations with academic

friends and colleagues over the past decade or so, I think there is another aspect of contemporary academia that deserves more scrutiny: the corruption of language. In *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell (2002: 966) wrote that ‘one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end’. Neoliberal academia offers plenty of good examples of this Orwellian corruption of language. I would say this is apparent in at least four regards. First, there is the proliferation of empty managerial jargon (including absurd high-sounding titles for ‘bullshit’ academic-managerial positions) that is now the basic staple of any communication coming from the ranks of academic and corporate bureaucracy, which is often remarked on in the literature and need not be discussed in detail.

Second, language is often deployed in ways that subvert the original meaning of words. This can be seen in at least two regards: in the coining of neologisms and in a radical subversion of established concepts. The phenomenon of academic neologisms is quite interesting. While academics-turned-managers are not famous for their inventiveness, they sometimes still manage to display a sparkle of creativity in how they use language. Unfortunately, the neologisms they come up with would not be out of place in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. One example is the term ‘voluntelling’, which is someone ‘asking you to do something by pretending to give you a choice, when both of us know you don’t really have a choice’. As for the subversion of key concepts, this can be seen, for instance, when university administrators lay off hundreds of staff and simultaneously announce that they are organising workshops on ‘resilience’ for them. Or, more worryingly, when key principles that should be the very foundation of academic life are distorted. This is the case with ‘academic freedom’, which is today often perverted into an excuse to peddle whatever ill-conceived idea crosses one’s mind, without consideration for academic integrity. As Joan Wallach Scott (2019: 5) remarked: ‘The university is not a marketplace of ideas in the sense that any opinion is worth

hearing; it is, rather, a place in which “one voluntarily subjects one’s own speech to the rules of some sort of ‘truth procedure’” (quoting Sitze 2017: 597). With neoliberal academia becoming a marketplace in every sense of the word and academics desperately trying to find new ways to tout their wares (that is, themselves and, possibly, a few original ideas), the ‘truth procedure’ loses clout and, as every claim, no matter how absurd, is subsumed under the umbrella of ‘academic freedom’, the way is open for all the whining about ‘cancel culture’ in universities that we have heard in recent years.

The third instance of the academic corruption of language is linked to what Orwell (2011: 244) described as ‘doublethink’—that is, ‘the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them’ (which could also be interpreted as trivial hypocrisy, but we are giving these academics the benefit of doubt here). This, for example, is when university leaders decry the sorry state of the university budget—perhaps due to a pandemic, but not necessarily—and express their sorrow at having to lay off casual staff and other expendables, while at the same time pompously announcing that the university is acquiring assets—a piece of land, for instance—because a university needs to invest in the future and not remain stuck in the present. Or, similarly, when academics-turned-bureaucrats proudly send out college-wide emails to explain that new subsidies are now available but, to make sure this funding is shared *as widely as possible*, only permanent staff are eligible. Or, when choosing to axe a ‘minor’ language from a teaching program due to the limited number of students enrolling in the class, college administrators say they are not eliminating the class, they are simply identifying new ‘modalities of language transmission’. Or, again, when high-level university officials correctly identify the problem of precariousness that prevents many of the most talented junior scholars from continuing their academic careers, but as a solution they propose sending everyone ‘up or out’ of the university after no more than three to five years.

The fourth and final aspect of this degeneration of language in academia can be found in the discourse of gratitude. In a recent essay, Christian Sorace (2020) has discussed how both the Chinese and the US governments often resort to the language of gratitude. In China, we saw this in the wake of the earthquake that hit Sichuan Province in 2008, when the Chinese Government demanded gratitude for its reconstruction efforts from the survivors of the tragedy, or again in 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, President Donald Trump delayed COVID-19 relief cheques because he insisted that his signature be on them to remind American citizens of to whom they owed their gratitude. According to Sorace (2020: 168), ‘these hysterical demands reveal the insecurity of sovereign power’. Despite all its pretences of transparency, efficiency, and proper procedures, neoliberal academia works exactly according to this logic. One could argue that, in this, neoliberal academia is no different from the old baronial model of the university, but the latter at least did not go to such lengths to belie its underlying dynamics. Today, even though bureaucracy is omnipresent and there appears to be a bureaucratic procedure for everything, it is easy to miss how the system is still grounded in demands for ‘gratitude’ and its twin, ‘loyalty’. Be grateful to us because you got a promotion; be grateful to us because you had funding for your project; be grateful because we allowed you to use the name of the institution in your grant application; be grateful we let you keep your spot in the crumbling ivory tower. How many times does one have to hear these injunctions in his or her academic life? Then, of course, if a person fails to exhibit loyalty, they are ‘ignored, labelled a “troublemaker”, or given unappealing teaching duties’ (Fleming 2021: 59). The persistence of these unwritten rules, and the lengths to which academics-turned-bureaucrats go to disguise them, shows how the neoliberal university of today suffers from the same insecurity of sovereign power described by Sorace. Once the principle of *real* academic authority—that is, ideally, knowledge—loses its clout, all that is left is a void that can only be filled by brutal, insecure power.

Eroding the System

In conclusion, *Italian Life* and *Dark Academia* should be read side-by-side, as they discuss two dimensions of the same phenomenon: life in the old baronial university that today is (perhaps) on the verge of extinction, and in the new neoliberal academia with which it is being replaced. These two models are often described as incompatible, with the latter generally presented as a significant upgrade on the former in terms of efficiency, transparency, and even quality—an argument that right-wing critics deploy over and over to push forward the latest round of market reforms in higher education. And it is hard to disagree that being subjected to the arbitrary power of a *barone* who has not done a shred of original research over the past 30 years hardly represents good practice or an ideal to look back to with nostalgia. Yet, deep down, are the two models of academia really that different?

Having had direct experience of both realities, I would say they have more in common than we usually think. First, both models significantly corrupt the language. The baronial university, too, loves to mask its authoritarianism behind talk of meritocracy and collegiality, even though as a rule, I would say it is more honest regarding its true nature, as its authoritarianism is basically in the open for everyone to see. Second, both systems function according to unwritten rules that stipulate obligations of loyalty and gratitude, no matter the amount of paperwork involved. This logic is so entrenched that even writing this short essay was quite difficult. As I was penning these lines, I kept questioning myself and my motives: is my critique ungenerous considering the many opportunities I have been given by universities over the years? Am I ungrateful considering I am still lucky enough to have a job in a university when many others have lost theirs? But then I remembered what Graeber (2015: 26) wrote about how bureaucratic systems

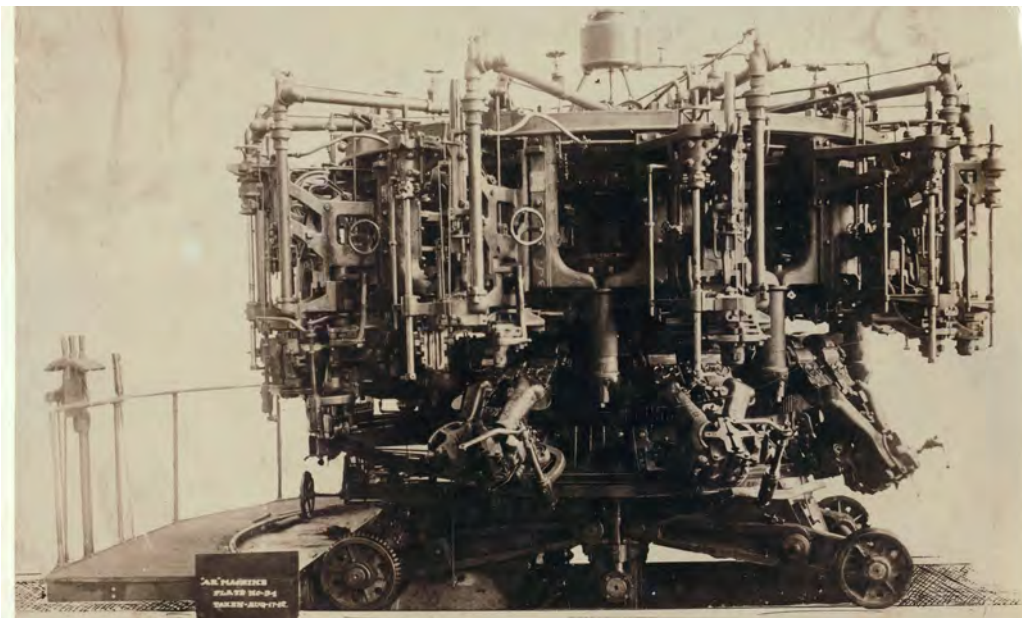
always create a culture of complicity. It's not just that some people get to break the rules—it's that loyalty to the organization is to some degree measured by one's willingness

to pretend this isn't happening. And insofar as bureaucratic logic is extended to the society as a whole, all of us start playing along.

This settled it.

The real question is what can be done in such a context? Not much, I am afraid. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004) have argued that academics in the neoliberal university should finally give up any emotional attachment to their labour. However, they also allowed us a glimpse of hope by pointing out that an answer to the current crisis might be found in the 'undercommons' of academia—that is, those people (possibly the majority) who work within the university but look at its drift with dismay. It is in the cooperation between these individuals that occurs below the petrified structures of official power that one can still find hope. Alternatively, we can follow the advice of the late sociologist Erik Olin-Wright, who, in his spiritual testament *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (2019: 126), writes that the only feasible strategy today is that of 'eroding' capitalism, which 'also requires dismantling capitalism—that is, changing the rules of the game that make up the power relations of capitalism in such a way as to open up more space for emancipatory alternatives'. This can be achieved by working within the interstices of the capitalist system, even in academia. In universities, this can be done by actively working to promote an authentic open-access culture—not the questionable 'gold' open-access strategies that are all the rage today and which simply represent another example of the perversion of language as this form of 'open access' simply aims to ensure hefty profits for commercial academic publishers. It can also be done by joining unions, or by dedicating time (for those who have this luxury) to 'labours of love' and not only to projects that are simply aimed at scoring points in the eyes of the bureaucrats who run the university. We could also attempt to reappropriate language, calling a spade a spade, or engage in passive resistance—by, for instance, pretending to have not received the umpteenth email from some overzealous administrator requiring that we take yet another online course to get a useless certificate. Or we could simply be nicer to colleagues,

students, or, if one is in a position of power, subordinates, avoiding becoming like that university official who, when a friend of mine went to see them with a grievance, told them to hold tight and find consolation in the fact that one day, once they moved up the ladder, they would be able to inflict the same injustice on others. It might be a drop in the ocean, and it surely will not lead to the invention of the flying car, but it is still a first step towards eroding the dark system we experience today. ■



Industrial Things in a Post-Industrial Society

The Life and Afterlife of a Chinese Glass-Forming Machine

James A. FLATH

This essay considers the emergence of post-industrial China through an examination of the ‘social’ and ‘antisocial’ lives of an industrial glass-forming machine. By reviewing the process through which glass-forming technology developed in China, the closure of industrial glass manufacturing in Shanghai, and the adoption of an abandoned glass-forming machine by the Shanghai Museum of Glass, the essay reflects on the ways in which one formerly industrial district has begun to negotiate its multiple and sometimes conflicting identities.

Figure 1: Ten Arm Owens Automatic Bottle Machine, ca. 1913. PC: Lewis Wicks Hein, Library of Congress.

In the former industrial suburb of Baoshan in Shanghai, in a corner of the Shanghai Museum of Glass (上海玻璃博物馆; ShMoG), rests a decommissioned Owens-Illinois double-gob individual section (IS) glass-forming machine. Surrounded by gleaming glass treasures, the cold steel object is a remarkable sight, but what is it doing there, and what does it mean? This essay explains how, in the space of the museum, the industrial thing is at once a real link to the past, an abandoned thing relieved of the duty to mean anything at all, and a surreal stranger in its own land. Both present and absent, it destabilises traditional notions of

progress, modernity, and socialist utopianism, and in so doing invites the possibility of transition to post-industrial and post-socialist society.

Arjun Appadurai has made a notable contribution to the way we talk about the complex and conflicted identity of things by suggesting that we treat them not as stable entities but as processes. First, he asks us to consider that the thing is a commodity; second, that commodities are exchanged; third, that it is the exchange of the commodity that creates value. Through exchange, the thing becomes invested with social relations. If we are to understand these social relations, we are obliged to follow the ‘trajectory of the thing’ as it moves through different phases of existence (Appadurai 1986). Igor Kopytoff adds that by tracing the diversion of that thing from commodity to abandonment and onward to singularisation as art/heritage, we may begin to appreciate not only the thing itself, but also the moral economy in which it is exchanged. In his words:

In the homogenized world of commodities a colorful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classification and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context. As with persons, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity. (Kopytoff 1986: 90)

Appadurai’s approach may be usefully applied to glass-forming machines. In their first phase of existence, such machines appear as dynamic instruments of global capitalism and socialist production, having trajectories that powerfully illuminate their social contexts, whether it be the American Midwest, wartime Shanghai, or Mao-era Qingdao. The trajectory thesis, however, is never really about the thing itself and so cannot cope with the possibility of there being no moral economy in which the thing is exchanged. The second, brief section of this essay considers that eventuality by observing the abandonment of a 1990s-era glass-forming machine and the 1950s-era glass factory in which it now rests. The removal of the machine and the factory from the supply chain at

the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries abruptly severed the relationships that had kept them in motion and dissolved the networks that once defined their purpose. Stripped of their materiality, these industrial things may be remembered in terms of their past but can only be encountered sensually as an arrangement of materials. That reduction to material is critical to evaluating the machine’s current phase of existence, in which it appears not as a point in a trajectory, but as a semi-autonomous object existing in the asynchronous time and ambivalent space of the museum.

Phase 1: Glass-Forming Machines and their Dissemination in China

In the mid-nineteenth century, when glass producers were just beginning to experiment with mechanisation, jar and bottle production had changed very little from the time when it was first practised in ancient Syria. Quartz sand and additives such as soda ash were heated in a kiln to make raw molten glass; one worker inserted a gob of glass into a form held by a second worker and blew it into shape through a long tube. Efficient though it already was, the container industry was transformed at the end of the nineteenth century by the invention of semiautomatic glass-forming machines in Europe and America and, most notably, by the patenting of the first fully automatic machine by Mike Owens in 1903 (Meigh 1960) (see Figure 1). Glassworker guilds, restrictive licensing policies, and the massive scale of the Owens machine slowed its adoption, although by the end of the next decade, approximately half of American, and an increasing share of European and Japanese, bottle and jar production was being done with Owens machines (Journal of the Ceramic Association, Japan 1928). Karl Peiler’s invention of a flow-and-feed device in 1917 allowed glass producers to convert semiautomatic machines to virtually automatic, at once undercutting Owens’ command over the industry and advancing the

pace of mechanisation overall. The final major innovation in glass-forming machines came in 1925 with the invention of the IS glassblowing machine by Henry Ingle at the Hartford Empire Company (Emhart Glass). This machine could send gobs of molten glass to multiple forming sections, blow them into an intermediate mould, transfer and blow them into a finishing mould, and deliver the completed bottle or jar to a conveyer belt—all within about 11 seconds (Miller and Sullivan 1984). After some 2,000 years of productivity, the age of manual glassblowing was all but over.

Chinese manufacturers were late in the race to mass-produce glass containers. Glass is not unknown in early Chinese history but there is little evidence of glassblowing being practised before 1680, when the Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) established a workshop for decorative glassware within the walls of the Forbidden City in Beijing. That workshop closed during the reign of Qianlong (1735–96), although by the mid-nineteenth century, a bustling glass industry had emerged in Boshan, Shandong. Boshan's artisans produced a variety of objects and utensils, including glass ingots, panes, and blown-glass vessels, although like Kangxi's imperial glassworks, Boshan was better known for high-end 'Peking glass' rather than the mass production of bottles and jars (Warren 1977).

Industrial glass technology first appeared in China in 1904 when the newly incorporated Boshan Glass Company gained access to German technology, expertise, and contracts with German enterprises (Yishibao 1923). Domestic and foreign-owned glassworks increased in number during the 1910s and 1920s and likely used some forms of mechanised production such as air-compression, although it was not until 1936 that Jinghua Glass Factory (晶华玻璃厂) in Shanghai acquired China's first glass-forming machine—an American-made Lynch-10 semiautomatic fitted with a Hartford feed-and-flow mechanism supplied by a Japanese kiln. When the Empire of Japan invaded Shanghai the following year, Jinghua moved the Lynch-10 system to the relative safety of the foreign concession area. Despite the wartime conditions, the company expanded its production line with the acquisition of a second glass-forming machine. A third machine, which was

stranded on a wharf in Manila for the duration of the Pacific War, arrived several years later. In 1950, the company transitioned to the communist era by merging with China's oldest brewery to form the Qingdao-Jinghua Glass Company (青岛晶华玻璃厂), and one of Jinghua's original Lynch-10s was shipped to Shandong, where it went to work making bottles for export-oriented Tsingtao Beer (Zhao n.d.).

In the 1950s and 1960s, glass bottles and jars became increasingly important to the Chinese economy, although Mao-era isolationist policies meant there were few opportunities for Chinese manufacturers to import new glass-forming machines. To meet the demand for glassware, engineers began to replicate the few operational machines they could locate in China. In 1956, Qingdao-Jinghua's Lynch-10 was pulled off the production line and replicated by the Shanghai Mechanical and Electrical Design Institute. The resulting clones—eventually about 50 in number—were a breakthrough for Chinese manufacturing and many continued to operate into the 1980s. However, from a technical standpoint, the clones were already obsolete when they debuted in 1958. In the 1960s, other engineering teams continued the search for more efficient designs. Shandong Light Industry Machine Factory (山东省轻工机械厂), for example, was able to replicate and remanufacture a relatively advanced Emhart IS employed at the Guangdong Glass Factory (广东玻璃厂). The Shandong team repeated their success in the late 1970s and early 1980s by replicating a Belgian made ROIRANT S10 owned by the Qingdao-Jinghua Glass Company, and outfitting Weifang No. 1 Light Industry Machine Factory (潍坊第一轻工机械厂) to manufacture its copies (Shandong Province Qing Net n.d.).

The 'reform and openness' of the 1980s gave China's engineers the opportunity to work more directly with foreign manufacturers. When Shandong Light Industry Factory turned its attention to another American-made glass-forming machine, at Beijing No. 2 Glass Factory (北京玻璃二厂), they realised there was more at stake than just a set of blueprints. Instead of simply copying the specifications as they had done in Guangdong and Qingdao, the unit signed a contractual 'Technical

Transfer of Complete Equipment for the Manufacture of Glass Bottles' and then joined the American manufacturer to create Beijing-Wheaton Glass Company Limited in 1988. The Australian branch of the Owens-Illinois Glass Company followed in 1990, opening a group of six joint ventures in China including ACI Shanghai Glass Limited (澳联玻璃有限公司) in the Shanghai suburb of Minhang. There, as in any good biography, the Chinese glassblowing industry comes full circle, rejoining the global flow of commodity production that had delivered the first glass-forming machine to Shanghai in 1936. Eighty-seven years after Mike Owens invented his first automatic machine, ACI returned to the source and installed an Owens-Illinois glass-forming machine in its Shanghai plant. The machine would spend its life there making bottles for domestic and international brewers and distillers, including Anheuser-Busch, Suntory, and Jin Feng Rice Wine (AustCham Shanghai n.d.).

Phase 2: Abandonment and the Antisocial Life of Ruin

The end of the machine's productive life and transition to post-industrial existence involve the abandonment of two worksites: the Shanghai No. 1 Glass Instruments Factory in the suburb of Baoshan, and ACI Shanghai Glass in the suburb of Minhang.



Figure 2: Shanghai Museum of Glass, Art Plaza under construction, 2019. PC: James A. Flath.

The Shanghai No. 1 Glass Instruments Factory (上海玻璃仪器一厂) commenced operation during the Great Leap Forward in 1958. Over the next three decades, the factory generated a steady stream of high-grade labware but, like countless other Mao-era socialist enterprises, finally went bankrupt and closed its doors in the 1990s. The place sat abandoned until 2008 when Zhang Lin, an executive with the Shanghai Glass Company, secured a lease on the property, intending to develop it as a museum. However, for years, much of the site remained in a shambles. In the early days, a few workers lingered in the factory's old dormitories, but soon all that remained was trash: dusty old sofas, empty cabinets, random documents strewn about, and of course, glass—lots of glass. The junk was eventually removed, but the buildings still seemed oppressively empty. In the absence of machinery and garbage, the spaces were dominated by steel-reinforced concrete columns—the bane of any gallery developer—that were still needed to hold up the remains of the old workshops and warehouses. The museum reclaimed more of the old glassworks in 2015, although many buildings from the 1950s and 1960s were still observed 'scattered among the weeds and rubble, with half-opened windows and open doors' (Shen 2015). Heavy truck traffic along Changjiang Road continued to coat the museum in dust and the gigantic Shanghai Steel Mill clung to life a short distance to the east. It was apparent, nonetheless, that Baoshan was an 'old industrial area in its twilight' and out of step with Shanghai's futuristic development model (Shen 2015).

The changes sweeping through Baoshan in the second decade of the century were also felt in Minhang. The economics that had once driven Owens-Illinois to move production away from Corning and Toledo now turned on Shanghai, as the company's Asian branch began to move production to second-tier Chinese cities such as Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, and other more cost-effective locations including Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City. In 2014, the Minhang joint venture powered down its production line, stripped the plant, and sent its workers home. The Owens-Illinois IS glass-forming machine that had been the beating heart of the factory might have lived another life

somewhere else, but it likely would have cost more to move, refurbish, and upgrade the machine than it was worth. In the productive environment of the factory, operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the heavy metal object had earned the illusion of permanence and a stable working relationship with its operators. Then, after 25 years of almost constant motion, it blew its last bottle and died with a hiss.

What happens to the factory and its things when manufacturing stops? If the process defines the thing, as Kopytoff (1986) contends, then in what kind of process is the abandoned industrial machine involved? What happens to the thing when it is released from the productive phase of its social life? Tim Edensor (2005) observes that industrial order is maintained through networks of objects, humans, spaces, technologies, and forms of knowledge. Without maintenance, those networks fall apart, revealing the impermanence of things and exposing their broken social relations. When disconnected from the processes that made them, formerly industrial objects lose their materiality—that is, the active construction of identity. Edensor argues that the remaining raw material of industrial ruins and abandoned objects ‘rebukes’ the normative assignment of objects and interrogates the nature and history of objects. Though we remain conscious of these past assignments, the ruined or abandoned thing becomes surreal and sensuous. As long as they appear before us, they oblige us to think about machines without people and people without machines.

Phase 3: Heritage, and the Singularisation of the Industrial Thing

For most metallic industrial objects, the ruin phase of existence is a brief interlude lasting only as long as it takes for them to be melted down and fed back into the industrial chain of production. Post-industrial societies, however, have an interesting tendency to lift objects out of that terminal stage and grant them a new existence as heritage.

Industrial heritage sites are widespread across America, Europe, and increasingly Asia, and glass museums can be found by the dozen in places like Murano in Italy, Corning (in New York), and Toledo (Ohio), where actual glassmaking has been scaled down or discontinued. Baoshan has joined their ranks thanks largely to Zhang Lin.

Zhang spent much of his early career as a business traveller helping to facilitate the offshoring of American and European glass production and, incidentally, touring many overseas glass museums. Recognising that Shanghai was subject to the same forces of globalisation that were driving industrial glass manufacturing away from its cradle in the West, he began to prepare for the end of glass manufacturing in his city. Partnering with Zhuang Xiaowei at the Department of Fine Art of Shanghai University, Coordination Asia, and logon Architecture, Zhang began the work of transforming Shanghai No. 1 Glass Instruments Factory into the Shanghai Museum of Glass.



Figure 3: Tilman Thürmer, 'The Timeline of the Glass Industry in Shanghai'. PC: Coordination Asia.

The museum is one of only a few such institutions in China that does not receive state funding. Consequently, as at Jianchuan Museum in Sichuan (Ho and Li 2016), developers had a relatively free hand in deciding how it is organised. In the beginning, the Shanghai team leaned heavily on the example and guidance of the Corning Museum of Glass, but ShMoG was intent on forging its own identity. Sometimes referring to itself as a ‘G-park’ (glass park), owing to its sprawling 24-hectare premises, the museum has not taken the path of other post-industrial conversions where original industries have been cleared out to make room for tech hubs (like the 1865 Creative Park in Nanjing), sporting facilities (Shougang Arena in Beijing), and, as Wu Hung (2012) points out, artists’ colonies (798 Art Zone in Beijing). Glass production, though not on an industrial scale, still defines the museum’s mandate and, like glass museums elsewhere in the world, ShMoG tries to preserve its industrial roots. However, it was never meant to be an ‘industrial museum’. According to Tilman Thürmer, the

Coordination Asia architect who plotted its development, the museum should constantly evolve, intermingling past and present people and objects as they move through the space (Coordination Asia 2019).

In the museum’s most recent configuration, visitors enter through a musical kaleidoscope and continue through an installation by Tobias Gremmler, who is best known for and perhaps best understood through his video collaboration with Björk on *Loss* and *Tabula Rasa*. At ShMoG, Gremmler’s *Fusion* draws together material (glass), elements (heat, fire, and light), and time. The past is witnessed as residual heat rising through glass conduits from the factory’s original kiln, but in *Fusion* time does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is arranged in layers and merged with movement, sound, and light. The museum itself does not direct the visitor along any predetermined pathway but encourages them to wander through galleries devoted variously to ‘shapes’, ‘colours’, and ‘dreams’, to negotiate



Figure 4: Lin Tianmiao, ‘Warm Current’. PC: Coordination Asia.

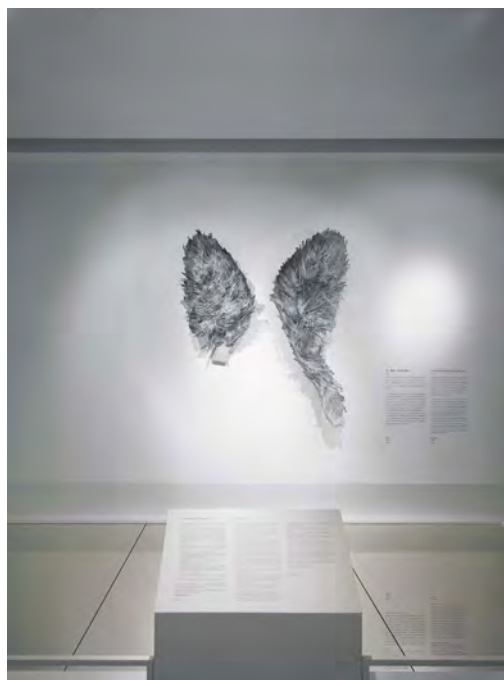


Figure 5: Shelly Xue, ‘Broken’. PC: Coordination Asia.

the glass maze, visit the crystal-filled Rainbow Chapel, and tour the childproofed Kids' Museum of Glass. Artists-in-residence work in design studios, there is a public library, a theatre, a DIY workshop, and part of the former glass factory has been restored. Beyond the galleries, the park succumbs to the need to generate revenue. Visitors are urged to hold their wedding in the Rainbow Chapel, and they are never far from restaurants, coffee, and shops (Glassy Living Store, Arts and Crafts Market). Although the purpose of these concessions is obviously to make money, they are layered into the museum, serving as an implicit reminder that post-industrial societies value consumption over production.

One of the central objectives defined for the museum is to consider the relationship between people and materials. In the perspective of the museum's chief, the purpose is to move the common understanding of glass from 'rational' (理性) to 'sensual' (感性) (The Paper 2020). Generally, the museum's exhibits and installations engage the idea that there is some tension between the immateriality of modern art and glass, which is materials-based, craft-oriented, and cannot be fully extricated from industrial processes. Glass can be idealised and pulled into the sphere of art by releasing it from practical functions like filtering light or retaining fluids, but when used as a medium, glass inevitably pulls art back towards the material base (Yang 2017).

The tension between materials and expression is explored in depth through the museum's 'Annealing' project. Annealing is the final step in the production of high-quality glass, where it is placed in an oven that cools gradually, reducing stress in the glass by allowing the atomic structure to freely arrange itself before transitioning into a stronger object. To develop the project, ShMoG made a point of inviting artists who had not previously worked in glass, expecting that inexperience would cause them to be in dialogue with the glass and to finally reconcile with rather than control the material.

Through the projects, some artists were also in dialogue with the industrial past. In the 2017 installation *Thus I Have Heard* (如是我闻), Zheng Wenqing applied needles of glass to the surfaces of

disused industrial machinery. In *Black Substance* (黑色物质), Zhang Ding precariously balanced steel plates on black glass spheres on top of other plates balanced on other spheres. In *Plain* (平坦), Liao Fei attempted (unsuccessfully) to melt the window glass from an old industrial site into new panes, reinsert the panes in the old steel frames, reinstall the windows, and observe the effect on light in the space. One of the museum's proudest acquisitions, Lin Tianmiao's *Warm Currents* (暖流), circulates fluorescent pink liquid through a circuit of tubes and labware reminiscent of the former manufactures of Shanghai No. 1 Glass Instruments Factory (see Figure 4) (Yang 2017).

While the concept of annealing suggests movement towards strength and resilience, many of the exhibits and installations reflect on uncertainty and fragility. The winged *Angel in Waiting* (天使在等待) by Shelly Xue was part of the museum's permanent collection until it was damaged by out-of-control children. It remains in place alongside security camera footage of the incident, but under a new title: *Broken* (折) (see Figure 5). A more intentional engagement with breakage was explored through the *BRKN* installation/exhibit curated by Tilman Thürmer in 2018–20. Liu Jianhua's *Black Body* (黑色形体) required visitors to wear protective shoes and sign a waiver before wading through 14 tonnes of broken glass (Yang 2019: 12). An installation titled *The Return* (塞归) by Sun Xun employed a device that repeatedly fired a ball bearing against a glass bowl, which, being progressively weakened by the force, must eventually shatter. Sun also experimented with the uncanny and uncomfortable quality of glass through *Frontier* (塞上), which was named for Wang Wei's iconic Tang Dynasty poem in which a traveller's cart drifts along with tumbleweeds and wild geese towards the 'barbarian sky' (胡天). The artist explains how glass prompts feelings of 'alienation, helplessness, the lack of a sense of belonging, or something like a fishbone getting stuck in the throat' (Shen 2019: 20). The search for its meaning, Sun observes, is like the search for the value of pi—never-ending. Solid and liquid, visible and invisible, glass suggests 'emptiness in non-emptiness and being in non-being'.

So where does the Owens-Illinois IS glass-forming machine fit in all this? The machine was brought from the old ACI Shanghai factory in 2015 and holds a prominent place in the ‘history of glass’ section of the museum. Most of the display cases in that part of the museum hold quaint and fragile handmade and mouth-blown glassware and ornaments formed by pre-industrial international and Chinese artisans. The double-gob IS glass-forming machine punctures the elegant aesthetics and forces the visitor to turn their attention from art and beauty to industrial brutalism and abandonment. The machine is not shiny glass but dull steel, not smooth but angular, not fragile but resilient, not clear but opaque. It is everything that glass is not, yet it is the thing that made glass. It is modern but obsolete, present but absent, American but somehow Chinese. Its appearance in the museum embodies all the contradictions created when Mike Owens invented its ancestor in 1903; all the contradictions created when ACI took this unit out of service more than a century later; and all the contradictions created when ShMoG decided to exhibit the remains .

The point is driven home by a monitor and a looped video that draw attention to the abandoned ACI factory and its workers. One by one, they stand amid the ruins of their former worksite explaining what they once were, giving their lasting impressions of their occupation, and telling the camera what they do now the factory has closed and the glass-forming machine has been shipped off to the ShMoG. When they can, they say, they work for the property developers who took over the land of their former enterprises, but mostly they hang around, ‘drinking beer and playing mahjong’ (see Figure 6). As in the series of dystopic films analysed by Jie Li (2020), the workers have been ejected from their spaces and occupations. Although ACI Shanghai did not possess a ‘utopian’ connection to Mao-era socialism, memories of belonging to a reform-era community are no less strongly held. The exhibit does not—as it might—portray the machine as dutifully spitting out bottles but places the object in the ruins of its abandoned factory and in the memory of its abandoned operators (see Figures 7, 8, 9). It remembers glass production as it might once have been, but it embraces

absence as it is now. It resists the common desire to reinsert things (including human things) back into their relationship with humans. But neither does it re-consign the thing to ruin. The machine’s placement in the museum is key to understanding how curators operate differently to film directors. ShMoG does not try to explain the science or economics of glass or otherwise tell a certain story of the machine or its operators by isolating a certain phase of existence. It allows the display to facilitate slippage or exchange between one phase and another. Yesteryear’s machine is yesterday’s junk and today’s found art object. And they are all at once.

Machines, Museums, and Multiplicities

The developmental history outlined at the beginning of this essay follows glass-forming machines along a quintessentially modern trajectory as they crush centuries-old traditions, spread across the globe, and transform everything down to the way we eat and drink. However, through close attention to the thing, its phases of existence, the materials of which it is made, and the materials it produces, modernity is problematised as a concept. Tina Mai Chen (2012) writes about the ‘human-machine continuum’ in which the Mao-era ‘iron man’ was portrayed as being essentially fused to his equipment. In practice, however, the machine effectively separates the human element from commodity production. In factory production, humans are not elevated by the machine; they are subordinated to it. Where earlier glassmakers were highly skilled and literally breathed their bottles and jars into existence, the Owens machine created a strict division between human work and machine work in the production process, eliminated many of the required skills, and lowered the value of human labour. By interpreting the factory as a process, and the glassmaking machine as a step in that process, we begin to circumvent the artificial dichotomy, or ‘purification’ of difference, between inanimate objects and human subjects—a dichotomy that Bruno Latour (1993) perceives as a basic and

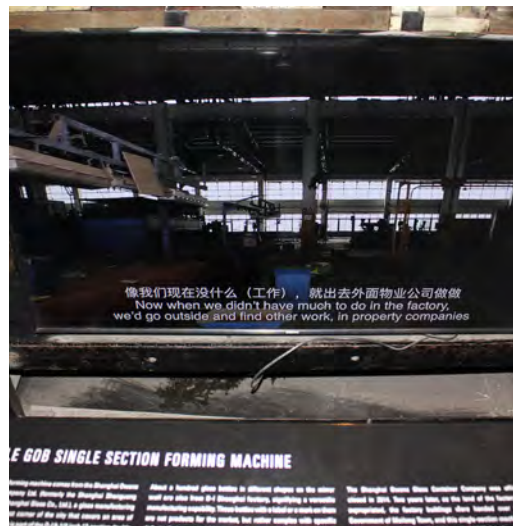


Figure 6: Glass-forming machine exhibit, ShMoG.
PC: James A. Flath.

problematic condition of modernity. To see or think about the double-gob forming machine in action is to realise what Latour means when he says that such distinctions are artificial, and to understand that the glass factory has never been modern.

When they are transferred to the post-industrial museum, these same machines grind to a halt but take on more layers of meaning. Arjun Appadurai (1986) accounts for this ‘commodity pathway diversion’ by citing Andy Warhol, who decontextualised Campbell’s Soup cans and so was able to interpret them as art. ShMoG partially decontextualises the glass-forming machine, but unlike Warhol’s paintings, the museum retains the actual thing, which stubbornly clings to its productive phase of existence, the unproductive phase of its abandonment, and its materials. These qualities are not artificially arranged into a narrative of modernity but engage the multiplicity of history and memory in a post-industrial society (Barndt 2010). ShMoG operates

under the same principle. It endeavours to be (or perhaps is) unstuck in time, but also unstuck in material, light, heat, and motion. By negotiating the contradictions of its existence and relinquishing control over its materials, its space, and ultimately its identity, the museum becomes the annealing oven through which its community must pass on its way to become something stronger—that is, if it does not first break. ■



[Top] Figure 7: Glass-forming machine exhibit, ShMoC. [Left] Figure 8: Glass-forming machine exhibit, ShMoC. [Right] Figure 9: Glass-forming machine exhibit, ShMoC. PC: James A. Flath.

CONVERSATIONS





THE WAR ON THE UYGHURS

China's Internal Campaign
against a Muslim Minority

SEAN R. ROBERTS

*The War on the Uyghurs:
China's Campaign against
Xinjiang Muslims* (Manchester
University Press and Princeton
University Press, 2020)

The War on the Uyghurs

A Conversation with Sean R. Roberts

Matthew P. ROBERTSON

Sean R. ROBERTS

Sean Roberts, an associate professor of international affairs and anthropology at George Washington University, is the author of *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Campaign against Xinjiang Muslims* (Manchester University Press and Princeton University Press, 2020), the first book-length treatment of the Chinese state's campaign against the Uyghur population of Xinjiang. The text situates the campaign as part of a long history of settler colonialism in the region, augmented by the rhetoric surrounding the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT). Roberts draws on his fieldwork experience, ties with Uyghur communities, extensive documentary research, and training in anthropological theory to narrate and contextualise the actions of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In his preface, Roberts makes the grim forecast that 'the ultimate transformation of the Uyghur homeland into a Han-dominated part of the PRC [is] a fait accompli'. As the role of the central leadership in the violent assimilationist campaign becomes clearer, this prediction seems more justified than ever. The discussion below steps back from those human rights concerns, and instead delves into the theories and ideologies that swirl around them.

Matthew P. Robertson: My interest in the topic of your book lies almost as much in the tangle of discourses surrounding it as it does in the actual substance of what is happening in Xinjiang. The concepts at stake—terrorism, ethno-nationalism, indigeneity, settler colonialism, genocide—go to the heart of the political. I have spent a lot of time reading arguments from 'tankies', or those who instinctively defend China based on the idea that it is an example of actually existing socialism resisting Western imperialism. They feel they must deny or raise doubts about the PRC's campaign because attention on the latest atrocity helps China's enemies and, in their view, enables socialism to be equated with totalitarianism. Some of the most articulate of these are self-consciously Stalinist. How does this happen?

Sean R. Roberts: Ah, yes, the 'tankies'. I'm mildly obsessed with them as well. They make me start thinking about how people establish broad ideological frameworks that they use to analyse everything around them without attention to local realities, facts, and history. That practice inevitably leads to an irony: adopting contradictory positions while trying to remain ideologically pure. They're so married to a certain framework that they end up shoving square pegs into round holes. For instance, from a Marxist perspective, I can understand why 'tankies' might feel that religion is retrograde, a negative influence on society, and thus not worthy of protection.

But on the other hand, when they start using this logic to justify an Islamophobia that is connected to the US-led GWOT, that is puzzling and certainly out of character for self-proclaimed anti-imperialists.

MPR: Because this discourse is associated with US imperialism, so to speak?

SRR: Yes. I have lots of responses on my Twitter timeline where ‘tankies’ post analyses from US neoconservative counterterrorism publications about the Uyghur ‘terrorist threat’ to justify China’s actions against Uyghurs. That is a pretty ironic stance for people who see themselves as committed anti-imperialists. Also, counterterrorism since 9/11 has become an inherently racist ideology, which is connected to colonial discourses of the uncivilised ‘other’. I have a lot of stuff on the cutting-room floor from this book, which I had to write to get my ideas together. I struggled a lot with how and why the GWOT quickly became a racial indictment of Muslims that is prone to genocidal actions. This largely is due to the assumption—inherent in most terrorism analysis—that the reason Jihadists are taking up armed struggle is only because of an irrational ideological adherence to an extremist version of Islam, which negates any grievances they may have, dismisses their voices, and identifies Islam as the motivation for their actions. Yes, Jihadists justify what they’re doing as a part of their religious obligation, but if you look at the people who end up joining these groups, they usually have grievances that are grounded in actual issues and things that have happened to them and their people. ‘Tankies’ and Jihadists share a lot in common: Jihadism or Stalinism presents them with an all-encompassing framework that provides all the answers, and they start framing everything in that way. However, the reasons they choose to find such an all-encompassing ideology to explain the world around them are likely connected to other, more concrete grievances and frustrations they have experienced.

But, to get back to your point about my book engaging lots of concepts that each carry their own baggage and legacy of ideas, this is true. I do this because I see all of these phenomena in what is happening to the Uyghurs in China today, but I also don’t see any one of them being entirely explanatory on their own. In my mind, colonialism represents the most useful explanatory framework, but this becomes a controversial stance because the popular conception of colonialism has become equated with European, and later American, attempts to dominate the world. While Chinese colonialism shares much in common with European and Anglo-American forms of domination over territory and peoples, it does not fit with the rigid Wallersteinian view of a Eurocentric world system that dominates Western leftist thinking about global affairs. This is further complicated by the fact that, contrary to the historical record, the PRC officially refutes that the Uyghur homeland became

a part of modern China through conquests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This lack of recognition of the origins of the Uyghurs' forcible inclusion in modern China has only perpetuated colonial attitudes towards the Uyghurs and their homeland. Today, what is happening is the logical conclusion of these attitudes as the state is seeking, in the tradition of settler colonialism, to pacify and marginalise the Uyghurs so that it can develop their homeland as part of a Han-centric nation-building project that is fuelled by the state's economic expansion—not unlike the US colonisation of its west and the pacification and displacement of Native Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, it is a process that inevitably also intersects with questions about indigeneity and of who has the right to determine the future development of this territory.

However, at the same time, these actions are couched in a discourse that is related to the GWOT, which is itself racist and founded in the global inequalities of colonialism. One of the things I try to unpack in my book is how hollow the ideology of counterterrorism has become and how easy it is to manipulate for other purposes. In many ways, it is every bit as narrow as the ideology of the 'tankies'; both characterise certain actors in the world as inherently evil, almost in a biological or racial way. That said, I try not to overemphasise theoretical arguments about the nature of colonialism and terrorism in the book because it is first and foremost about a human tragedy that requires action, and that is more important than engaging in academic debates about broad conceptual frameworks.

MPR: I benefited from your account of the long history of the colonisation of Xinjiang and the groups—mostly religious—which have risen to resist it. All this makes salient the question of ethno-nationalism and indigeneity as it intersects with the Uyghur cause. Some of the postcolonial literature seems ambivalent about indigeneity because it can be associated with nativism and patriarchy. Ethno-nationalism also does not typically fit comfortably within what we imagine to be the universalist aspirations of liberal democracy, modernity, and individual human rights, etc. Can you please elaborate on the tensions this produces?

SRR: What you're getting at is one of the inherent contradictions in the postcolonial world. It reminds me of an elderly Uyghur I knew in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, who would always ask: what-ever happened to national self-determination? After World War II, self-determination was a central concern as empires were dismantled and newly independent states created, but there's been an international ambivalence about self-determination as a universal concept ever since because every new nation-state that is recognised chips away at the territory and power of another nation-state. I prefer to view Indigenous peoples as those people in the world who were overlooked in the transition from empires to independent modern nation-states, rather than assigning them some 'exoticised' status as the 'first people' of a territory. From this perspective, they expose

the flaws in the concept of modern nation-states in a postcolonial world. On the one hand, while most modernist ideologies, whether Marxist or capitalist, imagine the withering away of nations as a sort of ‘false consciousness’, history has shown that the implementation of these ideologies does not erase people’s national consciousness. On the other hand, our present world system also shows that the imaginary boundaries of cultural difference represented by nations never completely correspond to the physical borders of states. In this sense, the discourse of indigeneity brings into question both the entire enterprise of modern nation-states and the utopian visions of modernism.

This is the problem with Palestine and Israel, and this is the problem in China with the Uyghur region and Tibet. As national identities without statehood, Palestinian, Uyghur, and Tibetan identities remain deeply connected to a specific territory that they view as their homeland, and this is at odds with the perceptions of the nation-states in which they live. However, I also do not believe this is necessarily a recipe for inevitable conflict. My research on the global Indigenous peoples’ movement and its engagement with development issues suggests an alternative to conflict. Most Indigenous peoples do not view statehood as a realistic option in our system of existing powerful states, but they still want recognition of their unique connection to a specific territory and self-determination over how that territory is developed. Self-determination in this form does not necessarily require separate statehood, but it does require recognition of a people’s collective rights to the decision-making around a specific territory. As such, it is a concept that is at odds with liberal democracy, which imagines all rights as embodied in individuals, and it is also inevitably at odds with global capitalism’s state-centric thirst to exploit territory for economic growth.

I’ve been grappling with this question probably since 2011, when I started teaching a class about Indigenous peoples and development. At the time, I wondered whether the PRC would entertain the idea of recognising Uyghurs as Indigenous people and giving them more of a voice in the development of their homeland. This would actually be in the state’s interest; it would both provide an incentive for Uyghurs to integrate into the Chinese state on their own terms and give the Chinese Government the ability to secure this region that they’re insecure about, albeit without total control over its development and uses. In some ways, this is a system that was at least imagined by the Party in the 1950s when they officially named this region the Uyghur Autonomous Region, but I would argue that the PRC never followed through on giving Uyghurs any real degree of ethnic autonomy in the region.

This has become particularly vivid since the 1990s, when China’s economic expansion fostered a state-led development plan for the Uyghur region that sought to transform it along the lines of development elsewhere in China. Initially, the Chinese state, using

modernist thinking borrowed from both Marxism and capitalism, believed that the resultant economic growth and modern amenities would win Uyghurs over, lead to their abandonment of religion and national identity, and end their discontent. However, many Uyghurs viewed this development and the related increasing Han migration to the region as an assault on their cultural uniqueness and connection to a territory they viewed as their homeland, especially in the Uyghur-majority south of the region. This development accelerated significantly in the 2000s and became intertwined with the narrative of the GWOT. In the context of the GWOT, if certain Uyghurs appeared to reject the state-led transformation of their homeland and daily lives, they could now be labelled as ‘terrorists’ or ‘extremists’ and neutralised. In many ways, I would argue that in the context of Xinjiang, the label of ‘terrorist’ became a twenty-first-century version of the US use of ‘savages’ when meeting resistance from Native Americans during the settler colonisation of the American west. Both terms are used to suggest an irrational resistance to what the state views as the inevitable march of progress. In both cases, the result is the destruction of the Indigenous peoples’ identity and social capital, their displacement, and their ultimate marginalisation.

These are some of the reasons that I believe the term ‘indigeneity’ is particularly germane to the Uyghur situation even though Uyghurs have generally not aligned themselves with the global Indigenous peoples’ movement. Most Uyghurs I have encountered over the years have articulated the need for independent statehood, but that is because they feel disenfranchised in their homeland. I believe that if the PRC had given Uyghurs control over the development of their homeland three decades ago, this insistence on statehood would have been replaced with an acceptance of limited sovereignty over their homeland as part of a multinational PRC. Giving Uyghurs such control over the governance of their homeland was perhaps imaginable during the reform period of the 1980s, but today under Xi Jinping’s Party, it is unthinkable. I believe Xi has decided that the Uyghur people are an obstacle to state intentions for their homeland and, thus, must be completely pacified and marginalised like Native Americans in the US west were a century before.

MPR: How much do you see the discourse of terrorism being instrumental to the construction of the supposed Uyghur threat, and how much do you think it has been adopted only opportunistically? If there were no GWOT, would there still be this campaign against the Uyghurs?

SRR: I’m writing a chapter for an edited volume on Islamophobia where I try to unpack this. The interaction between GWOT and what’s happening is complex. When I was writing my book, I realised that the Chinese state sees a certain degree of inevitability in the destruction of the Uyghur people. That’s why I really like David

Tobin's book *Securing China's Northwestern Frontier* [Cambridge University Press, 2020]; he unpacks this very opaque baggage on Chinese nation-building, suggesting that Uyghur identity has to be eliminated on various levels in order to create the ideal of the Chinese nation as the Party imagines it. Whether to fulfil the expectations of Marxist theory about the withering away of religion and nationality, to preserve the ideal of 5,000 years of unified Chinese civilisation, to secure this region against perceived separatist claims and outside imperialists, or to prove that Uyghurs have always been part of the Chinese nation, their separate identity must be destroyed. In this context, claims of a Uyghur 'terrorist threat' appear to be merely a justification for eliminating these people in the interests of the Chinese nation. However, the logic of 'terrorism' as an existential threat to the nation has also been internalised by many Chinese officials and has facilitated a new level of dehumanisation of the Uyghur people.

The GWOT discourse in China seamlessly reinforced pre-existing racist attitudes towards the Uyghurs. The discourse of indigeneity is part of what the Chinese Government is really reacting to; it's the concept that this region is the Uyghur homeland. That's a direct challenge to the official state discourse that the region has always been part of China and that Uyghurs have always been Chinese, and it is an obstacle to state intentions for the region. The PRC certainly opportunistically framed its conflict with Uyghurs as a 'terrorist threat' immediately after 9/11 to deflect international criticism of its repressive policies in the region. However, I don't think the PRC necessarily thought it was being disingenuous in doing so because it did not see a difference between 'terrorism', 'extremism', and 'separatism', or the 'three evils', as it likes to call them. The Chinese state sees in the GWOT a much older conflict between civilisation and barbarism or savages, and you could argue that this war is perceived by many in the West in the same way. Those characterised as 'terrorists' (a term that has no recognised universal definition) are ultimately those who threaten the state's vision of an orderly society and who happen to be Muslim. They are portrayed as irrational and anti-modern—traits that essentially become characterised as a part of their religion—and they must be defeated in the interests of progress.

Also, as I note in my book, the combined pressures in the region of state-led development and campaigns to identify those harbouring the 'three evils' during the first decade after 9/11 eventually spawned acts of violent resistance by Uyghurs. While there is no evidence that most of this violence was actually planned political violence, the state was able to portray it as part of an organised Uyghur 'terrorist threat' fuelled by 'extremist' beliefs associated with Islam and connected to external influences. As a result, many people, including government officials, began to believe this narrative and to view Uyghurs as an existential 'terrorist threat'. Furthermore, this led to the creation of

China's own 'terrorism-industrial complex' in which people could establish careers by becoming invested in this narrative. In this sense, while the real motivations for what the PRC is doing to Uyghurs have little to do with 'terrorism' or 'extremism', many involved in the repression as well as many others in China now believe they do. Thus, the narrative of the GWOT has been instrumentally used to justify the erasure of Uyghurs in the same sense that the 'civilising mission' was used to justify European colonialism in the nineteenth century. It is not the motivation for the state or empire's actions, but many implementing or supporting those actions have internalised the idea that it is.

Finally, the logic of the GWOT also helped facilitate the dehumanisation of Uyghurs in a way that was not previously possible. The narrative of the GWOT allowed the Chinese state to locate the source of Uyghurs' failure to assimilate and their lack of loyalty to a trait within their culture: Islam. While this did not immediately change state attitudes towards Uyghurs on 9/11, it did gradually alter state impressions of their 'Uyghur problem'. If this problem was related to a global movement of 'extremist' Muslims, eliminating the 'bad apples' among the population would not resolve it. Rather, the cultural traits of Uyghurs that facilitated the embrace of that 'extremism' had to be destroyed. As a result, the state was able to take the leap from suppressing the 'bad Uyghurs' to suppressing all Uyghurs and cleansing them of their cultural roots.

MPR: I would like your reaction to a thought experiment I have entertained. It is that the Chinese Communist Party does what they are doing now, but beginning in late 2001, fully leveraging the pervasive panic about terrorism. They stop travel to the region; there is only a small community of scholars studying Uyghurs and Xinjiang; China has been admitted into the World Trade Organization so there is little global appetite for challenging the government; there is no easily accessible satellite imagery; there are barely any data on the internet. It seems conceivable, then, that the entire campaign could have occurred but barely registered in global understanding. The only data would be a paper trail—akin to how the atrocities in the Belgian Congo were first learned about—and many would have been happy to assume that 'they probably *were* terrorists'. First, does this thought experiment seem plausible to you? And second, does it give you—as it does me—vertigo to consider it? I mean to suggest the contingency surrounding how we come to learn of a given atrocity 'as a thing' in the first place.

SR: On the question of plausibility, it is plausible, but it would not have likely taken place. One of the things I try to demonstrate in my book is that the present situation took time to evolve into an atrocity. While current events emerge from a long and problematic relationship between modern China and the Uyghurs, they needed a perfect storm to turn into the forced erasure of the Uyghurs as we know them. The GWOT was part of that storm, but it also included the urgency that the Party felt in establishing the Belt and Road Initiative, much of which hinges on Xinjiang. It also needed Xi

Jinping's nationalism and desire for societal control, leading the Party to be capable to carry out atrocities, and it needed the state to develop the hubris of a global power to believe it had the right to do so without receiving blowback from the rest of the world.

On the question of the contingency of how we came to learn of what was happening to Uyghurs in China, this is an interesting question. Is an atrocity an atrocity if we do not know about it? However, perhaps even more interesting is the contingency of when this is happening and how that impacts how people feel about it. On the one hand, it is difficult today for states to hide mass atrocities given the power of satellite imagery and the communication abilities facilitated by the internet. On the other hand, these same technologies offer opportunities for scepticism. Are satellite images doctored? Are claims on the internet merely creating disinformation? Furthermore, the internet has created so much information that many people no longer recognise legitimate news sources; both 'tankies' and 'Trumpists', for example, share a disdain for sources like *The New York Times* and *CNN*, referring to them as 'fake news'. Finally, the fact that people can curate their experience of current events by choosing the news that flows into their timelines means that people have shockingly different interpretations of what is happening in Xinjiang.

Finally, to bring us back full circle to your first question, these factors related to how we consume information are creating more hardened ideological lines around the world that lead people to fit square pegs into round holes. Neoconservatives in the United States have embraced the cause of Uyghurs as a sign of the evil nature of the PRC but happily ignore the role that the GWOT played in facilitating what is happening to them. At the same time, 'tankies' support China's actions against Uyghurs because the PRC represents to them the vanguard of the global socialist revolution, but they happily ignore that these actions are fuelled by racism, colonialism, and the thirst for capital in China. While these perspectives represent ideological extremes, they influence global public opinion about what is happening to Uyghurs on both the right and the left. At the very least, this situation muddies the waters enough to make most people apathetic about the issue.

MPR: On the question of settler colonialism and indigeneity, you argue that countries like the United States and Australia, for example, lack the moral authority to criticise China for what it is doing because of their own settler-colonial pasts. What is the function of moral authority in other states making such critiques? Does any country have the moral authority to criticise the PRC on this?

SRR: Well, moral authority lies in the perception of others. Calls from the United States to protect the rights of Muslims, or to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, are more easily dismissed by people who may want to dismiss them. It particularly lends itself

to ‘whataboutism’ intended to change the subject and raise doubt: ‘How can the United States claim China is committing genocide when the United States committed genocide against the Native Americans?’ This statement, of course, sounds absurd to those people who condemn the actions that have been taken against both Native Americans and Uyghurs, but to those who would prefer to not believe bad things are happening to Uyghurs, it sounds like an appropriate response that vindicates the PRC. This is a strategy often employed by ‘tankies’, but it is increasingly used by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs—sometimes even citing marginalised far-left voices in the United States, Europe, and Australia to make their point. The intention here is to sow doubt and raise the possibility that the US Government has fabricated the atrocities against Uyghurs as a means to stymie China’s rise. If you sow such doubt, the average person who knows nothing about Uyghurs may say: ‘I don’t know. It’s really complicated. Maybe they *are* terrorists. Maybe the US is making all this up. I don’t know. I’m going to go get a beer.’ The most unfortunate part of this type of discourse is that it makes what is happening to Uyghurs about geopolitical competition between the United States and China, when it should really be about the accountability of powerful states for their actions, whether we are talking about the United States or the PRC.

MPR: Yes, it is this question of doubt I was getting at in the 2001 thought experiment, where the movement for global awareness and response could possibly have been short-circuited—that it wasn’t inevitable that we would learn what we now know. PRC propaganda is important and interesting in this respect. Just for example, did you see the *China Daily’s* claims that official policies are progressive because they liberate Uyghur women from being ‘baby-making machines’? This is grotesque obviously, but they at least think they are tapping into something that an imagined audience would be receptive to. What is going on there?

SRR: This narrative about the liberation of women is a powerful modernist technique to attack people one wants to portray as ‘uncivilised’. It has long been used by both the Soviet Union and the PRC as a wedge issue against different ethnic groups to justify programs of cultural change, but it has also been used specifically to demonise Muslims by liberals in the United States and Europe—something Muslim feminists often push back against vehemently. This is evident today as the Western media often reduces the many pressing questions arising from the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan to the fate of women’s rights because it creates a visceral response. On the one hand, the rights of women and the power of patriarchal ideas are a real problem everywhere in the world that should be addressed. On the other hand, to portray the exploitation of women as a cultural or religious trait of an entire population of people is a racially profiled indictment of that people. In this particular instance, the PRC seeks to appeal to the Islamophobia of Western liberals. The logic seems to be: the Uyghurs are Muslim, so they must oppress

women; maybe this information about forced sterilisations among Uyghur women is really a pro-choice issue about reproductive rights? As with much of the PRC's propaganda efforts that are produced in English, however, it was explained clumsily and was generally not received by most readers in the way they had hoped.

MPR: What is your sense of the scholarship that is emerging in this field, particularly in political science and international relations? Is there a tension between the ideally value-neutral stance of scholarship, which might bracket its potential impact on victims, and the urgency and reality of what is happening?

SRR: I do see with the empirical turn in social sciences that scholars attempt to detach themselves from the situation on the ground. There were two political scientists I knew in the field during the 1990s; they were giving me a hard time, saying: 'You're too close to your subject, you can't be objective!' I responded as an anthropologist: 'You don't even like this place, why are you doing research here?' And they said something about how not liking the subject of their research made them more objective. That attitude is found in much of US academia in the social sciences; it's about making provocative arguments, getting publications in prestigious journals, proving one's theories, and not being emotionally attached to the subject. This is fine if the goal is merely to build frameworks of knowledge that might help us eventually understand the world better, but it becomes more problematic when it seeks to inform immediate policy that will substantively impact people's lives. I believe that policy advice should require empathy for the people your recommendations may impact, but this is rarely the case. A particularly obvious example of this is hawkish pundits who frequently call for military responses to problems where such actions will likely result in more misery for those involved while not resolving the problem. It's particularly problematic to call for the United States to engage China on counterterrorism as a means of ameliorating the situation. This reflects a lack of understanding of what is really motivating the state in the Uyghur region and assumes that US counterterrorism approaches are virtuous, which they are not. Most people intimately aware of the situation in Xinjiang know that US engagement of China on counterterrorism would only make the situation far worse. ■



Xinjiang Year Zero (ANU Press, Forthcoming 2022);
In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony (Columbia Global Reports, October 2021);
Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City (Duke University Press, February 2022).



Primo Levi, Camp Power, and Terror Capitalism

A Conversation with Darren Byler

Ivan FRANCESCHINI
 Darren BYLER

What does Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi have to tell us about life in reeducation camps in Xinjiang today? What role does labour play in these facilities? What is terror capitalism and how does it relate to other frontiers of global capitalism? Can there be such a thing as ‘benign’ surveillance? These and other questions are at the centre of this conversation with anthropologist Darren Byler, who in recent years has emerged as a leading voice in documenting the mass detention of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in northwestern China. The impending publication of three books of his—*In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony* (Columbia Global Reports, October 2021), *Xinjiang, Year Zero* (co-edited with Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, ANU Press, Forthcoming 2022), and *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Duke University Press, February 2022)—offers us an opportunity to revisit some key aspects of his work.

Ivan Franceschini: We are often warned to avoid facile historical comparisons when we discuss contemporary matters, yet history offers uncanny lessons when it comes to the Xinjiang camps. In your books, you repeatedly cite the great Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi to highlight a few common patterns between the situation in the camps

in Xinjiang as described by survivors and his experiences of being interned in Nazi lagers during World War II. This is something I would like to explore further in this conversation. The first obvious point of comparison is in the dehumanisation of prisoners. In particular, you mention this passage from Levi: 'Some of them beat us from pure bestiality and violence, but others beat us when we are under a load almost lovingly, accompanying the blows with exhortations, as cart-drivers do with willing horses.' One of the most infamous memories and legacies of the lagers are the numbers tattooed on the wrists of prisoners. How does this dehumanisation occur today in the camps in Xinjiang?

Darren Byler: As I was grappling with the accounts I heard from detainees and that I saw detailed in internal police documents, I turned to Primo Levi's work as an example of the kind of writerly method that I wanted to use in the book and less because I thought the Holocaust was the best example with which to compare the system. While death from neglect, disease, and abuse does appear frequently in the Xinjiang camps, the intentional mass killing of the Nazi death camps appears to be absent. So, in some ways, historical examples from China or the Soviet Union might have been better analogues when it came to camp ideologies and management, and the detainee camps in occupied Iraq might have been a better point of comparison for contemporary detainment of racialised, religious others. Levi's work stands out though because he writes as a careful observer of systems of power. By noting the small details and the bureaucratic norms of camp life, he shows how extraordinary violence is made possible. The goal in my writing was to make careful, rather small, truth claims that add up to something larger.

Levi, and perhaps Hannah Arendt (1964), have done some of the best thinking about the implications of dehumanising systems, and that is something I wanted to consider in this book as well. I wanted to understand what mass internment means for the contemporary moment, particularly what it means to use advanced technology as part of the process. To be clear, I'm writing from the position of someone who has lived in the society I write about for two years and have been thinking about for a decade, but that is not the same as someone like Levi, who directly experienced the things he is describing, or Arendt, who is from the community that was targeted. So, I'm writing from a greater distance than both of them and, of course, with infinitely less skill.

So that is why I turned to Levi's work. But, in doing so, certain things that people told me stood out in ways that they might not have otherwise. One of them has to do with a Kazakh herder who I refer to as Adilbek. He really emphasised how the camp experience felt to him as someone who had spent a lifetime with sheep and as a Muslim who had avoided pork his whole life. He said the guards struck them hard if they wanted to punish them, and with gentler blows if they were just trying to hurry them along, 'like a farmer herding sheep'—a line that was uncanny in its resemblance

to the lines you quote from Levi. The guards, too, most of whom were Kazakh and Uyghur, also came from farming life and had the same halal traditions. So, in their effort to exert their authority over the detainees, they referred to them directly as dogs or pigs, particularly when they were beating them over challenges to authority. Numerous detainees from across the region spoke about this usage of dehumanising names, though Adilbek was the most explicit in describing the different types of beatings.

Much of the dehumanisation in the camps comes from deindividuation and imposed scarcity. In every camp, people were given a uniform and had their head shaved or closely cropped. In many cases, they were forced to use buckets as toilets in the presence of other detainees and in front of high-definition surveillance cameras. The smell of the buckets permeated the cell. The detainees were permitted to shower very infrequently and given a change of clothes even less often. Showering is timed so detainees often fought with each other over access to water and soap. They are forced to sing 'Red' songs before meals as loudly as possible. Often, food is withheld until they sing well enough. Many people became ill due to poor nutrition, lack of sanitation, hours of sitting on plastic stools or benches, beatings, and lack of medical attention. While they were not assigned a permanent number, in the cells, they responded to roll call by shouting out the number they had been assigned within the cell. Numbers are typically assigned based on who is the 'class monitor' [班长] of the cell and the time of their arrival in the cell; the last to arrive is given the highest number and least favourable sleeping arrangements. If there are more people than can sleep hands to feet on a narrow bunk, the detainees are forced to take turns sleeping and 'standing guard', which introduces an additional antagonism in the social order of the cell.

IF: One second similarity can be found in what Levi called the 'grey zone', which, sadly or perhaps aptly, today is also the name of one of the main outlets spreading misinformation about what is going on in northwestern China. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Levi discusses at length this 'grey zone' of 'prisoners who to some extent, perhaps for a good purpose, collaborated with the authority', which 'was not thin, constituting instead a phenomenon of fundamental importance for the historian, the psychologist and the sociologist'. In his words (which I am quoting in my translation, here and below): 'There is no prisoner who does not remember that, and who does not remember his surprise then: the first threats, the first insults, the first blows did not come from the SS, but from other prisoners, from "colleagues", from those mysterious characters who also wore the same striped tunic that they, the new arrivals, had just put on.' In your books, you discuss at length the ways in which the reeducation camps in Xinjiang produce the conditions for these types of dynamics to emerge—in fact, you dedicate entire chapters of *In the Camps* to the collaborators; you also discuss how relationships between prisoners themselves are often characterised by violence. Can you tell us a bit more about this dimension of the camps? Who are the people who end up sustaining the economy of the camps and what are their motivations?

DB: Much of the discipline in the camp spaces came from other detainees within the cells, Uyghur and Kazakh guards, Muslim and Han camp instructors and ‘life teachers’ [生活老师], Han and Uyghur Civil Affairs Ministry bureaucrats who monitored detainee progress, judges, and prosecutors from all ethnicities. I see all of these individuals as being in the position of ‘swarms of low-level functionaries’ that Levi describes as the primary actors in the grey zone. Because they are operating in or around the extralegal space of the camp, they have extraordinary power over the detainees under their charge, but they are not the architects of the system—the camp commanders, the system designers, the party secretaries who set the quotas, and so on. The Muslims involved in the system face maximal coercion—as a constant rhetoric of rooting out and destroying ‘two-faced’ people is held over them at all times.

Han civilians—who work in the camps or evaluate the trustworthiness of their Muslim neighbours—also face the threat of loss of promotion, losing status if they appear unsupportive of the campaign, and potentially arrest (though this appears relatively rare) if they take too much of a role in resisting the system. On the other hand, those who do participate are often rewarded for their perceived sacrifice with promotions, commendations, and bonuses. Here there is an echo of Arendt’s thinking regarding dulling of conscience [Arendt 1964]. If there are few dissenting voices, little information that contradicts the regime of truth within a society, it is relatively easy to accept the norms that are given without much reflective thought. One of the things I’m trying to think through is the way advanced technology, which has been used to diagnose ‘terrorism crimes that are not serious’ [Government of China 2019] throughout Xinjiang’s Muslim population, aggregates and expands this type of unreflective truth-making. In many cases, it appears as though technology-led policing creates scripts of action that diminish the need and possibility for thought.

IF: This links to the question of solidarity, which you discuss in *Terror Capitalism*. In his recollection of the Nazi camps, Levi also remembered that ‘one entered hoping at least in the solidarity of your companions in misfortune, but the hoped-for allies, save some special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed monads, and among this a desperate struggle, hidden and unceasing’. What about solidarity both between those within the camps and between those inside and outside, including Han people?

DB: My sense is that Xinjiang—in and out of the camps—is also largely a society of ‘a thousand sealed monads’. Inside the camps, people do compare notes at least initially as they try to make sense of what just happened and what will come next. So, at first, there is a lot of whispered discussion regarding why people had been detained. But in interrogation and over time inside the cell, it appears as though guards and interrogators often turn detainees against each other. During interrogations, detainees are pushed to confess

a kind of ‘middle guilt’—not too guilty that they could be sent to prison but also not too innocent that they did not deserve to be in the camp (professing one’s innocence is construed as being resistant or having a ‘bad attitude’). Declaring this guilt often requires that they name others who are more guilty than them: the ones who first invited them to a Quran study group on WeChat or showed them how to use a VPN [virtual private network], and so on. The privileged position of ‘class monitor’ carries with it the responsibility of informing on resistant or failing detainees in the cell and doling out punishment for lack of discipline. Over time, as detainees become more desperate, they often become more suspicious of each other, so some of the initial solidarity begins to dissipate and people are often simply silent.

Outside the camps among Han populations there is certainly ethnonationalist solidarity in the campaign. When I was there last, in 2018, Han ‘volunteers’ who had been sent down to villages to monitor Uyghur families referred to each other as comrades and really saw themselves allied in shared struggle against the terrorism-in-hiding that they projected on to Uyghurs. In some cases, they saw themselves as helping Uyghurs in a kind of paternalistic way—that they were saving Uyghurs from themselves.

Among certain segments of the Han population, particularly those who lived in proximity to Uyghurs before the waves of market-oriented economic migrants in the late 1990s and 2000s, there is a good deal of sympathy for the Uyghurs and Kazakhs, but in most cases, such people are not in positions to act outside their immediate social sphere. Many of the leaked documents that have shed light on the inner workings of the system come from Han individuals who want to furtively expose what has been done in their name.

Among Uyghurs and Kazakhs, in some cases, the camp system has produced greater solidarity across social class and ethnic difference, as many wealthy, urban citizens who were previously less exposed are also missing loved ones. But it has also produced a great deal of alienation. The family members of detainees report being ostracised by their communities, and many spouses divorced as a result of one of them being taken. All of this produces the sealed monads Levi describes.

IF: Levi’s oeuvre also offers some fundamental insights into the role of labour in concentration camps, beyond the infamous moniker ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ that could be found at the entrance to Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps. Again, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, he writes that ‘unpaid work, that is slavery, was one of three purposes of the concentration system; the other two were the elimination of political adversaries and the extermination of the so-called inferior races’. He notes how, in the earliest lagers, work served purely persecutory purposes and had no use whatsoever in terms of production. This was because ‘for the Fascist and Nazi rhetoric, which in this is heir of the bourgeois rhetoric, “work dignifies”, and therefore the undignified adversaries of the regime are not worthy of working in the usual sense of the term. Their work must be punitive: it must not

leave space to professionalism, it must be that of beasts of burden, pull, push, carry weights, bend your back on the land. This is useless violence as well: perhaps only useful to put down the current resistances and to punish the past ones.' What purposes does work serve in reeducation camps in Xinjiang?

DB: Many former detainees noted that being allowed to work inside the camp or being transferred to work in a factory from the camp was a great relief from the drudgery and violence of life in camp cells and classrooms. Simply having something to do and a bit more bodily autonomy felt humanising. Because the factories where former detainees are transferred (in distinction from factories where farmers are assigned) are managed with the support of camp personnel, many detainees still viewed them as a carceral space. In some cases, they were locked in cubicles as they worked, and they were not permitted to move beyond allotted boundaries without permission. The guards and managers viewed them as dangerous and often still treated them as criminals rather than as professionals or employees.

Those who were placed under a form of house arrest likewise talked about how they were forced to perform their submission to the Civil Affairs Ministry workers who monitored them. One former detainee who was assigned to work as a cook and cleaner in a Civil Affairs unit [社区] said the two Han women who monitored him expected him to come to every flag-raising ceremony and sing Red songs on command. He said he learned to always keep a smile on his face and say, 'Okay! Okay!' [行!行!] to everything they asked. He said it felt like he was their pet. Among the former detainees I interviewed, none of them felt able to ask about compensation for their work. In general, they were made to feel that they should just be grateful that they were no longer locked in camp cells. And, in some cases, they were told quite explicitly that they could be detained again at a moment's notice.

Forms of status coercion that come from detainability—which, as Erin Hatton (2020) points out, refers not to the threat of losing a job or income, but the threat of being labelled untrustworthy—are extreme.

This means that work is primarily about extracting maximal profits from deeply controlled workers, which I refer to in *Terror Capitalism* as a permanent underclass. That is, at least in the near term, such workers are indefinitely excluded from the right to freely choose where they work and under what conditions. This is the case for both former detainees and Uyghur and Kazakh villagers who are simply deemed unproductive or 'surplus labourers' [剩余劳动力]. State documents show that individuals who fall into the categories of assigned work are graded based on their trustworthiness [Qapqal County Social Security Bureau 2018]. Those who are given a certificate validating their trustworthiness are typically those who are sent along with police officers and cadres who ensure their discipline to

work in factories across the country. Those who fall into normal or untrustworthy categories are sent to work in locations in Xinjiang or into a range of different types of ‘training’. The camps—or ‘concentrated closed training and education centres’ [集中封闭培训教育中心]—are one track used in this training. In all cases, a securitised form of the ‘dormitory labour regime’ (Smith and Pun 2006) used in relation to migrant workers across the country is used by factory managers to manage coerced Muslim workers. For former detainees working in camp-associated factories, rather than Muslim surplus labourers working in eastern China, the security measures used in this ‘reeducation labour regime’ are greatly enhanced with forms of biometric tracking, checkpoints, and locked enclosures.

IF: Interestingly, Levi also takes care to point out how work could serve as a defence in the camps for those who found the way to be assigned to jobs in line with their skills. These people, he wrote, ‘by finding their usual activity, recovered at the same time, to a certain extent, their human dignity’. For others, labour was a relief in that it distracted them from the thought of the worse things to come. Does the economy of the Xinjiang camps leave space for this kind of valorisation of labour?

DB: Certainly, working provides an escape and a kind of valorisation, especially for those who had skills they had cultivated before detention. For instance, Vera Zhou, a University of Washington geography student who was pressed into work as an unpaid English tutor for a police officer’s family after her detention, talked about how having a social role again helped her to regain her confidence as an individual and understand the injustice she had experienced. In general, because work was offered only to those who had proven their submission and knowledge by passing Chinese-language and legal knowledge exams, it means that detainees have passed a certain threshold in their reeducation. So, it gives them the feeling that the worst is in the past and that they now have more security. However, the reeducation labour regime operates within a highly coercive system of surveillance and legal indeterminacy that prevents demands for equitable wages or autonomous work conditions. Workers are always in a highly dependent position due to their detainability and the infrastructure that enforces it.

IF: There is no question concentration camps now have quite a long history. As Andrea Pitzer has brilliantly shown in her *One Long Night* (2017), the appearance of these structures is intimately linked to new technological and scientific advances towards the end of the nineteenth century and has little to do with the political system of a country. Concentration camps were first conceived by the Spanish in Cuba in the late 1890s, expanded by the British in South Africa during the Boer War, normalised by all warring factions during World War I, and finally manifested in the extreme variants of the Soviet gulags and the Nazi lagers, before lapsing into the more familiar forms of ‘black’ detention sites that became common in Latin America in the 1970s. Yet, Levi and most authors who have discussed different iterations of concentration camps in recent history frame their writings in terms of state

violence, authoritarianism, or even totalitarianism. Instead, you chose to discuss the camps in Xinjiang as a form of 'terror capitalism' within the context of 'global capitalism'. Some might see this framing as counterintuitive and accuse you of downplaying the agency of the Chinese authorities. Why do you think capitalism, or 'terror capitalism', is the best frame to make sense of what is going on in Xinjiang? But, most importantly, do you believe the camps in Xinjiang represent a historical rupture from the other forms of mass detention that appeared during the long twentieth century? And, if so, how?

DB: In analysis and critique of camp systems (Andrea's work is an exception to this) there is often a reflex to place the blame for them on the singular evil of key leaders. While political leadership and ideology certainly play a pivotal role—the camps in Xinjiang likely would not have been possible without people like Xi Jinping, Chen Quanguo, and Zhu Hailun and the effect of the Party-State system—my feeling is that limiting analysis to such actors risks ignoring the economic and material conditions that gave rise to the underlying antagonism and fuel its ongoing momentum.

So, for me, the story of the camps and surveillance state goes back to the 1990s when the drive for natural resources to fuel China's export-oriented economy is what turned the Uyghur-majority south of the region into an internal settler colony. The Uyghur response—both real and imagined—to their dispossession is, in turn, what spurred the state's adoption of War on Terror rhetoric and tactics post 9/11. This war space offered a place to build and experiment with new population-control technologies that have helped propel the exponential rise of computer vision and digital surveillance industries into a wide range of domains. At the same time, the camps and surveillance systems have become a carrier of the regional economy, attracting companies interested in subsidised, cheap, and subservient labour in low-skill domains such as garment manufacturing. That is, there is an economic and political call and response that have produced the dynamic we see in Xinjiang today.

And, importantly, this dynamic is interlinked with dynamics that pervade global economic and political systems not only in terms of supply chains, policing tool development, and insurgency theory, but also in terms of what frontiers of contemporary capitalism look like. Part of what I want to show in the book is the way the term 'terror capitalism' should be thought of in relation to recent scholarship focused on particular frontiers of global capitalism such as *disaster capitalism* and *surveillance capitalism* [Klein 2007; Zuboff 2019]. It also, importantly, focuses attention on the way these global novel formations should be thought of as articulated to the ongoing imperialist and colonial processes of *racial capitalism* [Robinson 1983].

Disaster capitalism theorises the economic and political complex that responds to emergent disasters associated with the climate crisis—a type of 'counter-disaster capitalism' that justifies itself by masking the role of capitalism and political ideology in the production of disasters. Similarly, surveillance capitalism, or 'dataveil-

lance', hides in plain sight, masking the production of controlled digital subjects and the exploitation of precarious, often racialised, workers in a patina of 'smart' convenience and logistical speed. These new global formations are connected to racialised capitalism, which describes the way economic frontier-making is premised on capturing the land and labour of ethno-racial others—a type of capitalism that justifies itself by masking the production of race and differential value.

Terror capitalism is related to these framings of contemporary global systems and their histories. On the one hand, it is a type of 'counterterrorism capitalism'—premiered on the prevention of the disaster-like terrorist event. However, naming it 'counterterrorism capitalism' would obfuscate the way the capitalist formation itself produces the figure of the terrorist as its object of investment. Terrorists and terrorism are not *a priori* givens, but rather historically contingent phenomena. Treating them as concrete objects that can be 'countered' works to mask a novel form of global racialisation that is attached to Muslim bodies as a result of the Global War on Terror [Mamdani 2002; Rana 2011; Brophy 2019]. In this sense, terror capitalism—particularly in a domestic, internal, colonial context like northwest China—combines the war-like machinery of terrorism 'disaster' prevention, corporate and police dataveillance with the racialised apparatus of capitalist-colonial frontier systems. Terror capitalism is about the production of the terrorist as a juridical category and object of a technological gaze, and in turn the expropriation of the land and labour of those who are produced as potential terrorists.

Framing the system as an expression of terror capitalism produces a different object of critique than framing the system as a new form of state terror. Terror capitalism, unlike state terror, focuses attention on the linkage between state and private industry investment in the mundane activity of capitalist frontier-making. Even more importantly, it refocuses attention away from the methodological nationalism of 'state authority' narratives, which dominates much social science discussion of contemporary China and, in doing so, frustrates an easy slippage into new Cold War binaries—which frame China as a site of illiberal despotism and human rights crises, ignoring the way racial capitalism and surveillance systems that target unprotected citizens are generated in the United States and elsewhere. None of this refocusing is to deny the role of the Chinese Communist Party in mandating and incentivising private industry to take on their roles in the systems; it is simply to say that such a focus has been made the dominant frame of analysis and my research shows that it does not fully capture the political and economic logics and material effects of the system.

IF: Digital surveillance is a fundamental topic in all of your books, since, as you make clear, the latest advances in surveillance technology are what made the Xinjiang camps possible. While pointing out how surveillance systems support systemic racism and dehumanisation by making targeted populations detainable, even in the West, you also explain that there are significant differences between what is going on in northwestern China and elsewhere. 'In Xinjiang', you write in *In the Camps*, 'the networks of cameras are much denser and supported by checkpoints and data surveillance, and every resident of the region has submitted their biometric data to the authorities in a comprehensive "public health" initiative. Because of the fidelity and scale of the dataset on which their algorithms are trained, the tools of the Xinjiang authorities are much more finetuned and invasive.' If technology is held to be neutral and the difference is only in degrees, it seems that banning trade with Chinese companies engaged in these fields or demanding that universities stop cooperating with Chinese actors in such fields, while important, is just clutching at straws. In his treatise about post-pandemic politics, Benjamin Bratton has recently argued for the need for an epistemic change in the direction of a 'positive biopolitics', which would involve a substantial reevaluation/reframing of the term 'surveillance'. Do you think that is possible and advisable?

DB: Advanced technology definitely has a role to play in a wide range of issues confronting the contemporary world—certainly in terms of the climate crisis and global social inequity. The answer to the surveillance state and digital capitalism is not simply banning algorithmic tools. Rather, it demands technology design for human liberation, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable populations. It means clear and enforceable limits on what kinds of data can be collected and for what purpose. Refusing to support Chinese companies that are involved in the camps, or boycotting US companies that support US policing and military systems—both of which are things I support as a short-term tactic from a moral justice perspective—will not in themselves produce the structural changes that are necessary to make surveillance work in a fundamentally different way (such as what Bratton suggests).

As a social scientist, my research method is itself a type of surveillance—a granular-level process of observation and participation in the phenomena I want to understand. In the past, this method, ethnography, was placed in service to imperial projects and, in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency theory. The problem with surveillance is not the method or technology per se, but rather has to do with who is looking, what are they looking at, and for what purpose. In an era of digital enclosures and big tech, the totality of life is now the object of surveillance and the 'who looks' is defined by those who control these enclosures. For protected citizens like myself, this situation is disconcerting but not dire. For unprotected citizens like Uyghurs, or undocumented immigrants in the United States, these technologies are life defining. Technology design and regulation must start from that position, rather than that of protected citizens. Ultimately, that is what I hope these two books push readers to consider. ■

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From Neoliberalism to Geoeconomics: The Greater Mekong Subregion and the Archaeology of the Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia (GREGORY V. RAYMOND)

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**Ruptured Worlds: A Photo Essay on the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, Cambodia
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