MADE IN CHINA

BEING WATER

Streams of Hong Kong Futures

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J O U R N A L

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EDITORIAL

Being Water: Mapping Hong Kong's Future

I n 2019 and 2020, Hongkongers witnessed—and, in many cases, participated in—one of the largest and most exacting grassroots movements in the city's history. Triggered by a proposed Extradition Bill and fuelled by a decades-long struggle for democracy and political freedom, the decentralised protests quickly seeped into the city's everyday life. While some protestors confronted the police in black blocs, others participated in strikes, sit-ins, and economic boycotts. To suppress the movement, the Hong Kong police used excessive force and violence. To quote just one figure, at the height of the protests, approximately 88 per cent of the Hong Kong population was exposed to teargas.

To put an end to the movement once and for all, in June 2020, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments abruptly implemented the National Security Law (NSL), effectively rendering any expressions of dissent seditious and illegal. Prominent prodemocracy activists and politicians have since either gone into exile or been imprisoned under the NSL; books penned by activists have been removed from the shelves of public libraries; key historical events and political concepts have been censored from textbooks; and around 60 advocacy groups and independent media outlets have been forced to disband. Given the chilling effect of the NSL, many Hongkongers have chosen to emigrate.

Amid this ongoing crackdown, this issue of the *Made in China Journal* takes stock of the aftermath of the protest movement and reflects on the changes that are taking place in Hong Kong's political and civil society in the post-NSL era. While these essays do not offer any definitive answers about Hong Kong's future—the situation is simply too fluid to make predictions—they illuminate lessons and possibilities from the city's struggle for political freedom and shed light on how activists and ordinary citizens are coping with the changed circumstances. We are now witnessing Hongkongers putting into practice, each in their own way, the injunction to 'be water'—a key slogan of the 2019 movement—to adapt to life under a 'new normal'.

The special section of this issue includes 12 articles. **Ka-Ming Chan** opens with an examination of how Hong Kong's political society was transformed by the NSL and the electoral reform of 2021, explaining why this is likely to affect not only the democratic parties but also the pro-establishment camp. **Johnson Ching-Yin Yeung** shifts attention to the realm of civil society, highlighting how both criminal liabilities and the subtle securitisation of regulations on nongovernmental organisations pose new barriers to the activities of civil society organisations, occasionally leading to self-censorship. In the same vein, **Au Loong Yu** investigates the implications of the post-NSL crackdown for civil society in both Hong Kong and mainland China and the tactics employed by Hong Kong political activists to cope with the changed reality. **Kevin Lin** explains how the past couple of years have profoundly changed the Hong Kong labour movement. **Petula Sik Ying Ho** and **Minnie M. Li** discuss the role of feminists during the 2019 protests, arguing that the emergence of internal rifts, along with the suppression of dissent, within the movement ultimately led to the collapse of Hong Kong feminism. **Ming-sho Ho** and **Wei An Chen** examine the situation of former Hong Kong protesters who have sought refuge in Taiwan and are now making a living by selling local products online to Hong Kong–based consumers. **Judith Pernin** revisits the rapidly changing landscape of the visual culture of the Hong Kong protests and examines how some of its components have been affected by political developments, leading to a shift in its regime of visibility. **Ka-ming Wu** looks closely at the changing faces and materials of public pedestrian surfaces, showing the transformation of neighbourhood space and culture in Hong Kong during and after the 2019 protests. **Maurizio Marinelli** reconstructs the struggle of Hong Kong's civil society to save the 150-year-old Graham Street Market from developers, arguing that this experience is both a laboratory for norma-

tive urban governmentality and a testing ground for grassroots practices of collective identity and sustainability. **Shi-Diing Liu** and **Wei Shi** present an affective analysis of the antagonism between Hong Kong and mainland China, illustrating the contexts in which the conflicts are driven by an accumulation of emotional experiences and imaginaries. In a conversation with **Zeng Jinyan**, poet **Liu Wai Tong** revisits his work on the background of social movements in both mainland China and Hong Kong. Finally, **Shui-yin Sharon Yam** has a discussion with **Ching Kwan Lee** about how a Hong Kong studies scholar can still navigate the sociopolitical terrain of repression while producing rigorous research that sheds light on Hong Kong's history and social movements.

In the China Columns, **Diego Gullotta** and **Lin Lili** deconstruct contending discourses of 'youth' in China, unpacking the 'lay flat' and 'rising tides' phenomena. **Tabitha Speelman** examines China's Covid-19 border-control measures, questioning how 'closed' China has been during the pandemic, and whether it is reasonable to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term. **Yawen Li** discusses how Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil's Olympic gold medal sparked heated controversies on the Chinese internet, bringing to the fore practices of child abandonment and transnational adoption during China's one-child era. **Promise Li** retraces the basic contours of the debates on the 'Chinese national character' in the past century, arguing that such discussions have provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping hawkish China policy for Western countries today. Finally, **George L. Israel** delves into the implications and risks of the Chinese political establishment's current fascination with Ming scholar Wang Yangming and his 'School of Mind'.

The cultural section of the journal includes a review essay by **Ivan Franceschini** on what Italian working-class literature has to say about the 'world of labour' today in Italy and beyond. We conclude the issue with two conversations. In the first, **Ivan Franceschini** interviews **Robert Ovetz** and **Jenny Chan** about their books, *Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives* (edited by Robert Ovetz for Pluto Press in 2020) and *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers* (authored by Jenny with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai and published by Haymarket Books and Pluto Press in 2020). In the second, **Timothy Cheek** and **Craig Smith** discuss Craig's recent monograph, *Chinese Asianism* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021). ∎

The Editors

BRIEFS
Sept–Dec 2021

SEPT–DEC 2021

Women's Voices Continue to be Silenced

In the final months of 2021, the Chinese authorities continued to silence LGBTQ+ groups and women's voices. In September, in a major setback for China's fledging #MeToo movement, a Beijing court ruled against Xianzi in her landmark sexual harassment case against Zhu Jun, one of the country's most popular television hosts. In the same month, journalist and feminist activist Huang Xueqing and labour activist Wang Jianbing went missing and were later officially detained under the charge of 'inciting subversion of state power'. Huang had been involved in several #MeToo campaigns in China and had previously been detained, from October 2019 to January 2020, after covering the protests in Hong Kong. Wang, also a vocal supporter of the #MeToo movement, provided legal help for people with disabilities and workers with occupational diseases.

In early November, #MeToo gained traction again in China, as the country's top tennis player, Peng Shuai, accused former vice-premier and Politburo member Zhang Gaoli of coercing her into sex in a social media post that was deleted and censored within half an hour. After her denunciation, Peng disappeared from public view for several weeks, triggering a global campaign under the hashtag #WhereIsPengShuai. Although Peng reappeared and seemingly retracted the sexual assault claims in an interview with a Chinese-language Singaporean newspaper in December, concerns over her wellbeing persist.

In other gender-related news, a woman was sentenced to three years in prison in November for killing her husband after suffering years of violence and abuse—an outcome that sparked widespread public outrage. In the same month, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, an influential non-profit organisation that has provided legal support in high-profile campaigns and raised awareness about the LGBTQ+ community, announced it had suspended its operations indefinitely and deleted its social media accounts amid an ongoing government clampdown on LGBTQ+ groups. In December, Chinese tech giant Alibaba fired a woman employee who accused a former colleague of sexual assault in August 2021.

The last quarter of 2021 also saw some changes at the policy level. To address the declining birth rate, in late November, a dozen Chinese regional governments extended maternity leave to appeal to women planning to give birth. This caused concern about the possibility of increased discrimination against women in the workplace by unscrupulous employers. Later that month, the Chinese authorities proposed revisions to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests to provide more protection against gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace—the first major change to the law in nearly three decades. Yet, considering the government's handling of the #MeToo movement, many remained sceptical that real progress would follow. *LL & DG*

(Sources: **Amnesty International; AP News 1; AP News 2; BBC; China Digital Times; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; Reuters 4; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; South China Morning Post 3; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; SupChina 3; SupChina 4; SupChina 5; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The Guardian 3; The Guardian 4; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; The Washington Post**.)

Permanent Crackdown in Hong Kong

The crackdown in Hong Kong continued unabated in the final months of 2021. On 9 September, Hong Kong police raided the city's museum commemorating the Tiananmen Square protest, hours after a dozen prodemocracy activists pleaded guilty to participating in an unauthorised assembly during the 4 June anniversary in 2020. Several days later, authorities warned that civil society organisations endangering national security would lose their charity status and no longer benefit from tax exemptions. In the same month, the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group and several other advocacy organisations dissolved following political denunciation by Beijing-backed media and investigation by national security police. Hong Kong's largest independent trade union, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and the militant Professional Teachers' Union also disbanded. Even the last remaining humanitarian fund for arrested protesters was forced to end operation. On 19 October, five former students of the Chinese University of Hong Kong were each sentenced to nearly five years for rioting at the university campus in 2019. Around one month later, former food delivery worker Ma Chun-man was sentenced to almost six years in prison for 'inciting secession' by chanting pro-independence slogans. On 13 December, eight prodemocracy activists were sentenced to up to 14 months in prison for organising, attending, and inciting participation in a banned vigil in 2020 for victims of the Tiananmen Square protest. Amid worsening political freedom in Hong Kong, turnout hit a record low for the 'patriots'-only Legislative Council election held on 19 December. A few days later, three Hong Kong universities removed their on-campus statues commemorating the Tiananmen Square protest. At the close of the year, independent media outlet *Stand News* was raided by police, and ceased operation on 29 December. *JL*

(Sources: **ABC News; CNBC; Civicus; Hong Kong Free Press 1; Hong Kong Free Press 2; Radio Free Asia; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; Ta Kung Pao 1; Ta Kung Pao 2; The Guardian**.)

Human Rights Still in the Spotlight

Human rights in China remained an international point of contention in the final months of 2021. In late September, Canadian citizens Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, together with two American nationals, Cynthia and Victor Liu, were released by Chinese authorities after being detained in China since 2018; their release was widely perceived as an exchange for the release of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. On 7 October, former journalist Luo Changping was arrested for defaming 'heroes and martyrs' after he questioned the justification for China's involvement in the Korean War. While Wu Yishan, a labour rights activist involved in the Jasic campaign of 2018, was released in late October after serving a three-year jail term, journalist Zhang Zhan was reportedly close to death due to months of intermittent hunger strikes. In late December, teacher Li Tiantian was believed to have been detained in a psychiatric hospital after writing critically about the firing of a lecturer who had encouraged her students to verify official accounts of the Nanjing Massacre. The situation in Xinjiang also remained in the spotlight. A 20-minute video, filmed by an anonymous Chinese national and uploaded to YouTube in October, showed fresh evidence of Uyghur detention camps in Xinjiang. In mid-December, the United States imposed trade restrictions on more than 30 Chinese entities because of their human rights violations and blacklisted eight Chinese companies, including SenseTime and DJI, for their involvement in the surveillance of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. On 23 December, US President Joe Biden signed the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act* into law. Within days of its enactment, American corporations, including Intel and Walmart, faced a tough balancing act between complying with the new law and avoiding a backlash from Chinese consumers and authorities. Within China, Ma Xingrui, former Governor of Guangdong, replaced Chen Quanguo as Communist Party Chief in Xinjiang. *JL*

(Sources: **BBC News; China Digital Times; CNBC; Deutsche Welle; Australian Financial Review; Market Watch; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Reuters; The Washington Post**.)

Delivery drivers sit on standby in the Futian district in Shenzhen. PC: South China Morning Post.

Regulatory Changes of Gig Workers

As part of a wave of regulatory tightening under President Xi Jinping's call for 'common prosperity', the Chinese authorities adopted new rules to push tech giants to better safeguard workers' rights in the gig economy. In mid-September, Chinese food delivery giants Ele.me and Meituan promised to stop forcing delivery workers to register as independent businesses after regulators pushed delivery and ride-hailing firms to improve conditions for workers. In late September, the Beijing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions issued guidelines to regulate and encourage unionisation for delivery workers and other labourers in the gig economy. In late November, China's Transport Ministry announced new rules requiring ride-hailing platforms to provide drivers with social insurance and make their earnings public, as a measure to protect workers' rights and strengthen anti-monopoly regulation in the new service industry. In December, the Chinese authorities planned to review an amendment of the trade union law to allow ride-hailing drivers and food delivery workers to form unions. In the same month, Chinese provinces hiked minimum wages. Tech workers were also again in the spotlight. In early October, thousands of tech workers filled in a collaborative spreadsheet to share information about their companies' work hours, revealing that most of them worked from around 10 am to 9 pm, five days a week—a slight improvement compared with the infamous '996' schedule. However, overwork remains a very real problem. In December, 30-year-old Mao Xingyun, a leading video game programmer at Tencent, committed suicide, sparking outrage against the company's culture of overwork. In the same month, after a year of regulatory crackdowns by Beijing on the country's once vibrant internet industry, job cuts mounted in China's big tech firms, with ByteDance, Kuaishou, and Iqiyi all saying they would trim their payrolls. *LL & DG*

(Sources: **China Labour Bulletin; Collective Action in Tech; Global Times; Nikkei; Quartz; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; Reuters 4; Reuters 5; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; South China Morning Post 3; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; SupChina 3; The New York Times; The Wall Street Journal 1; The Wall Street Journal 2; ZC-Labor.**)

CHINA COLUMNS

Rising Tides: *Bilibili's Speech for the New Generation* (Bilibili 献给新一代的演讲《后浪》)
PC: bilibili.com.

Disarticulating *Qingnian*

Chinese Youth beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat'

Lili LIN
Diego GULLOTTA

This essay explores youth in today's China by analysing Bilibili's widely viewed Rising Tides *video and the recent 'lying flat' campaign. To put these two phenomena in context, the essay examines a group of young students who are able to move beyond the confines of the position designated them by the state and the market through knowledge accumulation, cooperation, and network-building, but unable to become an autonomous social force.*

The ideas expressed in this essay draw from an article entitled 'Beyond "Rising Tides" and "Lying Flat": Emergent Cultural Practices among Youth in Urban China', forthcoming in the 2022 spring issue of *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture.*

Youth (青年, *qingnian*) as a subject has been a key element in the ideal of national rejuvenation since the beginning of the twentieth century—from the May Fourth Movement to the Communist Revolution, from the Cultural Revolution to the 1989 Democracy Movement (Song 2016; for a discussion of the ambiguity of biological and sociological categorisations of youth, see Lanza 2012). Over the past decade, different but interacting discourses on the history, definition, and role of youth have emerged and sometimes clashed, including the normative-prescriptive discourse of the Party-State, the productive and hedonistic discourse of the market, and the discourse of societal autonomy and heterogeneity. In his article 'World Factory', Christopher Connery (2020) proposed defining the decade from 2005 to 2015 as the 'post-WTO era'—a useful periodisation for

investigating the sociocultural development of China over the past two decades. In that post–World Trade Organization (WTO) era, which Connery believes was a 'unicum', it was possible to imagine different futures. The Harmonious Society (和谐社会) discourse of the post-WTO era produced different imaginaries and the visualisation of possible futures through social conflict, intellectual debate, and a relatively open political climate. The origins of this decade were in the radical transformations during the second period of the Reform and Opening Up program inaugurated in the 1990s, which not only produced the 'economic miracle' but also generated a profound anthropological transformation. Approaching these transformations from the analysis of youth subjectivity can provide some novel insight into contemporary Chinese society, or at least open a debate about how to disarticulate the *qingnian* subject.

The end of the post-WTO period can be seen in many different contexts—in the cultural field, in capital–labour conflicts, or in the political field—but the force behind the conclusion of this period was the rise of Xi Jinping and his 'Chinese Dream'. The souverainiste nationalism that now characterises China's policies, both internally and externally, has progressively sought to reduce the heterogeneity and autonomy engendered by the social ferment of previous years. This ideology was evident in all its force in the confrontations and suppression of the Hong Kong revolt of 2019—another signpost of the end of the post-WTO period. In this Chinese periphery, it became clear, in a negative way, what kinds of definitions of youth are accepted by official narratives: the youth in revolt were referred to as 'wasted youth' (废青) and the political motivations of the revolt were reduced to mere economic causes, such as lack of housing and employment (for an analysis of the revolt and the role of young people in the 2019 Hong Kong movement, see Au 2020). The dominant ideology in President Xi's China has put pressure on and reduced the scope for social autonomy and has opposed heterogeneity with a unifying concept of society, its groups, and its differences. This attempt at discipline appears to be most clearly and contradictorily aimed at young people.

In this essay, we explore the youth subject in the post-WTO era by analysing the recent 'rising tides' and 'lying flat' phenomena. The essay demonstrates that Bilibili's Party-State–endorsed *Rising Tides* video presents a unitary youth subject that is almost exclusively of educated middle-class urban background and is expected to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity for the sake of the country's 'national rejuvenation'. While 'lying flat' is widely seen as resistance to this state-sponsored prescription for entrepreneurship and hard work, we argue that this phenomenon expresses the structure of feeling among today's Chinese middle-class youth but still confines itself within the dominant state–market discourse. To better understand the heterogeneous and fragmented youth in China today, beyond analysis based merely on memetic representation, we elaborate on the experiences of a group of young students, exploring the ambiguities, contradictions, and predicaments emerging from the interplay between economics, politics, and biology in their lives.

The essay is structured in four sections: the first examines how the youth subject is positioned in Xi's formulation of the Chinese Dream; the second analyses how young people are represented through a close study of the *Rising Tides* video; the third presents the 'lying flat' movement, discussing it as a passive reaction to the discourse presented in the *Rising Tides* video; and the final section details the development of a student group, based on three years of participant-observation.

Youth in Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream

President Xi Jinping has emphasised the significance of youth in his formulation of the Chinese Dream on various occasions since the beginning of his term. He first elaborated on the relationship between the Chinese Dream and youth in his speech to 'outstanding young representatives from all walks of life' (在同各界优秀青年代表座谈时的讲话; officially translated into English as 'Realise Youthful Dreams'), delivered on 4 May 2013, China's Youth Day (Xi 2020). In the speech,

Xi Jinping with participants to the meeting for 'outstanding young representatives from all walks of life', 4 May 2013. PC: Xinhua.

Xi stressed that 'young people represent the future of our country and the hope of our nation' and asked youth to put 'youthful dreams into action in the course of realising the Chinese Dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. He urged youth to shoulder 'the heavy responsibilities that the times impose on us' to achieve the Chinese Dream. These responsibilities were encapsulated in the injunctions to: 1) firmly adopt the Chinese Communist Party's ideologies 'as a guideline for your life'; 2) 'orient yourself to modernisation, the world, and the future, have a sense of urgency in updating your knowledge ... enthusiastically develop skills, and constantly enhance your competence and capabilities to meet the development needs of our times and the requirements of our undertaking'; 3) 'dare to innovate and create' to drive 'the nation's progress and [provide] an inexhaustible source of the country's prosperity'; 4) devote oneself to hard work to achieve the nation's development goals; and 5) 'strengthen theoretical improvement and moral cultivation, take the initiative to carry forward patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, and actively advocate social and profes-

sional ethics, as well as family virtues'. In 2018 and 2020, Xi restated that 'a country will have a great tomorrow, and a nation will be full of hope, when the younger generations have ideals, ability, and a strong sense of responsibility', and called on Chinese youth to make greater contributions to China's development (Xinhua 2018; CGTN 2020).

Xi's Chinese Dream positions youth as not only the human capital driving national economic development but also the link between the past and the future, in line with the intellectual discourses of youth in China's twentieth century. The individual 'dreams' of youth are subsumed into the national dream; the category 'youth' is a product of the Party-State's mission of rejuvenation. The English translation of the term *fuxing* (复兴), 'rejuvenation', seems to render more clearly the 'biological' role that young people are called on to play on the socialist stage of the Chinese Dream, while behind the scenes, a logic of neoliberal accumulation dominates society. As Ong and Zhang (2008: 15) have noted, post-Tiananmen youth have been directed to be self-reliant, enterprising, and constantly

developing, and to pursue individual interests in alignment with market activities and loyalty to the Party-State.

The emphasis on the valorisation and extraction of the human capital of young people is evident in Premier Li Keqiang's campaign for 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation', which encourages 'key groups, including college graduates and migrant workers, to start businesses and find jobs through multiple channels, and help micro, small and medium enterprises create jobs' (State Council 2021). The political role of Chinese youth from May 1919 to June 1989 has been subordinated to the teleological development of the Party-State, and is not part of the 'entrepreneurial rejuvenation' discourse. This policy of depoliticisation has dominated since the 1990s but in recent years has become even more pervasive. People, young or not, are no longer asked just to eschew involvement in politics; they are also required to join permanent mobilisations initiated from above (as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic). The spaces of micro-freedom that 'socialism from afar' (Ong and Zhang 2008) usually leaves for individuals and social groups have been filled with prescriptive injunctions, just as urban and media landscapes are filled with symbols of the Party-State—the same symbols that in the post-WTO period were usually hidden from view.

There is a gap between the normative discourse of the Party-State and the daily practices of young people, as the official discourse 'fails to recognize the ongoing social differentiation and segmentation that drive today's youths into another historical maelstrom of unprecedented changes, escalating risks, contingencies, jeopardies, and struggles' (Hui 2020: 3). As Hui Faye Xiao (2020) has recently argued, 'it has become clear that the lives of the [Chinese] youth—their aspirations and apprehensions, socio-economic statuses, signifying systems, and cultural imaginaries—have been conditioned by age, class, ethnicity, and gender-specific socio-economic variables'. The official discourse defines youth within the urban middle and upper-middle classes. As we will see below, these groups of young people are now the ones causing concern in the Chinese media and making social engineers anxious because the official blueprint for China's future is being undermined. For instance, the prescription for parents to have more children in the face of demographic decline clashes with lifestyles that no longer revolve around traditional family values and gender norms (for a discussion of social reproduction, see Dong 2021). The insistence on a strong work ethic ideologically justifies China's overtime culture, thus reducing the space for creativity and consumption, as seen in the case of the '996' campaign (Li 2019), and triggering opposition. In short, it seems the 'national' interests of the Party-State and the 'individual' interests of post-1990s and post-2000s young people—respectively called the 'Me generation' and 'Z generation'—are increasingly diverging. And yet, according to the dominant instrumental rationality, each side needs the other.

In this context, the prescriptions of the Party-State, imbued with 'positive energy' (正能量) (Chen and Wang 2020), have generated a 'negative' response from young people—a refusal that is limited to the discursive sphere of the state and the market. This refusal, expressed on social media in words and memes, is part of an emerging structure of feeling. However, without an investigation of the daily practices of young people, there is a significant risk of mistaking this phenomenon for what it is not: a manifestation of opposition to the Party, refusal of work, and criticism of capitalism with Chinese characteristics.

Rising Tides

On 3 May 2020, one day before China's annual Youth Day, the popular youth-oriented video streaming and sharing giant Bilibili released a video—created in partnership with various state-run media and platforms—dedicated to Chinese youth, entitled *Rising Tides: Bilibili's Speech for the New Generation* (Bilibili 献给新一代的演讲《后浪》) (Bilibili 2020). Featuring 52-year-old male actor He Bing, the clip soon went viral on the Chinese internet, receiving tens of millions of views on Bilibili and other major social media platforms, including Weibo and WeChat. At the same time, state-run media, such as the *People's Daily* (人民

日报), expressed approval and reposted the video on their official social media accounts (The Paper 2020). This was at a time when China had just managed to control the spread of Covid-19 after the Wuhan outbreak earlier that year and when Hong Kong youth—the critical force behind the 2019 social movement—were still protesting. Yet, the video represented neither the traumatic experience of the pandemic nor the trauma of the young Hong Kong protesters.

In almost four minutes, He Bing, as a representative of the older generation, lectures youth in a masculine tone, accompanied by footage of smiling young people against an urban background. The term *houlang* (后浪), literally meaning 'rising wave' in English, is a metaphor for the young generation based on the Chinese idiom 'the waves of the Yangtze River from behind drive on those ahead' (长江后浪推前浪). It suggests the new generation surpasses the old. In the first 30 seconds of the video, He first disputes the idea that 'each generation is worse than the last' and expresses his 'envy' of today's youth, whom he thinks are living their best lives and possess everything the older generation could only dream of. The actor reminds viewers that it is because of the hard work of the older generation that young people can enjoy the gifts of 'all the wealth, knowledge, intelligence, and art' and 'the prosperity of technoscience, culture, and the urban world'. This description of the position of youth in contemporary history strongly echoes Xi Jinping's 2013 speech 'Realise Youthful Dreams', in which he stated that 'the closer we are to achieving the goal of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the more we should redouble our efforts and not slacken our pace, and the more we must mobilise all young people to this end'. As such, history is depicted as linear and progressive, with the 'wealth of humanity' accumulated generation after generation. As an emblem of the Party-State, the actor suggests young people must be grateful to their elder generations for their hard work and should work even harder themselves to 'surpass their elders' and achieve national rejuvenation.

After praising the unprecedentedly prosperous epoch in which Chinese youths now live, He Bing depicts young people as those who have 'freedom to learn a new language and a new skill, to enjoy a movie, and travel long distances', and is accompanied by images of youths smiling as they use virtual reality, learn English with an iPad, build a robot, travel, and document their lives using expensive digital devices. The youth presented in the video are almost exclusively middle-class urban subjects who have not only the economic capacity to consume high-tech products and afford urban lifestyles, but also high skills and capabilities. By presenting the experiences of urban middle-class youth as authentic and universal for the whole generation, the video intends to incite 'aspiring individuals to adhere to new social norms of middle-class identity often defined around consumer practices' (Anagnost 2008: 498). The video contributes to the myth of the young middle class as the symbol of China's rise. As Roland Barthes (1957: 181–223) argued in *Mythologies*, myth does not obscure; on the contrary, through exposing the subject of *youth*, myth alienates and empties it, and erases its complexity and irreducibility.

In the second minute of the video, He Bing passionately urges young people to turn their abilities and what they love into a career that can be shared with millions of people. Youth are encouraged to capitalise on and turn their experiential knowledge into 'part of the culture of everyday life' (Gorz 2010: 11), into productive activities. In this view, young people become not only consumers but also producers, which is the same mechanism at work on platforms like Bilibili—and, in fact, the footage of young people used in the video was produced and uploaded by Bilibili's users. The video's promotion of 'do what you love' romanticises work as a self-motivating mechanism that directs middle-class youth to capitalise on their biopolitical capacities, including knowledge, language and communication skills, experiences, and affect, and to embrace precarity, flexibility, and risk as new norms in the creative economy (Weeks 2018; McRobbie 2015). Moreover, the video's call to turn passion and love into work propels young workers to self-exploitation and prohibits them from expressing the negative feelings resulting from the overtime culture prevalent in China's tech industry.

Compelling youth to dedicate their lives to work, the *Rising Tides* video as a commercial production caters to the government's call for mass entrepreneurship and innovation. Since 2013, Premier Li has repeatedly asked young people to start their own businesses under the aegis of 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' (State Council 2021). He has been calling China's 900 million–strong workforce a 'goldmine' that 'provides a constant source of creativity and wealth' for economic growth, and asking young people, especially college graduates, to use their creativity to generate jobs for themselves (State Council 2016). Similarly, Xi Jinping (2020) considers youth 'the most creative group of the country' and has urged them to 'work long and hard without let-up' to contribute to the country's development goals. In this way, the video reinforces its mixed commercial and ideological nature, and shapes a normative '*qingnian*' subject that is expected to be productive and to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity in accordance with the country's modernisation project.

In the final minute of the video, youth are called on to contribute to the epoch and the nation. In an emotional crescendo, the actor claims only the weak criticise whereas the strong always eulogise and stay confident, and praises the 'self-confidence' (自信) of youth, which resonates with the official discourse of bolstering China's cultural self-confidence (文化自信) (Xi 2016). The actor then expresses his respect for and gratitude to those affluent, confident, and skilful young subjects who are seen as the products of a strong nation. Hence, youth become an ideological link between the neoliberal discourse of 'do what you love' and the Party-State's ideology of building a confident, powerful nation. The positive and bright portrayal of youth concludes with a statement: 'Thanks to you young people, the world likes China more because the best landscape of a nation is its youth.' In the end, the actor, playing the role of a symbol of the state and the market, gives his blessing to the young generation with a rousing call: 'Rising tides, surge!' (奔涌吧，后浪!).

While portrayed as cheerful, productive, and grateful, the youths in the video are silent. They do not have voices of their own; the only subject who has a voice is the actor, who symbolises the older generation, the market, and more importantly, the 'positive energy' required by the Party-State. This positioning reduces the complexity of the youth subject to the point of abstracting them from sociohistorical reality and representing them as a unitary subject. In this context, the construction of the *qingnian* subject is bound to remain abstract as the commercial and official representations produce and position such a subject through a prescriptive discourse. The *Rising Tide* video reveals the state's and the market's anxiety over the capacity of the young productive populace to 'surge' (奔涌). At the same time, it repeats in a meta-communicative way that, as a subject, young people are entirely a product of the 'dream' of the older generations.

Lying Flat and Garlic Chives

In responding to the call of the state and the market to 'surge', young netizens launched a campaign to 'lie flat' (躺平, *tangping*) as a way to resist the rosy and monolithic portrayal of Chinese youth. At the end of May 2021, a 30-year-old netizen published a post entitled 'Lying Flat Is Justice' (躺平即是正义), sharing the life lessons he learned from two years of joblessness. The post called on young workers and professionals, including middle-class youth, to avoid work and consumption, and live with minimum expenses and desires. The post reads: 'You just lie flat. Lying flat at home, lying flat outside, lying flat like the street cats and dogs … I choose to lie flat, and I'm no longer stressed' (Tang and Yang 2021). Although the post and relevant online discussion groups were soon censored, the article still went viral and was widely shared on the Chinese internet, especially among youths tired of the '996' overwork culture prevalent in China's big tech firms in recent years. To a certain extent, the lying flat movement thwarts the governmental desire to foster a productive young populace. In responding to the 'positive energy' sponsored by the Party-State and the market, youth answered with negative attitudes, including by refusing to marry, to have children, and to buy property, and consuming as little as possible. This 'lying flat' movement, initiated from below, can be seen as

躺平 *Lying Flat.* PC: enanyang.my.

a strategy of withdrawal from the imperative to maximise consumption and production and a refusal of the endless demands for competitiveness and constant self-improvement.

Reactions to the 'lying flat' movement have been varied. In an extremely hardline stance, the state mouthpiece *Global Times* wrote:

> China is at one of the most challenging stages of its long road to national rejuvenation. Young people are the hope of the nation, and neither their personal situation nor that of the country will allow them to 'lie down' collectively. Whether active or passive, they will be the most hard-working and mentally strongest group of people in the world. Let's just say that no matter how late they sleep, and whether the reason for their late sleep is working overtime or gaming, the times will wake them up again and again at dawn. (Global Times 2021)

On the opposite front, Xu Jilin (2021), a well-known liberal historian and public intellectual, took a rather open stance in a video speech on the post-1990s generation on his official WeChat account. In it, he argues that the generations from the 1950s to the 1980s believe 'individual family and country are the same' and are indissolubly linked with the destiny of the nation, whereas the post-1990s generation considers 'the country is the country, and the individual is the individual'. For Xu, members of the young generation, growing up in a virtual world, are individualistic, focused on pursuing their own interests, embrace instrumental rationality, and believe in the narrative of 'successful people' (成功人士). Still, Xu thinks it is

necessary to have a positive attitude towards the post-1990s generation as the fate of China depends on them. To pull young people back from their individualistic virtual world, Xu suggests companies must create space for young people to freely use their creative and imaginative skills to contribute to society. In this way, Xu believes the anxiety (焦虑) generated by the process of 'involution' (内卷化)—which scholar Xiang Biao (2020) describes as 'an endless cycle of self-flagellation, feeling as if you're running in place and constantly having to motivate yourself day in, day out' and 'a highly dynamic trap which consumes a lot of energy'—and the feeling of being trapped in the system (困在系统中) can be alleviated among China's youth. Xu's advice is more like a Chinese version of the subsumption of desire, hobbies, and creativity for capitalist and national productivity. If the 'lying flat' phenomenon to which Xu refers indicates anything to us, it is the suggestion of a different perception and experience of space and time: the horizontal body on a sofa or a bed calls into question the progressive modernising temporality of the nation and the mission that young people are called on to fulfil for their country. It is no longer a question of a disconnection between the individual and the state, but of a different spatial and temporal horizon. As mentioned, the relationship between the two actors is one of pure instrumentality. Misunderstanding, if not indifference and annoyance, reigns supreme.

A recent essay by Pang Laikwan (2021) provides significant insights for understanding the *qingnian* subject and the *tangping* phenomenon through the examination of 'garlic chives' (韭菜, *jiucai*)—a popular online expression that came into use before 'lying flat' as a metaphor for 'those ordinary Chinese people who are constantly lured to participate in all kinds of economic activities, but whose investments are destined to be consumed by the establishment' (Pang 2021: 3). Reinterpreting Foucault in a Chinese context, Pang considers the garlic chives meme a 'reflection' by Chinese citizens—in particular, young people—on their own condition. In addition to considering the subjectivity of Chinese citizens, Pang's article focuses on China's economic sovereignty. Economic development and success in handling the 2008

Global Financial Crisis, the trade war with the United States, and finally, the management of the pandemic are portrayed by the Chinese Government as proof of China's developmental statism. However, as Pang notes, this development is based on extreme internal competition among towns, cities, and people. This explains the immediate spread of the 'involution' term in recent years in Chinese media and academia. Pang (2021: 6) describes 'the ferocious rivalry and competition Chinese citizens need to face, to the extent where even toddlers in kindergarten are already exposed to a rhetoric of comparison and competition'.

In a context in which economic sovereignty does not guarantee political sovereignty, citizens express their frustration, especially the young, who see themselves as 'garlic chives': biological matter waiting to be harvested. The economic subject represented as *jiucai* is driven to embrace entrepreneurship under Li Keqiang's call for 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' and to increase production under the ideology of labour encompassed by the Chinese Dream, which sees hard work as the 'inherent spirit of the Chinese race'. Entrepreneurs and indefatigable workers—the *jiucai*—are 'trapped in a perpetual present, obedient and submissive to their biological drive' (Pang 2021: 14). The link Pang sees between the biological and the political emerges as the population ages, and consequently there is less and less *jiucai* to be chopped for economic development. Here official ideology intervenes, as in the case of the *Rising Tides* video:

> [I]n the official ideology the young people are adulated, but in reality they are jiucai. It is also through this bizarre devotion of the sickle to the garlic chives that the latter might be sensitized to regain their political consciousness. (Pang 2021: 9)

For the *jiucai,* the only way to avoid being harvested by the sickle is to lie flat. Lying flat is therefore seen as a passive revolt against the culture of work and entrepreneurship. Pang does not romanticise the agency of *jiucai* and *tangping*; in her view, it is not this 'subject' that can perform social transformation. However, she does express

hope for *jiucai* and *tangping*: 'I hope to see the Chinese citizens capable of seeing themselves as neither isolated entrepreneurs nor as a unified people, but a plural existence of many individuals different from each other, upon which a political community can be built' (Pang 2021: 16). Pang is aware the life power of *jiucai* can be appropriated by the regime, but she believes 'it could also become a mighty, resilient force if it could gain intersubjective awareness through its continual becoming' (Pang 2021: 16).

Between the meme as metaphor and self-reflection, the structure of feeling the 'lying flat' phenomenon expresses, and the daily practice of young people, there is a distance that needs to be bridged by fieldwork. In the case of 'rising tides' and 'lying flat', we are faced with a discourse in which the positive energy of official ideology is answered with negative energy. Chinese youth passively express their reluctance to contribute to the Chinese Dream and the endless rat race it entails. Nevertheless, 'lying flat' is neither a countercultural movement nor a protest movement. It refuses action, and any identification on which a youthful subjectivity can be anchored. The 'lying flat' phenomenon expresses the structure of feeling among Chinese youth today, but it confines itself within the positive/negative discourse. In everyday life, 'negative energy' gives way to practices that not only disarticulate the *qingnian* subject and the future of the nation, but also highlight the possibilities and limitations of a heterogeneous multitude.

It is not a matter of investigating a new social subject that is often positioned within the rhetorical and ideological question of 'Where is China going?' Based on our preliminary analysis, this youthful multitude is fluid, hyperconnected, and hyper-specialised. The knowledge they accumulate and share cooperatively through social media is used in practices characterised by extreme fluidity. Fluidity of identity, sexuality, and social relations protects this variegated multitude from subsumption by power—that is, by the state and the market. Fluidity favours the circulation and excess of knowledge that characterises young people, but at the same time produces continuous divisions within youth social groups as they come into being,

producing 'sad passions' and 'detrimental encounters' (on the former, see Benasayag and Schmit 2003; on the latter, see Hardt and Negri 2009).

From Marxism-Leninism to 'Doing Nothing-ism'

So far, we have examined Chinese youth through the discourse of 'rising tides' and 'lying flat' and pointed out the limitations of an analysis of youth based *only* on online representations. Thus, this section will offer a case study of a student group to explore how educated middle-class young people's accumulation of knowledge and cooperation enable them to exceed the subject position designated by the state, yet at the same time prevent them becoming an autonomous social force. Since 2018, we have followed a left-wing student group from an elite Chinese university. Most members are male, between 18 and 30 years of age, and their numbers have fluctuated over the years, from 20 down to only three. In the second half of 2018, the group was established with the aim of studying Marxism-Leninism collectively, reading Mao Zedong's works, translating relevant articles, and conducting political interventions among workers. The initial goal was therefore to set up a student association (学生社团) following the traditions of Marxist societies in several other elite universities, such as Peking University. Yet, following the crackdown on labour activists in the wake of the Jasic incident in the summer of 2018 (for a discussion, see Zhang 2020), Marxist student groups in universities were closely watched and tightly controlled (Lau 2018; Shih 2019). Against this background, the newly formed student group was unable to register and obtain the endorsement of the university authorities, so had to recruit students and meet informally.

Initially, the group recruited new members based on a simple ideological formula—namely, that the revolutionary subject is the Chinese working class, and students and intellectuals must participate in and lead the process of class emancipation. However, after only a few months, as they began receiving attention and pressure from the university and the relevant authorities, they had to shift course. Without the possibility of taking root in the university, they gradually abandoned their Marxist-Leninist ideological orthodoxy and began paying attention to feminist issues. In this, they were inspired by China's #MeToo movement and by communications with several groups in other universities, especially with a LGBTQ student association. Without a clear structure, the group was loosely connected through organising cultural events and translation projects. They collectively translated articles on diverse topics, publishing them on their group's WeChat account. The translations became a way for them to 'be together' virtually and critically reflect on social issues. In addition, a few core members also occasionally organised film screenings at the university and conducted fieldwork into the working conditions of logistics workers. The group also paid much attention to building networks with students and activists from different cities. Cooperating with other student organisations and young people in the city, they organised voluntary activities for workers suffering during the Covid-19 outbreak in February 2020 and for the victims of the record-breaking flooding in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, in the summer of 2021. It is worth mentioning most members of the group were from middle-class families, with high cultural and social capital.

Through cooperation, communication, and network-building with different groups, the members of the student group accumulated knowledge they could not learn in their university classrooms, thus *exceeding* the *qingnian* subject position designated for them by the state and the market. One main characteristic of this excess is the fluidity we mentioned above. Partly because communications and networking inside and outside the group were highly reliant on social media, the group was able to develop and explore social, sexual, and cognitive relationships in a relatively fluid way. For instance, unlike a traditional Marxist-Leninist student organisation, the group did not have a strict top-down structure and its internal hierarchy was not based on a fixed political line or ideology. In fact, they had only a de facto leader, who decided what to translate, assigned tasks to other members, and decided

who could be included as key members. As the group members mostly communicated through their WeChat group, each could join and quit a project and the group freely. In addition, they created chat groups on Telegram and Signal to escape surveillance by the authorities. Not a few members identified as bisexual, and they discussed and explored their sexuality both within the group and with other LGBTQ groups. Their identity also changed from time to time; they initially branded themselves Marxist-Leninist, then feminists and, as we will explain below, as 'doing nothing' or doing 'small things'. Such fluidity is a resource that protects the members of the group from both the unwanted attention of the authorities and the bitter instrumental rationality prevailing in society. In other words, fluidity can protect the group from the Party-State's and the market's attempts to extract value from the biopolitical potentialities of educated middle-class youth.

However, fluidity—of knowledge, experience, sexuality, and sociability—can be valorised by the market and the state. As Xu Jilin (2021) points out in his video, 'society' must be able to intercept these young people's abilities to realise not only individual dreams, but also the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. That is, Xu's talk indicates that the state and the market should alleviate young people's anxiety to better facilitate the establishment's extraction of a bio-economic subject. For example, the Count, a former key member of the student group, was 'discovered' by a Chinese tech giant as soon as he graduated. It was not merely what he learnt from the university, but more importantly the knowledge, experience, and networks he accumulated in the student group that made him an attractive knowledge worker for the current mode of capitalist production based on immaterial capacities. At the Count's farewell dinner on graduation, another student told him: 'I can't believe the guy who introduced me to David Graber's *Bullshit Jobs* now is working for a tech giant.'

After the Count's departure, the group entered a period of stagnation when only two or three members remained active. In September 2021, encouraged by the practices of cohabitation initiated by some educated youths in the city who used their private living space to organise semi-public cultural events, the remaining members decided to rent a room in a flat in a gated community near the university. The students frequently used the kitchen for collective cooking and the 10-square-metre bedroom for sleeping, screening videos, dining, and discussions. Appropriating the name of a chat group, they later called the rented place 'Doing Nothing Space' (无所事事). Only those who are invited may enter this space, and most visitors are students whom the two core members know from other universities. 'Doing nothing' has different layers of meaning in the context of this group. The first layer indicates the group tries to stay low key and not engage in any sensitive issues to avoid attention from the authorities. The second is related to the group's reflection on, and mocking of, the grand narratives of both the Chinese leftists and the Party-State. That is, by saying they are 'doing nothing', the student group claims they are not interested in big ideologies or big affairs, and would rather focus on doing 'small things', including cooking, drinking, dining, and watching films together. The final layer refers to their awareness of the uselessness and meaninglessness of their micro-level activities in such an invisible space.

Although it is small, with a maximum capacity of 10 people, the space is full of slogans and posters. To a certain extent, the 'doing nothing space' has itself begun to 'speak': on every wall, even in the bathroom, there are images and texts aiming to construct a fixed identity for the group—an identity that refers, sometimes in an exotic way, to a plural and radical young global Left. There is a lot of emphasis on sharing and sociability, particularly cooking and eating together. Even if they are not yet familiar with Ivan Ilich, they are coming to understand that conviviality pertains to a social force that the group lacks. Their lack of engagement with society thus leads to their overemphasis on fixing an identity, as exemplified in the slogans and posters on the walls. In addition, the enclosed space generates the inclusion/exclusion mechanism that divides those who are the owner-organisers from those who are the 'guests', leading to 'detrimental encounters'.

Like many other semiprivate spaces that have proliferated in large cities in recent years, this semi-open 'doing nothing' space has advantages and limitations. On the one hand, the space has liberated these students, allowing them to collaborate and share resources. In this space, these young students can be together in person and, to a certain extent, escape from the increasingly tight control and surveillance that have been taking root at the university since the pandemic began. On the other hand, almost all the participants in the space have a middle-class background, with similar high levels of education and social capital. Moreover, the enclosed space has somewhat blocked fluidity as it required organisation and hierarchy, and thus partially introduced forms of instrumental rationality typical of the 'outside' society.

With only a few members left in the group, its future and that of the space are more uncertain than ever. We once asked the de facto leader why he did not recruit and foster younger undergraduate students to perpetuate the experience. He replied: 'What is the point? They'll graduate anyway.' As for the future of the remaining three key members, one was planning to find an academic job, one has already been admitted into a postgraduate program, and one was applying for a postgraduate program while also thinking of taking a civil service entrance exam.

Disarticulating the Youth

To conclude, the 'rising tides' and 'lying flat' phenomena have provided an opportunity for us to explore and (dis-)articulate the *qingnian* subject in the post-WTO era. Since about 2013, the discourse of China's rise and the Chinese Dream of 'rejuvenation' have prescribed a normative subject position for young people that pushes them to embrace the spirit of entrepreneurship and hard work. The future of Chinese youth has already been written by the ruling class, and leaves little room for young people to negotiate. Through an analysis of the *Rising Tides* video, this essay has disentangled the state's instructions to young people, highlighting how it mixes both commercial and ideological imperatives. The video presents a unitary youth subject that is almost exclusively of an educated middle-class urban background and is expected to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity for the sake of the country's modernisation project. We have argued that the normative appeal sponsored by both the state and the market reveals the anxiety of the Party-State over the *qingnian* subject, who has become so heterogeneous and fragmented it undermines the subject position prescribed in the hegemonic discourse.

In responding to the *Rising Tides* video, young people have initiated the 'lying flat' movement as a backlash against the endless demands to maximise their consumption and production. Although 'lying flat' expresses young people's feelings of frustration and exhaustion, it is a reactive and negative response to the positive energy driven by official media and government campaigns. It refuses action and any identification on which a youthful subject can be anchored. In terms of representation, the dialectic between the Party-State's call to 'surge' and youths' reaction of 'lying flat' reveals only a blurred image of a more complex web of power relations intertwined with—as Pang Laikwan (2021) has pointed out—the biological, the political, and the economic. Other than analysing representations, this essay has provided a preliminary analysis of a Chinese student group in recent years. We have shown how these educated young students are able to move beyond the normative position designated by the state, the market, and higher education institutions through knowledge, cooperation, and network-building. From a hyperconnected Marxist-Leninist student group to a group based in a concrete space, they have explored different forms of being together and eagerly searching for their identity. Yet, these are intermittent and fragile moments, not a movement. Once they leave the university, their capabilities are quickly capitalised by the Party-State and the market either voluntarily or involuntarily. ∎

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Unfortunate or Convenient?
Contextualising China's Covid-19 Border Restrictions

Tabitha SPEELMAN

China's Covid-19 border control measures have disrupted decades of ever-increasing mobility in and out of China, just at a time of growing uncertainty about China's relations with much of the outside world. As they persist into 2022, fuelling worries about China's increasing isolation, it is useful to take stock and look at these policies more closely. How 'closed' has China been during the pandemic, and how reasonable is it to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term?

The continuation of China's Covid-19 border restrictions into 2021 has attracted an increasing amount of international commentary. Like with Taiwan, New Zealand or Australia, which also largely closed their borders for the past year and a half, there is an understandable focus on the steep human costs of these measures that have separated families and disrupted life trajectories. But in the case of China, this is outweighed by the amount of concern about the possible geopolitical implications, which have coincided with tense diplomatic relations between China and many Western nations.

First, media reports paint an image of a country 'isolated from the world', linking the restrictions to 'a broader inward turn' (Fay Cortez and Thomson 2021; Rachman 2021). 'What if China Never Reopens?' ran the headline of an opinion piece in *The Wire China* (Freymann 2021). Second, the reports suggest that China's border policies will make global cooperation harder on a broad range of issues. For instance, in July 2021, *The Economist*'s China column, *Chaguan*, noted: 'Mutual distrust will be hard to overcome until China re-opens' (The Economist 2021a).

The impact on international mobility of China's zero Covid-19 approach is perceived as a concern not just because of the size of the country's immigrant and (especially) emigrant communities. Rather, when it comes to China, the discourse about 'opening' and 'closing' the borders, which is now used worldwide in the context of virus control, carries added political weight—echoing previous periods when China was less accessible to foreigners and had tense relations with major Western powers. To many foreign observers, the border restrictions are more than a mix of health measures temporarily minimising international mobility to and from China for most Chinese and foreign nationals; rather, they symbolise a wider 'closing off' of Chinese society to the outside world that fits with the Chinese leadership's plans. As one Russian student put it: 'It feels like they're trying to get rid of foreigners' (Billman 2020).

This essay aims to disentangle some of this rhetoric. Rather than assuming a connection between China's border restrictions and well-documented wider shifts in its political environment—from an increasingly assertive diplomatic approach to the rise of ethnonationalism among parts of the population—I look at these policies more closely. How 'closed' has China been during the pandemic, and how reasonable is it to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term?

Disrupted Mobilities and China's Zero-Covid Approach

Certainly, the country's border policy during the pandemic has been restrictive, reversing a previous trend that saw international travel to and from China increasing year-on-year, reaching 670 million border crossings in 2019 (NIA 2020a). The 2010s witnessed a boom in international mobility for Chinese nationals, with the percentage of Chinese passport holders increasing from around 2 per cent of the population in 2010 to nearly 15 per cent, or more than 200 million people, in 2019 (compared with 44 per cent in the United States) (Xinhua 2019; US State Department 2021). At the time of writing in November 2021, for those allowed into the country, the sky-high ticket prices for a seat on one of the 200 permitted international flights a week (just over 2 per cent of the 2019 figure) is only one of several substantial barriers, on top of a 14 to 28-day quarantine on arrival (Reuters 2021). Chinese nationals without access to these resources have de facto been barred from returning home.

Many of the one to two million foreign nationals living in the country have also felt unable to leave because of difficulties they would face re-entering, while foreign residents who were outside China after March 2020 have often not been able to return. How many are affected is unclear: a once-a-decade census conducted in November 2020 counted 1.4 million 'overseas residents', including 845,697 foreign nationals and 584,998 residents from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, but estimates based on other official data sources suggest that by the start of the pandemic, the number of immigrants living in China was significantly higher (Xinhua 2021a). The figure includes a large foreign student population—a product of the rapid internationalisation of Chinese higher education—many of whom were on winter holidays at the start of the pandemic and most of whom have not been allowed to return. In 2020, even foreign diplomats were asked to stay away.

This situation is unlikely to change any time soon. As Zhong Nanshan, the respiratory expert and government advisor who has played a key

role in informing the Chinese public during the Covid-19 pandemic, recently said in several interviews, while 'China cannot go on like this long-term', its current approach of suppressing outbreaks when they are discovered is considered less costly to society than any version of living with the virus (Zhang 2021; CGTN 2021). It is unlikely the status quo, which has been restrictive but also highly effective in limiting Covid-19 transmission, will see radical change in 2022, when China's political leadership will focus on organising, first, the Winter Olympics and, then, a party congress in the autumn.

Still, Zhong's comments, as well as the statements of several other top experts suggesting that China open its borders in the next phase of pandemic management, are significant (see, for instance, Wang 2021). They suggest that officially acceptable debate on China's zero-Covid containment strategy has broadened since the summer, when a well-known epidemiologist had to backtrack after making remarks about coexisting with the virus and members of the public were punished for discussing alternative virus-control strategies (The Economist 2021b). As other countries that have followed zero-Covid strategies are changing their approach, China—by far the largest among them—is also debating when and how to 'reopen'. International mobility is a prominent part of this discussion, linking China's border restrictions to a phase in pandemic crisis management that should eventually end.

In the following, I give an overview of how China's border restrictions developed during the pandemic, highlighting the way Chinese policies changed over time and showing what aspects of international mobility continued or are being resumed, thus adding nuance to discourses about China being 'closed off'. Then, looking at China's wider Covid-era immigration management, I explore to what extent the policy discourse on international mobility has shifted, showing that the pandemic has accelerated some policy trends while slowing others. Based on these inquiries, I argue that, as of mid-November 2021, there is little evidence that Chinese authorities view severely reduced international mobility as more than a temporary public health strategy.

From Xenophobia and Border Walls to 'Normalised' Pandemic Border Control

When China closed its borders to most foreign visa-holders on 28 March 2020, 44 of 45 confirmed Covid-19 cases that day were among international entries. A spokesperson for the National Immigration Administration (国家移民管理局, NIA) described the new measure as an 'unfortunate, temporary restriction' that 'followed the example of many other countries' (State Council 2020). Compared with lockdown measures, which it pioneered, China was relatively late in implementing Covid-19 border restrictions. Following the Trump administration's restrictions on Chinese arrivals in early February 2020, which were among its earliest virus-control measures, Chinese Government representatives were critical of international border restrictions, many of which focused on China. In this period, many foreign nationals had temporarily left the country, with foreign students back home for the winter holiday while others left to avoid the domestic spread of the virus following the outbreak in Wuhan. However, as the spread of the virus reduced in China while increasing worldwide, China, too, turned its focus towards monitoring and quarantining arrivals from a growing list of high-risk countries. Late on 26 March 2020, the central government's Covid-19 Control Leading Group, led by Premier Li Keqiang, concluded that the pandemic was 'speeding up' outside China's borders and decided to close the border to foreign nationals, except for a select group of permanent residents (Xinhua 2020; MFA 2020a). This closure complemented the existing negative international travel advice for Chinese nationals.

I remember during a transit in Malaysia on 27 March waiting for wi-fi reception to open an online article that would confirm whether the border would close to foreign visa-holders that day—when my partner and I would coincidentally be arriving in Guangzhou—or the next. On arrival, we learnt that quarantine now had to be completed at the port of entry, with transit to one's city of residence and home quarantine no longer

allowed. The late notice was typical of how policies changed on a daily basis. Reliable information was hard to come by, with news coming out only after Covid-19 press conferences, although exit–entry authorities in cities with large foreign communities like Shanghai stepped up their public services by opening a hotline and publishing multilingual updates. While the Chinese Government had not yet restricted international flights—except for the closure of Wuhan's international airport and the rerouting of flights to Beijing—air carriers worldwide were cancelling most of their flights and, by late March, it had become extremely difficult to reach the country.

The focus on preventing imported cases marked a new phase in China's virus containment strategy. Domestic mobility, which had ground to a halt in the first months of the pandemic, was slowly resuming. According to anthropologist Xiang Biao (2020), whereas during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic of 2003 domestic migrant workers had been the main mobile group in Chinese society (and hence faced the most control measures and stigma), to control the spread of Covid-19, China had to resort to a blanket approach of shutting the entire society—showing just how integral mobility has become to contemporary Chinese life. As the domestic wave was contained, a grid-like surveillance structure at the neighbourhood level, made up of a patchwork of low-level state and societal actors—including resident committees, security guards, and volunteer groups—continued to monitor mobility (Chuang 2021). Things seemed to be under control, but when imported cases started to spread, fear of a second wave was real. As a community grid worker in the Yunnan border town of Ruili put it in an interview:

In January–February, we mostly looked at [mobility within] the province; in February–March it was about people coming to Ruili from Wuhan and surroundings, then in March the focus turned towards foreign nationals entering the border … strict control of imported cases will be our main focus going forward. (Liu, Y. 2020)

The threat of a second wave imported from abroad resulted in a period of increased xenophobia, right around the time of the border closure. Things came to a head in April 2020 in Guangzhou, where African migrants were singled out for unwarranted quarantine and other forms of discrimination after several Nigerian migrants tested positive (Marsh et al. 2020). Reports of restaurants refusing foreign customers and African migrants evicted by their landlords went viral globally, while in China the events were filtered through a longstanding and disproportional media fascination with the African trader communities in the south of the country. Several cases of foreign nationals in other Chinese cities not respecting virus-control measures, and of localities providing paid-for quarantine facilities, also attracted public anger (Lu and Li 2020; Sina.com 2020).

The public scrutiny of foreign migrants as potential virus carriers, which had been observed worldwide during the early phases of the pandemic, occurred in China shortly after what perhaps was the largest public debate on immigration to date. In February 2020, judicial authorities released for public comment a draft law expanding permanent residency rights for foreign nationals (MOJ 2020). A heated, largely negative public response followed, running to the billions of online comments, many of which focused on the perceived privileging of foreign migrants by state authorities. At the time, immigrants were not yet considered a health risk, but experts widely questioned the timing of the law's release during an unprecedented nationwide lockdown that likely intensified emotions (see, for instance, Liang 2020).

While state authorities were evasive and slow in their response to events in Guangzhou—and to discrimination against foreign nationals in this period more broadly—the concerns of the Chinese public around imported cases were addressed more directly. The Chinese Government emphasised that most new cases were now imported rather than domestic, but it was also relatively transparent in providing information on each imported case, making it clear that 90 per cent of these were Chinese nationals (Teng 2020). A *People's Daily* op-ed on 23 March 2020 stated that such authoritative information should calm

residents and instil confidence among the public that the pandemic could be overcome (Shi 2020). Rumours about a case in Xinjiang coming from abroad and of large numbers of Koreans coming to China seeking safety from the pandemic were dispelled by government spokespeople (The Paper 2020; Liu, H. 2020). At the same time, authorities stressed that foreign nationals in China must abide by local virus-control laws (MFA 2020b). In April, a summary of excerpts from Chinese laws pertaining to epidemic and immigration control was assembled and spread through state media channels in seven languages (NIA 2020b).

As awareness among the Chinese public of the closed borders increased, xenophobia reduced. Still, like Hubei residents, international returnees—foreign or Chinese—often faced some stigma, and foreign nationals could still cause more apprehension than before the pandemic, especially outside large cities. In May 2020, the Guangdong Provincial Government released China's first regulations combating immigrant discrimination (Elmer 2020). While this was a significant contribution to China's immigration legal framework, the main purpose of the regulations was arguably symbolic—that is, to appease diplomatic tensions with several African nations following the events in Guangzhou. More generally, foreigners who stayed in China during the pandemic were celebrated in the state media, which cited their contributions to—and praise of—Chinese Covid-19 control.

After the border closure, foreign nationals remaining in or wanting to enter China faced significant uncertainty. While a two-month automatic visa or residence permit extension was available to most foreigners, this and other similar measures were hardly publicised. In cities with large foreign populations like Shanghai, options for changing a visa without leaving the country were expanded.

A system emerged for applying for exemptions to the border restrictions on foreign nationals, requiring in many cases an invitation letter from a local foreign affairs office. These letters were issued in an unpredictable fashion, with large companies with good government connections the most likely to get their foreign employees into the country. Family dependants, and groups such as foreign teachers and self-employed workers, were less likely to be approved, especially in the first half of 2020. Relaxations announced in September 2020 allowing those who had valid work or family visas or residence permits in March 2020 to return were only partially implemented when a new wave of Covid-19 cases hit many countries in the autumn (Wee and Bradsher 2021).

Perhaps the most significant exception was made for professionals and students from South Korea—the top country of origin for immigrants to China—who faced a relatively relaxed return policy under a bilateral agreement in effect from May 2020. South Korean students were able to return to China starting from August 2020. Generally, however, foreign students wishing to return to China to continue their studies were excluded from this economy-oriented invitation scheme. In 2021, these measures did not significantly change, although it became somewhat easier for those with valid residence permits to leave and re-enter China, and some embassies started issuing more new visas on a case-by-case basis.

As authorities declared China's Covid-19 control measures 'normalised', the space for providing some immigration services grew (Gov.cn 2021). But the focus of the Chinese authorities was to further limit the occurrence of imported cases among the remaining international arrivals. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) played an important role in this, implementing a system in June 2020 that strictly limited the number of permitted flights and penalised airline companies for positive cases above a certain threshold on a flight by cancelling that flight connection for several weeks (CAAC 2020).

The NIA and public security authorities also strengthened control over China's 22,000 kilometres of land borders, which before the pandemic accommodated about one-third of all China's cross-border traffic, much of it over informal backroads. To curb this mobility, measures ranged from civil border patrol teams and increased monetary rewards for reporting irregular border crossings to building up border infrastructure, including electrified fencing and camera surveillance. Perhaps most heavily hit by these measures was Ruili, on Yunnan's border with Myanmar, which saw four

Covid-19 waves and extended periods of lockdown. Border residents in southwest China, especially those living in villages, have been banned from engaging in their usual cross-border activities and still face domestic mobility restrictions.

From December 2020, the NIA directed a large campaign targeting cross-border criminal activities, aimed mostly at Chinese nationals engaged in gambling and otherwise living under the radar in Southeast Asian countries. In July 2021, the NIA reported 17,285 arrests under the campaign in the first half of the year—more than double the number of the previous year (Bianhai News 2021). In the same period, it had apprehended more than 31,000 irregular foreign nationals and 85,000 irregular border-crossers (NIA 2021). For all this effort, as elsewhere, these physical border barriers are never watertight—*Radio Free Asia* recently reported on border residents cutting holes in the fence in the Guangxi Autonomous Region—leading to some small Covid outbreaks (Long and Chingman 2021).

In 2021, mobility somewhat increased, with the NIA recording almost 67 million border crossings in the first half of the year—10 per cent of the 2019 figure. In that period, it renewed the residence permits of 370,000 foreign nationals (NIA 2021). In the autumn of 2021, many Chinese students resumed or started their studies abroad, although authorities continue to restrict passport services for Chinese nationals without clear study or work-related reasons to travel—a measure that has been in place since the start of the pandemic. Among foreign nationals who meet the requirements, the border closures have led to increased interest in Chinese permanent residency, which in cities like Beijing and Shanghai has become more accessible in recent years for high-income professionals and those with Chinese relatives. Still, after 18 months of strict border restrictions, many foreign nationals in China report suffering 'cabin fever', have left, or are reconsidering their plans to stay in the country (see, for instance, White et al. 2021b).

Change and Continuity in China's Covid-19–Era International Mobility Management

The timeline and details of China's border restrictions show how these measures were shaped by the country's evolving public health response. As for other aspects of China's Covid-19 strategy, measures limiting international mobility started relatively late and, following a phase of haphazard, varied implementation, evolved into a well-oiled machine. As preventing undetected Covid-19 cases from entering the country became a national priority, the implementation of border restrictions followed a campaign-style logic that is familiar in the Chinese political context. The measures were made more restrictive by China's risk-averse decision-making and policy implementation in crises, when state actors rally around the number-one goal at the expense of other concerns. Appeasing especially domestic public concerns was another priority in that crisis context. At the same time, the timeline shows just how similar some of the Chinese responses were to those adopted elsewhere, especially in countries pursuing zero Covid-19 strategies—from the xenophobia to a diaspora that found themselves locked out, with only the well-off having a chance at getting back in.

Another context for China's Covid-19 border restrictions is its underdeveloped immigration system. In the reform era, China's approach to international mobility, and especially immigration, has been cautious and pragmatic. As a politically sensitive policy area, the legal immigration framework has experienced minimal reform—resulting, for instance, in very limited pathways towards permanent immigration status. At the same time, for decades, enforcement of the existing restrictive laws has often been lenient, resulting in large-scale de facto immigrant settlement. Overall, the focus of the notoriously fragmented and opaque bureaucracy managing international mobility has been on aiding China's economic development and internationalisation.

By comparison, as a relatively marginal policy issue, the securitisation of immigration—for instance, through state discourse presenting immigration as a threat or the designation of significant resources for border security and detecting irregular migration—has been limited (Chou et al. 2016). There have been exceptions to this in the past decade—most notably, the criminalisation of the international mobility of Uyghurs and the marginalisation of African traders in southern China. In recent years, both development and security agendas have seen some change. The NIA, China's first national-level immigration agency—which was made responsible for both ingoing and outgoing mobility as part of the 2018 government reforms—has an expanded mandate for building a more comprehensive immigration system for the foreign nationals China wants to attract, while also expanding its immigration control capacity (Speelman 2020b).

This context can explain some of the idiosyncrasies of the pandemic border restrictions, such as the privileging of returning foreign professionals over foreign students, which can be traced to China's development-oriented immigration bureaucracy. If more of China's long-term foreign migrants were permanent residents, they would have been able to enter under China's pandemic restrictions in conditions similar to those in many other countries in lockdown, as this group has been exempted from border restrictions. It is also unsurprising that remaining outbreaks were concentrated at China's southwestern border, where intensive cross-border cooperation has been the norm and investment in border infrastructure has not been a priority.

So, how are the events of the past two years affecting wider state priorities on international mobility? While the crisis logic remains in place at the border, it is striking that state actors' rhetoric on different types of international mobility has remained largely consistent with pre-pandemic trends and, in some cases, has even gained steam over the course of the pandemic. This is the case for return migration—a policy area in which the current border restrictions form an especially stark contrast with Xi-era discourse on strengthening diaspora engagement and encouraging return migration. Despite the ongoing restrictions, local

authorities, especially in areas with large emigrant populations, have resumed expanding services for returning migrants and are planning for their increased return (see, for instance, Zhou 2021). Talent attraction programs continue and, while the growth rate of emigration for study to some countries seems to have peaked pre-pandemic, researchers note that demand will not just disappear (Ma 2021).

For incoming migration, foreign students, while largely unable to return to China despite significant grassroots organisation, saw themselves welcomed by President Xi Jinping himself in a June 2021 letter (Xinhua 2021b). The NIA's plans to expand access to permanent residency for some groups and allow recent foreign graduates to stay in China to work or start businesses have been implemented at the city level, although the national proposed permanent residency law has been delayed due to the public backlash. During the pandemic, 'immigration service centres' (移民事务服务中心) offering a range of government services in areas with high concentrations of foreigners—part of an NIA-led social integration effort—have continued to be rolled out. At the recent opening of such a centre in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, a responsible official noted: 'You can't only emphasise foreigner management. You also have to create a feeling of belonging for them in Jinhua, and for that you have to provide good service' (Zhang et al. 2021). Government planning for the period of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan continues to count on growth in areas ranging from talent attraction to inbound tourism. The area of 'immigration services' has also continued to see international cooperation. In late 2020, the NIA participated in several events organised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on topics related to immigration legal reform and services provision, as part of a program sponsored by the European Union.

When it comes to security measures, such as the efforts to stem irregular migration and tightened border management, the pandemic sped up trends. As enforcing zero Covid-19 along China's long land border became a national priority, state discourse on border security, emphasising China's control over its borders, has greatly intensified. Resources were made available for an expansion of border

infrastructure and for a sustained crackdown on irregular migration. These trends have been further codified in the new Land Borders Law, which includes articles on border-blocking infrastructure and irregular migration. The law, under discussion since 2014, was released for public comment in August 2021 and then adopted by the National People's Congress Standing Committee in October 2021 (Xinhua 2021c). Significantly, however, the restrictions on international mobility have not been part of this politicised state discourse.

As for public anti-immigration sentiment, which has continued to feature in media reports of the Covid-19–era border restrictions, there is little evidence of a sustained increase as a result of the pandemic. While there has been no polling on the issue, domestic debates on China's Covid-19 control suggest the Chinese public has so far largely approved of the border restrictions. However, this should not be taken to equal broad support for reduced immigration (or emigration for that matter). During my research on public attitudes towards immigration, completed in the summer of 2020, I found that individuals clearly differentiated between the temporary situation during the pandemic, which had, as many of my interviewees noted, reduced the numbers of foreigners in their surroundings, and their—diverse—views on immigration policy more broadly. A nationwide online survey I carried out as part of a team at East China University of Science and Technology found results in line with previous studies showing that attitudes towards immigration grew more critical in the past five years compared with the previous decade. But moderate attitudes continued to dominate, and no major pandemic effect could be detected (Speelman 2020a).

That does not mean that these events will have no impact on Chinese public debate about international mobility. The large amount of media attention the crisis brought to immigration could contribute to its further politicisation once controversy strikes again. The events also confirmed that both foreign immigrants and Chinese returnees from abroad have caught the attention of a very active ethnonationalist constituency that increasingly dominates Chinese online discourse. While the xenophobia and extreme nationalism of this group should not be taken as representative of the wider Chinese population, some of the questions they promote resonate among a broader part of the Chinese public. We found this is especially the case for issues related to any type of foreign or transnational privilege. This will likely be a key issue of concern in Chinese immigration debates as part of a wider shift in Chinese perceptions of the rest of the world during a new phase of its development.

But the crisis also got many people thinking about China's immigration policy—a topic on which public information is limited and public knowledge levels are low. Both the Permanent Residency Law proposal and the escalation of discrimination against African migrants in Guangzhou in April 2020 led to wide-ranging public debate on immigration that went far beyond online racist comments. The degree of public interest, coming at a time of crisis, in both cases also led to a swift state response, suggesting that state perceptions of public opinion on international mobility are becoming a significant policy factor.

During the pandemic, with the Chinese leadership making regular statements directing policy on border security, international mobility governance has been unusually top-down. However, rather than assuming any centralisation the crisis brought about is an unstoppable trend, it is important to keep in mind the large number of actors and the diversity of interests regarding international mobility within Chinese state and society. While the NIA is supposed to be a coordinator of state management of incoming and outgoing mobility, this policy field continues to be very fragmented, with many actors adhering (at least rhetorically) to pre-pandemic international mobility priorities. Public opinion, which is now starting to push for more freedom to travel, is also a factor. Awareness of these dynamics can help make sense of the regional variation and bureaucratic discretion in the implementation of border restrictions in the past two years, while also showing that what happens next is far from inevitable but will be the result of various kinds of negotiations.

Meanwhile, much of the response to the restrictions of course lies beyond the control of the Chinese authorities. From members of the diaspora expressing alienation to the significant repu-

tational damage worldwide among migrants who were looking to China for educational and professional opportunities, the impact of the measures seems deep (see, for instance, Ren 2021). But from a state perspective, there is little evidence the authorities want an overhaul of their policy priorities on international mobility. Rather, in line with international experience, security-related agendas are empowered in the current crisis environment, while more ambitious developmentally motivated reforms are slowed, but not necessarily abandoned.

China's Borders and the Trust Crisis

As international mobility to and from China continues to be severely disrupted by Covid-19 border control measures, it is useful to take stock. The measures have disrupted decades of ever-increasing mobility in and out of China, just at a time of growing uncertainty about China's relations with much of the outside world. Still, even as the long-term impact of these measures remains unclear, it is important to keep in mind that, as analyst Yu Jie recently put it, 'turning inward is not a wholesale package' (White et al. 2021a).

As this essay has shown, China's pandemic border restrictions are also no package deal. Instead, they have changed and continue to change in piecemeal fashion, reflecting slow movements in bureaucratic and diplomatic negotiations, as well as evolving pandemic risk assessment. From the fast-track for US business travellers China announced at the November 2021 Xi–Biden digital summit to unconfirmed indications that more foreign students might be able to return in 2022, this is likely the way in which reforms will unfold in the immediate future.

Fully reopening China's borders would be a big deal for the country's Covid-19 approach. Keeping imported cases low is the impressive result of an all-government effort and a key aspect of China's zero Covid-19 strategy. Any 'living with the virus' strategy would require a radical rethinking of virus management for a nation that, beyond the initial outbreak in Hubei Province, has hardly had to deal

with pandemic issues still plaguing other countries with similar high vaccination rates—from vaccine escape and overflowing hospitals to long Covid.

Given the major health implications of such a policy change, it seems farfetched to see China's border restrictions as primarily or increasingly political as they persist into 2022. Of course, they do not help an already deteriorating environment for international exchange, in which Covid-19 control more broadly has been highly politicised both in and outside China, with Chinese nationalists arguing China cannot abandon its successful 'national model' for virus control. But the public health rationale for the measures remains strong while the intense border restrictions do not fit with much of China's agenda for international mobility and, so far, do not look like a new immigration policy in disguise. Notably, Chinese authorities have not linked the border restrictions to wider political tensions with Western countries—something they could easily have done.

Certainly, issues like declining trust between Chinese and foreign partners are important. Placing the border restrictions within the context of wider political trends is understandable, but also reveals outdated frames of reference. Crucially, it suggests that 'China' can (and wants to) isolate itself from the rest of the world and even physically close itself off, rather than being a large and complex society that is shaping and shaped by global trends.

If this is the view, it is unlikely that relations will restore themselves when a visit to Beijing is once again possible. Instead, one might look at what is still happening and what is possible, even now, in terms of transnational interactions. Think of the more than 800,000 foreign nationals currently in China, and the vast number of Chinese nationals around the world—many of whom have travelled home during the pandemic despite all the obstacles, or who have just arrived from there to study or work abroad. Think of communication technologies making long-distance interaction easier than ever, for public events or—when that is more restricted—at least small-scale communication.

Political trends, such as the Chinese Communist Party's increasing focus on reducing ideological influence from overseas, tighter control over

academic research, and the deterrence effect of the detention of foreign citizens as part of geopolitical disputes—most notably, the two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor—could also reduce some forms of mobility for years to come. In a poll of China researchers earlier this year, 40 per cent said they do not plan to travel to China once restrictions are lifted (Jakes 2021). However, such highly unfortunate trends should not be conflated with the pandemic border restrictions.

During the pandemic, long-term trends in rebalancing power relations between China and other parts of the world have been on full display. The Chinese state is focused on building state capacity for its purposes, while Chinese society is becoming less oriented—and sometimes more hostile—towards the West. Chinese demand, both domestic and from Chinese nationals abroad, will form the greatest impetus to reopen its borders—not that of foreign migrants or visitors. International visitors, especially those from the select group of Western countries that could previously count on low barriers, will have to readjust, while, as elsewhere, migrants can get painfully stuck between systems. At the same time, however, even the past few years remind us to what extent international mobility is an integral part of China's development. That will not just go away. ■

Maggie Mac Neil.
PC: haqexpress.com.

The Melancholy of Kinship in Post– One-Child China

Yawen LI

Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil's Olympic gold medal sparked heated discussions on the Chinese internet, bringing to the fore practices of child abandonment and transnational adoption in China's one-child era (1979–2015). This essay examines related online discourses and how their implications generate a more comprehensive and personal understanding of the ramifications of the One-Child Policy and contemporary social imaginings of kinship. It considers how Jiangxi Province, once a place where child abandonment was widely practised, has emerged as an important site of memory.

On 26 July 2021, Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil won the Olympic gold medal in the 100-metre butterfly, beating China's Zhang Yufei by 0.05 seconds. This sparked heated online discussions regarding child abandonment, especially of baby girls, in China during the one-child era (1979–2015). According to reports in Chinese mainland media, Mac Neil was given up by her biological parents in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, at the time of her birth in 2000, and then adopted a year later along with her younger sister from a local orphanage by a Canadian couple, Susan McNair and Edward Mac Neil, who took them to London, Ontario, in Canada.

In the comment sections of posts and reports on Mac Neil's victory, Chinese netizens conveyed their sense of disturbance at the ironic situa-

tion of an abandoned Chinese girl, trained in a foreign environment to become a world champion, defeating the 'authentic' Chinese athlete. Some indicated that Mac Neil's abandonment, and the practice of abandoning baby girls in general, should not be discussed, to avoid China losing face, whereas others actively emphasised the swimmer's Chinese genes and asserted that she must be 'claimed back'. The tone of the women responding, however, tended to be both more reflective and more generous. Besides extolling her Canadian foster parents and criticising her Chinese biological parents, and the general practice of sex-selective child abandonment, many female commentators expressed genuine happiness for Mac Neil, and even a sense of relief that she had been given away. Had she stayed, they suggested, she would probably have ended up working in a factory to help pay for her little brother's tuition fees. Many also denounced the attempt to reclaim Mac Neil's 'genetic Chineseness' for the purpose of approximating and subsuming her glory.

Taking the popular discourses around Mac Neil's Olympic gold medal and transnational adoption as a departure point, in this essay, I aim to provide critical analysis of the ramifications and the afterlives of China's One-Child Policy with respect to its impacts on the lives of single children, Chinese adoptees, and diasporas, as well as how their experiences shape their social imaginings of kinship and interactions with each other. I begin by examining online reactions to Mac Neil's achievement to understand how contemporary memories of the One-Child Policy unveil ways in which kinship is reconceptualised within different groups in present-day China. My focus will be on Jiangxi Province, where Mac Neil was born—a crucial geographical locus that has been featured in an increasing number of works addressing the historical practices of child abandonment and transcultural adoption (Valentino and Winstead 2018; Wang and Zhang 2019; Wang 2021). I then consider the ways in which testimonies and words of memorialisation are connected and contested at this juncture. This is followed by an analysis of Jiangxi-born American filmmaker Wang Nanfu's contentiously received *One Child Nation* (2019), a documentary co-directed with Zhang Jialing that showcases the tension and negotiation between the local and the global avenues of this memory discourse.

The 'Invisible Costs' of the One-Child Policy

The young female netizens' 'protective' attitudes discussed above were built on an empathetic identification with Mac Neil that challenges the ideas of kinship and compatriotism underpinning Chinese patriarchal nationalism. On the day Mac Neil won the gold medal, one netizen wrote on the popular Chinese social networking platform Douban: 'I'm from Jiangxi. After the elders at home heard that the winner of the women's 100-metre butterfly was an abandoned baby born in Jiangxi, they said that she must be claimed back.' According to such views, ties of kinship and compatriotism with female children can be conveniently forfeited when the patrilineal culture that favours male progeny conflicts with the population-control policy, and then effortlessly restored depending on the political (or economic, cultural, or emotional) capital that the abandoned, such as Mac Neil, possesses on the global market. In this regard, kinship ties, originally bound by blood, stop being something innate for females and instead become something that must be earned by proving self-worth and utility. This corresponds to Christian Joppke's (2021) conceptualisation of neoliberal nationalism among immigrants—that is, the idea of an 'earned citizenship' (kinship). The only difference is that while immigrants actively work to 'earn' their 'citizenship', in Mac Neil's case, she was renounced and is now being claimed back without having a say in the matter.

Another recurrent theme in the posts of young female netizens supporting Mac Neil is the custom of a big sister being financially responsible for her little brother (for instance, by paying for his education, betrothal gifts, and house), which usually involves the sister's engagement in physical toil to earn money to this end. The netizens generally

resorted to such stories to argue that Mac Neil had 'fortune born out of misfortune'. References were often made to the film *Sister* (我的姐姐, 2021), in which director Yin Ruoxin tells the story of an orphaned older sister, An Ran, who must choose between raising her younger brother, whom she has never met, in Chengdu and pursuing graduate studies in Beijing—her only way out of the patriarchal violence she has experienced in her life so far.

Posts like these highlight how young Chinese women, most of whom are only-children themselves, have every reason to celebrate the culturally independent status of Chinese female adoptees—an unintended 'freedom' resulting from the One-Child Policy. This gesture of solidarity enables them to channel their own rage about the patrilineal culture and find comfort in their experiences as 'singletons'—a term I adopt in Vanessa Fong's (2002) sense of 'the only child'. However, these seemingly 'positive' outcomes (Hong 1987; Fong 2002) and emancipatory aspects of the policy cannot be considered without a concomitant examination of the 'invisible costs'.

Even though many young female netizens consider the policy—and even resulting transnational adoptions—in a positive light, as a measure that saves them from competing with male siblings for attention and resources, this imagined protection essentially stems from fear of patrilineal traditions and the phallocentric order of sibling obligations. In this sense, female singletons do not enjoy the epistemic privilege of recognising, let alone mourning, the loss of sibling possibilities as do their male counterparts. Chinese contemporary artist Li Tianbing offers one such instance of male privilege. In 2008, he was able to create paintings of his child self with his imaginary brother sitting beside him and remake HIStory by reminding the public of 'what could have been', thus disrupting the official narratives that mainly chart the achievements of the policy while hailing singleton status. However, siblings, particularly male ones, remain an ungrievable subject for female single children, rooted in a compromised vision of kinship fraught with competition, jealousy, and enmity.

A Perplexing Identification

Mac Neil, on the other hand, maintains a polite distance from and limited interest in subjects relating to her origin. In an interview, she said: 'I was born in China and I was adopted when I was really young, so that's just as far as my Chinese heritage goes. I'm Canadian. I've always grown up Canadian' (Zhou 2021). Biological family, 'home' country, and cultural roots become ungrievable for transnational adoptees as well. Following the increasing public interest in Mac Neil, on 2 August, the Chinese podcast *Stochastic Volatility* (随机波动) published an article titled 'Once Abandoned, Later Embraced' (被抛弃的, 又被抱起) on its WeChat official channel, introducing the photographer Han Meng and photos of several Chinese adoptees in the United States that she shot between 2014 and 2015 (Zhang et al. 2021). Of more than 20 adoptees mentioned in the article, none of them articulated positive associations with China, although a few identified with 'Chineseness' in a diasporic sense, and some had returned to volunteer in the orphanages that cared for them before their adoption. Perhaps some resemblances could be drawn between the grief of the female singletons growing up in China and that of transnational adoptees. For them to be comfortable in their singleton and culturally autonomous states, respectively, grief over sibling experiences and biological family/birth country must be consigned to oblivion.

However, as the Jiangxi-born Chinese writer Dong Lai (2021) laments in an article questioning the celebratory mood of discussions of Mac Neil's adoptive status, 'she is the one in a million, and the majority of abandoned girls would have to face pain and loss'. Behind these detached attitudes and silences towards China and natal kinship ties lie the Chinese adoptees' daily negotiations with racial and cultural encounters and differences in their adoptive families and countries. Many were adopted by white parents. Scholars working on Asian transnational adoption have suggested that a great number of white parents adopt colour-blind approaches when raising their Asian adoptees (Register 2005; Louie 2015). This results in

epistemological gaps in parents with regard to anticipating and understanding how their children could be treated differently due to their skin colour, which has critical consequences concerning the adoptees' physical and mental wellbeing.

These scholars are also alert to the contexts of multicultural societies, where issues of race and cultural differences are allowed and encouraged to be discussed openly. However, multicultural discourses often end up reinforcing white parents' (static) projections of Chineseness and Chinese-American identities, many of which are based on essentialised and commodified representations (Dorow 2010; Louie 2015). Significantly, David Eng contends that in some cases Asian transnational adoptees serve as ideological and affective labours in sustaining an 'ideal' family format (white, heteronormative, middle-class, nuclear) and a 'feeling of kinship' for white parents, when white adoptees are not easily attainable and black adoptees are not preferable (2010: 108). This kind of transnational adoption can come with heavy psychological costs for Asian adoptees, with some susceptible to what Eng terms 'racial melancholia'—namely, enduring the process of working through past losses alone—when compared with Asian-American immigrant families who share a common experience with these issues.

Hence, some adoptees who wish to shield themselves from trauma may opt to refuse any contact with their birth country or remain in denial regarding the negative effects of the (interracial) adoption experience. This is reminiscent of Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'—that is, the situation 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011: 1). By imagining that biological ties, birthplace, race, and gender do not matter, it may be possible for some transnational adoptees to avoid actively working through such struggles. Similarly, the female Chinese netizens' identification with transnational adoptees is likely to be based on a form of cruel optimism as well, as these women tended to highlight how understanding, well-educated, and affluent the adoptive family was in Mac Neil's case. Those tendencies seem to affirm the better care, education, and financial support they believe they have gained from singleton experiences, which makes it more difficult to admit the losses, such as the desire for sibling experience.

The Complexities of Breaking Silences

Despite those cruel aspects of the optimistic visions of singleton and transnational adoption experiences, Chinese adoptees gaining international fame is conducive to breaking the silence of Chinese official media—as broaching the subject means implicitly acknowledging the common practice of child abandonment and the gendered cost of the One-Child Policy—and inciting spontaneous reflections and memorialisation. Apart from condemning Mac Neil's biological family and the (sex-selective) practice of abandoning children, Chinese netizens frequently singled out Jiangxi Province as a 'major province where child abandonment was practised' (弃婴大省). One by one, people from that province started sharing online the stories they had witnessed or heard, or their own traumatic experience of discovering—from overheard conversations or inadvertent revelations—that they had nearly been given away (Dong 2021). In the context of such discussions, some netizens mentioned Wang and Zhang's documentary, *One Child Nation*.

The film, which has a particular focus on the implementation of the One-Child Policy in Jiangxi, draws attention to a diverse array of stories told by witnesses, enforcers, victims, artists, and child traffickers. Despite the directors' efforts to circulate pirated copies of the film among a Chinese audience, the censors always held sway. The contrast between the invisibility of the subject matter in mainland discourses and the hypervisibility of it in Western countries raises the question of what it means to transplant the mourning and memorialisation to a different cultural context. What are the risks involved when this kind of trauma is underrepresented in China yet seemingly subsumed into the memory industry of the United States?

Some of the criticisms and controversies that followed the release of *One Child Nation* in the United States provide insight in this regard. For some critics, the most disturbing aspect of the documentary is its portrayal of the masses—represented by Nanfu's own relatives and villagers—as brainwashed and incapable of reflecting on policy enforcement (Li et al. 2020). This excludes the possibility that they could genuinely believe in the official justifications and the vision behind the policy or that their actions could be informed by historical imperative. That the documentary foregrounds the coercive facets of the policy also makes it not dissimilar to the stories prevalent in Western media in the 1980s and 1990s, and less representative of the practices in other provinces where the policy was more loosely enforced and some positive outcomes were achieved.

These are all legitimate critiques. Nonetheless, whatever the ideological impulses of the directors, the interviews included in the documentary present various nuances and complexities that deserve to be further explored. The film shows that the deprivation of the imagined possibilities of the children not born and aborted, or who died after birth, or were given away, haunts witnesses and survivors in Jiangxi, despite or precisely because of the lack of testimonial documentation and public mourning. Wang Nanfu's uncle was pressured by his mother to abandon his second child, a girl, in the market and she eventually died after two days without care. 'If she had not died, she would have been 27, 28 years old by now,' he sadly recalls. Ironically, the gendered orientation of this event brought about a different kind of obsession with, or lingering fear of, the alternative history in male children who survived the policy. Wang Zhihao, Wang Nanfu's little brother, says: 'If I were a girl, I would be put inside a basket and given away when I was born. I would be abandoned if I were a girl.'

Between siblings, the feelings are even more intricate. Zeng Shuangjie's twin sister was involved in the infamous 'Orphans of Shao' incident—a case in the early 2000s that saw nearly two dozen babies forcibly taken by One-Child Policy enforcers under various pretences, renamed 'Shao', and handed over to an orphanage in Hunan Province if the parents could not afford to pay the steep fines (Shangguan 2011). Zeng's twin was soon adopted by a foreign couple. Seventeen years later, when she learns she has a twin in the United States, Zeng starts imagining the many activities they could do together: 'I ... hoped that she will come back and we can reunite ... we can visit our relatives ... we can catch loach ... we can have a snowball fight. We can dress in the same clothes and wear the same haircut. We can go to school, eat, and go home together. It would be good to have company and to do everything together.' By saying 'can', Zeng might well mean 'could have'—an oblique way of saying that, growing up, she has been haunted by the sibling experience denied to her by the One-Child Policy and which now can only be imagined.

The documentary mentions that at least 130,000 Chinese children have been adopted by foreign couples since 1992. It also explains that many of these adoptive parents did not know their babies were bought by orphanages from policy enforcers who snatched them from their parents, as in the case of Zeng's twin. When people like the American foster parents of three children adopted from China, Longlan and Brian Stuy—both of whom appear in the film—started to collect DNA from the bereft Chinese families and tried to match them with children overseas, many adoptees for whom matches were found responded negatively; after growing up wondering why their biological parents did not want them, they had no desire for contact (see also Ma 2021). For those Chinese parents, these negative responses were almost tantamount to losing their children a second time, while the adoptive parents also panicked for fear of losing the children they now discovered had been adopted illegally.

As for Wang Nanfu herself and other interviewees in the film, such as Wang Peng, an artist whose work features abandoned foetuses, they bore witness to the coercive policy implementation yet were too young to resist the normalising force of the state propaganda, so their responses to the policy came in a belated manner; when they become parents themselves, this experience endows them with the ethical imperative to tell what it means not to be able to become parents. Indeed, as Caruth (2013: 87) puts it, 'the traumatic event is its future, is its repetition as some-

thing that returns but also returns to erase its past, returns as something other than what one could ever recognize'.

Melancholy Kinship

As a Jiangxi-born female singleton, I felt compelled to write this essay. Like many other families, mine was disappointed I was a girl. I felt lucky and grateful that their love did not seem diminished. As I become more accomplished by their standards, their attitude has improved, and they respect me more as an independent adult. I thought gender did not matter to them—not anymore—until recently when a female classmate of mine had a baby and my father asked me about the sex of the child. I told him the baby was a boy. He immediately smiled and, without thinking, said that her parents must be very happy. The indignation and grievances that had been sealed off for more than 20 years returned and overwhelmed me.

Mac Neil's gold medal brought to light the notorious patrilineal aspect of social reproduction in Jiangxi. The buried stories remind me that I am, as are generations of people, living in the aftermath of the One-Child Policy, and the 'progress' it brought about concerning gender equality can be superficial. What I have outlined in this essay is only a small fraction of the effects rippling out from the policy—the convergence of multiple strands of what I would like to term 'the melancholy of kinship'. I could have been one of those Chinese adoptees, reticently finding my biological parents unforgiveable and the Chineseness in me ungrievable. And those adoptees could have been me, hoping to outgrow the confines of gender yet still feeling profound pain from those subtle moments of violence inflicted by people I love deeply. ■

(Left to Right) *The Ugly Chinaman*, Bo Yang; *The Deep Structure of Chinese Society*, Sun Lungkee; *I Don't Want to Be Chinese in My Next Life,* Joe Chung.

From the 'Chinese National Character' Debates of Yesterday to the Anti-China Foreign Policy of Today

Promise LI

Retracing the basic contours of the debates about the 'Chinese national character', this essay considers the harkening back to the 'national character' discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by many liberal Sinophone dissident scholars in the 1980s and Hong Kong cultural critics in the 2000s as a reaction against decades of class discourse in China. This revival of cultural essentialism has since provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping anti-China foreign policy in the West today, thus limiting the horizon for alternative imaginaries of democratic politics.

Today, the foreign policy crusade against Chinese authoritarianism has united the Western establishment, and some of its most dedicated fighters are a passionate cohort of diaspora dissidents championing the United States as an alternative beacon. While many of these activists claim they target the Chinese regime and not the Chinese people, the language often slips. As Hong Kong prodemocracy poster child Joshua Wong writes in his recent book:

Hong Kong is just like a foster child who was raised by a white family and, without his consent, returned to his Chinese biological parents. Mother and son have very little in

On one level, Wong accurately points out the Chinese Government's tendency to unilaterally encroach on minority people's rights and Hongkongers' lack of choice in deciding their own political future. On another level, what is striking about this statement is the implicit essentialisation of the Chinese identity as something fundamentally irreconcilable with the Hongkonger one, and as something that plays a key role in determining individual political dispositions.

Wong's implication that Chinese cultural values are somehow alien to democratic values represents a recurrent theme among the anticommunist diaspora—a discourse that has directly fuelled a 'clash of civilisations' narrative promoted by the hawkish Western establishment. This tendency to draw an implicit link between China's repressive political system and Chinese culture's inherent tendency to embrace authoritarian politics becomes particularly dangerous ammunition for the warmongering right-wing in the West, as most recently exemplified by neofascist political pundit Jesse Kelly's comments about wanting US soldiers 'to sit on a throne of Chinese skulls' during a conversation with Tucker Carlson (Wade 2021). What the anti-China industry shows us today is that it insists on a crude politics governed by cultural determinism or essentialised models of cultural values that identify autocratic, backward politics with 'Chineseness' versus 'democracy' as represented by the West. Such a politics entails seeing Western governments as what Lin Yao (2021) has defined as a 'civilisational beacon'—a phenomenon that was particularly evident, for instance, when most expatriate Hongkongers and Taiwanese Americans voted for Donald Trump in the 2019 US election (Shum and Hui 2020). In such a context, a rigid dichotomy is generally posited between liberal Chinese and Hongkonger 'freedom lovers'—often neatly aligning with the discursive accents of US foreign policy regimes—and nationalist Chinese authoritarians.

More importantly, what political critics and activists have seldom investigated is how this essentialisation is a product of culturalist debates that borrows the terms of Western racist discourses—but with its own history, expressed in terms distinctive to the intellectual milieu of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. For more than a century, vigorous debates about what local intellectuals call 'the Chinese national character' (國民性), which sought to delineate the essential categories and values that determine what it means to be Chinese, consumed the intellectual circles of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The liberalising 1980s saw the rise of a generation of liberal dissidents—represented by the likes of Liu Xiaobo, Bo Yang, Wen Yuankai, and Sun Lungkee—who played, and continue to play, a role in setting the terms for these culturalist arguments. After the Handover, some cultural critics in Hong Kong—including Joe Chung and Chin Wan—took these theories to their logical conclusion and developed the intellectual basis for Hong Kong localism by essentialising and rejecting the category of 'Chineseness', calling instead for a political awakening based not on systemic transformation, but on ethnicisation of Hong Kong identity as something anchored by 'Western' political values. The price of failing to critically revisit these discussions is limiting our possibilities for struggle; this reductive binary between authoritarian China and the democratic West obscures how governments borrow techniques of repression from each other, and the fact we must identify our political lines beyond the terms set by deterministic cultural discourse.

Retracing the basic contours of the debates about 'Chinese national character', this essay considers the harkening back to the 'national character' discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by many liberal Sinophone dissident scholars in the 1980s and Hong Kong cultural critics in the 2000s as a reaction against decades of class discourse in China. This revival of cultural essentialism has since provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping anti-China foreign policy in the West today, thus limiting the horizon for alternative imaginaries of democratic politics.

From Culture to Class (and Back)

To understand the anticommunist diaspora's inability to think beyond the ideological frames of the West, we must look to the lasting influence of the 'culture heat' (文化熱) of the 1980s in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, which included recharged debates about the 'Chinese national character'. Chinese intellectuals' essentialist views of China have a long history. Influenced by early Western discourses from scholars like Montesquieu, late-Qing and post–May Fourth writers like Yan Fu, Yang Du, and Liang Qichao followed French sociologist Gustave Le Bon's theories of 'national character' or 'soul' to advance a kind of cultural deterministic analysis of the Chinese people (Wu 2007). For Le Bon (1898), one can observe an 'aggregate of psychological elements' that remains relatively stable across time that determines the 'soul' of a particular people, which in turn determines their political institutions and choices. Le Bon's analysis stems from a distinctly reactionary perspective on mass movements—best exemplified in his seminal work on crowd psychology, which sees crowds as a negative extension of the unconscious predicated on the irrational and the anti-democratic. His early Chinese admirers built on this analysis to identify the Chinese national character across time as one of slavishness, requiring enlightened forms of autocracy to remain civilised. By the 1930s, these perspectives had spurred a critical reaction, including the so-called debate on Chinese social history (中國社會史論戰), which called for a political, economic, and structural understanding of Chinese culture, paving the way for the communist class critique presaged by early Marxists like Chen Duxiu and Guo Moruo—a frame that would remain in vogue for decades, especially after the ascent to power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The eclipse of early twentieth-century culturalist discourse by class analysis, however, did not give rise to fundamentally democratic paradigms. On the contrary, the CCP enabled new forms of mass politics while deepening authoritarian control over independent political action. This can be seen, for instance, in workplace politics. From the brief periods of union reform, shopfloor organising, and democratic debate in the 1950s to the 'workers' congresses' and popular and state-level rethinking of what socialism entails in the late 1970s and early 1980s, glimpses of democratic self-determination in the workplace emerged through action and debate only to be suppressed by the CCP bureaucracy (Sheehan 1998; Andreas 2019; Franceschini and Sorace 2022). While these experiments—especially shopfloor activism in the work units of the 1950s—helped inform a democratic, worker-centred praxis that we saw, among many other instances, in the urban resistance against martial law in the days leading up to the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 (Zhang 2022), the resurgence and rise of the culturalist discourse in the late 1980s market reform period testify to the unfortunate reality that class-conscious and left-wing paradigms have been identified with authoritarian rule, rather than the possibility for independent mass politics. In other words, there was no coherent discursive framework—nor the capacity for organising campaigns—to capture the democratic energies at the seams of Chinese society in this period.

In the 1980s, the space to even articulate, let alone reject, a class-based independent democratic politics in the Chinese context rapidly began to close. A new cultural renaissance accompanied the market reform period: from the Fifth Generation filmmakers (which included Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, among many others) and the controversial *River Elegy* television series, inspired by the *Toward the Future* book series (走向未來叢書) by Jin Guantao, to the myriad conferences at Peking University in the late 1980s, students in mainland China were exposed to Western cultural norms and, through these, began to articulate a different sort of politics of resistance against Beijing's authoritarianism. After the launch of the Four Modernisations Program in the late 1970s, the Chinese state and society's increasing openness to science and technology as part of its road to strengthening productive forces through market reforms proved to be a double-edged sword that bolstered the state's economic path to liberalisation while amplifying the dissident discourse of polit-

ical liberalisation (for an overview of the debates about 'scientism' in that period, see Hua 1995). If the early century moment represented a turn from cultural critique to structural and Marxist discourse, the late 1980s saw a reversal to culture. Besides being wrapped in the register of Western values, the discourse this time came to set the ideological groundwork for Western foreign policy institutions. As Chinese left-wing writer Zoe Zhao (2019) has observed in a recent essay on the legacy of the Tiananmen massacre, Chinese dissidents, especially those in the diaspora, now 'tend to identify Western governments and parties, rather than civil society organisations struggling against them, as natural allies'.

Unlike the national character debates of the beginning of the century, the late 1980s version of this discourse emerged *in reaction* to decades of the CCP's perversion of class critique. In fact, movement participants Chen Fongching and Jin Guantao (1997: 10) frame this historiography as a teleological movement towards 'cultural development', situating themselves and their compatriots in the 1980s as 'one link in a long chain' stretching back to the May Fourth Movement's cultural debates. What really emerged was a crudely essentialised analysis of 'Chinese values', in which any vision of political reform must once again be waged on cultural grounds. This discourse has since powerfully constrained the anti-CCP movement, benefiting not only Western institutions but also the Communist Party, both of which sought to neutralise genuine class discourse more than ever to facilitate China's turn to capitalism. For Westernised Chinese students, democratic resistance began to be framed in terms of liberal conceptions of 'democracy', which were portrayed as cultural and political properties of the West from which the Chinese national character is intrinsically alienated.

At the centre of these discussions was the question: is Chinese culture fundamentally compatible with democratic values? Writers like Bo Yang—the author of a polemical 1984 essay titled 'The Ugly Chinaman' (丑陋的中国人)—stoked controversy because of their caustic criticism of Chinese people as inferior and backward. As Bo (1992: 17) writes: 'In his inferiority, a Chinese person is a slave; in his arrogance, he is a tyrant.' The late Chinese political prisoner and liberal intellectual Liu Xiaobo went as far as to criticise the documentary series *River Elegy*—which purported to demonstrate the depravity of traditional Chinese culture, causing a great stir among Chinese intellectual circles in the late 1980s—for not promoting Westernisation enough. Scholar of aesthetics Li Zehou (1982) touched on this discussion in advocating for China to imitate the West's Enlightenment paradigms, praising Yan Fu—who, as we have seen, was an early proponent of a deterministic view of Chinese culture—as a great thinker of modernisation. As cultural critic and historian Geremie Barmé (2019) writes: '"National Character Studies" was a thriving niche market in the Chinese publishing industry, first in Hong Kong from the 1970s and then on the Mainland since the early 1990s' (for more context, see also Barmé 2000).

Take a closer look at one exemplar of this market: Taiwanese academic Sun Lungkee's 1982 *The Deep Structure of Chinese Society* (中國文化的深層結構) (Sun 2011). Widely read at the time in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, this book was a prominent instance of this discourse, even though it remains little discussed and has not been translated in full yet in English media and scholarship. In his multiple English-language scholarly articles on the topic, Sun has shown familiarity with and interest in the cultural debates of the late Qing and post–May Fourth periods (Sun 1986, 1987, 1992). In *The Deep Structure of Chinese Society*, he draws on the discussions of the Chinese national character earlier in the century to crudely critique Marxism (with frequent swipes at Chinese diaspora leftists of the 1970s) for failing to understand the 'deep structures' (深層結構) of Chinese society and reducing all cultural phenomena to questions of class. In particular, Sun writes that Chinese people have no conception of a rational 'soul' (靈魂) and instead hold an inferior notion of 'heart' (心) that disastrously compromises rational thinking and appeals more to the 'body' (身). For this reason, they are intrinsically determined by other forces, like familial ties or an authoritarian nation, while 'lacking the capacity for self-organisation' (不能自主) (Sun 2011: 71). According to Sun, in Chinese culture, more humanistic concerns about polit-

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ical rights and democracy are substituted with cruder, depoliticised, and overly 'affective' (感情化) communal practices like nepotism, a slavish mindset that prioritises stability over creative change, and a lack of individuality. The CCP merely expresses the intrinsic paternalistic tendencies of the Chinese people on a national scale, and the people are satisfied with the lack of democracy and individuality if economic stability persists, since putting food on the table for the family trumps the value of 'individual' thinking (Sun 2011: 172).

There is much to criticise in Sun's scholarship, but the most striking problem is what he excludes to construct his analysis—that is, generations of left-wing praxis that attend to independent and democratic mass politics. Sun's argument about the intrinsic and essential characteristics of the Chinese people is grounded in a limited understanding of how democratic mass politics works. For Sun and his ilk, mass political action can never be revolutionary, independent, and democratic; it is always reduced to depoliticisation or irrational mob psychology, which Sun sees as antithetical to enlightened democratic thinking. Sun's cultural paradigms narrow the political horizon of the Chinese people's self-determination, reducing their options to either adopting the atomised colonial politics and identity of the West or resorting to slavish state-nationalist apologia. Writing under the pseudonym 'Lau Yufan' in 1988, Hong Kong socialist Au Loong Yu published a critique of Sun's book in which he explained how Sun's reductive framing obscures the material ways in which democratic gains are achieved by any people or movement—that is, how the history of democratic reforms in the West is not 'simply because of Western culture's "deep structure" of intrinsic democratic values, but as a direct effect of modern mass democratic struggles' (Lau 1988: 17). Indeed, the legacy of the anticommunist diaspora activists precisely exemplifies the reality of this disastrous binary thinking on a larger scale: since Tiananmen, many if not most CCP dissidents are unable (or unwilling) to conceptualise and build campaigns that are not tethered to the machinations of the Western foreign policy establishment. Borrowing Sun Yat-sen's characterisation of the Chinese people as 'a heap of loose sand', Sun

Lungkee's conclusion ridicules Chinese people as atomised (Sun 2011: 351); in reality, his readers and followers, whom we now see as the leaders of the international resistance movement against the CCP, are the ones who, enamoured as they are with a particular conception of Western democratic values, are unable to establish their own independent power and program beyond the constraints of another imperial bloc .

The Case of Hong Kong Localism

This deterministic view of 'Chineseness' plays right into the CCP's hands. In a sense, the most extreme anti-CCP dissidents and pro-CCP nationalists share the same intellectual foundation: the belief that genuine political liberation can be won by a struggle over a culturally essentialised understanding of the Chinese political identity and values. For many dissidents, the only politically enlightened mainland Chinese are those closest to disavowing their 'Chinese' roots—something that is conflated with adherence to 'democratic' values. With this history of cultural debates in mind, we can see the heightened consciousness of the Hongkonger identity as opposed to the Chinese identity in recent years as one logical end of the paradigm championed by the likes of Sun Lungkee. In fact, the pillars of Hong Kong localism—in particular, the prioritisation of Hongkongers' interests over political solutions that seek to link the democratic struggles of Hongkongers and mainland Chinese people—were defined years before the uprisings of 2014 and 2019.

In 2007, Hong Kong political commentator Joe Chung published the provocative and bestselling *I Don't Want to Be Chinese in My Next Life* (來生不做中國人)—a book in the polemical tradition of Bo Yang that Sun recommended from its earliest editions. All but calling for political independence for Hong Kong and a rejection of the Chinese identity, this text was reprinted in an extraordinary 55 editions within a decade of its release in Hong Kong (though it has still not been translated into English and is little discussed in scholarly circles). This

was followed in 2011 by Chin Wan's *On the Hong Kong City-State* (香港城邦論), which postulates that Hong Kong embodies the more authentic and democratic Chinese national character precisely because of its proximity to the West. Chin takes the Greek city-state or polis as an ideal for the city; conveniently and intentionally ignoring the widely inequitable foundations of these city-states, he writes that Hong Kong should be modelled as such, calling for a Western 'imperial protector' (Li 2020). Curiously, in the final chapters of his influential text, Sun had also cited the Greek polis as an ideal of freedom that the Chinese intrinsically do not have—pre-empting Chin's intervention by a few decades.

Of course, Hong Kong's democracy movement has developed greatly in the decade since Chung and Chin, but in many ways, their theories have deeply transformed and still inform how Hongkongers imagine their own struggle for democracy. Before their demise in the past year or so, mainstream prodemocracy pundits with huge platforms, such as the now-defunct *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報) and various yellow-ribbon online talkshows like those of Lee Yee and Chip Tsao, echoed similar essentialising points about Chinese culture (Barmé 2019). Just in January this year in *Mingpao* (明報), longtime cultural critic Hung Chingtin built on terms similar to those employed by Sun Lungkee to describe the 'Chinese cultural soul' (中華文化魂) as 'deterministic' (決定性) and fundamentally in contradiction with that of its Western counterpart (Hung 2022). But though Chin has been seen as a key intellectual influence for Hong Kong localism in the years since the Umbrella Movement, the terms of the debate have shifted. Especially with the mass uprisings of 2019 and 2020, the opposition movement in Hong Kong has become infused with more sectors and ideologies than ever before, and it is impossible to predict its future directions in the wake of the unprecedented repression triggered by the enactment of the National Security Law in July 2020. But in a sense, the failure to reckon with the questions posed by the likes of Chung and Chin means the culturalist attacks on Chineseness have not receded, but rather have deepened—to borrow Sun's language—just like the 'deep structure' of the localist opposition's political horizon. This is

not to say whether Hongkongers are more or less friendly or hostile towards mainland Chinese, but the mainstay of the movement has further framed the city's core political problem in opposition to the Chinese system of governance. The rise of localism, while containing elements that are legitimate responses to increasingly constrained material conditions and economic dispossession, expresses an important symptom of the deleterious effects of years of unchecked cultural criticism of the Chinese national character.

Today's Global Stage

Today, anti-CCP diaspora dissidents, powered by the lobbying voices of Chinese, Hongkonger, Tibetan, and Uyghur political exiles, stand on the frontlines of a carefully manufactured foreign policy machine that deliberately blurs the line between the CCP, the Chinese people, and intrinsic Chinese 'values'. With the repression in Hong Kong and the rise of US–China tensions, the battle against the CCP has rapidly become the centre of foreign policy legislation and debate. Activists see the United States as a defender of democratic values, and Chin's dream of a rejuvenated Western imperial protectorate for Hong Kong has become an implicit ideological framework for much anti-CCP lobbying: the 'enlightened' West must contain the Chinese system of governance. While Hongkongers have largely shunned Chin for his bizarre political theories, the anticommunist diaspora has given practical expression to his core framework perhaps more effectively than Chin could have imagined. 'Anti-China' bills, like the *Innovation and Competition Act*, pass through the US Congress with surprising speed, becoming a rare point of bipartisan cooperation. There is little consideration of the catastrophic effects of further empowering the US military and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region with funding of tens of billions of dollars per annum, or whether such a strategy of taking sides is even helpful for those oppressed by Beijing (Chávez 2021).

Tracing the history of these cultural debates reminds us that we must not only take seriously the alliance between the Western imperial establishment and the anticommunist diaspora, but also strive to see how each strand has emerged from a different milieu that ultimately fits hand in glove in this particular moment. While it is tempting to exceptionalise or excuse these diaspora agendas or neatly identify them with those of the Western white nationalist right, it is more effective to carefully contextualise them within the cultural debates from which they emerged. From Sun to Chin, these thinkers undoubtedly pandered to traditional racist, Sinophobic paradigms, but these ideas are expressed and registered through a longstanding debate about the Chinese national character in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

To be clear, excavating and contextualising these culturalist debates do not discount, let alone endorse, the deep-seated kinds of imperialistic and chauvinistic attitudes associated with the Han Chinese identity—effectively mustered by the CCP in recent years for its political ambitions. The key is recognising that such cultural essentialism can only lead to endorsing a 'clash of civilisations' discourse that actively impedes us from seeing different frameworks of struggle. Just as Chinese nationalism is no antidote to Western imperialism, aligning with white supremacy in essentialising the Chinese cultural identity as the bogeyman responsible for all China's political problems is no solution either. In his critique of Sun, Au Loong Yu also noted that such essentialism nihilistically treats Chinese people as eternally unable to think beyond authoritarian politics, ironically providing a strong apology for CCP authoritarianism (Lau 1988: 19). Indeed, Chinese blogger Ren Yi, writing under the pseudonym Tu Zhuxi ('Chairman Rabbit'), wrote a virulently ethnonationalist defense of the Chinese political system in 2020 by relying on the same strategy of cultural essentialisation, writing that 'from the standpoint of any nationality, for one to deny their own national character is very much unacceptable, no matter if it is Europe, China, or the United States,' and that 'denying one's race, blood, land, and language is to go against one's own national character, and is hardly acceptable.' For dissidents, the fight continues to be primarily framed as one against a fundamentally 'Chinese' political system, calling for the transfiguration of Chinese society and culture in line with the values of Western 'democracy', so trapping us in a political dead-end that misunderstands how democratic change materially functions. In this sense, the nature of Chinese political values comes to stand as the dominant flashpoint of conflict, instead of those systematic injustices that necessitate a rethinking of how battle lines are drawn—for instance, by considering how the CCP draws its power from its investment in and integration into a global neoliberal order that implicates the ruling elites across cultural lines.

What other political strategies arise when we recognise and reject the perspective that essentialised cultural frameworks fundamentally determine the systems of different nation-states? When we can adequately attend to the interconnections between different regimes, we will discover that solidarity across borders between one hegemon and another is no abstract ideal, but a concrete solution against state repression everywhere (Chien and Li 2020). ◼

Wang Yangming. PC: Wikipedia, Public Domain.

The Trouble with Wang Yangming

George L. ISRAEL

The revered Confucian Wang Yangming has received much attention in recent years, not only because his compelling life story and philosophy deservedly attract it, but also because President Xi Jinping has openly expressed admiration for him. Building on the foundation of his grassroots popularity and historical and philosophical significance, the government of China has actively encouraged learning from the Ming Dynasty scholar-official. However, the political implications of his tenets and conduct as a Ming official have long been the subject of heated debate, one that remains relevant today. This essay reviews the revival of Yangmingism in China and explores the meaning of it.

As many have observed, China's government has been touting Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and his School of Mind. President Xi Jinping has expressed a certain fondness for the famed Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) Confucian and scholar-official, even claiming that 'Wang Yangming's philosophy of mind truly is the quintessence of China's traditional culture; it is also one of the starting points for boosting the cultural self-confidence of Chinese people' (Li 2017). Several years ago, in an article published in the journal *Philosophy East and West*, I documented the history of this revival—that is, the burgeoning scholarship, historical restoration, monument construction, formation of study societies, and publication of educational materials for K–12 students and training manuals for government employees (Israel 2016). The revival pre-dated the Xi era and was part and parcel of broader government support

for and patronage of China's Confucian tradition (Page 2015), the purposes of which included supporting scholarship, placing Confucianism in the service of political goals and legitimation, instilling morality, and offering meaning at a time when modern ideologies had failed to do so, and promoting the globalisation of knowledge about Chinese history and philosophy (for its own sake, and as a form of soft power).

If anything, though, the pace has picked up in recent years. So notable was the Wang Yangming 'fever' and the robust funding driving it that international news organisations took note and reported it. Ian Johnson, a scholar and writer at *The New York Times*, penned a piece in 2017 with the apt title 'Forget Marx and Mao: Chinese City Honors Once-Banned Confucian'. He wrote:

Restoring a sense of public morality has been a policy goal of Mr. Xi, who is set to be reappointed as Communist Party leader at the party's 19th congress starting Wednesday. In his efforts to address the country's spiritual shortcomings, Mr. Xi has spoken favorably of Confucius, praised Buddhism and presided over a revival of traditional religious practices that were once condemned as superstitious. But he has seemed most comfortable praising the life and works of Wang Yangming. (Johnson 2017)

Such praise makes sense. Wang has long been revered in East Asia, where he has enjoyed a certain grassroots popularity and was central to the Confucian projects of some of the most important twentieth-century Chinese philosophers, such as Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi. They maintained that he had tapped into the very source of the universalistic spiritual dimensions of this great tradition. Wang's life story is also compelling, and many of the things he wrote and said provide moving testimony of the philosophical insights of a profoundly wise and deeply moral person. He deserves praise, admiration, and study, as well as to belong among the ranks of the world's great philosophers.
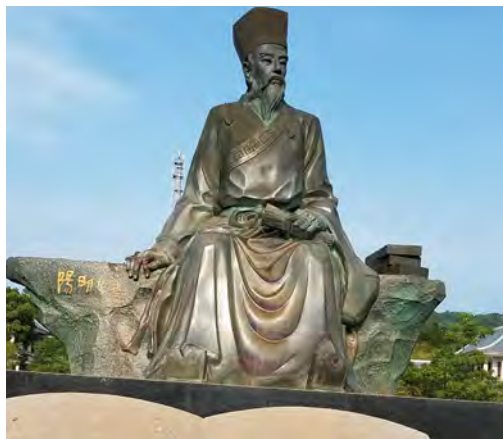
A statue of Wang Yangming and the museum devoted to him in Heping, Guangdong. PC: George L. Israel.

Conflicting Scholarly Interpretations

That said, prominent Chinese intellectuals such as Yu Yingshi (2014) have expressed their concern that should an authoritarian regime promote Confucianism, that may spell trouble for the tradition, insofar as it resuscitates it in its oppressive institutional forms. With respect to Wang Yangming, while academics in China might welcome the breathing space given to them by policy that supports pure scholarship and affords them the opportunity to talk about an individual and a school of thought many regard as the pinnacle of the Confucian tradition, others have reminded us that Wang's ideas were once regarded as tools of oppression. During the Maoist years, for instance, Wang was generally condemned for the military campaigns he led against 'peasants' and 'ethnic minorities'. These made him an agent of class oppression, and his philosophy had only served to give theoretical justification for his actions.

Indeed, Wang never fared well in Marxist scholarship, and even after Reform and Opening Up (from the 1980s), when scholarly perspectives diversified, some academics maintained that his tenets lent themselves to deeper state intervention in the moral life, for the purpose of instilling obedience in a population living under autocratic

despotism. On the one hand, the Ming Confucian's principal teaching of extending (or realising) our innate (or intuitive) knowledge of the good (*zhi liangzhi*, 致良知) locates the ultimate source of moral authority in the individual's mind/heart and that mind/heart's intrinsic ability to perceive *tianli* (天理)—a higher, transcendent, or cosmic pattern, law, or reason. Put simply, with this inner light, we are inherently capable of knowing right and wrong because we can access a deeper moral order. That places a great deal of power in the hands of the individual and his or her conscience and would seem to be implicitly challenging existing structures of authority.

According to this line of interpretation, Wang Yangming's philosophy is liberating, charging the individual with a dignity born of an innate potential for sagehood and independent capacity for moral self-determination, both of which are well suited to liberal political traditions (Wu 2014). The Ming Confucian was in fact speaking from a place quite apart from a materialist ideology or the constraints imposed by socioculturally determined relations of power. He was speaking to the original condition—the very essence or intrinsic reality—of the human mind and heart, where Heaven's pattern (or law) discloses moral knowledge to those possessing the clarity necessary to perceive it. Presumably, that is a place located beyond the reach of state interventions and even history. In fact, much of what Wang has to say about this only became clear to him after he had been treated very badly by the Ming emperor and his court.

On the other hand, Wang Yangming also appeared to believe that extending our good knowledge would serve to confirm the verity of a particular set of social norms or, more generally, what the philosopher Charles Taylor (2004: 23) refers to as a 'social imaginary': 'the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.' The renowned Sinologist William Theodore de Bary (1970: 151–52) wrote:

Wang Yangming seems to have assumed that the traditional Confucian relationships would remain intact. Innate knowledge of the good would only confirm them, revivify them with the spontaneity of freely given assent, and assure them of selfless commitment on the part of the individual.

He observed:

[F]or the most part his [Wang's] understanding of innate knowledge of the good was based on the assumption of a common moral nature in all mankind. Indeed, its common character was almost Wang's fundamental article of faith; individual differences were for him of secondary importance. (de Bary 1970: 151)

Similarly, David Nivison asserted that although Wang rejected the idea that moral knowledge could be mastered in advance through learned study and, rather, emphasised a kind of innate moral sense naturally responsive to any situation, he insisted that 'in a particular problem-situation, any morally perfected person would "hear" the voice of inner knowing in essentially the same way' as other morally upright people (Nivison 1996: 224–25).

Oddly enough, the earlier Marxist scholarship and the extent to which Wang Yangming's 'voice of inner knowing' might serve to validate existing power structures are the reasons dissident human rights activists, such as Yu Jie (2018), propose for Wang being touted where he was once condemned. A civilising discourse amenable to authoritarian appropriation as well as colonial projects lurks behind his thought and actions. Dimensions of Wang Yangming's own actions as a servant of the state reveal that his sense of right and wrong remained embedded in what the modern New Confucian Lin Anwu critically labels an imperial-style Confucianism—that is, a traditional Confucianism that evolved from natural bonds of consanguinity, moral bonds of human character, and political bonds of domination, and which was suited to a peasant economy, a lineage-based society, and an autocratic political system (Lin

2011: 356–57). Insofar as Wang's traditionalism served to reinforce the last, by offering theoretical justification for uncritical affirmation of these bonds, his philosophy could lend itself to a modern ideological appropriation by a centralising authority claiming to act in the best interests of family, society, and nation.

Appropriating Yangmingism Today

However, such readings will remain subject to historical scrutiny, which is one reason contemporary Wang Yangming-ism has created a lively discursive space where contesting narratives thrive. Returning to China and events pertaining to Wang Yangming today, a few things stand out among the readily accessible information. One is the unveiling of monuments, such as giant statues, along with the construction of museums. That has happened wherever the Ming scholar has left traces, including his hometowns of Yuyao and Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province; in Xiuwen County, Guizhou Province, where he experienced a kind of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment; and in county seats established by him in the wake of military campaigns conducted to suppress outlawry and internecine strife. Those seats include Fujian Province's Pinghe County, Jiangxi Province's Chongyi County, and Guangdong Province's Heping County. Much funding has been disbursed for this construction, and it has made for some interesting work featuring local history. Promoting tourism is also a goal here, and indeed all these places are quite charming, and well worth a visit.

Another reason is passing statements made by President Xi Jinping. Xi's patronage of Confucianism more generally is well known (Jin 2014). Close observers in China have noted when he mentions Wang as well as his allusions to Wang's philosophical tenets (especially the 'unity of knowledge and action'). Occasionally, they post something online documenting what was said where. These posts often begin by highlighting what Xi had once asserted about the significance of Wang

Yangming's learning of mind—that it is the essence of China's traditional culture and is essential for enhancing cultural confidence (see, for instance, Li 2017). Thus, Xi has linked Wang to his goals for 'national rejuvenation' (CGTN 2021). That is why businesses like the Yangming Philosophy Academy (知行合一阳明教育研究院, literally, 'The Unity of Knowledge and Action Yangming Education Research Institute') have jumped on board, offering training sessions on how Wang Yangming's ideas can improve business practices and bring success; why Wang Yangming conferences bringing people together from diverse sectors of society are routinely convened; and why bookstores are full of trade publications that bring his life and philosophy to broader audiences. In the simplest of senses, the revered Ming Confucian gives heart to what are otherwise heteronomous pursuits.

For this reason, differing historical interpretations of the Ming Confucian have become unusually relevant. For example, in China, it appears to be widely believed that Yangming-ism played a key role in the Meiji Restoration and Japan's successful modernisation—a modernisation that turned Japan into a dominant power in East Asia by the late nineteenth century. Yet the idea that Wang's thought provided intellectual resources for that process has been shown to be largely a construction of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Japanese intellectuals. They had found in him a resource for engendering nationalism, as Ogyū Shigehiro (2000) and Oleg Benesch (2009) have demonstrated.

Thus, while giving Wang Yangming a role in the projects of cultural pride and national rejuvenation surely has its merits, the definition of these goals and their manner of execution will also have the effect of bringing forward certain understandings of him and his School of Mind. That may have the unintended consequence of privileging one line of interpretation, while placing constraints on others, such as one that would stress the potentially universal reach of his humanism.

In 1527, Wang wrote a letter to his son while en route to Guangxi Province, where he had been charged with the task of quelling unrest among non-Chinese peoples native to southern China. He explained to him the crux of his teaching at

this time, which, of course, concerned how we are to go about realising and extending to others our innate capacity to know right from wrong. This was Wang Yangming's famed doctrine of *zhi liangzhi*, as discussed above. Wang told his son:

> [W]hat I have taught all my life when discussing learning is only the three characters *zhi liang zhi*. The human heart is humaneness. Humaneness is the genuinely loving and compassionate dimension of the innate knowledge. Absent a genuinely loving and compassionate heart, there is no innate knowledge of the good that can be extended. (Wang 2012: vol. 2, juan 26, p. 818)

Indeed, it is this fundamental moral knowledge that gives us the capacity to realise a vision of a humane unity (what the neo-Confucians call the 'one body or substance of humanity'). Wang Yangming's basic tenets speak to the capacity of all humans for an unbounded caring of universal reach. It is our humanity that forms of all things one body, one totality.

It is true that, for Wang, realising our innately virtuous capacities begins with extending love to those closest to us. By first loving our own father, we can understand loving others' fathers, and then all fathers, for example (Wang 2012: vol. 1, 7, p. 211). The same applies to others closest to us. Not unlike Stoic *oikeiosis*, circles of care begin with what is near and end with what is far (Yu 2017). Our genuine love and compassion, our humaneness, can be extended to others through concentric circles, from self to family to group to country, until the entire circle—Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things—is encompassed.

Of course, Wang Yangming's hopes for our moral capacities appear quite idealistic. It is difficult to extend our genuine love and compassion when everything about ourselves and the complexities of the world seem to work against us to constrict our reach. He was quite aware of this, and his writings can be rather pessimistic at times. He says that people are normally self-centred and hanker after recognition, status, and wealth. Their minds are like polluted water, whose natural clarity is difficult to restore. They find it easier to follow the morally corrupt and become so themselves rather than risk the ridicule, jealousy, and envy that being righteous seems to incur. In his assessment: 'The world has for long been swept over by a wave of degeneracy—how does it differ from someone who is terminally ill?' (Wang 2012: vol. 3, juan 21, p. 672).

Furthermore, let us imagine that someone has removed obstructions preventing awareness of this knowledge of right and wrong and hence become fully able to extend his or her humanity to the utmost. As such, moral action should take place quite effortlessly. According to Wang's tenet of the unity of knowledge and action, our innate knowledge, insofar as it is clear, becomes something like a guiding light available to us in any moment and under any circumstance, directing us down the right path, such that our moral life becomes spontaneous and natural.

Yet, as the world is fraught with moral complexity, how is such a unified moral life to align with it? Wang Yangming himself is something of a case study in this regard, especially the decisions he made as a Ming official. In fact, just after he penned the letter to his son, he carried out military campaigns against non-Chinese ethnic groups located in Guangxi Province. While some scholars see only political necessity at work (he did the best he could under the circumstances), others have argued the language he used to describe resistant peoples, and which served as justification for applying the military instrument and implementing policies designed to civilise and settle them under the Ming Empire, reveal contradictions, displaying a potentially oppressive facet of his philosophical discourse. Wang had placed his humanistic ideals in the service of a paternalistic civilising discourse and the colonising ends of the Ming state (Shin 2006).

This would seem to suggest that extending our good knowledge through concentric circles of care will rarely be easy, as we run up against social and political reality, insofar as those circles are usually not simply nested one within the other. Perhaps several overlapping or independent circles are nested within one larger one, but that larger one escapes the reach of any political entity. As such, it seems possible that our *liangzhi* and fundamental intuition of unity could find themselves tied to or

contracted within one circle, making claims on behalf of it to the detriment of others. Our pre-existing assumptions about the nature of the social and political may have shaped what we assumed to be natural knowledge of right and wrong. In other words, concepts central to the Ming School of Mind, including *liangzhi*, the one body of humanity, and the unity of knowledge and action may lend themselves to appropriation.

In fact, Wang Yangming's tenets have been subject to reinterpretation in ways that reshape them to ends debatably true or alien to their original intent. A good example of this can be found in David Ownby and Timothy Cheek's introduction to Ownby's translation of an essay by Jiang Shigong. The Chinese edition was originally published in a journal in 2018 and intended as an authoritative statement of the new political orthodoxy under President Xi. The essay integrates traditional Chinese thought with communist theory, building 'on a flirtation between the New Left and New Confucians which has been underway for some time'. Ownby and Cheek write:

> The text is littered with classical Confucian expressions like 'original intention' 初心 which liken the scholar's commitment to the Way to the Communist's dedication to revolution. Communism is presented as the equivalent of the 'learning of the heart 心学,' one of the Chinese names by which Neo-Confucianism is known, linking Wang Yangming's 'innate knowledge' 良知 to Maoist voluntarism in a creative attempt to redefine communism as a goal to be achieved by cultivating the proper spirit rather than through class warfare. As China moves forward, it also embraces its past; what will flourish in the twenty-first century and beyond is Chinese civilization. (Jiang 2018)

In other words, with respect to Wang Yangming's tenets, realising our innate knowledge of what counts as good is redefined within the framework of the values—the spirit—and goals of the Chinese Communist Party or, more generally, according to the horizon of the social imaginary as the Party would like to shape it and as it exists in Han Chinese society. One's sense of right and wrong will surely know that the goal of national rejuvenation is correct. The same would apply to Wang's theory of the unity of knowledge and action. Theoretical and practical knowledge will now be understood within the framework provided by Marxism–Leninism–Maoism and Xi Jinping Thought. With regards to practical action, this theory essentially supplants the role played by Heaven's pattern in Wang Yangming's philosophy. He had identified it with *liangzhi*, and thus as the ultimate source of authority. The source of authority now shifts from the transcendent and the inherent capacity of the individual's mind/heart to a state's modern ideology, or at least that ideology's interpretation of the nature of the guidance provided by this authority. Lastly, our fundamental ability to form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things—because it is natural to our mind and heart—potentially sees a slight contraction, bounding what is higher and inclusive with the desires, civilisational assumptions, social imaginary, and political aims of a particular people.

Questions for Our *Liangzhi*

These are just some of the ways and reasons Wang Yangming and his School of Mind have been appearing in China today. I have tried to explain and document this largely as an outside observer, in a detached, objective fashion. Others can draw their own conclusions and form their own judgements. Would it have been better had the Ming Confucian not been praised, and if such flirtation with the Ming School of Mind were set aside? I do not believe researchers in this area or admirers of Wang Yangming would think so. However, the Government of China might reflect on whether it is correctly extending, or realising, Wang Yangming's vision. Does it need to be disentangled from, or expanded beyond, the political discourse and social imaginary in which it is now embedded? These are questions worthy of further consideration. ■

FOCUS

Being Water

LegCo (Legislative Council), Hong Kong.
PC: Prachatai (CC).

Restructuring the Political Society during Autocratisation
The Case of Hong Kong

Ka-Ming CHAN

Hong Kong is undergoing an abrupt process of autocratisation. This essay highlights one aspect of this process that is often overlooked in the existing literature: the restructuring of political society. It argues that Hong Kong's political society was transformed by the National Security Law (NSL) of 2020 and the electoral reform of 2021. First, it analyses how the NSL trial against opposition activists has contributed to the disbandment of opposition parties. Next, it describes how the electoral reform has institutionalised a candidate-filtering tradition and explains why this reform presents the opposition camp with a lasting dilemma. Finally, it sheds light on how the restructuring can affect the establishment camp and the government.

The case of Hong Kong illustrates a problem not discussed in the literature on democratization. Is it possible to create and have a functioning democratic political subsystem within a nondemocratic state? Can a democratic political subsystem exist within the overall framework of a totalitarian or post-totalitarian state? Politically, probably not—because of the example that it would provide for the citizens of the larger unit to see one region enjoying freedoms to which they would not have access. This dissonance would generate a persistent temptation for the sovereign state to subvert those democratic institutions. But there is a more serious and principled constitutional difficulty. The state would still have the right to modify the political status of any component unit.

— Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996: 19)

According to the recent literature on the subject, scholars agree that contemporary autocratisation tends to be gradual. Such gradual practices include the demeaning of oppositional voices, court packing, and the curtailment of media freedom (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Maerz et al. 2020). The most blatant, sudden, and drastic moves to authoritarianism, such as military coups or executive emergency decrees, are less common nowadays. However, the autocratisation process in Hong Kong since 2020 does not square with this conventional wisdom—a deviation that makes it an important case to analyse. In this essay, I highlight one aspect of autocratisation that is understudied in the existing literature—namely, the restructuring of political society.

Political society, according to Linz and Stepan (1996), is the 'arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself to contest the legitimate right to exercise control over public power and the state apparatus'. The main elements of political society include political parties, voters' associations, electoral rules, and legislatures. Crucially, as noted by Ma (2007), authoritarian regimes, in general, do not tolerate an independent political society to contest state power. This point is certainly vindicated by the recent autocratisation process in Hong Kong. From mid-2020 onwards, we notice that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the local government have attempted to restructure Hong Kong's political society by two main measures: the National Security Law (NSL) of 2020 and the electoral reform in 2021.

In this essay, I recount how these measures have restructured Hong Kong's political society and discuss the implications. First, I argue that the NSL trial against opposition activists has signalled the CCP will hold the state power tightly and that the cost of being an opposition politician has increased. These two signals, in turn, have contributed to the disbandment of opposition parties. Second, I outline the electoral reform of 2021, which has reinforced Hong Kong's candidate-filtering tradition and presents the opposition camp with a lasting dilemma. Last, I highlight how the restructuring of political society can affect the establishment camp and the government, drawing attention to three phenomena that need further study.

The NSL Show Trial and Its Political Signals

The NSL can be regarded as autocratisation by decree—a situation in which authorities make use of previously unavailable powers to combat an immediate threat to the regime (Lührmann and Rooney 2021). Though the long-term impacts of the NSL remain to be seen, it hardly needs saying that the trial of the participants and organisers of the opposition primary elections marked a watershed in Hong Kong's political development.

On 28 February 2021, 47 opposition activists were charged with 'conspiracy to commit subversion' under the NSL. Under the new judicial setting, there are designated judges to deal with NSL-related charges and they can decide whether juries are necessary. Several characteristics of this NSL trial made it dissimilar to previous political trials. First, only one-third of the activists were granted bail, and they must adhere to requirements that severely restricted their civil and political rights. These include prohibitions against: 1) expressing any opinion seen to be violating the NSL or local ordinances that maintain national security; 2) organising, participating in, or coordinating any level of election (except voting); and 3) making contact with any foreign officials or parliamentarians. Second, many of the 47 opposition activists on trial renounced their party membership. As they held important leadership roles in their parties and acted as spokespeople, the renouncement of membership was likely a temporary shock to the party's daily operations. Third, some of those who were denied bail even advocated disbanding the parties to which they once belonged. Specifically, four former influential members of the Civic Party, which belonged to the moderate faction, jointly wrote a letter proposing to disband the party, for they believe it could no longer participate in the Legislative Council (LegCo) elections and its district councillors risked disqualifica-

tion from their public offices (Stand News 2021). Finally, among the activists on trial, some publicly announced they would retreat from politics during the trial.

At the time of writing in December 2021, it is still largely unknown what happened to the 47 opposition activists during their interrogation and what their prison terms will be. Yet, this NSL trial sent two clear signals to the opposition camp. The first is that the communist one-party system does not tolerate any contestation of state power from the opposition camp. When, in the spring of 2020, the opposition camp initiated primary elections to coordinate candidates, the key organiser, Benny Tai, asserted that one main goal was to leverage the LegCo election and the legislative proceedings to create a constitutional crisis.[1] However, as the NSL trial *de facto* cancelled the political rights of opposition elites, it signalled that the CCP would not allow the opposition any opportunity to exercise control over the state apparatus. Even for moderate opposition leaders, no mercy would be granted once this red line was crossed. In this way, the trial made clear that opposition coordination to contest state power would bring severe punishment, putting an end to this strategy for the foreseeable future.

The second signal is that the cost of being an opposition politician is now tremendously higher, no matter whether one belongs to the moderate or the radical faction. As the opposition elites involved in the trial are either in jail or prohibited from participating in elections, other politicians from both factions have had to weigh the costs and benefits of their own involvement in politics. To avoid or curtail such costs, they have adopted two strategies. On one side, some have chosen to retreat from politics or go into exile. On the other, some have stayed in the political society but renounced their party membership, since their affiliation with an opposition party can be perceived as a desire to contest state power. Either choice affects the operations of opposition parties, which were underdeveloped to start with (Ma 2018).

As contesting state power is no longer a possibility, and opposition elites are in prison, in exile, or have abandoned their party membership, one can expect these parties to disband. To document this phenomenon, I created a dataset that includes the lifespan of all opposition parties that took part in the 2016–21 election cycle. [2]To qualify as a party in my dataset, the entity must: 1) have fielded at least two candidates in either the 2016 LegCo Geographical Constituency (GC) election or the 2019 District Council (DC) election; and 2) have won at least one seat in either of these two direct elections. In the case of an entity that participated in the 2016 elections for the LegCo's Functional Constituency (FC)—whose electorate is sectoral organisations or individuals working in a particular profession—the entity had to win at least one seat. This dataset includes 41 parties—about one-third of which were created in the post–Umbrella Movement period (that is, between the end of 2014 and March 2019), and another third was established just before the 2019 DC election. This speaks to the idea that the proliferation of parties can be induced by large-scale social movements, as opposition elites seek to use the electoral arena to mobilise their constituents and put pressure on the authoritarian incumbents (Mok 2020; Shum 2021).

Regarding the disbandment pattern, I found 13 parties had publicly announced their disbandment. This accounts for 31.7 per cent of the opposition parties in the dataset. Most were formed either after the Umbrella Movement or during the anti–Extradition Bill movement; conceivably, their advocacy was mainly localism or self-determination. Of these 13 parties, nine were disbanded after the NSL trial. Note that this figure can underestimate the withering of opposition parties, as the dataset does not consider the renouncement of party membership and those parties that have become dormant since the NSL trial. Also, the dataset does not include the disbanded professional groups that were formed during the anti–Extradition Bill movement (Ma and Cheng 2021). These professional groups were supposed to participate in the FC elections that should have taken place in 2020 but were postponed by the government in the name of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, based on these numbers, we can observe the pattern of party disbandment since the NSL trial, and we can conjecture that the opposition camp will be much more elite-centred in the NSL era.

The Spectre of the Communist Electoral System

Undoubtedly, the political signals being sent during the NSL trial are not the sole factor behind the restructuring of political society in Hong Kong. To fully account for this process, one also needs to consider the electoral reform of 2021, which was guided by the motto 'patriots governing Hong Kong' (愛國者治港). In this section, I describe how this reform reinforces the previous candidate-filtering tradition and analyse how it fundamentally reshapes the competition for state power.

As many scholars have remarked, communist one-party systems have a tradition of keeping tight control of election nomination procedures (Gandhi and Heller 2018; Landry et al. 2010; Pravda 1986). The rationale is to leave no doubt about whom the people will choose as their representatives in charge of the state apparatus. To ensure this political certainty, a common manipulation technique is to filter candidates. This is nothing new in Hong Kong's executive and legislative elections. For instance, since the handover of Hong Kong, there has been candidate filtering in the Chief Executive (CE) election: the CE candidates had to be nominated and voted for by an Election Committee (EC) composed of 1,200 members who were supposed to represent the interests of different sectors, professions, and businesses. Also, after the 2016 LegCo election, the Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC) started to restrict the candidature, and member-elects from the radical faction were disqualified for not taking their oath properly (Chan and Ng, forthcoming; Fong 2021; Yuen and Chung 2018).

Despite this continuity, there are some crucial differences in the electoral reform of 2021. First, in the CE election, the expanded 1,500-member EC has created a fifth sector: the so-called patriots' sector (愛國者界別). This includes delegates to the NPC and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing, as well as Hong Kong representatives of mass organisations on the mainland, including the All-China Women's Federation, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, and the All-China Youth Federa-tion—bodies whose names are largely unknown in Hong Kong. Though delegates to the NPC and CPPCC were present on previous ECs, one should note that their proportion has increased, and the creation of this fifth sector enhances their impor-tance. Second, the EC and CE candidates now must be vetted by the National Security Department of the Hong Kong Police Force (警務處國家安全處), the Committee for Safeguarding National Security (維護國家安全委員會), and the Candidate Eligibility Review Committee (候選人資格審查委員會). Third, the sectors in the EC that use organisation vote surge while those that use personal vote plummet. This rule is certainly used to target the sectors that were opposition strongholds, such as accountancy, legal, education, medical and health services, and social welfare. Fourth, it now excludes district councillors from the selectorate, which can be attributed to the opposition's landslide victory in the 2019 DC election. At the time of writing in December 2021, 326 opposition district councillors had lost their seats, having either resigned due to the threat of disqualification and the related financial liabilities or been disqualified because the Home Affairs Bureau declared their oath-taking invalid. This overturning of electoral results follows the candidate-filtering tradition. Without question, this reform ensures the opposition camp has no power to nominate CE candidates, reducing their ability to introduce uncertainties in CE elections.

Concerning the LegCo election, there are settings in this reform that further institutionalise the candidate-filtering element as well, under-mining both radical and moderate factions. First, the distribution of seats has changed. In the 2016 election, the GC and FC both had 35 seats respectively. But after the reform, the composition of the LegCo is as follows: 40 seats are chosen from the EC, 30 seats are reserved for the FC, and the GC has 20 seats. This composition denotes the marginalisation of the GC, meaning the direct election is less important than before. Second, candidates—whether from the EC, FC, or GC—must collect at least two nominations from each of the five EC sectors. As such, if the opposition elites enter the LegCo election, they must receive nominations from the patriots' sector, which, as we have seen,

comprises Hong Kong representatives to the NPC, CPPCC, and other mainland organisations. Third, the vetting procedure for EC and CE candidates also applies to LegCo candidates. Overall, as the GC in the NSL era constitutes a small part of the LegCo and candidates must undergo a more restrictive filtering mechanism, the opposition camp—even the moderate faction—has far fewer incentives to participate in elections.

Put metaphorically, the state power is now like a holy grail that is locked in tens of thousands of safes, and the opposition camp can hardly touch it. One should note that such a restrictive electoral system presents a dilemma to the opposition camp. On the one hand, if opposition parties/elites boycott all elections, they will receive far fewer resources and media attention. They then need to consider how to sustain their daily operations and the role they can play in society if they do not enter the election game. On the other hand, if opposition parties/elites participate in such unfair elections and accept the Faustian deal, it is rather certain that they will hardly be able to challenge the regime and will most likely play a purely ornamental role in elections and the legislature. Hence, these opposition parties/elites need to justify their decision and convince opposition supporters that they are still representing the opposition camp. As long as the electoral system is unchanged, this dilemma for the opposition camp will persist.

What about the Establishment Camp and the Government?

So far, I have highlighted how the NSL trial and electoral reform affected the opposition camp. However, the restructuring of Hong Kong's political society also affects the establishment camp and the local government. In this section, I discuss three relevant phenomena that deserve more research.

The first concerns the conflicts among the establishment elites within the legislature. In the NSL era, the establishment camp will surely dominate the LegCo, and new faces will emerge. However, such dominance does not imply an absence of conflict. Previous studies already found that pro-establishment elites were not united on all fronts before the NSL era (Ma 2007; Smyth et al. 2019; Wong 2020). So, as the democratic–authoritarian cleavage wanes in salience in the legislature, disagreements between establishment elites will come to the forefront. Such disagreements may be driven by different positions on economic issues (such as spending on welfare and public housing) or different interpretations of what loyalty to the CCP means. During the 2021 LegCo election campaign, these disagreements already became more salient. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous section, candidates for the three cohorts—EC, FC, and GC—must collect nominations from each of the five EC sectors. What the nomination networks look like for different candidates and whether these networks are manifestations of establishment factions remain open questions.

The second phenomenon concerns the relationship between establishment legislators and the government. Before the NSL was imposed, the role of establishment legislators was to defend the government against the opposition, helping it to pass policy. But in the NSL era, the dominance of the establishment camp is guaranteed. As such, the establishment legislators can no longer attribute policy failures to the opposition camp's hindrance. Also, the establishment legislators of the three cohorts have their respective constituents, be they pro-government citizens, professional groups, social groups, or corporate actors. The establishment legislators have to represent the interests of these constituents, but these interests do not necessarily align with those of the government. Hence, more research will be necessary to study the circumstances in which establishment legislators will challenge or follow the government's policy agenda.

Finally, the restructuring of political society might come with a cost for the local government—namely, an information cost. In the authoritarian election literature, it is well known that elections can reveal citizens' discontent and the popularity of authoritarian incumbents (Brancati 2014). Yet, following the electoral reform, any opposition candidates who enter the election will be unable

to represent citizens' demands for democratisation, self-determination, or independence. As long as these polity demands do not disappear, the local government will have to directly confront them in the civil society, for the opposition elites who represent these demands will no longer be found in the legislature. Put differently, the legislature in the NSL era is unable to serve as a pressure release valve to reduce citizens' discontent with the polity question. Which strategies the government will adopt to confront or tame these demands is also an open question.

Unfolding the Mission Impossible

In the epigraph to this essay, two prominent scholars of democratisation, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, prognosticated that it would be impossible for Hong Kong to achieve full democratisation within the communist one-party system. The reason they provided is that the authoritarian sovereign state has every right to modify the subnational entity's constitution and restructure its political society. Their prognosis has now been vindicated by Hong Kong's recent autocratisation process.

In this article, I tried to fill in the details by studying how the communist one-party system has restructured the political society of this subnational entity. It is obvious that, in the NSL era, the CCP no longer allows an independent political society to contest state power. Nevertheless, such restructuring is not without cost. As mentioned above, legislators—even self-declared opposition candidates—can no longer represent citizens who stand for democratisation, self-determination, and independence. Therefore, if such polity demands do not fade, the government will still have to confront these citizens outright in the civil society. ∎

1 In an article published in Apple Daily on 28 April 2020, Tai outlined 10 steps to create such a crisis. Among these, he argued that opposition legislators should reject the budget plan in the legislature to hinder daily governmental operations. Because of this budget veto, the executive would then be forced to dissolve the legislature and call an election. After this election, if opposition legislators could still veto the budget plan, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) would have to declare a national emergency and impose the NSL on the jurisdiction of Hong Kong.

2 The full dataset is publicly available at dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/KQXYVO.

Pressure Gauge. PC: Shane Horan (CC).

'Strike Down Hard Resistance and Regulate Soft Resistance'

The Securitisation of Civil Society in Hong Kong

Johnson Ching-Yin YEUNG

This essay offers a first-hand account of the current crackdown on civil society in Hong Kong. Under the new national security regime, the securitisation of civil society has posed new structural challenges to the organisational sustainability of all types of civil society groups. Facing the risk of criminal liability, organisations had to adapt their strategies and behaviours to a precarious environment and continue to pursue their missions; many have chosen to disband or self-censor. Understanding this terrain is of the utmost importance for navigating through uncharted territory.

I t is difficult to capture a flying bullet on camera. And when the perpetrators of violence are firing numerous bullets with unpredictable trajectories, the cameraman may well end up a victim. This metaphor, unfortunately, aptly describes efforts to document the current crackdown on civil society in Hong Kong.

In May 2021, the *Made in China Journal* first invited me to contribute an essay. Back then, almost all opposition political figures in Hong Kong were already in custody for National Security Law (NSL) violations, but *Apple Daily*, the city's largest prodemocracy newspaper, was intact, and many trade unions and many nongovernmental organisations

(NGOs) were still operating. However, two months later, *Apple Daily*, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, as well as dozens of civil society groups founded after the 2014 Umbrella Movement were gone. My initial plan for the essay was to capture responses from civil society organisations (CSOs) to the strict and repressive regulatory regime. This subject became less and less relevant because the rights-based CSOs on my radar started to crumble, disband, and cease operation. Amnesty International Hong Kong, a human rights organisation with which I am deeply involved, announced the closure of its Hong Kong office in late October 2021, stating that 'the national security law makes it impossible to know what activities might lead to criminal sanctions' (Amnesty International 2021). *Stand News*, a non-profit multimedia outlet in Hong Kong, documented that 58 groups had disbanded or ceased operating in 2021 (Stand News n.d.). On 29 December 2021, *Stand News* became the fifty-ninth group to shut down after police raided its newsroom and arrested its senior executives (Wang 2021).

This shrinking of civil space in Hong Kong is unprecedented, and the conditions that CSOs must consider—such as changing regulatory frameworks, increasing political and legal risks, and new internal dynamics within the organisations—are highly volatile. Criminal liability under the NSL and penal code are not the only things CSOs worry about. There is also the backdrop of state securitisation of civil society. Chinese Liaison Office Director Luo Huining first introduced the concept of 'soft resistance' (软对抗) on National Security Education Day in April 2021, using the term to indicate indirect resistance via media publication, education, and cultural activities. On that occasion, Luo vowed that 'hard resistance should be stricken down by law, soft resistance should be regulated by law' (NSED 2021).

Subject as they are to increasingly strict regulation and surveillance by various government departments, ranging from tax and civil affairs to health and hygiene, CSOs are under constant threat of being 'stricken down'. This essay will highlight how both criminal liabilities and the subtle securitisation of NGO regulations pose new barriers to the activities of CSOs, occasionally leading to

self-censorship. This leads us to discussion of a topic about which no-one has a clear answer: the future. How will Hong Kong CSOs evolve to continue their work and achieve the changes for which they are striving?

Criminal Liability and Endless Risk Assessment

The largest deterrence to CSOs' work remains the potential for criminal liability under a vague, ill-defined national security regime. Despite repeated official reassurances that the NSL adheres to international human rights provisions, few believe this to be true when it comes to the protection of freedom of speech and expression.

The four core criminal provisions in the NSL— secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign entities—are written in vague and overly broad language and can easily be used arbitrarily on political opponents of the regime. Officials have been giving obscure responses when they are asked what types of activities or behaviours would breach the law. For example, a few days before the latest annual commemoration of the Tiananmen Massacre of 4 June, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam refused to clarify whether the five operational goals of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (which include 'ending the one-party dictatorship') would constitute subversion (Kwan 2021). A few months later, organisers of the alliance were apprehended and charged with inciting subversion of state power. Likewise, three weeks before *Stand News* was raided and forced to shut, Hong Kong Security Chief Chris Tang vowed: 'The authorities will relentlessly search for evidence to go after anyone threatening national security or violating the law in disguise of media and NGOs'—without clarifying which media and NGO activities would constitute a crime (RTHK 2021).

Amid such uncertainty, it is no surprise that 'risk management' has become the most important task for CSOs. In a nutshell, their risk assessment generally begins with a mapping of compliance

risk—a process through which they identify high-risk areas of work and action. Next, CSOs must consider the likelihood of noncompliance and legal enforcement, and the severity of impact in the event of enforcement. Finally, CSOs need a mitigation plan, such as altering the corporate structure of the organisation, amending program output, and implementing internal due diligence and control measures. These steps have become very time-consuming and complicated because of the arbitrariness of the NSL regime. In my experience, before the NSL, the assessment of compliance risk was a one-off task in the planning phase of each one-to-three–year project cycle. Living in a society based on the rule of law meant people could easily assess the legality and possible consequences of their actions. The one-off risk assessment was often valid and reliable for the life of the project, but this is not the case under the NSL regime.

Selective legal enforcement is now frequent, and people must continuously speculate whether they are on the authorities' hitlist. Politics has therefore become paramount in these assessments. Before the enactment of the NSL in July 2020, no-one would have expected participation in a primary election would constitute subversion of state power. Before November 2021, it was unimaginable that judges would indict someone who simply chanted protest slogans in public for inciting secession and sentence him to almost six years in prison (Lai and Kellogg 2021). Before July 2021, no-one expected the authorities would revive a sedition law enacted by the British colonial government in the 1930s to use against a prodemocracy unionist who published children's books (Kwok and Cheng 2021).

'In the past, we did risk assessment; now we do political assessment', I was told by Ivy, an activist working for a local environmental NGO who agreed to share their organisation's internal risk management process on condition of anonymity. 'We used to know clearly the potential legal consequences of our actions. For instance, what maximum penalties we would receive for holding a banner. Now, risk assessment has become political assessment.' How to locate the red line has become a popular topic among CSOs. The cold fact, however, is that there

is no red line, but rather a 'red web, red carpet, and red sea'—a metaphor used by Daisy Li, the founder of *Hong Kong Citizen News*, an independent news website that also ceased operations in early 2022 to avoid a likely crackdown (Mingpao 2021).

One of the indicators used by CSOs in their political assessment is whether they are being targeted by pro-government media. For some CSO executives, one of their morning tasks is to check 'Support.hkmedia.propaganda', a volunteer-run Facebook page that aggregates the stories of the day from pro-government mouthpieces. Some will differentiate between the sources of information to assess the level of threat their organisation faces. For instance, they will consider whether the rhetoric is coming from a pro-government mouthpiece or from someone in the pro-establishment camp, whether the criticism is coming from mainland China's propaganda machine—for instance, the *Global Times*—or from local news outlets. All this guesswork takes time, and time is one of the scarcest resources in CSOs as most donors and funders do not regard risk assessment and mitigation as part of their funding mandate, and CSO staff are already under pressure to meet the key performance indicators of their program.

Restraints on Funding

Even CSOs that have abundant funding are not free from worry, as all fundraising methods have been greatly disrupted by the new regulatory regime. A core criminal provision in the NSL concerns 'collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security', and we learnt from evidence tabled by prosecutors in court that even being followed by foreign politicians on Twitter is considered an act of collusion (Stand News 2020). Such an overly broad interpretation of the law has a chilling effect on both international and local NGOs in Hong Kong.

While Hong Kong was once a favourable location for many international NGOs (INGOs) for their regional hub, its attractiveness is rapidly diminishing. In 2013, there were 215 INGOs operating in Hong Kong. According to a 2015 survey,

18.5 per cent of the income of these INGOs came from overseas foundations and 16 per cent from overseas governments (Lee 2016). UN experts have emphasised that CSOs have rights to seek funding without restriction, both domestically and internationally. The Chinese Government, however, has a long history of blaming foreign governments for sponsoring 'colour revolutions' and of accusing NGOs that receive overseas funding of being 'foreign agents'. Using new powers under Article 43 of the NSL, the Hong Kong police have demanded that rights-based NGOs, such as the Hong Kong Alliance and the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, provide details of their activities, financial information, and personal data. CSOs fear their overseas funding will be used as a justification for the government to acquire sensitive data about their staff, project partners, and beneficiaries. As a result, some have decided to break ties or reduce interaction with overseas donors and INGOs.

CSOs that rely on local resources have also found themselves navigating a minefield. Under national security obligations, many government branches—from the Education Bureau to the Commerce Bureau and even the Fire Department— have included national security elements in their policies. The Tax Bureau has tightened its control over the 9,400 charities in Hong Kong. Charitable organisations that take part in activities 'contrary to the interests of national security' will no longer be recognised as a charity and will no longer enjoy tax exemptions (IRD 2021). The Tax Bureau has been making inquiries among charitable organisations, requesting detailed information about their past advocacy and campaign activities. Some CSO executives worry that past acts of defiance—such as joining calls for social and political reform or joint campaigns with prodemocracy lawmakers—will be used against them. If the bureau determines that any of their activities fall outside charitable purposes, the organisation will need to pay compensation. Even worse, their tax-exempt status could be revoked. For many, tax-exempt status is the ticket to access funding from local charitable foundations and companies; losing it would severely undermine their financial sustainability.

Hong Kong has a robust set of regulations on public fundraising activities; the Social Welfare Department, Home Affairs Department, and even the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department all take part in licensing and scrutinising activities like flag days (that is, days of public fundraising for charity), charity sales, and the solicitation of donations in public. Without proper checks and balances, as well as complaint and accountability mechanisms, these fundraising regulations could be weaponised to pressure CSOs. For instance, a new permit mechanism for face-to-face solicitation of donations in public was enacted at the beginning of 2022 (Hong Kong Government 2022). Under this new rule, only charitable organisations with a credible track record are eligible to conduct face-to-face solicitation. In addition, their permits are subject to review every six months, and quotas mean organisations must compete for permits.

The new regulations are a sword of Damocles suspended over the heads of Hong Kong CSOs; to survive, they must discipline themselves, self-censor, stop certain kinds of work, and/or restructure. To err on the side of caution, some CSOs have indeed begun to self-censor and impose robust gate-keeping systems on their public statements and comments on social media (Chen and Qiao 2021). These strategies include staying under the radar by reducing their media exposure, avoiding naming and shaming government officials, removing or altering old social media posts, or even deleting their social media pages entirely.

Many in the sector anticipate the rules on charities and non-profit organisations will tighten even further in the future. In 2011, the Hong Kong Government proposed the enactment of a charity law and, in a consultation paper published the same year, the Charities Sub-Committee of Hong Kong's Law Reform Commission (HKLRC 2011: 80) recommended excluding 'human rights, conflict resolution or reconciliation' from the definition of charitable purposes. The proposal was shelved, but in 2021, some pro-Beijing lawmakers began calling again for a charity law. One can only assume if such a law is introduced, rights-based groups or those that focus on legal reform and advocacy will be further marginalised.

Exodus of CSO Personnel and Mental Health Impacts

People who work for CSOs are in a precarious position. They are enduring intense psychological pressure, which has led not only to widespread feelings of resignation, but also to a wave of emigration from Hong Kong. In the previous four decades, Hong Kong's civil society operated in a relatively vibrant, safe, and peaceful environment, so many CSO executives, including boards of directors, have a relatively low tolerance of risk. Now they face considerable stress, and there have been three waves of CSO disbandment in the past 12 months alone. Each wave occurred after a prominent prodemocracy group—respectively, *Apple Daily*, the Hong Kong Alliance, and the General Union of Hong Kong Speech Therapists—was forced to disband and its senior executives were arrested on sedition charges. Some CSOs decided to fold because they could not afford costly legal battles if their members were targeted; others felt they could no longer pursue their social mission under the changed conditions. On top of this, the authorities have resorted to extralegal tactics to intimidate civil society. Many labour and rights-based groups were attacked in pro-government media, and some were harassed over the phone, followed, or invited to 'drink tea' by law enforcers—a practice eerily reminiscent of strategies long used by state security on the mainland.

More than a dozen CSOs on my radar working on issues spanning poverty alleviation, the environment, labour, and human rights have lost staff and senior executives in the past six months. This internal reshuffling and brain drain have intensified the administrative burden, and negatively impacted the mental health of remaining staff. It is common for CSO workers—including me—to experience insomnia, anxiety, fatigue, disorientation, a sense of guilt, and loss of meaning in their work. Putting it into a larger context, the overall mental health of all Hong Kong people has deteriorated as a direct result of social unrest combined with the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers have observed that an alarming 19 per cent of Hongkongers suffer from depression, and 14 per cent from anxiety

(Choi et al. 2020). Every CSO employee I know has someone they know who is in detention for social movement–related offences; many are traumatised by the separation.

Thankfully, mental health and wellbeing are not taboo topics in CSOs' cultures. There are grassroots initiatives that promote trauma transformation and mental wellness. Practices of wellbeing and nonviolent communication in the workplace have become increasingly popular in CSOs. Although local prisoner support networks like the 612 Humanitarian Fund and Wallfare shut in late 2021, there is a culture of mutual-aid networks to support detainees and their families.

What Next?

In liberal democracies, CSOs often influence policymaking through research and lobbying, and by mobilising public pressure. Although Hong Kong was never a full democracy, CSOs were largely operating in a liberal paradigm. With the rules of the game having changed so dramatically, CSOs will have to adapt their strategies. Ivy explained that in the past,

> step one [of our work] was research, step two was media publication, step three was advocacy and lobbying … today it has become very challenging to take steps two and three. Government ignores [advocacy] from CSOs because they are less concerned about their legitimacy … as the media space is narrowed, dissemination [of our messages] has become less effective in reaching broad audiences.

Moreover, the mass disqualification and arrest of almost all opposition political figures have weakened the advocacy abilities of CSOs. Pan-democracy lawmakers and CSOs enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship in the past, with the former facilitating the latter's access to government data and information and the latter contributing research and policy suggestions for the lawmakers. This equilibrium was broken when Beijing unliterally changed the electoral system of the Legislative

Council, effectively barring any opposition from gaining a seat on the council (see also Ka-Ming Chan's essay in the present issue).

Under these changes, CSOs must revise their strategies. To gain access to, recognition, and resources from the government, some organisations might focus on providing services and refrain from any organising and empowerment work—a shift we have also observed in mainland China over the past few years. To further marginalise rights-based, organising, and advocacy-oriented CSOs, the government is likely to impose greater oversight on private foundations and donors, cutting off funding to CSOs with a progressive agenda. This will also pose some challenges to the authorities, as the exclusion of such an important segment of civil society will see the government lose a source of information about citizens' grievances.

It is evident that Hong Kong authorities will further securitise civil society by undermining its leverage, placing it under heavy surveillance, and curtailing the autonomous space in which citizens can connect and build power. We should not view this as the end of Hong Kong civil society, although we should acknowledge the contentiousness of this process of securitisation. Many activists who were affected by the disbandment of CSOs are experimenting with innovative ways to cultivate civic virtue and promote democratic values. The decentralised, fluid mass movement of the past few years has provided citizens with the experience and a toolkit to self-organise without institutional support. Although Hong Kong lost many CSOs in 2021, new citizen initiatives ranging from community-building to book clubs and cultural activities are blooming. Of course, the authorities will come after these spaces, too. However, as a friend said, once we taste freedom, we will never resign ourselves to being caged. ∎

Police Officer in Hong Kong. PC: (CC) @yeahayeah, Flickr.com.

The Annihilation of Hong Kong's Civil Society
Implications and Weaknesses

AU Loong Yu

Since the passage of the National Security Law in July 2020, a relentless purge has been going on in Hong Kong, targeting political opposition parties, large and small trade unions, student associations, nongovernmental organisations, churches and their affiliates, and media. This essay takes stock of the implications of this crackdown for civil society in both Hong Kong and mainland China and looks into the tactics employed by Hong Kong political activists to cope with the changed reality.

A great purge has been going on in Hong Kong. At the time of writing in November 2021, 153 people have been prosecuted under Hong Kong's National Security Law (NSL), which was imposed by Beijing in July 2020 (Stand News 2021d). The threat from Beijing has prompted many organisations to disband. Between January and the end of September 2021, 49 civil society organisations chose to shut in the face of intimidation or potential repression. This included political opposition parties, large and small trade unions, student associations, nongovernmental organisations, churches and their affiliates, and media. Among the most notable turn of events, on 11 September, the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU), the largest teachers' union in Hong Kong with around 90,000 members, voted to disband. Less than one month later, on 3 October, the Hong

Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), the largest independent trade union confederation in the city, followed in their footsteps, putting an end to a grassroots movement that had lasted more than three decades. If a 'free-market' Hong Kong with its inequalities and social injustices was still worth defending by the working people there, it was because the city was also home to a variety of vibrant local social movements, even if they were still in their infancy. In just one year, however, this public space was destroyed.

It Is Not Just about Hong Kong

The present crackdown is meant to be not only a relentless purge to crush civil society, but also a cultural purge to control the thought and the soul of the Hong Kong people. In this sense, it is not surprising that the Hong Kong Government—after making civil servants pledge an oath of loyalty—is now trying to make teachers do the same thing (Cheng 2021). This is on top of its long-time policy of trying to replace Cantonese as the teaching medium for the subject of Chinese language with Mandarin; since Cantonese is an integral part of many Hongkongers' cultural identity, some see this change as an attempt to assimilate Hongkongers into the mainland Chinese cultural milieu. While Hong Kong artists and curators used to have the freedom to create, the cultural sector now suddenly finds itself at the mercy of censorship and harassment, to the extent that even viewing documentaries about the 2019 revolt is a punishable offence.

However, what is often overlooked in most commentary is that this great purge is not just about Hong Kong. The intertwining of Hong Kong and mainland civil society suggests that what happens in the city also has deep ramifications for grassroots organising and activism in the rest of the country. The latest casualty was the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (hereinafter HKA), a prodemocracy civil society group most hated by Beijing for its continuous support of the mainland democracy movement. For more than three decades, the

HKA held a June Fourth memorial in Hong Kong—the only place in China where it was possible to commemorate the tragic Tiananmen crackdown, until 2020, when the memorial was banned. This was followed by harassment of the HKA's leaders by the authorities, until the alliance was forced to disband on 25 September 2021.

While the disbandment of the HKA attracted attention from mainstream media, the public has been less aware of a specific sector of Hong Kong's civil society that has been shrinking over the past couple of years. This sector comprises Hong Kong organisations that have been supporting China's civil society—from lending a hand to persecuted mainland lawyers to supporting labour activism. They were among the first victims of Beijing's crackdown, but since they tend to maintain a low profile in their activities, their plight usually goes underreported. For three decades, such Hong Kong groups (self-help groups, networks, and NGOs covering a wide spectrum of areas from the environment and labour to gender and community engagement) have been crucial in bringing the practices of civil self-organisation to the mainland.

I am most familiar with the Hong Kong groups that were committed to supporting labour activism on the mainland. Since the mid-1990s, about 10 Hong Kong groups have been working in this field (Chan 2013). Most ran their own community or labour centres in the Pearl River Delta, some chose to support mainland partners, and others did both. At first, they were tolerated by local authorities, and some were even able to quietly collaborate with local offices of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the only trade union legally allowed on the mainland. But this did not last. Now, facing an increasingly hostile environment on the mainland, most Hong Kong organisations there have been pressured through various means to cease their activities. After the enactment of the Hong Kong NSL, some even had to 'voluntarily' cancel their Hong Kong registration as well.

The demise of these labour advocacy groups had already begun in 2015, when, on 9 July, Chinese authorities began rounding up nearly 300 lawyers who had engaged in *weiquan*—that is, defending the legitimate rights of the underclass or dissidents (on the so-called 709 Incident,

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

see Pils 2021). Towards the end of that year, two dozen labour rights advocates were also arrested, a few of whom ended up on trial and subjected to a smear campaign in state media (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018; Franceschini and Sorace 2019). Three years later, in 2018, another wave of arrests took place, this time mainly targeting dozens of Marxist students who had come out *en masse* to support the resistance of workers at Jasic Technology in Shenzhen, a publicly listed private firm specialising in the manufacturing of welding machinery (Au 2019; Zhang 2018, 2020). During this crackdown, the authorities also arrested staff working for labour groups founded by Hong Kong citizens, although they were not involved in the Jasic struggle (Lin 2019).

These groups have since experienced regular harassment from the Chinese authorities. Most either significantly reduced or ceased their operations. For the few that managed to stay, it has been increasingly difficult to conduct even the most ordinary activities in support of labour rights. This was the beginning of the end for Hong Kong groups supporting Chinese labour. With the enactment

of the NSL, some of these organisations began to worry about their presence in Hong Kong as well, especially when mainland state media and pro-Beijing media in Hong Kong not only condemned local organisations that received funding from the United States, but also, for the first time, criticised European organisations that had contributed developmental funding to Hong Kong groups, from trade unions to church groups (see, for instance, Ye 2021). This wave of criticism pushed some groups to disband.

A Handful of People Holding the Line

In the face of the harsh repression from Beijing, Hong Kong's political opposition and civil society have necessarily taken a defensive position to minimise further losses. Since the passage of the NSL, it has been a time of tactical retreat. Sometimes one must sacrifice the knights to save the queen. The problem, however, is whether the retreat is

an orderly or a chaotic one, dominated by panic and resulting in the complete annihilation of one's forces. Recent events make one increasingly worry that the latter may be how things go. The current repression has also tested those who still have the will to resist, even if their resistance is of a more symbolic and moral nature.

The disbandment of the PTU—the largest trade union in Hong Kong—presents us with one example of the most controversial way to retreat. Technically, the motion to disband was decided by a democratic vote among member delegates, yet the leadership had already decided the union would be disbanded in the face of verbal threats from Beijing (the PTU had made this public) (Ming Pao 2021). To achieve this goal, the leadership rushed to change the union's charter so that instead of requiring a two-thirds majority of members to consent to the disbandment, only a meeting of delegates was needed. In the end, instead of allowing nearly 100,000 members to vote on the leadership's motion or to observe the meeting if any of them chose to, only 140 delegates voted, with 132 in favour, six against, and two abstentions (Stand News 2021b, 2021c). The main argument put forward by the PTU leadership to explain their decision to manipulate the decision-making process with such haste was that this secured them leniency in the face of the ongoing crackdown (Stand News 2021a). Ironically, when the leadership made public its decision, pro-Beijing media immediately made it clear that even if the union disbanded, Beijing would continue to go after the unionists (HKTKWW 2021).

In contrast, the way the HKA disbanded proved to be a bit more uplifting. On the surface, it followed a pattern like that chosen by the PTU, but when the leadership met to discuss the motion to disband, there was strong internal dissent, and the decision was eventually passed with only a four-to-three majority (Mak 2021). The opposition was led by Chow Hang-tung, a young barrister and activist. By the time HKA members were allowed to vote, she had already been detained for incitement to subversion. However, before the vote, she wrote a public letter to members, asking them not to give in (Chau 2021). She argued that the 'disbandment in exchange for leniency' tactic

was flawed and that by refusing to capitulate, the organisation would show the world the determination of the Hong Kong people to keep the struggle alive. By acting this way, her supporters lost the vote—of 45 members who voted, 41 voted in favour of disbanding (Grundy 2021)—but Chow and her comrades upheld the spirit of the Hong Kong resistance. Today, many people look to her as a new symbol of resistance.

As for the HKCTU, there has been no publicly visible opposition to its suggestion to disband. On 3 October 2021, the union's convention passed a motion to disband with a 57-to-eight majority. In contrast to the PTU, both the HKA and the HKCTU allowed their members to exercise their legitimate right to vote. Even as we understand how difficult it is to resist Beijing right now, it is important to acknowledge the few who continue to stand up against it.

A deep demoralisation has set in among Hong Kong activists and prodemocracy movement supporters because of the disbandment of mass organisations. This has also affected students and their organisations. On 7 October 2021, the Student Union of the Hong Kong Chinese University (HKCU), one of the most important bases for the city's student movement, also disbanded. Strictly speaking, it was only the university that was making things difficult for the student union (forcing it to disaffiliate from the university), while the government had not yet taken it on. It is therefore difficult to see why it should dissolve itself so speedily.

Unlike previous cases of dissolution of civil society organisations, the student union's disbandment drew criticism not only from students, but also from outsiders. The most noticeable criticism came from HKCU Professor Chow Po Chung, a well-known liberal scholar who was active in the union when he was a student at the university. On the same day the HKCU Student Union announced its dissolution, Chow (2021a) asked on Facebook how the union leadership could have declared the disbandment, considering its charter required full consultation with its members followed by a referendum to disband. His comment was met with hostility by some, who reminded him that he was not in a position to make such criticism as

he was not the one being targeted. Chow (2021b) responded with great decency by saying that he might not have been clear enough in his post, and he just wanted to reiterate that the decision of the union's leadership had no legal effect on any students there who wished to revive the student union in the future. In other words, his message was more about advising those who wished to keep the union going. His message was soon heard. A month after the HKCU Student Union's announce-ment of its dissolution, a student appealed to the organisation's legal committee and persuaded them to rule that, according to the union's charter, the leadership did not have the power to disband the organisation and hence their decision was void (inmediaHK 2021).

The Self-Defeating Strategy of *Yaugaiking*

Without a doubt, Beijing's crackdown is very serious and the price to pay for any resistance is high, although one must have a sense of proportion as well; it is still far from the kind of repression we saw in Myanmar in 1988 or in Beijing in 1989. Surely no-one can force another person to be a martyr against his or her own will. If you are the leader of an organisation, a better response would be to adopt the 'walking on two legs' strategy: understanding those who wish to avoid risks, while also allowing those who want to resist through nonviolent means the time and space to do what they want, especially when the organisation's charter entitles them to such rights. Too often, those leading organisations wanted to avoid risk for themselves and simply did not respect their own charters or sought to manipulate them.

While we should not be too harsh on those students who announced the dissolution of their union without following proper procedures, we should cast doubt on those experienced leaders from the Democratic Party who acted similarly. The party's forerunner, the United Democrats of Hong Kong, was founded in 1990 to run for elec-tion under the colonial political reform package. While in those early years the party won landslide

victories and became the biggest pan-democracy party in Hong Kong, the organisation was severely weakened by subsequent splits. However, even in this weakened state, the Democratic Party still had more significant and unique influence over the PTU and the HKA than any other opposition party in the city. Over the past decade, there has been a lot of hearsay that this or that leader from the Democratic Party, the PTU, or the HKA has been coopted by Beijing. While rumours abound, there are no smoking guns. Nor do we need to find them. All we need is a short review of the political strategy of the Democratic Party.

To its credit, the party did not condemn the 2019 revolt, as demanded by Beijing. Rather, it went along with the rebellious youth to some extent, and now some of its leaders are in jail because of this. Politically speaking, however, the line it has been pursuing since the 1980s sowed the seeds for the speedy crumbling of Hong Kong's social movement today. This can be summed up with two of the party's Cantonese terms: *yaugaiking* (有 偈傾) and *doizyusin* (袋住先). The former literally means 'we can talk' (with Beijing)—from lobbying the mainland authorities to give Hongkongers universal suffrage to persuading them to allow more directly elected seats in exchange for their failure to honour a promise of a completely open and democratic election. The latter literally means 'accepting whatever concession is offered' (again, by Beijing).

Consistent with this line, the pan-democrats agreed with Beijing that the implementation of universal suffrage should be piecemeal and gradual. For instance, in 2010, the Democratic Party accepted a political reform package from Beijing to partially increase the number of directly elected seats in the legislature, which was a typical action of *doizyusin*. Yet, this drew widespread criticism from the prodemocracy camp, and was also the moment when the Democratic Party began to lose support and credibility. The party was unaware that the failure of its compromise strategy was already written on the wall.

A more recent example of *yaugaiking* and *doizy-usin* can be seen in the unexpected decision of Han Dongfang, the well-known founder and executive of the *China Labour Bulletin* (*CLB*), to try to secure

nomination by the Democratic Party to run in the December legislative election. This was surprising because if he had managed to secure a nomination, he would have been running alone, as most of the leaders of the opposition yellow camp were not bothering to run, including members of his own party. This is because Beijing has all but destroyed the electoral system and potential candidates will be screened through the NSL. Moreover, Beijing has wound the clock back so far the proportion of those directly elected has been cut from half the seats to just 22 per cent. Han explained his reason for running by saying: 'If I haven't eaten for a month, if you place a piece of mouldy bread in front of me, I'll eat it, though others might not. Even though it might make me sick' (CLB 2021).

Spreading the Word

So, this is the end of the Hong Kong democracy movement. With an absolute asymmetry of forces, once Beijing made up its mind to crush Hong Kong's autonomy, even a strong and flawless Hong Kong democracy movement would not have stood a chance of winning. Still, such rapid adaptation to the 'new normal' in Hong Kong has had a profoundly demoralising effect on people. But let us not be harsh on those who have chosen to adapt. Instead, we should double our efforts to spread the words of the handful of activists who have chosen to resist at the expense of their freedom. Let us remember what Chow Hang-tung (2021) told her comrades:

[I]n the coming trials we all have to choose between defending the position of our organisation or dissolving ourselves … Among these two options, I choose not to forget, not to quit, not to abandon [our struggle], and also to hold the line until the last moment. Although I am now being prosecuted on four counts of charges and therefore face the threat of long prison sentences, I am more concerned about how these political persecutions would impact the energy of our movement. I am also concerned about the history of our resistance, whether our organised struggle would diminish into disparate acts of individual resistance in the face of state repression. All of that is deeply impactful not only to Hongkongers' organisational effort in their history of resistance, but also to the future of Hong Kong's civil society. ■

Foodpanda workers on strike in Kowloon Bay. PC: May Tse, *South China Morning Post*.

A New Chapter for Hong Kong's Labour Movement?

Kevin LIN

The optimism triggered by the growth of a more powerful independent labour movement in Hong Kong in 2019 has now been replaced with pessimism about the very survival of such a movement. If one chapter has arguably been closed, what will the next chapter look like for Hong Kong's labour movement? This essay looks at three episodes: the demise of the leading independent trade union in the city, the struggles of the new unions that have emerged in the past few years, and the recent strikes by delivery workers. Each of these episodes reveals something about the moment we are in and, together, they provide some clues as to what lies ahead.

The labour movement in Hong Kong is something of an enigma. Hong Kong is the only territory under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China that allows its workers to organise and freely join independent trade unions, and they have done so in the hundreds of thousands. Trade union registration is not particularly difficult, and political interference has been minimal until recently. Strike action, for the most part, is legal and protected. Workers have taken advantage of this political space to build an independent trade union movement unaligned with the government.

Yet, despite such politically favourable conditions, the Hong Kong independent labour movement—as represented by the now defunct Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU, 香港職工會聯盟), which used to represent more than 160,000 members in 61 affiliated unions—has not managed to wield significant economic or political power. Labour remains marginalised. This fact is perhaps not in itself remarkable because of the long-term decline of trade unionism across much of the world under neoliberalism. But it poses interesting questions when compared with the dynamism displayed by the labour movement in mainland China, where collective action by workers has been the norm for much of the past two decades despite the obvious political constraints (Hui 2019).

However, the events of the past two years have profoundly shaken the Hong Kong labour movement in complex and contradictory ways. First, the general strikes of 2019 and the wave of unionisation starting later that year and continuing into early 2020 suddenly imbued Hong Kong trade unions with a newly found relevance, raising hopes that organised labour would play a more central role in the city's politics to highlight problems of social and economic rights and not just political rights (Pringle 2021). Events took a drastic turn in mid-2020, especially after the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL), when several vocal trade unions became the targets of criticism, pressure, and open persecution. As many of the most vocal union leaders were arrested and are awaiting trial, this posed an existential crisis for the very survival of independent trade unionism in the city.

A general pessimism understandably prevails today. But it has also been counterbalanced by a belief among union organisers that workers' collective actions will continue even under these new, exacting circumstances. As Leo Tang, the former vice-chair of the HKCTU, wrote on the disbandment of the organisation:

> We know that the relationships forged among workers will not be dissipated by today's decision [to disband the HKCTU] … The struggles in every industry and workplace have proved that 'where there is oppression, there is resistance'. We believe that this will continue to be the case in the future. (Tang 2021)

Indeed, a strike by Foodpanda delivery workers in November 2021 seemed to justify, to a certain extent, such optimism, even though it remains an isolated incident for now. In this essay, I will argue that to gain a sense of what the next chapter of Hong Kong's labour movement may look like, it is important to consider three episodes to which I have already briefly alluded: the end of the HKCTU, the state of new unions, and the recent delivery workers' strike.

The HKCTU and Independent Trade Unionism

The dissolution of the HKCTU announced on 3 October 2021 closed a critical chapter in the development of an independent trade union movement in Hong Kong. Over the past 30 years, this movement, centred on the HKCTU, has stood explicitly against the complicity of the pro-establishment trade unions, taking pride in its workers' militancy and engagement in the city's political affairs. The HKCTU has been such a fixture in Hong Kong's social and political landscape that its decision to disband—although not unexpected after months of attacks and threats—sent shockwaves through the city and caused demoralisation. How should we evaluate the impact of its disappearance?

In political and economic terms, the HKCTU was very much a product of its time. Founded in July 1990, the confederation emerged from a period of independent labour organising and democratic opposition that started in the 1970s (Chiu 2011). Set explicitly in opposition to the then dominant pro-establishment Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU, 香港工會聯合会), the HKCTU led a revival of more militant tactics in the city's labour movement. And, because of its origin, it saw itself as not simply a labour union, but rather part of broader political and social movements in Hong Kong, with its leaders participating in elections and even forming the Labour Party

(工党) to influence the political and legislative agendas—even though there were always tensions about whether the HKCTU should prioritise labour organising or political engagement.

The HKCTU was also an integral part of the global labour movement, not just through formal membership of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)—one of the most influential global trade union federations—but also through its exchanges with and solidarity actions across Asia and beyond. For decades, the HKCTU could be counted on to extend solidarity and practical support to the labour movement in mainland China and elsewhere in the world.

From its inception, the HKCTU found itself operating in a largely post-industrial economy, as manufacturing production had already begun to relocate from Hong Kong to mainland China and elsewhere in Asia from the 1980s. The conditions for strong industrial and manufacturing unions that historically have formed the backbone of trade union movements in capitalist economies did not exist for the new unionists who came on the scene in the Hong Kong of the 1990s. The stronger worker organisations were instead white-collar, professional, and public-sector unions, such as the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (PTU, 香港教育专业人员协会), which also became a major government target in 2021 and also eventually decided to disband. Union activity and mobilisation at the workplace level did not always match the high profile of the HKCTU, with a discrepancy between the high-level political engagement of the confederation and the weakness of worker power at the grassroots level.

The HKCTU and its allies developed a tradition of social movement unionism in which the lack of workplace-based power was compensated by the mobilisation of social groups for solidarity action and public pressure. This approach was predicated on the ability of social actors to participate in solidarity action and gain broad public support, as well as the unique position of Hong Kong as a global city where businesses took care to avoid reputational damage both locally and internationally. Such social movement unionism relied on the activism of unions, civil society organisations, student groups, left-wing activists, and other

concerned citizens joining together to amplify workers' messages. Yet it was also characterised as a 'double-edged sword' for workers' power, as it was argued that, while the mobilisation of social groups created societal power for workers, it could also become a substitute for workers' own militancy (Chan et al. 2019).

Be that as it may, the disbandment of the HKCTU has undoubtedly undermined this model of social movement unionism and is a serious loss for Hong Kong. Of course, the demise of the confederation does not necessarily spell the end for its affiliated unions. For instance, the Hotel Employees' Union issued a message about the dissolution of unions and other organisations:

> We might not be able to recover the affections and bonds we once had, but we can organise again even if an organisation dies. Whether it's hotel work or other sectors, we anticipate working conditions becoming worse and worse … We can still band together in solidarity to raise our collective demands—just like before. (Hong Kong Hotel Employees' Union 2021)

Nevertheless, the disappearance of the HKCTU means less support for its affiliates, especially the more precarious domestic workers' unions, and less capacity to coordinate organising and united actions. Combined with the closure of other powerful unions, such as the PTU, which cost the city's labour movement hundreds of thousands of unionised white-collar workers, the impact has been devastating.

However, as a product of its time, the HKCTU sometimes found itself out of place as events rapidly unfolded, especially when they took a radical turn. Although it joined the call for general strikes at the height of the 2019 protests, the HKCTU on its own did not have the power to mobilise; rather, it required the disruptive power of a few determined unions and individual activists (Au 2020). There was also an uneasy relationship between the HKCTU as an institution and those on the street and the front lines of the anti–Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement. Before the unionisation wave that took place in late 2019, few

of those on the street were likely to be members of a trade union, either because they were students or because they worked in non-unionised sectors, and thus they were largely unfamiliar with the city's trade union movement. Moreover, as the HKCTU was enmeshed in the pan-democracy opposition camp as one of its more radical wings, many in the new generation of activists saw it as complicit in the pan-democracy camp's failure to stage effective opposition. So, while some of the new unions that emerged in 2019 developed close relationships with the HKCTU, many others chose not to affiliate with it.

New Unions in Crisis

The wave of unionisation that took place in late 2019 temporarily ignited a great deal of hope that more organised working-class power would emerge in Hong Kong. More than 450 new unions were established in less than a year, with hundreds of thousands of workers signing up for membership. One of the most important new unions was the healthcare workers' Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HAEA, 医管局员工阵线), which played a key role in early efforts to combat the Covid-19 outbreak in the city (Chan 2020). But workers were also organising in new industries, establishing, for instance, unions for accountants and those in the financial sector. Sectors with many young, and often highly informal, workers witnessed a flourishing of new unions. The goal at the time was more explicitly political, with these organisations seen as an extension of the political movement and as a voting bloc to secure elected positions in the legislature. This development did generate increased interest in focusing on growing power through worker organisations, if not necessarily mobilising around labour rights per se.

However, facing the same challenges as unions everywhere, these new trade unions have been struggling to stay afloat under the increased political pressure of recent months. While in 2019 they easily signed up new members, throughout 2020 and 2021, many struggled to grow their membership and some spent considerable energy just to

retain existing members (Tsai and Chan 2021). In the final months of 2021, some of these unions announced their closure on social media, which rarely merited any mention in the mainstream press, and it is unclear how many are still functioning. Political pressure has contributed to the crisis in these organisations, but the biggest problem is these groups have not been given the time to build up membership and capacity. Even though their predicament may deter others thinking about unionising, their closure should not be seen as an indicator of the viability of trade unions. It would be too hasty to dismiss their potential.

Labour Activism in the Post-Union Era

Against this backdrop, the Foodpanda delivery workers' strike of November 2021 came as a pleasant surprise. The mobilisation was triggered by gradually increasing cuts to workers' delivery fees. In the weeks leading up to the strike, delivery workers used their informal networks and communicated via WhatsApp groups to voice their indignation. Over days of discussions, their disgruntlement escalated into a plan to demonstrate outside PandaMart stores and refuse to take orders from them over the weekend. Hundreds showed up at the demonstrations, and it is estimated several thousand took part in the strike. They crystallised their demands around restoring their delivery fees, as well as changes to the Foodpanda app's algorithm to improve their working conditions. This action successfully forced the company to the table and, after two rounds of negotiation, the company agreed to most of the workers' demands.

As the now defunct *Stand News* (2021) put it, the strike represented a form of labour activism in the post-union era. While not particularly large in scale, the strike took on particular significance as a test of the limits of activism under the changed political circumstances. As open protests have become risky, the delivery workers' strike gained attention not only for its successful mobilisation, but also as a

gauge of how the police would react; as it turned out, they did try to disperse public demonstrations but otherwise largely left the workers alone.

In many ways, there are more continuities than discontinuities between the conditions and actions of delivery workers now and those before the recent dissolution of trade unions. The Foodpanda delivery workers' strike was only the latest of several successful and failed mobilisations over the past several years by delivery workers at the two main food delivery platforms in Hong Kong, Foodpanda and Deliveroo. These episodes share similar conditions and grievances. Key issues centre on the reduction of delivery fees that over time significantly cut workers' incomes, as well as the suffocating algorithmic control over the work process and time management. South Asian immigrants have played an oversized, active role in the strike actions despite most of the workforce being ethnically Chinese Hong Kong residents (Stand News 2021).

Delivery workers in Hong Kong have never belonged to a trade union or any other form of worker organisation. While previously HKCTU organisers and affiliated unions have supported the organising efforts of delivery workers, there has never been any formal relationship between them. The strike actions have been self-organised from within, and the delivery workers themselves have led the strikes (Hui and Ho 2021). Based on discussions in November and December 2021, leading delivery worker organisers, as well as delivery workers more broadly, are unwilling to form their own union, believing it would be a burden and constraint on their activities. This conforms with a global pattern that sees newly emerged platform workers largely eschew traditional trade unions. Globally, some have organised their own unions, collectives, or other associations, but they maintain only tenuous links with more established trade unions. Without a union's organisational structure, any mobilisation is most likely ad hoc, and gains made through the action are arguably more difficult to secure and sustain.

There are some notable differences between the latest strike and earlier ones. The latest mobilisation deliberately maintained a non-political stance, focusing squarely on issues related to pay and conditions. Although no previous action turned political, some did incorporate ideas like the 'five demands' but used them to refer to their own labour demands. And while the absence of the HKCTU did not necessarily directly affect the labour organising itself, it did deprive the activism of the external solidarity and public pressure that were the hallmarks of community-based social movement unionism. With very little external mobilisation, the Foodpanda workers' strike did not gain any significant public support and depended almost exclusively on the workers' own disruptive power.

In a sense, the role of trade unionism and the labour movement cannot be reduced to just the level of political pressure in Hong Kong; it should be understood also in the context of the decline in trade unionism in many parts of the world. Self-organised direct action by non-unionised workers, excluded or otherwise unrepresented by traditional unions, is often the main form of worker resistance today.

The Next Chapter

I write as an observer, and therefore I am not in a position to shape the movement. If recent events are any indication, the horizon for Hong Kong's labour movement is likely to shrink to mostly economic demands. Political activism by trade unions could be deterred for a long time to come. In many ways, this situation is familiar to observers of the labour movement in mainland China. Economic demands are usually accepted as legitimate there, as long as workers do not escalate their collective action into open street protests or demonstrations that threaten social stability outside the factory gates. While independent trade unions have always been out of the question on the mainland, labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) were tolerated until recently, if they provided only social services and legal counsel and did not take a leading role in workers' actions. There were immediate repercussions if they crossed the line (Franceschini and

Lin 2019) and, after successive waves of repression between 2015 and 2019, even that limited space has now largely vanished.

In Hong Kong, trade unions still have greater space for organising than on the mainland. In other ways, however, it may be harder for the Hong Kong labour movement to adapt in this new era. Hong Kong's independent trade unions used to operate under a set of rules that largely no longer apply, whereas their mainland counterparts have been working in a semi-legal environment since the very beginning and therefore have long been accustomed to such rules (or lack thereof)—even though it must be reiterated that, despite this familiarity, mainland Chinese labour NGOs are also struggling in the current political climate.

What, if anything, can be learned from how the Chinese Party-State has responded to growing worker activism in the mainland that could be relevant to the Hong Kong labour movement? Organisations and networks are to be shattered, and individuals will be kept under close watch. But the state strategy has also at times been more nuanced. A recent study shows the Chinese authorities have reacted to worker mobilisations not only by increasing repression, but also with increased responsiveness—for instance, by pushing for outcomes from mediation and arbitration more favourable to workers and other means to accommodate workers' interests and prevent escalation (Elfstrom 2021). The two contexts are radically different, so whether the exact same strategy will be followed in Hong Kong remains to be seen.

However, trade union weakness is not just a product of repression. The Hong Kong labour movement had its own shortcomings well before 2019. The changing structures of the economy and employment relations are critical factors shaping the labour movement, in the city as anywhere else. The new trade unions that emerged in Hong Kong in the past couple of years saw the need to unionise young workers in service and informal sectors that are notoriously difficult to organise, pointing to the urgency and the possibilities of organising such an often precarious and marginalised workforce. Furthermore, the Foodpanda strike also revealed the racialised segmentation of the Hong Kong working class, while at the same time displaying the activism of workers of South Asian origins. By highlighting these dynamics, it demonstrated the necessity of overcoming racial divisions and building unity among workers of different ethnicities and national origins.

With a tough new chapter ahead, readjusting to the new reality requires rethinking not only strategies and tactics, but also organisational forms and approaches. A new generation of labour organisers may emerge. How they and the movement as a whole respond to the new conditions will need to consider not only politics but also changes in the broader economic and employment landscape. In this sense, while trade unions as we traditionally understand them are important, exploring new ways of labour organising is both a necessity and an opportunity. ∎

Hong Kong Protests.
PC: Jonathan van Smit (CC).

A Feminist Snap

Has Feminism in Hong Kong Been Defeated?

Petula Sik Ying HO
Minnie Ming LI

This essay analyses the politics of the Hong Kong protest movement and the displacement of feminism within it. It highlights the emergence of an internal rift between 'Left in form, Right in essence' (形左實右) feminists and 'Leftard' (左膠) feminists (those who refuse to move to the Right), which, along with the suppression of dissent within the protest movement, ultimately led to the collapse of Hong Kong feminism.

Since the beginning of the Anti–Extradition Law Amendment Bill protest movement in Hong Kong in 2019, the question 'Where were Hong Kong's feminists?' (女權撚去咗邊) has been raised intermittently on Hong Kong social media. In this Cantonese expression, the character 撚 refers to male genitalia and is used as an expression of contempt, akin to the English word 'fucking'. As women were subjected to police brutality, mainstream voices in the protest movement began to ask: 'Where did the fucking feminists go? Why are you feminists not doing your part?' In this essay, we review the structure of the Hong Kong protest movement and the dislocations of the feminist movement within it, highlighting the emergence of an internal rift between 'Left in form, Right in essence' (形左實右) feminists and 'Leftard' (左膠) feminists (those who refuse to move to the Right), which ultimately led to the collapse of Hong Kong feminism.
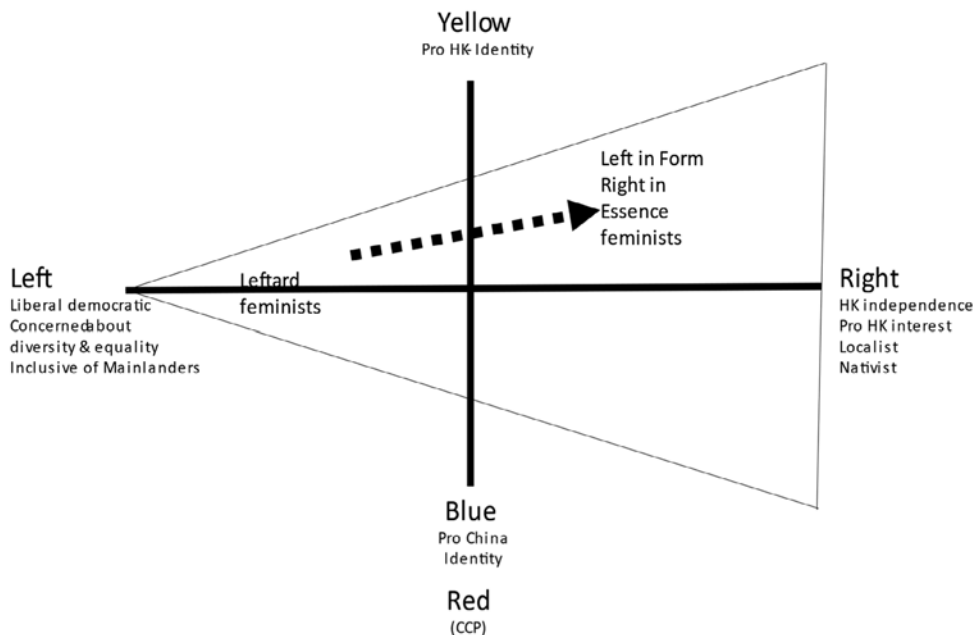
Visualising Hong Kong Feminism

Even though it obviously oversimplifies the composition of the broader protest movement, Diagram 1 helps us understand the complexities of Hong Kong's feminist landscape. The two axes—the x axis representing the range between 'Left' and 'Right' and the y axis showing that between 'Yellow' (pro–local Hong Kong identity) and 'Blue/Red' (pro-China and pro–Chinese Communist Party, respectively) positions—define four possible political stances. It is important to note, however, that the Left/Right and Yellow/Blue–Red variations should not be seen as mutually exclusive dichotomies, but rather as a continuum. Not only are the binary opposites not unitary categories; they also are generally used to define each other.

In general, the Left is seen as more liberal democratic as it is inclusive of mainlanders, concerned about diversity and inequality, and supportive of more welfare and services for disadvantaged communities. The Right is seen as more focused on Hong Kong's specific interests, with the most

extreme fringes advocating independence for Hong Kong. They are also called localists or nativists as they campaign for a Hong Kong exclusively for Hongkongers, which does not include mainland Chinese. In relation to the 2019 protests, the Yellow ribbons have been supportive of the movement, are against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB), and are ostensibly democratic. The Blue ribbons, instead, have been pro-China and have supported the ELAB. The 'Bluest' among them can also be described as 'Red' because of their support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Specifically, Diagram 1 purports to show the conflict within the Yellow–Left quarters between two groups of feminists—whom we have called the 'Left in form, Right in essence' feminists and the 'Leftard' feminists. While the latter remain staunchly anchored in the Yellow–Leftist quarter, the former have chosen pro-localism/nativism over feminist principles, shifting to the Yellow–Right quarter.

In a recent article, we took this conflict as our starting point to declare 'the defeat of Hong Kong feminism' (香港女權 的敗北) (Li and Ho forthcoming). Our argument was that Hong Kong

feminism was defeated not because we chose the losing side, but because of the self-inflicted injury of selling our souls, forgetting our mission, and abandoning our ethics of care. Our defeat occurred because the feminist movement jumped on the bandwagon of the mainstream anti-ELAB movement, thinking it was a good political bet to gain credibility and expand our influence. This motivation resulted in a self-silencing with respect to the violent tactics deployed both by and within the protest movement, which ultimately led to what we argue is a substantial defeat for Hong Kong feminism. It is a self-inflicted injury as it is a situation brought on by us, by our own actions, or our failure to act.

With this declaration, we aim to question why the current suppression of feminism, especially our self-inflicted injuries, cannot be seen more clearly. How has it come to this? If becoming conscious and refusing to surrender our agency are forms of feminist struggle, are we not behaving like fools if we attempt to cover up the mistakes we have committed along the way? What has made it impossible for us to confront the feminist defeat and go as far as to conceal it? We believe we have been seeing the world through 'Yellow-coloured glasses' and that a change of lens is in order. For this purpose, we need to create a new discourse through which we can interpret reality.

Since 2019, we have been coining new terms with a view to revealing some hidden forces of oppression, so we can make sense of how we have become an oppressing force ourselves. We believe transformation can only come from self-criticism and the renewal of the self. If feminism seeks to transform patriarchy, gender relations, and society, we should not exclude self-criticisms and should be aware of the violence of our own practices of bordering—that is, maintaining boundaries that exclude and oppress others. What we feminists really need to do is to not respond too quickly when someone asks us: 'Where the fuck have you feminists gone?' Rather, we should ask ourselves where has the feminist perspective gone in our attempt to prove ourselves as loyal Hongkongers—an identity that has come to subsume everything else.

One might wonder what the point is of declaring the defeat of feminism in the context of the loss of the Hong Kong protest movement? What is there to be gained by doing this? Our assertions do not come from arrogance, moral superiority, or greater knowledge. They come from our belief in the importance of reflecting on our life pathways and experiences and in the wisdom of relinquishing false hope and cruel optimism to open an intellectual space for new ideas to emerge (Berlant 2011). We view this as creating an 'epistemic break' (Ho et al. 2018: 969) or as a 'feminist snap' (Ahmed 2017: 187)—that is, a wake-up call.

Why Can't We See Our Defeat?

The first step to create this 'epistemic break' is to understand why we are unable to see our defeat. We believe there are three reasons for this selective blindness.

First, some 'Left in form, Right in essence' feminists still believe the feminist movement has gained strength through the Hong Kong protest movement, and that we won the bet. They feel the protests featured a few glorious moments, such as the 'Hong Kong Mothers' Anti-Extradition Rally' of 14 June and 5 July 2019, initiated by several feminist academics, and the 'Anti-ELAB #MeToo Rally' of 28 August 2019, initiated by the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women. Back then, most feminists did not question the populist mythology of the mainstream discourse of the movement, or its exclusionary practices, but were satisfied with the movement's instrumental and superficial inclusion of feminism. They hoped feminism would gain momentum and expand its influence by riding on the mobilisation, especially when they noted the increase in popular support for the protests. However, those glorious moments were short-lived and their success only illusory. In our opinion, we cannot be proud of such success if it comes from endorsing physical violence against the police and those who are opposed to the movement, who are seen as deserving of attack and unworthy of our sympathy.

The feminist movement, as well as the broader protest movement, cannot succeed unless people are made aware of how Hong Kong's struggles relate to women's rights—and, in fact, to intersectional inequalities of all types. This may require a new consciousness that goes beyond playing into a traditional patriarchal framework to earn some credibility to speak up. Some feminists did not make the connection between fighting on the frontline and fighting for women's rights. When they shouted slogans, they were not thinking about women's rights. These feminists thought only women who were completely loyal to the movement deserved sympathy; their focus was not on women's rights or female voices at large. Most feminists did not harness the momentum of the pro-democracy movement to critically advocate intersectional justice and care for those who are disadvantaged because of their race, ethnicity, or disability. Those who were critical of the movement have often been seen as traitors and those who held different views as political opponents deserving to die. We posit that in their eagerness to show support to the movement and to silence alternative views—including the voices of Leftard feminists such as the two authors—feminists gave up their souls. When the movement failed, feminism perished with it.

Second, we have been too afraid to be different in the context of a populist movement. This protest movement was repeatedly described as leaderless, but it was not; it had an imaginary leader in a collective sense. It did not really matter who the leader was, as long as they were saving the 'Hong Kong people'. The task for all of us was to protect the young protesters on the frontline, and anything else was secondary. Through populist mythological narratives, the movement established a particular orthodoxy that prioritised the interests of certain protesters over others. To be accepted within the movement, one had to become a 'useful' tool for it, and anyone who did not contribute to the 'ultimate victory of the people' in the way the 'people' wanted at that moment could be singled out as guilty or kicked out as an enemy. It is in this context that feminists—consciously or unconsciously—came to ignore issues of systemic gender-based violence against women (unless perpetrated

by the police), or disadvantaged communities in Hong Kong society. While these issues continued to exist, they were no longer a priority. The boundaries between righteousness and evil, the enemy and us, were constantly being redrawn; those who were on our side today may not be tomorrow. While sometimes strategically accepted into the 'us' camp, groups such as the 'Leftard' feminists and pro-movement mainlanders could be excluded at any time as not being pure and genuinely loyal. It was the danger of being defined as beyond the pale at any moment and of becoming the target of hostility that led many feminists to demonstrate in word and action an eagerness to participate in the movement even when they should have adopted a more critical approach.

Third, some of us decided we should be clever about the situation. For these people, 'Left in form, Right in essence' feminism became a survival strategy. Some feminists indiscriminately accepted populist mythologies with a view to maximise the overall utility of the movement, protecting its image, and expanding its influence. They believed feminists should pursue a theoretical vision of feminist social movements and empirical field research in the service of this goal. Elsewhere, we analysed several cases that underline these dynamics (Li and Ho forthcoming). Here, we provide just two instances to orient the reader.

The Kwong Wing Catering Incident

In February 2020, when Covid-19 became increasingly severe in Hong Kong and the government was initially reluctant to close the border, the pro-movement restaurant Kwong Wing Catering openly stated that it would close its doors to all Mandarin speakers except those from Taiwan. Nearly 100 shops in Hong Kong adopted a similar policy. At that time, Minnie Li co-authored with her husband, Roger Chung, a short review published in the medical journal *The Lancet* in which she called for attention to the anti-Chinese sentiment in public health measures (Chung and Li 2020). Before that, the couple and a group of friends had

visited Kwong Wing Catering intending to speak to the owner. Many netizens saw the visit as a failure to understand Hongkongers' fears about the imposition of Mandarin Chinese on the local population, as well as causing embarrassment for the restaurant staff. Li was immediately called 'mainland chick' (大陸雞), 'VaChina', 'green tea bitch' (綠茶婊), 'corrupt academic' (學棍), and 'feminist dick' (女權L) by netizens and various opinion leaders. Her Facebook page was overwhelmed with abuse, and someone even wrote anonymously to her university department demanding her dismissal, claiming emphatically that she had misbehaved before her marriage.

It was not uncommon for women and feminists to be the targets of intense attacks within the movement. By reflecting on the anti-China character of the movement (Li 2020b, 2020c), criticising its patriarchal orientation (Ho 2019a, 2019b), and refusing to cut ties with Jon Solomon over his criticism of virologist Yuen Kwok Yung of the University of Hong Kong for some racist remarks he had made against mainland Chinese (Li 2020e), the two authors came to be among the favourite targets of the localists. Right-wing localist opinion leader Lewis Loud wrote several articles in the local press and on social media in which he called one of the authors 'a blow to the moral high ground of the movement' (Loud 2020a), 'obsessed with self-importance', a 'high-minded academic green tea', and 'an academic supporter of the Chinese colonialists' (Loud 2020c). Taking the opportunity to address all 'Left-wingers' (including feminists, of course), Loud (2020c) wrote: 'After the anti-ELAB movement, in fact, the Left-wing and the liberals, no matter how much they dislike it, have to choose whether they want to go ahead and become Minnie Li and Ho Sik Ying.'

The fact these attacks and blatant threats by Right-wing localists have been praised and retweeted by many feminists suggests it is not only anti-feminist individuals in the movement or people who were poorly informed about feminism who were involved in this kind of discursive violence. In other words, the shrinking of feminist discourse has come not only from the attacks of Right-wing localists, but also from feminists themselves.

The Case of Wenshan Chen

A second typical example is the case of Wenshan Chen's 2020 article on the Hong Kong protests advocating for feminist interventions that would 'maximise' the protest's 'overall positive utility' (並使其正面總體效益極大化). Her writing has a utilitarian tone that makes her sound more like the CEO of a 'feminist company' discussing the company's financing and product launch. From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why Chen proposes that feminist activists who care about gender equality should not focus on challenging the patriarchal system embedded in the movement. Rather, she thinks feminists should ask whether this anti-ELAB movement has the potential to create a long-term impact on Hong Kong's patriarchal culture and social system (Chen 2020). From the perspective of a CEO, this is a 'reverse takeover' (借殼上市) strategy—that is, obtaining a controlling stake in an already listed company by injecting capital into it, allowing the assets of an otherwise unlisted company to be listed. However, since the controlling stake was not in the hands of the feminists but rather in the dominant voice of the movement, the expected reverse takeover did not happen. Rather, a 'reversed reverse takeover' (反向借殼) took place—that is, an intended takeover that was coopted by the other party. The anti-ELAB movement—originally seen by feminists as a tool to expand their own influence—has in turn captured the feminist agenda, making it a tool to help the movement expand its influence and enhance its perceived progressiveness.

By siding with the mainstream voices in the protest movement, feminists have gained nothing but their own defeat. This strategy of 'Left in form, Right in essence' feminists can deceive no-one but themselves. Why is it important for Left-leaning feminists and scholars to join forces with Right-wing localists even if they do not agree entirely with their ideologies and the strategies of the movement? Not only did they refuse to be critical of the Right's bordering practices, but they also took an active role at the forefront of discursive regulation to prove their loyalty to the people—still

in the name of feminism and Leftist concerns. This strategic choice is related to their instrumentalist orientation.

If Only We Would See: Connection in Support of Collusion

Like feminists, Left-leaning scholars may also focus on retaining connections with mainstream protesters to preserve their remaining political capital and some degree of relevance and public trust in the context of the movement. The price they pay for this bargain could be high in terms of the loss of intellectual integrity, missed opportunities to provide critical feedback that could be useful to steer the decisions of the movement, and the temptation to sell out to Right-wing populism (Ho 2021). In other words, for both Leftist scholars and feminists, 'Left in form, Right in essence' may end up disguising rather than identifying hidden forces of oppression. Let us use as an example the case of Cho Man Kit, a lecturer in Gender Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Minnie Li (2020e) reflected on the use of the word 'faggot', which was written in English on a protest poster to attack Hong Kong's Commissioner of Police. In response, Cho, a queer scholar and activist, wrote in a now deleted Facebook post: 'The use of discriminatory or implicitly derogatory terms to humiliate the police by protesters is ultimately a desire for justice, even if the process intentionally or unintentionally perpetuates and/or reinforces derogatory discourses against minorities.' He went on to say:

> We can completely disagree with such tactics that reinforce homophobic discourse, while at the same time trying to express our understanding in writing, to understand the desire for dignity and justice, as well as the anger and resentment that comes from being suppressed and persecuted for so long without a way out.

The hashtag '#Connection_before_correction' was added at the end of the post, which then was widely liked and shared on social media, including by many feminists. His slogan #Connection_before_correction also gained traction among many feminists who should have made use of the opportunity to talk about intersectional justice rather than condemning those who pointed out the problems. As a result of their emphasis on connections with the movement, they ended up excusing homophobia and justifying discrimination.

These feminists and Leftist scholars actively participated in different kinds of Right-wing bordering practices, especially in the monitoring and control of discursive space through knowledge production on social media or academic platforms. Their eagerness to please the mainstream voices of the movement eventually brought about their own defeat in the form of losing their relevance and impetus. The tragic aspect of this is that feminists now have nowhere to go, especially since they inflicted this situation on themselves when they helped to constrict the space for self-reflection needed for both self-transformation and the transformation of the movement.

If Only We Would See: Coercive Solidarity and the Hierarchy of Victimhood

Before we declared the defeat of feminism in Hong Kong, we had already penned articles in 2019 and 2020 about feminists selling their souls to the movement (Ho 2019a, 2019b). We documented the changes occurring within the movement and, particularly, the ways in which a collective identity—that of 'Hongkongers'—underpinned the intersubjective construction of a 'Hong Kong protesting self' defined antagonistically against its opponents and in identification with those constituted as 'true Hongkongers', the heroes of the struggle. How, and with whom, people identify can be highly emotive, expressing an ethic of solidarity that binds activists together as one.

On top of 'coercive solidarity', we detected a 'hierarchy of suffering and victimhood' (Ho 2020; Kong et al. 2021) that was used to legitimise the differential extension of sympathy only to people who were seen as useful to the movement, while denying it to those who were deemed not useful—especially those with certain identity markers, such as mainlanders, and those with independent or unconventional views who may not have been able or willing to say 'the right thing' to defend the movement. Denied recognition, these people's trials and suffering are as real as they are inaudible. We observe that there is no place for the ethics of care, except in relation to Yellow ribbons, especially those who have been 'valiant' (勇武)—that is, frontline protesters). The Blue ribbons and those perceived to be traitors to the movement are given no credence. Feminist values such as compassion for those with whom one disagrees and care for those in disadvantaged positions—such as the disabled people who have been negatively affected by the protests (for instance, when streetlights were being vandalised)—are deemed irrelevant by feminists themselves. Needless to say, external enemies, especially the police, are those who deserve to die, such as the 37-year-old policewoman who drowned on duty as a marine officer during an anti-smuggling operation on 27 September 2021.

What the authors have experienced and observed is the collusion of feminists with the mechanism of coercive power within the movement. It is important to see this because coercive power is at the heart of the concept of the police. This internalised attitude of coercion ultimately constitutes a 'police system' in the general sense of a bottom-up approach. Feminists, because of their concern for various types of violence—such as domestic violence, sexual violence, and intimate-partner violence—are supposed to be sensitive to the operation of such power relations. Unfortunately, during the Hong Kong movement, they were also implicated in this 'policing from below'.

If Only We Would See: Interconnected Histories

The feminist ideal of unity amid diversity has given way to an intolerance of different opinions within the movement, of any criticism of movement tactics, and of any departure from an increasingly dominant localist, Sinophobic, and Right-leaning narrative. More progressive political positions have been disavowed and disallowed; alternative subjectivities either fail to emerge or are silenced. The political priority is preserving Hong Kong identity even if it means ruining Hong Kong, as in the case of advocating for a scorched-earth strategy ('If we burn, you burn with us!'). As researchers, we have been bothered by anti-Chinese sentiments, particularly the circulation of potentially inflammatory views that mainlanders (collectively and individually) are not only uncivilised, but also perverse. According to this ideology, mainland Chinese are the colonisers; Chinese colonialism is seen as the biggest evil, and mainlanders are invaders who have eroded Hong Kong society (Char 2020). Mainlanders, even if they are political dissidents themselves or supporters of the Hong Kong protest movement, become 'the enemy'. There is no space here for critical discussion of British colonialism.

Racial injustice and the gross inequalities within Hong Kong society are partly attributable to the city's colonial heritage. As Leo Goodstadt (2013) has argued, the mismanagement that has perpetuated poverty is both a legacy of British colonialism and the current administration's continuance of the colonial neglect of the local population. Elsewhere we have drawn attention to these issues as, in large part, a legacy of the 'interconnected histories' of China, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, as well as of their wider global connections (Jackson and Ho 2020: 47, ff.). Moreover, it is difficult to find space in which to talk about how British colonialism has shaped our mindsets, especially our understanding of liberal democracy, so we are aware of the danger of 'political beaconism'—that is, 'the idealization of the "West" especially the United States as the "beacon of the light"' (Lin 2021: 93). These reflections should help us come up with a better diagnosis of the present. With

more understanding of history, we may be able to open ourselves to learn from other anticolonial and anti-authoritarian intellectuals.

If, and Only If, We Want to Live a Feminist Life under Authoritarian Rule

In the post–National Security Law era in Hong Kong, there is limited appetite for feminist action in the form of new organisations or civil society groups, especially to express overt opposition to the government. There are other important forms of activism besides the obvious ones on the streets. For instance, Ahmed's (2017) 'Killjoy Survival Kit' includes several suggestions for how to slow the march of authoritarianism and enable feminism to survive. Feminists should embrace an ethics of care that will enable them to imagine other people's suffering as their own in the struggle against authoritarian rule (Ho 2020).

In our work, we have questioned our own hierarchy of suffering and victimhood and the importance of reviewing our bordering practices. Some strategies for protecting our identity as Hongkongers include drawing boundaries between the self and the Other—us and them, in the populist narrative. However, these are cruel to mainlanders and to disadvantaged communities, as well as to ourselves. What began as an assertion of dignity, a recovery from exclusion and denigration, and a demand for representation has led to a hardening of oppressive and exclusionary boundaries. As we have all been part of the bordering practices involved, we must examine our ways of drawing boundaries and allow the subordinated identities to find a place from which to speak. When Hongkonger identity is all that matters, other politically salient identities, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and so on, are played down. If preserving a particular version of Hong Kong is deemed a priority, we will be blinded to all sorts of inequalities in our society. Has queer theory not taught us to transcend identity politics?

Let us keep writing. We should not relinquish free speech and surrender the public domain too easily. We can still write to journals and whoever else can publish our works. This article is another attempt to initiate a dialogue among ourselves. As Ahmed (2000) has suggested, feminist theorising (and activism) is about questioning existing categories and allowing internal dissent. Everything we have done so far has to be seriously reconsidered. If we take off our 'Yellow-coloured glasses', hopefully, we will see things we could not see before. If we cannot talk about these issues among ourselves, the regime really has won. ∎

A Yellow Store in Taipei with protest posters, banners, and flags from wall to ceiling. PC: Wei An Chen.

Peddling the Revolution?

How Hong Kong's Protesters became Online Vendors in Taiwan

Ming-sho HO
Wei An CHEN

Some former Hong Kong protesters who fled to Taiwan have resorted to selling local products online to Hong Kong-based consumers to make a living. This essay argues that these purchases become both an alternative form of financial support from Hong Kong's politically conscious consumers and business transactions endowed with political meaning. Not without ambivalences, these online vendors sell more than products, but also a lifestyle, an identity, and a commitment—in short, a revolutionary dream at a time when street protests in their home city are no longer feasible.

The national security legislation imposed by the People's Republic of China's rubber-stamp legislature in mid-2020 has forcibly turned Hong Kong into a repressive police state. With opposition leaders and protest activists either in jail or in exile, the city's prodemocracy movement and civil society sustain relentless assaults from the authorities. Apparently, Beijing is not satisfied with merely stamping out the 2019 city-wide resistance against the extradition bill, but also is bent on radically reengineering the former British colony into a submissive mainland city. As Hong Kong is undergoing a drastic transformation in the wake of a failed uprising, it is of interest to

examine 'life after the squares' (Fernández-Savater et al. 2017). Where have the protesters gone? After the flare-up of passionate protests, how do former activists adjust to the return of 'normalcy'? And among those who have fled abroad, how do they retain allegiance to their political vision while managing to survive in an unfamiliar setting?

Hong Kong's diaspora communities have managed to maintain the momentum of the prodemocracy movement. Well-known leaders, such as former lawmakers Nathan Law and Ted Hui, have become globetrotting advocates for the Hong Kong cause. In North America, Europe, Australia, Japan, and Taiwan, immigrant associations are sprouting up to offer support for newcomers. However, beyond these salient cases, there are numerous exiled activists who are struggling to gain a footing in the host society. Although a transnational network for donations of money and protest gear (goggles, helmets, masks, and so on) emerged during the anti-extradition movement (Li and Fung 2021), former participants who do not have fame or connections must survive on their own wits. There are no official statistics about the number of Hong Kong protesters who have taken refuge in Taiwan, where they are able to stay on student or other visas or under a special protection program run by the government if they cross the border legally. Our understanding is that the number is no less than 1,000—an estimate that does not include those who have migrated to Taiwan not because of their involvement in the protests, but out of concern for Hong Kong's future.

Given these numbers and the lack of attention this phenomenon has received so far, how ex-protesters in Taiwan are managing to secure their livelihood on their own deserves a closer look. In particular, in this essay, we analyse the phenomenon known as 'protesters' purchasing' (手足代購) in Taiwan. Some former activists use online platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, and others) to sell Taiwanese commodities to Hong Kong–based customers. Drawing on eight in-depth interviews we conducted in 2020 and 2021 with Hongkongers and Taiwanese—including six interviews with sellers personally involved in the 'protesters' purchasing' business—complemented by data we collected by observing websites and

social media accounts, we show how, while most of their patrons have access to other shopping venues for the same Taiwan-made food and goods, they are willing to pay higher than market price to support these comrades in exile. We argue that in this way such purchases become both an alternative form of financial support from Hong Kong's politically conscious consumers and business transactions endowed with political meaning. As such, these online vendors sell more than products, but also a lifestyle, an identity, and a commitment—in short, a revolutionary dream at a time when street protests in their home city are no longer feasible.

Broadly speaking, 'protesters' purchasing' is part of the so-called Yellow Economic Circle (黃色經濟圈) that has emerged since the autumn of 2019. At its core, it amounts to a consumer campaign to patronise pro-movement stores or 'yellow stores' (黃店) and to boycott pro-government stores or 'blue stores' (藍店) (Chan and Pun 2020). Beyond the immediate goal of political consumerism, the campaign also envisions a utopia of economic solidarity, in which like-minded Hongkongers form a mutually supportive and redistributive community. Despite a similar political intent, Taiwan's 'protesters' purchasing' deviates in a few significant ways. First, internet-based transactions are more anonymous than those in physical shops. Second, as there is no need to rent shop space and the seller purchases products only after an order has been paid, it is a business that requires no advanced capital and thus is easily accessible to young and poor people. Last, it involves an almost exclusively one-way flow of Taiwan-made commodities to Hong Kong and a flow of cash in the opposite direction. There is no circularity envisioned in the Hong Kong–based Yellow Economic Circle.

Origins

Hongkongers are avid online shoppers, eagerly embracing the convenience of e-commerce. During the 2019 protests, many participants and supporters purchased protective gear such as helmets and masks from Taobao, a China-based

online marketplace, before such items were removed from the catalogue. Hongkongers are also frequent international travellers who enjoy buying foreign goods, including Korean cosmetics, Japanese snacks, and Thai groceries. Taiwanese snacks, fruit, and creative cultural products are also increasingly popular in the city, partly for political reasons. Since the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Taiwan's government and civil society organisations have stood behind Hongkongers' struggle for democracy, incurring criticism from the Chinese authorities. As such, consuming Taiwanese products carries a symbolic meaning of political insubordination. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has played a facilitating role. As Taiwan imposed a travel ban on non-essential international visitors from February 2020, Hongkongers' online demand for Taiwanese products soared as they were no longer able to travel and purchase them on their own.

The first wave of Hong Kong protesters fled to Taiwan immediately after the occupation of the Legislative Council on 1 July 2019. As the confrontation escalated during the summer, the numbers gradually increased, climaxing in the wake of the two university sieges in November. After the Covid-related restrictions were implemented, the flow was reduced to a trickle. Before the pandemic, the Hong Kong–Taiwan Taoyuan aviation route was among the busiest for international flights, thus those protesters who were most at risk of being arrested could rush to the airport and easily get a seat to Taiwan. In less than two hours, they would descend on an island of freedom—one of the reasons Taiwan was often chosen as the first overseas layover before proceeding to other countries.

Of those who have chosen to stay in Taiwan, some have been able to receive financial support from Hong Kong donors or are eligible for humanitarian assistance from the Taiwanese Government. Yet, to work legally, they need a government-issued alien residence certificate and work permit, and these official documents take time to be processed. As such, online vending has become one of the most accessible ways to make a living for these stranded sojourners. With merchandise easily available from convenience stores or megastore outlets, all that is needed is a social media page

to display one's catalogue. Once a purchase order arrives, vendors simply buy the commodities and take them to drop-off points for delivery. As the purchase cost and shipment fee are reflected in the sale price, profit basically comes from the willingness to run errands for customers. Given the small scale of such transactions, these online vendors cannot compete with large retailers in terms of price and delivery time. They can stay in business only as long as Hong Kong–based consumers are willing to patronise them to express their support.

Probably the best-known start-up in this field is RS International, which has just over 6,000 followers on Instagram. It is far from the biggest online vendor specialising in Taiwanese products; other, apolitical sellers have more than 13,000 followers. Its operator claims to hail from the Dragon Slaying Brigade (屠龍小隊), a militant group with dozens of members who engaged in violent attacks against the police in Hong Kong. Such clandestine groups were not uncommon at the height of the protests, but the Dragon Slaying Brigade was one of the most famous because its participants granted media interviews to publicise their beliefs. Different stories have circulated regarding their whereabouts after their decision to disband. Some say the members were never identified and were able to return to normal life unscathed; others believe that most members were arrested and only a few managed to escape abroad. What we know for sure is that a person who claimed to belong to the now defunct brigade arrived in Taiwan and launched RS International, purchasing for Hong Kong clients, in 2020. Unsurprisingly, the legendary audacity and mysterious aura of the group brought attention to the business operation.

According to the explanation provided on RS International's website, the initials 'RS' refer to 'Radical Solider' and 'Rebuild System', indicating their radical motivations. Their self-description reads as follows:

We are a group of 'stupidly naïve' [憨撚] people who were born into a chaotic time [亂世]. After several rounds of upheavals, we are forced to tread on the path of international study [遊學] and give up what many

of you have taken for granted and can easily access. We have to readjust our mindset and get started on an unknown path.

This passage is so densely coded that its subtle meanings are easy to overlook. For instance, 'international study' is a euphemism for those young protesters who were forced to flee abroad. And the self-mocking reference to their own 'stupid naivety' is an implicit acknowledgement of their involvement in the violent protests. Such coded expressions are not likely to go unnoticed by Hong Kong's politically conscious internet users. Yet, despite the seller's self-proclaimed radicalism, the commodities displayed on RS International's digital shelves include food, snacks, cosmetics, and skincare products readily available in Taiwan, and even some made in South Korea. Except for T-shirts bearing the seller's name, there are no politically themed products for sale.

Unable to exploit the reputation of the Dragon Slaying Brigade, other online vendors struggle to convey their political orientations to attract potential customers. Some choose to share news reports about Hong Kong and Taiwanese politics on their platforms with their own comments so viewers know clearly what they stand for. Others include the terms 'protesters' (手足) or 'yellow stores' in their account name and description, or attach a barrage of hashtags with familiar protest slogans such as 'Revolution of Our Time' (時代革命) and 'Reclaim Hong Kong' (光復香港) to promote their merchandise. They fear that if they do not emphasise their political beliefs enough, potential customers will think their stores are not 'yellow' enough.

Marketing Strategies

Online vending is probably the easiest form of entrepreneurship in the digital age, but its low threshold requirements easily attract many participants, who then have to face constant pressure to survive due to competition and low profit margins. Many of our interviewees said they got their start thanks to friends in Hong Kong. As one of them

said: 'I tell my Hong Kong friends that I am running this website and ask them whether their friends might need something.' Some of these friends are people they met or got to know during the street protests. In addition, some have been able to use certain social media channels to attract customers. There have been several sales events to promote the Yellow Economic Circle in Hong Kong, both digital and physical, and these occasions also help the online start-ups to gain attention.

Nevertheless, online vending remains a crowded field with too many competitors. One online vendor expressed her frustration in these terms:

Many yellow stores in Hong Kong are now selling Taiwanese products. Yellow stores should be helpful toward protesters; now with so many protesters in Taiwan in the business of purchasing to support themselves, why do they choose to compete with us … Hong Kong is a free port, and these yellow stores can sell Korean and Indonesian products as well. The world is so big, and they should not scramble for Taiwanese products.

Clearly, the more Hong Kong–based stores that sell Taiwanese products, the narrower the profit space for Taiwan-based online vendors becomes. Since Taiwanese products have come to represent political defiance, they are a hot commodity for politically frustrated consumers in Hong Kong. Another interviewee revealed that she and her business associates were bitterly envious of the fact that Lam Wing-Kee, a publisher who was detained in China for more than six months in 2015 for a scandalous book about Xi Jinping's private life, was able to crowd-fund TWD$5 million to launch his Causeway Bay Bookstore (銅鑼灣書店) in downtown Taipei. Thanks to his halo as a freedom fighter, Lam was able to corner the attention and the money of supporters.

Facing such tough competition, sellers resort to various marketing strategies to keep their business afloat. First, online vendors can add personal touches to the commodities they sell. For instance, they generously share their experiences with a particular skincare product and the results of their personal experiments. In this way, they pose as

friends spontaneously sharing new information, rather than traders promoting a cold business transaction.

Second, while many products displayed in the online catalogues are readily available at retail points and vendors earn only the price markup, it makes business sense to pursue a cost-reduction strategy such as accessing upstream producers directly to avoid middlemen. Thus, one vendor specialising in Taiwanese fruit took a road-trip to visit farm after farm in search of pineapple growers to be his suppliers.

Third, while vendors do not shy away from selling mainstream and well-known products, such as pineapple cakes, they are troubled by the low profit margin on such merchandise. For this reason, they typically concentrate on developing a few niche products with which Hong Kong–based customers are unfamiliar. For instance, a handmade cookie brand whose store was once visited and recommended by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen became instantly popular with customers. Alternatively, some vendors collaborate with Taiwanese manufacturers to develop new products or seek exclusive sales rights. One of our interviewees revealed that niche products like these made up his largest source of profit.

Last, beyond the catalogued merchandise, vendors are also willing to provide personalised service to frequent customers with special needs. One interviewee said he once scouted Taipei's second-hand bookstores for a particular collection of comic books that was not available in Hong Kong. His legwork was compensated by the processing fee, which was 20–25 per cent of the procurement cost.

With such a range of marketing strategies, our interviewees enjoyed various degrees of business fortune. A particularly successful vendor was able to expand by opening a storefront in Hong Kong so he could access more customers. On the other hand, another interviewee chose to drop out of the business shortly after our interview. Although we did not have the chance to conduct a follow-up interview to ask why, it is likely the cutthroat competition and low profit margins were the main reasons. For many of our interviewees, 'protesters' purchasing' was not their main source of income,

but a side job at most, and they did not intend to stay in this line of business indefinitely. Nevertheless, since many buyers are typically motivated by the intention to help exiled former protesters, it is necessary for vendors to spend time maintaining personal relationships with their patrons. Socialising with customers via digital platforms therefore emerges as a core task in the business. One interviewee revealed:

> For my business, I use a lot of time in managing my Instagram page. I spend more than 12 hours a day on my mobile phone. I have many frequent customers on Instagram, so I need to chat with them to maintain our relationship. We talk about many things in our daily life.

Another shared a similar experience:

> I frequently contact my customers, and I even chat with them like friends. I share my life in Taiwan and exchange our mutual cares. Recently, there was an earthquake in Taiwan and the weather is getting cold, and these are the topics that they are interested in. I am away from Hong Kong and I still want to know everything happening there. They can update me with the newest development.

In short, despite the business innovations mentioned above, 'protesters' purchasing' remains akin to direct selling in its heavy reliance on personal relationships (Biggart 1989).

Profit and Politics

Our analysis is not meant to imply that these online vendors are merely driven by profit. In addition to securing their livelihood, these people remain committed to the vision of the prodemocracy movement. Moreover, they are conscious of the fact that several self-styled yellow stores in Hong Kong are morally dubious because they offer overpriced and substandard goods and services. This explains why most of our interviewees revealed

a certain uneasiness with the Yellow Economic Circle slogan and insisted on emphasising the quality of their goods and services. They take pride in the fact they are working to fulfill their personal material needs and live up to their commitment to the movement at the same time. These micro-entrepreneurs support themselves by honest work and, in promoting Taiwanese products, they are envisioning an economic future for Hong Kong that is less reliant on mainland China. Thus, one interviewee insisted on not using Chinese-operated delivery services because 'we start the business in the hope that Hongkongers do not buy China-made stuff. We do not want China to earn a penny from us.' Another made it a principle to thoroughly investigate the sources of her commodities to make sure the materials were not from China. As such, these online vendors see their economic operations as being closely aligned with their political goals.

Mixing profit and politics inevitably creates some moral grey zones. For instance, when chatting with their online customers, do these online vendors intend to make sincere friendships or do they only have their business interests in mind? Are Hong Kong–based customers altruistic sponsors of the exiles for a noble cause, or are they shrewd consumers who aim at maximising their economic benefits? If our interviewees were forced to answer, it would probably be: 'Both.' And here lies the crux of the enigma of 'protesters' purchasing', because it amounts to an experimental and creative mixture of movement activism and business transactions, and this delicate balance is likely to be disrupted by a shift to one extreme at the expense of the other.

We do not intend our preliminary observations to provide a final judgement on this new phenomenon, as it is still evolving. We acknowledge that there are plenty of moral ambiguities in 'protesters' purchasing' other than this tension between profits and politics. For instance, former protesters typically belong to a victimised generation of young Hongkongers who came of age in an increasingly unequal capitalist society. Yet, they are perfectly willing to act as the diligent foot-soldiers of an expanding platform economy that heavily relies on a disposable precariat. However, from another perspective, they succeed in inserting a political

dimension into the otherwise excessively commercialised world of social media. Their insistence on Taiwan-made products and their marketing of Taiwan's democratic values help to 're-enchant a disenchanted world', to borrow a phrase from Ritzer (2010). In other words, while the relentless logic of profit-making might be the same, Hong Kong's former protesters have succeeded in adding a political charm to Taiwanese commodities, making them appear immensely superior to China-made ones.

However, is Taiwan's capitalism any better than mainland China's? Sweatshops will probably continue to exist in many places regardless of the local political system, but there is a difference in that, while democratic governments tolerate trade unions and resistance movements, dictators feel no qualms about quashing them. The real question is whether democracy can be promoted by such market-conforming strategies. The fact that 'protesters' purchasing' originates from a port city that takes pride in unbridled wealth accumulation and thrives in an era of increasingly frictionless global flows of money and commodities gives us pause. Only time will tell what direction such a politicised capitalism will take. ∎

Graffiti at the General Post Office Building.
PC: Judith Pernin.

Phantom Sounds, Haunting Images
The Afterlife of Hong Kong's Visual Protest Culture

Judith PERNIN

Before the enactment of the National Security Law, recordings of and artistic productions about the 2019 prodemocracy movement were thriving on Hong Kong's streets, university campuses, in social media, the press, and the cultural sphere at large. Now that protests have almost disappeared from public space, and symbols and slogans are criminalised, what happens to the profuse and popular visual culture generated by the protests? This essay revisits the rapidly changing landscape of the visual culture of Hong Kong protests and examines how some of its components have been affected by political developments, leading to a shift in its regime of visibility.

Almost three years on, the sounds and images of the 2019 Hong Kong protest movement are still haunting. Powerful, imaginative, and long-lasting, the half-year mobilisation and its iconography are hard to forget, and the ongoing political crackdown keeps our memory alive with constant republications of photographs and video clips of the events. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the proclamation of the National Security Law (NSL) on 30 June 2020, protests have, however, almost disappeared from Hong Kong's public spaces. Protest symbols and slogans are now criminalised and their representation has become politically sensitive. As a result, many films, books, and artworks have vanished from screening venues, shops, and libraries. In this new context, any prodemocracy discourses and artefacts are likely to attract unwanted attention.
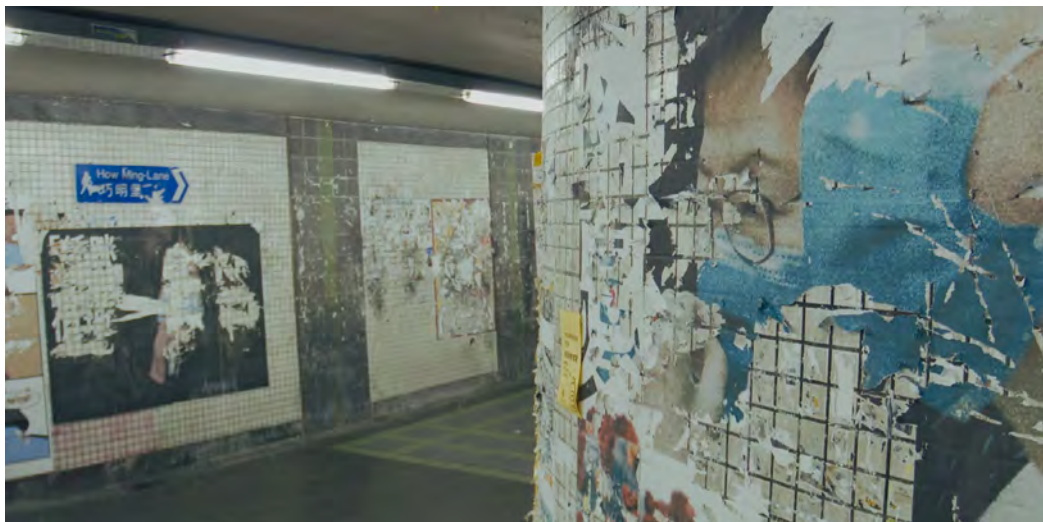
Traces of a Lennon Wall in *Fear(less) and Dear* (誠惶(不)誠恐, 親愛的), 2021. PC: Anson Mak.

The Pillar of Shame statue removal saga, the clampdown on prodemocracy news outlets, the revamping of secondary school curricula, and the withdrawal of books on the Tiananmen movement from public library shelves show that a sweeping eradication effort is under way. This raises concerns about the possibility of maintaining (at least in public) some of the cornerstones of Hongkongers' collective identity, such as the commemoration of the 1989 crackdown in Beijing, as well as uncensored accounts of the recent history of prodemocracy movements.

This process of erasure targets physical objects, images, and texts that used to be widely visible online and offline. What happens to a profuse and popular protest visual culture when it is suddenly outlawed or, rather, when it faces unprecedented legal risk? This essay revisits the rapidly changing landscape of the visual culture of Hong Kong protests and examines how some of its components have been affected by political developments, leading to a shift in its regime of visibility (McGarry et al. 2020). Documentary images (still or moving) from the press, independent filmmakers, and netizens form a great part of this culture. Widely shared, recycled, and appropriated, documentary images depicting the protests circulated online

and offline, and inspired or supplemented other creative works such as graffiti, murals, posters, music, and performance art. By no means exhaustive or predictive, this essay considers this diverse media's modes of visibility and authorship and seeks to imagine the afterlife of Hong Kong's visual protest culture in the post-NSL era.

During the Protests: Ephemeral Urban Displays

Many popular visual productions such as the Prague-inspired Lennon walls were characterised from the beginning of the 2019 protests by ephemerality and collective, anonymous, or pseudonymous authorship. Initiated during the Umbrella Movement, the practice of posting messages on walls adjacent to the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) building was revived in 2019 and extended to pedestrian subways and bus and Mass Transit Railway (MTR) stations in every Hong Kong neighbourhood (see also Wu's essay in the present issue). Instead of using sticky notes like in 2014, in 2019, protesters drew or printed bigger posters displaying their demands, criticising the
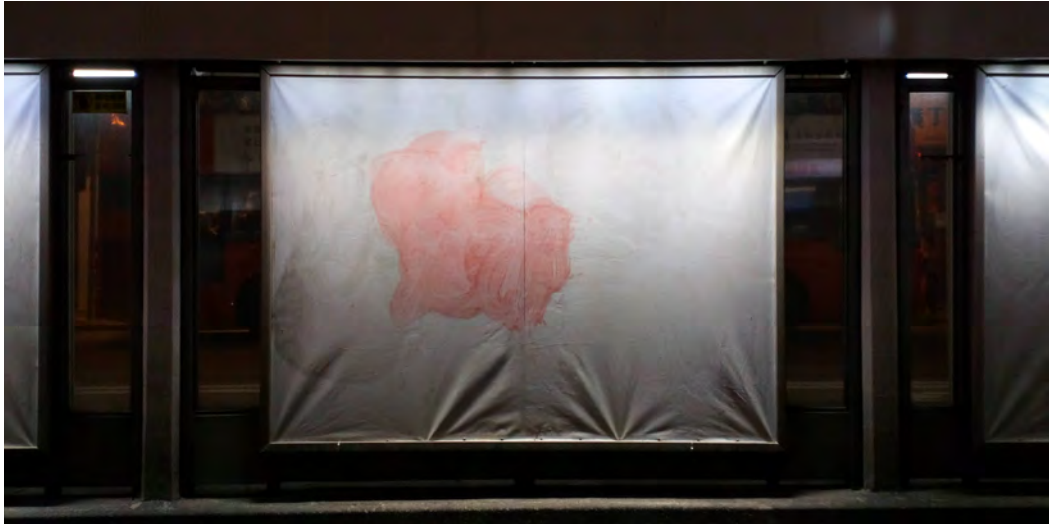
Traces of a slogan after an unsuccessful cleaning operation. PC: Judith Pernin.

police, and mocking the government. Day after day, Lennon walls were set up, vandalised, cleaned up, and reappropriated with new posters, covering vast surfaces in a rapid turnover. Cleaning operations usually failed to make them entirely and durably disappear, and instead created colourful palimpsests of text and images and prompted even larger and bolder displays. The posters themselves were made by ordinary people, artists, or groups who also operated online and usually concealed their identity behind a moniker or collective name.

Soon after the end of the movement, two anonymous books documented these ephemeral displays challenging authorities and urban order (Abaddon 2020; Guardian of Hong Kong 2020). Despite recent recognition of street art through local figures such as the King of Kowloon and the Plumber King, clean, blank walls are the norm in Hong Kong (Cartier 2012; Potts 2021). Aside from Lennon walls, one of the most subversive aspects of the 2019 movement was perhaps protesters' disregard for street cleanliness and orderliness, which was exemplified by political graffiti. While the Umbrella Movement advocated peaceful civil disobedience and was praised for protesters' concern about maintaining hygiene and tidiness, in 2019, protesters responded to police violence

by dismantling street furniture and tagging or destroying shop windows, Chinese banks, MTR Corporation property, and businesses linked to Beijing and local triads. The subsequent flurry of cleaning and repair operations did not immediately return these urban canvases to their original blankness. Several photo projects document the easily recognisable traces of protest slogans—once legible and now turned into abstract landscapes and smears rather than being effectively concealed (Gaul 2019; Ho 2020).

Intimidation Strategies in the Post-NSL Context

Since the enactment of the NSL, a vast campaign to eradicate dissent has been launched in Hong Kong. Despite original claims that the law would affect only a minority of people, the number of trials of democracy advocates indicates the net of justice is wider than before. Even though it is still too early to assess its long-term consequences on freedom of expression in the visual realm, the NSL is so vague and broad in its formulation, it applies to all intellectual, artistic, and cultural productions. Rather

than being the only tool used to intimidate activists and cultural workers, the NSL has also endorsed and amplified a more general transformation of the overall environment in which such people operate. For instance, the colonial-era Crimes Ordinance is now often used to charge individuals with sedition, and amendments or new laws are allowed to pass in a LegCo deprived of any opposition (see Chan's essay in the present issue). The pro-Beijing press also plays an important role in launching witch-hunts against prodemocracy individuals or groups, further increasing political pressure on them (see also Yeung's essay in the present issue).

The case of the documentaries *Taking Back the Legislature* (佔領立法會; Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers 2019) and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (理大圍城; Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers 2020) illustrates these mechanisms. Respectively recording the LegCo Occupation of 1 July 2019 and the siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in November 2019, these two observational documentaries were authored by an anonymous collective of Hong Kong independent filmmakers. Before the NSL, film distributor Ying E Chi (影意志) had selected them for its Hong Kong Independent Film Festival (香港獨立電影節) and organised multiple sold-out screenings as category IIB films (not suitable for children and young people) (Van den Troost 2020, 2021; Pernin 2021; Chui 2020).

In July 2020, the festival had difficulty renewing the films' screening certificates with the Office for Film, Newspaper and Article Administration (OFNAA). After months of negotiations, they finally managed to obtain the certificates just hours before the scheduled screenings, with *Inside the Red Brick Wall* this time in category III (audiences over 18 years). They also had to insert the following disclaimer at the beginning of the films: 'Some of these depictions or acts may constitute criminal offences under prevailing laws. Some of the contents of or commentaries in the film may be unverified or misleading' (Ying E Chi Cinema 2020). In March 2021, pro-Beijing newspaper *Takungpao* (大公報) accused these documentaries of 'beautifying' the protests and, in April 2021, it made personal attacks against distributor Ying E Chi and the Taiwan International Documentary Festival 台灣國際紀錄片影展 for screening them

(Takungpao 2021a, 2021b). In June 2021, the guidelines for film censors were updated to incorporate matters pertaining to national security (Hong Kong Government 2021). Finally, in October 2021, the Film Censorship Ordinance was amended to align with the NSL (Ho 2021b). After losing its Arts Development Council funding, Ying E Chi stopped distributing these award-winning documentaries.

While these two films offer a close and compassionate perspective of protesters and ordinary Hongkongers in the face of oppression, they also avoid sensationalising the protests, so the accusation that they 'beautify' them is questionable. More concerning again is the OFNAA's statement, included in the disclaimer that was added before the two films, warning that not only the filmed acts, but also their 'depiction' itself 'may constitute a criminal offence'. Facing attacks from pro-Beijing newspapers and increasing judicial pressure, filmmakers, distributors, and exhibitors have had to disassociate themselves from protest documentaries by keeping a low profile, adopting anonymous authorship, or even relinquishing their rights over their work (see, for instance, Young 2021).

This chilling effect is paralleled in society at large. With the NSL in place, the general climate around protest images and materials has turned to wariness whereas before a relative openness prevailed, especially online. During the protest movement, online forums, social media apps, and video portals such as LIHKG, Facebook, Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp, and YouTube were beaming live broadcasts from news media, debates illustrated by news clips or photographs, netizens' pictures and videos, slogans, memes, songs, as well as practical discussions, schedules, maps, and so on. Some of these materials depicted situations evolving rapidly on the ground and were made for immediate consumption. Quickly outdated, they were also increasingly ephemeral thanks to built-in features that allowed the setting of an expiry time for the posts or the option to circulate them on encrypted channels or within closed groups. This mode of visibility offers protection against the current trends of online surveillance and offline vigilantism, with citizen reporting encouraged by government and pro-establishment figures—for instance, through a new NSL hotline and former

chief executive C.Y. Leung Chun-ying's own reporting website (HKFP Fast News 2021; Lam and Leung 2019). As soon as protest images are recorded, drawn, tagged, or shared online or offline, they are now exposed to police scrutiny and public reporting. After activists started being investigated for their social media use and protest materials were confiscated, many ordinary people began to worry about their online activities, or their collection of protest memorabilia and equipment, their books, and tattoos, and they proceeded to delete, conceal, send away, or archive them (Ho 2021a).

Video Journalism after the NSL

Erasure is an even bigger threat to prodemocracy news outlets, which were the source of a sizeable portion of activism and protest visual culture. On the online channels of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK 香港電台), *Stand News* (立場新聞), and *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報), daily livestreams of brutal clashes were followed by hundreds of thousands of people. In contrast with the Umbrella Movement, in 2019, protest actions became increasingly dangerous, spontaneous, and spread simultaneously in various parts of Hong Kong.

News reporting was also impacted by the forceful police response and brutality towards journalists, with many operations specifically targeting those working for prodemocracy outlets (Luqiu 2021). This was particularly true for Gwyneth Ho, a former journalist for the recently closed online media *Stand News* who won a seat in the District Council election in 2019 and is currently detained on several national security charges. After covering the LegCo occupation on 1 July 2019 and the 721 Yuen Long MTR Incident (during which she was beaten in front of her million viewers by a mob-affiliated thug), she became an extremely popular figure, given the affectionate nickname 'Stand News sister' (立場姐姐) (Stand News 2019). During the assault, she collapsed on the ground with her camera, but continued livestreaming without interruption, and the clip went viral.

Screenshot from Gwyneth Ho's livestream for *Stand News* as she was being attacked at Yuen Long MTR Station (Stand News 2019).

Following the implementation of the NSL, the nature of the risks journalists face has changed dramatically. Editors and journalists have been arrested and several prodemocracy media outlets have been forcibly or preventively shut: *Apple Daily* in June 2021, *Stand News* in December 2021, and *Citizen News* (眾新聞) in January 2022. Other news organisations had already moved out of Hong Kong (for instance, Initium Media 端傳媒), undergone radical transformation (RTHK), or failed to obtain visas for their foreign journalists. With these closures, not only are Hongkongers unable to choose their news sources, but also countless videos, reports, and visual depictions of the protests have been wiped from their original websites.

Performances and Ghostly Presences

To pre-empt legal problems, many independent filmmakers recording protest actions such as those depicted in *Inside the Red Brick Wall* used framing and other strategies such as digital blurring to protect the identities of their protagonists. As a result, these films are strikingly and purposefully devoid of the character portrayal techniques usually found in observational documentaries (Pernin 2021).

While these are the characteristics of the films focusing on young radical protesters (勇武 *jungmou*) during the most eventful actions,

Vinci Mok's *butoh* performance in *Fear(less) and Dear* (2021). Courtesy Anson Mak.

other documentaries take the opposite approach to reflect on the personal struggles of the *wo lei fei* 和理非 generation—a term referring to those protesters who took a less confrontational approach. For instance, in *Fear(less) and Dear* (誠惶(不)誠恐, 親愛的; Mak 2021), sound artist and filmmaker Anson Mak gives voice to three artists who are also parents of young children. In three sections dedicated, respectively, to performance artist and former district councillor Clara Cheung, political comic artist Justin Wong, and writer Cheung Yuen-man, the director asks them about their fears, and they end up talking about the impact of the movement on their family, their professional life, and their creativity, and how they see Hong Kong's future. The film's slow and reflective pace invites us into the lives of ordinary families facing dilemmas about education, financial survival, and political positioning in a city haunted by protest memories. Among these conversations, Mak inserts scenes of Vinci Mok's *butoh* dance performances on the streets. She moves against the grim urban background that was once the stage for massive marches, using road fences to support her ghostly body while cars pass, bringing to the surface traumatic memories of the protests. The film also highlights the political role of Hong Kong

artists with a recording of a 2015 performance by Clara Cheung. A few years before running for district councillor in 2019, Cheung broke 1,000 eggs on her body in front of the LegCo 'as a protest on the day when 689 (Chief Executive CY Leung) presented his policy address' (Guthrie 2016).

Well connected to their international and mainland peers, Hong Kong performance artists have long been involved in local social movements and prodemocracy activities (Wen 2018; To 2019). They were often spotted taking part individually or collectively in demonstrations such as the 1 July march and, on the evenings leading up to the 4 June commemoration, artist and researcher Wen Yau and others routinely staged street performances near Victoria Park, where the now defunct Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (香港市民支援愛國民主運動聯合會) once organised the candlelit vigil. Artists such as Sanmu Chan and Kacey Wong were particularly active during the 2019 protests, which saw the former detained in mainland China and the latter choosing self-exile in Taiwan (Artforum 2019; Shaw 2021). Ephemeral and generally poorly recognised and understood, performance art allows Hong Kong practitioners to push the boundaries of freedom of speech. Voicing the democratic

aspirations of their local audience in a public but implicit manner requires them to find ever more subtle forms of expression to avoid legal trouble.

The Afterlives of Hong Kong Protests Visual Culture

Before the introduction of the NSL, protest recordings and artistic productions about the prodemocracy movement were thriving on Hong Kong university campuses, in the media, among civil society, and in the cultural sphere at large. In retrospect, their virality and ubiquity seem to have at once fostered and been undermined by Hong Kong's special administrative status and the ambiguities of the 'One Country Two Systems' principle. Echoing Ackbar Abbas's (1997) much-quoted theory on Hong Kong cinema and culture, one could say these images belong to the nostalgic sphere of the '*déjà disparu*' of the NSL era. Yet, as much as it seems fitting, this assessment also feels self-defeating and fails to consider the boundless creativity of Hongkongers in handling protest images and building their own visual culture. With the exile of many high-profile and ordinary activists, a de-territorialised space of resistance continues to press on political issues. Film screenings, debates, marches, and political satire remain alive abroad, and protest culture is still produced and consumed in Hong Kong, even though in a more private way, using more implicit and anonymous forms and on a smaller scale.

Since the implementation of the NSL, images of the 2019 protest movement have begun a new life. The records of street actions that fuelled social media exchanges and provided information in real time on the evolution of the protests are now part of the collective memory and live on in backups and memory drives. In the case of prodemocracy news clips and livestreams, most of the sites from which they originated are shut, but, fortunately, they were archived by Hong Kong citizens on repository websites. While this archiving effort cannot remedy the enormous loss of free media or the ease with which protest videos were previously circulated, it also shows that protest visual culture

cannot completely be wiped out—just as political graffiti and Lennon walls remain as traces and photographs. Hong Kong's protest visual culture survives in memories and circulates in disguise— for instance, in a music clip combining images of Carrie Lam's press conferences and the 831 Prince Edward MTR attack in an abstract ghostly outline (Fong 2019), or as a 3D virtual reconstruction of the Pillar of Shame (Chaigne 2021).
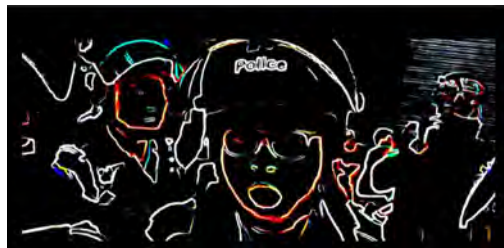
Footage of riot police turned into outlines. Screenshot from Fong (2019).

Digital archives and museum preservation initiatives are particularly crucial to keep a record of the political atmosphere and social creativity during the protests, allowing a better understanding of Hong Kong's history in the future. This, however, might not be possible in Hong Kong itself. In a city with a new, yet heavily monitored museum of visual culture, it is doubtful any of the imagery of the 2019 protests will manage to slip through the censors' net. Yet, we should not feel hopeless. While deplorable, this turn to ephemeral, implicit, anonymous, de-territorialised, digitised, and archived forms indicates that protest visual culture is not going to simply disappear in Hong Kong, but rather, a new regime of visibility and new forms of expression will emerge in response to political changes to resist complete erasure. ∎
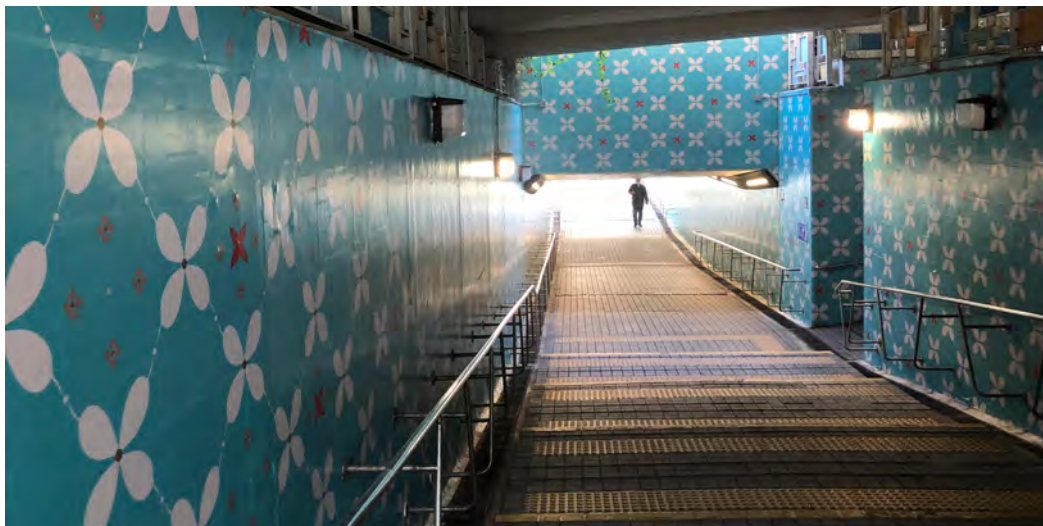
Wall covering in a pedestrian tunnel, July 2021.
PC: Ka-ming Wu (CC).

Mapping the Affective Neighbourhood in Post-Protest Hong Kong

Ka-ming WU

Looking closely at the changing faces and materials of some pedestrian surfaces, this essay shows the transformation of neighbourhood space and culture in Hong Kong during and after the 2019 protests. By showing the movements and sensual encounters of residents walking through their neighbourhoods, the article reveals the affective everyday encounters or an emergent politics of affect in which the 'intensities of feeling'—sounds, senses, and other non-verbal dynamics—prevail, so deepening an understanding of authoritarian politics as embodied in everyday life.

'Lennon Walls'—that is, public walls covered with post-it notes, posters, and manifestos left by citizens—were a major feature of the protests in Hong Kong during both the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the Anti–Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement of 2019. On both occasions, Hong Kong citizens placed hundreds of thousands of post-it notes on all kinds of vertical surfaces throughout the city. Scholars have called these places sites of citizenship, social engagement, and imagination, and even public art (Ku 2019; Valjakka 2020; Ng 2021). But while Lennon Walls such as the one set up at the Hong Kong Government Headquarters in Admiralty in 2014 were a major theatre of protest, these set-ups

also mushroomed in more 'ordinary' formats elsewhere in the city in 2019. Throughout 2019 and 2020, protest messages were mounted on walls inside a neighbourhood noodle shop, on the pillars of a highway overpass, next to a subway station, and even in the corridors of some public hospitals (Guardian of Hong Kong 2020). Since the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in July 2020—as the city was rocked by continuous arrests, court hearings, and detentions without bail—these messages have largely vanished.

By examining the pedestrian spaces once occupied by Lennon Walls, this essay traces the affective tension between life somehow going back to normal for many citizens on the one hand, and the ongoing persecution of dissidents on the other. Looking closely at the changing faces and materials of some pedestrian surfaces, this article first challenges the official narrative that the NSL targets only a small group of prodemocracy leaders, showing instead how the law is radically transforming the spaces, politics, and culture of the city. Second, it locates the politics of crackdown and resistance outside the subjectivity of the rulers or the ruled, the arrests of activists, or the tactics of the protestors. Rather, it focuses on the visual moments and sensual encounters of residents walking through their neighbourhoods, revealing an emergent politics of affect in which the 'intensities of feeling'—sounds, senses, and other non-verbal dynamics—prevail (Thrift 2004; Massumi 2002). By mapping the affective cityscape, I aim to deepen an understanding of authoritarian politics as embodied in everyday life. I also argue that the government's efforts to clean up have paradoxically reinforced those 'intensities of feeling' the clean-up was supposed to suppress.

Since the enactment of the NSL, the Hong Kong police have charged and imprisoned many prodemocracy leaders, lawyers, scholars, elected councillors, civil society activists, and journalists over their organisation of and participation in banned gatherings and a primary election for the now-postponed Legislative Council election—all of which have been redefined as secessionist activities. The detention and heavy sentencing of some iconic figures—such as *Apple Daily*'s owner, Jimmy Lai, and Scholarism's leader Joshua Wong—have made

headlines around the world (Wong and Lau 2021; Siu 2021). While these cases have attracted most of the media attention, the government has also locked up thousands of citizens, many of them youngsters, who participated in the protests of 2019 and 2020. Their crimes range from displaying or shouting certain slogans to posting certain news on Facebook, from struggling with the police to being found with a laser pointer or a cutter in their backpack, among many others. Combined with the anti-pandemic gathering ban that began in mid-2020, the NSL effectively ended all rallies, protests, and public gatherings critical of the government (Wong and Cheng 2021).

This is perhaps the first time in the recent history of the city that citizens have seen so many political prosecutions. Behind these arrests and heavy sentencing are Hong Kong's leaders, who have remained indifferent to the mass exodus of disappointed citizens who have chosen to leave Hong Kong, their homes, stable jobs, and loved ones (Wordie 2021). Chief Executive Carrie Lam claimed 'the Law has restored social order and brought the city back on the right track', while other government officials welcomed the NSL, saying it was ushering in a 'new favourable era' (SCMP 2021).

With the government-aligned press and political leaders sounding more and more like a propaganda operation, many citizens feel increasingly alienated from the state and question its severe bans on gatherings during the pandemic. The public's distrust of the government is also reflected in the city's low vaccination rate and the widespread refusal to download and use the government's public health tracing app, as people fear these tools will be used for political surveillance. But between the continuous arrests, court hearings, and the plainly false official claims of normalcy and stability, what is happening in the city at the pedestrian level? While the protests and the Lennon Walls have disappeared, have the streets reverted to the grey concrete surfaces they once were?

This essay traces some encounters during and after the protests in the Eastern District of Hong Kong Island, a part of the city I often visit. I have included photos of a pedestrian tunnel, pavements, and elevated highway support pillars that during

and after the protests were transformed into major displays of discontent. By showing the ways the government has scraped away or covered over all protest messages, post-it notes, and graffiti, and the new kind of visual and sensual experiences residents like me have had, this essay attends to that affective everyday realm that is not often captured by media headlines.

Three Incidents

Some brief history is useful here. The Eastern District of Hong Kong has always been a rather quiet residential area, around 20 minutes east of the Central Business District (CBD) by bus or subway. It is home to about half a million ageing people and middle-class families. When Carrie Lam's administration announced its intention to push forward with the ELAB despite the fact two million citizens had joined rallies against it in June 2019, many protestors felt desperate and decided to adopt a new strategy of decentralising the protest movement to as many residential areas as possible. Dubbed 'blossoming in every district' (區區開花), the strategy was meant to reach out to more citizens and avoid focusing exclusively on the heavily policed CBD, where the Government Headquarters is and where the Occupy Central Movement of 2014 and many protests in the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement concentrated. Following this strategic adjustment, protestors started to create roadblocks, organise handholding human-chain demonstrations, and set up Lennon Walls in multiple residential districts.

Three protest-related incidents in the Eastern District neighbourhoods of North Point, Taikoo, and Sai Wan Ho provide us with some insight into the affective politics of today's Hong Kong. The first was on 5 August 2019 when a group of men in white shirts took up batons to beat protestors passing through North Point. The attackers were allegedly linked to the Fujianese Fellows Association, which has close connections with pro-Beijing forces. Protestors felt the police did not protect them from the attacks and left them to defend themselves (Ramsay 2019). The second incident

was on 11 August 2019, when a team of riot police fired teargas inside the Taikoo subway station to stop protestors. In the encounter, police were seen pushing over protestors on a moving elevator, almost creating a stampede (Siu and Zhang 2019). The third incident, on 1 November 2019 in Sai Wan Ho, was one of the major escalations of 2019: a young protestor who was trying to set up a road-block at a major crossroads outside the Sai Wan Ho subway station was shot in the stomach by a police officer (Lau and Cheung 2019).

These three events stirred emotions in the normally quiet, comfortable middle-class residential areas of Eastern District. They brought triad and police violence, roadblocks, anti-government slogans, and teargas on to the doorsteps of ordinary residents, including mothers with babies, elders in wheelchairs, and nuclear families trying to find a place to eat in the neighbourhood. For many residents who did not normally join the protests, this was their first experience of breathing teargas, feeling the acid in their throats, getting skin rashes, witnessing violent arrests, and hearing gunshots. All were visceral and painful experiences. One would therefore assume the government would want to quickly erase the memory of such events and alleviate residents' anxiety by quickly returning things to normal, and that the clean-up campaign would at least try to make people forget the most nightmarish details of the protest. Surprisingly, the result of the clean-up effort was rather different.

From Lennon Walls to Government Murals

At the height of the Anti-ELAB Movement, public surfaces in residential neighbourhoods were covered in all kinds of messages, posters, and notices. On the pillar in Eastern District depicted in Figures 1 and 2, the post-it notes were covered in protective plastic. Later, satirical cartoons and slogans printed on A4 sheets were added. One of the biggest slogans—the one that can be read in simplified Chinese characters on white paper at the bottom of the pillar—reads: 'Wherever there

Figure 1 (Left): Lennon Wall on an elevated highway support pillar in Eastern District, 2019.
Figure 2 (Right): The same pillar after 1 July 2020. PC: Ka-ming Wu (CC).

is repression, there is resistance', which is a quote from Mao Zedong. Many posters were torn down, perhaps by residents who held a different opinion about the movement. At the height of the protests, in Eastern District, there were at least a dozen such pillars or walls of protest. These installations lasted on and off from August 2019 to July 2020, when the NSL was enacted. Many pillars then assumed a new face, as the government had them painted with various slogans and images related to traffic safety, such as 'Cross with the green light' and 'Watch out for the elders'. Though colourful, the illustrations, characters, and layout were often not attractive. Whenever I walked towards the pillar in Figures 1 and 2, my eyes often focused on the two rectangular outlines above the mural, and I wondered why they had not been entirely cleaned or covered.

After the enactment of the NSL, more clean-up campaigns were launched across the city. Figures 3 and 4 show another support pillar close to the previous one. In the wake of the NSL in 2020, the surface of the pillar was cleaned and it as painted

white, even though wild vine continued to grow on one side. Figure 4 shows the same pillar in 2021. The wild vine was removed and a tree and butterflies were painted on the surface of the column. The photos also show the extent to which the damaged pavement was mended. The shooting of the young protestor by the police outside the Sai Wan Ho subway station outraged many. Some protestors dug up this pavement and used the paving bricks to establish roadblocks, which were then quickly cleared. Even though these roadblocks were short-lived, for several months in early 2020, residents had to walk on dirt and cobbles where the pavements had been vandalised. By the time the photo in Figure 3 was taken, the footpath had been re-laid with black concrete—a big contrast with the original red bricks. The repair work, however, was not done properly. The pavement was no longer level and, for a long time, the repainted white pillar contrasted strongly with the ugly mended pavement. While perhaps not everyone would be reminded of the shooting, the bodies of the injured, and the battles that took
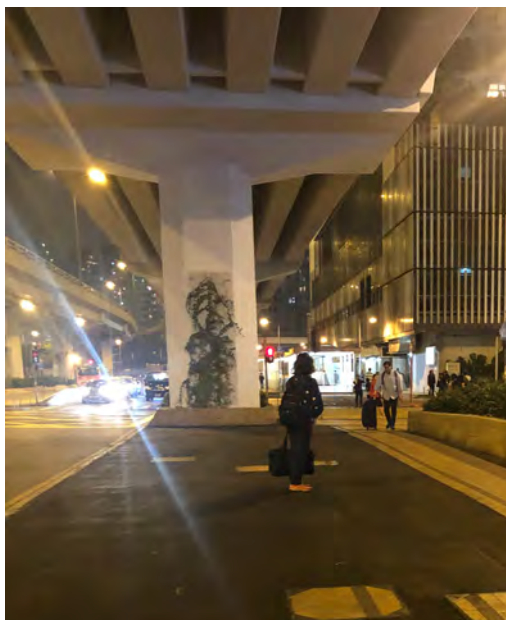
Figure 3 (Left): A cleaned pillar and mended pavement after 1 July 2020. Figure 4 (Right): The same pillar repainted and the pavement added with fences later in 2021. PC: Ka-ming Wu (CC).

place in the area, it was nonetheless awkward for anyone who walked there. In fact, one sometimes had to focus on their feet to avoid tripping; residents using strollers, wheelchairs, or shopping carts would feel the bumps even more.

The painting of murals on pillars that had been covered with protest messages started in the summer of 2021 in many areas of the Eastern and other districts. Most of the artwork depicted natural themes such as trees, flowers, and butterflies, replacing the traffic safety slogans that had been initially used as a substitute for the protestors' messages. These murals have changed citizens' spatial perspectives of their own neighbourhood. Before the Lennon Walls, passers-by barely noticed these highway pillars, which were dusty, dull, and merely functional. The Lennon Walls drew residents to look closer at the messages. The new murals, instead, draw one's eyes up, offering people a vertical perspective of how the neighbourhood has been surrounded by elevated highways and bridges. The murals brighten and generally beautify the walkways under the highway, yet somehow they create a stronger tension between the repainted surfaces of the community and the daily news of trials and arrests. The government likely expected the murals to deter graffiti, and make vandalising more difficult, but this also raises the question of why the previous safety messages were erased so quickly.

As mentioned, Lennon Walls appeared in different settings. The walls of the pedestrian tunnel in Eastern District pictured in Figure 6 were previously covered in thousands of protest messages. There were multiple clean-up efforts, none of which was successful, as graffiti and protest slogans reappeared after each paint-over. The government eventually came up with a kind of wall covering similar to a white board. Mounted over the concrete tunnel wall, this 'wallpaper' with its pattern of white flowers on a blue background repels most types of oil paint. Walking through this tunnel is a rather dizzying experience and it is difficult not to wonder what lies underneath. One can also see the cut marks left by sharp tools. This picture was taken in July 2021, two years
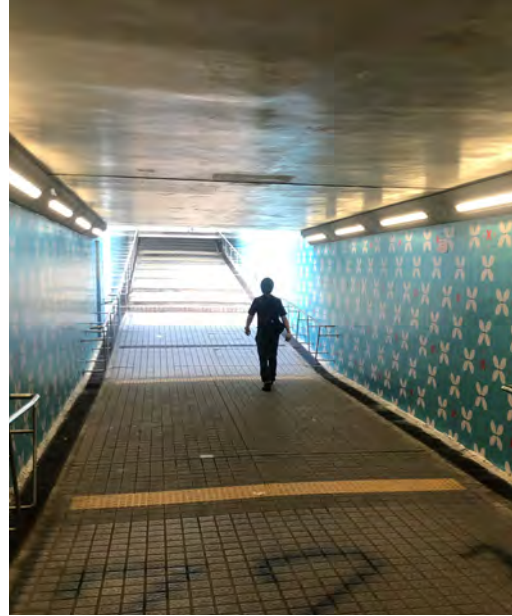
Figure 5 (Left): Painting a mural, September 2021. Figure 6 (Right): Wall covering in a pedestrian tunnel, July 2021. PC: Ka-ming Wu (CC).

after civilians were indiscriminately attacked by triads in the Yuen Long subway station on 21 July 2019. The number 721, representing 21 July, can be seen spraypainted on the ground to avoid the paint-resistant wallpaper. This was wiped clean a few days later.

Affective Afterlives

A cultural studies perspective of Hong Kong after the protests would probably identify petty sabotage, ambiguous graffiti, online boycotts, and satirical writings as windows of potential contestations and continuing resistance when open opposition is no longer allowed. One could also link these small acts to the 'infrapolitics' James Scott (2012: 113) brilliantly defined as the 'prevailing genre of day-to-day politics for most of the worlds' disenfranchised, for those living in autocratic settings, for the peasantry, and for those living as subordinates in patriarchal families'.

By concentrating on the affective realm beyond the protest movement, and examining changing pedestrian surfaces, I have focused on bodily sensations and the ways they interact with the changing visual and material surfaces of the neighbourhood. I have observed the ways pedestrians hop over rain puddles formed in the cracks where new black concrete meets old red paving bricks. I have paid attention to the feelings of pedestrians walking through a tunnel of shiny flowery wallpaper trying to convey the message that nothing has happened. I have shown the mixed feelings a pedestrian may experience when they see traffic safety messages in ugly images, as well as their suspicion and uncertainty when they see new art murals with nature motifs under the elevated highway.

This essay maps affect—that is, the deeply sensual, visual, and bodily experiences of walking through and feeling the changing materiality of a neighbourhood after the protests, the clean-up, and now the beautification campaigns. I have shown the government's efforts to deploy various kinds of material coverings, official messages, and even

artwork to erase evidence of the protests from urban surfaces. The government might hope these efforts will ideologically restructure 'the material interactions of things' and accordingly 'interpellate the new citizen subjects' (Massumi 2002: 1–2), but the results have been mixed at best. By bringing everyday matter, the pedestrian body, sensation, and affect to the picture, I have attempted to complicate our understanding of the effects of ideological apparatus and of the relationship between power and culture, going beyond an understanding of affective politics in today's Hong Kong as a simple dialectic between political crackdown and resistance.

I argue that the state's constant efforts to clean up have paradoxically reinforced those 'intensities of feeling' the clean-up was supposed to suppress. Apprehension about the reappearance of protest messages is ironically sustaining—and even reinforcing—the affectivities of the protests. To many ordinary citizens—including those who did not agree with the protest movement—seeing and feeling the rapidly changing material faces of their neighbourhoods and walking on the repaired pavements can be an intensively sensual experience. It is about coming to terms with the realisation there is no going back to normal in this 'new favourable era'. ∎

Event Horizon PC: (CC)
Anthony Gormley, 2016.

Hong Kong's Socioeconomic Divide on the Rise

Lessons from the 'Redevelopment' of the Graham Street Market

Maurizio MARINELLI

In 2007, Hong Kong's Urban Renewal Authority declared the 150-year-old Graham Street Market 'a slum' and announced 'redevelopment' plans that would replace it with four luxury high-rise office buildings and hotels. This essay analyses the market's historical function and the actions of concerned civil society organisations vis-a-vis government authorities and urban developers in the battle to 'save the market'. It argues that the Graham Street Market is both a laboratory for normative urban governmentality and a testing ground for grassroots practices of collective identity and sustainability.

While we are heading towards the 2022 Hong Kong Chief Executive 'election', scheduled for 27 March, it is worth remembering that on 26 March 2017, when former chief secretary and pro-Beijing candidate Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor was 'elected'[1] as the new Chief Executive, she pledged to heal the city's social divide, declaring: 'Hong Kong, our home, is suffering from quite a serious divisiveness and has accumulated a lot of frustration. My priority will be to heal the divide and to ease the frustration—and to unite our society to move forward' (Ng 2017). Significantly, she added: 'I too want

more democracy in Hong Kong. But Hong Kong is facing a lot of problems. Why don't we start with the easier subjects first?' (Ng 2017).

Contrary to the Chief Executive's disingenuous statement, the socioeconomic divide is not an 'easy subject'; rather, it is the most striking characteristic of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's model of normative urbanism, which is the focus of this essay. Using textual analysis, interviews, and participatory action research, this essay aims to contribute to the scholarship on the sociospatial politics of land redevelopment and displacement in Hong Kong, arguing that what I define as the normative urbanist logic of disciplining and sanitising public space has drastically accelerated since the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 July 1997. This essay offers both a critique of the dominant ideology of economic prosperity—what Wing-Shing Tang (2017) poignantly defines as 'hegemony-cum-alienated redevelopment'—and an analysis of the forms of resistance to the urban planning interventions that have determined the transformation of the physical and socioeconomic structures of dwelling and retailing, changing forever the practices of everyday life. The selected focus is the progressive annihilation of fresh food markets, which were traditionally at the centre of Hong Kong citizens' way of life and which now have mostly been replaced with ultra-modern, luxury, highrise buildings.

Street markets offer a unique lens through which to investigate the political discourse of urban areas as a field of inquiry and analyse the negotiation processes between the vertical strategies of land redevelopment deployed by the dominant powers and the horizontal tactics of urban resistance deployed by citizens (Lefebvre 2003). These places are barometers of equity and economic development, collective sociality, and sustainability, living heritage, socioecological prosperity, and community cohesion (Shepherd 2009; Stillerman 2006; Watson and Wells 2005; Marinelli 2018). In Hong Kong, they have become sites of conflict and compromise, vibrant expressions of collective identity, embodied resistance, and the production of social capital. Analysing the transformation of street markets offers significant insights into the ramifications of the socioeconomic and spatial divides, allowing us to challenge Hong Kong's facade of economic prosperity and to test alternative pathways towards socioecologically sustainable prosperity. In this vein, this essay takes a 'history from below' approach to rescue the extraordinary stories of ordinary people and their everyday experiences from the 'enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1966). It also advocates a 'sustainability from below' approach as opposed to sustainable livelihood discourses (Morse and McNamara 2013; Lau 2010).

The Graham Street Market: The Context

Hong Kong's uneven cityscape is emblematic of the hegemonic logic of the 'city for profit' versus the 'city for people' (Brenner et al. 2009). The dominant ideology of economic prosperity is dictated by the sociospatial politics of land redevelopment and displacement (Tang et al. 2011). At the macroeconomic level, the uneven distribution of wealth serves as evidence of this: Hong Kong's Gini coefficient in 2021 has widened to 0.539—not only the highest rating recorded in four decades in the city, but also the highest rating of any developed economy (Chiu 2004; Forrest et al. 2004; World Population Review 2021). In recent years, income disparity has widened, and quality of life has declined for the city's 7.3 million residents, with the top 1 per cent becoming richer, while 1.3 million residents (20 per cent of the population) live below the poverty line.

At the microlevel, the evidence is provided by the numerous 'urban renewal projects'. Here, I will concentrate on the 150-year-old Graham Street Market (嘉咸街市集, Gayanggai in Cantonese)—Hong Kong's oldest market, and a remarkable example of living heritage. The Urban Renewal Authority (URA), a Hong Kong Government statutory body formed in 2001 to promote and undertake urban redevelopment, uses the term 'project' to refer to the market's transformation from 2007, arguing: 'The living and built environment will be improved to facilitate a regeneration

of the vibrancy of the neighbourhood as well as preserving the identity of the place' (URA n.d.). However, as we will see, the upgrading of the neighbourhood was not necessarily meant for the former residents or the market's stall vendors and shop operators, since most of these were expected to accept compensation and leave during the 'redevelopment', which is what happened.
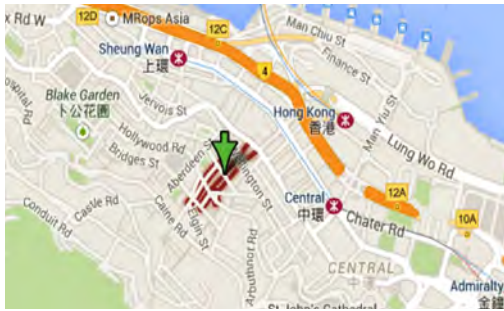
Map showing the location of Graham Street Market.

Historically, street hawking was the first step up Hong Kong's economic ladder, especially for newcomers from mainland China. This led to a huge increase in the number of hawkers, from around 13,000 in the 1920s to more than 70,000 in the 1950s and 1960s (Smart 1989: 52). In the 1970s, the British colonial government decided to take an active role in disciplining public space: first, it stopped issuing hawkers' licences, in 1973, and then, throughout the 1980s, it progressively turned street markets into public markets in the name of 'progress' and for the sake of 'public health'. The outcome was the development of 'modern', 'civilised', and 'hygienic' urban spaces, despite the collateral damage of annihilating living heritage. Here, I define living heritage as the complex of informal activities, embodied social relationships, and cultural practices that create collective forms of everyday life and coexistence in a specific locale. In this view, the street market is a perfect example of living heritage; maintaining its vibrancy and keeping it alive are the *sine qua non* to continue to bring disparate social, ethnic, and generational groups together, engendering a sense of community among residents. The significance of the Graham

Street Market lies in its living past and community value, which for a long time coalesced into a remarkable resilience in the face of change and challenging circumstances.

In his 2001 study of Hong Kong, Hikaru Kinoshita asked: 'When does a street market come to an end?' He identified five stages in the development of the city. First, hawkers appeared on a popular street; second, they gradually formed two rows on both sides of the street; third, between the 1930s and 1970s, many street hawkers selling raw meat and fish moved into low-rise market buildings, while in the fourth stage temporary market buildings were erected to contain the hawkers. In the fifth and final stage, since the 1980s, 'entire retail markets have been moved into high-rise buildings, leaving very few hawkers outside' (Kinoshita 2001: 82). However, Graham Street Market did not change from stages two–three to four–five until the URA's 2007 'renewal project'. But let us start with the origins of the market.

Undated historical photograph of Graham Street Market. PC: Heritage Discovery Centre Library of the Antiquity and Monuments Office, Hong Kong.

PC: The image is taken from URA (2008).

The Origins, Development, and Challenges of Graham Street Market

In Hong Kong's Central District, Peel Street runs parallel to Graham Street. The two streets were built in the 1840s, at the beginning of the colonial era. Street hawkers have operated in this area since 1841 when the market became known as the 'Middle Bazaar'. In the racially segregated colonial society, Chinese people were only allowed to live in the western part of what was then called Victoria City, centred on present-day Central and extending from today's Kennedy Town, Shek Tong Tsui, and Sai Ying Pun to present-day Wan Chai (Carroll 2007: 74–75). Therefore, as Mee Kam Ng (2014: 83) noted: 'The then "China Town" west of the CBD was filled with street markets' and '[t]he Graham and Peel Street area became one of the first settlement sites for the Chinese community, and it was also the trading centre for Parsee and Indian merchants'. Significantly, however, the first hawkers' licences were formally issued in 1946

and the last one in 1980, even though from 1973 the government had generally ceased to issue new licences.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, street hawkers continued to operate in the area alongside indoor retail vendors and more formal stores, which were on the ground floors of two four-storey tenement buildings called *tong lau* (唐樓), on Graham and Peel streets. Built from the late nineteenth century until 1964, the *tong lau* were designed for both residential (on the upper floors) and commercial (ground floor) uses and represented the livelihood of the market's food vendors.

After the handover, in February 1999, the Land Development Corporation (LDC)—the Government statutory body created in 1988 to oversee urban 'renewal'—approved the Development Scheme Plan to regenerate the area, comprehensively redeveloping the three street blocks where the Graham–Peel Street Market was operating, with the declared aim of 'eliminating environmental nuisance such as on-street hawkers' (LDC 1998, para. 3; cf. LDC 1999). As Ng (2014: 80) observes: 'Similar to many other redevelopment

projects undertaken by the LDC, the objective was to produce more spaces for exchange value.' In 2001, the LDC was replaced with the URA. Both the LDC and the URA have been criticised as 'land robbers' which 'slash and burn' old neighbourhoods (Ng 2014). The momentum for redevelopment and the removal of local shops and affordable housing to make way for upmarket buildings have led to growing community-based resistance movements, especially among the younger generation frustrated with the accelerated social polarisation in the city (Ng 2014).

In 2007, Graham Street Market covered 5,317 square metres, with 360 property interests in 37 buildings with 470 households (1,120 people), 78 shops, and 130 licensed fixed-pitch hawkers and other itinerant peddlers, for a total of 823 traders. According to the URA survey, four blocks were built before World War II, while most of the remainder were built between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s (URA 2007). In the jargon of the URA, this was merely 'a project'. The crucial question is whether this 'project' related to a 'vital living heritage' community or 'a slum' to be eliminated as collateral damage of normative urbanism.

Graham Street Market map: 'Our Vital Living Past', 2008. PC: Maurizio Marinelli.

In 2007, the URA explicitly declared the historical market 'a slum' and announced its 10-year project (2007–17, even though the target completion is now 2024) to regenerate the area 'bounded by Peel Street, Graham Street, Gage Street, Wellington Street, Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Staveley Street and Kin Sau Lane in the Central and Western district' (URA n.d.). Allegedly, the area was sanitised and 'modernised', but it was ultimately normalised under the supervision of the URA, in accordance with its mission 'to promote and undertake urban redevelopment in Hong Kong' (Marinelli 2016a).

In January 2008, three local organisations, the SEE Network, the Central and Western Community Concern Group (中西區關注組, CWCCG), and the Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage (CACH), published and distributed a 12-page fold-out pamphlet with the English title 'Graham Street Market: Our Vital Living Past' (see Pic. 5). Behind the playful appearance of the cartoon map,

this document read as a powerful civic and political statement. The pamphlet's authors argued that the URA-led 'project' was purely profit-driven and would have turned the whole area into a dusty building site, inexorably annihilating the preexisting market. In fact, in July 2007, the URA had announced plans 'to demolish the old tenement buildings [*tong lau*] on Graham and Peel Streets' (URA n.d.), without mentioning that the market would be torn down in the process. According to the URA-led 'project', 'only' 38 of the 78 shops would have been affected, but ultimately all 823 traders would have been impacted. The redevelopment would have transformed the ground-floor area of 20,219 square metres (on a site area of 5,330 square metres) into 68,533 square metres, including 44,575 square metres for commercial use and 293 new flats, allegedly leaving 2,060 square metres for 'a strong open space spine accentuated with piazzas and courtyard spaces' (URA n.d.).[2]
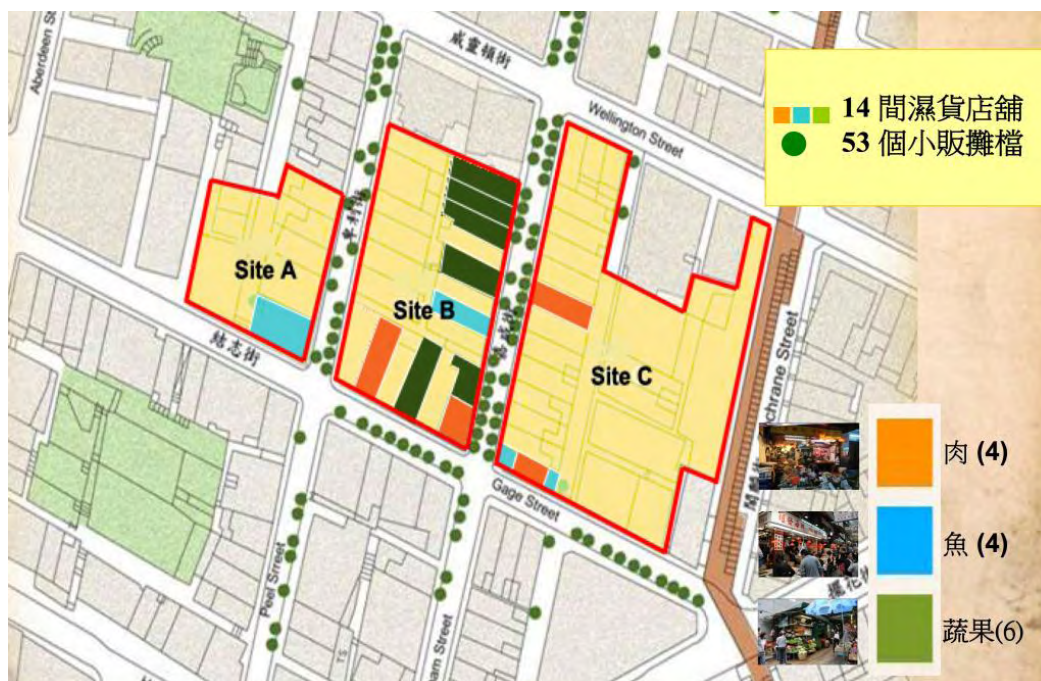
Site plan for Graham Street Market. PC: URA (2008).

Artist's impression of the wet market shops (viewed from Graham Street). PC: URA (2008).

The final aim of redesigning this urban space was to build a giant luxury complex, with four sleek and glittering high-rises, including: two residential blocks comprising 293 luxury flats (Sites A and B in Pic. 6), one 26-storey hotel with 8,918 square metres of floor space, one 32-storey office building with 37,161 square metres of space for sale, and an underground car park (Site C in Pic. 6). All this 'luxury' was to emerge from the ashes of the historical market's stalls. In the URA's three-dimensional architectural rendering, there was also an 'Old Market Street' (Pics 7 and 8), but the adjective 'old' was merely an evocative charm on a new, artificial tourist attraction—the uncanny triumph of the fake, after the destruction of the real old market.

In 2007, the overall cost of the renewal operation that would have stopped the heartbeat of one of Hong Kong's oldest neighbourhoods was estimated at a controversial HK$487 million (roughly equivalent to US$3.8 billion) (URA 2007), which was justified in the name of progress, modernity, and ultimately, the normative-prescriptive character of urban governmentality.

The Graham Street Market 'Project' and the Challenges for Social Prosper

Over the years, the redevelopment of the Graham Street Market became one of the URA's most controversial projects. The distinctive location added to the complications. The government was fully aware of the strategic importance of the Central District for Hong Kong; the market occupies an extremely congested part of Central, which had to be made more accessible, in terms of both onsite and global connectivity.

Artist's impression of the wet market shops
(viewed from Graham Street). PC: URA (2008).

In January 2008, Hong Kong Central–born Katty Law, co-founder of the CWCCG, together with Australian architect and art critic John Batten, questioned the truthfulness of the URA's claims regarding the Graham Street redevelopment project (Law 2008). Law's argument was that the URA's statements were deliberately 'misleading' as they did not intend to take into consideration the needs and desires of community members and hawkers. Furthermore, she emphasised that the URA project was ignoring important factors of the redevelopment that would have negatively affected the hawkers, such as the loss of business, the erasure of at least 30 food stalls, the demolition of 37 buildings, and numerous safety hazards. Law also complained that the URA had not been straightforward or transparent.

Community members have repeatedly urged the URA to present an honest and complete picture of its redevelopment plan as the three-dimensional model presented to the public in 2008 showed only three levels of shopping mall along the so-called Old Market Street, and did not show the four high-rise towers. When asked to present the model produced for the Town Planning Board, the URA said it had been damaged and sent to Shenzhen for repair. Apparently, it never came back. Therefore, Law raised the legitimate question: 'Why is URA so afraid to show us the true picture?' (Law 2008; Marinelli 2016b).

On 28 July 2008, during a media briefing to announce detailed measures for the 'Makeover of Graham Street Market', former URA chairman Barry Cheung emphasised the adoption of 'tactical measures' to keep 'the nearby century-old market intact as well as to enhance its vibrancy' (URA 2008). This was evidence of the URA's appropriation of the language of the community-concern groups. Cheung's speech was an attempt to distinguish between what he called

The progressive disappearance of Graham Street Market. PC: Maurizio Marinelli.

'the construction project' and 'the market-area' (URA 2008). Cheung claimed 'the project' would only affect a specific area, while the market would be external to 'the project': 'Strictly speaking, the market is outside the boundary of the Peel Street/Graham Street project. Nevertheless, the URA considers it as a *golden opportunity* to *improve the living environment* of residents in *dilapidated buildings* as well as to help *save the market* from further shrinking' (URA 2008; emphasis added). The paradox is evident: anyone who is familiar with the market's extension and the street hawkers' embeddedness within the perimeter of the 'project' would find the claim that the market is outside the area to be redeveloped disingenuous. But Cheung insisted that 'tactic measures' would be 'targeted to ensure that *business is as usual* in the market during the construction of *the project*, and to prevent it from further shrinking as a result of *natural gentrification* already taking place there' (URA 2008; emphasis added).

The URA's justification derives, allegedly, from its mapping of 'a *comprehensive plan* to address the needs and requirements of shops and stalls operating in the market', with a promise that, based on its ability to hear '*the voices of the community to retain the market*' when the 'project' was announced in 2007, '[c]onstruction work will be carried out *in stages* to *minimize inconvenience* to market stall operators and users' (URA 2008; emphasis added). The photographs I have taken over a 10-year period (2008–18), however, prove otherwise (see photos above).

On 7 August 2008, the URA convened a focus group meeting in Central. A URA spokesman declared:

> We have been soliciting community views on the planning of the Peel Street/Graham Street project since 2005. While the Master Layout Plan of the project was approved by the Town Planning Board in May 2007, the URA attaches a great deal of importance on maintaining the local features and characters within and in the vicinity of the Peel Street/Graham Street project. (URA 2008)

One of the outcomes of the focus group meeting was the creation of a Conservatory Advisory Panel, which included representatives of the street hawkers and residents in addition to district council members, with the aim of 'looking into matters related to preservation elements around our project area' (URA 2008). Unfortunately, these statements have proved to be purely cosmetic, and no substantial changes have been made.

Aggravated Precarity and Increasing Social Division

The lack of communication and consultation with the public has progressively heightened the vendors' sense of vulnerability and precarity, increasing fears about 'what will really happen at the end of the redevelopment' (Law 2008). The crucial issue for the Graham Street Market is the relationship between public space and private interests in the redevelopment of Central Hong Kong. The normative urbanist discourse of 'what ought to be' according to the master plan is dominated by the logic of increasing the area's exchange value while dismissing the community's concerns for the use-value of the marketplace. This logic is strictly interrelated with what Harvey calls the 'accumulation' of public resources 'by dispossession' (Harvey 2004: 64). The consequence is the aggravation of conditions of precarity, which Butler (2009: 25–26) defines as 'a politically induced condition of maximized precariousness'. Butler further argues that '[a]ggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles' and, building on Emmanuel Levinas, acknowledges the possibility of seeing 'how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended' (Butler 2004: xviii).

In this sense, I argue that the unmasking of the dominant narrative upheld by the URA in 2007–08 created a space for articulating critical views of government policy and saw the emergence of a collective civic culture. In 2007, activist Chu Hoi-dick—who strenuously fought to save the Star Ferry and Queen's piers from destruction in late 2006 and early 2007—criticised the government's top-down policymaking. He argued that Hong Kong's heritage activism had brought to the fore the lack of democratic practices: 'I do not deny this is just the beginning of a new political movement. It is a movement to re-establish the identity of Hong Kong people, not controlled by the British and not controlled by Beijing' (cited in Pomfret 2007). One could even argue that the battle to save the living heritage of Hong Kong's street markets was a precursor of the 2014 'Umbrella Movement'. This

is what emerges from the numerous interviews and participatory action research I have conducted over the years with street vendors, community concern groups, and government officials.

Significant also are the remarks by Designing Hong Kong CEO and local politician Paul Zimmerman and Australian architect John Batten, who emphasised how less than two years after the first focus group meeting, in the spring of 2010, the real estate trust was sold to Link Asset Management, which was created and floated on the stock market in 2008. Batten added that 'this is certainly not an enterprise committed to social corporate responsibility ... It is a sort of buffer for the Government, so that it does not have to get directly involved' (Marinelli 2012). Link also took over the carparks and retail and commercial spaces included in the housing estates built by the Housing Authority, with the declared aim of 'upgrading them'. However, the real final aim of upgrading was to 'generate higher revenue, since once the upgrading has been completed, the rent goes up' (Marinelli 2012). According to Batten, this is what is happening with the Graham Street Market: 'The government wants to maximise floor-space and money so they like luxury tower-blocks' (Marinelli 2012)—in other words, increasing the exchange value rather than the use-value. Batten pointed to a series of *tong lau* buildings, all of which would have to come down to make way for the 26-storey luxury hotel. Batten and Law's activism is motivated by the desire to prevent the total annihilation of this living heritage: 'The issue with the URA is that they want to take over the public space. They will have the monopoly of the tenure of the place: there will be just one single landlord (the URA), not many. Thus, the URA will control this [formerly public] space' (Marinelli 2012).

For Batten, as an architect, and Paul Zimmerman, an environmentalist, politician, and businessman: 'It is essential to develop a holistic approach to good urban planning: this should guarantee pedestrian flows, the existence of public space, and appropriate buildings that allow airflow and sunlight' (Marinelli 2012). In this sense, the battle to save Graham Street Market has turned this historical, vibrant space into a testing ground for

the preservation of forms of healthy, sustainable living, community identity value formation, and bottom-up practices of democratisation.

Phased Redevelopment as a Tactic of Normative Urbanism

After multiple complaints and demonstrations organised by the CWCCG, in 2010–11, the URA promised a 'phased redevelopment' (URA 2011). It announced it would focus on one area first, clearing 'Site B', while building a two-storey 'New Market' complex to rehouse the affected shop owners. The URA declared it wanted 'to create synergy with the current street market' and only later would it have started working on the other two sites, A and C (URA 2011).

In 2011, the URA also promised to adopt 'a caring and sustainable approach' aimed at 'improving the physical living–working environment whilst offering opportunities to retain the historical-cultural characteristics as well as the social network of the district' (URA 2011). Therefore, it argued:

> Apart from the design and planning of the overall development, interim measures such as phased redevelopment for temporal re-site [sic] of the current market stakeholders at Site B to Site A and C, provisioning of electric meter for hawkers and market vibrancy promotion were also carried out to enhance the vibrancy of street markets. (URA 2011)

The URA had skilfully appropriated both the language and the civic-political discourse of its critics to weaken their strength and invalidate their arguments. However, at the time, the acknowledgement of the necessity to proceed through a 'phased redevelopment', accompanied by the URA's promises, appeared to be a limited, although temporary, 'success', especially compared with the original project to annihilate the whole market. The URA's pledges were accompanied by a government-led promotional campaign called 'Hong Kong Our Home', which featured many of the market's vendors. Immediately after that, it became clear that the promised 'New Market' would allow fewer than half of the vendors to be relocated, as there were only 10 spaces in the new complex—all reserved for vendors of wet goods, such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and meat. Serious questions were also raised about the rates to be paid for the new stalls after the end of the three-year period of rent control promised by the URA (Chan 2013).

I conducted fieldwork between 2008 and 2018. I noticed that, by 2013–14, the transformation of the site was already advanced: the redevelopment had already affected 37 buildings, forcing out dozens of stall vendors whose family had been there for generations, while the remaining traders lost 30–50 per cent of their business. Furthermore, the demographics of the customers and residents in the area were progressively changing, and the whole market was disquietingly dominated by a huge cloud of dust. The construction of Site B was in progress, with an estimated completion date of 2017, while the targeted completion date for Sites A and B was 2021. However, in October 2021, the URA's website was reporting the following: 'Site B completed in 2019, Site A is expected to be completed in 2023, Site C is expected to be completed in 2024' (URA n.d.).

According to my observations and onsite interviews, while construction of the three sites has not been completed, the vibrancy of the historical market has indeed faded. During a 2016 meeting with URA Director Michael Ma, I asked him whether the 'project' risked the destruction of Hong Kong's living heritage. He first stated that '[h]eritage and its urban landscape is a manifestation of the cultural values of a community', but then added that 'while Hong Kong's colonial history was very short … the pre-colonial time expanded over thousands of years', thus claiming that the preexisting, millenarian Chinese heritage of Hong Kong was erased by British colonial rule (Marinelli 2016a). One must acknowledge, however, that the temporalities of the sociospatial redevelopment seem to indicate an acceleration of the destruction of living heritage after the 1997 transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the PRC.

In the case of Graham Street Market, it was the LDC that put forward the Development Scheme Plan to redevelop the area, allegedly in the name of 'environmental improvement ... by eliminating environmental nuisance such as on-street hawkers' (LDC 1998). The plan was approved by the Town Planning Board in February 1999 but not implemented (LDC 1999). After the LDC passed the baton to the URA in 2001, the URA submitted a revised Redevelopment Master Plan, which contained the 'project' with four high-rises, and the Town Planning Board approved it in May 2007 (URA n.d., 2011). Unfortunately, the unstoppable transformation has led to the demise of this historical market; this proves that the normative urbanist logic of disciplining and sanitising public space has drastically accelerated and ultimately won in Hong Kong, creating increasing levels of precarity, uncertainty, and vulnerability, and widening the social divide.

Lessons of the Present and Past, and Hopes for the Future?

Intense debates about what is the urban (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Scott and Storper 2015; Peck 2015) call for concrete investigations through a bottom-up approach to understand where our daily experiences of the urban are embodied. This is the crux of the urbanist discourse. For urban planners and architects, the focus should be on built forms and structure, while historians and geographers call for more attention to patterns of urban growth and transformative processes. This essay advocates an epistemological shift to bring into the urbanist discourse a sensitivity to residents' social interactions, their sense of belonging, and the construction of communities within cities.

I concur with Merrifield that the main political theme in the unfolding of contemporary urbanism should be a shift 'from the right to the city to the politics of the encounter' (Merrifield 2013: xvii). Street markets are the entry point to understand how and to what degree an eco-socially sustain-able urban life is produced and experienced—paraphrasing Lefebvre (2003): the social ontology of the everyday.

Street markets enable daily encounters among urban residents and between people and things; they are critical spaces to support urban residents' livelihoods. Street markets allow us to delve into the conflicting trajectories and comparative dynamics of gentrified neighbourhoods, since the global neoliberal restructuring of urban space brings to the fore fundamental questions about rights and practices to preserve communities and their living heritage. Therefore, this essay's focus responds to the appeal of gentrification studies for a critical scholarly commitment to 'viewing the most serious consequence of gentrification—displacement—"from below" (e.g. those who experience it)' (Slater 2012: 572; see also Slater et al. 2004; Lees et al. 2016). The study of street markets allows us to delve into the micropolitical dynamics of the urban, shedding light on the material processes of the everyday, which are critical for further investigating the ontological nexus of variegated practices and relations that are shaping the urban. This focus allows us to explore issues related to sustainable social prosperity and community cohesion, adopting a 'history from below' and 'sustainability from below' perspective, to better understand the increasing sociopolitically induced condition of precarity (Butler 2009).

Street markets help us to better understand the nexus between politics and policy from the bottom up. In colonial and global Hong Kong, street markets are sites where both the normative urbanist logic and the possible counterdiscourses have reached their climax: 'what ought to be' has suppressed any possibility of what could have been preserved and valued.

The street markets' progressive annihilation, accompanied by drastic changes in the practices of everyday life, shows how citizens' tactics for coping with the policy–politics nexus succumb to normative urbanism. Private and public capital exert relentless forms of power in regulating and rewriting the urban fabric. At the horizontal level, precariousness and precarity are coalescing, denaturalising Hong Kong citizens' sense of collective

identity, and challenging possible pathways to heterotopic forms of eco-socially sustainable prosperity. Graham Street Market is the epitome of the normative urbanist logic of modernising, sanitising, and disciplining both public space and those who inhabit it. The state cannot accept what it considers to be outside the norm, while urban informality involves 'complex adaptive assemblages' (Dovey 2012: 372).

Graham Street Market's vendors and customers were 'outside the norm' as differentiated users of public space, and not generic urban subjects. Historical processes and social patterns of inhabiting this locale had created a sense of belonging and a collective identity that was not in line with the universalising character that normative urbanism presupposes and implies. The state, and its executive arm embodied by statutory bodies, encompassed an urban strategy mechanistically based on 'what ought to be' rather than 'what could be'; the implementation of the Graham Street Market 'project' aimed to increase the area's exchange value, ignoring the use-value of public space. In the process of creating 'what ought to be', Graham Street Market was not a 'site of vibrant social encounters' (Watson 2009: 1580), but merely collateral damage.

Perhaps there is a dim ray of hope. As I write these lines in October 2021, URA Director Wai Chi-sing has recently declared the authority will launch a pilot scheme, sending questionnaires to 250 apartment-owners in an old building on Sai Wan Ho Street in Shau Kei Wan, asking them whether they want their flats to be redeveloped or just renovated. One is left to wonder whether this questionnaire indicates the beginning of a new (holistic?) strategy, 'a new bottom-up approach to urban regeneration ... a fine-tuned version of previous demand-led models' (Ng and Low 2021) or is merely wishful thinking. Judging from the redevelopment 'project' for this street, which was awarded by the URA to Kingland Century Limited in September 2015 (URA 2015), might the questionnaires simply be another appropriation of community-concern groups' language and heritage preservation discourse? Or might this be just a tactical, propagandistic electoral measure for Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who on 6 October

2021 delivered her annual address to the Legislative Council, thanking 'the earnest words of the central government, that it will always provide staunch support to Hong Kong' (Siu and Jim 2021). On that occasion, she also announced (again) that she intends to address Hong Kong's social divide, put an end to the longstanding housing shortage, and eliminate the tens of thousands of subdivided units and 'cage homes' (Ng and Low 2021) through the creation of vast metropolises away from the city centre, such as the Northern Metropolis and Lantau Tomorrow (Lhatoo 2021). Only time will tell, but the 'history from below' of the Graham Street Market is more an ominous rather than a promising sign for community living and sustainable social prosperity. ∎

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1 In 2016–17, only 3 per cent of the population (233,000 people) was allowed to select the 1,500 Election Committee seats—now reduced to 0.06 per cent (4,800 people) under the new 'patriots-only system' imposed by Beijing.

2 The site area only indicates the surface of one floor while the ground-floor area indicates the whole built area on various floors. The terminology can be deceptive, but that is how one must interpret the figures and the verticalisation of 'the project' to maximise the profits.

Hong Kong, Victoria Peak.
PC: (CC) Allan Watt.

Why Is Reconciliation Impossible?

On the Clash of Emotions between Hong Kong and Mainland China

Shih-Diing LIU
Wei SHI

This essay presents an affective analysis of the antagonism between Hong Kong and mainland China. It illustrates the contexts in which the conflicts are driven by an accumulation of emotional experiences and imaginaries. The divergent emotional positions should be understood as a consequence of nationalism and nativism. Fear and pride are two opposing emotional structures that have become the material basis of ongoing confrontations. Each side uses its own experience to erase that of the other, making regional reconciliation difficult. We suggest that comparing the two structures of feeling helps identify the psychological mechanisms at work.

Since the 1997 handover, tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China have been running high. The strained relationship is driven not only by the deep-seated contradictions embedded in the 'One Country, Two Systems' arrangement, but also by a historical accumulation of mutual emotions, experiences, and imaginaries. Feelings such as anxiety, frustration, and fear have become the most obvious components of the crisis, producing a range of political practices and effects on Hong Kong's postcolonial landscape.

Our thinking about the Hong Kong question is propelled by our reflections on the role of identity and emotional memories in sustaining the hostilities between mainland China and its margins

(Shi 2007; Liu 2005, 2008, 2018). In recent years, the intensified conflicts between Hong Kong and mainland China have triggered our interest in understanding the historical factors that produce different emotional experiences.

Although the conflicts between Hong Kong and mainland China are driven by multiple factors, we believe that differences in identity and self-understanding play a crucial role. We argue that Hong Kong's fear and China's pride constitute two distinctive and clashing emotional structures that have become the affective material basis of ongoing confrontations. In what follows, we contextualise the emotional forces that have gathered to intensify such conflicts.

From Localism to Nostalgia

In Hong Kong, the experiences of British colonial rule and the Cold War cultivated a sense of localism (Law 2007). In the 1980s, negotiations between the Chinese and British governments prompted Hong Kong's citizens to reflect on their identity and culture. During this time, Hong Kong gradually developed a sense of self and collective emotions, including feelings of superiority compared with the economically disadvantaged mainland (Law 2009). At roughly the same time, local academics and artists began exploring the cultural and historical roots of Hong Kong, emphasising the uniqueness of the city's lifestyle and cultural milieu, as well as the complex nature of the historical colonial experience (Abbas 1997; Law 2009; Chun 2017).

In the 1990s, some scholars described Hong Kong as struggling to survive between its two colonisers (Chow 1995: 94); 'localism' was regarded as a form of rebellion against colonial rule. During the late colonial era, a discourse emphasising the uniqueness and autonomy of Hong Kong's culture was inevitably entangled with the binary political imagination formulated during the Cold War, which was framed as the dichotomy of 'totalitarian China versus democratic Hong Kong'. As mainland scholar Qiang Shigong (2008: 90) observed, when faced with Western notions of human rights, rule

of law, democracy, and universal suffrage, China is 'in a state of aphasia' and unable to offer competing discourses. This has made it immensely difficult to win the hearts and minds of Hong Kong's people.

However, local resistance to 'renationalisation' (Erni 2001) and the democracy movement against the Chinese state have combined to reinforce nostalgia for colonialism and the persistent obsession with the uniqueness of the local culture. Some scholars have therefore noted the risk of Hongkongers becoming fixated on localism (Lo and Pang 2007), the 'Great Hong Kong Chauvinism' as well as the essentialised 'Us versus Them' structure (Hung 1997; Ip 1997). As a result, the colonial mindset that saw China as underdeveloped, barbaric, and backward has been preserved. As Chow Wing Sun (2015: 103) observed:

> The thought of 'Great Hong Kong' has been deep-rooted into the minds of the Hong Kong people, who believe that everything about Hong Kong is superior to mainland China, so that they look down on mainland Chinese, and disdain their own Chinese identity.

This is the reason cultural critic Chan Koon-Chung (2012) urged the need to reflect on the tendency to essentialise discourses of Hong Kong localism.

Intensification of Fear

In this sense, intensification of the conflict between Hong Kong and mainland China in recent years should be understood not simply in politico-economic terms, but as a result of the emotional and psychological state driven by nationalism and nativism (Chen 2010: 156–57). Hong Kong's collective sense of uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety, depression, and fear about the future—which are frequently mixed with distrust, frustration, and anger—can be traced back to the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 that determined the fate of Hong Kong after 1997. Since then, such emotions have never faded, but have been expressed in Hong Kong's popular culture

Ten Years (十年, 2015).

and continue to shape Hong Kong's subjectivities. Chow Wing Sun (2015: 126) described the collective feelings of the Hong Kong people in the following terms:

> After its return to China, Hong Kong people feel fearful towards their home country, as they are afraid that the Chinese government would impose the governance approach for the mainland Chinese on them. Moreover, due to the different systems, things that happened in mainland China might appear to be ridiculous and unacceptable to Hong Kong people.

Hong Kong's collective sentiment towards mainland China is obviously complicated. This can be seen clearly in contemporary Hong Kong cinema, which has been obsessed with the 'othering' of China as a means of constituting Hong Kong subjectivity. Some Hong Kong movies explicitly feature the destructiveness of a pervasive, powerful, violent, and fearful 'China', which is characterised as making the lives of Hong Kong people difficult and miserable, and which imagines China as the source of uneasiness and fear. Others portray China as an old-fashioned, backward, yet intimate and ambivalent Other with which to live beside (Shi 2019). In the wake of the Tiananmen incident in 1989, the fear of a despotic, tyrannical China triggered more negative feelings in Hong Kong such as hopelessness and despair. Since the handover, there has been a growing tendency to highlight a sense of powerlessness and anger due to the perception that people in Hong Kong cannot freely decide their own future and way of life—a trend that culminated in 2015 with the release of the movie *Ten Years* (十年).

Released in the wake of the Umbrella Movement and against the backdrop of Chinese President Xi Jinping's call for China's national rejuvenation, the film can be seen as a turning point in the intensification of Hong Kong's politics of fear of the Chinese Other. The movie highlights the pain China brought to Hong Kong and its people, with their fate portrayed as tragic and miserable, entirely deprived of dignity. It features the 'invasion' of tourists from the mainland, the invisible power threatening Hong Kong's political autonomy, the disappearance of local cultures, as well as

Amazing China (厉害了, 我
的国, 2018)

the brainwashing of local youngsters. 'China' is portrayed as an aggressive, insidious, malicious, and unscrupulous oppressor depriving Hongkongers of their rights and freedom. Such a fearsome image is in stark contrast with the discourse of the 'Chinese Dream' and its underlying triumphalism, which is promoted by popular culture and in the media on the mainland.

Ten Years offers an emotional narrative through which to articulate and reinforce the politics of fear that motivates Hong Kong's resistance to state power, which has two features. First, Hong Kong is constructed as the injured and victimised subject under threat and unable to maintain its way of life or dignity, whose people are ultimately unable to control their own destiny. Second, articulated through hatred for the enemy, this politics of fear leads to the cultivation of a rebellious subject who is self-determined and uncompromising when fighting the enemy. The self–other relationship is defined in absolute moral and antagonistic terms of binary opposition that make reconciliation impossible. Imbued with intense feelings of dissatisfaction, indignation, and disgust, the politics of fear

calls for an active and radical political practice to change Hong Kong's fate in more direct and confrontational ways.

Emergence of a Proud Subject

The shift in Hong Kong's collective emotions should be understood with reference to the concurrent triumphalist mood on the mainland, where nationalism has intensified since the late 1990s (Qian 2016). The complex experiences of China's modernisation have created fertile ground for nationalism. The formation of the modern Chinese nation-state overlapped with its experience of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers so that the way Chinese imagine their 'Century of Humiliation' has a powerful influence on the disposition towards nationalism today—manifested, in particular, in the persistent drive to rebuild a strong nation (Chen 2010; Gries 2004).

Since 1949, the political constitution of the national subject in mainland China has been transfixed by a reservoir of stories about the country's shameful past. Shame has been a key component of China's nation-building process. The psychological effects of the traumatic encounters with Western aggression include feelings of anxiety, fear, resentment, humiliation, and grief, accompanied by self-defensiveness and a longing for restoration. Such a mental state has shaped a world view that is grounded in the idea of 'the survival of the fittest', which in turn has fostered the desire for China to become a superpower that can compete with the West, which has driven much of China's nationalism and modernisation.

Our previous analysis of the cinematic production of national pride in the era of Xi Jinping illustrates the most recent psychic transformation of Chinese nationalism (Shi and Liu 2020). Since Xi came to power, his regime has engineered a new nationalist subject in the Chinese Dream through state-sanctioned media narratives. The TV documentary *Amazing China* (厉害了, 我的国, 2018), co-produced by the state-owned China Central Television and China Film, demonstrates that the formation of the new national subject is articulated by advanced technology and invested with a strong sense of self-confidence. The continuing obsession with national strength and great power is manifested in TV productions such as *The Rise of the Great Powers* (大国崛起, 2006) and *The Road to Rejuvenation* (复兴之路, 2007). With China now the world's second-largest economy and a regional superpower, the reinvention of pride as nationalism has gained social currency and produced various imaginaries of China's superior position in the world.

Underlying the nation's growing assertiveness is a profound desire to rewrite a history marked by pain and suffering. It is driven by the desire to demonstrate the overcoming of the shame of the past, and the restoration of the dignity of the formerly insulted, humiliated, and outraged subject. The new sense of pride is generated by a psychic reinvention of historical memories and experiences in the new geopolitical context of great power politics. Simply put, a double articulation of China's historical legacies is at work:

the new, desiring subject inherits the political ambition of the Maoist period and rearticulates a desire to be modernised in the reform era. As illustrated in the 2017 film *Wolf Warrior 2* (战狼 2)—in which a Chinese special forces operative travels to Africa to deal with a sadistic band of mercenaries terrorising innocent civilians—the subject of the Chinese Dream desires to be technologically advanced and intends to take the place of the Western Other.

Us Versus Them as Political Manifestation

Hong Kong's fear and China's pride constitute two opposing emotional structures that have become the material basis of ongoing conflicts. In the binary relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China, British colonial modernity is always an 'absent presence' in Hong Kong's self-imagination. This internalised Other is invested with a variety of cultural imaginaries such as modernity and civilisation that cultivate a sense of superiority. In this sense, Hong Kong's anti-China complex and pro-West subjectivities are inseparable. Its emotional energy is exemplified in a series of localist movements.

However, Hong Kong is never a purely foreign Other in the perception of mainland China. Rather, Hong Kong is a compatriot once ruled by the West—a victim of colonial humiliation. Its existence is evidence of the arrogance and greed of colonialism. The nationalist narrative frames the 1997 handover in terms of the Chinese people's history of suffering and a common ancestry, erasing Hong Kong's own emotional experiences.

With the increasing regional integration of the enclave into the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area, the former British colony no longer enjoys a unique status. Meanwhile, mainland China is no longer lagging Hong Kong in terms of modernisation and economic power. The changes between the two further solidify their emotional positions. Fear represents Hong Kong's uneasiness and anxiety about these changes, while pride signifies China's emotional transformation

from a weak to a powerful position. Each side uses its own experience to ignore that of the other—an approach that has made regional reconciliation more difficult.

The tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong provide an opportunity to understand the psychological impact of the rise of China. Whether it is fear or pride, we believe these collective feelings are essential elements to understand the conflict. The affective disjuncture can be seen as a consequence of different aspirations for and pursuits of modernity. Due to the different psychological forces at work, each entity has developed different emotionally charged imaginaries of the self and the other. The self-centrism and enclosure of each's imagination cannot cope with the complicated and changing present. We agree with Baik Youngseo's (2016) claim that the key to reconciliation is the subjects' ability to 'share each other's agony and sufferings' and to feel for and understand one another. He Zhaotian (2005: 255) believes the key to reconciliation in Asia lies in the 'awareness, sympathy, entry, understanding and sharing of the other's deep-seated confusion and worries'. When both parties imagine and construct relations with the other in an opposing manner, only resentment, hostility, and hatred are cultivated. Juxtaposing the two affective planes helps identify the internal mechanisms at work.

The question is: What dialogic space could be opened with this kind of emotional divergence? How can the emotions of both sides be mutually recognised? How can both sides avoid the dangers of parochial identity politics and narcissistic self-centrism? These questions demand a new mode of inquiry and intellectual practice to overcome the platitudes of the political domain. The ongoing tensions may offer a starting point for attending to the emotional dimensions that are central to the future of China. ■

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Words Against the Wind
A Conversation with Liu Wai Tong

ZENG Jinyan
LIU Wai Tong

Liu Wai Tong (廖偉棠) is a poet, writer, and photographer. He was born in 1975 in Guangdong Province, later moved to Hong Kong, lived in Beijing for five years, and currently lives in Taipei. Liu has received the Hong Kong Biennial Award for Literature, the Taiwan Times Literature Award, and the United Daily News Literature Award. He was awarded the 2012 Hong Kong Arts Development Award for Best Artist in the literature category, and is often invited to international literary events, such as the 2011 Taipei Poetry Festival, the 2013 Poetry International in Rotterdam, and the 2016 Singapore Writers Festival. Since his debut, Liu has published more than 10 poetry collections, including *Bitter Angels* (苦天使), *Young Wanderer* (少年游), *Black Rain is Near* (黑雨將至), *Wandering Hong Kong with Spirits* (和幽靈一起的香港漫遊), *Barbarous Night Songs* (野蠻夜歌), *Eight Inches of Snow* (八尺雪意), *Half a Notebook of Ghost Talk* (半簿鬼語), *The Cup of Spring* (春盞), and *Cherry and Vajra* (櫻桃與金剛). Poems cited in this conversation were published in Liu's 2020 book *All Lights Will not Burn Out: Liu Wai Tong Selected Poems 2017–2019* (一切閃耀都不會熄滅：廖偉棠 2017–2019詩選) and his 2015 book *Umtopia* (傘托邦).

Liu Wai Tong (廖偉棠)
PC: Kubrick Poetry Society.

Liu's work also includes a collection of short stories titled *War Game in Eighteen Alleys* (十八條小巷的戰爭遊戲); collections of prose such as *Wearing Flowers Wandering in the Night* (衣錦夜行) and *Branches of Feelings* (有情枝); photography and writing collections such as *We Evacuate Here, Leaving Only the Light* (我們從此撤離, 只留下光), *Bohemian Hong Kong, Hippy China* (波希香港, 嬉皮中國), *In Search of Tsangyang Gyatso* (尋找倉央嘉措), and *My City Gorgeous* (我城风流); photo collections like *Lonely China* (孤獨的中國), *Paris: Photos de scène sans titre* (巴黎無題劇照), and *The Darkening Planet* (微暗行星); the photography review collection *Travel Notes* (遊目記); literary essay collections such as *Late at Night Reading a Fictional History of the Universe* (深夜讀罷一本虛構的宇宙史) and *Heterotopia Guide* (異托邦指南); and the music essay collection *Against the Grain* (反調).

This interview was finalised in 2020 while Liu was in Taiwan and Zeng was in Israel. The Chinese edition was published in the same year in the Autumn issue (no. 31) of *Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*.

ZENG Jinyan: You grew up on the Chinese mainland, lived for a long time in Hong Kong, and are now resident artist at Taipei National University of the Arts. You have experienced life in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and have long been responding to social phenomena in your work, interacting with social movements. Can I start by asking about your poem 'Thirty Years [卅年] (24–28 May 2019)'?

Do you think it is fair to say the memory of 4 June 1989 belongs to Hong Kong and not mainland Chinese people? For mainlanders, who live under constraints on freedom of speech, there is no open discussion or commemoration and so, in the collective memory, the events of June Fourth do not exist. But Hongkongers have, through TV and press coverage, through the annual candlelight vigil at Victoria Park, and through the same songs sung in commemoration every year, come to know about the events of June Fourth. They have internalised the memory of those events, given shape to collective feeling, and developed a separate sense of identity—as Hongkongers who have long had relative freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and rule of law—from mainland Chinese people, who live without freedom of speech. In the poem 'Thirty Years', you say: 'Good night, Hong Kong.' During the Umbrella Movement in 2014, in 'Hong Kong Nocturne (29 June 2014)', you also wrote the same lines. Has Hong Kong been hurt? Is it drifting or alone without help? In your own work, and in contemporary literature, what is Hong Kong? Is Hong Kong a shelter for you?

LIU Wai Tong:

After thirty years of talk
The dead have all finally come south to this city.
After thirty years of rectification
The place where it happens, too, has finally come south to this city.

經過三十年的念叨
死者終於全部南下這個城市。

經過三十年的改造
事發地點也終於南下變成這個城市。

This is the opening to 'Thirty Years'. Over the past three decades, almost every year I have written a poem for 4 June as a way of remembering. I also use this as a way of writing some reflections on recent developments in China and Hong Kong. This year [2019] is the most direct I have been about expressing the idea that, at least as far as Hongkongers are concerned, June Fourth is no longer just something that happened in 1989 in Beijing. For the past 30 years, not a moment has gone by when it is not casting its light and shadow on Hong Kong. Eventually, it became a part of the spirit of Hong Kong—not just a collective memory, not just a moral obligation, but a continuation of the movement, even a resurgence of the waves, and so it became tied up with Hong Kong's destiny; there is no longer any avoiding it. To put it another way, June Fourth did not end in 1989 in Beijing. It has become a movement that every person unwilling to forget has chosen to carry on.

When I said good night to Hong Kong twice, five years apart, both times I was also saying 'take care'. But in this year's message, there was an added sense of pining hope in Hong Kong—a hope that, on her path of no return, Hong Kong will rub her eyes clear and stride ahead. In my work, Hong Kong is, first, the closest object of experimentation I can get to examine this age; for me, and other Hongkongers, as we experience this tremendous upheaval together, we are demonstrating a kind of deeply unique agency irreplaceable with any other nation's people, choosing a future. Its vicissitudes, its grassroots, its dignity—are all things I treasure; they are also what gives my work rich nourishment and enduring courage.

As far as the arts are concerned, Hong Kong is not the best place for artists to survive. Aside from freedom of creativity, it has no other advantages. But it is a place suited to the survival of art itself because this place is always so full of energy, of a kind of stirring. The business of a poet always goes on in their mind; it goes on as we walk around and experience the world around us; it is not some concrete business or trade. But Hong Kong has practically no full-time artists. Instead, its artists get a kind of mixed nourishment. In every artist's 'part-time' pursuits, they meet with a unique world, which is much better than shutting themselves away and working with no experience of the world.

In a city like this, a writer's observations must be different to those of a journalist, a sociologist, or an anthropologist, though they borrow from their methods. Closer to the way I work is a photographer's intuition, a scientist's attention to detail, the pain of a person who wanders the city and feels it firsthand. On the one hand, I see myself as a kind of object of experiment, tossing myself into the city, and on the other, I treat myself like a spirit, going in search of other spirits to talk to. In that way, I can raise the spirits of another Hong

Kong, and capture them like developing a photograph. Whatever my specific perspective, it is always one fixed on marginalised groups, vulnerable people, whether new immigrant mothers, sex workers, or so-called losers—people who, in a developed society, have been dealt a losing hand. They are all a bridge to reconstruct another Hong Kong, they have been forced to become 'spirits'.

Another thing to note is that Hong Kong and Macau literature has for many years been marginalised by literature from China's central plains, but who knew marginalisation became an advantage for these local literatures, helping them to establish themselves? First, there is the decisive influence that local language has on the way a writer thinks. In poetry, this is particularly marked because in writing poems you are directly considering sound, rhyme, and rhythm. Different local languages result in different ways of thinking and different forms of presentation; poets will first consider their mother tongue.

Hong Kong to me, as 'my city', has to it a sense of 'sharing in adversity'. If Hong Kong were to have just kept on doing great, I do not think I would have identified with it so strongly. But when it met with distress, that is when I realised that we shared a kind of affinity in our troubles. There is no one place that can become a poet's 'shelter', and I am sure I am set to keep on wandering. It may look like I am moving around because of an objective need, but behind it there is something powerful in my subconscious that is directing me: at heart, I have this longing to become a nomad, a Bohemian. For now, humans are not able to travel in time, so I do my best to travel through space. Every city I have lived in has integrated a part of itself into my poems. Just like Du Fu yearned to travel, in the process of movement, you can come as close as possible to experiencing different destinies; whatever the destiny, for a poet, it is good.

ZJY: I found it interesting to read 'In Praise of Objects (2 January 2014)' and 'Words Against the Wind (1 August 2019)' together. These two poems instantly take us to the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the scenes that unfolded in the black-clothed protests against China's extradition bill in 2019. They give such a full picture and yet the feeling evoked by each detail is just so inexplicably on-point; this is writing that comes right from the soul of the protestors. In both 2014 and 2019, you spent time at the scenes of the protests and took a lot of photographs. Can I ask you to talk about what changes had taken place, in terms of aesthetics, between the forms of expression at the scenes of Hong Kong's 2019 protests and those of the protests in 2014?

LWT: The 2014 protests always had some sense of Utopian imagination about them, which is one of the reasons I named a book *Umtopia* (伞托邦). The street aesthetics tended a bit towards the romantic side. This sense of romanticism has carried on until now, and it remains the greatest sense of comfort that the streets give to

those taking action together. Of course, there is now [2019] more of the confrontational material, and there are also more large-scale systematic forms of artistic expression; this reflects the maturity and the stronger will of the protesters. Besides that, a lot of the work five years ago was done by the more sentimental writers who were throwing themselves, all guns blazing, into these war proclamation–type writings, as if they could not help but strive to become heroes.

Coming back to my own poems, if, in 2014, my series of poems on the Umbrella Movement still had a kind of Wisława Szymborska-style sarcasm and wit to them, in 2019, the feeling is more cutting, like Bertolt Brecht, and grave, like Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam. The change is to do with the further worsening of the times and with my own thoughts about the relationship between poetry and politics.

Words Against the Wind (1 August 2019)

The cardboard said:
No, I won't hand them over
They use me as their shield
They feel the burn of the teargas with me

The umbrella said:
No, I won't hand them over
I'm their boat, their wings
I've navigated the rapids with them, five years like a sudden downpour

The post-it note said:
No, I won't hand them over
We've used all the colours of the rainbow together, been slapped on to the walls
We'll be a soft ripple to comfort their bare feet

The crowd control barrier said:
No, I won't hand them over
They let me gallop, they let me
All hooves pounding like their sparking eyes

Finally, the people said:
No, I won't hand them over
Red bombax flowers on the silent street write out folks' names
Among all those blood stains there's a drop of mine

逆風說的話 (2019.8.1)

紙皮說：
不會，我不會把他們交出
他們以我為盾
和我一起領受催淚彈的燒烙

雨傘說：
不會, 我不會把他們交出
我是他們的船, 他們的翼
和他們潛行激流, 五年如驟雨一刹

便箋紙說：
不會, 我不會把他們交出
我們一起用虹彩拍擊高牆
我們要做撫慰他們裸足的細浪

鐵馬說：
不會, 我不會把他們交出
他們讓我馳騁, 讓我
四蹄迸出和他們雙眼一樣的火花

人民最後說：
不會，我不會把他們交出
木棉花在喑啞的街道寫眾人的名字
血跡遍地也有我的一滴

On poetry and politics, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1987) once said: 'As long as the state permits itself to interfere with the affairs of literature, literature has the right to interfere with the affairs of the state.' We are all familiar with this. My own understanding of it is that interference does not mean that we need to fight tooth and nail with it, or that all writers need to get involved in politics. Instead, I think we need to stay equally sensitive to the healthy and unhealthy elements of politics and, in our poems, convey something of these elements that we perceive through this sensitivity.

These are things that may well relate to our future, like a snowball, building slowly from something slight, a barely noticeable political phenomenon, into a fate that sweeps up a nation, a country, or the world. Poets need to be filled with a kind of sensitivity to the era in which they live, a sensitivity to all those terrifying things that arise in the disquiet of politics, and then attempt to call on their readers to awaken to them. This is what Mandelstam did. We also need to be filled with a sensitivity to what is beautiful but has not yet emerged in politics and call on our readers to attempt to find a way to touch it. This is something that Whitman, Brecht, and Neruda attempted to do.

ZJY: During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, you wrote two hunger-strike poems for the protesters. During the 2019 anti–extradition law movement, you wrote two poems for protesters who had committed suicide. If we take one of each of the poems from these different times, 'Hunger-Strike at Harcourt Village (5–7 December 2014)' and 'Two Million and One (16 June 2019)', what were the changes in these protesters' own understandings of their situations and the possible forms of existence they were imagining?

LWT: By the time of the Harcourt hunger strike, the Umbrella Movement was already fading and those involved were using a kind of moving self-restraint fuelled by a sense of revolutionary obligation. The people who committed suicide during the recent protests were expressing their views through death, and entrusting their resolve with the living, in the notion that 'success does not have to have me'. This act of moral courage set a high moral standard for the three months of protest that followed and became a kind of force with spiritual appeal. Each time protesters counted the numbers of participants, they would add a '01', '02', and so on [to include the suicides], expressing that they were a community that could not be divided. In the end, I also wrote for the young people who took their lives, thinking it might help us to understand a little more clearly their relationship with me.

Elegy for a 15-Year-Old (12–16 October 2019)

In my 15th year, I hadn't met a young woman like you.
Just locked that sweat-stained white ribbon from a year ago deep in a drawer; Wrapped myself up tight in that dark denim shirt I always wore. When a young woman like you asks, I won't tell her that once a tank ploughed through my ribs.

Just like you have no way today to explain
How your body pure white was pressed into a shower of blood
This ghost city's beauty is the way you and I remember each other
Are we birds and fish
With only empty sky and dark waters left as our sailing path?

Who floats and sinks with us
Hang a star on my spine
The moon lights only a desk cluttered with books
A young man, body bent over them, seeking salvation
You can piece together future outlines of other teens' remains

Soaked and steely
A knife, not a musical note,
My 15th year was submerged in a flood in a dark fish belly
Ring the doorbells of the dead along your way,
Call me, use that
Phonecard that burst into flames
How I wish time could collapse like the station that together we passed by.
Breathe deeply, the oxygen cries out it's hypoxic, when you crash into this planet's seventy percent water, of which it's so proud, all the cries—all those sounds I once thought were the cries of the water. Turns out they were the sounds of burning red wood coals piercing the water, making it boil and splutter.

15歲輓歌 (2019.10.12–16)

我的15歲, 沒有認識像你一樣的少女。
只是把一年前汗污的白飄帶鎖在抽屜深處; 把自己始終用一件深藍
色牛仔襯衫裏緊。當和你一樣的15歲少女問起, 我不會告訴她曾經
有坦克從我肋骨犁過。

就像你今天也無法向我解釋
你的身體如何以潔白迫降漫天血雨
這鬼城楚楚是你我記得彼此的面目
我們是鳥和魚嗎
只剩下真空和暗海是我們的航路?

誰浮沉於我們
懸掛一顆星在我的脊柱
月光照亮的只有一桌亂書
一個少年曲身往裡打撈
可以拼湊出未來輪廓的另一些少年的遺骨

濕瀝瀝, 鐵錚錚
是刀子, 不是音符
我的15歲淹沒在洪水中黑暗魚腹
你沿途按響這些死者的門鈴吧
給我打電話吧, 用那張
燒起來了的電話卡

我多麼希望時間能崩壞如我倆擦肩而過的車站。
深呼吸, 所有的氧氣都高呼缺氧, 你撞擊這個星球它引以為傲的
百分之七十的水的時候, 所有的喊聲—所有我曾經以為是水在喊
痛的聲音。原來都是赤炭入水沸騰爆裂的聲音。

ZJY: If the songs sung to commemorate June Fourth at the Victoria Park vigil every year are songs filled with a powerful sense of national feeling, 'Glory to Hong Kong' (願榮光歸香港) became the song of Hongkongers during the 2019 protests. Among local Hong Kong activists there are those no longer willing to discuss Hong Kong's problems in the context of Chinese politics, or to treat solving the problems Hong Kong is facing as a step towards or a tool for solving the problem of China's one-party rule. But if there is no democratisation in China to act as a route out, it is not only Hong Kong's (and Tibet's, Xinjiang's, and Inner Mongolia's) form of existence that is disappearing; civilisations and ways of being in other parts of the world, too, are under threat. How do you understand this feeling of Hongkongers, this direction of its social movements? How do we reinterpret the meaning of solidarity and the China–Hong Kong relationship? Can I ask you to talk specifically about the possible ways of living that you imagine?

LWT: I continue to believe there is a need for solidarity between the people of China and Hong Kong. Hong Kong cannot stand up alone to such a powerful neighbour. But I must admit it is the change in public sentiment in mainland China that has created the disappointment and divide among the majority of Hong Kong activists. Part of it is the clamour of the Little Pinks [young jingoistic Chinese nationalists on the internet] with no bottom line telling us we can leave but Hong Kong stays, and it is partly the cowardly silence of those thoughtful mainlanders with some notion of what is going on. They do not make a clear break with the fascist-like discourse of their brainwashed compatriots, so what, then, gives them the right to demand that Hongkongers do not break themselves off? 'I love Chinese people, but do Chinese people love me?' It is almost unavoidable that the people of the Hong Kong localist democracy movement you are talking about would think this way. This is even more the case for the movement this time around. With the mainland's fierce nationalist propaganda on cohesion, and misleading selective reporting, quite a number of mainland liberals who used to sympathise with Hong Kong have been swayed, have lost their basic sense of judgement, and now, time and again, heavily criticise the Hong Kong resistance on some moral grounds. It is chilling.

My criticism of Hong Kong's capitalism and the ruling class's relationship to the land remains unchanged; this has nothing to do with a political stance; it is just a matter of basic conscience. If you see absurdity, you have to speak out, not let the absurd become the emperor's new clothes. Hong Kong has the world's highest Gini coefficient and most alarming wealth gap, but it also has a good welfare system and community relations, with people existing alongside each other organically. These are the foundations of Hong Kong and, as a poet, you have to see what is most basic to a place, the most human details. As a commentator, you need to calmly show all of this to the side on which there is misunderstanding. Even if the path is increasingly narrow, I am still not about to give up on getting others to understand the possibilities of my city.

Personally, I like the idiom 'stepping forward with courage' (挺身而出) and I have always believed in the notion of 'putting words into action' (坐言起行). Poems are my way of 'stepping forward' and 'acting'. Poets can feel a greater depth of sorrow and joy than ordinary people—they say it is passion—but a good poet should be able, from this sense of sorrow and joy, to see the dark and cold, or 'to feel such sadness and speak over-urgently' (其心苦，其詞迫), but what they really need is the cogency that comes with a calm depth of thought. I have always taken a liberal left social critical stance, and anarchism, with its profound spirit of selflessness and its forms of behaviour rich with imagination for change, has always kept me and my poems healthy. When you get to around 40 and are no longer confused, you need to be more rational about protecting your emotions, judging which among them are the most valuable.

When you reach middle age, you have greater, more obvious family constraints. To be honest, I gave up doing most of those trips far afield that I made as a photographer when I was younger. I have gone back to travelling only in my head or on paper, like when I was young. I hope that after I turn 50, I can throw myself back into the world that is so alive. For example, picking up photography again, getting to grips with certain issues that have always concerned me, and using writing and images to produce some important work. I could then live a simple and plain existence.

As far as the way of life for a community goes, sure, I yearn for a kind of anarchist mutual-aid commune. A couple of years ago, I wrote a poem for my little daughter, describing for the future that kind of impossible possible state.

After That
  For Zhanyi (2–3 March 2017)

Afterwards two hundred will become poets
A hundred will become bakers
Fifty will become brewers
Another two hundred will work the land
And make crafts by hand
Fifty will fish and hunt
And that will be enough
Enough to love an island

After that
Kids will learn to walk in the clouds
Their parents forsaken
Rain will rain and sun shine, no urge to really understand
Bare bodies will birth fruit
And that will be enough
Enough to produce another sea

In the end one guy will sleep comfortably in a wine urn
Dreaming of thousands of flakes of gold
Since the city-state of the past rose and fell
I have an elegy
No plans to bring it to the future
Your smile's enough
To clean out our age

其後
—給湛衣 （2017.3.2–3）

後來有兩百人成為詩人
一百人成為麵包師
五十釀酒師

又兩百人耕種和手作
五十人漁獵
這樣足夠了
足夠愛一個島嶼

其後
孩子們學會在雲上走
父母都被放棄
雨灑日曬，不求甚解
裸露的身體結孕果實
這樣足夠
足夠再生一個海

最後一人在酒甕中甜睡
夢見千千萬金屑
自過去的城邦剝落升起
我有一首輓歌
不打算帶往未來
你的笑靨足夠
清空我的時代

■

(Translated by Holly SNAPE)

Graffiti on a wall in Hackney Wick, East London. PC: Duncan C (CC).

Ideas Are Bullet-Proof
A Conversation with Ching Kwan Lee

Shui-yin Sharon YAM
Ching Kwan LEE

Ching Kwan Lee is a sociology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and former Chung Sze-Yuen Professor of Social Science and chair professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST, 2019–21). She is the author of several award-winning monographs on Chinese capitalism and labour, including *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (University of California Press, 1998), *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (University of California Press, 2007), and *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor and Foreign Investment in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

In late 2020, while at the HKUST, Lee drew the ire of pro-Beijing media outlets for participating in an online panel with dissidents Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and scholar-activist Benny Tai. Organised by the United States-based advocacy organisation Hong Kong Democracy Council, the panel was titled 'Is This the End of "One Country Two Systems"?'. Lee opined that Hong Kong was a global city, remarking: 'I think it helps not to think of Hong Kong as a Chinese city. We don't belong to China. We belong to the world.' Her comment was taken out of context by two pro-Beijing newspapers in Hong Kong, which accused her of illegally supporting Hong Kong independence and colluding with 'foreign forces'. Lee forcefully and succinctly denied such allegations, asserting her right

to express her academic analysis during a lawful public event. Her co-panellists, Tai and Wong, were both subsequently imprisoned for their political activism.

Despite the chilling effect of the National Security Law (NSL) on academic freedom, Lee remains an active scholar and teacher in Hong Kong studies. In this conversation, she discussed her changing relationship with and approach to studying Hong Kong as she worked on her latest monograph, about the 2019 prodemocracy movement. This interview offers a glimpse into how a Hong Kong studies scholar navigates the sociopolitical terrain of repression while producing rigorous research that sheds light on Hong Kong's history and social movements.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: Can you introduce yourself and your scholarly background for readers who are less familiar with your work? What is your relationship to Hong Kong and Hong Kong studies?

Ching Kwan Lee: I was born and raised in Hong Kong. After I earned my PhD in sociology from University of California, Berkeley, I returned to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, my alma mater, to teach. But I left in 1999 to take up a position at the University of Michigan and then at UCLA, where I am now. The arc of my scholarly career coincided with the rise and opening of China and, quite naturally, as a sociologist, I was drawn to that phenomenon. My dissertation covered Hong Kong, interestingly, as part of southern China's miraculous emergence as the workshop of the world. It was a comparative ethnographic study of factory regimes in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, and the class and gender relations between the first generation of Chinese migrant workers and the last generation of industrialists and factory women in Hong Kong.

Since then, my two book-length projects were squarely on China: labour protests in the rustbelt and sunbelt, and the politics of Chinese investment in Africa. The Umbrella Movement sparked my interest in Hong Kong again, but by then it was a Hong Kong I no longer recognised, let alone understood, and therefore intellectually challenging. I tried to catch up on all the excellent Hong Kong studies scholarship produced during the two decades I was away. I was fortunate to have the help of a team of colleagues who know much more about Hong Kong than I and, together, we produced a volume on the Umbrella Movement, *Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Political Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement* (ILR Press, 2019, co-edited with Ming Sing).

For my colleagues in Hong Kong, the need for Hong Kong studies is self-evident. It's like in the United States: studying the US needs no justification of any kind. But as someone who is in the United States, studying China, Asia, and Africa, I always need to situate these regions and societies in the larger context of theory, history,

and the world. That double consciousness to me is an asset, not a burden. That's why when I began reading and researching Hong Kong, my vision for Hong Kong studies is a bit different from my colleagues based in Hong Kong. Hong Kong studies cannot just be about Hong Kong; it has to be situated in the larger context of theory, historical forces, and the world.

SSY: Your remark about having to situate non-Western research subjects resonates with me, as I shared similar experiences. The need for non-Western scholars to constantly justify their area of research is emblematic of academia's Eurocentrism. A question I often ponder is how transnational non-Western scholars can effectively navigate this tension without capitulating to Eurocentric tendencies. I am also very excited and interested in your current book project. Can you tell us a bit more about it? How is it influenced by your experiences and/or research interests in Chinese capitalism, labour, and gender?

CKL: The book I am working on begins with an ethnography of the 2019 Anti–Extradition Bill Movement, focusing on what I found to be 'revolutionary' in the context of Hong Kong's history. I will then historicise the ethnography with what Foucault would call a history of the present—identifying not the chronological origin of the movement, but rather traces of past practices and power mechanisms that continue to configure the present. If I succeed, I will hopefully offer a critical understanding of how British and Chinese colonialisms have constituted the fundamental category of the 'political' in Hong Kong, how 2019 represented an epistemic and experiential breakthrough of those legacies (or burdens), not so much among academics but among the people.

I am not revealing too much with such an abstract statement, but I have to re-educate myself about my birthplace. On top of that, writing to me is always a process of discovery and analysis. Before I finish any book, I am not in a position to state my overarching arguments.

SSY: Writing is an iterative process, so in fact I appreciate your hesitancy to mount an overarching claim now.

CKL: For me, this is the most challenging book I have ever written. I need to relearn Hong Kong history through the lens of colonial and postcolonial studies, and to bring my understanding of China and global China to bear on this. So, I'd say my previous work on the Chinese ways of power, both in maintaining stability domestically and on expanding domination overseas, helps me see how this historical juncture is part of a larger China project, with all the uncertain and uneven consequences we have seen elsewhere.

SSY: Between your current book project and the co-edited anthology Take Back Our Future, what major differences and developments have you noticed about social movements in Hong Kong?

CKL: You should direct this question to my colleagues who study social movements from the perspective of social movement studies—how social media organised and mobilised protesters, how the government has used the police and pro-establishment nongovernmental organisations to launch a counter-mobilisation against protesters, how LIHKG [website] discussion cemented solidarity at the discursive levels, etcetera. For me, 2019 was so much more than a social movement that the questions and analytical categories of the social movement literature do not really capture what happened. Social movement studies have a much narrower focus on mobilisation and organisation, not historicity, political subjectivity, the mechanisms of colonial and postcolonial power. Of course, one can generate useful knowledge about 2019 from the perspective of social movement studies. But was it the essence? It is the equivalent of studying government or the state as a complex organisation using organisational theory. Many sociologists do that, but is the state just another organisation? What do we miss if we analyse it using general sociological theories of organisation as one would use for a corporation or an NGO?

SSY: You have written several op-eds and explainers on the Hong Kong protests in prominent US media outlets and are currently working on a monograph about the issue. What roles do you see yourself playing as a scholar and public intellectual who straddles academia and the broader public sphere, and the transnational contexts between Hong Kong and the United States?

CKL: I do not see myself playing the role of public intellectual because I do not think I have the aptitude for public engagement. My ability is in scholarship—a slow-motion mode of knowledge production that hopefully has greater depth and larger scope than opinion pieces that are responsive to current affairs and have more immediate relevance to the public. Those op-eds were all written at the request of news editors. Also, the circumstances in 2019 were so exceptional that I felt I should not let go of those opportunities to explain Hong Kong to the world. But I agree there is an urgent need for public intellectuals capable of transnational and intercultural communication, and who can formulate publicly consumable opinions about rapidly changing current affairs.

SSY: Even though you do not see yourself as a public intellectual, you were treated as such when you came under fire in 2020 for saying that 'Hong Kong belongs to the world', as pro-Beijing news sources misconstrued your statement. You cogently refuted such accusa-

tions. What was your experience like at the time? Are there any transferable lessons there that would help Hong Kong scholars and public intellectuals—both local and diasporic—navigate the increasingly murky and risky discursive terrain under the National Security Law (NSL)?

CKL: I was attacked not for what I said. What I said provided them an excuse. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never cares about what academics say or write. They know we don't have influence in the public. As a party, they worry about organised dissent, or alternative organisational capacity. I was attacked because of my association with Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, Benny Tai, and the Hong Kong Democratic Council (HKDC). I was on the same panel with these high-profile dissidents and was a member of the HKDC advisory board. I resigned from the HKDC when the NSL came into effect. The second attack was derivative of the first: once I became a target of 'interest', people who wanted to demonstrate political loyalty or to score political points went after me again. But my experience was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared with what so many others in Hong Kong have to endure.

SSY: At the time, HKUST noted in a public statement that it respected everyone's freedom of speech as entitled under the Basic Law. This poses a stark contrast with the repression of intellectual freedom and freedom of speech that occurs on college campuses now. What changes do you think we will see in Hong Kong higher education in the coming years, and how will that impact on knowledge production and pedagogy, especially in the social sciences?

CKL: The popular misconception of the 'ivory tower' notwithstanding, universities and academia are never insulated from the rest of society, the economy, or the body politic. Without freedom to speak truth to power or the freedom of association to engage peers around the world, there will be no true scholarship. Politics has moved into Hong Kong academia not just in the appointment or dismissal of faculties and administrators. I fear that knowledge itself—research topics, data collection, arguments—will soon be censored, as has been the case in mainland China. Hong Kong studies will be under particular duress as the political regime will also try to impose a regime of truth about Hong Kong. It is more important now than ever that Hong Kong studies be globalised. Colleagues at various UC campuses and I have just launched a program called 'Global Hong Kong Studies@UC' (www.globalhks-uc.org). Our goal is to understand the global and theoretical relevance, connection, and context of Hong Kong's past and present. It transcends the conventional area studies approach to a particular place, country, or region defined by geographical and jurisdictional boundaries. We have regular seminars, symposiums, book talks, films, and multimedia events that are free and accessible worldwide. Beyond this UC program, there is now an international network of Hong Kong

studies research units based in different universities called Global Nexus for Hong Kong Studies (www.globalnexushk.org). Such interdisciplinary and international collaboration will hopefully put global Hong Kong studies on the map and allow it to grow in a de-territorialised and free space.

SSY: While the development of an international network of Hong Kong studies scholars is encouraging, social scientists and researchers in Hong Kong face an uphill battle. The first NSL trial hinges on the connotations of the protest slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times'. Social scientists Eliza Lee and Francis Lee both testified, drawing on their research and expertise. While the NSL clamps down on academic freedom, this case highlights the relevance of social-scientific research to public and legal discourse. What role do you see social scientists playing in the public sphere under the shadow of the NSL?

CKL: Not much, I am afraid. Kudos to Eliza and Francis for making a stand based on empirical research and reasons. Their testimonies were a breath of fresh air into a dying public sphere. But the court's dismissal of their arguments shows that we have entered a very dark time when arbitrary brute force overrides rational debates of right and wrong, true and false. The space for social science research is rapidly closing in Hong Kong, as has been the case for many other authoritarian societies, including mainland China. There was a reason for my own discipline, sociology, to be banned a few years after the CCP took power, only to be revived in the early 1980s.

Today, powerholders may not need to go to the extreme of banning a field of knowledge. Instead, they could reorganise knowledge production, and restructure faculty lines and employment. This is what I observed at HKUST. Its new Guangzhou campus is organised around 'hubs and thrusts' that are basically think tank–like units serving the government—internet of things, smart manufacturing, intelligent transportation, financial technology, sustainable development, etcetera. No more departments based on long-standing disciplines and global accumulation of knowledge such as physics, chemistry, economics, let alone sociology and political science.

SSY: For Hong Kong and many Hongkongers, the 2019 protests and their aftermath were a watershed moment. Is there anything from that period that continues to resonate with you?

CKL: Among the many innovative and insightful slogans during the 2019 protests, there is one that resonates with me most: 'Ideas are bullet-proof.' It resonates with me because I am in the business of producing ideas. In addition, the regime is very intent on reshaping our ideational worlds—common sense, perception, and history. As we witness movements, institutions, and organisations being crushed every day, it is all the more important that we protect this line of defence. ∎

Vitaliano Trevisan (1966–2022).
PC: AmorettoItalico, Wikimedia (CC).

WORK OF ARTS
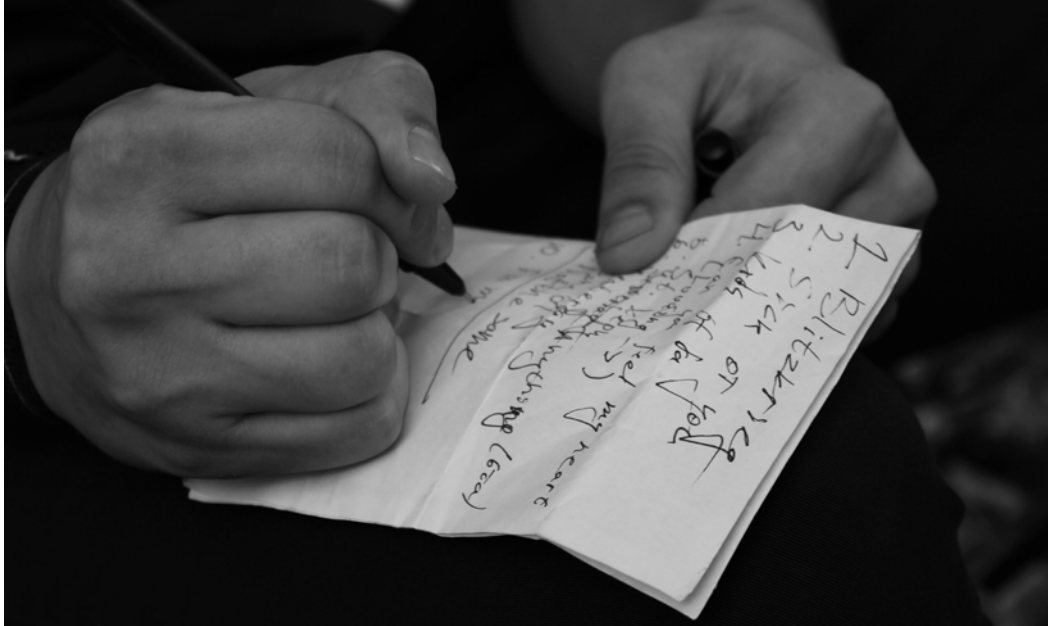
PC: @hmateeva (CC),
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The Effable Worker

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Leftist intellectuals have long pondered whether it is possible to convey the experience of being working class in writing and other artistic forms. Does this still apply today, when humans from all walks of life are possessed by a violent desire to express themselves on social media? Does posing this question even make sense at a time when the working class has experienced a 'symbolic death' and the working-class subject belongs nowhere? To shed some light on these questions, this essay discusses three recent Italian memoirs that recount the work experiences of their authors.

Locked in a shelter for the homeless on a weekend along with a few dozen vagrants, a young George Orwell was feeling the pangs of boredom. He had nothing to read, nothing to do, and could not even look outside since the windows were too high. He tried to listen to the general conversation, but found it left much to be desired:

There was nothing to talk about except the petty gossip of the road, the good and bad spikes, the charitable and uncharitable counties, the iniquities of the police and the Salvation Army. Tramps hardly ever get away from these subjects; they talk, as it were, nothing but shop. They have nothing worthy to be called conversation, because emptiness of belly leaves no speculation in their souls. The

world is too much with them. Their next meal is never quite secure, and so they cannot think of anything except the next meal. (Orwell 2002a: 11)

The near impossibility for the poor and down-trodden to look beyond the most pressing need to survive made any artistic expression from members of the subaltern classes valuable to Orwell. When reviewing an autobiographical book by a working-class author a few years later, he did not equivocate:

Books like this, which come from genuine workers and present a genuinely work-ing-class outlook, are exceedingly rare and correspondingly important. They are the voice of a normally silent multitude … If all of them could get their thoughts on paper they would change the whole consciousness of our race. (Orwell 2002b: 34)

Yet, Orwell was fully aware of how hard it was for people on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, often deprived of a proper education, to find the right words to convey their experience—just like one of his own acquaintances, a tramp who was trying to write his autobiography:

He was quite young, but he had had a most interesting life which included, among other things, a jail-escape in America, and he could talk about it entrancingly. But as soon as he took a pen in his hand he became not only boring beyond measure but utterly unintel-ligible. (Orwell 2002b: 34)

The problem, however, is one not only of intel-ligibility and style. When subalterns get to speak in their own voice, they often express views that not only are surprising to whomever is listening, but also turn out to be utterly disappointing to the scripted expectations. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Jacques Rancière began unearthing the writ-ings of those French workers who managed to leave a trace of their views in popular publications before Marxist discourse came to insert itself into the voices of working-class protests, he found something unforeseen. Whereas he was expecting to discover a class-subject unified through a set of sociabilities and utopian religions, he found two distinct and separate realities. He uncovered, on the one hand, a chronicle of countless atom-ised struggles always confined to the particularity of the actors involved; on the other, there were workers' pamphlets and papers that expressed a working-class identity—just not the identity he was looking for:

[T]his assertion was completely tied to a denial of the identity imposed by Others. The workers spoke in order to say that they were not those Others, those 'barbarians' that bourgeois discourse denounced, and whose positive existence we subsequently sought to discover. And this speech, far from being rooted in the soil of utopian culture, showed an indifference towards, or rejec-tion of, extravagance or utopian immorality. (Rancière 2019: 22)

The reality he brought to light was deeply unset-tling—as disturbing as the realisation among leftist circles in recent years that working-class voters throughout the developed world have been rallying to far-right, xenophobic political movements.

Italian intellectuals have always been at the vanguard of this type of exploration of work-ing-class identities. A few years before Ranciére embarked on his enterprise, Italian *operaisti* ('workerists') began mounting a critique of the bureaucratism of organised trade unions, arguing for the need to tap into the revolutionary spon-taneity of fractions of the dominated classes not yet organised, especially those migrant workers who were leaving the south of the country in troves to find employment in the factories of the north (Keycheyan 2014: 80–85). A centrepiece of the Italian workerist approach was the 'workers' inquiry'—an attempt to analyse through sociolog-ical means the 'subjective factor' of how dominated classes experience the domination to which they are exposed. However, this approach had its own limitations. As Ottiero Ottieri wrote in his classic 1959 novel, *Donnarumma all'assalto*:

Donnarumma All'Assalto,
Ottiero Ottieri, 1959.

Works, Vitaliano Trevisan,
2016.

Sociology always looks for its method of investigation and pursues it. If I try to work at the presses, I am not them. If I interrogate them, they can lie. If I observe them, I can describe them but not understand them. If I put myself in their head, I can make up a wrong inner monologue. They should express themselves; and yet, from the moment when they express themselves, they betray or overcome that silence which is characteristic of the worker condition, which, perhaps, can only be inferred from indirect signs, from life outside the factory. (Ottieri 2004: 173)

Which brings us back to the original point made by Orwell about the silence of the poor and downtrodden, with an additional twist: even workers who manage to express themselves through the artistic form should be considered unreliable witnesses to the working-class condition, as their ability to convey meaning somehow separates them from their peers.

This additional layer of ineffability further adds to the enigma of the working class. But does this still apply today, in what Richard Seymour (2019: 16) calls the era of the 'twittering machine', when humans from all walks of life 'are, abruptly, *scrip-*

turiens—possessed by a violent desire to write, incessantly'? Do these questions even make sense at a time when, as Cynthia Cruz (2021: 6, 9) has argued, the working class has experienced a 'symbolic death' and the working-class subject belongs nowhere, as 'a ghost, existing between worlds, a haunting'? Three recent Italian memoirs that recount the work experiences of their authors help shed some light on these questions.

Works

The first is Works, a 650-page memoir published in 2016 by the late Vitaliano Trevisan (born in 1960, he committed suicide on 7 January 2022). Even though the volume is entirely in Italian, the choice to give it an English title can be read as paradigmatic of the 'foreignness' of Italy's *mondo del lavoro* ('world of labour', an entirely Italian formulation used to refer to everything related to labour) as experienced by the author in the three decades between his first factory job in the mid-1970s and the moment he achieved success as a writer in the early 2000s—a time frame that coincides with the transformation of Italy's labour

market from one in which job security was the rule to a wild arena dominated by precariousness and uncertainty.

The story begins with the teenage author asking his parents to buy him a bicycle only to be tricked by his father into working at a factory producing birdcages not far from his home, in a small town near Vicenza, in Italy's industrialised north. From that moment—although he later received a high-school diploma as a surveyor that should have paved the way for a lucrative career—Trevisan's work life became a rollercoaster with few highs and many lows. After some youthful experiences as a small-time drug dealer and a parenthesis in a prestigious architecture studio and some companies where he was assigned technical and managerial positions, he takes up odd jobs as diverse as construction worker, waiter, ice-cream seller, ink-cartridge recycler, tinsmith, street cleaner, and warehouse worker, until his final job as a night porter in a small-town hotel.

Looking back at these experiences when he is in his fifties and an established writer, Trevisan realises his life has been anything but linear:

> Thinking about my work history as a whole, I could very well say that it has been nothing but a long series of false starts, of roads taken without knowing well why, and all sooner or later abandoned. Despite this, at least from a certain point on, a sort of progression, more than a real career, began to take shape. Not a trajectory. Not even an arch. No curved lines in my life, but a broken one, the segments of which are linked to that diploma that I would have never wanted to receive, and which, before breaking up for good, gets to cover a period of almost fifteen years. Before that, only incoherent fragments, that do not lend themselves to be put in line. (p. 90)

This incoherence is wilfully reflected in the style of the memoir, which, as the back cover unabashedly points out, reads like a 'classical jazz composition', which is nothing but a euphemism for the chaos of continuous digressions, flashes forward, and lengthy tangential footnotes that make up this book—a structure that reflects the

author's declared antipathy for all editors, whom he considers the epitome of the 'industrialisation' of writing (p. 332, footnote).

If his experience of Italy's *mondo del lavoro* felt 'foreign' to Trevisan, this was because he set such precariousness and fragmentation against the model of his father, who spent his whole life as a policeman, as well as against the expectations of his mother. Although other family members appear only insofar as their actions affect the author's professional choices, they play fundamental roles. His father is the one who tricks the young Trevisan into the birdcage factory job when he demands money to buy a new bicycle, effectively kickstarting his working life; his mother is always nagging him, saying he should do something better with himself, subtly influencing his views and decisions; his older sister is a source of tension when she and her family take over the family house and then refuse to take Trevisan back in his time of need; and his ex-wife not only introduces the author to the secrets of the goldsmith profession, but also brings him to the verge of a breakdown, sending him running to Germany to take on a seasonal job as an ice-cream seller. It is his family, and in particular his father, which sets the invisible standards to which Trevisan compares himself and, unwillingly, finds himself wanting. In a poignant passage, these feelings of inadequacy come to the surface with full force:

> Why do I always find a job?, I was telling myself, Why don't they let me go adrift in peace? Become a hobo. One of the possibilities I was contemplating. Which I still contemplate now. Then I lack the courage. My father comes to mind, the policeman Arturo, and his uniform, always impeccable; and my grandfather, the dignity with which he wore his best clothes. Absurdities that always come back to me. The origin is a dress that one never takes off. (p. 532)

On a few occasions, the author comes close to achieving a stable job 'respectable' enough to gain his mother's approval, but then pulls back in horror at the idea of what this would entail on an existential level. Again, the not-so-implicit

comparison is with how labour was experienced by many (most?) in the generation of his parents. For instance, in describing the moment when, at the age of 29, he is offered his first open-ended contract, Trevisan writes:

> Never really thought about retirement, and the idea of a permanent job, of undetermined length [in Italian, 'open-ended' is rendered as a tempo indeterminato], which means thirty-five–forty years in the same place, to do more or less the same thing, every day the same road to go and come back, the same people, etc, had always disturbed me, even though, at least in appearance, it was what I seemed to be always looking for, all the more desperately, and which now, perhaps, I had finally found. (p. 237)

It would not matter much to him that after more than 10 years in the labour market, he has managed to accumulate only one year of social security contributions—meaning he has almost always been employed in the informal economy—if it were not for his mother, who keeps bringing this up to criticise his life choices (p. 237). Similarly, when Trevisan attends a party at another company in which he is now pursuing a promising career and sees the bosses give some senior employees a commemorative plaque and a watch, he reacts with disdain. The patriarchal conception of the workplace as a 'big family' in which employers and employees take care of each other for the duration of their lives disgusts him:

> Ah no!, I was telling myself, this doesn't suit me at all, I don't want to join any fucking big family. The one I have is enough, and I wouldn't be able to stand another one. If I am here, it is only because I must be. I work and you pay me, period. I don't give a fuck about your sons and grandsons. And if I ever found myself in the place of one of those senior employees, I thought, after over thirty years of work, seeing the plaque and the watch, I would most likely break those little arms of yours. Or maybe not, I also thought,

> because after thirty years in the same place, I too would be a senile old guy just like them. (p. 272)

It is easy to imagine how such contempt for a conception of *il mondo del lavoro* that places stability and predictability above any other consideration puts the author at odds not only with his parents, but also with many of his peers, fuelling his feelings of alienation. For Trevisan, work comes with no illusions regarding the nature of his relationship with his employers and the workplace: labouring is simply a way to make money to survive; there is no emotional attachment to it. For instance, when, much later in his career, he ends up working in a cooperative of Catholic imprint that arranges social work for recovering drug addicts, his supervisor points out that he is doing everything well, but without passion. This leads the author to muse that 'demanding a contagious enthusiasm for the job from me, that I even have *faith* in it, was wasted time' (p. 588).

The rejection, however, is not one-sided. Throughout the book, Trevisan repeatedly expresses dismay at his discovery that, even when he takes on blue-collar jobs that bring him to share the same hardships as his co-workers day in and day out and ends up developing feelings of camaraderie, he still feels like an outsider. For instance, when he joins a small tinsmith company comprising only a handful of people and spends his days climbing roofs along with them to fix gutters, he retains an uncomfortable sensation of being different in the eyes of his colleagues. Even though he shares every experience with his co-workers—including almost falling from a roof—he realises they still treat him with kid gloves:

> They feel, and I know, that I am not completely one of them, even if I do exactly everything more or less like them, and put my life in their hands without hesitation, with the same ease with which they put theirs in mine; and what, more than this, I thought, can make you a part of other people's lives?, and yours part of theirs, without any question. However, in spite of this, I could not avoid noticing how they still tended to give me a special treat-

ment, to preserve me, in a certain way, from the dangers a bit more dangerous among those that can be found daily in the work experience of the tinsmith. (p. 433; Here the author quotes at length from an earlier story he wrote.)

What really sets Trevisan apart from his colleagues is his deep conviction—even in the many years before he manages to put a single line on paper—that writing is his true vocation and deliverance from *il mondo del lavoro*. Not knowing this, his co-workers simply think that, if the situation becomes unbearable, Trevisan's surveying diploma and skills allow him a way out—a luxury they do not have. At the same time, other idiosyncrasies make Trevisan stand out, such as his habit, at the beginning of every new job, of securing a copy of the national contract for his category and reading it carefully to know about his rights and duties (p. 520). While being generally apolitical in his approach to labour, he tries, as a warehouse worker, to bring to the attention of his co-workers the unfairness of some company policies. His only attempt at labour organising spectacularly backfires:

What the fuck was I thinking? Giving them a bit of class consciousness, what else? Class consciousness! I cannot believe I wrote this. It seems even more impossible that I thought this, and that I even believed in it. And still, it is it: I really thought so. A remnant of the Seventies perhaps, even though, during the Seventies, I had never believed those who busied themselves to instil in me that which I now wanted to instil in my workmates. And not only was I deluding myself that the endeavour itself was possible, but also that it could have been accomplished by me, and on top of that by me alone. (p. 556)

Once again, this failure triggers in him the feeling that he does not belong: 'It is destiny that I should never belong to anything, not even my class. It is they themselves who remind me of this. They accept me, but sooner or later point it out to me' (p. 529).

Even though Trevisan clearly resents this hybrid condition, his liminal position inoculates him against the misconceptions that dominate public discussion regarding the working class these days in Italy and beyond. In accounting for the criminal phenomenon of the *morti bianche* (the 'white deaths' due to the lack of workplace safety measures that are so common in Italy), he draws from his experience as a tinsmith in a tiny company in which the bosses share the same risks and workload as their workers to challenge the narrative about 'bad' employers and 'good' employees, pointing to how *everyone* plays a role in perpetuating this system. Then, he takes Italian intellectuals to task for their outdated conceptions of the working class. In a remarkable passage, he recounts how, in the mid-2000s, a famous Italian actor—who is never mentioned by name but is obviously *The Great Beauty*'s Toni Servillo—offered to bring to the stage some of Trevisan's earliest writings based on his experiences as a warehouse worker. The experience is surreal. When the actor first reads the texts, he pictures the characters of three warehouse workers wearing blue overalls—an archaic and cartoon-like image that Trevisan knows to be completely detached from the reality of the working class of today:

It was not easy to explain to him that these young 'workers', who refused the very idea of wearing anti-injury shoes provided by the company because they thought these shoes aesthetically sucked, who all went to tanning salons at least twice a week, who got into debt to buy a shitty Golf Tdi, or to go spend a couple of weeks in a Caribbean spermdrome [sic], who spent their weekends between discos and afterhours, often and willingly high on drugs, the great majority of whom professed themselves to be and voted for the Right, well, as I said, it was not easy to explain to X how these workers were completely foreign to that idea of his, which was so archaic that could have been considered part not of the archaeology of industry, but its palaeontology. (pp. 502–3)

Ipotesi di una Sconfitta,
Giorgio Falco, 2017.

Trevisan takes this anecdote as being representative of the impermeable nature of the classes that characterises the present—a stark departure from the 1960s and 1970s, when 'it was fashionable among young members of the bourgeoise to deal with workers' (p. 504). Caustically, the author cites Adriano Sofri, a former leader of the Italian autonomist movement Lotta Continua, who said that the implicit rule for the youth of those years was 'to have sex with everyone, but marry only among ourselves', to say that today only the second half of that rule applies, leading to an estrangement so deep that many even claim social classes are now a thing of the past (p. 504). It is possible to argue that, despite Trevisan's largely apolitical language and stance, it is to recuperate the experience of a cohort whose very existence is denied, to dispel the illusion of the pervasive middle-classification of Italian society, that Trevisan put pen to paper. But what to make of a class that, even when you admit it exists and mingle in it, keeps you at bay?

Hypothesis of a Defeat

In his 2017 memoir *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* (*Hypothesis of a Defeat*), Giorgio Falco (born in 1967) covers a temporal frame similar to Trevis-

an's. Starting with his decision to take a summer job in a lapel-pin factory when he is 17, the book details how Falco's lack of interest in having a 'proper' career leads him to accept a series odd jobs, including conducting product placement surveys in grocery stores, driving foreigners around on business trips, selling door-to-door newspaper subscriptions, being a sales assistant in the fashion section of a mall, selling brooms and cleaning products, coaching a junior basketball team, working in a warehouse, and hanging cinema schedules. In the 2000s, the author moves from Milan to the Veneto region, where he finds a stable job with good benefits in the then booming telecommunications sector. Formally employed by a telecommunications company, he chooses to settle down in Rome and then return to Milan. However, as the sector quickly begins to unravel, he is confronted by increasingly exploitative practices in toxic workplaces. Only literary success eventually presents him with an escape from his plight.

By dedicating the first chapter to his father, who migrated from Sicily to Milan in the mid-1950s and immediately found a job as a bus driver with the city's public transportation company, Falco immediately sets a nostalgic tone for his memoir. He describes his father's morning routine, how he would get up every morning at 3.30 and was so afraid of being late he always set two alarms, leaving Falco with a habit of waking up suddenly between 3.20 am and 3.40 am that follows him to this day. Work ethics were of paramount importance to his father, and when, as a child, Falco told him how much he disliked the idea of getting a job, this irritated his father more than anything. Just as Trevisan associates the image of his father with that of his police uniform, Falco has fond memories of his father's bus driver's uniform:

> I was afraid that, when he became a clerk, he could not wear the company uniform anymore. Instead, luckily for me, he had continued to wear one, just a bit more prestigious, with escutcheons and starlets on the shoulders of the jacket, as if it were the army. Ever since I was a child, I had loved the company uniform, to the point that I made it, pointlessly, the only costume that I would

have wanted to wear at Carnival. I hated the Zorro, cowboy, or Indian American costumes. If I really had to follow the custom, I wanted to dress up like a company driver, or better, after my father's work successes [his promotion to clerk in charge of bus schedules], as head of the company. After all, I wanted to masquerade like my father: whether it was to demolish him with carnival derision or to absorb him until I was absorbed by him, I still don't know to this day. (p. 22)

More than once, Falco compares the decorum of his father and his colleagues with the shabbiness displayed by younger generations. As he watches footage of his father's retirement party, he comments on the dignified elegance of those men and contrasts it with the general sloppiness that is becoming the norm in every workplace. And, when, in the wake of his father's death, he visits what remains of the old bus depot and sees four drivers hired by the private company which has now taken over the service, he points out how none of them is wearing a uniform. Nothing can take away this dignity from his father, not even death: 'My father had been recomposed in the coffin, the shoes almost new, a black suit, the necktie, decorum as foundation of existence until the end, even beyond, in the endless decay of the following days' (p. 47).

Falco offers a pitiless assessment of Italy's *mondo del lavoro* at the turn of the century:

Here's the reason why we used to repeat and still repeat mondo del lavoro: we take for granted that it is a separate world, where every cruelty is possible exactly because it is work and not what takes a great portion of life, to the point that it becomes life itself. (p. 112)

Falco's work life over three decades leads him to this conclusion, beginning with his very first job, the two summer months he spends producing lapel-pins when he is seventeen. There, he toils with two other students for a miserable piece rate to produce pins featuring images of the rock stars of the day, plus one hour a day spent making pins of Jesus Christ and the Pope, which his boss forces them to produce for free, eating away their already meagre income. This leads him to question the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which was at the time ceaselessly working to erode communism while having nothing to say about capitalist exploitation:

While the other two students kept saying the pope or John Paul II, I only saw the man Karol Wojtyła. To me, the lapel pin of Karol Wojtyła looked like the counterfeit symbol of the freedom of the West, the pin of Karol Wojtyła was the simulacrum of economic and financial forces that deprecated the communist system but were replicating the same forms of exploitation in that shed that was so Italian, five hundred kilometres from Vatican City. The West was sucked in a shed. The West was only a shed. I could not directly blame Karol Wojtyła for my condition, there surely were intermediaries who engaged in speculation, starting with the boss. However, [pop star] Simon Le Bon allowed me to earn 5 liras, Jesus Christ 3 liras, Karol Wojtyła 0 liras. (p. 68)

Given he was a student and the uncle of one of his fellow student-workers was friends with the factory owner, Falco felt privileged: 'They were real workers, men and women, they packaged the merchandise that would later be exposed in the supermarkets; we were students, played at being workers, could deal with the futile' (p. 58). Working alongside 'real workers' for two months, he comes to admire them for their strength but also detests them for their docility, before realising that he has himself fallen head over feet into a Burawoyan 'making out game' of piece-rate work that makes him at least as pliant as they are. In moments of despair, he still has youthful hopes to which to cling: 'Despite my doubts about my ability to adapt to the world, I would never have spent my life in a shed nor produced lapel pins to pin on jackets; I would have gone to the university, I would have found a good job' (p. 65).

That is not to be: in the following years, he quickly drops out of university and begins the descent into the loop of odd jobs mentioned above. It is a momentous time in world history, but not for

Falco. As the Berlin Wall falls in November 1989, he is going door to door selling subscriptions to a newspaper:

> It was November, we were ringing bells, in Berlin they were making history. Friends of [my colleague] Chiara were there in the days when the Wall fell: they had left to live this event, be protagonists. Someone still had to ring bells, we could not all go to Berlin. And then to do what? To take a little piece of souvenir? Wasn't the concrete we had enough? (p. 136)

When the Soviet Union falls two years later and history supposedly reaches its end, he is puzzled to find himself subject to extreme exploitation as a warehouse worker at the mercy of two despotic bosses: 'The end of communism, an epochal turn. Media commentators argued that the world had really changed: I was working for two brothers from Abruzzo. They had hired me as a warehouse worker. I started at 9am and ended at 6pm; break from 1pm to 2pm; seven days a week' (p. 208). When he forgets to load a mannequin on a customer's car, they fire him on the spot and refuse to pay part of what he is owed.

Some of Falco's co-workers have a remarkable way to cope with being cut off from history. In the face of a depressing present and uncertain future, they take to embellishing their lives with unlikely stories of sexual exploits and proximity to Italy's elites. When he is working as a sales assistant in a mall, Falco befriends a very fat, middle-aged window-dresser whom he nicknames Olaf. Every day, Olaf spins tales enriched with considerable details about his liaisons with famous actresses and singers. While a factotum at the Milan Fair, Falco works alongside a man named Willie, who claims to live on a road where the resident who has 'the least money' is famous Italian TV host Mike Bongiorno. When another recent hire challenges this story, there is consternation among the crew:

> Willie looked at him in astonishment. The new arrival had desecrated not so much the story of Mike Bongiorno, as a millenary tradition of orality; he ignored that a lie, especially if repeated, did not take away anything from the story nor from existence, it was not a retraction nor a downgrading of reality, but instead it enriched it. And, in addition, the stories told in the workplaces—those of Olaf, Willie, and the many others I met—could stand up to contradictions. (p. 206)

The author himself gives in to a leap of fantasy at one point, when he brings up with some friends the possibility of establishing an agency specialising in arranging depressing experiences—such as having your car break down on a highway in the middle of the Milanese hinterland—for the rich and powerful who have lost connection with reality.

Although his experiences in *il mondo del lavoro* are disastrous enough, it is when he enters the telecommunications industry that Falco truly falls from grace. After a few years in which he feels lucky to have found a stable job in a telecom company, he witnesses the descent of the industry into a hellscape of depersonalisation, 'bullshitisation', automation, and ultimate delocalisation. He begins with the task of activating SIM cards at a time when the market for mobile phones is booming; then is tasked with analysing the credit profile of prospective clients—a job that demands he repeatedly violate the privacy of individuals and companies to collect bank and other financial information with which to assign them a specific score. As his literary career begins to take off, he finds himself increasingly marginalised by his peers: 'The writer is expelled from the workplace by his own colleagues even before the managers. He is considered an alien body, one who is not like us. One who should not be there. If you are there, there is something wrong. You are a charlatan, a con, a traitor' (p. 291). In the wake of the publication of his first book, Falco is demoted to chase customers who miss a payment on their phone bills. As if this demotion were not enough, his position is later detached to a contractor where labour conditions are appalling and competition among colleagues cutthroat. As positions like his are soon moved to Romania, he is used to fill gaps in businesses the contractor has in the energy sector—first, to deal with the transfer of the utility contracts of the deceased, then, to face customers' complaints.

In this new role, as he responds day in and day out to complaints from exasperated customers cheated by the company, he sees an even uglier face of capital. With his mental health quickly deteriorating, his only way to cope with the situation is to retreat within himself and appropriate a closet as his own office, so he does not have to see anybody. To evade all human contact, he does not drink any water, to avoid having to go to the toilet. One day he cannot resist, however, and ends up peeing in a plastic bottle. He has reached the bottom, and only his literary success saves him.

As an eyewitness to and a victim of the apocalyptic consequences of Italy's neoliberal revolution, Falco has unsparing words for three actors that, at least in theory, should have prevented such catastrophe: the trade unions, the Catholic Church, and workers themselves. While he is at the telecom company, Falco regularly attends union meetings, which he describes as perfunctory affairs. In so doing, he realises 'the trade union was not an instrument of struggle but of management of the transition' between two economic epochs, the first of which, coinciding with his youth, was a time 'when it seemed everything could last forever' (p. 280). As for the church, its guilt lies in its unholy alliance with capital in the bid to destroy communism, which eventually leads to it being swallowed by capitalism:

Unable to react to its own decline, the Catholic Church lived within the spell that it itself had created. Its words were lagging behind the common feeling, the faithful consumers were distracted by other things, by the opening of a new front, by a hypothetical liberation. And then the Church had started to use the same tools as its ally [capital]. For this reason, Karol Wojtyła behaved like a sportsman, one of those marathon runners who collapsed to the ground and kissed the earth after a victory, not like a man of religion. He had won his battle against communism, but in the process he had destroyed the Church, or worse, he had reduced it to irrelevance. (p. 283)

Yet, workers are the biggest disappointment for Falco. His colleagues in the telecom company are depicted simultaneously as victims and as perpetrators. When the author complains about the ventilation and heating conditions in their office—a common grudge that has already led to the hospitalisation of a colleague—his co-workers treat him as a nuisance. They are scared that, should they demand the company fix the heating system, the bosses might decide to save money by cutting their jobs: 'They were terrified of losing their job, they understood that it would have been easier to reemploy some detainee rather than them' (p. 286). Again, when Falco one day 'naively' asks his colleagues in the complaints department whether they feel any guilt about abetting the company in cheating the elderly with predatory contracts and other dirty tricks, they reply:

We don't care, we only do what they tell us to do, and quickly. They were not even Nazi-Fascists, they thought that they were saving themselves by refusing freedom, offering themselves up like robots, manpower for the lesser mechanical evil; during the short work breaks, they expressed a rage never addressed against the closest power—their own boss, the company—but always against a colleague at the same level. Had they received something more, a small benefit, an incentive, they would have become the most loyal supporter and executors of a dictatorship to which, albeit as extras, they already adhered to, almost for a natural question. (p. 298)

This Arendtian passage puts on full display the degeneration of Italy's working class, its atomisation, and its complicity in the perpetuation of a system that victimises those who are already marginalised—a 'permanent revolution of [the] free market that got everyone out of their responsibility, starting from the managers, and exempted from reaching any goal that was not money' (p. 295). A telling signal of this decay can be found in the fact that the new working class no longer has any affabulatory powers: 'There was no Olaf. Before I locked myself within the closet, in the company in the service industry I had not heard any stories

that were worthy of my former workmates. To be sure, I didn't even want to listen: when I had done so, it had been depressing' (pp. 303–4).

Curiously, it is only while he is at the telecom company (before he is dispatched to the contractor) that Falco feels he is living up to the expectations of his now far-away father:

I should have taken a photo of myself, developed the film, and sent an image to my father, to show him that at the end he had won; even though we hadn't spoken in years, I lived the life that he had wanted so much for me. Employed in a big company, a small role but, in theory, with a little power. A role as a contemporary bureaucrat, just at a time when almost everybody considered bureaucracy the worst evil, the cause of the Italian decline. (p. 266)

His father has, perhaps, won, but this victory represents a defeat for the son—a defeat that will eventually become a total rout. It is this incompatibility and incommunicability between generations, the inability but also contemptuous unwillingness to live up to the expectations set by one's parents and grandparents, that is the crux of the contemporary working-class condition in Italy.

108 Metres

The third book was published in 2018 by Alberto Prunetti (born in 1973) under the title *108 metri* (*108 Metres*)—another volume in Italian, but with an English subtitle: *The New Working Class Hero*. The book, a tiny 130 pages compared with the massive memoirs discussed above, details the author's experience as a migrant in and around Bristol in the United Kingdom, after he leaves his hometown to escape the miseries of Italy's *mondo del lavoro*. The son of a working-class family in Grosseto Province, Tuscany, he was supposed to follow in his father's footsteps, get a vocational education, and then become a skilled worker in Piombino's old steel plants. Instead, he chose to study at a scientific high school and then get a

108 Metri, Alberto Prunetti, 2018.

university degree—an education that set him apart from his peers. He later came to regret this choice, as a working-class kid like him who chose to stray from his path to the factory had only '1-to-35 odds' to succeed: 'I was a provincial who knew nothing of the world. A failed promise of second-tier football and of the Maremman-Labronic working class. A rebel titan who had bet everything on the wrong horse: a university degree' (pp. 31–32). Curiously, we are told that he was set in this direction by a Jesuit collective, close to the circles of Catholic dissent, which in the 1970s began offering afternoon classes for workers' children and then opened a middle school in the area. Trained in the 'pedagogy of the oppressed', the educators at this institution used to send students to conduct surveys in workers' neighbourhoods and initiated Prunetti to the pleasures of reading and writing—habits tolerated by his father and strongly encouraged by his mother.

The generational break is, once again, a central theme of *108 Metres*. The title of the book refers to Prunetti's hometown, the 'iron town' of Piombino, where 108-metre-long steel railway tracks were produced. His origins in this old Italian industrial centre are a source of pride for Prunetti, as is the fact his father has spent his whole life travelling around to do maintenance work for the steel factory. However, proud as he might be, the

author is aware that the working-class legacy he takes pride in is now rapidly disappearing, and the world view that values manual work is vanishing along with it. In a poignant scene early in the book, Prunetti sketches the moment of his departure for England. When he is checking in for his flight, he discovers his luggage is much heavier than he thought. As he starts sorting through the contents, he realises that his father, Renato, has sneaked in some heavy plumbing tools, convinced his son might need them to find a job in England. While Prunetti removes them, a scene ensues between his father and the airline staff:

> The situation quickly degenerated, and Renato took it on me, as if it were my fault: 'You see, nobody wants the tools anymore … they are afraid of sweating! They are! To them, working sucks! I wasn't putting it in the hands of Prince Charles, the hammer, eh! The screwdriver and pliers were for my own son, eh!' Renato was almost about to hammer the check-in counter, while I was holding him by one arm. Yay, we made a fool of ourselves again! I knew it would have been better not to let them come for what to them is a goodbye. Well, you had to understand my parents: they had slipped the tools of the trade in my bag for my survival at the beginning. You never know. Only, times had changed. We had been told that labour had dematerialised, we would never have to sweat again, we would never have to use our hands again. (p. 30)

As well as the physical tools of his trade, Prunetti's father leaves him a more important legacy: a set of 'ten commandments'—universal rules that apply 'wherever there is a working class' (pp. 38–39). These include:

> Help one's colleagues. Go on strike. Don't kiss the bosses' asses. Don't be a scab. Don't be pitiless if you have to beat up someone. Don't take it too hard with Pisans, they are human beings too. Don't trust the moneyed. If someone who has studied calls you 'sir', stand with your ass to the wall.

While the tools must be left at the airport, these rules stick with the author for life.

Before his departure, Prunetti had been stuck in a loop of poorly paid informal jobs in the Italy of the early 1990s. During the summer, he cleaned stretches of beach, cooked in pizzerias, served in bars, or cut the grass in the garden of some rich family; in winter, he could find absolutely nothing. His university degree was worse than useless, and he was even advised to avoid mentioning his education in his CV. Once in England, he finds his first job in a pizzeria in Bristol owned by an Italian family, where he spends three months along with riffraff, hooligans, and troublemakers from all over the world. Although the author explicitly resorts to Robert Louis Stevenson's characters and imaginaries to narrate this workplace and his colleagues—for instance, the cook is an old sailor and drug addict named John Silver—the description of the frenzied rhythms of the workplace is more reminiscent of George Orwell's experiences in the kitchens of Paris in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (it comes as no surprise that the translation of *108 metri* into English by Elena Pala is titled *Down and Out in England and Italy*). Prunetti details how he and his co-workers in the kitchen engage in small acts of resistance, such as pretending to work, tricking the boss into rummaging in garbage bins, and spreading rumours about the restaurant. It is, overall, a terrible experience: not only does he not learn a single word of English, but also he works seven days a week for less than the minimum wage, without days off or holiday pay, living in a room above the pizzeria for which money is deducted from his wage, while his employers keep up the pretence that they are all a 'big family'. It all ends after a surprise visit to the premises by labour inspectors, when the owners literally push Prunetti out of a window.

Prunetti then finds a job in a shopping mall through an agency. He spends the first day cleaning tables in the food court, forbidden to sit or speak for eight hours; then, already feeling miserable and useless, he is informed by the manager that the next day he will be assigned to 'the pariah of the shopping mall, the untouchables, the latrine operators' (p. 62). It is then he feels he has hit rock bottom: 'Even in the food court, it is no paradise

... But there is always someone doing worse than you, under you. And that someone under, that was me' (pp. 62–63). In the toilet-cleaning crew, he meets a series of unlikely characters, like Brian, an enormously fat fellow who looks a bit like Pavarotti, wears a papillon, and has a secret technique to unclog a toilet with his bare hands; and Kate, an elderly Irish woman who was pushed out of her job by the manager due to her advanced age only to be replaced by Prunetti. Although Prunetti gets along with his new colleagues in the toilets and finally manages to improve his English, the shopping mall is a jungle where employees who take too many cigarette breaks or ask for too many leaves of absence are subjected to unceasing gossip and eventually mobbed out, with no solidarity from their colleagues. It is only fitting that the manager greets Prunetti with a ridiculous 'see you later, alligator', and insists that he replies with 'in a while, crocodile' (p. 72). After Brian is fired, Prunetti decides to leave.

He then ends up working as a kitchen hand in a holiday camp in Stonebridge. There, he prepares meals for hordes of adolescents, along with another crew of rabblerousers that includes Ian, a petty thief, Gerald, an old and dirty former radio actor who knows Shakespeare by heart, and Ross, the son of a miner whose family was left broken by the policies of Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s. Prunetti spends some time there, until he accidentally discovers that the roof of the kitchen staff's accommodation is asbestos, and he is overtaken by uncontrollable anger: 'The managers had slate, the teaching staff had wood covered by isolating plastic tape, and we, the scullions from the kitchen, had asbestos. But then it was us who were the shitty ones' (p. 102). He does not even have time to take countermeasures, as he and his troublemaking colleagues are fired in small groups or one by one, to avoid any resistance. From there, he moves to pick raspberries under a *caporale* along with immigrants from Eastern Europe—an experience that also does not last long, as Prunetti is not compliant enough. Finally, he finds employment in an Italian restaurant run by Turkish immigrants pretending to be from Naples, where his only job is to help in the kitchen and loudly speak a few words of Italian to deceive customers about

the authenticity of the place. After he accidentally burns himself on the handle of the oven, he throws a fit of rage at the owners and customers and quits.

The author's return to Italy is melancholic. Back in his hometown, Prunetti is surprised to find a clear sky. An old worker tells him in tears that the steel factory has been shut, its ovens turned off after a century. The elderly man, a friend of his father, does not know what will happen to the factory: rumours are swirling that it will be bought by Chinese, Indians, or 'cowboys', or that the ovens will be dismantled and reassembled in Brazil, but no-one knows for sure. Meanwhile, 2,000 workers and their families have been left to fend for themselves, and the 108-metre railway track segments now serve only as an escape route for local youths who need to travel to other countries to eke out a living. The elderly worker has no illusion about the past or the present:

> To be honest it was hard work. Some hurt themselves, some died, some got sick. It was the last bread but it was also the only one. And now even that is gone. But it was still better than the way they take the piss at you young people to make you work for free. They make you run like hamsters in a wheel. They make you go round and round, maremma cane, turning around like 'trained animals'. (p. 123)

To compound the sadness of this decline, on Prunetti's arrival home, he discovers that his father is terminally ill—most likely a consequence of a lifetime of hard work.

The book has a nightmarish Lovecraftian undertone—a creative ploy to underline the unspeakable horrors that workers today face under capitalism. One night, when he is working in the Italian pizzeria, Prunetti finds a mysterious cephalopod-headed (and fish-smelling) totem hidden in a niche in the room where the waitresses change before their shift. He returns to look for it the next day, but it is gone. Similarly, while he is working at the mall, a nauseating stink of fish and rotting seaweed and a mysterious chant emerge from the underground levels. After following this trail of odours and sounds, he

witnesses a ceremony in which his direct supervisor and the mall's upper management adore a bigger version of the same cephalopod-headed idol, which, in this case, is surrounded by some ex-votos, including a photo of Thatcher in the guise of a multi-armed Kali goddess. During the ceremony, the chant mutates from an invocation to Cthulhu to Prunetti's supervisor reciting Thatcher's maxim: 'There's no such a thing as society, there are only individuals' (p. 77). From then on, the author has nightmares about the mall as a giant medieval hellscape, with the managers playing the role of demons and the employees as the souls of the damned. Finally, the holiday camp where Prunetti works as a kitchen hand features a Victorian 'Cthul Manor', where a reclusive director lives apart from everyone else, fuelling rumours that he is a deformed monster (this chapter is aptly titled 'Cthul Limited Company').

Prunetti holds no illusions about the strength of today's working class in facing these unspeakable horrors. When he is employed by the shopping mall, he attempts to cheer up a disheartened Brian by showing him illustrations from an old magazine that depict a society turned on its head. As he does so, he imagines how that carnival in which workers and managers and customers swap roles would work in the mall, but then has a realisation: 'These white magic spells of mine did not transform reality. That magic required the strength of workers' solidarity. But the adversary was too strong an enemy, able to cast spells and charms' (p. 76). And still, Prunetti argues, the Lovecraftian entity that is Capital today can be overcome. After his encounter in the lower levels of the shopping mall, he has a dream in which the idol is defeated by a swarm of bees—the workers. The incident in the Turkish restaurant breaks the spell for good:

I stormed into the hall and began haranguing the astonished crowd of customers, a speech full of screams and insults, in a macaronic English made threatening by my pink palm perpetually extended. And I said that I would have written and told everything. I swore it on the body and blood of wounded, exploited, and humiliated workers. And once I took that oath, which annulled the feudal one that wanted me as a servant to Her Majesty on British soil, I found myself free from any curse. (p. 116)

What he finds in his hometown breaks his heart and makes him wonder whether the curse has really been lifted, but even though he acknowledges that he might not achieve success in his lifetime, he is now determined to fight the Entity through his writing:

Perhaps I wouldn't have lived long enough to witness the end of the Entity. However, I knew that that day would come, I knew I could make it happen faster. I had to write my story, the story of the working class [in English in the original text] into which I was born. I had to disseminate it so that it could become a tiny protein in that code that would have broken the chains of oppression. (p. 129)

Horizon Lost

These three books obviously do not exhaust the experience of the contemporary Italian working class. They cover extensive ground in terms of industries and circumstances, but, for one, all are written by white men, so they are not representative of the lived reality of women and immigrants—just two important subjects that come to mind when discussing Italy's *mondo del lavoro*. Yet, they are enough to give us a glimpse of what it means to belong to the working class in Italy today. First, what these books reveal is a shared trauma of generational loss. Trevisan, Falco, and Prunetti were born in the 1960s and 1970s, so their adult life has coincided with deep transformations in Italian society, including the transition from a labour market that emphasised permanent employment and stability for many to one in which 'flexibility' has become paramount. Having lived through the final throes of the old employment model, they feel the pangs of its disappearance strongly, even when they profess contempt for it. This holds true for

the following generations as well, albeit for those born in the 1980s and later (including myself), precarity was the norm from the outset.

I can write by direct experience here. Like the three authors, I also come from a working-class family. I have memories of my father waking early in the morning to prepare his coffee and drive off to the railway. He started young as an ordinary worker and, over the decades, slowly rose through the ranks of the Italian state railway, eventually retiring a few years ago as the manager of a branch line. He rarely missed a day of work: from Monday to Friday, he would leave home at 6.45 am and return after 5 pm. The salary was not high, but the job was stable, the contributions to social security and the pension were assured, and there were perks such as the opportunity to take any train for free—a privilege of which I also could partake until I turned eighteen. As the son of a working-class family, I remember all the uncertainty when the time came to choose what to do after middle school. No-one in my family had attended university, and the priority then was to choose a path that would land me a good job. I remember seriously considering a vocational school specialised in advertising, but I eventually chose to go to a high school with a strong focus on the classics that entailed a commitment to attend university to be placeable in the labour market. It was not a foregone conclusion and for a long time I questioned my decision.

As I entered university in the early 2000s, agencies for temporary employment had started popping up everywhere in Italian cities. Again, instead of thinking of my employability, I chose to study Chinese language at a time when this was not a fashionable choice, and eventually ended up being sucked into a subsection of *il mondo del lavoro* different to that described by the three authors discussed in this essay—that of *il lavoro di cultura* ('the work of culture'). While the level of physical exertion is obviously very different from that of a tinsmith, warehouse worker, or kitchen hand, what the world I found myself in has in common with the *mondo del lavoro* at large is its extreme precariousness, the prevalence of contracts that last no more than two or three years, the toxicity of workplaces dominated by neoliberal

logics pursued by corporate hacks with intellectual pretences, with the additional bonus of having to often relocate from one continent to another. While that of the neoliberal university is a story I have written about elsewhere (see Franceschini 2021), in circumstances like these, just like Trevisan, Prunetti, and Falco, I cannot but compare my situation with that of my father, and his father before him, and wonder whether at some point something went seriously wrong in the way we imagine our society and the roles we play in it.

These books also reveal a general loss of horizon. The three memoirs are highly pessimistic and, despite the best efforts of the authors to be ironic and detached, the tone often borders on desperation. For Trevisan and Falco, the only path to deliverance can be found in the act of writing, in the opportunities that being acknowledged as writers provide them. However, few people have the skills to become a successful writer, not to mention that writing is a highly individualistic action that, in itself, does not offer a collective way forward. Only Prunetti, after his epiphany in the Turkish restaurant, comes to conceive of writing as a way to challenge the Lovecraftian horror of capitalism—an agenda he continues to pursue to this day by editing and promoting working-class literature for a leftist publisher in Italy. However, even in Prunetti, the general feeling is pessimistic. Even admitting that change is possible, it will take generations to make it happen: working-class heroes today are nothing but workers who can take a good beating and then still get up, and the best you can do for the time being is to have a good laugh by tricking your boss into rummaging in garbage bins.

Finally, the three books challenge the idea of the ineffability of the working-class condition. While the difficulties to convey in words the working-class experience raised by George Orwell are still there, the three authors did not infiltrate the working class as intellectuals trying to raise the class consciousness of workers or as sociologists trying to understand worker subjectivities; they *are* true members of the working class and still manage to beautifully translate their experiences on the written page. It is true that, as Ottiero Ottieri warned, their education and artistic bent

set them apart from their colleagues and occasionally made them feel like outsiders, but they nonetheless remain reliable narrators of what it means to be a worker in Italy today. And what they bear witness to is the fact that, as Trevisan writes, the working class of today is a far cry from the caricature that actual outsiders like us often have in mind. Just like the French workers in the nineteenth century described by Jacques Rancière, they are full of surprises: they love luxury, have little or no class consciousness, and often vote for the latest right-wing or populist politician. Most importantly, these working-class authors tell us that workers have been deprived of political imagination, of the very ability to conceive a different future in which their labour is valued, in which the workplace is not a lawless jungle, and in which they do not have to constantly worry about their own future and be ready to cut their neighbour's throat to survive. If anything, the effable workers of the twenty-first century expose this loss of horizon for everyone to see. ◼

Chinese Factory Machinery.
PC: Daniel Foster (CC).

CONVERSATIONS

(Left) Cover of Robert Ovetz' *Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives* (Pluto Press, 2020). (Right) Cover of *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*, authored by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2020).
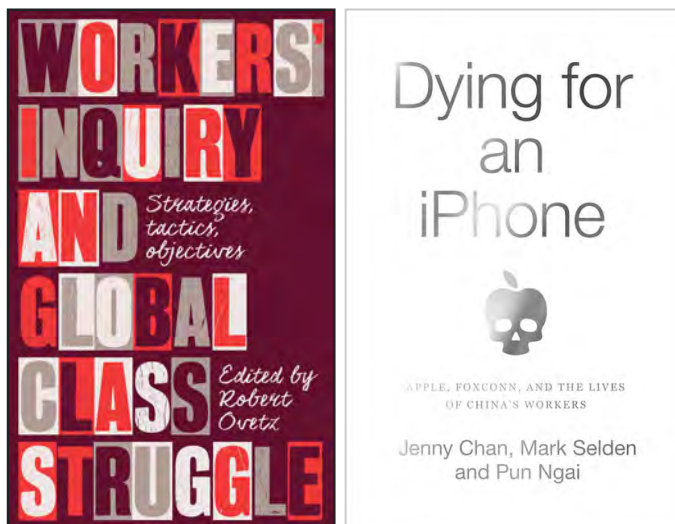
Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle

A Conversation with Robert Ovetz and Jenny Chan

Ivan FRANCESCHINI
Robert OVETZ
Jenny CHAN

As the *Made in China Journal* was born as a platform to document labour struggles in China, we always welcome the publication of books and studies that offer novel perspectives on the 'world of labour'. In this conversation, we discuss two recent additions to the literature: *Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives*, edited by Robert Ovetz (Pluto Press, 2020), and *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*, authored by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2020; translated into Korean by Narumbooks, 2021). In the former, Ovetz collects case studies from more than a dozen contributors, looking at workers' movements in China, Mexico, the United States, South Africa, Turkey, Argentina, Italy, India, and the United Kingdom. The latter is a book-long inquiry into labour conditions in the plants in mainland China of the Taiwanese-owned company Foxconn, an electronic components supplier for Apple and other global firms.

Ivan Franceschini: Robert, many intellectuals have bemoaned that the working classes under neoliberalism have been discursively erased from history, becoming shadows or, perhaps more aptly, ghosts of their former selves. In the opening of your collection of essays, you acknowledge that capitalism has been in crisis during the entire period of neoliberalism, and you pose the question: 'Is it merely a crisis of its own making or does the working class have a role to play in it?' What is your answer to this question and what does it tell us about the current state of the working class?

Robert Ovetz: My mentor and friend Harry Cleaver taught me to read through capital to see class struggle by engaging in what he calls 'an inversion of class perspective'. We can see class struggle by studying the current actions, organisation, and strategies of capital—what is called the 'technical composition' of capital. The evidence is there, but we have to learn how to find it, read it, and apply it for the purpose of class struggle. That is the role of a workers' inquiry into the current class composition of both capital and the working class.

In the past few months, there has been a significant uptick in the number of strikes and credible strike threats in the United States. With all the attention towards this current crest in the wave of class struggle, we tend to zoom out to look at other collective and individualised indicators of class conflict besides strikes. One thing that has been overlooked is the number of strike threats that proved credible enough to settle before the strike occurred. During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have also seen a large number of workers leaving their jobs to move to higher-paying and safer jobs. Workers are constantly on the move from one job to another, and across borders from one country to another, carrying with them their experience of class struggle. Worker mobility is another form of struggle, albeit a highly individualised one.

For decades, the United States and other industrialised countries have struggled with the supposed problem of low growth and declining rates of return on capital investment despite rates of productivity rising. This indicates that despite workers getting pounded by stagnant wages, worsening working conditions, digital speed-ups, increasing precarity, etc., capital has remained insecure itself about putting workers to work. We can see this with the widespread introduction of artificial intelligence and other algorithmic management techniques to control workers by augmenting, supplementing, and replacing us. Since the journal *Zerowork* was published in the 1970s, no-one has yet presented a convincing analysis of why capital continues to flee the reliance on work if workers are so weak and not engaged in struggle, whether overt or covert.

This apparent paradox should be the focus of our work as labour scholars, to understand where the vulnerability and choke points are, and devise tactics and strategies to apply leverage there to tip the balance of power back in our favour. To do that, we need to conduct

a global workers' inquiry into the current class composition of both capital and the working class in as many countries and sectors as possible to inform the struggle.

IF: Can you elaborate a bit more about this 'workers' inquiry' approach? What does it entail and what advantages does it present?

RO: Elements of a workers' inquiry approach to understand the current class composition run through each chapter of my book. While none is complete, they all contribute the first or second steps of what is needed to continue building a global inquiry into the current class composition of what is called the technical composition of capital, the current composition of the working class, and how working-class power is or can be recomposed. Let me briefly explain what each means.

First, capital's current organisation of production is a response to the last cycle of class struggle. Capital seeks to restore control by reorganising work, introducing new technology, devising management methods, fragmenting workers by job status, altering the global supply chain, and creating hierarchies of wages, race, gender, legal status, etc. In the process of implementing a new technical composition of capital, the working class is decomposed, and its power fragmented and defeated. Capital wins this round.

To recompose our power, to win on the new terrain of struggle, it is first necessary for workers to understand both capital's new current technical composition and how work and workers are organised. It becomes necessary to examine and understand changes in work, the characteristics of workers, the roles of technology to control and manage work, how different workplaces are connected in the supply chain, the connections between the waged and unwaged workplaces and the workplace and community, and the demographics of who the workers are. By doing this, we uncover what I call the 'invisible committees' of workers coordinating and struggling together in order to devise new tactics, strategies, and forms of organisation that can expand and circulate these struggles in order to restore the balance of power to the workers (Ovetz 2019). By doing this we identify the weak linkages, or what Jake Wilson and Manny Ness call choke points, in the technical composition where workers can apply the greatest pressure to cause disruption and extract gains (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018). Workers' inquiry is the method of understanding these changes, or the current class composition, and applying them to organising and struggle.

IF: Throughout your introduction, you draw from the pioneering work of Italian operaisti such as Raniero Panzieri and Romano Alquati. What lessons can we draw from the Italian workerist experience when it comes to understanding the challenges facing the working class today? And what part of their approach did not stand up to the test of time?

RO: The greatest lesson we can learn from the Italians is that the waged workplace is still our greatest source of power. In order to wield that power, we need to understand capital's strategy, its technical composition, and use that information to self-organise and recompose our class power. Panzieri, Alquati, *Quaderni Rossi*, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *Zerowork*, and *Midnight Notes*—all left us with an invaluable methodology for self-organisation, identifying capital's strategy and weakness, and how to exploit it. The problem is that it is incredibly challenging to inject a focus on organising for power in the workplace, even when we have a union. Our unions have been eroded of their power as a result of decades of labour legislation, the reorientation to advocacy, mobilising, lobbying, suppressing class struggle in favour of liberal identity politics, and being harnessed to liberal, labour, and social-democratic parties. Forty years of this has resulted in organising no longer being taught, practised, or even emphasised. Our unions have been taken over by leadership that transform them into adjuncts to political parties and strangles efforts to organise the disruptive power we still have over work, which is the only way we can make system change—by disrupting the capitalist relations of production. And then, even when we do organise, the objective is merely to get a small wage increase, protect benefits, and preserve the contract. We almost never put the struggle over and against work at the centre. To struggle against work would be to struggle against the entire capitalist economy, which is a critically vital strategy if we are to transcend capitalism and keep it from roasting the planet.

While we can learn much from those who transformed Marx's workers' inquiry into a practice of learning from struggle, they limited their inquiries to single workplaces. I try to remember that class struggle is always changing, shifting, and transforming. I think of it as a spiral dance in which one wave of victories is countered by capital and, if it is defeated, we move the struggle to a higher, more intense level and the cycle begins again. However, it need not be an endless spiral. If humanity and the rest of our ecosystem are to survive, we need to rupture this dialectic, as Cleaver (2017) puts it. Those who have used workers' inquiry in the past were too limited in their focus on single workplaces and countries. We need the continual project of global workers' inquiries that Ed Emery called for in 1995, in which we are constantly feeding stories and lessons from workers' inquiries from around the world as we circulate our struggles.

IF: Your book offers inquiries from nine countries on four continents. How did you choose these case studies?

RO: I took up Emery's (1995) call in the journal *Common Sense* for a global workers' inquiry. As capital cooperates, plans, and strategises globally, so must the working class. From the first enclosures of the Americas, capital has always been global. It has had to be. As workers' struggles knock capital off balance, it seeks both a spatial and a technical solution, as Beverly Silver (2013) put it. The spatial solution has been there from the beginning, fleeing the struggles of the sixteenth century in Europe. Except for the short experiments with the four workers' Internationals, the anti-imperialism movements, the post–World War I council movement, 1968, and the Arab Spring and Occupy, class struggle has also been global but lacking the concerted coordinated cooperation that will take us to the next terrain of struggle. We are seeing many impressive efforts to do exactly that with the two internationals of Amazon Workers International and the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers, which are unions coordinating their struggles globally with powerful impact. Where localised trade unions have tried and failed or moved the struggle into the electoral arena or courts, these self-organised workers have demonstrated just how vulnerable these global behemoths really are.

In response to Emery's call, I decided to ask those working with or interested in workers' inquiry into class composition to carry out one inside their country so we could begin the conversation. What came out was an impressive first baby step towards the beginning of doing a global workers' inquiry. Together, the series of earlier articles I curated for the *Journal of Labor and Society* and the book chapters showed us what is possible as well as how much more work is needed. There is some good work being done by *Notes From Below*, *Into the Black Box* in Italy, and a few others around Europe and Brazil, but the network we started has gone dormant and the coordination is stalled. It is a gigantic undertaking, but I have high expectations. Because it is urgently needed, the work will continue.

IF: Among the essays included in the book is a reflection by Jenny Chan on the challenges and opportunities related to labour organising in China. Jenny is also the co-author, along with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, of *Dying for an iPhone.* Jenny, you have been researching labour conditions in China for more than a decade; can you elaborate on the challenges you faced in conducting this type of workers' inquiry in the Chinese context?

Jenny Chan: The challenges come from our contestations for economic resources and sociopolitical power, and the forces that are combating us. *Dying for an iPhone* is an in-depth inquiry into the vulnerability of contemporary supply-chain structures and an

assessment of the potential power of workers at the key nodes of global electronics production. Workers' struggle reveals the depth of control and institutional impasse under the state–capital nexus.

Fundamentally, the ruling Chinese Party-State has guarded against organised opposition by workers through the law, the court, and the police. Foxconn workers have sought to reclaim their union at the workplace level but the Foxconn union—not unlike many other enterprise unions—remains in the tight grip of senior management. Moreover, the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions has monopolised the institution of worker representation across all levels. The battles for labour rights by protesting workers and supporting researchers are therefore very difficult.

IF: In the late 2000s and early 2010s, and particularly after the spate of suicides among its employees in 2010, Foxconn became a symbol of labour exploitation in China. One decade later, does the company still deserve this reputation or has there been any improvement in labour conditions?

JC: Foxconn earns its name by essentially turning humans into machines in the 'scientific' labour process. Yet human workers need to find meaning in life. During the first five months of 2010, when more than a dozen young workers ended their lives, one after the other, the corporate executives admitted that they were 'caught by surprise'. Their awakening, in our analysis, is an illusion. The pay raise, for example, was partially offset by the removal of bonuses and subsidies in a fiercely competitive market. To lower costs and enhance flexibility, Foxconn and other companies have further outsourced labour through so-called internship programs.

During the summer of 2010, Foxconn recruited as many as 150,000 'student interns' to meet production deadlines and to ramp up production. The mobilisation of intern labour was a joint effort between Foxconn managers and local officials, who prioritised investment over worker protections. Beginning from April 2016, when the Beijing government was pressured to cap the deployment of student interns to 10 per cent of the company's workforce, Foxconn moved to hide interns from inspection. In this way, the abuse of teenage students has become more hidden from public scrutiny. In a broader context, the Chinese state has classified interns as students, *not* employees, thus the systematic deprivation of their legitimate rights. Global tech behemoths have continued to benefit from the interning of students in their supply chains.

The super exploitation of low-wage 'student workers'—who are obligated to work to earn their educational credentials—dampens the intended national effort of upskilling and industrial upgrading. When intern credits are required for obtaining a diploma, local governments can extract the labour of students, conscripting them into manufacturing employment to meet production quotas. The

students eventually receive an educational credential, but such 'internships' actually have very little educational value. At a time of slowing economic growth, a shrinking pool of workers, and an ageing population, vocational school students and graduates could play a significant role in China's economic and technological development if they are protected against violations of labour law, and particularly if they were to receive appropriate training leading to better jobs and the use of higher levels of technology.

IF: Over the past decade, Foxconn was also at the forefront of robotisation in China, with its leaders often boasting about their plans for replacing workers with machines. Has this replacement happened? And what does the case of Foxconn tell us about the changes that have been occurring in the labour field more broadly in China?

JC: Foxconn makes Foxbots in-house while importing robotic arms at home and abroad. Styled as the 'harmonious men' in the company's lingo, Foxbots are automatons capable of spraying, welding, pressing, polishing, quality testing, and assembling printed circuit boards. In the accelerated process of automation, 'less-competitive' workers were already made redundant even when Foxconn has never disclosed the total number of adversely affected workers.

Foxconn is dominant in global electronics manufacturing and is branching out to other higher value-added industries and services in the face of strong competition. We have witnessed the concentration of capital and the development of oligopolistic globalisation in a rising China. Across state-owned, foreign-invested, and privately owned enterprises, the Chinese Party-State has vastly expanded its control to achieve national objectives. Officials are appointed to new oversight offices within large companies. The evolution of the state, capital, and labour relations in China's digital economy requires long-term observation.

No-one is free when others are oppressed. *Dying for an iPhone*—sparked by the rash of suicides and grounded in undercover research on Foxconn, Apple, and the Chinese state—has attempted to inform and heighten social consciousness concerning labour issues to inspire transnational activism in opposition to the oppression of labour wherever it is found. Despite pressures from both the Chinese authoritarian state and global corporations, grassroots labour organising for sustainable change continues. Buyers' interventions in their suppliers through such methods as audits of factory conditions and the introduction of new labour standards to prevent work-related suicides in corporate social responsibility programs have expanded over the past decade. Consumer awareness of the links between electronics manufacturing and the plight of workers has also grown. In Europe, for example, a number of universities and other public sector organisations have leveraged their procurement power to require brands and their suppliers to protect and strengthen workers'

rights in their contracts. Since a substantial part of Apple's market is education-oriented and their claims to ethical practices directly influence the perceptions of students, faculty, and the public institutions which buy their products, this might intensify pressure on the company in the many countries that constitute its global market. ∎
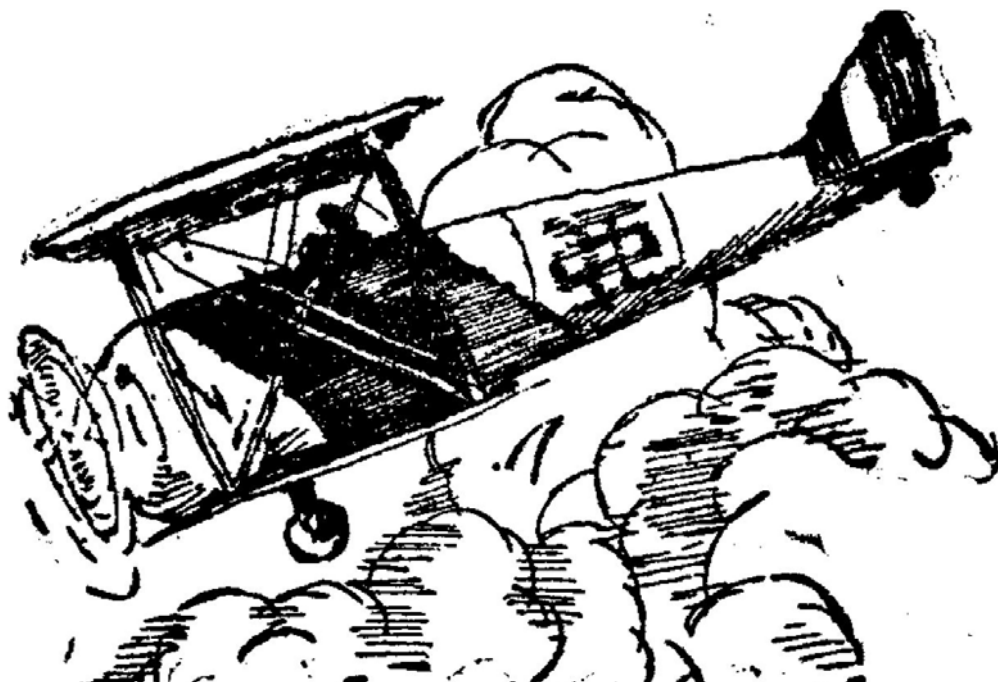
Detail from an illustration accompanying a Chinese Asianist publication from the early 1930s (Yin 1930).

Chinese Asianism Yesterday and Today
A Conversation with Craig Smith

Timothy CHEEK
Craig SMITH

Craig Smith's new book, *Chinese Asianism* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021), examines Chinese intellectual discussions of East Asian solidarity, analysing them in connection with Chinese nationalism and Sino-Japanese relations. Beginning with texts written after the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and concluding with Wang Jingwei's failed government in World War II, Smith engages with a period in which the Chinese empire had crumbled and intellectuals were struggling to adapt to imperialism, new and hegemonic forms of government, and radically different epistemes. He considers a wide range of writings that show the depth of the prewar discourse on Asianism and the influence it had on the rise of nationalism in China. Asianism was a 'call' for Asian unity, Smith finds, but advocates of a united and connected Asia based on racial or civilisational commonalities also utilised the packaging of Asia for their own agendas. It was less a single ideology than a

field of contesting aspirations. Asianism shaped Chinese ideas of nation and region, often by translating and interpreting Japanese perspectives, leaving a legacy in the concepts and terms that persist in the twenty-first century.

Timothy Cheek: In your book, you tackle the topic of Chinese 'Asianism'. How do you define this term?

Craig Smith: I define Asianism as a *call* for Asian unity, usually in the face of Western imperialism. This definition removes the focus from transnational identities and differs from earlier understandings of Asianism that focused on the implied meaning behind the concept. For example, Sinologist and cultural critic Takeuchi Yoshimi (1963) famously defined Asianism as 'the intention of solidarity of the countries of Asia'. I am not convinced that all Asianists had this intention. Rather, I find they often used Asianism as a concept to further their own agendas, which ranged from the furthering of their personal power to the construction of the wealth and power of their nation.

This led me to write a conceptual history in the fashion of Reinhart Koselleck. I am interested in *how* Chinese intellectuals and the elite used the concept of Asianism in different times and places; how it garnered power through the early twentieth century; and how Japan's loss in 1945 ultimately dissipated that power. Asianism has since generally been seen in a negative light, because of Japan, but perhaps also because the white West still harbours fears of the 'Yellow Peril' and a united Asia.

TC: In your book, you focus on the period from 1894 to 1945. Does this mean Chinese Asianism can be considered a closed experience, or do those ideas still reverberate today?
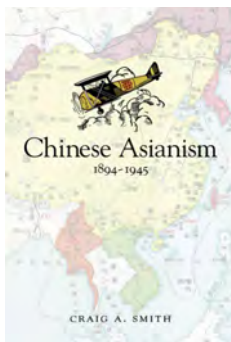
Cover of Craig Smith's *Chinese Asianism* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021).

CS: Asianism was a problematic but sometimes popular concept in the first half of the twentieth century, and because of its association with Japanese wartime ideology, most Chinese intellectuals relegated it to the dustbin of history. However, with the rise of China in the twenty-first century, the history of Asianism offers us ways of critically analysing the present and identifying continuities with the Republican period.

After Xi Jinping referred to Asia's future as a 'Community of Common Destiny' (命运共同体) at the 2014 Boao Forum for Asia, critics jumped at the opportunity to compare the rhetoric related to China's rise with that from the earlier rise of Japan and ideas such as the wartime 'Greater East Asian Coprosperity Sphere' that were used to justify Japanese imperialist ambitions. These criticisms

intensified with the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is increasingly placing China at the centre of a growing infrastructure network that stretches across much of the continent.

Now it must be said that there are obvious differences between Japan's rise and China's rise. China is not invading other Asian countries with its armies and that is a crucial difference. This is connected to the Gramscian differentiation between hegemony of coercion and hegemony of consent. If anything, China's network has much more in common with American models of hegemony than with nineteenth and early twentieth–century European and Japanese empires.

So, yes, there are many discursive similarities between early twentieth-century Asianism and today's efforts towards Asian regionalism, but these should be connected to Chinese and Japanese writings, and perhaps to the Japanese Empire's economic aspirations but not to Japan's invasion of Asia. I am primarily interested in Chinese discourse, so I find it fitting to consider recent discussions in connection with the desire in the 1920s for Chinese global leadership.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, popular elite intellectuals from the Kuomintang (KMT) made arguments for China to unite and lead Asia. Most of the top leaders, including Sun Yat-sen, Hu Hanmin, and Dai Jitao, made such calls for Asian unity under Chinese leadership. These arguments even detailed an 'international' to compete with the 'white imperialism' of the League of Nations and the 'red imperialism' of Moscow's Third International. Those internationals promised equality under the banners of liberalism and socialism, respectively, but inevitably came with their own forms of hegemony. KMT officials envisioned a united Asia based on Sun Yat-sen's ideas of 'nationalism' and called the 'International of Nations' (民族國際)—a third path with the oldest and largest nation at the forefront.

Ultimately, these arguments were designed to bolster domestic support for the KMT. They legitimised its rule in a way that connected Republican China to the country's past imperial glory while asserting its future position globally in a way that would re-establish the continuity of power. We can examine today's situation in connection with this past discourse.

TC: What did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) think of Asianism in the period you examine in your book?

CS: Most members of the CCP were very clear about their rejection of Asianism from the mid-1920s, and this only intensified with Wang Jingwei's support of Japan and wartime Asianism in the 1940s, but one of the outliers is particularly significant.

One of the first Chinese intellectuals to write influential articles about Asianism was CCP cofounder Li Dazhao. As in most Chinese writing on Asianism, Li firmly rejected a Japanese-led Asianism. In

fact, Li was initially compelled to write about Asianism in 1917 to declare his rejection of the 'New New Asianism' advocated by Ukita Kazutami—one of his former teachers from Waseda University. Li then advocated his own 'New Asianism', based on Leon Trotsky's proposal for a United States of Europe, and focused on the idea of a leaderless union. While Li's ideas were not as influential as Sun's at the time, his position as CCP cofounder has resulted in an inescapable legacy.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when KMT intellectuals were writing about Asianism in journals such as *New Asia* (新亞細亞) and *Asian Culture* (亞洲文化), none of the CCP's intellectual leaders wrote about Asianism. In 1925, Lin Keyi, a CCP member just returned from two years of study in Moscow, cofounded Beijing's Asian Nations Alliance (亚细亚民族大同盟). But the organisation veered towards cooperation with Japanese Asianists shortly after its founding and Lin and other leaders were the subject of angry editorials by famous figures such as Lu Xun and Li Dazhao. I think Chen Duxiu (1924) really captured the leftist feelings on Asianism: 'What we call for is not a union of all the nations of Asia, but a grand union of all the oppressed common people of Asia, excluding the Japanese, the Chinese warlord governments, and all the privileged classes!'

TC: What about today? I wonder whether you see any echoes in the speech on China, Asia, and the world that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently gave at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations?

CS: Yes, we can make connections between Wang Yi's speech on 20 December 2021 and early twentieth-century ideas on Asianism, but we should first look at Wang's earlier writing. In 2006, while he was the ambassador to Japan, he made a speech on Asianism and published it in *Foreign Affairs Review* (外交评论). Like Ukita and Li Dazhao, Wang called his ideas 'New Asianism'. The astounding lack of creativity in naming the different forms of Asianism points to the malleability of the concept. It meant very different things to different people and was by no means an ideology or consistent approach. However, Wang drew heavily on earlier Japanese and Chinese ideas, particularly emphasising Sun Yat-sen's and Li Dazhao's writings on Asianism. Yet for the twenty-first century, Wang outlined three principles to guide and represent 'Eastern civilisation' (东方文明): 'cooperation' (合作), 'openness' (开放), and 'harmony' (和谐). Harmony is no longer the keyword it once was, but Wang mentioned 'openness' and 'cooperation' in the same sentence five times in his December 2021 speech. And the spirit of harmony remains. In his speech, Wang explained:

> [F]acing people's call for peace and development, we have joined force with our neighbors to build a beautiful homeland and uphold regional peace and tranquillity. Asia is the most vibrant region in the world. To promote regional peace and common development is the shared aspiration of countries in the region … China has always followed the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness in relation to its neighbors. We will continue to work with neighboring countries to deepen cooperation and pursue tangible progress in bilateral and multilateral ties. (Wang 2021)

'Amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness' (亲诚惠容) are the Xi Jinping–era keywords/buzzwords for China's relationship with Asian countries. The discursive similarities with the Republican period are interesting, but is this Asianism? Wang also discusses Africa, Latin America, and many other places in this speech. The connection to the above discourse from the 1920s resides in the continuity of assertions of the legitimacy of Chinese moral leadership and of China's long history as a peaceful and supportive neighbour. Just like Li Dazhao, Wang repeatedly asserts the equality of nations and the importance of peaceful cooperation rather than hegemony and competition. CCP leaders have consistently made these arguments that Chinese leadership is not intended to be hegemonic.

TC: It appears that Sino-Japanese relations are at the heart of Asianism, but what about other Asian countries?

CS: Since the nineteenth century, most calls for Asian unity concentrated on Sino-Japanese relations. Getting the largest powers to cooperate was usually seen to be at the heart of Asian unity, but not always.

Working with India returns to this narrative again and again. I discuss this in a few chapters, but especially in Chapter 3, where I examine Zhang Taiyan's work with Indian revolutionaries in the Asiatic Humanitarian Brotherhood on the eve of the 1911 revolution. India sometimes offered a viable alternative for strategic partnership, but many intellectuals accepted the concept of Asia as some sort of meta-geographic identity and discussed the future unity of the entirety of Asia.

KMT publisher Ye Chucang may have been the first to write a lengthy discussion of Asianism and use the term 'Asianism'. Of course, we have texts written about Asian unity going back much earlier, but Ye wrote a series of articles specifically titled 'Great Asianism' (大亞細亞主義), serialised in the *Minli Bao* (民立報) in 1913. In his vision, a united Asia from Turkey to Japan would have a common military and economy. Sun Yat-sen's geographic under-

standing of Asianism was the same as Ye's, but in his famous 1924 speech on 'Great Asianism', Sun concentrated on the Sino-centric cultural commonality of benevolence as Asia's principle of unity.

TC: Your book focuses on Asianism as articulated by Chinese thinkers and political actors. How does this focus add to our understanding of Asianism and Asian regionalism?

CS: With a few exceptions—most notably, Prasenjit Duara's work—previous discussions of Asianism or prewar Asian regionalism have focused on Japanese writings. My book shows that, although the context and content were different, vibrant discussions on regionalism were commonplace in early twentieth-century China. This was particularly true in the 1920s and 1930s, when Chinese intellectuals formed Asianist organisations across the country and published numerous books and journals on the idea of an Asian Union.

This *zeitgeist* of regionalism is like the European timeline. In 1923, Count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi published his seminal book *Pan-Europa*, which is now seen as one of the key inspirational works for the formation of the European Union. Transnational regionalism was not limited to Europe, and Asianism was not limited to Japan.

TC: Your narrative focuses on the relationship between Asianism and nationalism, as well as the role of 'civilisation'. How do you make sense of this mix?

CS: Although one might logically expect Asianism and nationalism to be at odds, I found that every expression of Asianism in the early twentieth century was laced with nationalist intentions. In the book, I refer to this as the 'imbrication of nationalism'. Assertions of Asianism were designed to further the wealth and power of the nation. In fact, Asianism could not have existed without nationalism.

My book has chapters devoted to the concepts of race and civilisation because these concepts were adopted and used to understand and further the idea of a united Asia. The conceptual history of civilisation is particularly interesting as the term initially indicated a singular and linear form of civilisation when it entered the Chinese lexicon in the late nineteenth century. However, soon after this, Chinese intellectuals found the concept useful in differentiating between Western civilisation and Eastern civilisation. In what often appeared to be a self-Orientalising process, intellectuals defined the self in opposition to its other. Prasenjit Duara (2000) made sense of this change by differentiating the two forms as capital-C 'Civilisation' and small-c 'civilisation', with the former indicating the idea of a singular Eurocentric (and undoubtedly Christian) Civilisation and the latter indicating the potential for multiple civilisations, and therefore multiple paths to modernity. Of course, Chinese intellectuals still limited this to two civilisations, East and West.

This process of defining the East in opposition to the West was crucial for understanding Asia and Asianism, and it is still significant today. In the 2006 Wang Yi speech that we just discussed, he makes repeated references to the characteristics of Eastern civilisation, mirroring the arguments Sun Yat-sen made for Great Asianism in 1924.

TC: Ultimately, I find you are giving a grounded, nuanced, and thoughtful account of ideas (or concepts) moving across cultural frontiers. You are also showing how these ideas were used pragmatically by actors in different societies for their own purposes. This is an enduring question in intellectual history. How do you see your example contributing to our understanding of this important process in global history?

CS: Just as Philip A. Kuhn pointed out in his study on the 'Origins of the Taiping Vision' back in 1977, as concepts are translated between two different cultures, they take on different meanings and significance. How this happens is important for intellectual historians. Kuhn identified three factors: 'the precise language of the textual material'; the relevant historical circumstances; and the process by which the ideas are widely taken up. I agree with Kuhn, but I would put much more emphasis on the process of translation, which Kuhn only hints at. Intellectual history is almost always a history of translation. We need to be more explicit about this, and we need to pay more attention to this process. For example, the all-important concept of 'nation' (民族) famously entered the Chinese lexicon through the Japanese term *minzoku*, which was often used to translate the German term *volk*. Along the way, the term took on different meanings and characteristics that enabled it to be useful to intellectuals in different times and places. For much of the twentieth century, being of the same *minzu* indicated sharing the common ancestor of the Yellow Emperor, and shared bloodlines were an important part of the concept, just as they were for German and Japanese intellectuals.

The power imbalances between China, the West, and Japan provided the historical contexts for Asianism, just as they did for nationalism. As concepts such as 'race', 'civilisation', and 'Asia' arrived in China, East Asia was facing an onslaught of Western imperialism. Although the Europeans claimed to be operating as individual empires, they often appeared as a united group. The white peril was very real and Chinese intellectuals looked both inward and outward for solutions to the crisis, adapting these concepts to the needs of the day and constructing binaries, such as East and West, yellow and white, to make sense of the historical contexts and protect themselves and their countries.

Translation played a crucial role in formulating these responses, as it did in other intellectual changes. Most articles in many, if not most, late-Qing journals were translations, yet few intellectual histo-

rians spend time thinking about translation and comparing texts in different languages. I hope my book will show the possibilities associated with this approach.

TC: And finally, how did you get interested in this topic?

CS: Before beginning my PhD, I studied Taiwan's literature at National Chung Cheng University. The Institute for Taiwan Literature had a number of young academics working on the Japanese colonial period, and it was these teachers and scholars who first brought about my interest in regional identities. During World War II, regional identities were forced on the Taiwanese and occupied China. However, some of the writers we looked at appeared to accept an East Asian identity and that piqued my interest. In particular, I read the works of Zhang Wojun (張我軍), a Taiwanese writer living in Beijing from the 1920s to the 1940s.

When I started on the PhD, I had a conversation with Timothy Brook about Zhang and his collaborationist writings. Brook discussed researching his own book about the Nanjing Massacre and said that we can never really know whether those under the occupation believed in anything they wrote or whether they were simply doing what was needed at the time. Of course, this indicated that wartime Chinese Asianism would also be impossible to truly unpack. In response, I spent years looking at the 50 years leading up to the war, tracking continuities and similar discourse to try to find the intellectual contexts needed to understand collaborationist and Asianist writings. That is how I fell down this rabbit hole. ∎

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