

# MADE CHINA

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**UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

*Visions of Chinese Infrastructure*



MADE IN CHINA  
JOURNAL

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We shall sing the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, or rebellion: we shall sing the multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis; shall sing the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons; bloated railroad stations that devour smoking serpents; factories hanging from the sky by the twisting threads of spiraling smoke; bridges like gigantic gymnasts who span rivers, flashing at the sun with the gleam of a knife; adventurous steamships that scent the horizon, locomotives with their swollen chest, pawing the tracks like massive steel horses bridled with pipes, and the oscillating flight of airplanes, whose propeller flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,  
*The Manifesto of Futurism* (1909, translated by R.W. Flint)



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# Under Construction

## Visions of Chinese Infrastructure

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We shall sing the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, or rebellion: we shall sing the multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis; shall sing the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons; bloated railroad stations that devour smoking serpents; factories hanging from the sky by the twisting threads of spiraling smoke; bridges like gigantic gymnasts who span rivers, flashing at the sun with the gleam of a knife; adventurous steamships that scent the horizon, locomotives with their swollen chest, pawing the tracks like massive steel horses bridled with pipes, and the oscillating flight of airplanes, whose propeller flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,  
*The Manifesto of Futurism*  
(1909, translated by R.W. Flint)

Although the smoking serpents of erstwhile have been replaced by the sinuous lines of aseptic high-speed trains, and steamships have long disappeared from the horizon, these words penned by an Italian poet at the beginning of the twentieth century are a surprisingly apt description of the infrastructural frenzy that has overcome China in recent history. Rushing to catch up after the political turmoil of the twentieth century, over the past four decades the Chinese authorities have been remoulding the urban and rural landscapes in the service of economic growth. Starting from the township and village

enterprises and special economic zones of the 1980s, factories have sprung up everywhere in China, boosting a new industrial revolution that has carried the country's economic miracle well into this century. This was before the Party-state decided that it was time to launch a new green tidal wave of revolution in the now-postmodern metropolis, in an attempt to sever the pillars of spiralling smoke that used to link these plants to the sky (but in so doing, also forcing an entire working class to set their eyes to the ground). New highways and high-speed railways now crisscross the country, enabling the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, and (little) rebellion to travel with an ease and a speed never experienced before. Bridges of unprecedented length span rivers and seas, bringing together places and people that do not always desire to be connected. If there is a place where the futurist utopia of the early twentieth century has come to fruition, it is China.

It is to this infrastructural fever that we dedicate this issue of the *Made in China Journal*. In the special section, guest edited by **Tim Oakes** and **Alessandro Rippa**, **Jonathan Bach** focuses on the special economic zones that have played such an important role in China's development trajectory, asking whether they reflect the morphology of the socialist city. On a similar note, **Tong Lam** looks into the so-called special zones or areas that were designated for war preparation and economic/technological development in the socialist and post-socialist eras respectively, pondering the promises of the future that they once represented and the implications of the trail of ruins and foreclosed possibilities that they left behind. **Hallam Stevens** considers 'digital infrastructure', illuminating ways in which physical and digital infrastructures in China are tightly interwoven, and highlighting the importance of examining the relationships between digital infrastructure, human bodies, and labour. **Dorothy Tang** reflects on the conceptual history of landscape, mired as it is between the dualities of poetics and utility, paying particular attention to the 'Sponge City' practice as an innovative technology in

contemporary Chinese landscape architecture. **Amy Zhang** examines recent investment in municipal waste infrastructure and argues that, absent citizen participation, recycling programmes and waste collection are nevertheless achieved by workers who mobilise their labour, constituting a mundane, low-tech infrastructure to recuperate and circulate waste. **Alessandro Rippa** recounts how in Tengchong—at the China-Myanmar border—as large parts of the old town are destroyed to make space for new buildings, groups of people dig through the rubble looking for precious jade, a phenomenon that illuminates the ‘desire’ that lies at the core of China’s infrastructural development. Finally, **Andrew Grant** takes the example of Xining city to examine the ways in which contemporary urban infrastructure uneasily coexists with traditional Chinese and Tibetan cosmic infrastructures.

The issue includes op-eds on the legacy of the 1919 May Fourth Movement in today’s China by **Fabio Lanza**; the implication of the recent abolition of presidential term limits for Xi Jinping’s succession by **Ling Li**; the importance of a politics of solidarity to break the recent impasse in Hong Kong by **Jake Werner**; and the latest changes in the Chinese civil society landscape by **Holly Snape**. In the China Columns section, **David Brophy** examines the discourse developed by the Chinese authorities to justify the repressive policies towards the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang, highlighting how Beijing taps into a global discourse of counterradicalisation that has developed in the context of the US-led War on Terror. **Li Xiaotian** analyses the potential and limitations the 996.ICU movement to produce solidarity among the workers in the Chinese tech sector. Finally, **Jasmine Wang** looks into the attitudes of the rich in China towards the poor, using the case of the recent evictions of migrant workers in Beijing as a focal point.

The Window on Asia section offers one essay by **Erik Mobernd** about the progressive turn in South Korean politics, an historical shift for a state that has long given priority to business

interests. The cultural section includes two articles. In the first, **Zandie Brockett** and **Alessandro Rolandi** outline the principles and practices of the Social Sensibility Research & Development Department at Bernard Controls, which aims to use process-based art-making and research to reimagine how art can serve as a vehicle for the social imagination in the setting of a Chinese factory. In the second, **Zeng Jinyan** converses with movie director **Ying Liang** about how his life in exile has shaped his latest work.

We wrap up the issue with two conversations, one between **Loretta Lou** and **David Graeber** about *Bullshit Jobs*, David’s latest book about the proliferation of useless (if not outright harmful) jobs in this late stage of capitalism, and the other between **Ivan Franceschini** and **Antonella Ceccagno**, about *City Making and Global Labour Regimes*, the result of Antonella’s in-depth ethnographic study of the Chinese community in Prato, Italy. ■

The Editors

# **BRIEFS**

**Apr-Jun 2019**

# APR/JUN 2019

## May Fourth and June Fourth Anniversaries

The second quarter of 2019 has been rife with political symbolism and significance for China's ruling Communist Party, having marked the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement and the 30th anniversary of the June Fourth Incident (see Lanza's op-ed in the present issue). The 1919 May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist campaign that grew out of student protests demanding the restoration of Chinese independence and sovereignty following the Treaty of Versailles. The protests soon spread nationwide, inciting fiery displays of Chinese nationalism. In recognition of the centenary of the May Fourth Movement, President Xi Jinping televised a speech from the Great Hall of the People in which he hailed the bygone students as patriotic heroes who were driven by their love for the nation. While the centenary of the May Fourth Movement was heavily propagandised, the CCP has maintained silence surrounding the 30th anniversary of the 1989 June Fourth Incident. In 1989, students took to the streets of Beijing to call for democratic reforms as well as more rights and freedoms. However, on 4 June there were few reminders of the violence that occurred 30 years ago, with security in the square being tightened and online social media outlets being heavily censored. Nevertheless, the stillness of Beijing stands in stark contrast to Hong Kong, where over 100,000 people gathered on the streets for a candlelight vigil to commemorate the victims of the 1989 crackdown. *TS*

(Sources: CNN; South China Morning Post; Sydney Morning Herald; The Guardian; The New York Times)

## Unabated Repression

The second quarter of 2019 saw unabated repression of critical voices in China. On 4 April, Mongolian historian Lhamjab A. Borjigin was tried in secret for charges of 'separatism' and 'sabotaging national unity'. Borjigin maintained his innocence throughout the proceedings and a verdict has yet to be announced. Another writer, publishing online under the penname Tianyi, was sentenced to a four-year prison sentence for publishing homoerotic works, while Liu Pengfei, the moderator of a news chat group on WeChat bringing verified news from overseas to a Chinese audience, was sentenced to two years in jail on unclear charges. Human rights lawyers are not faring any better. On 29 April, rights lawyer Chen Jiahong was detained by the police on suspicion of 'incitement to subvert state power'. Meanwhile, prominent rights lawyer Liu Xiaoyuan was stripped of his practicing licence following an online photo where he is seen selling pesticides, an artistic form of protest he resorted to in order to denounce his inability to practice law due to official obstruction. On 28 June, Li Wenzu, the wife of lawyer Wang Quanzhang, was allowed to meet her husband for the first time since his arrest in July 2015. She found him a 'totally changed man', who spoke in a 'robotic tone'. The situation in Xinjiang, where an estimated 1.5 million Uyghurs are believed to be held in internment camps, has shown no sign of improvement either. On 14 June, prominent Uyghur writer Nurm Muhammad Tohti died while being held in an internment camp in Xinjiang. Amid the trade conflict between China and the United States, American universities are reevaluating their collaborations and partnerships with Chinese companies. Reports have emerged that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at least one other American university maintain partnerships with iFlytek, a Chinese artificial intelligence company whose voice recognition software has been used to securitise Xinjiang. *TS*

(Sources: ABC News; Global Times; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Voice of America)

## Permanent Crackdown on Student and Worker Activist

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The second quarter of 2019 once again saw heightened repression of Chinese student and worker activists—a further intensification of the crackdown that began in July 2018. As Xi Jinping hailed the nationalist legacy of the May Fourth Movement, calling on the Chinese youth to love their country and follow the leadership of the Communist Party, six more Marxist university students who were planning to celebrate the International Labour Day by working alongside workers disappeared just before May First. The crackdown also extended to members of social worker and community organisations engaging with labour and migration issues. Li Dajun, Liang Zicun, Li Changjiang, and Tong Feifei—staff members of various NGOs based in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—disappeared in May along with Wuqiong Wenqian, former editor-in-chief of the left wing media site *Groundbreaking* (破土) and volunteer at *Tootopia* (土逗公社). In spite of this unending repression, there has been some pushback. In April, one hundred Chinese workers suffering from silicosis signed a petition in which they demanded the release of three activists arrested in March who had assisted them in the past. Among the three arrested is Wei Zhili, whose wife Zheng Churan—herself a feminist activist who was detained for her advocacy work in 2015—has mounted a public campaign to secure the release of her husband by penning articles, speaking to the media, and inviting supporters to run ten thousand kilometres with her until Wei’s release. Few of the activists arrested since July 2018 have stood trial: most have either remained under detention or have been released under residential surveillance. *KL*

(Sources: CNN 1; CNN 2; Hong Kong Free Press; SCMP)

## New Statistical Report on Migrant Workers Cuts Section on Rights

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In April 2019, China’s National Bureau of Statistics released its latest annual report on migrant workers. It was probably the most underwhelming edition in many years, containing the usual sections on demographics, employment, migrant children education, and urban integration. However, this year differed in that there was no mention of labour rights issues. According to the document, the total migrant population in 2018 was 288 million people, an increase of 1.84 million (0.6 percent) over the previous year. While the number of migrants has continued to increase, the growth rate has slowed, as the migrant population showed clear signs of aging. In 2018, the average age of migrant workers was 40.2, a six-month increase from the previous year. Migrants born after 1980 were 51.5 percent of the total migrant population, an increase of more than 1 per cent from 2017, with 43.2 percent of this cohort born in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2018, migrant workers employed in the third sector represented 50.5 percent of the migrant population, an increase of 2.5 percent from 2017. The average monthly wage was 3,721 yuan, an increase of 236 yuan (6.8 percent). For the first time in years, the Report did not include a section on the situation of workers’ rights protection, which formerly provided statistics on overtime, labour contract coverage, and wage arrears. Other sections also did not provide any information about rights violations. The document only noted that the participation of migrant workers in activities organised by unspecified community organisations had increased by 0.9 percent, reaching 26.5 percent, and that 9.8 percent of migrant workers were members of unions. *KL*

(Source: National Bureau of Statistics)

## Sustainability of China's State Pension Fund in Question

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The financial sustainability of China's pension fund has recently come under the spotlight. According to a report released in April by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the reserve held by the urban worker pension fund—the cornerstone of China's state pension system—will peak at 7 trillion yuan in 2027 and then start to drop steadily, reaching zero by 2035. The report also mentions that net outflows from the pension fund would already have begun this year had there not been fiscal subsidies for the pension fund, and that the gap between pension contributions and withdrawals will become as large as 11 trillion yuan by 2050. One important reason for the dire financial situation of China's pension fund is the rapid ageing of China's population and the concurrent decline in the available workforce. Other reasons include the relatively low age threshold for claiming pension benefits—60 for males and 55 for females—and the lax regulatory enforcement of pension contributions by both employers and employees. The looming pension crisis has caused fear in China, notably among younger generations. In response to these concerns, the Chinese authorities have pledged that they will 'fully guarantee' further pension payments and announced that they are pondering different solutions to make China's pension fund more financially sustainable, including raising the retirement age while tightening the enforcement of pension contributions. To further address the adverse effects of demographic changes on China's social security, the Chinese government has decided to completely lift the restrictions on migrants obtaining household registration (*hukou*) in second-tier cities, and is contemplating the removal of these restrictions in first-tier cities with populations of three to five million for particular social groups, such as university students and recent graduates. *NLiu*

(Sources: Bloomberg; Caixin; Reuters; Sina 1; Sina 2; South China Morning Post; Tencent)

## China Debates Labour Conditions of Migrant and White-collar Workers

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In the second quarter of 2019, China's public opinion heatedly debated issues related to working conditions for both migrant and white-collar workers. On 11 April, Dou Yongyu, a construction worker, posted a video online in which he smashed a yellow safety helmet worn by front-line workers and a red helmet worn by site supervisors. While the yellow helmet was shattered into pieces after a single strike, the red helmet remained intact. The video quickly went viral, triggering a public backlash against the scarce regard of employers for the workplace safety of their migrant employees, as represented by the substandard helmets provided to Dou and his colleagues. Having initially maintained that his helmet was provided by a construction firm, Dou, nonetheless, backtracked afterwards, saying that he bought the helmet himself. The change in Dou's account did not quell public outrage, with social media users arguing that the helmet was still of inferior quality, however he obtained it. Amid escalating public anger, China's Emergency Management Department urged companies to ensure the quality of the equipment provided to their employers. Another debate raged over the work culture in the tech industry—in particular over the so-called '996 work schedule', i.e. from 9am to 9pm and six days a week (see Li Xiaotian's essay in the present issue). Starting from an anonymous post on GitHub in early April, the online campaign against the demanding work culture in China's tech industry quickly gathered momentum. Chinese lawyers penned an open letter to urge the government to duly enforce labour laws, while Microsoft employees petitioned their company to decline any demands from the Chinese government to censor the debate. China's Internet heavyweights, including Alibaba's Ma Yun and Jingdong's Liu Qiangdong, by contrast, vocally embraced the 996 work pattern, although their stances softened after the eruption of public outrage. *NLiu*

(Sources: Daily Mail; ifeng; Sina; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; tech.163)

## Hong Kong Rises against Proposed Extradition Law

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The second quarter of 2019 has seen growing tensions in Hong Kong. On 9 April, nine leaders of the Umbrella Movement, a mass pro-democracy protest that took place in the former British colony in 2014, were found guilty for their roles in mobilising protesters to block major roads in the centre of the city for 79 consecutive days. In a 268-page document, Judge Chan Jong-herng wrote that although Hong Kong courts recognise the notion of civil disobedience, it 'is not a defence to a criminal charge'. A proposed extradition law further exacerbated the already-acute tensions in Hong Kong (see Werner's op-ed in the present issue). The legislation was put forward by the Hong Kong government in February, with the stated aim of easing the transfer of criminal suspects between jurisdictions with which Hong Kong lacked formal extradition agreements, including mainland China. The legislation caused widespread public concern, as people worried that it would be abused by mainland China, whose legal system remains opaque. Still, in spite of the criticism, the bill was submitted to Hong Kong's legislative council for approval in early April, which triggered the first round of protests. With the backing of the Chinese government, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam determined to press ahead. On 12 June, around one million protestors took to the street, clashing with the police, who deployed tear gas and rubber bullets to contain the demonstration. Unexpectedly, three days later Carrie Lam announced the indefinite postponement of the bill. Short of total cancellation, however, the announcement did not prevent an even larger protest on 16 June, which involved as many as two million people. Amid mounting public pressure, Carrie Lam personally apologised but refused to resign. In the latest twist, on 1 July, the anniversary of Hong Kong's return to the mainland, protesters broke into the Legislative Council building, breaking glass walls and spray-painting surfaces with political slogans. *NLiu*

(Sources: Bloomberg; CNN; People's Daily; Reuters; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The New York Times; Xinhua)

## Murders in the Mines

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On 12 April, six men from poor villages in Shaanxi province were executed in northern China for faking premeditated murders as industrial accidents in order to pocket millions of yuan in compensation. Between 2007 and 2014, the six criminals, ranging in age from 22 to 47, murdered 11 mine workers in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, cheating a combined 3.1 million yuan in compensation out of the mine owners by disguising themselves as the victims' families. The victims were all cash-strapped rural migrant workers who had been enticed into working in mines by the six criminals and agreed to use the identity cards of the criminals' relatives to apply for jobs. Reminiscent of the plot of the award-winning Chinese movie *Blind Shaft*, such grisly crimes have repeatedly occurred in China over the last two decades. In December 2007, five miners in Hunan province were detained for murdering their coworkers and swindling hush money from the pit owners. In 2014, a court in Hebei province sentenced five criminals to death and 16 others to prison for similar charges. In 2016, 74 people were prosecuted in Inner Mongolia for the killing of 17 people whose corpses were used to forge mining accidents and extort compensation from the mine owners. In the same year, a court in Beijing handed down suspended death sentences to two felons who committed similar offences. Observers consider extreme poverty in remote villages in China as being the underlying reason for mine murders, while loopholes in regulations on safety in mines are regarded as a facilitating factor. *NLiu*

(Sources: Caixin Global; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The Atlantic; The New York Times)

**OP-EDS**



Monument to the People's Heroes, bas relief depicting the May Fourth Movement. PC: Ken Lum

## The Legacy of May Fourth in China, a Century Later

Fabio LANZA

In March, graduate students at Peking University (Beida) were given a survey on ‘the conditions of the development of university students’ (Park 2019). One of the questions addressed the one-hundredth anniversary of the first student demonstration in Chinese history, when students marched in the streets of Beijing to protest the terms of the Versailles Treaty.

‘In 2019 we celebrate the centennial of May Fourth. The May Fourth Movement established patriotism, democracy, the May Fourth scientific spirit. Your position with regards to the following statements is ... (choose from: Very strongly support, strongly support, not sure, strongly disagree, very strongly disagree).’ They were asked to express their judgment on the following statements:

- 1) Patriotism, progress, democracy, science are fundamental values which we must uphold and practice.
- 2) The May Fourth Spirit embodies the Chinese people and the Chinese nation’s pursuit of advanced values.
- 3) The ideals, enthusiasm, and struggle of the youth is the source of China’s spirit and vitality.
- 4) Youth should release its passion in their struggle to search for youthful ideals.
- 5) Patriotism cannot be a mere slogan
- 6) The most important thing about becoming an adult is knowing how to love the nation.

The vagueness of these statements shows how little significance references to the May Fourth Movement carry in contemporary Chinese official discourse, beyond stirring nationalist feelings among the young (May Fourth has also been designated China’s ‘Youth Day’.) In the West, where decades

of modernisation theory have convinced many that China is ‘behind us’ yet on the same path towards liberal democracy, observers usually talk about May Fourth as the beginning of a narrative of ascending liberalism in the country, a narrative in which intellectuals and students are the tragic protagonists.

Both in and outside of China, then, there seems then to be little reason to commemorate, let alone celebrate, the anniversary of that day in 1919—a day which is considered the culmination of the New Culture Movement, a far-reaching attempt by young intellectuals to rethink ‘China’ and its tradition within the global conditions imposed by colonialism, and which, in almost every Chinese textbook, marks the beginning of Chinese modernity. But the narratives of vacuous nationalism and failed liberal democracy reproduce only two strains of the complex political legacy of May Fourth. Today, we should examine that legacy and its contradictions, not so much to rescue it but to highlight how and why May Fourth has been a source of inspiration to Chinese people throughout the last century.

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As Dai Jinhua has pointed out, May Fourth, 1919 ‘shaped the basic model for modern mass movements and for civic disobedience in the public sphere’, a model which can be summarised: 1) university students protest in the streets of Beijing, gathering in Tiananmen Square; 2) Beijing citizens support them; 3) the movements expands in other cities; 4) workers join the movement, thus increasing its revolutionary scope (Dai 2009, 5). This is the model that has been absorbed into the official history of the Party-state.

The official history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) describes the movement of students out of the schools and into the streets as part of a reaching out of intellectuals towards the proletarian masses—workers, peasants, citizens—which was crucial for the future success of the revolution. One of the bas-reliefs on the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square synthesises this model in the image of students in long gowns haranguing a crowd of workers, peasants, and women; in the stone of the monument, the legacy of May Fourth is literally inscribed as an essential part of the constitution of the Party-state.

However, the reality is more complicated and contradictory. During the May Fourth Movement, the students presented themselves in opposition to the state, but they resolutely and repeatedly refused to identify their protests as a demonstration of ‘students’ as a specific social category. In speeches, essays, and documents, the May Fourth activists repeated over and

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In the demonstrations of 1919, students acted politically by crossing borders. In May and June 1919, students left the school and moved into the streets. By moving outside the school, students also refused to be contained by the narrow 'student' category. The state, meanwhile, defined the protests as a 'student' movement—deploying that characterisation in order to justify the repression.

over that they were not acting as students, but as citizens, and that they were fighting for the future of the nation, not their own social status or educational level.

In the demonstrations of 1919, students acted politically by crossing borders. In May and June 1919, students left the school and moved into the streets. By moving outside the school, students also refused to be contained by the narrow 'student' category. The state, meanwhile, defined the protests as a 'student' movement—deploying that characterisation in order to justify the repression.

Students were young, reckless, and ignorant of the complexities of the adult world, the government argued. By getting mixed up with politics and marching in the streets, they had also abandoned what was supposed to be their only duty: to study and improve themselves for the sake of the nation. Government repression then aimed to put students back 'in their proper place', both theoretically and practically: back to classrooms and campuses, away from streets and squares, where they could have encountered and joined forces with other social groups, and back to being just 'students', concerned only with student tasks and duties. In containing and repressing the protests of 1919, the government deployed a strategy of separation, separating students from the rest of the people, youth from adults, and the locations devoted to scholarly debate from the public space of politics as organised action (Lanza 2010).

This is one of the crucial tensions that have defined the Chinese student over the past century. On the one hand, a model of activism centred around a mythological idea of the 'student', embodiment of enlightened patriotism. This is a model which is also quite comfortable and convenient for intellectuals, as it reaffirms their privileged role within the revolutionary legacy.

On the other hand, May Fourth gives us a historical case in which it was exactly the voluntary overcoming of social categories that allowed the students to be most innovative and revolutionary—in other words, the students' decision not to behave as 'students' but to insist that they were citizens was, for the state, the most radical element of their protest. It is not by chance that, in later instances of activism, repression followed the same strategy of separating students' claims from those of regular citizens that began in 1919.

For example, in 1966, students answered Mao's appeal to wage a 'cultural revolution' by leaving their schools and classrooms, going out into the city, striking alliances with other groups, taking the political debates into the streets (in the form of the *dazibao*, big-character posters), and creating independent political organisations (the Red Guards), made of students but

not exclusive to students. The government reacted by trying to reduce the political struggle to a carefully shepherded academic debate, driving the students back into the classrooms, where they supposedly belonged.

In the spring of 1989, students asked for and received the support of Chinese citizens—taxi drivers, small business owners, workers, journalists, and even monks marched at their side—yet they never gave up their self-identification as students, leaders of the movement, and voices of the people. But what worried the government was the possibility that the movement could spread to other social classes, morphing from a student protest to a true mass movement. Particularly troubling was the presence of a contingent of workers in the square, who went as far as trying to organise an independent union. Government repression after June Fourth, then, became much crueller towards workers and non-students in general.

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Student protesters in 1989 used references to the May Fourth legacy to legitimise their right as ‘students’ to be heard and respected. They faced violent repression. In the last three decades, Chinese students have been mentioned primarily as either victims or beneficiaries of the country’s economic reforms, apathetic or enthusiastic participants in the neoliberal transformation of Chinese society. Whichever role they choose, entering the political stage as actors was not an option—at least not until a few months ago.

Since last summer, a group of students have mobilised in support of workers in Shenzhen, where the employees of a private company, Jasic, have launched a brave and equally surprising campaign to organise an independent union. The campaign, which started in May 2018, eventually drew reaction from Party authorities, culminating in the arrest of workers, supporters, and family members on 27 July of 30. Hundreds of students from the most prestigious universities then signed a petition in support of the workers, with about 20 of them travelling to Shenzhen, to offer their help in person.

In August, police raids in Shenzhen and Beijing led to the arrest of about 50 people, including workers, students, and activists who had organised demonstrations in support of Jasic employees. Even after they were released, many of them remained under strict, unrelenting surveillance (Wong and Shepherd 2018; Zhang 2019).

These are very peculiar students: most of them belong to Marxist study societies, and vow ‘to be good students of Chairman Mao forever’ and to ‘work hard in our studies of

Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought, to take it in like spiritual sustenance' [as student-activist Yue Xin wrote in her open letter to Xi Jinping] (Au 2019, 73; Yue 2018).

These students—in interviews, speeches, and video clips—speak a language derived directly from Party rhetoric. But here the Marxist references to class, labour, and equality are infused with new meanings and become indictments of the CCP. The party is accused of betraying those ideals.

For example, in their petition supporting Jasic employees, students accused the officials who repressed the workers' movement of showing contempt for the 'rule of law' (one of the vaunted principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics), of violating the leadership role of the working class—'one of the governing philosophies of the Chinese Communist Party'—and indirectly of jeopardising the achievement of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' (HRIC 2018).

In November, the authorities of Peking University accused the Marxist students of 'criminal activities', and in December they placed the Marxist student association under the control of an external committee (one step removed from shutting it down altogether) (Lau 2018; Park 2018). (Ironically this is the place where the first Marxist student association was founded in 1920.)

These Marxist students are very aware of the often contradictory role that 'students' occupy in the official narrative of the Party-state, and they deploy references to that narrative—specifically to May Fourth—in their political statements. They are not only turning this piece of Party rhetoric to their advantage, but also drawing new meanings from a stale tradition.

In an open letter penned on 19 August, Yue Xin—a Beida graduate and workers' rights activist—responded to critics who had accused students of being, as their predecessors in 1919, 'anti-state'. First, she redeployed the usual phraseology about the importance of May Fourth, including its role in the formation of the CCP, even citing Xi Jinping's encouragement to 'carry forward the spirit of the May Fourth Movement'. But then she reinscribed the students and workers' struggle 'for fairness and justice' as the true meaning of that 'spirit' in the present situation and rebuked her critics for having 'forgotten the original values of the CCP and the People's Government'.

Similarly, the petition by Beida students in support of the workers in late July reframed the May Fourth legacy as one in which the workers, not the intellectuals, are the protagonists, thus making it relevant right now, where 'the working class stands once again at a critical turning point in history' (HRIC 2018).

As for Peking University itself, one of the mythical locations of the May Fourth narrative, the Marxist students compare its lustrous past to its ineffective present, reversing the institution's relentless celebration of its elite status by calling its members to a new activism that is faithful to the university's student activist legacy. Yue Xin evokes the moral mandate of the iconic writer Lu Xun and of those at Beida who 'dared to speak, dared to fight': '[A]s someone from Peking University, I have no excuse to sit by guilt-free as an idle beneficiary of the status quo' (Yue 2018).

The petition by Beida students presents an even starker indictment of the university, which is described as rotting, decomposing while resting on its laurels. The petitioners urge their fellow students to look outside the school gates at a world in which power and capital are waging a war on the people, a war that will affect the future of the students as it does the present of the workers.

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Another crucial characteristic of these students' message is the acknowledged centrality of the working class in this new movement—a movement whose goal is not short-term benefits for individuals, but the fight against all kind of 'darkness' in society. They call for a wide alliance among workers, peasants, lawyers, media people, students, intellectuals, retirees, and those leaders who protect civil rights.

And here lies the perceived danger of this movement for the current iteration of the Chinese state: first, it is centred on the class that is, even if only theoretically, the CCP's source of legitimacy, which is still supposed to represent the 'vanguard of the working class'; second, the alliance between workers and students, no matter how aspirational or incomplete, signals the possibility of political actors representing something beyond the immediate interest of their social group, and thus presenting a more radical challenge to the organising principles of society. That was a crucial part of the legacy bequeathed by the May Fourth Movement. That this challenge is now framed in the name of Marx and Mao makes it even more worrisome for the Party-state, which, under Xi Jinping, has pushed to reintroduce the mandatory study of state-interpreted Marxism at all levels.

While this usually means a form of ideological indoctrination enforcing the 'correct' interpretation of socialism, it becomes clear that if one reads Marx and takes it seriously in China today, there is a serious risk of getting in trouble. As one of the Marxist students recalls, only after reading Marx's *Wage-Labour and Capital* and works on political economy did he

realise that the culprit for the oppression of workers ‘was not any particular capitalist but capitalism itself’ (Couceiro 2019). This shows how Marxism, studied and interpreted by students in this way, could have a different reality in today’s China. For young students and activists, Marxism once again offers a methodology to think about politics, one that is fostered by but incredibly threatening to the Party.

As Cristiana Couceiro points out: ‘Unlike the Tiananmen protesters, China’s new leftist students are not calling for a change in government. Instead, they say they are calling for the Communist party to return to its own roots, and carry out Mao’s promise of workers’ liberation’ (Couceiro, 2019). And that is a much more radical challenge and much less easy to dismiss.

What might this new wave of student and worker activism mean in the future? On the one hand, student participation has transformed what was a local movement into a national and international case. This has given increased visibility to the Jasic workers, but it might also have the unwanted effect of increasing the severity and the extent of the repression.

Young idealists who speak the language of Marxism, ally themselves with workers, and point the finger at the hardships produced by capitalism are miles away from the still dominant western dream of a liberal transformation of Chinese society under the push of the market economy. But on the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of student activism in China, we can see today’s student and worker activism as the potential beginnings of a transformation of China, not just a rehash of their predecessors’ actions. ■



Mao's body after death.  
PC: www.gmw.cn.

## Xi Jinping's Succession

### What Did the West Get Wrong?

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Ling Li

What would happen if Xi Jinping suddenly died, killed by assassination or incurable illness? Would such an unexpected departure of the paramount leader paralyse the government and release the suppressed chaotic energy in the upper echelons of the Party leadership, with all those vying for such an opportunity racing to fill the power vacuum and bringing about an unpredictable outcome? In the past few weeks, these questions have inflamed the imagination of commentators on social media and in the press. All this because in March President Xi Jinping, accompanied by French President Macron, appeared to have exhibited a 'suspiciously' slow walk when inspecting the guard of honour in Paris. And then, in an incident that apparently reaffirms the earlier suspicions, he executed a laboured descent into (and ascent from) his chair when meeting the press following the EU-China Summit in the same week. Concerned observers passionately examined the President's gait, posture, walking pace, and micro-expressions from the two-minute video clips released by the media, and hastened to conclude that the President is in poor health. This episode offers a glimmer of hope for the many opponents of Xi and his policies: a premature change of leadership.

One reason that Xi Jinping has attracted such obsessive attention to his personal life and affairs is that he is considered a rule-breaker. Six years into office, he has instituted so many changes in governance on so many fronts that people have started to decorate his many titles with adjectives that used to be the exclusive domain of Chairman Mao. Out of nowhere, Xi came to power and shook up the Chinese polity and surprised the world with his intensive anti-corruption campaign, relentless purges in domestic politics, unconventional military reforms, and an audacious global strategy supported by an aggressive foreign policy. His reworking of the Party's propagandistic discourse from unprincipled pragmatism to making-one's-own-narrative assertiveness is unequivocal and decisive. His about-face from the familiar exercise of classic Chinese prudence to an uneasy flaunting of entitlement and vindictiveness is so sharp that no one seemed prepared for it. All these have earned him the reputation as a political maverick, one who breaks rather than follows the norms.

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Whereas in democratic systems information about candidates is provided to the public during electoral campaigns long ahead of the election day, in China no such information is divulged before the election because electoral campaigns are prohibited.

Has Xi Jinping reached his position because he has defied norms or, rather, because the norms are flexible and pliable enough to allow him to shape them to his own ambition? To answer this question and to properly assess the quality of Xi's governing style, we need to first establish what kind of norms are involved. And for this investigation no topic is better suited than that of leadership succession.

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Power succession has always occupied the centre of discussions of Chinese political affairs. Usually these discussions are focussed on personnel changes—i.e. who are the most likely candidates and what are their chances of winning. Whereas in democratic systems information about candidates is provided to the public during electoral campaigns long ahead of the election day, in China no such information is divulged before the election because electoral campaigns are prohibited. The list of nominated Politburo candidates is highly classified information and guarded as tightly as the plotlines of successful Hollywood TV dramas. Thus, speculation on results of Party elections is mainly based on analysing known or speculated factional linkages between potential contenders, which is almost impossible to verify.

In 2018, however, the focus of discussion shifted from electoral outcomes to succession norms, all due to an amendment in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the least enforceable piece of legislation of the land. Experts are seemingly unanimous in their opinion that, with this constitutional amendment, Xi Jinping has committed the most flagrant violation of Party norms—namely, the prescription of a two consecutive term limit for Party leaders. This rule is widely described as being established by Deng Xiaoping, followed by Xi Jinping's predecessors, and considered the foundation of the 'normalisation' of Chinese politics in the post-reform era.

The conclusion that Xi has, with a single pen stroke, rewritten the rule of politics in the PRC has gained widespread popularity and quickly appeared in the headlines of news outlets around the world. However, it is reached by conflating many issues and is based on the preconceived notion that Xi is a rule-breaker—a textbook example of confirmation bias.

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In 2018, the Party-controlled National People's Congress (NPC) amended the PRC Constitution and lifted the two consecutive term limit for the office of the Head of the State (HoS), which is concurrently held by Xi Jinping as the Head of

the Party (HoP). According to the PRC Constitution, the HoS occupies merely a ceremonial position. As HoS, Xi represents the state and performs diplomatic functions. Additionally, upon instructions from the NPC and its Standing Committee, the HoS promulgates laws, issues appointment orders, confers state medals and titles of honour, grants special pardons, declares a state of emergency or war, and issues mobilisation orders. In other words, the Constitution does not confer any power upon the HoS to participate, oversee, supervise, monitor, or intervene in the operation of any branch of the state. Therefore, the only legal consequence of lifting the term limit of HoS is that Xi Jinping is allowed, if re-elected, to continue to be the face of the PRC when addressing dinner guests at diplomatic events that he hosts and to continue to enjoy the diplomatic privileges accorded to the HoS during his state visits to other countries.

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Before the 2018 constitutional amendment, Article 79 (3) of the PRC Constitution of 1982 stipulated: ‘The Chairman (HoS) ... can serve no more than two consecutive terms.’ The legal consequence of removing this restriction is straightforward: there is now no limit on the number of times an incumbent HoS can enter a race for re-election, nor is there any limit on the period of time that the office can be retained. Like many things in life, there is a substantial gap between having the opportunity to do something and actually realising what the opportunity has made possible.

Unlike the office of the HoS, the office of the HoP has never been subject to any term limit. But unlike monarchs, no HoP is given a life tenure either. The exact number of terms held by the HoP has differed from person to person. Mao is the only one who had enjoyed life tenure as the HoP, both in name and in effect. Deng had a bumpy mid-life career, being promoted and demoted back and forth three times, and then serving as the HoP in effect, but not in name, until his death. Hua Guofeng, once the holder of the highest offices of the Party, the Army, and the State Council, barely managed to survive his first term and was then stripped of power and almost erased from Party history. The HoP careers of Hua’s next two successors, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, were even shorter-lived as neither managed to complete their first and only term as General Secretary (GS). The record of the two most recent HoPs does not reveal consistency either: Jiang Zemin served 13 years (counted as three terms) as the GS and Hu Jintao retained a seat at the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) for 20 years (four terms), serving ten of them (two terms) as the GS.

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Before the 2018 constitutional amendment, Article 79 (3) of the PRC Constitution of 1982 stipulated: ‘The Chairman (HoS) ... can serve no more than two consecutive terms.’

The practice of pairing the HoP and the HoS started with Mao in 1949, when the Party came to power, and lasted for ten years. Then the two positions were split between Liu Shaoqi as the HoS and Mao as the HoP from 1959 to 1968. After 1968, with the purging and eventual death of Liu Shaoqi, the office of the HoS was left vacant. At that time, this vacancy was not filled because of determined objection from Mao, who intended to abolish the office altogether. At the same time, Lin Biao, the then second-in-command and Mao's designated successor, campaigned for the position to be filled. The contention around the preservation or abolition of the HoS became so principled that it broke up the Mao-Lin alliance, which ended with Lin's death in a mysterious plane crash in 1971. Thereafter, in 1975, the HoS office was formally removed from the PRC Constitution and in 1978 the ceremonial functions of the HoS were conferred upon the head of the state legislative body, the NPC. When the HoS office was reintroduced in 1982, the position was still not paired with that of the HoP. Between 1982 and 1993, two Party elders took the office of HoS consecutively, Li Xiannian (1983-88) and Yang Shangkun (1988-93), neither of whom concurrently held the position of the HoP either in name or in effect. The pairing practice was revived in 1993, 34 years after it was last practiced, and has been consistently followed ever since.

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Despite the absence of a term limit for the HoP, few of them have managed to retain that office for life. Some of them were voted out of office at Party Congresses and some retired seemingly of their own volition. The origin of the retirement practice can be traced back to the State Council Regulation regarding the [Retirement] Arrangements for the Elder, Invalid, Sick, and Disabled Cadres issued in 1978, which allows officials below ministerial rank to retire with pension at the age of 60 for males and 55 for females. The practice was expanded to cover the ministerial rank, imposed by a Party document [Zhong Fa No. 12 (1982)] issued in 1982, which sets 65 as the retirement age for the chief-ministerial rank and 60 for the deputy-ministerial rank. As of now, no retirement age has been mandated for the highest-ranking Party members in the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Nevertheless, a pattern has emerged and is widely acknowledged among China observers: since 1992, ordinary members of the PSC have peacefully retired after the age of 68 at the end of their term. Records of retirement practices of the HoPs are, however, inconsistent: Deng Xiaoping wielded power as the HoP in effect until losing his faculties around the age of 90; Jiang Zemin took up his third term as the HoP at 71 and retired from his final position at 78; and Hu Jintao retired

from all his offices at the age of 70. To say the least, the records constitute too small a sample for any conclusion to be drawn about HoP retirement practices.

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Among his many perceived norm-breaking deeds, Xi Jinping has been credited with having dismantled both arms of a presumed succession norm that was attributed to Deng Xiaoping. The norm is considered so vital that it is listed as a key component of the ‘normalisation’ of Chinese politics in the post-Mao era. The first arm of the norm is the term limit, which Xi Jinping has allegedly broken with the 2018 Constitutional amendment. The second arm is the right of the outgoing HoP to designate his successor’s successor, which Xi has also seemingly broken by deposing Sun Zhengcai, a former Politburo member who was believed to be one of Xi’s heirs apparent designated by Hu Jintao.

Was Deng Xiaoping truly a norm shaper and defender of a ‘normalised’ polity as many have come to believe? In answering this it is necessary to recall that the term limit was not imposed on HoP, the real seat of power, but only on the ceremonial position of HoS. And when it was reintroduced to the PRC Constitution in 1982, the HoS was not paired with the HoP either in name or in effect. In addition, the very same Constitution exempted only one position among all offices of all branches of the state from the term-limit: the head of the State Military Commission. This was a position that was paired with the head of the Party Military Commission and then concurrently held by Deng Xiaoping himself, from which he wielded power as the HoP in effect.

As far as succession is concerned, Deng was anything but a stickler for conventions. He did not hesitate to violate the most ‘sacred’ norm of the Party in conspiring to and succeeding in the deposing of then HoP, Hua Guofeng, to whom he had sworn allegiance. Not long after, Deng proceeded to depose in quick succession two of his hand-picked successors, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, both of whom had made significant contributions to Deng’s own reformist legacy. After the political turmoil of 1989, Deng enthroned Jiang Zemin as the GS and thereafter empowered and groomed Hu Jintao as the successor of his successor, a practice that was not only unprecedented to the Party, but also rarely seen during the 2,000 years of Chinese imperial history

If anything, Deng’s succession practices are inconsistent, reversible, and unconventional. It is hard to imagine that his invention of choosing two successors down the line, a political legacy frequently attributed to him, would actually take hold

or evolve into a succession norm. This practice constitutes an unprecedented overreach of Deng's own power, a prerogative created by and for himself alone, but a significant corrosion of the power of all future HoPs because they would be deprived of the privilege to pick their own immediate successors—an integral part of the power of any ruling autocrat. More importantly, this practice necessarily creates two competing seats of absolute power in the same temporal space whose origins of legitimacy come from two different reigns, a situation that makes the best incubator for power struggles, deposing and dethroning until the supremacy and singularity of absolute power is restored. In this light, the day when a HoP truly abdicates his power to choose his own successor will be the day when the Party is ready to surrender itself to constitutional rule, indeed a harbinger of democratisation, though for now a very distant prospect.

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Did Hu Jintao come to power because the presumed succession norm dictated it or because Jiang Zemin endorsed Deng's choice of his own volition out of expediency? And who was responsible for the crowning of Xi Jinping? Was it dictated by Jiang Zemin alone or rather the result of a multilateral power settlement? Disappointingly, no one who knows the answers to these questions would be at liberty to say. The same logic applies to most issues raised above. There is no question that Xi Jinping is, like some of his predecessors, a man of tremendous power of agency. However, to characterise selected discrete past instances as attested precedents, and then to treat any disparity from the perceived precedents as evidence of norm breaking is like calling any change in the climate a violation of the cosmic order. It not only dulls our understanding of the dynamism of power relations at the top of the Party and accords an exaggerated magnitude of power of agency to individual leaders, but also distracts us from paying more attention to other aspects of the operation of the Party where binding norms do exist. ■



"No ferocious law, refuse China extradition", protesters rally in Hong Kong. PC: @etanliam2019 (Flickr.com).

## A Global Path through the Hong Kong Dilemma

### Towards a New Internationalism

Jake WERNER

Recent weeks have seen the reemergence of an extraordinary protest movement in Hong Kong. Perhaps one million of the city's seven million people turned out on 9 June to demand the withdrawal of an extradition bill put forward by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam that would have left people in Hong Kong vulnerable to politically motivated extradition to mainland China. Perhaps two million came out on 16 June, even after Lam suspended consideration of the bill in response to police clashes with protesters on 12 June.

The movement is ongoing, having extended its demands to accountability for police violence, the resignation of Lam, and universal suffrage for the city's elections. Its future direction, however, is unclear. Powerful secessionist tendencies are at work and many protesters frame their conflict as one between their own local identity and the supposedly incompatible culture of mainland China. Yet internationalism and solidarity with popular struggles on the mainland are also present.

There are no indications, however, that the Chinese leadership will soften its insistence on ultimately integrating Hong Kong into the authoritarian system of the mainland. As in the last major moment of protest—the Occupy Central movement of 2014—Beijing has again accused Hong Kong's protesters of acting under the influence, if not direction, of foreign powers (Zhang 2019). In the years since 2014, it has encouraged a range of repressive measures targeting those who took part in Occupy, from blocking elected members of the Legislative Council from taking their seats to imprisoning protest organisers. And it has stood firm in its determination to prevent direct elections for either the chief executive or the full Legislative Council.

These events have left the impression that Hong Kong and mainland China are polar opposites: the liberal democratic values and cosmopolitan openness of a great global city facing off against an increasingly nationalist and authoritarian mainland regime. That, in turn, has inspired a sense of hopelessness that democracy can ever triumph in Hong Kong. As *The Wall Street Journal* put it, the protests represent 'the last flickering flame of resistance to a rising oppressor' (Baker 2019).

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Bringing to light new possibilities is of vital importance not just for Hong Kong and China, but for the entire world.

Yet a closer look at the conflict reveals a less fixed set of identities and a more complex political trajectory. On the one hand, recognising these dynamics undermines the simple binary of freedom against tyranny, but on the other hand it opens the possibility of overcoming today's irreconcilable oppositions and achieving a freer society on both sides of the border. The key to such an analysis is to place the seemingly local question of Hong Kong's governance within the global context that has produced the conflict. The task is urgent and the stakes are enormous. Bringing to light new possibilities is of vital importance not just for Hong Kong and China, but for the entire world.

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Antipathy in Hong Kong against mainland China is driven not only by the looming threat of authoritarianism, but also by popular resentment at the increasing presence of mainland Chinese in the city. Attacked for everything from buying up the supply of infant formula to engaging in uncivilised behaviour in public spaces, mainland Chinese tourists, students, and workers have found themselves harassed on the street and denounced in the media with quasi-racist slurs. In the words of the organiser of a full-page newspaper ad against mainlanders: 'Why are mainland mothers flooding in to take up resources in public hospitals, getting our benefits and social welfare? Why do mainlanders ... refuse to follow our rules and order?' (SCMP 2012; Tsang 2015). Such attacks echo anti-migrant politics worldwide.

The mainland is symbolically linked not only to the everyday presence of these maligned sojourners, but also to a more abstract sense of powerlessness because Hong Kong's elite is taken to be an instrument of Beijing. A few families have accumulated enormous wealth by dominating the key economic sectors of property, ports, communications, and power generation. In 2017, the top five tycoons took 23.6 billion HKD (3 billion USD) in dividends from their primary listed companies alone, income that in Hong Kong's laissez-faire system goes entirely untaxed (Bland 2018). The power of the economic elite is institutionalised in Hong Kong politics in an unusually open way because Beijing designed the mixed electoral and appointed legislature to ensure corporate control (Hung 2010). Thus, the question of democracy is inseparable from the question of how the people of Hong Kong can exert influence against the Beijing-business axis.

The urgency of this question lies in the deteriorating possibilities for a decent life in Hong Kong. The percentage of university graduates in the city has more than tripled over the last 25 years, yet wages have been sluggish or flat for the bottom two-thirds of the population (Cartledge 2017, 25–27). Median starting pay for new graduates in 2017 was 10 percent lower than it was in 1992 (Ng and Choi 2019).

As in the other financial centres around the world, incomes and job opportunities have sharply polarised in the era of free market globalisation. As manufacturing has shifted across the border to Guangdong province, the growth of well-paid jobs in finance and the other professions has been dwarfed by the increase of poorly paid service jobs performing menial tasks for the professionals (Wong 2018; Ng and Choi 2019). Workers in Hong Kong endure the longest working hours of any global city—a problem afflicting the privileged and poor alike—which the government has long discussed but never addressed due to business opposition (Ng and Leung 2018; Liu 2018). At the same time, the people of Hong Kong face the world’s most expensive housing market (Ting 2019).

Mainland China is closely associated with all of these issues. The influence of mainland property speculators has driven the cost of housing up ever further (Cheng 2017). Hong Kong university students feel growing pressure from their mainland rivals (Bland 2017, 39–40). The major labour union federation is dominated by Beijing, and helped to repeal the right to collective bargaining that Hong Kong workers briefly enjoyed in 1997. Today it denounces the democracy protests (Cheng 2015; China Daily 2019). Finally, Beijing is now implementing its plan for a Greater Bay Area, the aim of which is to deepen the presence of the mainland by tightly integrating Hong Kong into the transportation, communication, and economic systems of Guangdong.

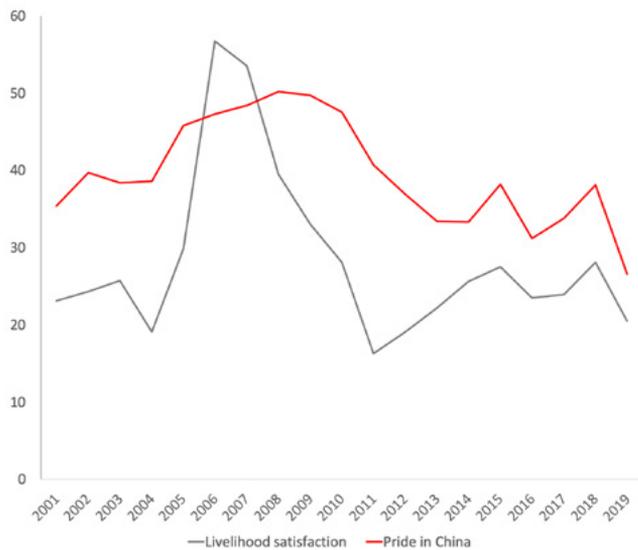
Thus, the discontent expressed in the protests draws together different forms of popular suffering and fear whose immediate experience is linked in various ways to the presence of mainland China in Hong Kong (Peter 2019). The breadth of these sentiments is reflected not only in the size of the protests, but also in the sharp decline after 2008 in various measures of identification with the mainland (Public Opinion Programme 2019; Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2016).

As shown in the graph below, the percentage of Hong Kong citizens expressing pride in being a citizen of China is closely correlated with the degree of satisfaction in livelihood conditions. While thoughts about democracy and individual identity should not be reduced to narrowly economic facets of

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Thus, the discontent expressed in the protests draws together different forms of popular suffering and fear whose immediate experience is linked in various ways to the presence of mainland China in Hong Kong.

life, neither should they be divorced. Each is caught up in the other, and in recent years all have been pointing in the same direction. With the erosion of individual opportunity and the sharpening of exclusionary economic and political dynamics in Hong Kong society, a politics aimed at pushing out the presence of mainland China increasingly seems like the only one adequate to the challenge.



Data: Public Opinion Programme

Yet the sense that hostile outsiders and heartless elites are ruining the future of the common people is hardly unique to Hong Kong. The populist desire to solidify a common in-group identity in order to mobilise the people against these forces is likewise widespread. The mass emergence of these themes across many countries over the last decade indicates that their ultimate sources must be traced deeper than mainland China. What rising populisms both left and right around the world have in common is the shared experience of extreme inequality and intense competitive pressures, which has generated an acute sense of scarcity around jobs and resources alongside a growing sense of having lost control over decisions about the future to shadowy alien powers.

If the nature of the discontent is widely shared, Hong Kong is nonetheless unusual in the way a single concept—China—seems capable of explaining resentments felt against both the elite above and the uncivilised outsider below. That, in turn, nurtures a kind of quasi-nationalist localism as the form of politics that seems to address the whole range of grievances. The problem with such a politics is not only that it focuses on the immediate

sources of oppression rather than the deeper dynamics. The more pressing danger is that the advance of localist politics in Hong Kong may radicalise Chinese nationalism.

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Just as the people of Hong Kong have faced an increasingly fraught socioeconomic landscape over the last two decades, so too have the people of mainland China. The market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s generated not just rapid economic growth but also high levels of inequality, corruption, and popular unrest. Around the turn of the century, the Communist Party leadership sought to alleviate these tensions by strengthening social protections and opening up space for NGOs and activists to press the claims of disadvantaged social groups. A decade of slow but genuine liberalisation across a wide range of social realms followed, in which a host of Hong Kong-based solidarity organisations played an important role (Hung and Ip 2012).

But the financial crisis of 2008, rising international tensions, and growing popular nationalism—three tightly entangled phenomena—led to a sharp reorientation. The Chinese leadership recentralised power, clamped down on dissent, and became increasingly suspicious of ‘foreign’ influences—trends that have intensified under Xi Jinping but that predate his ascent to power. Within this general repudiation of liberalisation, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress issued its notorious 2014 decision limiting candidates for Hong Kong chief executive to those acceptable to Beijing, setting off the Occupy Central protests (SCMP 2014).

The Xi administration reacted strongly against those protests for two key reasons. First, Chinese leaders feared the unrest not because it was alien but because Hong Kong’s social landscape mirrored so closely the situation in the rest of China. The same discontent with extreme inequality, instability, overwork, competition, corruption, and elite unaccountability haunts every city in China. On the mainland, it has proven difficult to mobilise this anger, both because of the state’s tight control over dissent and because there is no single target against which to direct the full range of resentments. China’s leaders are nonetheless convinced that political liberalisation would unleash these pressures. Giving in to the Hong Kong democrats thus endangers the delicate authoritarian settlement that has thus far sustained market-driven growth in China.

Chinese leaders’ feeling of internal insecurity has now been seriously aggravated by a growing sense of external threat. The discrediting of neoliberal economic doctrine in 2008 and the need to accelerate development to deal with a drop in export demand led Chinese leaders to assert increasing state control in

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The Hong Kong protests, then, represent a practical challenge to Beijing's goal of maintaining control, but they also pose a symbolic and ideological challenge to the fate of the nation.

the economy, as embodied in the 'Made in China 2025' industrial policy. This posed a growing challenge to a US economy facing its own serious challenges after 2008, inspiring the Trump administration's campaign to prevent China's development of high-value production (Werner 2018). Whereas Hong Kong's frustration with the status quo is directed against mainland China, in mainland China the immediate appearance of threat and restriction is the United States, 'Western civilisation', and liberal values.

The Hong Kong protests, then, represent a practical challenge to Beijing's goal of maintaining control, but they also pose a symbolic and ideological challenge to the fate of the nation. Chinese leaders believe that for the nation to survive and prosper, the population of the entire country—today fragmented and often unreliable—must be unified and regimented to compete successfully within an increasingly zero-sum global economy. From this perspective, the Hong Kong protesters not only reject that project, they also betray the nation in service to foreign values and foreign schemes.

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The most common framings of the Hong Kong–China conflict have posed it in moralising terms (freedom vs authoritarianism; treason vs loyalty to the nation) or as a clash of cultures (colonial or cosmopolitan vs Chinese). These binaries represent the conflict as one of fixed positions whose resolution can only be the defeat of one side or the other. They also tend to encourage such an eventuality by increasingly hardening identities within their oppositional terms.

If, instead, we step back from the immediate conflict and analyse the structure that has given rise to such incompatible positions, then we open the possibility that a new political path might resolve the antagonism by creating different possibilities that overcome these binaries.

The structural development in question is not specific to Hong Kong or to China. It is, rather, the slow disintegration of the dominant global system of political economy—free market globalisation—since 2008. The collapse of the global economy was narrowly averted in that year, but the forms of economic growth and social reproduction that had previously integrated a growing number of people around the world into the system did not recover their former vitality. Instead, more and more people either face mounting difficulty finding a place in society, or they experience their participation in it as a source of suffering rather than possibility.

Hence the rejection of the status quo is a global phenomenon. Yet the forms of appearance assumed by the status quo—and with it, who is blamed for the suffering—vary widely depending on the position one occupies within the system. People in both Hong Kong and mainland China have turned against the social forms that sustained neoliberal growth over the last four decades, above all the concentration of economic and political power, the corruption that grows from it, and the cosmopolitan process of integration that expands its ambit. Yet, the concrete bearers of these forces are differentiated in a way that turns distinct parts of a common rebellion against each other. Ideologies of exclusion and separation are the outcome.

Nationalists and localists of all varieties—those in the United States and Europe as much as those in Asia—are perfectly right to recognise that their suffering is deepened by further integration into the existing system of growth. But they are quite wrong to think that seceding from that system offers any sort of solution. Instead, the attempt will only deepen the dysfunction through a cycle of escalating conflict as each nationalism feeds on the others and strangles the possibility of progressive politics in all countries.

However, apprehensions of the status quo are determined not only by one's structural position but also by the political experiences to which one is exposed. This means a politics that configures the sharp social tensions of a disintegrating global system in a different way could avert the current movement toward world conflict.

The politics that could break the cycle of rising antagonisms is not the severing of connections across borders but their deepening. The people of Hong Kong have a great deal in common with those on the mainland, as both groups do with the people of Vietnam, India, Iran, Sudan, South Africa, Brazil, and the United States. All face an elite that is unresponsive to popular pressures due to an extreme concentration of wealth and power. All suffer the instabilities of eroding social protections, speculative bubbles, intensifying nationalist conflict, and a deteriorating natural environment. Joining together to remake the global system around an egalitarian set of principles—universal labour rights, dramatically increased investment in capital-starved regions, international cooperation in the transition to green production—would confront the deep sources of suffering and reduce the insecurities that have promoted intolerance and authoritarianism around the world.

In the Hong Kong context, the immediate work of such a politics would be repositioning democracy from a localist demand to one of solidarity with popular struggles on the mainland. This would confound Beijing's attempt to tar the democracy agenda as an anti-China scheme, demonstrating

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The people of Hong Kong have a great deal in common with those on the mainland, as both groups do with the people of Vietnam, India, Iran, Sudan, South Africa, Brazil, and the United States. All face an elite that is unresponsive to popular pressures due to an extreme concentration of wealth and power.

instead that the Hong Kong movement stands with the people of China. By breaking out of the US–China and liberal–national binaries, it would help to mitigate the insecurities that are fuelling Chinese nationalism.

The short-term goal—possible if (but only if) the next US president sharply reorients China policy—would be a return to the political environment of the 2000s on the mainland, lifting state repression and allowing the return of grassroots politics. Opening space for those struggles would not only move mainland China in a progressive direction, it would help shift political attention within Hong Kong to the deeper social forces within the city imposing popular disfranchisement. The long-term goal towards which all this would build is a new structure of global growth. A progressive form of globalisation would sustain further integration, but in sharp contrast to neoliberal globalisation, it would accomplish integration by reducing inequalities and extending productive investment to the vast numbers today excluded from growth.

Such an internationalism is just as essential a part of Hong Kong identity as the more exclusionary currents that have been gaining strength. From the general strike of 1925, in which half of all workers in Hong Kong stood together with the labour and anti-imperialist movement on the mainland, to today's labour organisations like Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM), Worker Empowerment, Globalisation Monitor, or China Labour Bulletin, to name but a few of the groups supporting workers on the mainland, Hong Kong's position both inside and outside of China has made it an essential site for connecting the country to transnational movements.

In such a project, the demand to preserve Hong Kong's autonomy and expand its freedoms is not superfluous but essential. The fight for a progressive globalisation as the alternative to both free market globalisation and nationalist disintegration cannot succeed without securing China's cooperation. Hong Kong's defence of the diminishing space to articulate a different vision for the future of China and to practice the politics that might bring it about is thus indispensable. The future of global society may turn on what happens in Hong Kong over the coming weeks and months—not only whether the struggle for democracy grows stronger, but how the movement defines its vision for the future as well. ■



公民社会 (*gongmin shehui*, literally 'citizen society').

## Painting in Grey and Permeating Gaps

### Changing the Space for Chinese NGOs

Holly SNAPE

**S**peak this clearly: the development goal for Chinese society is a Marxist social community; it is not a Western civil society of state-society opposition.' This comes from a recent article originally published on the public WeChat account of a central academy (CPPCC Daily 2019). The academy is charged with training people from the 'democratic parties', religious groups, and ethnic minorities. When referring to civil society, the article uses the slightly less sensitive term 市民社会 (*shimin shehui*, literally 'townspeople society') and not 公民社会 (*gongmin shehui*, literally 'citizen society'), sidestepping the problem of clarifying its position on something that is all but unspeakable. Over a number of years, the term *gongmin shehui* has been gradually blotted out of the public lexicon (Bandurski 2011). CNKI, a Chinese academic database, shows a peak of papers with this term in the title in the period between 2009 and 2011. This fell off sharply from 2012 to 2015, and by 2018 research overtly discussing civil society using this term had been almost entirely expunged. *Shimin shehui* is now following a similar trajectory.

'Civil society' is not the only casualty of this lexical cleansing. A whole family of related vocabulary is being polished and trimmed. After almost two decades as the 'NGO Research Centre' (NGO研究所), Tsinghua University's cutting-edge research institute quietly changed its name to the 'Social Organisation and Social Governance Research Centre' (社会组织与社会治理研究所). The popular term 'public interest' (公益), used to express a panoply of citizen-led activity, seems to be undergoing a similar process. It is being uncluttered of its potential connotations of citizens' rights, a public sphere, and anything conceivably 'oppositional', and is instead being affixed to the more congenial term 'charity' (慈善). It now appears often in the neat compound 'public interest-cum-charity' (公益慈善). This is not just a matter of abstract ideas. It is a process of shaping the space to conceive of real activities and possibilities. This possibility-shaping, combined with a process of government institution-building and Party permeation, is slowly but deeply changing citizen organising in China.

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Before 2016, when the country's first Charity Law went into force, for around three decades there was an enormous amount of citizen-led organising at the grassroots. It happened in a regulatory grey zone.

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The past three years have seen the beginning of a gradual shift in what is usefully conceptualised in scholarship as 'grey space' (Yang 2005). Before 2016, when the country's first Charity Law went into force, for around three decades there was an enormous amount of citizen-led organising at the grassroots. It happened in a regulatory grey zone. Technically, most types of 'social organisation'—essentially non-governmental organisations (NGOs), though the official lexicon smoothed this term away too—were obliged to register with the government, usually after finding a sponsoring agency to add a second layer of management. If NGOs did not register, they could be deemed illegal and shut down. Yet, over the decades the government departments charged with enforcing the regulations did so only selectively, in fits and starts, or not at all. This enabled citizens to establish grassroots NGOs numbering in the hundreds of thousands, if not upwards of a million (Deng 2010). These unregistered organisations were an important focus of legislators in developing the Charity Law (Zheng 2016), the beginning of a trickle of legislation and institution-building that is reshaping the space for NGOs to exist and operate.

On paper, this legislation largely eliminates the grey space (Teets and Almen 2018). It creates detailed legal obligations and duties for both governments and NGOs regarding registration, internal governance, regulation, and oversight. But, most importantly, enforcement has not been approached in such a way as to erase all grey space instantly. Instead, so far there has been a prolonged process of disappearing space, enabling an uncertain grace period for NGOs to choose whether to comply or gradually crumble. This has been achieved through a combination of temperately-paced institution-building—creating incentives and compulsion—and the increasingly explicit verbal and written commands of government and Party. Some moves are more sudden while others are slow, creating heightened uncertainty for all those NGOs that remain in the process of adjustment.

New forms of e-governance are creating pressure to comply and conform or be caught out, shamed, or closed down. In June this year, the Ministry of Civil Affairs released an app directly accessible on WeChat that allows users to check instantly the legal status and basic data of any Chinese NGO just by searching its name. This shifts part of the burden of enforcement from government to citizens, who can now call out any organisation that has not registered. Central and local government departments have also used online platforms to sporadically release blacklists of law-breaking or 'fake' NGOs, presumably with the intention of pressing others to comply and build awareness of the notion of 'illegal social organisations'.

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None of these developments amount to an instant push to close down NGOs that do not immediately comply with legislation; what they do, instead, is create pockets of transparency and the haunting possibility of being ‘found out’.

Some localities have begun using platforms like WeChat public accounts and online news agencies to encourage compliance with detailed regulations. A notable example is the shaming of NGOs that have failed to comply with requirements about reporting for government approval on activities such as leadership changes and anything involving foreign people or money. None of these developments amount to an instant push to close down NGOs that do not immediately comply with legislation; what they do, instead, is create pockets of transparency and the haunting possibility of being ‘found out’.

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The widely propagated speeches of government and Party leaders act as authoritative interpretations regarding what ‘social organisations’ should be and do, what their ultimate purpose is, and how ‘charity’ should be understood.

An article written by Zhan Chengfu, the Vice-minister of Civil Affairs and person directly in charge of ‘managing’ NGOs, offers a window onto the thinking guiding decision-making throughout the civil affairs system. Zhan argues that the time has come to make clear what it means to develop a ‘path with Chinese characteristics for social organisation development’ (Zhan 2016). He directly refutes any notion that Party leadership over NGOs—which he never names as such—conflicts with the right of association that appears in the country’s Constitution. He stresses that over many years, while ‘a vast number of “Western” essays and books on “NGOs”, “non-profit organisations”, and the “third sector”’ have been translated into Chinese, read, and accepted, ‘efforts to build our own social organisation culture, social organisation value system, and discourse have been left behind’ (Zhan 2016,17). What Zhan means by ‘our own’ is quite clear: he states that when government and Party organisations approve an NGO’s ‘entrance’ into the sphere of legality, revoke its registration, or ban it altogether, decisions should be based on ‘whether that NGO is conducive to maintaining the Party’s governing status, to expanding the base from which the Party governs, and to accomplishing the Party’s governing mission’ (Zhan 2016, 17).

Why should we care about the speeches and articles of officials in the civil affairs system? First, their interpretations give greater shape and clarity—for those making, implementing, and being targeted by policy—to principles and concepts that remain open to interpretation.

Second, they signal that in the ‘new era’ the ‘lawlessness’ of the past will not stand, perhaps with the caveat that there is still enough grey space for the process described above. Zhan has made ‘no land beyond the law’ (没有法外之地) a repeated motif

in his speeches to actors like charities, alliances, corporations, and banks. For example, during a speech at the Internet Public Interest Forum, held in Guangzhou in May 2019, he told his audience: ‘If you become more charity-conscious and respect the Charity Law’s authority, remaining within the scope set out in the charity [regulatory] system, you will neither “overstep” or “understep” the mark’ (Public Interest Daily 2019). He then said that ‘all means involving looking for loopholes and exploiting weaknesses are in the spirit of rule-of-law-violation’. His speech stressed that while some issues are not covered by the Charity Law, actors should go by the ‘original meaning of the legislation’ (立法的本意) when determining how to behave. This places the onus on actors to heed the words of individual leaders to understand that ‘meaning’.

Third, it is in the interest of local officials to ensure implementation of policy and legislation in line with the preferences of the top leadership. Civil servants at every level throughout the civil affairs system nationwide are subject to new political demands institutionalised through an amended Civil Servants Law passed in 2018. They will now be assessed on their ‘political quality’ (政治素质) as much as on their ‘work achievements’ (工作实绩)—a fundamental change in their incentive structures. Meanwhile, leading Party cadres in the civil affairs system are also affected by new Party regulations. For instance, while the minister and vice-ministers are, as civil servants, managed by the new Civil Servants Law; as members of the Ministry’s Party Group (党组), they are also managed by a new set of regulations on Party groups, issued in 2015, amended in 2019, and otherwise unprecedented in the 70 years that Party groups have existed in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The obligations and accountability of these Party group members regarding Party leadership in their respective roles have thus been made concrete.

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Along with these inseparable processes of possibility-shaping, institution-building, and authoritative interpretation is another trend of deep significance to civic space. We might for now call it ‘Party permeation’. The phenomenon of the CCP seeking to lead all activities is, itself, not new. It was described to me recently as ‘pouring mercury the length of the land’ (水银泻地), or ensuring there is no space without the glimmer of the Party’s presence. In the past, Party rules, branches, and members have, to some degree, been present in these spaces—but rules may have gone unimplemented, branches may have been dormant, and members may have given dominance to other identities.

Today, in the social sphere, the CCP is using new rules, institutions, and campaigns to encourage members and non-members, CCP organisations and non-CCP organisations, to create and apply new and dynamic ways to facilitate or enforce ‘Party leadership’ (党的领导). This is more than an increase in the intensity of Party activity or of efforts to implement previously semi-dormant rules. It also involves new approaches and mechanisms that will potentially change the relationships between different actors and between the institutions that shape their behaviour.

An interesting example is the employment of full-time ‘Party building guidance officers’ (党建工作指导员 PBGOs) in NGOs. In some cases, their salaries are paid by the government through service-purchasing projects. In Anhui province in 2017, 20 PBGOs ‘took up residence’ in 61 provincial-level NGOs, dividing their time between their host NGOs. In Chengdu, over 700 PBGOs and ‘Party building liaison officers’ (党建工作联络员 PBLOs)—which mainly observe and report on the NGO’s Party activities—have been stationed in NGOs around the city. In June, Anhui’s provincial Social Organisation General Party Committee (SOGPC) began evaluating the work of its first ‘batch’ of PBGOs as they came to the end of their initial tenure. The evaluations included a combination of qualitative appraisals and quantitative indicators covering 13 aspects of PBGOs’ work, and were carried out jointly by the NGOs themselves and the SOGPC. Two points here are notable. First, while ‘Party building’ in general remains a fuzzily-defined concept, in Anhui there is an attempt to quantify and describe good NGO ‘Party building work’. While Party building in NGOs is not new, the attempt to better enforce, oversee, and facilitate accountability of it is novel and merits attention. Second, this type of model potentially changes the dynamics of ‘Party building’ inside the NGOs involved. The introduction of a PBGO as a full-time addition to the staff of an NGO to guide its Party building does not replace the existing requirement in the Party’s own Charter that any ‘social organisation’ with three or more full Party members already belonging to it should establish a Party branch (党支部). But while the members of a Party branch should in theory come from within the NGO itself, in both of the above cases the PBGOs are introduced from *outside* the NGO.

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Another less overt example of a shift in the relationship between Party, government, and NGOs is the institutionalisation of demands on the latter to become involved in poverty alleviation. Vice-minister Zhan, in a recent speech to the China

Charity Alliance, described poverty alleviation as the ‘natural duty’ (天职) of Chinese charities (China Social Organisations Public Service Platform 2019). The Charity Law’s definition of ‘charity’, in contrast, is relatively broad and does not create such imperatives. Charities—a concept introduced by the Charity Law itself in 2016—are not a legal form of organisation in their own right. They are one of three types of ‘social organisation’ that are registered with, and managed by, the government and which have successfully applied for charitable status accreditation. Even when accredited they may—but often do not—go on to gain the right to engage in public fundraising. Considering both this broad definition and the restriction of the right to fundraise to a privileged few, the notion that poverty alleviation is a natural duty of charities is surprising and potentially troubling for many. Charities and other NGOs working in different fields will likely come under pressure to spend significant time and resources on poverty alleviation. This clear indication of how the central government interprets ‘charity’ is already in some areas being replicated and institutionalised at the local level. In the provincial-level city of Tianjin, for example, the government has issued orders for poverty alleviation to be incorporated into social organisation evaluations and credit data systems for all social organisations.

But this is not only a narrowing of the notion of ‘charity’, it is also an example of ‘Party leadership’ in action. In late 2018, a central inspection tour spent over a month examining the Ministry of Civil Affairs’ work on ‘the poverty alleviation battle’ (脱贫攻坚战 PAB). The findings were reported to CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, who made an ‘important speech’ and other remarks. Following this, the Ministry’s Party Group held a meeting attended by all civil servants of the Ministry and its live-in commission for discipline inspection. The Party Group Secretary and Minister, Huang Shuxian, spoke at the meeting to stress the importance of the Ministry fulfilling its PAB duties: ‘[We] need to have the pressure trickle down to each level; all departments and bureaus need to set up poverty alleviation and inspection result-based rectification small leadership groups’ (Party Building in Social Organisations 2019). Huang’s speech demonstrates the need in the Ministry to heed the Party’s PAB-related top-down demands, which extend across and down throughout the civil affairs system, including its social organisation management departments, and charity sector promotion and social work departments.

In practice, participation in PAB is already being incorporated into NGO and NGO project evaluations contracted out by the civil affairs ministry and bureaus. In some localities only projects under the PAB label count. In other words, if an NGO has alleviated poverty, but not done so within the Party-

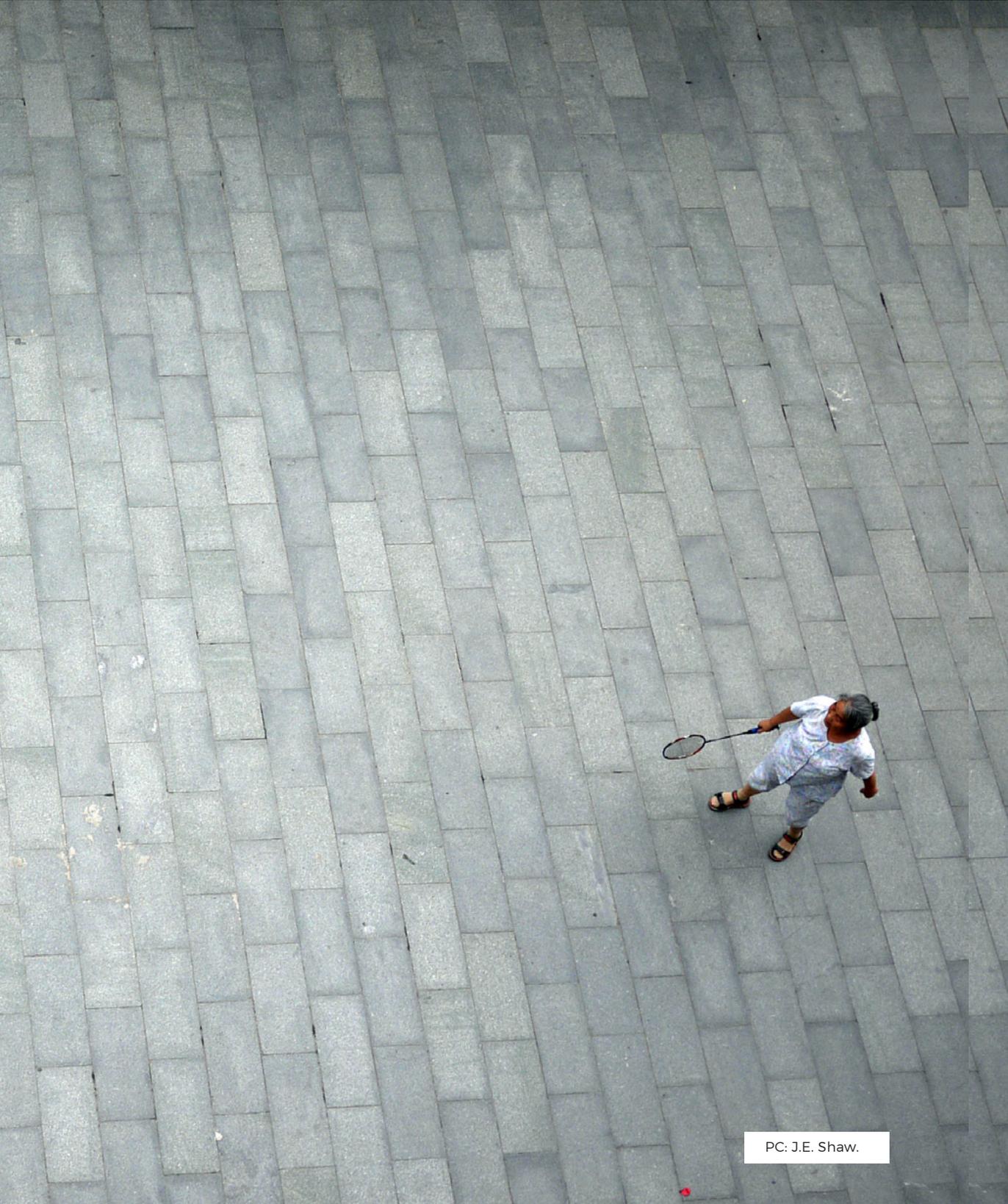
recognised PAB, it will fail to gain points in its evaluation. Evaluations are important as they help to determine the NGO's access to government-funded projects, its public credibility, and—in some localities—its ability to apply for charitable accreditation and the right to fundraise. This is a practical blending of a high-profile campaign of the Party and the role in society of all types of NGOs. It is also an important example of how, by combining all of the processes described here, 'Party leadership' might be more effectively enforced.

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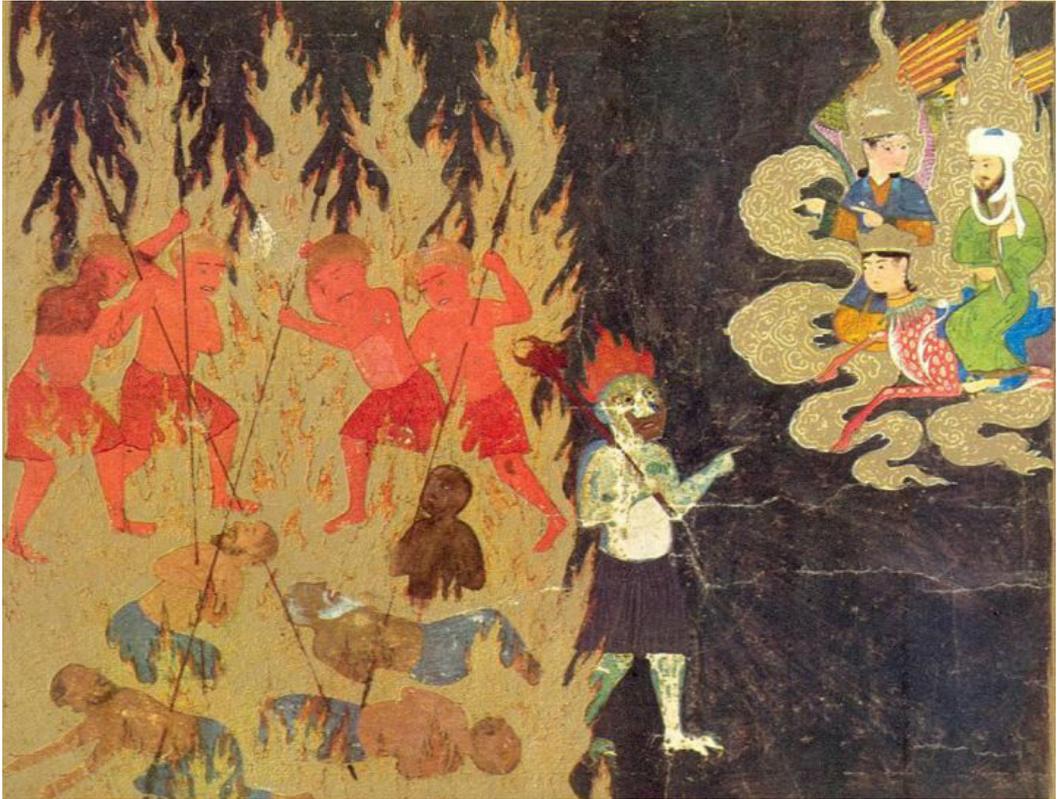
Viewed as a whole these processes present a clearer picture of what is meant by a 'path with Chinese characteristics for social organisation development' (中国特色社会组织发展道路). However, what is not yet clear is how NGOs will continue to use their own agency in this changing context. With new vocabularies, new compulsion to come out of the 'grey', new imperatives to abide by the 'spirit' of legislation, and new dynamics in their interactions with the Party, NGOs will need to adapt. Some, no doubt, will internalise each of these new processes and perhaps come to look more like 'people's organisations' (人民团体) than 'social organisations' (社会组织). But others may adapt in ways that enable them to retain some autonomy while making that autonomy less apparent to outside onlookers. ■



# CHINA COLUMNS



PC: J.E. Shaw.



## Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang

David BROPHY

*To justify its repressive policies towards the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang, Beijing taps into a global discourse of counterradicalisation that has developed in the context of the US-led War on Terror, a discourse that rests on the dichotomy of extremist vs. moderate Islam. Western commentary, while critical of China's policies in Xinjiang, often reflects this same way of thinking. A more effective critique will challenge the terms of this Islamophobic discourse, and the West's role in popularising it.*

PC: Depiction of Islamic hell from a fifteenth-century Turkish drawing (University of Bergen).

A huge network of internment camps for those displaying the slightest sign of 'extremism', where, according to some ex-detainees, Muslims are encouraged to renounce their religion. Closure and demolition of mosques, with intense surveillance of those still functioning. Severe restrictions on the observance of ritual fasting, enough to dissuade all but the most devoted to the faith. These form part of the charge that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is conducting a sweeping campaign against Islam—what some activists decry as a total ban on the

religion. For its part, China has responded with a mixture of indignation and incomprehension, with the PRC authorities maintaining that they are only following international norms of counterextremism and deradicalisation. Spokespeople for the Chinese government point to what they see as a worldwide consensus on the need to combat radicalisation through preemptive measures that identify, isolate, and rehabilitate potential extremists. A recent propaganda film on Chinese state television cites deradicalisation centres in France and Britain as precedents for China's own efforts in Xinjiang (China Central Television 2019). While Chinese experts acknowledge that the scale is different, they can explain this too: Western counterextremism policing, focussing only on select individuals, has not done enough to prevent ongoing acts of terrorism (Doyon 2019). China's more sweeping approach is not only justified, but is the logical extension of Western methods.

This is the terrain on which the war of words over the Xinjiang question is likely to be conducted for the foreseeable future, and it is worth reflecting on how best to navigate it. It may be uncomfortable to admit this, but the Chinese position has its own underlying logic. Yes, China's efforts to reengineer Islamic religious life are of a scale that seems to undermine the very foundations of the faith. But there is no denying that these policies embody a widely held view about the need to bring Islam into line with 'modern' social norms and expectations. It was Barack Obama who said in 2016 that 'some currents of Islam have not gone through a reformation that would help people adapt their religious doctrines to modernity' (Goldberg 2016). The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) vision of a Sinicised Islam compatible with socialist modernity mirrors Obama's invocation of an idealised Christian path of religious evolution.

China's Party-state system allows for the swift implementation of an elite consensus on a mass scale, while Western liberal democracies are partly, though by no means sufficiently, constrained by civil liberties and possibilities

for resistance. We should be thankful that such constraints still exist. But criticism of China's policies should not dwell on these systemic differences for too long. For those outside of China, a robust critique of China's approach, and one that provides a blueprint for an effective response, must extend to the philosophical underpinnings that its policies continue to share with the domestic War on Terror in the West. Failure to do so carries considerable risk. After all, the West's own unwillingness to confront the political causes of terrorist violence is likely to end up validating the point on which China rests its case—that the West's more circumscribed counterradicalisation strategy will fail to end terrorism. In the absence of a more radical critique that attacks the terms of this debate, China's foreign critics may well end up losing it.

## How the Uyghurs Became Muslims

A heightened focus on Islam in discussions of Xinjiang—with much reporting emphasising the Muslim identity of the Uyghurs, or simply describing China as oppressing 'Muslims'—is something new. I will argue that this is justified, but we can also acknowledge extraneous factors that contribute to this framing. Outside China, freedom of religion sits alongside human rights as one of the most widely-recognised, and well-received registers of international lobbying. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) has observed, since 9/11 the institutionalisation of this discourse has led to the reinterpretation of various global conflicts in religious terms. Emphasis on the 'Muslim' identity of China's victims also provides a convenient entry point for Western actors hoping to persuade Muslim-majority countries to take a stand against China's policies. Equally, the religious identity of the Uyghurs gives the United States an opportunity to claw back some lost credibility of its own as a defender of Muslim interests.

As Benny Avni (2018) put it in *The New York Post*, the Uyghurs are ‘a model pro-American Muslim community’.

Some Uyghurs resent this emphasis, arguing that this is not a question of religion, but of nationality. In part, this response reflects a long-standing tendency of Uyghur intellectuals to downplay the role of Islam in Uyghur identity, and treat their predicament as the product of conflicting, even irreconcilable, *national* claims to the territory of Xinjiang. Concomitant with this, a generally anti-communist political orientation has often led Uyghurs to disassociate themselves from causes which pit Muslims against US imperialism, such as Palestine. Interestingly enough, such sentiments persist even among those Uyghurs drawn to jihadist militias in Syria. As reported by Gerry Shih (2017), Uyghur fighters there express admiration for Israel and ‘how the Jews built their country’. But setting these considerations aside, the Uyghur critics seem to have a point: if China was pursuing an anti-Muslim policy, then wouldn’t we expect it to also sweep up the Sinophone Hui Muslims in Xinjiang? Uyghurs seem to be ending up in internment camps not because they are Muslims, but because they are Uyghurs.

This objection is best dealt with by reference to our experience in the West. Eighteen years since the launch of the War on Terror, we have become familiar with the idea of the ‘racialisation’ of Muslims. This is what has made it possible for police and politicians to refer to people as ‘of Muslim appearance’. It has led to a spate of attacks on turban-wearing Sikhs, mistaken as Muslims by their Islamophobic assailants. The converse of this association of religious identity with visible identifying features has been the ‘Islamisation’ of national identity. In the wake of 9/11, people have described how they came to be seen first as Muslims, and only secondly as members of a particular nationality. Self-ascription carries little weight in the face of the ability of the state and media to construct social groups.

White converts to Islam in Australia or the United States (depending on how they dress) may face little to none of the stigmatisation and discrimination directed at fellow Muslims who conform to the stereotype of the brown-skinned Muslim. Simply put, they will not be racialised as Muslim. Similarly, we might posit that in Xinjiang the Uyghurs have become *racially Muslim* in ways that the Sinophone Hui have not. Their Central Asian features increasingly signify the category ‘Muslim’, that is to say, more so than they do the category ‘Uyghur’, a classification which is losing its salience at administrative levels as the promises of China’s *minzu* (民族) system—the national (or ethnic) rights enshrined in the constitution—fall by the wayside. In the more homogenous Chinese interior, of course, the situation differs. There, despite their high degree of acculturation, the communal life of the Hui singles them out as different, and we see a climate of Islamophobic suspicion growing around them. Racial and cultural distance are not things that can be measured objectively. Visible marks, or distinguishing customs, take on significance only in specific political contexts.

Thinking of the Uyghurs as racialised Muslims is compatible with analysis that emphasises the sense of a deepening racial divide in Xinjiang (e.g. Hunerven 2019), but has the advantage of allowing us to engage China’s justifications for its policies on their own terms. These justifications centre not on race or ethnicity, but on extremism and terrorism—the two guiding categories of the State Council’s most recent ‘White Paper on Xinjiang’ (State Council Information Office 2019). In the process of turning Uyghurs into racialised Muslims, the figure of the ‘terrorist’ clearly plays an outsized role. Chinese officialdom now describes any and all Uyghurs involved in violent actions as terrorists. In the 2009 communal riots in Ürümchi, the White Paper claims, ‘[t]housands of terrorists attacked civilians, government organs, public security and police officers’. In its crackdown

since 2014, China claims to have ‘arrested 12,995 terrorists’. In a global climate where the archetypal terrorist is the brown-skinned Muslim, the editorial choice to subsume any and all Uyghur violence in Xinjiang into the category of terrorism entrenches, in the most prejudicial way possible, a view of the Uyghurs as Muslims.

Superficially, China looks to be doing the exact opposite of what I am arguing. Indeed, the March 2019 White Paper goes to great lengths to downplay the Islamic identity of the Uyghurs: ‘Islam is neither an indigenous belief of the Uygurs and other ethnic groups, nor the sole one of the Uygur people. Today in Xinjiang, a fairly large number of people do not believe in religion or believe in religions other than Islam.’ But of course, this desire to enforce the correct line on the contingency of Islam’s preeminence in Xinjiang is itself a reflection of the state’s preoccupation with the Muslim identity of the Uyghurs. This insistence on the only recent and incomplete Islamisation of the Uyghurs historically has the paradoxical effect of heightening the rhetorical Islamisation of the Uyghurs in the present.

## China’s Liberal Islamophobia

It is possible, therefore, for an Islamophobic climate to take hold and inform policymaking, while visible marks of difference continue to shape the way that climate is experienced by different groups of Muslims. We can, and should, therefore, situate our discussion of the repression meted out to Xinjiang’s Turkic-speaking minorities within an analysis of Islamophobia. That is not the only possible context for this discussion, of course, but it will be the focus of this essay.

Alongside its ongoing racial dimensions, it is important to consider the dynamics of Islamophobia itself. Islamophobia is not

always expressed in the form of a blanket hostility towards Muslims. In *The Muslims Are Coming!*, Arun Kundnani describes how, in the wake of the War on Terror, Western anxieties surrounding Islam took on two forms. The first was a conservative discourse, which posited an incompatibility between Islam and the West—i.e. Islam as inherently backward, with Muslims predisposed to violence by virtue of their religion. The second was a liberal discourse, which set up a distinction between the ‘good’ Islam that can be reconciled to Western society, and the ‘bad’ Islam, which fosters alienation from, and hostility towards, the West. While this ‘bad’ Islam can act as a catalyst of radicalisation, ‘good’ Islam can serve as an ally against it. While ostensibly more enlightened, Kundnani shows how this liberal discourse has licensed state interventions into Muslim religious and social life that are equally, if not more, far-reaching than its conservative form.

At various points in Chinese history, the view has been expressed that Islamic customs, or theological precepts, are at some deep level incompatible with Chinese culture. In the eighteenth century, some Qing officials called on the emperor to suppress the doctrine on these grounds. The court usually repudiated such views, though they did eventually implement certain discriminatory statutes against Chinese-speaking Muslims in the interior, which reflected a view of them as particularly prone to violence. Still, even in times of conflict, it was rare for officials to attribute anti-state or anti-Han violence to any inherent flaw in the Islamic faith. While often disparaging of non-Chinese religions, China’s intellectual tradition had no ‘Orientalist’ discourse comparable to that of the West, which furnished explanations of Muslim anti-colonial violence in terms of a congenital ‘fanaticism’. To this day, Chinese analysis tends to attribute the highpoints of resistance in pre-PRC Xinjiang not to religious fervency but to the meddling of foreign imperialists. In

a recent essay on China's western frontiers, for example, Wang Hui (2017) revives claims that a Sufi-led rebellion in the 1820s was part of a British imperialist plot. China's March 2019 White Paper conveys a similar message in describing Republican-era Pan-Islamism as the creation of 'former colonialists'.

If one logs on to Chinese social media today, it is certainly possible to find self-styled 'Muslim-haters' (穆黑) articulating what Kundnani describes as the 'conservative' view—that Islam is irredeemable and has no place in modern society. Much of this Chinese hate speech thrives in a pernicious feedback loop with Western online Islamophobia. Analysts such as James Leibold point out that in China's highly censored media environment, the ability of such views to circulate with relative freedom may reflect a certain connivance with them on the part of the state (Leibold 2016). At the official level, however, one is hard-pressed to find Chinese pronouncements that could compare with the stridence of the West's conservative anti-Islamic rhetoric. Among candidates for the recent Australian senate elections, for example, Pauline Hanson has said that 'Islam is a disease, we need to vaccinate ourselves against that', while Fraser Anning, has called for a 'final solution' to the 'problem of Muslim immigration' (Remeikis 2017; Karp 2018).

Rather, China's official discourse on Muslims is almost exclusively of the liberal variety, drawing a dichotomy between what is acceptable and unacceptable, between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. Chinese counterextremism experts sound exactly like their Western counterparts: they warn against Islamophobia, of the need to disassociate 'extremism' from any particular religion, and to avoid subsuming anti-extremism measures within a discourse of counterterrorism (Wang 2018). The Party's intention to 'Sinify' Islam implies a normative view of shortcomings in the religion as currently practised, but is couched in optimistic terms that posit remedies and a bright future for a healthier, more Chinese-looking version of the faith.

One way this dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' manifests in Xinjiang today is in the divide between Turkic-speaking minorities and the Chinese-speaking Hui. This association of Xinjiang Muslims with potentially subversive foreign influences, in contrast to the more domesticated Hui, has historical precedents—but it is worth noting that the line between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims has not always been drawn in this way. A hundred years ago, Xinjiang's Governor Yang Zengxin tended to view Hui religiosity as deviant and undesirable. He drew a contrast between what he saw as the Hui's clannish devotion to local 'Eastern' shaykhs, and the more Muhammad-centred religiosity of the Uyghurs ('devout believers in the teachings of the Western Prophet') (Brophy 2013). Writing in the shadow of the Qing Empire, Yang's views capture a moment in time before Chinese nationalism made proximity to Chinese culture a standard by which to take the measure of a citizen. And he was writing before the first of two of pro-independence uprisings in the Republican period, which led to the identification of the Uyghurs, and not the Hui, as the chief threat to Beijing's hold on Xinjiang. These twin perceptions of cultural difference and propensity for militancy now single out the Uyghurs as Xinjiang's 'bad' Muslims.

Yet importantly, the distinction applies within the Uyghur (or Kazakh, Kirghiz, etc.) community as well. The premise of the liberal view is that when 'extremist' ideology penetrates the Muslim community, it puts some, but not all of its members onto a path towards radicalisation. Descriptions of this pathway vary in the emphasis given to either theological deviations or individual psychological considerations: the two are usually hard to disentangle. From this premise an elaborate discourse has arisen, purporting to scientificity, which allows security agencies to identify 'at-risk' individuals and take steps to rehabilitate them. As other commentators have noted (e.g. Jamshidi 2019), China's lists of warning signs of radicalisation—growing a beard, donning religious dress, or even quitting smoking—immediately call to mind those

applied in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policing elsewhere: Britain's Channel programme is a classic example, as is the New York Police Department's surveillance of Muslim communities in New York.

For China, the upshot of all this is something of a contradiction. On the one hand, liberal counterradicalisation theory tends to describe extremists as distorting the true meaning of Islam. This often commits the terrorism expert to a certain fundamentalism of his/her own, and China is no exception. The task of deradicalisation, according to a Chinese scholar in Kashgar (Liu 2018), is to 'restore the basic message of the religion's teachings' (还原宗教教义本身的主旨). On the other hand, talk of 'Sinicisation' seems to imply that Islam became something different upon reaching China and partaking of the common Chinese culture (中华文化). That is to say, Islam in China has features that distinguish it from Islam as originally conceived, and as practiced elsewhere (Zhang 2017). The intellectual gymnastics required to reconcile these two contradictory impulses will likely keep China's Islam specialists busy, but these contextual specificities should not obscure their common mission with War on Terror Islamologists in the West. The 'reformist war on terror', as Kundnani describes it, is 'one in which governments tell believers what their religion really means, and back that up with the power to criminalize alternatives' (2014, 107).

## Western Commentary on Islam in China

Because the PRC's discourse is so enmeshed with that of the West, foreign commentary on the Chinese state's relationship to Islam often finds itself in something of a bind. While striving to be critical of China's policies, it tends to reproduce certain assumptions that drive these policies. In its most crude form, this commentary simply buys into major elements of the Chinese narrative. Although the high tide

of post-9/11 counterterrorism collaboration between China and the West has receded, it has left behind a residue of low-quality punditry that more or less endorses China's claim to be fighting a serious domestic terrorist enemy. An article published by the Hoover Institute in 2018, for example, while critical of Chinese repression, describes the 'East Turkmenistan [sic] Islamic Movement' (ETIM) as 'the largest domestic extremist group in China', and parrots China's evidence-free accusations that this organisation has carried out more than 200 attacks (Auslin 2018). The author's view of 'irreconcilable tensions' here predicts a long-running fight to the end between China and organised Uyghur terrorists.

Most writers these days are more sceptical of such claims, and critical of the Bush administration's acquiescence in deeming the nebulous ETIM as a terrorist organisation. The instinct of these commentators is to be sharply critical of China's efforts to play up the scale of the terrorist threat in Xinjiang. But at the same time, the terms of China's counterextremist discourse are so familiar, so similar to the West's own way of framing its domestic Muslim populations, that they are difficult to entirely escape. The most well-meaning critiques can easily lapse into them.

Take, for example, a recent article in *The Economist* on the Hui Muslims of the southwest province of Yunnan, in which the author criticises China's 'crude attempts to sinicise the faith' as counterproductive (Chaguan 2019). Holding up the example of patriotic Chinese Muslim politicians of the early-twentieth century, the author faults today's PRC officials for their ignorance of this already-existing Sinicised Islam. But then, the author encounters Hui Muslims who fail to conform to his preferred image of them. These Hui reject the hadith that 'love for the homeland is part of faith' (*hubb al-watan min al-iman*), thereby distancing themselves from the patriotic, Sinicised Islam that the author valorises. For this they are deemed 'historically ignorant'. What starts off as a critique of China's Sinicisation-of-Islam campaign thus

ends up reinforcing one of this campaign's basic assumptions: that there exists a historically authentic, patriotic Chinese Islam, and that Muslims who think otherwise are getting their religion wrong.

In the case of Xinjiang, one often reads of the 'moderate, Sufi' Islam that the Uyghurs practice, usually intended as a rebuke to China's depiction of Xinjiang as a region rife with extremism. True enough, Sufism—and associated practices of shrine pilgrimage, meditation (*zikr*) circles, etc.—has long been an important part of religious life in Xinjiang. But these invocations carry the baggage of a distinctly Western discourse on Sufism as a meditative, new-age form of Islam, making it a perfect foil to extremist ideology. There is, in fact, little in this Western mythology surrounding Sufism that stands up to historical scrutiny. Sufis in Xinjiang have proven themselves perfectly capable of religious dogmatism, and of engaging in violence against their political enemies. It was Sufis who led the anti-Qing resistance of the nineteenth century, and judging from references to 'ishanism' (依禅派) in early PRC accounts, it was Sufis who put up some of the stiffest resistance to the People's Liberation Army's arrival in the Tarim Basin in the 1950s (National People's Congress Ethnic Affairs Committee 1956). Criticising China's crackdown by reference to the region's Sufi traditions will likely make little sense to a Chinese audience, therefore. And more importantly, upholding the notion of a native 'moderate' Islam implies the acceptance of its converse: a foreign, non-Sufi, 'extremist' or maybe 'Salafist' Islam. This is precisely the dichotomy on which China's policies rest, and PRC officials make use of it in explaining these policies to the world. In a meeting with religious affairs officials in 2018, for example, China's ambassador to Pakistan told them that '[t]he Chinese government is the bearer of Sufi and moderate thought' (Hussain 2018).

Obviously conscious of the use to which the frame of moderate Sufi vs. radical Salafist can be put, James Millward's (2019) otherwise

excellent article in *The New York Review of Books* nonetheless relies on it, but with a twist. Instead of viewing the decline of a native Sufistic Islam and the emergence of more austere forms of religiosity as a trend arising from within the Muslim community itself, he pins the blame for this on the Chinese state: 'Chinese policies have tended to undermine indigenous Uyghur Islam and to enforce, through the party-controlled Islamic Association of China, an idealized version of Islam modelled in part on Sunni practice as promoted by Saudi Arabia.' A better appreciation of the Xinjiang's religious traditions—something that Uyghur scholars of religion might provide—would have obviated the need for the Chinese state's misguided interventions.

Today, in its aversion to shrines and ornate mosque architecture, it is possible to see a certain convergence between Chinese policy and the prescriptions of Wahabbi Islam. Arguably, the logic behind this convergence has been present in the modernising PRC since its founding. But there is no evidence for the role of any deliberate Beijing–Saudi nexus in supplanting a shrine-centred Islam in Xinjiang. There is far more evidence to show, as we would anticipate, that scripturalism and its accompanying critique of Sufism had native roots, while also gaining sustenance from ongoing exchange between Xinjiang Muslims and the wider Islamic world, and all of this well before the Communist Revolution. Questionable from a historical point of view, Millward's narrative also keeps us firmly within the moderate/extremist paradigm, drawing a contrast between indigenous Uyghur Islam and something alien to it. Shifting the blame for a malignant Saudi-style Islam from Xinjiang Muslims themselves to the Chinese state simply does not pack the rhetorical punch it is intended to. After all, many in the West acknowledge the past role of the United States in sponsoring jihadism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, while still endorsing the need for invasive counterterrorism policing to root out extremist forms of Islam today.

These are examples of ways in which analysis of Xinjiang reproduce the reformist discourse of ‘good’ Sufis and ‘bad’ scripturalists. But at times, the effort to critique China’s repression in Xinjiang draws authors into something approaching the ‘conservative’ discourse of essential incompatibility between China and Islam. As I have discussed, this view is not a major feature of the Chinese intellectual tradition. Confucian literati could be highly disparaging of all non-Chinese faiths, but their prejudice did not lead them to envisage an inevitable showdown between China and its Muslims. This perspective, though, has had a prominent place in scholarship outside China. It emerged first in the nineteenth century, in a period of Muslim rebellions against the Qing, when the notion took hold that Islam was a rising force in China, and one that might eventually endanger Western (and Russian) interests. The discourse was revived in the 1970s, as commentators in the West became increasingly conscious of Islam as a global political force. In a 1977 article titled ‘The Incompatibility between Islam and the Chinese Order’, Israeli intelligence analyst-cum-historian Raphael Israeli argued that the ‘Muslim presence in China ... has always posed a challenge, at times even a threat, to the Chinese establishment. This was due to [the fact] that Islam, far from willing to acculturate into Chinese society, on the contrary nurtured its distinctive traits and stressed its own superiority, something almost unheard of in other minority cultures in the Middle Kingdom’ (Israeli 1977). In 1978, Harvard historian Joseph Fletcher offered a similar analysis of the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang, arguing that they could only temporarily accept the rule of a non-Muslim emperor, and that they therefore lived under the ‘obligation of jihad’ (Fletcher 1978).

Today, most scholarship on Islam in China looks askance at these views, but the deteriorating situation in Xinjiang has led them to resurface, now in a more anti-CCP form. In a recent contribution, also in *The New York Review of Books*, Ian Johnson (2018)

presents a bleak picture of the possibility for coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Xinjiang. Focussing on the Qing Dynasty, he highlights what he sees as the Chinese state’s inability to accommodate pluralism, manifested at that point in time in the ‘Qing’s Buddhist political-religious utopia’, but deriving ultimately from ‘older, deeper problems in the Chinese worldview’. Yet in the same article, Johnson also references Abrahamic theology’s ‘monolithic view of truth’, a phrase which carries more than a hint that there have been cultural impediments to tolerance and coexistence on both sides. He claims that militant resistance was an immediate response to Qing rule in Xinjiang, and was motivated by the fact that Xinjiang’s Muslims ‘did not feel Chinese, look Chinese, speak Chinese, share Chinese values and myths and stories, or, by and large, want be part of China’.

Once again, what sets out to provide a critique of China’s policies in Xinjiang ends up losing much of its force. Johnson cites historian Johan Elverskog for the view that ‘[w]e can’t say that Islam is incompatible with China or Chinese culture.’ But as he describes it, the fault line in Xinjiang ends up looking a lot like a Huntingtonian clash of civilisations. From that perspective, whether or not the Chinese state or Islam is ultimately to blame starts to become more of a question of emphasis. And regardless of where we might come down to that question, Johnson’s paradigm offers little scope to think about solutions to the crisis facing Xinjiang today: if the confrontation has such deep historical and cultural roots, what can anyone hope to do about it?

## Towards a Defence of Religious Freedom

There are obviously grounds for pessimism in viewing the present state of affairs in Xinjiang. Thankfully, though, Johnson’s narrative does

not provide us with the complete picture. While the Qing Empire was merciless towards its enemies among Xinjiang's religious elite (mostly Sufis who claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad), one can in fact tell a story of the eighteenth century as a period of considerable accommodation towards the region's Muslim population. Of course, whether or not the Qianlong reign of the high Qing provides a workable model for today's PRC is debatable. My point here is simply that history is far from univocal, and we should not allow it to dictate a particular view of the present.

On taking control of Kashgar in 1759, Qianlong immediately commissioned the restoration of the city's chief Sufi shrine. While wary of the influence that remaining members of Xinjiang's elite religious families wielded, his approach was to accommodate them in luxury in Beijing, from where they kept up contact with the Muslim society of the Tarim Basin. Johnson is correct when he writes that there was no mosque inside Beijing's Forbidden City—in his view an indication of its exclusion from the Qing's 'religious system'. But there was a mosque directly opposite, a well-appointed compound built to house this community of Xinjiang Muslims, and we know that the emperor paid it annual visits. While probably much more knowledgeable of, and interested in, Tibet's Buddhist traditions, Qianlong was equally keen to find out what Xinjiang's Muslims had to offer the dynasty in terms of spiritual capabilities, and recruited ritualists from among them to conduct rain-making ceremonies in and around the capital. When Naqshbandi Sufi networks loyal to the dynasty's enemies were rediscovered in Xinjiang in the late eighteenth century, Qianlong's response was not to launch a bloody inquisition, but to disperse the network by appointing its members to low-ranking official positions. It was not until the 1820s, 60 years on from the Qing conquest, that dissident religious elites were able to mobilise serious resistance to the Qing, and these efforts were far from unanimously welcomed by the locals.

From Beijing's point of view, of course, all this is of secondary importance. In official rhetoric it was the arrival of 'Pan-Turkism' and 'Pan-Islamism' at the turn of the twentieth century that laid the foundations for today's violent extremism. But here too, history can complicate things. These twentieth-century ideologies did not automatically bring with them a critique of Chinese rule in Xinjiang, and more frequently expressed hope for anti-colonial collaboration with China. The 2019 White Paper cites Mas'ud Sabri and Muhämmäm Imin Bughra as representatives of these radicalising trends, but both men spent considerable portions of their lives working alongside Chinese nationalists in the Guomindang—hardly the CV we would expect from a pair of die-hard extremists. A third much-maligned villain of this period is Sabit Damulla, who served as prime minister of the short-lived East Turkistan Republic in 1933–34. Yet, although obviously inspired by 'Salafist' theology, there is nothing in his writings to indicate that he felt religiously obligated to engage in anti-Chinese resistance. On a trip to the Middle East in the early 1930s, Sabit Damulla penned articles describing the Muslims in Xinjiang as enjoying almost complete freedom of religion, directing most of his complaints towards the activities of European missionaries. His views were in accord with those of prominent Arab theorists of political Islam such as Rashid Rida, who held that while China lay outside the Islamic world and was technically *Dar al-Harb* (the Abode of War), this did not impose on Muslims any obligation to contest Chinese rule (Halevy 2019). The preferred course of action, he believed, was to engage in proselytisation of the faith.

The point to be drawn from all this is that no straight line can be drawn from theological standpoints to political prescriptions. Just as Sufism did not necessarily cultivate a pluralistic pacifism, nor was the call to return to Islam's founding texts—the Qur'an and the Hadith—invariably accompanied by a rigid anti-Chinese militancy. In the changing political circumstances that he encountered upon

returning to Xinjiang, Sabit Damulla endorsed the province-wide rebellion that gave birth to the East Turkistan Republic, and justified this bid for independence in religious terms. But his participation in this act of resistance was not a function of his interpretation of Islam. The intellectual genealogy that China seeks to provide for its campaign against ‘extremist ideology’ cannot do the work it is designed to.

This need to separate our analysis of political violence from a typology of Islam is as true today as it has been in the past. Whether couched in terms of theological deviations, or psychologising talk of alienation and identity crisis, explanations that rely on notions of ‘extremist ideology’ do not provide a convincing diagnosis of the origins of terrorist violence, and therefore cannot inform effective remedies for it. Already, many experts have spoken out against the ill-founded assumptions that inform CVE policing, arguing that the empirical research on terrorism simply does not support its guiding assumptions (Ross 2016). At best these theories provide vague correlations, which count for little in the absence of more rigorous control group studies. When given voice, almost all justifications for terrorist violence centre on political grievances, which have failed to find alternative outlets for expression.

Arguing that it is political factors that spur some Uyghurs to acts of violence will provoke little objection among a Western audience predisposed to acknowledge China’s policy failures. But pointing this out to China is likely to be ineffective as long as our own practices of policing Muslims obscure this basic truth. This is not to mention the prestigious, well-funded institutions that sustain the theory behind these Western policing practices, and which have contributed to disseminating a dubious counterradicalisation doctrine to China. Critics should therefore rethink the reflex calls on China to comply with ‘international norms’. The international norms on this issue are precisely what we should be challenging. Instead, we should be working to rescue the principle of genuine religious freedom from

the damage it has sustained through the global War on Terror. Muslims in China deserve the freedom to be shrine-worshipping Sufis or not, as they see fit. They should be free to insist on the exclusive validity of Islam’s original texts or not, as they see fit. And if they wish to argue among themselves as to the best way of being Muslim, they should be free to do so, without the Chinese state, China’s non-Muslim experts, or foreign critics intervening in that debate to pick sides, promoting preferred voices while slighting others as alien and inauthentic. To reshape the discussion in this way, we need to free ourselves from our own ingrained paradigms of good vs. bad, moderate vs. extremist Islam, which, even when invoked in a critical spirit, can serve to sustain state interventions into Muslim communities. ■



## The 996.ICU Movement in China

Changing Employment  
Relations and Labour Agency  
in the Tech Industry

PC: 996.ICU.

LI Xiaotian

*Beginning in March 2019, the 996.ICU movement has signalled growing resentment among tech workers in China regarding the sector's overtime work culture. The mobilisation emerged in the context of growing discontent among employees in China's tech and Internet industry due to normalised overtime, stagnant salary and benefit growth, and health damage caused by demanding management. Still, according to this essay, the movement did not generate further solidarity because it failed to advance any structural critique, limiting itself to producing a nostalgia of the more reciprocal employment relationship of the recent past.*

Since its launch on 26 March 2019, the online protest 996.ICU has attracted enormous attention, giving voice to the growing resentment against long working hours in China's tech industry and eliciting widespread sympathy. The 996.ICU project was initiated by an anonymous user on GitHub, a Microsoft-owned code-sharing online community with more than 20 million users. This person complained that the '996' work schedule—that is 9am to 9pm, six days a week—recently advocated by some prominent entrepreneurs in the Chinese tech industry risked sending employees straight to the hospital intensive care unit (ICU) (for more

detailed reports, see Qu 2019; Wang 2019; Yang 2019). The beginning of such a discussion on 996 can be traced back to 17 January, when the CEO of the Hangzhou-based Internet company Youzan announced the implementation of a 996 work schedule for his own employees. The announcement quickly provoked extensive public debate and criticism, especially on China's Quora-like forum Zhihu, followed by a legal investigation initiated by the local labour bureau (Yang 2019).

The 996.ICU project soon went viral on social media platforms in China. On 29 March, Guido van Rossum, the creator of the programming language Python language, tweeted: 'The 996 work schedule is inhumane.' By 30 April, the project had received 240,000 'stars' on GitHub, and key opinion leaders on China's social media also came out to publicly denounce the overtime work culture. Concerned with possible censorship from the Chinese authorities due to the unexpectedly broad reach of the movement, on 22 April a group of GitHub and Microsoft workers in the United States expressed support for and solidarity with tech workers in China, and petitioned Microsoft to keep the 996.ICU repository 'uncensored and available to everyone' (O'Donovan 2019). For once, even China's state media were vocal in support of a protest movement, carrying commentaries that highlighted how 996 practices were in violation of the Labour Law and requesting employers to consider this protest as a chance to reflect on the corporate culture and management in the Internet industry (see Xin 2019).

However, Chinese tech tycoons unrepentantly joined the debate to defend themselves. Alibaba's founder Jack Ma, the richest businessman in China, said that the 996 schedule is 'a huge blessing' to young employees at Alibaba, as it provides them with an opportunity to strive for their dreams, which is unavailable to those working in many other firms (Huang 2019). While the public relations department of JD.com, another Chinese e-commerce titan, announced that 996 is not mandatory for the company's employees, Richard Liu, the founder and CEO, commented

that the company should get rid of three kinds of employees: 'Those who fail to make sacrifices for work; those who are not performing well; and those who are having a rather low price-performance ratio' (Jung 2019). Zhou Hongyi, CEO of the cybersecurity firm Qihoo 360, expressed contempt for the anti-996 protest and challenged the idea of work-life balance as simply impossible. He suggested that the right way to boost morale among the workforce was to make employees shareholders: 'Make them feel like they are working for themselves, then they won't mind the 996 schedule' (Zuo 2019). Although the CEOs have defended the legitimacy of their practice, Chinese domestic browsers—including Tencent's QQ browser, Alibaba's UC browser, and Qihoo's 360 browser—have restricted access to the 996.ICU repository, saying that the website contains 'illegal or malicious information'.

These statements and actions became the object of a huge public backlash on Chinese social media, where users condemned the tech companies as unethical. Popular hashtags have appeared one after another, with a recent one calling for #sending the labour law to Jack Ma# (#向马云寄劳动法#) on 4 May (Gritsi 2019). Memes, stickers, and t-shirts related to the protest have continued spreading among employees and supporters. In the 996.ICU repository on GitHub, a blacklist of more than 100 companies, including tech giants Tencent, Baidu, Alibaba, ByteDance, and many small-sized firms, was crowdsourced by anonymous users, along with descriptions of work regulations at these firms. An 'anti-996 license' was proposed in the repository, which potentially restricted companies violating local labour laws from accessing certain open-source codes on GitHub. Nevertheless, the movement has so far remained mainly online and only about 100 projects have adopted the 'anti-996 license' template, not enough to exert any significant impact on the business world.

## Growing Discontent

The anti-996 movement emerges in the context of growing discontent among employees in China's tech and Internet industry due to the overtime work culture, stagnant salary and benefit growth, and health damage caused by demanding management. Liu and Zhong (2019) have noted that the 996 schedule is China's version of the hustle culture in Silicon Valley. Overtime work has always been a tradition in the tech industry the world over, but Chinese tech workers are getting sick of it. This historic turn in workers' subjective perception of the hustle culture signals a structural change in China's tech and Internet industry, and only through a holistic approach we are able to capture its features.

Commentators have linked the anti-996 movement to the slowing down of the Internet economy, looking at it as an echo of China's 'new normal'. In such a context, the once-booming tech sector has come back down to earth—in the midst of a so-called 'capital winter'—which is making financing increasingly difficult for tech firms (Barrett 2019). According to the testimony of a former employee at the search giant Baidu, ten years ago employees in the industry barely complained about overtime, but now they are angry because the industry no longer offers them good career prospects (Liu and Zhong 2019). However, I would argue that the recent anti-996 movement was not directly triggered by the slowing economic growth, but by the way employees have experienced it. These experiences of tech workers, which have subsequently shaped their consciousness and actions, were mediated by the tech companies themselves.

Resentment and disappointment among tech workers has been accumulating since 2018, when a wave of layoffs began to affect China's Internet industry, including in influential Internet firms, such as Smartisan, Qunar, and Meituan-Dianping (Wu 2018; Zhang 2018). In late 2018, for example, several teams at Zhihu, a Quora-like question-and-answer

website, were dismissed; and at Mobike, the dominant bike-sharing company in China, 30 percent of employees were let go. The downsizing was mostly carried out in the name of 'optimising business and staffing structure', in order to pursue sustainable growth with competitiveness and efficiency. Several larger firms joined the mass layoffs in 2019: Tencent will demote 10 percent of its middle managers, with more than 200 individuals to be affected; Didi will let go 15 percent of its workforce, or about 2,000 people; and Dianrong, a peer-to-peer lending firm, will shed 2,000 employees (Kawakami 2019; Huang 2019; Lucas and Liu 2019).

Although some firms—for instance Didi—have announced plans to recruit new employees amid waves of layoff, overall recruiting in tech firms is either slowing down or frozen. This has left the labour market increasingly competitive, as confirmed by the data on Zhaopin.com, an online recruitment site with 180 million users (Lucas and Liu 2019). Previous workplace benefits, such as gym membership, cab fare, and office snacks, are also disappearing, which further affects the morale of the workforce.

In late 2018, the tech industry in China was awash with rumours of imminent layoffs, and in early 2019 tech workers' fears turned into bitterness and anger as most rumours came true—in many cases, right after the firms they worked for had denied there was any truth to them. They were betrayed twice, first by the public relations departments of their companies and then by the relentless layoffs, and haunted by the helpless feeling of being disposable. The mass layoffs brought a cruel end to the 'big firm dream', the belief in the existence of a trade-off between commitment of time and devotion by employees, and a good salary, career opportunities, and relative job security offered by the big tech firms. This now declining, unspoken assumption of reciprocity in the employment relationship somehow resembles the normative control model best illustrated by Kunda (2006) in his research on the engineer culture in a high tech company in the United States, which

emphasises the exchange between the loyalty and commitment of employees, and the job benefits and career prospects from employers. This principle of reciprocity in employment relationships has both material and ideological facets (Thompson 2003). In the 996 debate, the billionaire entrepreneurs speak on behalf of the interest of capital, yet they only tell part of the story. In exchange for providing good salaries/benefits (in the words of Zhou Hongyi) and opportunities (in the words of Jack Ma), employers can receive overtime work, and sometimes even enthusiasm, from their employees. This seemingly fair exchange once made big firms a dream workplace.

However, the recent combination of downsizing and 996 practices has disrupted this tacit agreement. From the perspective of capital, there has been a natural inclination to intensify the labour process inside the firm on one hand, and downsize the labour force to create a larger reserve army in order to enhance its bargaining power in the labour market on the other—the classic dynamic clearly illustrated by Marx in *Capital*. This has served to break down the cohesiveness of the previous employment relationship. As Thompson wrote back in 2013 regarding the financialisation of capitalism and its impact on workplaces, it seems that:

There was a growing divergence and dysfunctionality between employer objectives in the work and employment spheres. Labour was asked to invest more of themselves (effort, commitment, new aspects of labour power such as emotions) at work, yet employers were retreating from investment in human capital, a retreat manifested in declining security, career ladders, pensions and the like. (Thompson 2013, 473)

## Dreams Shattered

There have been three crucial moments that have played outsized roles in shattering the dreams of China's Internet industry workers

and shaping patterns of workplace activism. The first moment was the crushing of the 'fast-track IPO dream' in the early 2000s. The Internet was built in China in 1994, but it did not become a thriving business until the late 1990s, when the rapid growth of the World Wide Web in the United States nourished a plethora of 'dot-com' companies, many of which took advantage of fad-pursuing venture capital by initiating initial public offerings (IPOs). Later referred to as the 'Internet bubble' (Kenton 2018), the boom of the US Internet industry inspired the IPO dreams of many early entrepreneurs in China, even if only a small elite with early access to the new technology and Western venture capital were able to partake in this first wave of investment. The first generation of China's Internet companies, including Sina, Sohu, and NetEase—nowadays known as the 'Old Big Three', in contrast with the 'New Big Three' BAT, i.e. Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent—took advantage of the Internet bubble by listing IPOs at the NASDAQ in 2000, turning their founders into tech millionaires.

The bubble burst in the early 2000s, when venture capital dried up and many of the dot-com companies failed. At that time, the 'fast-track IPO dream' brutally vanished in both China and elsewhere. The 'Old Big Three' suffered from the burst but managed to survive, but the Chinese industry changed dramatically. The bursting of the bubble illustrated that a profitable business model, rather than just pure technology, is needed to sustain a new business venture. Thereafter, Internet entrepreneurship has been struggling to balance the tension between technological innovation and business innovation.

The rapid growth of the 'New Big Three' in the first decade of the twenty-first century bore the imprint of this tension. BAT, among a plethora of other start-ups, represented the pioneering spirit of Internet entrepreneurs: their success depended not simply on the latest advances in information technology, but more importantly, on innovative business models. Their legendary beginnings served as proof that the Internet could truly create prosperity in

business, and soon motivated tens of thousands to pursue their ‘entrepreneurial dreams’ in the Internet industry.

At that time, an incurable optimism dominated the industry. This attitude reached its peak in 2011, when Lei Jun, who had then just started Xiaomi, explained why he had entered the smartphone business, saying on Weibo: ‘Even a pig can fly if it can find a place in the eye of a storm’ (只要站在风口, 猪也能飞起来) (Sina Finance 2018). He believed that the smartphone business was the storm and encouraged grassroots entrepreneurs to search for ‘the next storm’ in the industry. The famous Garage Café, a private incubator supported by governmental funds, was later opened in Zhongguancun, as a place to ‘connect and serve grassroots Internet entrepreneurs’, further promoting the belief that the Internet has eliminated the threshold for entrepreneurship as long as one has ‘good business ideas’.

Large amounts of venture capital flowed into start-ups, creating millionaires while stimulating the overtime work culture in what was a very competitive industry. It did not take long for the door to close, though. BAT, the role models of grassroots tech enterprises, became the new monopolies. Entrepreneurial stories fell into a clear binary of success and failure. On the one hand, grassroots entrepreneurs worked ever harder under extreme working conditions, seeing their endeavours turning into unpaid labour for angel investors. It seemed that the more grassroots entrepreneurs invested, the less likely their projects were to be selected as sites for venture capital. On the other hand, China’s Internet economy came to be manipulated by monopolies endlessly pursuing a dominant position in every new frontier. Millions were spent to subsidise users to grow the market share, as clearly demonstrated in the war between Didi and Kuaidi in the online car-hailing service sector in 2014, the battle between Meituan and Eleme in the online-to-offline food-delivery service from 2015 to 2017, and the competition between Mobike and ofo in the bicycle-sharing business more recently. When Pony Ma, founder and CEO of Tencent,

revealed that Didi once spent 40 million yuan on subsidies in a single day (Southern Metropolis Weekly 2015), the grassroots finally realised that the fleeting golden era of mass entrepreneurship in the Internet industry was long gone. This was the second watershed moment in the shattering of the dreams of Chinese workers in the Internet industry.

In the mid-2010s, China’s Internet industry workers started waking up from their entrepreneurial dreams and realised that jobs in ‘big firms’, such as the ‘New Big Three’, were probably the optimal choice, as they could provide stability, decent salaries and work environment, as well as prospective career paths. This is what I call the ‘big firm dream’ of the golden age of China’s Internet industry, which is also what made it possible for the hustle culture to dominate the industry. The employees ‘volunteered’ to work on a 996 schedule or ‘flexibly’, in exchange for potential salary raises and steps up the career ladder. It is in such a context that the third crisis took place: the mass layoffs and the anti-996 movement of 2018–19 signalled the end of the ‘big firm dream’. In the name of ‘optimising business and staffing structure’, firms declared that their employees are disposable, putting an end to any illusion of reciprocity between employers and employees. With this final revelation, the hustle culture could only generate an increasingly purified form of resentment from employees.

## Labour Agency

Labour agency can only be documented through a holistic and historicised view of the structural changes in China’s Internet industry since its inception. From the perspective of labour, workers made efforts to pursue their dreams to materially improve their work and existential conditions. In those moments when the dreams of Chinese workers in the Internet industry were shattered, they explored new strategies to deal with the changing

circumstances. In 2000, fast-track IPOs were only available to a limited elite in China. The industry was still in its infancy and the divergence between labour and capital was not clear. After the bursting of the Internet bubble in the early 2000s, new entrepreneurs with the crucial help of venture capital invented a plethora of innovative business models (with Chinese characteristics) that adopted Internet technologies, many of which were extremely successful. A few of these entrepreneurs were able to become CEOs of well-established Internet giants and new representatives of capital. Motivated by the legendary stories of success behind these companies, an increasing number of grassroots entrepreneurs engaged in opportunistic strategies, exaggerating their innovative ideas and endeavours to angel investors, only to find that the latter had started to become increasingly cautious and selective about investment decisions. Therefore, over the last decade, tech workers have been retreating to stable jobs in big firms. Meanwhile, they keep looking out for better job opportunities and do not hesitate to exercise their mobility power by moving on to better positions (Smith 2006).

Behind the anti-996 movement is the anger of these employees who embraced the ‘big firm dream’, and are now frustrated by the collapse of the employment relationship in China’s Internet industry. Admittedly, the 996.ICU protest has its limitations. As many have pointed out, the protest is limited to the online sphere; it is merely a narrow expression of resentment, without any further agenda or appeal; the workers, especially developers, barely show any solidarity; and, actually, the majority of those who spoke up in the protest are key opinion leaders, rather than employees.

Still, this discussion of labour agency against the backdrop of industrial transformations over two decades allows us to gain a unique perspective on the protest. Efforts of workers to shape the development of the industry for their own benefit have never wavered. What was lacking was never the pursuit of self-interest, resistance, or resentment toward

capital, but an ability to imagine alternatives. The resentment of 996.ICU has not generated further movements or labour solidarity only because it has failed to produce any structural critique, and has instead just produced a nostalgia of the reciprocal employment relationship from the past. Many workers are furious only because that they work longer to get less. However, a blacklist to locate the ‘good employers’ is not a solution. Good employers simply do not exist in capitalist production—at least not for long. What is necessary is to call for ‘a political imagination’ (Burawoy 2008) to open up the discussion of alternative work organisations, which would ultimately feed and sustain the emergence of labour movements in China’s Internet and tech industry. ■



## Poor Attitudes towards the Poor

Conceptions of Poverty  
among the Rich and  
Powerful in China

The Little Match Girl.

Jasmine WANG

*Besides being increasingly unequal, Chinese society is saturated with status-consciousness. In such a context, what kinds of attitudes do people situated on the top rung of the social ladder hold towards people on the bottom rung? Through a series of interviews with individuals belonging to the top 1 percent of the Chinese population in financial terms, this essay considers how rich people around the country view the poorer segments of society and perceive their responsibility towards them.*

In primary school, nearly every Chinese child reads Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl', a short story that is supposed to foster empathy for the poor. Chinese children also read Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*, a novel that explains that poor people are noble, kind, and compassionate, always willing to help others despite their tremendous difficulties in life. While these stories are meant to teach the Chinese youth to be empathetic, respectful, and kind to the less fortunate, in practice these ideas have frequently remained secondary to social status and one's position in the social hierarchy.

Chinese society is no doubt saturated with status-consciousness. In such a context, what kinds of attitudes do people situated on the top rung of the social ladder hold toward people on the bottom rung? After all, 'poverty

alleviation' is one of the government's chief policy priorities and charity work is also taking place on a large scale in the public sphere (see Snape's op-ed in the present issue).

With this question in mind, in 2018 I conducted a series of interviews with a couple dozen rich people around the country, asking about their views of, and perceived responsibility for, the poorer segments of society. The latest Hurun report on Chinese wealth, released in November 2018, provides a relatively clear definition of the rich in mainland China. In it, the 'rich or high-net-worth families' (高净值家庭) are described as those with investable assets of more than six million yuan. In 2018, China had about 3.2 million such high-net-worth families, with an average of three members each. This means that, in total, there were nearly ten million rich people in China, less than 1 percent of the population. With this frame of reference in mind, those people I interviewed belonged to the top 1 percent, and were involved in businesses as diverse as restaurants, investment companies, and real estate.

## Voices from the New Rich

The ways in which the rich discussed the poor was shocking. Of particular surprise was the way the rich repeated themes found in the Party propaganda. Many of my questions focussed on the draconian campaigns of mass evictions of migrant workers in Beijing in late 2017 (Li et al. 2019). Some of them knew about the eviction campaign, and some had heard about it for the first time from me.

One of my interviewees was a so-called *fu'er dai* (富二代)—a second-generation rich person—who was educated for several years in the United States and is now running a restaurant and several investment companies at the same time. Well informed about the eviction campaign, he thought that the official media should not have called these migrant

workers 'low-end population' (低端人口), but rather 'low-end employees' (低端产业从业人员). He believed that the government should not have evicted the migrant workers in the middle of winter, but he did agree that it was necessary to drive them away. In his opinion, Beijing had now reached a developmental stage in which this type of worker would no longer be needed. From his point of view, this kind of eviction campaign was an unavoidable side effect of city development, and some changes were necessary to secure further progress. From this perspective the impoverishment of the migrant workers was a natural, and unsolvable, side effect of development.

Another *fu'er dai* I spoke with had taken over his father's business after coming back from Canada, where he had stayed for nearly ten years. He saw himself as an 'inter-disciplinary talent' (复合型人才) belonging to the elite class (精英阶层). He was fiercely class conscious and believed that the elite class consisted of people possessing a sense of responsibility for making transformative changes in today's Chinese society. In commenting on the evictions in Beijing, he compared the poor to a tumour on society: 'It does not help to treat a tumour by taking medicine only. It takes surgery to take out the tumour and then heal it. What is unbearable for the society is that some people become like "rice bugs" (米虫) [a much-hated pest in China].' This man told me that the poor are people 'who have no social responsibility and sacrificial spirit, and that they are lazy hedonists (吃喝玩乐), acting like destructive pests and taking away profit from the society.'

Another respondent—a self-made successful businessman in his early fifties—also commented on the 'low-end population'. He thought the evictions were legitimate since Beijing did not need these migrants any longer. He was very much in line with the decision of evicting the migrants even in the middle of winter, assuming that they must have been lazing around without doing any proper work and having a negative impact on society.



Two propaganda cartoons. On the left, a fat lazy poor farmer is thinking about the poverty alleviation policy of the government. On the right, the government spoon—carrying the characters for ‘aiding the poor’ (扶贫) is feeding another fat lazy poor person.



A fourth interviewee—a rugs-to-riches businessman in his mid-fifties—thought eviction meant progress. He did not deem the evictions as an extreme campaign, but as a necessary way of pushing through good policies. In his words: ‘It is of no use to discuss things: only extreme methods will get things done because the population of China is too huge.’ This comment made me think of Robert Moses (1888–1981), an American city planner and official regulator famous for his brutal plans for transforming New York City, especially the Bronx area. One of the most polarising figures in the history of urban development in the United States, he is described vividly in Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. One of Moses’s favourite slogans was: ‘You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.’

On a related note, one young and successful businessman in his early thirties showed the least interest in charity among all the interviewees. He did not have any feeling for charity work and he told me that to help ‘the handicapped’ (残疾人) was illusory and disconnected from reality (虚无缥缈). Asked to comment on the ‘low-end population’, he answered: ‘I have my own logical understanding them. As a Chinese idiom says: “Those who are pitiful must be hateful” (可怜之人必有可恨之处). You reap what you sow. If you don’t

work hard, poverty will naturally come down on you.’ In the end, he told me that he always voluntarily filtered information about the poor, as he did not like reading this kind of news.

One interviewee used to practice as a dentist, but had now turned to business, running several companies. He had a very positive take on the poverty reduction programme promoted by the government. He pointed out what he thought to be the central problem of poverty: ‘Poverty usually is a matter of having the wrong mindset. The poor cannot be helped unless they strive to change their mindset.’ He basically believed that financial poverty is a less serious problem than a ‘poverty of the mind’. Throughout my interviews I found this tendency to emphasise mind over reality as a widespread pattern among the rich in today’s China.

## Parrotting Party Propaganda

Why do many rich people in contemporary China see the issue of poverty as a problem of mindset? Are they in denial so as to maintain their privileged position? Or are they just short of proper education on social issues? It is hard to say, but an analysis of Party propaganda



Two more propaganda cartoons. The one on the left mocks the idea of the burden of the poor by transforming the poor man's heavy bundle into a comfortable sofa. The second shows once again a fat poor worker with his shirt rolled up sitting in a sun-chair with a bottle of alcohol at this side.

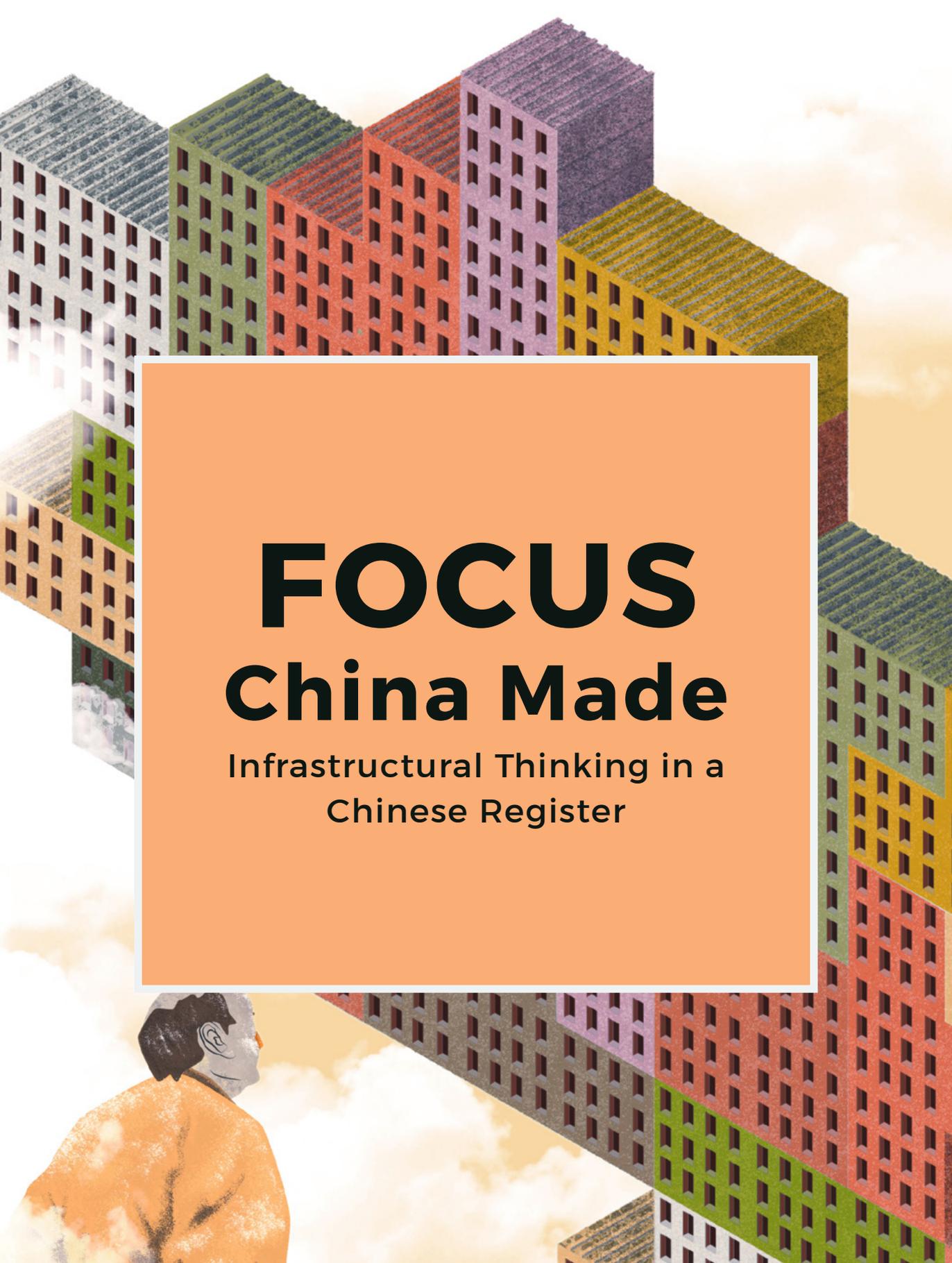


provides some preliminary insights. Since at least 2005, official propaganda has systematically depicted the poor as 'sluggards' or 'lazybones' (懒汉). The *People's Daily* and *Xinhua* popularised this concept, making ugly caricatures about the poor peasants who just feed on government funds without making the slightest effort to lift themselves out of poverty. Following their lead, local newspapers across China scrambled to jump on the bandwagon, in what has clearly become an overwhelming, undeclared campaign from above to shape popular opinions of the poor.

Inequality in a society is generally measured by the Gini coefficient—a statistical measure of income/wealth distribution. China has travelled from the most equal—albeit very poor—society in the world in 1978 with a Gini of 0.18, to one of the most unequal societies today, with official statistics showing an income Gini of just under 0.5 and a wealth Gini of 0.73. World Bank estimates place China among the two or three most unequal societies in the world (AFP 2012). In such a context, the rich are powerful not only financially, but also normatively, acting as norm-setters and influencing how people from other social classes behave and react to social issues. In this light, the victim-blaming attitudes common among the financial elite seem to have effectively blinded a significant segment of Chinese society from seeing the

root causes of poverty. This has resulted in the demonisation of those people situated at the bottom of the social pyramid.

China is not alone in fostering this kind of anti-poor discourse. To cite an example, in 1965 Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan from the American Department of Labor published a report entitled 'The Negro Family'—a document that has come to be seen as a blatant attack on poor African Americans, giving birth to the expression 'blaming the poor'. Whether it is in the United States or China, the real problem is that blaming the 'lazy poor' allows the structural causes of poverty to be systematically neglected. Today it seems that the 'Chinese Dream' has become strangely entangled in some of the worst ideological biases of the old 'American Dream'. This is ironic considering 'common prosperity' (共同繁荣) is one of the most important 'core values' of the Socialist Core Values Campaign (社会主义核心价值观), which lies at the centre of the 'Chinese Dream'. In a significant departure from socialist values, the politics of poverty meant to achieve common prosperity described in this campaign centres on the idea of 'cultivating the lazy man' (养懒汉). With the legacy of the Moynihan report now paradoxically living on as a 'socialist core value' in China, the poor have simply been rebranded as 'lazy', and Andersen and Dostoevsky's stories have once again been reduced to fairy tales. ■



# **FOCUS**

# **China Made**

Infrastructural Thinking in a  
Chinese Register



# China Made

## Infrastructural Thinking in a Chinese Register

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Tim OAKES

The brief essays in this collection emerged out of a 2018 workshop hosted by the China Made project—a collaboration between the University of Colorado’s Center for Asian Studies and the Hong Kong Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. We sought to explore what we might learn when we look more closely at China as the world’s ‘paradigmatic infrastructure state’ (Bach 2016). Rather than prepare formal papers, workshop participants were asked to write brief thought pieces exploring how they ‘think infrastructurally’ in, as well as beyond, China. This collection features a selection of those pieces as an initial foray into the broader question underlying the China Made project: how do we conceive of ‘infrastructure’ in a Chinese register? Or, to put it another way, how might we extend the so-called ‘infrastructure turn’ in the social sciences to the China studies field? We begin to respond to this question by affirming that infrastructure be understood as both an object of analysis, as well as an analytical lens for understanding China. In this brief introduction, I explore this kind of ‘infrastructural thinking’ and provide an overview of the multiple versions of it offered in the essays.

We might begin by observing the timely convergence of, on the one hand, a turn toward infrastructure as a medium of social analysis in the Western academy and, on the other hand, a turn toward infrastructure as a development model among policymakers in China. The infrastructural focus of China’s development has, in fact, inspired a new round of ‘China-as-sleeping-dragon’ narratives: no other state spends more of its GDP on infrastructure construction, no other state pours more

concrete, no other state wants to blanket all of Eurasia (and beyond!) with a shiny new web of railways, pipelines, highways, ports, power plants, and cement factories. The China Made project was conceived to address two issues that become apparent when considering this spectacle of infrastructure that animates what is increasingly being called the ‘China Model’ of development.

First, there is very little discussion of infrastructure itself. Instead, what has captivated the academic and policy communities, along with the broader public, has been the mind-blowing scale of China’s infrastructure push, and what it means for the world. Conversations tend to be dominated by China’s emergence as the world’s new superpower of concrete, by its mega-bridges, mega-dams, mega-ports, and by its signature foreign policy gift to world connectivity: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the BRI is indeed a stunning development for a country that still claims an identity as part of the Third World, it tends to suck all the oxygen out of the room when conversation turns toward Chinese infrastructure development. The China Made project was conceived to focus instead on a finer grained analysis of China’s infrastructures themselves, to consider the infrastructures—rather than nation-states—as the units of analysis, and to take a more cultural, social, and techno-political lens to understanding the local ramifications of infrastructure as an instrument of development and modernisation.

Second, discussions of the ‘China Model’ of development pay surprisingly little attention to what has been happening *within* China over the past several decades. Much of the excitement about China’s newly aggressive foreign presence tends to assume 2013 as year

zero, when President Xi Jinping announced the idea of a New Silk Road Economic Belt during his visit to Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. Yet China's infrastructural model of export development has deep roots in state socialism, and in the mechanisms within the Communist Party that govern both personnel and policy. The political economy of the Chinese state creates what might be described as a kind of infrastructure production machine. These domestic and historic roots, of which the BRI is but the latest manifestation, receive less attention when discussion turns to the China Model of development now being touted in much of Southeast Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. The China Made project was conceived to return our attention to the legacies of state socialism and to the particular workings of infrastructural development within China in order to gain a more detailed perspective on this newly aggressive outward posture.

## What Is Infrastructure and Why Is It Useful to Think with?

We might initially view infrastructure as matter that enables the movement of other matter. Expanding on this, Brian Larkin (2008, 5–6) provides a number of useful definitions: 'The material forms that allow for exchange over space, creating the channels that connect urban places in wider regional, national, and transnational networks'; 'technical systems of transport, telecommunications, urban planning, energy, and water that create the skeleton of urban life'; or, 'the institutionalized networks that facilitate the flow of goods in a wider cultural as well as physical sense.' He sums up these definitions with this: infrastructure is the 'totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities.'

While the technical dimensions of infrastructures draw our focus toward their material qualities, infrastructures also involve powerful imaginaries: aspirations of a more modern, more perfect future, where we might escape (largely through technology) the constraints of the present. As Lam tells us in his essay in this issue, the imagination is part of the infrastructure. Built into our interaction with infrastructure, then, are spatial and temporal dimensions, both of which can be rendered in highly ideological ways. China has long used infrastructure to structure and restructure national and regional identities; and to buttress socialist ideology. Railway construction, for example, proved ideal for building state socialism during the Mao era. Railways were large scale, state funded, and centrally managed. And they tended to create special zones where a different kind of development would occur. As Monson (2009) has shown in her study of China's construction of the TAZARA railway in Tanzania during the 1970s, the infrastructure model of (export) development was around long before Xi Jinping had anything to say about it.

With their centralised nature, large infrastructure projects have lent themselves well to the reproduction of socialist state power in China and elsewhere. But the on-the-ground realities of infrastructure construction also powerfully shape, and are shaped by, the everyday lives of people who come into contact with them. This draws us back to the technical and cultural parts of Larkin's definition; these systems cannot be understood as either 'top-down' statist projects or 'bottom-up' appropriations of these projects, but necessarily entail both of these perspectives.

As an analytical perspective, 'infrastructural thinking' pulls together two broad strands of inquiry. One involves an interest in rethinking the materiality of infrastructure not as an inert or relatively stable basis for dynamic social processes, but rather as unstable assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies (Bennett 2010; Bennett and Joyce 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). Another explores the oftentimes

hidden political (or ‘techno-political’) ‘work’ of infrastructural forms (Amin 2014; Anand 2015; Barry 2013; Easterling 2014; Larkin 2008; Mitchell 2002). Infrastructural thinking thus draws our attention to how social relations are bound up in the physical and technical materialities of our built environments, and to how those materialities constitute social relations in ways that produce unexpected and unintended political outcomes. This has implications for how we can link theory and practice in more productive ways. As Harvey et al. note (2017, 6), ‘a focus on infrastructure can cut across the tensions between surface and depth that mark social theory.’ These tensions are, we believe, precisely what current scholarship on China’s foreign push is challenged to overcome. The study of infrastructure can help link abstract processes and ideas to on-the-ground material conditions in important new ways.

So, what happens when we bring together these strands of inquiry to ‘think with infrastructure’ about the Chinese state and about life within China, where infrastructure construction is now a basic feature of everyday life? To what extent do infrastructures consolidate state power, territoriality, and sovereignty, and to what extent do they undermine these? How do we weigh spectacular infrastructures and megaprojects in relation to prosaic infrastructures of the everyday? How do the material qualities of specific infrastructures—energy, transportation, water, telecommunication, etc.—constitute socio-political relations and formations in China’s development projects? What histories are embedded in contemporary infrastructural forms and materialities? How do socialist infrastructural legacies depart from their colonial counterparts? What sorts of publics or counter-publics are called into being in relation to China’s infrastructure projects? How should we analyse the rise of utopian, green, eco, ‘sponge’, smart, and waste infrastructures?

## Infrastructure in a Chinese Register: Four Themes

The essays collected here explore four broad themes of infrastructure thinking in China. These include infrastructural states, spaces, temporalities, and the everyday.

### The Infrastructural State

As noted in the essays by Rippa and Zhang, infrastructure development is inseparable from the project of consolidating state power in China. Infrastructure projects have been central to state legitimation (along with state visions of development, modernity, progress, and future prosperity) since well before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, of course, but the socialist party-state organisation was, in particular, fuelled by the technical, fiscal, social, and political requirements of large-scale infrastructure. While much recent attention has been paid to infrastructure as a (geo)political strategy beyond China’s borders, it has also been a fundamental basis of Chinese state governance since the 1950s. One aspect of this is the fact that the career paths of political leaders throughout the country have depended not simply on meeting the economic targets and campaign objectives handed down from Beijing, but by demonstrating significant economic impact for their localities during their appointments. Infrastructural projects have been a go-to means of achieving these ends and securing promotion up the career ladder. China’s state system is thus structured around the construction (and demolition) of infrastructure; the state itself is a sort of infrastructure machine.

This is a somewhat different take on the technopolitics of infrastructure discussed in non-Chinese contexts. In his explanation of technopolitics, Patrick Joyce (2003) argued that liberalism is a mode of politics that functions through invisibility. In such a system,

the government does not overtly intervene in everyday affairs. So liberalism seeks political proxies in technological regimes, such as infrastructure. These achieve political outcomes precisely because they are viewed as apolitical. Brian Larkin (2008, 47) notes that this role of technology was inverted in African colonial regimes, where ‘technology was visibly and constantly foregrounded by both colonizer and colonized as evidence of the separation between European and African.’ Something similar might be said of the Chinese state, where the technopolitics of infrastructure are not hidden or perceived as apolitical but are rather displayed as spectacular statements of state (techno)power. Infrastructure might then be understood as the excess material by-product of the reproduction of state power in China.

The essay by Stevens reminds us that another arena of state infrastructural power lies in the control of ‘big data’ digital infrastructures (see also Byler 2019). Here, we see a somewhat different version of the ‘surveillance capitalism’ described so thoroughly by Zuboff (2019), one where there is seemingly a much closer relationship between digital technology firms (e.g. Tencent, Alibaba) and the state. Yet the extent of ‘state control’ is ambiguous, as the recent debates over the mobile technology giant Huawei’s ties to the Chinese government indicate (Balding and Clarke 2018). What is perhaps more significant than the question of whether or not companies like Huawei operate in collaboration with China’s state security apparatus, is the role of the state in clearing the way for digitally networked and gridded cities that China increasingly builds from scratch. While these new urban zones naturally entail traditional infrastructures—pipes, cables, streets, waste collection systems, etc.—they are more significantly developed as fully surveilled spaces, built for 5G technology as ‘smart’ and ‘eco-cities’. As Jianan Qian recently wrote in *The New York Times*, the ‘China Model’ is not just about building ports and pipelines, but rather a specific kind of surveillance

infrastructure that has reversed the ancient adage of ‘heaven is high and the emperor is far away’ (Qian 2019).

## Infrastructure Space

The essays by Bach, Lam, Tang, and Grant explore more deliberately the spatial dimensions of infrastructure in China. Tang draws on a landscape framework to explore the eco-imaginaries of China’s emerging ‘sponge city’ infrastructures, while Bach and Lam explore the socialist genealogy of the special zone and its transformation into a paradigmatic space of China’s market reforms. Grant draws upon a much longer historical perspective to suggest the ‘cosmic infrastructures’ of religious and ritual space that have materialised in traditional Chinese urban forms and built environments. All of them, in different ways, consider how exploring infrastructure space in a Chinese register upends some of our dominant assumptions about the relationship between these spaces and contemporary forces of global capital.

These dominant assumptions tend to underlie the concept of ‘infrastructure space’ as articulated by Keller Easterling in her 2014 book *Extrastatecraft*. For Easterling, such spaces can be found where *de facto* forms of infrastructural governance emerge before they can be officially legislated by the states that house them. ‘As a site of multiple, overlapping, or nested forms of sovereignty,’ she writes, ‘where domestic and transnational jurisdictions collide, infrastructure *space* becomes a medium of what might be called *extrastatecraft*—a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft’ (p. 15, emphasis in original). As these spaces have, like the evolution of Shenzhen discussed in Bach’s essay, transformed from processing zones and logistics hubs into aspirational models of the future, infrastructure space has become ‘an operating system for shaping the city’.

In China, however, such spaces say less about the logics of global capitalism than they do about the legacies of the socialist city, and of the state's territorialising power. While the idea of *extrastatecraft* presupposes a state of contingent sovereignty, scholars of China's system of territorial administration see no ambiguity or contingency in Chinese special zones whatsoever (e.g. Cartier 2017). Rather, China's infrastructure spaces are—to continue from the previous theme of infrastructural states—firmly embedded within an administrative hierarchy in which socialist urban planning has played a significant role. Such 'exceptional' spaces have long served as the infrastructures of state-led social transformation.

Bach thus offers the special zone as not simply a spatial expression of neoliberal capitalism, but of the ways socialist urban planning still lurks within much of the infrastructural urbanism we see today both within and beyond China. For Lam, many of these spaces bear the marks of Cold War socialist mobilisations. For Grant, China's new urban developments are entangled with the infrastructural remnants of not only socialist ideals, but Buddhist and Daoist cosmologies as well. And Tang finds that efforts to institute—through urban planning—landscapes as infrastructures for new social orderings, collectivities, and publics often get tripped up in the everyday spatial practices of local governments and real estate developers. In all cases, China's infrastructure spaces compel us to reconsider just what kind of 'operating system' drives these spatial formations.

## Temporalities of Infrastructure

Infrastructures age with varying degrees of durability, requiring maintenance and rehabilitation. Or they simply decay, fall into disuse, get buried, get demolished, or just forgotten. All of these temporalities have different social, cultural, and political implications as explored in the essays by

Lam, Rippa, Zhang, and Grant. China's infrastructural development is accompanied by an enormous amount of ruin, rubble, and waste. The material qualities of this waste and rubble are fundamental to understanding the kinds of social and political processes generated by the decay and destruction of infrastructure. Lam reminds us that if infrastructural aspirations are all about more perfect futures, ruins mark the abandonment of those futures. Meanwhile, Rippa discusses how demolition yielded another kind of future, turning the town of Tengchong into a mine of sorts, with residents digging out old pieces of jade hidden in the ruins. Rubble, then, is old material reconfigured and in some cases repurposed. It is also a by-product of the infrastructure machine that is the Chinese state. Sometimes it produces another round of value (as in old pieces of jade), but it inevitably marks the always-suspended state of destruction—construction produced by infrastructural development.

This temporal ambiguity is noted by Lam as well, who finds in infrastructural ruins examples of reuse, rehabilitation, and repackaging. For Grant, the ruins of ancient cosmic infrastructures are also repurposed and enrolled into contemporary urban state-building campaigns (such as 'building civilised cities'). These ruins, then, are not just paved over and forgotten as successive new rounds of infrastructure development render older patterns invisible. Rather, they maintain a certain vibrancy in their (albeit decayed) material persistence. In Zhang's essay, the state's efforts to build infrastructures for a shiny future of efficient and 'green' waste management are thwarted by the everyday practices of waste collection and by the rubbish tossing habits of citizens. The persistent materialities of waste, in other words, have their own temporal dispositions, and these seldom match the future-oriented temporalities of infrastructural planners and designers.

## The Everyday

Finally, we find a provocative tension exists between the spectacular infrastructures championed by the state—high-speed rail, new smart cities, long bridges, huge dams, ‘Sky Net’ surveillance systems—and the mundane, everyday encounters with infrastructure that condition people’s lives. Zhang’s essay, in particular, explores this dimension of infrastructure in China, focussing our attention on the embodied nature of infrastructure provision when we bring it down to the scale of the everyday. Rubbish needs to be picked up by *someone*. Similarly, as Stevens also notes in his essay, surveillance cameras need to be monitored by *someone*. The everyday thus brings up the issue of ‘people as infrastructure’ (Simone 2004), of socio-material hybridities, of everyday appropriations of infrastructures for purposes other than what they were designed for, of the ways infrastructure services are deliberately ignored, and of active resistance or sabotage.

It is mostly in our everyday lives that we encounter infrastructure. Everyday practices of getting by, making do, building collectivities and ‘publics’, these are not things infrastructure does for us. Rather, they are things that we do as we engage with infrastructure. Because of the everyday, infrastructures are never purely technical things. But it is also important to recognise that our everyday lives are constantly producing infrastructural alternatives, new innovations and disruptions, that feed back into cycles of infrastructural (re)production. This is perhaps most readily apparent in the ways our behaviours become ‘data’ for the digital algorithms of Google, Facebook, or WeChat (Zuboff 2019). Digital infrastructures are ubiquitous in everyday life for most people in China. How that translates into varying conceptions of ‘privacy’, ‘security’, and civil rights, has quickly become one of the central concerns of everyday encounters with infrastructure in China.

In China, then, the body has become something of an infrastructural prosthesis. Not only does it produce and feed data to huge companies, but it also consumes the services those companies subsequently provide, much of it optimised to match the particular time-space needs of the body. More fundamentally, China’s infrastructure boom has been built quite literally on the backs of a surfeit of bodies, mostly unskilled workers from the countryside (think, for example, of the millions of bodies bearing the weight of China’s express delivery boom, or of all those bodies building all those roads and dams and bridges, for that matter). The labouring body under duress is a basic feature of the infrastructural everyday in China. And, as Stevens also notes in his essay, the digital infrastructures that infuse daily life in China requires enormous amounts of human, bodily labour to build and maintain.

The essays collected here provide only brief snapshots of these themes. They are written in the spirit of suggestion, provocation, and exploration. We hope they provide the basis for an ongoing dialogue on infrastructural thinking and China. ■



## What Kind of Model?

Thinking about the Special Economic Zone and the Socialist City

Jonathan BACH

*This essay asks whether the special economic zone could, counterintuitively perhaps, reflect the morphology of the socialist city. By locating the roots of today's special economic zones in socialist urbanism, this essay both complements and questions the standard genealogy of the zone in capitalism and our imagination of global infrastructural space.*

Looking through the lens of the economic zone seems eminently fruitful for conceptualising the infrastructural logic of socio-spatial transformation that has been the result of China's economic growth in the last 40 years. Since China embraced and adapted the zone model as a site for production of exports and accumulation of capital in the 1980s, it has paved the way for the economic zone to develop into an urban form(ula). This new urban typology has infrastructure at its core—from the 'hard' infrastructure of ports and pipes, roads and

Building Shenzhen.  
Diorama at the  
Shenzhen Museum,  
2015. PC: Jonathan  
Bach.

factories, and electronic ‘backbones’ to ‘softer’ infrastructures of housing, entertainment, education, and ‘creative’ spaces to nurture and attract the right ‘talent’. Zone cities have a uniform appearance, often drawing on a handful of international consulting companies, architecture and construction firms, and retail complexes—not to mention the firms doing the investment. As I have argued (2011), and as Keller Easterling (2014) has explored, these new urban forms constitute a spatial formation of late modernity, one where socio-technical infrastructures graft onto, transplant, and extend existing ideas about cities as catalysts for global structural transformation. As a worldwide phenomenon, the infrastructural space of zones has become part of the geographical imagination of the global economy.

Nowhere in recent decades has the rise of the special economic zone as a type of infrastructural technology been as prominent as in China, which has turned its own experience with special economic zones (foremost among them Shenzhen) into an export model of its own. Yet most of the discussion around contemporary zones centres on their role as parvenus of capitalist globalisation, whether from the perspective of the enthusiast or the critic. In this brief essay I would like to compliment the standard genealogy of the zone in capitalism by raising a different set of questions about whether the zone can be seen as part of the morphology of the socialist city itself. Can the zone be a fruitful empirical site for exploring, not only the capitalist contours of contemporary production and consumption, but the genealogy of socialist urban planning, its hybrid legacy today, and its transformation under neoliberal economic forces? Can looking at the zone as a type of hybrid socialist legacy raise questions about varieties of socialism in practice, especially the Asian developmental state, and thus be useful for thinking about the new zonal logics of China’s global infrastructural network?

## Socialist Meta-Models

In the introduction to our recent volume on the Chinese post-Mao model city of Shenzhen (O’Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017), my co-authors and I called attention to how the city’s delirious rise is premised on earlier socialist models, such as the famous agricultural commune in Dazhai or the industrial ‘iron man spirit’ of the city of Daqing, which the entire country was to ‘learn from’ in order to, as the slogan went, ‘surpass England and catch up with the United States’ (to these we could have added the city of Panzhihua and other Third Front experiments). These cases share the defining impulse of modernist cities to start anew, afresh, and from a blank slate. This idea of the *tabula rasa* ‘new city’ has a long history—Descartes himself evoked the planned city as encompassing the privileged qualities of method, rationality, and objectivity. Descartes’ ideal city, noted the historian Matt Erlin (2004, 3), ‘is essentially ahistorical, the eternally valid construct of a single, unified, rational subjectivity’.

Socialist cities famously embraced the idea of urban planning as a fresh start for institutionalising new universal subjectivities and rationalities. As Kimberly Zarecor (2018, 5) concedes, ‘all socialist cities were modernist, but not all modernist cities were socialist,’ and yet, she argues, the way in which the modernist quality was adopted in socialist settings contributed significantly to socialist urban forms and their legacies. The logic of the socialist ‘model’, I submit, is central to understanding socialist urban forms, and to seeing the zone as one of its prominent legacies.

There are arguably three basic dimensions of the socialist (meta) model for model making. The first and foremost is the ontological commitment to state-led development. For various well-known reasons, socialist countries sought solutions through the heavy hand of the state as opposed to market-driven approaches to development. This was hardly restricted to the Soviet or Marxist model, since it can also describe, with variations, the post-war Asian

developmental model of countries such as Japan and South Korea, and the Scandinavian model.

The second is the concept of the test space. The state-led project often starts with a chosen village, city, commune, or other space that is selected as the site for an experiment. The site of the experiment, more often than not, was in an area where risks could be controlled. In China, sites for early experiments with market reforms often took place in rural settings (e.g. Town and Village Enterprises). The first special economic zones were placed not in existing economic centres such as Shanghai or Tianjin, but in reasonably remote areas such as Shenzhen, Xiamen, and Hainan, where failure could be more easily contained (there were additional strategic reasons for choosing these locations, of course, including their proximity to overseas Chinese capital in Hong Kong and Taiwan). But more important than containing possible failure was the advantage that experimental spaces allowed for trying out new policies and plans. Paying attention to the early period of experimentation in such spaces can tell us much about subsequent events and processes.

The third is the transformation of society, what Zarecor (2018) has identified as ‘infrastructural thinking’ in the service of ‘total societal transformation’ by connecting material production with social transformation. These state-chosen experimental spaces achieve their transformative goals not through local impact, but through emulation. The test spaces must therefore become both symbolically and materially portable. If successful, the experiment would be emulated and expanded until it became the norm. Emulation can take the form of highly visible campaigns exhorting citizens to ‘learn from X or Y’, new construction techniques or materials, new policy guidelines or technology transfer. While many historical models were made to be as visible as possible, the logic could also encompass less visible forms, such as Soviet ‘secret’ cities designed for weapons and other forms of industrial

production. These secret cities both drew from, and in a sense perfected, the idea of the ‘model’ city.

## The Special Economic Zone as a Model

These three characteristics came together in my and my colleagues’ work on the city of Shenzhen, which prompted me to think about the connection between socialist-era ‘model’ cities, and model making and socialist/post-socialist special economic zones. It is well known that special economic zones, themselves a variation on earlier export processing zones, became a major phenomenon of the global economy in the 1980s across the Global South, notably in China. While most of the literature on zones discusses them in the context of capitalist development from a macro-economic perspective (e.g. evaluating the amount of foreign direct investment they attract), the socialist and post-socialist world continues to play an understudied but significant role in their historical trajectory.

While the spread of special economic zones is often regarded as part of the story of capitalist triumph after the end of the Cold War, their rise as a hybrid socialist/capitalist model city in China took place a decade before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam has been exploring special economic zones since the early 1990s, and North Korea continues to experiment with them. Russia, in its post-Soviet incarnation, has embraced the idea with 18 of its own special economic zones, while former Soviet republics have pursued them as well (with mixed results). Thus, while at first glance the phenomenon of the special economic zone seems diametrically opposed to socialism (e.g. when zones claim to represent the ‘freest’ market principles, including weak regulation and taxation and easy repatriation of profits to companies), they arguably exhibit a similar logic to some socialist urban



Scene at an exhibit  
(F518 Art Space),  
Shenzhen, China, 2015.  
PC: Jonathan Bach.

models in their genesis as state-led projects of experimentation, transformation, and emulation.

As with socialist planned urban spaces from Marzahn to Magnitogorsk, the zone requires complete legal and spatial control by the state over the territory. More often than not, the zone is explicitly tied to a project of ‘total societal transformation’. That this transformation takes a neoliberal, rather than classic socialist form, does not alter its claim to be able to fundamentally reshape and revolutionise society (and in China the claim is still that this transformation is with the ultimate goal of realising socialism). Zones are invoked as part of plans to lead the country in the direction of future harmonious prosperity or, as the World Economic Processing Zone Association puts it, ‘to lead both poor and rich countries to their wealthier destinies’ (Bolin 2014). Thus, because they are intimately connected to national aspirations of industrialisation, zones become an experimental space in which

new forms of production, living, working, and being are enacted which, if successful, will be expanded to the rest of the country. If from an economic point of view zones exist to export products, from a political point of view they exist to transform societies.

Let me give two brief examples of the social transformative dimensions of zones, from both the (nominally) capitalist and socialist worlds. China’s Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, formally established in 1980, was the cornerstone of a massive economic and social experiment to create a post-Mao society by developing ‘material and spiritual civilisation’ (物质文明与精神文明). For the material side of the equation, exports and foreign direct investments were key, but for the spiritual side, new subjectivities were needed. What came to be called ‘Shenzhen Spirit’ (深圳精神) became the method to create the new form of worker for the post-Mao era. As Eric Florence (2017) has shown, this new worker must simultaneously ‘sacrifice themselves and their whole lives’ to



(Left) City view, Nanshan, Shenzhen; (Right) In a café, Nanshan, Shenzhen. PC: Jonathan Bach.

the nation while building a spiritual civilisation by ‘deciding for oneself, strengthening oneself, autonomy, competition, taking risks and facing danger, equity, effectiveness, and legality’, according to an official list of values from the city’s Communist Party, while Shenzhen Spirit, in turn, should contribute to the ‘four-have new person’ who should have ‘ideals, culture, virtue, and discipline’ (cited by Florence 2017, 87).

The zone model, with its new worker subjectivity and spirit, was thus meant to transform the entire country, and it did. In 1980, there were four new Special Economic Zones in China. Today, nearly every city in China has a variation of a zone existing to attract foreign investment and shape the modern citizen. Not every city can become Shenzhen (which went from a rural area with villages and market towns to a metropolis of over 20 million people in one generation), but Shenzhen serves as both a national and now global model—from India (e.g. a headline in the *Times of India* in 2015: ‘UP to be developed into China’s Shenzhen Model’) to what Deborah Bräutigam and Tang Xiaoyang (2011) have called ‘African Shenzhen’ in China’s export of the zone model.

In South Korea, despite the different circumstances, a similar logic was at work. As Bae-Gyoon Park (2005) has shown, when the country reintroduced special economic zones in the early 2000s, it was no longer to create an export-driven economy (as in the 1970s and 1980s), but to create spaces where ‘liberalisation’ could be introduced and, if successful, slowly expanded to the rest of the country. Here the zone was seen as a way to undermine the power of protectionist *chaebols* (large firms such as Samsung), bureaucrats, and labour unions. While, again, the economic goals may be opposite to socialism, the larger goal is that, as Bridget Martin (2013) writes, ‘people will become fully incorporated into a property system, a social life, and an economic order over which they have less and less control’, noting how villages on the site of zones were replaced by ‘a planned arrangement of infrastructure falling into the sanctioned categories of “housing”, “shopping centers”, “office space”, “church”, and “school”.’

The zone is thus a recognisable strategy or scaffolding—in Zarecor’s (2018) sense—that ‘activates’ discrete, state-controlled urbanised spaces by seeking to marry social transformation with material production. Zones are a tabula

rasa approach to planning which, among other things, avoids the messiness of dealing with existing urban centres. Both the zone-as-city and zone-as-appendage allow the state to approach urban space as the proverbial ‘blank slate’. What Eli Rubin (2016) wrote about how the East Berlin satellite city of Marzahn appeared as a form of ‘amnesiopolis’, a place with no past but only futures, is also a hallmark of the zones. The Shenzhen municipal government, as I discussed elsewhere (2016), sought to physically and discursively erase the traces of its villages and successfully promote the narrative that the city’s history began effectively in 1980. The zone as a city provides the tantalising promise of an eternal ‘fresh start’ unencumbered by baggage of the past and resolutely facing the future. As a consultant proudly pronounced to Bridget Martin (2013) as she was doing her research on the South Korean zone of New Songdo City: ‘It’s not an experiment, it’s the future!’

## China and the Legacies of the Socialist City

China arguably plays a key role for the continuity of socialist cities into the present day, especially as they turn their cities into global models. What is often overlooked in the literature on zones and Chinese cities is how Chinese urban space draws directly on the multiple influences of Soviet urban planning, Chinese socialist planning (especially the idea of the work unit, or *danwei*) and Asian developmental models. Their original special economic zones certainly closely reflected lessons from the export model of the ‘Four Tigers’ (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and, above all, Singapore). Yet the practices of planning the new zones drew on generations of planners, architects, policymakers, and residents whose point of urban reference was Soviet-style planning. As Jacob Dryer (2014) writes about Soviet influence in Chinese urban development, ‘the Soviet model city could be

realized on Chinese soil, when it could not be in Russia, because there were fewer impediments ... Soviet architectural typologies and the models of Soviet urban planners constituted the first vision of cities ever glimpsed by Chinese peasants in a rapidly modernizing society.’

Can we see in the rapid spread of economic zones worldwide the traces of socialist cities? If so, what would it mean for our understanding of both the genealogy of socialist planning and the function of zones today? For true believers of neoliberal dogma, the zone serves as a catalyst for a harmonious future, yet as with the lived reality under socialism, many zones are hollow promises, with unfinished infrastructure and ‘ghost cities’ of uninhabited high rises serving as visual markers of corruption, vanity projects, and plans gone astray. At the same time, zones have become a fundamental form of urban development in much of the world. Might an understanding of socialist model making help us understand this phenomenon?

In Andrei Tarkovsky’s famous film *Stalker*, the Zone is the only open space left capable of transformation and possibility, a dangerous place with an irresistible mythical room at its core that can fulfil dreams. When the film came out in 1979, China was preparing to announce its first special economic zones and thereby transform both socialist and capitalist development. As national spaces of exception, zones are like secret rooms that promise to fulfil the dreams of countries. As part of the geographic imagination of capital, they form a parallel world parasitic on, but separate from, sovereign states. And with their traces of socialist practices and planning, they might also tell us something about the past and future of the socialist city. ■



## Futures and Ruins

### The Politics, Aesthetics, and Temporality of Infrastructure

Tong LAM

*In both the socialist and post-socialist eras, many of China's infrastructure projects took place in the so-called special zones or areas that were designated respectively for war preparation as well as economic and technological development. These large-scale infrastructure projects have made promises about the future, but have also left behind a trail of ruins and foreclosed possibilities. Amid these utopian and dystopian landscapes are opportunities to reflect on China's relentless development and our growing planetary crisis.*

One of the many clean, orderly, and techno-oriented high-tech parks built in Shenzhen's former farmlands. Enclaves such as this also determine the amenities, land values, as well as who get to work and live in the area. PC: Tong Lam.

**F**uture and ruin are two intricately linked concepts. Especially in the age of a growing planetary crisis, conceptualising the future often anticipates ruination whereas ruins are symbols of abandoned futures. Nowhere is this paradox manifested more profoundly than in China's recent frenetic development. In less than four decades, China has transformed from a predominately agrarian society to an urban one. The rapid pace of urbanisation is especially visible in the nation's relentless urban renewal projects, the rise of instant cities, and more recently, the building of 'smart cities' and science parks. Meanwhile, intricately linked to this process is also a growing collection of modern ruins, including the so-called 'ghost

cities' sensationalised by the media, as well as the little-known rustbelt cities in the hinterlands.

My ongoing project is a genealogy of special zones from China's Cold War secret cities to post-socialist smart cities. In the contemporary era, science parks and smart cities are specific kinds of special zone that use techno-science as the cultural trope and physical marker to present themselves as visions of the future. But shared characteristics aside, the stories collected from my interviews, ethnographic observations, and archival research reveal that the developmental trajectories of these zones were often products of contingent events, improvised experiments, as well as local and national politics. For example, while the history of the Zhongguancun Science Park in Beijing and the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone are both central to the understanding of China's post-socialist development—including the issues of urbanism, state-led neoliberalism, and the so-called Chinese developmental model—they hardly shared the same historical path or the same imagined future. Therefore, even though the existence of both places was briefly called into question immediately after the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, and while they are now both dubbed China's 'Silicon Valley', the recent histories and present conditions of these two sites cannot be more dissimilar. Nonetheless, together, they tell the complicated and behind-the-scenes stories of China's high-speed growth and the underlying economic logics of its rising geopolitical ambitions. Among the stories I have collected, for instance, are the practices of how the Chinese state has tried to export its model of special zones to friendly countries of the Global South.

In this respect, the proliferation of these special zones as tropes, territorial spaces, financial speculation, and governmental technologies should be considered along with parallel developments elsewhere. Likewise, the ruination of these spaces—from foreclosure to abandonment—is also a global process. Therefore, even if the phenomenon of Chinese ghost cities may look extreme, such cities are

far from unique. In fact, arguably, these places are concrete stories of ruination and of the planetary crisis in the age of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Moore 2015, 1–13)

The evolution and the rise and fall of special zones in contemporary China is only one part of my project, however. After all, these special zones are also preceded by another kind of special zone developed in the mid-twentieth century during the socialist Cold War mobilisation. Indeed, in China at least, the concept of the special zone was introduced in the 1950s and proliferated massively in the 1960s. Starting in 1964, specifically, China began to see the development of a wave of what could be called 'instant factory towns'. Commonly known as the Third Front Construction, the decade-long mobilisation was an intense effort in developing industrial-based settlements as part of China's preparation for a possible full-scale war, including a nuclear war, with the Soviet Union and the United States. It is little surprise then that when special economic zones such as Shenzhen and Zhuhai were introduced in the late 1970s, they too were articulated in the logics of emergence and exception. However, unlike the socialist secret cities, these special zones were launched with different underlying ideology, political economy, and aesthetic considerations. Unsurprisingly, as new investments were redirected to newly-established special zones along the coast, many factory towns built primarily for war preparation during the Cold War era also began to fall into ruins. Thus, just as there are plenty of capitalist industrial rustbelt cities, there also exist many Chinese socialist rustbelt cities (Lam 2019).

In the following, I would like to use a few images to further contemplate the issues of temporality, aesthetics, and politics of infrastructure in the context of special zones. To begin with, infrastructure projects have clear implications for social justice, rights, as well as social inclusion and exclusion, even though they are often presented as apolitical and non-ideological. More precisely, unlike human rights, the rights to infrastructure

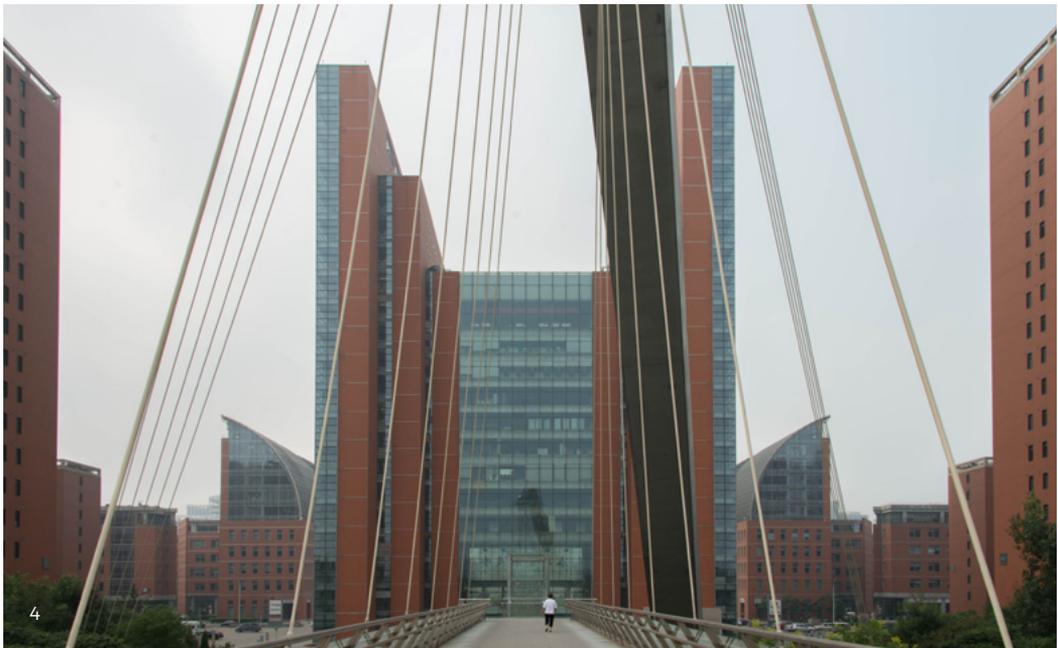
are frequently determined by technocrats and experts (Mitchell 2002). And even when debates about infrastructure do take place in public discourse, it seems that the promises made by infrastructural projects are also about erasing all controversies and alternatives by putting them into a black box. For example, there may be endless controversies about the construction of a particular high-speed train station, but once it is built, it becomes an inevitability. In this regard, the enormity of infrastructure forecloses possibilities as much as creating new ones.

In a similar fashion, since infrastructure is often used to articulate political promises, it seems that the distinction between infrastructure and ruins should be obvious. The former points to development, social

betterment, and the future; the latter represents failure, disinvestment, and abandonment. In short, they evoke opposite emotions and senses. In reality, however, these two supposedly distinct temporalities often collapse into one another. Take, for instance, the case of Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei neighbourhood. The area's old factory buildings house a large number of small workshops and hackerspaces for product design and development. These places—whether their activities are considered imitation or innovation—represent the heart and soul of Huaqiangbei's reputation as the world largest market for electronic accessories. But do these old factories represent images of aging or even crumbling infrastructure? Or, are these forward-looking examples of reuse and rehabilitation?



(2) A former factory in Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei district. Once upon a time, these air-conditioning units were symbols of modernity. As Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei is being rebranded as a place for innovation and entrepreneurship rather than production, many industrial buildings built in the 1990s such as this have also been updated with a futuristic look. PC: Tong Lam.



(3) An old factory from the 1990s in Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei with a newly-installed façade.

(4) This newly-built instant city in the suburb of Tianjin has been branded as a science park. Yet, like many similar places elsewhere in China, they have remained mostly empty so far and are sometimes being referred to as 'ghost cities' by the media. Still, this place has been used as a model by the Chinese government for promoting and exporting the practice of the science park to some friendly countries of the Global South. PC: Tong Lam.



(5) An abandoned military factory in one of the former secret cities in Guizhou province. During the Third Front Construction that began in 1964, hundreds of these instant factory towns were built in southwestern China. However, as industries migrated back to the coastal area after the 1980s, many of these places have become China's rustbelt cities. PC: Tong Lam.



(6) Peasants squatting an abandoned factory in a former special zone in Guizhou province. Ruins, in other words, do not just involve dilapidated infrastructure and unused spaces, but also the ruination of lives and abandonment of people. Put differently, if smart cities with their capacity to collect data and modify human behaviour, abandoned rustbelt cities are places where the state choose to neglect. PC: Tong Lam.

After all, such flexible use of space is one of the basic conditions for Huaqiangbei's success. And since the public discourse on infrastructure is often more about visible structures and objects, rather than underlying facilities and networks, no wonder some landlords in Huaqiangbei have begun to repackage their old buildings with futuristic facades even though the interior spaces and functions of these updated buildings stay the same, i.e., as warehouses, workshops, makerspaces, and retail spaces.

In other words, aesthetics and the senses seem to play a crucial role in our perception of infrastructure (and ruins) in the contemporary visual and sensorial economy. As such, images are not superficial or false, as Guy Debord (1994) contends in his thesis, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Rather, they are part of the infrastructure. Moreover, scholars of science

and technology studies have long noticed the importance of culture in the forms of narrative, trust, and sentiment in the production of scientific knowledge (Latour 1987; Shapin 1994). They have also argued that the networks of actors and institutions are pivotal to the constitution of admissible data and evidence, the implementation of scientific experiments, and the persuasiveness of arguments. In the same vein, infrastructure—including materiality and the emotions associated with it—is a main force that makes the special zone's techno-scientific claims and promises about the future persuasive.

Meanwhile, the paradoxical relationship between infrastructure and ruins can be seen in a variety of contexts. This is especially the case in China where many newly-constructed cities and districts have remained unoccupied and have begun to fall into ruins due to

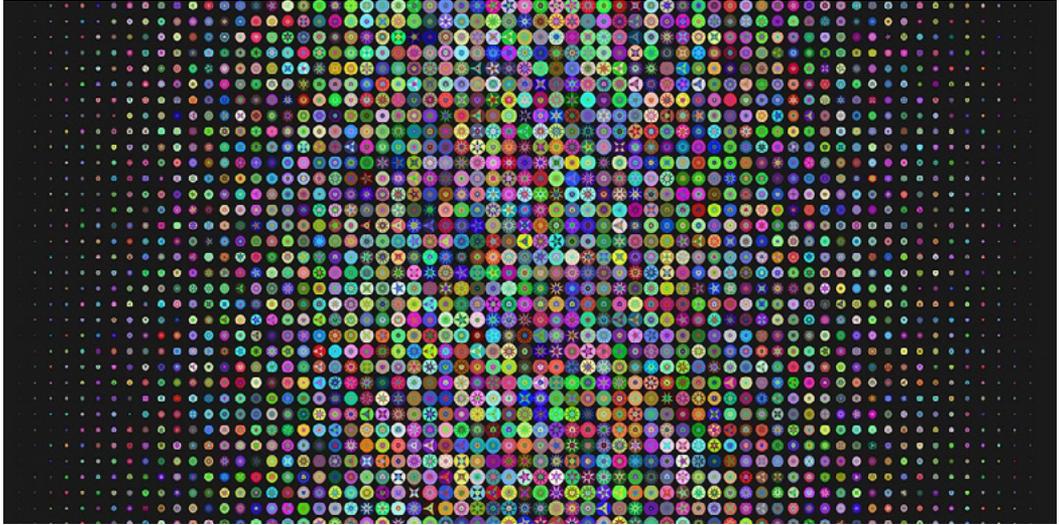


(7) Mostly driven by speculation, this new district in Dandong has remained unoccupied and has even begun to fall into ruin. PC: Tong Lam.

overdevelopment. But unlike ancient ruins that often convey a sense of historical sublime, modern ruins are about untimely death. And the sound of silence echoing within the spaces of these abandoned buildings does not inspire the excitement of a grand future, but the melancholy of abandoned dreams.

Still, in spite of their dilapidation and demise, ruins always outlast us, not so much as permanently preserved heritage but as debris and dust. Ultimately, as Walter Benjamin (2008, 180) puts it, ruins in the realm of things are similar to allegories in the realm of thoughts. In other words, like allegories, ruins are inherently unstable, and they allude to possibilities and missed opportunities. As such, ruins as cultural tropes and political allegories are productive for contemplating questions of civilisation, violence, and destruction. If so, perhaps it would be no less revealing to

think about the question of human civilisation through ruins of new infrastructure in our growing planetary crisis. ■



## Digital Infrastructure in the Chinese Register

Fractal Art.  
PC: Pixabay.com.

Hallam STEVENS

*Science and technology studies now include a significant literature that examines the practices and meanings of ‘digital infrastructure’. This literature can help us to understand some of the importantly different aspects of digital infrastructure in China. In particular, it illuminates ways in which physical and digital infrastructures in China are tightly interwoven, and highlights the importance of examining the relationships between digital infrastructure, human bodies, and labour. These entanglements suggest that digital infrastructure in China is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the relationships between citizens, corporations, and the state.*

There is now a large body of scholarship—broadly centred on the field of science and technology studies (STS)—concerning ‘digital’ or ‘information’ infrastructures. One strand of this intellectual genealogy leads back to the work of Langdon Winner in the early 1980s. Winner (1980) argued that ‘artefacts have politics’—that all technologies, from forks to nuclear power stations, have a ‘politics’ embedded into their physical forms. Winner’s key examples were New York City overpass bridges that instantiated racist politics by being built so low as to keep public buses (and therefore low-income, mostly African American commuters) from reaching beaches on Long Island. Current scholarship in this vein often uses the language

of ‘affordances’ to describe how technologies either reinforce or undermine particular views or practices (Davis and Chouinard 2017).

In the 1990s, scholars began to ask similar questions about the online, digital, and cyber realms: if a physical object could have a politics, what about a virtual one? Star and Ruhleder (1996) examined the development of the online ‘Worm Community System’—a digital infrastructure for coordinating biological information and communication. Building on this, Bowker and Star’s *Sorting Things Out* (1999) examines the role of classification systems (especially databases) in structuring our everyday lives. As such, this book forms an important basis for thinking about how data structures, file systems, databases, and other ‘digital infrastructures’ influence, undergird, and structure our doing and thinking.

The STS work on digital infrastructures (and ‘information infrastructures’) has now expanded in many directions (for example, Borgman 2007; Bowker, Baker, Millerand, et al. 2009; Edwards, Bowker, Baker, and Jackson 2009; Pollock and Williams 2010). One crucial development here is the increasing crossover between the concerns of infrastructure studies and ‘platform studies’ (Bogust and Montfort 2009; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, and Sandvig 2016). Platform studies emerged in response to the fact that much of our experience on the Web and on our phones is structured not by ‘computers’ or ‘the online’ in a general sense, but by ‘platforms’ (平台, *pingtai*) such as the iOS, JavaScript, Android, Windows, Atari (Montfort and Bogust 2009), the World Wide Web (Sandvig 2013), etc. As this (very partial) list already suggests, platforms can exist at many different levels—platforms can exist on platforms that are built on platforms. Nick Srnicek (2016) argues that the most widely used of such platforms—AirBnB and Uber or, in the Chinese context, WeChat and Didi—are now critical in structuring our economic and social worlds.

There are also important overlaps between infrastructure studies, critical algorithm studies, and critical data studies (Illiadis and

Russo 2016). As many scholars have noted, an increasing amount of our lives, online and offline, is dominated and structured by algorithms and flows of data, which are often hidden from view. Google’s PageRank algorithm, for instance, and the algorithms that determine what appears on our Facebook feed, are obscured by both trade secrecy and their technological complexity. Many such systems are referred to as a kind of ‘digital infrastructure’ that undergirds both our online and offline worlds. Recent critiques—such as those by Eubanks (2018), Noble (2018), O’Neil (2017), Pasquale (2016), and Zuboff (2019)—have shown how these algorithms and big data technologies reinforce discrimination, undermine democratic processes, and ultimately benefit corporations at the expense of the public.

## China and Digital Infrastructure

What is digital infrastructure in China, why should we pay attention to it, and how might the STS literature help us to better understand it?



WeChat payment scanning code.

I want to begin with an object (see figure above) that can, in many ways, be thought of as emblematic of digital infrastructure in China. It is an image of a WeChat payment scanning code: in many parts of China one can pay for goods and services simply by scanning a QR code like this one with your smartphone. Money is transferred from the purchaser's 'Wechat wallet' to the vendor's. Such codes are ubiquitous in China as, significantly, this mode of payment is available not just at high-end stores or restaurants, but even for street vendors and itinerant workers.

The code is representative of China's digital infrastructure in several ways. First, this is a material object—it is part of the material infrastructure of shopping, banking, and consumerism in contemporary China. However, it is a material object that is a 'gateway' to the virtual or the digital. It is one of the materials of a massive system that involves both other material parts (smartphones, phone towers, cables, computers, banks) and digital parts (databases, algorithms, file structures, etc.). The code also works because it is supported by the infrastructures of standards, laws, and metrification.

Second, this object plays an important role in structuring people's experiences of space and time. Dourish and Bell (2007) have argued that the experience of using mobile devices brings computing away from offices, homes, and desktops into everyday life and everyday experience; computation moves much more directly into the physical world, reshaping our experience of space. Many Chinese citizens have to interact with objects such as this code dozens of times a day. And they have to do so in a very specific and prescribed way—with embodied actions that make the system work: holding the phone up to the code, punching in the desired payment amount, and then displaying the screen to the vendor to show that you have successfully paid. These mundane physical actions tie together the physical world of phone and code to the digital worlds of algorithms and databases.

Third, the codes are a visible manifestation of the power of both the central government and China's largest corporations—in this case, Tencent, the owner of WeChat, the platform on which the 'digital wallet' is built. Alibaba, another of China's digital giants, has a similar system called Alipay. Such platforms are the means through which citizens' data are collected and forms of surveillance operate. *Pingtai*/platforms increasingly shape the relationships between individuals, corporations, and the state.

In what follows, I will expand on these three concepts—the materiality of digital infrastructure, the role of the body in digital infrastructure, and the role of the state and corporations in digital infrastructure—to suggest some of the unique (or at least importantly different) elements of digital infrastructure in China.

## Digital Infrastructure and Physical Infrastructure

As I have already suggested, most infrastructures now have both physical and digital elements. In China, the relationship between the two is particularly strong. In many instances, it is hard to understand and appreciate the meanings of China's physical infrastructure without also understanding the digital infrastructures associated with it.

To take an example closely related to the one above, the success of Alibaba in China can be attributed not just to digital innovations, but to developing critical physical elements as well. According to Duncan Clark, one of the pillars of Jack Ma's success was creating logistics services that bypassed China Post for delivering the vast number of online orders placed by Alibaba customers each day (Clark 2016). Large investment in firms from Zhejiang province created a conglomerate known as China Smart Logistics (菜鸟, *Cainiao*), which

delivers over 30 million packages per day and employs over 1.5 million people. Express Delivery (快递, *kuaidi*) is a critical part of everyday language and experience in China and one that has dramatically reshaped China's domestic economy by connecting sellers to buyers via platforms with a high degree of convenience and efficiency. Although neither Alibaba nor *Cainiao* directly owns the delivery service companies, they collect and process the data that they generate. In contrast, Amazon and eBay have largely relied on the US Postal Service and other existing delivery services (FedEx, DHL, etc.) to deliver their products. Where fewer reliable and established services existed, Alibaba had to create the physical networks for delivering packages *alongside* the digital networks used to browse and purchase them.

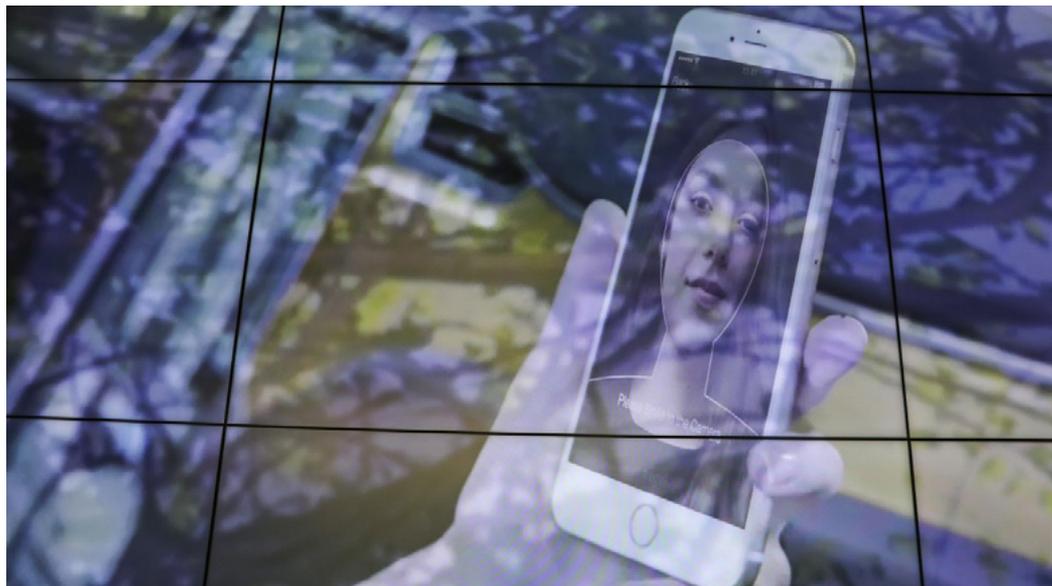
The switch in China to mobile payments such as Alipay—skipping over credit cards—is another instance in which the relative *incapacity* of China (in this case in banking and finance) has meant that physical and digital infrastructures have been developed side-by-side. Additionally, traditional infrastructures—such as bridges, canals, and railways—are also now being developed with sensors and cameras that are integrated into digital networks (see, for example, Staedter 2018). As China moves towards the Internet of Things and 5G, this sort of integration of physical and digital is likely to become the norm. Indeed, the discourse of ‘smart cities’ in China revolves exactly around such integration of the digital into physical (urban) spaces. Of course, similar things are happening elsewhere. But China's recent and rapid scaling-up in many technological domains is allowing it to deploy digitally-enabled objects perhaps more widely than anywhere else. Increasingly, and especially in China, digital and physical infrastructures are becoming impossible to untangle.

## Digital Infrastructure and Human Infrastructure

Second, in China digital infrastructures are playing a particularly powerful role in (re) shaping social lives. Digital infrastructures are usually thought about primarily in non-human terms, with discussions being dominated by a focus on machine learning and artificial intelligence. But, just as physical infrastructures are shaping how people live, digital infrastructures are increasingly part of human lives and work. This creates profound transformative possibilities.

Digital technologies are, for many urban dwellers at least, very much daily routines. Things like barcodes and online payments structure people's everyday lives in ways that are analogous to the ways roads and water systems do. They tie people together into various kinds of overlapping networks through the use of online payment systems or other apps, such as ride sharing, online marketplaces, etc. Likewise, they take on specific meanings—they are used (or not) for affective reasons (‘it's cool’) as well as for practical reasons. They also become objects of desire (or as Alessandro Ripa argues in his essay in this issue, following Deleuze and Guattari, self-propelling and self-fulfilling ‘desire machines’) that are connected to ideas about modernity, freedom, and progress in the way other infrastructures are.

The relationship between culture and such digital technologies was neatly demonstrated in the use of virtual ‘red envelopes’ (红包, *hongbao*)—WeChat pay used this innovation (released just in time for Spring Festival) to (almost) leapfrog over its competitor and to open up virtual currency to millions of their users almost overnight (Shu 2016). This gives corporations like Alibaba and Tencent immense power, not only economically, but also socially. These apps entail the ability to shape how, when, where, and among whom such



Facial recognition system on a mobile phone. PC: SCMP.

transactions can occur. WeChat here mobilised an existing cultural practice to their advantage; but in the process it also fundamentally changed its meanings and possibilities (e.g. adding the possibility of giving *hongbao* at a distance).

All these are systems that very much involve bodies; it is important to think of humans (or, to use a different term, users) as very much a part of these digital systems. I am thinking here of both the bodily actions necessary to participate in systems—scanning barcodes, gestures associated with payment, etc.—but also the forms of labour that are required to provide almost ubiquitous access to digital devices, labour that is also largely taking places in factories in China. There is a ‘human infrastructure’ (Simone 2004) and human labour here that is necessary to establish and maintain the infrastructures of the digital. Even some of the work that appears to be digital or automatic is actually based on invisible labour (for example, Facebook moderators who screen content for pornography). There is an

intertwining of the digital with human labour in ways that are often difficult to untangle. We might simply call this ‘production’. But the fact that much of it is directed towards creating and maintaining ‘platforms’ on which we can work, play, and live suggests that it has important infrastructural features.

Much attention has been given to the significance of Chinese *physical* infrastructure projects overseas, especially those initiated through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But as Chinese *digital* products move overseas too, they may also bring with them modes of doing, thinking, and interacting that have the power to reshape social relations in other countries. Such digital–physical formations are already taking ugly shape in Xinjiang, where facial recognition and other digital technologies are combining with police and prisons to create what Darren Byler (2019) has called ‘terror capitalism’. Ultimately, this human or social dimension of digital infrastructure may have the most significant impact beyond China.

## Digital Infrastructure and the State

Finally, it is difficult to talk about the significance of digital infrastructure in China without thinking about the role of the entanglement of corporate infrastructures with the state. This appears to be an aspect of the digital that is quite different to the concerns we might have about Facebook, Google, and Amazon. In those cases, worries have largely focussed on the failures of the state to properly regulate their activities (especially their collection and use of data; see Pasquale 2016, for example). In China, on the other hand, worries emerge *because* of the close relationships between digital infrastructure providers and the state.

Some of these digital technologies discussed here emerge due to the insufficiencies or shortcomings of the state and state-linked institutions. For example, a lack of access to bank accounts or others forms of financial systems, a lack of adequate public transport, or a lack of access to other kinds of services. Corporations have found opportunities ‘in the cracks’, so to speak, providing for people’s needs. The shortcomings of the state or state-related institutions create opportunities in digital spaces.

However, as the recent concerns about Huawei suggest, China’s largest technology companies appear to be closely connected to the Communist Party and the government (Magnus 2018). Perhaps the most troubling example of this is the links between Alibaba’s credit system, ‘Sesame credit’ (芝麻), and the wider social credit system now being rolled out by the state (Loubere and Brehm 2018). Although these systems are not by any means identical, it seems likely that data collected by online tech giants will form part of the government’s own system.

If online behaviour, including data from online purchases, will be used as part of the state’s surveillance apparatus, this creates for users a fundamentally different relationship

with digital infrastructure than that which currently exists in the liberal West. In China, digital infrastructure becomes a lens through which citizens are watched and through which behaviour (on- and offline) is policed. The power of this system lies partly in its potential to link online behaviour (shopping, surfing the Web) to offline transgressions (e.g. jaywalking) to create a totalising view of individuals. Again, it is impossible to disconnect the physical surveillance infrastructure of the state (e.g. cameras) from its digital parts.

## What Difference Does Digital Infrastructure Make?

In the recent book by Thomas Mullaney (2017) on the history of the Chinese typewriter, he recounts how the machine *did not* travel from alphabetic to non-alphabetic systems but rather had to be reimagined for China and Chinese. This is an important reminder of the naïveté of simple diffusionist models of technological transfer. Chinese versions of technologies are not simple replications or translations of their western counterparts. As with physical technologies in China, digital technologies—and the digital infrastructure that supports them—will likewise not have the same characteristics as American and European platforms, databases, and algorithms. I have suggested here some of the ways in which I think Chinese digital infrastructure already seems importantly different. As China takes a more active role in building and maintaining infrastructure—not just in China but around the world—these characteristics are going to become increasingly important. What are the affordances of a 5G network built by Huawei rather than Cisco? It is going to take a lot of work to answer that question. ■



## Between Poetics and Utility

### Landscape Infrastructure in China

Tianhe District, Guangzhou.  
PC: Wikimedia Commons.

Dorothy TANG

*The conceptual history of landscape is mired between the dualities of poetics and utility—rooted in its origins of landscape art and the current preoccupation with alternative sustainable infrastructures. This essay unpacks the ‘mutuality’ of nature as a traditional cultural practice and as innovative technology in contemporary Chinese landscape architecture. The ‘Sponge City’ practices of promoting green infrastructure exemplify the coproduction of urban nature in scientific and cultural terms, and suggest an alternative analytical framework for urban infrastructure research in China.*

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‘You use a literal translation of *landscape architecture* in Hong Kong!’ Colleagues from mainland China often exclaim after dutifully examining my business card. Indeed, the use of the phrase 園境建筑 (*yuan jing jianzhu*) in Hong Kong betrays its British origins and North American influence. *Yuan* can be translated into park or garden, *jing* is the environment, and lastly *jianzhu*, or architecture, references the nineteenth-century term Frederick Law Olmsted first used to signal landscape architecture as a modern profession in America. Landscape architects in Hong Kong were first commissioned to work on new town development in the 1970s based on Garden City principles. The word choices for ‘landscape’ reflect their modernist optimism in the role of public urban landscapes and their desire to be recognised for their contributions to Hong Kong’s urban development (Chan 2015). In mainland China, the official term for the

discipline is 风景园林 (*fengjing yuanlin*)—translated as ‘scenery’ and ‘gardens’, while in Taiwan 景观设计 (*jingguan sheji*) can be understood as ‘the design of views’. In contrast to the Hong Kong landscape architecture community’s aspirations for recognition as a modern profession operating on the international stage, other Chinese translations of ‘landscape’ reclaim the cultural legacies of Chinese gardens and Chinese landscape paintings (山水画). Not only do these instances illustrate how the concept of landscape resists simplistic translations in China, but also suggest that this fluidity provides an analytical lens for better understanding the transformation of landscapes in Chinese cities.

The etymology of the word ‘landscape’ in the English language shares a pictorial origin with its Chinese counterparts. Early uses of the word refer to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, and there exists a rich discourse in cultural geography of how the image mediates the cultural production of landscapes (Mitchell 2002; Jackson 1997; Cosgrove 1998). The poetics of Chinese paintings and literature are often cited as the origins for the symbolic expression of Chinese gardens, and while recent scholarship argues that this static pictorial view is insufficient, the role of landscape paintings is still central to understanding its cultural production and spatial experiences (Fung 2016). Building on these theories of ‘reciprocity between ways of seeing and ways of doing’, US-based landscape architect James Corner (1999b, 9) argues that even the technical drawings landscape architects produce are speculative and projective, and reveal underlying cultural values and ideologies. He then proposes that the work of mapping and drawing the physical environment should be an art form that not only critiques the present but actively shapes political and social futures (1999a, 1999c).

On the other hand, landscape architecture is considered a rational and scientific practice. Corner describes contemporary practice as steeped in ‘a deep concern with landscape’s conceptual scope, with its capacity to theorize

sites, territories, ecosystems, networks, and infrastructure, and to organize large urban fields’ (2006, 23) as a response to global environmental awareness. Chinese landscape architect Yu Kongjian describes his approach as using ‘ecological planning methodologies’ to rationalise cities on ‘a solid ecological basis’ (2016b, 165–66) in order to address the environmental crisis of urban China due to unchecked growth. Interestingly, Yu’s ecological discourse finds its roots in traditional *fengshui* (风水), Chinese geomancy, as its spiritual and cultural source, but locates its technical expression in the work of ecological planner Ian McHarg’s seminal book *Design with Nature* (Yu 2011, 154–55). Corner and Yu are arguably two of the most prominent landscape architects and thinkers in their respective national spheres, and we observe striking similarities in their quests to reconcile landscape as both a culturally specific practice and a site of ecological rationality. If we dig deeper, we find that the national distinctions are much more complicated: Corner is British but based in the United States and has acquired significant commissions in Chinese cities, while Yu is Harvard-educated and active in professional circles in the United States. As landscape architectural practice and education is increasingly globalised, isolating origins of cultural practices or analysing the directionality of knowledge transmission also seems to be a futile endeavour.

In an insightful essay titled ‘Mutuality and Cultures of Landscape Architecture’, architectural historian Stanislaus Fung traces instances where practices of Western landscape architecture find parallels in Chinese gardens (1999). However, he reminds us that the concepts of ‘mutuality’—defined as forms of interdependence and coproduction—found in Chinese landscapes are a critical distinction from traditions of Western dualistic thinking. For example, classic Chinese garden spatial techniques such as ‘interdependence (*yin*) [因], borrowing (*jie*) [借], suitability (*ti*) [体], and appropriateness (*yi*) [宜] follow a nondualistic logic’ (1999, 147), whereas Western landscape

traditions emphasise dualities that act to exclude (e.g. the culture/nature binary). He also proposes that the current form of landscape architecture in China could be analysed through the lens of cultural mutuality—the product of long-standing mutual exchanges between China and Western institutions, rather than postcolonial critiques of uneven power. This essay borrows Fung’s formulation of mutuality to explore the relationships between landscape, infrastructure, and nature, in order to contextualise the widespread adoption of green infrastructure in Chinese cities. I then use the work and writings of Yu Kongjian—a major advocate for the Chinese ‘Sponge Cities’ green infrastructure policy—to unpack discourses of China’s ecological urbanisation, before concluding with observations about ‘spatial practices’ (de Certeau 2002) of implementation in the Pearl River Delta.

## From Landscape to Infrastructure

A narrow and pedantic taxonomy has persuaded us that there is little or nothing in common between what used to be called civil engineering and garden or landscape architecture ... but they both reorganize space for human needs, both produce works or art in the truest sense of the term ... we will eventually formulate a new definition of *landscape*: a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence... (Jackson 1997, 305)

Originally written in 1984, cultural geographer J. B. Jackson’s essay *The Word Itself* argues that landscape is a ‘concrete, three-dimensional, shared reality’ rather than a metaphor to describe the general state of all affairs (1997, 304). Jackson’s call to reconceive the ontology of landscape as infrastructure foreshadows anthropologist Brian Larkin oft-quoted article

‘The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure’, which argues that ‘infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things’ (2013, 329). Despite the parallels of landscape or infrastructure as underlying systems that sustain human existence, the shifting definitions of nature over time and across cultures (Cronon 1995; Nye 1999) impact their utility respectively. By comparing the co-evolution of nature-infrastructure and nature-landscape, two diverging genealogies of ‘landscape infrastructure’ materialise: the first is the notion that landscapes are in service of infrastructure, and second is that landscape is infrastructure.

## Landscape in Service of Infrastructure

Modernist narratives of infrastructure are often tales of control over natural forces: streams are channelised, land is reclaimed, disease is eliminated, and rivers are dammed (Carse 2017; Graham and Marvin 2001; Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000). Nature in this view is an environment to be stabilised or a resource to be extracted, and infrastructure is the medium in which these human desires are satisfied (Edwards 2003). The development of the iconic Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project in the 1930s is an apt example of how the development of large technological systems eventually relied on the management of landscapes (Hughes 1987). Shortly after completion, it became clear that soil erosion due to poor farming practices in the TVA watershed was causing sedimentation problems, and plans were quickly formed to educate farmers about landscape management and the provision of chemical fertilisers to increase vegetative cover within the watershed (Wolff 2007). Similarly, huge afforestation projects within the watersheds of major reservoirs were carried out in Hong Kong by

the British colonial government to ensure water security for the colony (Peckham 2015). The management of natural landscapes was subsumed as a critical system component in large-scale infrastructural systems of extraction (Carse 2012).

With increasing development pressures and the rise of environmental consciousness after World War II, landscape architect Ian McHarg pioneered an ecological planning paradigm outlined in his 1969 book *Design with Nature*. Taking an apocalyptic tone of impending environmental disaster, McHarg offered a methodology that required an extensive inventory of natural systems to determine the ‘suitability’ of a landscape for urban development. Working *with* natural systems by planning around them, in McHarg’s view, utilised the full potential of limited land for urbanisation and guaranteed a sustainable future (McHarg 1992). While not explicitly extractive, the rationales of *sustainability* are found in optimisation and replenishment, and its tools include the scientific management of natural resources—e.g. recycling—or the technological enhancement of nature—e.g. green roofs. The logical culmination of this trajectory is the quantification, monetisation, and trading of ecological benefits, frequently conceptualised as ‘eco-system services’ or ‘natural capital’. In short, the modernist infrastructural impulse of rationalising nature to serve human desires has evolved into the mandate for the regulation of green spaces, renewable energy, or water recycling as a means to justify future urban development.

## Landscape Is Infrastructure

The pictorial origins of ‘landscape’ are entangled with the evolving concept of ‘nature’. The eighteenth-century English landscape garden was composed with picturesque principles that mediated the extremes of nature as sublime and the artificial as beautiful. The

work of Frederick Law Olmsted in the second half of the nineteenth century introduced a new function of nature—as civic infrastructure—into the practice of landscape architecture. If New York’s Central Park exemplifies nature as a social good in the industrialised city, then Boston’s Back Bay Fens utilises nature as sewage infrastructure in the rapidly-developing city. Despite the naturalistic appearance of Olmsted’s landscapes, nature was no longer understood only as an aesthetic object, but as providing a vital service to the public health of urban residents. Some have argued that the naturalistic aesthetic of Olmsted’s landscapes masked the legibility of the ecological performance of his designs and were later overlooked or destroyed (Spirn 1995). Disputes over the appropriate aesthetics of ecological landscapes continues today (Nassauer 1995; Meyer 2008), but perhaps what these debates reveal is the refusal of essentialising nature to a science, a resource, or a view.

The bundling of cultural practices and ecological processes in the landscape has recently found a new voice in ‘landscape urbanism’—a claim that landscape systems should be the primary actor in shaping the city (Waldheim 2006). Responding to the rise of post-industrial cities and the decline in infrastructural investment in the United States, landscape urbanists expanded their scope of interest to under-utilised spaces as a by-product of urbanisation, contaminated sites, modified natural systems, or refuse and waste, to argue for an ethical return to ‘landscape infrastructures’ (Berger 2006; Kirkwood 2001; Corner 2005). By pitting the ‘grey’ infrastructures within the domain of engineering against ‘green’ or ‘ecological’ infrastructures of the landscape, the rationale shifts from privileging the technical efficiency of single-function infrastructure to recognising that landscapes have the potential to address economic, social, and environmental concerns, albeit over greater time scales or spaces (Bélanger 2009). More importantly, landscape urbanism borrows heavily from recent developments in systems ecology that

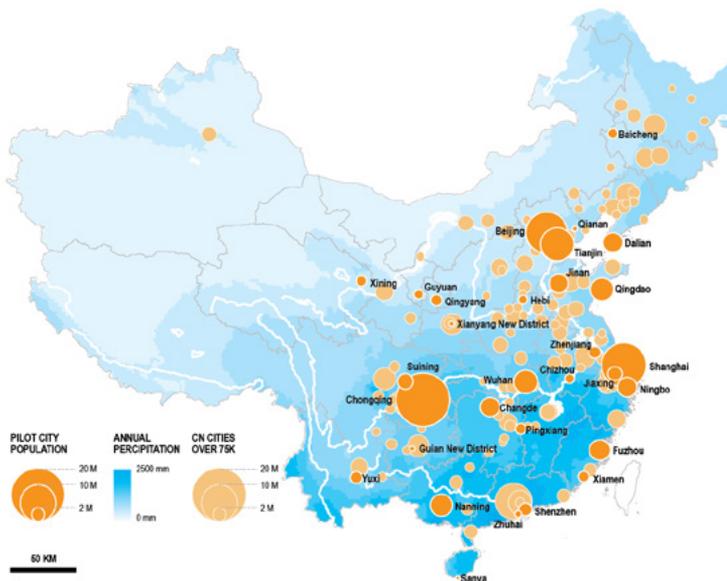
no longer understands nature as a closed and stable system but rather as one that is dynamic and open-ended—one that defies management or control (Lister 2007). This design approach has gained much traction in recent years with the slow but volatile threat of climate change, and the discussion has turned from infrastructure as protection to infrastructure creating a platform for resilience (Bélanger 2017).

## Sponge Cities: Landscape and Infrastructure in China

How does this history of landscape infrastructure in North America relate to a register of Chinese infrastructure? The speed and scale of China's 'infrastructure boom' has befuddled Western critics—from the extent of subway lines in Shanghai to the Three

Gorges Dam, especially when in the West high-modernist forms of infrastructure and their post-war ideologies are heavily criticised. In contrast to the crumbling and underfunded infrastructure of North America, Western media has described China's boom in terms of corruption (Buckley 2017) or 'risky technical solutions' (Wines 2011), assuming accelerated obsolescence in China. However, in the wake of the Hurricane Harvey that hit the American coastal city of Houston in 2017, an article in *The Guardian* featured five urban visions of what 'entirely flood-proof cities would look like'—one of which was China's Sponge City programme (Knight 2017). As China aspires to take on global leadership regarding climate change, Western media outlets from *CNN* to *Scientific American* have made Chinese sponge cities a legitimate poster child (Biswas and Hartley 2017; Gies 2018).

Launched in late 2013 after devastating floods in Beijing that killed 79 people, President Xi Jinping announced an ambitious programme to convert all Chinese cities into



(Figure 1) 30 pilot cities throughout China were selected within two years of President Xi's announcement of the Sponge City programme. PC: Dorothy Tang.

‘sponge cities’ by 2030. The programme aims to lessen urban floods by using dispersed landscapes throughout the city to absorb rain like a sponge, rather than through the more immediate and centralised pipe drainage systems. The national scale and rapid rollout of the programme sets it apart from other eco-city experiments in China’s recent past. Within a year of Xi’s announcement, Sponge City technical guidelines were issued (MOHURD 2014), and by early 2016 30 pilot cities had begun work on converting their stormwater drainage infrastructure. Yet, this process is far from uniform and smooth. The technologies adopted by the technical handbook reveal its roots in sustainability practices developed since the 1980s in the West and Japan, including a range of strategies such as green roofs, storage tanks, porous pavement, infiltration strips, and treatment wetlands (Geiger 2015). These strategies are most effective when implemented in new development projects, but are more often piecemeal conversions due to constraints in the existing urban fabric. In addition, while these technologies are not necessarily new, the massive scale of implementation in a compressed timeframe meant that there was widespread shortage of expertise in both local governments and design institutes. Out of this chaos emerged two main camps of expertise, the first is led by a group of environmental engineers who were instrumental in drafting the Sponge City technical handbook; and another revolving around landscape architect Yu Kongjian.

In 2018, I interviewed Yu about his role in shaping the Sponge Cities initiative and its origins. He suggested that Xi was inspired by his landscape designs that ‘absorbed water like a sponge’ to prevent flooding, and he was adamant that its conceptual origins were not Western. ‘Sponge cities are very Chinese,’ he remarked, ‘first, the concept of sponge cities is rooted in Chinese philosophies of transformations, from large to small, from centralised to distributed, from hard to soft, and from grey to green. Second, it responds to the natural environment of China and is

a return to our heritage of an agricultural civilisation ...’ However, Yu cautioned, the traditional cultures that inform the Sponge City are not the same as conventional elite Chinese knowledge, such as the legendary heroic flood control infrastructures of the Yellow River 4000 years ago built by Yu the Great. Instead, sponge cities are inspired by the everyday agricultural practices of peasants. To Yu, generic implementation of imported stormwater management technologies did not address the urgent demands of the Sponge City programme. Rather the Sponge City should bridge the scientific approach of large-scale watershed management and the cultural practice of landscape architecture that respects its ‘peasant’ origins (Yu 2016).

The concept of mutuality is useful here in unpacking Yu’s claims. Yu’s doctoral work at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design was supervised by Carl Steinitz, who specialised in the use of computer analytics for planning, and landscape ecologist Richard T. T. Forman (Saunders 2012). Upon return to China, he founded the Graduate School of Landscape Architecture at Peking University, which is known to be a research-focussed and scientifically-oriented professional programme. It seems that Yu’s experiences and rhetoric echo the modernist avant-garde embrace of Western rationality and faith in the scientific method, and yet rather than rejecting history completely he is selective in whose traditions are valid. He is critical of the importation of foreign expertise to address Chinese problems, yet relies on foreign validation to maintain professional legitimacy. For Yu, these are not dualistic or contradictory terms, but rather co-constituted and cohesive. Contemporary Chinese nature is best managed with the guiding principles of traditional agricultural practices in conjunction with the scientific quantification of ecological services. Thus, landscape infrastructure—as expressed in the Sponge City programme—has the capacity to embody both the rationales of nature as a commodity and as a cultural practice.



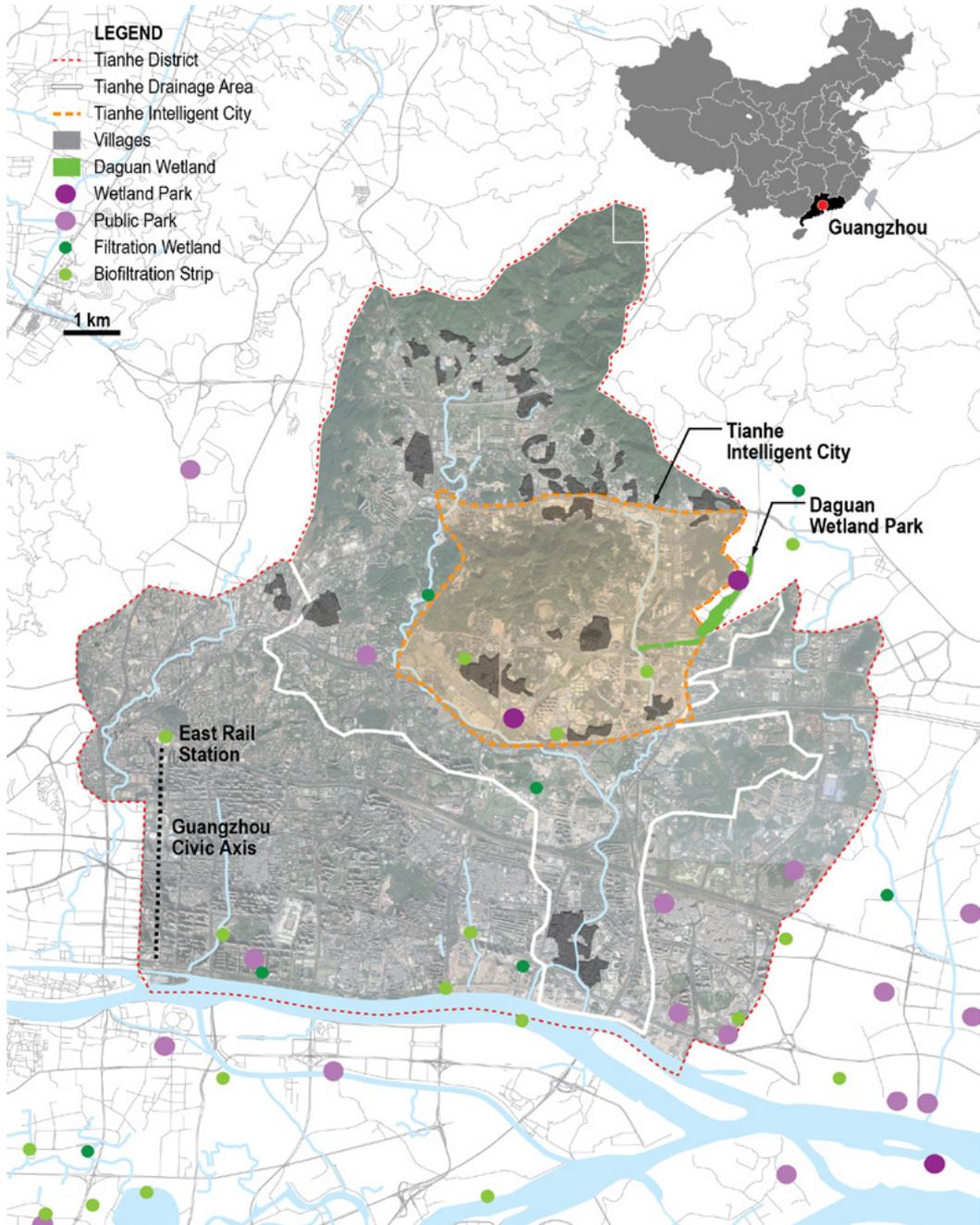
## Sponge Cities as a Spatial Practice

After interviewing Yu Kongjian, I went to visit a newly completed Sponge City project designed by his firm, Turenscape. Dagan Wetland Park (Figure 2) is a component of Tianhe Intelligent City, one of Guangzhou's flagship development projects and forays into the IT sector. Yu's vision for the Sponge City was intended to be realised through comprehensive ecological planning at the watershed scale and sponge projects were to be implemented strategically to maximise infiltration and treatment of stormwater. However, when I overlaid administrative boundaries with watershed boundaries on a map (Figure 3), I found that the wetland park does not receive stormwater from its surrounding development and only absorbs excess rainwater within its boundaries. Despite the lushly planted wetland—populated with native plants selected to filter urban pollutants—the utopian ideal of a landscape for a liberated peasant was diminished with the jarring noise of ongoing construction and a forest of cranes just beyond the wetland, erecting glazed curtain-wall office towers for a not-yet-existent IT sector. Furthermore, in my conversations with the project manager at Turenscape, densely-populated urban

(Figure 2) Construction of office building complexes adjacent to Dagan Wetland Park in Guangzhou designed by Turenscape. PC: Dorothy Tang, 10 January 2018.

villages with inadequate drainage and sewage infrastructure within the watershed posed great challenges to systematically satisfying stormwater targets set for the district.

In a canonical text distinguishing the theoretical gaze of the planner and designer from the daily experiences of those walking in the city, Michel de Certeau argues that the 'spatial practices' of the everyday produce 'lived spaces' that cannot be understood through the abstract practices of the planner (de Certeau 2002). However, in China the binary structure of the theoretical gaze in contrast to everyday spatial practices needs to be expanded as well. In the case of Dagan Wetland Park, the theoretical extent of landscape infrastructure is violated by the everyday practices of various levels of the state, real estate developers, planning and design consultants, urban villagers, and IT workers. While proponents of 'landscape as infrastructure' have embraced uncertain futures and dynamic ecological systems, this concept still heavily relies on the theoretical gaze of the planner, and has yet to fulfil J. B. Jackson's notion of landscape as an infrastructure for our collective existence. ■



(Figure 3) Spatial relationship between the Tianhe Intelligent City, Daguan Wetland Park, Tianhe Drainage Area, and Tianhe Administrative district in Guangzhou. PC: Dorothy Tang.



## Invisible Labouring Bodies

### Waste Work as Infrastructure in China

Amy ZHANG

*Recent investments in municipal waste infrastructure in China can be understood as a part of a broader effort by the state to build modern green cities that symbolise development. This article examines the failure of China's attempts to implement citizen recycling programmes. Absent citizen participation, recycling, and waste collection are nevertheless achieved by workers who mobilise their labour, constituting a mundane, low-tech infrastructure to recuperate and circulate waste.*

Recent investments in municipal waste infrastructure in China can be understood as a part of a broader effort by the state to build modern green cities that symbolise development. In concrete terms, the state's approach to modern waste infrastructure has meant building waste-to-energy (WTE) incinerators and promoting citizen recycling programmes. In Guangzhou, where my research is based, efforts to implement these visions have generated contention and suspicion on the part of citizens over the state's approach to infrastructural development. Concerns over the environmental and health impacts of WTE incinerators have sparked protests across China since 2006; notable mobilisations in Beijing, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen

Sanitation worker in  
Guangzhou. PC: Amy  
Zhang.

have garnered both national and international attention (Johnson 2013; Lang and Xu 2013; Zhang 2014). This article examines the failure of China's attempts to implement citizen recycling programmes. Absent citizen participation, recycling, and waste collection are nevertheless achieved by workers who mobilise their labour, constituting a mundane, low-tech infrastructure to recuperate and circulate waste.

## Infrastructures of Waste Management

Brian Larkin characterises infrastructure as the 'built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people or ideas and allow for their exchange over space' (Larkin 2013, 328). Waste infrastructure is concerned with the reproduction of urban life by channelling the flow of discarded things out of cities. Socio-technical assemblages such as water, highway, and sewage systems form 'a series of interconnecting life support systems' (Gandy 2005, 28), the 'prosthesis and prophylactic' responsible for ensuring the healthy reproduction of humans and their urban environments (Swyngedouw 2006).

Waste infrastructure is best understood as a socio-technological assemblage constituted through an array of practices, technological systems, and mundane objects. The heterogeneous network of things and practices include not only end-of-life facilities such as landfills and WTE incinerators, but also labour and citizen practices. Political campaigns that, for example, encourage citizens to recycle, often deploy the discourse of moral responsibility and environmental stewardship to mobilise citizen participation. Urban scholars studying public service delivery systems in the Global South have pointed to how the labour of collecting, handling, and sorting waste often function as 'vital infrastructures' in which labour forms the channels of circulation and flow (Simone 2004; Fredericks 2014).

Anthropologists have shown how seemingly mundane technical structures of urban service delivery, such as water or electricity, have embedded within them the techno-rationalities of the state's governance. These rationalities perpetuate different forms of state rule such as the racial politics of post-apartheid South Africa, for instance, or reveal the relations of patron-client networks in India (Von Schnitzler 2013; Anand 2017). In a given context, the socio-technological configuration for the circulation and conversion of waste is further a function of the constitution and content of heterogeneous materials in the waste stream, each demanding specific practices and technological systems for their treatment. In short, different streams of waste matter generate different socio-technical systems. Efforts to build such systems produce their own infrastructural publics as infrastructures become 'collective objects of contemplation, discussion, or sentiments' (Taylor in Fennell 2015, 26).

## Chinese Infrastructural Development and State Power

Chinese infrastructural development indexes a different narrative than the decline of public services and the privatisation of financing under neoliberalism (Roy and Ong 2011; Ganti 2012; Bear 2015). Dominique Boyer argues that the recent anthropological focus on infrastructure can be thought of as 'a conceptual New Deal for the human sciences—a return of the repressed concerns of public developmentalism to the academic environment ... that has become saturated with market-centered messages for the past three decades' (Boyer 2018, 224). Scholars have shown how infrastructural development in China—through both domestic and foreign investment—can be characterised by a reliance on state-led investments. While private actors now play a larger part in

infrastructural projects than in the socialist era, infrastructural development in China is nevertheless inseparable from the project to consolidate state power. Going all the way back to 1920, the publication of Sun Yat-sen's *The International Development of China* signalled that the Nationalists viewed the construction of railways, electricity networks, and urban sewage systems as intimately linked to the formation of state bureaucracies (Sun 1943). Contemporary China, similarly, is a 'paradigmatic infrastructural state ... produced by and through infrastructure as a modern project' (Bach 2016).

From the onset of the Reform Era, infrastructure investment has been at the centre of the state's project of political legitimation. Large-scale projects such as the Three Gorges Dam and the proliferation of ghost cities—planned and built but unoccupied—illustrate the ways that investments in infrastructure have been at the core of national development policies (Bach 2016). Chinese infrastructure investment abroad is also characterised by the dominance of state rather than multinational capital. Writing on Chinese investments in Zambia, Ching Kwan Lee (2017) shows that the outflow of finance capital from China indexes a problem of national and global overaccumulation. The dominance of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in foreign infrastructural development has also created an interactive relationship between international investment and domestic politics (He 2019).

The role of infrastructural development in the expansion of China's interests overseas and its consolidation of power at home is particularly evident under Xi Jinping's administration (Economy 2018). State capital backing the construction and maintenance of infrastructural projects created a distinct approach to labour and managerial culture (Lee 2017). In my current project on urban waste in Guangzhou, I am interested in the ways that infrastructural development is entangled with urbanisation as a development strategy, and how China might export its urban infrastructural and development model

abroad—as both a technological approach and a system of labour. In China, infrastructure investment and the closely related drive to 'modernise' through infrastructure encompass not only the construction of mega-projects but also an attempt to reform social relations by altering citizen behaviours and labour practices. In particular, I illustrate how efforts to implement a recycling campaign in Guangzhou altered the system and placement of waste bins in one housing complex. Rather than encouraging citizens to recycle, these changes structure the texture and rhythm of waste work for sanitation workers even as it demarcates who is responsible for handling waste.

## Mundane Infrastructures

In 2012, One West Street, a high-rise gated commercial housing complex to the west of the city, was selected as the site of a pilot programme in Guangzhou's citywide efforts to promote recycling. Since the early 2000s, cities across China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, have repeatedly attempted and failed to motivate citizens to participate in municipal recycling campaigns. In Guangzhou, the first wave of citizen recycling campaigns was launched in 2000 by environmental groups and the municipal government. Ten years later, however, residential waste still remained largely unsorted. The gated community kicked off their recycling campaign by introducing an additional waste bin in the staircase of each building: a single mixed waste bin was replaced by two, one for regular waste and one for recyclables (see Figure 1). Individual volunteers went door to door to hand out pamphlets explaining exactly which types of waste could be recycled. However, after several rounds of promotion and education campaigns, sanitation workers found both trash bins filled with mixed waste: bottles on top of individually bundled plastic bags splashed with wet tea leaves. Despite waves of rhetorical support



Waste bins in One West Street: Recyclable Waste and Other Waste. PC: Amy Zhang.

and promotion of recycling by the municipal government, residents remained recalcitrant towards the task of sorting their own garbage.

The campaign to promote citizen recycling illustrates how sustainable systems of municipal waste management hope to rely in part on the efforts of citizens to order and sort their own garbage. Yet, in reality the collection and transportation of trash in contemporary Chinese neighbourhoods is still carried out through a series of low-tech, labour-intensive practices by sanitation workers. In One West Street, the question of where to place the additional bin for recycling illustrates the ways that seemingly mundane objects such as waste bins alter labour practices. The 'operation' of trash bins by citizens and sanitation workers dictates the spatial flow and divisions of waste labour within an urban gated housing community. Waste work reifies a social division between urban residents who are eager to enjoy the amenities of a green city and rural migrants who perform much of the work of sanitation maintenance. Where recycling campaigns aim to create a motivated and environmentally responsible urban citizenry, sustainable waste management is, in reality, reliant on the labour of sanitation workers who recuperate recyclables not for the sake of the environment but out of economic necessity.

As I illustrate below, the addition of an extra bin for recyclables in housing communities did little to convince citizens to sort their waste but, by doubling the number of bins in buildings, effectively doubled the labour of waste collection required of sanitation workers. Citizens in China, not unlike in the United States, rarely pay attention to the types and number of waste bins, often simply tossing waste into whatever receptacles are available. The work of sorting and hauling waste and recyclables is often carried out by sanitation workers whose bodies become dirtied and stained by leaking receptacles (Nagle 2013). Waste work marks their bodies as filthy and contributes to a form of social differentiation in the housing community.

As with many commercial high-rises in Guangzhou, building management (物业) at One West Street contracts out cleaning work to a private sanitation company which, in turn, hires rural migrants from outside of Guangzhou. In One West Street, every day at 6pm cleaners enter a separate service elevator next to the main freight to empty the building's trash. One August evening during my fieldwork in 2013, I followed Wang, a migrant sanitation worker, as he completed the evenings collection. As we cram into the elevator along with a large bin with wheels that cleaners use to haul out the bags of trash, Wang, a thin man in his late fifties, points to tiny black spots on the ground for which he will be 'docked points', in effect a deduction from his monthly wage. He tells me that building management complains that the spots are leakages from waste bags but he believes they come from residents who throw cigarette butts and gum onto the floor.

I follow Wang as he rides the service elevator to the very top floor in order to work our way down. Every three floors or so, Wang dumps all the trash into one bin and then makes a second trip between every other floor or so to pull these buckets downstairs (Figure 2). Working alone, he uses the waste buckets to stop the elevator door from closing too quickly, and then wheels the bags to the front entrance of the building where the bags are piled along the sidewalk.



Wang lining garbage bins in the service elevator during an evening collection route. PC: Amy Zhang.

Buckets that have a split or are missing a handle are especially hard to grip. Bags of trash are momentarily stored at the front of the building. Before long, another cleaner rides by on a three-wheel cart to lift the trash bags, and wrestle them onto his vehicle. I try to lift one onto the cart but the bag rips easily and pieces of leftover and bones fall out. ‘You can’t grab onto the corners, it will tear,’ Wang instructs. The way to ensure that the bags do not spill is to pull the bag close to your body, so that you can use your chest as a support while hoisting it up. The juice of the rotting food waste drips out of the bag, spilling onto Wang’s well-worn uniform. Sanitation workers, stigmatised as dirty and filthy, tell me that to remain clean while doing their work is impossible: ‘There’s no way that this can be clean’ (这个干净不了). The daily work of cleaning up waste illustrates the extent to which labour practices constitute a form of vital infrastructure (Fredericks 2018), a critical part of the circulation and flow of urban services. At the same time, human bodies bear the burden of waste collection and function as channels of circulation.

## Invisible Labouring Bodies

The scholarly discussion around China’s efforts to invest in and to construct domestic infrastructure, and its ability to export infrastructure abroad have primarily focussed on the study of large technological systems such as highways, dams, electricity generation, and high-speed rails as objects that symbolise both the promise and arrival of modernity (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). The effort to create modern green infrastructure also involves campaigns that attempt to change citizen behaviour and technical configurations that impact the system of labour. The discrepancy between the state’s proclaimed goal of achieving development through technological innovation and the concrete labour practices that make the realisation of those goals possible is a reminder of the invisible labouring bodies that have sustained China’s meteoric economic rise over the last 40 years. China’s ongoing infrastructural expansion must be understood as not only the construction and export of a set of technologies but also as a collection of labour practices and social formations that infrastructural modernisation produces. ■



## Infrastructure of Desire

Rubble, Development, and Salvage Capitalism in Rural China

Alessandro RIPPA

*In Tengchong, at the China-Myanmar border, a new development project has led to the destruction of large parts of the old town. As construction of the new, high-rise apartments has yet to begin, groups of men and women dig through the rubble, looking for precious jade. This essay moves from this unique event to reflect on the ‘desire’ that lies at the core of China’s infrastructural development, which produced Tengchong’s rubble in the first place.*

*Tengchong, Yunnan province, August 2017. The sound of bulldozers. Dry, white dust is suspended in the stuffy summer air. The old town is a patchwork of ruins. A single, lone house resists amid all the destruction. By its entrance an ominous inscription, painted in black on a piece of blue tin: ‘People living inside, one dies if s/he dares to enter’ (有人住入内死).*

Anthropologist Gastón Gordillo (2014) approaches the materiality of ‘rubble’ as a symbol of recurrent waves of human violence and destruction. Rubble, he argues, is not just an unembellished ruin; rather, it allows for a rethinking of critical negativity in the production of space,

Jade diggers by the house with the ominous inscription.  
PC: Alessandro Rippa.

narratives, and history. Rubble in Gordillo's words takes the form of 'constellations', that is, objects primarily understood in relationship to other historical objects, places, and processes. In Tengchong, visiting the rubble that bulldozers left behind, such constellations emerge rather clearly alongside the *desire* at the heart of China's infrastructural hubris. But first, let's return to the rubble.

On a small section of cleared ground, a plastic ribbon supported by four wooden sticks encloses a small vegetable garden. Lettuce and cucumbers. A single line of tomatoes. This, an old woman explains, used to be the place in which her family kept a small vegetable garden. Before the Bulldozer came. She cleared the rubble and fixed the garden again after the house was torn down and will continue to do so until construction on the new project finally starts.

Another part of the rubble is even more animated. Beside the lone house with the sinister inscription a cluster of at least three dozen men and women, armed with shovels, sticks, and water pumps are busy digging holes in the rubble. Other men, smartphones in hand, frenetically move between the holes, chatting with the diggers and looking at what is being taken out the rubble. They are after some jade, hidden in the belly of old Tengchong houses. Some dig it out of the ground, others sell it across China via WeChat and other online platforms. This is the moment when the rubble becomes unique, entangled in a web of social and historical worlds. Of stories, hearsays, and legends. The old town of Tengchong is not just any rubble—its constellation speaks to a very specific past and present, and to multiple possible futures.

## A City Built on Jade

Tengchong, situated less than 100 kilometres from the Burmese border, has been a major gateway for Burmese jade and amber since ancient times. In the Ming period (1368–1644),

records show that the city had become a major carving centre for precious jade—a much prized gemstone throughout Chinese history (Kloppenborg Møller 2018). Legend has it that back then Tengchong bridges were made of jade and memorial arches were made of amber, as trade in both commodities flourished and brought wealth to the city (Rippa and Yang 2017). During my first visit to Tengchong in 2015, I heard several people saying that in those days only top-quality jade was carved, while stones containing jade of lower quality were thrown away or used as construction material for houses. As a man in his early sixties told me once: 'As kids whenever we wanted to buy some candy we would go into a field, dig a hole, find some jade and use that to pay for the candy.' I remained sceptical but kept listening to such stories with fascination. What happened next, however, made me change my mind about the veracity of such stories.

In late 2016, ground was broken on a major project for the reconstruction of Tengchong's old town. Large sections of the city were demolished, and a maze of alleys and two-storey houses gave way to tall apartment blocks and shopping streets. As work began, my WeChat feed began filling up with curious videos. Groups of Tengchong residents were seemingly leaving their houses at night to go digging in places where the bulldozers had just torn a house apart. Legends, it appeared, were driving some interesting activities. Yet it was not until a few months later, when I found myself walking through the rubble that the old town had become, that I realised the scale of the operation. Jade was indeed hidden amid the rubble. A single man, excavating with his hand and a few basic tools, could easily find 500 yuan worth of jade in just a few hours. A number of WeChat traders (微商) were making a fortune out of it, livestreaming from the rubble and selling jade pieces online to customers all over China. The old town of Tengchong had to be reduced to rubble before becoming a mine of sorts—and then, eventually, a place with a bright and modern future reflected by the towering new buildings surrounding the rubble.



Tengchong rubble.  
PC: Alessandro Rippa.

## Rubble, Development, and Desire

The stories surrounding Tengchong's rubble echo much of Anna Tsing's work on out-of-the-way places and the margins of global capitalism (2005; 2015). The woman tending to her small vegetable garden seems to suggest a possibility for life in capitalist ruins. Jade diggers and WeChat traders, on the other hand, are an example of what Tsing calls salvage capitalism—that is, an opportunity for exploitation of value produced without capitalist control. Tsing uses the notion to conceptualise the way Southeast Asian immigrants and white Vietnam War veterans pick matsutake mushrooms in Oregon, and their relations to global markets, particularly Japan which drives much of the economy revolving around the matsutake trade

and consumption. These lives, 'simultaneously inside and outside of capitalism' (Tsing 2015, 63), are characterised by a form of freedom—from wage labour, property, and exploitative power relations.

Drawing from such discussions, Tengchong's rubble also poses a set of fundamental questions about China's development and modernisation. If the rubble is a constellation of history and violence that nevertheless produces new forms of sociability, such as the countrywide market for jade excavated in the city, what does this rubble say about the destructive power that created it? How do we approach the infrastructural desire at the heart of Tengchong's development?

In their discussion of desire, Deleuze and Guattari build a radical critique of the Freudian model—extremely influential in the social sciences—that presupposes desire as predicated



Jade diggers  
amidst the rubble.  
PC: Alessandro Rippa.

on a lack. Here, in other words, the object of desire is placed outside of the subject—directed towards something that the subject does not have, or that remains prohibited. Desire, in this way, is ‘externally organised in relation to prohibitions that give it a constitutive relation to “lack”’ (Parr 2010, 66). The two theorists, on the other hand, intend to free desire from the yoke of lack and to transform it into a positive, productive force. As they put it: ‘Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 26). Deleuze and Guattari call this a purely immanent theory of desire. What it means is that desire is not a psychic reality, an idea—most generally understood as a lack or a wish—but an active and positive reality immanent to desire itself. Desire is thus not a negativity, it

is not defined by the lack of something, but is rather defined as productive, experimental, and ultimately ‘positive’. Importantly, for Deleuze and Guattari, the immanent drivers of desire never exist by themselves, they are always social: the product and production of interconnected machines—organic, technical, abstract, and so on. Desire does not lack, but produces. The desire-machine of Deleuze and Guattari is the site of that production, and thus encompasses both the subject and object of desire, not as two separate entities, but as one positive and inseparable force.

Similarly, Tengchong’s rubble cannot be seen as pure negativity. Jade diggers and the vegetables sprouting up from it show its potential for life and (salvage) capitalist exploitation. Rubble in Tengchong is also productive in a different sense. As a precondition for new infrastructure, Tengchong’s

rubble can be situated at the core of rural China's aspiration for modernisation and development. Rubble becomes, following Deleuze and Guattari, an immanent site of desire. Not a negativity, but a prominent constellation of production—of the future to be, made of high-rise apartments and shopping streets.

The infrastructure that is set to emerge out of Tengchong's rubble is highly paradoxical. It is paradoxical not only in that it materially points towards the destruction that necessarily lies at the heart of (infrastructure) production; but also in that rubble's 'suspended' state (Gupta 2015) seems at odds with the pace and scope of development in China. The seeming a-temporality of rubble, in other words, clashes with the future-oriented scope of infrastructure in China, where the construction of new buildings has become not just an answer to a particular need, but a more encompassing model of development (see Ren 2014; on the notion of temporality in infrastructure studies see also Grant and Zhang in this issue). Infrastructure seems a solution *per se*: it generates GDP, employs low-skilled labour, provides a lifeline for the overcapacity issues of state-owned enterprises, and fills up the pockets of local officials. The Chinese bureaucratic statecraft can be seen as a sort of infrastructure machine in itself: it functions—from the appointments and promotions of officials to the relations between local and more central organs of the state—in a way that makes infrastructure its most likely material product. The reconstruction of Tengchong's old town is but one particular outcome of this particular desire machine, its rubble a necessary moment in the development trajectory of China—the 'paradigmatic infrastructural state' (Bach 2016).

What I want to stress in this essay is that the infrastructural production—discursive and material—that China has embraced as a development model cannot be understood based on theories that place the object of desire outside of the infrastructures themselves. Rather, what Tengchong's rubble shows is

that infrastructure development is more akin to what Deleuze and Guattari define as a pure desire-machine logic. As opposed to Gordillo's rubble, in today's China there is no time to dwell on the negative. Rubble is ephemeral, fugacious, a brief moment of desolation within the productive logic of desire. The past is swallowed by the yet-to-come—by something bigger. In Tengchong, rubble needs to be put into use—excavated for jade or cultivated for vegetables—before it is not there anymore. This is an exemplification of the logic of a desire machine, in which infrastructure is productive of more infrastructure—a self-propelling force that does not need an external 'function' (a lack or a wish) in order to be perpetuated. Infrastructure, in rural China, is desire in and of itself.

*In the meantime, the lone house in the middle of Tengchong's rubble has been torn down. 'For desire desires death also, because the full body of death is its motor, just as it desires life, because the organs of life are the working machine' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 8). ■*



## Cosmic Infrastructure

Highrise apartments in Xining. PC: Tim Zachernuk.

Andrew GRANT

*Urban redevelopment in contemporary China has created new material infrastructures that spatialise developmental temporalities and accelerate the destruction of older urban forms. In Xining city, the infrastructure of the contemporary city uneasily coexists with the cosmic infrastructures of Chinese eternal harmony and Tibetan Buddhist cyclical rebirth. In this essay, Andrew Grant explores how these three infrastructures ground different social orders and how thinking through cosmic infrastructures can reveal temporalities that urban redevelopment obscures.*

Whether taken by rail or by road, the journey up the narrow gorges and blasted passageways that link the Chinese interior to Xining city, located at the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, is a study in shades of browns, yellows, and dull greens. The landscape flattens out when the Plateau is finally reached. Amid farms and low-rise buildings, religious structures take pride of place. Crescent moon finials of mosques reach into the sky. In the distance, Buddhist stupas and prayer flags are secured to loess hillsides. The landscape again shifts as Xining approaches. There concrete high-rises dominate the skyline. In Xining, like in many Chinese cities, urban development is shifting the focus of the city and the regional circuits of circulation that put people into motion and which give order to their lives.

But what is occurring is a shift not only in urban form, but also more fundamentally in Chinese infrastructural space. Brian Larkin (2014) argues that infrastructures undergird not only economies and the built environment, but also domains of practice, including religion. As what Larkin calls ‘architectures of circulation’, particular cosmic infrastructures lubricate particular social orders. Construed broadly, cosmic infrastructure is formed through the connection of material places to a sacred order that binds landscapes and bodies to forces and temporalities that transcend the human world. China is a country whose material landscapes were traditionally built on cosmic infrastructural templates. Paul Wheatley (1971, 447) argued that the ancient Chinese city used ‘the magical harmonizing powers of construction according to a cosmic image’ to create a timeless social and political order derived from classic texts. Cosmic infrastructural standards, like any infrastructural standards, stem from canonical ‘repeatable formulas’ that guide the creation of material infrastructures and allow movement of goods and ideas between them (Wright 1965; Easterling 2014). The quadrilateral form of the traditional Chinese city is one such infrastructural standard. Once in place, a city built to this image would enable—if people acted accordingly—harmony and stability to reign. Likewise, as I will further explain below, Tibetan Buddhist mandalisation provides a cosmic infrastructure that offers escape from mundane rebirth. Both of these cosmic infrastructures offer temporalities that differ from post-socialist infrastructural development. They also both persist in one form or another in contemporary Xining.

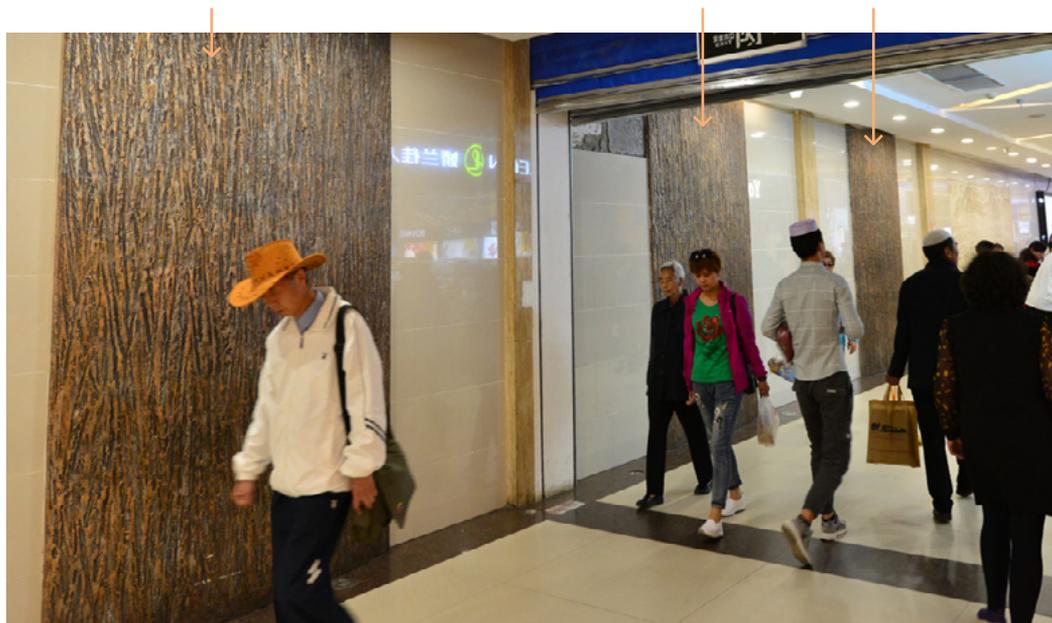
My interest in infrastructure as a research object was jump started in April 2015 when I attended a colloquium at University of California Los Angeles in which Akhil Gupta showed us an image of an unfinished bridge in India. The bridge’s construction had been ‘suspended’ in part because of the slow bureaucratic process of getting building permits (see Gupta 2015). Complications included not only financing,

but also land access and the displacement of the poor population. The non-completion of this infrastructure project was discussed as a failure related to bureaucratic entanglement and fitfulness that deferred the promise of economic development (Gupta 2018). I could not help but think of the contrast with China, where the inability of urban residents to *stop* the razing of their neighbourhoods to make way for new urban development projects is a persistent sign not only of the weakness of China’s brand of ‘grassroots democracy’, but also the unavoidability of the future insofar as it was promised by infrastructure-as-economic-development (Appel 2018). Temporalities clearly mattered, but were the only temporalities in the Chinese city those of linear development or the disruption thereof? How might the relationship between time and infrastructure be reconceived if we think outside of the developmental teleology?

In the following sections I will discuss cosmic infrastructures in a redeveloping Xining city. Urban materialities are entangled in temporalities that speak both to the futures conjured up by socialist and post-socialist urban development, but also temporalities that speak to the eternal harmony of the Chinese ideal-type city and to the cyclical rebirth of Tibetan Buddhist cosmic infrastructure.

## Cosmic City, Civilised City

As Tong Lam discusses in his essay in this collection, socialist development in the twentieth century often concretised visions of the socialist future. In mid-twentieth-century Asia, infrastructure made palpable the socialist promise of the future. This was a modernisation teleology that has today been largely surpassed by the equally linear process of development that China’s ‘world-class’ cities have made possible. Cities across China, including Xining, are being materially remade in line with new urban projects of ‘civilisation’



The three trees visualised in an underground shopping arcade. The trunks roughly correspond to where their roots should be. PC: Andrew Grant.

and ‘happiness’ (Cartier 2013; Oakes 2017; Grant 2018b). Newer parts of the city have a distinctively ‘China Made’ form, created in line with the infrastructural standards commonly crafted and deployed in contemporary China. Chinese urbanisation is based on institutional infrastructures such as the special zone (Cartier 2001; Bach 2010). These exceptional spaces guide how and where new infrastructures are built. They give impetus to massive disjunctures in urban form: new urban territories are built according to schemes that may diverge sharply from older urban districts. Urban redevelopment valorises newer urban constructions as the pinnacle of development and devalues older neighbourhoods, including those of the Maoist period, as backward. That is, as glass skyscrapers and wide black asphalt avenues appeared on recently annexed farmland to Xining’s west, older neighbourhoods

came to be distinguishable by their outdated twentieth-century infrastructures and the people who lived in them. Aspiring middle-class Chinese (of all ethnic groups) have sought to distance themselves from parts of the city that are associated with lagging behind. As this form of infrastructure becomes more deeply embedded, linear time is spatialised. According to my research participants in Xining, simply being among these suddenly ‘old’ parts of the city had a negative effect on urbanites’ bodies, stigmatising them with dirt, low quality, and a temporality deprived of a future.

Among the casualties of urban redevelopment were the cosmic infrastructures that mark the traditional Chinese city: four walls enclosing a rectangular city and four gates roughly oriented to the cardinal directions. In order to make room for new industrial sites and the transportation infrastructures that would

support them, the old city walls and the cosmic infrastructure they materialised were destroyed in the late twentieth century (Gaubatz 1996; Tuan 1996). Outmoded walls, formed from rammed yellow earth, were sacrificed to make way for creations of concrete, steel, and brick. Yet more recently in the postsocialist period, walls have gained a renewed significance. Old walls can index the eternal harmony of the traditional Chinese city and give a sense of heft and harmony to the newly redeveloped city. The twenty-first-century restoration in Xining of the Republican-era North Gate, coming close on the heels of the destruction of the remaining city walls, is an indicator of the continued symbolic significance of this cosmic infrastructure today. It has been rehabilitated and enrolled into the new harmony and social stability promoted in China's contemporary 'civilised city' (文明城市).

Another example of this enrolment can be found in a more natural form of infrastructure: trees. In the centre of the old city persist three old trees, dated by various official and word-of-mouth accounts from three hundred to fourteen hundred years of age, and marking the misty agelessness of folklore pertaining to the Queen Mother of West. These trees are part of contemporary Xining's claim to 'Kunlun Civilisation' (the contemporary Kunlun mountain range divides the Tibetan Plateau from the Tarim Basin to its north). The potential eternity of these trees indexes the embeddedness of the city and its hinterlands in a cosmic infrastructure. Certainly, these trees sit somewhat bizarrely with the claims to developmental progress found in the contemporary Chinese consumer city, as well as the circulations of consumerism the newer infrastructural space reinforces.

## Cosmic Collisions

It would seem then that a new cosmic infrastructure is on the rise. Glass skyscrapers and shopping centres punctuate new urban

centres, while the old Chinese cosmic infrastructure lends it an air of permanence. The Harmonious Society and the Chinese Dream are realised through the sorts of circulations that the underground shopping arcade celebrating the Kunlun trees permits. How do these infrastructures sit alongside another cosmic infrastructure—that of Tibetan Buddhism? Urban skyscrapers, some pious Tibetan Buddhists confided to me, could be interpreted as symbols of greed. They also marked an emerging domain of infrastructural connection that disrupted Tibetan cosmic infrastructures. In this view, postsocialist infrastructure was putting the wrong sorts of things into circulation.

The ancient Chinese city shared a basis with other South Asian and Southeast Asian urban forms insofar as they both aspired to condense the cosmic order into a fabricated microcosm. In some Chinese Daoist texts, the urform of the city was thought to reside somewhere in China's northwest, in the mythical Kunlun mountain, abode of the Queen Mother of the West (Wheatley 1971, 442). But across Asia, Mount Meru provided a basis for mandalisation, the process of representing a spatial form of the cosmos (Tambiah 1977). Tibetan Buddhist sacred mountains are also mandala cosmos which, I argue, can be understood as cosmic infrastructures. At these mountains, pilgrimage guidebooks and conventions of ritual practice perform the role of infrastructural standards, giving form to the pathways that serve as montane circumambulation circuits. Affective connection to soil, stones, and water encountered along the routes, themselves experienced through bodily prostration, allow for the progressive cleansing of the pilgrim's accumulated evil deeds (Huber 1999). This is a cosmic infrastructure based in neither a secular harmonious order indicated by the old city wall, nor the temporality of capitalist modernisation, but in the soteriological rhythms of rebirth and a cosmic economy mediated through affective encounters with other bodies and things (da Col 2007). We might also grant cosmic infrastructure a quasi-agency. Jane Bennett



An installation of prayer wheels in a Xining housing complex. The prayer wheels bring Buddhist cosmic infrastructure into the city. PC: Andrew Grant.

(2010) considers materials as quasi-causal agents, capable of filling or draining our human vitalities. Materials have an affective vibrancy and that cannot be divorced from ethical practice, a reality that is clear in the case of Tibetan cosmic infrastructures such as prayer wheels, materials that can bestow merit upon those who engage with them.

Xining's urban core contains no mountains, but it does contain smaller structures that form part of a larger cosmic infrastructure of religious practice. Tibetans have pooled money to build prayer wheels, typically affixed to the

sides of buildings under awnings or housed in their own stand-alone structures within urban neighbourhoods. For older Tibetans, who may spend many hours a day prostrating at household shrines or turning prayer wheels, these activities enable a connection to the greater circulations that the cosmic infrastructures embedded in the Plateau landscape allow. Spinning and circumambulating these prayer wheels is a cleansing process that bodies utilise to capture karmic merit. Yet territorial restrictions in urban environments make the building of religious structures difficult, and

in some cases local authorities have destroyed unapproved prayer wheels. In one housing community, Tibetans joined hands to attempt to prevent a complex of prayer wheels from being bulldozed (Grant 2018a). Furthermore, state meddling in the religious built environment can invoke memories of past state-sanctioned violence. Images of the destruction of Buddhist monasteries, including prayer wheels reduced to rubble by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution were popular on the Chinese social media platform WeChat. The circulation of such images and stories helps connect contemporary destruction with past state efforts to eliminate Buddhist infrastructures and, ultimately, Buddhist practice.

In contrast to the positive materiality outlined by Bennett, the affective potential of cosmic infrastructure can also be grasped through Gaston Gordillo's (2014) consideration of negativity and infrastructure. A shattered cosmic infrastructure affects bodies in very different ways from one in regular repair. Its destruction disrupts cosmic flows, and is both inauspicious and prevents the positive agency of the prayer wheels from positively affecting Tibetans' bodies. In this case then, the cosmic infrastructures of postsocialist development and Buddhism collide, the former disrupting and shattering the circulations of the latter.

## Beyond Linear Temporalities

A key benefit of a cosmic infrastructural approach is that it gets beyond linear temporalities of development. Beyond looking at the past, present, and future, it also allows for the consideration of the temporalities of eternal harmony and cyclical rebirth. Cosmic infrastructures form a bridge between this world and others, realisable through symbolic significance and affect. It also deepens consideration of the urban by situating it within other forms of infrastructural space.

Built according to canon, creating a community of practice (Star 1999, 381), and primed for the circulation of certain bodies, goods, ideas, and supramundane forces, they bring to the foreground the very values of the societies that create them. ■

A nighttime photograph of a city street in Seoul, South Korea. The scene is illuminated by streetlights and the lights of buildings, creating a vibrant urban atmosphere. The street is wet, reflecting the lights. In the background, there are tall buildings with many lit windows. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, oranges, and yellows.

# WINDOW ON ASIA

Seoul, South Korea. PC: Josh Hallett.





## South Korea's Progressive Turn

Erik MOBRAND

*The South Korean government is responding more and more to concerns about inequality, diversity, quality of life, and the environment, an historical shift for a state that has long given priority to business interests. In this essay, Erik Mobrاند argues that this change is rooted not only in the rotation of parties in office, but more deeply in the Candlelight Movement of 2016 and 2017 and the recent thaw in relations between North Korea and the United States.*

Two years have passed since disgraced former President Park Geun-hye was dismissed and President Moon Jae-in took office in Seoul. While South Korea's newspapers remain filled with accounts of acrimonious encounters between opposing blocs of legislators and their supporters, a profound shift has occurred in the political order. For just about the first time in the country's history, the state has been prodded in a progressive direction. The shift has been turbulent and involved false starts, dead ends, and unfortunate compromises, but it remains nonetheless substantial. It would be incorrect to attribute the progressive turn solely to the party in power. The Moon administration has been indispensable for this turn but far more has occurred than simply a switch in office

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South Korea's  
President Moon Jae-in.  
PC: JUNG YEON-JE/  
AFP/Getty Images.

from one party to another. Rather, a deeper set of forces is at work. Two developments have been especially significant.

The first development is the Candlelight Movement of 2016–17, in which millions of Koreans peacefully took to the streets demanding Park's resignation, expressing frustration over unearned privilege and unjust inequality. The Movement also demonstrated the power of citizen participation (Kim 2017), and helped propel Moon, a former human rights lawyer, to the presidency. More than that, though, the Movement forced issues of inequality and obstacles to social mobility to the top of the agenda, so that anyone who took office would need to make these problems their priorities. Moon and his ruling Democratic Party have thus been pushed in a more progressive direction than is necessarily expected from a party that has not always distinguished itself with the promise of social and economic justice. In other words, the constituency for the ruling party shifted in 2017.

The second development can be found in the thaw in relations between Pyongyang and Washington. In South Korea, the stance of the United States on North Korea is not a matter that belongs in some separate realm of foreign relations—it cuts to the heart of the domestic political order. The United States' traditionally hawkish stance empowers illiberal figures in South Korea, justifying suspicion of progressive forces and heavy-handed treatment of labour advocates. Donald Trump, by meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-un, has been the unlikely—and surely inadvertent—bearer of a message that weakens illiberal forces south of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The argument that insecurity justifies limits on pluralism becomes all the less compelling when South Koreans see an American president meeting with the North Korean leader. With anticommunism weakened as a pretext for attacking progressive moves, South Korea has been able to shift course.

## Progressive Legislation and Court Decisions

This shift is related to particular social and economic concerns. Work-life balance and feminism have emerged as buzzwords over the past two years. These concerns have gained new forms of articulation in the political system. Despite holding only six seats in the 300-member National Assembly, the labour-oriented Justice Party has played a significant role in driving the progressive agenda. In doing so, the Justice Party emerged as a standard bearer of the calls from the Candlelight Movement for creating a fairer society.

Several initiatives have grown out of these concerns. The government in 2018 raised the minimum wage by over 10 percent. A further increase was debated but eventually dropped. In the same year, legislation reduced the maximum hours an employee can work. South Koreans work some of the longest hours in the OECD, leaving little time for family and leisure. After the new law came into effect, employees can work no more than 52 hours per week—hardly a low figure for an industrialised economy, but a reduction from the previous 68 hours. Managers resisted the shift, and the main media groups attacked the policy for reducing the country's competitiveness. Arguably, though, inefficient managerial styles are to blame for the relatively low level of labour productivity, and the new policy can incentivise managers to increase efficiency. Surveys show that employees have gained substantial amounts of free time since the law went into effect—nearly an hour per day in one study of office workers (Lee 2018). The cultural shifts that may follow could be significant.

In the same year, gender relations gained widespread attention, in part because the global #MeToo movement reached Korean shores. Protesters staged events to demand better treatment of women in a country where they face barriers to finding work and managers treat family life as an alternative to

a working career for a woman. Government responsiveness to this could be seen in a landmark court ruling. In April 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled that the country's ban on abortion is unconstitutional. Abortion has been illegal since early in the Republic's history, though the ban has rarely been enforced and abortion remains a common practice. The Court's decision, which does not immediately annul the law, is a move toward bringing law more closely into line with practice and is a significant symbolic statement.

These changes have not lived up to everyone's hopes and some progressive moves have even been rolled back. Lee Jae-yong, the de facto Samsung boss, was sentenced to five years in prison for corruption but released only months later. Nonetheless, these recent developments should be viewed against two decades of persistent neoliberalisation. Even the progressive President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), for whom President Moon served as chief of staff, could not derail the neoliberal trajectory. Despite Roh's plans to expand regulation in several areas, his tenure became the golden era of free trade agreements and informalisation of labour continued apace (Armstrong 2008). The experiences of the Roh administration underscore that the current shifts cut deeper than who occupies the presidency.

## Electoral Reform

The Moon government has put revision of the political system on the agenda as well. The aim has been to make government more responsive to a wider range of interests, while also enhancing checks on powerful offices. One effort was constitutional reform, and the Moon administration pushed for this soon after taking office. However, again, this initiative cannot be attributed solely to Moon. In January 2017, months before his election,

legislators considered possible amendments to the constitution to prevent something like the Park scandal from recurring.

While constitutional revision has been hampered a reform of the electoral system has made greater progress. Expanding the principle of proportionality in representation was made a priority in the wake of the Candlelight Movement. The concern was that the current system gives insufficient voice to the variety of interests in society. Minorities of all sorts are, in this view, poorly served under the existing institutional design. South Korea has a mixed electoral system for its single-house legislature. Most seats are allocated through single-member districts with the remainder given to party list candidates. The majoritarian rules for single-member districts have contributed to a situation where the largest parties perform disproportionately well. Parties suffer if they gain support widely across the country, but only among a minority of voters in each district. The reform bill expands the proportional representation component of the electoral system. The ruling Democratic Party joined forces with the Justice Party and a third party of legislators who had traditionally been in the Democratic Party. While the bill has not yet passed, it has sufficient support and has been 'fast tracked' toward passage this year.

The reform bill is a positive move, and it is accompanied by a proposal to expand oversight and to weaken prosecutorial authority in a context where prosecutors have been perceived as unhealthily close to big business. What is most promising—and a departure from the past—is that parties have been willing to take a calculated risk in proposing electoral reform. Previous reforms to the electoral system and to election-related laws have largely moved in the opposite direction, toward minimising the uncertainty of elections for the major parties. Those reforms came from agreement between the largest political parties, meeting usually with frustration from the Justice Party or its predecessors (Mobrand 2019). This time, the

Democratic Party has worked with the Justice Party and not with the main opposition Liberal Korea Party. There is uncertainty over who will gain most under the revised electoral rules. Presumably, a minor progressive party like the Justice Party will do well; it already gets most of its seats through proportional representation. However, the Democratic Party could push in a progressive direction and encroach on Justice Party space. In any case, when politicians take these risks that possibly undermine the influence of their own parties, citizens are the main beneficiaries.

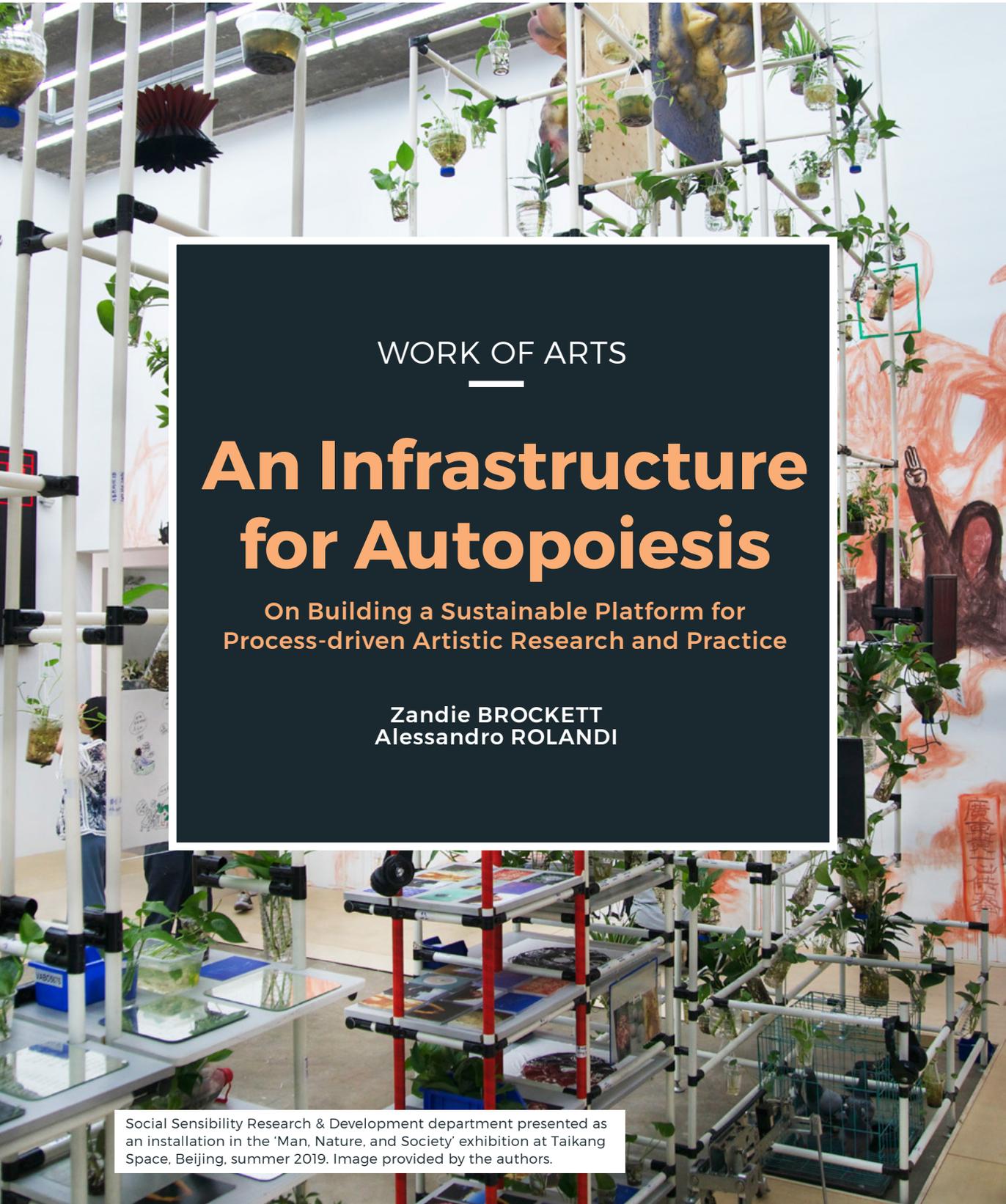
## Remaking the State

The shift in South Korea is not primarily the result of a simple rotation of parties in office. A progressive administration can take power without successfully implementing its plans. The challenge to a progressive agenda is profound. The South Korean state has strengths in security operations, overseeing construction projects, and supporting a range of business activities. The state can be used to facilitate mind-bogglingly ambitious land reclamation projects and the world's largest sea wall, both at enormous environmental costs. But it is not a state that can protect people from the effects of markets and business activities with ease, whether it be in labour regulation or in controlling energy production in a way that reduces air pollution. Metaphors of South Korea as a 'strong state' overlook these difficulties. Progressive forces, including at times the current administration, aim for these shifts but doing so requires pushing the state to operate in new ways. This politics is not simply about electoral change but also involves popular forces smashing up against the state to make it do things it has not done in the past.

The pushback against the progressive turn is all too visible. The opposition and the main media groups continue to claim that social

legislation and electoral reform push the country toward 'socialism' and that Moon is embarking on the construction of a 'left-wing ideological dictatorship' (Lee and Kim 2019). Conservative opposition legislators have—most ironically—appropriated the tactics and styles of the opposition under authoritarianism. They accuse the government of undermining democracy, they use their bodies to obstruct parliamentary processes, and they stage street demonstrations. They gain support from activists who call on the release of Park Geun-hye, a president convicted of abusing her authority and who deliberately did not respond for seven hours when the ferry MV Sewol began to sink with hundreds of students on board. The largest media organisations join the conservative opposition by accusing the ruling party of being undemocratic for not negotiating with the opposition.

At this moment, South Korea is rebuilding its political institutions. Passing legislation with majorities is part of that process, even when criticised by the opposition. Labelling normal legislative behaviour as undemocratic is nothing less than an effort to obstruct this rebuilding process. Prominent intellectual Paik Nak-chung (2018) goes so far as to argue that the Candlelight Movement was a constitutional moment—by bringing people out to restore the constitution after its violation by a president, the Movement put a social force behind the constitution. As the political scientist Jang Jip-choi notes (2012, 44–48), the constitution was formed in an exclusive and foreign-influenced process, and never really reflected the concerns of a substantial section of society. The Candlelight Movement and the thaw in US–DPRK relations—an internal push for accountability and a release of the pressure insisting on security before pluralism—both work to give ordinary people more space in politics. The result has been an impressive and historic fight to take the country in a progressive direction. ■



WORK OF ARTS

# An Infrastructure for Autopoiesis

On Building a Sustainable Platform for  
Process-driven Artistic Research and Practice

Zandie BROCKETT  
Alessandro ROLANDI

Social Sensibility Research & Development department presented as an installation in the 'Man, Nature, and Society' exhibition at Taikang Space, Beijing, summer 2019. Image provided by the authors.

# An Infrastructure for Autopoiesis

## On Building a Sustainable Platform for Process-driven Artistic Research and Practice

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Zandie BROCKETT  
Alessandro ROLANDI

**Autopoiesis (n)** *the property of a living system that allows it to maintain and renew itself by regulating its composition and conserving its boundaries.*

China's recent economic development policies, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have served as a poignant reminder of how large infrastructure projects often lose connection with the citizens they are designed to serve. With scale and top-down institutional policies comes the unintended transformation of nuanced lives and communities into mere statistical references. Infrastructure in the sphere of art and culture—existing as a global network of public and private museums, art fairs, biennales, art districts, and creative industry clusters—operates similarly.

Exhibition spaces and museums have long stood as mechanisms that distinguish and construct notions of truth; now, with the shifting tide of consumption and growing demands for participation, much of this cultural infrastructure is evolving into mechanisms for 'edutainment'. Either way, contemporary art—its production, excavated knowledge, and modes of communication—remains guided by institutional logics and market dynamics. How, then, can we remodel cultural infrastructure such that it is a sustainable framework for producing unbiased knowledge given the current economic climate, yet detached from

market demands? Further, how could this infrastructure mirror how contemporary societies perform labour and build community?

Perhaps we should think of art not just as objects or remnants of our (material) actions, but also as the processes that are actively retooling the very framework that facilitates the creation of these objects. In this essay, we look at how the Social Sensibility Research & Development (SSR&D) department uses process-based art-making and research (i.e. its process) to reimagine how art can serve as a vehicle for the social imagination (i.e. its motive), how this knowledge is transmitted between various social groups (i.e. legitimisation), and how this infrastructure exists in an economically-viable format despite operating at a small, labour-intensive scale (i.e. its economics).

## The Social Sensibility Research & Development Department

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As a site of collective labour and material production, the factory has served a seminal role in the economic, social, and urban development of modern China. Nevertheless, the Chinese factory remains a site of many contradictions. In the reform era, Chinese society subscribed to the idea that 'personal efforts inevitably lead to improvement in one's condition, a value which has become a major mode of legitimation of access to wealth and status' (Florence 2019, 269). But as wealth creation and accumulation has become the primary goal for China's manufacturing and heavy industries, the status and image of the working class as the iconic proletariat has increasingly eroded.

With such a context in mind, in January 2011 Alessandro Rolandi sought to embrace these very contradictions, establishing a platform for open-ended, research-based, artistic projects in

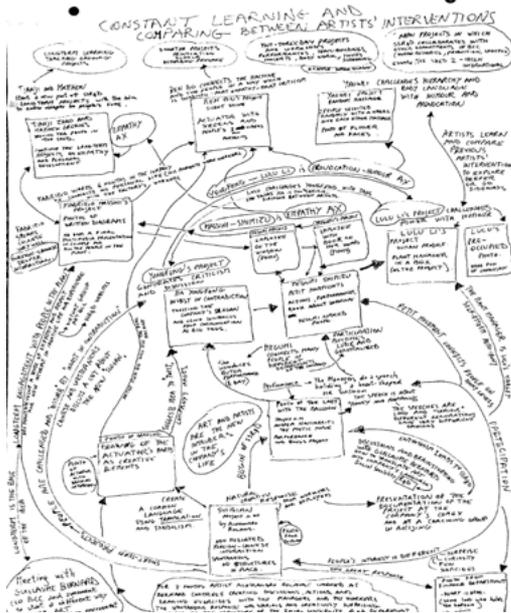


Installation of voices, videos, and written words in English, French, and Chinese from 20 factory workers and employees working at Bernard Controls' China and French factories. Exhibited at Ming Contemporary Art Museum (McaM) Shanghai, fall/winter 2017. Image courtesy McaM.

a privately-held manufacturing company and its factories. SSR&D is a research and development department at the French-owned-and-operated Bernard Controls actuator-producing plants in Beijing and Paris/Gonesse. Since its establishment, it has served as a platform for the employment of artists who develop long-term, creative, relational, critical, and dialogical activities that engage and collaborate with factory workers. Originally founded as a factory-based residency programme for artists, musicians, curators, scholars, and architects, it has evolved to facilitate the production and exhibition of artworks created by factory workers themselves.

SSR&D was founded after Rolandi spent nine unpaid months conducting informal research in the Beijing plant of Bernard Controls. During this time, he realised that the company's culture

and factory's conditions already provided the workers a certain amount of dignity, respect, and care. This prompted him to introduce something more complex and demanding—an art practice. It was then that Rolandi and the factory executives decided to establish the department on the single negotiated condition that all factory workers and company employees have the right to use a portion of their working hours to interact with himself and other invited artists. For these reasons, SSR&D was founded on sustained practices and long-term commitment existing on a 1:1 scale, which suggests actions should be enacted on a scale between the direct enactor and direct receiver of the practice rather than mediated through spectatorship (Wright 2013). It is an idea and vision where the presence of artists and art practices within an optimised, profit-



(Left) Map of SSR&D processes by Alessandro Rolandi for 'Teetering at the Edge of the World' exhibition at Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo, Montevideo, Uruguay, fall 2015. (Right) Installation view of Rolandi's Wall Map in 'Teetering at the Edge of the World'. Images provided by the authors.

driven corporation could trigger unexpected interactions amongst various members of the organisation, and further develop an emotional complexity in the workplace. These 'social sensibilities' (Brockett and Rolandi 2017)—or social skills, emotional capacities, and creative aptitudes that help individuals listen, learn, and adapt to other factory personnel and situations in real time—are cultivated between artist and factory worker, worker and manager, as well as between workers themselves. They attempt to challenge the increased standardisation of human processes and relationships, especially in a manufacturing setting, by fostering new modes of knowledge exchange.

SSR&D is a flexible form, a living dynamic that provides and defends the openness and freshness of an interactive, artistic framework. It does so by: a) finding inspiration in dialogues

with factory workers and spontaneous collaborations rather than planning ahead; b) abandoning clear ideas of authorship in favour of more complex dynamics of mutual influence; and c) accepting non-professional input, commentary, and critical inquiry as a source of feedback and inspiration. It creates room for thinking that is genuinely creative and spontaneous—which at times results in the creation of art in response to daily working life, and at other times responds to other personal, spiritual, and psychological queries and needs. From indifference to observation, from casual interaction to full intellectual and emotional engagement, the quality of the exchange depends on the emotional and cognitive state of the group.

## Process

The SSR&D department operates as an integrated unit within the Bernard Controls company. The ‘research and development’ component of its name reflects the practice-based nature of the department’s work, while contextualising its function within operations, rather than in the realms of human resources or corporate social responsibility. The function and mission of the department also informs its structure. The department currently consists of a team of three artists hired with a full-time working contract, salary, and health insurance: two in Beijing (Alessandro Rolandi and Tianji Zhao) and one in Paris (Blandine de la Taille). Both units remain in constant communication as they attend their respective Beijing and Paris/Gonesse factories on a regular weekly basis. External artists are invited for two to three-month-long residences, of which there are no more than four per year per factory. Within this unique opportunity to work within a corporate entity and in a fully-operating factory, SSR&D artists are allowed to engage with the company, its procedures, equipment, space, workers, administrators, and staff. Artists interact with employees through discussion and mutual exchange of ideas and materials in an informal and impromptu manner. Over the past eight years, as SSR&D has brought 43 artists and some 30 scholars and industry professionals into the factory, a wide source of knowledge and practices have emerged.

For each visit from an artist, arrival at the factory is between 10 and 11am. A lunch is served for department and visiting artists in the conference room, which also doubles as the SSR&D office. At 2pm, once the workers return from their lunch break, and until 5pm, when the working day concludes, SSR&D artists are allowed onto the factory floor and into the offices. It is here, with the mere physical presence of the artist, that the process-based research begins. Roaming with books, physical artworks, and videos-on-phones in hand and ready to share, each artist explores different

approaches that allow them to establish a personal connection with factory workers. Often inquiring about the worker’s life and work situation, the artists use these materials as tools to deliver stories about how they or other artists have dealt with similar ideas and situations. Each interaction attracts voluntary degrees of closeness, collaboration, and criticality from the workers, while providing the artist an opportunity to develop an awareness about the dynamic’s natural flow, an acute attention to the subtlety of response, and a patience for awkwardness during the exchange. Each of these skills become ‘social sensibilities’, or when employed, methodologies for soliciting participation, exchange, and negotiation.

Over time, common interests or past experiences are revealed and through continued conversation, these ideas evolve into artistic projects. Some are didactic or collectively participatory, while others are centred around craft, object-making, and sound-based experimentation.

## Motive

In this hyper-connected world propelled by, but also overloaded with, information exchange, the nature of learning and work are dramatically changing. Through processes of storytelling—that is presence-driven connection and exchange—we find an analogic, flexible, informal, and creative way of engaging with each other, finding the commonalities in our collective existence. Through anecdotes, we might find a shared social fabric, criticality, and memory that prevent technological and economic infrastructures from reducing social life to solipsistic feedback loops ruled by standardised machines and optimised systems. With story-based exchange, we give birth to unexpected alliances that establish undercurrents of knowledge production and where art becomes a catalyst for unusual relationships and strategies that address and express personal and collective issues. These



Bernard Controls China factory worker, Wei Chengcheng, performing his 'Sensitive Heart' artwork at Yang Art Museum (YAM), Beijing, April 2017. Image provided by the authors.

stories are activated as 'new material' for use in artworks. In doing so, they distil, transform, and activate the mundaneness of life and the vernacular of labour into a dynamic that elevates and empowers the experience, the individual, and their skills.

While fundamental to the practice, these relationships are not themselves the main objective of the interactions between artist and worker. Rather, the department understands that the interactions are of bidirectional influence and that this more subtle, self-adjusting, and intuitive form of exchange enables the negotiation of taste (Mörsch 2011). Within this process of discussing, exchanging, spontaneously reacting, and collectively deciding, the multifarious 'tastes' found within social life—as conditioned by various ethnicities, genders, classes, and ages—are mediated. This process allows individuals to

gain new experiences and insights through which they can perceive the realities of the 'Other'.

## Legitimation

The department facilitates the production, display, documentation, and promotion of all artworks created by resident artists, as well as those produced by workers themselves. It further fosters relationships between itself, galleries, and museums in the art world at large to establish opportunities for the exhibition, presentation, and in a way, the external legitimisation of artworks created by employees of the factory. The presence of non-professional artists (i.e. factory workers, managers, and employees) and their work

exhibited in galleries and museums, as well as during lectures and workshops, is not intended as a provocation or confirmation of an unusual art education. Rather, it is meant to extend the dialogue about the role of artists in society and the potential value of art when dissociated from the commodity and spectacle-oriented dynamic of an elite market system. SSR&D's presence in art institutions intends to ask fundamental questions like: where is art conceived and made, and where *could* it be conceived and made? By whom? For what purpose? Who is the audience? What is art's impact on reality and how can we measure it? How do we value artwork and how do we value art practice, or the process by which artwork is made?

Most importantly, the SSR&D department also internally validates and legitimatises alternative forms of knowledge production and learning with a gravity akin to formal institutions. With its one founding condition—workers have the freedom to allocate a portion of their labour time to engage with invited artists—the SSR&D department produces infrastructure that recognises the value of casual interaction and promotes engagement in artistic labour. Through this process of discussing memories and daily life, anecdotes are exchanged but also creatively valued and validated. The department establishes its credibility in recognising forms of cultural knowledge found in aesthetic skills, non-linear thinking, and non-verbal languages that negotiate and address the tensions, contradictions, and impasses between people of different specialities and levels of seniority.

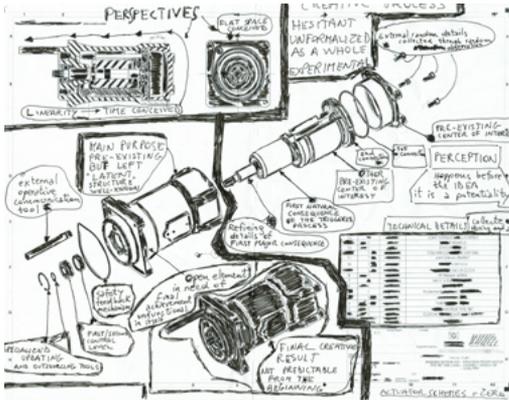
By allowing this, Bernard Controls implies that exploring artistic labour and articulating intellectual, psychological, and emotional curiosities are of value equal to the labour performed by full-time employees, on the factory line or at their desks. By paying both invited artists and employees to make art, Bernard Controls also—much like the museum's relationship with objects from, for instance, the colonised world—legitimatises the knowledge produced by the 'Other'. These

layers of information are non-hierarchical and are not systematically referenced, as is with formal curricula or corporate policies. Rather they are organically circulated and shared, thereby establishing the intimacy necessary in alternative modes of corporate management and negotiation. SSR&D shifts the geography of knowledge production within the company by valuing information, skills, and stories that arise from non-academic systems.

## Economics

The department together with Bernard Controls has created an economic model that provides steady funding to artists as researchers, not paid out in a sporadic or competitive manner but rather as a monthly salary for a properly hired R&D professional. The remuneration, conceived of as research fees, pays for the time artists spend engaging workers in activities and dialogue, rather than as fees for the 'production' or purchase of an artwork. This economic model invites us to consider the future potentiality of an artist being paid for engaging with complex and experimental field research, instead of depending on the commission or sale of artworks. As such, an artist can secure financial stability with their long-term commitment to researching and developing a single project. Furthermore, instead of investing in the acquisition of artworks, capital—in this instance, from Bernard Controls' operational budget—can be allocated towards improving conditions for producing artworks. This economic model prioritises creative actions and thinking, the role of artists within society, and more complex logics of cultural production and distribution that escape the gravity of a market economy.

Importantly, all artworks created in the factory and under the supervision of the department belong to those who created them. Unlike corporate policies mandating everything produced at the company remains



'Techno Poetic Drawing'  
by Alessandro Rolandi on  
blueprints for factory-made  
actuator parts, 2011/2012.  
Image provided by the  
authors.

property of that entity, the authorship, physical object, its intellectual property, and value of each artwork is transferred to its creator(s).

While some may ask what the factory receives in return, a subtler reply might be that the organisational culture shifts towards a more collaborative dynamic. SSR&D pushes Bernard Control managers to think and behave in ways that allow 'non-essential' personnel to work within the factory space. During the working day, SSR&D shifts standardised managerial practices away from hierarchical, order-giving strategies, and towards ones that attend to, and are patient with, the process of negotiating human dynamics.

Commensurate with local incomes, these salaries and stipends are benchmarked by employer standards. Most importantly, this research position is conceived so that artists' basic needs like health insurance, rent for a studio/home in the country of residence, and even some materials for their own studio practice can be afforded. A model of this kind supposes that artists could spend roughly half of their career (depending on interest levels) being remunerated for simply being artists and conducting research in a participatory social framework.

## Potentiality

As SSR&D moves towards its ten-year anniversary, we ask how its model might situate itself within different factories across China, if not companies from different sectors and around the world. Is the practice that SSR&D puts forth one that could be incorporated into organisations of larger dimensions? Is it a model that might stimulate the social imagination of workers in factories or companies with highly automated processes, and thus prove as another approach to shape and circulate artistic, cultural, even organisational knowledge? Is it a model that is unique to China's labour context, given the country's State-led market economy that enables the rise of innovative infrastructural forms and the rapid prototyping needed to build these models?

By embedding artists into a factory and within the hours of a working day, the SSR&D department develops organisational infrastructure that activates time and a flexible creative arena for the exploration of ambiguity within a streamlined manufacturing context. This infrastructure does not maintain a logic of the recreational, commercial, or cultural, but rather of daily work and life—spaces where the majority of human time is spent and patterns of thought and action are habituated. As artists coopt time from the workers in between their paid tasks, the informal exchanges and discussions of personal interests redefine and reposition the importance of creative and expressive individuals. It is SSR&D's legitimised space that maintains distance from a defined purpose that allows voluntary spontaneities and flexible sensibilities to organically adapt to ambiguity. It is an infrastructure that is not forced upon its users, but rather values and incorporates the multiplicity of knowledge, forms of creative expression, and styles of learning and engaging into its pillars. ■

A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark green button-down shirt and large headphones, is shown in profile from the chest up. She is looking down and to the right. The background is a blurred cityscape at night with various lights and buildings. A light blue rectangular box with a black border is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

WORK OF ARTS

**Autobiography,  
Exile, and  
Gender**

A Conversation with Ying Liang

ZENG Jinyan

# Autobiography, Exile, and Gender

## A Conversation with Ying Liang

ZENG Jinyan



Ying Liang.

Ying Liang is an independent filmmaker, whose work encompasses film curation, teaching, and commentary. His well-known feature films include *Taking Father Home* (背鸭子的男孩 2005), *When Night Falls* (我还有话要说 2012), as well as the short movies *Condolences* (慰问 2009), *A Sunny Day* (九月二十八日·晴 2016). Ying's works have won numerous international awards; *When Night Falls* earned him the best director award and Nai An won the best actress award at the Locarno Film Festival. In 2018, he released his autobiographical feature film *A Family Tour* (自由行), which debuted at the International Competition section of the Locarno Film Festival, was screened at the fifty-sixth New York Film Festival, and was the closing film at the eighteenth Kaohsiung Film Festival.

The film tells the story of Yang Shu (played by the actress Gong Zhe), who is punished by the Chinese government for making a movie and has to go into exile in Hong Kong, with no chance of returning to China. Her mother (played in the movie by Nai An) remains in Sichuan, where she suffers a relapse of stomach cancer and needs to undergo an operation. As a result, she desperately wants to meet her daughter and grandson, whom she only knows from communication over the Internet. An opportunity arises for a reunion at a film festival in Taiwan, which Yang Shu plans to attend with her husband (played by Peter Teo) and their son. Yang's mother books a tour to the island, but cannot leave the tour group to travel on her own. As a makeshift solution, Yang's husband books the same hotels as the mother, and they follow the itinerary of her tour group, allowing the family to reunite at hotels and various scenic spots in Taiwan.

**Zeng Jinyan:** You and your family were physically threatened by the Chinese police because of your 2012 film *When Night Falls*, which was based on the case of Yang Jia attacking and killing several policemen with a knife on 1 July 2008. You have never been back to mainland China since you left in 2011, and you have spent most of your time living and making movies in Hong Kong. You also consider yourself an exile. Would it be accurate to say that your new film, *A Family Tour*, is an autobiographical film summarising your six years living outside China?

**Ying Liang:** This is quite a personal story. Much of the film draws on my own experiences, and it is a 100-percent reflection of my feelings and emotions. But of course, to narrate a story that can be widely disseminated, it is essential to adapt certain elements. I don't really expect that after watching the film the audience will assume that the person in the movie is me, or that what happened in the film is a perfect account of my own experiences. I believe that stories need to reflect true feelings and emotions, rather than perfectly reproduce what happened in real life. This kind of latitude allows filmmakers to adjust their stories, and also provides an opportunity for personal reflection. This provides a means of achieving deeper self-understanding—making this film provided the opportunity for me to reconsider my own experiences and my relationships with my parents, among other things.

Actually, over the past six years I have been blessed with numerous friends in Hong Kong, who have both witnessed and facilitated important changes in my life. It was interesting to have the film screened in Hong Kong. I feel that Hong Kong locals and audiences who have close ties with city are very responsive to the characters in the film, as they have found themselves involved in similar situations. I feel quite glad about this because I was not expecting such responsiveness and commonality when I was writing the film.

One of the original motivations for writing *A Family Tour* was that I wanted to communicate with my child. He was born in Hong Kong, and was almost four years old when I was writing the film. I feel that Chinese people always face the problem of a lack of communication between generations, especially in families that have experienced traumas. These traumas are seldom mentioned because people feel frightened, think it is unsafe, and are afraid of destroying the relatively stable life that they have carved out for themselves. My family was also like this. I really longed for the possibility of openly communicating with my child. When I was writing the script, I told him: 'I'm writing a story about us going to Taiwan to meet your grandma. This story is a gift for you, and I am writing it now.' He was a bit more than three years old at that time. He sat on my lap and watched me typing. Later, when we were ready to shoot the film, Gong Zhe—the actress playing Yang Shu—came to Hong Kong, and hung out a lot with my son; they became friends. During shooting, my son would often come to the filming location as well. In fact, he had many impressions and feelings, and understood the effort I was making. This is my original motivation for making the film. At the film festival, he watched the film from beginning to end. He was very little, only five years old and the fact that he concentrated on watching the film was fascinating and meaningful to me.

ZJY: Why is the protagonist of the film a female director rather than a male director like you?

YL: As I mentioned, I don't want the audience to think that the protagonist is a perfect representation of me, since this would have narrowed the appeal of the film. For people like me, who have been in exile, meeting family at a third location can be considered a kind of collective memory or collective experience. I was thinking this way when writing the film. I also spoke with friends who have had similar experiences to mine, and privately showed the film to friends with similar backgrounds. Their reaction was that it is our story rather than simply the story of an individual.

I also needed a certain distance to examine and refine the narratives in the film. In real life, when my own family reunification in Taiwan occurred, I was helping students with their script writing. My students needed me to help them solve all kinds of problems that they encountered in their writing. What is a story? How should the behaviour of characters be designed? How can a starting point or angle be chosen to help complete communication involving more people? Naturally, I used my upcoming journey as an illustration, and the students thought it would be great if it could be filmed. However, it was completely out of the question to film the whole journey—it would have been impossible to distinguish the identity of the person who was experiencing the event from the identity of a filmmaker, and thus impossible to accomplish an artistic work. Back then, I mainly treated my narrative as a teaching conversation, like communication between friends, hoping that my students could get some inspiration from it. I told my students that narrating stories like this would require them to think deeply about time and space, and to find a suitable perspective and method. I stopped short of taking any further action beyond my story telling.

These conversations with my students took place four years ago, when my child was about one year old. It was not until two years later, that I finally had some room to digest and look at my own family reunion with fresh eyes. Only at that moment did I start to consider turning the story into something that could be conveyed to more people. I was not very courageous then, but many of friends who heard me talking about this idea, especially some filmmakers in Taiwan where I planned to shoot the film, expressed their support, so I decided to have a go. But I knew it would be extremely hard. The crux of the issue was that when I started to write the script, I realised that because I was so close to the story, I couldn't make rational judgments about

many aspects of the narrative, and couldn't use my identity as a creator to solve certain problems. There were many things that I didn't realise needed explaining, as the story was so personal.

In addition, the other two co-scriptwriters of the film were both female, and we became interested in the challenge of writing about mother-daughter relationships. My wife and I began writing the script, and when we were on the third or fourth draft my friend Wai Chan joined us. She is a bit older than me, and grew up in Hong Kong rather than mainland China. She is a novelist, and was a colleague of mine when I was teaching in Hong Kong. She provided me with numerous suggestions for the first few drafts of our script, which dealt huge blows to my ideas, making me both miserable and delighted. From her comments I gained new understandings of my relationship with my own mother and with China. I began to rethink my own problems. Finally, I said to Wai Chan: 'Only by formally inviting you to join us in writing the script can I have the chance to finish it with your help.' Since it was a sincere request, she agreed. In our new team, I was still responsible for most of the writing, but would send her every draft. She was like a lighthouse, standing beside me and clearly identifying all the problems in the script. She would then sit me down and provide me with some very critical comments. We wrote eleven or twelve drafts in total. It was not until the ninth or tenth draft that she started to do some actual writing. She refined some details of the script and adjusted the order and structure of some scenes, among other things. This was how our writing process unfolded.

When I first talked to Wai Chan, the protagonist was a male director, making it impossible to distinguish the story from my own life. The character of his wife was also indistinguishable from my wife, who accompanied me in exile from China to Hong Kong. In rejecting this idea, Wai Chan said: 'First, the concept of exile does not really come into existence if everyone in the family is in exile, because there is no contrast of identity and no difference in their rights and difficulties—a certain differentiation must exist. Second, the status of women will be very low in the film if the director is a male.' Originally, the role of the director's wife was someone who was always ready to help, walking around in the background, quietly arranging the itinerary, and taking care of the child. I considered this and her other suggestions, and ultimately accepted them all.

**ZJY:** You and your wife Peng Shan have worked together on filmmaking for a long time. As a result of your previous film, you are now both in exile, living, and working in Hong Kong. Wai Chan is a local female novelist in Hong Kong. She therefore had a doubly different perspective as someone who is not in exile and as someone outside of your immediate family dynamics. Can you give some examples of how this insight shaped the film?

**YL:** In the initial draft of our script, the biggest problem was that I wrote a very happy, warm, and emotional scene for the first meeting of the grandma and her grandson. As a filmmaker, I definitely would not have liked this style of writing. But I didn't realise the problem at that time because writing the script helped me to accomplish something unachievable. In real life, I have not seen my parents for six years. In our own journey, we travelled to Taiwan to meet my wife's family. So I envisaged the scene in which my child met my mother to be cosy and joyful. Wai Chan said to me: 'Such a scene cannot happen. Children actually feel scared when they first meet the elderly because their smell, which foreshadows death, is particularly hard for children to accept.' Wai Chan clearly pointed out the issues for me. Only at that moment did I realise that I had been avoiding filling this particular film with sorrow and psychological scars, but this was actually a really bad practice. I needed Wai Chan's way of looking at things. As a Hong Kongese—rather than a mainlander—she had a perspective of distance, through which I found a kind of truth.

Wai Chan's insight can be clearly seen in following scene: on the first night, the team leader of the Chinese tour group came to the hotel room to announce requirements about the upcoming itinerary and rules for independent travellers joining the tour. When I started to write this scene, I portrayed the protagonist Yang Shu as being very unhappy, mainly with the team leader. Wai Chan said to me: 'This is not right. Actually, she is most unhappy with her mother, because the way her mother handles everything is exactly the typical mainland Chinese behaviour that she hates most, and the China that she loathes most is fully reflected in her mother.' At that moment, I was deeply hurt by Wai Chan's sharp remarks, for what she said was indeed my situation, but I just couldn't confront the reality.

Another example of her insight was on display in her edits to the first draft of our script. The opening scene was on a flight. Everyone in the family was on a plane to Taiwan, and the flight attendants asked if they needed incoming passenger cards. Wai Chan said to me: 'This is such a complicated a journey and starting with this scene will not allow the audience to understand the complexity. One main character is a child, who was born in Hong Kong; he needs to do an online application for his visa to Taiwan. Another is the elderly mother, who lives in China but wants to travel to Taiwan; she must stay with the tour group because her passport is held by the tour guide. The third main character is Yang Shu with a somewhat complicated identity: she is the child's mother and since she is in exile in Hong Kong she has to go through a special procedure to obtain a Taiwanese visa. The fourth main character is the young Hong Kongese dad who frequently travels back and forth to China

to hold exhibitions. You need to reserve sufficient time for unpacking all these complexities.’ These suggestions for script revisions were very sensible, technical, and close to how I really felt, but just hadn’t realised at that time. I relied very much on Wai Chan’s advice and guidance.

I put my thoughts and feelings about Hong Kong into the character of the Yang Shu’s Hong Kongese husband. The husband is a low-profile yet indispensable character that went through further development when we were selecting the actor. In the film, the husband was actually very nice, in a kind of radiantly perfect way. If we had chosen an actor who was always outgoing and optimistic, this would have been boring. I then started to think: which actor can play the role, among those whom I know of and whose films I have watched? Our final choice was the actor who usually takes a gangster role in independent films in Malaysia. He makes independent rock music and his songs are all a bit dark. This edginess served to complement the character.

I have been in exile since I left China. This experience has provided me with a different perspective, allowing me to see and experience different cultures and places. In my daily life, comparisons abound between my past experiences in China, which are still in my memory, my interactions with Chinese friends, my life in Hong Kong, and my trips to Taiwan. When writing the film, I drew on these comparisons, experiences, and observations. The film was also the product of a team effort, rather than my own work alone—everyone on the team had freedom to innovate and put their own feelings and understandings into the story and characters.

**ZJY:** Around 2012, independent directors who faced political repression due to their works and thus relocated to Hong Kong—including you, Huang Wenhai, and myself, together with two young scholars in Hong Kong (Tit Leung Cheung and Li Tiecheng)—established the Chinese Independent Documentary Lab and started to organise film curation, discussions, research, and filmmaking. Now it is 2019, and we have decided to disband our Lab. The Chinese Documentary Film Festival founded by Hong Kongese director Tammy Cheung will also be renamed as the Hong Kong International Documentary Film Festival. You believe that these changes epitomise and herald a wider trend. Why do you think so? On a side note, I noticed that many small objects in your latest film were related to independent film festivals, and I feel that it is almost an elegy for Chinese independent films. I am wondering how the audience outside the world of independent films will perceive this.

**YL:** In *A Family Tour*, independent filmmaking is like an invisible storyline; people who know the scene will immediately get it. But it is not the main theme of the film; it is only something complementary or something hidden behind the story, which pertains to the Chinese independent film movement. A crucial



*A Family Tour* (自由行, 2018).

turning point for this movement happened at the beginning of the century, when people started to get together to watch independent films and some exhibitions emerged. These gatherings were either semi-official or semi-underground, and faced numerous uncertainties; it was very common that the screenings could not finish or had no choice but to self-censor. This activity reached a peak around 2008, when high-quality works abounded. I also participated in film curation at that time, and organised local film festivals in Chongqing. Back then, as many as 300 films were received each year, including shorts and experimental films, with more than 100 being screened at the festival. These figures were shocking in China. Because of all the constraints with regard to promotion, the size of the audience was not very large: maybe around a couple of thousand over a week. At that time, four to five cities in China, or even more, had similar collective screening events and had established definite audiences. There were ongoing conversations and resonances between directors, audiences, and commentators. Back then, the creative and discursive environments were both relatively positive. Everyone had the same feeling that it seemed possible to do anything. All kinds of conversations were happening including conversations with officials; it was a honeymoon and utopian feeling.

The situation began to deteriorate around 2010, and exhibitions of independent films completely came to an end in 2012. Some large-scale independent film festivals and film exhibitions with nearly a decade of history were formally and forcibly closed down by the government. Previously, the interference in independent film festivals was comparatively mild—certain measures were usually adopted to force film festivals either to go underground, where they could continue their screening, or to change their names and locations. In 2012, there was absolutely no chance for independent film festivals to survive even if they took these precautions.

In this context, some filmmakers emigrated, but still go back to China occasionally to make their movies. Some filmmakers are in exile, holding film exhibitions or other activities abroad. Others remain in China and are now doing some small-scale screenings. Having no way to concentrate their screenings at one time or place, they can only do piecemeal screenings on the weekends and at irregular intervals. Film projectors are facing increasingly stringent self-censorship, and the scope of discussion is also getting narrower. All these changes have then led to a situation in which films can no longer be screened in their entirety as they could in the past.

Chinese independent films used to play quite a leading role. Among the numerous examples is an independent film named *Petition* (上访 2008) by director Zhao Liang. After ten years of

shooting, the film finally debuted in 2008. Back then, only a few people were actually watching independent films, and many felt that the experience of petitioners was too far away from their life, so it was just a story. Nowadays, however, anyone is likely to become a petitioner at any moment due to, for example, what is happening to their children in the kindergarten. Almost anything can turn a commoner into a petitioner. Independent films took the lead. However, their demise, from my perspective, was also inevitable. I feel that Chinese independent films have already become a thing of the past.

During the preparation for shooting *A Family Tour*, I collected some clothes, bags, and other things from independent film festivals. The protagonist Yang Shu is someone who has attended many exhibitions of independent films over a long period. I wrote biographies for the characters. Both the actors and I knew well what kind of film exhibitions that Yang Shu had attended, how the exhibitions had changed, and what impacts these changes had on her own work. The character is active in exhibitions of independent films; her Hong Kongese husband is also a film curator who travels between different places. Such artistic activities and backgrounds of the characters mean that everything they possess is closely related to the recent history of the independent film movement. As with the preceding poetry and independent music movements, the independent film movement has already become a feature of the past. In the film, this past was in exile, or, to put it another way, objects related to the past were presented as if they were relics of another time. This is why independent film constitutes an invisible storyline of *A Family Tour*, which narrates the gradual demise of China's independent film movement and intends to memorialise it. It is also a nod to my friends involved in the independent film movement.

**ZJY:** In China, independent filmmakers are usually marginalised and find it hard to get in touch with the audience, readers, or commentators. Does this situation constitute another form of exile? Your short film *A Sunny Day*, which recounts the Umbrella Movement, was released in 2016, and you were described as 'having sworn allegiance' to Hong Kong, and even as having become a Hong Kongese. In *A Family Tour*, the protagonist Yang Shu replied that she was a stranger after being repeatedly asked if she perceived herself as a Hong Kongese. What did you want to convey to the audience with this statement?

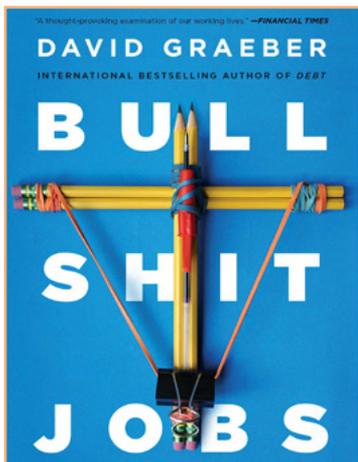
**YL:** Po Chung Chow, a political science professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, once wrote on Facebook: 'If freedom is a very important value in our daily life, how will you then face the loss of freedom in your surroundings?' When such loss makes your surroundings increasingly strange to you, you have actually become a stranger, an unknown person.

At this moment, you may have to make some choices. Should you simply adapt to the new environment, hoping that all the confusion, suffering, or loneliness will disappear? Or should you choose to do something else, such as leave? Or should you stay and continue to fight against your new surroundings, being ready to bear the ramifications? The last option may put you in a situation where you feel even lonelier and even fewer people can understand you.

During our discussion about the last version of the script, Wai Chan asked me: ‘What does Yang Shu actually want?’ I was dumbstruck. Although I had spent much time creating and writing about the character, I could not actually offer a reasonable explanation of what she actually wanted. Wai Chan suggested that I read Wang Dan’s book *My Identity as a Stranger Is Becoming Clearer* (我异乡人的身份逐渐清晰 2003). So I did, and later asked the actress who played Yang Shu to read it as well. I feel that it is a great book that touches on issues of identity that are important to the character of Yang Shu at her stage of life. She is a female, mother, and filmmaker, but of course, her identity is not this simple.

Exile has always existed and continues to exist, including exile pertaining to literature, poetry, music, and independent films. Even some contemporary mainstream filmmakers used to be in exile, but because many of them have never mentioned or publicly discussed this, their experiences have gradually faded into the past and have been ignored. For example, for a long time I didn’t know that in the aftermath of the June Fourth Incident, many mainstream filmmakers actually went into exile and stayed in the United States or other countries for a while because they had expressed support for students or held viewpoints that differed from the official stance. Back then, these filmmakers, including some who are now very active in China’s film industry, all made their choice between going into exile or staying put. The discursive space for these topics is somewhat obscure and invisible. I don’t have any statistics, but I feel that exile is part of the human experience. When it happens in our sphere, we will feel that it is getting increasingly common. Since political situations have turned acute and have been changing rapidly over the past few years, more and more people around me have exited. It does seem that the number of independent filmmakers who left or were exiled from China has become larger. Nonetheless, I don’t think these filmmakers are separate from those mentioned before; they actually all belong to the same generation. ■

Translated by Nan LIU



*Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber (Simon & Schuster 2019). Graeber's photo by Frantzesco Kangaris/Guardian News & Media Ltd.

## Bullshit Jobs

A Conversation with David Graeber

Loretta LOU

**I**s your job a pointless job? Does it make a meaningful contribution to the world? If your job was eliminated, would it matter to anyone? These are some of the questions that David Graeber, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics and Political Science, examines in his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (Simon & Schuster 2019). It has been estimated that across the developed world up to 40 percent of workers—especially those in administration, finance, and the legal professions—saw their jobs as a form of meaningless toil analogous to the Greek myth of Sisyphus. These white-collar workers covertly think that their jobs are not only useless, but sometimes harmful to society. With increased automation, a fifteen-hour workweek is not unachievable, but on average working hours have increased rather than decreased over the past few decades. In this book, Graeber examines this epidemic of futility, and offers a theory for human freedom and social liberation.

Loretta Lou: Can you give us a summary of how the book builds on your essay 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant', which went viral when it was first published in STRIKE! Magazine in the summer of 2013?

David Graeber: Well, to some degree, all I was trying to do was to give voice to all the hundreds of people who wrote to me with stories and reflections on their own experience of bullshit jobs. It was so clear that a substantial portion of the population, in most rich countries at least, had experienced things that to them constituted a profound form of spiritual violence, but completely lacked a language to talk about it—or, even more perhaps, did not feel that they had a right to. But also I wanted to think a little harder about why this had happened. A lot of people thought the original essay ended in some kind of conspiracy theory, since I pointed out that the rich and powerful find it very convenient that everyone else should be spending all their time working, even without a purpose of any kind, and this must have something to do with why this is allowed to happen and why no one steps in to do anything about the situation. So it is really, if anything, an anti-conspiracy theory. I wanted to explore the larger socioeconomic and cultural mechanisms that not just allowed pointless work to emerge, but which make it so difficult to talk about it openly, let alone see it as a social problem.

LL: Your definition of 'bullshit jobs' is mainly subjective. You define a bullshit job as one that the workers consider to be pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious. Yet, for many Chinese people, sacrificing and being able to support for their family is as important if not more important than contributing to the wider social good. It is a way of becoming a moral being. What do you make of that?

DG: What you speak of in China is not all that different from some of the attitudes I encountered in Europe or America. Paid employment, especially wage labour, has long been considered part of a life-cycle phenomenon; it is the way you learn how to be an adult, but also how you gain the means to actually become an adult capable of taking care of a family. When you talk to people who say their jobs are pointless, they too will almost always say that they are doing it for their family—or even for the family they would like to have in the future. Yet, at the same time, I do not think there is anyone in the world who, on discovering that the only way to ensure comfort and opportunity for their children was to dig a hole and fill it in a hundred times a day, would not be driven a little crazy by it.

LL: What are the differences between the bullshit jobs created in our current neoliberal moment, the make-work jobs created to fulfil the illusion of full employment in twentieth-century communist states, and the Keynesian ditch digging/refilling of the great depression period?

DG: In many ways, I think they are structurally similar. In all these cases, there was enormous political pressure for full employment. If you think about it, nowadays, the one thing the left and right in rich countries seem to entirely agree on is that ‘more jobs’ is always good—even if they argue about the best means to create them. But this also provides an insight into the differences. The left approach, typical of Keynesianism, was always to throw money at consumers, to increase ‘aggregate demand’, so that employers would hire more people to produce more cheese and televisions and swimming pools and such. The right wing, ‘supply-side’ approach, dominant since the 1980s, has simply been to shift money directly to the rich, who, as ‘job creators’, are assumed to know best how to invest. But, of course, if there is no increase in aggregate demand they are not going to hire new people to produce goods no one is there to buy, so how are they likely to respond to another huge tax break and attendant political pressure to create jobs? The logical thing to do is hire more flunkies and office minions to make themselves even more powerful and important, and that is pretty much what they do. So it is a redistributive mechanism, much like the older socialist forms, but instead of creating dummy proletarian jobs, they create dummy administrative and managerial jobs. The difference in terms of the experience of people who have the dummy jobs is that the capitalist version gives you much more prestige, but at the same time there is more surveillance: they are much more likely to force you to actually keep busy even if there is nothing for you to do.

LL: The spiritual violence of doing nothing in a bullshit job seems to be the inverse of the labour exploitation we see among workers doing precarious ‘shit jobs’ in the casualised gig economy (for instance, university cleaners; Amazon workers being fired for not working fast enough, etc.). Are these two phenomena linked somehow?

DG: I think so. There is an enormous culture of ‘lean and mean’ in the corporate world, but that is applied almost exclusively to blue-collar workers, not to white-collar ones, where the opposite logic applies. I always go back to the example of the Elephant Tea factory near Marseille, which illustrates for me a lot of what has been happening since the 1970s: in this case, workers improved the machinery and increased productivity steadily over the years. In the 1950s or 1960s, this would have led to increases in pay—there was basically an understanding

that if productivity goes up, workers get a share of the increased profits—or perhaps hiring more workers, but since it was the 1990s, the boss just hired more and more white-collar workers. At first, there had been only two: the boss and a human resources manager. Suddenly the catwalks were full of guys in suits, three, four, five, ultimately maybe a dozen of them, wandering around with clipboards watching people work, basically trying to figure out some kind of excuse for their existence. They tried to concoct schemes for greater efficiency but the place was already about as efficient as it could be. They held meetings and seminars and conferences and read each other's reports. Finally, they decided: well, we can just fire everyone and move the plant to Poland! The place has been in occupation ever since.

LL: You argue that Universal Basic Income (UBI) will liberate people from their bullshit jobs. In China, UBI has resonances with the socialist state's 'iron rice bowl' policy—something that the Chinese people have mixed feelings about. What do you think are the major obstacles to implementing UBI in former socialist states?

DG: Some people have talked instead about 'universal basic services' which is much more similar to what used to exist under state socialism. I think the experience of such regimes is in many ways paradoxical. In the early twentieth century, people used to remark that the socialist unions tended to demand higher wages, the anarchist unions tended to demand fewer hours: one appealed to workers who wanted a larger stake in the system, the 'advanced proletariat' as Marx termed them, the other, to recently proletarianised peasants and craftsmen, who could still imagine a life outside the system entirely. Marx and Bakunin had a famous argument over who were the real revolutionary classes: the 'advanced proletariat' in places like England and Germany, or the recently proletarianised or 'in-threat-of-being proletarianised' in places like Russia or Spain, or for that matter China. I think the great irony of twentieth-century socialism is that Bakunin was right, it was the anarchist recently proletarianised constituencies who made the revolution, but what they got was socialist rulers who subscribed to the idea that they should ultimately create a land of industrial and consumer abundance. However, it is doubly ironic that this was never going to happen under a command economy, and that the one benefit they did provide was precisely the anarchist one: with universal employment and a system where it was pretty much impossible to get fired from your job, people did, in fact, get less hours.

Paradoxically, owing to their productivist ideology, the socialists could not take credit for this, even though it was perhaps the most significant social benefit they did provide.

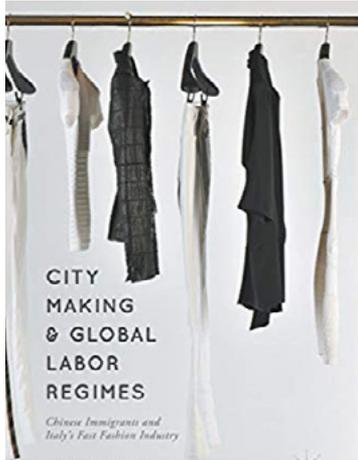
Rather, they had to refer to it as ‘the problem of absenteeism’. When workers in, say, Poland became enthusiastic about reintroducing capitalism, it simply never occurred to them it would mean they would have to actually work 8–10 hour days and ask for permission to go to the bathroom. By the time they figured this out it was too late to do anything about it. But it strikes me that we need to start by rewriting the history of what really happened in the twentieth century, to liberate it from the propaganda from both sides, before we can assess what we can do about it now. As for China, well, I do not really know, but I am aware the 996 movement is starting to challenge exactly these sorts of issues. But it is just a start. I think we need to ask how much did the two rival systems of socialism and capitalism share some of the same basic mistakes about work and production. And we should more carefully assess the extent to which the apparent flaws of the socialist system might have actually been its biggest advantages? Is there a way to make a social guarantee a way of unleashing popular inventiveness and creativity rather than stifling it?

LL: Some of your conservative readers might actually endorse your espousal of Universal Basic Income as not only an argument in favour of increased automation, but also an excuse to eliminate all social welfare programs, which would be detrimental to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in our society, such as disabled people. How do you feel about the political implications and perhaps misappropriation of your work?

DG: Well, it seems to me that there are three broad approaches to UBI: there is a liberal version which just wants to give everyone a modest amount of money in addition to their income, as a kind of cushion; there is a right-wing version, which explicitly wants to undermine the welfare state; and there is a left-wing version, which is about detaching livelihood from work entirely—to say everyone is guaranteed a modest but comfortable lifestyle, if you want more, that is up to you. I am a proponent of the latter, which is about expanding the zone of unconditionality, not shrinking it. We need free health care, free higher education, *and* a basic income. Things like disability support would not be affected: we would not expect people to pay for their own wheelchairs any more than we would expect them to pay for their own medical care. But reducing conditionality also shrinks the role of the state and what might be called the demi-state—say the private healthcare industry in the United States, which is entirely state enabled and regulated, or the financial sector, which has become inexorably intertwined with the modern state. Above all it reduces the most obnoxious and intrusive elements of that state, the endless

functionaries who just exist to make poor people feel bad about themselves, to monitor if they are looking for a job hard enough, or taking care of their children well enough, or really married to the person they claim to be, etc. Most of those people are pretty miserable themselves. Except for a small minority of sadists, they do not actually enjoy denying people benefits. Let them have UBI too and maybe they will form a band or something, do something that will actually enrich the lives of others.

UBI in its radical leftist version is about redefining ‘economic freedom’. Freedom is not the ability to sell yourself into your choice of slaveries, or even to invest in buying a piece of your own collective slavery: it is the ability to decide for yourself what you have to contribute to society—because almost everyone does actually want to contribute in some way—without having to worry about being punished if some corporate or government bureaucrat disagrees. I think some conservatives would like that—it would certainly free up people to have more time for church, family, and the like—but it would also very much undermine the power of private capital, since even though it would not alter property relations, it would entirely change the meaning of wage labour. Since proletarians would not be forced to sell their time and energies, they would do it only if they actually chose to, meaning employers would have to offer them a far more advantageous deal. ■



*City Making and Global Labour Regimes* by Antonella Ceccagno (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).



## City Making and Global Labour Regimes

A Conversation with Antonella Ceccagno

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Chinese immigrants in European societies have often been perceived as a threat, especially in those contexts affected by economic decline and industrial retrenchment. Prato is no exception to this. Once a flourishing textile hub in which local entrepreneurs dominated the industry, a couple of decades ago the Italian city entered a phase of decline. It was only thanks to Chinese immigrants that it managed to survive, eventually thriving once again as the centre of a new value chain stretching from suppliers in China and Turkey all the way to buyers in Europe. Still, in spite of this contribution to the local economy, Chinese workers and entrepreneurs were repeatedly vilified and criminalised. In her new book, *City Making and Global Labour Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy's Fast Fashion Industry* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), Antonella Ceccagno draws on 15 years of fieldwork in the city to shed light on the entangled processes of city making and the restructuring linked to capital accumulation—tackling issues of governance, territory, migration, division of labour, labour mobility, housing, and human rights.

Ivan Franceschini: Your book takes a close look at the situation of Prato, with particular attention to its Chinese business community. Can you tell us more about your reasons for choosing this case study?

Antonella Ceccagno: The topic has been at the centre of scholarly debate for several years now, both in Italy and internationally. Chinese immigration in the Prato area has brought important questions to the fore, such as the characteristics of Chinese migration, transnationalism, and migrant entrepreneurship. The book discusses the city of Prato and the Chinese entrepreneurs who have transformed a declining textile district into the pulsing heart of a vibrant global fast fashion industry. However, neither the city itself nor the migrants are the unit of analysis of the book. They are the entry points from which I observe the migrants' role in the Italian fashion industry, which is shaped by local and national institutions and broader fields of power.

A lively debate has been going on, mainly among urban sociologists, about the uneven and unstable historical spatialities of capitalism. Prato is an exemplary case in that capitalist investment and disinvestment can be observed as taking place within a single locality but involving different industries, roughly over the same time span. My study unveils these related processes, showing that disinvestment in the textile industry by native industrialists has literally made room for investment in the clothing industry. Chinese migrants, active in the rising clothing industry, have come to physically replace native industrialists in the use of old textile factories and warehouses, which were abandoned because of the economic crisis. This process of replacement offers a concrete glimpse into the role of migrants as agents of neoliberal restructuring.

Besides, Prato—once famous as the 'exemplary' Italian industrial district—is now a disempowered city, one that has fallen behind in the global competitive processes of city repositioning. But its trajectory is a peculiar one, as instead of building on the new opportunities emerging with the arrival of the Chinese migrants, Prato has instead blamed the crisis on them, thus failing to make a comeback.

I was able to capture these dynamics because of my long-term engagement (1994–2007) as the research director and director of services at the Centre for Immigration Research and Services in Prato—an institution linked to the local government. In this capacity, I have had countless unstructured conversations with migrants, and later I complemented this with more recent fieldwork aimed at understanding variations over time. These sources disclosed a range of relationships that develop between migrant employers and workers, husbands and wives, parents and children, natives and migrants, and migrants and local institutions.

IF: In the book, you mention how the situation in Prato over the last few years has become tense and describe the city as 'exhausted and characterised by a state of crisis that it is unable to address'. What are the root causes of this crisis and how are these dynamics emblematic of broader social and economic tensions?

AC: Some crucial alterations in the global fashion industry—the rise of cheaper competitors, including China, and the restructuring of distribution chains that concentrated the power in the hands of global retailers—gave rise to an unprecedented crisis in the Italian fashion industry. These global shifts brought most of the small and medium manufacturing firms to their knees. This is a situation whose effects have been particularly visible from the turn of the century—well ahead of the 2008 crisis—but whose roots can be traced back to the 1980s. And, significantly, the late 1980s were the years when the Chinese migrants were attracted as subcontractors and workers into the Italian fashion industry.

As a result, Prato—just like other Italian fashion districts—transformed from a wealthy manufacturing centre contributing to the international success of Italian design to a disempowered city. At the same time, the economic downturn following the 2008 crisis had a huge impact on local society: the population experienced new forms of dispossession, including unemployment and early retirement, mortgage foreclosure, and the loss of social status. Even wealthy industrialists were deprived of their previously glamorous lifestyles. A gloomy atmosphere prevailed.

In the book, I show how anger became the prevalent mood among the populace throughout the country since the mid-2000s. This translated into different forms of distrust and hostility towards China, which by then was clearly the main winner in the globalisation race. Italian economists publicly declared that China was adopting dumping practices and tried to convince European institutions to fight against imports from China; also Italian cultural productions depicted China as the bad guy. For instance, the 2011 movie *The Arrival of Mister Wang* by the Manetti Brothers depicted China as an octopus-like alien invading the earth, and the award-winning 2012 book *Story of My People* by Edoardo Nesi, a writer and politician from Prato, held China responsible for a situation where 'everything that had always run smoothly suddenly started to go wrong'.

IF: In the book, you delve into the fundamental role of the Chinese community in shaping Prato as a city. Has the relationship between local inhabitants been smooth or has it been marred by underlying tensions?

AC: Well, tension was so high there that Prato was the only place in Europe where Chinese entrepreneurship was criminalised. Selective police controls on Chinese businesses came into being which included strong symbolic actions such as soldiers patrolling the streets, policemen assisted by police dogs, and police helicopters repeatedly flying over the areas where checks were conducted. In the book, I connect this all with the city's harsh experience of the crisis.

But let's start from the beginning. While most other migrant groups in Italy are mainly employed in low-paid jobs with modest prospects for career upgrading, Chinese migrants have made inroads into the Italian fashion industry mainly as small entrepreneurs in subcontracting and as workers employed in Chinese-run workshops. In the book, I argue that by offering high flexibility and low costs, at the national scale the network of Chinese subcontractors has helped prevent a more drastic reduction in Italy's role as a global exporter of fashion items. Thus, they represent one crucial way in which local-run manufacturing firms were able to respond to the globalisation of the fashion market.

Prato, however, is the much discussed exception in the Italian fashion scene. In fact, it is the only place in Italy where Chinese migrants have been able to break the unwritten rule that only locals are allowed to be manufacturers reaping the most substantial benefits, while migrants are only allowed to be subcontractors. In stark contrast with the rest of the country, in Prato Chinese migrants have upscaled and become manufacturers themselves, retaining profits that elsewhere are retained by the locals. Prato has become a renowned low-end fast fashion centre, sourcing textiles from China and Turkey, and selling fashionable low-cost garments in Europe and beyond.

What has blurred the picture, though, is that the rise of the Chinese-run fast fashion centre coincided with the crisis of the textile industry run by local entrepreneurs. Discontent was thus channelled in such a way that Chinese migrants were blamed for the loss of Prato's international relevance. Moreover, while the nationally-felt anger at the crisis was directed towards the inability of the elites to guarantee general wellbeing, in Prato the hegemonic discourse linked the ability of Chinese businesses to succeed at a time of crisis to their connections with, and economic rise of, China. This narrative posited a dual challenge that hung over the city—both from China the country and from Chinese migrants themselves—and provided an opportunity to use Chinese firms in the territory as scapegoats. My research explores and dismantles this conceptual conflation of China (as

a powerhouse of manufacturing and export) and the Chinese migrants in Italy (as successful entrepreneurs) into a single, dangerous challenge to Prato's society and economy.

IF: In December 2013, a fire in a Chinese-owned clothing factory in Prato killed seven Chinese migrants prompting widespread condemnation of the supposed 'Chinese productive regime'. In the book, you take issue with this interpretation of the event. Can you tell us more about your take on this?

AC: My argument is that the Chinese-run low-end fast fashion is not a 'deterritorialised' working regime. On the contrary, Chinese firms are firmly embedded in the territory and in the fashion industry. In the book, I show that in many respects the production regime of the Chinese migrants follows the pathway and the unwritten rules prevailing in the Italian fashion industry. Besides, I single out the 'mobile regime'—whereby workers sleep at work and move to other workshops to complete urgent tasks—and the outsourcing of family life—with children sent back to China or living in the houses of Chinese babysitters in Italy—as extreme forms of flexibility linked to the contemporary processes of the multiplication of labour and not to a specifically Chinese model. Furthermore, I show that this reorganisation of the space of production and of family life introduced by Chinese migrants is to the advantage of the entire Italian fashion industry. The so-called 'Chinese productive regime' is in actual fact emblematic—I argue—of the imperatives of fast-fashion.

My book also distances itself from essentialist interpretations that adopt the 'ethnic businesses' approach to get to grips with the peculiarity of Chinese-run fast fashion in Prato. Taking the opposite approach, I show that the process of 'ethnicisation' of the workforce smooths production operations and is therefore beneficial to the manufacturers, not only to the Chinese. Rather than taking the ethnic factor as a starting point for exploring and explaining the behaviours of a single group that is assumed to share common cultural traits and exhibit bonds of trust, in the book I carefully investigate the ways in which the ethnicisation of the workforce emerges from within and is shaped by more general transformations of the productive space which do not only involve or only benefit Chinese businesses. As the ethnicisation of the workforce emerged in a particular historical conjuncture, it can easily be abandoned when the conditions change, as is increasingly happening these days. ■

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Jonathan Bach is an Associate Professor of Global Studies at The New School. He is co-editor of *Learning from Shenzhen: China's Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City* (University of Chicago Press 2017) and author of *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany* (Columbia University Press 2017). His work examines material culture, memory, and urban change in Germany and China.

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Zandie Brockett is a curator, editor, and publisher working between the realms of book and exhibition making to present trans-Pacific visual narratives and oral histories that 'dis-Orient' notions of the 'East'. In Beijing, her research on social practice and urbanisation led her to establish Bactagon Projects, a platform for contemporary culture in urban China, and the bilingual literary publication 八家 *Bajia*. Besides serving as the journal's Editor-in-Chief, she is a founding member of Distribution Assembly East, a working group and distribution network of independent publishers and book-making artists from contemporary Asia. After eight years in China, Zandie now resides in Los Angeles.

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David Brophy is a Senior Lecturer in Modern Chinese History at the University of Sydney. He studies the social and political history of China's northwest, particularly the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and its connections with the Islamic and Russian/Soviet worlds. His first book, *Uyghur Nation* (Harvard University Press 2016), is on the politics of Uyghur nationalism between China and the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century.

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Antonella Ceccagno teaches Sociology of East Asia at the University of Bologna, Italy. For more than ten years she worked as the Managing and Research Director of the Center for Immigration Research and Services in Prato, Italy. She is interested in the emergence of new labour regimes and the role of migrants in processes of urban, regional, and industrial restructuring. She has written extensively on the Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry. She is the author of *City Making and Global Labour Regimes* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

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

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### **Painting in Grey and Permeating Gaps: Changing the Space for Chinese NGOs (HOLLY SNAPE)**

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