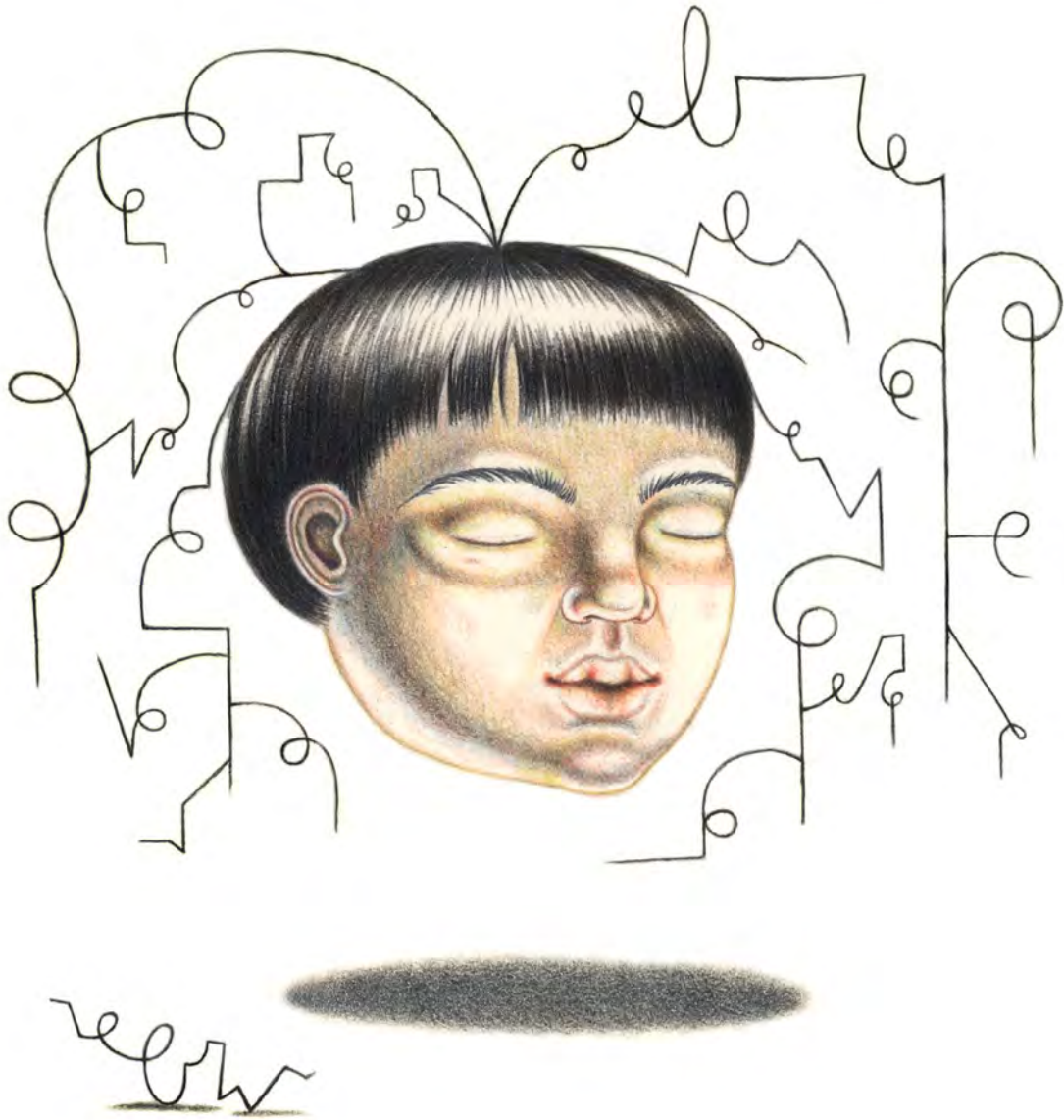


MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 10, ISSUE 1, JAN-JUN 2025

BEING YOUNG IN CHINA



MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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VOLUME 10, ISSUE #1
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EDITORIAL

Being Young in China

What does it mean to come of age in a society where the paths to adulthood are increasingly uncertain, yet the pressure to succeed remains relentless? In today's China, youth navigate the fading promise of reform-era mobility, the grind of economic slowdown, and a moralising narrative that glorifies hardship. Two expressions have come to define this generational mood: *neijuan* (内卷, 'involution'), the feeling of being trapped in endless competition with little reward, and *tangping* (躺平, 'lying flat'), a quiet refusal to play by those rules. In response to these pressures, young people are experimenting with new ways of living, working, and imagining the future, even as that future grows more precarious.

This issue of *Made in China Journal* explores how these dynamics unfold across schools, homes, workplaces, digital platforms, and creative spaces. Rather than casting youth as rebels or victims, the contributions examine the everyday strategies and compromises that define life under constraint. Some revisit how the Party-State has intervened in youth intimacy and labour; others trace how young people critique the celebration of hardship through grassroots investigations and poetic analogies between study and work. New imaginaries also take shape—through co-living, viral dreams of escape, feminist performance abroad, algorithmic entrepreneurship, and the layered politics of basketball—revealing a shared condition of precarity, improvisation, and ambivalence.

We open the focus section with an essay by **Zhaorui Lü**, who traces how the Chinese Party-State launched a nationwide matchmaking campaign in the early 1980s to address the so-called older youths' marriage problem. Through a close reading of newspapers and union gazetteers, she shows how the state actively intervened in young people's personal lives to shape intimate norms in the early reform era.

Several contributions explore the shifting emotional and moral landscapes of youth in China today. **Yukun Zeng** examines the enduring moralisation of hardship and how young people are beginning to challenge its

legitimacy. Drawing from his own schooling experience and youth-led 'labour investigations', he traces how students make connections between the pressures of study and those of work. **Dino Ge Zhang** introduces the concept of Sino-pessimism to describe the mood of stagnation and diminished expectations that increasingly shapes the experience of being young in China. He interprets popular terms such as 'involution', 'lying flat', and 'runology' not as passing trends but as forms of embodied critique and quiet refusal.

Other essays investigate how young people are forging alternative ways of inhabiting space and time in response to deepening precarity. **Zhuang Haoyan** examines the spread of co-living among urban youth, arguing that it reflects an 'experience orientation' shaped by mobility, uncertainty, and a sense of impermanence. This 'guest mind', she suggests, is both a coping mechanism and an expression of disposability. **Siyu Tang** explores the viral online fascination with Hegang, a declining rust-belt city near the Russian border that briefly became a fantasy site of rest and escape. In these digital spaces, young people project otherwise inexpressible emotions—anxiety, exhaustion, disaffection—creating what she calls 'zones of encounter' for fleeting forms of recognition.

Two contributions centre on how gendered aspirations and forms of labour unfold across digital and transnational settings. **Meiyun Meng** follows an all-female Chinese rock band in Tokyo whose feminist performances challenge conventional norms of femininity and navigate both platform constraints and diaspora politics. **Li Ziyi** investigates the world of 'mum bloggers' on Xiaohongshu, where the pursuit of freedom and flexibility is entangled with algorithmic control, state narratives of motherhood, and the persistent insecurities of platform-based work.

Basketball emerges as a site for reimagining masculinity, rural identity, and national belonging in the next two pieces. **Joel Wing-Lun** traces how the unexpected popularity of village basketball in Guizhou became tied to rural revitalisation efforts and nationalist spectacle, raising questions about its sustainability and meaning for local communities. **Selina Kötter** and **Gil Hizi** examine how masculinity is constructed across both rural basketball competitions and television dramas, showing how young men grapple with class-based frustration and social expectation in the face of shrinking opportunities.

Closing the section, **Chengzhi Zhang** examines the identity struggles of descendants of foreigners raised in China, showing how these individuals remain marginalised by racialised norms of belonging despite their deep cultural fluency and social integration.

In the China Columns section, **Yangyang Cheng** opens with the rediscovery of the MingKwai typewriter, invented by Lin Yutang in the 1940s. Through this seemingly incidental event, she reflects on the entanglement of language, invention, and the politics of cultural memory, raising enduring questions about modernity, authorship, and what it means to be Chinese. **Changhao Wei** and **Taige Hu** examine the recent reform to China's retirement age—a long-anticipated but politically sensitive move that the authorities enacted through an expedited legislative process. Their analysis reveals how the Chinese legislature has weakened its own deliberative norms in the face of political pressure and social risk.

We then have two pieces, one by **Hong Zhang** and one by **Zenel Garcia** and **Phillip Guerrero**, that consider the implications of the launch of the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project on the Tibetan Plateau. Framed as a green energy milestone, the project exemplifies the state's increasingly centralised, top-down approach to development and its expansion of infrastructural power into sensitive frontier regions. Finally, **Fan Yang** investigates the rise of Shenzhen's 'low-altitude economy' as a technopolitical imaginary anchored in drone infrastructure and airspace governance. By conceptualising Shenzhen as a media infrastructure complex, she explores how new vertical geographies are reshaping urban development and state power in the Greater Bay Area.

In the Work of Arts section, **Zhang Xiaoyun** and **Yang Hua** analyse *Vagabonds Trilogy*, Xu Tong's documentary series on sex workers, fortune-tellers, and rural migrants, showing how it captures the fragile balance between precarity, agency, and survival on the social margins. **Sia X. Yang** examines the evolving career of performance artist **Ge Yulu**, tracing how his once-radical interventions have been absorbed into institutional frameworks while continuing to probe the limits of authority and artistic autonomy.

We close this issue with four book conversations. **Sam Bass** speaks with **Johan Elverskog** about *A History of Uyghur Buddhism* (Columbia University Press, 2024), which recovers the Buddhist past of the Uyghurs and challenges Islam-centric framings of

their identity. **Yihuan Zhang** interviews **Ting Guo** on *Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), discussing how love operates as a political and affective force in Chinese modernity. **Dechen Pemba** speaks with **Brendan A. Galipeau** about *Crafting a Tibetan Terroir* (University of Washington Press, 2025), examining how wine production in Yunnan has become a site of Tibetan cultural expression and environmental engagement. Finally, **Laura De Giorgi** talks to **John Alekna** about *Seeking News, Making China* (Stanford University Press, 2024), an exploration of how the rise of radio and the circulation of news transformed China's political and social landscape. ■

The Editors

CHINA COLUMNS



Lin Tai-yi takes a letter from her father, Dr. Lin Yutang, using the remarkable new Chinese typewriter he invented.

Lin Tai-yi writes a letter dictated by her father Lin Yutang on the typewriter he invented. Source: Lin Yutang House.

Lost and Found

The Unexpected Journey of the MingKwai Typewriter

Yangyang CHENG

A casual inquiry on Facebook led to a stunning discovery. The lone prototype of the legendary MingKwai typewriter has reappeared in a New York basement, after it was assumed lost for more than half a century. Invented by the Chinese writer and scholar Lin Yutang in 1947, the pathbreaking device inspired generations of language-processing technology but was deemed a commercial failure. The story of MingKwai, as well as the life and legacy of its creator, embodies an ancient civilisation's search for modernity and national identity. Its rediscovery raises lingering questions about who owns an idea and what it means to be Chinese.

It began as an innocuous inquiry on Facebook. Nelson Felix, a resident of New York State, posted in the group 'What's My Typewriter Worth?' about a curious find he made while clearing out the basement of his wife's grandfather. He shared a few photos. The keys on the typewriter are all in Chinese, Felix noted, and the model does not appear to have ever been sold in the United States. 'Is it even worth anything?' he asked (Felix 2025).

By the next day, news of Felix's find had spread across the Pacific (IT之家 2025). Exclamations of excitement and disbelief flooded the comment section of the original post (see comments to Felix 2025).



Screenshot of the Facebook post in which Nelson Felix inquires about a typewriter he found.

Thomas S. Mullaney (2025), a historian at Stanford University and the author of *The Chinese Typewriter* (2017), called it '[t]he most important discovery in Chinese history since the rediscovery of Dragon Bones or the Terracotta Warriors'.

The machine is called *MingKwai*: 'clear and fast'. Invented by the renowned Chinese scholar and writer Lin Yutang in 1947, it was the first Chinese typewriter with a keyboard. Its ingenious design inspired generations of language-processing technology, but only one prototype was made and had long been assumed lost (Mullaney 2017). In recent years, engineering teams and design studios have tried to re-create the device based on available documentation, with limited success (Liu 2024; HTX Studio 2023). The legendary typewriter, like Lin himself, was inimitable.

A prolific author both in his native tongue and in English, Lin was regarded as one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century and a peerless interpreter of Chinese culture to the West during his time (Reuters 1976). His creativity extended beyond the page. As he told reporters, he 'always liked gadgets' (San Francisco Examiner 1947). For three decades after 1936, Lin lived in New York, where *MingKwai* was built. Like many of his written

works, the pioneering invention bridged the East and the West and propelled the past into the future. The birth of *MingKwai* and its subsequent journey, from tragic loss to surprising rediscovery, encapsulate an ancient civilisation's search for modernity and national identity across an uneven world connected by technology yet fractured by politics.



The son of a village pastor, Lin grew up in Fujian Province on China's southern coast, across the strait from the island of Taiwan (Qian 2017). In 1895, months before Lin was born, the Qing Empire lost the First Sino-Japanese War and yielded Taiwan to Japanese rule. Sixteen years later, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown and the newly founded Republic of China struggled to control its vast territory. Lin studied English at St John's University in Shanghai and earned a master's degree from Harvard. After completing his doctoral dissertation on ancient Chinese phonetics at the University of Leipzig, he returned to China to teach and soon established himself as one of the country's most prominent authors (Lin Yutang House 2015).

In 1935, the publication of *My Country and My People*, written in English and first released in the United States, brought Lin international acclaim. Encouraged by his friend Pearl S. Buck, Lin and his family moved to New York the following year.

While he lived an ocean away, the homeland was never far from Lin's mind. In essays and books, he described his country's illustrious past and trying present to a Western audience, and contemplated China's future. Lin had come of age at a historic juncture for China and the world. Devastating defeats by foreign powers shattered the Chinese literati's centuries-old sense of cultural superiority. Progressive scholars, including many of Lin's peers, saw Chinese tradition as the social albatross holding their country back. They sought new tools and ideas, imported from the West, for national salvation. One of the targets of their critique was the Chinese script (Moser 2016). Dating back millennia, the ideographic characters were deemed antiquated: they are too difficult to learn and too cumbersome to write.

As the historian Uluğ Kuzuoğlu elucidates in his 2023 book *Codes of Modernity: Chinese Scripts in the Global Information Age*, industrialisation ignited fresh demands for efficiency and productivity. New modes of transportation and communication, from railways to the telegraph, shrank distance and collapsed time. The growing flow of people, goods, and ideas gave rise to an expanding bureaucracy, as more clerical work was needed to record and regulate migration, production, and exchange. A lot more needed to be written down and shared fast. By the early twentieth century, the click-clack of the typewriter had become the soundtrack of the modern state.

The original typewriters were designed for the Latin alphabet. Conceived with little regard for the non-Western world, the technology's proliferation served Western hegemony. The devices arrived on distant shores along the same routes as capital and colonial expansion and were advertised as a necessity for civilisational advancement. Languages with non-Latin alphabets were forced to contort and comply with the alien instrument. The Chinese script, unreachable with an alphabetic keyboard, was castigated as incompatible with modernity (Mullaney 2017).

Many Chinese scholars and educators agreed with the unforgiving assessment. They proposed ways to radically reform how to write their language, from

reducing the number of strokes in a character to replacing the ideographs with a phonetic alphabet. Lin was in favour of simplifying the characters, but he opposed abolishing the script—'the visible symbol of China's unity' (1935: 17–18; see also Lin 1933). The Chinese writing system epitomised longevity and richness. Contemporary readers could access ancient texts and people who spoke different languages could understand each other's writing.

Lin also criticised the relentless pursuit of efficiency. In his 1937 bestseller, *The Importance of Living*, Lin cautioned: 'The tempo of modern industrial life ... imposes upon us a different conception of time as measured by the clock, and eventually turns the human being into a clock himself' (pp. 168–69). Nevertheless, the advocate for 'glorious and magnificent idling' also recognised the value of time and the importance of mass literacy, especially in moments of national peril. In a column written for the *New York Times* in 1938, Lin prophesied that a new nation would emerge from the ancient land of his birth, forged in the flames of war amid escalating Japanese invasions. Yet, 'without modern means of communication, unity was a physical impossibility'. New technologies were essential to carry 'the force of ideas' for 'increasing public enlightenment' (Lin 1938).

By the time Lin penned this influential essay, he had been working for years to develop an index system for the Chinese script. He wanted to organise the tens of thousands of characters in a more practical manner, and to manifest the method physically via a keyboard. He wanted to build a Chinese typewriter.



For decades, the very idea of a Chinese typewriter was disparaged as an oxymoron in the West, a punchline in popular culture 'almost synonymous with the paradoxical or impossible' (Bonavia 1973). Before MingKwai, earlier models of Chinese typewriters had been invented; some were in commercial use. Instead of typing with a keyboard, the characters were set on a tray bed or rotating drum, and the user had to locate them individually for print. The process was slow and labour-intensive. The limited space on the devices meant only a few thousand characters could be included (Mullaney 2017). Learning of Lin's progress on a new Chinese typewriter in 1945, reporters at the *Chicago Daily Tribune* consulted their laundryman



The Minkwai typewriter. Source: Mullaney 2017.

and a busboy at the local chop-suey joint and speculated on the size of the machine: might it rival the Hoover Dam or at least match the pipe organ in the Chicago Theatre?

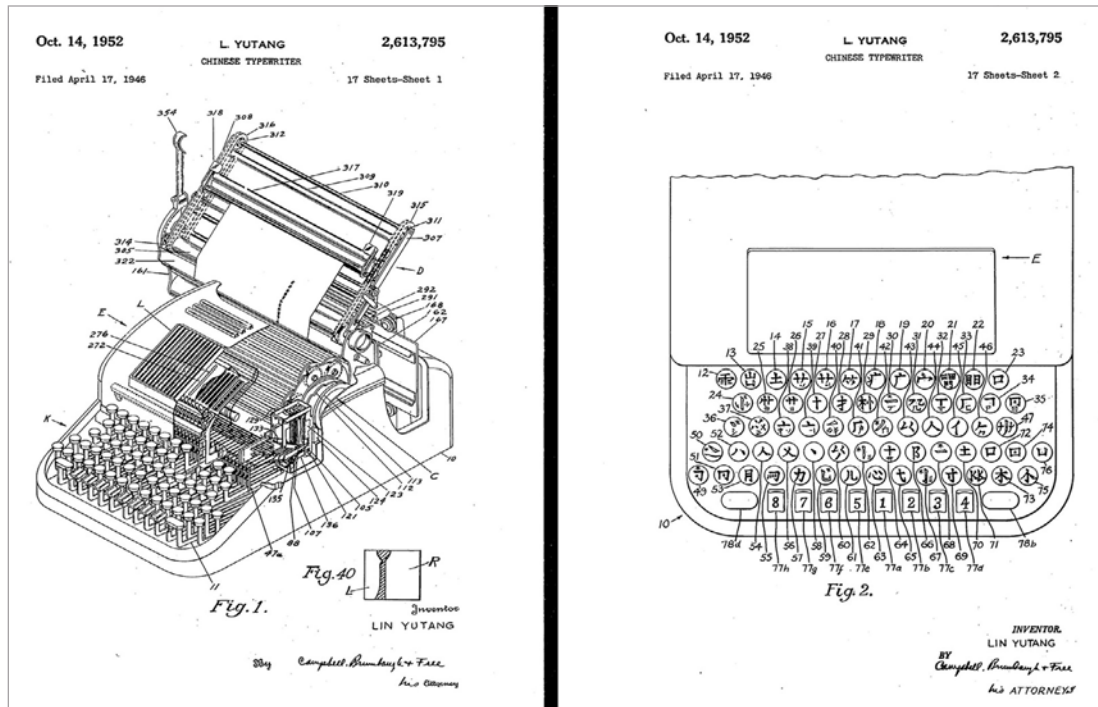
The press did not need to guess for long. Two years later, in the summer of 1947, Lin unveiled his creation, the culmination of a three-decade-long endeavour. His second daughter, Lin Tai-yi, a prodigious writer and novelist, demonstrated its use. At nine inches (23 centimetres) tall and less than 20 inches (50 centimetres) in length and width, MingKwai was no larger than a standard English typewriter. Most notably, it resembled its Western counterparts and featured a keyboard. With 72 keys, the device could type more than 90,000 Chinese characters.

The incredible feat was accomplished through a novel sort and search method. Lin broke down Chinese ideographs into more fundamental components of strokes and shapes, and arranged the characters in a linear order, like an English dictionary does with alphabetic words (Tsu 2011, 2014). By pressing one of the 36 top character component keys and one of the 28 bottom component keys simultaneously, the machine would find up to eight corresponding characters. The user could see the candidates through a special viewing window on the device, which Lin called his ‘magic eye’, and select the correct one by pushing the respective numerical key.

In other words, the combination of three keys—two character components and one number—produced a unique address, with which the gears in MingKwai could locate and retrieve the matching character from its memory bank: a cluster of tightly packed metal cylinders where all the character shapes had been set. MingKwai was not just the first Chinese typewriter with a keyboard; it also embodied the first Chinese input method and helped lay the intellectual foundation for modern human–computer interactions (Mullaney 2017, 2024).

The stunning design debuted to much attention and fanfare. Newspapers across North America and the Sinophone world and as far away as Dublin and Jerusalem covered Lin’s invention (Times Pictorial 1947; The Palestine Post 1947). The reports highlighted MingKwai’s promise of efficiency, when a day’s secretarial work could be done in an hour. Lin boasted that his device could transform the Chinese office and commercial life, help usher in a new industrial era, and ‘move the clock of progress in China forward by ten to twenty years’ (San Francisco Examiner 1947). The *Chinese Nationalist Daily*, a newspaper based in New York, saw in Lin the potential to be ‘ranked with Gutenberg’ (Ritchie 1949).

As Lin aspired to revolutionise Chinese writing and bureaucracy, a different kind of revolution was taking place in his homeland. Japan had surrendered, but China was still at war, and the Nationalist



Pages from MingKwai's patent application.
Source: Google Patents.

Government under Chiang Kai-shek was rapidly losing ground to the communist rebels led by Mao Zedong. Speaking at the press conference in New York in 1947 at which he announced his invention, Lin stated that he hoped to return to China soon and show Mingkwai to his countrymen. The machine had to be manufactured in the United States for the moment, Lin said, but he hoped it could be made in China in the future (Central News Agency 1947). The littérateur was optimistic, but the Cold War would crush both his dreams.

To build the typewriter, Lin had exhausted his savings and went into debt. The lone model had cost more than US\$120,000, or nearly US\$2 million in today's money, to build. In 1948, Lin signed a contract with Mergenthaler Linotype Company, which received the prototype to investigate the feasibility of commercial production. In return, Lin was paid US\$5,000 every six months.

'The compensation was modest,' wrote Lin Tai-yi (2011: 240) in her biography of her father. 'But it was a great encouragement to my parents.'

Mingkwai was a work of art, which made it a bad consumer product in the eyes of capitalism. Too intricate for mass manufacture at low cost, its marketing prospects were further dimmed by political developments in China. Mergenthaler executives wondered whether a communist country would honour intellectual property rights, and Mao had repeatedly called for the Romanisation of the Chinese script to achieve mass literacy (Mullaney 2017). By the time Lin sold the patents for Mingkwai to Mergenthaler for US\$25,000 in 1951, the communists had declared victory over China and the Nationalists had retreated to Taiwan. As American and Chinese soldiers battled each other on the Korean Peninsula, Mingkwai and the people for whom it was designed stood on opposite sides of a geopolitical chasm.

In 1966, at the personal invitation of Chiang Kai-shek, Lin and his wife moved to Taiwan (United Daily News 1966). The official press of the Nationalist Government celebrated the literary giant's arrival as a homecoming (Taiwan Review 1967). Lin had only visited Taiwan briefly before, but the sound of Hokkien spoken on the island reminded him of his native Fujian (Lin 2011: 309). From his new abode in Taipei—a gift from Chiang's government—Lin continued to write and compiled a Chinese–English dictionary for modern usage. A narrow body of water separated him from his ancestral land. Crossing was forbidden. He died in 1976 at the age of 80. He never set foot on the mainland or saw MingKwai again.



On a business trip to the United States in the 1960s, Lin Tai-yi, who helmed the Chinese edition of *Reader's Digest* in Hong Kong, tried to recover her father's precious invention (Lin 2011: 247). After countless calls, she finally reached an engineer at Mergenthaler who had worked on the device. 'Oh no! You're late by three months,' he exclaimed over the phone. The company had recently moved from Brooklyn to Long Island. Much was tossed out, including MingKwai, which had been gathering dust in his office for more than a decade. Lin Tai-yi suggested she could place an ad in the firm's bulletin in case someone had picked it up, perhaps drawn to its beautiful casing.

'I don't think that would be useful,' the engineer said.

But someone did pick it up. Douglas Arthur Jung, a toolmaker at Mergenthaler, kept the typewriter in his basement. Jung died in 2004 (Ancestry.com n.d.). Two decades later, his granddaughter and her husband made a fortuitous discovery.

The reappearance of MingKwai opens tantalising new windows of research into not just how the machine works, but also how and by whom it was built. Lin did not fabricate the device, and much can be learned about 'the hidden labour of engineering', said Mullaney when I interviewed him. Yet, before all the scholarly inquiries could take place, a more immediate question was: where should MingKwai go?

Suggestions abound on social media. In the comment section of Felix's post (2025), a few people offered to purchase it directly. Some proposed an auction. Others stressed that a work of such cultural and historical significance belongs in a museum. A

representative from the North American alumni association of St John's University, Lin's undergraduate alma mater in Shanghai, which was shuttered by the communist government in 1952, expressed great interest in helping find a good home for MingKwai.

Several Facebook users urged Felix to reach out to the Lin Yutang House in Taipei. After Lin's death, authorities in Taiwan established his former residence as a library and museum, where most of his books, manuscripts, and other memorabilia are kept (Lin Yutang House 2015; Qian 2017). In the meantime, someone identifying as a staff member from the Lin Yutang Memorial Museum in mainland China asked whether MingKwai could be donated to them. Another user, claiming to speak for the Computer Museum of the Chinese Computer Federation, commented that they would like to acquire MingKwai for a price. The Computer Museum is currently under construction in eastern China and is expected to be the world's largest museum on computing technology (CCFCM n.d.).

When Lin conveyed his intention to bring MingKwai to his countrymen, it was during the height of the Civil War. The blade of ideology cleaved through what he saw as one nation and one people. He chose a side, that of the Nationalists, and shouldered the consequences. His capacious mind probably could not have foreseen that decades after his passing, both sides would strive to claim his legacy, in overlapping yet distinct ways.

A fiercely independent spirit, Lin was sceptical of the leftist ferment during his youth and grew into one of the boldest and most insistent critics of communism among his generation of Chinese intellectuals (Qian 2017). The wordsmith aimed his pen against the regime in Beijing and Mao himself, weaving verses mocking the Great Helmsman and wishing for his early demise (Lin 1965, 1966a). For years, Lin's name was banned on the mainland. In the reform era since the 1980s, when much of what was forbidden has become permissible, Lin's works have enjoyed a popular resurgence. As a young child in China at the turn of the new century, I found an old copy of *My Country and My People* on my father's shelf. It had been translated into Chinese. The content escaped me, but one line in the editor's preface left a lasting impression. It noted that parts of the book had been censored and the reader should beware Lin was not a follower of Marxism.

As China exited its socialist past to embrace global capitalism, association with Lin has been wielded as a marketing strategy by local governments. In 2012, Lin's ancestral hometown of Zhangzhou, Fujian, announced plans to invest RMB190 million (about US\$27 million) to construct a 'Lin Yutang Cultural Park' (林语堂文化园) (Xinhua 2012). About the same time, the neighbouring county of Pinghe, where Lin was born, put forth an even more ambitious proposal: it would spend RMB3 billion to turn the place into a 'world-class literary village' (China News 2012). In the homeland that once renounced him, the native son is no longer a person but a brand. Coincidentally, weeks after the recovery of MingKwai, a documentary about Lin premiered at the Lin Yutang Cultural Park in Zhangzhou (People.cn 2025). Co-sponsored by state and local authorities, the film is part of China Central Television's 'Centennial Master' (百年巨匠) series.

For many in Taiwan, the prospect of MingKwai being acquired by a mainland entity was deeply upsetting. On social media (see comments on Felix 2025), some emphasised Lin's anticommunist stance. Others pointed out the device was designed for traditional Chinese characters, not the simplified script used on the mainland, even though Lin had been an advocate for character simplification. Several cited the devastation of Chinese heritage during the Mao years and contended that the regime in Beijing could not be trusted with national treasures.

In 1966, the year Lin decided to settle in Taiwan, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution that avowed to smash the old and make the world anew. In response, Chiang initiated the Cultural Renaissance Movement in his jurisdiction. By promoting a standard tongue and dictating a shared culture, the Nationalist Government sought to bolster its reign by fashioning a collective Chinese identity in Taiwan. As the hopes of taking back the mainland faded over time, positioning itself as the vanguard of Chinese tradition was also crucial for Chiang's government to assert legitimacy on the international stage, where the Republic of China in Taiwan was not just 'Free China' but also the 'real' China.

Lin eviscerated the Cultural Revolution in his writing and predicted that the rule of the 'Commie bandits' would collapse within three years (1966b). He supported reviving traditional Chinese culture but warned against orthodoxy and intellectual isolation (Qian 2017). While he directed his ire against

communism, Lin had also criticised the Nationalist Government at various points, and one could interpret his refusal to take part in formal politics as a subtle rebellion. Nevertheless, for much of his life, the maverick author enjoyed a cordial relationship with Chiang and was often sympathetic to the Generalissimo's positions. Writing in 1960 after a short visit to Taiwan, Lin praised the territory under martial law as 'a showpiece of democracy' and a model for industrial progress (Lin 1960).

Much has changed since Lin's time. Having walked the long, hard road to freedom, the people of Taiwan increasingly see themselves as distinctly Taiwanese. For many, rejecting the Chinese label imposed by the dictatorial Nationalist Government constitutes liberation. As tensions rise across the Taiwan Strait, and Beijing dresses its desire to annex the territory in the language of national reunification, being proudly Taiwanese is also a defence of sovereignty and the right to self-determination. When social media users from Taiwan argued passionately against MingKwai going to China and lamented that Taiwanese institutions might not have the resources to win a bid, the heart of the issue was no longer about preserving an artefact or honouring its creator. The heated exchanges carried echoes from a past conflict and sounded anxieties about the future.



In a discussion on Threads about potential destinations for MingKwai, one user commented that given the 'cultural atmosphere' in the Sinophone region, as well as cross-strait dynamics, the device staying in the United States would be 'the least beneficial to Sinophone heritage and education, but the best for guaranteeing the safety of the artefact' (aaron_yodel 2025). And it is in the United States that the typewriter will remain. Stanford University just announced that the California campus will be the new home of MingKwai, owing to generous support from the Bin Lin and Daisy Liu Foundation (Stanford University 2025). Stanford is planning a series of research, education, and outreach activities around its prized acquisition.

When I first heard the news, my excitement was laced with regret. I am happy and relieved that MingKwai has found a good home and will be available to researchers and the public. I cannot wait to see it in person. Yet, Lin's wish of taking MingKwai to

his homeland is left unfulfilled. The groundbreaking Chinese typewriter remains out of reach of most Chinese speakers.

When Lin was on the verge of bankruptcy over his passion project, a loan from his Chinese friend C.T. Loo (Loo Ching-Tsai) helped him complete the design (Lin 2011: 230). A preeminent art dealer, Loo was a subject of controversy in his birth country, where he was criticised for pawning ancestral jewels to the foreign elite. Loo, however, reasoned that the antiques were safer and better appreciated in the West (Kahn 2012).

Unlike the jade and bronze artefacts traded by Loo, many of which came from ancient tombs in China, MingKwai was born in New York. It would be a mistake to insist that the Chinese typewriter belongs only on Chinese soil. Like Lin's life and career, the creation of MingKwai was quintessentially bicultural and transnational. The keyboard design was a marriage between the composite shapes of the Chinese script and the linear logic of the Latin alphabet. The machine was conceived through Chinese ingenuity and realised by American engineering.

I wonder how Lin would feel about the latest developments around MingKwai. The prototype plundered his finances and was discarded as trash by the company that acquired it, only to reappear more than half a century later as a coveted gem, thanks to an unsuspecting American family and the magic of social media. The story of the typewriter reads like a metaphor, an allegory for the world it disappeared from and the one it has just entered, containing old wounds, new troubles, a persistent imbalance of power, and an unyielding quest for recognition and belonging.

I imagine telling Lin all this. He listens patiently as I ramble on with unformed thoughts. Then, he puts down his signature smoking pipe and lets out a hearty laugh. I am overthinking it, he says, burdening myself like the lad in the classic Hsin Ch'ichi (辛棄疾) poem: 'But loved to mount the top floor, / To write a song pretending sadness.'

Lin included the twelfth-century verse in *My Country and My People* (1935) and again in his final book, *Memoirs of an Octogenarian* (1975). 'I am a bundle of contradictions, and I enjoy it,' he wrote in the latter (Lin 1975: 1). He always took pleasure in not conforming. MingKwai was invented to facilitate

capitalist production and failed as a product thanks to capitalist logic. Financing and geopolitics, the twin factors that shaped Lin's life and doomed MingKwai's future, also limited the final destination for the lone prototype. Even a spirit that soared as high and as freely as Lin's had to contend with earthly bounds. One wisdom of old age, Lin wrote, is to know 'the limitations of life' (1975: 79).

But just as we cannot reduce Lin's writings to one language, define his home as one place, or tie his legacy to one country, the value of MingKwai cannot be measured by a price tag. The meaning of the machine is much larger and more enduring than its physical form. It broke the conventions of two writing systems and generated new dialogues between them. It challenged Western stereotypes and explored new ways to write Chinese and be Chinese. Lin found new order in an ancient script and cast it in metal, while his soft calligraphy brush probed the unruly margins.

In a 2016 essay for *The New Yorker*, the Taiwanese-American science fiction writer Ted Chiang (no relation to Chiang Kai-shek), whose parents had left mainland China during the Civil War, posed an interesting question: what might have happened had the Chinese people invented a phonetic writing system some three millennia ago? Chiang suggested increased literacy, less emphasis on tradition, and a culture that was more open to new ideas and modern technologies. Yet, in this hypothetical scenario, would modernity and the technologies that represent it look the same as they do today?

I would like to propose a different question: what might the first typewriter look like had it been invented by a Chinese speaker for the Chinese script? To attempt an answer demands one radically reimagine one's relationship to machines, the value of time, and the purpose of writing. Maybe there would be no typewriter and life would be governed by a different conception of the clock. Maybe the clock would only tell the time and not dictate how one should live in it. Maybe nothing would take too much time. Maybe no dream would be out of time. The thought experiment reveals paths not taken and hints at alternative futures. It offers glimpses to another world, where Lin Yutang would feel at home. ■



Source: Alexander Schimmeck (CC), Unsplash.

Delaying Retirement via Procedural Shortcut

The Fragile Promises of China's Lawmaking Reforms

Changhao WEI, Taige HU

In September 2024, China's national legislature enacted a long-planned but controversial reform to raise retirement ages—unchanged since 1958—in response to labour and pension shortfalls resulting from demographic shifts. But it did so without following the standard legislative process developed over recent decades, which normally involves multiple rounds of legislative review and public consultation. Facing political pressure and anticipating public pushback, it instead used an expedited procedure intended for simple or stopgap legislation to pass the wide-ranging retirement reform. The move laid bare the fragility of its commitment to deliberation and public participation in lawmaking.

On 16 November 1957, China's labour minister Ma Wenrui appeared before the country's top legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC), with proposed updates to China's retirement scheme. Faced with a deluge of secondary-school graduates but insufficient job openings, the government hoped to make it easier for older workers to retire (Literature Research Office 2015: 527). The proposal would, in general, require men to retire at age 60, white-collar women at 55, and blue-collar women at 50 (State Council 1957). Women must retire earlier, officials contended, because they were 'generally weaker' than men (General Office et al. 1958: 9). As was typical

of the time (Kan 2019: 53), the NPCSC endorsed the proposal ‘in principle’ the same day, while allowing the State Council to fine-tune the rules before finalising them (Xinhua 1957a). The State Council soon distributed the draft law to localities for consultation (Xinhua 1957b) and later reported that more than 3.1 million workers participated in discussions over the following month (Ma 1958). Some (unsuccessfully) questioned the disparate treatment of white-collar and blue-collar female workers, but there was otherwise no serious objection to the proposed changes, according to an official account (Ma 1958). The State Council (1958) formally promulgated the rules in February 1958.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), China’s nascent retirement system suffered a fatal blow (Xia 2019a). Ultra-radicals attacked the country’s earliest social insurance scheme for ‘breeding loafers’ (养懒汉) and ‘corrupting the working class’ (腐蚀工人阶级) (Yun 1999: 20). The movement soon paralysed the entire labour bureaucracy. By the end of the decade-long turmoil, more than 2 million eligible workers were waiting for the state to process their retirement applications (Xia 2019b). To clear the backlog and reinvigorate the workforce, the State Council came to the NPCSC with a new pair of retirement rules in May 1978—just weeks after the legislature had resumed regular meetings after the Cultural Revolution. Some of the 1958 rules no longer suited the circumstances and needed updates, the State Council said (Xinhua 1978). Among other changes, its proposal would reinstate separate retirement systems for ‘workers’ (工人) and ‘cadres’ (干部), which roughly corresponded to manual and nonmanual labourers under previous rules (Wu 2021; Kuei and Peng 2013: 30); create a special retirement status (with full salary) for veteran cadres; and otherwise treat ordinary cadres and workers equally, along with a general increase in their pension benefits (Feng 1986; Manion 1992). The State Council proposed no change, however, to the 1958 retirement ages. The NPCSC swiftly approved the rules ‘in principle’ after a two-day session (Xinhua 1978). The default retirement ages would remain in place, as it turned out, until almost half a century later.

Meanwhile, China experienced a sea change in demographics. Life expectancy has risen rapidly, from 48.8 years in 1958 to 72 by the turn of the century, and to 78 today (UN DESA 2024). Due to socioeconomic development and the One-Child Policy, fertility in

China has declined in an equally swift fashion: it has dropped far below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman since the 1990s and is now among the lowest in the world (Cai 2013: 382–83; Cai and Cheng 2015: 46). Together, these two forces—rising longevity and declining fertility—have accelerated population ageing, which in turn has led to a shrinking workforce, mounting pressure on healthcare and social security systems, and widening welfare inequities among different social groups (Zhu and Walker 2021: 192–95; Mao et al. 2020: 284–85; see also SCIO 2021). The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences projected in 2019 that, if the trend continues, China’s main pension fund will run out of money by 2035 (Li 2019).

Delaying retirement, as the Chinese leadership was well aware, could mitigate those problems by replenishing the labour force and the pension fund (Feng et al. 2018: 31–34). The labour ministry studied such a move as early as 2005 (Bai 2012), before the Chinese Communist Party eventually added it to the official reform agenda in late 2013 (Central Committee 2013). Since then, the Party has repeatedly vowed to raise retirement ages, most recently at the Third Plenum of its Twentieth Central Committee in July 2024 (Central Committee 2015, 2020, 2024; Xi 2022). Yet, any retirement delay would have a direct, tangible impact on hundreds of millions of Chinese, who have, for more than a decade, consistently and overwhelmingly opposed the idea in successive polls conducted by various state media outlets (Han 2014: 129–30; Zhou 2016; The Economist 2021). At the top of their concerns were youth unemployment, age discrimination against older workers, and the loss of childcare provided by retired grandparents (The Economist 2021; Bao 2013). Because of the move’s unpopularity, no concrete plan to raise the retirement ages materialised—until last autumn.

On 10 September 2024, the NPCSC suddenly announced that it was considering legislation to raise retirement ages, without the usual prior indication that a bill was in the pipeline, much less drafted and ready for legislative deliberation. Three days later, it passed the ‘Decision on Gradually Raising the Statutory Retirement Ages’ (关于实施渐进式延迟法定退休年龄的决定) (NPCSC 2024, translated in Wei and Hu 2024), or the ‘Reform Plan’. The Reform Plan has three core provisions: first, it gradually raises the retirement age, over 15 years, to 63 for men, 58 for women in managerial or specialist positions (that

is, redefined ‘cadres’; see Zhong 2024), and 55 for women in other roles (that is, redefined ‘workers’); second, it will gradually increase the minimum years of contribution required to receive post-retirement benefits from 15 to 20; and third, it allows for ‘flexible’ retirement, whereby eligible employees may retire up to three years earlier or later. The Reform Plan took effect on 1 January 2025.

Though the swift process was reminiscent of the way the NPCSC set and reaffirmed the original retirement ages decades earlier, the times are different. Much like China’s demographics, the NPCSC’s legislative procedure has undergone a profound transformation in the interim. As we will explain, the Chinese legislature has embraced, in rhetoric and in practice, procedural reforms that grant lawmakers more time to review and propose changes to legislative drafts, while considering the views of a broad range of stakeholders, including the public. Yet, that deliberative process was wholly absent from the momentous retirement reform, laying bare the fragility of the legislature’s promises.

‘Scientific, Democratic, and Law-Based Lawmaking’

In official discourse, China’s post-Cultural Revolution lawmaking reforms have been subsumed under the slogan of ‘scientific, democratic, and law-based lawmaking’ (科学立法、民主立法、依法立法). According to an authoritative commentary by legislative officials, this trifecta of principles entails both substantive and procedural commands (Shen and Xu 2019: 390). Legislation must address actual issues and ‘reasonably’ prescribe the rights and obligations of private and state entities; must ‘reflect the will of the people’; and must conform to higher-level norms in China’s legislative hierarchy (Shen and Xu 2019: 395–99). And such goals are achievable only with a process that, among others, promotes thorough and informed deliberations and incorporates public participation.

The NPCSC first moved to extend legislative deliberations. For about the first 30 years of its existence, the Chinese legislature passed all but a few bills after a quick single review, as the 1957 and 1978 retirement

laws illustrate (Kan 2019: 53). It began to move away from this approach soon after legislative business resumed after the Cultural Revolution. To ‘prevent hasty deliberations and imprudent considerations from undermining the stability of the law’, legislative leaders decided in March 1983 to generally add an extra review to allot more time for discussing and improving draft laws (Council of Chairpersons 1983). This two-review process was then codified in 1987 in the NPCSC’s rules of procedure (Kan 2019: 54). To some lawmakers, this longer time frame nonetheless still felt ‘hasty’, as they worried that the quality of legislation would suffer from insufficient time to digest certain bills. With a third review down the line, they could instead use the second reading for ‘in-depth discussions over a draft law’s key issues, contentious points, and areas of disagreement’. The NPCSC leadership endorsed this proposal in April 1998, believing that more thorough deliberations would promote ‘the quality and efficiency of legislation’ (Li 1998: 177). The three-review rule was formally codified in the landmark Legislation Law (立法法) in 2000 and still applies today (with exceptions for uncontroversial, simple, or emergency bills).

The lengthier legislative process in turn created the space for public consultations, which over time have become another key feature of Chinese lawmaking. In January 1988, the NPCSC carried out the first public consultation on a draft law under the current (post-1982) constitutional order (Ai 2014). It published the draft in national newspapers and requested that citizens send in comments by mail. It was not until 2005 that public participation eventually shifted online and instantly reached new heights. The very first bill released on the legislature’s website, a draft Property Law (物权法), received 9,605 comments—almost three times the record of the comment-by-mail era (Ai 2014). Despite the technological upgrade, the NPCSC remained highly selective in its consultations, releasing only 13 drafts during the 20 years after the 1988 consultation. But legislative leaders soon instituted improvements. They first required in 2008 that the legislature generally solicit comment on the first draft of every bill, before extending that soft requirement to any additional non-final draft of a bill five years later (Ai 2014; Shen 2009: 1500). Almost 350 drafts have been released since 2008 as a result.

In the meantime, the Chinese legislature has implemented additional reforms to broaden informational input into legislative deliberations. They include involving academics and other experts at various stages of the legislative process—from formulating legislative agendas to revising draft laws, to assessing legislation’s feasibility, impact, and potential enforcement problems prior to enactment—and establishing ‘grassroots legislative outreach offices’ (基层立法联系点) to proactively solicit public input (Shen and Xu 2019: 407–10; Horsley 2010: 293–97; Chen 2023). And, as we have alluded to, the legislature has always allowed for expedited legislative review under specified circumstances and reserved the discretion to waive public consultation when necessary. But the default process—three reviews coupled with two rounds of public consultation—remains the standard (Wei and Hu 2023).

The ‘Quasi-Statutory Decision’ Shortcut

When the Party reiterated the goal of raising retirement ages at the 2024 Third Plenum—this time with apparent urgency—the NPCSC found itself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the reform is wide-ranging and deeply unpopular, as discussed earlier. It is also quite complex, which has led policy experts to propose a range of options based on different combinations of the relevant parameters (Feng et al. 2018). The case for following the standard process to evaluate these proposals and their implications could not have been stronger. On the other hand, doing so would have opened the floodgates to a deluge of comments. The public would have seized on an opportunity to air their views, as they did with comparable social legislation in the past; the labour contract legislation of 2007 and 2012, for example, together received almost 750,000 comments (Harper Ho and Huang 2014: 1009; Gallagher 2017: 68). So, too, would experts have eagerly offered their input. The sheer amount of information would inevitably have compelled the NPCSC to prolong the process by months, if not years, especially given the strong possibility that an overwhelming majority of public comments would have opposed the reform (Bai 2013). This prospect would have been politically untenable.

Faced with this dilemma, the NPCSC ultimately chose political expediency: it enacted the Reform Plan as a ‘quasi-statutory decision’ (QSD, 准法律决定; Wang 2011: 92), a category of legislation exempt from the procedural paradigm. Officially known as ‘decisions on legal issues’ (有关法律问题的决定), QSDs are not ‘statutes’ (法律) but nonetheless carry statutory force (Huang 2014: 14; see also Wei 2021). Because the NPCSC adheres to the unwritten principle that a statute should be comprehensive and infrequently amended, QSDs fill important gaps. Ordinarily, they are short instruments designed to address narrow issues, tackle urgent matters when a comprehensive statute cannot be drafted in time, or develop new legal schemes without formal statutory changes (Qin and Liu 2017: 213–14; Jin 2018: 154–55). For these reasons, since 1987, NPCSC rules have allowed it to adopt a QSD after a single review without public consultation, even as its legislative process has otherwise grown more sophisticated. Over the past two decades, the legislature has rarely taken a second look at a QSD, and, even when it did, it never solicited public comment.

The Reform Plan’s unusual features suggest the State Council may have deliberately exploited that abbreviated process. Like a typical QSD, it begins with a brief (five-article) main text, which announces the new retirement ages and lays down general principles for implementing the reform (NPCSC 2024: 720). Then, in a break with convention, the Reform Plan proceeds to a separately titled, visually distinct document: ‘Measures of the *State Council* on Gradually Raising the Statutory Retirement Ages’ (国务院关于渐进式延迟法定退休年龄的办法; our emphasis). Despite appearances to the contrary, officials emphasised that this lengthy document is an integral part of the Reform Plan (Constitution and Law Committee 2024). The Measures introduce the other two pillars of the reform (longer pension contribution periods and flexible retirement), address various subsidiary issues (such as the application of the reform to unemployed individuals), and include detailed charts that allow affected citizens to look up their new retirement ages and contribution periods (NPCSC 2024: 720–34). This level of detail brings the Reform Plan closer to a statute than an average reform-initiating QSD.

In addition, the State Council likely drafted the bill in a manner designed to restrict meaningful legislative review of the Measures. The Reform Plan’s

main text states that the NPCSC ‘approved’ (批准) the Measures—indicating that lawmakers, at best, had less room than usual to propose changes to the embedded document and, at worst, had to vote on it as drafted (Wang 2012: 483). As evidence, the Reform Plan’s accompanying legislative report addresses only lawmaker comments on the short main text (Constitution and Law Committee 2024). While it is true that the State Council also drafted and submitted the 1957 and 1978 retirement laws—both under its name—for the NPCSC’s ‘approval’, the legal landscape of the time necessitated that process. Before 1982, the NPCSC’s legislative power was far more circumscribed than it is today, while the State Council had no authority at all to issue binding regulations. In response to the heightened legislative demand shortly after the PRC’s founding and the Cultural Revolution, the NPCSC resorted to legislating, in part, by approving documents that the State Council sought to issue (Chen 2016: 71; Luo 2019: 163). The 1982 Constitution subsequently expanded the legislative powers of both institutions and more clearly demarcated the boundaries of their authority. Reviving that archaic practice in 2024 was thus not only unnecessary but also legally dubious under today’s constitutional framework (Chen 2016: 70). Not to mention the resulting Reform Plan—an NPCSC enactment with a component bearing the State Council’s name—is an odd hybrid previously unknown to Chinese law.

That said, the State Council’s drafting choices could not—and indeed should not—have bound the NPCSC. The latter was free to rewrite the Reform Plan so that it contained a unified text. It also faced no legal obstacles to waiving the single-review exception and conducting further review, as it could with any QSD. There has long been scholarly argument that QSDs, like statutes, should comply with the Legislation Law; otherwise, this Law would become a ‘dead letter’ (形同虚设), as the legislature could simply circumvent its more stringent procedures by enacting important legislation as QSDs (Jiang 2012: 32; see also Jiang 2023: 105–6). This view finds additional support in the March 2023 amendments to the Legislation Law, which added a new article applying ‘the relevant provisions’ of the Law to QSDs. This new clause is admittedly cryptic. But there is early scholarly agreement (which we second) that it requires, at a minimum, that QSDs creating or modifying generally applicable legal schemes—such as the Reform

Plan—follow the same procedures as statutes: three reviews with public consultations, unless a specified exception applies (Jiang 2024: 1377–78; Tan 2024: 34). No such exception would have applied to the Reform Plan.

‘Breaching the Contract with an Entire Generation’

The public predictably reacted to the Reform Plan with ire, confusion, and anxiety. Yet, it is now only possible to glimpse that reaction through contemporaneous press coverage, as China’s censorship machine swiftly kicked into high gear after the document’s release. According to *The Economist* (2024), of the more than 5,200 replies to *Xinhua*’s Weibo post announcing the news, only about two dozen remained visible just four days later—‘none of them disapproving’. Most recorded comments expressed apprehension about the reform’s substantive impact on people’s livelihoods (The Economist 2024; Ng 2024; Woo and Qi 2024; Li 2024). Few directly attacked the lack of process, though that concern underlay posts worrying about a sudden further delay in retirement.

That sentiment more clearly drove netizens to widely circulate an 11-year-old front-page commentary from the *China Youth Daily* (中国青年报). That 2013 piece by Cao Lin, the outlet’s then chief commentator, responded to a social security official’s call to delay retirement—a few months before the Party would officially endorse the proposal. Among other criticisms, Cao rebuked the suggestion that the Chinese public should stomach a future delay in retirement simply because it is ‘a common international practice’. He argued that laws and policies, especially those that ‘concern significant public interests’, must provide the people with ‘stable expectations’. ‘The age of retirement and the timing of pension payments,’ he stressed, ‘are the state’s commitments to and agreements with the people—contracts that must not be breached lightly.’ He observed that retirement reforms in developed countries followed ‘due legal process, democratic channels, and consultation with the people’. If China were to dispense with the necessary processes, it would ‘breach the contract with an entire generation’ (与一代人的违约), Cao presciently warned. Eleven

years later, reposts of his op-ed were quickly censored and the original disappeared from the newspaper's online archives (Li 2024).

The Chinese state's impulse to pass the Reform Plan hastily was understandable, as strong public opposition had forced it to repeatedly postpone the reform over the past decade (The Economist 2021). By pushing the whole package through the legislature on a highly expedited timeline, it could present the reform as a *fait accompli*, thereby rendering moot public calls for reconsideration and pre-empting attempts to bargain with the government over specifics. Yet, by settling for a quick fix for the looming crisis, the Chinese Government myopically sacrificed the greater benefits it could have gained by extending the legislative timetable—even by just a few months—to allow for further deliberation and consultation.

The NPCSC itself has recognised that 'public participation can bolster the legality and fairness of legislative decision-making' (Shen and Xu 2019: 397). As it elaborated in a 2019 volume touting its legislative accomplishments: 'When the decision-making process is undemocratic and public participation insufficient, the enacted laws may represent the will of only a minority, making them unjust; they may also lie dormant once enacted, failing to solve actual problems' (Shen and Xu 2019: 397). Taking the time to publicly justify the Reform Plan and to credibly consult the public on such a complex and far-reaching matter—just as the State Council did in 1957—could have, in the best case envisioned by the NPCSC, fostered 'a sense of identification' (认同感) with the reform (Research Office 2019: 51–52) and 'raise[d] the public's willingness to abide by' it (Shen and Xu 2019: 397). At a minimum, it could have 'confer[red] procedural legitimacy on the NPCSC, the process, and the resulting legislation' and 'help[ed] lessen, if not prevent, opposition' to the reform (Horsley 2020).

In comparison, the costs of cutting procedural corners here were immense. Not only did this move stand in tension with the NPCSC's decades-long procedural reforms and cast doubt on China's commitment to 'scientific, democratic, and law-based lawmaking', but it also needlessly damaged the legislature's own credibility and legitimacy and sowed distrust in the legislative process. After all, the average Chinese citizen is unlikely to grasp the NPCSC's procedural intricacies well enough to identify the

Reform Plan as a QSD and to understand that it could be passed through an abridged process. And, given that officials had promised—time and time again (Bai 2012, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Bao 2013; SCIO 2021)—to consult the public on any retirement reform, citizens were especially justified in expecting such an opportunity in this case. In the end, taking the procedural shortcut did not—and could not—end the controversy over delaying retirement, despite the censors' best efforts. It would only make the next unpopular but necessary reform in China that much harder to enact. ■



Lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo in Mêdog County. Source: JL Cogburn, Wikimedia Commons (CC).

Infrastructure and State-Building

China's Ambitions for the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Project

Hong ZHANG

The launch of the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo (LYT) Hydropower Project—the most expensive infrastructure project in the world—is set to transform the Tibetan Plateau physically, demographically, and politically. Framed as a cornerstone of China's green and industrial future, the project is advancing with minimal public scrutiny, despite its extraordinary environmental, technical, and geopolitical stakes. In contrast to the open debates that preceded the Three Gorges Dam three decades ago, the LYT project reflects the contemporary Chinese State's increasingly centralised, top-down approach to development. It marks the latest extension of the state's infrastructural power into a remote frontier of strategic importance.

1 9 July 2025, Nyingchi, Tibet. Against a bold red backdrop with snow-capped mountains looming in the distance, China's Premier Li Qiang—flanked on both sides by four senior officials and leaders of major state-owned enterprises—formally announced the ground breaking on the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project (LYT project). Below the stage, rows of officials and engineers stood in disciplined formation, as though receiving orders for a pre-battle mobilisation.

With an estimated cost of RMB1.2 trillion (approximately US\$167 billion), the LYT project is poised to be the world's most expensive single infrastructure development. If the planned five cascade hydropower

stations with a combined installed capacity of up to 60 gigawatts are realised, it will be the largest hydropower project globally.

While no official details have been released, the LYT project is widely expected to be located near the Great Bend on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo River—a dramatic U-turn where the river cuts through the Himalayas before flowing south into India as the Brahmaputra. Within a 50-kilometre straight-line distance, the river descends nearly 2,000 metres in elevation. Coupled with the substantial flow volume of one of China's major stem rivers, this section is believed to possess one of the world's greatest untapped hydropower potentials.

The site lies within 50 kilometres of the McMahon Line, the boundary claimed by India but disputed by China. Medog County, the expected location of the project, borders a region that China refers to as Zangnan (literally 'South Tibet'), while India administers it as the state of Arunachal Pradesh. India has voiced concerns over the project since China's plan to develop it became public. There are worries that China could use the dam to either withhold or release water in a way that hurts those downstream (Wong 2025).

While global media coverage is likely to focus on rising tensions between the world's two most populous nations, the significance of the LYT project goes far beyond cross-border water politics. It should be understood as a critical instrument in China's broader state-building agenda—designed to consolidate control over a politically sensitive, ethnically distinct frontier while mobilising natural resources to power the next phase of national development. As this essay will show, the LYT project embodies a striking confluence of territorial strategy, economic ambition, and infrastructural statecraft.

From Three Gorges to Lower Yarlung Tsangpo

The last time a Chinese national leader inaugurated a major hydropower project was on 14 December 1994, when then premier Li Peng presided over the ground-breaking ceremony for the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in Hubei Province, central China. The historical significance of the moment

could not be overstated. Harnessing the power of the Yangtze River had been a longstanding ambition of China's nation-builders since Sun Yat-sen. Mao Zedong championed the idea in the 1950s, but serious planning was derailed by the upheavals of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution during the latter part of his rule. It was not until the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, that discussions were revived and moved towards implementation.

Throughout the 1980s, the Three Gorges Project was the subject of intense debate over its design, feasibility, and potential environmental and social impacts. These were genuine public debates in which opposing voices were heard. Among the most prominent critics were Li Rui, a former vice-minister of the Ministry of Water Resources and Mao Zedong's one-time personal secretary, who later became an outspoken critic of the Communist Party, and influential journalist Dai Qing, who wrote extensively against the project and was imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Opposition to the project came from a wide spectrum of actors, including officials and government-affiliated researchers, public intellectuals, and grassroots communities whose lives stood to be profoundly affected. These debates have been well documented, including by the participants' published diaries and oral histories (Li 2017), academic monographs (Su 2007), edited volumes (Dai 1994), media reports (Tang 2009), and documentary films (Wang 2013).

The Three Gorges Project's final approval in 1992 was shaped by the political aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Premier Li Peng, who played an instrumental role in authorising the military suppression of the protests, emerged politically empowered and used his position to champion the dam (Li 2003). The post-crackdown purge of liberal reformers within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cleared the way for Li to push the project through (RFI 2020). Despite that, when the Seventh National People's Congress voted on the resolution to develop the project on 3 April 1992, 177 of the 2,633 deputies voted against it and 664 abstained (Xinhua 2009). This significant level of dissent and abstention—unusual in China's typically rubber-stamp legislature—reflected the depth of concern and controversy surrounding the project, even within the political establishment. The rest is history: more than one million people were eventually

relocated to make way for the dam's construction. Numerous ancient cities and cultural heritage sites were submerged, and the long-term environmental impacts remain uncertain.

In contrast, the LYT project—with an investment cost five times greater and planned installation capacity three times greater than the Three Gorges Project, in a far more environmentally fragile and politically sensitive area—is moving ahead without a vote in the national legislature. It was simply decided and moved along China's bureaucratic process. In October 2020, the CCP's Nineteenth Congress passed its 'recommendations' for the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan covering the 2021–25 period, which included the 'implementation' of hydropower development on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo River (Xinhua 2020b). This was duly reflected in the Five-Year Plan released by the State Council the next year (NDRC 2021). In 2022, the project appeared in the *Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for Renewable Energy Development*, framed as part of a plan to develop Southeast Tibet as a comprehensive base for hydro, wind, and solar energy (NDRC 2022a). In December 2024, the state news agency Xinhua announced that the project has been approved by the Chinese Government (Xinhua 2024). In March 2025, the project was included on the list of national priority projects to be launched within the year (NDRC 2025).

Also unlike the Three Gorges Project, which sparked fierce public debate and posed serious challenges to the policymaking process, there has been little public awareness or discussion about the LYT project beyond hydropower industry circles. A search of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database reveals that most published literature on hydropower development on the Yarlung Tsangpo River has been authored by industry professionals, typically emphasising its immense hydropower potential and supportive of the project. The only public figure who has openly raised concerns about the potential environmental consequences is Yang Yong, an independent scientist renowned for his long-term exploration of the Tibetan Plateau. Having written on both Chinese and international platforms about the ecological and geological risks such development could pose (Yang 2014, 2015), his anti-dam stance has made him a target of attacks by

some prominent advocates within the hydropower industry, who have questioned his scientific credentials (Shuibo 2011).

The contrast between the Three Gorges and the LYT projects is revealing. It underscores the diminished space for civil society engagement as the state consolidates its capacity for top-down policymaking. At the same time, a powerful hydropower interest group—which emerged from the development of the Three Gorges and numerous other hydropower projects since the 1990s—has gained influence that now far surpasses any opposing voices.

The financialisation of the Chinese economy has further amplified the influence of this interest group. Following the announcement of the LYT project, the stock prices of major infrastructure firms surged, reflecting investor expectations of lucrative state-backed contracts (Luo 2025). On Chinese social media, financial analysts raced to identify which companies stood to benefit most. The growing entwinement of state-led infrastructure development with capital markets—and, by extension, with the financial interests of the broader public—further reinforces the political and economic clout of this interest group in shaping national development priorities.

Final Frontier

China is the most heavily dammed country in the world, with an installed hydropower capacity greater than that of the next four countries combined. Accounting for more than one-quarter of the country's total assessed hydropower potential (Chen 2019), Tibet is the final frontier for China's hydropower expansion.

While most regions of China have seen intense hydropower development over the past decades, Tibet's vast water resources have remained relatively untapped, primarily due to the formidable challenges of large-scale construction in its harsh and remote terrain. Among these resources, the Yarlung Tsangpo River stands out as the crown jewel, accounting for nearly 70 per cent of Tibet's total hydropower potential (Li et al. 2010). The river is considered the culmination of China's hydropower ambitions. As one

Table 1: Planned and operational hydropower dams on the middle reaches of Yarlung Tsangpo (main stem)

Hydropower station	Installed capacity	Investment	Status
Bayu (巴玉)	780 MW	n.a.	Pre-construction
Dagu (大古)	660 MW	RMB12.2 billion	Under construction/ early operation
Jiexu (街需)	510 MW	n.a.	Under construction
Zangmu (藏木)	510 MW	RMB9.6 billion	Operational since 2015
Gyaca (加查)	360 MW	RMB7.83 billion	Operational since 2020

hydropower expert put it: ‘The day the development of the Yarlung Tsangpo is completed will be the day China’s exploitable hydropower resources are fully developed’ (Chen 2019).

The ambition to develop hydropower on the Yarlung Tsangpo has been long in the making. Surveys have been under way since the 1990s to study the hydropower potential of Tibet’s major rivers, with the Yarlung Tsangpo as the focus (Yang 2014). From the early 2000s, China’s leading state-owned power generation companies gradually expanded their presence into Tibet. Over the years, several small dams have been built on various rivers, mainly to meet local power demand. In 2009, construction began on Tibet’s first large-scale hydropower project—the 510-megawatt Zangmu Hydropower Station, located on the middle reach of the Yarlung Tsangpo River—which was commissioned in 2015 (NEA 2025). Since then, multiple hydropower projects have been planned or developed along the river’s middle reaches (Table 1).

Despite the experience building dams along the middle reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo, the prospect of building a mega-dam on the river’s lower reaches, particularly near the Great Bend, presents far greater challenges. Unlike the relatively stable terrain and moderate elevation of the middle reaches, the lower Yarlung Tsangpo plunges into one of the world’s deepest and most geologically unstable gorges. The region is prone to landslides, earthquakes, and extreme weather (Yang 2014; Li et al. 2015), all of

which dramatically increase construction risks and costs. Seismic activity presents the deadliest threat. Medog County, the anticipated site of the LYT project, experienced an 8.7-magnitude earthquake in 1950, also known as the Assam–Tibet Earthquake. The 8.1-magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal in 2015 was the latest reminder of the extreme seismic risk to which the Himalayan region is subject (Duan 2015).

In addition, the site of the LYT project will likely fall in the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon National Nature Reserve, an area protected for its dramatic topography and exceptional biodiversity (State Council General Office 2000). According to national zoning regulations, this area is designated a ‘strictly protected’ zone, where ‘water resource development activities that are detrimental to the aquatic ecological environment are strictly prohibited, and stringent water resource conservation policies are enforced’ (State Council 2010). It remains unclear how the LYT project will address this contradiction with existing zoning regulation. Moreover, there is no publicly available information on the project’s environmental impact assessment, which is legally required as a prerequisite for initiating major construction activities.

In any case, building the dam will not be easy. Despite China’s strong capabilities in hydropower development after building thousands of dams in past decades, the LYT project presents several technical challenges without proven capabilities, including dam-building on unstable ground, constructing long

tunnels through mountainous terrain, and operating in a cold and low-oxygen environment (Tan 2019). Medog County—with a population of just 15,000—was the last county in China to gain access to the national road network, with its first automobile road completed only in 2013. A 2016 report by the *People's Daily* revealed that a smaller hydropower station constructed in Medog in 2013–15 cost four times more than comparable projects elsewhere in China due to the logistical challenges posed by the area's more than 200 days of heavy rainfall annually, and frequent landslides and mudslides (Xie et al. 2016). Although paved road mileage in Medog has more than doubled following nearly RMB120 million in government investment over the past decade (Yuan and Xu 2023), the logistical challenges of transporting the large equipment required for a project like the LYT development remain substantial.

Energy-Hungry Development Vision

Why, then, have Chinese policymakers chosen to pursue the LYT project despite its significant environmental and geological risks and formidable logistical challenges? While a self-interested push from the hydropower industry may help explain the decision, the deeper motivation likely lies in the state's broader developmental agenda: preparing the country for a new phase of growth that will require an immense and reliable supply of electricity.

China previously experienced overcapacity in its hydropower. Over the past decade, the pace of hydropower development has slowed markedly, as many existing stations have faced underutilisation—a problem known as ‘wasted discharge’ (弃水), where large volumes of water pass through dams without generating electricity. This stems from several factors: weak industrial demand, limited transmission capacity to export electricity to other regions, and local protectionism that hampers cross-regional power trade. According to *China Energy News* (中国能源报), the state-run energy sector newspaper, the volume of wasted discharge nationwide in 2020 was equivalent to two-thirds of the annual electricity output of the Three Gorges Dam, resulting in losses of nearly RMB10 billion (China Energy News 2021).

In response to the central government's call to address the ‘wasted discharge’ issue (NEA 2018), Sichuan and Yunnan—two southwestern provinces where ‘wasted discharge’ has been most prominent—have introduced energy-intensive industries such as electrolytic aluminium and silicon smelters to boost industrial demand (Xinhua 2020a; Yunnan SASAC 2024). These industries are closely linked to the electric vehicle, photovoltaic, and energy storage sectors—pillars of China's strategic push for industrial transformation and global ‘green development’ leadership. In recent years, the global race to develop artificial intelligence (AI) has further underscored the energy-intensive nature of AI infrastructure—a concern that is gaining significant traction in China's policy discourse (Cui 2024; Li 2025).

In short, China is gearing up for a new phase of high-tech industrial development that will be highly energy intensive. With measures taken to absorb overcapacity such as selling surplus electricity at discounted rates (NDRC 2022b), the supply–demand balance has gradually begun to shift towards shortage. These developments may have prompted Chinese policymakers to initiate a new wave of power generation expansion. Hydropower is seen not only as a source of ‘renewable’ energy essential to China's decarbonisation goals, but also as a foundational pillar for supporting the integration of other ‘green’ energy sources, such as solar and wind. Given their intermittent and variable nature, solar and wind alone cannot sustain large-scale grid stability without the baseload and regulatory support provided by hydropower. Against this backdrop, Tibet's immense hydropower potential is increasingly seen as a resource that cannot be bypassed.

Tibetan Power, Outbound

Large-scale hydropower development in Tibet primarily serves the energy needs of other regions in China. Given Tibet's small population size and limited industrial base, local electricity demand was quickly met by small power plants built in earlier phases of development, although seasonal supply–demand mismatches persist (Tan 2019). The commissioning of the Zangmu Hydropower Station in 2015 marked the beginning of outbound electricity transmission

from Tibet. By 2024, the region had exported 1.791 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity—primarily hydropower, but also geothermal, wind, and solar energy—to ‘East, Central, North, Northwest, and Southwest China’ (State Grid 2024). In other words, electricity generated in Tibet is now transmitted across vast distances to power regions throughout China—a feat enabled by the ultra-high-voltage transmission technology that China is actively promoting on the global stage. Tibetan electricity has become an increasingly integral part of the country’s national infrastructure landscape.

In addition to plans for transmitting Tibetan electricity to other parts of China, hydropower industry insiders have repeatedly floated the prospect of ‘international cooperation’—suggesting that electricity generated from Tibetan rivers could one day be exported to countries in South and Southeast Asia, integrating the region into China’s broader Belt and Road Initiative (Li and Chang 2019; Zhou et al. 2021).

The LYT project is explicitly designated to serve primarily outbound transmission needs (Xinhua 2025). However, evacuating the vast amount of electricity generated by the project will require overcoming both technical and institutional obstacles. Transmission networks must be constructed across the Himalayan ridges to connect the LYT project with other regions, posing engineering and logistical challenges that might overshadow those of building the LYT dam itself.

Furthermore, given the project’s extraordinarily high construction costs, the resulting electricity is expected to be highly expensive and economically uncompetitive without substantial subsidies (Su 2018). To ensure the viability of the project, it is anticipated the government will provide significant financial support—beyond the estimated RMB1.2 trillion in capital investment—to subsidise electricity prices. Yet, how these funds will be mobilised remains unclear.

As one hydropower industry expert has warned, utilising Tibet’s hydropower potential will require careful coordination among power generation, transmission, and consumption sectors, which under China’s current power sector structure remain institutionally fragmented (Tan 2019). This fragmentation has been a contributing factor to the problem of

‘water discharge’ seen in past hydropower projects and could be repeated in the LYT project unless substantial institutional reforms are undertaken.

Perhaps in anticipation of the project’s financial and coordination challenges, the central government established a new state-owned enterprise (SOE), China Yajiang Group (CYG), to lead the development of the LYT project, rather than assigning it to one of the SOEs already active in Tibet. Notably, CYG is ranked number 22 among the 99 SOEs directly supervised by the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC). This high ranking suggests that the new company will enjoy vice-ministerial authority, in contrast to the lower administrative standing of most existing power generation SOEs. Such elevated status is likely intended to facilitate the cross-regional and interagency coordination necessary for implementing a project of this scale and complexity.

Cross-Border Water Conflict, or Competition in Infrastructural Power?

As the downstream country, India has closely monitored China’s hydropower development activities on the Yarlung Tsangpo River in the past decade (MEA 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2021, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Much of the focus has centred on the two countries’ respective rights to the waters of the Yarlung Tsangpo–Brahmaputra River. The Indian public has expressed particular concern that China could weaponise its upstream position to manipulate river flows. However, the prevailing media narrative may overstate the risks of cross-border water conflict and obscure the deeper geopolitical stakes—namely, the consolidation of territorial control in a disputed border region.

While cross-border water management is undoubtedly a source of tension, both countries appear to have managed this issue relatively cooperatively. They set up an Expert Level Mechanism in 2006 to discuss issues related to trans-border rivers and signed a memorandum of understanding on ‘Strengthening Cooperation on Trans-Border Rivers’ in 2013 (MEA 2013). China has been providing India with

hydrological data, albeit charging US\$125,000 a year for the privilege (Mitra 2017). Cooperation under these mechanisms was reiterated during a visit by the Indian Foreign Secretary to Beijing in January 2025 (MEA 2025b). In recent months, Chinese diplomats in India have also actively engaged with the Indian press to assuage concerns about China's potential weaponisation of hydropower projects (Chinese Embassy in India 2025).

There are technical grounds to support the argument that China's ability to disrupt downstream waterflows through the LYT project will be limited. Unlike the Three Gorges Dam—a large storage dam that creates a vast reservoir by holding back substantial volumes of water and submerging wide areas of the riverbank—the dams planned for the Yarlung Tsangpo are designed as 'run-of-the-river' type. While the Three Gorges Dam serves multiple purposes, including hydropower generation, flood control, navigation, and irrigation—supporting densely populated and economically vital regions along the Yangtze—the Yarlung Tsangpo dams are intended solely for power generation, given Tibet's sparse population and lack of significant agricultural or industrial demand that would justify multipurpose water regulation. According to the announced design, the LYT project involves diverting water through tunnels across the Great Bend, enabling it to flow in a more direct path and harness the river's steep drop in elevation. Unlike the Three Gorges model, these dams will not rely on high barriers to hold back water, meaning their capacity to significantly regulate or interrupt downstream flows is inherently limited.

As the Chinese scientist Yang Yong—himself a vocal critic of the LYT project—has pointed out, 'downstream countries' concerns about the impact on river flow are not scientifically based' (Walker 2011). This is because China's contribution to the Brahmaputra's flow is estimated to be lower than 30 per cent, with substantial contributions to the river's flow coming from tributaries in India and Bhutan and from rainfall—all beyond China's control (Giordano and Wahal 2022).

There has long been speculation about a separate initiative to divert Tibetan rivers to arid regions of China, such as Xinjiang. If realised, such a project would pose a significantly greater threat to the water

security of downstream countries. However, not only has this speculation been officially denied (Xinjiang Cyber Administration 2025), but also the recent confirmation of the LYT project has further reduced the likelihood of diversion; it would be difficult to pursue both projects simultaneously, since hydropower generation and long-distance water transfer compete for the same water resources.

However, this does not diminish the geopolitical implications of the LYT project. Rather than centring on direct competition with India over water use, the project may be more strategically aimed at consolidating territorial control in the border region. Its construction and operation will require the mobilisation of large numbers of engineers, workers, and managerial personnel into an area that has long been isolated and sparsely populated. The newly established CYG, which enjoys a higher administrative rank, may offer stronger incentives for personnel to relocate to this remote region. High-grade roads and railways will be built to transport large equipment, further enhancing infrastructure connectivity and military defensibility. Taken together, these developments are likely to transform the region physically and demographically, potentially turning it into a new economic hub whose influence could extend into surrounding areas, including those currently under Indian administration.

Therefore, the development of the LYT project in this border region illustrates the extension of the state's 'infrastructural power' (Mann 1993)—not only through the building of physical infrastructure, but also through an expanded bureaucratic presence and deepening of economic integration.

This logic of state power is mirrored on the Indian side. The Brahmaputra Basin holds the greatest share of India's total hydropower potential, more than the Indus and Ganges basins combined (Goyal 2022). Within Arunachal Pradesh (or what China refers to as 'Zangnan'), up to 150 dams have been planned on the Brahmaputra (Giordano and Wahal 2022). Additionally, the National River-Linking Project envisions diverting water from the Brahmaputra to other parts of India. Few of these projects have materialised so far, as India's federal system and more dynamic civil society make it less likely for the government to launch large-scale infrastructure projects in the

manner that is done in China. Nonetheless, the strategic rationale of integrating this remote northeastern frontier into India's national economy and reinforcing territorial control remains a key impetus of Indian policymaking.

Transformed Horizons

Unlike the balloon-decorated, celebratory atmosphere that accompanied the launch of the Three Gorges Project in 1994, the stern looks on the faces of Chinese officials and SOE leaders at the LYT project's ground-breaking ceremony hint at an uneasiness about the extraordinary challenges that lie ahead. Whereas the Three Gorges Project underwent more than four decades of public debate and scrutiny, the LYT project is being pursued with little rigorous examination of its environmental risks or the social impacts on local communities. Instead, it is being framed as a strategic response to the country's future industrial needs and, ironically, as part of its 'green development' agenda. The imperative to compete with a rival neighbour has likely also contributed to the decision.

With the launch of the LYT project, the anticipated surge in infrastructure development on the Tibetan Plateau will usher in a new wave of state-building projects in a region long regarded as a remote frontier. One thing is certain: the plateau will be profoundly transformed. ■



Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet. Source: Luca Galuzzi (CC), www.galuzzi.it.

The Technopolitics of China's Yarlung Tsangpo Dam Project and the Paradox of Hydropower

Zenel GARCIA, Phillip GUERREIRO

This essay explores the technopolitics of China's Yarlung Tsangpo Dam, framed as a solution to energy and water insecurity, regional underdevelopment, and carbon goals. It situates the project within the CCP's reliance on large-scale infrastructure to assert control and legitimacy, while noting how such schemes often generate ecological, economic, and political risks. Drawing on China's hydrological history and past megaprojects—the Sanmenxia and Three Gorges Dams, the South-North Water Diversion—it argues these strategies may worsen the insecurities they aim to resolve.

Three years after announcing their intent to construct a mega-dam along the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) River as part of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, Chinese officials gave their approval to proceed with the project on 25 December 2024. This was followed by a groundbreaking ceremony led by Premier Li Qiang on 19 July 2025. While key details of the project remain unknown, the construction of the dam has sparked considerable debate about its environmental impacts as well as its potential to exacerbate tensions with downstream states (Pearce 2025). However, much

of this debate neglects the technopolitical logic that not only shapes Chinese officials' attachment to hydropower, but also their elision of its paradoxical outcomes. In essence, officials view hydropower as foundational to China's energy and water security, economic development, and energy transition despite its negative impact on each of those efforts. This paradox reveals how technopolitical dependencies emerge whereby technological solutions produce new conditions that necessitate additional technologies for their success. As a result of this 'fix to fix the fix' dynamic, officials become locked into path dependencies, thereby undermining system resilience (Harrell 2022). These recursive dynamics entrench the state's reliance on large-scale infrastructure, obscuring alternatives and reinforcing an ideology of control through engineering.

Technopolitics and the Yarlung Tsangpo Dam Project

Technopolitics involves the design and use of technology to advance political objectives. However, despite this expressed intentionality, technopolitical implementation produces social and material effects that are often unintended by proponents (Hecht 2011: 3). These technologies, once implemented, can acquire their own agency and power, thus requiring political actors to implement additional technological solutions to ensure their success. In the Chinese context, technopolitics is deeply shaped by the intersection of the country's long hydrological history (Ball 2017), the technocratic approach of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exercising mastery over the environment (Crow-Miller et al. 2017), and security and development discourses that link social stability to economic development, which underpin these processes (Garcia and Guerreiro 2025). This intersection produces a form of state-building in which infrastructural interventions are not merely technical solutions but also imbued with ideological significance, legitimising state authority and reinforcing centralised control over frontier regions (Zhang 2025).

The Yarlung Tsangpo Dam, projected to cost US\$167 billion and generate a staggering 60 gigawatts of electricity—three times that of the Three

Gorges Dam—embodies this complex intersection. Nevertheless, while its scale and scope exceed that of the roughly 100,000 other dams in the country (Song et al. 2022), the mega-dam reflects a continuation of China's historical hydrological engineering practices and technocratic approach to national development through mastery over the environment (Shapiro 2001). More importantly, the project represents the technopolitical implementation of security and development discourses. The CCP has consistently mobilised discourses that link underdevelopment to social instability. As a result, underdevelopment is viewed as a leading indicator of insecurity and detrimental to the party's legitimacy (Garcia 2021). This discourse is especially salient in the less developed interior and frontier provinces with sizeable minority populations, such as Tibet, where the CCP perceives the development gap as a key factor in driving unrest and social tensions (Garcia 2021). Consequently, party officials have sought to address this issue through infrastructure that is intended to simultaneously generate economic activity while extending the reach of the state, illustrating the co-constitutive relationship between infrastructural and despotic power (Mann 1993). In this framing, the Yarlung Tsangpo Dam project is a vehicle for addressing several interconnected developmental challenges within China, which are expected to contribute to social stability and therefore security.

Proponents of the dam view its construction as a way to stabilise energy provision within Tibet and neighbouring provinces, which have experienced electricity shortages in the past (People's Daily 2013). Furthermore, the dam would enable Tibet to transmit electricity to more developed provinces further east whose energy demands continue to grow (Shen et al. 2024). In other words, Tibet is expected to emerge as an energy hub by leveraging its vast hydropower potential (Xizang Autonomous Region Development and Reform Commission 2021). Party officials also regard this as a key step towards accelerating economic development in Tibet since energy security is intended to attract industries that can develop human capital (Xinhua 2024). From their perspective, these dynamics would better integrate Tibet into the rest of China while bridging the development gap with other interior provinces, thus addressing what they believe to be the primary source of social tensions in the province. Additionally, the presence

of a high-profile infrastructure project functions as a performative display of state power and commitment to long-term development in a geopolitically sensitive region. Finally, the Yarlung Tsangbo Dam project is also viewed as vital to China's transition to renewable energy as Beijing seeks to meet its carbon emission reduction goals (Xinhua 2024). However, despite these stated aims, the implementation of mega-dams such as the one proposed on the Yarlung Tsangbo exposes the paradox of hydropower.

The Paradox of Hydropower

Given China's massive population, growing energy demands, ambitions for energy diversification, decarbonisation goals, stark economic disparities between coastal and interior regions, and persistent water insecurity, it is understandable that CCP officials are driven to pursue large-scale hydropower expansion. Hydropower projects impact the nature around them, the economies developed from them, the energy distributed by them, and the politics holding them up. They represent the juxtaposition of energy and nature. On a grand scale, hydropower is a technology that simultaneously introduces great gains and great pains. Supporters of large-scale dams tout the ability of these projects to generate reliable and affordable energy, become a catalyst for economic development, and spearhead the transition to green energy.

However, while hydropower projects can ostensibly support these efforts, they often produce opposite outcomes. Large hydropower projects demonstrably ravage local ecologies and river basin health, suffer from cost overruns, become mired in bloating operating costs, hinder agricultural output, force mass relocations, and create flooding and energy burdens for planners (Petheram and McMahon 2019; Fan et al. 2021). As a result, these outcomes erode ecological, social, and institutional resilience (Harrell 2022). The paradoxes of large-scale dams are neither new nor unique, yet the sheer volume of China's pursuit of hydropower warrants a continuing discussion about the wisdom of pursuing not only large dams, but also mega-dams.

China is already a world leader in dam development and possesses an extremely long history of hydrological engineering. Yet, this long history does not

stop the increased development of dams regardless of the documented drawbacks within China. For example, the argument that dams offer affordable energy should come with the caveat that dams inevitably will cost more in the long run than initially estimated, with cost overruns ranging from 49 per cent to 120 per cent (Petheram and McMahon 2019). These costs are not merely financial but also environmental, social, and political, spurring unrest in relocated communities and challenging the very legitimacy of local governance that these projects are intended to reinforce (Xu et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the expectation that dams will catalyse economic development and urbanisation must be qualified with the caveat that, globally, dams produce opposite effects, with many reducing local GDP, population, and urban spaces (Fan et al. 2021). Within China, projects such as the Sanmenxia Dam exemplify this. Built in the early years of the People's Republic of China, the dam was supposed to offer complete control of the Yellow River and help farmers by reducing flooding, resisting sediment flow, and boosting development (Shapiro 2001). However, the dam failed to deliver on these promises, leading to sediment build-up and flooding. This required costly renovations that limited the energy generation capacity of the dam while retaining sediment and flood risks. In essence, the Sanmenxia Dam remains an economic and ecological burden on the Yellow River Basin to this day. Consequently, it illustrates the paradox of hydropower and challenges triumphalist narratives about technological mastery over the environment, revealing instead the long-term costs of centralised, high-modernist planning that fails to adapt to environmental complexity.

Technopolitical Dependencies

Hydropower's complex reality inevitably generates technopolitical dependencies. This refers to the dependent relationship political systems develop with technology or, in this case, infrastructure. These dependencies effectively become co-constitutive. Political capital is expended on technological solutions and implementation; as the technology becomes entrenched in daily operations, it becomes foundational to the broader system. Problems stemming from

this technology must be addressed with increased layers of technology or continuous improvements to existing technology. This dependency runs so deep that this solution is now directly tied to the legitimacy and power of the state, and the state now must expend political capital to continuously maintain the technology.

Existing examples of this in China include the relationship between the Chinese State, water (in) security, and large-scale infrastructure to address the existing challenges. It is no secret that the combination of pre-existing environmental conditions, rapidly expanding urbanisation, and a changing climate has introduced historic heatwaves and drought to China. Coupled with increased industrial and agricultural use of water, freshwater resources are a precious commodity in China. To address the challenges of water security, the CCP has supported multiple large-scale infrastructure projects, including the South-North Water Diversion Project (SNWDP) and the Three Gorges Dam. Both projects were introduced as solutions to pressing challenges. They were intended to address water availability, flood control, energy demands, and developmental needs. Both projects are centrepieces of CCP legitimacy within China as a nod towards engineering marvels and mastery over the environment. The SNWDP and the Three Gorges Dam also came at a great cost, with the relocation of more than one million people and an estimated price tag of more than US\$100 billion combined.

These two projects illustrate clear technopolitical dependencies. They are now foundational in diverting water to drought-ridden regions, controlling floods for the fragile agricultural sector, and generating power on a large scale. Over time, however, their unintended consequences have become increasingly pronounced. Both the SNWDP and the Three Gorges Dam have been linked to a wide range of environmental problems, including erosion, sedimentation, deforestation, wildlife extinction, natural disasters, and terrestrial adjustments (Li et al. 2013; Rogers et al. 2019). As a result, the CCP must address these issues without compromising on the political power placed on these two projects. The embeddedness of these infrastructure projects in the national imaginary as symbols of progress makes it difficult for officials to scale back or reconsider their viability. Instead, the response often takes the form of doubling down and introducing new interventions, technologies, or

regulations to stabilise what has become politically indispensable, even if environmentally or economically unsustainable.

Implications

The proposed Yarlung Tsangpo Dam encapsulates China's technopolitical strategy of addressing energy and water security, regional underdevelopment, and carbon reduction goals through large-scale infrastructure. While framed as a solution to these challenges, the dam reflects entrenched state practices that prioritise technological mastery over environmental and social stability. In other words, these megaprojects are not simply engineered responses to technical problems but also political acts that reinforce dependencies between the infrastructure and state legitimacy. As past cases such as the Sanmenxia Dam, SNWDP, and Three Gorges Dam demonstrate, these dependencies often lead to escalating financial, ecological, and political costs.

The implications are profound. First, by investing political capital in megaprojects with uncertain long-term benefits, the Chinese State risks deepening the very insecurities it seeks to resolve. Second, the environmental disruptions in one of the world's most ecologically and geopolitically sensitive regions may exacerbate tensions with downstream neighbours. Last, the dam reinforces a cycle in which each infrastructural 'solution' demands further technological fixes, creating a feedback loop of dependency and degradation of system resiliency. Rather than signalling progress, the Yarlung Tsangpo Dam may come to symbolise the limits of technocratic governance and the paradoxes of development-by-infrastructure—challenges not unique to China, but increasingly central to global debates about sustainable modernisation. ■



Buildings in Nanshan District, Shenzhen, 2024.
Source: Fan Yang

City in the Sky

Drones, Shenzhen, and the
'Low-Altitude Economy'

Fan YANG

This essay brings an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach to the study of Shenzhen as a 'core engine' city in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA). Through archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and textual analysis, I examine the tensions and contradictions that have informed and emerged from the recent formation of the low-altitude economy, which aims to transform the airspace below 3,000 metres into a digitised and value-generative economic resource. By probing the central role played by drones in this discursive and imaginary formation, I explore how technological agents carve out future scenarios for Shenzhen, the GBA, and the nation. Conceptualising Shenzhen as a media-infrastructure complex, I argue, is helpful in illuminating the multidimensional reconfiguration of Shenzhen as a 'City in the Sky' through vertical, aerial, digital, and more-than-human means.

Imagine this scenario: you ordered takeout during lunch rush hour, but the delivery bros were overbooked, so a drone dropped from the sky to deliver your meal; on your commute, while ground traffic was jammed, flying cars allowed you to take an 'air taxi' to work ... These scenes seemingly out of science fiction movies will become part of people's daily lives in the era of the 'low-altitude economy' [低空经济].

This invitation to envision an aerial future appeared on *Sina Finance* in an article titled '2024, the First Year of the Low-Altitude Economy' (PEDaily 2024). What it references is the first appearance of the term 'Low-Altitude Economy' in the *Report on the Work of the Government* presented to the National People's Congress in

January 2024, which signalled the aspiration to transform the airspace below 3,000 metres into a space that generates economic value. In the section titled ‘Major Tasks for 2024’, the report states the goal to ‘actively foster emerging industries and future-oriented industries’, which includes developing ‘new growth engines in fields such as biomanufacturing, commercial space-flight, and the low-altitude economy’ (State Council 2024). Soon after this report, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Finance, and the Civil Aviation Administration of China issued the ‘Implementation Plan for the Innovation and Application of General Aviation Equipment (2024–2030)’, proposing to promote the low-altitude economy to reach a market scale of RMB1 trillion by 2030 (PEDaily 2024).

While various local governments, including those of Shanghai and Beijing, have heeded the call to develop the low-altitude economy, it is Shenzhen, the city with a longstanding reputation for innovation and the de facto ‘drone capital’ of the world—a title earned through the presence of leading drone makers such as DJI—that has ‘flown’ to the forefront in the race to build a low-altitude future. In fact, it was via the WeChat post of a friend with whom I went to high school in Shenzhen that I first encountered the term. When I saw her last in 2019 back in Shenzhen, where I had lived from 1986 to 1996 before heading to college in Shanghai, I rode in her brand-new Maserati and listened to her adventures in ‘real estate e-commerce’. A Shenzhen University alumnus who had returned from graduate school in England and later worked in Japan, she became an enthusiastic participant in the low-altitude economy in the making, and she has engaged in drafting development plans and inviting ‘angel investors’ to join the cause.

I recall pausing at the seeming contradiction of ‘real estate e-commerce’, even though my experiences with the Zillow app while house hunting in the United States did come to mind. To me, the term indicated the interpenetration of the physical world and the digital space—something the cultural studies scholar Scott McQuire (2008) has described as characteristic of the ‘media city’. Elsewhere, I have referenced the ‘media city’ concept as part of an analysis of a light show in Shenzhen in 2018–19 celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the city’s founding wherein the

facades of highrises were turned into data flows via algorithmically rendered moving images, emblematising the malleability of the built environment (Yang 2023b). But I have also come to wonder whether the ‘media-architecture complex’ as McQuire defines the term best captures Shenzhen’s trajectory. After all, this is a place whose presence in the global information and communication technology sector has transformed dramatically over time—first, as a manufacturing hub (that is, ‘Made in China’ 中国制造) and counterfeiting capital of tech devices exemplified by *shanzhai* phones (‘Faked in China’ 中国山寨), and later as a city of innovation (‘Created in China’ 中国创造), before becoming the nation’s high-tech centre for artificial intelligence (‘Made in China Intelligently’ 中国智造). The venturing of my interlocutor from real estate e-commerce from 2019 into the realm of the low-altitude economy in 2024 speaks at once to the speed of change characteristic of the city’s development and the momentum the city appears to generate as a core engine in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA)—newly named in 2017 but long known as the Pearl River Delta.

I have therefore come to think of the city as a *media-infrastructure complex*. This understanding rests on the recognition that just as Shenzhen’s urban environment becomes highly mediated via digital means, Shenzhen itself has become integral to what Hong Kong–based academic Pun Ngai calls China’s ‘infrastructural capitalism’. For Pun, infrastructural capitalism

encompasses both the concrete infrastructures of roads, cities, high-speed rail, and logistics transportation—themselves linked to extractive capital in China and overseas—and their intersections with the digital infrastructures of e-commerce and the platform economy that increasingly take advantage of physical as well as human infrastructures. (2024: 351)

While Pun is primarily concerned with the potential for Chinese workers to accrue ‘infrastructural power’ vis-a-vis that of the state, I am more interested in the interactions between media technologies and infrastructural formations as they implicate Shenzhen in recent decades. This is particularly salient in the period after the global recession of 2008–09, which

Pun marks as the onset of infrastructural capitalism in China, and which also coincides with China's multi-faceted global project, the Belt and Road Initiative, officially launched in 2013.

The concept of the media-infrastructure complex draws attention to the city's entangled history with media technologies from mobile phones to drones, especially the ways in which media makers in Shenzhen negotiate various processes of globalisation from above and below. The tensions and contradictions that have informed and emerged from the recent phenomenon of the low-altitude economy have piqued my interest. By probing the central role played by drones in this discursive and imaginary formation, I hope to explore how technological agents carve out future scenarios for Shenzhen, the GBA, and the nation. The conception of Shenzhen as a media-infrastructure complex, I argue, is helpful in illuminating the multidimensional reconfiguration of Shenzhen as a 'City in the Sky' (天空之城) through vertical, aerial, digital, and more-than-human means.

Drones, the 'Human-Less Machines'

The English term 'drones' originated in World War II, referring to 'the small robotic planes used for target practice' (Benjamin 2013: 13). Commentators in the West have also described drones as 'unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), remotely piloted aerial vehicles, or remotely piloted aircraft systems' (Hildebrand 2021: 5). The Chinese name for drones, however, has a distinctive flavour. *Wurenji* (无人机), after all, directly translates as 'human-less machines' or 'human-less aircraft', with the character *ji* (机) present in both *jiqu* (机器, 'machine') and *feiji* (飞机, 'airplane'). Elsewhere, I have noted that the two characters in this name simultaneously point to the drone's human-made status and its capacity to move seemingly without direct human control (Yang 2023a). This combination often evokes a sense of fascination with technology in the Shenzhen/Chinese context—an optimism that contrasts with the dystopian vision often seen in Western media representations such as *The Terminator* (Richardson 2015). For instance, in 2022, I came across a Shenzhen third-grader's mini graphic novel

on WeChat called *Happy 2042* (快乐的2042). One of the pages shows three drones flying over a building and delivering packages. As the accompanying text notes, 2042 will see 'no more delivery workers', as all goods are distributed door-to-door via drones with 'big bellies' within minutes of receiving orders (Xulagudeyouhuo 2022).

The striking resemblance of this third-grader's imagination to the scenario of the 'low-altitude economy' depicted in the *Sina Finance* article comes as no surprise. As I interacted with informants who were the beneficiaries of Shenzhen's (and China's) economic boom of the past few decades, e-commerce had become so normalised in the city that having groceries delivered to your door was already a common practice before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019. Yet, the convenience for some relies on the hard work of others—namely, the army of delivery workers employed in the booming platform economy or, as a viral journalistic report puts it, 'trapped in' (困在) a web of algorithmically prescribed efficiency dominated by companies such as Meituan (Chuang 2020). If the pandemic provided any lesson, it is that this arrangement is predicated on an uneven distribution of mobility and risk, with the rural-to-urban migrants turned couriers bearing the brunt of the 'hypermobility' required of their work—and all the dangers that come with it, including traffic accidents—to deliver goods to their privileged customers' homes (Yang 2025).

When I was in Shenzhen briefly in January 2024, I witnessed a scene that put the contradictions of this 'mobility business' on full display. Visiting the Nanshan District, where many of my friends in the tech sector reside, I decided to rent a bike from the seemingly ubiquitous share-bike stands to travel to my next destination. Using an app on my mother's Chinese phone, which allows convenient access to Alipay and WeChat Pay, I unlocked a bike and started riding, only to quickly discover that the directions given on my Baidu map did not always reflect the route's compatibility with bikes. More often than not, when I arrived at an intersection, I had to lift the bike up and across a bridge—the kind designed for pedestrians to cross a street of high-speed traffic—to continue the journey.

As such, my trip on that Friday evening was significantly lengthened and, before long, the evening rush hour traffic began. When I encountered another of

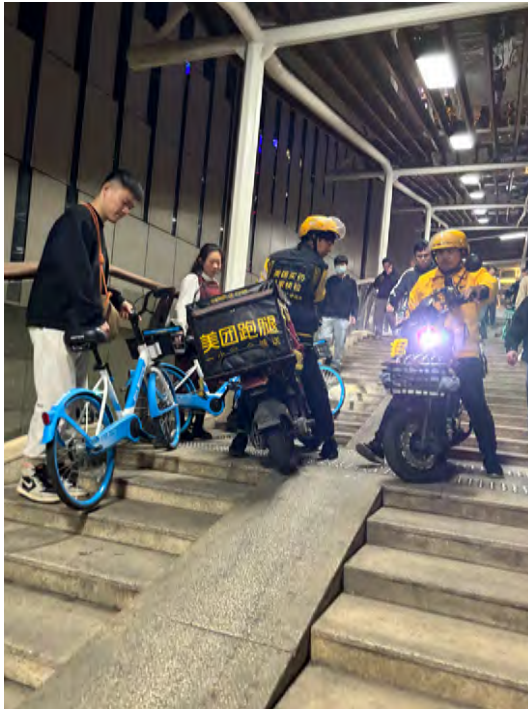


Figure 1: Meituan couriers manoeuvring their e-bikes on an overpass in Nanshan District, Shenzhen, 2024. Source: Fan Yang.

these infrastructural units meant to smooth the flow of cars without traffic lights, I gave up, returned the bike to a nearby stand, and decided to walk instead. It was then that I noticed another kind of traffic on the pedestrian bridge: two delivery workers in yellow Meituan jackets carrying goods on their e-bikes trying to navigate down and up the ramp in the middle of the steps leading to the overpass, with obvious difficulty. After I inconspicuously snapped some pictures, I arrived at the top of the bridge. The road below was filled with cars moving at a snail's pace, confirming the frequent complaints about traffic among my car-owning friends in Shenzhen. Automobiles—a symbol of middle-class mobility—are here juxtaposed with the delivery workers' struggle for mobility on bikes. And the infrastructure of the overpass meant to facilitate the flow of the former class is now an obstacle for the latter—something I would not have experienced at first hand if not for my curiosity to try out a share-bike instead of the privileged and speedier routine of taking a cab (see Figures 1 and 2).

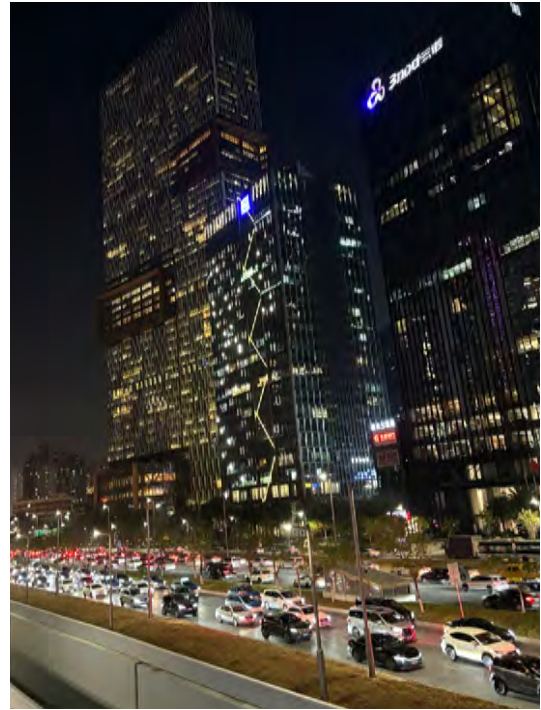


Figure 2: Traffic jam in Nanshan District, Shenzhen, 2024. Source: Fan Yang.

As I began to investigate the forces that gave rise to the 'low-altitude economy', I could not help but think of my encounter with those two traffic jams on and below a pedestrian bridge in the high-tech Nanshan District of Shenzhen. It appears that a city known for speed is being held back by its own aspiration to move faster. This contradiction is manifest in the urge to buy and drive one's own car despite limited parking spaces and rampant road congestion (if not the additional work hours required to maintain it). It is also shown in the delivery riders' troubled navigation of the city's many pedestrian bridges intended to speed up the movement of cars but potentially slowing the door-to-door delivery of goods. As anthropologist Max Hirsh (2016: 103) suggests, special border zones such as Shenzhen 'owe their very existence to the privileging of movement—of goods, of people, of foreign capital; and their spatial layout revolves invariably around infrastructures of mobility—train stations, highways, air- and seaports—that connect them'. Hirsh points out that

this privileging of mobility may come into tension with intercity rivalry (with Hong Kong, for example) and the state mandate to contain its growth. But what may also be observed is that the desire to accelerate mobility, which informs the expansion of a horizontal road into a three-dimensional structure that is the pedestrian bridge, can also cut into the efficiency it aspires to enhance.

‘Building a road into the lower airspace’ (把‘路’修到‘低空’去) is a line from the Shenzhen Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Association’s announcement of the Eighth World Drone Conference (or the International Low-Altitude Economy and Drone Exhibition) that was held in Shenzhen in May 2024, with the theme ‘Low-Altitude Economy, the Future’ (低空经济, 未来已来). The conference exhibition poster depicts a range of ‘human-less’ (无人) devices, from self-driving cars to electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft (eVTOL), from uncrewed ships to robots against the silhouetted backdrop of Shenzhen’s key architectural landmarks. If skyscrapers may be seen as vertical extensions of the city into the sky, these ‘human-less machines’ appear to further stretch the three-dimensional limit of that future ‘City in the Sky’, even as it leaves open the question: what of the humans in this future?

A More-than-Human Formation

According to the International Digital Economy Academy (or IDEA, whose Chinese name is the more location-specific 粤港澳大湾区数字经济研究院), ‘low altitude’ refers ‘in principle to the airspace with a vertical distance of less than 1,000 meters from the ground directly below, which can be extended to 3,000 meters according to the characteristics and actual needs of different regions’. What is considered ‘low’, then, is best understood as a ‘virtual concept’. The same article, reposted on the website of the Shenzhen UAV Industry Association (深圳无人机行业协会), goes on to suggest that this ‘low-altitude airspace is the most common natural resource found above the earth’s surface’. Unlike air and other material and energy in this space, this airspace is ‘an immovable space resource with significant location value’, with ‘characteristics of a public pond’

(公共池塘资源特性), albeit positioned ‘in an awkward “sandwich layer”’ (夹心层) (Shenzhen UAV Industry Association 2024a).

Notably, the writing emphasises that the airspace ‘is a natural resource that has existed since ancient times’, the lower portion of which is now waiting to be converted into ‘economic resources’ (Shenzhen UAV Industry Association 2024b). The invocation of ‘location value’ points to the need to reconfigure the physical space through an informational apparatus. In the words of Li Shipeng, the head of the low-altitude economy research branch of IDEA, ‘the low-altitude airspace is not only a physical space for low-altitude flying but should become an important productive element [生产要素] for realising new commercial and social values’. A ‘prerequisite’ for expanding this economy, Li adds, is to ‘build a unified low-altitude intelligent integrated infrastructure to transform low altitude into a calculable airspace’. This means using ‘modern digital technology’ to ensure ‘large-scale, sustainable, and high-quality rapid development in a safe and controllable manner’ (Nanfang Daily 2023). To turn physical airspace into a value-generative economic resource, then, relies on digitising that space so that the ‘roads’ in the sky can be equipped with proper ‘traffic rules’ enforceable through ‘advanced communication, computing, sensing, flight control and other technologies’ (Chen et al. 2024). What is being envisioned is nothing less than a media-infrastructure complex that blends ‘hard infrastructure’ with ‘soft infrastructure’. The former involves ‘physical infrastructure’ that includes ‘low-altitude flight take-off and landing transfer, cargo loading and unloading, passenger waiting, aircraft charging (recharging), flight testing and other infrastructure’ and the latter refers to ‘information infrastructure’, entailing ‘low-altitude flight communications, navigation, surveillance, meteorological detection ... as well as low-altitude flight digital management service systems’ (Zhao and Wang 2024). This media infrastructural formation appears central to the future growth of the low-altitude economy, and it is no accident that Shenzhen has become a pioneering site for developing this new, three-dimensional, and ‘comprehensive economic form’ that can bring a multitude of industries into convergence (Shen 2024).

One of the oft-mentioned entities in the low-altitude economy discussion is the Shenzhen-based drone company DJI (大疆). According to the *People's Daily*, with its 'flight control, gimbal, image transmission, self-developed imaging system ... currently accounting for more than 70 per cent of the global market', the firm is 'at the forefront of the transformation of drones into productivity tools' and 'is leading the popularisation of drone applications in multiple vertical industries' (Yang 2024). In 2023, DJI reportedly sold more than 300,000 agricultural drones worldwide, 'with flight tracks covering more than 100 countries and regions' (Chen et al. 2024). Its spokesperson attributes its success to 'core technologies' as well as a 'supply chain and production and sales system' plus 'after-sales maintenance and other full business chains' (Yang 2024).

Self-branded as 'the future of possible', DJI's scale of global success is closely tied to its technical knowhow. For Lü Renli, researcher and director of the General Aviation Department of the Civil Aviation Administration and the author of multiple 'Blue Books' for Chinese aviation and civilian drones, there are specific, even 'disruptive', technical breakthroughs that have allowed DJI to outpace others in the construction of the new low-altitude economy. Backing the 'stable hovering and simple control function' of the 'Phantom 1' aerial photography drone released in 2012, for example, were 'the drone's computing power, algorithms and communication capabilities ... utilising and combining the lightweight and miniaturisation technology of key components in the mobile communications industry'. In other words, it is the 'digital indigeneity' of these 'human-less aircraft' that distinguishes them from those piloted by humans in previous developments in aviation technology (Lü, R. 2024).

The celebration of DJI's 'human-less machine' as a pioneer figure in the low-altitude economy also points to the recognition that more-than-human capabilities are needed to manage this 'archetype of new-quality productive forces' (新质生产力) (Lü, R. 2024). To that end, IDEA launched the 'Open SILAS (Smart Integrated Lower Airspace System)' to 'connect numerous cities, organizations, and businesses to collectively create a system of standards' that can be applied nationally in the future. The hope is to mobilise artificial intelligence and related technologies to address the traffic that might ensue when

the low-altitude economy scales up to a high degree of heterogeneity, density, frequency, and complexity (Xinhua Insight 2024). Again, as Li Shipeng mentions in an interview with the *People's Daily*, Shenzhen's 'many years of accumulation and sedimentation in the fields of electronic information, big data, artificial intelligence, etcetera' have granted the city 'a unique advantage' (Lü, S. 2024).

It is telling that Open SILAS is sometimes dubbed the 'digital brain of the low altitude' (Ye 2024). At work is an image of the city as an organism not unlike a human—with a brain-like unit for control—but also endowed with capabilities that exceed those of a human. This more-than-human aspiration also arguably relates to the human–nonhuman hybrid vision afforded by drone photography. As I have argued elsewhere, drone footage has become a trope in official representations of China's infrastructural projects, including those in the GBA (Yang 2023a). These slow-moving images typically position the viewer as an explorer who can identify with the drone's eye view to marvel at the large-scale constructions carried out by the state. A similar pattern can be discerned in televisual coverage of the low-altitude economy, whether it is footage that shows the drone delivery of goods or the human-carrying eVTOLs for point-to-point transportation. These scenes—invariably shot in perfect weather and featuring no more than one flying vehicle against the backdrop of a pollution-free blue sky—invite the viewer to imagine inhabiting a clean and safe airspace above the congested infrastructure on the ground.

Having witnessed the traffic jam on and below that pedestrian bridge in Shenzhen last January, I couldn't help but notice the contrast between this vision of a lone traveller roaming a clean lower airspace and the busy web of flying objects often seen in sci-fi movies, if not the dystopian look of a polluted sky typical of Chinese cities. The anticipated congestion in the sky, after all, is what prompts the need for a 'lower-altitude brain' to manage and control the space. Companies such as Meituan are also featured in these videos as enabling speedier deliveries of medical supplies, food, and consumer goods, highlighting the capacity of their drones to overcome the geographical barriers faced by human couriers (Xinhua Insight 2024). But the spectre of an airspace jam is arguably already looming. After all, Shenzhen has reportedly 'opened 212 cargo drone routes' and launched more than

900,000 cargo drone flights since 2023. Nationwide, the first half of 2024 saw China registering ‘more than 600,000 new drones, and the total number of drones increased by 48 per cent compared with the end’ of the previous year. There is ample indication that ‘China’s low-altitude economy is entering a new stage of rapid growth’, with ‘more than 14,000 drone companies holding valid civil unmanned aircraft operation certificates, and more than 225,000 people as licensed drone operators.’ There appears to be an urgent need to properly carve out and distribute ‘airspace resources’ as the ‘flat economy’ transforms into a ‘three-dimensional economy’ (Ye 2024).

The GBA and ‘City in the Sky’

In this admittedly very preliminary study of the low-altitude economy, it is notable how many border-crossing activities between Shenzhen and Hong Kong (among other cities in the GBA) have informed its development. The CEO of DJI, Wang Tao, for example, was educated at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) before founding the company in Shenzhen. Li Shipeng, the IDEA spokesperson, is affiliated with the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s Shenzhen campus and HKUST’s Guangzhou branch. The latter in April 2024 established the Low Altitude Systems and Economy Research Institute (LASERI), which ‘will serve as an anchor to initiate collaborations with the Shenzhen IDEA Research Institute and HKUST as a first step’ (HKUST 2024).

Several years ago, the GBA was perhaps still a slogan for the future promulgated through state media spectacles, such as the 1,000-drone formation of ‘Greater Bay Area, Greater Future’ in Guangzhou (Wang 2021). Now, that future appears to be closer, with the idea of a GBA ‘lower-altitude economy circle’ becoming more palpable. With its total economic output surpassing RMB14 trillion, the GBA has seen the rapid growth of low-altitude economy businesses, including ‘tourism and entertainment, cross-border flights, intercity flights, air commuting, and medical ambulances and emergency rescues’ (Fang 2024). For some, the GBA has evolved ‘into two “low-altitude economic cross-belts”’, referencing ‘the production and manufacturing service belt with Guangzhou, Zhuhai and Foshan as the core’ and ‘the productive

financial service belt with Hong Kong, Macau and Shenzhen as the core’ (Fang 2024). For others, such as Li Shipeng, there remains the issue of ‘cross-border transportation’ between Shenzhen and Hong Kong due to the lingering presence of ‘juxtaposed controls’ or, literally, ‘two customs in one location’ (一地两检). In Li’s view,

those working and living in the northern part of Hong Kong may be able to order take-outs via drones from Shenzhen in the future; things like this are technically possible, and it mainly depends on whether the government has effective policies and measures to encourage and control them. (Chen 2024)

In Li’s eyes, geographic boundaries may be easily crossed thanks to technology, but political demarcations are perhaps more challenging to overcome even as economic imperatives tend to demand the dissolution of borders.

My conception of Shenzhen as a media-infrastructure complex, then, aims precisely to draw attention to these tensions and contradictions—some latent and others already visible—in the unfolding phenomenon of the low-altitude economy. As someone who grew up watching Hong Kong TV and consuming imported goods from Hong Kong in 1980s and 1990s Shenzhen, I have experienced the highly securitised and yet porous Shenzhen–Hong Kong borders at first hand. More recently, friends in Shenzhen and Hong Kong alike have reported that Hong Kong residents are increasingly travelling north to Shenzhen for entertainment, leisure, and even grocery trips to Costco—a reversal of flows from a few decades ago—due to the excruciatingly high costs of living in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the rapidly improving quality of life in Shenzhen. The latest formation of the low-altitude economy simultaneously reminds us of the continuity of border-crossing activities that persist from the past into the present and points to the multidimensional reconfiguration of borders in the making of the GBA.

Certainly, my initial investigation has generated more questions than answers: What kinds of cultural imaginaries stem from the vision of building Shenzhen as a ‘City in the Sky’—a name also used to describe DJI’s newly completed futuristic headquarters in Nanshan, designed by Foster and Partners

and informed by a sort of drone aesthetics? How does the low-altitude economy figure in the troubling geopolitical conditions in which China finds itself, especially amid the intensifying US–China high-tech rivalry and post-pandemic economic slowdown? How might the aspirations for the more-than-human haunt the (differently classed and gendered) humans who remain trapped in the (dehumanising) systems of industrial, platform, and infrastructural capitalism? As the low-altitude economy continues to engage vertical, aerial, digital, and more-than-human means in shaping the contours of Shenzhen and the GBA, critical questions like these are worth bearing in mind. ■



FOCUS



Zhang Anpu, 'Transform Social Traditions, Hold a New Wedding' (1982). Photo courtesy of the Wesleyan University Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies Art & Archival Collections.

The *People's Daily* (人民日报) publishes important announcements on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It covers high-level politics, economic achievements, diplomatic breakthroughs, and other serious topics. So, on 14 December 1984, a reader might have been surprised to see the paper run the playful headline 'Interprovincial Dating Project' (跨省市恋爱协作) (*People's Daily* 1984). The article in question reported that many women workers in Jinzhou, Liaoning Province, were having a hard time finding a husband, while the Dagang oilfield in Tianjin had numerous single male workers. After learning about the situation, local trade unions had decided to cooperate and initiated several interprovincial blind dates: more than 40 Jinzhou women had travelled to Tianjin, while 50

Navigating the Market for Love

The Chinese Party-State as Matchmaker in the Early Reform Era

Zhaorui LÜ

Drawing on newspaper articles, social studies, and union gazetteers, this essay examines the origin of the 'older youths' marriage problem' in the China of the early 1980s, as well as the Party-State's response to it. The end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of economic reforms engendered cultural shifts and social changes that transformed marriage practices. Unsettled by the growing population of single youths, the central government launched a national matchmaking campaign, the first in Chinese history. Through social events, individualised matchmaking services, and collective weddings, the Party-State problematised the phenomenon of older unmarried youths as a public issue and actively intervened in young people's personal affairs.

Tianjin men had travelled in the opposite direction. Within four months, 39 women from Jinzhou had begun romantic relationships with workers from Tianjin and five planned to marry in a collective wedding hosted by the union in the new year. With such flowers of love in bloom, the state newspaper declared the dating project a success.

The Birth of the 'Older Youths'

Why did the Chinese Government, which at that time was supposedly preoccupied with 'eliminating chaos and returning to normal' (拨乱反正) after the end of the Mao years, suddenly take an interest in sponsoring

dating projects? It all started with a meeting earlier in the summer of 1984. On 10 June, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CCP had convened to discuss what it called the ‘older youths’ marriage problem’ (大龄青年婚姻问题). On that occasion, top officials had ordered the mass organisations—the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the All-China Women’s Federation, and the Communist Youth League of China—at every administrative level to pitch in. While maintaining the official line that marriage should occur later in life to control population growth, participants at the forum deemed that marrying too late and staying single were problematic as well. The ideal window for marriage was arbitrarily set to be from the age of 25 to 30 for men and 23 to 30 for women. With its characteristic ingenuity with words, the government came up with the paradoxical phrase ‘older youths’ (大龄青年) to describe those who remained unmarried beyond the age of 30 (Wang and Li 1989: 551).

The Chinese State has historically intervened in marriage and family affairs. During the Qing Dynasty, various legal codes regulated parent–child relationships, marriage practices, and ‘proper’ sexuality as part of the state’s civilising project (Du 2021; Theiss 2004; Sommer 2015). In the eighteenth century, as a result of a skewed sex ratio, especially in rural areas, single men—known as ‘bare sticks’ (光棍)—were ostracised and suppressed as the Qing State perceived them as a threat to social stability (Sommer 2000: 10). The Party-State of the early reform era inherited such concerns and officially problematised the unmarried population in 1984.

This unease was not entirely unwarranted. The transition from decades of revolution to the policy of Reform and Opening-Up in the early 1980s had given rise to cultural shifts and social dynamics that transformed marriage practices. During the 1960s and 1970s, young people upheld a person’s political background as the most important criterion when finding a romantic partner. Party members, workers, and soldiers were considered the most desirable for their ‘progressiveness’ (Yu 1987). However, as revolutionary fervour dwindled in the late 1970s, one’s political background quickly lost its appeal and marriage for love came to be celebrated instead.

Yet, practical concerns remained crucial criteria in selecting a spouse. The Chinese traditional view that favoured educational attainment in the selection

of one’s partner regained prominence in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s decision in 1977 to restore the college entrance exam. And once people were no longer accused of being bourgeois and counter-revolutionary in their pursuit of a cultured and upper-class lifestyle, economic status also became a priority in mate choice, especially for women (Cai 1989: 25). Women workers no longer wanted to marry peasants or men working in the service industry, while male workers still expressed some interest in women from those occupations (Feng 1985: 56). In fact, it was believed that one of the major reasons for the growing number of single women was their unwillingness to marry their fellow workers (Shang 1994: 40).

While marriage culture began to shift at the start of the reform period, broader social dynamics that had their roots in the Mao era were also at play. Beginning in the 1950s and expanding during the Cultural Revolution, the ‘Down to the Countryside’ (上山下乡) movement mobilised millions of urban youths to labour alongside and learn from peasants in rural villages (Bonnin 2022). While these youths maintained an active romantic and sexual life in the countryside, they rarely tied the knot. The household registration system (户口) made it difficult for urban youths to marry their rural partners and an urban–rural union could complicate their plan to go back to the cities (Honig 2003: 160). Thus, most of the urban youths returned home in the late 1970s as male or female ‘bare sticks’. This, however, was not the end of their problems. The mass return of Chinese young people to their city homes precipitated a labour surplus, which in turn caused urban unemployment to rise. The bare sticks therefore struggled to sprout since being jobless did not bode well in a new marriage market that valued one’s economic status.

These developments engendered much anxiety and discontent. Many sent-down youths felt they had been sacrificed, abandoned, and even betrayed. In the 1970s, they had enthusiastically answered the Party-State’s call, delaying marriage and dedicating the best years of their lives to carry out the revolution in the countryside. Yet, when they returned, they discovered that their chances of marrying were further diminished and their marital status was a subject of intense social scrutiny. As a young man from Beijing pleaded with researchers investigating the ‘older youths’ problem in the 1980s: ‘We are the



New wedding practices, 1983. The Beijing Capital mechanical factory youth league and union established a 'service group to promote new wedding practices'. They were praised for holding collective wedding ceremonies for workers and alleviating parents' burdens. Source: Zhaorui Lü's personal collection.

most miserable among the miserable generation. We got involved in every unfortunate situation. What does society plan to do to take responsibility [for our misfortune]?' (Older Youths' Marriage Problem Investigation Team 1985: 40).

Building a Magpie Bridge

Unsettled by these developments, the Party-State took a proactive stance. Two days after the secretariat meeting in June 1984, the Women's Federation organised a national conference to discuss the marriage problem. On 18 June, the ACFTU also held a forum to address the matter by examining existing matchmaking initiatives. The two mass organisations concluded that they would set up special units

to 'build a magpie bridge' (搭鹊桥) and 'pull the red thread' (牵红线)—references to Chinese legends about fated lovers—by organising activities and creating opportunities for youths to socialise (Zhang 1984).

The CCP in fact has something of a track record in matchmaking. Mao Zedong famously praised the character Hong Niang (红娘), the matchmaker between the two protagonists in the classic play *The Romance of the West Chamber* (西厢记), for her chivalry and for standing up for choice in love (Chen 1996: 1349–50). He matched Liu Shaoqi with He Baozhen during the Anyuan strike of 1922 and reportedly enjoyed matchmaking for those around him. Other communist leaders such as Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping served as matchmakers at some point (Li 2016: 143). While the CCP sought to dismantle some aspects of traditional marriage, matchmaking remained a critical and popular practice. What



On Chinese New Year's Eve in 1983, 150 couples were married in a collective wedding organised by the ACFTU, Communist Youth League, All-China Women's Federation, and six other work units in Beijing. Source: Zhaorui Lü's personal collection.

changed in 1984 is that for the first time in Chinese history these individual practices became a concerted effort backed by the government.

Following the national forums' directives in June, local branches of the mass organisations quickly went to work, with the unions spearheading the initiative. In August that year, the municipal union in Changde, Hunan Province, founded the Changde Marriage Broker Agency (常德婚姻介绍所) and established 122 matchmaking units within union branches at the factory level (Editing Committee of the City Gazetteer of Changde 1993: 512). In Zhengzhou, Henan Province, the municipal union built a matchmaker network among factories and mines (Women of Zhengzhou 1989: 114). And in Tianjin's Nankai District, the union formed a team of more than 700 matchmakers—something they had pioneered from the early 1980s—and went on to found the Tianjin Matchmaker Associa-

tion (天津市红娘协会) in 1990, which attracted more than 14,000 members in just two years (Jia 1993: 431). For their active contribution to help older youths, some union matchmakers were even awarded titles that resembled those of model labourers. In 1985, the union at a workers' college in Hubei Province organised a competition for 10 categories of model workers, one of which was 'progressive matchmakers' (先进红娘). On Women's Day the following year, the union awarded five matchmakers in this category (Pang 1999: 170).

Taking advantage of the unions' organisational infrastructure—which had often been used to organise recreational activities for workers—these new teams of matchmakers came up with a variety of activities to build a magpie bridge between female and male workers. A Beijing construction company's union organised regular weekend dance parties for

work units that had large numbers of women. On holidays such as National Day and Labour Day, the matchmaking units held ‘magpie bridge’ events for young workers to mingle (Duan 1988). The marriage agency of a Zhengzhou union even held movie screenings, games nights, and took hundreds of older youths on excursions to suburban tourist attractions (Women of Zhengzhou 1989: 114).

In addition to holding large-scale social events, the matchmakers worked on a more personal level at their newly established matchmaking offices by helping older youths to find matches individually. A coalmine in Fujian Province made national headlines in 1982 when its union pleaded with the public to help in the miners’ struggle to find wives (Li 1982). After reading the news in the *Workers’ Daily* (工人日报), many young women wrote to the coalmine, expressing their interest. The matchmaking office collected letters and photos from young women, took note of their preferences, put them into files, and encouraged male workers to submit a profile and request a match. Workers’ applications included a photo of themselves, their age, height, family background, education, occupation, self-described personality, and what they were looking for in a spouse.

After reviewing a worker’s information, the matchmaking office would select a small number of potential matches from the women’s profiles and show the photos to the worker. Letters and photos from women were treated as classified documents and not available in large numbers as matchmakers were worried that amorous men would be distracted by too many options. After looking through the files of several women, the worker would decide whether there was a ‘red thread’ with one of them. If he found someone especially attractive, the office would share the woman’s contact information and let the two start correspondence via mail (Li 1991: 10). In the case of the Fujian coalmine, the application procedure at the matchmaking office gave male workers the power to choose because in that context they were the majority. In other matchmaking offices, female workers could also initiate applications. The tendency to frame the campaign as a way to help older men find wives was possibly due to the skewed sex ratio in the older

youth population, in addition to the idea that single men posed a greater threat than single women to social stability.

The Interventionist State

The matchmakers’ job did not end after a match was made. As the Tianjin–Jinzhou interprovincial dating project suggests, matchmakers also played a crucial role in sealing unions by hosting collective weddings. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Nationalist government first popularised collective weddings as a way to modernise the ceremony (Ayscough 1937: 64–65). In the late 1970s, weddings became increasingly extravagant, in part as a reaction to the suppression of such ceremonies during the Cultural Revolution. To reinstate a frugal spirit and lessen the financial burden on young couples and their families, the Party-State began promoting alternative wedding models, such as travelling and collective ceremonies (Honig and Hershatter 1988: 147–55). The new matchmaking teams thus included collective weddings as the final act of in their mission.

The procedure of the collective weddings is worth noting here. Trade union leaders, party secretaries, or factory heads—mostly men—usually served as officiants. They were the first to give a speech, followed by brief remarks by a guest and occasionally by representatives of the couples’ parents. The tens, sometimes hundreds, of couples first read a prepared statement, then bowed three times to the wedding officiants, three times to the guests, and three times to each other (Yang and Wang 1984: 89–90). The conspicuous presence of political leaders at the wedding ceremony invited the state into a moment of familial celebration.

Not only did the collective wedding exemplify political leaders’ involvement in family affairs, but it also revealed how the state wielded patriarchal authority, even within ostensibly personal matters. Traditional Han Chinese wedding ceremonies culminate in three bows: first to Heaven and Earth, second to parents and family elders, and third between husband and wife. Conveying a message of veneration



A collective wedding in the 1980s. Source: Zhaorui Lü's personal collection.

and gratitude, the first two sets of bows are directed towards the authority figures in family affairs. By retaining the bows in the ceremony, the supposedly modern collective wedding retained the differential power dynamic deeply rooted in the marital rituals between the young couple and family elders. To denounce the 'backwardness' of traditional marriage and patriarchal oppression, the Party-State could have simply done away with official remarks and the bows and asked a worker peer to officiate the collective wedding. Yet, the state adapted the bows instead and replaced Heaven and Earth with the union leaders and factory heads. In this vital ritual, the male political leaders surpassed everyone else to be the first to receive the couples' bows and deliver remarks (Wu et al. 1988: 228–29). It was therefore not that the state tried to abolish patriarchal authority in the family. Rather, it deployed political leaders, usually older men, to exploit such authority.

This interventionist ethos indeed underlay the state's response to the older youth problem. When grassroots cadres raised doubts about the match-making campaign, contending that dating was a private business and did not merit public resources and mobilisation, the government made clear that dating, which would lead to marriage, was in fact a public matter. For instance, a Women's Federation official from Tianjin reported that there were about 60,000 older youths in Tianjin by the mid-1980s. She reasoned that the marriage problem did not just concern these individuals but was also a burden to their friends and family. Now that millions of people were involved, the issue was no longer private and required a public solution (Wu et al. 1985: 228).

At the 1984 national forum, the ACFTU secretary Li Xueying further emphasised the marriage problem as a public issue to justify the matchmaking campaign. She argued that as marriage was a major life event, its

absence could impact production and the country's development and modernisation (ACFTU Department of Women Workers 1989). Significantly, the Party-State's open discussion of marriage and the public campaign for matchmaking also reversed its previous culture of silence around romance and sexuality. During the Cultural Revolution, work units forbade young workers from showing their affection in public, whereas in the reform era, organised matchmaking brought affection to the public spaces of shop floors, workers' clubs, and union meetings.

After framing the marriage problem as a public responsibility, the Party-State's intervention in workers' personal lives became more comprehensive. In her speech, Li Xueying stressed the importance of matchmakers to instil the 'correct values' for dating (正确的恋爱观) among the older youths. Given the recent cultural shift in mate choice, the matchmakers should undertake political thought work and advise the older youths to not overly prioritise one's physical appearance and economic status, not hold their standards too high, objectively evaluate oneself and others, discard old customs and traditional biases, and, of course, participate in birth planning (ACFTU Department of Women Workers 1989: 318). Publications by the ACFTU even went as far as giving fashion tips on what to wear on the first date and advising couples to control their sexual arousal when sharing a hug or a kiss (ACFTU Department of Propaganda and Education 1989: 1247–48).

Legacies

It is hard to conclusively determine the degree to which the 1984 matchmaking campaign succeeded in addressing the problem of older youths. The national forums never put forth any statistics about the changes in the rate of single youths and the initiative was largely carried out at the local level after 1984, exiting the national discourse. The mass organisations only catered their matchmaking programs to young people formally employed within the work-unit system. Unemployed youths, who were the most

marginalised in the marriage market, had to seek help from matchmakers established by subdistrict offices and neighbourhood associations.

But the campaign did leave its mark. The Party-State's initiative led to the rapid growth of marriage broker agencies in many cities. The matchmaking events provided a much-needed venue for youths to socialise when there were few entertainment arenas in the early reform era. Although there are no national data, a study comparing Beijing's census figures from 1982 to 1990 shows that the percentage of unmarried people aged between 33 and 40 dropped from 9 per cent to 7.9 per cent (Zhou 1992: 30). A single data point cannot establish causation, but it does indicate that the phenomenon of older youths, created by the sociohistorical conditions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was somewhat relieved by the end of the decade.

The unions' matchmaking project also became a crucial part of the welfare benefits workers enjoyed. As China pushed forward with marketisation in the 1990s, the model of official matchmaking disintegrated along with the collapse of the work-unit system. This paved the way for commercial matchmaking agencies. When matchmaking corners popped up in city parks in the 2010s, retirees who tried to matchmake for their children became nostalgic for the 1980s. Historian Sun Peidong (2012: 85) recalls one of these elderly people telling her in the late 2000s: 'In the past the Women's Federation, the Youth League, and the trade union would organize activities for the youths to socialize. How come no one is doing it now?'

If history offers us any lesson, it would be that the Party-State does not hesitate to step in when perceived 'social problems' crop up. The matchmaking campaign in the early reform era in many ways served as a prelude to the Chinese Government's response to the marriage crisis in the twenty-first century. In 2020, to counter the declining marriage rate, the government instituted a 30-day 'cooling-off period' for divorce (离婚冷静期) and, in 2024, it simplified the bureaucratic process for marriage registration, despite popular opposition. The Women's Federation's stigmatisation of 'leftover women' (剩女) for being picky in the 2000s echoed

the organisation's earlier complaints about women workers not wanting to marry male workers and its promotion of the 'correct value' of not holding too high a standard when looking for a suitable partner (Fincher 2013). With the end of the marriage crisis nowhere in sight, the Party-State will probably once again lend Chinese youths a paternalistic and interventionist hand to navigate the market for love. ■



Chinese Workers in Chengdu, 2005. Source: Bosse Hultgren (CC), Flickr.com.

In Praise of Hardship, or the Labour-Schooling Poetics of Chinese Youth

Yukun ZENG

This essay examines how Chinese youth are rethinking the long-celebrated virtue of hardship. From grueling school routines to exploitative workplaces, they draw parallels between education and labour pressures. Opening with a discussion of labour conditions at BYD's factory in Brazil—labelled ‘slavery’ by local authorities—the essay highlights resonances with students’ own dorm experiences. It then traces the cultural logic behind hardship in schools and companies, before centring youth voices as they investigate its moral legitimacy and reflect on the ties between studying and working.

In January 2025, I was chatting online with a few friends about the ongoing controversy surrounding the construction of a factory for Chinese carmaker BYD in Brazil, which had just come under scrutiny after the country's Public Labour Prosecution Office accused it of ‘slavery’, following an investigation into the working conditions of Chinese labourers at the site (Ministério Público do Trabalho 2024). The report noted that workers’ passports were being held by BYD's outsourced construction company. Featuring two striking images of worker dormitories, it described ‘workers sleeping in beds without mattresses’, ‘filthy living and dining conditions’, ‘no



The dorms of the workers building BYD's factory in Brazil.
Source: Ministério Público do Trabalho.

lockers for personal belongings', 'one bathroom for every 31 workers', and 'workers having to wake up at 4 am to form a line and start working at 5:30 am'.

These descriptions struck an uncanny chord with us. While we condemned the miserable working conditions at BYD's construction site, the details and images echoed our own high school experiences in China. As one friend remarked: 'It's just like my dorm.'

My friend was referring to the cramped living conditions typical of Chinese high school dormitories in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Bathrooms were scarce—often requiring strategic early wakeups to secure access. The metal bunk beds shown in the report were the national standard in Chinese school dormitories, from high schools to colleges.

Beyond the spatial similarities, the BYD construction site in Brazil also mirrored the rigid temporal rhythms of Chinese high schools. Hengshui High School—renowned for its intense focus on university entrance exam performance—is infamous for having students wake at 5.30 am and carry small notebooks while queuing for meals.

Hengshui is far from unique. An online survey conducted during the 2024–25 academic year collected more than 4,600 student complaints about excessive school hours (611Study.ICU 2025). At least 1,168 schools required students to begin classes before 6 am and nearly all (4,421) started before 8 am—despite the Ministry of Education's recommendation that secondary schools begin no earlier than 8 am (Ministry of Education 2021). Students also expressed frustration with dormitory and canteen conditions, citing, for example, '14 people living in a dorm with one bathroom' and 'insects in the meals'.

As young Chinese like my friends and I—shaped by these spatial-temporal hardships—condemned the harsh treatment of Chinese workers in Brazil, it was unsettling to realise that what Brazilian labour authorities now labelled as 'slavery' had been, in many ways, normalised in our own schooling experiences.

BYD has a troubling track record when it comes to labour practices. On 28 September 2024, just two months before the controversy at its Brazilian site, a 55-year-old worker at BYD's Xi'an factory died

from overwork. That month alone, he had clocked 260 hours before his death (China Labour Bulletin 2024). During the Covid-19 pandemic, BYD was among several companies that implemented ‘closed-loop management’—a policy designed to maintain production by confining workers within a sealed loop between factory floors and dormitories. This system imposed severe hardships: excessive working hours, no time for rest, and harsh treatment of those who tested positive for Covid-19.

Closed-loop management began to unravel in late 2022, most visibly at Foxconn’s massive plant in Zhengzhou. In October of that year, during a Covid outbreak, Foxconn tightened restrictions on its 300,000 workers, sparking mass panic and an unprecedented worker exodus—one of the most dramatic episodes of labour unrest during China’s pandemic era (Li 2022). In response, the company launched a rapid hiring campaign in November of that year, recruiting 100,000 new workers amid widespread economic desperation. These recruits, however, were soon met with forced quarantines, withheld wages, and gruelling conditions, culminating in one of the fiercest worker revolts in recent memory (China Labour Bulletin 2022).

My friends and I had long sympathised with labour struggles, from BYD to Foxconn. We were certainly critical of closed-loop management and the harsh discipline imposed on students. Yet the remark, ‘It’s just like my dorm’, lingered. Were we also ‘enslaved’? Probably not; we were merely hardworking students. But were we, in some way, normalising hardship and, by extension, exploitation? Or was this remark a radical eureka moment that revealed a deeper continuum—one that stretches from Chinese factories overseas to the dormitories of Chinese high schools?

With these questions in mind, this essay explores the evolving meanings and politics of hardship, tracing its contours from classrooms to factory floors, in China and beyond.

In Praise of Hardship

The most deeply ingrained moral sentiment about hardship among Chinese students and workers is a celebratory attitude—one that embraces rather than

avoids difficulty. This ethos is encapsulated in terms such as ‘hard work’ (努力), ‘striving’ (奋斗), ‘eating bitterness’ (吃苦), and ‘engraving bitterness’ (刻苦)—all of which emphasise both effort exerted and hardship endured (see also Loyalka 2012). These phrases reflect a positive, even honourable, stance towards suffering, framing it as something to be overcome through perseverance and moral dedication. In this essay, I use the term ‘the praise of hardship’ to capture this constellation of expressions and the broader discourse they represent.

The praise of hardship operates through different logics in different contexts. One of its canonical roots—still influential today—comes from Chinese philosopher Mencius (2009: 143):

Mencius said, ‘Shun emerged from the fields; Fu Yue was elevated from among the boards and earthworks; Jiao Ge from the fish and salt; Guan Yiwu from the hands of the jailer; Sunshu Ao from the seacoast; and Boli Xi from the marketplace. When Heaven intends to confer a great responsibility upon a person, it first visits his mind and will with suffering, toils his sinews and bones, subjects his body to hunger, exposes him to poverty, and confounds his projects. Through this, his mind is stimulated, his nature strengthened, and his inadequacies repaired.’

In this passage, Mencius cites a series of ancient sages, foregrounding their humble origins—as builders, fishers, and prison officers—and the immense hardship they endured, from physical toil and hunger to deprivation and mental strain. For Mencius, such suffering is not incidental but formative—a moral training necessary to cultivate the fortitude required for virtuous leadership in society and politics.

This passage remains part of the mandatory curriculum for Chinese junior middle school students (Wen 2017) and is frequently invoked by teachers as moral instruction on the importance of hard study. Other well-known sayings circulate widely, such as: ‘Only those who endure the hardest hardships can rise above the rest’ (吃得苦中苦, 方为人上人), a maxim dating back to imperial-era exam candidates; and ‘Heaven will not disappoint those who persevere;

like the King of Yue who, after years of bitter endurance, led 3,000 warriors to conquer the State of Wu' (苦心人天不负, 卧薪尝胆三千越甲可吞吴), a poetic rendering of a famous revenge story from the Spring and Autumn period (see Xin 2013).

These expressions stem from distinct historical moments and reflect varied logics of hardship: hardship as moral cultivation, hardship as a ladder for social mobility, and hardship as a vehicle for revenge. All three logics shaped my own schooling. Some of my classmates genuinely viewed hardship as a virtue to be embraced for life. Others rationalised the extreme demands of high school as the necessary cost of success in the college entrance exam—the defining gateway to stratified tiers of education and employment. And some, in a gesture of cathartic rebellion, burned their textbooks after the exam was over.

Importantly, the praise of hardship is not always celebratory. More often, it functions as a defence—a way to make sense of deeply embodied suffering. Criticism of hardship can even have the opposite effect, provoking a backlash that further entrenches its moral justification.

Hengshui High School has been a frequent focus of public debate since the early 2000s, largely due to its 'fully enclosed' (全封闭) schooling model, which is marked by long study hours, strict surveillance, and consistent top rankings in the national college entrance exam. Despite sustained criticism from education experts and media outlets, the school has continued to assert its own counternarrative with considerable force.

In 2014, for instance, Hengshui's official WeChat account published an article titled 'If Your Child Had Gone to School at Hengshui' (Hebei Hengshui High School 2014), directly responding to public critiques of its rigid disciplinary regime. The piece adopts an internal perspective, highlighting the agency and commitment of its students and teachers, while pushing back against charges that its success relies solely on 'inhuman' methods:

If your child had ever studied at Hengshui High School, you wouldn't say that its success comes just from admitting top students. We wake up at 5:30 every morning and race to the track, just to make use of a few precious minutes before

morning exercises to memorize a few words or poems. We hold small notebooks in our hands while waiting in line for meals, just so we don't waste a single second ... The achievements of Hengshui students are built not just on a little bit of intelligence, but on countless drops of sweat. (Hebei Hengshui High School 2014)

By 2021, this narrative had grown even more assertive. Zhang Xifeng, a top-performing Hengshui graduate, delivered a televised speech presenting his experience of hardship not as coercion but as a subaltern struggle—one that, he argued, was misunderstood by elite critics (Zhang 2021). His speech ends with a powerful rebuttal:

To those who slander us without reason—
Have you ever seen what Hengshui High
looks like at 5:30 in the morning during
senior year?

Do you think we run to the track before
dawn every day, shouting as we go, just for
show?

Is it pretend? Is it performance?

No—we're doing it to change our fate.

The students of Hengshui, the students of
Hebei—we're children from ordinary fami-
lies, carrying the hopes of generations on our
shoulders.

We're not machines built for the college
entrance exam.

We're just a group of kids from poor fami-
lies who want to become our parents' pride,
who want the people we love to live better,
brighter lives.

Hengshui is in Hebei, a province historically associated with heavy industry—coal, steel, and cement—and long ranked near the bottom among China's 31 provinces in terms of GDP per capita. The defiant tone of Zhang's speech is grounded in this broader context of structural inequality. For students emerging from marginalised regions and working-class families, the path of intense self-discipline is not only morally defensible but also a form of pride—a defence against the condescension of external observers whose critiques fail to reckon with the lived realities of subaltern hardship.

Hardship Beyond Schooling and Beyond China

What I had been taught only minimally—and came to understand much later—was the continuity between the hardship of schooling and the hardship of the workplace. The examples Mencius cited were drawn mostly from sages who began their lives in manual labour. Similarly, the quote used by Hengshui High School to justify its success—‘a little bit of intelligence, but countless drops of sweat’ (一点点聪明和无数的汗水)—is a clear paraphrasing of Thomas Edison’s famous dictum: ‘Genius is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration.’ This quote, along with Edison’s portrait, is among the most prominently displayed in Chinese classrooms.

What is often lost in translation, however, is the original context of Edison’s statement: a work ethic rooted in productivity and profit—a vision of hardship oriented towards commercial invention. Edison’s fame owed less to innate genius than to his role as a patent entrepreneur (Stross 2007). And the ‘perspiration’ behind his achievements was not his alone, but also that of the many workers in the Menlo Park Laboratory who contributed to his inventions.

Hardship in the workplace, therefore, operates differently from hardship in school; it is intrinsically tied to labour rights and wages. Yet, the discourse of the praise of hardship often blurs or erases these distinctions. As the widespread celebration of Edison’s quote suggests, moral narratives of perseverance can obscure the material and political dimensions of labour.

Similar forms of praise for hardship also pervade Chinese workplaces. For instance, Ren Zhengfei, CEO of Huawei, has emphasised that the company’s core spirit lies in ‘working diligently through hardships’ (艰苦奋斗). This ethos is vividly embodied in what has come to be known as ‘Mat Culture’ (垫子文化)—a legacy of hardship dating back to Huawei’s early years, when employees often worked around the clock, briefly resting on floor mats before returning to their tasks (Qu 2012: 2):

In the early days of our venture, our R&D [research and development] department started with just five or six developers. Despite having no funding and no favourable



A banner printed with a portrait of Thomas Edison with the Chinese translation of his quote ‘Genius is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration’. This banner was printed in 1982. Similar banners are still popular on Chinese campuses. Source: Kongfuzi Bookstore.

conditions, we upheld the spirit of hardship and perseverance embodied by the ‘Two Bombs, One Satellite’ initiative of the 1960s. Inspired by the older generation of scientists who worked selflessly and with relentless dedication, we made up for our lack of resources with sheer diligence. We tackled challenges head-on, delved into technical solutions by seizing the day and night, developing, verifying, and testing our products and equipment.

There were no holidays or weekends, no distinction between day and night. When we were exhausted, we'd sleep on floor mats for a while, then get right back to work once we woke up. This is the origin of Huawei's 'Mat Culture'.

Indeed, 'Mat Culture' offers relatively better sleeping conditions than those of the construction workers at BYD's Brazilian factory, who were reportedly not even provided mattresses. Yet, it also lays the material foundation for further hardship. At Huawei, every employee is issued a mattress—not as a gesture of care, but as part of an implicit expectation to work overtime and, when necessary, sleep at the company. 'Mat Culture' has thus come to symbolise Huawei's notorious culture of overwork. Often referred to as '996', this schedule requires employees to work from 9 am to 9 pm six days a week.

This form of hardship is framed as a spirit of 'seizing the day and night' (夜以继日) to overcome problems—a mode of labour that, in both ethos and structure, is not far removed from the intense routines of schooling. In this, it once again echoes Edison's dictum enunciating the ideal of relentless effort over inspiration. In the logic of corporate management, this ethic is enforced through performance metrics such as key performance indicators (KPIs) and objectives and key results (OKRs), which assign specific targets with strict deadlines—generating intense peer pressure and ever-rising expectations to work harder and longer (Liang 2019).

Moreover, by invoking the revolutionary trope of the 'Two Bombs, One Satellite' initiative of the 1960s, Huawei channels a grander version of the subaltern glorification of hardship that also underpins the narratives of Zhang Xifeng and Hengshui High School. The 'Two Bombs, One Satellite' story follows a specific nationalist arc in China: after the Sino-Soviet split, the country found itself caught between the imperialist hostilities of both the Soviet Union and the United States. In this context, the independent development of nuclear weapons and a satellite was framed as an urgent revolutionary task. A generation of scientists sacrificed time, family, and even their lives to fulfil this mission, ultimately securing China's techno-military independence from foreign powers.

Following this narrative arc, Huawei's rise since the 1990s has been cast as a struggle to break through the technological dominance of Western

telecommunications firms. The hardships endured by Huawei's employees are thus positioned as parallel to a national—and even global—revolutionary effort to catch up with and surpass the West (赶英超美).

BYD has similarly taken up this nationalist mantle in its efforts to compete with Western firms in the global electric vehicle market. Its current managerial ethos is encapsulated in the slogan 'compete, learn, help, rush, surpass' (比学帮赶超) (Qin and Xiong 2024: 360), which structures performance-based competition and public rankings among workers. Both the slogan and its operational techniques are strikingly reminiscent of disciplinary practices in Chinese high schools. Yet, at BYD, this ethos of hardship is scaled up and projected onto the national stage, as reflected in one of CEO Wang Chuanfu's frequently quoted remarks:

The Chinese people are intelligent and hard-working. For an entrepreneur, to be in a country like China—with a nation like ours behind you—what challenge could possibly be insurmountable? And then, consider the sheer size of this market. Deep down, I've always believed in the ability of the Chinese people. Give us the opportunity, and we'll build world-class companies. Not just one but many. (Qin and Xiong 2024: 390)

Wang Chuanfu's ambition to build world-class companies aligns with shifts in the global political economy and the ascendant role of China. Under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese capital is not merely displacing Western companies; it is also advancing a form of post-revolutionary internationalism—one that promises to support countries in the Global South through investment rather than ideological aid. BYD's factory in Brazil exemplifies this narrative. Once completed, it will be BYD's first overseas manufacturing plant, symbolising the broader geopolitical transition from Western industrial capitalism to Chinese tech-driven capital. Its location in Camaçari, a city in Brazil's industrial heartland, adds further symbolic weight: the site previously housed a Ford Motor Company plant that shut in 2021, resulting in the layoff of about 5,000 workers. In contrast, BYD has pledged to create 20,000 new jobs, reinforcing China's image as an economic saviour in a post-Western industrial order.

Beneath this grand narrative of surpassing the West, and beneath the workplace ethos of ‘compete, learn, help, rush, surpass’, lies the enduring praise of hardship. This moral economy is especially resonant in relation to engineers and scientists, who are idealised as tireless problem-solvers in the service of progress. A clear example is BYD’s internal slogan, ‘the spirit of the engineer’ (工程师之魂). This ideal echoes Huawei’s R&D culture, the revolutionary legacy of the ‘Two Bombs, One Satellite’ scientists, the global mythos of Thomas Edison, and the lived experiences of Chinese students who endure gruelling academic pressure in pursuit of success.

Yet, the controversy surrounding the construction of BYD’s factory in Brazil exposes the limits of this ideal. What was once celebrated as virtuous perseverance is now being condemned as forced labour by the Brazilian labour authority.

In this context, the praise of hardship has morphed into a vulgar anthropological justification—one that deflects labour violations by framing them as mere ‘cultural differences’ (文化差异). On 25 December 2024, Jinjiang, the construction firm affiliated with BYD, issued a public response to the allegations. In its statement, the company claimed:

Due to cultural differences, the leading nature of the questioning, and misunderstandings caused by language translation, many of the statements released by the labour department’s press conference were inaccurate—especially the claims that the goldsmith employees were ‘enslaved’ and ‘rescued’, which were completely inconsistent with the facts. (Jinjiang Group Brazil Branch 2024)

Following this logic, a viral WeChat article published in defence of BYD invoked a crude form of cultural relativism. While acknowledging that ‘slavery’ is a particularly sensitive term in Brazil, the author dismissed the controversy as a mere case of ‘cultural conflict’ (文化冲突), even citing the nineteenth-century missionary ethnography *Chinese Characteristics* to argue for the exceptional hardworking nature of Chinese people (Chen 2025).

This kind of vulgar anthropology fails to account for the specific sociopolitical context of Brazil, where ‘slavery’ is not just a metaphor; it is a legal and historical reality with enduring resonance. As the last

country in the Americas to abolish slavery, Brazil still bears fresh scars of that legacy. Forced labour remains a deeply charged issue in both the legal and the public spheres. Uniquely among global labour institutions, the Brazilian Public Labour Prosecution Office does not merely adjudicate workplace disputes and injury claims; it also actively investigates labour violations in the public interest, with a key mandate to identify and prosecute slavery-like practices (Lara and da Silva 2020). In this setting, the rhetoric of hardship runs into the muzzle of the gun.

Yet, the binary framing of the ‘hardworking’ Chinese worker versus foreign labour environments that allegedly ‘do not value hardship’ persists in both popular and academic narratives surrounding Chinese capital abroad. In *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* (2019), anthropologist Miriam Driessen documents Chinese workers’ narratives of ‘speaking bitterness’ in Ethiopia. Many of these workers, serving as foremen on road construction projects, contrasted their own endurance with what they perceived as the ‘indolence’ of Ethiopian workers (see also Lee 2017).

However, as Driessen’s ethnography makes clear, the hardship experienced by Chinese workers is neither the result of an essentialised national character—as implied by vulgar anthropological accounts—nor the embodiment of a heroic ‘spirit of the engineer’ working towards national or global missions. Rather, their suffering stems from the mundane and isolating realities of life abroad: separation from family and friends, a lack of leisure time, and substandard living conditions. These challenges are particularly acute for the cohort of young workers—recent graduates from universities or vocational schools—who are the primary focus of Driessen’s study. For many, the decision to endure hardship in Africa was driven by the promise of comparatively high wages. This was especially appealing to those from modest backgrounds who had long internalised the necessity of working hard—first, in school, then in the workplace (Driessen 2019: 164–74).

These workers often compared themselves with their local colleagues, not just in terms of productivity but also in terms of affect—their own suffering versus the joy, satisfaction, or relative ease they perceived in others. In these comparisons, what emerges is not a triumphant praise of virtue, but rather a quiet sigh of resignation (Driessen 2019: 38).

The Poetics of Hardship of Chinese Youths

The *sigh* of hardship rhymes with the earlier remark: ‘It’s just like my dorm.’ It is critical of hardship, yet suffused with a familiar sense of pessimistic fatalism, which has been deeply internalised by students and workers in China. People work hard because they must, especially those whose roots lie in modest soil. This argument of necessity also underpins the defence, if not the praise, of hardship voiced by figures such as Zhang Xifeng and the students of Hengshui High School. Yet, what follows is a vicious cycle. The logic of necessity only intensifies competition, raising the threshold of what constitutes socially acceptable hardship, and in turn reinforcing the very logic that justifies it. It becomes a sad hamster wheel.

Before proceeding to the final discussion, it is necessary to clarify this essay’s methodological stance. Comparing the changing meanings of hardship as they resonate between workers and students is not meant to blur their distinct political and economic conditions. Behind workers’ *sigh* of hardship is their outright exploitation. Students, though often future workers themselves, currently occupy a position framed by the promise of social mobility. Their hardships are embedded in different political economies and oriented towards different trajectories. Yet, the ways in which these divergent situations may rhyme through shared experiences of hardship are crucial, for they shape the possibilities of solidarity, or apathy, between students and workers. The remainder of this essay explores this *poetics of hardship* by examining the diverse efforts of contemporary Chinese youth to forge connections between the hardships of schooling and working.

Coming back to the pessimistic recognition of hardship, it is most revealing in the widespread discourse about ‘involution’ (内卷). Originally a piece of Chinese internet slang popular among young people, ‘involution’ describes a zero-sum situation in which everyone is working harder and harder just to compete with one another, but no-one is gaining anything. Like ‘eating bitterness’, involution applies to both school and workplace settings. It recognises the reality of suffering yet disavows its telos. Hardship is no longer a virtuous effort or effective strategy as

once taught, but an endless, repetitive grind. Like a hamster spinning on a wheel, this labour yields no reward, only the deterioration of health and spirit.

A more active response to this condition was the emergence of the 996.ICU movement, launched on GitHub on 26 March 2019 by an anonymous Chinese programmer. The project’s title encapsulates the brutal logic of overwork: the ‘996’ schedule—9 am to 9 pm six days a week—leads, in reality and in sarcasm, to the ICU (intensive care unit). The movement’s initial demand was simple: enforcement of China’s existing Labour Law, which mandates an eight-hour workday. Hosted as a crowdsourced database, the GitHub repository allowed users to publicly report companies that violated these provisions. The project gained immediate traction. By April 2019, it had received more than 240,000 stars and had sparked widespread public sympathy for the working conditions of tech employees (Li 2019).

Soon, the movement’s focus expanded beyond legal enforcement to a more fundamental critique of the praise of hardship itself. Just two weeks after its launch, tech magnate Jack Ma, then China’s richest man, publicly defended Alibaba’s 996 regime, calling it ‘a huge blessing’ and insisting that only the truly fortunate had the chance to dedicate themselves so completely to their work (Ma 2019). This ‘blessing’ theory of hardship backfired, fuelling even more intense backlash and public debate.

In retrospect, although 996.ICU was not initiated by any formal labour authority, it functioned as a large-scale grassroots labour investigation, which, in many ways, mirrors the role played by the Brazilian Public Labour Prosecution Office. The movement began by documenting the lived realities of overwork (996) and quickly escalated into a critique of its moral justification. Even without invoking legal terms such as ‘slavery’, the provocative aesthetics of ‘ICU’ redefined the meaning of hardship. No longer a taken-for-granted virtue, hardship became a vicious causality between overexploited labour time and workers’ health.

In 2025, another online movement ignited around a similar theme, centred not on the workplace, but on schooling. Named 611Study.ICU, the campaign was launched by Teacher Li, a Twitter-based activist who rose to prominence during the 2022 White Paper Movement. He has since continued to collect and



The logo of 611Study.ICU. Source: 611study.icu/.

circulate anonymous grievances from within China. The 611Study.ICU emerged in response to a flood of complaints submitted during the winter vacation—a period increasingly used by schools to extend academic instruction and erode students' rest time.

The name 611Study.ICU clearly echoes its predecessor: '611' refers to a now-normalised school schedule stretching from 6 am to 11 pm. The posts under this hashtag quickly multiplied. By April 2025, more than 4,600 complaints had been submitted, documenting daily study routines, excessive weekly hours, infrequent breaks, and even reports of suicide.

Like 996.ICU, 611Study.ICU centres its critique on the politics of time. Unlike 996.ICU, which anchored its demands in the Labour Law, participants in 611Study.ICU rarely cite legal or policy frameworks regulating over-schooling. Yet, it also forms a critical causality between enforced excess study time and students' health.

The parallel between 996.ICU and 611Study.ICU arguably stems from the career continuity between students and tech workers. Many employees at 996 companies such as Huawei and Alibaba are graduates of top-notch Chinese universities, having endured years of intense academic hardship to be accepted. Their experience of studying hard grounds their experience of hardship working in tech companies: both are facilitated by solving problems under time pressure. Yet, this parallel has a significant blind

spot. It overlooks the hardship experience of manual labour, which is largely excluded from the pathway to academic success.

There are also youth voices which draw critical resonances between the hardships of schooling and those of the manual workplace. One notable example is the Bilibili account *This Is a Bewildering Planet* (这是个令人疑惑的星球 *Zheshige lingren yihuode xingqiu*). Its creator, a recent college graduate, produces what he describes as 'fieldwork report' videos that document both the labour conditions of Chinese workers and the educational experiences of students. These two ends of hardship resonate throughout his work, as captured in one video:

Under the dim streetlights at 5:40 am, when we were required to raise our textbooks above our heads and recite aloud, I would sometimes enter a kind of transcendental state. In the grip of overwhelming exhaustion and sleep deprivation, the mind begins to detach. You experience a kind of out-of-body sensation—it's as if you can observe yourself from a third-person view, watching the posture, the movement of your own body, but feeling no ownership over it. Your body no longer belongs to you.

I felt this same disembodiment again later, working the factory line, or during night shifts sorting packages as a temp. I once tried describing this to my co-workers. They all said I captured it perfectly. (*This Is a Bewildering Planet 2025a*)

To make sense of factory labour through the lens of his own schooling experience, the author develops what can be described as a critical phenomenology of disembodiment and alienation. Rather than simply listing the excessive demands on time, he renders the laborious hardship through situational feelings and the embodied tactics workers use to cope with it. Reflecting on another video documenting delivery riders' long working hours, he remarks:

One could say that a delivery rider enters a certain state—a state of 'immersion'. In this immersive mode, you become fully absorbed in the act of riding, picking up orders, deliv-

ering them. Your attention is streamlined, your efficiency increases. But this kind of so-called focus doesn't bring a sense of progress.

It's not like studying for an exam, where effort leads to new knowledge and the joy of intellectual growth. It's not like scientific research, where deep concentration moves you closer to discovery. This is a purely physical form of immersion. And what it yields—beyond the dozen or so yuan for two or three extra deliveries—is nothing that benefits your body or your mind in any meaningful way. (This Is a Bewildering Planet 2025b)

While acknowledging a shared embodied sense of immersion, this reflection also makes a crucial distinction between delivery labour and the experience of schooling: the absence of intellectual growth. It is precisely this critical synthesis of sympathy and differentiation between studying and working that defines his 'fieldwork report'-style videos. This Is a Bewildering Planet has struck a resounding social chord, with view counts ranging from 200,000 to more than 1 million and hundreds of comments under each video. Historically and globally, the united voices of students and workers have often formed a powerful symphony of social progress. Today, in the shared experience of hardship, and in the shifting tones and diverse poetics through which hardship is narrated, those voices once again resonate in China. ■



Abandoned swing set, @mlhradio, Flickr.com (CC).

On Sinopessimism, or Junkies of Futility

Dino Ge ZHANG

Sinopessimism—a neologism that describes sentiments of stagnation and pragmatic recalibrations in response to China’s economic slowdown—has been fermenting since the mid-2010s. Long overlooked, it surfaced sporadically in media coverage of youth disengagement, from sanhe vagabonds to sang culture, before gaining sharper definition through terms such as ‘involution’ and tangping (‘lying flat’). This essay offers a preliminary lexicon of Sinopessimism, framing it as a form of popular, embodied knowledge—a kind of low theory. It explores coping strategies including anti-work, hetero-pessimism, runology (outmigration), and revived debates about ‘national character’, while tracing connections with the global undercommons.

This essay is written precisely so that it could be dismissed.

—Paul Mann (1991: 141)

Gary Zhexi Zhang (2021) first coined the term ‘Sinopessimism’ as a speculative counterpart to Afropessimism, imagining a future in which China becomes the object, rather than the subject, of global racialisation. While Zhang’s usage was primarily a thought experiment, I repurpose the term here to describe a different set of conditions: the negative affects emerging in a post rapid growth China, where a society once buoyed by dreams of personal flourishing and upward mobility now finds itself increasingly disenchanted with those unfulfilled promises. There has been a paradigm shift from an

earlier seemingly indubitable optimism that took root in precarious circumstances, documented in the many studies of young migrants from the 1990s to the 2010s (to name a few, Cockain 2012; Wallis 2013, 2018; Rofel and Yanagisako 2019; Pun and Qiu 2020; Xiang 2021; Hillenbrand 2023), to a newly acquired socioeconomic tempo of malaise and affective flatness. During the period of growth, young migrant workers' investment in futurity converged with a deliberate suspension of their present hardships. In Xiang Biao's (2021: 240) words: '[T]he migrants are at once resigned ("there is nothing that you can do about the current condition") and hopeful ("things should get better in the future").' Xiang dubs this a 'suspension' (as in suspended in the air), calling to mind the precarious balancing act of tightrope walking across a fantasy. This is akin to the condition of 'being condemned to live out their lives in a perpetual cycle of striving and frustration' (M'Rabty 2024: 5) that was conceptualised in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Optimism becomes cruel when it generates a desire for a good life that can never be realised.

As Lisa Richaud (2021: 903) has noted in a recent special issue of *HAU* on negative emotions, since the reform era there has been 'little room for public expressions of negative affects' in China. However, affective disengagement is by no means a novelty of the 2020s. In fact, this affective deflation has been brewing for a long time, but its practitioners were often treated as reclusive 'noble savages' (a metaphor sometimes used in Chinese media) via the lens of either journalistic curiosity or ethnographic peculiarity. These urban 'hermits' ultimately retreated from public attention because their voluntary withdrawal seemed so marginal and distant from the positive moods invigorated by continuous economic growth and improving quality of life. For instance, from the early 2000s, the internet revered the 'gods of *Sanhe*' (三和大神, with *Sanhe* being a Shenzhen-based human resource centre where vagabonds and migrant workers clustered to look for casual gigs) as 'divinities' for volunteering for a hyper-precarious lifestyle, perpetually shifting between day jobs and days spent doing nothing—that is, typically sleeping their days away and spending their nights in internet cafes (Du

2018; Tian and Lin 2020). Later, in 2016, '*sang* culture' (丧)—a subculture of 'despondency and defeatism', in the words of Margaret Hillenbrand (2023)—came to public attention, as internet memes and merchandise were created to capitalise on this playful yet pessimistic outlook (Tan and Cheng 2020; Lu 2021).

However, since 2020, circulation of negative affect has grown exponentially in the Chinese public sphere in the face of state-enforced optimism and despite social sanction, if not outright punishment, of such negativity. Even *Cruel Optimism*, translated into Chinese in 2023, has become a cliché among artists and in para-academic circles. The concept of Sinopessimism highlights this ongoing transition to a post-optimistic society that is becoming conscious of the cruel nature of its aspirations and, more importantly, actively searching for analgesics, whether pragmatic or spiritual. The younger generations have already begun to anticipate these changes of mood: from a future-oriented ascetic culture of indefinitely deferring self-enjoyment that characterised most of the post-reform era—a mentality that is fundamental to an economy largely built on debt, real estate speculation, and psycho-political expectations of infinite growth (see Ho 2017)—to a present-oriented youth culture of hedonism, economic thrift, and utilitarian resignation. This emergent world view is forging a gap between an older generation accustomed to economic (and therefore political) optimism and a younger generation whose core coming-of-age experience is learning how to live with precarity without the prospect of better days.

Sinopessimism is a form of popular and embodied knowledge rather than academic abstraction. In this essay, I construct a 'low theory' of young people diagnosing societal issues—that is, 'the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts, and refuseniks' (Halberstam 2011: 5)—and the corresponding exit strategies they propose on the Chinese-language internet. The following is a preliminary lexicon of Sinopessimism, originally envisioned and elaborated in para-academic literature from fringe (if not underground) reading groups, art collectives, seminars outside intellectually sterile university campuses, as well as internet argot, broadly circulated online inside and outside China's digital borders.

From Involution to Lying Flat

The story begins with the term ‘involution’ (内卷 *neijuan*), coined by Clifford Geertz (1963) and repurposed by Xiang Biao to refer to ‘the experience of being locked in competitions that one ultimately knows is [sic] meaningless’ (Liu 2021)—another catch-all term that governs many young Chinese people’s sense of their situation. For instance, alarming symptoms such as the unsustainably low birth rate (Master 2024) and high youth unemployment (Woo and Wang 2024) are attributed to ‘involution’—a future stuck in a loop of unrewarding present competition. ‘Involution’ becomes a hackneyed synonym of despondency created by prolonged burnout, permanent austerity, and endless waiting.

In this context, *tangping* (躺平, literally, ‘lying flat’) becomes a pragmatic strategy to counter ‘involution’. Since the late 2010s, the disposition of precarious ‘suspension’ gradually deflated into the horizontal dimension of *tangping*. It is said the term first appeared in a Baidu Tieba sub-forum on misogamy (a term that refers to aversion to marriage) in 2011 but was popularised through Luo Huazhong’s post ‘*Tangping* is justice’ only in 2021 (Chen 2021). *Tangping* can be considered a pragmatic or quasi-intellectual pessimism and withdrawal from the default mentality of prioritising upward mobility. As a response to changing socioeconomic realities, *tangping* signifies a resignation not just from the present but also, unprecedentedly, from the future.

Against the optimistic narrative and ‘positive energy’ (正能量) (Hizi 2021) needed to sustain the sacrifice of the present for a brighter tomorrow, people are increasingly seeing through the trap of heteronormative reproductive futurity and the wealth-accumulation model that sustains it. However, *tangping* is a multifaceted term that is difficult to pinpoint without reproducing the political establishment’s binary of compulsory positivity and prohibited negativity. The term Sinopessimism encapsulates the affective atmosphere or mood (*stimmung* in the Heideggerian sense) of contemporary China. As such, it is less a uniform concept than a general heading for a cluster of various grassroots attempts to make sense of local situations.

To put it in the argot of *tangpingism* (Anonymous 2022), ‘flattened [garlic] chives are difficult to harvest’ (躺平的韭菜不好割)—a euphemism for the popular

wisdom that ‘once you have given up working so hard, you cannot be exploited’. According to Pang Laikwan (2022), this metaphor of chives (韭菜 *jiucaī*) points to how the regime acknowledges ‘capitalism’s effective absorption of the people’s energy in their self-thriving’ (Pang 2022: 83). In response, this new style of resignation is not simply a ‘light-hearted self-mockery’ (Zhu and Peng 2024), but also a well thought-out utilitarian strategy and recalibrated mindset of everyday life marking disenchantment with capitalism. *Tangpingism* can be considered a cluster of diverse but incoherently articulated ideas surrounding the affective contagions of pessimism, intellectual critiques, and concrete strategies against precarity.

Anti-Work

Tangping can be both a political position of anti-work and a pragmatic position of recalibrating expectations and plotting disengagements. As a political position, it is elucidated well in the anonymous ‘*Tangpingist Manifesto*’ (Anonymous 2022). This document channels an anarchist anti-work politics in its proclaimed and rather dignified ‘grand refusal’ (Coin 2025) of work (and logic of economic growth), especially in response to the ubiquitous condition of uncompensated overwork:

A radical *Tangpingism* marks a complete rejection of the current order. The *Tangpingists* make a merciless mockery of institutional inclusion, and are indifferent to any kind of praise or criticism ... [T]he one who lies flat is standing, and the one who stands is crawling. (Anonymous 2022)

Tangpingism refuses to be coopted by any prior political positions. Instead, *tangpingism* is ‘a philosophical and political subject pertaining to the universal issue of our relation to the concept of work’ (Brossard 2023). The concept of work or questioning the meaningfulness of work is core to discussions of *tangpingism*. Here, I will not repeat the philosophical discussions from ‘the right to be lazy’ (懒汉权) or post work. Xu Zhiwei and Wang Xingkun’s (2022) timely edited volume of translations *Post-Work*

Theory already did the heavy lifting of introducing to a Chinese audience the intellectual history of anti-work—predominantly left-wing critiques of capitalism and labour.

Instead, I want to contribute to the discussion by adding my own observation of *tangping* as a case of *negative utilitarianism*. This position is tacitly apolitical and aims not at societal changes but at reducing suffering. Anti-work can also manifest as ‘anesthetising force’ (Seresin 2019), which in fact prevents social change—a point we should not miss while prematurely framing *tangping* as a politics of radical alterity. Anti-work can also be seen as an individual choice in response to a society hostile to indolence. The utilitarianist and realist practitioners of indolence oppose work but crucially acknowledge the social consequences of their stance, including stigma and drawbacks. They would ridicule the leftists for being too naive for wanting anti-work to be recognised by the political establishment. Instead, they argue one might as well embrace self-marginalisation as a form of self-healing. To quote the preface written by novelist Cao Kou in Wei Sixiao’s *Melancholy of Small-Town Youth: 18 Ways to Die* (2016: 5–6; my translation):

‘Why don’t you go find a job’ is more depressing than ‘why don’t you go to work’. The former stops before finding a job, he has nothing to rely on, and anything about his talents or capability outside of secular work remains uncertain. The latter seems to have some leverage to act on impulses, in a psychological state in which he *can* find a job, but he does not want to. Tortured by poverty but not necessarily leading to a depressive state, there is a certain kind of joy and happiness that pushes him on.

This refusal to work is exercised from the perspective of a realist looking for distractions rather than an unhinged radical who aspires to shake up the status quo. It is neither a literal escape (as in the case of *runology*—a concept that I will unpack later) nor sublimation in imagination. It must be emphasised that the negativity in the above discussions of exit strategies is not necessarily a depressive attitude but a certain kind of pleasurable negation of the purposeful or meaningful life dictated by the sociopolitical mainstream—a ‘joyful pessimism’

(Frederiksen 2017) embraced by ‘junkies of futility’ (Shipley 2021). These exit strategies are no longer the barely keeping one’s head clear while ‘treading water’ described by Berlant, but a pleasurable immersion in the social fact of ‘breathing under the water’ (Frederiksen 2017: 18).

Doing nothing never really suggests that nothing happens. When one’s behaviour (for instance, wasting a day doom-scrolling on the phone while staying in bed) is vilified as ‘nothing’, it is almost always a result of a specific structure of normativity that equates work with value and moral worth. This is where Sinopessimism can be a theory of a good life *after* one forsakes the conventional meanings of ‘good life’ and ‘purposeful being’ (Hage 2013).

Heteropessimism

The phrase ‘We are the last generation’ (Bram 2023)—a calm yet defiant response during a Covid-19 lockdown to a police threat that disobedience would harm future generations—has come to embody the disillusionment of a generation. What began as a rejection of state intimidation has since become a powerful symbol of broader anxieties about the future and a refusal to participate in it. It is not simply a pre-emptive rejection of the hopelessness future generations will face because of the continuation of the status quo, but a pragmatic choice to minimise suffering here and now in this generation. As observed in the misogynous origin of *tangping* on Baidu Tieba, a collective, pragmatic disavowal of reproductive futurism has taken hold, marked by anti-natalism and ‘heteropessimism’ (Seresin 2019)—a widely shared sentiment that heterosexuality has become irredeemable. This disavowal is not necessarily ‘performative’, as shown by both low birth rates and the recently reported ‘recession of sex’ (Chen, J. 2024) among the young as shown in survey data. What is more indisputable than the ever more elusive demographic data is the ordinary observation of an unrelenting and fatalistic pessimism about heterosexual relationships on the internet and in everyday interactions.

This withdrawal from heterosexual relationships appears to be reciprocal, with both women and men increasingly opting out, albeit for different

reasons. More women have voluntarily opted out of heteronormative conceptions of the ‘good life’, citing the malignant patriarchy and unequal distribution of and compensation for labour both at work and at home, among other reasons. On the male side, the libidinal economy spearheaded by desperate ‘sims’ (internet slang for someone who is in pursuit of affection from someone who does not reciprocate) or *tiangou* (舔狗, in the Chinese internet argot) has also gone into a downward spiral. Confronted with formidable dowry prices, financial expectations, and, above all, emotional uncertainties, battalions of *tiangou* are finding solidarity in their collective confessions of ‘the quotidian experience of romantic harm as evidence of a global female conspiracy’ (Seresin 2019).

The suicide of Liu Jie (better known as ‘Fat Cat’, 肥猫) following a breakup with his then girlfriend Tan is now characteristically remembered as a pivotal event in a national male ‘awakening’ (Koetse 2024). The initial controversy was raised by Liu’s sister, who reported Tan for alleged ‘financial scams’. Liu initially met Tan via the mobile game *Honor of Kings* in 2021 and started a long-distance relationship with her before moving to Chongqing to be with her in 2023. Throughout this relationship, Liu gifted money to Tan multiple times, even right before his suicide on 11 April 2024. The news of his suicide and the backstory told from the perspective of Liu’s sister sparked a wildfire of ‘incel’ (‘involuntarily celibate’) outrage and solidarity against the financial distress and emotional damage of unreciprocated romance. This outrage marked a collective abdication of heterosexuality, which came to be seen as a socioeconomic and affective trap. Netizens ordered thousands of meals, drinks, and flowers to be delivered to the Chongqing bridge from which Liu Jie leaped to his death. Shortly after, memes about the transition from incel to ‘volcel’ (‘voluntarily celibate’) proliferated on the internet, as have viral videos preaching misogamy among lower-class men on Kuaishou: ‘As I stop being obsessed with mortgage and procreation, I can totally live freely with my CNY3,000 monthly salary.’ After all, it is not a difficult decision to stay perpetually single.

Runology

‘Runology’ or *runxue* (润学, a neologism that literally means ‘studies’ of how to run away from China) is another systemic effort of coping: rationalising outbound migration as a solution to domestic issues within China. There is a GitHub page dedicated to the ‘comprehensive philosophy and methodologies’ of *runxue* (GitHub n.d.). While *runxue* certainly fits into hundreds of years of history of outmigration from China framed in narratives of hope, its latest manifestation can be seen as politically militant or at least pessimistic. The diagnosis provided by *runxue* arrived at a profound despair: hope is relegated to an imagined Outside that has ‘been founded upon different principles and operated under a different order’ (Ligotti 2008: 48).

In this sense, apart from being a practical guide to different pathways of (il)legal migration, *runxue* is not simply a negative, pessimist disavowal of one’s home country and the conventional life there, but also a positive, optimistic, or even utopian hope for a meaningful escape. For example, in the past three years, there were waves of undocumented Chinese migration into the United States from across Latin and Central America, often dubbed as *zouxian* (走线) or, literally, the ‘walking line/route’ (Dong 2022). It remains to be seen whether the hopes of this track of runology will survive Donald Trump’s second-term presidency and his executive orders for mass deportation.

To connect *runxue* to a case of literary misanthropy, the protagonist Ye Wenjie in Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Problem* (2014) was so traumatised by the Cultural Revolution that she turned to the Outside of an unknown alien species as a better alternative. The deadlock of *runxue* is rooted in the ‘naivety’ of such hope: what if there were no such place on the Outside? Runology dwells on the same centuries-old presumption of the diasporic condition: will resigning from the conventional Chinese life (steeped in deeply rooted patriarchy, toxic kinship and workplaces, ordinary sexism, and so forth) guarantee a meaningful new life (Coates 2019)? Perhaps the terminal end of runology is not flight, but escaping *further into* the system (体制)—hence the nationwide craze for civil

servant exams (Chen, L. 2024) or internal migration back to the rustbelt such as Hegang (Zhang and Tang 2024) or the idyllic countryside (Cai 2024).

A Low Theory for the Global Undercommons

The ‘*Tangpingist* Manifesto’ initially gained traction internationally with its English and Japanese translations, introduced by the Japanese activist Hajime Matsumoto. In 2022, *Dandu* (单读), one of the most influential contemporary cultural magazines and a publisher based in Beijing, organised a reading group in which the general public was invited to participate. The manifesto was featured on its reading list (Dandu 2022), along with Bob Black’s *The Abolition of Work* (1986), David Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), and Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet* (2017). This group attempted to address the lingering critique of *tangping* as impractical and unlikely to become anything more than an empty signifier floating in public discourse. If ‘involution’ remains the underlying social structure, is *tangping* merely lying down on top of it?

This reading group can also be considered an attempt at a low theory coming directly from the ‘undercommons’ (Harney and Moten 2013): the ‘ungovernable realm of social life’ where the marginal populations themselves produce meanings with each other (Ngin 2020). The undercommons is an intellectual underground that centres on ‘refusal’ and ‘absence of a plan’ rather than a traditional modality of critique. The variety of these proposed readings covered in the reading group underscores how *tangpingism* must be defined, historicised, and relativised in reference to other existing cultural theories from the global undercommons. In fact, Sinopessimism is not alone in aligning with the lethargic disengagements of post-optimism. Following what Brosard (2023) proposes, the lexicon of Sinopessimism recognises the cross-cultural resonances that help situate youth resignation in a constellation of related concepts from other sociolinguistic contexts. For example, *tangpingism* includes six tenets:

- (1) Do not buy any housing.
- (2) Do not buy cars.

- (3) Do not get married.
- (4) Do not buy material things.
- (5) Maintain the lowest possible standard of living.
- (6) Refuse to become money-making machines exploited by others (Ye 2021).

This sounds awfully familiar to the Korean ‘N-po generation’ stemming from *Sampo Sedae* (‘Three giving-up generation’). Many young South Koreans feel that certain milestones once seen as guaranteed in previous generations are now out of reach:

- (1) courtship
- (2) marriage
- (3) childbirth.

Extending to *Opo Sedae* (‘Five giving-up generation’):

- (4) homeownership
- (5) interpersonal relationships (Wikipedia n.d.; Lee 2023).

This list goes on and on as more milestones are to be given up, hence the N-po Generation. As the Korean pop idol group BTS pleads in their 2018 song *Paradise*, ‘It’s okay to not have a dream’. If *tangping* falls upon a generational narrative as suggested earlier, it is certainly in parallel, if not directly related, to Korea’s *Sampo* Generation and Japan’s *Satori* Generation (literally, the ‘Buddhist enlightened generation’, referring to a mental state in which one is free from material desires and ambition). But this curse of affective deflation is not limited to East Asia. In observing what he dubs a ‘psycho-deflation’, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2022) calls for more serious research on the ‘widespread rejection of work, consumption, and procreation’ in Europe and around the world in the ongoing wave of the ‘Great Resignation’ (Coin 2025). China is in fact one of the latest members to join this global club of post-growth impasse. We are, fortunately or not, all in this together.

From Sinofuturism to Sinopessimism

Another opportunity of this connection with the global under-commons is Afro-pessimism. In fact,

the coinage of Sinopessimism by Zhang (2021) was inspired by Afro-pessimism (Wilderson III 2020). However, this connection is not in the sense of equating anti-Blackness and anti-Chinese-ness; in fact, Chinese people have widely participated in the global politics of anti-Blackness (Huang 2024). The above lexicon of Sinopessimism is my attempt at appropriating the term to contextualise the specific nexus of pessimist thought, affects, and attitudes that emerged in China about the past, present, and future. These pessimistic thoughts, while not a reflection on racism, do contemplate the historical, structural, and ontological conditions of a nation, as I will elaborate in the following.

Sinopessimism is the ideational obverse to Sinofuturism; the latter is speculative if not delusional, the former is fatalistic but utilitarian. Sinopessimism thus emerges as a pharmakon—a substance blurring the opposition of poison and remedy—of its own. The terminal pessimism seems irredeemable, but its pragmatism also potentially remedies the flaws of Sinofuturism. As Gabriele de Seta (2020: 91) critiqued the ‘denial of coevalness’ in the disposition of Sinofuturism as a form of ‘reverse orientalism’, Sinofuturism ‘deploys the future as a way of deferring participation in contemporariness’. In response, Gary Zhexi Zhang (2021) argues for a Sinopessimism that ‘offers the terms of refusal of the modernist frameworks for those who have been denied the present’. Sinopessimism therefore potentially offers a way out of this denial imposed by the linear discourse of modernisation—at best an alternative to the Western model of modernisation (which seems rather utopian at this point, even on its own terms) or, at the very least, a refusal of that model or an *exit*, even if this exit is just as agonising.

Sinopessimism feasts upon the self-inflicted agony of flat refusal. As M’Rabty (2024: 47) writes: ‘[W]hen a subject cannot change, challenge or attack the external of their angst and ire, they may instead choose to attack or enact a self-defeating/self-destructive change in themselves.’ In the case of Sinopessimism, this ‘subject’ most often manifests as the self-destructive essentialism of Chinese-ness. We can argue that Chinese-ness has been regarded as the transhistorical structuring force of the Sino-phone world since the Republican era. As a subject of perpetual scrutiny, the ‘ontological depravity’ of Chinese-ness is no stranger to Chinese-language

cultural theory. In fact, Chinese-ness is a case of navel-gazing and self-abnegating introspection: the project of Chinese-ness is a matter of both a positivistic need to construct ‘a persistent imagination of an unbroken historical continuity’ (Chun 1996: 113) and a pessimistic pathology of ‘what is fundamentally wrong with the category of Chinese-ness’ under the banner of a ‘national psychology’. For example, the fact that Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 ‘crowd psychology’ has been an enduring bestseller for decades in China under the translated title *The Rabble Grouped Like Ravens* (乌合之众) really illustrates the obsession with a pathological self-diagnosis of Chinese-ness as a collectivity. The negation of Chinese-ness (for example, via assimilation to modernity) was—and is now again, at least among those who self-exiled in the subreddits and to the destinations of *runology*—seen as a recovery of humanity itself.

‘Self-loathing and braggadocio’, according to William A. Callahan (2009: 9), are ‘interwoven, separated only by a fine line and can easily trade places’. As Bo Yang (1985, cited in Barmé 2019) puts it: ‘[O]n his inferiority, a Chinese person is a slave; in his arrogance, he is a tyrant. Rarely does he or she have a healthy sense of self-respect.’ China is therefore a ‘pessoptimist nation’ as its national aesthetic ‘entails the combination of a superiority complex and an inferiority complex’ (Callahan 2009: 9). On the pessimistic side, the ontological conundrum of Chinese-ness has emerged through convoluted and high-profile debates about the rubric of ‘national/ethnic character’ (Sun 2002) since more than a century ago—from the ‘Sick Man of East Asia’ in 1896 (Lei 2022) as ‘a self-deprecating warning about the uncertain future of China itself’ (Barmé 2019), Lu Xun’s 1922 *The True Story of Ah Q*, to the ‘blighted roots’ and ‘inferiority complex’ of *The Ugly Chinaman* (Bo 1985), Wu Zhihong’s (2016) claim that the ‘majority of Chinese people are man-child’, and Liu Cixin’s (2014) ‘Dark Forest Hypothesis’ as a form of cosmic pessimism rooted in the traumas of the Cultural Revolution.

Xiang Biao (2021) revisited this rubric in a recent interview:

I believe that exactly when a society truly loses its direction, grand narratives prevail ... Grand narratives tend to obscure many real contradictions and difficulties because the direction

in discourse differs greatly from the sense of direction in individual lives ... In my upbringing, many people say that Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* and *The Ugly Chinaman* are similar, both addressing the inferior roots of the nation. However, I believe their essence is different. *The Ugly Chinaman* can be seen as a grand narrative with significant judgements within it; however, Lu Xun's account is a highly personalised experience. He was seeking a sense of vitality in Ah Q, as an individual full of various fantasies and disillusionments. This is what truly provides a sense of direction, not necessarily about how history will unfold, but about how we as individuals can preserve strength and face the darkness with a sense of direction. (My translation.)

The weight of such pessimism is certainly buoyed by the state-prescribed compulsory optimism of the past decades—for example, in the social aesthetics of ‘positive energy’ (Richaud 2021) and, more recently, ‘cultural confidence’ (文化自信). Such mandatory optimism manifested not just in unreciprocated propaganda or frantic ethno-nationalism. This optimism has also taken root among the public through rationalising the unrealistic expectation of infinite economic growth in the past three decades. However, when optimism is flatlined by shuttered hopes of real estate markets and a skyrocketing unemployment rate, this recession may end up resuscitating the pessimistic undercurrents of ‘national character’ among the masses themselves.

Living in the Garbage Time of History

In assembling a lexicon of Sinopessimism as circulated on the Chinese internet, this essay does not frame it as an ethnic or national specificity but rather contextualises this collective disavowal. Most of the surveyed issues on labour, gender, and migration are global in scope but they are also channelled through specific histories, languages, mediums, epistemologies, and, most importantly, a *local grassroots politics of living in the present*. Hu Wenhui (2024) uses the phrase ‘garbage time of history’ (历史的垃圾时间)

to describe ‘the period when a nation or system is no longer viable’, yet it lingers, and ‘any attempt to struggle against it is futile’ (Boyd 2024).

While the example Hu discussed was the Soviet Union in the Gorbachev era, Chinese netizens readily interpreted it as an allusion to contemporary China, which led to the essay's subsequent censorship (Hawkins 2024). However, the ensuing controversy regarding the ‘garbage time of history’ largely missed the other half of Hu Wenhui's point, which was that, since

the development of history and the development of culture are often not aligned, and the end of a culture often lags behind its respective historical progression. That is why, when history enters garbage time, culture will be able to take a long holiday. (Hu 2024)

Hu's reference to culture and its relative autonomy from history *qua* development in an economic or social sense points to a sense of individual agency or a ‘direction’ exceeding historical determination: ‘[H]istory will always have garbage time—but our lives don't’ (Hu 2024). ■

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The living room of Experimental House T.
Source: Haoyan Zhuang (CC).

Live and Leave

Experience Orientation and the Guest Mind among Chinese Co-Living Youth Today

Haoyan ZHUANG

Contemporary Chinese youth in co-living arrangements emphasise an ‘experience orientation’ (体验倾向) that prioritises the present, mobility, and the pursuit of ‘more life possibilities’ as key aspects of their identity. This orientation leads them to place high value on the co-living experience, while simultaneously viewing it as disposable. This seemingly paradoxical attitude stems from broader trends of mobility and individualisation in Chinese society. It reflects the notion of a ‘guest mind’ (客心), whereby young people perceive themselves as transient guests in the present moment. The ‘guest mind’ functions as a coping strategy in response to societal involution, contributing to delayed life planning.

Co-living residents highlight the present, exploration, and fluidity as central to their ‘experience orientation’, viewing these traits as essential to the uniqueness of their life.

Interactions within co-living spaces tend to emphasise the present. Upon leaving, the roommate relationship typically concludes, with any further developments being largely serendipitous and not a primary focus during the co-living experience. This orientation could be described as an ‘experience orientation’ [体验倾向]. This ‘experience orientation’ stands in contrast to the ‘pragmatic orientation’ [实用倾向].

向], a concept that aligns with the contemporary trend of 'long-termism' [长期主义]. The latter refers to individuals who prioritise building connections through professional and business activities, thereby enhancing their social identity and creating opportunities that offer meaningful advantages for their future careers and personal lives. Instead, the future of our co-living residents is encapsulated by the slogan of our co-living house: 'Explore more possibilities in life.' The emphasis on 'more' highlights a desire to embrace diverse experiences, reflecting an openness to exploration rather than a pursuit of a definitive 'best' or 'most suitable' path. This mindset is particularly characteristic of vibrant youth, a life stage marked by fluidity and the understanding that life trajectories are not rigidly fixed.

The above reflection on the 'experience orientation'—a focus on the present among Chinese co-living youth—was articulated by Liuzhi, a co-living resident, on the public account of their co-living space on Notion, a recording application used by residents to document their daily lives. This 'orientation' prioritises living fully in the present, framing the future not as a fixed trajectory but as an open landscape of possibilities disconnected from the immediate demands of the present. Why do co-living youth favour the 'experience orientation' and the present over the 'pragmatic orientation' and long-termism? What impacts does this attitude have on the co-living experience? More broadly, what does this approach to life tell us about contemporary Chinese youth and society at large?

Co-Living, Mobility, and Individualisation

In contemporary China, co-living has emerged as a new residential arrangement among some young people. Referred to as *gongju* (共居, literally 'living in common'), it differs from more conventional joint rental arrangements (合租). The key distinction lies in the self-organisation, egalitarian ethos, communication, and sharing among co-living residents, which set this choice apart from living situations characterised

by minimal interaction among roommates, commercial collective setups, or arrangements based solely on co-working relations. Through co-living, they seek to cultivate emotional intimacy and build social connections in large cities within a collective environment that helps alleviate both the financial burden of high rents and the emotional strain of loneliness.

My research is based on one year of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai from September 2021 to August 2022, with a follow-up visit from July to September 2023. I selected two co-living houses—referred to as Experimental House T and Experimental House F (hereinafter EHT and EHF)—as my primary sites, immersing myself in a 24/7 living experience alongside the other residents. Both co-living houses are strategically located in the central area of Shanghai, with convenient access to public transport and urban amenities. Each house covers approximately 150 square metres, with spacious living rooms that take up nearly half the total area. However, this central location and generous space come at the cost of high rent: EHT's monthly rent started at RMB18,500 (later decreasing to RMB15,000), while EHF was priced at RMB22,000. Despite the seemingly high costs, the rent is shared among seven or eight residents, making it a relatively affordable arrangement for each individual.

The residents are predominantly white-collar workers employed in internet and advertising companies, freelancers, and gap-year students pursuing studies in the United States, Europe, and Australia, most of whom are aged in their twenties or early thirties. Co-living residents are typically migrants who lack extensive existing social connections in Shanghai. They move to the city for various reasons—such as career opportunities, personal interests, or study—but often arrive without a strong network of classmates, friends, or family.

Fengshi's experience illustrates this common situation. After graduating from a college in Nanjing, he followed his classmates to Shanghai, where they established a studio producing short videos for social media. During my time living with Fengshi, I noticed only one occasion when he went out with a friend: he visited the Shanghai Museum with a former classmate who was in town. The rest of the time, if he wasn't at work, he stayed home. In an interview, he candidly admitted that he had 'no friends here' (in Shanghai) and rarely interacted with colleagues outside work.

Another resident, Zhuru, moved to Shanghai because of her boyfriend. Her initial motivation for relocating was to maintain the relationship, prompting her to quit her job in Beijing and find a new one in Shanghai. However, things took an unexpected turn when the relationship ended. Zhuru jokingly remarked that while her boyfriend had disappeared, the job had remained.

Co-living residents experience high mobility, typically staying in shared living arrangements for an average of six months. When I revisited my field sites in the summer of 2023, only two original residents remained at EHT. The others had moved on: some had gone abroad for further education, others had begun cohabiting with romantic partners, and some had changed jobs and relocated to different cities. For all residents, establishing a long-term living arrangement is not a priority. Instead, co-living is seen as an experiential phase—one of many possibilities available during their ‘vibrant youth’.

This orientation reveals a paradoxical relationship with the present, which is simultaneously cherished and disposable. On one hand, co-living offers a quasi-familial experience, providing warmth and companionship as residents navigate solitary work or study lives in Shanghai. Kongqing, a resident originally from northern China who graduated from a US university and began working in Shanghai, reflected: ‘Co-living is a warm experience, especially for working people like me. It gives me a feeling of family. In the co-living environment, I feel comfortable and enjoy the intimacy of friends after I return from exhausting work.’ The high turnover of roommates further enriches the experience, allowing residents to meet new people and form fresh connections. On the other hand, residents do not hesitate to leave when new opportunities arise—be it for career, education, or personal growth. This open-ended approach enables them to sever ties with the present moment in co-living, confident that other meaningful experiences and relationships lie ahead. Kongqing, for example, left after falling in love and later moved to another city for a better job. As Liuzhi aptly observes, residents fully engage with and value the present while it lasts, but ultimately move on in pursuit of broader possibilities.

These seemingly contradictory dynamics are deeply rooted in the process of individualisation within Chinese society (Yan 2009, 2010). The post-Mao

era, marked by neoliberal reforms, has accelerated individualisation across key domains such as housing, education, and health care, with profound effects on everyday social relations (Hamamura and Xu 2015; Li and Yan 2019). This shift marks a move from collective familial loyalty to the pursuit of individual aspirations, fostering what Yan (2010: 504) terms the ‘enterprising self’—a self characterised by calculated, proactive, and self-disciplined behaviour. Within this neoliberal context, individuals are expected to navigate an expanding array of life choices, striving for self-fulfilment amid market-driven and privatised lifestyles. This transformation opens the possibility of ‘living one’s own life’, while also placing the burden of risk and uncertainty squarely on the individual.

Among Chinese youth, the effects of individualisation manifest in two ways. First, there is a pursuit of *re-embedding* institutions to mitigate the risks that independence entails. Co-living represents one such form of re-embedding, offering a support system beyond the traditional family structure. This is particularly vital for young people working or studying alone in large urban centres, as co-living provides a sense of communal solidarity and emotional support otherwise absent in the familial void. Second, the ethos of the ‘enterprising self’ drives youth to pursue better life possibilities, treating present conditions as inherently transient and adaptable. Co-living thus functions both as a practical response to the demands of individualisation and as a platform for exploration—allowing residents to balance the need for temporary stability with their aspirations for future growth and transformation.

Guest Mind, Anti-Involution, and Delayed Life

The ‘experience orientation’, shaped by the process of individualisation and embraced by these young individuals, extends beyond co-living and influences multiple facets of their lives, including career decisions and life planning. In an interview, Zhuru offered insight into the contrasting life trajectories of co-living residents and those who choose to remain in Shanghai after completing their education there. According to her, those who stay often have clear goals: building robust social networks, investing in

homeownership, and cultivating familial ties within the city. For this group, the transient and rental-based nature of co-living holds limited appeal. In contrast, most co-living residents experience Shanghai as a temporary stopover—a platform for advancing their careers or pursuing other life ambitions. Lacking a strong sense of belonging to the city, they engage with it in instrumental and provisional ways rather than with long-term commitment.

This phenomenon reflects an ideology I refer to as the ‘guest mind’ (客心), wherein young people perceive themselves as temporary guests in the spaces they inhabit, the jobs they hold, and the relationships they form. As guests, they see their current circumstances as inherently transient, always anticipating an eventual departure.

Adopting the guest mind enables young people to avoid taking full responsibility for every aspect of their work and personal lives. This mindset functions as a strategic approach, allowing them to remain open to new possibilities while alleviating the pressures of pervasive involution (内卷). As an academic concept, involution originated with Alexander Goldenweiser (1936) and was later introduced into anthropological discourse by Clifford Geertz (1963) in his study of rice cultivation in Southeast Asia. In China, the term gained popular currency around 2020, as individuals confronted increasing pressures from a hyper-competitive job market, constrained educational mobility, and resource scarcity. Involution describes a situation in which people invest excessive effort—such as working overtime—without receiving proportional returns. Anthropologist Biao Xiang links the widespread experience of involution to limited and homogeneous opportunities and the absence of viable alternatives (Wang and Ge 2020). Individuals are compelled to compete for a narrow pool of desirable outcomes, unable to exit the race due to a lack of other options. As Xiang puts it, involution is a ‘mandatory game’ that people dislike but feel forced to play to survive.

Many people, especially youth, seek to resist this cycle by preserving their ability to leave—that is, by maintaining the status of a guest in their current circumstances. This stance enables them to avoid full immersion in their present realities. Xiangru’s reflection on her co-living experience and broader life plans captures this perspective:

For a while, I didn’t ponder these questions [of leaving and mobility], perhaps because my life was tranquil and satisfying. Yet, to some degree, I wish to retain a sensitivity that enables me to adopt a critical stance, avoiding complete immersion and safeguarding the prospect of departure.

Her words illustrate the delicate balance between enjoying the present and remaining prepared to move on. While the idea of leaving may be more ideological than practical, some young people believe they could leave their jobs or cities at any moment—practising a form of mobility as departure.

This mindset allows them to remain relatively indifferent to issues such as promotion or workplace conflict, thereby easing the pressures of competition in their jobs. Chansu described her work attitude as defined by a ‘quit mood’ (躺平, literally ‘lying flat’), where she accepted assigned tasks but resisted overwork that encroached on her personal time:

I worked with a ‘quit’ mood. So, I said ‘yes’ to all work assigned to me but said ‘no’ to any overwork that encroached on my spare and personal time. If my working conditions didn’t allow for that, I could quit and find another job. That way, I felt relaxed at work. This approach stopped me from becoming the cog I feared turning into. It also taught me how to negotiate with people in different positions and power relations. I realised my colleague sitting at the next desk also had the same ‘quit’ mindset, and our relationship became harmonious. We could complain about our superiors and talk openly. We both knew we might not be working here for long, so there was no need to be wary of one another. That kind of colleague relationship made my work environment more comfortable.

As Chansu’s example shows, the notion of quitting—whether acted upon or kept as a possibility—serves as an anti-involution (反内卷) strategy. By retaining the option to leave, she felt liberated from rigid hierarchies and internal competition. When this mindset is shared among co-workers, it can foster a more cooperative and less antagonistic work culture.

The experience orientation and guest mind significantly shape the life trajectories of contemporary Chinese youth, contributing to the widespread deferral of major life commitments. Faced with an expanding array of life possibilities, many feel little urgency to marry, raise children, or assume the role of household 'host'. This shift is reflected in rising marriage ages: for men, the average age of first marriage has increased from 23.57 years in 1990 to 25.86 in 2010, and to 29.38 in 2020. For women, it rose from 22.15 years in 1990 to 23.89 in 2010, reaching 27.95 in 2020 (Chen and Zhang 2022; He and Tan 2021). Among co-living residents aged in their mid-twenties, marriage and family formation are rarely considered urgent. When I asked about their marriage plans, most said the idea still felt distant. Faxia, a resident in her thirties and considered by some to be of 'marriageable age', emphasised her desire to delay. She cited her strained relationship with her parents and their troubled marriage as key reasons. Faxia explained that she did not want to replicate her parents' path and instead hoped to find a partner who truly suited her.

Risks and Social Insecurity of Youth

However, while individuals enjoy the freedom to explore more possibilities in their 'vibrant youth' through the experience orientation and guest mind, they also face greater risks and uncertainties in life. Bauman (2001, 2002) argues that, dialectically, freedom itself is constrained in postmodernity. As Leo Strauss notes, the flipside of unencumbered freedom is the insignificance of choice (Bauman 2002: xvii). Thus, freedom is not truly free—the price of this freedom is insecurity. 'Living under conditions of insecurity is a *Risikoleben*, and it is the acting person who is bound to pay the costs of the risks taken' (Bauman 2001: 91). To manage these risks, youth continue migrating and seeking new opportunities, hoping to find the 'best' life conditions. However, this pursuit raises critical questions: Which opportunity is truly the best? Is there a singular 'best' possibility? What is the goal of this constant exploration?

These uncertainties result in youth remaining caught in a cycle of experience and exploration, unable to stop because they do not know where their journey should end. Their emphasis on experience transforms life into a kind of 'suspended experience' (悬置性体验), in which, despite their desire to pursue an authentic self, youth often remain uncertain about what they truly want and what conditions they are striving for (Zhou and Xiao 2022). As Liuzhi put it, there is no definitive 'best' or 'most suitable' option yet. In other words, they are unsure of what the 'best' or 'most suitable' path looks like, leaving their journey as an ongoing search without a clear destination.

The core issue underlying the dilemma faced by youth in contemporary China is the lack of social security. As Yan (2010) argues, the process of individualisation in China is distinct from Western experiences, primarily due to the absence of a robust social security system and the presence of an authoritarian regime that lacks the classic features of individualism, political liberalism, and public institutions for social re-embedding. This process is more about subjective consciousness than objective life circumstances (Beck 1992: 128). While youth in China enjoy subjective freedoms—such as the ability to choose their jobs, residences, and lifestyles—they are simultaneously confronted with the lack of a sufficient social security system. It becomes their responsibility to secure a better life through education, job opportunities, and personal exploration—in their own words: 'more possibilities in life'. In this sense, co-living, the experience orientation, and the guest mind emerge as strategies youth use to cope with the pervasive uncertainty and risks in contemporary Chinese society. However, despite these adaptive strategies, youth are left without a sense of security, as there is no comprehensive social security system in China to provide stability or support during times of need.

The Downside of Freedom

The experience orientation and guest mind of youth, as exemplified by co-living residents, reflect both the life strategies and the dilemmas faced by young people in the individualisation process of contempo-

rary Chinese society. While youth enjoy the freedom to explore more possibilities, this freedom serves as a strategy to resist involution and free themselves from traditional familial obligations, such as marriage and childrearing. However, this newfound freedom is accompanied by significant uncertainty, as individuals are left to bear the weight of their decisions without sufficient social security. As a result, youth must constantly seek better options for their lives, leaving behind current situations as mere experiences and maintaining the guest mind to alleviate the pressures they face. Despite the flexibility this mindset offers, the experience orientation and guest mind do not resolve the underlying uncertainty. Instead, they perpetuate a cycle in which youth are always on a quest to find the 'best' option, unsure whether they will ever encounter it or whether it even exists. ■



The former site of Hegang's Xingshan Coalmine, a state-owned enterprise that underwent 'restructuring' (重组) after declaring bankruptcy in 2003. The process involved a reshuffling of shareholding structures, state financial assistance, and mass layoffs. Source: Siyu Tang (CC).

Imagining the 'Utopia of Homeownership'

Tracing the Online Virality of a Chinese Rust Belt City?

Siyu TANG

This essay traces the collective fantasies of a life of 'rest' that an online public projected onto Hegang, a city near the China–Russia border known as 'the city with the cheapest housing prices' in China. By examining a series of online conversations about Hegang—including social media posts, comments, and journalistic coverage—the article argues that these discussions functioned as 'zones of encounter', where sociopolitically produced emotions such as anxiety and fear came into contact and intensified. It considers how, in a context in which direct political expression remains largely unviable, such viral contact zones have become vigorous, albeit elusive, spaces in which the fraught emotions generated by the broader sociopolitical milieu can be validated and amplified.

I have saved up 50,000 yuan, planning to buy a house in Hegang. I will budget 30,000–40,000 yuan for the house itself, and the remaining 10,000 for living supplies.' This post went viral on the Chinese online forum Baidu Tieba in May 2019, attracting more than 10,000 comments and extensive journalistic coverage (Longtoulada 2019). In the post, the author, Li Hai, documented each step of his journey, travelling 2,900 kilometres from Zhoushan in Zhejiang Province to Hegang in Heilongjiang Province, where he eventually purchased an apartment.

Upon arriving in Hegang, Li Hai immediately began searching for apartments with local real estate agents. On the eighth day, he bought a top-floor unit in a six-storey building, spending 58,000 yuan in total, including agency and ownership transfer fees:

The new home has furniture left by the previous owner ... I spent 1,200 yuan on a new anti-theft security door, and 2,000 on heating and property management fees. That leaves me with 500, which is just enough to install the internet router. I'll use Huabei [a mini-loan mobile app] for other expenses for now.

In subsequent posts, he shared photos of the living room, bedroom, the new security door, and the red booklet of the Certificate for the Ownership of Real Estate in the People's Republic of China (PRC). 'Chinese people have the strongest obsession with housing. So do I. I hope to have my own home, so that I can feel stable.'

Rebirth of a Rust Belt City

Hegang is a prefectural city in Heilongjiang Province, a region in northeast China historically known as Manchuria and today referred to as the 'rust belt of China' (Xie 2019), where industrial production flourished during the Mao Zedong era. Once driven by a resource-dependent economy based on its abundant coal reserves, Hegang's mining industry contracted sharply around the turn of the millennium, as its coalmines were depleted after nearly a century of extraction. Combined with the broader geographical restructuring of post-Mao China, Hegang has experienced severe economic and demographic decline since the early 2000s, as most young, able-bodied residents migrated south in search of work in the booming eastern seaboard. In statistics from recent years, Hegang has consistently been ranked as the city with the lowest housing prices in China (Yicai 2020, 2022; Lin 2021).

Since about 2019, however, the post-industrial city of Hegang has experienced an unexpected 'revival' in both online and offline spheres, as a surge of young people living in China's urban hubs began purchasing its cheap apartments. Most notably, the city near the China–Russia border went viral on social media when several homebuyers shared their journeys of buying property there. In these posts, authors portrayed their previous lives in China's top-tier cities as marked by 'wandering' or 'floating', with 'no way out'. For them, purchasing a cheap apartment in Hegang—often using their entire savings—was a way to end a life of relentless struggle and simply 'rest' in a stable place they could call 'home'. As these posts gained widespread attention, the online public projected onto Hegang an imagined escape from urban precarity: a fantasy

of indolent living in the rust belt. The city was soon dubbed a 'heaven for lying flat' (躺平天堂) and a 'utopia for homeownership' (买房乌托邦).

In this essay, by charting a series of online conversations about Hegang, I explore how collective fantasies of homeownership in the post-industrial city became 'zones of encounter' (Hillenbrand 2023), in which sociopolitically produced emotions such as anxiety and fear came into contact and intensified. My aim is twofold: first, to identify the political situatedness of Hegang's virality beyond the oft-invoked economic explanations that reduce the phenomenon to housing affordability; and second, to examine how injuries inflicted by broader sociopolitical forces coalesce in the online sphere in a context where there is limited scope for political expression. If the dominant emotional tone of China's public sphere is one of 'overwhelming positivity'—epitomised by state-promoted campaigns of 'happiness' (幸福) and 'positive energy' (正能量)—its counter currents of negative affect may possess the potential to be both disruptive and generative (Richaud 2021).

Although since the founding of the PRC urban China has institutionally and economically marginalised a significant proportion of the 'floating population' without local *hukou* (household registration) (Chan 2009), the past decade has seen urban life become increasingly competitive—if not outright exclusionary—for both middle-class white-collar workers and lower-income migrant labourers. This trend is driven by a series of structural and institutional shifts (Chan et al. 2013; Wang and Ge 2020; Bram 2022; Liu and Chen 2025). Rather than merely an economic response to unaffordable urban housing, the visions projected onto Hegang by the online public constituted a potent cultural genre—one that resonated with and validated the distress of those trying to survive in a social environment in which formal employment, welfare, affordable housing, and channels for political expression are steadily diminishing.

This essay also draws on a broader PhD project based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hegang. It should be noted that the imaginaries circulating online often diverge significantly from the lived experiences of those who have migrated to the city—an issue that lies beyond the scope of this piece. For now, let us return to Li Hai's story.

A Life of Wandering

When Li Hai's post began attracting numerous replies on the second day of his journey, some commentators expressed disbelief at the incredibly low price of the apartment, while others ridiculed his decision to move to a city suffering from dramatic population decline. Despite this disapproval, most readers marvelled at his decision to leave behind the life in a big city and move to Hegang.

At the same time, the post evoked a compelling public sentiment: a yearning to abandon the unending struggles of urban life, to quit entirely, and simply rest—or 'lie flat' (躺平). In his post, Li Hai described his life before buying the apartment as a state of 'wandering' (漂泊), marked by the feeling of 'never being able to make it' (混不出头的)—a sentiment with which many online readers empathised. 'I am not married yet, nor have I ever had a girlfriend. When I was in my twenties, I felt a bit lonely living by myself, but over the years I've gotten used to it,' Li Hai wrote. His decision to buy an apartment in the northeastern rust belt seemed like a resolution to his hardships: it signified both an acceptance that he could not attain the hegemonic 'good life' in China's top-tier cities and a long-awaited opportunity to rest in a place he could finally call 'home'. One commenter summarised:

The hardest thing in life is perhaps not being able to achieve something, nor being able to give it up. If you've accepted your circumstances and seen things clearly, you'll live with ease and satisfaction. If I still can't make it when I'm thirty, I'll also get a house in Hegang ... Maybe that kind of life can calm my restless heart again.

Although Li Hai's autobiographical post may not be representative of all those who admired his decision, it voiced a gripping sense of unbelonging and disenfranchisement to which many could relate in their own struggles with precarity in China's major cities. Born in Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province, Li Hai received little care growing up, as his parents separated when he was young and started new families. Without access to higher education, he worked in low-paid jobs such as security guard, waiter, and fire-

fighter. Later, in search of less physically demanding work, he obtained a seafarer's certificate and took a job as a repairman on a cargo ship. The work was seasonal—only six months a year—and dreadfully lonely. Moreover, as the jobs were short-term and contract-based, Li Hai was excluded from social security and pension schemes, and lacked a stable cohort of colleagues (Longtoulada 2019; Li 2019).

The alienation he felt at work was compounded by the instability of his housing situation during the other half of the year spent on land. Renting an apartment was both economically burdensome due to high prices, and deeply unstable; short-term leases were unviable, and landlords could evict him at will. Returning to his hometown was not an option either: not only had he long been estranged from his family, but also housing in Zhoushan was unaffordable (Li 2019).

In 2015, Li Hai came across a Baidu Tieba forum called 'Nomads' (流浪), where he found others in similar, or even more dire, life circumstances. Established about 2004, the forum had originally drawn young people romanticising about a life of wandering, but by the mid-2010s it had evolved into an online refuge for those forced into nomadism because they could no longer afford stable housing or earn a reliable income. By the late 2010s, the forum's membership largely comprised rural migrants working in casualised factory jobs or other forms of day labour—a 'surplus population' that scholars have long identified as symptomatic of China's post-reform rural–urban divide (see, for instance, Lee 1998; Solinger 1999; Yan 2008; Pun 2016).

Unlike earlier generations of migrant workers who toiled in the hope of upward mobility, members of the Nomads forum belonged to a burgeoning group of rural migrants who, fully aware of their permanent socioeconomic impasse, no longer believed in the hegemonic promise of progress. Instead, they chose to 'work for one day and play for three', picking up short-term jobs in factories, construction, or delivery work. The availability of such jobs expanded rapidly over the past decade, even as it further disenfranchised China's surplus labour force (Tian and Lin 2019; Li 2022). With this way of working came extreme precarity: once the average of 150 yuan earned from a day's factory work was gone, many were forced to sleep on train station benches, under bridges, or on the streets until the next job became available.



Screenshot from the documentary about Li Hai.
Source: Jian (2019).

Given that shelter was one of the most urgent concerns among forum members, many posts shared information about obscure localities across China where one could buy ‘cabbage-price apartments’ (白菜价房). Having managed to save some money, Li Hai began actively participating in these discussions from 2017. During his six ‘unemployed’ months off-ship, he travelled to several of the places recommended by forum users to conduct ‘onsite investigations’ of housing. In early 2019, when news of Hegang’s 20,000-yuan apartments first circulated on Weibo, Li Hai set out on yet another journey in search of a home.

The Making of a Cultural Symbol

By being the first person to publicly document his journey into the northeastern rust belt and settling into his new apartment, Li Hai transformed Hegang from a place with astonishingly low housing prices into a plausible destination for others hoping to escape a life of wandering in search of an affordable, stable home. Following the popularity of his story, heated discussions about Hegang began circulating online from late 2019. A short documentary was even produced about Li Hai’s new life in Hegang (Jian

2019), which garnered 838,000 views and more than 8,000 comments on the video streaming platform Bilibili. On the Nomads forum, members responded to Li Hai’s viral post by reflecting on their own lives. One post, accompanied by a photo of the author’s sweat-covered face—likely taken on a construction site—read: ‘I am 32 years old, and I have finally evolved perfectly into someone who is abnormal in the eyes of others: no [stable] job, no wife or children, can’t drive, no savings’ (Ziyoububian 2024).

Others, determined to escape their dire circumstances, expressed a desire to follow in Li Hai’s footsteps and move to Hegang. A post titled ‘I Also Yearn for Poetry and Distant Places, and I Also Want to Wander Around’ (也向往诗和远方, 也想去流浪了) declared:

I came to this forum because of Li Hai, and I also want to buy an apartment in Hegang ... Now in my thirties, I finally realise that it is difficult to change a person’s fate, and no matter how hard you try, it will be useless. (Xishecibei1987 2019)

Several others who had relocated to the rust belt city also began posting about their new lives—some gaining significant online attention. Posts that resonated most were those in which authors detailed their

life trajectories before moving to Hegang, which often were marked by trauma related to family, work, or simply the exhausting effort of daily survival.

For instance, a young woman posted about a home in Hegang she purchased for only 15,000 yuan. In a series of posts, she recounted her complicated family history, marked by trauma inflicted by her abusive parents. Moving to Hegang, as she wrote, not only enabled her to escape familial trauma but also allowed her to find ‘peace and happiness’ in a home of her own (Bixia Changqing 2022). A few months after settling in Hegang, she even changed her name on her national ID card to legally distance herself from her family. ‘I live in a place 2,000 kilometres from where I was born, but this is my real home,’ she wrote (Bixia Changqing 2022). By assuming a new name in a place with no prior social or familial ties, Ling effectively experienced a second birth in the faraway northeast.

Posts like these helped construct an image of Hegang as a space of healing—a refuge where people could gain physical and emotional distance from the wounds of their previous lives. Hegang thus became not only a site for the imagination of homeownership but also a vessel for a phantasmic vision of escape, in which a life of ‘rest’ could be lived free from anxiety and fear. As one comment on the documentary on Li Hai observed: ‘I don’t know what I am searching for. The loneliness in a distant place is often the best protective shelter’ (我也不知道在寻找什么。远方的孤独有时是最好的保护壳).

It is no coincidence that Wei, an interlocutor whom I met in Hegang, described his journey to the northeastern city—and his decision to buy an apartment there—as a kind of ‘pilgrimage’ (朝圣) to a ‘holy place’ (神圣的地方) he had been following on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) for more than two years. While doing manual work in Jiangsu and Anhui provinces—a period he described as ‘painful’ (痛苦)—Wei found comfort in videos about Hegang. They gave him a sense of relief: not only did he feel reassured knowing there was a fallback option if he chose to quit the struggle, but he also saw his own suffering reflected in the comments and discussions beneath the videos. Among all the content he encountered, it was Li Hai’s post that inspired him most. When working as a cruise ship waiter, Wei deeply identified with the loneliness Li Hai had described in his own seafaring job.

Engendering Zones of Encounter

The rich connotations of ‘quitting’, ‘resting’, and ‘sheltering’ associated with life in Hegang invite closer attention to their political situatedness. As a cultural form gone viral, the imagery of Hegang legitimised and created space for the expression of fraught emotions generated by people’s sociopolitical context. In an environment where the state actively (re)shapes citizens’ emotional tone—particularly in online spaces—the conversations about Hegang constituted an online sphere in which dysphoric expressions could gather, linger, gain attention, and, in some cases, yield affective resonance (Richaud 2021: 910).

During my fieldwork in a real estate agency in Hegang, apartment sales agents often attributed the surge in their business to the ‘psychological effect’ (心理作用) afforded by the city’s cheap properties. Specifically, given that most buyers made their purchases online without ever visiting the city, agents explained that customers were drawn to Hegang as a psychological safety net. Simply knowing they could fall back on this option amid the instability of life in top-tier cities offered them comfort. As one journalist succinctly put it: ‘How much would it cost to see a therapist for a year? The concrete and steel in Hegang are far more solid than a therapist’s well-meaning advice’ (Niujiao 2022).

A widely shared post on the Q&A platform Zhihu in 2022 elaborated on the kinds of collective anxiety that Hegang’s online representation seemed to soothe:

If one day you cannot afford to repay your monthly mortgage instalments in the tens of thousands, or you’ve become completely hopeless about the several-million-yuan down payment, or you’re fed up with being a ‘puppet person’ [工具人] in a first-tier city, or the doors of the first- and second-tier cities have completely closed to you—at that point, I hope you don’t despair. Losing you is the city’s loss. Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Remember: there is a small border town ... She will always open her doors to you. She is Hegang. She does not require a master’s degree, nor a minimum period of social security enrolment, nor a place in

a lottery queue [摇号排队], nor even a household registration [户口]. As long as you have a sleeper train ticket and 40,000 to 50,000 yuan in savings—or even just 10,000 to 20,000—you can become her owner.

... Maybe you still look down on the simplicity and plainness of Hegang, but I believe one day you'll tire of endless competition. When you're worn out, you must board the train to Hegang.

In this passage, Hegang is poetically imagined as a feminine figure—a caring, unpretentious maternal presence offering unconditional refuge to those worn down by debt, exclusion, and exhaustion. For those who are 'fed up', 'tired', and 'desperate', she becomes a last resort, a soft landing in contrast to the harsh demands of China's major urban centres. The passage not only amplifies Hegang's desirability but also lays bare the exclusionary mechanisms—such as *hukou* status, education level, and social security enrolment—that have rendered urban life increasingly unlivable for many. These structural barriers, which limit access to housing and social welfare, cultivate the desperation that makes Hegang appear as a sanctuary.

Writing on the marginalised aesthetic practices of China's disenfranchised 'underclass', Margaret Hillenbrand (2023: 31–46) conceptualises such cultural forms as 'zones of encounter'—spaces where individuals threatened by the looming spectre of slow death come into contact, 'stumbling from the ledge into the zone below'. Unlike psychotherapeutic interventions that became popular in post-reform China—aimed at disciplining anxiety into managed calm—these aesthetic forms render distress strikingly visible, offering a stage upon which 'stifled class tensions burst through' (Hillenbrand 2023: 45–46). Within these zones, Hegang became both a testament to pervasive sociopolitical malaise and a potent symbol of public distress in a climate of economic decline, tightening political control, and diminishing prospects for social mobility.

As viral contact zones, online discussions of Hegang enabled the intersubjective sociability of negative feelings that might otherwise remain unspoken. They also gave shape to a collective imaginary of a restful life outside the imperatives of productivity. To identify with the desire to move to Hegang was to express

what Richaud (2021: 910) calls a 'dissonant but not oppositional' dysphoria—an affective orientation in which emotions produced by injustice could circulate, resonate, and intensify. In this way, Hegang stood not just as a place on the map, but also as a cultural imaginary through which exhaustion, injury, and longing found articulation.

Aftermaths of Viral Contacts

By sketching Hegang's online virality as a socio-political contact zone, my aim is not to portray a suppressed agency in a non-liberal context, but rather to make visible a different form of political voicing—one that is not necessarily legible within liberal-democratic frameworks. As Elysée Nouvet (2014: 98) writes, feeling pain and seeking relief speak 'to power as it desires, and thus insists another better existence is possible'. By examining the gripping public desire to quit the precarious present and find rest in a rust belt city, I hope to shed light on the generative potential of these online encounter zones as spaces where situated experiences of pain, anger, anxiety, frustration, and disillusionment come into viral social contact.

Such zones may open space for transformative manoeuvres, or simply serve as fleeting sites for the normalisation of negative venting. They may be censored or subjected to other forms of online traffic control. Regardless of their fate, the vitality of these contact zones—their ability to amplify public imagination for a life otherwise—should not be taken for granted.

I close with another comment to the documentary on Li Hai: 'I realised that society won't give me [what I hoped for], and my lover won't come, so I gave myself a home. A decent, comfortable home, where nobody will ever be able to abandon me again.' ■



Iceless performing live. Source: Meng Meiyun (CC).

Rocking Boundaries

Made-in-China Feminism and an All-Female Chinese Band in Tokyo

MENG Meiyun

This essay examines how Iceless, a Tokyo-based band of highly educated, middle-class Chinese women, redefines gender norms through their music, marking a unique evolution in Made-in-China feminism. Traditional band culture in China often celebrates male success stories in which talent wins fame and love, while women's bands historically embody ideals of obedience, elegance, and service to male authority. This essay highlights how Chinese women are now resisting these expectations, asserting their agency within the constraints of state and algorithmic censorship.

In the Chinese music scene, women have traditionally been confined to roles embodying elegance and obedience. This is exemplified by groups such as the 12 Girls Band, whose success, built on performing traditional instruments such as the *guzheng* (古筝) and *pipa* (琵琶), aligns with societal expectations of femininity, reinforcing Confucian stereotypes of Chinese women as ornamental and prioritising cultural commodification over artistic autonomy (Yung and Saffle 2010).

Similarly, China's rock music market has been overwhelmingly male dominated, influencing everything from cultural narratives and themes to audience expectations and industry representation. Women

in rock are often marginalised as passive admirers of male success or relegated to supporting roles that facilitate male musicians' creative visions, rather than being recognised as legitimate creators in their own right (Larsen 2017). This imbalance is stark: as of 2020, about 70 per cent of music artists with official accounts on Chinese online platforms were male (Lai 2023). Female rock musicians, catering to male audience preferences, are frequently expected to project a 'sexy' yet 'non-confrontational' stereotype. For instance, the band South Acid MiMi Dance Team (南方酸性咪咪领舞队) found themselves with show posters on which they were labelled as 'Girl band!' or 'Hot girls playing electronic music!'—descriptions that emphasise their appearance, not their music (Chen 2016). Conversely, male musicians are readily associated with the 'authenticity' of rock culture and celebrated for their individualism and rebellion. This disparity is further entrenched by market preferences that prioritise male-oriented content, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, systemic biases within the industry exacerbate these challenges, with female musicians often reporting experiences of gender discrimination.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of all-female bands in China—from the pioneering Cobra (眼镜蛇), the first all-female rock band in the country to achieve fame, to the newly established Floruit-Show (福禄寿), who gained prominence through the online reality music show *The Big Band* (乐队的夏天)—marks a subtle yet significant disruption of gender norms in the music industry. However, the success of many of these groups is often tied to contracts with established rock music companies, which grant them professional management but at the same time subject them to market-driven narratives. By contrast, there exists a cohort of grassroots all-female bands that operate without corporate backing, relying on limited resources to navigate challenges such as gendered expectations of female musicians and to craft narratives that resist the dominance of the male gaze in China's rock music industry.

This essay examines the story of one such group based in Tokyo, Iceless, an all-female grassroots band comprising four young professionals who were born and raised in China before graduating from prestigious Japanese universities. Through their experience of operating a rock band in a diasporic setting while targeting audiences in mainland China, I explore how

Chinese women are negotiating spaces in a genre once defined by masculinity, transforming rock music into a possible medium for feminist expression. To contextualise these dynamics, the next section examines the theoretical framework of Made-in-China feminism (also known by its shorthand, 'C-fem').

'Made-in-China' Feminism and the Increasing Exposure of Women's Voices

As proposed by Wu and Dong (2019), C-fem reimagines feminist politics in China by disrupting political, economic, and cultural orders simultaneously. C-feminists critique two key strands in Chinese feminism. The first, rooted in liberal perspectives, views Chinese feminism as rights-based activism against state authoritarianism. This is exemplified by the anti-harassment and street-based advocacy of the 'Feminist Five', the five activists who in 2015 were detained for planning a protest against sexual harassment on public transportation. The second, often associated with a neo-left camp, critiques the first strand for neglecting issues of class and systemic inequality, arguing that such feminism often mirrors neoliberal capitalist values rather than addressing deeper social and economic injustices in the context of mainland China (Huang 2016). Against this backdrop, C-fem seeks a more nuanced approach that balances subtlety with insistence on public gender discourse, often using indirect forms such as cultural media.

As feminism continues to develop in China, the struggles and life choices of young female professionals in urban areas have garnered increasing attention in both online activism and cultural production (see, for instance, Xianzi 2021; Yang 2023). While often perceived as privileged due to their job security and middle-class status, these women bear disproportionate societal expectations related to family and reproduction compared with their male counterparts. Men are often encouraged to focus on career development during their twenties and thirties—without fear of devaluation in either the marriage or the labour markets—whereas women face intense pressures from their 'ticking biological

clocks', which underscore the reproductive urgency and possible age discrimination in the workplace (Chi and Li 2014).

The association between womanhood and motherhood is deeply rooted in Confucian and patriarchal traditions, which regard women's ultimate success as achieving marriage and children (Gui 2020). Despite these norms, a noticeable shift has emerged in urban China, where marriage rates and birth intentions are steadily declining. In 2022, the national marriage rate dropped to a historic low of 4.8 per 1,000 people, and birthrates fell to the lowest levels in decades, resulting in the first population decline in more than 60 years (Richter 2023). Alongside these shifts, gender inequality discussions are gaining prominence in cultural spaces within the country. For instance, female comedians are increasingly addressing previously sidelined topics—such as menstruation, body shaming, and the preference for male offspring—bringing these discussions into mainstream entertainment and content creation.

Nevertheless, as debates about C-fem suggest, it is crucial to contextualise these trends—such as the apparent increase in agency over marriage decisions and the seemingly more open environment for feminist expression—within the broader sociocultural dynamics of mainland China. A key factor shaping how apparent demographic shifts or feminist themes are presented in cultural spaces such as reality shows and music is the subtle, yet pervasive censorship enforced not directly by the state, but by private platforms (Yang 2023; Amar 2020). Censorship is often enforced through mechanisms such as content moderation on cultural products and surveillance. Occasionally, this is accompanied by direct intervention by the state in the form of repression of feminist activists or nongovernmental organisations deemed a threat to social stability (Yang 2021).

These censorship dynamics differ in diasporic settings, particularly in Western countries. For example, in contexts like the United States, content creators using Mandarin as their main language face alternative forms of regulation, such as platform moderation, audience backlash, and cultural stigma (Prager 2019). These diasporic content creators who target the mainland Chinese markets remain bound by local cultural expectations within China while also engaging with feminist discourses in international settings, navigating a delicate balance between

these influences (Shi and Hazel 2019). This is the case for Iceless, to whose journey as a diasporic band writing lyrics targeting a Chinese-speaking audience, performing in Tokyo's underground scene, and promoting their music in mainland China I now turn.

Diasporic Agency and Feminist Rock: The Case of Iceless

The four members of Iceless relocated from China to Tokyo to pursue higher education at prestigious Japanese universities. After graduation, they secured stable employment in fields such as business, IT, and academia, leveraging their fluency in Japanese and professional expertise to achieve financial independence and visa stability. Unlike peers who did not engage in transnational mobility or returned to China after completing their studies, these women showed enhanced agency by facing and overcoming the everyday challenges of both studying abroad and building independent professional careers in a foreign country.

The formation of the band Iceless in 2024 represents another deliberate manifestation of this agency. Balancing full-time careers with their passion for music, they write songs, practise skills, and perform during their off-work hours. Their lyrics, written in Chinese, target Chinese-speaking audiences in China, Japan, and globally. According to two founding members, Q and H, the motivations for forming the band were simply to 'play the music we like' (玩自己喜欢的音乐) or because they thought 'it's cool' (因为酷). Most of their earliest songs (until the time of my interview with them in November 2024) have been lyrical pieces reflecting on themes such as the monotony of urban working life, with the only exception so far being a fast-paced track with strong beats that tackles gender themes, 'Security and Cleaning Staff Protecting Silly Bear Paradise' (保安保洁保卫笨笨熊乐园).

The lyric-writing process for this song, with its nursery rhyme-like title, evolved from intuitively creating a text aligned with the melodies to strategically addressing gender themes. Iceless envisioned the song as both 'cool to play' and potentially 'controversial', mindful of the risk that it could be interpreted as

overly radical and against social harmony (社会和谐). As the initial lyric writer, Q did not explicitly touch on gender themes but chose to depict a dystopian fantasy land as a metaphor for a society constrained by overt surveillance and deeply entrenched social norms. In her original lyrics, this place is inhabited by ‘strawberry rabbits’ serving as cleaning staff and ‘creamy bears’ acting as security personnel, all dedicated to upholding social harmony and stability above all else. The inhabitants are compelled to ‘discard their dreams and talents’ and endure a never-ending cycle of reproduction. While Q refrained from explicitly linking this dystopian society to any specific system, she believed that the song’s message would resonate with audiences who experience similar constraints in their own lives, no matter in what context.

Q told me that writing lyrics about this dystopian fantasy land was made easier by her diasporic position, which offered her the capabilities and space to reflect on social issues she once considered untouchable. The reasons for this are varied. First, unlike her experiences in China, she found it easier in Tokyo to connect with like-minded Chinese-speaking groups—especially women—who shared her perspectives on gender inequality in East Asian societies as well as musical preferences. This diasporic setting not only provided her with a network of supportive peers but also created an environment in which she felt emboldened to experiment with themes that elsewhere might be deemed politically sensitive. While Japan is also a society marked by gender inequalities, including disparities in income and social status (Hara 2018), Q emphasised the unique sense of freedom she experienced as a foreigner living in Tokyo. Her outsider status placed her beyond Japan’s entrenched gender norms, while the physical and psychological distance from China allowed her to step away from traditional expectations of womanhood and family roles. This dual detachment empowered her to approach themes with greater boldness, including topics that subtly critique societal constraints.

However, the lyrics soon changed as the other band members chimed in. H, the keyboardist and a business owner who also manages the band’s marketing, admired Q’s ability to craft literary and nuanced lyrics that seamlessly aligned with the melodies.

However, she felt that the original metaphorical and ambiguous approach might not resonate effectively with audiences who may lack Q’s perspective in connecting a dark fairytale to real-world social issues. After several rounds of negotiation, H convinced the others to adopt a more direct approach, zooming in on the struggles women face in traditional patriarchal marriage. The reworked lyrics ultimately took a bolder stance, presenting feminist critiques through dystopian imagery.

The directness and radical nature of the final lyrics lie in the band’s bold critique of patriarchal norms, which prescribe a standardised life path for women centred on reproduction and selfless loyalty to their in-laws. Drawing from their observations of people around them, Iceless unboxed themselves from the structural constraints placed on women, offering a sharp, personal perspective on gender inequalities. Lines such as ‘Gentle and submissive, a model for all women’ and ‘Devoted and selfless, without a trace of complaint’ indicate the persistent societal expectation, rooted in Confucian and patriarchal traditions, that women’s value lies in caregiving roles. Similarly, the line ‘Throw away your past, throw away your dreams. Forget your talents, forget your ambitions’ highlights the enduring association of womanhood with motherhood, emphasising the familial sacrifices demanded of women regardless of their professional achievements. The line ‘Happiness is hard-earned, take time during the cooling-off period’ references the 30-day divorce cooling-off period in China, highlighting institutional complicity in prioritising the preservation of marriage (Ma 2018), even for women enduring domestic violence.

This transformation—from Q’s metaphorical critiques of surveillance to a direct focus on gender norms within marriage—was not just an artistic choice but also a strategic negotiation of how feminist messages can be conveyed effectively. While, as we have seen, the diasporic setting in Tokyo allowed Iceless the freedom to experiment with bolder themes, they remained aware that such explicit critiques could raise obstacles when trying to reach audiences in mainland China. Before attempting to promote their music more widely, they first tested audiences’ reception in Tokyo.

我是草莓小兔 担任保洁部长
台前幕后 保持乐园空气清新花香
清扫障碍 期盼大家永远舒畅
白色礼服 惊喜娃娃为您奉上

履行职责 维护乐园整洁
温婉顺服 模范女性榜样
倾情奉献 没有一丝怨言
感谢您的理解 谢谢您的配合！

我是奶油小虎 担任保安队长
不分日夜 用心驻守每一现场
坚守岗位 排除危险保障平安
维护秩序 不让混乱肆意扩张

红底照片 开始准备入场
领取证件 进入这个围墙
钻石手铐 由我帮您戴上
感谢您的理解 欢迎您回家！

听说暴力事件让您感到恐慌
请先不要害怕 寻找出口离场
幸福来之不易 冷静期内想想
三十天后 保证您会重新爱上

I am Strawberry Bunny, the Head of Cleaning.
Onstage and behind the scenes, I keep the para-
dise fresh and vibrant.
Clearing obstacles, I hope you always feel at ease.
Dressed in white, I present marriage dolls just for
you.

Fulfilling my duties, maintaining the park's cleanli-
ness.
Gentle and submissive, a model for all women.
Devoted and selfless, without a trace of complaint.
Thank you for your understanding, and for your
cooperation!

I am Creamy Tiger, the Head of Security.
Day and night, I guard every scene with care.
Standing firm, eliminating danger to ensure safety.
Maintaining order, preventing chaos from
expanding.

Red background photos—please prepare to enter.
Collect your ID and step into this besieged City.
Diamond handcuffs—I'll help you put them on.
Thank you for your understanding, and welcome
home, your honour!

Hearing about violent incidents has made you
uneasy.
Please don't panic—look for the nearest exit.
Happiness is hard-earned, take time during the
cooling-off period.
Thirty days later, you'll fall in love again, I promise.

Unsurprisingly, the gender themes embedded in the lyrics of ‘Security and Cleaning Staff Protecting Silly Bear Paradise’ resonated strongly during their performance in a small music club in Roppongi, a district in Tokyo known for blending luxury and underground culture. The venue, with seating for about 30 people and standing room for more, hosted more than 40 attendees, most of whom were Chinese-speaking women (including myself). As Iceless performed four songs during their 20-minute set, the audience’s response was striking—many engaged deeply, moving with the rhythm and discussing the lyrics displayed on the screen. Their appreciation of the lyrics reflected not only a shared understanding of the song’s themes but also a strong connection to its feminist message.

Tokyo’s diasporic setting offers Iceless a rare space in which feminist expressions can circulate among Chinese-speaking women who, like them, navigate life in a diasporic context—managing professional or academic pursuits while being distanced from both Japanese gender norms and the societal expectations of mainland China. However, the freedom they experience in live performances may not seamlessly translate to digital platforms in China. As the band prepared to promote their work beyond Tokyo’s underground scene, they were forced to confront the question: how far could they push feminist expression before encountering censorship?

Balancing Visibility and Risk

As they considered how to build an audience in mainland China, Iceless was compelled to reassess whether the song’s themes might be perceived as overly aggressive or they risked being labelled as promoting ‘gender antagonism’. In her interview with me, H, who is currently focusing on commercialising Iceless for release on music platforms in mainland China such as CloudMusic (网易云), expressed reservations about labelling the band as ‘feminist activists’ or ‘awakened’. She feared that standing out as a ‘lightning rod’ in the male-dominated industry could invite unnecessary backlash, including possible censorship.

This concern resonates with broader trends in Chinese activism, where many have rejected the label ‘feminist’, viewing it as too radical or extreme (Edwards 2009: 121). H observed that the audience for rock music in the mainland Chinese market—both male and female—frequently reinforces perspectives shaped by the ‘male gaze’. She pointed to examples such as a song by a male songwriter titled ‘Dog Girl’ (狗女孩), which uses pornographic terms to demean women (such as the derogatory 婊子, commonly translated as ‘bitch’). Despite their blatantly misogynistic content, such songs are available on CloudMusic without revision of the lyrics—only the curse words are masked with asterisks to meet censorship guidelines. In worrying about the supposedly excessive radicality of Iceless’s music, H could not help but wonder: ‘If their lyrics can be shared on public platforms, why can’t ours?’

The contrast between the freedom to address gender themes in Tokyo and the anticipated restrictions of publishing on CloudMusic highlights Iceless’s self-censorship practices. While underground cultural creation in China often operates with relative autonomy, the moment artists, writers, or musicians seek to commercialise themselves via reality shows or publish their work—whether through books, albums, or other official channels—they enter a complex process of negotiation with censorship mechanisms (Amar 2020). This is particularly evident in the music industry, where lyrical content is frequently modified to meet censorship requirements—enforced not through direct state intervention, but by private cultural platforms. A notable example is the popular Chinese reality music show *The Big Band* (乐队的夏天), in which the rock band Hedgehog (刺猬) was required to alter the lyrics of a song from ‘Society is a pain competition’ (社会是伤害的比赛) to ‘Time is a pain competition’ (时间是伤害的比赛), significantly softening its critiquing tune (on the show, see Fan 2019; on the lyric change, see DreamReaver 2019). The stark contrast between the non-censorship of ‘Dog Girl’, which basically remained unchanged, and the significant lyric alterations imposed on Hedgehog forces grassroots musicians like Iceless into cycles of self-censorship, amid vague and varying standards across platforms.

强烈的爱 总是伴随疼痛
一时冲动 请大度原谅
请您安心 一切都很正常
请您安心 一切都很正常！

丢掉你的过去 丢掉你的理想
忘记你的天赋 忘记你的志向
传宗接代 必须履行义务
天下女人 哪个不是这样
生儿育女 你坚谁的信仰
消失的她 你是谁的希望
生儿育女 我和她都一样！
消失的她 我和她都一样！

欢迎来到欢乐世界
这里叫做笨笨熊乐园
世界上最快乐的地方
每个人都在梦里狂欢
欢迎来到精神故乡
这里叫做笨笨熊乐园
世界上最幸福的地方
每个人都流连忘返

您已在面部识别范围内
请让我们看到您的笑脸

Although Iceless has not yet undergone the formal publication process, they cannot help but anticipate potential repercussions of releasing a song that could be (mis)interpreted as challenging the legitimacy of heterosexual marriage structures—such as removal from platforms or being flagged. As H remarked: ‘If misogynistic songs like “Dog Girl” can be published on CloudMusic, ours should be allowed, too. But if they really don’t permit it, we already understand the reason and have no room to argue.’ This awareness of risk imposes a cognitive burden, prompting band members to engage in anticipatory self-censorship even before any external intervention occurs. Their concerns extend beyond state

Intense love is always accompanied by intense pain.
Please forgive a momentary impulse with generosity.
Rest assured, everything is perfectly normal.
Rest assured, everything is perfectly normal!

Throw away your past, throw away your dreams.
Forget your talents, forget your ambitions.
Carrying on the family line is a duty you must fulfil.
What woman in the world doesn't do the same?
Bearing children—what is your faith?
The gone girl—what is your wish?

Bearing children—we are all the same!
The gone girl—we are all the same!

Welcome to the Happy World.
This is called Silly Bear Paradise.
The happiest place on earth.
Everyone revels in their dreams.
Welcome to the spiritual homeland.
This is called Silly Bear Paradise.
The happiest place in the world.
Everyone stays and never wants to leave.

You are now recorded.
Please let us see your smile.

censorship to anxieties about public reception, as feminist discourse in China is often met with online backlash (Shao and He 2024). As a result, the band grapples with a dilemma—whether to first establish visibility through lyrical songs about urban white-collar life and later test the boundaries of censorship, or to assert their feminist voice outright at the risk of immediate pushback.

The dilemma faced by Iceless and many grassroots musicians like them places their music in a liminal space—where feminist expression is both possible and precarious, shaped by the balance between creative agency and external limitations (Thomassen 2014). On the one hand, rock music and live performances

serve as vital grassroots platforms for feminist voices. As Zhang and Xiao (2023) observe, live venues offer underground musicians visibility beyond their immediate geographic location, as online circulation of music videos extends their influence globally. For Iceless, live performance, as well as the circulation of their performance videos on Chinese-speaking social media platforms such as RedNote (小红书), allows them to challenge male-dominated narratives and present perspectives often absent from mainstream music.

However, Iceless's efforts to reach a wider audience in mainland China remain constrained by anticipatory self-censorship, which limits their ability to fully present their band's identity. These restrictions are not imposed through explicit policies but stem from imagined boundaries shaped by the perceived risks of backlash or bans faced by other musicians. The increasing commercialisation and platformisation of the live music market, along with China's expanding online censorship, continue to shape musicians' perceptions of what can be publicly expressed (Zhang and Xiao 2023).

Rethinking C-Fem through the Lens of Iceless

The case of Iceless exemplifies how grassroots female musicians negotiate the complexities of feminist expression, self-regulation, and domestic censorship in transnational settings. While diasporic spaces provide greater creative freedom to explore gender-related themes, the looming threat of backlash and censorship in mainland China necessitates a cautious yet strategic approach, potentially hindering their feminist expression. Iceless's strategic approach involves leveraging the creative freedom of Tokyo while adapting their commercialisation strategies to navigate perceived censorship in mainland China. This process reflects the self-regulation necessary to make feminist messages visible without inviting excessive scrutiny.

These dynamics underscore the need to reconsider C-fem as distinct from feminist discourses in Western contexts, where overt activism is often facilitated by a broader acceptance of individualism (Song and Wesoky 2023). In China, however, sustaining

engagement often requires more subtle negotiation (Wu and Dong 2019). Iceless's experience mirrors the broader reality for grassroots female artists in China, who find that navigating the shifting and often ambiguous boundaries of permissible discourse is key to survival. Unlike some state-imposed policies with clearcut restrictions, the regulation of cultural products addressing themes such as gender politics in China is increasingly left to private platforms, resulting in a form of censorship shaped by subjective judgements or social sensitivities rather than written rules. This uncertainty forces musicians and creators into cycles of self-censorship, modifying their content based on perceived risks (see also Amar 2020).

Despite their relative privilege as female professionals enjoying a certain employment security, the members of Iceless still face significant constraints in fully articulating feminist themes in their music. Yet, their negotiation should not be seen purely as a limitation, as it also serves as a strategy of endurance. It is exactly this ability to test boundaries without outright provocation that contributes to the evolving landscape of C-fem, setting a precedent for other musicians and helping to gradually ease unnecessary self-regulation in creative practices. The liminality of their music, therefore, is not merely a space of restriction and fixity but one of ongoing adaptation and subtle defiance—demonstrating that even within restrictive environments, feminist voices are persisting, adapting, and reshaping the cultural landscape in mainland China. ■

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Source: Tate Kiveal.

Blogging on the ‘Little Red Book’

Freedom and Unfreedom
for Mum Bloggers in Today's
China

Ziyi Li

In recent years, many young urban mothers in China have embraced ‘mum blogging’ as a profession on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese female-centred social media platform. Motivated by a desire for freedom, mum blogging, however, is marked by precarity under the platform’s algorithmic governance. How can freedom be both empowering and a source of precarity? How does this phenomenon connect to broader sociopolitical and economic shifts in post-socialist China? Drawing on digital ethnography, this essay explores the discourse of ‘freedom’, showing how empowerment and exploitation intertwine and how the state, platforms, and mum bloggers collaboratively shape a dynamic negotiation of power.

About 20 minutes into our conversation, Jiao paused as though gathering her thoughts. ‘Actually, the timing of this interview is coincidental,’ she said, ‘I’m planning to resign this week and blog full-time.’ She quickly added: ‘But this is my choice. Compared with my current job, I have more freedom as a mum blogger on Xiaohongshu.’ The notion of ‘freedom’ (自由 *ziyou*) was a recurring theme among the mum bloggers interviewed, often serving as a key motivation for their commitment to the precarious work of blogging.

With plans to become a full-time blogger, Jiao now aims to post daily on Xiaohongshu (小红书, literally ‘Little Red Book’), a prominent social media

platform in China. To stay motivated, she joined a WeChat group called the ‘Xiaohongshu Mum Bloggers Self-Discipline Check-In Group’ (小红书母婴博主自律打卡群), which has nearly 400 members. In this group, mum bloggers ‘check in’ (打卡 *daka*) by sharing their daily posts, helping one another stay committed to regular updates. Originally a workplace term referring to clocking in with a timecard, *daka* has taken on a new meaning here, symbolising the commitment of these women to staying visible and consistent on Xiaohongshu.

While the term *daka* mirrors traditional workplace discipline, Jiao and others emphasise how *ziyou* sets mum blogging apart from conventional jobs. The widespread use of *ziyou* in everyday language in China dates back to the introduction of the Reform and Opening policies in the late 1970s, which promoted a socialist market economy and expanded the idea of *ziyou* to encompass a broad array of concepts ranging from individual freedom (个人自由) to consumer freedoms (消费自由), reflecting a general shift towards greater personal autonomy (Zhang 2008).

Accompanying the discourse of *ziyou* is the state’s post-2008 economic restructuring, particularly through the 2015 ‘Internet Plus’ (互联网+) policy, which aimed to integrate internet technologies with traditional industries to drive economic growth and promote ‘mass entrepreneurship and innovation’ (Zhang 2023: 12). Through state sponsorship, these efforts have given rise to platform capitalism and the ‘She Economy’ (Zhang and Jurik 2021)—a concept that highlights women’s roles as both consumers and entrepreneurs in economic development. Such shifts reflect what Yang (2021) describes as ‘state-sponsored platformisation’—a strategy that aligns with China’s state-capitalism agenda. While it creates new career paths for women, it also channels their consumer and entrepreneurial activities into a broader state-driven framework of economic restructuring.

With the rise of the ‘She Economy’, Xiaohongshu has emerged as a leading social media and e-commerce platform for women. Branded as a ‘lifestyle platform’, Xiaohongshu (n.d.) combines ‘authentic, community-shared content’ with e-commerce. According to the Qian-Gua Database (2024), a third-party organisation specialising in Xiaohongshu data analytics and consultancy, women make up about 80 per cent of Xiaohongshu’s active users, with urban

mothers representing 22 per cent of this group. As China’s influencer economy expands, many mothers are drawn to the platform to build audiences by sharing their lives, from childcare to consumption.

However, mum blogging on Xiaohongshu is just as precarious as other new-media work (Duffy et al. 2021). Some participants go months without sponsorship, and even the more experienced bloggers cannot guarantee consistent deals. The uncertainty is exacerbated by Xiaohongshu’s algorithmic governance. Despite the instability, many mum bloggers persist, often citing *ziyou* as a key reason for continuing.

This raises a paradox: How can freedom be both empowering and a source of precarity? How is this freedom truly experienced? Drawing on digital ethnography conducted in 2023 and 2024, this essay examines how mum bloggers understand and live *ziyou*. Rather than treating freedom as an abstract ideal, through in-depth interviews and participant observation, this research reveals the complex ways in which empowerment and exploitation are deeply intertwined.

Ziyou as a Gendered Hegemony

How can freedom simultaneously empower individuals and push them to accept precarity? Claudio Sopranzetti (2017) identifies two primary perspectives. The first, rooted in Marxist theory, views freedom as a tool for exploitation, masking systemic oppression behind the illusion of empowerment. The second, influenced by early Foucauldian thought, frames freedom as a way to produce governable subjects who feel ‘obliged to be free’ (Rose 1999: 87). While both perspectives offer valuable insights into how power and freedom intersect, Sopranzetti critiques their tendency to portray people as passive figures trapped in false consciousness, failing to account for the complexity of lived experiences.

Mum bloggers’ experiences and desires can hardly be dismissed as mere illusions. To understand the paradox, Gramsci’s (1971) concept of ‘hegemony’ provides a compelling framework that respects women’s agency. According to Gramsci, power operates not solely through coercion but also through individual consent. This perspective helps explain why

mum bloggers embrace precarious work: freedom is framed as desirable within the context of their gendered experiences and challenges. Their consent, shaped by these motivations, ultimately upholds the hegemonic system by masking the realities of systemic inequality.

For many women, shifting to mum blogging has paradoxically become a way to navigate the gendered precarity of traditional workplaces. Most of the mum bloggers interviewed had worked in corporate roles before becoming full-time bloggers. Jiao, for example, left her corporate job after a frustrating meeting with human resources (HR). Despite exceeding her performance targets by 110 per cent, she was warned her contract could be terminated without compensation—an implicit push out, she suspected, especially with a new hire joining and no new projects on the horizon.

Jiao had for months played with the idea of leaving her corporate job, especially as her part-time blogging income already rivalled her salary. She had hesitated, worried about the uncertainty of blogging, but the HR meeting brought a harsh realisation: her corporate job was less stable than she thought. Thus, full-time blogging became her way of managing the insecurity of traditional employment. Freedom was central to Jiao's decision. 'Mum blogging provides me with a lot of *ziyou*,' she explained. 'I can control my work hours, unlike in my previous job, where I rushed for early subways and spent full days doing unappreciated work. It drained me. Even on lighter days, I felt mentally exhausted.' She regretted not being able to be there for her child after she became a mother. To Jiao, freedom implied two facets: positive freedom to control her time, and negative freedom from rigid work structures (on this distinction, see Berlin 1969).

Similarly, Hu, a former finance worker, cited freedom as her reason for embracing full-time blogging. 'It [*ziyou*] is about having control over my time. I like staying up late and sleeping in, so a job with flexibility suits me.' Hu's sense of freedom in blogging sharply contrasted with her previous job in finance, where the high-pressure '996' culture (working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week) dominated. She witnessed colleagues facing serious health issues, including miscarriages, and realised the environment conflicted with her plans to start a family and take care of her wellbeing. Ming, another mum blogger, left her accounting job after struggling to balance work and family following her child's birth. 'After becoming

pregnant, I felt so overwhelmed and exhausted,' she recalled. 'With nobody to help after my baby was born, I had to manage everything alone. Returning to my previous job was impossible. That's how I picked up mum blogging on Xiaohongshu.'

In post-socialist China's workplaces, the pressures on women can be intense. Many face gender discrimination, limited maternity support, and a hidden 'motherhood penalty' that cuts wages by about 12 per cent per child (Yu and Xie 2018). Thus, for many urban mothers, mum blogging has emerged as a practical alternative to navigating these pressures in traditional employment settings.

The Feminine Entrepreneurial Subject

Freedom goes beyond coping with gendered precarity in traditional workplaces. 'I can pursue what I love, fulfill my value, and not have to give up my family for my career,' said Hong, who described *ziyou* as the greatest benefit of blogging. She highlighted three key aspirations shared by many: 'doing what you love' (DWYL), 'achieving value', and 'work-life balance'.

Hong enjoyed documenting her life. She was already active on social media before she became a mum blogger, frequently reviewing and sharing product experiences. On discovering Xiaohongshu when her child was six months old, she took the plunge. 'I thought, why not? I've always loved taking pictures of my babies and sharing stuff. Why not make some money doing it?' Hong's sentiment, shared by many other bloggers, highlights a shift from traditional employment towards more fulfilling, passion-driven work. However, the DWYL ethos that is central to this sense of freedom often obscures the precarity of blogging.

For Hong, 'achieving her value' is another key aspect of freedom. Living with her husband's family, she started as a full-time stay-at-home mother but felt that her lack of income left her without a say in family decisions especially when it came to financial matters. Hong's decision to become a mum blogger was therefore a practical strategy to gain economic independence and challenge her prescribed position in the family. However, for Hong, the significance of freedom goes beyond this reason. It encompasses the

pursuit of her ‘value’ (价值) and self-fashioning as a self-reliant career woman. Reflecting on her mother and sister-in-law, whom she sees as having sacrificed their potential to achieve their ‘value’ for childrearing, she explained: ‘My sister-in-law paused her work for six years for her kids. Six years! That could be a woman’s golden years.’ Hong believes her generation represents a more progressive mindset—one that strives to balance career with family responsibilities, refusing to prioritise one at the expense of the other.

Hong’s description of freedom carries an affective dimension, resonating with Foucault’s (1985) concept of freedom as being part of processes of self-fashioning through what he calls ‘technologies of the self’—techniques through which people constitute themselves. Consequently, freedom involves transforming oneself into an ethical subject through one’s actions (Foucault 1985: 27). For Hong, this process is about achieving her value by pursuing work about which she is passionate, all while balancing her domestic responsibilities.

While emphasising achieving personal value through a career, Hong’s vision of freedom remains rooted in traditional gender roles. Like many others interviewed, Hong is acutely aware of the unequal division of domestic labour. Yet, she expressed a sense of inevitability, feeling that the only viable solution was to adapt her professional path. Many mothers felt that blogging helps them reconcile career ambitions with these gendered expectations, however challenging these are. This dynamic reflects a neoliberal feminist ideal (Gill 2007), in which career and family are portrayed as compatible goals.

The Rise of Gendered *Ziyou* Hegemony

Hegemonic systems create frameworks for individuals to navigate social structures marked by domination (Roseberry 1994). In China, *ziyou* has emerged as a form of hegemony, functioning not only as a personal ideal but also as a collective response to the socioeconomic and political transformations of the post-reform era. The concept of *ziyou* in China has evolved significantly (Zhang 2008). First introduced through Fu Yan’s early-twentieth-century translation of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, it initially linked

personal freedom with national liberation. In the early years of the People’s Republic, *ziyou* emphasised collective interests under socialist collectivism. However, as we have seen, Reform and Opening redefined the concept to encompass more personal freedoms. Subsequent labour reforms further connected *ziyou* to market-driven employment, shifting from state-guaranteed jobs to flexible work with greater personal choice and risk.

The impacts of privatisation extend to social life, ethics, and self-perceptions. Ong and Zhang (2008) note that as urban state enterprises privatise, individuals are encouraged towards self-reliance over state dependency. This shift fosters a mix of private freedom and authoritarian control, as the Party-State, social sectors, and individuals collaboratively promote market-oriented values, moulding citizens into self-reliant subjects aligned with state interests (Ong 2006: 4).

These transformations have profoundly gendered impacts. China’s Reforms and Opening have shifted the country away from socialist egalitarianism towards more traditional gender roles. Women’s employment dropped sharply between 1988 and 2002, largely due to public sector layoffs (Ding et al. 2009). Privatised childcare and education further burdened women, pushing many to ‘return home’. Consequently, the state has actively shaped a neoliberal feminine identity, positioning women at the intersection of individualism and re-traditionalisation (Zhang 2023). Policies addressing demographic decline, such as the Three-Child Policy, have reinforced these dynamics, alongside a revival of Confucian ideals (Greenhalgh 2024). President Xi Jinping’s 2013 address to the All-China Women’s Federation epitomised this trend, emphasising women’s roles in upholding family values and promoting a state-led revival of Confucian patriarchy (Zheng 2016: 260).

Thus, the intersection of Confucian traditions and neoliberal governance has profoundly shaped the lives of contemporary Chinese women. The state and market-driven revival of Confucian patriarchal ideals is often framed within the discourse of *ziyou*, ostensibly to enhance women’s autonomy. In this setting, mum blogging and the promise of *ziyou* seem to offer young mothers a way to reconcile conflicting gender roles. *Ziyou* has thus emerged as a hegemonic framework for them, not only to ‘make sense of’ but also to ‘make do’ with the shifting

socioeconomic landscape (Sopranzetti 2017: 69). It serves as a framework through which these women interpret their lives as emancipated and as a strategy to manage new forms of gendered precarity shaped by post-socialist neoliberal reforms and patriarchal capitalism in China.

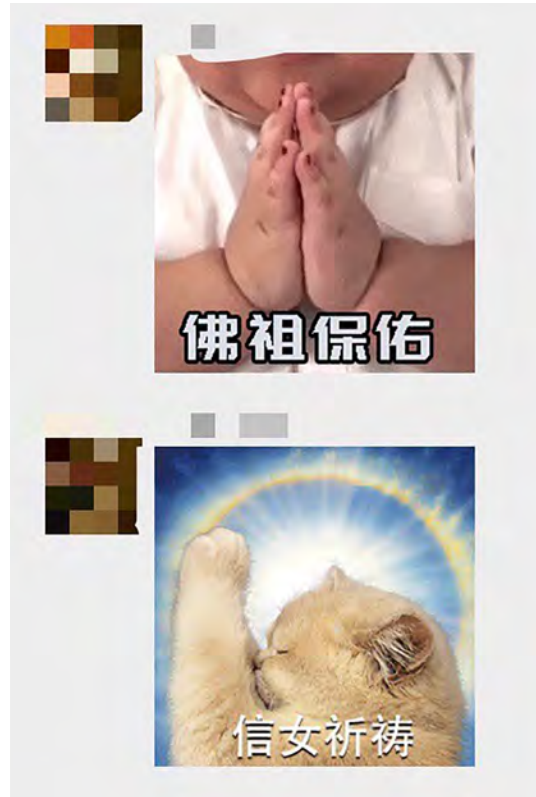
Algorithm Governance and Mutual Warming

On the evening of the 24th of every month, the WeChat group of mum bloggers often buzzes with nervous energy. The next day, Xiaohongshu announces users' account status for the coming month, determining whether their accounts will function smoothly or face restrictions. Some bloggers share tactics for damage control in case their accounts are flagged, while others post prayerful memes, hoping their accounts remain unaffected (see Figure 1).

One blogger admitted that she often lost sleep that night. The month I spoke to her, she was particularly anxious because she had been actively engaging in what mum bloggers call 'mutual warming' (互暖)—a visibility-boosting strategy in which bloggers exchange likes and comments. While effective, it risks detection by Xiaohongshu's algorithms as a violation of platform rules. To play it safe, she had stopped participating on the 20th of the month and was now waiting tensely for the 25th.

Blogger Su described mutual warming as 'guerilla warfare' against Xiaohongshu, as it operates with careful coordination. Each day, an organiser invites members from the WeChat group to join a smaller group of 20 to 30 participants, ensuring control over group size. In these smaller groups, bloggers share their posts, and members engage by liking, saving, and commenting using their secondary Xiaohongshu accounts, following strict rules to avoid detection by the platform. For instance, they wait at least a minute between actions, as hasty interactions might raise algorithmic suspicion.

These tactics and participation in 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016) reflect bloggers' pressure to maintain visibility, which is critical for securing sponsorships. At the same time, Xiaohongshu commodifies visibility by encouraging creators to purchase paid promotions to boost traffic. Many bloggers are acutely aware of



Memes in the mum bloggers' WeChat group. The text reads: 'Blessings from Buddha' and 'A devotee's prayer'.

the platform's commercial motives. As Jiao noted: 'Getting natural traffic on a post with an advertisement is nearly impossible. The platform wants to make money by selling traffic.' Yet, many interviewees find these promotions too costly. Blogger Xin explained: 'It costs at least 108 yuan per promotion, and that only gets you around 20 likes, sometimes even less.' Thus, mum bloggers have turned to mutual warming as a more affordable alternative, circumventing Xiaohongshu's expensive and unpredictable promotion system.

To sustain visibility, bloggers must also navigate Xiaohongshu's algorithmic rules and regulatory frameworks. Research on Instagram influencers has highlighted strategies like 'engagement pods', where users mutually boost each other's content through coordinated liking and sharing (O'Meara 2019). Mum bloggers on Xiaohongshu have refined

this approach: they not only boost one another's posts but also shift between platforms, using WeChat to sidestep Xiaohongshu's algorithmic control.

These strategies have emerged in response to Xiaohongshu's tightening restrictions. In January 2021, Xiaohongshu launched 'Pugongying' (蒲公英), its official brand collaboration platform that regulates and commercialises individual content creators. Unregistered ads risk being flagged by algorithms, resulting in visibility restrictions or removal of posts. Central to this system is the 'Pugongying Health System' (蒲公英健康系统), which rates bloggers as 'healthy' (健康) or 'abnormal' (异常) based on their behaviour, with ratings released monthly on the 25th. Actions like 'abnormal traffic data' can result in an abnormal status, and three consecutive 'abnormal' ratings result in permanent exclusion from Pugongying. This compels bloggers to self-censor and carefully coordinate their mutual-warming pods.

Thus, platformisation offers mum bloggers new entrepreneurial opportunities, but their freedoms are simultaneously curtailed by algorithmic control. In this tightly regulated digital ecosystem of market and surveillance, freedom becomes a continuous process of negotiation. Mum bloggers internalise the 'algorithmic gaze', shifting between platforms and mimicking organic behaviour to evade detection. When asked about the origins of these strategies, Su described them as 'folk theory' (民间理论), a form of community-developed knowledge born out of trial and error. Through these practices, mum bloggers demonstrate their agency by engaging in 'algorithmic imaginations' (Zhang et al. 2020), constructing alternative knowledge to navigate the opaque systems of algorithmic control.

ziyou in mum blogging offers young mothers a means to navigate conflicting gender roles, making *ziyou* both a way to interpret their lives as emancipatory and a tool for managing the gendered precarities brought about by post-socialist neoliberalism and patriarchal capitalism in China.

However, as we have seen, freedom paradoxically imposes controls. In the platform economy, this paradox is even more accentuated: while platformisation offers mum bloggers freedoms and entrepreneurial opportunities, it simultaneously restricts and commodifies them through algorithmic governance. Nonetheless, mum bloggers demonstrate resilience, using personal and collective strategies to navigate these constraints. This creates a layered landscape of freedom and unfreedom, empowerment and exploitation, negotiated through bloggers' agency. Their experiences challenge a monolithic view of oppression versus resistance, instead showing how the state, platforms, and mum bloggers themselves collaboratively shape a dynamic negotiation of power. ■

The Paradox of Freedom in the Platform Economy

Shifts in sociopolitical, economic, and gender dynamics in post-socialist China have given rise to a gendered hegemony of *ziyou*, which mum bloggers use to self-fashion as entrepreneurial feminine subjects. The revival of Confucian patriarchal ideals, driven by state and market forces, is often framed within this discourse of *ziyou*, ostensibly enhancing women's autonomy. In this setting, the promise of



A CunBA game in Taipan Village, July 2024.
Source: Joel Wing-Lun.

The Viral Success of Chinese Village Basketball

Joel WING-LUN

In 2022, as much of the country was enduring harsh Covid lockdowns, a basketball competition in Taipan Village, southeast Guizhou, exploded on Chinese social media. By 2023, state media was reporting that the CunBA, or 'Village Basketball Association', had generated a staggering RMB2.3 billion in tourism revenue. In 2024, village basketball was written into central government policy on rural revitalisation. This essay finds a surprising foreign policy connection to the CunBA's viral success. It also questions how much the CunBA benefits local communities and whether its popularity can be sustained.

As China's economy struggles in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, young people have been leaving cities and returning to the countryside. In Southeast Guizhou Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, the CunBA (村BA), or Village Basketball Association, has offered some respite from the economic gloom. Teams compete in front of raucous crowds for prizes such as live cattle and goats. At halftime, local women dressed in Miao finery perform energetic dance routines. In July 2022, when much of the country was suffering under harsh pandemic restrictions, Douyin-friendly images of a tournament held in Taipan Village, Taijiang County, went viral on the Chinese internet. In 2023, after travel restrictions were lifted, state media reported that CunBA generated a staggering RMB2.3 billion in tourism revenue for the local economy (Global Times 2023).



In Taipan Village, a woman walks past a screen displaying the *CunBA* schedule, August 2024.
Source: Joel Wing-Lun.

Crowds at the *CunBA* finals rivalled those for the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the United States.

Officially known as the 'Beautiful Village' (美丽乡村) Basketball League, the tournament has been touted as a grassroots miracle of 'rural revitalisation' (乡村振兴)—a silver lining in a cloudy economic outlook. In January 2024, the *CunBA* was written into central government policy (People's Daily 2024a). Yet, the *CunBA*'s emergence as a significant, if shaky, pillar of the local economy raises questions. Is the *CunBA* a grassroots phenomenon or a government-led 'Astroturf' campaign? Who benefits from its new national audience? Is it a model of successful rural revitalisation or a symptom of a greater economic malaise?

Returning to the Countryside

After the market reforms of the 1980s, China's coastal regions grew rich while many inland provinces were left behind. Located in the country's southwest and home to a large ethnic minority population, Guizhou was for many years one of China's poorest provinces.

Young people flocked to coastal cities to work, leaving hollowed-out villages where only children and the elderly lived year-round. Since the early 2000s, the government has sought to address inequality through the 'Develop the West' (西部大开发) policy and, more recently, targeted poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation (Hillman 2023). In Guizhou, massive government investment in infrastructure such as highways and highspeed rail boosted the province's gross domestic product. However, rural families hoping to improve their own economic circumstances were still forced to seek work in coastal areas or to relocate to larger towns or cities.

With the outbreak of Covid-19 during the Lunar New Year in 2020, migrant workers were cut off in their villages and unable to return to their urban jobs. By 2021, most of the country had returned to work and the economy was recovering, but in 2022, heavy-handed economic policy, Zero-Covid policies, and the resurgence of the virus wreaked havoc on the Chinese economy, damaging consumer confidence and exposing the precarious state of local government finances (Oi 2023). The Covid economy pushed millions of migrant workers and young people to return to their hometowns. Youth unemployment

reached an all-time high before the government paused reporting in mid 2023; statistics for 2022 showed an increase in the number of people engaged in primary industries such as agriculture for the first time in two decades (Sun 2024a).

However, the government and some young people themselves have seen returning to the countryside as an opportunity. Even before the pandemic, a mix of internet-savvy rural residents and more recent urban transplants presented an idyllic version of rural life and ethnic minority cultures to millions of followers on Douyin and other social media. As the country locked down at the start of the pandemic, there was a surge in rural residents taking to social media, streaming, and e-commerce platforms to promote local culture, produce, and their personal brands. The return to the countryside and the rise of rural influencers and e-commerce have been cheered by the government as it seeks to combat poverty and revitalise rural areas through tourism, cultural heritage, and the digital economy. One of the most successful models of this kind of internet-driven rural revitalisation is the *CunBA*.

The *CunBA* Goes Viral

Basketball has a long history in China and is ‘perhaps the only true national sport’ (Gao 2012). It was first introduced by missionaries in the nineteenth century and, under Mao Zedong, gained popularity in universities and the People’s Liberation Army. In Guizhou, steel hoops and concrete courts dot the countryside alongside temples and paddy fields in village after village. As a Taipan resident explained to a Chinese journalist, ‘during the harvest we dry grain’ on the court; ‘in the slow season, we play basketball’ (Su and Chen 2022). Tournaments are timed to coincide with local holidays such as the lunar ‘Double Six’ (六月六) festival. The tournament in Taipan dates back decades and is now a multigenerational affair (Xu and Da 2022). But in July 2022, images captured by a visiting photographer exploded online, exposing the competition to a new national audience.

The ‘discovery’ of the *CunBA* has been credited to a young photographer named Yao Shunwei, who was born in rural Guizhou. After graduating from Northern Minzu University in 2016, he returned to

Guizhou and opened a studio in Guiyang, the provincial capital, where he worked shooting weddings and promotional videos. In June 2022, Yao posted video of dragon boat racing in Taijing County to Douyin, where it was quickly reposted by locals. But, as he explained in an interview with local media, he soon received a message from an account in coastal Zhejiang Province asking to use his images to promote China’s ethnic minority cultures abroad (Cao 2023). Shortly after, Yao’s Douyin account was followed by then Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, best known for his ‘Wolf Warrior’ keyboard diplomacy, who reposted his video to Twitter (now X).

The next month, Yao Shunwei found himself watching a livestream of Taijiang’s ‘Double Six’ basketball tournament. A basketball fan himself, he was struck by the unusual fervour of the players and the crowd as play ran into the early hours of the morning. On 20 July, he drove to Taijiang to shoot the finals. The following day, he uploaded a 4-minute video to Douyin. Set to the 2017 song *Infinity* by American singer-songwriter Jaymes Young, Yao’s video shows a remarkably professional contest playing out against the night sky and improbably steep stands. The clip quickly racked up views and likes and, within half an hour, Yao received a call from Douyin informing him that his video would be promoted across the platform (Han 2023).

Yao’s video was already spreading quickly on Douyin, but village basketball became a cultural phenomenon after the footage was reposted to Twitter by an account in Zhejiang and retweeted by Zhao Lijian the next day. Twitter (now X) is banned in China, but screenshots of Zhao’s tweet extolling the tournament’s ‘great atmosphere’ were carried by state media and began circulating ‘wildly’ on the Chinese internet. Within days, internet users had renamed the tournament ‘the *CunBA*’. When local players invited Yao Ming, the NBA legend and current head of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), to Guizhou, he jokingly responded that he would not be able to get a ticket. He claimed that a four-day tournament in late July was streamed more than 100 million times online (Global Times 2022).

Officials in Taijiang were familiar with the tournament’s large, in-person crowds, but they were quick to capitalise on the new national audience. Taipan’s basketball court was built in 2016 and the vertiginous stands were added two years later to accommodate



Tourists in Taipan Village approach a statue of the *CunBA* mascot, August 2024. Source: Joel Wing-Lun.

the growing crowds (The Paper 2022). After the tournament went viral in 2022, the Taijiang County Government announced funding to upgrade the facilities, including a new media centre, in time for the 2023 season (Li and Bu 2022). When I visited Taijiang in mid 2024, Taipan had been reconfigured around the *CunBA* stadium and statues of its mascot, a bandana-wearing bull atop a basketball—a nod to the local tradition of water buffalo fighting (Chio 2018). At the same time, new basketball courts tiled in the *CunBA*'s signature red and green had been installed in villages across the county.

The Taijiang County Government was not the only one to take an interest in the *CunBA*. In neighbouring Rongjiang County, enterprising local officials promoted *Cunchao* (村超), or 'Village Super League', a football (soccer) tournament that drew enormous crowds to its inaugural competition in 2023 (Aw 2023). The NBA also saw potential value in the *CunBA* and its audience of millions. In September 2022, it hosted a 'Rural Basketball Championship Cup' in Quanzhou, Fujian, with its broadcast partner *Kuaishou* (Green 2022). In 2023, the Australian NBA

star Ben Simmons donated a basketball court in Machang Township, Guizhou (Basketnews 2023). In July of that year, Jimmy Butler, an NBA all-star who wears shoes by Chinese sportswear giant Li-Ning (Jeong 2023), became the first NBA player to attend a *CunBA* match in Taipan, where he addressed the crowd draped in Miao silver jewellery.

The central government also took note of the *CunBA*'s success. In 2024, *CunBA* and *Cunchao* were written into government policy as exemplars of 'rural initiative' (农民唱主角) and 'collective cultural and sporting activities' (群众性文体活动)—models of rural revitalisation to be supported and emulated across the country (People's Daily 2024a).

Grassroots or Astroturf?

Was the *CunBA*'s viral success a grassroots phenomenon or the result of a government-led 'Astroturf' campaign? In local media interviews, Yao Shunwei describes being approached by the mysterious



A sign outside the *CunBA* stadium in Taipan Village reading 'Advance the intercourse, exchange, and integration of the various ethnic groups. Solidify a sense of community for the Chinese nation', July 2024.
Source: Joel Wing-Lun.

Zhejiang Douyin account and how Zhao Lijian's tweet ricocheted across the internet. Sport has long been an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy, from ping-pong players in the 1970s (Millwood 2022) to the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Winter Olympics in 2022. Indeed, before Yao's video went viral, Zhao had already tweeted several images of people playing basketball in surprising rural settings without much response. The *CunBA* has received some coverage in international media, seemingly all positive. The unexpected turn was that, if Zhao aimed to reach a foreign audience, he found a larger, more receptive audience at home.

The *CunBA* has its own grassroots appeal. It is often described as 'down to earth' (接地气)—a term that refers to its amateur, rural qualities: livestock as prizes, local halftime entertainment, players and spectators from all walks of rural life. (By contrast, *Cunchao*, played on actual AstroTurf, was essentially a local government initiative.) There may be a degree of wistfulness and, indeed, condescension in urban viewers' perceptions of the simplicity and authenticity of rural life (Zhao 2023). And minority groups

like the Miao have long been subject to 'internal orientalism' in media and popular culture (Schein 2000). Yet, the *CunBA* is often explicitly contrasted with the CBA, which is infamous for its glossy production values, mediocre basketball, and allegations of corruption (Lu 2023). In contrast to the CBA, *CunBA* is described by commentators as 'relatable'. This is perhaps partly because a significant segment of the *CunBA*'s audience online are current or former rural residents.

Nor can the emergence of the *CunBA* be separated from Zero-Covid policies, nor indeed, the virus itself. When Yao Shunwei's video went viral in the middle of 2022, large parts of the country were under harsh, unpopular lockdowns. Commentators noted that almost none of the spectators was wearing a facemask (Feng 2022), with some reports chalking this up to the success of the government's Zero-Covid approach (Huang et al. 2022). Not long afterwards, the situation worsened. On 18 September, amid a spike of cases in the province, a bus carrying people to a quarantine centre south of Guiyang overturned at 2 am, killing 27 passengers and sparking anger and anguish online.



Three-time NBA champion Danny Green takes to the court at the *CunBA* in Taipan Village, July 2024.
Source: Joel Wing-Lun.

On 24 November, a fire in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, killed 10 people, leading to nationwide protests and, ultimately, the abrupt, devastating end of the country's Zero-Covid policies. Amid the harrowing collapse of Zero-Covid and the economic malaise that followed, the government and the media found a much-needed good news story—a distraction. And so did ordinary people.

A Day at the *CunBA*

In July 2024, I visited Taipan on my first trip to Guizhou since I was forced to leave my fieldwork at the beginning of the pandemic. I had not visited Taipan before, but it had clearly been transformed by

its sudden fame. The road was marked by billboards touting the 'birthplace of the *CunBA*' and a statue of the mascot stood on a roundabout at the entrance to the village. A giant screen beside a *CunBA*-themed restaurant streamed the action inside the stadium. There was a *CunBA* gift shop and a sign promoting ethnic 'intercourse, exchange, and integration' (交往交流交融) and 'solidifying a sense of community for the Chinese nation' (铸牢中华民族的共同体意识)—the current watchwords of the government's ethnic policy. Entry was free, but spectators were required to swipe their national ID cards at the gate or submit to the now-ubiquitous facial recognition cameras.

The first game of the afternoon was a friendly match between Peking University's Guanghua School of Management and a local Taipan team. The crowd was small at first and sheltered from the sun under

hats, umbrellas, or the shadow of the new media centre. A lone journalist from *China Central Television (CCTV)* was filming take after take as he sweated in the sun. At halftime, men and women in Miao costume filed on to the court to perform a vigorous dance routine that belied their relatively advanced age. Historically, summer festivals were an opportunity for Miao youths to court and flirt (Chien 2009), but with most young people still working in coastal cities, the *CunBA* halftime performers were middle aged or older.

As the tournament resumed, the stands began to fill. The crowd was mostly local with a smattering of tourists. Several young women appeared on the sidelines, livestreaming the game on their phones, and pulling players aside for interviews. A local television host arrived with camera crew in tow, and the evening began to resemble a TV variety show. There was karaoke, a pork-knuckle eating contest, watermelon wrestling, a high school basketball game, and a game between teams of Miao ‘aunties’. As the final began about 10 pm, it became clear that the crowd was not there for what turned out to be a pedestrian, one-sided contest, but to catch a glimpse of three-time NBA champion Danny Green.

Even before the halftime buzzer, crowds were mulling around the ends of the stadium and, during an extended break from play, men playing the *lusheng*, a traditional Miao musical instrument, and women bedecked in silver paraded across the court. They were followed by an intense media scrum, with Green at its centre and towering above it. He shot three-pointers and played one-on-one with local players and was enticed to say a few words in Miao and ‘*wo ai CunBA*’ (‘I love *CunBA*’). He was presented with Miao silver jewellery (usually worn by women), signed a basketball, posed for photos with *CunBA* officials, and finally joined a circle dance before retiring to the stands. As play resumed, people poured out of the stadium and into the night.

Who Benefits from the *CunBA*?

The *CunBA* caters to several different audiences and agendas. There are the 20,000-odd spectators in the stadium, most from the local area, there to

enjoy the tournament, the spectacle, and the ‘hot and noisy’ (热闹) atmosphere. Then there are the millions of people around the country who stream matches online or consume them on social media. For the government, it has been a public relations coup, showcasing rural revitalisation and ethnic harmony amid the tense, post-Covid environment. For streaming and e-commerce platforms, and the NBA, the *CunBA*’s online audience is seen as a promising stream of revenue. Record-breaking tourist numbers in 2023 and 2024 (People’s Daily 2024b) suggest that local governments and businesses are already profiting from the *CunBA*’s newfound popularity.

But does the *CunBA* benefit local communities? Since the market reforms of the 1980s, tourism and cultural heritage projects in Guizhou have packaged minority culture and identity for the consumption of outsiders and transformed villagers’ lives and livelihoods (Oakes 1998; Schein 2000). This can be a profoundly discomforting experience for local people, particularly when heritage orders are imposed from ‘above’ (Chio 2024; Rautio 2024). Moreover, tourism proceeds inevitably benefit some residents more than others. During a decade of research on southeast Guizhou, I have seen the character of some villages transformed dramatically by tourism. I have also seen how tourism and cultural heritage have created employment and opportunities in villages where previously there were none. While the well-honed version of Miao culture performed at the *CunBA* might be simplified and commodified, I would not begrudge communities who have faced centuries of discrimination (Wing-Lun 2022) the chance to capitalise on their cultural difference.

Rural revitalisation, like the earlier ‘Develop the West’ and poverty alleviation policies, seeks to address vast economic disparities that have been decades in the making. The current economic malaise has forced young people back to rural areas and, in the eyes of the government, the *CunBA* and *Cunchao* can create jobs and make hollowed-out villages whole. Many working-aged people would happily return to villages, and their families, if given economic opportunities. But people in their twenties and thirties grew up in a booming economy ‘raised on stories of economic dynamism and social mobility’ (The Economist 2023). Many expected to make a life in the city and would probably prefer urban employment if economic conditions allowed. Some young people

in Guizhou, like the photographer Yao Shunwei, have willingly returned home to work in tourism or primary industries, but for others, it has been less of a choice than a last resort.

Whether the *CunBA*'s popularity can be sustained is also an open question. Since the end of Zero-Covid in December 2022, Guizhou has experienced an enormous boom in 'revenge travel' (Yang and Peng 2024). However, a worsening economic outlook could cause tourists to close their wallets (Sun 2024b) and, with intense competition for eyeballs, it could be difficult to maintain online interest in years to come. The *CunBA*'s viral fame could yet prove fleeting. Despite this uncertainty, village basketball will carry on regardless, even if there is no national audience or any NBA stars or CCTV journalists sweating on the sidelines. ■



The opening ceremony for the final-four competition of the provincial *cunBA* tournament in Guizhou, March 2025. The slogan reads 'Build Dreams in Miao Villages, Arouse the Passion of Taijiang' (筑梦苗乡, 燃情台江). Source: Gil Hizi.

Basketball Masculinities in Chinese Television Dramas and Rural Competitions

Selina KÖTTER, Gil HIZI

*Basketball is a widely played sport in China, shaping youth culture and masculine coming-of-age experiences. This essay describes the roles and representations of basketball in Chinese television dramas, highlighting how basketball is displayed to affirm gender ideals during an alleged 'crisis of masculinity' amid broader socioeconomic challenges of personal development and social mobility. We further elaborate on the new popularity of rural basketball through the 'village NBA' (*cunBA*) competitions, in which competing models of masculinity are negotiated and merged—propelling market-driven aspirations while also aiming to alleviate the disillusionment that increasingly dominates young adults' social experience.*

'I am a pig'—these are the words that interrupt Chu Yuxun as she peacefully writes her first impressions of the new school. Looking up, she sees a male student in a basketball jersey stammering the humiliating sentence before bolting away. Three more male students follow in quick succession. Fed up with these peculiar encounters, Yuxun decides to follow the last one, who leads her to the school's basketball court, where a crowd of students cheers on the players.

Pushing her way through a swooning mob of teenage girls, Yuxun sees Shangguan Ruiqian

dominating the game, aggressively outplaying his male opponents. Shangguan—the school's leader and star basketball player—commands attention with powerful jumps and his signature move: slam-dunking the ball while hanging from the rim. His favourite pastime? Forcing the losing team, through dares, to approach the nearest girl and say: 'I am a pig.'

After the next humiliating confession and the crowd's uproarious laughter, Yuxun, enraged, storms onto the court and seizes the ball. At the top of her lungs, she shouts, 'You're the one who's a pig!' She slams the ball to the ground; it bounces high and drops cleanly through the net.

'Not bad,' one of Shangguan's friends mutters, impressed.

Having made her point, Yuxun turns and walks off the court, throwing one final, disdainful glance at Shangguan.

—Description of a scene from *Meteor Shower* (2009), Episode 1, 34:09–37:43

In the introduction to their 2002 book *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom explore how ideals of femininity and masculinity have shifted over time in China. More than two decades have passed since they explored this issue, yet it remains highly relevant today, as this essay demonstrates through three examples of basketball in Chinese television dramas. The purpose of this essay is to highlight basketball's role as a masculine coming-of-age experience. This is further explored by comparing and connecting representations of basketball in television dramas with amateur rural basketball—most commonly known as 'village NBA' (村BA or *cunBA*). We argue that basketball serves as a medium through which youth identities are constructed and idealised forms of masculinity are illustrated.

Three factors shaping the construction of idealised masculinity in audiovisual mass media warrant attention. First, in the context of television drama, representations of the 'ideal' are subject to ongoing

reinterpretation and repackaging for mass consumption. Second, given the strict censorship regime in China, audiovisual media always conveys political messages and state ideology strongly shapes the portrayal of ideals. Third, such media tends to present polarised figures: the idealised male or female and their undesirable opposites. While conforming to state-sanctioned ideals, these portrayals are also influenced by market dynamics and viewer preferences—often those of young women—ultimately instructing audiences on what is desirable, who they should aspire to be, and what to seek in their lives (see Chong 2013).

It is also important to consider how media reaches its audience in the 'post-network era', when streaming platforms provide content on demand, anytime and anywhere (Zhang 2022: 69). In China, platforms such as Tencent Video (WeTV), YouKu, and iQIYI dominate internet-distributed television, freeing viewers from fixed broadcast schedules and offering a vast array of content (Lotz 2017). The traditional mode of transmitting simplified ideological messages through centralised broadcasting has shifted towards a constant stream of stimulation that, as Kötter (2023: 22) notes, overwhelms viewers while hindering rational information processing.

Building on Brownell and Wasserstrom's (2002: 2) emphasis that 'unique judgements about femininity and masculinity are made by specific people in particular contexts', this essay examines basketball as a site shaped by the media, viewers, fans, and players. We ask: Why and how does basketball become central to the image of competent youth masculinity, while simultaneously functioning as affective entertainment? How do basketball's symbols, styles of play, and bodily aesthetics generate role models that reflect youth desires while aligning with hegemonic state ideologies?

Our analysis draws on audiovisual entertainment media (Kötter) and ethnographic material on basketball play and fandom among Chinese young adults (Hizi). We show how basketball imaginaries extend across social spheres, and how official media guides young people in navigating gendered expectations, personal development, and traditional values. We further argue that basketball—understood as an assemblage of practices, objects, and media representations—plays a key role in shaping gendered youth identities in China today, simultaneously

fuelling market-driven aspirations and engaging with the disillusionment that increasingly defines young adulthood.

Basketball Masculinities in TV Dramas

When discussing masculinity in popular media, it is imperative to mention the so-called masculinity crisis in contemporary China. Yang (2010: 552) and Song (2010: 406) suggest that this crisis stems from growing social instability, which can be attributed to the negative effects on men of neoliberalism beginning in the 1990s. The recurring outcry in Chinese media to prevent the effeminisation of boys is thus a rearticulation of pre-existing insecurities (see Yu and Sui 2023). In line with this, Tan (2024) argues that the recent state-influenced pushback against *Hallyu* ('Korean Wave')—which introduced so-called soft masculinity into China—has gone hand in hand with the promotion of a militarised masculinity. She notes, however, that this agenda faces setbacks, as predominantly female viewers 'also hold sway over the articulation of ideal masculinities' (Tan 2024: 206).

To conclude that militarised masculinity is the sole model promoted by state ideology would, however, be short-sighted. While numerous dramas featuring male leads with military backgrounds—both contemporary and historical—have premiered in recent years, a more attainable and less violent variant of ideal masculinity is offered in portrayals of basketball-playing male leads. These characters are physically fit, attractive, and capable of leading their teams to victory, albeit on the basketball court rather than the battlefield (see Fan and Liu 2023: 178). Referring to Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002) on shifting ideals of male identity, the representation of basketball as a route to idealised masculinity reveals that lingering insecurities continue to shape definitions of 'masculinity' and male beauty. Although the presence of basketball in Chinese dramas is far from new, little has been said about its specific connection to idealised masculinity.

According to Wang et al. (2023: 1768), Chinese fans associate basketball—and the US National Basketball Association (NBA) in particular—with

masculinity. Team sports and basketball playing are seen to demonstrate male superiority. As a narrative device, male violence or aggression towards female characters is often instrumentalised to highlight the male lead's positive traits as a protector and romantic partner. In recent years, however, this instrumentalised victimisation of women has been increasingly criticised, leading to new narratives in which female characters help one another or save themselves, thereby removing the opportunity for male characters to assert masculinity through protective action. In response, the basketball court emerges as a new space where young male characters can reassert their masculinity. Here, male protagonists display physical prowess and competitive spirit, often encouraged by cheering female characters or female characters learning the sport under their guidance.

This is evident in three very popular dramas: *Meteor Shower* (一起来看流星雨, 2009), *Love O2O* (微微一笑很倾城, 2016), and *Hidden Love* (偷偷藏不住, 2023). *Meteor Shower* is a high school drama, *Love O2O* is set in a university, and the male lead, Duan Jiaxu, in *Hidden Love* is already working for most of the series. Over the course of more than a decade, the basketball theme has remained popular in Chinese drama. While cinematography has evolved considerably, now aligning more closely with international standards, key elements of the depiction of basketball remain largely unchanged.

The basketball matches in these dramas serve multiple purposes, the most important of which is the portrayal of idealised masculinity. Beyond this, basketball scenes also function as a narrative device to explore the relationships among characters. In the first two episodes of *Meteor Shower*, a rivalry between the male lead, Murong Yunhai, and another male character, Shangguang Ruiqian, over who is the best player and most popular boy in school culminates in an epic basketball match in episode two. This match also serves to establish and deepen the relationship between the female lead, Chu Yuxun, and both male characters. In episode 10 of *Love O2O*, the basketball game highlights the relationship between the male lead, Xiao Nai, the female lead, Bei Weiwei, and their respective friend groups. Similarly, in episode 17 of *Hidden Love*, the basketball match symbolises the romantic rivalry between two male characters vying for the affection of female lead Sang Zhi.

In all these scenes, the gender contrast is striking. The male characters excel as athletes, exuding vigour, youthful energy, and competitive spirit, while the female characters stand on the sidelines, admiring and cheering them on. Basketball thus reinforces the notion of male physical and social superiority—not only over female characters but also among the male characters themselves. Rivalries between men are resolved through the non-violent medium of sport, while the public setting of the match ensures the outcome is visible and validated by the broader social group. Finally, these scenes frame the male lead as the ideal romantic partner, as the game provides a space to showcase traits typically associated with idealised masculinity.

Comparing the three basketball scenes, we find several recurring elements of idealised masculinity: physical superiority, depicted through high jumps, slam dunks, and precise shooting (as seen in *Meteor Shower*); and leadership, whether through team captaincy (*Love O2O*) or by giving strategic instructions (*Hidden Love*). These leadership qualities are reinforced through the male lead's versatility—playing different positions or even remaining on the bench (*Love O2O*)—and his sense of fairness and good sportsmanship. Notably, there is little representation of what it means to be a 'good loser'.

From the conversations among female characters observing the matches, it becomes clear that good looks are considered just as important as athletic skill. In *Meteor Shower*, the biased female crowd quickly shifts their admiration to Yunhai once he wins the game. In both *Love O2O* and *Hidden Love*, the female characters focus almost exclusively on the male leads' appearances—shouting their names and commenting on their attractiveness. More importantly, the female lead's association with the male lead—sitting next to Weiwei to watch the second half of the game in *Love O2O* or Sang Zhi receiving Duan Jiaxu's jacket in *Hidden Love*—directly enhances her status among her peers.

Thus, basketball in these dramas functions to portray masculinity as a composite of physical prowess, leadership ability, attractiveness, and the capacity to elevate a woman's social standing.

Rural Basketball Masculinities

TV dramas reveal how basketball is embedded in the bodily styles and aspirations of young Chinese men. Basketball courts become sites where individuals negotiate and compensate for the challenges of their moral and gendered coming-of-age. Research confirms the sport's importance for young men. Since the 1990s, with the increased exposure of the NBA in China, basketball has become not only a major object of fandom but also the most widely played outdoor sport in the country, along with badminton and ping-pong, and the most popular among young adults and youth (Chinese Basketball Association 2023; Huang 2013: 270). Basketball in China draws on multiple traditions: the early twentieth-century YMCA's promotion of the 'modern' and 'well-rounded' man through team sports (Polumbaum 2002: 192); the communist emphasis on strong, healthy bodies aligned with moral and political cultivation (see Mao 1917); and today's more commercially oriented leagues. Contemporary basketball blends teamwork with individualistic undertones, which are visible in stylistic moves such as dunks, fadeaway shots, cross-over dribbling, and three-pointers—plays that carry emotional resonance.

In this context, specific basketball stars emerge as role models for youth—not only for their athletic prowess but also as symbols of moral character. NBA players past and present, such as Kobe Bryant, Allen Iverson, and LeBron James, are admired by Chinese fans for traits such as a hardworking mentality, the ability to overcome adversity, and stories of social mobility (Peng et al. 2023).

This capacity for role-modelling is not limited to fan culture but is also actively promoted by educational institutions in China, which aim to combine masculine moral cultivation with patriotic values (Wang et al. 2023). Recent state initiatives also frame basketball as a path to personal development in an era marked by widespread feelings of *neijuan* (内卷 'involution')—a state in which effort put into work or study fails to yield meaningful results while exhausting one's mental and physical energy (Wang and Ge 2020).

This is particularly evident in projects linked to the ‘rural revitalisation’ (乡村振兴) policy, which is part of the broader ‘Beautiful China Initiative’ (美丽中国) championed by President Xi Jinping (see Fang et al. 2020). A standout example is the *cunBA* in the Qiongdongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in southwest Guizhou. This initiative combines investment in rural infrastructure, promotion of intangible heritage, and tourism, while celebrating basketball as a means of masculine self-realisation. According to popular accounts, a photographer’s spontaneous attention to a rural basketball competition during a harvest festival (on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month) in mid-2022 sparked viral interest online, drawing the attention of the local state. In response, the local government expanded the outdoor stadium in Taipan, adopted the colloquial label *cunBA*, and helped scale the competition—expanding from local county-level games in Taijiang to provincial and national tournaments. As Taijiang is primarily inhabited by the Miao ethnic minority, the games also feature displays of local dress, cultural performances, and agricultural products (see Hizi 2024; Wing-Lun 2024).

CunBA encapsulates many of the paradoxes of the present moment. While it appears as a rural grass-roots event, it relies on trans-local media attention, tourism, and government investment. The choice of basketball is also telling: although long popular in Taijiang, it is by no means unique to the region, thus enabling the expansion of interest and participation across and beyond Qiongdongnan. *CunBA* is promoted in speeches, media coverage, and resident narratives as a celebration of sport rooted in amateurism and community values. Rather than emphasising victory, it foregrounds tropes such as ‘passion’ (热爱) and ‘atmosphere’ (气氛). These contradictions allow *cunBA* to promote a masculinity that is both aspirational and grounded: championing rural development in line with market logic while suspending the urban–rural hierarchy entrenched in Chinese policy since the 1980s.

As Suvi Rautio (2023) observes, among the Dong ethnic community in rural Guizhou, two contrasting models of masculinity coexist: one that pursues trans-local success through urban entrepreneurship, and another that values manual labour and agricultural livelihoods within the local rural economy. *CunBA* bridges these two models. It activates ‘dreams’



Ou Minghui during the final game of the Guizhou provincial league against Tongren, 29 March 2025. Source: Gil Hizi.

through basketball matches, glamorous performances, and youth training programs, while redirecting those ambitions towards local pride rather than expectations of socioeconomic transformation.

Alongside these emphases, *cunBA* prioritises the celebration of village and collective identity over the exceptional performance of individual players, as reflected in numerous reports, interviews, and speeches both on site and in Chinese media. Nevertheless, fans of the teams and dedicated followers of the games naturally come to appreciate the strengths of players and enjoy their achievements. A prominent example is Ou Minghui, a 31-year-old, 1.75-metre-tall player on the team representing Qiongdongnan. Despite his unassuming, non-athletic appearance, Ou led his team to its third consecutive provincial *cunBA* championship in March 2025. He is known for his stamina, three-point shooting, and game-winning plays. When facing taller and more athletic opponents, Ou compensates with fitness, leadership, and clutch performance. Nicknamed the ‘Ox King’ (欧牛王), he embodies both the region’s cultural associations with bullfighting, cattle, and beef, and his own personal experience raising livestock (Li 2023).

‘Professional players have their dreams; we have our own dreams,’ Ou stated in an interview after being named Most Valuable Player of the 2023 tournament (Jimu News 2023). Despite his grounded rural perspective, Ou draws inspiration from Kobe Bryant, particularly the NBA star’s work ethic and ‘Mamba’ never-give-up mentality (Crossover Character 2024). The tournament prizes are largely symbolic: livestock (a bull for the winning team, and smaller animals for those placing second to fifth) and agricultural products. It remains to be seen whether players like Ou might generate additional income through sponsorships or advertisements.

Basketball in the context of *cunBA* is infused with rural symbols and material culture, linking it to local lifestyles, while also connecting it to trans-local and transnational fandoms. At the same time, it is reified as a satisfying pursuit in its own right, rather than a stepping stone to ‘better’ lives or opportunities. Whether through televised dramas, pickup games on school campuses, or village tournaments, masculinity expressed through basketball gains its meaning not from external rewards—such as profit, fame, or romantic success—but from its embodiment of self-realisation and potential. It offers a resilient form of masculinity amid precarious social realities, rooted in dedication to the game itself.

a popular transnational sport, basketball accommodates both aspects of fandom and play by enthusiasts and is a site for conveying moral prescriptions that extend well beyond sport and leisure, including bodily aesthetics, gender roles, and rural–urban discrepancies. Close examination of popular pastimes proves insightful for understanding larger developments in gender and youth identity in Chinese society. ■

A Gendered Cultural Arena

In this essay, we have discussed the centrality of basketball for the formation of an image of idealised masculinity in China today. Different characteristics of masculinity are emphasised across activities and entertainment products involving basketball. Youth drama portrays ideal masculinity through physical attractiveness, fitness, leadership, and the ability to raise female social status, whereas *cunBA* players and fans highlight moral character, local pride, and a never-give-up mentality. Along with the different depictions across different types of cultural products and events, basketball practices are themselves sites for negotiating different forms of masculine citizenship, incorporating popular desire and fantasies of personal development, on the one hand, and hegemonic official ideologies (‘rural revitalisation’ and pushback against ‘soft masculinity’), on the other. As



Lotus Flower, Source: Patrick Sledz (CC), Flickr.com.

Flowing without Roots

The Identity Crisis of
Foreigners' Descendants in
Mainland China

Chengzhi ZHANG

This essay explores the identity struggles of descendants of foreigners in China, who, despite being raised in the country, often confront exclusion based on race, appearance, and geopolitics. It also examines how these individuals navigate belonging and cultural in-betweenness while experiencing considerable under-recognition in Chinese society. Their experiences reveal a deeper tension between globalisation and nationalism, and the question of who can truly be considered Chinese in this interconnected world.

In 2009, a woman named Lou Jing, born to a Chinese mother and an African American father, went on a TV show in China and declared herself a proud and patriotic Chinese person (Leung 2015). Her remarks ignited a firestorm online as people debated whether a mixed-race person could be considered truly, properly Chinese. Supporters argued that she was born and raised in China, educated within the Chinese system, and therefore naturally Chinese. Nonetheless, many others claimed that someone with dark skin and of African heritage could never be counted among the 'descendants of the Yan and Yellow Emperors'

(炎黄子孙)—the mythical ancestors of all Chinese people (Frazier and Zhang 2014; Leung 2015). While the controversy surrounding Lou Jing was never fully resolved, it raised an important question with broader implications: can people born to non-Chinese parents but raised in China be recognised as ‘properly’ Chinese? As China opens itself to the world, can the descendants of foreigners in China (外国人子女) also be considered part of the thriving new Chinese youth?

Few such foreigners’ descendants had their identities examined as intensely as did Lou Jing. Nevertheless, the question about the boundaries of Chinese-ness persists, continuing to puzzle descendants of immigrants to China who live outside the limelight. This growing community reflects China’s deeper global engagement. Since the start of the Reform and Opening-Up policies in the late 1970s, China has joined the global market and opened its doors to foreigners. According to national census data from 2010 and 2020, the number of long-term foreign residents in the country nearly doubled during this decade, rising from 371,475 to 684,226 (NBS 2010, 2020). Over time, this growing group has become part of an increasingly globalised Chinese society, with many settling in the country and even marrying Chinese citizens.

Even though they seldom make the news, there are many young people like Lou Jing who quietly struggle with their identity. Despite their small number compared with the total population in China, these descendants of foreigners increasingly stand out in a rapidly changing Chinese society because of the way they look, speak, and live. They were raised in China, so they are fluent in the Chinese language, immersed in Chinese culture, and educated in Chinese schools, sharing a similar upbringing to typical Chinese youth. However, despite these commonalities, the foreigners’ children face unique identity crises because they are rarely regarded by most Chinese people as being ‘properly’ Chinese. Yet, research on this group remains sparse, especially regarding how they navigate their sense of belonging. To address this gap, in 2024, I conducted 38 interviews with the descendants of foreigners in China as part of my PhD research.

Is China Ready to Accept the Offspring of Foreigners?

Since the emergence of the concept of the Chinese nation (中华民族) as proposed by thinkers such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen in the Republican era (Zarrow 2012), debates have persisted in China about two fundamental questions: How is this Chinese nation defined? Who can be considered Chinese? Over time, the Chinese public developed various answers to these questions. Some have argued that anyone holding Chinese nationality is Chinese. Others advocate a Han-centric or bloodline-based view, asserting that only those with Han ancestry qualify as Chinese. Yet others propose a culturalist stance, maintaining that identification with Chinese culture is sufficient (Watson 1993; Zhao 2004; Rae and Wang 2016). However, these debates have largely centred on relations among citizens of different ethnicities within the People’s Republic of China, where China and hence Chinese-ness are perceived as bound by a geographical territory. Yet, as previously noted, the dramatic increase in the number of foreigners living in China over the past decades since Reform and Opening has given rise to new forms of ethnic and cultural mixing. This expansion inevitably extends the original question into a new one: can the descendants of foreigners also be accepted as Chinese?

Based on my fieldwork, the answer appears to be negative. Descendants of foreigners living in China face challenges that are strikingly like those experienced by the offspring of immigrants around the world, who encounter persistent barriers in their efforts to integrate into local mainstream society. This has caused confusion among my interviewees: should they see themselves as Chinese when others refuse to?

For instance, Sarah, an Arab-Chinese woman who holds Chinese citizenship and has lived in China her entire life, complained to me about how her Chinese identity was still regularly questioned: ‘My identity is already deeply rooted in China, yet they [the Chinese] still try to push me away ... How am I

supposed to prove it? I am absolutely a Chinese, and I'm very patriotic!' Sarah is not the only one who told me that her Chinese identity was denied by others. In fact, nearly all my interviewees expressed a deep love for China and believed they were genuinely Chinese. Having spent most of their lives in the country, they saw Chinese culture and China itself as inseparable parts of who they are. However, their attempts to identify as Chinese were rarely recognised by the people around them, regardless of how strongly they *wished* to define themselves that way.

Among the various factors contributing to this exclusion, race stands out as an important symbolic boundary between the immigrant descendant and their local counterparts (Lamont 1995). For those who do not look 'Chinese', their experiences can be highly racialised. The Chinese public often closely examines the physical appearance of these descendants of foreigners, focusing on attributes such as skin tone, hair and eye colour, height, and even more nuanced features such as so-called facial bone structure (骨相), in search of visible hints of perceived 'foreignness'. The perception of such foreignness can cause the descendants to be treated as outsiders even when they possess Chinese heritage and/or citizenship. Therefore, my interviewees were generally in agreement that a fundamental threshold to be considered properly Chinese is that one must *look* Han Chinese. In the words of Xiaoyu, a young Chinese-Dutch woman:

They [her classmates] believe that since everyone has yellow skin, black hair, and black eyes, you must be different and therefore surely have something wrong with you. In current terms, it's like saying: 'If you're not one of us, your intentions must be wickedly different [非我族类, 其心必异].'

This is a vivid example of how exclusion and hostility draw on racial characteristics. The emphasis on yellow skin and black hair and eyes reflects the early construction of the Chinese nation based on blood ties and the discourse of social Darwinism in the early twentieth century. After the First Opium War in 1840, China suffered a series of defeats against Western colonial incursions. These repeated losses prompted certain intellectuals of the time, such as Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Sun Yat-sen, to reflect on the causes of China's weakness and to turn to

Western ideas, including the concept of 'survival of the fittest', as part of their effort to understand and address the crisis. Taking the language from Western racial discourse, they were convinced that the 'Yellow' race was in competition with the White, Black, and Brown races for collective survival, and that Western imperial aggressions in China were in essence attempts by the White to enslave and even eliminate the Yellow race, as they were attempting with the Black and Brown, so it was necessary to develop a united Chinese nation to resist Western forces. Here, the non-Chinese races played the role of the *other* to delineate the Chinese *self* (Dikötter 1994; Duara 2009; Zarrow 2012; Rae and Wang 2016). In other words, race has been a fundamental criterion in shaping the boundaries of the Chinese nation, the margins of which are further complicated by the classification and inclusion—sometimes by force—of non-Han ethnicities.

The essentialisation of a unified Chinese race and the othering of the rest make the identities of mixed-heritage descendants suspect (Lamont 1995). Having Chinese heritage does not necessarily reduce the sense of difference felt by foreigners' descendants. On the contrary, it leads to more serious doubts about the purity of the nation. That is, the interviewees were not recognised as a part of 'us' but were further discriminated as a kind of *degraded* Chinese. In the example of Lou Jing, she was attacked due to not only her black skin *per se*, but also her mixture with the Chinese bloodline, which was seen as a sort of *genetic pollution* (Leung 2015). My interviewees also suffered from such insults due to their mixed heritage. For instance, Lion, a young Chinese-Russian woman, told me: 'Someone called me "Chuan Chuan'er" [串串儿] which is also not a good term for someone of mixed heritage, as it is commonly used to refer to mixed-breed dogs.'

Similarly, Dasha, another young Chinese-Russian woman, told me:

They think mixed people like us are inferior and say awful things, like calling us 'mongrels' [杂种] and similar insults. I've also met girls who, whether out of ignorance or on purpose, said I had leukaemia [in Chinese leukaemia is translated as 'white blood disease' (白血病)].

Several studies have shown that being a white expatriate in China can serve as an advantage, offering increased visibility and even privilege in the form of better treatment both socially and professionally (Schein 1994; Camenisch 2022; Lan 2022a). However, quotes such as these show that, perhaps counterintuitively, being of mixed white and Chinese heritage does not always bring advantages. With nationalistic sentiments surging in recent years, the portrayal of white people has gradually become more negative in Chinese political discourse (Leonard and Lehmann 2019; Lan 2022b). As a result, this deterioration has also extended to white and mixed-race descendants, leading to exclusion and hostility directed at them.

This was most evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, a Chinese-Russian interviewee was physically and verbally assaulted in 2022 simply because she was perceived as a foreigner due to her appearance. While taking the metro in Beijing, she was shoved by some Chinese strangers, spat on in public, and humiliated with slurs such as ‘virus’ and ‘Go back to your home country’ (滚回你老家). This was not an isolated occurrence. Rather, she experienced similar harassment several times during the pandemic, which contrasted sharply with how she had previously been treated in China. As she recalled, she had generally been treated well by Chinese people and she thought she was just a ‘regular Chinese person’ (就是一个中国人). Some white American interviewees also mentioned similar experiences. Once they were revealed to be American, they were furiously called ‘American imperialists’ (美帝) by some Chinese nationalists and asked to go back to America.

Ultimately, the experiences discussed above reflect the racialisation of identity—a process in which individuals are othered based on perceived physical racial differences. However, even descendants with East Asian heritage, who might ‘pass’ as Chinese in appearance, are not necessarily better off as their experiences and self-identification are significantly affected by domestic and international politics, which makes them vulnerable to Chinese nationalism. Among the most egregious examples were two violent assaults in 2024 targeting the offspring of Japanese immigrants in Suzhou and Shenzhen that caused the death of a Chinese school-bus attendant and a Chinese-Japanese child (Liang 2024; Marsh 2024).

As for my interviews with youths of Chinese-Japanese heritage, they often experienced heightened hostility during national memorial days commemorating events such as the Nanjing Massacre or the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July 1937, which marked the beginning of the full-scale Japanese invasion of China. One Chinese-Japanese interviewee had a hard time after the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Island dispute in 2012. His teachers used to be very kind to him because he was a top student, but after the dispute they became cold and indifferent and would scold him harshly if he made a casual utterance in Japanese. He claimed that during a fieldtrip to the Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre, his classmates looked at him in a very strange way, as though he were to blame for the tragedy.

Other interviewees with Japanese heritage also expressed a sense of helplessness when confronted with anti-Japanese propaganda on Chinese television or social media, where Japan and Japanese people are often portrayed as one-dimensional villains. The Japanese interviewees came to realise that a part of their heritage is perceived by many in China as inherently hostile or even shameful. As a result, they became especially cautious about their behaviour, careful to hide their Japanese background. This constant vigilance made them feel that full integration into Chinese society was difficult.

Likewise, interviewees with Korean heritage also encountered growing coldness and social distance in their daily interactions after the South Korean Government agreed to deploy the US military’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defence system in 2016. The interviewees observed a rise in negative Chinese social media posts, such as accusations that Korea had stolen from Chinese culture or that the South Korean Government was a puppet of the United States. Each time they saw such slander online, it was a reminder that they were perceived as outsiders in Chinese society. For instance, Yuna, a Korean descendant, complained to me: ‘I tried not to mention anything political, but sometimes you can’t avoid it. Even though I could understand their unfriendliness thanks to my upbringing in China, it’s always extremely embarrassing when it came to THAAD or Chinese-Korean politics, etcetera.’

Whether the exclusion is racially or politically motivated, the experiences of the descendants reflect the intolerance of Chinese society to perceived

differences. According to an interviewee with Serbian heritage: ‘A feature of Chinese culture is that it’s like the speed of light. You can get infinitely close to it, but you can never catch up.’ In other words, for the foreigners’ descendants, the best they can aspire to is to be Chinese-alike.

Flowing without Roots

Since their integration into Chinese society has not been smooth, foreigners’ descendants face a serious identity crisis. Although it seems that they still have a backup option—to embrace their other ancestral country—that alternative is rarely viable because most often they lack direct knowledge of or lived experience in that country. This leaves them in a limbo in which they cannot develop a firm sense of belonging or identity in China or in their ancestral country.

A French-Chinese girl named Ella described this condition as being a ‘dual foreigner’, as she was called *laowai* (老外, a moniker for foreigners) in China and *la petite Chinoise* (‘the little Chinese’) in France. Being a ‘dual foreigner’, she felt that she had nowhere to call home. Mary, a Chinese-Korean woman, complained that she was just like a foreigner who could speak perfect Korean when she was back in Seoul. She did not understand the local slang, trending TV series, or music; also, people there did not care much about what was happening in China. She was therefore unable to socialise with her Korean counterparts, let alone effectively integrate into Korean society or start a career in the country. She felt disappointed and confused about her identity; it was as though both homelands had abandoned her.

This reminds me of an English expression popular among Chinese international students in the United Kingdom, such as myself: ‘I am rooted but I flow.’ It shows a contradiction between a static ‘root’ in China and a dynamic momentum of ‘flowing’ overseas. This tension manifests in reverse on the foreigners’ descendants in China. Born as direct products of their parents’ global mobility, they embody a foreignness that has become an obstacle to their integration into mainstream Chinese society. They are forced to find new ways to self-identify. Perhaps the condition of these descendants can be described as: ‘I have to flow because I cannot take root.’

For those who are willing and able to move abroad from China, they would flow to places where their presence is welcomed. As Junxing, a young Chinese-Thai woman, told me: ‘My aim is to be a global citizen ... Belonging doesn’t really matter to me. I belong to and love whichever country brings me a better life.’ Or, as Yuna, the Chinese-Korean woman we met above, said: ‘My identity flows. I don’t belong anywhere, yet I belong to everywhere.’

It is somewhat ironic that these foreigners’ descendants would finally feel at ease by becoming ‘proper’ foreigners in the United States or Europe, where their otherness is mostly taken for granted and not in tension with their sense of belonging. Yet, there are many other descendants who choose to remain in China. They do not passively accept the prejudices they face in their daily life from the Chinese people around them. Instead, they take the initiative to assert their identity. A common practice is to make their identity contextual and contingent, depending on the specific situation and the person with whom they are communicating. For instance, Zhizhi, a Chinese-Papua New Guinean woman who grew up in many places in China, told me that she has realised her identity is constantly changing: ‘Sometimes I’m a Northerner [东北人], but sometimes I can be a Shandong person [山东人], whereas I’m both Chinese and Papua New Guinean. I’m all of them and I can’t divide them up.’

Some individuals have developed the ability to sense social expectations and adopt strategies to present themselves in ways that align with what others want to see. For example, some descendants have become internet influencers and often highlight their foreignness on social media, since a Chinese-speaking but foreign-looking person tends to attract more attention. When I interviewed them, they referred to this strategy as the ‘secret code to social exposure’ (流量密码), which increases their visibility and can potentially lead to higher income through commercial partnerships and ad placements.

Wherever they move and whatever they choose as a form of self-definition, the fluid identity of these descendants reveals their ongoing struggle for acceptance in China. Whether these enterprising young people can truly be considered Chinese youth by the Chinese public remains an open question.

To Be or Not to Be Chinese

While research on this emerging yet expanding group remains limited, foreigners' descendants in China face a widespread identity crisis and struggle to overcome misunderstandings and exclusion, despite their efforts to forge a reconciled identity and live harmoniously within Chinese society. At the same time, the lack of recognition of these descendants reflects the fact that Chinese society is not yet prepared to accept foreign ethnicities into the broader family of the Chinese nation. These individuals live in China, speak its languages, and follow its social norms. However, their lives often remain suspended between inclusion and exclusion. They move within the mainstream but feel rootless, embodying a condition of cultural in-betweenness. Nevertheless, as interactions between China and the rest of the world continue, so too does the integration of foreigners and their offspring into Chinese society. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's classic idea that a nation is an imagined community, perhaps it is time to update our collective imagination of what it means to be part of the Chinese nation, and to let those who flow take roots in this land. ■

WORK OF ARTS



Still from *Fortune Teller* (2009) by Xu Tong.

Fate, Agency, and Precarity

The Vagrant Stories in Xu Tong's Documentary Trilogy

Xiaoyun ZHANG, Hua YANG

This essay examines Xu Tong's documentary series 'Vagabonds Trilogy'—Wheat Harvest (麦收, 2008), Fortune Teller (算命, 2009), and Shattered (老唐头, 2011)—which portrays the everyday lives of marginalised 'vagrant' populations. Through intimate observations of sex workers, fortune-tellers, and beggars who navigate rural–urban boundaries, the series captures their moral dilemmas and survival strategies amid instability and recurring social 'evictions'. It reveals how individuals construct meaning and agency within conditions of precarity and structural constraints, exposing the complex interplay of institutional forces, responsibilities, and desires at the margins of post-socialist Chinese society.

China's post-socialist modernisation and economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s have led to great political and institutional changes and deepened structural inequalities, creating a large marginalised subaltern group whose lives have been shaped by shifting labour markets and migration policies (Hillenbrand 2023; Pun 2016). Today, the stories of China's 'subaltern' are widely heard, from the plight of workers in factories such as those owned by Foxconn to the 'eviction' of rural migrants from city centres or, more recently, cast-out workers on the streets of Shanghai during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chan 2022; Yang 2017; Initium 2022). These individuals, whom public discourses often depict as migrant workers and peasants, are considered part of the

‘precariat’—a social group characterised by mobile, marginal, and vulnerable lives experiencing irregular working hours, unstable households and salaries, and insufficient social and economic support (Standing 2011; Han 2018: 332). On the other hand, ‘precariousness’ also describes a common ontological condition of interdependency and bodily exposure to socioeconomic and political forces that seems to be independent of forms of life (Butler 2009: 14), a situation that encompasses a variety of experiences of marginality and vulnerability across different lives and historical contexts.

Since the 1990s, a wave of documentary films has been depicting China’s marginalised groups in a new way, focusing on their real lives. These include Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京, 1990), Zhang Yuan’s *The Square* (广场, 1994), and Du Haibin’s *Along the Railway* (铁路沿线, 2001). This shift has marked the onset of the so-called New Documentary Movement (新纪录运动), which saw a group of avant-garde filmmakers seek independence from the Party-State’s rigid system of control of cultural production and its established political ideologies. These directors chose to move away from propaganda-driven documentaries, instead reflecting on the social realities and dilemmas faced by those left in the wake of China’s economic miracle (Berry and Rofel 2010: 137). While China’s mainstream media had begun to discuss and portray marginalised groups in the late 1980s, it often did this in a homogenised way. This shift in the cultural landscape was a turning point in that it allowed the exploration of more nuanced categories of marginalisation and the wide variety and complexities of subaltern lives (Sun 2014: 117).

This essay delves into the diverse and often hidden life experiences of marginalised groups through the lens of Xu Tong’s documentary series ‘Vagabonds Trilogy’ (游民三部曲). These movies—*Wheat Harvest* (麦收, 2008), *Fortune Teller* (算命, 2009), and *Shattered* (老唐头, 2011)—focus on individuals whom Chinese society considers ‘vagrants’ (游民, *yumin*), from those involved in illegal occupations such as fortune-telling and sex work to beggars. The article seeks to explore how vagrants’ life conditions are presented through independent documentary films and to understand how their desires, morality, and hopes for achieving a better life are connected to the broader themes of precariousness in post-socialist China.

Vagrants and ‘Vagrant Intellectuals’

With its first documented appearance in the *Book of Rites* (禮記, a text that dates from the late Warring States period to the Han Dynasty), the term *yumin* has long been associated with the state’s regulation of social mobility in traditional Chinese society, particularly under a system that prioritised agriculture over commerce. In this context, those who left farming in search of alternative livelihoods were historically marginalised and deemed inferior (Cui 2021). In Xu Tong’s works, the term ‘vagrant’ is, however, used more broadly to describe a state of precariousness, referring to individuals who drift from place to place, constantly changing jobs, excluded from mainstream labour markets and social networks. These people are not only stuck in a cycle of vulnerability but also often perceived in Chinese society as a potential threat to social stability.

Born in Beijing in 1965, Xu was deeply influenced by both the revolutionary ideals of the previous generation and Western literature. After graduating from university in 1987, he did not follow the conventional career path within the ‘system’ like most of his peers; instead, he shifted between various jobs making commercials and television dramas, photography, and writing, even though he was not very successful in these endeavours (Liu 2023: 639). Facing economic hardship, he rented a place in the ‘rural–urban interface zones’ (城乡结合部) on the outskirts of Beijing, an area populated by marginalised social groups, including beggars, thieves, sex workers, and others. Xu spent time with these individuals, living alongside them and listening to their stories. It was at that time that he met Hongmiao, a sex worker who became the central figure in *Wheat Harvest*, the first documentary in his ‘Vagabond’ series. Given this experience, Xu sees himself as part of the ‘vagrant’ group or, as he puts it, as a ‘vagrant intellectual’ (游民知识分子)—someone who lives outside the formal ‘system’ while remaining deeply concerned with it (Liu 2023: 643).

Like many documentary filmmakers of his time who employ the ‘direct cinema’ style with a renewed focus on ‘realism’, Xu, in his trilogy, uses a quasi-ethnographic approach to capture the lived experiences of vagrants living on the city’s outskirts (Lu 2010: 15). For Xu, vagrants are not simply part of the ‘under-

class', but also rather ordinary individuals who form a *jianghu* (江湖)—a phrase that literally means 'rivers and lakes'. This indicates a social underworld with its own set of rules and networks divergent from mainstream Chinese society, and whose inhabitants often have experiences and mindsets that are distinctly different from those who conform to societal order. In such a context, 'precariousness' manifests unpredictably in various, multifaceted ways throughout their lives.

Female Migrants, Fate, and Everyday Agency

The world shaped by vagrants inevitably revolves around 'fate' (命). With limited control over their lives, these individuals experience far more unpredictability and uncertainty than those who go through their lives within the system. They are frequently entangled in unforeseen circumstances such as unemployment, sexual violence, and imprisonment, which often lead them to seek solace in transcendental forces. In *Fortune Teller*, Li Baicheng, a disabled elderly man, earns a living through fortune-telling in Yanjiao Town, Hebei, alongside his partner, Pearl Shi, who is both mentally and physically disabled. For various reasons, Old Li has long been excluded from the mainstream labour market and, for years, the couple has survived on his modest earnings from fortune-telling. While Li is relatively well-known for his accuracy in predicting the future, many town locals consult him for insights into their 'luck in romance or marriage' (感情运) and 'luck in wealth' (财运). Following the couple's everyday lives, the film introduces its audience to a broad spectrum of life conditions, opportunities, and dilemmas experienced by individuals involved with fortune-telling, many of whom are vagrants, particularly migrant workers who frequently travel between the town and Beijing.

One of Li's clients is a woman named Tang Caifeng, who runs a brothel in the capital. As the 'anti-pornography campaign' (扫黄运动) is gaining momentum in Beijing, she faces constant uncertainty in her daily life. She not only faces police inspections of her premises but also must use her own money to secure the release from prison of her goddaughter, who worked at the brothel. One day, Tang asks Li to predict her 'luck in

marriage' and Li informs her that it is her destiny to remain lonely, with little chance of marriage. Thereafter, she adopts a new name, Xiaoyan (小雁), one of the names that Li has suggested as a means to 'change her fate' (改命). You Xiaoyun, another client of Li's, is a sex worker in a massage parlour in the capital. She seeks Li's guidance to predict her 'luck in wealth' for the two months left before the Chinese New Year, as she is hoping to save enough money to get her husband out of prison, where he has been for four years. Driven by a strong desire to rebuild her family, You Xiaoyun has entered the sex industry, which, while illegal, has the potential of earning her quick money. Like Xiaoyan, she lives in fear of police interrogations and grapples with moral dilemmas, struggling to endure abuse from clients while feeling compelled to ensure their satisfaction.

These moral dilemmas are common among China's sex workers, as they are often caught between urban and rural realities, conflicting social identities, and family responsibilities—all of which leads them to live dual lives. Hongmiao, the central character in *Wheat Harvest*, also works as a sex worker in a brothel in Beijing; yet, in her rural hometown in Hebei, she is a devout daughter often seen busy in the wheat-fields and responsible for providing economic support for her family. Her father, suffering from a long-term cerebrovascular disease, has his medical bills paid entirely from the money she earns through sex work—a profession she keeps hidden from her family. Her earnings, however, are precarious and insufficient to fully support her family, at just RMB100 per client and RMB300 for overnight stays, from which the brothel owner takes a substantial commission. On returning to her rural hometown, Hongmiao must navigate multiple responsibilities. She frequently moves between the wheatfields and the hospital, anxiously confronting the bureaucracy of medical care, collecting test results, and purchasing medications, while also attending gynaecological clinics for examinations concerning possible pregnancies or infections.

Even though these three female characters lack institutional protection and face the threat of imprisonment, working in the sex industry in an urban area allows them to earn relatively more in a shorter time than other jobs they might be able to access. On the other hand, they must constantly navigate social stigmas and moral concerns to maintain 'a better life'



Clip from *Shattered* (2011): After her goddaughter is arrested during the 'anti-pornography' campaign, Tang Xiaoyan secures her release from prison.

while fulfilling the societal expectations of being 'good daughters, mothers, or wives' (Fengjiang 2021). This ongoing dilemma fundamentally shapes their agency, which is intricately produced and influenced by cultural and historical forces that frame their choices. By offering a relatively objective and sometimes 'raw' portrayal of their inner moral dilemmas, the film showcases the struggles, emotions, and desires of these women, while also bringing to light the intricate realities of their lives moving between rural and urban spaces.

Navigating 'Fate', Hoping for a Better Future

During the anti-pornography campaign, Xiaoyan is reported to the police, which leads to her arrest and detention for 14 days. On her release, she finds

that her store has been taken over by others, so she returns to her family in rural Heilongjiang. Following Xiaoyan's journey back to her hometown, Xu Tong encounters Old Man Tang, her 80-year-old father, who later becomes the central character of *Shattered*. Born in the 1930s in Manchukuo, Old Man Tang's life has been shaped by the sociopolitical upheavals of China in the twentieth century, from the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s to the reform of the state sector and waves of layoffs of the 1990s. Over the decades, politics continually disrupted his life and that of his family. Once a worker at a Mudanjiang locomotive factory, in 1958, Old Man Tang was forced to leave his work unit after returning a few days late from approved leave he had taken to care for his oldest daughter who was ill. He became disillusioned with the Party-State and withdrew from it that same year, at the height of the steel campaign that was a landmark of the Great Leap Forward.



Clip from *Fortune Teller* (2009): Li Baicheng and Pearl Shi visit Xinji Temple Market where Li offers fortune-telling services to locals in the town.

Like many in his generation, Old Man Tang harbours both resentment and affection for the country, expressing deep discontent with its decline following the economic reforms of the 1980s. In contrast to the younger generation, represented by Xiaoyan, You Xiaoyun, and Hongmiao—who embody the new spirit of post-reform China, with its emphasis on wealth and personal growth—the subjectivities of Li the fortune-teller and Old Man Tang were shaped by different political and institutional forces and disruptive life events, resulting in their distinct experience of precariousness. Estranged from the system, Old Man Tang retained an optimistic spirit, and the film captures some light-hearted moments with his family or him telling stories from his life. However, the director's gaze also reveals how divisions within the family during Chinese New Year manifest as a split rooted in the generational gap between the father and his children.

For Li, fortune-telling is a precarious occupation, one to which he resorts as an alternative means of survival due to his circumstances. When the movie was shot, fortune-tellers, like sex workers, were considered nonconformant to the mainstream ideologies and values promoted by the Party-State and were strictly scrutinised and subject to state control, which often resulted in violent evictions. During the peak of the campaign against pornography in Hebei, during which fortune-telling was also targeted, the 'Bagua' (八卦, 'eight trigrams') signboard hanging in Li's yard was confiscated and he was briefly detained, even though he was soon released, perhaps due to his disability. Later, Li and Pearl Shi return to their hometown in Qinglong County. While walking through a street where Li once lived and begged, they encounter some 'street friends' (街友) from Li's old days. The two friends, Old Tian and Old Zheng, are still homeless on that street and tell Li that one

of their old friends was killed in a traffic accident involving a government vehicle, making clear their sense of powerlessness about it.

The lack of institutional protection and exclusion from social networks embody the most fundamental part of the ‘vagabond existence’ in China. Despite the country’s rapid economic growth, the issues that people such as Li and his friends face are often obscured as these individuals lack political bargaining power, which renders them basically invisible. Even when Li approaches the local welfare office for disabled persons in Qinglong County to seek additional support, he is told that there are individuals with more severe disabilities than him and he is advised to improve his condition through personal effort. This substantially neoliberal perspective—both a root cause and a consequence of post-Mao China’s sharpening divide between the private and the public spheres and the growing division between those who can access wealth and social status and those who cannot—leaves individuals like Li alone in navigating their own pursuit of happiness while the state retreats from its role in providing adequate support.

As a fortune-teller, Li is often seen with his hands pressed together in prayer before the Buddha, chanting ‘*Namo Amitabha*’. Believing in fate, he also seeks spiritual solace for the sufferings he endures, hoping that the Buddha will relieve him of his hardships. When the spring comes, however, Li still believes that it is a good time to try his luck. Once again, he leaves his hometown for Yanjiao, dusts off his long-unused fortune-telling tools, and heads to the town’s ‘temple fair’ (庙会).

converge and form intricate social networks of their own following separate sets of rules and moralities. Yet, this *jianghu* should not be viewed in a romantic light; it remains a harsh and unrelenting reality in which the powerless endure constant hardships and suffering. The cycles of ‘eviction’, often carried out under the guise of ‘justice’, such as in the case of the ‘anti-pornography’ campaigns, are a reminder that the vulnerable are caught in an alienating system that keeps pushing them into even more precarious positions. ■

Epilogue

The lives of the vagrants depicted in Xu Tong’s documentaries stand as a powerful testament to the resilience of individuals in the face of everyday adversity. The trilogy offers a critical lens on the structural inequalities embedded within post-socialist Chinese society. Instead of simplifying their experiences into a single narrative of victimhood, it reveals the complex interplay of institutional forces, responsibilities, and desires that are constantly shaping the agency of the individuals who are at the margins of society. In this ‘*jianghu* world’, as Xu describes it, vagrants



Ge Yulu, Ge Yu Lu, 2013–17. Source: China Digital Times.

Radicalness in Suspension

From 'Ge Yu Lu' to Ge Yulu

Sia X. YANG

This essay presents a case study of the widely known—and at times controversial—artist Ge Yulu and his interventionist practice. Through an account of Ge's life and career, including his early years as a grassroots migrant artist navigating precarity in Beijing, the essay explores how radical artistic gestures are gradually tempered, and often reshaped into more palatable forms that conform to institutional aesthetics. At the same time, it shows how a persistent critical impulse—despite the risks of censorship, social marginalisation, and financial hardship—sustains hope and continues to provoke public engagement.

From 2013 to 2017, migrant artist Ge Yulu (葛宇路, b. 1990) carried out his private project *Ge Yu Lu* (葛宇路), secretly installing a street sign bearing his name on an unnamed road in the chaotic bustle of Beijing, as well as embedding the name in digital maps such as those of Gaode (高德) and Baidu (百度), which provide real-time navigation for everyday use. This was possible because in Chinese, *lu* (路), the final character in Ge's name, also means 'road'. As the street was seamlessly transformed into 'his own', Ge developed an emotional connection to the people who passed along it each day. He often returned to the site, watching and wondering what might unfold on 'his road'. Once, a drunk man stumbled out of a luxury Lamborghini, vomiting and crying like a desperate child on a dark, frozen night. The road, impartial and



Figure 1: Ge Yulu, *Ge Yu Lu*, performance in Beijing, 2013–17. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.

unassuming, bore the mundane realities of life—each passer-by's joy and sorrow—among Beijing's rigid and complex class hierarchy.

When the media began uncovering and reporting Ge's mischievous act in June 2017, headlines announced: 'You can hardly afford to buy a unit in Beijing, but you can have a road of your own' (Ge and Zhu 2021). Ge gained instant fame—or notoriety. Even China Central Television (CCTV), one of the Chinese Government's official and most orthodox mouthpieces, solemnly interviewed him, further amplifying the absurdity surrounding the incident. Despite a huge number of netizens calling for the street to retain the name 'Ge Yu Road' and declaring it one of the best performances in recent Chinese art—precisely because it showed the public that this was a form of art—city authorities insisted on removing the seemingly ordinary street sign. Their intervention only heightened the effect of Ge's work, making it an even more powerful example of site-specific, socially engaged art. On 13 July 2017, a crowd of journalists witnessed the end of *Ge Yu Lu* in just three minutes; it was immediately renamed 'Baiziwannanyi Road' (百子湾南一路).

From Best Performance to Punishment

In August 2017, shortly after the media frenzy, Weilin Xu, a junior scholar researching urbanisation at Peking University, visited the Apple Residential Community, a luxury apartment and office complex where *Ge Yu Lu* had once been installed. At the time, the average listed price for a previously owned unit in the complex was RMB93,500 per square metre (approximately US\$14,500 per square metre). Xu conducted a survey among residents to gauge their attitudes towards the naming and renaming of 'Ge Yu Road'. She asked: 'Do you think Ge's naming practice should be praised or condemned, and why?' and 'Do you think it was necessary for officials to rename "Ge Yu Road", and why?' (Xu 2021).

The responses revealed mostly nuanced or ambivalent views. Many residents believed Ge's naming act was both praiseworthy and worthy of criticism. Twelve people supported Ge's behaviour and opposed the renaming; nine strongly disagreed with the authorities' decision; another nine thought society



Figure 2: A news anchor on CCTV interviews an authority on urban planning to discuss why the 'Ge Yu Road' sign could not be permitted in Beijing. Source: China Digital Times.

should tolerate Ge's intervention and preserve his work for the general public. Sixteen residents found the new name, 'Baiziwannanyi Road', more appropriate and conventional, while the remaining respondents considered both names acceptable. According to the interviews, Ge's actions were lauded for being innovative, insightful, and convenient to everyday life, while also exposing local government negligence. However, some interviewees argued that any moral judgement hinged on the 'illegality' of Ge's approach. One noted that although the act was creative and provocative, it violated state regulations and should not be excused as art. 'If everyone names roads after themselves,' the respondent warned, 'it would lead to disorder in the city's toponymic landscape' (Xu 2021).

Although the local council had confiscated—or forcibly 'collected'—Ge's road sign, the controversial 'masterpiece', a copy of *Ge Yu Lu*, was formally exhibited at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum (CAFAM) during its 2017 annual graduation show as Ge's graduation work. In fact, his signature project had begun well before he enrolled at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) as a postgraduate student in experimental art in 2014. Ge completed his undergraduate education at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in Wuhan, his hometown.

One day during his undergraduate years, Ge was helping a teacher tally how many students wanted to purchase a textbook. He wrote his name first on the classroom blackboard. The next student didn't write

"葛宇路"挂新牌 美丽错误被结束 (1/4)



Figure 3: The road sign that replaced the one set up by Ge Yulu. Source: 中国青年网 [China Youth Net].

their own name but simply added 'x2' after Ge's name. This was followed by a growing sequence: 'x3', 'x4', 'x5', 'x6' ... The collective mimicry unsettled Ge. He felt both embarrassed and intrigued: why did everyone choose to follow rather than assert their individuality by writing their own names? In response to this unconscious group behaviour, Ge decided to parody it. That weekend, he bought cans of spray paint and began doodling his name along the road to school. A street pedlar riding a fruit cart stopped him and asked, 'Is this road called "Ge Yu Lu"?' (Chen 2021). That unexpected encounter would later inspire the full realisation of *Ge Yu Lu*.

Ge's street art featuring his 'big names' inevitably irritated the school authorities. They interrogated him and ordered him to erase the graffiti from the road, as it was a public space. Ge retorted: 'There are so many crappy advertisements on the wall and everywhere—why doesn't anyone get annoyed?' (Chen 2021). Fortunately, the incident taught him an important lesson: the context in which he displayed his name—and doing so in a strategically undetectable way—was crucial. He began experimenting with paper road signs, pasting them onto walls instead.

In 2013, Ge travelled to Beijing to sit the national entrance examinations (including English and politics) required for a master's degree at CAFA. He failed that year but chose to remain in Beijing, taking part-time jobs while preparing to retake the exams. At the same time, he continued distributing his



Figure 4: Screenshot of the author's WeChat group chat. I was included in a research group with about 30 members, led by an esteemed scholar in China. All members have obtained their doctorates; most are tenured professors. Whenever the lead scholar shares any good news in the group, one member immediately sends out a well-written message to congratulate the scholar. Then, all members will automatically replicate the first one's words.

name throughout the city to keep his project alive. Consulting digital maps, he searched for unnamed roads, selected one, and posted his name on the wall. Some signs were removed on the same day; others remained undetected for days or weeks. Only one—installed on an actual road sign—survived. It eventually became *Ge Yu Lu*, the work that made Ge Yulu a renowned artist (Chen 2021).

All those 'crappy advertisements on the wall and everywhere' also prompted his 2014 work *Chatting about Art*. In this project, Ge printed mock advertisements offering a service: anyone who called the number could talk with him about art. Pasted across urban surfaces in the style of the unsightly ads he mimicked, these posters attracted a wide range of callers. Their responses revealed the jarring, often



Figure 5: Ge Yulu, *Chatting about Art*, performance in Beijing, 2014. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.

absurd dissonance between art—commonly understood as elite or rarefied—and the everyday perspectives of people from diverse class backgrounds.

However, on 29 July 2017, CAFA authorities announced an official punishment against Ge for what they described as an egregious violation of school regulations. It was because Ge produced another provocative artwork: he installed a dildo atop the campus flagpole. The piece was quickly embraced by excited netizens, who dubbed it *Fucking Great to Bang the Sky* (屌炸天) or *The Rise of China* (中华崛起) (Anonymous 2019b). The official CAFA statement was vague, providing no details about when or how Ge had violated school rules.

In a casual phone call, Ge later told me that he had climbed the flagpole alone before dawn, mounted the sex toy, and left it there until it was discovered. He accepted the punishment and subsequent investigation by national security officers for several reasons. First, his act could be seen as a deliberate provocation against China's official education system. Second, placing the object on the flagpole could be deemed a violation of the National Flag Law. Third, according to school authorities, Ge's soaring popularity risked misleading the younger generation—encouraging them to become impetuous, superficial, and to seek shortcuts to success and instant fame.



Figure 6: Ge Yulu, *Untitled* (A dildo placed on the top of a flagpole), performance on CAFA campus in Beijing, 2017. Source: China Digital Times.

The punishment Ge ‘deserved’ upon graduating undoubtedly impacted his life and career trajectory. While he was under investigation by authorities, he was socially ostracised. For two months, few CAFA classmates spoke to him. Even teachers with whom he had once been close reduced their interactions to distant nods in the café; no-one wanted to become entangled in the controversy. After the media report about him went viral, some individuals even followed a food deliveryman to locate his residence. During this period, he compulsively monitored online discussions about himself, which were a chaotic mix of insults and praise. He was sleeping little more than two hours a night, unable to work, mentally spiralling. Pushed to his limits, he entered a state of deep psychological distress (Anonymous 2019b).

These events thrust him into the harsh glare of public opinion. Gradually, the range of responses made him sense that society was shifting: ‘Values are becoming increasingly uniform, with boundaries drawn more clearly than ever’ (Anonymous 2019b). He spent the following year largely in hiding at home with his anxious parents, recovering from his ‘lucky notoriety’. In the *Curriculum Vitae* he sent me in 2020, he is listed as graduating from CAFA after three years of study, receiving a certificate in 2018 rather than a master’s in 2017. Notably, in his artist portfolio, *Fucking Great to Bang the Sky*, despite its fame, is conspicuously absent.

Ge had once been someone who disregarded social rules and acted with focused confidence. In his own words, he treated public space—the external world—

Goddess (女神)

Li Zhi (李志)

我有一个朋友，今年二十一岁，
一直喜欢穿白色的风衣
住在盒子后面，后面挂着照片，
照片上的人在盒子里面
每天早晨红色的尿布从阳具上兴起
升起让她看不出墓碑上的人的表情
我的这个朋友，她说她是宝贝，
为何爸爸要丢她在这里



Figure 7: *Untitled* by Ge Yulu sparked public creativity and speculation. The work was thought to be inspired by, or related to, a lyric from Li Zhi’s 2011 song *Goddess (女神)*, which includes the line: ‘Every morning a red nappy arises on a phallus.’ Source: China Digital Times.

as though it were his own backyard (Anonymous 2019b). This perspective made him indifferent to the boundary between private and public spaces, and oblivious to social and political conventions. However, after his punishment, each time a new idea crossed his mind, he found himself asking: ‘Can I do it?’ ‘Is this the right way to do it?’ ‘Will it cause problems or lead to trouble?’ In the process of such self-questioning, potential creations dissolved inside him (Anonymous 2019b). Ge had been disciplined; he now understood that practising self-censorship had become a necessity.

From Society to Museum

As a migrant in Beijing, Ge faced further setbacks when a university in the city—the name of which he refuses to disclose—cancelled his contract due to the punishment. This came despite his having undergone several rounds of tests and interviews over more than six months and receiving an oral offer. As a result, he was unable to secure a *danwei* (单位, ‘work unit’)—a key requirement for affiliation with the system and registering a Beijing *hukou* (户口, ‘household registration’), which is essential to work and live in the city as a legal resident.

In 2017, following the eviction of artist communities from Heiqiao (黑桥)—an urban village that had long served as a hub for artists and art school graduates—Ge was forced to relocate. He moved to Yanjiao (燕郊), a satellite town of Beijing but governed by Hebei Province. There, he rented a modest two-bedroom unit for RMB1,600 per month (about US\$220) (Wang 2020).

Despite his rising public profile, Ge remained notably aloof from commercial ventures, often responding to media attention and offers with a reserved, even ascetic, attitude towards money. In one instance, he told me, a businessman approached him with a proposal to mass-produce 500 replicas of the now-iconic street sign bearing Ge’s name, pricing each at RMB10,000 (US\$1,400). Confident of the commercial potential, the businessman expected collaboration, but Ge rejected the idea outright. This refusal not only shielded him from market exploitation but also helped cultivate what singer Patti Smith once called a ‘good name’—a reputation grounded in integrity rather than profit, and something to which many Chinese artists today openly aspire.

Following the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan and the citywide lockdown in early 2020, Ge faced yet more unexpected adversity—this time due to his origins. Although he held a Beijing ID card obtained while studying at CAFA, it included a sequence of unique and permanent numbers indicating his place of origin, which was Wuhan (Wang 2020). As fear and suspicion spread, Wuhan migrants—regardless of their infection status—became targets of stigma, facing a form of intra-ethnic racism across China.

To cross the border into Beijing’s suburbs, Ge jokingly considered purchasing a canoe with a paddle online and launching an art project to ‘smuggle himself in’ via a river (though he never carried it out). Eventually, he found an alternative by relocating to Songzhuang (宋庄), an artist enclave on the outskirts of Beijing. Though technically still part of the municipality, Songzhuang was far from the city centre, but Ge continued to face precarity and the threat of expulsion there (Strafella 2024). His monthly rent for a two-bedroom unit rose to RMB2,500 (US\$350) (Wang 2021).

Social anthropologist Xiang Biao once observed that, since China’s market-oriented social reform, *hukou* has become a significant issue, primarily when migrants seek to settle permanently in cities and require access to formal education for their children, public sector employment, or land and homeownership (Xiang 2005: x). While each *danwei* may no longer function as comprehensively as in the past, many still maintain their own housing, childcare, schools, clinics, shops, canteens, and postal services. As a result, the influence of a *danwei* on the life of an individual—and even a family—remains substantial (Zhang and Chai 2014: 80), especially for young migrants struggling to put down roots and escape uncertainty. From one’s hometown to Beijing, ‘transient migration’ is meant to be ‘short-lived, ephemeral, leaving minimal marks in the local society’ (Xiang 2017: 3). Thus, ‘little energy is invested in systemic changes here and now, as people keep moving without an end in sight’ (Xiang 2021: 234). The condition, Xiang argues, is both ‘structurally compelled’ and ‘self-inflicted’, which partly explains ‘why we see tremendous entrepreneurial energy in daily life in China but few bottom-up initiatives for social and political change’ (Xiang 2021: 234).

Ge once considered leaving China but changed his mind after participating in art residencies in South Korea, Thailand, and Austria in 2018 and 2019. The international exposure made him realise that his artistic practice depends deeply on China’s social, political, and institutional context. Outside China, his works were often simplified as acts of ‘civic protest’ or expressions of a ‘young Chinese dissident’ (Gao 2017)—a framing that disappointed him, as he simply wished to be known as an ‘artist’. One of his works,



Figure 8 (Left): Ge Yulu, *Eye Contact* (video recording provided by a security guard showing the artist's face), performance, Beijing, 2016. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune. Figure 9 (Left): Ge Yulu, *Eye Contact*, performance, Beijing, 2016. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.



Eye Contact, was quickly embraced by international audiences. To create it in 2016, Ge wandered through Beijing in search of a suitable CCTV camera in a public space. Once he found one, he stared into it until the operator came out to confront him. Ge then offered a bribe in exchange for the footage in which his face appeared. The resulting work gives the impression of Ge sharing an intimate gaze not with an adversary, but with a kind of 'big brother'. In Ge's own words in an interview with me: 'That makes me feel romantic.'

Thanks to being radically tamed, Ge now views some intentionally confrontational artworks as fragile; once the targets or contexts they challenge disappear, their meaning can wither away. As a result, he rhetorically declares a preference for being 'resistant', with dark humour, and takes the necessity of being 'compromised' for granted. Once an emerging avant-garde figure who gained sudden attention from and brought excitement to the art world, Ge's turn towards 'mild resistance' has led some radical peers to view him as 'slippery', 'idolised', and 'prematurely established' (Anonymous 2021).

Beginning in 2018, Ge shifted from unpredictable, provocative interventions to more thoughtful, pleasing, and entertaining engagements within art institutions. In many cases, institutions welcomed

these standardised performances—commissioning and permitting them to showcase their openness, generosity, and self-critical stance. In this context, Ge was afforded the privilege of being a 'silly artist' or prankster—someone who could prod institutional boundaries, disturb surface-level harmony, and make a slightly different sound without truly threatening the system.

In *Cost Performance* (2018), Ge audited the accounts of an art space and presented the work at Taikang Space. He presented the exhibition's itemised spending on a live scrolling screen, revealing a stark discrepancy between the institution's budget (RMB183,550; US\$28,500) and real expenditure (RMB 44,021.50; US\$7,000). While institutions typically invite artists and organise exhibitions, in China, it is often the artists who must meet the costs—submitting a series of invoices to later be reimbursed. The claims process—gathering eligible receipts, sorting paperwork, filling out forms, and preparing a patient smile—can be exhausting, tedious, and needlessly complex. Some artists eventually give up. This widespread experience has sparked a bitter joke: 'exhibition-made poverty' (展览致贫).

Ge designed *Cost Performance* to expose this structural inequity and successfully pressured the institution to promptly reimburse a group of artists during

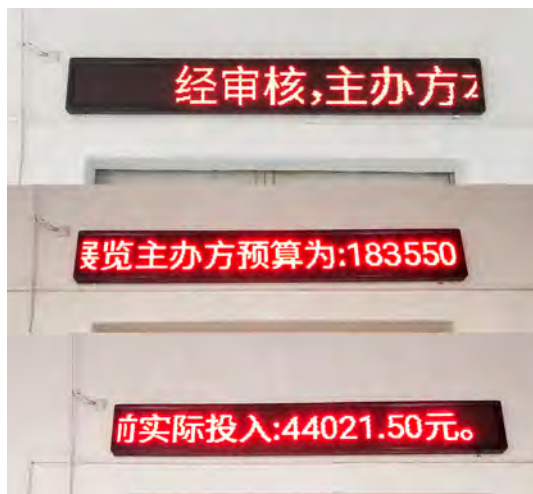


Figure 10: Ge Yulu, *Cost Performance*, performance, Taikang Space in Beijing, 2018. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.



Figure 11: Ge Yulu, *Cool*, performance commissioned by Fei Museum, Guangzhou, 2018. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.

the show. Despite this, the work remained a sanctioned installation or performance—an institutional collaboration. The real-world dynamics, of course, are far more difficult to change.

Also in 2018, during the scorching summer in Guangzhou, Ge carried out a commissioned work titled *Cool*, hosted by Fei Museum. The performance cast him in the role of a ‘privileged prick’ who continuously hassled museum staff and wasted resources in the name of art. For this 24-hour piece, Ge instructed the staff to ensure that he did not sweat—not once. The staff were obliged to follow the artist’s orders, no matter how absurd the request or how difficult the logistics, turning the performance into a satire of authority, privilege, and institutional compliance.

Ge arrived in Guangzhou from Beijing wearing thick makeup and formal business attire, playing the part of an important person—a parody of state officials or corporate elites. Museum staff and volunteers picked him up at the airport and escorted him around the city: visiting the museum, delivering a public speech, and attending parties. To fulfil his command that he ‘could not produce a bead of sweat’, a support team always surrounded him with a large umbrella, a generator, electric fans, and blocks of ice. He ate a warm lunch in an icehouse and was driven into the museum in a car packed with ice. The entire

project was livestreamed on popular social media platforms and projected on three giant screens in the museum’s main hall.

From late 2020 to early 2021, Ge collaborated again with Fei Museum, this time proposing a six-month project in which he would serve as an alternative staff member. The idea was to reward each museum employee with a one-week holiday, during which Ge would take over their duties. He documented his daily work and later exhibited the records in both solo and group shows. His growing disenchantment with the museum—as part of a culture industry that produces elitist spectacles—was captured in the headline: ‘Even artist Ge Yulu was trapped inside the system like an average corporate slave’ (Yao 2021).

In an interview, Ge remarked: ‘The art system is so good at weaving fantasy, and the institutions use this skill to disguise practical and realistic problems’ (Yao 2021). He also organised public conversations with young art professionals to discuss the labour conditions behind these ‘fantastic’ institutions. Many of the idealistic youth, he noted, had once been ‘enchanted’ by the fantasy that drew them into the system, only to become ‘institutional slaves’. Eventually, many dropped out after being confronted with what Ge called the ‘bloody truth’ (Yao 2021).



Figure 12: Seminar titled 'Art Slaves: From "Interns" to "Drop-outs"', organised by Ge Yulu at Fei Museum in 2020 as part of his One-Week Holiday project. Source: 扉美术馆[Fei Museum].

An Artistic Suicide?

The significance of Ge's institutional critique has often been measured against his earlier socially engaged practices. When his gallery, Beijing Commune, presented his second solo show, *This One is a Painting, So is That One* (一幅是画, 另一幅也是画), in 2021, Ge abandoned his signature performance art in favour of exhibiting about 30 of his miniature paintings, each priced between RMB20,000 and RMB30,000 (US\$3,100–4,700). He described

the act as an 'artistic suicide' (艺术自杀) because, as he openly admitted, he had created the works for money (Liu 2021).

Founded in 2005 in the Beijing 798 Art District, Beijing Commune is a commercial gallery known for representing some of the most expensive and internationally recognised Chinese artists, including Zhang Xiaogang, Richard Deacon, Yin Xiuzhen, and Song Dong (Ge's former professor/supervisor at CAFA). It was established by literary theorist Leng Lin, who was formally affiliated with the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and was



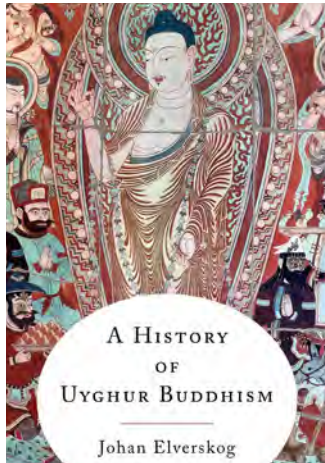
Figure 13: Ge Yulu, *The Cross-Shaped Prismatic Triangle Plaster*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, wood frame, engraved brass plate, 50 × 50 cm. Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune.

handpicked by the influential American art dealer Arne Glimcher, founder of Pace Gallery, to launch Pace Beijing (2008–19) in 798 (Anonymous 2019a). Beijing Commune’s decision to represent a performance artist such as Ge appears, at first glance, to run counter to its market-oriented logic.

Rendered in a standard realist style, Ge’s paintings showcased the foundational techniques required of high school students and adult candidates preparing for entrance exams to art schools in China. The irony embedded in the exhibition was pointed: many of China’s most celebrated—and expensive—painters

shared this same mechanical, repetitive training, rooted in awkward imitation. Through these works, Ge sought to evoke the collective trauma of Chinese art education. Yet, the controversy surrounding his so-called ‘artistic suicide’ stemmed from his choice of medium and form. As Ge himself acknowledged, ‘Paintings are undoubtedly much easier to sell than conceptual performances and videos’ (Liu 2021). By being so transparent about his financial motivations, Ge was labelled ‘sophisticated’, ‘pragmatic’, ‘money-driven’, and even ‘boring’ (Anonymous 2021). His critics began to question the sustainability of his talent. For Ge, however, this shift marked a return—not to *Ge Yu Lu* the artwork, but to the real Ge Yulu. ■

CONVERSATIONS



A History of Uyghur Buddhism
(Columbia University Press, 2024)

A History of Uyghur Buddhism

A Conversation with Johan Elverskog

Sam H. BASS, Johan ELVERSKOG

In the past decades, the Uyghurs in China have become known as an oppressed minority in their homeland, today's Xinjiang. Islam and Islamophobia are central to that story, but visitors to Xinjiang and students of Uyghur history know that there is another, lesser-known, Buddhist history and culture of the Uyghurs, which remain visible in museums and grottoes in the oases of southern Xinjiang. Johan Elverskog's *A History of Uyghur Buddhism* (Columbia University Press, 2024) is the first English-language book-length study of that pre-Islamic history. The author uses the rich corpus of Uyghur-language texts, artwork, and material objects to demonstrate how the Buddhist Uyghur world came into being and thrived in the multi-confessional religious landscape of medieval Central Asia. The study is situated between the Buddhicisation and Islamisation of the Tarim Basin, offering probing insights into questions of conversion and agency, with an eye on the implications for the histories of China, Central Asia, the Mongol Empire, and Buddhism itself.

Sam Bass: This book has been a long time in the making. You published the reference catalogue *Uyghur Buddhist Literature* in 1997 with Brepols and have returned to the subject more than 20 years later. Your work in the meantime has touched on medieval Uyghur-relevant regions and themes. How have works such as *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) and *The Buddha's Footprint* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020) shaped the questions you ask in *A History of Uyghur Buddhism*?

Johan Elverskog: Yes, it's certainly been a while since that first book, and no doubt much has happened in the intervening quarter of a century. However, as you rightly point out, both those other works invariably revolved around the Uyghurs simply because they live in the proverbial crossroads of Eurasia. Yet, at the same time, neither one of those works dealt with the Uyghurs in any sustained or explicit way. Even so, many of the basic questions that shaped both those works also drive the intellectual framing of *A History of Uyghur Buddhism*.

The first is my interest not only in integrating Inner Asia into the broader narrative of Asian history, but also in using that integration to develop new historiographical frameworks for writing history. Of course, as such, my work has been inspired by the move away from national histories and towards transregional frameworks such as those on the Atlantic and Indian ocean worlds. Thus, exploring the meeting of Buddhism and Islam from Iran to China provided such a framework,

as did studying how Buddhists engaged with the natural world across Asia—from Afghanistan to Japan and Sri Lanka to Siberia. And, on account of their location in the middle of Eurasia, it is the same with the Uyghur involvement with the Dharma since they linked Central, South, and East Asia. Uyghur Buddhist history thus affords us a new perspective on how to think about Asian history beyond the conventional perspectives of China or India or what-have-you that still dominate the academic field of history.

And tied into this historiographical reorientation is the second major component of my work, which is the notion that religion matters. Of course, the secular academy—built on the edifice of secularisation, modernisation, and developmental theory—is in general unprepared to think about religion, and this is woefully true of historians. A 2009 survey by the American Historical Association, for example, revealed that only 3 per cent of professional historians focus on religion, which seems like a grievous dereliction of duty. In the case of Buddhism, for example, one can read whole libraries of books on Asian history and rarely see mention of the Dharma. The absurdity of this lapse should be obvious to historians: Buddhism is the only tradition that spread all over Asia in the premodern period and, in so doing, it came to dominate Asian economic, sociocultural, and political discourses for almost 2,000 years.

And it is this fact that is the third element that shapes all my work—namely, on account of this reality, one must ask: how has Buddhism shaped Asian history? These three issues were the central driving themes of both *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* and *The Buddha's Footprint*, and it's the same with *A History of Uyghur Buddhism*. The Uyghurs resided at the centre of Eurasia and linked multiple worlds: China and the West, the steppe and the sown, China and Tibet, as well as the Buddhist and Muslim worlds. As a result, my hope is that, by exploring the history of Uyghur Buddhism and its place in Asian history, we can understand both better.

SB: The book begins with a pre-script, an excerpt from imprisoned Uyghur author Perhät Tursun's *The Backstreets*, in which the author intentionally stymies a Chinese bureaucrat and reflects that his existence as a Uyghur who exercises agency may be the bureaucrat's 'greatest source of frustration'. In the book, you neither dwell on the present situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang nor explicitly connect the history of Uyghur Buddhism to the current persecution of Turkic Muslims, but the inclusion of the pre-script shows that you were thinking about it. How is the history of Uyghur Buddhism relevant to contemporary Uyghurs and Xinjiang?

JE: I included that pre-script because the current situation was very much on my mind. Indeed, I went back to this topic—which I hadn't worked on for more than 20 years—since I felt it was a moral imperative to do something in the context of the ongoing cultural genocide. And, although it may sound grandiose and ridiculous in relation to the horrors that the Uyghurs are now facing, I felt that writing such a book—and documenting this chapter of their history—was essential in

thwarting to some degree the Chinese Communist Party's unrelenting machine of cultural destruction and historical obfuscation. As such, anyone concerned about the situation in Xinjiang and who wants a better understanding of the Uyghurs and their history would be well served in reading this book.

The question of whether it is relevant to contemporary Uyghurs and Xinjiang as a whole is more difficult to answer. Clearly, Muslims in northwest China have more pressing issues at hand. Moreover, some Uyghurs are ambivalent about this Buddhist past. One young Uyghur lamented to me years ago about how both the West's and the Chinese State's glorification of Uyghur Buddhist culture came at the expense of their Islamic history and current realities. And this tension is captured in the fact that, at the same time as the Chinese Communist Party is running internment camps, they have also recently refurbished the main history museum in Ürümqi with an emphasis on the China-driven multi-ethnic past. Of course, this is all part of a whole—as Orwell put it in 1984: 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.' Thus, my answer to the question of the relevance of this work to contemporary Uyghurs would be that this is their history, and it must be preserved before everything is distorted and lost.

SB: You say that Uyghur Buddhism was 'freewheeling' in nature because it was relatively disconnected from political power in the Uyghur Empire. You make a comparison between the Buddhism of the Uyghur Empire and Buddhism in the modern West, where people are 'free to do what they want with the tradition'. This idea is romantic but not in the way the Silk Road is usually romanticised, as a network of camel caravans creating premodern globalisation and forging connections between eastern and western Eurasia. Instead, your characterisation of Uyghur Buddhism reminds me of the anarchist histories of the late James C. Scott; there was a community of people who found a way to create and sustain a world of their own making, despite being surrounded by top-down, centralised states and ideologies. Then, it all changed because a powerful, centralising state engulfed them: the Mongol Empire. Contrary to popular ideas of religious tolerance in the Mongol Empire, you point out that its incorporation of Uyghurs stifled freewheeling Uyghur Buddhism, putting post-Mongol conquest Uyghur Buddhism on the path of the state-centred religious traditions of the Tibetan or Tangut empires. What are the implications of this narrative arc of Uyghur Buddhism for the study of Buddhism more generally? Much recent scholarship on Buddhism in Inner Asia ties religion to political power; how do your conclusions on Uyghur Buddhism intervene in that scholarship?

JE: Thank you for making that connection with Jim Scott's work, which was certainly in the background of my thinking. In fact, several years ago, I gave a talk titled 'An Anarchist History of the Silk Road' at a borderlands conference in Chiang Mai where Jim was the keynote speaker, and thus, while drinking whiskey, we talked about these issues. So, yes, you're right that Uyghur Buddhism initially had this 'romantic' pirate element, which is really what makes it distinctive and interesting. And, as such, especially on account of the pervasive link between the Dharma and political power in recent scholarship, pointing this out is something like a riposte or a call for a reorientation.

In doing so, however, it is also important to keep in mind that this recent focus on Buddhism and politics is certainly not a problem. Rather, it was an important re-evaluation of the modern construction of Buddhism as being ‘apolitical’ and lacking ‘economic rationality’ that goes back to Max Weber and other scholars of the nineteenth century. Indeed, as noted above, all my work has been trying to dismantle this paradigm by putting Buddhism into Asian economic and political history. Nevertheless, as you rightly note, the Uyghurs’ attempt at a free-wheeling Dharma did not last. It eventually came to an end with their incorporation into the Mongol Great State, whereby the Dharma became deeply imbricated with imperial power. Thus, the counterpoint and transition between these two forms of Uyghur Buddhism give us something to think about regarding what Buddhism is or was or can be in relation to state power. And this is not only in terms of elucidating the history of medieval Inner Asia, but also regarding contemporary realities in countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and China.

SB: In Chapter 4, you describe the significance of the now-famous grottoes—for example, in Bezeklik—which were sites of pilgrimage. The way you describe the significance of patronage and visitation, which are legible to us through the artwork and graffiti, reminds me of Rian Thum’s description of Islamic shrine pilgrimage around the Tarim Basin. Is this a case of a Uyghur cultural or religious tradition that travelled from Manichaeism to Buddhism to Islam? Or does each religious tradition have pilgrimage rituals that end up looking similar in the context of the Tarim Basin and western China’s geography?

JE: The geography of the Tarim Basin and its limited ecology certainly play a role in the similarity between these practices. Moreover, as with all religious conversions, there were invariably all kinds of continuities and reinscriptions of sites and stories during the transition from Buddhism to Islam. Or, as with the act of confessing one’s sins, there was similarly a transmutation that happened when the Uyghurs abandoned Manichaeism in favour of Buddhism. In fact, several scholars, including Rian, have explored how Buddhist caves and stories were reformulated into Islamic ones, the most famous example being the Buddhist cave temples at Toyuq that became a Sufi shrine dedicated to the ‘Seven Sleepers’ of Islamic hagiography. And while such transformations are certainly interesting and important to know, a more profound linkage regarding the history of Uyghur pilgrimage relates to your question above. Namely, just as Rian showed how Islamic pilgrimage became a vehicle for forging a Uyghur—or Altishari—identity, the same dynamic was clearly operating in the Buddhist case. Which again is interesting and important to recognise; however, the most crucial aspect to note is that both were also largely done outside any direct state-building project. This may help explain why Uyghur culture, history, and language have survived for more than a millennium and may even give us a glimmer of hope that they will continue to do so into the future. ■



Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China (Amsterdam University Press, 2025)

Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China

A Conversation with Ting Guo

Yihuan ZHANG, Ting GUO

Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China (Amsterdam University Press, 2025) examines how the language of love (愛 *ai*) has been appropriated and politicised by Chinese political leaders throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to legitimise authority, mobilise emotion, and shape state ideology. The book traces a genealogy from Sun Yat-sen's idealistic articulation of *bo'ai* (博爱, universal love), through Mao Zedong's emotionally charged *re'ai* (热爱, ardent love) that energised revolutionary commitment, to Xi Jinping's deployment of parental love as a means of naturalising authoritarian familial nationalism. These evolving emotional discourses are situated within broader transitions across religious, secular, and postsecular frameworks. In addition to mainland narratives, one chapter turns to post-Handover Hong Kong, analysing how gendered tropes of motherly and fatherly governance are used to manage dissent and reinforce state power. This study offers a critical intervention in the cultural politics of emotion, affective governance, and political religion in modern China.

Yihuan Zhang: Your book offers a compelling genealogy of love as a political discourse, showing how notions such as *bo'ai* (博爱, referring to a morally idealistic and inclusive love, rooted in Mohist and Christian-socialist thought, used by Sun Yat-sen to articulate a cosmopolitan nationalism), *re'ai* (热爱, denoting an emotionally intense, sacrificial devotion, especially toward Mao and the revolutionary cause, functioning as the affective core of Maoist political religion), and parental love (a gendered, hierarchical metaphor that frames state authority as benevolent parenting, used in the Xi era to legitimise authoritarian governance through familial nationalism) have been mobilised to shape modern Chinese political authority through emotionally charged, quasi-theological narratives. What stands out is your demonstration of the deep entanglement of ostensibly secular ideologies such as nationalism, communism, and developmentalism and affective structures that closely resemble religious forms of devotion, sacrifice, and moral obligation. How does religious studies, especially ideas of secularism and post-secularism, inform your analytical framework and influence our understanding of the role of emotion in shaping modern political life?

Ting Guo: Secularism remains a prevalent framework across disciplines to define the fundamental characteristics of modern societies. The secular framework inherits the Enlightenment idea of intellectual progress, Max Weber's notions of disenchantment and rationalisation,

Peter Berger's secularisation theory, and so on. In other words, it follows the development of Western society, Western Protestantism, and intellectual history in which religion is defined by the Western Protestant model. This model was brought to intellectuals and reformers around the world through imperial expansions, and certain belief systems began to be recognised as 'superstitions' while Indigenous expressions and understandings of religion were abandoned and marginalised.

As such, the secular framework is often applied in contrast with cultural Others—most notably Islamic societies that are considered not as modern, democratic, or civilised because they are not secular but religious (Islamic). Responding to what he considered to be challenges posed by Islam—both religious fundamentalism and the so-called 'Muslim question' in Europe—Habermas proposed the concept of post-secularism, suggesting that religious groups, particularly minorities, will continue to play a relevant role in Western secular democracies. This view of secularism and post-secularism has been challenged by scholars such as Edward Said and Talal Asad, and especially decolonial feminist Islamic scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood.

However, notions of religion and the secular in China also follow the Western Protestant genealogy and its discontent with cultural Others. In fact, the very discourse of 'religion' in East Asia (宗教 *shūkyō* or *zongjiao*)—which emerged during the nineteenth century as East Asia struggled under Western imperialism—was invented by diplomats, intellectuals, and reformers and developed alongside other Western concepts such as freedom, science, and democracy. 'Religion' has since come to be recognised almost exclusively as Protestant Christianity while native religious practices in East Asia, including those of ethnic minorities (Islam, for instance), are negated as incompatible with modernity. In the field of Chinese religions, recent scholarship has also shown that religion, in its diffused, customary, implicit forms, has been a core element of Chinese modernity and modern governance since the Nationalist regime (Nedostup 2010), communist revolutions (Kang 2023), and economic development (Yang 2020), offering refreshing decolonial and feminist perspectives.

Decolonial feminist Islamic studies resonates with me the most because I observe not only the Orientalisation and negation of Chinese religions by the West but also self-Orientalisation and instrumentalisation of Chinese religions in China today. The decolonial project in this context should be 'double decolonisation' (Guo 2024). So, bringing together decolonial feminist Islamic studies, the study of Chinese religions, and the recent affective turn in religious studies, my book tries to show that post-secularism should be conceptualised not chronologically as what occurs after secularism but as a critical reflection of how we have never been secular. Religion has played a central and complex role in processes of modernisation, democratisation, authoritarianism, and many dimensions of social and political life across many societies—even in those that appear secular or claim to be so. It is in this context that the book contributes to current debates on affective governance and religious nationalism around the world.

YZ: In your work, you trace how love has been continually redefined, evolving from a Confucian ethical relation to a revolutionary affect under Mao Zedong and, more recently, to a mode of nationalised sentiment, particularly under Xi Jinping. What strikes me is the dual function that *ai* has come to serve: both moralising and mobilising. It shapes gender norms, regulates private emotions, and reinforces state authority. This leads me to wonder to what extent the affective vocabulary of *ai* retains the capacity for resistance or rupture. In other words, can love in China today still function as a subversive force?

TG: Thank you so much for the insightful summary and question. I was only able to touch upon this slightly in the conclusion, and it eventually became a separate article, entitled ‘Sisters, Friends, Strangers: Queering the Political Discourse of Love’ (forthcoming in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*). Precisely because the state has been emphasising a language of love based on and for the promotion of heteropatriarchal ethnonationalism, love has remained a powerful political discourse. Ordinary citizens have adopted and reinterpreted this discourse in their own ways, using it to make sense of their political and social realities, and to either support or challenge official policies. In so doing, they have generated new, creative, and ever-evolving visions of love—such as sisterhood, local and transnational solidarities, and alternative forms of political belongings.

We saw this most strikingly during the White Paper Movement of 2022, when a poster that appeared on the campus of the University of California, Irvine stated: ‘Love not the nation but ourselves, our friends, our chosen family, the Great Earth, and freedom; Not your patriot; Stand with Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, Iranians, Ukrainians; Stand with people of the whole world against autocracy, oppression, and violence.’ We also saw it in Hong Kong during the Occupy Central movement of 2014, when the official name of the Occupy Central movement was ‘Occupy Central with love and peace’, and then again since 2019, when ‘We fucking love Hong Kong’ (我哋真係好攞鍾意香港 *ngo die zan hai hou len zung ji heung gong*) became a popular protest art and Internet meme. Note that in the second case, the expression in Cantonese uses a different word for love, 鍾意 (*zung ji*), rather than *ai*. As Gina Anne Tam points out in her *Dialect and Nationalism in China* (2020), Mandarin represents a unified official language and a homogeneous Chinese identity, and the conscious choice of using a ‘dialect’ rather than the ‘official language’ to express their love for Hong Kong was an act against *ai*, an inherently political discourse.

In my forthcoming article, I use *queering love* as a framework to emphasise not only the social bonds of activists through a discourse of love that subverts top-down heteropatriarchal politics and state-sanctioned expressions of love, but also the constant movements, negotiations, divergences, and differences within such subversions and among activists themselves.

YZ: Your second chapter offers a compelling account of Soong Ching-ling's lifelong devotion to socialism, portraying it as both an intellectual conviction and a deeply emotional, embodied commitment, which you describe as a labour of love. I was especially struck by your framing of Soong's socialism as rooted in a personal, affective ethic of *bo'ai*, even when it diverged from the official line of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This raises a broader question: to what extent can political legitimacy be grounded in love, care, or emotional attachment rather than formal institutional authority or ideological conformity? Building on that, is *bo'ai*, as both a theological and a political language, still a viable framework for imagining political belonging and resistance in contemporary China, or has it been fully absorbed into state discourse?

TG: Although not exactly in the expression or language of *bo'ai*, but the essence of this concept, 'universal love', still provides a viable framework for contemporary political belonging and resistance in two ways: the collaborations and solidarity among different groups within China, and the transnational connections across different societies. Contemporary social movements are often transnational. The #Milk-TeaAlliance, #MeToo movement, and @queers_feminists_4_palestine are all excellent examples.

In their practice of *bo'ai*, contemporary feminist and queer activists transform the fraternal interpretation of solidarity and the abstract sameness of the May Fourth Movement and early communist renditions of *bo'ai* by engaging with personal stories in relation to each other, to reorient the conversation in a way that serves meaningful solidarity, rather than coming together only on points of agreement. Compared with forms of internationalism in the early twentieth century that aimed to abolish the state and the bourgeoisie in a socialist-versus-capitalist approach, feminist and queer activists recognise the source of oppression in authoritarianism, heteropatriarchy, and ethnonationalism in both socialist and capitalist states, since imperialism can manifest in multiple forms today as China asserts itself as a global power. In other words, they have queered internationalism as contemporary transnational alliances by claiming intersectional identities from multiple, collaborative forms of oppression with emotional repairation.

This intersectional aspect of *bo'ai* also attends to minor transnationalism, including the transnationally marginalised individuals and communities under Western and non-Western powers as shown in the White Paper Movement and the grassroots transnationalism of migrant workers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the migrant solidarity committee, autonomous 8a (2022) highlighted the transnational nature of Sinophone societies in terms not of global capitalism but of domestic migrant workers' networks of care. The voices of migrant workers draw attention to the frequently overlooked bottom-up transnationalism of Sinophone societies facing authoritarianism and the continuous transnational effort to dismantle not only political hegemonies but also the global capitalist economy, racial hierarchy, and gendered social and labour relations.



Happy Family, 快乐的家庭 Source: (PC-1954-024, chinese posters.net, Private collection).

YZ: Your analysis highlights how both Mao and Xi have employed the discourse of love in their political governance, each with distinct inflections and strategies. From a gender perspective, could you elaborate on how Mao's use of love within the revolutionary collectivist framework compares with Xi's reinvention of 'parental love' grounded in Confucian patriarchy? How do these different constructions of love influence political authority and subject formation, particularly in relation to gender roles and expectations? Furthermore, in what ways does Xi's framing of love as filial obedience and familial harmony reinforce or transform gendered power relations differently from Mao's more mobilising, yet still gendered, revolutionary rhetoric?

TG: While both leaders' use of love is paternalistic, Mao's political discourses of love, even though rooted in traditional religions, had socialist and revolutionary undertones. Xi, however, is the first Chinese leader to incorporate traditional rhetoric into official speeches—a practice I describe in the book as 'reinvented traditionalism'. This occurs in a neoliberal, post-socialist China, where ideas about feminism and gender equality have also undergone significant transformation.

Mao's discourse of love (*re'ai*) drew on deeply gendered vernacular symbolism and traditional beliefs, framing political love as a form of spiritual salvation bestowed by a leader who embodied a cosmic force. This use of familiar religious language and imagery made the CCP's revolutionary agenda more accessible and rendered affective political devotion to Mao more intuitive for the masses. Ironically, the Maoist era was marked by revolutionary campaigns to dissociate traditional religion and Confucian morality from peasant life and to establish a new national myth of liberation under the leadership of the CCP. However, these campaigns did not necessarily accomplish the Party's supposed goals of eradicating superstition and achieving secularisation but relied on the same language and gender imagery embedded in traditional Chinese religions to construct a new political religion.

Xi has added a human touch to the Maoist personality cult—the human touch of familial love. President Xi is celebrated in official propaganda as a loving husband, a family man, a filial son, as well as the supreme leader. Xi's restoration of the Confucian patriarchy has occurred in a digital era that celebrates the romanticisation and commercialisation of personal relationships. The digital strategy that presents *Xi Dada* as the ideal husband and perfect leader is occurring at a time when the language of love has become commonplace in both the private sphere and state propaganda. The traditionalist discourse of love also reconfigures and reinterprets the official Marxist ideology in the neoliberal, non-revolutionary context, justifying China's trajectory of development as distinct from the West with a cultural explanation that also conveniently legitimises ethnonationalist, patriarchal politics towards women, ethnic minorities, and dissidents.

YZ: Your book highlights how the political discourse of love in modern China is closely linked to authoritarian parental governance, rooted in Confucian filial ethics, and shaped into a hetero-patriarchal nationalism under Xi Jinping's leadership. In Hong Kong, this manifests through gendered narratives in which leaders assume parental roles to frame citizens as children in need of discipline and control. Could you elaborate on how this gendered discourse functions within Xi's model of familial nationalism? Specifically, how does this notion of parental love shape political subjectivities in Hong Kong, particularly among gendered and marginalised groups? Within this framework of care and control, how do Hongkongers resist or redefine their political identity beyond the role of obedient children of the nation?

TG: The reinvented traditionalism in contemporary China demands a patriarchal norm under a traditional cultural framework in which a strongman should lead the family, community, and nation. Women and all sorts of minorities feel such changes more acutely, whether it's the mandatory cooling-off period before divorce, the one-child, two-child, and three-child policies, the crackdown on feminist, queer, labour, and other grassroots activism, or women being exoticised to showcase China's ethnic harmony or even subjected to sexual violence. Such policies and politics are justified by the familial framework as

the official discourse celebrates the state as a family for all, saying that people should love the leader and the nation as parents and women should return to the family.

Familial nationalism is certainly not unique to China. For instance, Queen Elizabeth II was widely referred to as ‘the nation’s grandmother’ or even ‘everyone’s grandmother’—a phenomenon critiqued as ‘familial imperialism’ (see, for instance, Gullace et al. 2023). In authoritarian contexts however, familial nationalism permeates and dominates the public sphere by means of what I call ‘parental governance’. In the case of China, this type of governance employs a Confucian framework to justify casting political relationships in familial terms, thereby constructing political actors as either filial dependants or firm but benevolent parent-officials. Critiques of the state therefore put dissenters in the position of juvenile dependants appealing for parental recognition.

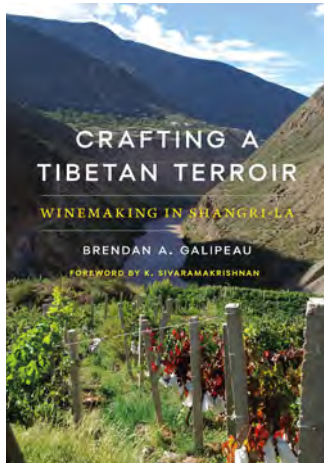
The politics of love in Hong Kong manifests in regional leaders’ parental discourses of their relationship to citizens as children requiring discipline. It is also evident in slogans incorporating the language of love such as ‘Love China, love Hong Kong’ (愛國愛港) and ‘Patriots administering Hong Kong’ (愛國者治港). Coming from a place of familial intimacy, such discourses justify and reinforce the heteropatriarchal nature of authoritarianism under the discourse of love. For instance, Hong Kong’s former Chief Executive Carrie Lam most (in) famously referred to herself as a mother who loved her children too much to indulge their demands when addressing the 2019 protests (see Guo 2022). Hong Kong’s current Chief Executive, John Lee, also shed tears for the ‘sacrifices’ of his wife at the speech he gave upon his appointment, which coincided with Mother’s Day (Sing Tao Daily 2022). On that occasion, he stated that he considered himself as ‘representing all fathers and husbands in Hong Kong’ in ‘shouldering the responsibility for the family’—this family being all Hong Kong. Lee’s explicitly parental and patriarchal analogy was similar to those used by Xi. He has also remarked that he would introduce women to young men from mainland China to help them get married, have children, and settle in Hong Kong.

The parental analogy has been further extended to the relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland, as Lee has repeatedly said in public speeches that Hong Kong should act as the filial child of China. Following his example, Hong Kong’s current Cabinet has also been using this analogy. The chairperson of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (TDC) described Hong Kong as ‘a beautiful daughter’ to China, with ‘numerous advantages’ such as adherence to common law, the free flow of capital, and a low-tax regime. In a similar manner, the Chief Secretary for Administration, commenting on how members of the prodemocracy camp were not allowed to qualify as candidates in the new district council elections, stated that individuals who had previously engaged in ‘anti-China’ activities in Hong Kong could still

have a chance to run for election if they genuinely repent: ‘When a child makes a mistake and apologises to their parents, the parents need to observe whether the child has truly reformed over a long period’ (TVB News 2023).

Such a patronising tone met with strong reactions from people who were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with this kind of political language. Carrie Lam’s tearful parenting analogy was deemed ‘clumsy’, and at least 44,000 women signed a petition demanding an apology. Large rallies were organised to protest Lam’s patronising tone as well as the police brutality unleashed under her leadership, with the demonstrators calling for a responsible and accountable leader rather than a mother.

To challenge the patronising hegemony inherent in official discourses on love and family, protestors also reclaimed love for Hong Kong in their own language instead, such as the aforementioned Cantonese cursing slang ‘We fucking love Hong Kong’. Love remains a versatile and powerful political discourse to re-enchant affective politics for local and transnational activism and redefine community, identity, and belonging. ■



Crafting a Tibetan Terroir: Winemaking in Shangri-La
(University of Washington Press, 2024).

Crafting a Tibetan Terroir

A Conversation with Brendan Galipeau

Dechen PEMBA, Brendan A. GALIPEAU

In *Crafting a Tibetan Terroir: Winemaking in Shangri-La* (University of Washington Press, 2024), Brendan Galipeau takes readers to the Sino-Tibetan border region rebranded as ‘Shangri-La’ by the Chinese Government to promote tourism. Drawing from his ethnographic research in the area, he shows how wine has transformed Tibetan landscapes and livelihoods. With grapes originally introduced to locals by French and Swiss Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century for making sacramental wine, today’s commercial wine production reflects how Tibetans are indigenising modernity and engaging with economic development on their own terms.

Dechen Pemba: There is a very evocative quote from your introduction that has stayed with me: ‘Drinking wine can be like tasting history, and doing so may summon memories and sensations. Wine can evoke feelings about place, weather, land, and human relations. Wine may speak to politics and global relations between nations and cultures.’ How did you come to Tibet and the topic of viticulture?

Brendan Galipeau: I came to study viticulture in the Tibetan areas of northwest Yunnan sort of by accident. I first began travelling to the region in 2007 as an undergraduate student in Environmental Science while taking part in a two-month ecological and cultural field studies program in northern Thailand, southwest China, and Tibet. I returned to the region the following year to work for a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and then again in several other capacities over the ensuing years. I heard about and saw vineyards and grape growing on that first trip and several times afterwards, but I didn’t really become thoroughly interested in the topic until 2011, when I was conducting research for a master’s thesis on the impacts of dam resettlement on a Tibetan farming community living along the banks of the Mekong River.

At that time, as I was conducting interviews and surveys about household economies and agriculture, it became clear that grapes and viticulture were rapidly changing people’s livelihoods and traditional agropastoral modes of living. This was how I came to study viticulture and wine, first, for my dissertation and then for the book. The more I dug into this topic, the clearer it became that the contemporary viticultural economy was tied up with questions and concerns about colonial histories, human relations with land and climate, contemporary

The Catholic church in Cizhong Village, built in 1909, with government-planted cabernet sauvignon vineyards in the foreground. Source: Brendan Galipeau.



politics, etcetera. So, it was the issue of wine and what was happening on the ground in the region that taught me how to utilise wine as an analytical tool, as exemplified in the quote you mention above.

DP: Yours is the first scholarship I have encountered that focuses specifically on Tibetan Catholic communities in Kham. This diversity within Tibetan identities is truly eye-opening, especially through the lens of wine production. It's also clear from your book that you developed deep and lasting relationships with local communities during your fieldwork. Beyond the fact that their religion is not Buddhism, was there anything that surprised you about these communities or that challenged your preconceptions of Tibetan people?

BG: The communities and households within and around Cizhong (茨中)—where much of my fieldwork took place and where, as you noted, I formed close and lasting connections—are as fascinating and complex as much of the broader northwest Yunnan region. While most families in these villages self-identify as Tibetan, some consider themselves to be Naxi, Bai, Yi, or Han Chinese. When you ask elders about the roots of this multi-ethnicity, they explain that in past centuries most families in the area were Naxi, but over time, more Tibetans migrated into the area, intermarried, and slowly the region came to be known more as Tibetan. This blending is evident in festival attire, home decorations, and even in the local Catholic church, where Tibetan influences appear in visual elements, translated Bibles and hymnals, and the use of Tibetan language in prayers and songs (Galipeau 2018). One major remaining vestige of this Naxi heritage is that, architecturally, houses are clearly a combination of Tibetan homes in Buddhist communities upstream along the Mekong, where I also spent much time, and Naxi homes downstream. In Cizhong, the lower walls of homes are painted white—a Tibetan trait—but the roofs are arched rather than flat like most Tibetan homes in the area and are constructed using wood rather than rammed earth. Catholic and Buddhist families living side by side

Children from the host family in Cizhong celebrating the grape harvest, 2014. Source: Brendan Galipeau.



is just one part of the complex hybridity of cultures and ethnicities that reside in this part of Kham, which was very surprising when I first visited given that just a few kilometres upstream towards the county seat of Dechen, communities (also all now growing grapes) are much more homogeneous in terms of traits such as architecture, language, religion, etcetera.

DP: You describe winemaking in Shangri-La as a form of ‘indigenising modernity’ and your work shows the local people adapting to and engaging in this process. Could you tell us more about this concept and why you chose it as the lens through which to understand this imported practice?

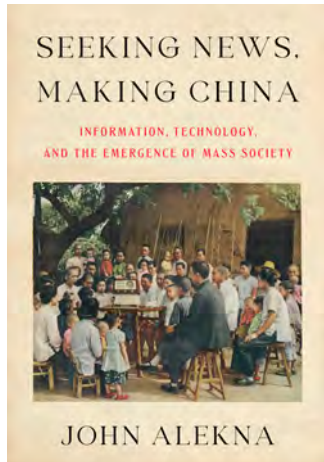
BG: This concept was originally proposed by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, and I took it up as exemplary of what was occurring with wine and viticulture in southern Kham due in part to academic genealogies. In graduate school at the University of Hawai‘i, I worked closely with Alex Golub, a student of Sahlins who would often recommend readings by him. I also find his writings on capitalism in China, Asia, and the Pacific particularly useful and important. I was especially struck by the idea of ‘indigenising modernity’ when reading the work of geographers and anthropologists Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud in their book *Frontier Livelihoods* (2015). Their analysis captured precisely the kind of adaptation and cultural change I observed taking place around wine production. In this book, they discuss how Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands in southern Yunnan Province are engaging with state economies and capitalism through activities such as cardamom cultivation, alcohol production, and other forms of local enterprise—finding ways to grow both within and beyond the structures of the Chinese and Vietnamese states on their own terms. As I explain in my book, ‘indigenising modernity’ can sometimes become a form of resistance to markets and states (as in the case of Buddhist

environmentalists and fungi collectors). For me, understanding local people's livelihoods through 'indigenising modernity' also allows for flexibility and hybridity in coping with states and markets for indigenous Tibetans. This is partly why I found the concept useful, given all the contradictions and shifting parameters and methods within the wine economy in southern Kham.

DP: While locals exercise a certain degree of agency in winemaking, the final chapter—exploring how individuals and communities resist aspects of modernity—was especially powerful. It appears that the colonial histories of the region are, to some extent, replicated in both the state-driven and the corporate-driven wine landscapes. Are local environmental efforts stemming from Buddhist ethics doomed to fail?

BG: I might be too much of an optimist, but I don't believe failure is a *fait accompli* nor imminent. When I first began spending time in this region, 'conservation' was becoming one of the prime industries alongside tourism due to the presence of transnational and domestic environmental NGOs. I thought it was an exciting time and place in which to be working precisely because these conservation projects were invested in collaborating with ethnobotanists and others in similar fields in the cultivation of local knowledge and community participation. In 2008, a state crackdown across Tibetan areas in China removed all financial and physical resources for Buddhist environmentalism. This caused a loss of footing for the movement. At least initially, this vacuum allowed viticulture to grow rapidly, driven by the state-supported Shangri-La Winery and accompanied by increased agrochemical use.

Since I completed the fieldwork for the book and in more recent years, the viticulture economy has diversified, and Shangri-La Winery no longer holds a real monopoly on grape growing. With the expansion of more foreign-influenced wineries, winemakers' priorities are more aligned with Buddhist world views about mountain deities, ecology, climate change, and other matters. Most do seem to view wine now as a product that should be made using sustainable practices. Inspired by the region's vast and evocative landscape, there is a strong desire to preserve this environment so that wine production can continue in the long term. However, while foreign influence over Chinese state practices may be more sustainable in the long term, this doesn't mean these sorts of collaborations don't come with their own forms of conflict and potential to create marginality for local Tibetan communities—a situation that I examine in detail in the book. ■



Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society (Stanford University Press, 2024).

Seeking News, Making China

A Conversation with John Alekna

Laura DE GIORGI, John ALEKNA

In *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society* (Stanford University Press, 2024), John Alekna explores how the rise of radio and the circulation of news transformed China's political and social landscape. He shows how new technologies of communication created a Chinese 'newsscape' that linked distant regions, shaped how people understood politics and community, and redefined the relationship between citizens and the state. By tracing these shifts across the twentieth century, the book reveals how media innovation and political power became deeply entwined in the making of a modern mass society.

Laura De Giorgi: One of the core arguments of your book is the idea that, when we reflect on the emergence of mass society in China in the twentieth century, we must pay attention to the interplay between social practices and technologies of communication—a fluid interaction that changes over time in what you call the 'technopolitical process'. To highlight this nexus, you have also coined the concept of 'newsscape'. Why this choice? How does this concept inform our analysis of China's path to a mass society?

John Alekna: In the simplest terms, the newsscape is the way in which new, time-sensitive information ('news') moves through society and the physical landscape. The contours of the newsscape are determined by communication technologies (telegraph, broadcasting, newspapers, roads), human behaviour (socio-religious calendars, habits, the tendency to gather), and natural geography (rivers, mountains, distance). Using this framework helps us analyse how the circulation patterns of news create power. Tracing the changes in these information circulation patterns over time, therefore, reveals changes in the political structures of society. We might say, then, that the newsscape is a snapshot of the technopolitical process in time.

This changes our understanding of the emergence of a mass society in several ways. First, we can understand mass society—which I define as a society capable of theoretically universal political, economic, and informational consumption—as one that does not emerge from war or party reorganisation alone. Shifting away from these distinctive political developments allows us to see a longer-term technological story—one that sits outside the usual litany of governments and political movements. In fact, I argue that shifts in information technology and the newsscape were chronologically prior to political transitions and stretch across supposed geographical or temporal regime disjunctures.

Technologies of news allow for new political possibilities as much as the reverse. The technopolitical process is unitary; one cannot separate the technology from the politics.

This understanding helps us decentre narratives of the rise of the nation-state or party as the primary event in China's twentieth-century sociopolitical history. The technopolitical changes I trace through changes in the newsscape show that fundamental change was occurring almost regardless of the official ideology or leadership. Thus, I write that the 'mass society' may take the form of the nation-state, a multinational empire, capitalist consumerism, or peasant communism, but it is not any of those alone. Rather, it is a form of organisation common to all.

While centring materials and technology at the expense of ideology, my framework avoids technological determinism—that is, the idea that a certain technology necessitates a *telos* towards which all societies will move. The unity of the technopolitical process also implies that politics (decisions, choices, ideas) still matters to the form, expression, and consequences of technological development. The technopolitical process is dialectical.

LDG: At the centre of your analysis of the Chinese newsscape is radio broadcasting, which you describe as a medium in which social practices connected to different communication technologies converged, going beyond the divide between the written and the aural, the urban and the rural. Do you think this centrality is somehow connected to specific aspects of Chinese society and culture?

JA: The short answer is no. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the world's population was illiterate, living in rural agrarian communities. China was not an outlier in this regard. It resembled Tsarist Russia, much of the colonised world (Africa, South Asia), and semi-colonised areas (Latin America, the Middle East). The true outlier was the industrialised West, with its extremely high literacy rates, mass political parties, widely distributed newspapers, and extensive railroad, telegraph, and steamship networks.

I would liken the case of communications to Marx's famous interpretation of culture as the superstructure built upon the base of material, economic, and class relations. In this analysis, culture is a veneer on the underlying communications structures. So, for instance, China's early modern newsscape—before the twentieth-century emergence of mass society—was much like societies at a similar level of development around the world. News was sung by itinerant singers, it was passed on market days, it was pasted up at crossroads, or passed along in letters. Plays, pamphlets, and religious festivals, bureaucratic movement, school calendars, and the agricultural cycle were key to how society learned about itself and the outside world. The China of 1919 and France of 1789 were not dissimilar in terms of their newsscapes. So, what happened in China in the twentieth century was also what Western European societies went through in the nineteenth century—what some might call 'modernisation', which is a term I purposefully avoid because of

its vagueness and teleological implications. Analysing news and technological systems offers a more concrete way of understanding this process and shows the degree to which the resulting ‘culture’ depends on the underlying structures.

China created a mass society around radio. This differed from the industrialised West, which initially built its mass society around newspapers. But this difference did not lead to fundamentally different outcomes, because China’s twentieth-century newsscape revolution was essentially intermedial, as I show. Furthermore, China’s development resembled the technopolitical path followed by other late-industrialising societies in what is today called the Global South. Very few of the changes I trace can be causally connected to ‘Chinese culture’, even if one were to assume that ‘Chinese culture’ is a historical, reified force—which I do not.

LDG: It is a common view that there were several factors—such as linguistic diversity, geographical constraints, technological underdevelopment—that hindered efficient use of the potentiality of radio broadcasting. What is wrong about this assumption?

JA: The common view is largely correct. All these things constrained the potential of radio to transform the newsscape directly. But I do not understand the ‘radio’ or ‘broadcasting’—both of which are umbrella terms for several different activities—as acting alone. Rather, they occur only within a deeply intermedial context. Text becomes speech, and then text again. Radio broadcasts transmit published reports, and small local newspapers transcribe and republish them. Because until the late 1950s broadcasting was not heard so much as read, and because so much of the wired broadcasting until the end of the Maoist era was locally controlled, language did not present as much of a problem as one might assume. Certainly, linguistic differences were a barrier, but layers of human and technological mediation made these issues less profound. Local wired broadcasting was conducted in local dialects. The introduction of standard Mandarin on the airwaves was gradual.

Though I do not interpret radio as being a unique or even independent technology, it did have characteristics that lent themselves to overcoming the problems of geography and technological underdevelopment. Compared with other countries where radio emerged as a sociopolitical force in the twentieth century, China’s newspaper circulation was exceedingly small, its railroad network miniscule (a couple of trunks lines), and roads barely passable across long distances. Telegraph and telephone connections were expensive, slow (with many relay points), and unreliable. Moreover, China was divided politically just as much as it was infrastructurally. The two points are related: the technopolitical process moves in tandem; you cannot have political development without infrastructural development. Because it passed over great distances and over political divisions, radio could overcome these problems of geography, infrastructure, and politics. I try to show

in my chapters how exactly this occurred, how information and administration passed through society, from the most important cities to the smallest villages.

LDG: You also stress the historical continuity of the technopolitical process from 1919 to the Cultural Revolution. Why this span of time? Are there any moments that you deem as turning points? And are there any moments of divergence between the two faces of this process, the technological one and the political-ideological one?

JA: In one sense, these are arbitrary dates. They are chosen as much for their historiographic and political meaning as anything else. As everyone with basic China literacy will know, the May Fourth Movement of 1919 kickstarted a movement of national revival commonly seen as the origin of modern Chinese politics and nationalist ideology. But, as I show, it took place in an informationally premodern society—one in which most people were deeply disconnected from one another and almost no-one received news in the modern, mass media sense. The entire movement comprised maybe a couple of tens of thousands of people (being extremely generous) out of a population of 400 million. On the other end of this timespan, we have the total politicisation of the Cultural Revolution, with hundreds of millions of people participating. What I try to answer in this book is how this occurred.

I hope I can be forgiven for pointing to 1923 and the introduction of broadcasting as a turning point. Although not discrete (forms of wireless transmission had preceded it), this introduction allowed for a ‘leapfrogging’ (as one article of the time put it) of what was conceived as a stage of development. In other words, China could jump from a premodern form of political-informational organisation to a hypermodern ‘mass’ one—in theory, anyway. Much of the book is concerned with the extent to which this actually occurred and how.

I find another turning point in the Japanese occupation. During this period, we find a quantum leap in the total broadcasting power and number of receiving sets in the occupied zones. Why? Well, it is not as though their policy regarding broadcasting was much different from any other regime in China or many in the world—in fact, the broadcasting model for Japan was based on the British one. Instead, what Japan had was the industrial manufacturing capacity to build radios and broadcasting stations and the wherewithal—that is, effective political control of the most populated areas—to carry out social campaigns to broaden listening. Japanese broadcasting and receiving infrastructure dominated the Chinese newsscape well into the 1950s.

Your question about divergence brings me to a rather philosophical point: I don’t believe that the political and the technological can diverge. Any technological development is necessarily a political development, in that it changes the way in which society operates or, in the case of communications, how society organises itself. This was certainly true

of radio, and it is still true of social media and the mobile communications revolution of our lifetimes. They have necessarily changed politics and society.

LDC: Last, I would like to go back to the idea that the search for news is a universal human need and a fundamental driver of change. We need and are thirsty for news to make sense of our lives and experiences, to act and to envision future possibilities. Social life and material practices are created and shaped by the desire for information and communication. You write that ‘people wanted a mass society because it was better at delivering large volumes of information’ (p. 262). I find this quite a strong and interesting statement.

JA: A strong statement designed to be provocative, but one that is historically demonstrable. The reorganisation of the newsscape preceded mass political development in most places. Elsewhere around the world, the newspaper preceded the mass party and the nation-state. Radio preceded Roosevelt, Mussolini, Hitler, and Churchill, and allowed them to wield forms of power that were different from those of their predecessors. Stile, technology did not necessitate or predetermine these developments. Historians of technology are very squeamish about appearing to imply otherwise—for good reason. If taken to extremes, technological determinism implies a lack of human agency; it denigrates the importance of culture, ideology, and free will. That is why I, and many in the field, speak in terms of *possibility* rather than necessity. Technology creates the possibility of certain outcomes but does not determine them.

But we are still faced with a conundrum. A universal phenomenon requires universal explanation. And *mass society* is as near to a universal phenomenon as I can imagine—in other words, it appears to be a determined outcome. There is no area of the world today that is not dominated by a mass political, mass economic, mass cultural society. Why? The claim that this is just an artefact of imperialism or capitalism is unsatisfying. It ignores, as many have done in the case of China, the choice and desire of colonised and semi-colonised peoples to build such a society. Such a view—that political, economic, and cultural modernity are a Western, imperial imposition—risks Orientalising the rest of the globe into world-historical passivity and reinscribing a unique relationship between the West and modernity that we seek to leave behind. Likewise, ascribing the universality of mass societies to capitalism doesn’t work either. It denies the reality that Chinese societies (and others) reorganised themselves in the twentieth century outside capitalist frameworks. Industry, wage labour, the profit motive—all played a secondary role in creating Chinese mass society.

Human nature is complex and contradictory. But as anthropology has shown, people are generally the same everywhere, with the same range of personalities, behaviours, thoughts, and desires. These cross ethnicities, cultures, economic organisation, class structure, and chronologies. We may find other cultures and times strange and different, but they are not incomprehensible. In fact, I would argue that it is quite easy to

explain and understand difference. People are fundamentally comprehensible to one another, as testified to by the fact that people have moved between cultures, in every conceivable direction, throughout history.

All this is to say that it is empirically demonstrable that humans when organised in societies share common patterns and behaviours, from the most isolated hunter-gatherers to the most densely organised contemporary megacity. There is much to be gained by denying this. Ethno-supremacists of all sorts are an obvious case, but scholars, too, from anthropologists to historians, benefit from exaggerating difference, making themselves seem more professionally competent, daring, persevering. Claims appealing to ‘human nature’ or universal behaviours also seem old-fashioned. I appreciate that sweeping claims about causation and underlying tidal forces seem specious or even suspicious in their totalising effect. But I think such claims are sometimes still justified, especially when, as in this case, one is trying to explain a universal phenomenon (the mass society). Surely some mechanism is promoting its universal emergence?

My proposition that the desire for news (the push for time-sensitive information at greater volumes, at greater speeds, with greater regularity and reliability) was an important mechanism is driven by several historically informed observations. First, in Chinese villages economic reorganisation (participation in regional or national markets, non-subsistence farming, land and/or capital redistribution and reform, class re-formation) occurred *after* political restructuring. And this political restructuring occurred *after* or alongside the infrastructural, technological, and behavioural changes in the newsscape. Therefore, the mass society of China’s twentieth century was not an economic—and especially not a capitalist—phenomenon. Furthermore, it was also not a primarily top-down political phenomenon. People did not need to be commanded to buy, install, or build radio receiver networks. They demanded them. When some ways of receiving news existed, people wanted more, almost regardless of the content, and told the authorities so. I show this through local archival sources, across periods and regimes. But it also makes sense within the newsscape revolutions of our own lifetimes. Were Western people without news and information at the end of the twentieth century? No. One might even have perceived society to be saturated with newspapers, magazines, radio, and broadcast television. And yet, over the past quarter-century, new technologies have emerged—and been nearly universally adopted—that further multiply even this already high volume of time-sensitive information. (There are, of course, exceptions. What I mean is adoption by a very high percentage of any given population.) Why? Do I need to listen to a podcast while playing a YouTube video and reading a PDF document at the same time? Do I need to scroll through social media feeds? The answer again is obviously no. And yet, I and others do it constantly, even while feeling its ill-effects at the social and personal levels. Something fundamental is clearly driving this tendency across cultures. What I am arguing in this book is that this is also a historical phenomenon, rejecting the arrogance of assuming that my impulses

and desires—my humanity—are fundamentally different from someone whose time, culture, and class background (for instance, an early twentieth-century illiterate Chinese farmer) are different to my own.

One final point. As I show, the technopolitical process proceeded across a wide range of regimes, with widely varying ideologies. The movement towards a mass society proceeded regardless of whether a multi-ethnic empire, communist regime, or semi-capitalist dictatorship was in charge. In the expansion and restructuring of the newscape to bring greater volumes of information, resistance rarely emerged under any ideology. None of these ideologies (the nation-state, an empire, or a communist utopia) was a fundamental, widespread *telos* for *most* people at any point. I would argue that most people are apathetic. The informed and motivated are a minority (just look at the low voting rates of developed democracies). But people are not apathetic about their access to information. People buy computers and mobile phones (as their forebearers bought radios or helped install wired broadcasting) in much larger numbers than participate in overt political processes. News has a much more fundamental appeal than the nation. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

John ALEKNA is a historian of the technology and sociopolitics of China. He joined the History of Science, Technology and Medicine Department at Peking University in 2020 after completing his PhD at Princeton University. His recent book, *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society* (Stanford University Press, 2024), a history of news in twentieth-century China, investigates the ways that information technologies and social practices interact to create new political orders. He is currently working on two projects: a biography of a Chinese scientist-explorer in the ‘Great Game’, and an examination of mathematics and print technology in China’s modern transition.

Sam H. BASS is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Toronto. His research and teaching focus on medieval and early modern China and Inner Asia, with a special interest in social histories of dependency, gender, religion, and culture. He is currently working on a book about slavery and society in Mongolia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Yangyang CHENG is a Research Scholar in Law and a Fellow at Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center, where her work focuses on the development of science and technology in China and US–China relations. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, *MIT Technology Review*, and *WIRED*, and have received several awards from the Society of Publishers in Asia, the Asian American Journalists Association, and the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. She is a co-host, writer, and producer of the narrative podcast series *Dissident at the Doorstep*, from Crooked Media. Born and raised in China, Cheng received her PhD in physics from the University of Chicago and her bachelor’s degree from the University of Science and Technology of China’s School for the Gifted Young. Before joining Yale, she worked on the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) for more than a decade, most recently at Cornell University, and as an LHC Physics Center Distinguished Researcher at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory.

Laura DE GIORGI is a Professor of Chinese History at Ca’ Foscari University Venice. Her research interests include the history of media and propaganda in twenty-century China and the history of cultural relations between Italy and China in the Republican and Maoist eras. She has worked on the history of radio broadcasting in Republican China and she is currently working on a project on China’s international radio and the sonic dimensions of China’s perception in Europe.

Johan ELVERSKOG is Dedman Family Distinguished Professor, Professor of Religious Studies, and, by courtesy, Professor of History at Southern Methodist University. He has published widely on the history of Buddhism across Asia and is the author and editor of 11 books and numerous articles. His current projects include *A Barbarian History of China* and *The Fathers and Sons of Chinggis Khan*. In 2025–26 he will be a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study.

Brendan A. GALIPEAU is a Lecturer in Environmental Studies at Binghamton University in New York. His research and publications broadly focus on environmental and social change and human relations with nature in southwest China and Taiwan. He has worked and lived among Tibetan communities in northwest Yunnan for almost two decades.

Zenel GARCIA is an Associate Professor of National Security Studies and Associate Dean of the School of Strategic Landpower at the US Army War College. His research focuses on the intersection of international relations theory, security, and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government.

Phillip GUERREIRO is an Assistant Professor of Military and Security Studies in the Department of the Joint All-Domain Strategist at the Air Command and Staff College. His research focuses on international development, infrastructure, resource conflict, water security, and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

Ting GUO (she/her) specialises in religion, politics, and gender in transnational Asia. She is Book Review Editor for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and an Honorary Researcher at the Richard Charles Lee Canada-Hong Kong Library at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025) and co-host of the podcast 時差 *in-betweenness* (@shichapodcast).

Gil HIZI is a Research Associate at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, the University of Cologne. Having studied discursive practices of psychology and personal development, he addresses in his research moral change in urban China. His publications include the edited volume *Self-Development Ethics and Politics in China Today: A Keyword Approach* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024) and the forthcoming monograph *Transient Becoming: Self-Improvement and Capitalist Virtuousness in Contemporary China* (NUS Press).

Taige HU is a Research Associate at the Paul Tsai China Center, Yale Law School, based in Beijing. He is also the deputy manager of the website *NPC Observer*, where he researches and writes about China's constitutional system and legislative developments.

Selina KÖTTER did her undergraduate and MA studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University and Goethe University Frankfurt. She works at Goethe University Frankfurt as a research assistant and lecturer, and is writing her PhD dissertation on the depiction of the Qing Dynasty in Chinese television dramas, with a special focus on the Manchu ethnicity and language. She is particularly interested in female perspectives past and present and how they relate to social life and entertainment media.

Ziyi LI graduated with an MSc in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford and a BSc in Sociology from University College London. She is particularly interested in digital culture, the gig economy, platform labour, and feminist media studies, focusing on the intersections of technology, work, and social change.

Zhaorui LÜ is a PhD student in history at the University of California, Irvine. Her research focuses on gender, labour, and grassroots politics in twentieth-century China. Her dissertation examines ordinary women's political participation and leadership in urban neighbourhood associations in Beijing from 1949 to the present.

MENG Meiyun is a postdoctoral researcher at University College Cork, Ireland. Her research explores contemporary China and East Asian migration, with a particular focus on the experiences of middle-class women navigating internal migration within China and transnational movements across borders.

Dechen PEMBA is editor of *High Peaks Pure Earth*, an online platform that offers translations, news, and commentary from the Tibetan internet and social media. Born in the United Kingdom to Tibetan parents, she graduated from University College London and SOAS, University of London, with an MA in Chinese Studies. She has worked as a researcher and campaigner on Tibetan issues. She also co-curates the annual Tibet Film Festival in London.

Siyu TANG is a PhD student in Anthropology at the University of Oxford, UK. Her research is broadly concerned with the cultural forms materialised through political and economic events in contemporary China. Her doctoral thesis, titled ‘Phantom Real Estate: Imagining and Inhabiting Housing of China’s Rust Belt’, investigates how homeownership—and the ‘good life’ of social belonging it signifies—has come to function as a ghost-like form that mediates reality and not-yet-reality, while shaping temporal experiences of a precarious present and imagined futures.

Changhao WEI is a Fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center, Yale Law School, where he focuses on China’s national legislature, the National People’s Congress (NPC)—in particular, its legislative process and constitutional enforcement mechanisms. He also runs *NPC Observer*, a website that provides reporting, analysis, and original research on the NPC.

Joel WING-LUN is a Lecturer in History and Asian Studies at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His current book project, *Negotiating Empire on China’s Miao Frontier*, uses fieldwork and local documents to explore how families and communities in southeast Guizhou navigated imperial expansion from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century. His recent research has been on Miao marriage practices and he is the translator of Michael Szonyi and Zhao Shiyu’s *The Chinese Empire in Local Society: Ming Military Institutions and their Legacies* (Routledge, 2020).

Fan YANG is Professor of Media and Communication Studies and faculty affiliate in the Asian Studies Program and the Language, Literacy, and Culture Doctoral Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is the author of *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* (University of Michigan Press, 2024) and *Faked in China: Nation Branding, Counterfeit Culture, and Globalization* (Indiana University Press, 2016). An interdisciplinary scholar, Yang has published widely in media/cultural studies, China studies, global studies, and urban studies.

Hua YANG is a narrative-focused artist with foundational training in filmmaking who graduated from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Her work is deeply influenced by the intricate dynamics of modern Chinese society and extends to broader global contexts. Transitioning from a primary interest in documentary filmmaking, she now explores and articulates contemporary social, political, and cultural themes through a multifaceted approach that encompasses digital media, installations, and video art.

Sia X. YANG (PhDs in Comparative Literature and Art History) is an Australian bilingual writer currently on career hiatus due to motherhood. She was a visiting scholar at the Faculty of History, University of Oxford (2016–17), the inaugural recipient of the prestigious Judith Neilson Scholarship in Contemporary Art (2018–23), and the recipient of the Australian Academy of the Humanities Travelling Fellowship (2024), among other highly competitive arts and cultural studies grants. She is the author of *A Memorandum of Utopia* (Times Classic, 2024) and has also published essays in the *Asia-Pacific Journal*, *Japan Focus*, *Memo Review*, and *Art Review Oxford*.

Yukun ZENG holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago and is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. His book project *Radical Wisdom: Reading Classics and Staking Morality in Contemporary Chinese Confucianism* explores grassroots Confucian revivalism in contemporary Chinese society at the intersection of language, knowledge, gender, and social movements. He also co-runs the public anthropology platform *Tying Knots* 结绳志 and experiments with new modes of urgent, engaged ethnography.

Chengzhi ZHANG is a PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Manchester, UK. His research project is primarily focused on the lived experience and identity formation of foreigners' descendants in Mainland China. His research interests include identity politics, racism, and nationalism in China.

Dino Ge ZHANG is a media anthropologist and non-fiction writer. He is an Assistant Professor at the School of Creative Media, City University Hong Kong. You can find more of his work at anthropos.live.

Hong ZHANG is an Assistant Professor of International Studies at the Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research and teaching focus on global development and China's role in it. Previously, she was a China Public Policy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Ash Center for Governance and Democratic Innovation, Harvard University Kennedy School of Government (2022–24), and a postdoctoral fellow at the China–Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and the Columbia–Harvard China and the World Program.

Xiaoyun ZHANG is a recent graduate in Social Anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests lie at the intersection of youth subcultures, visual practices, and mental health in contemporary China. She explores alternative modes of storytelling through documentary and experimental media and currently works as a curator at Ambiguity Film.

Yihuan ZHANG (they/he) is a doctoral student at the University of Macau and a cultural studies scholar specialising in the affective politics of gender in contemporary China. Their research draws on digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis, and affect theory to explore how gender, class, and emotion intersect in digitally mediated contexts. Yihuan's recent work on digital gender politics in China has been published in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Feminist Studies*. Beyond academia, they are an active public intellectual and media activist, and the founder and host of the podcast 歧义 *La politique*, which features critical conversations on gender, labour, and popular culture in the Chinese public sphere.

Haoyan ZHUANG is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Renmin University of China. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include co-living, youth studies, urban studies, and social transformation. His doctoral dissertation, explores the everyday lives and life attitudes of co-living youth. He has also published work on co-living in *Asian Anthropology* and contributed chapters to edited volumes.

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