MADE IN CHINA

JOURNAL

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 2, JUL–DEC 2022

PROMETHEUS IN CHINA

Techno-Optimism and Its Discontents

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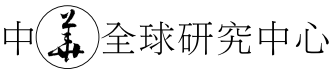
The *Made in China Journal* is a biannual publication on Chinese politics and society. This project has been produced with the financial assistance of the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), The Australian National University, and the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University. The views expressed are those of the individual authors and do not represent the views of CIW, Lund University, or the institutions to which the authors are affiliated.



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Made in China Journal is published by ANU Press
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600, Australia
Email: anupress@anu.edu.au
This title is available online at press.anu.edu.au

ISSN 2652-6352 (print)
ISSN 2206-9119 (online)

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

INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS:
Authors are invited to submit articles, notes, or book reviews, but are encouraged to discuss their ideas with the editors beforehand. All manuscripts are subject to a refereeing process. Manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be emailed to: editors@madeinchinajournal.com.

INFORMATION FOR READERS:
The *Made in China Journal* is published by ANU Press twice a year. It is freely available online via press.anu.edu.au and madeinchinajournal.com.

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The Australian Centre on China in the World is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government of Australia and The Australian National University.

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Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west
To hold back Wushan's clouds and rains
Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.
The mountain goddess if she is still there
Will marvel at a world so changed.

Excerpt from Mao's poem 'Swimming' (游泳), June 1956

In 2020, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping pledged to 'transition to a green and low-carbon mode of development', as well as to 'peak the country's CO_2 emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060'. Xi's pledge offered a tangible example of what has come to be known as the ecological civilisation (生态文明)—the idea of engineered harmony between humans and nature that was recently incorporated into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. But what kind of engineering is required for sustainable transitions at this scale and pace? Through which political concepts and technical practices could such a harmonious rebalancing of China's resource-devouring development be envisioned and achieved?

This issue of the *Made in China Journal* addresses these questions by borrowing political theorist John Dryzek's rereading of the Greek myth of Prometheus. Inspired by the story of a demigod who stole the technology of fire for the sole purpose of human advancement, Prometheanism describes an eco-modernist orientation that perceives the Earth as a resource whose utility is determined primarily by human needs and interests and whose environmental problems are overcome through continuous political and technological innovation. In contrast with other environmental perspectives, Prometheanism prioritises human interests and needs over those of ecosystems or the individual needs of other lifeforms. Through this framework, we asked our contributors to offer their takes on the following questions: To what extent can Xi's dream of an ecological civilisation be understood in terms of techno-optimism and the anthropocentrism that characterise Prometheanism? What price is China paying in its effort to transition towards a heavily engineered 'sustainable' market utopia?

The special section of this issue includes 10 articles. **Richard Smith** opens with a sweeping analysis of China's environmental and energy policies, arguing that regardless of Xi Jinping's stated intentions, China cannot meet its carbon-neutrality pledge due to insuperable technical and political barriers. **Emily T. Yeh** examines the Sky River Project—which promised to scale up China's weather modification practices by moving water vapour from the southern Tibetan Plateau to northern China—arguing that the initiative is Promethean in that it advances a mechanistic and techno-optimist vision of the atmosphere as a set of relations to be modelled, modified, and optimised for human use. **Jerry Zee** looks back at a season of successive massive dust storms in Beijing in the early 2000s, showing how since then broad political experiments in mitigating dust events have reconfigured the problem of land degradation into one of large-scale weather intervention across the capital's airshed. **Stevan Harrell** argues that nowhere is the Chinese Party-State's Promethean thinking more vividly apparent than in its continuous proclivity to build more and bigger water projects, and he points out that where these projects create problems, the solution is usually not to remove them but to build further projects—or to construct 'fixes to fix the fixes'. **Michael Webber** focuses on projects to store water to overcome seasonal fluctuations and move water to rebalance regional differences in supply and demand, contending that such Promethean endeavours protect the political and economic status of powerful municipalities, stimulate Chinese economic growth, and proclaim the power and administrative capacity of the state.

Sigrid Schmalzer argues that recent environmental projects of the Chinese State, including the preservation of 'agricultural heritage' and the promotion of 'ecological civilisation', are deeply embedded in economic thinking and systems thinking—two ideologies that foster technocratic and growth-oriented approaches to managing the natural environment and ultimately enhance the power of an oppressive, technocratic state. **Xinmin Liu** concentrates on the widespread techno-science craze in contemporary China, examining its complex and often misguided role in China's pursuit of 'urbanism' as a benchmark of modernisation. **Jesse Rodenbiker** examines geoengineering for aesthetic and utilitarian ends, arguing that this is part and parcel of the banal operation of state power in contemporary China. **Giulia Dal Maso** dissects Ant Forest—a Chinese app developed by Alibaba that claims to leverage its technology to solve environmental problems within and beyond China—highlighting how it manipulates the environment as a site of financial and biopolitical calculation. Finally, **Corey Byrnes** discusses how, in recent years, familiar or seemingly 'traditional' landscape forms have provided artists working in China with legible ecocritical modes, focusing on what he terms 'speculative landscapes'—that is, landscapes that look forward to a time (fast approaching but eerily similar to our own) when the impacts of ongoing environmental crises have definitively reshaped the world.

In the China Columns section, **Sadia Rahman** and **Darren Byler** consider the plight and, paradoxically, the power of the undocumented Uyghur community in Turkey in relation to threats received by their families in both China and their host country. **Ting Guo** deconstructs Shanghai's reputation and self-perception as an exceptional cosmopolitan space, emphasising how Shanghainese cosmopolitanism is rooted in more than a century of migration, grassroots activism, and the rejection of traditional hierarchical social structures by the city's residents.

This issue also includes several op-eds. **Christopher Connery** provides an hour-by-hour account of the protests that took place in Shanghai in November 2022 with an eye to their urban surroundings, bringing into view the multiple perspectives of the protesters and noting the exhilaration but also a critical void. **Christian Sorace** and **Nicholas Loubere** push back against those on the libertarian right who held up the recent demonstrations in China as vindication of their own stance against any biopolitical state intervention against the Covid-19 pandemic. **Holly Snape** discusses how at the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party the entrenchment of Xi Jinping Thought was paired with a call to 'carry forth Great Party-Founding Spirit'—a Xi-era invention turning the gaze inwards on the party itself rather than its guiding theory and goals. **Marine Brossard** revisits the *tangping* attitude as a philosophical and political subject pertaining to the universal issue of our relationship to the concept of work, praising the subversive potential of this behaviour to help us face our contemporary global crises. **Brian Hioe** wades into the discussions caused by the recent visits of US officials to Taiwan, focusing on how some of these officials waded into complex historical debates.

We conclude the issue with a series of conversations. **Margherita Zanasi** interviews **Peter Thilly** about his *The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China* (Stanford University Press, 2022). **Jeffrey Wasserstrom** engages **Seiji Shirane** in discussion about his *Imperial Gateway: Colonial Taiwan and Japan's Expansion in South China and Southeast Asia, 1895–1945* (Cornell University Press, 2022). **Matthew Lowenstein** and **Ghassan Moazzin** discuss the latter's *Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China: Banking on the Chinese Frontier, 1870–1919* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). **Ivan Franceschini** interviews **Brian DeMare** about his *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution from New China* (Stanford University Press, 2022). **Jenny Chan** chats with **Dorothy J. Solinger** about *Poverty and Pacification: The Chinese State Abandons the Old Working Class* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). **Shui-yin Sharon Yam** interviews **Charlie Yi Zhang** about his *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Duke University Press, 2022), and **Howard Chiang** about his *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (Columbia University Press, 2021). ■

The Editors

BRIEFS

Jul–Dec 2022

JUL–DEC 2022

The Chinese Communist Party Holds Its Twentieth National Congress

In mid October, the Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took place. The most consequential outcome of this week-long meeting was the designation of Xi Jinping as the undisputed leader of the Party. In a major personal victory, Xi inserted into the revised CCP Constitution an obligation that all Party members strengthen the 'Two Safeguards' (两个确立, that is, to safeguard the 'core' status of Xi within the CCP and the centralised authority of the Party) and the 'Two Establishes' (两个维护, that is, to establish the status of Xi as the core of the CCP's Central Committee and of the whole Party, and to establish the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era). Xi also managed to stack the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) entirely with loyalists. None of the seven PBSC members appears designated to be his successor, which could set up Xi for a possible fourth term. In another surprise, no women were appointed to the Politburo for the first time in 25 years. One moment above all stole the show: during the closing of the congress, Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, was forcibly removed from the stage in a major aberration in the highly choreographed event. While the exact reason for Hu's departure remains unclear (Chinese state media claimed Hu left for medical reasons), many saw it as a further indication that Xi is firmly in control of the Party. *AK*

Human Rights and Civil Society

The second half of 2022 did not provide much relief for persecuted human rights defenders in China. As Xi Jinping began his third term as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, observers reflected on the state of civil society under his 10 years in power: resilient, but near total collapse. A recent report by the nongovernmental organisation Safeguard Defenders found that the police's use of the Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location (RDSL, 指定居所监视居住) system—a form of extrajudicial detention for the investigation of crimes relating to 'endangering state security', 'terrorism' or 'serious crimes of bribery'—has expanded dramatically under Xi. Since he took power in 2013, an estimated 560,000 to 860,000 people have been lawfully detained via this mechanism. Whether through the RDSL system or entirely illegal channels, activists and dissidents have been disproportionately targeted for state-enforced disappearances. Among them is human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong, who at the time of writing in November 2022 was still under house arrest despite having finished his three-year sentence of deprivation of political rights in February. Others in detention include women's rights activist Huang Xueqin and labour activist Wang Jianbing, who were detained in September 2021. In November 2022, human rights lawyer Tang Jitian marked one year of detention after trying to attend a 2021 International Human Rights Day event hosted by the European Union in Beijing. Labour and women's rights activist Li Qiaochu also remains in detention since March and has been undergoing forced medication. Shanghai-based activist Ji Xiaolong was formally arrested in September for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble' after writing an open letter criticising the government's Covid-19 lockdowns. Dong Jianbiao, father of detained 'Ink Girl' Dong Yaoqiong (who in July 2018 published a video on social media showing herself splashing ink on a poster of Xi Jinping and denouncing his rule as 'tyranny'), died from torture in September after protesting his daughter's treatment; she had been interned as a psychiatric patient since February 2021—the third internment since 2018. Democracy activist

Chen Siming was detained shortly afterwards for revealing Dong's death, and human rights activist Ou Biaofeng remains in detention after tweeting on behalf of Dong Yaoqiong. Recognising the absence of due process in China, the European Court of Human Rights issued a landmark ruling in October effectively halting future extraditions to China, stating that those detained would be subject to torture. On the eve of the Twentieth Party Congress in October 2022, a lone protester in Beijing hung two banners from a bridge over a busy intersection and lit a fire to draw attention. The banners read: 'Depose the traitorous despot Xi Jinping' and called for 'elections, not rulers', among other things. The protester was promptly detained and his message censored from the Chinese internet, but not before videos spread to millions in China and around the world. *AK*

Zero-Covid Restrictions Lead to Unemployment

Workers from various sectors suffered amid the country's stringent zero-Covid restrictions in the second half of 2022. By July, the urban unemployment rate for youth aged 16–24 had risen to 19.9 per cent. According to a survey conducted by CIIC Consulting, in 2022, more than 80 per cent of Chinese manufacturers faced labour shortages, ranging from hundreds to thousands of workers, and young people were reluctant to work in factories. Construction workers were left without pay in several cities due to the recession in China's real estate industry. Local state-owned bus companies owed drivers wages in arrears in several provinces, including Hebei, Gansu, Hunan, and Guangdong, indicating tight local budgets amid China's property woes and zero-Covid restrictions. Private companies also came under pressure. Retailer GOME and fashion retailer Metersbonwe were accused of massive wage arrears for months. In October, Meituan initiated a new round of layoffs and significantly reduced its campus hiring from September. By the end of October, Chinese online grocery store Missfresh cut 97 per cent of its workforce, causing labour disputes and more than 1,300 lawsuits by former employees and suppliers. Domestic workers went unpaid as several recruitment platforms collapsed. In November, a cleaner committed suicide by jumping from a building in a university in Shenzhen during lockdown, sparking discussions about poor working and living conditions under the zero-Covid restrictions. In late November, Lalamove workers across China went on a three-day strike against the squeeze on workers' incomes due to changes in the platform's algorithm. In the same month, migrant workers in Haizhu district in Guangzhou's textile hub protested lengthy stay-at-home orders. *LL*

Foxconn Workers in Zhengzhou Protest

Starting in mid October 2022, Foxconn in Zhengzhou, Henan Province—the world's largest iPhone manufacturing complex—was placed under lockdown amid a Covid-19 outbreak, holding about 200,000 workers inside its compound and forcing an unknown number of staff into quarantine without sufficient food and other supplies. To maintain production, Foxconn put workers under a closed-loop production system that prevented them from leaving the factory compound and demanded they continue working and take daily PCR tests. The lack of reliable Covid-19–related information, poor conditions, and the closed-loop system set off widespread panic, driving hundreds of workers to flee from Foxconn on foot. Foxconn is a major taxpayer and employer in Henan Province, contributing up to 80 per cent of Zhengzhou's and 60 per cent of Henan's total export outputs in 2019. Locals refer to Zhengzhou as 'iPhone City' because of the prominent presence of Foxconn. The exodus of Foxconn workers hit Apple's supply chains ahead of the holiday season. A week after the mass departure of workers, the local government stepped in and worked with Foxconn to address a labour shortage at the Zhengzhou plant, demonstrating the mutual dependence between the state and international capital. The government sought to recruit party cadres and retired soldiers to help make iPhones in the Zhengzhou factory. With the large-scale use of government power, Foxconn recruited more than

100,000 new workers for the Zhengzhou plant in mid November. However, workers—most of whom were aged under 35—refused to remain silent. They spoke out about poor working conditions and the mismanagement of Covid-19 controls on the social media platforms Kuaishou, Weibo, and Douyin. On 23 November, thousands of workers joined protests at the Foxconn plant in Zhengzhou, marking an escalation of unrest against unfair pay and Covid-19 rules. *LL*

Domestic Violence, #MeToo, and Discrimination against Women and LGBTQ+ in the Spotlight

In the second half of 2022, discrimination and violence against women persisted. In July, poet Yu Xiuhua revealed she had been assaulted by her partner, igniting debate about domestic violence against women. In August, Xianzi's appeal for an apology and damages in her landmark #MeToo case accusing a state TV presenter of sexual harassment was rejected by a court. Nevertheless, she vowed not to give up. In September, Du Yingzhe, a well-known tutor at a prestigious teaching academy, was accused of sexually assaulting at least 21 former students in one of China's largest #MeToo cases. Also in September, a man who brutally attacked four women in a barbecue restaurant in the northern Chinese city of Tangshan was sentenced to 24 years in prison, in a case that the local government treated as a gang crime rather than gender-based violence, eliciting outrage. In late September, China Railway refused to sell sanitary pads on trains after a female passenger made a complaint on Weibo, renewing the debate about discrimination. In October, JD.com founder and billionaire Liu Qiangdong reached an out-of-court settlement with Liu Jingyao, a former student of the University of Minnesota who accused the billionaire of rape in 2018, in one of the most high-profile cases of China's #MeToo movement. In the same month, the suicide of a 19-year-old gay student who was bullied and suppressed by his teacher in Shandong sparked outrage over LGBTQ+ discrimination in China's schools. In October, no women were included in the Politburo for the first time in 25 years, marking a major regression in gender representation. Also in October, Beijing revised the Women's Protection Law for the first time in three decades, raising concerns about increasing government rhetoric on the value of women's traditional roles and what some saw as setbacks for women's rights and more restrictive attitudes towards abortion. In late November, Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu was sentenced to 13 years for raping multiple women. *LL*

Anger and Protests against Zero-Covid Restrictions Contribute to Policy Change

While in the second half of 2022 the Chinese Government stuck to its zero-Covid policy despite rising public frustration and the economy shrinking, after mounting protests in November, it finally lifted restrictions. After the end of the Shanghai lockdown in early June, multiple cities were put under partial or total lockdowns, affecting the daily lives of millions of people. In August, tens of thousands of domestic tourists were suddenly forced into lockdown on Hainan Island, clipping the wings of the tourism industry and domestic mobility. The same occurred across the country, including in Hebei, Henan, Gansu, and Inner Mongolia, with the worst scenarios in Tibet and Xinjiang, where cities were put under lockdown for more than 100 days with very little public information about what was happening.

The deployment of the zero Covid policy came at the price of a squeezed economy. It also cost several lives. Twenty-seven passengers were killed when a bus carrying them to a quarantine facility ran off the road in Guizhou during a night-time trip in September; a 14-year-old girl died due to delayed treatment at a Covid-19 quarantine site in Henan Province in October; a three-year-old boy died after delayed treatment in the lockdown in Lanzhou in early November; two weeks later, a four-month-old baby died of similar causes while in quarantine in Zhengzhou; a 55-year-old woman and a 32-year-old woman committed suicide in Hohhot and Guangzhou, respectively, raising concerns about the impact on mental health of the strict measures; at

least ten people were killed and nine injured in a fire in a highrise building under prolonged lockdown in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, on 24 November. The paradoxical nature of the Chinese Government's 'people first, life first' motto is illuminated by the case in Sichuan when residents were ordered to remain in lockdown instead of fleeing to safety during an earthquake in September.

Although China issued 20 new measures to loosen some of its Covid restrictions on 11 November, its lockdowns reached a record level in the next two weeks. A week after the release of the new rules, Chongqing and Guangzhou were ordered into strict lockdowns, and Beijing shut schools, parks, and museums. Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province shut down, opened, and closed again over the course of nine days. Two truck drivers were sentenced to four years in prison in Shenyang for spreading the virus. Shanghai imposed strict rules on people entering the city from 24 November, which prohibited them attending any public place for five days, except to use public transport and go to work.

Nearly three years into tough pandemic restrictions, unusual numbers of protests emerged first in Tibet, Zhengzhou, and Guangzhou, before spreading to a dozen cities and college campuses across China and abroad after the deadly fire in Ürümqi. In response to a record number of protesters across regions and social classes, the Chinese Government eased the Covid-19 restrictions, while also stifling protests with intimidation and surveillance. *LL*

Extreme Weather Hits China

China was hit by severe extreme weather in 2022. Sea levels around the country, which have been rising by an average of 3.4 millimetres a year since 1980, reached their highest levels on record in 2021 and were higher than the global average over the period. During the summer, China recorded its longest and hottest heatwave and one of its lowest levels of rainfall since national records began in 1961; it was also the most severe heatwave recorded in the world. The unprecedented heat caused water scarcity, crop failures, wildfires, and power shortages, affecting more than 900 million people in 17 provinces. One of the worst affected regions was the Yangtze River Basin, stretching from coastal Shanghai to Sichuan Province. On top of strict Covid-19 controls, the extreme weather negatively impacted on the livelihoods of millions of people, especially workers and the country's vulnerable population. Meanwhile, increasingly devastating flood seasons fuelled by climate change in eastern, southern, and northwestern China killed dozens of people and forced tens of thousands to evacuate. As it contended with power shortages, China added an extra 300 million tonnes of coalmining capacity and approved new coal-fired power plants and coal-based iron and steel facilities in the first half of 2022. The flip-flopping on coal policy risks the country's climate commitments to decarbonise its economy. In October, the Chinese Government released a second draft revision of the Wildlife Protection Law, loosening the requirements for entities that wish to hunt, capture, and breed wild animals, while continuing to endorse the commercial utilisation of wild animals. The second draft is a big step backwards, as it reverses several significant changes made in the first draft, which was published after the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In November, China resumed its climate dialogue with the United States at COP 27 and the G20 summit that had been halted over US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August. However, the precarity of the US–China relationship underlines the dangers of depending on continued goodwill between the world's two largest emitters to tackle the global climate crisis. *LL*

Hong Kong and Xinjiang

Minutes before her mandate ended in late August, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet released her long-awaited report on Xinjiang. It concluded that the Chinese Government has committed 'serious human rights violations' against Uyghurs and other ethnic groups, which 'may constitute … crimes against humanity'. Despite this being the most authoritative condemnation of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang to date, members of the UN Human Rights Council voted in October against holding a discussion about the

organisation's own report. Uyghur and human rights groups expressed extreme disappointment, and have since sought alternative avenues for achieving justice. In an effort to avoid complicity in forced labour and other human rights abuses in Xinjiang, in September, the European Union released its plan to create a mechanism to ban the sale of goods made using forced labour. The plan is under negotiation and mirrors the European business community's broader shift away from China, partly to avoid Uyghur forced labour in global supply chains. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, authorities have continued to cleanse the territory of any person they deem to be acting contrary to the interests of national security. In October, five teenagers, some of whom were as young as 15 at the time of the offences, were sentenced to up to three years in prison under the National Security Law for 'inciting others to subvert state power'. The sentences drew criticism from the United Nations' human rights office. In September, five people were sentenced to 19 months in prison for sedition after publishing children's books that allegedly incited 'hatred' against Beijing. Later that month, police arrested a man for sedition for playing a song on the harmonica during public mourning for Queen Elizabeth II. Over the summer, the administrators of online forums for whistleblowers and the posting of anonymous comments were arrested for sedition and their social media pages taken down. In early December, prodemocracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai was sentenced to five years and nine months in prison for fraud for breaching the terms of lease for the headquarters of his now defunct *Apple Daily* newspaper, after concealing the operation of a consultancy that provided corporate secretarial services to private firms Lai controlled. *AK*

Tensions over US High-Profile Visits to Taiwan

In early August 2022, then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made a high-profile visit to Taiwan in a show of democratic solidarity amid the Russia–Ukraine war. This was only the second time a US House Speaker had travelled to Taiwan and the first visit in 25 years. The visit was highly controversial, as US pundits questioned its timing and purpose, and Chinese officials decried its implications. The Taiwanese Government remained relatively silent before her arrival. In Taipei, Pelosi met with President Tsai Ing-wen, members of Taiwan's legislature, and the chairman of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). Reacting to what it perceived as a major provocation, the Chinese Government initiated a week-long series of unprecedented military exercises: deploying air and naval forces across the median line of the Taiwan Strait and in Taiwan's territorial waters; firing ballistic missiles over Taiwan, some of which landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone; and conducting record-breaking cyberattacks. The Chinese Government also cut off high-level military and climate dialogues with the United States. In October, the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party added a new amendment to the party's constitution to 'resolutely oppose and contain Taiwan's independence'. Analysts worry these actions may have established a new status quo in cross-strait tensions. However, none of this deterred delegations of other officials from the United States, the European Union, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Lithuania, Belgium, and Japan from later visiting Taiwan, in what some called the 'Pelosi effect'. Pelosi's visit also highlighted the disconnect between fearmongering in Western media and the apathetic reality of most people in Taiwan, preconditioned to expect China's military threats. Many Taiwanese commentators criticised the Western media's framing of the event through the lens of Sino-US rivalry instead of reporting on it on Taiwan's own terms and amplifying Taiwanese voices. *AK*

OP-EDS

Mock up of Barnett Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis. PC: Wikimedia Commons.

Wulumuqi Road

Christopher CONNERY

It was the middle section of a north–south road in the prewar French Concession and was originally named Route Magy (Maiqi Road, 麦琪路) for Alfred Magy, a French officer in World War I. Lined on both sides with dense rows of French plane trees (法国梧桐树), it ran through a neighbourhood of villas, consulates, and Shanghai-modern apartment buildings—notably, the 1936 Art Deco Magy Apartments, designed by local architect Alexander Léonard.

Prewar Shanghai housing was dominated by *lilong* (里弄, 'lane') communities, in old and new styles. Old-style *lilong* housing (*shikumen* 石库门, 'stone-framed gate') comprised row houses along lanes within a walled border, with a mixture of Western and Chinese design elements, the latter including a walled front courtyard. New-style communities were sometimes built in a 'garden' style, without the front courtyard. The close and crowded life of the *lilong* alleys became the stuff of Shanghai nostalgia: Wang Anyi's 1996 *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌) is probably the best-known evocation of that life (Lu 2004).[1] In the neighbourhood along Wulumuqi Road, particularly towards the west, in addition to *lilong* communities one could find freestanding villas, lavish Deco apartment buildings, and smaller apartment buildings and houses in the eclectic style (mixtures of Moorish, Chinese, Bungalow, and Deco elements) common to the prewar period.

In 1943, under the collaborationist Wang Jingwei administration, Route Magy's name was changed to Dihua Road (迪化路), and later Dihua Central Road. Dihua ('enlighten and educate') was an alternative name for Ürümqi and was also the Qing Empire's description

of its army's extermination campaign against the Zungar rebellion in one of the bloodiest wars of the eighteenth century. In 1954, under the People's Republic, the street was renamed Wulumuqi Road (乌鲁木齐; the Chinese Romanised form of Ürümqi), with southern, central, and northern sections—a name it has kept to this day. Some consulates remain: the Iranian and US consulates, occupying former villas, face each other across Huaihai Road. Several high-rise apartment and office buildings built over the past three decades are scattered among the prewar buildings.

More prewar housing stock survives in Shanghai than in any other large Chinese city and, although vast areas have been razed and redeveloped—a process that continues to this day—a substantial core remains, concentrated in the area known as the French Concession. Due in part to the efforts of architectural preservationists, many of the prewar buildings enjoy a semi-protected status. The area thus contrasts sharply with the dominant patterns of urban commercial and residential development in China of mid- or high-rise apartment buildings grouped within gated perimeter walls—a spatial form that has proved particularly conducive to administration and control. The French Concession, in the centre of one of the most expensive cities in the world, has for several reasons remained a zone of surprising unevenness. Successive housing allocation policies from the 1950s to the present resulted in the subdivision of most apartments, houses, and row houses into smaller and smaller units, often with shared kitchens.

After the reform period, many of those with the means to relocate elsewhere in the city did so. Beginning in the 1990s, a few of these smaller units were recombined and repurposed as more upscale dwellings and rented to wealthier Shanghainese and foreigners. Through the late 1990s and into the 2020s, the area's distinctiveness and charm brought an admixture of upscale shops, restaurants, bars, and other social venues. New apartment buildings—as one would expect in such a central location—were generally expensive and exclusive. In much of the French Concession, however, the high-end stratum lives close to a substantial number of lower-income residents, many of whom occupy small, cramped, semi-slum conditions: long-term Shanghai-dialect–speaking elderly residents on low fixed incomes and service and other workers from Anhui, Jiangsu, and elsewhere. In much of the area, along with venues aimed at a wealthier clientele, one can find the small hardware stores, repair shops, tailors, and cheap noodle restaurants typical of urban areas anywhere in China.

Wulumuqi Road's middle section and intersecting streets—Wuyuan, Anfu, and Changle roads—have in the past two decades formed a district of small, upscale restaurants, boutiques, wine bars, and cafés, some in renovated prewar housing and some in elegant, lowrise newer buildings. In contrast to the glitzy luxury of the shopping districts on Nanjing or Huaihai roads, whose counterparts can

be found in every large city in the world, this neighbourhood tends towards the Boho-chic. For several reasons, the area is more socially homogeneous than older neighbourhoods to the east and south. The large detached villas and smaller luxury apartment buildings often retain their socially exclusive character. Several of the area's more luxurious prewar apartment buildings were allocated to government officials in the 1950s and were not subdivided into smaller units, as was common to housing elsewhere in the city, limiting the influx of lower-income residents.

Shanghai's redevelopment in the 1990s and 2000s, however, was often a violent process, involving forced relocation, official and unofficial intimidation, and unfair compensation (Shao 2013). The southeast corner of Wulumuqi and Anfu roads was the site of one of the more notorious incidents. Maiqi Li (麦琪里, known also as Maggie Lane), a large *lilong*-style community, had been slated by district authorities for destruction and redevelopment in the early 2000s. As was often the case, some residents refused to move without guarantees of adequate compensation and new housing, as stipulated by law. Following weeks of harassment of residents reluctant to move, in January 2005, three employees of the Chengkai Housing Placement Corporation set fire to one of the houses with the intent of forcing its occupants to move. Two family members died and the employees were later convicted and sentenced. The huge site has remained tied up in the official investigation and litigation ever since, standing vacant for 17 years—a striking anomaly in the middle of such an exclusive district (Dai and Tian 2005; Schmitz 2016: 21–40).

A major early contribution to the neighbourhood's upscale character was The Summit apartment complex (汇贤居, literally, 'elite conclave residences') along the eastern side of Wulumuqi Road, between Anfu and Changle roads—a project of Hong Kong real estate magnate Lee Ka-shing and associates that opened in 2004, in the middle of Shanghai's post–World Trade Organization (WTO) era of elite prosperity. When built, it was the tallest and most expensive residential complex in the city. The complex also has an interesting political history, including the efforts of activist residents to democratise the Property Owners' Committee (similar to cooperative boards in the United States), rationalise administrative fees, and other projects. Residents had a high level of community identity, publishing newsletters and blogs, and organising volunteer activities. In April 2022, during the pandemic lockdown, they made demands for more relaxed and decentralised relief and control measures, and in May petitioned authorities for a more thoroughgoing relaxation of lockdown restrictions. It is said to have been the first residential compound in Shanghai to be released from lockdown (A Good Neighbour Beats a Distant Relative 2022).

In recent years, the section of Anfu Road (formerly Route Dupleix, after the French naval officer) between Wulumuqi and Wukang roads to the west has been one of Shanghai's more prom-

inent *wanghong* (网红, 'internet celebrity') streets, where young Shanghainese, dressed to the nines, photograph one another drinking coffee, eating pastries, modelling purses, etcetera. The Shanghai events of 26 and 27 November 2022 began on the northwest corner of the intersection of Anfu and Wulumuqi roads, across the street from the towering apartments of The Summit and the walled, razed lot where Maggie Lane once stood.

Into the Streets

On 24 November 2022, a fire broke out in an apartment building in a Uyghur neighbourhood of Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang Province. Official figures listed 10 dead; some local sources put the figure at 44. Ürümqi had long been the scene of harsh lockdowns and other anti–Covid-19 measures, which followed years of repression of the Uyghur people. It was widely believed throughout the country that the fire would not have been deadly had the building not been locked down and barricaded, which delayed access, and had emergency vehicles not been slow to enter a predominantly Uyghur neighbourhood in a city with a majority Han Chinese population. Protest vigils started in Ürümqi on 25 November, news of which circulated widely on social media. The fire was the latest in a series of outrages large and small in the wake of China's zero-Covid policy: suicides, those who died without access to emergency medical services, the 27 dead in a Guizhou bus crash while being transported to a quarantine site in September, the workers of Foxconn in Zhengzhou who escaped *en masse* from their appalling lockdown conditions in late October, the unemployed, the bankrupt, students prevented from leaving their campuses, and the many and varied deprivations of normal life. On Saturday, 26 November, word spread on Weibo and Weixin—the most widely used social media apps—that there would be a vigil on Wulumuqi Road in Shanghai for those who had died in the Ürümqi fire.

At the northwest corner of Wulumuqi and Anfu roads there is a triangle of open space in front of the shops that curve around the intersection. People began gathering at midday on Saturday, and throughout the afternoon and early evening numbers were small. Some brought flowers and candles, which were placed in two spots. The mood initially was quiet and somewhat sombre and, as it grew, the crowd contained a mixture of those who had come for the vigil and passers-by (the area was always crowded on weekends). Most were in their late twenties or thirties; students were likely fewer in number due to the cumbersome procedures necessary to leave their campuses. Some people were masked and some were not (masks have been quite common outdoors on Shanghai streets) and, in the early hours, some argued that it would be better to remove their masks. As night fell, more and more people arrived, reaching

maximum numbers by about 1 am. In the evening, police began a containment operation that comprised a line of officers around the vigil, as well as street barricades further out. Some among the crowd had begun chanting slogans, which increased as the police grew in number:

Freedom of speech!
Freedom of information!
We want freedom, not PCR tests!

A few began to sing 'Can You Hear the People Sing' from *Les Misérables*—commonly sung during the 2019 protest movement in Hong Kong and the soundtrack of a widely circulated video from the April–May lockdown in Shanghai.

A call arose for people to hug the police. The police would have none of it, but many in the crowd hugged each other.

When someone chanted 'The spirit of May Fourth!', another responded 'The spirit of June Fourth!'.

People passed out sheets of white paper, which many held aloft. As the police presence grew and the cordon grew thicker and tighter, some began to chant the harder slogans:

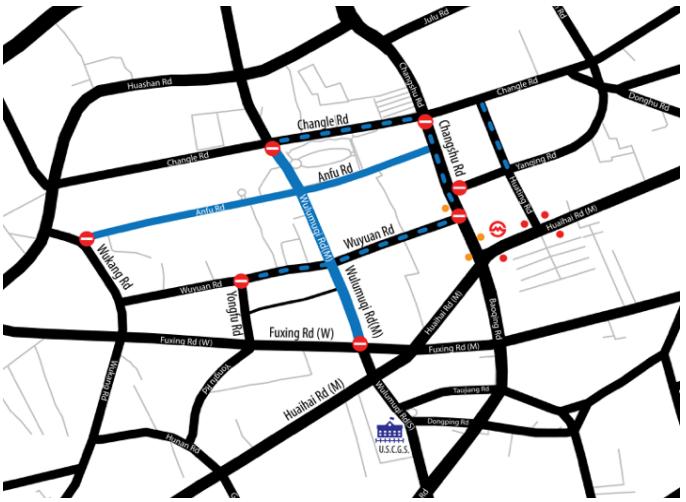
Down with the Communist Party!
No to dictatorship! Yes to elections!
Down with Xi Jinping!
Who is this asshole? Long live the people!
Fuck Xi Jinping!

Anyone who has attended protests in the United States would have found the police presence relatively benign: no hard hats, no riot gear, no truncheons. Until the arrests began, the police were generally calm, silent, and impassive. Many in the crowd later commented on their restraint, though they resented the tightening cordons and arrests. Arrests became more frequent as the night wore on. A group of four or five policemen would approach and subdue their target, often with considerable violence and rough handling, as others worked to block anyone in the crowd from trying to help. The arrestee would be loaded into a van and driven away. Several people have noted a significant change in the public attitude towards arrests. It was quite common when people were being arrested for others—participants, onlookers, neighbourhood residents—to come to their aid, sometimes shouting: 'No arrests! Let them go!' On Sunday night, the entrance to one apartment at the intersection of Wulumuqi and Fuxing roads had been roped off with police tape. When one young person fleeing arrest tried to run inside, residents in front of the building rushed to his aid and clashed with the police. Similar displays of solidarity with arrestees were reported from other cities as well.

People continued arriving into the night, joining the crowd at the intersection and nearby points. The later arrivals would have known that this was not just a quiet vigil and may have thought that something like a movement had begun. They collected in various spots, chanting slogans, and occasionally making feints towards the police lines. Many of those who did were arrested and those standing nearby were sometimes taken as well. There were many police vans and buses at the ready, lining nearby streets. Into the early hours of Sunday morning, the crowd had grown more restive, the slogans grew more politically pointed, arrests grew apace, and the police became more aggressive. Crowd-control tactics remained the same—a kind of soft kettling: split and separate the crowds, contain, move people along. By 5.30 am or so, the area was mostly cleared.

It will be some time before a clearer picture of the fate of those arrested emerges. Reports suggest most were released relatively quickly, which was viewed as a hopeful sign. One young woman reported that after being arrested about 3.30 am on Sunday, she was taken to a police station, questioned in a desultory manner, and kept in the building until later in the day. She was not held in a cell. The loud conversations of the police officers kept her awake all night, but she reported no harsh treatment. Her phone was confiscated, as is always the case, but she was able to retrieve it on Monday. It is not uncommon in such situations for phones to be kept for a month.

Map 1 shows the scene on Sunday, 27 November. Streets marked in blue represent the prohibited zone: no cars or bicycles were allowed to pass; pedestrians could move somewhat more freely, depending on the time of day, though they were not allowed to gather. Red circles with a white line represent police barricades across the width of the street. Streets outside the prohibited zone were lined with police cars, vans, and buses. Orange and red dots represent entrances to the Changshu Road subway station. The thin black line between



Map 1: Greater area of the Wulumuqi Road protests. Used with permission of the map's anonymous author.

Wulumuqi and Yongfu roads is a small alley that gave access to the prohibited zone; it was neither blocked nor used; police and crowds were likely unaware of its existence.

Those who came on Sunday found a different scene than the day before. There was a much heavier police presence, of course, and barricades preventing passage, as indicated on Map 1. There was no entry to the Anfu–Wulumuqi Road triangle, and Anfu Road was closed, as marked, though it was possible for some people to cross the street. Limited pedestrian traffic was allowed on Wulumuqi Road and was largely confined to the footpaths. A widely circulated video from Sunday's events showed a young man holding a bunch of flowers, walking back and forth across Wulumuqi Road at the Anfu Road intersection, taunting the police. After a few passes, he, too, was arrested in the usual rough way, and several who sought to go to his aid were subdued as well. His arrest revealed the presence of plainclothes police, who were likely there in large numbers. Special operations police, with distinctive uniforms, were on the scene as well.

In the evening, the crowd had grown in number, but was more dispersed. As Sunday evening wore on, news of protests in Ürümqi, Korla, other parts of Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Wuhan, Lanzhou, Guangzhou, and other cities had spread through the crowds and around the country. At about 9 pm, there was a small group outside the US Consulate (marked on the map), and further along Wulumuqi Road there were calls to join them. One group on the footpath trying to reach the consulate was prevented from doing so. Another fairly large crowd had been kettled into the area in front of the subway entrance at the intersection of Wuyuan and Changshu roads. Other crowds gathered at two spots on Wuyuan Road. Further to the east, a crowd gathered on Huating Road, north of the intersection with Yanqing Road. South of this intersection, all the way to the subway entrance on Huaihai Road, stood a group of about 100 police—presumably there to block access from the subway station. Another crowd, about 200-strong, had gathered at the point nearest the prohibited zone on Changle Road near its intersection with Wulumuqi Road, not far from the police barricades. There were far fewer people holding white paper than on Saturday, and sporadic chanting. Arrests continued into the night and, by early Monday morning, the greater area was wholly cleared.

By Sunday night, bars, cafés, and most restaurants in the area on the map north of Huaihai Road and south of Huashan Road, from Fumin Road to Wukang Road, had been ordered to close. Most fruit and vegetable stores remained open. The area around the intersection of Fumin, Changle, Yanqing, and Donghu roads, at the far right of Map 1, has long been one of the liveliest nightlife spots in the city. A small group of people sat on a bench in front of one of the closed bars, discussing the events of the previous two nights. A smartly dressed couple, out for a night on the town, approached

them and asked why everything was closed. Though the police barrier at Changle and Changshu roads was visible to the west, the uneven distribution of information—depending on which Weixin or Weibo feed one read—made it possible to be quite near the scene yet unaware that anything was happening.

The weather turned cold and rainy on Monday. The area had been cleared, but municipal workers worked into the night lining Anfu Road and other nearby streets with the blue barriers familiar from the lockdown days. The blockades marked on Map 1 remained, but bicycles and pedestrians were allowed through. The police presence had been greatly reduced; officers gathered at the subway stops and were stationed at all intersections approaching the area. There were no crowds. If anyone was seen taking a photo, police would ask to see it; if they met resistance—such checks are illegal—they would not press the matter. There had been an announcement on social media—its provenance was unknown and many questioned its legitimacy—announcing a gathering on Monday night at People's Square, a few kilometres to the east, which had previously been the usual spot for protests in Shanghai. There were indeed more police around the square than around Wulumuqi Road on Monday night, but the numbers were not overwhelming. Officers stationed at subway exits near the square occasionally stopped passers-by and asked to inspect their mobile phones, checking for Twitter, Telegram, and other forbidden apps. Word had spread that these checks were taking place and those in the know could download a fake home screen on which all apps were either anodyne or patriotic.

Over the week following the protests, some attendees whose presence had been identified through facial recognition software or other means were asked to report to the police. Their names and other information were recorded, but it is yet unclear whether any were arrested. Although there have since been no large-scale gatherings in the city, beginning on Monday, 28 November, there have been reports of small incidents all over the city, mostly protests over threatened lockdowns of buildings or communities. Some of these protests may have been successful. The lockdown of an apartment complex on Huaihai Road on 5 December ended after a few hours; such speed had previously been rare. There are also reports of sporadic vandalism of PCR testing stations—a tactic also used elsewhere in the country.

Countrywide Protest

The Ürümqi demonstrations touched off these events while those in Shanghai further opened a space for action that spread throughout the country. The major demonstrations elsewhere in the country—mostly on Sunday, 27 November—showed considerable social, spatial, and tactical variety. The Ürümqi demonstration and vigil beginning

on 25 November—the earliest in the country—was the first political action in the People's Republic in which Han Chinese and Uyghur people marched together. In Chengdu, a vigil on Sunday night grew rapidly in size, turning into a 3-kilometre-long march through the centre of the city that included thousands of people. On 11 May, at a protest over a Chengdu high school student's death under mysterious circumstances, a large group of high school students, along with some of their parents, had gathered at the school in a protest vigil, with many carrying white chrysanthemums. The flowers reappeared on the night of 27 November in Chengdu. Following the many arrests, demonstrators gathered outside police stations to demand the release of those arrested.

The Wuhan demonstration on 27 November was one of the biggest in the country. It centred on Hanzheng Road in the Hankou area—a district far from the universities and more blue collar in character in a neighbourhood dominated by redistribution centres and small shops catering to traders from towns and villages in Hubei and elsewhere in central China. Deprived of their livelihoods due to the forced closure of their shops, thousands of shopkeepers, workers, and residents marched down Hanzheng Road, methodically smashing down the blue barriers that lined the street.[2] In Guangzhou, many workers deprived of their livelihoods also participated, and their demonstrations lasted through the week.

The scene at Wulumuqi Road had a prominent place in the social media ecology, and the massive and rapid uploading of photos and videos proved too much for the Weixin and Weibo censors to handle. Nearly every confrontation played out in real time on phone screens around the country and throughout the world. At the Liangma River protests in Beijing on Sunday night—another of the larger demonstrations—mixed with the cries for freedom, an end to PCR testing and lockdowns, and other demands were cries and placards exhorting the crowd to 'stand with Shanghai'. Pictures of foreign media coverage were widely reproduced as well. The Twitter feed 李老师不是你老师 ('Professor Li is not your professor'; @whyyoutouzhele) has the most complete compendium of videos, photos, and short descriptions of events, and has also posted instructions on how to contact and interact with journalists. 'We're going to be in *The New York Times*!' was a phrase that came up more than once among the Shanghai crowd.

One participant described in an interview with *The New York Times* reporter Yuan Li that before the protests she felt she had lived in a 'liberal bubble' (Yuan 2022). The two-month spring lockdown in Shanghai had been traumatic for nearly everyone in the city, especially for migrant workers who were often the last to receive food and other supplies, and recovery had been slow (LG 2022). For the cosmopolitan young bourgeoisie—the type typically found on a Saturday on Anfu Road—the lockdown had been a particularly jarring wake-up call, forcing them to face fully the nature of

the state in which they lived and the precarity of their perceived state of exception. This realisation occasioned no small amount of *Schadenfreude* among non-Shanghainese, whether residents of the city or not, who had long resented Shanghai's particular brand of superiority. Some among the left-communist, Marxist-Leninist milieu—an anti–Chinese Communist Party (CCP), anti–capitalist workerist orientation[3]—hold that China has long been characterised by 'internal imperialism': the prosperity of the southern coastal cities and Beijing has been based on the exploitation of the interior; inter-regional inequality is a direct consequence of the Chinese capital's spatial fix. This imperial relationship extends, in this analysis, to the discourse about the protests. What the Wulumuqi Road protesters wanted, in this view, was a restoration of their pre-pandemic life-style in their liberal bubble: a cosmopolitan life of consumption, foreign travel, and relatively unfettered access to books, media, and information from around the world.

Worker suffering and worker militancy have been constant throughout the pandemic. In Zhengzhou—long a site of worker activism, political mobilisation, and analyses—the Foxconn workers' actions in October 2022 reached a level of militancy unseen in many years; videos of hundreds of workers escaping the 'closed-loop' system requiring employees to work, eat, and sleep in the workplace circulated widely, and were probably known to most demonstrators around the country (Friedman 2022a, 2022b). Though not prominently featured in the recent protests, one can still find news on alternative media channels about workers facing death, starvation, and isolation for pandemic-related reasons. Workers travelling home after factory closures frequently find themselves unable to take public transport due to pandemic measures and can be stuck far from home with little to live on. As one would expect, worker militancy over the past two decades has included critical analyses, investigative reporting, and political work by workers and their allies. These efforts have of course been met with state suppression, including crackdowns, which have intensified under the Xi Jinping regime, on workers' organisations and sympathetic nongovernmental organisations. Nonetheless, several social and alternative media channels in and outside China have continued to draw attention to the plight of workers during the pandemic. To the extent that the Sunday demonstrations were perceived, despite their varied character, as a single struggle, they contributed much to popular awareness of and sympathy for workers' struggles.

A Critical Void

In several recent analyses, much has been made of the more universal character of these nationwide protests, which have involved a broad spectrum of the population, including significant numbers

of university students, suggesting a civil society-wide display of popular discontent in the most significant outbreak of the political since 1989. The construction of its meaning will be an ongoing process. But November's uprisings took place within a distinctive political and ideological void. Critique, in its broadest sense—apart from the important work taking place in worker and feminist activist milieus—is probably at a lower ebb in China than at any time in the past 130 years. Critical left intellectual voices, which flourished from the 1990s through the 2010s, scarcely exist. A depressingly large number of former leftists have cast their lot with the state and the past few years have seen some of them extolling the Chinese Dream, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the strengthening of state capacity. During the lockdown, one Shanghai intellectual once identified with the nationalist populist left dismissed complaints against the lockdown, writing that he quite enjoyed drinking tea in his studio. At a conference in autumn in Shanghai, two prominent 'critical media studies' scholars stated—echoing state discourse to the letter—that the current task of critical media studies was to 'tell the China Story well'. Many other critics once associated with the left have retreated into a narrower professionalism or have turned their attention to matters of less contemporary concern. The increasing rationalisation of the universities, where academics are required to publish in state-approved venues and participate in national-sponsored research projects, and where teaching is closely monitored by administrators and zealously nationalist students, has of course been an important factor in the narrowing of critical intellectual possibilities. Yet, it is still possible to write and informally publish work of critical analytical depth, although such pieces are rare.

The state has greatly reduced the capacity for artistic, literary, and theatrical engagement with contemporary events, yet some exist. These include two recent productions in the 'Theatre of Contagion' series by Shanghai-based Grass Stage Theatre Company: *Clam Island* (蛤蜊岛, 2021; 'clam' is a homonym for 'quarantine') and *Home* (家园, 2021) (Gullotta 2022). *Quarantine* (隔离, 2022), written by Li Jianming, was an intimate, more mainstream family drama set during the lockdown. It was staged in 2022 in Beijing, Shanghai, and at the Daliangshan International Theatre festival in western Sichuan. For the Daliangshan production, authorities asked for certain terms, such as 'lockdown', to be replaced with their more anodyne official equivalents.

Many have read the concluding scene of Wang Anyi's recently published novella *The Five Lakes and the Four Seas* (五湖四海, 2022)—a rags-to-riches chronicle of Xiu Guomei and Zhang Jianshe, a couple born in the 1950s who rose to wealth during the reform period—as a reflection on the lockdown. Its final scene begins with a reflection: 'Xiu Guomei believed that all things had an ending but hadn't imagined an ending like this.' As Zhang Jianshe dies in a

freakish workplace accident, '[H]e saw a large dark cloud bearing down on him, but he couldn't move. "What's happening?", he wondered, as all became shrouded in darkness' (Wang 2022: 155).

The colophon immediately following this last sentence and giving the date of the novella's completion reads '24 April 2022, Shanghai'—one month into the city's lockdown (Wang 2022: 155, translations mine).

Such feelings of dread and foreboding quickened as the dynamic zero-Covid policy stretched into the autumn. The Twentieth Congress of the CCP in mid-October was a clear confirmation of President Xi's consolidation of absolute power. When the '20 Points' announcing a more relaxed anti-Covid policy were released on 11 November, there was widespread anticipation that the loosening had begun. This exacerbated the gloom that descended when initial official policy relaxations, such as in Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province, were almost immediately reversed. Early December saw new policy relaxations in Shanghai and elsewhere in the country; as of 3 December, proof of PCR tests was no longer required to ride the Shanghai subway. On Sunday, 4 December, there were announcements in several areas of the country promising significant changes in anti-Covid policy, but these seemed to be restricted to places controlled by Xi's closest associates. Policy relaxation will be understood by many as a response to the protests, but experience has shown that such relaxation can be tentative. Some feel that these concessions might be matched by a more intensive crackdown on political dissidence. We'll see.

Many at Wulumuqi Road, as well as at similar protests around the country, are new to political life, and many have doubtless experienced the euphoria that comes from standing together in defiance of a repressive authority, especially after so many years of social quiescence and months of isolation. The heady feeling of being part of a historical turning point will create resources of affect, reflection, and the will to action that could take many and varied forms in the years to come, whatever the character of state repression or conciliation. Such awakenings should not be dismissed, even when initially expressed in calls for liberal and not radical reforms. The near total absence of a substantial body of critical reflection, analysis, and theorisation, however, will make more difficult the formation of a new political subjectivity, even for those who desire it. This void contrasts sharply with the analytical resources that existed in 1989, as well as during the high tide of worker activism earlier in this century (Franceschini and Sorace 2021). Debates within civil society across the political spectrum were quite common from the early 2000s to 2016 or so, during what I have referred to elsewhere as the 'WTO years' (Connery 2020), and their absence in the Xi era has been striking.

Social media has been indispensable in giving the movement its nationwide, and even worldwide, character. Yet, the nature of the medium—image-saturated, brief in exposition, affect-heavy, and engineered for low attention spans—has its limitations.

The photograph (Figure 1) of two workers carrying off a blue and white road sign, reading '乌鲁木齐中路 Middle Wulumuqi Road', quickly became one of the movement's dominant memes: behold the state, engaged in a clumsy and futile act of erasure! The photo was disseminated on social media all over the world, and demonstrators in China and elsewhere have been photographed holding up reproductions of the sign, as if to say: 'Wulumuqi Road lives' or 'We are all on Wulumuqi Road'. One video posted on social media—and so far there has been little comment about its fakeness—shows a new sign with a new street name, '乌中路 Wuzhong Road', the first and last characters of the street's full name, and goes on to ridicule the state for thinking that changing a name can erase history. There was

Figure 1: Middle Wulumuqi Road, Shanghai, date unknown.

in fact a Wulumuqi Road sign taken down during the construction that has recently pervaded the neighbourhood, but from Sunday, 27 November until the time of writing, the many Wulumuqi Road signs are intact and in place. We all know that memes need no basis in reality. This one made for a good image and a good story: a sign taken for wonders. But it will take time and work to understand what has happened, and likely even more time to see, in the seeds of time, which grains will grow and which will not.

5 December 2022 Shanghai

In a world without fear of the consequences of guilt by association, this would be a long and detailed paragraph expressing my deep gratitude to the many people who took considerable time and effort to help with information gathering and analysis, provided additional useful material, and who reviewed and critiqued earlier drafts. You know who you are; I am deeply grateful. I am also very grateful for Yuan Li's recordings of her interviews with participants in the Shanghai events, as cited in the text (see Yuan 2022). My apologies for any errors and omissions; one can only do one's best in medias res. ■

1 See also Shu Haolun's 2011 documentary *Nostalgia* (乡愁), about life in Dazhongli, the community in which he grew up, a film he made just before the community was razed for redevelopment.

2 Several days after the Wuhan protests, the government announced that shops could reopen, subject to further closure in the event of positive Covid tests.

3 For an example of this discourse, see Chuang (2019).

Figure 1: Deng Zhen 邓震, As Boundless as Sea and Sky 海阔天空, installation and performance, Gegentala Grasslands, Ulaanchaab, Inner Mongolia, 2019.

Biopolitical Binaries (or How Not to Read the Chinese Protests)

Christian SORACE
Nicholas LOUBERE

On 26 November 2022, prompted by a deadly fire in a high-rise apartment block in Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, protesters took to streets and university campuses across China calling for an end to the country's restrictive 'zero Covid' policy (清零政策) (Davidson and Yu 2022). Unsurprisingly, the libertarian right, anti-maskers, and anti-vaxxers in the West wasted no time in celebrating the demonstrations as vindication of their own pandemic protests against any form of biopolitical state intervention. For instance, Charlie Kirk, leader of the ultraconservative Turning Point USA, tweeted: 'China is looking a lot like Canada suddenly', suggesting a parallel between Chinese protests and the Canadian 'Freedom Convoy' of truck drivers who protested vaccine mandates in early 2022 (Williams and Paperny 2022).

While we are hesitant to give the far right (which can no longer be understood as 'fringe') a further platform—which risks normalising them through mentioning—these narratives have entered a shared atmosphere of resignation to the inevitability of Covid-19 endemicity, as though the pandemic and all the suffering it has wrought were preordained and unavoidable. This normalisation of death due to Covid—framing it as an inevitable part of life itself—represents a *post hoc* justification of the disastrous pandemic outcomes in much of the West, particularly the refusal to attempt to eliminate the virus in early 2020. It also sets up a false binary of pandemic possibilities: either nihilistic necro-politics (the 'business as usual' model) or an endless spiral of intensifying authoritarian surveillance.

The internalisation of this false binary in Western narratives risks misreading the Chinese protests by interpreting the protesters' rejection of the authoritarian biopolitics of the State's zero-Covid policy as a tacit demand for the necro-politics of the United States. At the same time, this type of thinking severely constrains our ability to comprehend the global lessons of the pandemic as we enter an age of collective crisis.

Pandemic Poles

Horrific avoidable deaths from pandemic restrictions have catalysed recent protests in China. The Ürümqi fire, which killed at least 10 people in an apartment complex under long-term quarantine, was only the latest incident. In September, a bus crash in Guiyang, Guizhou Province, killed 27 people on the way to a quarantine centre in the early hours of the morning (Thomas and Abdul Jalil 2022); an unknown number of people are reported to have died after being denied medical treatment for non-Covid illnesses (HRW 2022); not to mention the suicides during extended lockdowns (Yang 2022). In the case of the Ürümqi blaze, according to reports, while fire-fighters arrived within 30 minutes, it took them nearly three hours to work their way through the lockdown gates, fences, and security, as well as the parked cars whose batteries were dead (Shepherd and Kuo 2022). Following a long tradition of mourning and political protest in China, the protests started from outrage over these tragic, irrational, and preventable deaths.

These events have gone a long way to unravelling the substantial effort expended by the Chinese Party-State to weave a narrative of pandemic success (Repnikova 2020; Zhang 2020). With its zero-Covid policy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attempted to position itself as the polar opposite of governments in the West and the United States in particular—as a biopolitical state that 'deploys its governing techniques in the name of defending the security of life against external threats' (L.G. 2022: 139), which represents a centralised technocracy starkly distinct

from the class-based revolutionary politics of the Mao Zedong era. Until the emergence of the much more transmissible Omicron variant of the virus, the Chinese Government successfully mobilised the population, state, and economy in a concerted effort to suppress transmission through newly developed surveillance technologies aimed at systematically mapping, tracking, and containing the population. In the name of the health of society, the Party-State constructed an elaborate immuno-apparatus that depended on both public compliance and coercion—the result being low levels of transmission, illness, and death due to the virus.

In stark contrast, in the United States, there have been more than 1 million deaths due to Covid-19, many of which occurred in 2020 before vaccines were available (Simmons-Duffin and Nakajima 2022). As of 27 November 2022, the United States was still estimating 330.4 deaths a day from Covid-19 (The New York Times 2022). In their recent book on the pandemic, *What World is This?*, Judith Butler (2022) argues that the normalisation of deaths due to Covid-19 means the acceptance of a percentage of the population as disposable—or a society in which 'mass death among less grievable subjects plays an essential role in maintaining social welfare and public order' (Lincoln 2021: 46). The fact that the United States is a necro-political culture is undeniable (one of the authors writes from his home in Colorado Springs where in November a gunman murdered five people in a queer nightclub). There is not enough mourning in the world to encompass the deaths in the United States from Covid-19, gun violence (particularly the normalisation of school shootings), police brutality, drug overdoses, and suicide. It is not an exaggeration to say that the acceptance of cruel, meaningless, and preventable death and debilitating illness—particularly among poorer, racialised, and medically vulnerable segments of the population—has become a key feature of contemporary US culture.

Donald Trump's May 2020 capitulation that 'there will be more death' (Wilkie 2020) indeed seems to represent the antithesis of China's commitment to put 'people first, life first' (人民至上 生命至上). On the surface, this necro-political/biopolitical binary would seem to be a simple one rooted in contradictory ideological systems: the United States and many other Western countries placed reopening the economy and resuming a semblance of normalcy above the lives and health of many people, whereas China has been willing to absorb economic damage to protect the lives of its people. For a time, this comparison served to reinforce the CCP's legitimation narratives. China's technocratic biopolitics supposedly values life as sacrosanct—in the words of Xi Jinping: 'People only have one life. We must protect it' (Bram 2022)—versus the United States' necro-politics of inevitability, where the acceptance of irrational death is conceptualised as a requirement for life, liberty, and human flourishing.

However, this seeming bio/necro-political binary falls apart as soon as one realises that the CCP above all values its own legitimation, which during the pandemic has hinged on the perception that it values human life. The subsequent bureaucratic implementation of the zero-Covid policy means that the statistics of cases and containment—that is, the perceived performance of the state—matter more than the lives that are being saved. When people visibly suffer or die due to the CCP's pandemic regime, the biopolitical logic begins to unravel. No scene captures this contradiction in a more visceral and painful way than people being burned alive while locked in their own apartments from the outside, as their neighbours watch and record their dying voices begging for help. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a biopolitical commitment to maintaining life in a pandemic (this is precisely the position we advocate, without resorting to authoritarian biopolitics); the problem is that the CCP's overwhelming priority is its own legitimacy, with viral suppression becoming the locus of legitimising narratives during the pandemic. In this sense, the biosecurity embodied in China's response to Covid-19 was less about 'the securing of collective life against risk' (Lincoln 2021: 46) and more about securing the life of the party.

Life, Liberty, and Party Legitimacy

Consequently, contrasting a rose-tinted view of China's pandemic response with the United States' dismal handling of the disaster sets up a false binary. For apologists of China, the narrative almost writes itself: China's initial responses were popular and saved lives. The US response was a national funeral pyre, which continues to smoulder at the margins of national attention. All this is true. However, it is only a partial picture. What is omitted from this narrative is the emerging feeling among Chinese protesters that their lives are trapped within the Party-State's apparatus of legitimation, the scientific validity and biomedical necessity of which seem increasingly far-fetched. The Party-State has maintained zero Covid because it has staked its legitimation on it, and Xi Jinping's reputation in particular. This can be illustrated clearly by putting the pandemic into the context of the CCP's handling of other disasters.

For instance, in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the CCP insisted that the deaths were due to a 'natural disaster' (天灾) and not a 'man-made catastrophe' (人祸). If it is a natural disaster, the party appears as the saviour; human-made catastrophes, on the other hand, raise questions about responsibility and point to broader systemic issues. Party legitimation turns on this distinction (Sorace 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021). The same rationality applies to the pandemic. The only thing standing between the Chinese people and the virus is the CCP—its quarantines, billowy white contamination suits, digital tracking, and the evolving coercive surveillance tools

that make all this possible. The current protests signify the disintegration of this narrative. People are starting to question whether the CCP's zero-Covid policy is about protecting their lives—as evidence mounts to the contrary—or its own legitimation. At the level of symbolic inscription, in a flash, China's zero-Covid policy has transformed from a positive biomedical infrastructure into an apparatus of containment and (literal and metaphorical) suffocation.

Our analysis does not predict that the CCP will be unable to reassert discursive control over the public framing of the narrative; it is a powerful 'discursive state', exceptionally talented at metabolising crises into victories (Sorace 2017). One of the key differences between the Sichuan earthquake and today is that whereas the earthquake was bounded in time and space, restricted to a single region and point in time, the pandemic is an ongoing national crisis with no clear end. Although people in China have had different experiences during the pandemic based on their class, ethnicity, gender, and other salient categories (Butler 2022; Friedman 2022; Karl 2022), it is possible to identify with other people's experiences, and the current wave of protests has even temporarily fostered solidarity between Han and Uyghurs (Millward 2022). Moreover, it is a global and mediatised issue, which is why comparisons with a maskless World Cup could, to a degree, exacerbate feelings of negative exceptionalism.

US–China binaries usually become stuck in a Cold War eternal return or Orientalist otherings, and this one is no different. Depending on where one points the mirror, the reflection yields either statist biopolitics versus anti-state necro-politics or totalitarian control versus freedom—and the conspiratorial far right combines the Chinese and US governments as two faces of the same medical authoritarianism. Instead, we suggest that the United States and China offer two competing models of pandemic governance, neither of which promotes human flourishing. As transnational labour organiser Tobita Chow (2022) recently tweeted: 'The competing nihilisms of the US and Chinese governments when it comes to COVID policy are not the only options.'

Misreading the Protests

So, while the Chinese protesters are demonstrating against the authoritarian pandemic governance to which they have been subjected, it would be a profound misreading to conclude that they are demanding the nihilistic necro-politics of the United States and other Western countries. To put it as unequivocally as possible: the protesters in China and the anti-mask/anti-vaxx protesters in the United States, Canada, and Europe are not the same. Western protests against masks and vaccines are a rejection of our 'shared interdependence', as political theorist Elisabeth Anker puts it.

Figure 2: Detail of Deng Zhen 邓震, *As Boundless as Sea and Sky* 海阔天空, installation and performance, Gegentala Grasslands, Ulaanchaab, Inner Mongolia, 2019.

According to Anker: 'The COVID warriors practice a freedom to expose others to death, and indeed to be free *from* them' (2022: 9), with 'them' representing anyone outside their private bubble. The assertion of individual freedom as the right to expose others to harm and protect a fantasy of invulnerability and indifference to strangers is neither a universal nor a desirable definition of freedom. Chinese protesters' calls for 'freedom' (自由) are both polyvocal and symbolically overdetermined by the context of their inscription. It is also worth pointing out that student protesters (as they did in 1989) have been singing *The Internationale*, illustrating that socialist values are not the monopoly of nominally socialist regimes.

While some protester demands are clearly driven by broader political grievances—for instance, calls for Xi and the CCP to step down—when it comes to the pandemic response, the protesters are not asking for complete state abdication to allow the virus to decimate the population, but rather a reasonable biopolitical rebalancing. For example, calls to end constant nucleic acid testing and forced relocation to centralised quarantine facilities are sensible and pragmatic; they are not the same as a flat rejection of all biopolitical measures aimed at avoiding runaway viral transmission. All this is to say that invocations of 'freedom' cannot be abstracted from their context, especially to form some glib pseudo-solidarity of reactionary

anti-statism. The leftist commitment to transnational solidarity that we embrace, at a minimum, entails a politics of mutual recognition, listening, and contextual translation.

This is also not to be confused with the statist solidarity offered by nominally leftist apologists for non-Western state capitalist regimes, such as the public intellectual Vijay Prashad, who on 28 November posted a selfie on Instagram holding a white piece of paper with '❤ **Z**ero Covid' written on it—clearly an expression of support for the CCP and a mockery of the Chinese white/blank paper protests. The bolded '**Z**' provocatively smuggled in support for Russia. The ideological incoherence of Prashad's positions is held together by an infantile view of anti-imperialism that holds that any enemies of the United States offer desirable alternatives by virtue of their opposition. This position is utterly insensitive to the settler-colonial and carceral operations (and, in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even war crimes) committed by Prashad's preferred allies (which are clearly states, rather than people). With so-called friends like this on the left, who needs enemies?

It is important to step out of the binary quagmire in which people like Vijay Prashad and Charlie Kirk are quite happy to be stuck. If we focus only on China versus the United States, we miss the fact that many countries sought to suppress the virus and protect vulnerable populations through solidarity-based collective measures, managing to maintain individual freedoms while curtailing the mass spread of illness and death. But a focus on the limited horizon of nation-states themselves is part of the problem.

Towards a Positive Biopolitics

What we are straining towards is a new language of the left—an articulation of a positive biopolitics that is planetary in scale (Bratton 2021) and can invent new political forms that address our being-in-common (Nancy 2022). As Benjamin Bratton points out: '[P]retending that biopower should not exist, and that choices concerning what does and does not live can be evaded because they are difficult and disturbing, is ultimately another way of allowing biopower to be exercised without accountability' (2021: 5). The positive vision of biopolitics as a solidarity-based collective endeavour stands in stark contrast with the nihilistic necro-politics embodied in the corpses that overwhelmed funeral homes in the United States, as well as the dire political realities of capitalist accumulation, political stability, neo-Confucian patriarchy, Han chauvinism, and carcerality that the Chinese State offers today. There are other lineages, names, and debates (Sorace et al. 2019). There are languages we have not yet learned how to speak or listen for. This would also

be a language of mourning, which attempts to respond to Butler's haunting question: 'Do any of us know how to name what we have lost?' (2022: 94). We have lost not only loved ones, but also the capacity to imagine a world in which all of us flourish. We are not sure of how to proceed, but at least confident that the path forward is not towards a world in which either the United States or China defines the terms of collective existence. ■

Delegates attend the closing session of the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, 22 October 2022. PC: Xinhua/Pang Xinglei.

The Great Entrenchment

An Unofficial Synopsis of 'Twentieth Party Congress Spirit'

Holly SNAPE

Act One

The Theme: Study Me! Be Loyal and Struggle!

In the opening of his 72-page report to the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping (2022b) proclaimed that the theme of the congress would be 'comprehensively implementing Xi Jinping Thought'. The theme also included 'carrying forth Great Party-Founding Spirit' (伟大建党精神), being 'self-confident and self-strengthening' (自信自强), 'innovating in the observance of fundamentals' (守正创新), and uniting to build a 'modern socialist country'.

The 'theme' (主题) of a National Party Congress is like a synopsis that appears at the start of the event's report. It typically states which body of 'thought' to follow, which overarching goal to pursue, and something about the approach for pursuing it. Jiang Zemin's Fifteenth Congress report in 1997—shortly after Deng Xiaoping's

death—proclaimed the theme to be sticking to 'Deng Xiaoping Theory'. Since then, each congress report has had an explicit theme. The CCP General Secretary opens a congress by delivering the report orally. Even if he orates only certain parts, the theme is among them. It sets the tone for the congress.

The Twentieth Congress's theme entrenches a twist in the inner workings of the Party instituted in 2017, when Xi's Nineteenth Congress theme abandoned all mention of the theories of former leaders. Contrasting sharply with each report since 1997, Xi in 2017 stripped the theme of 'Deng Xiaoping Theory' and the theories of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Amendments to the Party Charter at the Nineteenth Congress had then codified the status of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' (hereinafter 'Xi Thought').

The Twentieth Congress theme flows smoothly from that Nineteenth Congress twist, entrenching the notion that the body of thought to 'comprehensively implement' (全面贯彻) is Xi's own. While Jiang's final congress report used the same formula—'*comprehensively implement* [*my* theory of] Three Represents'—Jiang (2002; emphasis added) had then stepped down as General Secretary and passed the reins to Hu. In contrast, the Twentieth Congress theme is about 'comprehensively implementing' the 'Thought' of an incumbent leader. The Nineteenth Congress twist and the Twentieth Congress entrenchment thus introduce and lock in a new phenomenon in the Party: this is the first time in post-Mao China that a living, incumbent head of the CCP has had his Thought leading the show—a body of thought that will continue to swell and suffuse the Party's systems and policies going forward and which may do so in ways that the theories of leaders who stepped down or died did not.

The entrenchment of Xi Thought is paired with the theme's call to 'carry forth Great Party-Founding Spirit', which kicked off the congress by turning the gaze inwards on the Party. Though CCP congresses are always heavy on Party content, their themes typically feature the Party's guiding theory and goal but not the Party itself—its people and organisations—or, specifically, the 'Spirit' they must seek to exude.

Great Party-Founding Spirit is a Xi-era invention, introduced on the Party's one-hundredth anniversary in July 2021 in the context of 'carrying forth the honourable traditions, [and] continuing the red bloodline' (弘扬光荣传统、赓续红色血脉) (Xi 2021b). The Central Propaganda Department (CCP CPD 2021) followed that same summer with a long exposition about the Party's 'mission and values', starting from this 'Spirit'. The 'Resolution on History' (CC 2021) that autumn located the Spirit in history and Xi later penned a piece in *Qiushi* on the resolution, pointedly stating: '[D]on't think you understand it by giving it a quick read; that's not the case.' By way of explanation, he highlighted the resolution's novel revisions to Party history: '[We] wrote for the first time in a resolution on

history the view' that 'in the course of revolutionary struggle' the Party evinced 'Great Party-Founding Spirit' (Xi 2022a). So, a 'new' age-old Spirit was born.

The demands of the Great Party-Founding Spirit are to: 'Uphold truth, uphold ideals; practise the founding aspiration, shoulder responsibility for the mission; do not fear sacrifice, bravely struggle; be loyal to the Party, [and] do not let the people down' (CCP Twentieth Congress 2022a). While some among these are longstanding Party precepts, they have been reinvigorated in the 'New Era' (the regnal name for the decade since Xi came to power in 2012). The Spirit's inclusion in the congress theme is the first of many instances in the Twentieth Congress's documents that hammer home to Party members the entrenchment of New Era requirements for their behaviour, internal Party culture, and the way the Party exercises leadership.[1]

Using discursive formulations steeped in actual Party history, Xi's Twentieth Congress report opens by singling out one of the tenets of Great Party-Founding Spirit: 'All Party comrades must have the courage to struggle, and be good at struggle' (敢于斗争、善于斗争). The exhortation itself (务必, 'must') unmistakably replicates Mao's cautionary commands to members in the final days before the Party morphed into a governing party by establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC). 'Struggle' has a long history in the Party (Wang 1995) and is a concept of which Xi seems fond (CMP 2019). Even when heading the drafting of Hu Jintao's *Eighteenth Party Congress Report* in 2012, Xi had reportedly 'explicitly advocated including' the notion that the Party 'must prepare to undertake great struggles with many new contemporary features' (Wenmingcn 2021).

The Nineteenth Congress report had stated plainly that 'it is in the movement of contradictions that a society advances; where there is contradiction there is struggle';[2] and had called for 'great struggle' (伟大斗争), offering basic points on what this would involve (Xi 2017). The first was: 'Resolutely oppose all statements and actions that undermine, distort, or negate' Party leadership and the socialist system. In 2019, speaking to cadres training at the Central Party School, Xi listed five 'whatevers' (凡事) to 'struggle' against (Xi 2019). They included 'whatever risks and challenges are harmful to' Party leadership and the socialist system, China's sovereignty, security, and development interests, 'core national interests and major matters of principle'. He made clear that 'struggles' would arise in many fields, domestically and beyond, from the economy to culture and environmental protection. 'Struggle is an art,' he said, 'be reasonable in choosing the method, get the degree and duration right [把握斗争火候]; on matters of principle do not give an inch, on matters of tactics be flexible' (Xi 2019). Xi (2021a) then used the runup to the Party's one-hundredth anniversary as an opportunity for a new campaign, which he launched with a 'mobilisation speech' restating the need for struggle: '[We must] prepare mentally and in

our work for a relatively long period of responding to changes in the external environment, strengthening struggle consciousness, enriching struggle experience, and raising struggle ability' (Xi 2021a).

The Twentieth Congress report treats 'carrying forth struggle spirit' as one of five 'major principles' to which the Party must adhere in pursuit of its goals. It cites a lack of 'struggle ability' (斗争本领) as a continuing problem but reassures: 'We have already adopted a series of measures to deal with this.' One such measure are the *Provisions on Advancing the Ability for Moving Leading Cadres Up and Down* (CCGO 2022b). Released publicly on the eve of the congress, the revised provisions make 'weak responsibility-taking and struggle spirit' (担当和斗争精神不强) a criterion for removing leading officials from posts across Party and state systems.

Having invoked Great Party-Founding Spirit, the congress theme then states the need to be 'innovative in observance of fundamentals' (守正创新). The report later explains to what the 'observance of fundamentals' alludes. The correct practise of the 'world view' and 'methodology' of Xi Thought requires one to: 'Uphold no wavering on basic Marxist tenets, no wavering on the Party's comprehensive leadership, and no wavering on socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Xi 2022b). What is newly entrenched here—doubling down on the Nineteenth Party Congress report's thinking—is 'comprehensive' Party leadership.

With the expectations for Party members set—study Xi Thought, struggle, and uphold comprehensive Party leadership—the theme suggests more measured expectations for the Party's mission for the coming five years. The goal of the congress (stated in its title and theme) is comprehensively building 'a modern socialist country' (社会主义现代化国家) and not a 'great modern socialist country' (社会主义现代化强国), the latter being the ultimate, longer-term goal.[3] Plans for the coming five years detailed later in the report also point to this more measured end—working towards the Party's notion of modernisation.[4]

Act Two

The Greatest Strength of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is the Party's Leadership

Question 5 [True or false]: The Twentieth Congress report pointed out that we have comprehensively strengthened the Party's leadership and made clear that the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the Party's

leadership, the greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the people as masters of the country, and the CCP is the highest political force.

Answer: False. (Xuexi Daguo 2022)

A congress report functions as not just a guide to broad-brush strategies, policies, and aims, but also the most authoritative text in the Party's canon on the 'correct' current views to which Party members must adhere about *how to pursue* those strategies, policies, and aims. Its language must be precise; and Party members must study it. To help them, Party propaganda departments and Party schools create talks, videos, visual aids, and quizzes.

The 'Study Country' (学习大国) WeChat account's quiz (Xuexi Daguo 2022) quoted above does not provide the correct versions when a passage from the congress report is 'False' (that is, intentionally misquoted). Presumably, quizzers are meant to check incorrect answers for themselves, though the answer to most questions is 'True'. The example cited above is an exception. Its incorrectness is jarring: 'The greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the people as masters of the country.'

China's single-party system is meant to uphold the 'unity' of 'the people as masters of the country', CCP leadership, and rule according to law. The 'people as masters of the country' part is a role that 'the people' are meant to fulfil through channels and systems such as people's congresses, which are organs of the state.

In the context of the New Era, the idea that the Party could conceivably describe 'the people as masters of the country' as the socialist system's 'greatest strength' is preposterous. It is preposterous because for at least five years the Party has consistently, through its discourse and actions, made patently clear that it is *Party leadership* that is of paramount importance to the system. The Party's New Era project, which most visibly ground into motion after the Nineteenth Party Congress, is one that seeks to exert powerful Party leadership over all organs, actors, and operations of the state. It was at the Nineteenth Party Congress that Xi declared that the Party 'leads everything', the Party Charter codified 'the Party leads everything', and the congress report stated the correct version of the above 'True or False' passage as a basic principle of Xi Thought: 'The greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is *the leadership of the CCP*' (Xi 2017; emphasis added).

The 2017 congress set in motion a deep new agenda for resetting the Party's relationship to its state, strengthening the Party vis-à-vis its state in virtually every conceivable way: through law, institutions, organisations, mechanisms, and rules governing personnel. In the spring of 2018, after the Nineteenth Party Congress, the CCP inserted 'the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the Party's leadership' into the main body of the PRC

Constitution, breaking with the 35-year convention of keeping Party leadership within its preamble. It was that spring that the Party had rolled out a path-breaking 'Party and government agency reform plan', foreshadowed by the Nineteenth Congress report's promise to 'scientifically designate powers of Party and state agencies'. It was that spring that had seen the constitutional creation of a new system of state supervision, extending the Party's reach deep into the state (Horsley 2018).

The Twentieth Congress report entrenches that reset in the Party's relationship with the state. The notion that the Twentieth Congress report had stated that 'the people are masters of the country' as the system's 'greatest strength' is preposterous and jarring because for this to be true, the Twentieth Congress would have had to be a 'Great Overturning'. It was not; it was a 'Great Entrenchment'. It confirmed with great clarity that the Nineteenth Congress reset is here to stay.

Act Three

Every Field, Every Element, Every Node: Strengthen the Party's Comprehensive Leadership

'Comprehensive' is such a bland word. It feels somehow inadequate to capture the vision that the Great Entrenchment continues to pursue. *Quanmian* (全面) is sometimes translated as 'overall', which can be read as 'in general rather than in particular' (Cambridge Dictionary 2022b), which in this case does not seem quite right. Another option for translators is 'comprehensive': 'complete and including everything that is necessary' (Cambridge Dictionary 2022a). Whatever the word chosen, the 'Party's comprehensive leadership' (党的全面领导) has to it a definite ring of the 'everything'.

The notion of 'the Party's comprehensive leadership' made its New Era Party congress debut in the Nineteenth Congress report, which put it bluntly: 'Uphold the Party's leadership over all work' (坚持党对一切工作的领导), listing this as the first of 14 principles (十四个坚持) to underpin all New Era Party operations (Xi 2017). The Twentieth Congress report does not trouble itself with detailing Xi Thought again. Instead, it tells students of congress Spirit that the 'main content' of Xi Thought has already been articulated elsewhere—at the Nineteenth Congress and in the 2021 Resolution on History—and directs them back to those 14 principles.

The Twentieth Congress report commands: 'Implement the Party's leadership in every field, every element, every node of the Party's and state's cause' (Xi 2022b). This echoes the wording of a 2019 Central Committee resolution (CC 2019b), which worked towards having 'Party leadership' permeate 'whole processes for fulfilling all functional duties of all state agencies'. The Twentieth

Congress report entrenches the notion of Party leadership in 'every field, every element, [and] every node', both in its overall requirements and in specific sectors.

On science and technology, it calls for 'improving the system for Party Centre unified leadership over sci-tech work' and 'perfecting the new form of whole-of-country mobilisation system' (新型举国体制) [5](the latter being an approach for aggregating, mobilising, and deploying human and material resources towards particular ends [Ye and Zhao 2022]). On law, the report proclaims that there will be 'no wavering on the status of the Party's leadership as affirmed by the PRC Constitution'—a nod to the post–Nineteenth Congress constitutional amendment that altered the Party–state relationship at a deep institutional level. On discourse and ideas, it reasserts the need to 'comprehensively implement ideological work responsibility systems' (this 'comprehensively' is new compared with the Nineteenth Congress report) and states the need to 'firmly grasp the Party's leadership authority over ideological work' (Xi 2022b)—a principle that the Party added to its Charter in 2017 and an end towards which it has recently been building up its systems and mechanisms, such as the *Party Committee (Party Group) Ideological Work Responsibility System Implementing Measures* (CCGO 2015) and the *Party Committee (Party Group) Internet Ideological Work Responsibility System Detailed Rules for Implementation* (CCGO 2017). On security, the report calls for 'integrating the protection of national security into all aspects and whole processes of the work of the Party and state', prescribes the principle of 'upholding the Party Centre's centralised, unified leadership of national security work', and states the aim of improving the 'high-efficiency, authoritative national security leadership system' (Xi 2022b). On townships and neighbourhoods, villages and communities, CCP Charter amendments 'clarify the status and role' (CCP Twentieth Congress 2022b) of Party organisations as being to exercise *unified* leadership of *all types of primary-level organisations* within their respective geographic spaces (CCP Twentieth Congress 2022a; emphasis added).

On the Party itself, the report exhorts 'strengthen the Party Centre's centralised, unified leadership'. This is a dimension of pursuing 'comprehensive Party leadership' that particularly preoccupies the CCP. The Nineteenth Congress report had explicitly asserted that 'the foremost task of the Party's political building' is to 'ensure the entire Party obeys the Centre, [and] uphold[s] the Party Centre's authority and centralised, unified leadership' (Xi 2017). Subsequent central documents asserted that 'resolutely protecting the Party Centre's authority and centralised, unified leadership' was 'the most important thing in strengthening the Party's comprehensive leadership' (坚持和加强党的全面领导, 最

重要的是坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导; CC 2019a) and that 'the Party Centre's centralised, unified leadership' was the 'highest political principle' (CC 2021).

'Strengthening the Party Centre's centralised, unified leadership' is about both making the Centre's operations 'centralised and unified' and making the rest of the Party obey the Centre. The Twentieth Congress, like the nineteenth, was followed immediately by a meeting of the newly installed Politburo to review the Central Committee Politburo Provisions on Strengthening and Protecting the Party Centre's Centralised, Unified Leadership (《中共中央政治局关于加强和维护党中央集中统一领导的若干规定》). In 2017, that meeting (which suggests something of the content of the provisions, which are not publicly available) reportedly involved ordering Politburo members to 'submit major issues to the Party Centre for study', to report orally to the General Secretary annually, and to 'struggle against words and actions' that 'violate the Party Centre's centralised leadership and unity' (Xinhua 2017). In 2022, the meeting reportedly called on the Politburo to 'comprehensively implement' the Twentieth Congress report's demands about 'strengthening the Party Centre's centralised, unified leadership' (Xinhua 2022). Those demands include 'improving the Party's leadership systems for commanding the big picture and coordinating all sides', improving 'the mechanisms for ensuring that Party Centre major decisions and deployments are implemented', and developing 'new and improved leadership methods' to build the Party's capacity to 'chart the course, make overall plans, [and] design policy' (Xinhua 2022; emphasis added).

Act Four (The Finale)
Regulating Revolution

Xi may have started his Twentieth Congress report by borrowing discursive formulations straight from Mao's mouth, but his strategy for running the Party and exercising 'comprehensive Party leadership' shatters the common claim that Xi is 'the new Mao'. The congress report calls the strategy 'improving the system of institutions and regulations for Party self-revolution' (完善党的自我革命制度规范体系). The strangeness of the juxtaposition—*regulating* 'revolution'—was likely of no concern to drafters, and the now commonplace 'self-revolution' (自我革命) is officially translated as 'self-reform'.

The content of the 'regulating revolution' section is not new to the New Era. It alludes to a vast, systematic initiative carried out over the past decade to remould the Party from within by building an intraparty regulatory system to tighten its culture, practices, intraparty relations, and the exercise of Party leadership. This

has involved developing an increasingly sophisticated system of Party regulations, mechanisms, and methods to attempt to tame and systematically control the Party through mutually reinforcing, highly efficient levers. Though the congress report cites insufficient implementation and the need for mechanisms to allow for errors, imperfect as this system remains, this is the direction of travel being entrenched.

The report suggests that China's domestic and international environments are becoming tougher and more fraught with uncertainty. Its caution about the need to 'be ready … even for stormy seas' (准备经受甚至惊涛骇浪) reminds of the wording of Xi's 2019 talk to cadres at the Central Party School about 'struggle'. He had demanded of them a heightened awareness of challenges and risks:

> Leading cadres must be able to see subtleties and sense what is coming, as if discerning a flutter of grass and sensing a deer, pines dropping in a gale and knowing a tiger is approaching, or a single leaf turning colour and knowing autumn is drawing near. (Xi 2019)

Xi told them they must be able to 'judge potential risks, know where the risks are, know what their signs are, know how they will develop, and struggle against those that need struggling against' (Xi 2019).

The congress report sets clear expectations for Party members insofar as it lets them know that New Era demands are here to stay. It entrenches the thinking expounded at the Nineteenth Congress and thereafter: be literate in the bulging body of 'Thought' of the incumbent leader and capable of applying it; know that obeying the Party Centre is the highest political principle; pursue 'comprehensive Party leadership' in 'every field, every element, [and] every node' of the state's work; know your place in the well-oiled, well-regulated Party machine; and be ready to struggle. This is not just a bucket list of disparate demands but rather a mode of managing the Party and restructuring its relationship to the state; the bulging body of Thought is not just shouted into a void but is laced through the regulations of 'self-revolution'. Be it in 'struggling' or in exercising 'comprehensive Party leadership', the system's design is increasingly geared towards commanding calibration to the preferences of a 'unified' Party Centre and the spirit of Xi Thought.

And still, as the curtain closed on the congress, students of its 'spirit' may be left pondering: just how might a Party official find the time to keep up with the Party Centre's preferences, digest the latest in Xi Thought, discern flutters of grass—and all while leading every node of the state's activities? And what is the fate of the state as its Party-defined role becomes more of a supporting one to the Party protagonist? ■

1 The congress also codified the Great Party-Founding Spirit in the Party Charter's general program (in a passage about how the party manages itself and leads others), and added 'the regularisation and institutionalisation' of the study of Party history—of which Great Party-Founding Spirit was recently made part (CCGO 2022a)—to the Charter's concrete clauses on the tasks of a Party branch (CCP Twentieth Congress 2022a).

2 On CCP understandings and uses of 'contradiction', see Sorace et al. (2019).

3 The report's chapter on future goals states the overarching, longer-term aim: '[F]rom this moment on, the Party's central task is to unite and lead all ethnic groups of the entire country to comprehensively build a great modern socialist country [社会主义现代化强国] in all respects [and] use Chinese-style modernisation to comprehensively advance the Chinese nation's Great Rejuvenation.'

4 The report states that 'Chinese-style modernisation' (中国式现代化) is a CCP invention: '[O]ur Party has successfully advanced and developed Chinese-style modernisation.' The 'resolution on history' (CC 2021), in which drafters also used the notion of 'Chinese-style modernisation', had at least paid lip-service to the Party having 'successfully led the people' along a Chinese-style modernisation path (党领导人民成功走出中国式现代化道路).

5 There is a lot of Chinese scholarship on the concept of a 'whole-of-country mobilisation system', much of which was originally about mobilising support to make Chinese athletes internationally competitive; the concept saw a resurgence during China's response to Covid-19.

A man reading a book in the street in Paris, December 2021. PC: Hu Jiamin.

Lying Flat

Profiling the *Tangping* Attitude

Marine BROSSARD

In October 2021 at a forum organised by the US–Asia Institute, China's Ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, updated his American audience about the situation in his country. China remained isolated from the world after closing its borders in March 2020 following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic:

> I know that due to COVID-19, many of you have not been able to go to China for a while, and you want to catch up with the latest. There are so many new things going on in my country, but where should I start? Well, maybe it's a good idea to share with you some buzzwords in China, from which you will know what is going on in China, what the Chinese people are thinking about, and what they are doing. (Qin 2021)

One of these buzzwords was *tangping* (躺平, 'lying flat').

As I read about this concept for the first time in the spring of 2021, I immediately felt connected to the term as I had started lying flat after completing my PhD in Chinese Studies in 2018. My life in China from 2012 to 2015 had shifted my understanding of the world and undermined my ambition to become an academic. After receiving my PhD, I decided to quit my academic career as an act of rebellion against both the labour market and a system in which knowledge had become an instrument of domination. The unemployment benefits granted by the French Government allowed me to lie flat to ponder the world's problems and attempt to imagine a

new way of life beyond the capitalist imaginary. The emergence of the lying-flat attitude in China and the way it echoed my personal experience revealed the universality of the phenomenon among younger generations who struggle to cope with the disintegration of the meaning of life at this stage of late capitalism.

In describing the concept of *tangping*, Ambassador Qin highlighted how many in China—especially among the older generations—hold a negative view of the phenomenon, frowning on it as selfish in contrast with 'those who go against the current' (逆行者): the everyday heroes dedicating their lives to helping others during the pandemic. Ironically, when the first lockdown paralysed France in March 2020, I started working in a home for poor elderly people, replacing employees who were quarantined. I worked there for a year, experiencing the ups and downs as a PhD-holding unskilled worker while many skilled workers were forced to lie flat on their sofas as the economy shut down.

In this sense, I believe that lying-flat-ism should be understood as a global phenomenon. Edward Snowden expressed his support for the *tangping* attitude in a tweet in August 2021 in Chinese: 'The aim of the system is not to help you, but to control you. No matter how lonely you feel, please never forget that you are not alone. The exploitation of the new generations is a global struggle.' The subtitle of the anonymously authored '*Tangpingist* Manifesto' (躺平主义者宣言) published in English on *The Anarchist Library* asserts the same internationalism: '*Tangping*ists of the world, unite!' (Anon. 2021a). In this vein, this essay seeks to examine the *tangping* attitude less as a sociological subject revealing the sociopolitical characteristics of contemporary China than as a philosophical and political subject pertaining to the universal issue of our relation to the concept of work. Considering the *tangping* attitude as a political subject, this essay also takes the tone of a manifesto, praising its subversive potential to help us face our contemporary global crises. Thus, its aim is not to depict the sociological landscape of *tangping*-ism but to underline the radicalism of *tangping* thinking.

Lazy Fat Cats

Some months ago, a Chinese friend posted on her social media photos of her (fat) cat lying comfortably on its back on a carpet with the following caption: '*Tangping* Monday. *Tangping* against *neijuan*', ending with an emoji face crying tears of joy. These two terms became buzzwords on the Chinese internet in 2021 and 2020, respectively: the attitude of 'lying flat' is a reaction to the phenomenon of *neijuan* (内卷, 'involution')—a buzzword also mentioned by Ambassador Qin—which signals a rejection of the intense competitiveness of China's education system and labour market. By relating

these two terms to her pet, my friend's post highlighted an interesting pattern in the viral use of the concept of *tangping*: house cats as the epitome of lying-flat-ism.

The parallel between the lying-flat attitude and cats has been drawn on extensively across Chinese social media with memes portraying cute cats lying flat on their back. In July 2021, amid the frenzy around the term, German writer Bernd Brunner's book entitled *The Art of Lying Down: A Handbook of Horizontal Living* (2013)—a historical exploration of lying down, arguing against it being correlated with laziness and highlighting the subversive potential of this body position to challenge the verticality of our time—was published in Chinese with the title *Tangping* (躺平). While the cover of the German edition features the image of a man in a hammock, smoking and drinking in the company of wild animals, the Chinese version's cover features an illustration of a fat cat lying on a comfortable pillow.

Figure 2: Left: The cover of the German edition of *The Art of Lying Down* featuring a man in a hammock. Right: The cover of the Chinese edition featuring a lazy fat cat.

Lying flat has also become a marketing strategy in the pet industry to sell cosy cat-beds. The cat gear industry tugs at pet owners' heartstrings by projecting human needs on to their furry friends. In one advertisement for cat-beds, a cat lying comfortably in its duck-shaped bed speaks to its owner: 'Let's lie flat together.' While the recent boom in the pet industry in China can be explained by the emergence of a wealthier middle class, it is also tempting to see this proliferation of domestic cats as a way to soothe one's anxiety as social pressure has intensified for younger generations.

For young people exhausted by overwork, frustrated by the stagnation of their purchasing power, and tormented by their loneliness (especially considering many do not have sufficient free time to socialise), having their cat waiting for them at home is one of the rare

comforts in their life. This is exactly what the pet brand Pidan sells to its customers: 'Humans need cats because they help us freeze the sorrowful mood we so easily sink into when we are alone into the beauty of serenity.' This is also the motto opening director Bi Gan's short film *A Short Story* (破碎太阳之心; 2022), which was commissioned by Pidan and premiered at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival—a fantasy centred on an adventurous black cat which encounters lonely characters on a quest for the world's most precious things.

Figure 3: Advertisement for cat-beds: 'Let's Lie Flat Together.'

The lying-flat cats shared on social media are often fat. The correlation stems from another worldwide phenomenon: the online frenzy for obese cats. This social trend can be observed globally, with people swiping Instagram accounts in search of cute cuddly cat fatness and with 'chonk', a new English internet slang term that appeared online in 2018 to describe an adorably fat house cat. In China, the attraction of fat animals can be understood, first, as a more rural mindset relating fatness to higher social status—for example, the owner of 'the fattest cat in China' in a 2007 video from a television channel proudly commented on his cat's size: 'When Chinese people improve their life, cats improve, too.' And, indeed, according to a study published in 2012 (Sun et al.), at that time in Beijing, 23 per cent of cats were overweight and 6 per cent were obese—figures not too far behind that of humans in China, with the National Health Commission reporting in 2020 that more than half the adult population was overweight or obese. Second, it can be understood from a more urban perspective as part of the culture of cuteness expressed by the slang term *meng* (萌), influenced by *kawaii* culture in Japan.

The specular relation between humans and cats has deepened with the Covid-19 pandemic, when many employees started to work from home on their laptop with their cat sleeping next to them. In this situation, house cats reveal for pet owners the absurdity of their painful human condition in comparison with the cat's comfortable and worry-free daily life. The relationship is even reversed when pet owners start calling themselves 'officials who shovel poop' (铲屎官) and their pets 'masters' (主子).

Although cat owners are inspired by their pets' nonchalance, this amounts to a form of self-deception. Indeed, frustrated humans envy their cats for lazily sleeping throughout the day instead of realising that they have become apathetic because of their own boredom. The image of the sterilised house cat devoid of desires is the figure to which they tragically aspire. This is the self-deception of all the *tangping* believers who do not have the courage or the means to put their belief into practice. This is perhaps what the emoji face with tears of joy in my friend's post expresses: it is less laughing at her cat's comfortable life compared with her own than expressing her awareness that she cannot have such a coveted life. Interestingly, it has been reported that while the crying laughing emoji was listed as the most-used emoji on Twitter in 2020 (Yurieff 2021), it is considered 'no longer cool' by Generation Z, who prefer to use more sarcastic expressions such as the skull emoji—so much so that the crying laughing emoji is close to extinction on TikTok. The irony of Millennials has been replaced with the cynicism of the younger generations.

Lying Flat as Lying Low

The image of the lazy fat cat is the negation of the lying-flat attitude in that it is based on the capitalist imaginary that commodifies our relation to pets and animals in general. While *tangping*-ism aspires to the idea of autonomy, the portrayal of cats on social media conceals the fact that our relation to them is shaped by their dependency and their being dominated by humans. Radha O'Meara (2014) argues along these lines in an interesting article analysing how the consumption of cat videos functions through and reinforces the system of surveillance:

> The lack of inhibition of cats in online videos means that we can exercise the power of surveillance without confronting the oppression this implies. Cat videos offer the illusion of watching the other without disturbing it, brandishing the weapon without acknowledging the violence of its impact.

The analogy between lazy fat cats and lying-flat-ism also contributes to ridiculing the very concept of *tangping*. The temptation to relate lying flat to laziness comes from the guilt and shame such a bodily position arouses, as expressed by Brunner (2013: 1) at the beginning of his book: 'If you're lying down right now, there's no need to defend yourself.' These are feelings we have all absorbed through our education and our experience of work. To contrast such a pejorative depiction of the lying-flat position, one of the most important anecdotes that comes to mind is the story of Michel de Montaigne—at a time before the alarm clock had been invented—asking his servant to wake him in the night so he could relish the inspiring experience of falling asleep a second time (Montaigne 1965: 494). As the servant shook his arm, the great essayist rose to sit and then fell back softly to lie flat in his bed. Montaigne's philosophy argues that the pleasure of lying down is not simply lazy contentment but also a subject on which to 'ruminate' and thus a source of knowledge. Turning the concept of *tangping* into a headline, mainstream and social media have twisted its meaning, identifying it with lying down lazily, perhaps following the viral 2016 meme 'Ge You lying down' (葛优躺), showing famous actor Ge You slouching apathetically on a couch. A similar caricature was used by the Chinese Government, for example, in the official and repeated appropriation of the word *tangping* by the state press agency to disdainfully describe Western countries' apparently more passive response to the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'lie-flat approach' compared with the zero-Covid policy enforced uncompromisingly in China until December 2022.

Figure 4: A still of actor Ge You slouching on a couch from the 1990s sitcom *I Love My Family* (我爱我家), which inspired the buzz-term 'Ge You lying down'.

Mainstream and social media have often missed the deeper symbolic significance of the horizontal position. Luo Huazhong, the young man who popularised the concept of *tangping* with his post on the Baidu Tieba online forum entitled '*Tangping* Is Justice' (躺平即是正义), which was later perceived as the first manifesto of lying-flat-ism, described how he occasionally worked as an extra on movie sets at Hengdian World Studios (incidentally, the character *heng* [横] means 'horizontal'), where he was sometimes paid to just lie on the ground pretending to be a corpse. Writing a post on the lying-flat attitude on his WeChat feed, Tsinghua University Professor of Sociology Sun Liping (2021) expressed how the *tangping* attitude could not be applied to the lowest classes of society: 'To be able to lie flat you have to be alive, and if you've got nothing to live on, lying flat is not an option. Do we call "lying flat" lying flat when you're dead?' Based on Luo's experience, we might contradict Professor Sun's argument by stating that we can call the act of pretending to be dead 'lying flat'. The image of the corpse also allows us to relate the concept of *tangping* to another slang term, *tangqiang* (躺枪)—the abbreviation of '躺着也中枪', meaning 'to get shot (even) when lying down'. It is an ironic, often self-mocking term that describes the absurdity of someone being unjustly or unintentionally targeted when innocent—for example, on the battlefield of internet slander. Thus, the horizontal position signifies our relation to the absurdity of our existence.

Rather than lazy fat cats, there is another meme that better represents the concept of *tangping* that has been circulating for a while on Chinese social media: the image of chives (韭菜, *jiucai*) lying on the ground. Because they slump on the ground, chives escape the harvester's sickle. It is a metaphor that stems from the slang term *jiucai*—an old expression that appeared online at the end of the 2010s to suggest that young people were like chives in the way they were continuously harvested by the state to serve as a workforce and consumers. In a recent study, Pang Laikwan (2022: 86) underlined how the metaphor works through the biological characteristics of the plant as being very adaptative and easy to grow. Highlighting the fact that the plant regrows after being cut, she points out that Mao Zedong used the *jiucai* metaphor in this sense in a 1956 speech to emphasise the fact that, unlike *jiucai*, wrongfully executed anti-revolutionaries could not be brought back to life (Pang 2022: 95). Today, the metaphor implies that instead of fearing having one's head cut off by society, it is safer for the *jiucai* generation to lie flat. It is tempting also to relate the symbolism of chives to its property in Chinese traditional medicine of improving men's erections and fertility. We can also think of the exhortation to 'arise!', exclaimed throughout the Chinese national anthem—'起来! 起来! 起来!'—as the twin, but inverse, concept of lying flat.

When there is no justice and no way to fight back, it is better to keep a low profile. The temptation to lie flat springs from the crisis of individuality felt by the younger generations in China. Their aspiration for society to recognise them in their particularity is crushed when they perceive themselves as nothing more than *jiucai* stems growing in the giant national field. Lying flat is lying low, avoiding unnecessary trouble. The expression 'to keep a low profile' unveils the relationship between the idea of one's profile and the concept of individuality, as analysed by French historian Georges Vigarello (2012) in his study of the art of silhouette, which is drawing the outline of a person using the technique of shadow puppets, which developed in France during the second half of the eighteenth century. The word 'silhouette' comes from Etienne de Silhouette, Controller-General of Finances under Louis XV, who remained in office for less than a year because of his unpopular 'tax the rich' reform plan. Himself passionate about the profile art form, his name was first used mockingly to describe something unfinished (*'à la silhouette'*) and subsequently for the artistic technique using the simplicity of the line to create a portrait. According to Vigarello, the motor of the art of silhouette was the search for differences between individuals physically but also in terms of bodily posture, while Western art had in previous centuries been a quest for universal ideal proportions. A profile was thus a celebration of one's particularity. But within China's current context of state capitalism based on standardisation, young people who have learned how to identify themselves through subjectivity can only protect their individuality by stepping out of the game. By avoiding the attention of the social order on their silhouette, the lying-flat-ers affirm their uniqueness.

The Horizon of Horizontal Living

The *tangping* attitude has been widely understood as a phenomenon of the young middle class. Professor Sun Liping (2021) draws the same analysis in his WeChat post:

> For people at the bottom of society, the word 'hope' is often a luxury. Sure, they may lie down from time to time, but this is not a lifestyle they are looking for, this is just resting, or taking a break. And before they've caught their breath and rested up, they have to get back up and go to work.

Curiously, this type of comment seems to ignore the fact that Luo Huazhong, the instigator of the virality of the lying-flat attitude, was a factory worker when he decided to quit his job to travel by bike around China. Shawn Yuan (2022) reveals a similar profile for his interviewee Du Min, a woman who sells handmade wallets in the

[Left] Figure 5: A still from Li Yifan's film *We Were Smart* (2019) with young 'Smart' girls hanging out in the street.[Right] Figure 6: A still from Li Yifan's film *We Were Smart* (2019), in which some 'Smart' youths express their willingness to stop working at the factory and do what they like.

streets of Dali, Yunnan: 'I quit my job as a fabrics factory worker a few months ago and have been roaming around the country doing random things or sometimes nothing … I like this—being free.'

The idea that young people from a poor social background do not have the privilege to imagine hope overlooks the fact that the digital divide between rural and urban youth has been considerably reduced in recent years with the popularisation of smartphones. Beyond the China Dream (中国梦) promised by the government, young people from rural areas dream through social media platforms, too. Even before smartphones became common, the 'Smart' (杀马特, *Shamate*) movement of the 2000s—–that is, the beginning of the epoch of QQ (or Tencent), the 'grandaddy' of China's social media scene (Chen and Deng 2018)—showed how young people from poor rural backgrounds could adopt nonconformist ways of life despite their low economic and cultural capital. At that time, teenagers who had dropped out of school and left their villages to become underage workers in the factories of China's major cities started donning extravagant hairstyles and coming together in groups for solidarity.

Their disillusionment with exhausting and uninteresting mechanical work and their dreams of a freer life were well portrayed in Li Yifan's 2019 documentary *We Were Smart* (杀马特我爱你). Some of the 'Smart' interviewed in the film described how they felt the need to transform their hair to become fearless and to avoid being cheated by others, as well as to not remain invisible. For them, wearing colourful extravagant hairstyles was both a way to find some enjoyment in their extremely dull, hopeless, and painful lives and a way to defy the enslavement of their body and mind by the factory system. While they attempted to maintain their subjectivity within this exploitative system, their factory managers soon began to disapprove of their marginal silhouettes and to forbid the 'Smart'

hairstyle on the assembly line. Consequently, some of these teenagers quit their jobs and started gathering in parks, lying flat and often hungry. Others eventually went back to their villages to farm, like a young man whom Li filmed working alone in his fishpond with his stylish long hair. With the development of social media in the 2010s, *Shamate* became the target of online mockery, and the continuous attacks eventually put an end to their attempt to live a horizontal life through the verticalisation of their hairstyle.

The example of Zhou Liqi also demonstrates the existence of lying-flat-ism among lower social classes. A man from a poor social background, Zhou became famous in 2016 after a 2012 television interview of him while he was handcuffed at a police station in Shenzhen resurfaced online. On that occasion, he said he would never work for someone else (打工) in his lifetime, preferring instead to steal and spend his time in prison, where he could enjoy the presence of talented and interesting people whom he could not find in a 'normal' life. Nicknamed 'Qie Guevara' (*qie* [窃] meaning 'to steal') by netizens, he became a heroic figure for many young people in China. Apart from its comical appeal, his life philosophy went viral among people from different social classes because it addressed their feeling of alienation from work. After he was released from prison in 2020, he was approached by live-streaming agencies, offering him large sums of money, but he declined, preferring to follow his principle of never working for someone else. He later expressed publicly his desire to become a farmer.

Figure 7: A sketch portraying Zhou Liqi handcuffed at the police station created by a young graduate of a Chinese fine arts academy who was himself detained for a misdemeanour. He sent the photo of his drawing to my husband, Hu Jiamin, who was his cellmate when they spent several days in detention together. PC: The young graduate, with his permission.

There are numerous terms in Chinese that convey the idea of stepping out of the socioeconomic system, to the point that it is difficult to untangle their specificities. However, the first element that sets *tangping* apart from similar buzzwords is that it is less abstract as it concretely refers to a body position (lying flat) and an action (to lie down). Contrary to other 'anti-system' terms, *tangping* represents an attitude, not a lifestyle—the *'Tangpingist* Manifesto' uses the word 'posture' (Anon. 2021a, 2021b). It is precisely because it is not a lifestyle that it can best transcend the differences between social classes. The young middle-class Chinese who move to the countryside forming communities that have a neo-hippy hue are not *tangping*-ers. The *'Tangpingist* Manifesto' calls them (as well as other groups) 'fellow travellers' (同路人)—that is, people who travel out of the system but who are not genuine *tangping*-ers (Anon. 2021a, 2021b). Although its followers hope for a collective future, the *tangping* attitude today is synonymous with urban solitude. It is mostly in the city that *tangping*-ers find the temporary jobs that allow them to survive financially without committing themselves to the tyranny of stable employment.

While there seems to be a tendency among researchers in the social sciences to doubt or deny the potential of the *tangping* attitude among the lower social classes, they should perhaps reconsider how visionary thinkers like French philosopher André Gorz (1989: 192–93) described the way the middle class monopolises 'skilled, complex, creative and responsible occupational activities' to the detriment of lower social classes precisely by overworking. Thus, the fight for liberation from the ideology of work is not the fight of middle-class people whose aim is to 'defend the rank and the position of strength their work affords them' (Gorz 1989: 235), but rather the fight of the lower social classes. If the examples of the *Shamate*, Luo Huazhong, Du Min, or Zhou Liqi cannot be considered sociologically representative of a general tendency among the lower social classes, their very existence proves—politically—the potential of the *tangping* attitude to pertain to lower social classes. *Tangping* is further from Buddhist detachment and closer to Marxist radicalism. It is the most rebellious of all the anti-system buzzwords, and it includes all kinds of individuals. In the words of the *'Tangpingist* Manifesto': 'It tries to contact all those who refuse coercion and obedience, men and women, workers and the unemployed, citizens, farmers and nomads, hooligans, students and intellectuals, heterosexuals, homosexuals and other queer people, vagrants and pensioners' (Anon. 2021a, 2021b).

More generally, *tangping*-ism aims to challenge the determinism of one's social class and to conceive of social mobility beyond ascending hierarchical movements. By refusing the social power of the working position their education could grant them, some young middle-class people indirectly unite with the *tangping*-ers from lower social classes. An example can be seen in a young man

interviewed by *ABC News* named Li Chuang, who went to live with monks in the Wudang Mountains after quitting his job as an editor, then returned to Beijing and opened a small grocery shop in the *hutong*s (Feng 2021). Or a friend of mine who, after five years living and studying in Europe and the United States, returned to her hometown in China to stay with her parents, living the life of an 'unemployed roamer' (无业游民). It is also the path I have chosen as a middle-class woman by quitting my academic career to fight against social stratification and for anticapitalist feminism.

The Philosophy of Stray Dogs

The inclusiveness of the *tangping* attitude corresponds with its universality. Following the internationalism of lying-flat-ism, I propose a French translation of *tangping*: *'tant pis'*. I believe the most revealing Chinese translations of concepts are the homophonous ones, like the translation *'jishi'* (忌屎, literally, 'to avoid shit') for 'kitsch' proposed by a Taiwanese translator, which is both homophonic and etymologically close to Milan Kundera's concept of kitsch. *Tant pis* conveys the idea of 'whatever' or 'never mind', with *'pis'* meaning 'worst'. Expressing resignation, it reveals one's cynicism. Cynicism is a universal disposition adopted by young generations to make sense of the absurdity of their life under capitalism. In his post advocating for *tangping*, Luo Huazhong mentioned the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who gave up his mundane life to live in a barrel on the street. Like Diogenes, the 'dog philosopher' (the Greek etymology of cynicism, *kynikos*, means 'dog-like', and the Chinese translation, *quanru* 犬儒, follows the same etymology, with *quan* meaning 'dog'), the horizon of horizontal living is not the philosophy of house cats but the philosophy of stray dogs who roam freely and determinedly, like the 'calamitous dogs' sung about by Charles Baudelaire in the last poem he wrote before his death, *Les Bons Chiens* (*The Good Dogs*), which made Richard D.E. Burton (1994: 466) describe Baudelaire as an 'aristocratic cat poet' turned into a 'democratic dog poet'.

Several authors cast doubt on the agency of the *tangping*-ers because of their individualist attitude. Lili Lin and Diego Gullotta (2021: 27), for example, underline Pang Laikwan's scepticism: 'Pang does not romanticise the agency of *jiucai* and *tangping*; in her view, it is not this "subject" that can perform social transformation.' The word 'romanticise' is Pang's own lexical choice: 'I do not want to romanticize this *jiucai* agency' (Pang 2022: 96). Although Pang does not conclude with a definitive statement, she sees the lack of 'intersubjective awareness' (2022: 96) as an impediment to the agency of the *jiucai*. However, what appears unclear in her argument—and in the way Lin and Gullotta quote her—is that the term *jiucai* is used to indicate both the people being harvested by the socioeconomic

Figure 8: Stray dogs napping in Taiwan, recalling the poetics of Tsai Ming-liang's film Stray Dogs (2013). PC: Marine Brossard.

system without being consistently aware of it (who can be called *jiucai* by the people who are aware of it; in Pang's words, 'every citizen becomes *jiucai*' [Pang 2021]) and the people who are aware of being harvested by the socioeconomic system. Moreover, *jiucai* and *tangping* cannot be understood on the same analytical level: *tangping*-ers are *jiucai* who decided to step out of the system; they are *jiucai* who are lying flat and not just *jiucai* in general. It is precisely on the analytical level of *tangping* that the question of agency should be examined. In this sense, we can argue against the idea of a lack of 'intersubjective awareness' among the *tangping*-ers.

This is the point made by the *'Tangpingist* Manifesto' when it takes the example of Diogenes to contradict the critiques analysing *tangping* as a selfish and reclusive attitude:

> When Diogenes lay in his barrel and looked out at the world, he did not appear isolated. He did not shy away from advocating his ideas to passersby, and he placed the wooden barrel in the most prosperous road in the centre of the ancient Greek world. (Anon. 2021a, 2021b)

Non-individualistic individuality—which I would call 'interior individuality'—is precisely the attitude that allows one to be available to others. This was well depicted by Milan Kundera in his book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, with its solitary characters, such as Franz, who prefers nature over prosaic civic matters: 'What political party did Franz vote for? I am afraid he did not vote at all; he preferred to spend Election Day hiking in the mountains' (1999: 258). Kundera praises individuality as the true subversive force towards the kitschification of reality. It is not selfishness, not egotism, but non-participation in kitschified collective forms with the hope of a

new imagined sense of collectivity. Similarly, the *tangping* attitude is a political (and thus collective) act that demonstrates intersubjective awareness, as stated by the '*Tangpingist* Manifesto': the *tangping*-ers 'do not provide more leisure for themselves, but for others. They did not erect these shelters for themselves, but for all the oppressed' (Anon. 2021a, 2021b).

Beyond the various criticisms of the *tangping* attitude, the challenge for horizontal philosophy is that it must defy the ideology of verticality that defines our existence under capitalism, the fluctuations in the graphs of economic growth and even in the materialisation of heartbeats. While everlasting fluctuation currently defines life, horizontalism envisions life through the stability of precariousness and the aesthetics of fragility. The anthropological etymology of the concept of involution (first used by anthropologist Clifford Geertz) invites us to imagine human life beyond our current socio-historical context. It is what anticapitalist anthropologist David Graeber proposed in his visionary work by drawing from anthropological and archaeological data that proved the potentiality of non-capitalist social models to develop a new imaginative force:

> I was drawn to the discipline [of anthropology] because it opens windows on other possible forms of human social existence; because it served as a constant reminder that most of what we assume to be immutable has been, in other times and places, arranged quite differently, and therefore, that human possibilities are in almost every way greater than we ordinarily imagine. (Graeber 2007: 1)

In our globalised world, Graeber's vision and more generally the philosophy of degrowth can enlighten the quest of the young generations for a path towards individual and collective fulfilment. ■

US. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen waving to those in attendance during their meeting on 3 August 2022. PC: Taiwan Presidential Office (Wikimedia Commons).

Praising a Dead Dictator

How US Officials' Visits to Taiwan Wade into Complex Historical Debates

Brian HIOE

In August 2022, US Senator Marsha Blackburn travelled to Taiwan in what was the last of three visits by members of the US Congress during that month alone. The trip occurred soon after Nancy Pelosi had visited the island with a bipartisan delegation of other elected US officials in what was the first visit by a US Speaker of the House of Representatives in 25 years, since Newt Gingrich's mission in 1997 (Timsit 2022).

Pelosi's visit was originally scheduled for April (Bloomberg 2022) as a show of support at a time when Russia's invasion of Ukraine had left many wondering whether Taiwan would be the next international flashpoint. However, that trip had to be called off because Pelosi was infected with Covid-19. As Pelosi was planning her visit to the island in early July, the *Financial Times* reported on her intentions (Sevastopulo and Hille 2022). At that point, public comments by US President Joe Biden suggested that he viewed the visit as inadvisable, given the potential for escalation by China in response (Desiderio and Ward 2022). For her part, Pelosi downplayed Biden's

comments as simply related to her personal security (Dawson 2022). For several weeks, international observers speculated about whether Pelosi would make the trip, with discussion centring on the possible consequences if she did.

When Pelosi finally arrived in Taiwan, China responded with a series of live-fire exercises that were closer to the island's shores than those during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96 (Lee and Wu 2022). The Chinese military also fired missiles over Taiwan for the first time to signal its capacity to launch a decapitating strike on Taipei and major metropolitan centres (Takahashi 2022). Chinese missiles also landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, which Japan's Ministry of Defence viewed as deliberate (Kyodo News 2022). Both before and after Pelosi's visit, Chinese warships were sighted around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, suggesting China was also timing military displays aimed at Japan (Central News Agency 2022). Chinese ships were also spotted in the Yellow Sea and Bohai Sea, near South Korea (CGTN 2022).

We can speculate that, if Pelosi had not become infected with Covid-19, ensuring a different timing for her trip, or if international media had not reported on the trip before it took place, this scenario would have played out very differently. Since the Biden administration took power, it has been more common for US politicians to announce visits to Taiwan only once they have arrived, to minimise the window for China to react. In this case, international speculation about the possible consequences of a Pelosi visit became so heated, it arguably obligated the Chinese leadership to respond with a strong show of force, to avoid coming across as weak to both domestic and international audiences. This is a situation that is exacerbated by the twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is scheduled to take place in mid-October and which is expected to see Chinese President Xi Jinping securing an unprecedented third term.

We can only speculate about Pelosi's motives. She reportedly decided to make the trip because of the view that sooner or later China would find a pretext to escalate tensions in the Taiwan Strait, so she might as well signal US support now (Abutaleb and Pager 2022). At the same time, many interpreted the trip as a move primarily related to US domestic politics. As she is expected to retire soon, Pelosi may have been hoping to secure a legacy as a liberal hawk on China. Or she may have been hoping to shore up the Democrats' credentials as tough on China through signalling support for Taiwan ahead of US midterm elections. Regardless of her intentions, the trip did not mean much in terms of substantive gains for Taiwan. No arms deal or economic treaty came out of the visit, for example. Nevertheless, Pelosi's journey was fraught with symbolism—significant stops included meetings with semiconductor executives and a visit to a former prison from the authoritarian era to meet with Tiananmen Square student leader and Uyghur dissident

President Tsai meets US delegation led by Senator Ed Markey. PC: Office of the President, ROC (Taiwan).

Wu'er Kaixi; the last of the Hong Kong Causeway Bay booksellers to remain free, Lam Wing-kee; and Taiwanese human rights nongovernmental organisation worker Lee Ming-che, who was arrested in China and detained for five years on charges of subversion of state power (Apple Daily 2022).

Blackburn Praises a Dead Dictator

Not long after Pelosi's visit, a second US delegation, led by US Senator Ed Markey, touched down in Taiwan. This more closely conformed to the pattern established by other Biden administration visits, in that it was only announced shortly before it took place and was conducted in a relatively low-key manner—though even on this occasion China responded by announcing military drills (Hua and Wang 2022). Like Pelosi's visit, the Markey delegation was bipartisan in nature. Later in the month, Taiwan also played host to Indiana Governor Eric J. Holcomb (Yeh 2022) and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey (Cheng 2022), both of whom likely had trade in mind. These received less attention than the visits by members of Congress.

In between Markey's trip and those by the two governors came Senator Blackburn. Deviating from the pattern established by other Congress members, she arrived alone. Blackburn's visit was marked by several incidents in which she veered off script, including referring to Taiwan as an 'independent nation' during a meeting with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (Hsu and Gau 2022).

President Tsai poses for a photo with a delegation led by US Senator Marsha Blackburn. PC: Office of the President, ROC (Taiwan).

Most notably, however, she took a photo of herself in front of the Chiang Kai-shek memorial and posted it on her personal Twitter account. The accompanying tweet described the memorial as devoted to the 'work' of Chiang Kai-shek. Few domestic outlets in Taiwan reported on the fact that Blackburn had waded into the middle of an unsettled debate about Chiang's legacy of which she was probably unaware.

Blackburn's tweet proved ironic, especially as she had just vowed resistance to authoritarian leaders in a previous tweet. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), after all, emerged from the decades-long democracy movement to resist the authoritarianism of Chiang's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT). The KMT ruled Taiwan for decades in what was then the world's longest period of martial law. The founding figures of the DPP and many of its major politicians, including Tsai's predecessor as DPP President of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, served years in jail—and even faced the threat of capital punishment—at the hands of the KMT. Major members of Tsai's administration, such as Premier Su Tseng-chang and Control Yuan head Chen Chu, entered politics after a long history of activism against the dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek and his successor and son, Chiang Ching-kuo.

Public verdicts on the Chiangs remain divided. Polling shows that Chiang Ching-kuo is remembered as the Taiwanese president who contributed the most to Taiwan, while Chiang Kai-shek is remembered as having contributed the least (Luo 2019). The Nationalists have framed Chiang Ching-kuo as a benevolent dictator who

relinquished power to allow for Taiwanese democracy. In reality, the KMT was under extreme pressure to allow the transition to democracy in the face of an 'extra-party' (黨外) movement that aimed to form a political party outside its ranks. Many adherents of the KMT's view of history still praise both Chiangs as anticommunist heroes who allowed for Taiwan's current freedom from China, or as having provided the foundations for Taiwan's economic prosperity. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that this takes place in the changed political reality of the twenty-first century, when the KMT has now pivoted towards being a pro-China, pro-unification party.

The KMT fits the classic pattern of right-wing authoritarian dictatorships backed by the United States in the interests of anticommunism, with many of the individuals who came to Taiwan from the mainland with the KMT in 1948–49 constituting an elite political and economic ruling class during the authoritarian period. This ruling class could not have maintained power without US backing. However, with democratisation, this ruling class lost its privileges. As the KMT is not militarily capable of retaking China, the party has become amenable to facilitating the unification of Taiwan and China, even if it occurs under the auspices of the CCP. Arguably, this comes with the view that political unification could mean a restoration of elite privileges for the party.

The KMT has sometimes been understood as a settler-colonial regime. Though statistics are inexact and dated, according to Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior, in 2002, 88 per cent of Taiwan's majority Han population was descended from previous waves of Han migration, while about 10 per cent of the population was descended from those who came with the KMT (Hsu and Chen 2004). The descendants of Taiwan's indigenous inhabitants are thought to constitute about 2 per cent of the population, according to the government (Gao 2015). Seventy years after the KMT's withdrawal to Taiwan, the lines between these groups have become increasingly blurred.

For their part, US officials distrusted Chen Shui-bian—the first non-KMT president in Taiwanese history, in office from 2000 to 2008—as potentially throwing a wrench in US designs for regional stability in the Asia-Pacific, viewing him as an ideological provocateur irrationally bent on realising Taiwanese independence. Even if Tsai has now won the backing of the United States through adhering to a moderate status quo position, successive US administrations originally saw her in the same light, sabotaging her 2012 run for president with a phone call placed to the *Financial Times* from the White House expressing a lack of faith in her ability to stand up to China (Shih 2020).

Yet, a strange series of historical reversals has now resulted in the DPP aligning with the United States, which backed the KMT during the authoritarian era. And the KMT has now pivoted towards its

former enemy, China. This is perhaps related to the fact that KMT political rule was always predicated on its backing by an external power.

Unwittingly Wading into Complex Historical Debates

Though Senator Blackburn was likely unaware of it, her trip and tweet occurred at a time of complex debate about what to do with the legacies of the authoritarian period, including the verdict on Chiang Kai-shek. There are statues of Chiang on school campuses and government sites across Taiwan. As many of those educated during the authoritarian era still view Chiang as a figure of veneration, removing these structures is controversial (Hioe 2015a). The biggest question is what should be done with the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, a hulking place in downtown Taipei that enshrines a 3.5-metre statue of Chiang. Proposals for the memorial as part of transitional justice efforts include turning the site into a museum about the authoritarian period or the new home for the legislature, as a structure more suitable for contemporary democratic values (Hioe 2022).

The verdict on this history is not settled and many members of the KMT retain positive views of Chiang. A sign of this is the fact that the KMT's candidate for Taipei mayor in the local elections later this year—a position traditionally viewed as a stepping-stone to the presidency—is Chiang Wan-an, who claims to be the illegitimate great-grandson of Chiang Kai-shek (Krishankutty 2022). In the meantime, the DPP and KMT continue to contest the other's view of history. Part of this is simply a reflection of the unsettled legacy of the authoritarian era, with the KMT downplaying incidents such as the '228 Massacre', which, in February 1947, marked the start of the decades-long White Terror, and generally minimising the number of victims or suggesting that those targeted were primarily communist infiltrators or spies.

Opinion polls show the current generation of Taiwanese overwhelmingly identifies as Taiwanese and not Chinese (Feng 2022). Unlike their grandparents, young Taiwanese—sometimes termed the 'natural independence' (天然獨) generation—do not have direct experience of China. Educated after the advent of democratisation, they did not experience an education system that framed Taiwan as part of China. At the same time, they grew up observing the deterioration of freedoms in Hong Kong under Chinese rule and reports of the mass imprisonment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. It is also significant to remember that young Taiwanese are very conscious that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is 'China' and that Taiwan has never been part of the PRC.

For its part, the KMT views the identity shift among young Taiwanese as the result of DPP efforts at 'de-Sinicisation' and curriculum changes passed under the Chen Shui-bian administration. Young people have expressed their views of what their education should look like through incidents such as the 2015 occupation of the Ministry of Education by high schoolers—a mobilisation against changes to textbooks proposed by the KMT Ma administration that would have whitewashed the KMT's past crimes and framed Taiwan as part of China (Hioe 2015b). In a similar timeframe, one could draw parallels to the actions of Scholarism in Hong Kong.

Senator Blackburn's tweet is illustrative of her ignorance of contemporary developments in Taiwanese politics, but this is not surprising for US Republicans, who sometimes maintain views of Taiwan that date to the Cold War, when the KMT ruled unchallenged. By contrast, the symbolic importance of the stops on Nancy Pelosi's itinerary at least showed knowledge of Taiwanese history, in that she visited a memorial to the victims of the authoritarian era rather than a monument to the former dictator. Also, ironically, the debate about what to do with the Chiang Kai-shek memorial and statues across Taiwan resembles the debate about what to do with symbols of the Confederacy in the United States, including many statues in public buildings.

Global geopolitical tensions have made for strange bedfellows here. Senator Blackburn has made a name for herself as a US politician with starkly conservative views. Apart from backing the repeal of abortion rights, she also supports repealing the legalisation of gay marriage and opposes Obamacare. But, as with many of the US Republicans who back Taiwan, one wonders whether they are aware of the politics of the Tsai administration, or Taiwan as a whole, beyond a general anti-China frame. Among other policies, Taiwan enjoys universal healthcare—a domestic issue with no relevance to cross-Strait politics that has unquestioned bipartisan support—and legalised gay marriage under the Tsai administration, which was a first in Asia (Hollingsworth 2019). As such, Taiwan today would seem to be a quite different place to the one US Republicans generally imagine themselves to be standing with against the threat of communist expansion.

A Springboard for Domestic Aims?

Still, Blackburn's trip was likely made primarily with domestic US political aims in mind. In this way, her visit was not so different in intention to Pelosi's, whose coming was welcomed by many Taiwanese who viewed it as a sign of welcome support from the United States. Reactions to Chinese live-fire drills and other military activity were relatively muted in Taiwan, probably because Chinese military threats have been directed at Taiwan for decades, meaning

the public has become inured to efforts at intimidation. Overall, there were fewer reactions to Blackburn's trip, which was treated largely as a footnote compared with the Pelosi and Markey visits, probably because she came alone and not as part of a bipartisan delegation. The same could be said of the visits to Taiwan by the Arizona and Indiana state governors. However, it is important to note that the trips of Blackburn and other US elected officials serve to further normalise such visits, making them less of an extraordinary event that necessitates a strong reaction from China.

Blackburn's visit further raises the possibility of US politicians—usually from the political right—using Taiwan for political signalling to a US domestic audience. For instance, the Trump administration's secretary of state Mike Pompeo visited Taiwan in March as part of a series of moves that seemed aimed at a future presidential bid (Reuters 2022). When it was still unclear whether Pelosi would visit Taiwan, Pompeo expressed support, even offering to travel with her (Taipei Times 2022). The Tsai administration rolled out the red carpet for Pompeo in a manner that set the template for Pelosi's visit, with the Taipei 101 skyscraper lit up in support of both politicians. Pompeo is expected to visit again in September (Kao 2022).

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the Blackburn visit has set a precedent for what is to come in terms of US politicians using Taiwan to signal domestic political ambitions or aims. What we can say is that these visits indicate the significant place Taiwan plays within the US imaginary about its geopolitical and economic tensions with China. The real question is whether Taiwan will end up paying a price for such posturing by US officials. Though unconfirmed, some reports suggest that Taiwan tried to deter the initial Pelosi visit because of these dangers but was overruled (Chou et al. 2022). Unfortunately, Taiwan may not be able to say no to Blackburn, Pompeo, or other US politicians hoping to bolster their own domestic credentials, and thus may find itself in a potentially perilous situation as geopolitical tensions worsen. ■

CHINA COLUMNS

Classroom of Ibilik Primary and Middle School in Istanbul. PC: Sadia Rahman.

China's Soft Power, Counter-Localisation, and the Role of Stateless Uyghurs in Turkey

Sadia RAHMAN
Darren BYLER

This essay considers the circumstances of stateless Uyghurs in Turkey, Chinese soft power in that country, and the counterstrategies adopted by the Uyghur community. Through ethnographic interviews with Uyghurs across Turkey, the article underscores the plight and, paradoxically, the power of the undocumented Uyghur community in relation to threats received by their families in China and Turkey. While China's soft-power strategies exacerbate the vulnerability of Uyghurs, the latter have responded with their own soft-power tactics of in-person and online 'counter-spectacles' and by building educational institutions—all of which help to develop localised affinities with the Turkish public.

Some people are saying that they cannot contact their relatives in Xinjiang. They are demonstrating in front of our embassy. They also spread fake news on social media. Several Turkish Ministers of Parliament and the Vice-President of the World Uyghur Congress were also involved in endorsing this fake news. It seems it was an organised and well-planned activity. Their purpose is to make up lies regarding Chinese policy in Xinjiang, casting China in a bad light. They are using Xinjiang to ruin the relationship between Turkey and China.

China's Xinjiang policy is clear and consistent. We hope our Turkish friends won't be deceived by this. We treasure our friendship.

—Press release by Chinese Embassy in Ankara, 2021

This 2021 press release from the Chinese Embassy in Turkey highlighting the 'deception' of 'some people' offers a glimpse of the power of stateless Uyghurs abroad in countering Chinese soft-power strategies. Criticising the protest activities and social media campaigns of Jevlan Sirmehmet—a Uyghur man in Turkey-whose family has been targeted by the crackdown in Xinjiang—and other Uyghurs in Turkey, the notice marked one of the first written acknowledgements of the way in which protests led by these individuals has damaged China's public image in the country. It came after months of campaigning by Sirmehmet and others in front of the Chinese Embassy to demand the release of relatives interned in reeducation camps back in the Uyghur homeland, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

We describe these Uyghurs, who were born in China but now live in Turkey without legal documentation other than expired passports and visas, as 'stateless'. They live in a durative liminal condition of hunted-defiance, hiding behind the tenuous extralegal goodwill of the Turkish State while simultaneously protesting a nation that treats them as minor or petty 'terrorists' who should be interned just as their family members have been imprisoned back in China. They are protected by the Turkish public and the current configuration of the Turkish political system, permitted to stage protests and advocacy campaigns on behalf of detained family members, but not provided a path to legal refugee status or citizenship in the country. Yet, despite the vulnerability of their position, stateless Uyghurs in Turkey play a significant role in countering the deployment of Chinese soft power in the country and in much of the rest of the world.

In an important recent book, communications scholar Maria Repnikova (2022) demonstrates that Chinese global soft power is expressed through the establishment of cultural institutes, the manipulation of mass media, academic exchanges, and diplomatic spectacles. A key element, she argues, in the long-term success of these strategies is the degree to which they are 'localised' by receiving communities. This process of building soft power depends a great deal on the ability of Chinese state and non-state actors to include local citizens in taking ownership of the initiative in question. Soft power, after all, as defined by Joseph Nye (2004; see also Loubere 2022), is the ability to influence or adopt, rather than coerce. In other words, soft power involves shaping the norms and desires of targeted people through attraction and friendship. And, importantly, Repnikova points out that Chinese overseas populations—ranging from students to diasporic communities—are often utilised as a 'bridge' to boost China's soft power, especially where there are large populations of overseas Chinese, such as in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Yet, Repnikova (2022: 57) is careful to also point out that the role of diasporic communities cuts both ways, as these groups 'can also serve as a hindrance for China's image work'.

In this short essay, we draw on the case of China's relationship with Turkey to examine what happens when a group of former or alienated Chinese citizens such as the stateless Uyghurs actively attempts to counter China's soft power by building cultural institutions of their own. More specifically, we argue that the case of the Uyghurs in Turkey demonstrates how large populations of marginalised former Chinese citizens who have both material and fictive kinship relations with populations in receiving states can deeply damage the efficacy of China's soft power. Drawing on ethnographic interviews conducted by Sadia Rahman in Uyghur communities across Turkey in 2021 and an analysis of scholarship on Chinese soft power in Turkey, using critical discourse analysis, we show how in the Turkish case stateless Uyghurs have utilised what we call 'counter-spectacles' in front of the Chinese Embassy in the Turkish capital, Ankara, to elicit a response from Chinese officials and bring attention to the plight of their relatives and other Uyghurs back in China. Ultimately, we show the way affinities between the community of stateless Uyghurs and Turkish citizens worked to undermine Chinese soft power through the establishment of Uyghur education institutions, even as a more transactional production and consumption-oriented relationship between China and Turkey deepened. They also have intervened in the global deployment of China's soft power.

Jevlan Sirmehmet, a Uyghur man in Turkey whose family has been targeted by the crackdown in Xinjiang, holds an image of his mother, Suriye Tursun, with a demand for her release written in Turkish, English, and Chinese. PC: Sadia Rahman.

Ties That Bind

In 2011, Jevlan Sirmehmet arrived in Turkey from Ghuljia, a city near the Chinese border with Kazakhstan, to pursue a degree in legal studies. Because his native language and faith resonated so deeply with Turkish society—the Uyghur language shares 60 to 70 per cent of the same grammar structure and lexicon as modern Turkish—he hoped to find a job as a paralegal or attorney and provide for his family, in what he expected to be an easy transition. He never imagined his effort to achieve economic security would be taken as an excuse by the Chinese authorities to shatter his family six years later, in 2017, when his mother and father were taken to an internment camp due to their ties with him.

The ethnographic research of one of the co-authors of this article, Sadia Rahman, shows that Jevlan's situation is typical of many of the stateless Uyghurs who form a significant proportion of the approximately 50,000 Uyghurs in Turkey (Tavsan 2021), nearly all of whom are missing a relative or friend to the camp system. During Rahman's fieldwork in Ankara, Istanbul, and Konya, numerous families from across the Uyghur region described how they had lost contact with family members in China. Rahman observed how stateless Uyghurs in Turkey tried repeatedly to reconnect with their families by resorting to friendship networks and scouring Chinese media, only to learn, inevitably, that their relatives had disappeared into reeducation camps or been sentenced to prison.

In many cases, the reasons given for these internments and imprisonments had to do with religious practice, but accessing unauthorised knowledge via the internet, or charges of travelling to 'sensitive countries'—such as Turkey or Egypt, where Uyghurs have religious and cultural affinities—or supporting a family member who travelled abroad were also quite common. In nearly every case, the 'crime' with which the person was charged was not a crime when they committed it. The activities were criminalised after the fact, especially after 2017, when the Chinese State and private corporations started building a massive internment camp system that targeted Uyghur community leaders and regular citizens.

For example, in Jevlan's case, his mother, Suriye Tursun, was detained due to her fully legal, state-approved visit to see her son in Turkey in 2013. At the time, Suriye was an accountant in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Huocheng County. As a state worker, she was assigned to work for the 'Becoming Family project' (防护局), a program initiated by the government in 2014 at the start of the 'People's War on Terror' (人民反恐战争) to monitor rural Muslims suspected of extremism or potential terrorism. Over the next year, her job was to visit or stay with a rural Muslim family as their 'adopted' family member. On his last visit back to Xinjiang, Jevlan accompanied his mother during her surveillance and teaching work with Uyghur families. At first, she and other Uyghur civil servants did this work without direct Han supervision, but by the end of 2016, Han officials were tasked with living in Uyghur homes, inserting themselves into their private lives, discerning their activities, and categorising their level of risk using a software system installed on their smartphones.

Jevlan viewed this as a systematic attempt to root out Uyghur traditions and destroy community structure. Practising Islam was one of the flagged activities, but not the only reason to be taken away. 'It wasn't possible for my mother to do anything religious at all, since party officials and state workers were not allowed to be religious,' he recalled to Rahman. 'Yet still, she was interned in the concentration camp.' Jevlan surmised that his family was targeted because his mother visited him in Turkey in 2013. Like Malaysia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey is included on a list of 'sensitive countries' for Uyghurs to visit. Jevlan never imagined that pursuing higher education and a better life would result in his mother being deemed a 'terrorist'.

Breaking the Silence

Desperate to know his mother's whereabouts, Jevlan decided to break his silence and appeal to both the Chinese authorities and the Turkish public. As per his training as a student of legal studies, he first attempted to follow the formal legal route in 2020 by contacting the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul to ask the whereabouts of his mother. At first, consulate staff did not respond. Then, about a month into his petitioning, he received a call from the consulate threatening him. According to his recollections, they told him to remain silent and stop his public activities or he would never see his family again. He was told to act as a good citizen and stop any activity criticising China. Only if he maintained his silence would he receive any information about his family.

Refusing to be intimidated by these threats, he first began to use Turkish and English-language social media platforms to organise a public campaign for the release not only of his mother but also of the relatives of other Uyghur families in Turkey. He and others in similar circumstances then began staging daily, and later weekly, protests in front of the Chinese Embassy in Istanbul. Finally, hoping to build a greater mass media presence, he and his fellow Uyghur Chinese citizens began creating a multilingual 'Where is my family?' video campaign to foster awareness among Turkish citizens (Kashgarian and Sahinkaya 2021). This again attracted the attention of Chinese officials and, finally, six months into his campaigning, he received a phone call from his father, who, it appeared, had temporarily been transferred to a police holding cell to place the call.

His father told him that he was calling from a police station. He confirmed that Jevlan's mother was in a 'school'—one of a number of euphemisms used to discuss the Concentrated Closed Education and Training Centres (集中封闭教育培训中心) that are often referred to by Uyghurs in private as 'reeducation camps' (Uy: *qayta terbiyilesh lager*) or simply 'concentration camps' (*lager*)—but asked him to stop his petitioning in Turkey. This resonated with the case of many other Uyghurs in Turkey. As relatives confirmed to Rahman, they were told that their loved one had been taken to be 'treated for mental illness'. Another Uyghur interviewee who also came to Turkey as a student noted to Rahman that she talked to her mother through WeChat before she was taken to a reeducation camp. During one of their final conversations, her mother told her that 'if you do not hear from me for a long time, understand that I have been taken to a hospital for treatment because the local police say that we are sick'.

In the following years, Jevlan and his modes of appeal—media campaigns and diplomatic counter-spectacle—became the most prominent among the Uyghur diaspora community in Turkey. He and many fellow Chinese Uyghur citizens have developed tactics in opposition to global China's soft-power strategies in Turkey.

Uyghur Cultural Reproduction in Turkey

In January 2021, Jevlan and his fellow protesters decided to take their diplomatic counter-spectacle campaign from the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul to the Chinese Embassy in the capital, Ankara. In his account, he and the other Uyghur petitioners were informed by Chinese Embassy staff that 'if they confirm that they are separatists doing

Jevlan and the Uyghur diaspora community protesting outside the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul in 2021. PC: Sadia Rahman.

activities against the Chinese Constitution, express their regret and become a good Chinese citizen, only then would a diplomat meet them'. Faced with the denial of the constitutional rights they should have as Chinese citizens—even as they were in the process of disavowing this citizenship—Jevlan and the other Uyghurs vowed to continue their own counter–soft power efforts and also establish and support Uyghur cultural institutions that would protect the culture and history of their people from being erased.

This shift in strategy was because Jevlan and his fellow protesters had come to believe that what had happened to his family was part of a systematic campaign to destroy the Uyghurs as an ethnicity, ranging from religious and cultural restrictions to a complete ban on the Uyghur language and the imposition of Chinese language in Uyghur society. In his view, this erasure of knowledge production in Uyghur language risked eliminating Uyghur social reproduction altogether.

Over two months of fieldwork in different cities across the country, Rahman learned that a great number of Uyghurs in Turkey had similar experiences and feelings. Nearly all members of the Uyghur refugee population in Turkey face immediate and intimate everyday state violence directed towards them and their families. Many in the Uyghur community live under threat of both extradition and violence towards their families, particularly those who have neither a Turkish residence permit nor Turkish citizenship.

In one of Rahman's visits to the Zeytinburnu District, a sizeable Uyghur neighbourhood in Istanbul, a Uyghur man told her that Uyghurs in the area live in a state of constant anxiety and moral tension. 'Our conscience does not allow us to be silent and if we raise our voices for our family members they disappear,' he said. To make matters worse, the presence of Chinese and Uyghur informants has increased distrust and suspicion within the community. Every public action taken by Uyghurs is monitored and reported to the authorities in Xinjiang. So, Uyghurs live with the knowledge that whatever happens in Turkey has consequences back in their homeland.

Both despite and because of this, Uyghurs in Turkey are trying to hold on to and use their traditional cultural and religious practices to both protect themselves and foster support from the Turkish public. They understand they are the ones who can renew and cultivate Uyghur culture among the next generation. Over the course of Rahman's fieldwork among Uyghur families, she witnessed how suffering and belonging were shaping the identity of the Uyghur diaspora. In her interviews, she explored how the emotions associated with pain and suffering are expressed

through a sense of bereavement, which is thoroughly grounded in Uyghur identity, culture, history, and faith.

This shift in strategy led to the establishment of Uyghur schools such as the Satuk Bugrahan Science and Culture Foundation at the training centre in Konya and Ibilik Primary and Middle School in Zeytinburnu. These schools have formed a central pillar in attempts to create futures for the new generation of Uyghur children, traumatised as they are by the disappearances in their families. In addition, groups such as the Nuzumgum Culture and Family Association provide help to Uyghur widows and single mothers whose husbands are in internment camps.

The success of these schools is driven by shared empathy and communal belonging with the Turkish public—something that is lacking relative to the four existing Confucius Institutes in the country (Koçakoğlu 2021). As the president of the Nuzumgum Kültür ve Aile Dernegi (Nuzugum Culture and Family Fund), Munevver Ozuygur, put it: 'Turkish civil society and local people support Uyghurs because we are of the same lineage, so whatever help we receive, we try to support poor families in need every month.' The 'shared lineage' to which she refers is the common notion in Turkish popular culture that Uyghurs are the source of Turkic identity, a kind of 'ur-Turk' indigeneity connected to Uyghur land-based identity and geographic location near Mongolia where Turkic people are thought to have originated. This commonality, along with similarities of faith and language, provide a powerful hedge against Chinese soft power in the country.

Empowered Statelessness

These institutions, along with the passion of disruptive and charismatic advocates like Jevlan, are what give Uyghurs the grace and courage to refuse to forget or give up. Together, their diplomatic counter-spectacles, social media presence, and institutions counterbalance the dehumanisation produced by the Chinese State and settlers in Xinjiang in northwest China. Among large segments of the Turkish public, these schools and spectacles, combined with the widespread idea of an at least partially fictive or imagined 'common lineage' between Uyghurs and Turkish citizens, have deeply damaged the success of Chinese soft-power localisation (Koçakoğlu 2021).

Yet, for all this support from the Turkish public, the Uyghur cause is not well supported by Turkish political elites. Instead, Turkish leaders speak publicly about the 'shared friendship' described by the Chinese Embassy (on the bilateral relations between China and Turkey, see Gürel and Kozluca 2022). The value of Chinese trade with Turkey has risen sharply to about US$27 billion (Nuroğlu 2019), and when it comes to goods and services—from phones to internet service—the price point and quality have proven to be powerful tools in maintaining a strong China-made presence among the Turkish public. Turkey, along with Ethiopia, has become one of the largest producers of Chinese phones for the Middle East and African markets (Biçer 2021). Taken together, it appears that the most effective form of soft power is the quasi–hard power of soft infrastructure and consumer goods.

Yet, with new bans on goods and services connected to Xinjiang in large markets such as the United States, the counter–soft power of Uyghur narratives and their amplification through mass media—as well as national and international legal bodies—have inflicted lasting damage on China's soft-power prospects. Chinese Uyghurs in Turkey, just like Chinese Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and stateless Uyghurs elsewhere, have told the world what is being done to their communities back in their homelands. Ultimately, they—hunted yet defiant Turkic Muslims without citizenship protections—are the ones who play a significant role in preventing the localisation of Chinese soft-power initiatives around the world. ■

Covid-19 lockdown in Shanghai. PC: Hsiuan Boyen (CC), Flickr.com.

Cosmopolitan (Dis) Illusion

Migration, State Policies, and the Mirage of the Shanghai Exception

Ting GUO

Throughout contemporary Chinese history, Shanghai has been perceived as an exceptional cosmopolitan space. While these days this exceptionalism is generally framed in terms of the city's status as a global financial hub, it should not be forgotten that Shanghainese cosmopolitanism is rooted in more than a century of migration, grassroots activism, and the rejection of traditional hierarchical social structures by the city's residents.

When Shanghai went into lockdown in the spring of 2022, a sense of shock and disbelief prevailed among both the city's residents and outside observers. This astonishment came from the idea that Shanghai enjoys an exceptional level of autonomy, freedom, and a Western-influenced lifestyle that is at least partially immune to the more repressive aspects of rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This perceived exceptionalism might be partly true because Shanghai is the largest financial centre in mainland China and a direct-controlled municipality (直辖市); also, the city is imbued with the legacies of past extraterritorialities (Bickers and Jackson 2016; Jackson 2017). However, while the

sense of Shanghai as a bourgeois liberal cosmopolitan exception free from CCP control is largely an illusion, it is important to remember how this perception is also rooted in a long history of grassroots activism, migration, and a quest for change against elite hierarchies, rather than being solely a reflection of the city's place as a key hub of global capitalism.

Migrant Cosmopolitanism in the Late Imperial and Republican Eras

Underneath today's shiny bourgeois consumerist impressions of Shanghai, the city's cosmopolitanism is largely the result of the actions of generations of Chinese migrants and activists, rather than simply a reflection of the metropolis's rise as a global financial centre. The impression that Shanghai is the key to and exemplar of Chinese modernity under Western influence ignores local agency and histories.

Although the beginning of Shanghai's cosmopolitanism is often associated with the first Opium War, after which the city officially became a treaty port under the Sino-British Treaty of Nanking of 1842, Shanghai had been connected to international currents much earlier. It was an important hub of intellectual and economic exchange long before the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), serving first as the capital of a district or county (县) and becoming a circuit (道, meaning 'road' or 'path', a political division in imperial China) in 1725 (Wasserstrom 2008: 27). During the late imperial and early Republican periods, as Shanghai linked an elaborate system of domestic trade to the international market, it allowed greater social mobility for migrants and refugees with varied skills and capacities to establish themselves in the city based on a sense of a social-contract alternative to Confucian, native-place, or lineage identities. Although there was the community of literati—the traditional elites in imperial China—associated with the various administrative bodies set up in the city (Henriot 2001: 22), the structure changed rapidly as lineage declined through modernisation.

As a city comprising mainly merchants and migrants, rather than Confucian literati, Shanghai swiftly came to represent a more open environment, relatively unburdened by patrilineage. Migrants—who, by the early Republican era, had become the majority of the city's population—were unable, or simply did not want, to trace their family origins, and thus escaped the control of traditional clan authorities. In this way, Shanghai allowed more heterogeneity and mobility as changing lifestyles and modernising ideas began to challenge the lineage and clan authorities that structured traditional Chinese societies. Lineage is a product of descent and inheritance. Traditional lineage authority is based on the principle of patrilineal descent for males of privileged bloodlines entitled to family inheritance (Faure 2007; Szonyi 2002). Without such traditional structuring authorities, Shanghai came to be a place where migrants enjoyed the freedom to reinvent themselves, particularly those who would not otherwise have been able to because of their gender or social background—though not without new prejudices and negotiations (see, for instance, Honig 1992 on the racism that people from certain areas faced). In a poignant example in one of her articles, Yeh Wen-hsin (1997) tells the story of how, in the Republican era, a casually dressed Shanghai woman dominated a public conversation and underscored her points by pounding on the table when debating with three frustrated provincial gentlemen.

Rural lineage contained the nexus of provincial power, as the rural gentry was able to take advantage of its social power in the countryside to assert its authority even in the cities through formal and informal networks. In the early twentieth century, major reform movements—from the May Fourth and New Culture movements to socialist revolutions, and from Sun Yat-sen to Mao Zedong—began to attack lineage and clan powers. Chen Duxiu, the CCP's co-founder, for instance, proposed replacing the clan with individual subjectivity (Chen 1915, quoted in Ye 2015: 49). Mao more specifically criticised the clan alongside the political authority of previous ruling regimes and traditional theocracy in his famous *Hunan Peasant Movement Investigation Report*, stating

that government, clan, theocracy, and patriarchy represented the totality of feudal patrilineal clan law (宗法) and were the four ropes that enslaved Chinese people, especially peasants (Mao 1966, quoted in Ye 2015: 49). He then advocated for peasants to overthrow ancestral halls and take over clan authority and feudal establishments. The critique of clan lineage legitimised the CCP's agenda to consolidate its power and extract resources from the villages, as the Party began to establish land law in its territories and confiscate ancestral properties that belonged to the clans.

As mentioned, in a migrant society such as Shanghai, lineage and rural land concepts were undergoing changes and challenges long before the CCP was established. Since the late Qing period, reform-minded new elites and immigrants from nearby Jiangnan Province (which administered Shanghai) began to distance themselves from their native clans and traditions. Yang Ping of Jiangnan Province, a member of the first National Assembly of the Republic of China, claimed in 1928: 'Since women and men are equal according to our constitution, it reflects the progress of time and the Confucian etiquette law [礼法]. Women and men come from the same family origin and they then should enjoy the same rights of inheritance' ('Genealogy of the Yang Family of Bilin Xing Village, 1928', quoted in Ye 2015: 54). Another family in the same region revised their genealogy (家乘) in 1916 to include the notion that 'now men and women are not that different in their learning, vision, and professions, therefore our family will begin to record the names of the women, married or unmarried, from this generation on' ('Genealogy of the Hui Family', quoted in Ye 2015: 54). Such visions were more pioneering than official policies. It was only in 1927 that the Supreme Court of the Republic of China officially granted women rights to inheritance, which took a few more years to actualise in practice (Ye 2020: 36–37).

More importantly, the organising structure of lineage began to change as well, represented by the emergence of clan society (族会, *zuhui*) in Shanghai in the late Qing and early Republican periods. Different from lineage in the traditional sense, *zuhui* were founded on the principle of modern social groups, representing the idea of voluntary and common will, with their own principles and agendas (Ye 2020: 28). The meritocratic examination system from imperial China had already gradually replaced the birthright-based authority of lineage. In response, clans began to establish new types of authority through control of land and property. As such, the issue that emerged for reformers was how to justly mediate property rights with clear rules. For instance, families with means and familiar with modern science and philosophy began to discuss 'lineage constitutionalism' (家族立宪)—an idea modelled on modern constitutional democracies that entailed *zuhui* being allowed to elect their managers and representatives. Lineage constitutionalism emerged in this context of transforming the private and the familial in the eyes of the larger public and signified a new way of defining community and structuring society. Accordingly, some *zuhui* became self-organised, self-purposed, and self-principled, with democratic elections and management, in contrast with the patriarchal authoritative system of traditional lineage. In this way, they were clearly connected to civil society and arguably emerged from the broader social contract. The decline of the clan lineage in Shanghai is consistent with the observation of some scholars, including Yeh Wen-hsin (1997), that early twentieth-century Shanghainese society deemed the inherited and established Chinese way of life problematic. New social practices and redefined boundaries of community identities rendered new gender dynamics that persisted in later times, as we shall see in the following sections in the case of 'househusbands' and LGBTQ activism.

After 1949: Between Historical Legacies and State Policies

The urban planning and financial and industrial developments in Shanghai in the late imperial period and the early twentieth century laid out the infrastructure for post-1949 developments. Since the late nineteenth century, the textile industry—a sector dominated by female workers—embodied

Shanghai cityscape observation. PC: Franck Michel (CC), Flickr.com.

such new bourgeoning social changes, though not without often gendered limitations and contradictions (Honig 1986; Cliver 2020). This industrial development and associated forms of urban planning created—perhaps unintentionally—large public spaces for women outside the domestic sphere. As Leo Ou-fan Lee argues in *Shanghai Modern* (1999: 94), the new public structures and spaces of the Republican period served as the material background for further interpretations of Shanghai's urban culture and Chinese modernity, with the emergence of a new public persona for women in particular. As patriarchal control over women is often manifested through the control of their social space, their being able to occupy meaningful public spaces constituted significant empowerment. In addition, much like the city of New York, to which Shanghai is often compared with pride, public space is woven into the fabric of the city. Open spaces provide places for public interaction and potential solidarity, as individuals invest in places with social and cultural meaning, thereby empowering themselves collectively (Hayden 1995: 78).

The CCP inherited the Republican government's state planning and selected Shanghai to be the driving force for industrial growth for the new socialist state. In the 1950s, Shanghai became the base for the industrial development of the newly established People's Republic of China. The Shanghai Military Control Committee took over the textile industry, which then became state-owned. In the context of such industrial changes, the female employment rate in Shanghai rose to the highest in China. As the textile industry became the frontline of socialist development, women who were its main workforce gained more respect and were paid more, under both the new socialist policies and the legacy of earlier gender equality before 1949. Socialist propaganda and discourses emphasised gender equality. The image of female workers represented socialist modernity against Confucian,

feudal, and capitalist patriarchal forms (Chen 2003). The All-China Women's Federation also called for role-sharing in domestic labour. Such 'women hold up half the sky' propaganda does not necessarily mean a utopian reality, of course, as there are multiple contradictory social realities, including gendered employment and other subtle discrimination contributing to women's subordination. Nonetheless, traditional male privileges and entitlements had already been weakened in Shanghai before communist industrialisation, as we have seen in the previous section.

Moreover, the industrial history of Shanghai before 1949 had entailed more than mere economic development, including a legacy of feminist activism as well. Textile factories improved women's social visibility and participation in public discourse. As Emily Honig (1986) and Steve Smith (1994) have pointed out, strikes were not only crucial to the development of class identity, but also a vehicle through which women explored a new gender identity. In August 1911, decades before any labour unions existed in Shanghai, thousands of women took part in self-organised protests and coordinated action across different filatures by electing delegates. They were capable of organisation, confident, and determined to make their voices heard, exhibiting a sense of women's liberation long before the CCP took control of the country. My grandmother recalled her time at a textile factory with pride for two reasons: it not only allowed her to earn wages and develop friendships and solidarity with other women that lasted for life, but also introduced her to study groups and activism—including strikes—through networks from the factory. Both types of experience enhanced her and her co-workers' understanding of economic modernity and their own subjectivity. Therefore, the story of early twentieth-century Shanghai women factory workers' strikes should be read alongside other types of class struggle and the formation of political consciousness, as feminism and broadening perspectives of gender in the public sphere had already begun to challenge and even change forms of patriarchal subordination.

The material advantages ordinary urbanites were able to enjoy before and after 1949 because of Republican and socialist state policies also became an incentive to create new and more prosperous types of private life even during the socialist rationing era. As a city that was granted more resources, during periods of national hardship, people in Shanghai were still able to live a relatively comfortable life. One way this was manifested was in the phenomenon of Shanghai's 'househusbands', who were devoted to domestic work while their wives were busily involved in socialist industrialisation—a domestic configuration that was, in part, made possible by Shanghai's material privileges. In this way, the equality and progressiveness of Shanghai's gender relations reflected the inequality of socialist policies and national development, demonstrating what Zheng Wang refers to as 'multiple contradictory social realities' (2016).

Today: Between Neoliberal Exterritoriality and Activism

The cosmopolitan legacies from the late imperial and early Republican eras, as well as the state policies in the Republican and socialist eras, enabled Shanghai to enjoy greater liberties in relation to its international connections, including diplomatic, financial, educational, and cultural ties. For instance, Shanghai Pride, founded in 2009 as the first LGBTQ event in China, was sponsored by foreign consulates. In the early 2000s, Chi Heng Foundation sponsored an LGBTQ course at Fudan University that I was able to attend as an undergraduate student—the first of its kind in mainland China. The political atmosphere was relatively liberal at the time and To Chung, the founder of Chi Heng, was able to share in class his story of coming out as a gay man to his elite peers. In addition, the special connection Shanghai has with Hong Kong—the place To Chung is originally from and a global financial centre in Asia with more freedom (Chase 2011)—helped facilitate the

establishment of Chi Heng in Shanghai. The international attention Shanghai receives also makes it easier for nongovernmental organisations to gain support (BBC China 2017). Many LGBTQ-related events have been held in Shanghai, such as the 2009 Pride Week, and Shanghai's queer social spaces also grew with the rise of the internet, social media, and international connections.

However, this queer environment developed during China's economic and ideological neoliberalisation, which coincided with the emergence of an 'imagined cosmopolitanism' (Bao 2011) and the development of forms of culture to be consumed, rather than rooted in communities. Shanghai's imagined cosmopolitanism must also be seen in the light of the era of Reform and Opening and the shifts in the household registration system (*hukou*) that have placed serious limitations on the choices and resources of many rural–urban migrants who work in the city. In this way, the mobility afforded Shanghai's residents since the onset of reforms has mostly benefited college-educated middle-class (im)migrants. Many have noted that the LGBTQ liberties in Shanghai, such as the annual pride parade, were only linked to small groups with middle-class backgrounds and international connections, while gender activism in other places—most notably, Guangzhou—has been built on a broader community of activists, artists, and social workers due to the city's tradition of citizen activism and civil society since the early 2000s (Hand 2006; Zeng 2017).

In short, Shanghai's relative freedom has been conditioned by local and international histories and state policies with legacies in both the Republican and the socialist eras, owing to generations of migrants and activists challenging Confucian, capitalist, and patriarchal authorities. Shanghai also reflects larger inequalities in national development and social policies under different regimes. However, it is important to remember how, under the illusion of liberal cosmopolitan freedom, Shanghai is not exempted from central policies, particularly during periods of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This explains why the kinds of grassroots activism and bottom-up quest for change and reforms in the first half of the twentieth century became more limited in the second half, and today are severely hindered in a more repressive environment. In the context of today's state capitalism and neoliberal authoritarianism, it is increasingly urgent to recognise Shanghai's often neglected legacy of grassroots activism and bottom-up demands for change and reform by diverse actors, which complicates the more dominant depiction of the city as a place of (neo)liberal bourgeois-cosmopolitan exceptionalism. ■

This essay draws from a forthcoming chapter penned by the author for the *Cambridge World History of Sexualities*.

Artwork: Daniele Castellano.

FOCUS

Prometheus in China

Industrial landscape in Northern China. PC: @Dailuo (CC), Flickr.com.

Why China Cannot Decarbonise

Richard SMITH

This essay argues that regardless of President Xi Jinping's stated intentions, China cannot meet its carbon-neutral pledge. First, there are insuperable technical barriers to decarbonising the 'hard-to-abate' industries that account for about half of China's carbon dioxide emissions. Second, there are insuperable political barriers posed by Xi's overriding concern to save the Chinese Communist Party from the fate of the Soviet Communist Party by winning the race to technical supremacy and overtaking the United States to become the world's top superpower. To this end, he has no choice but to maximise the growth of the very industries that are driving China's emissions off the charts.

My book *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse* (Smith 2020a) opens with a question: given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) runs one of the world's most ferocious police states, why can't its leaders compel their subordinate officials to suppress pollution, including carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions, even from the state's own industries? Indeed, as recent studies have highlighted, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from individual state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in power, steel, cement, oil refining, and other industries exceed those of entire industrialised nations. Last year, China Baowu, the world's largest steelmaker, pumped out more emissions than Spain—the world's twenty-fourth-ranked emitter. China Petroleum & Chemical pumped out more than Canada—the world's eleventh-largest emitter (Bloomberg 2021; Clark 2022; World Population Review 2022). In his widely acclaimed speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping

pledged to 'transition to a green and low-carbon mode of development' and to 'peak the country's CO_2 emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060' (Xi 2020; Smith 2020c). Since the companies mentioned are directly controlled by Beijing, one would think Xi should be able to force them to clean up. After all, it is often argued—as by Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro, for example—that China's dictatorship should be an advantage in this context: 'Given the limited time that remains to mitigate climate change and protect millions of species from extinction, we need to consider whether a green authoritarianism can show us the way' (Li and Shapiro 2020, quoted from the publisher's book description).

Since CCP bosses do not have to contend with public hearings, environmental studies, recalcitrant legislatures, labour unions, a critical press, and so on, Xi should be able to force state-owned polluters to stop polluting *or else*, and ram through his promised transition to renewable energy (see Smith 2017, 2020c). So why is he not doing that?

In its most dire assessment yet, in April, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) declared that 'it's now or never'. Only 'rapid, deep and immediate' cuts in carbon dioxide emissions can prevent runaway global warming and the collapse of civilisation. To keep global warming below 1.5°C, coal use must decline by 95 per cent by 2050, oil by 60 per cent, and gas by 45 per cent. The decreases required to limit warming to 2°C are not much different. Under all scenarios, no more fossil-fuel power plants can be built and most existing ones must be decommissioned. The IPCC's message is clear: 'Any further delay in concerted anticipatory global action will miss a brief window of opportunity to secure a liveable planet and sustainable future for all' (2022).

Most of the world's leading capitalist industrial democracies have reduced their GHG emissions to an extent. In the United States, carbon dioxide emissions in 2020 were down 14 per cent from their peak in 2005; emissions in the 27 member states of the European Union were down 32 per cent from their peak in 1981; and Japan's have dropped 14 per cent from their peak in 2013 (CAT n.d.). To be sure, those reductions are still insufficient to meet their respective Paris commitments (and their Paris commitments are themselves insufficient to prevent global temperatures rising above 1.5°C), but at least they are declining.

By contrast, under Xi Jinping, as much as under his predecessors, China's carbon dioxide emissions have relentlessly grown, more than quadrupling from 1990 to 2020. Climate Action Tracker estimates that in 2021 China's emissions increased by 3.4 per cent to 14.1 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO2e)—nearly triple those of the United States (4.9 GtCO2e) with a gross domestic product just three-fourths as large (CAT n.d.; EIA 2022). Since 2019, China's emissions have exceeded those of all developed countries combined and presently account for 33 per cent of total global emissions (Larsen et al. 2021; IEA 2021). Paradoxically, China leads the world in the production of installed capacity of both wind and solar electricity generation. Yet, 85.2 per cent of China's primary energy consumption in 2020 was still provided by fossil fuels—down just 7 per cent from 92.3 per cent in 2009 (BP 2021). And despite huge investments in giant solar and wind farms across multiple provinces and autonomous regions, fossil fuels (mostly coal) still accounted for 67.4 per cent of electricity generation in 2021, while wind contributed just 7.8 per cent and solar barely 3.9 per cent (China Energy Portal 2022; Myllyvirta 2022b). In the first half of 2021, rebounding from the first wave of Covid-19, China's carbon dioxide emissions surged past pre-pandemic levels to reach an all-time high 20 per cent increase in the second quarter before dropping back in late 2021 and the first half of 2022 as the real estate collapse, Omicron lockdowns, and drought-induced hydropower reductions slashed economic growth to near zero in the summer (Hancock 2021; Myllyvirta 2022a; Riordan and Hook 2022).

Doubling Down on Coal and Dooming the Transition to Renewables

Since 2016, the Chinese Government has repeatedly promised to phase out coal and coal-fired power production only to renege on those commit-

ments (Smith 2020a: xv–xvi). While coal-fired power plants are being decommissioned around the world, China has approved a raft of new coal mines and coal-fired power plants. In March 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission committed to boosting domestic annual coal production by 300 million tonnes. In April, the government approved a new mega-coalmine in Ordos that will produce 15 million tonnes each year and could do so for nearly a century (Global Times 2022a). China produces and consumes half the world's coal and the nation's coal production hit record levels in 2021. The new Fourteenth Five-Year Plan stresses the critical role of coal in 'ensuring basic energy needs' and supporting the nation's power system (Yeh 2022). China promised to stop building coal-fired power plants abroad, but it is building more than 200 new coal-fired plants at home in a drive to boost economic growth, maintain jobs in coal-dependent regions, and ensure energy self-sufficiency—locking the country into coal reliance for many decades to come, derailing the transition to renewables, and dooming Xi's UN pledge to transition to a green and low-carbon mode of development (Xie 2020). In 2020, the Chinese Government approved 47 gigawatts of new coal power projects—more than three times the new capacity approved in 2019. In 2021, it approved another 73.5 gigawatts of coal power—more than five times the 13.9 gigawatts proposed in the rest of the world in that year (Standaert 2021). And with the unprecedented summer drought this year that dried up rivers across southern China and cut hydropower generation by 40 per cent, the government is doubling down on coal and officials are concerned about the reliability of renewables, even voicing scepticism about the very idea of phasing out coal (Global Times 2022b; Riordan and Li 2022).

And not only coal. China's government has been pouring investments into oil and gas production, refineries, and building pipelines from Kazakhstan and Russia to import natural gas. The Siberian pipeline alone will enable China to import 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas a year (two-thirds as much as Russia supplies to Germany) through to 2049 (Darwell 2020). China is now the world's largest importer of natural gas and oil. Pipelines are huge investments and require years to construct. It strains credulity to believe that the same government that is investing hundreds of billions of dollars in new coalmines, oil wells, refineries, and gas pipelines really intends to start shutting them just seven years from now.

In sum, far from 'transitioning to a green and low carbon mode of development', ultra-authoritarian Xi Jinping is developing the most carbon-intensive large industrial economy in the world. The Party-State has abandoned the transition to renewables in favour of an 'all of the above' approach to energy generation: more solar and wind, but even more fossil fuels. The question is why? I contend that there are two main reasons for this.

China's Engine of Environmental Collapse, Richard Smith (2020).

Technical Barriers to Decarbonising the 'Hard-to-Abate' Industries

The first reason is technical. I claim that there are insuperable technical barriers to decarbonising China's economy, especially in any time frame that matters for human survival. Let us start with what are collectively termed the 'hard-to-abate' industries that account for about half China's GHG emissions. Xi's first problem is that China is home to the world's largest concentration of carbon-intensive, hard-to-abate industries like steel and cement. Thermal electricity generation (90 per cent from coal, 10 per cent from gas) accounts for 32 per cent of China's total carbon dioxide emissions. For this reason, replacing coal-fired power plants with solar and wind-powered generators could cut China's emissions by about one-third—a huge gain if this transition can be implemented (Smith 2020c: 49–51). But electricity generation is the low-hanging fruit of carbon mitigation—one of the very few sectors in which economic growth can be decoupled from emissions growth.

At least 47 per cent of China's GHG emissions come from hard-to-abate manufacturing and other industries, most of which cannot be significantly decarbonised with current or anticipated technology either at all or in time to avert runaway global warming and climate collapse. Steel, aluminium, cement, aviation, shipping, heavy road transport, chemicals, plastics, synthetic textiles, and electronics stand out. As I have explained elsewhere (Smith 2020c), decarbonising those industries has defied all efforts to date both in China and in the West, and while scientists and engineers are working on many new technologies—green hydrogen steel, electric and hydrogen airplanes, carbon capture and storage, etcetera—commercialising these, where possible at all, will require many decades.

For example, Bloomberg's New Energy Frontier analysts estimate that with a crash program, the global steel industry could replace coal with hydrogen for 10–50 per cent of output before 2050 (Smith 2020c: 34–35). McKinsey estimated that with massive funding, hydrogen could meet 14 per cent of total US energy needs by 2050 (Penn and Krauss 2020). At those rates, why bother? Worse, 96 per cent of the world's commercially available hydrogen is derived from fossil fuels. Producing 'green' hydrogen would require the rapid construction of a huge and stupendously expensive new 'electroliser' industry based on technologies that are still in their infancy and unproven at scale. Even if such an industry could be built in the next decades, the daunting hazards of transporting, storing, and safely fuelling steel mills and vehicles, let alone airliners, with hydrogen have no ready solution either. Cement, aluminium, aviation, chemicals, plastics, and all the other hard-to-abate industries face similar constraints. Furthermore, the technical barriers to carbon mitigation apply as much to the capitalist West as to communist China. As *The Guardian*'s environmental columnist George Monbiot wrote in 2007 with respect to the aviation industry:

> There is no technofix. The growth of aviation and the need to address climate change cannot be reconciled … [A] 90 percent cut in emissions requires not only that growth stops, but that most of the planes which are flying today are grounded. I recognize that this will not be a popular message. But it is hard to see how a different conclusion can be extracted from the available evidence. (Monbiot 2007: 174)

Fifteen years on, the global aviation industry still has no viable alternative to kerosene jet fuel for airliners—but the climate emergency we face today is far more desperate, hence the need to park those planes (and the cars, trucks, cruise ships, container ships, etcetera) is far more urgent. Climate activist Greta Thunberg (2019) is right: 'Our house is on fire. We need to act like it.'

All talk of carbon taxes, cap and trade, and carbon capture and sequestration is delusory (Smith 2016a, 2019). The only way China can effect 'rapid, deep and immediate' cuts in carbon dioxide emissions is to 'grab the emergency brake': immediately begin retrenching and/or shutting the country's thousands of needless, wasteful, harmful, and polluting industries, such as the shockingly wasteful

production of disposable products, from flimsy unrepairable plastic household goods and appliances to disposable shoes, 'fast fashion', bottled water, chipboard IKEA furniture, and high-end but disposable new versions of iPhones; halt the 'blind production' of steel, aluminium, glass, cars, 'Made in China' airliners, self-driving cars, cruise ships, 'smart' appliances, copy-cat theme parks, glass bridges, and recreational drones; end the 'blind construction' of Ponzi-scheme condominium blocks, 'ghost cities', useless 'international' airports in provincial towns, empty high-speed trains on little-used routes, the tallest skyscrapers, longest bridges, longest tunnels, and similar 'blingfrastructure' projects built not for the needs of China's people but for the glory of CCP officials; and shut all but critically essential coal-fired power plants and halt the stupendous waste of power used to produce all this needless junk and over-illuminate China's cities (Bloomberg 2017; van Wyk 2020; Smith 2020a: Ch. 7).

I am not singling out China. I have made the same arguments with respect to the capitalist West (Smith 2016a). Nor am I saying we must go back to log cabins and horses and buggies. What I am saying is that the pursuit of infinite economic growth on a finite planet is going to kill us all, and soon. With more than 7 billion people crowded on one small blue planet, we need to slam the brakes on out-of-control growth. We need to 'contract and converge' production around a globally sustainable and acceptable average that can provide a dignified living for all the world's peoples while leaving ample resources for future generations of humans as well as for the other fauna and flora with which we share this planet and on whom we critically depend. If we do not do this, we are doomed (I have tried to show how such a wholesale reorganising of our economies could give us not only an environmentally sustainable economy but also a better mode of life in Smith 2016b).

But suppressing production is the one option President Xi cannot accept because those hard-to-abate industries have been indispensable to China's rise and underpin his aspirations to 'make China great again', win the technology race, and overtake the United States.

Political Drivers of and Barriers to Decarbonisation

Thus, the second reason is political. What drives growth in China? China is the most complex economy in the world, with numerous built-in drivers of and barriers to emissions mitigation. It has every kind of capitalism: state capitalism, joint-venture capitalism, gangster capitalism, regular chamber of commerce capitalism—the lot. Roughly speaking, the industrial economy formally comprises the state-owned state-planned sector (50 per cent of industrial output), the foreign-invested joint-venture sector (30 per cent), and the private sector (20 per cent) (Smith 2020b). The private and joint-venture sectors are of course driven by profit maximisation. The government also owns some foreign companies (such as Syngenta and Volvo) which it runs as state-capitalist companies. The state-owned economy has been modernised and partially marketised, but structurally remains little changed from Mao Zedong's day. This sector operates on different maximands. State-sector growth is driven by the CCP ruling class, by their subjectively felt needs, fears, and ambitions, and projected by central planners into five-year plans geared to achieve their goals. I contend that China's state-led economic development is propelled by five unique drivers of hypergrowth.

First, at the highest level, hypergrowth is driven by CCP *ambition* and *fear*. Since Mao took over the CCP in the 1930s, the Party-State has been led by a self-appointed elite of ultranationalists. Mao was first and foremost an ethno-nationalist in the tradition of China's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century 'self-strengtheners'. They were concerned not merely with modernising and industrialising their country to catch up with the West. From Sun Yat-sen to Mao, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi, China's leaders have all been obsessed with one overarching goal: to overcome China's 'century of humiliation', achieve 'wealth and power', and 'overtake the West' to reclaim what they imagine is China's *deserved pride of place* as the premier civilisation and culture in world history. In their view, China should be the 'natural leader of human-

kind', the rightful successor to 'the declining West', because China is a morally and politically superior 'new-type superpower' (Smith 2022; Sun 1922; Liu 2015; Hu 2011). Since 1949, China's leaders have also been motivated by a deep fear of capitalist restoration or even a takeover of their economy by Western corporations. As a state-based communist party ruling class in a world dominated by more advanced and powerful capitalist nations, Mao and his successors understood, like Stalin and his successors, that they must overtake the United States to become the world's leading superpower. The Russians' failure to win the economic and arms race with the United States doomed the Soviet Communist Party, and Mao's successors—notably, Deng and Xi—have been determined to avoid that error. Thus, the leading driver of hypergrowth is the party's determination to build a relatively self-sufficient industrial superpower by protecting state industries (regardless of their pollution), ramping up import substitution, and achieving technological superiority over the West.

Second, China's rulers need to maximise employment to maintain 'stability' even if this often means producing superfluous coal and steel, needless infrastructure, ghost cities, and so on. Maximising employment is a major driver of overproduction, overconstruction, 'blind growth', 'blind demolition', 'blind investment', and profligate waste of energy and resources across the economy.

Third, they also need to maximise consumerism. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party in 1991 and the Chinese communists' own near-death experience with the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the CCP leadership resolved to create a mass consumer economy and raise incomes to divert people's attention from politics to consumption. Since the early 1990s, the government has promoted one consumer craze after another: cars, condominiums, shopping malls, tourism, golf courses, theme parks, cruise boats, food delivery, video games, online shopping, and more. After centuries of poverty and decades of Maoist austerity, the Chinese were overdue for improved living standards (Bloomberg 2017). Yet, the promotion of mindless consumerism for the sake of consumerism on the model of Western capitalism has contributed mightily to China's and the world's waste and pollution crises (Li 2015; Chen 2017).

Fourth, intra-bureaucratic competition drives more growth. In 1992, Deng cut a profit-sharing deal with local and provincial officials (the nominal owners of most SOEs) giving them the right to sell over-plan and sideline production on the free market, and split the profit with the state (Wu 2005: 146–51). He then exhorted them to 'grow the gross domestic product' (GDP). This certainly jumpstarted growth, providing a wider array of goods and services. But the introduction of market incentives within the framework of the old bureaucratic system of collective property and surplus extraction also exacerbated many of the irrationalities of that system while adding new irrationalities of capitalism (Smith 2020a: Ch. 5). In this compartmentalised particularistic system, opportunities for officials to boost the income of their counties, municipalities, or provinces (and enrich themselves by legal and illegal means) were largely confined to the perimeters of their own bailiwicks. Thus, they found themselves in a zero-sum competition with officials in other municipalities or provinces over markets, central appropriations, and promotion such that, as one official put it, 'every locality sees itself as if it's a separate country' (Smith 2020a: 102). As a result, Deng's exhortation led in short order to GDP 'tournaments' as local officials competed to boost their growth rates to polish their credentials. For example, while the Eleventh Five-Year Plan set the national target for GDP growth at 7.5 per cent, all 31 of China's provinces set higher targets. The average was 10.1 per cent. Competition-driven local GDP growth in turn has driven national GDP to overshoot planned targets. Since 1978, central planners never set growth targets higher than 8 per cent per annum, but that target has been routinely exceeded. In the period 1983–88, GDP growth averaged 11.9 per cent, hitting 15.2 per cent in 1985. From 1992 to 2011, GDP growth averaged 10.5 per cent, topping 11 per cent and 14 per cent on the crest of the boom in 2006 and 2007, respectively (Smith 2020a: 98–99). The government has been trying to suppress 'zombie' overproduction

Traffic jam in Beijing, China. PC: @ianholton (CC), Flickr.com

of coal, steel, aluminium, glass, housing, cars, and other commodities for decades—largely without success (Smith 2020a: 100).

Fifth, corruption is a major driver of hypergrowth. Thanks to market reform, the Chinese Government became the richest state in the world, with rivers of cash flowing in from SOE profits, taxes, trade surpluses, and so on. Its US$3 trillion foreign exchange hoard is the world's largest. All this treasure is the property of the Party-State, but individual CCP officials have no legal right to any of it. They are legally entitled only to their trivial salaries and perks. Yet, as we know, China's rulers are filthy rich (Garside and Pegg 2016). The only ways officials can take 'their share' of these social surpluses are illegal. Thus, from princelings down to local mayors and party secretaries, officials have used and monetised their power to loot the state. Hundreds of high officials have been prosecuted for bribery, embezzlement, sale of offices, and related crimes. Corruption also fuelled growth. From ghost cities to high-speed gravy trains, an unknowable but no doubt huge proportion of China's overproduction and overconstruction would not have been produced were it not for the new opportunities they afforded cadres to steal even more (Smith 2020a: Ch. 6).

In sum, planned growth targets of 6–8 per cent per annum plus intra-bureaucratic competition to maximise GDP plus government efforts to maximise employment and consumerism plus corruption are, in aggregate, even more powerful drivers of hypergrowth than profit maximisation under capitalism. Those drivers have powered China's growth at three to four times the rate of growth of Western capitalist economies for the past three decades and generated soaring carbon dioxide emissions in the process.

Rejuvenation Submerged

This summer, China endured what scientists have called 'the most severe heatwave in world history' (Le Page 2022). Startling in its scale, duration, and intensity, record-shattering temperatures baked the southern half of China, drying up hundreds of rivers, withering crops, igniting wildfires, forcing factories to close, and pushing people to seek refuge in caves or at higher altitudes (Bossons 2022; Ali 2022). Yet, awful as this was, it will seem mild compared with what is coming. Global average temperatures have not yet breached 1.5°C above preindustrial levels but are projected to exceed 3°C before the end of the century. In October 2019, climate scientists published research showing that on present trends, global warming is going to 'all but erase' Shanghai, Shenzhen, and 'most of the world's great coastal cities by 2050' (Lu and Flavelle 2019). There will not be any 'great rejuvenation' and glory for the CCP when its cities are under water, when the glaciers melt, and farming collapses across the country. There will be ecological apocalypse, famine, and untold human suffering. ■

A cloud-seeding rocket launched to ease the drought in Bayannur, Inner Mongolia in July 2018. Scientists are testing such technologies to alter rainfall patterns. PC: *China Dialogue*.

Sky River

Promethean Dreams of Optimising the Atmosphere

Emily T. YEH

Proposed in 2016, the Sky River Project promised to scale up China's weather modification practices by moving water vapour from the southern Tibetan Plateau to northern China, working as an 'aerial corridor' for the South–North Water Transfer Project. Although the engineering project has not come to fruition, the concept of a 'sky river' is itself noteworthy for its inventors' explicit goal of allowing surface and atmospheric waters to be managed together. Sky River is Promethean in that it advances a mechanistic and techno-optimist vision of the atmosphere as a set of relations to be modelled, modified, and optimised for human use..

In the summer of 2022, China's Yangtze River Basin suffered a record-breaking drought and heatwave caused by anthropogenic climate change, which damaged crops, caused electricity shortages and industrial shutdowns, and led to scarcity in drinking water supplies. Of course, water paucity is not new to China, given that the country has 18.5 per cent of the world's population and only 7 per cent of its freshwater, which is also very unevenly distributed. For decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has responded to water insecurity in ways broadly consistent with what John Dryzek (2013: 58) calls 'promethean environmentalism'—a form of environmental thought that recognises the severity of problems (rather than denying them) and calls for resolving them through technology. Whereas some forms of

Promethean environmentalism focus on the market as the purveyor of necessary technology, Dryzek identifies another type, associated with the likes of Bjorn Lomborg, and the Chinese State, which confronts environmental problems with large-scale engineering projects directed by government intervention. This is exemplified by the gargantuan South–North Water Transfer Project (南水北调, SNWTP)—an extraordinarily costly infrastructure project to transfer water from the Yangtze River to the much drier north of the country. The SNWTP has entailed the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and created myriad harmful ecological consequences (Moore 2014; Webber et al. 2017).

Though perhaps the most well known, the SNWTP is not the only Promethean solution to water scarcity on offer in China. Notably, provinces along the Yangtze responded to the 2022 drought by stepping up their weather modification efforts, shooting silver iodide into clouds in the hope of inducing rain (Deng et al. 2022). In this essay, I consider China's weather modification efforts, and particularly the Sky River Project (天河工程), in relation to the theme of 'Prometheus in China'. As an engineering project, Sky River promised far more than it could deliver. Nevertheless, I argue that the scientific conceit on which it is based is itself noteworthy, in that it calls for making the atmosphere work as a water conveyance infrastructure. This imagination entails the enframing of moisture in the sky as a resource to be integrated with terrestrial water resources, engineered, and controlled through technology.

Weather Modification

The desire to shape the weather is ancient, but direct material attempts to intervene in the behaviour of clouds did not begin in earnest until after laboratory experiments at General Electric in the 1940s showed that seeding supercooled clouds of water vapour with silver iodide could cause water droplets to freeze and fall as snow (Qiu and Cressey 2008; Fleming 2010). These experiments motivated military and civilian efforts in the United States and other countries to use seeding techniques on real clouds. Revelations of US classified operations during the Vietnam War to try to prolong the monsoon to wash out transportation infrastructure led to a public outcry (Fleming 2010). In 1978, the international Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques came into force, prohibiting the hostile use of environmental modification with the potential to produce 'widespread, long-lasting and severe' harm (Fleming 2010).

Today, more than 50 countries undertake weather modification programs (Muñoz 2017). Interest has only grown with climate change—for example, in the United States, climate change–induced drought is reinforcing efforts in western states where ski resorts, power companies, and state governments have been involved in cloud-seeding for decades. This is despite the fact that atmospheric scientists remain largely unconvinced about the efficacy of cloud-seeding to control precipitation given the natural variability of rainfall and the difficulties in proving causality due to the mismatch between the scales of seeding and impact (Rauber et al. 2019).

Weather Modification and Ecological Civilisation in China

The scepticism of atmospheric scientists has not stopped China from developing the world's most extensive and institutionalised weather modification program. Between 1995 and 2003, the country spent US$266 million on weather modification. The China Meteorological Administration organises, coordinates, and guides weather modification activities. All provincial-level governments except Shanghai's have established weather modification bureaus, with budgets to 'control' weather in their jurisdictions, altogether employing about 40,000 people (Chien et al. 2017). In 2020, a new central government plan called for the area covered by weather modification to expand to 5.5 million square kilometres—more than half the country's

total area (CMA 2021). The sheer scale and the deep institutionalisation of weather modification in China's administrative system indicate that clouds are viewed not as mere atmospheric features, but rather as a resource from which water can be extracted and used.

Weather modification within China is commonly deployed for four reasons: ecological preservation, increasing agricultural production, securing water resources and, most notoriously, securing good weather for important events, such as the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Chien et al. 2017). Of note here, official sources refer to rain enhancement as a technique for safeguarding ecological security (生态安全), protecting 'ecological construction' (生态建设), ecological restoration (生态恢复), and helping to achieve 'ecological civilisation' (生态文明) (Bluemling et al. 2020). Indeed, news reports about weather modification efforts regularly describe cloud-seeding to produce rain as playing an important role in the 'construction of ecological civilisation' (生态文明建设).

'Ecological civilisation' entered the national political discourse in 2007 with the endorsement of then president Hu Jintao and was subsequently enshrined in both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution and the PRC Constitution. Under Xi Jinping, it has been discursively coupled with the 'Chinese Dream' (中国梦), the building of 'Beautiful China' (美丽中国), and the 'Two Mountains Theory' ('clear waters and clean mountains are as valuable as gold and green mountains', 绿水青山就是金山银山) (Goron 2018; Marinelli 2018). As a sociotechnical imaginary, ecological civilisation draws selectively on reductionist interpretations of China's traditional philosophies to assert cultural and national continuity while distinguishing China's path from that of 'the West'. At the same time, ecological civilisation maintains a longstanding focus on scientific and technological solutions to ecological crises (Hansen et al. 2018). Economic growth is left unquestioned because it is assumed that it is precisely such growth that will produce the techno-fixes needed to secure the transition to the ecologically civilised future.

Jesse Rodenbiker (In press) argues that ecological civilisation is premised on a fundamentally mechanistic approach to managing nature, which is conceptualised as a set of modular biophysical relations that can be measured, modelled, altered, and optimised for human use. He traces how systems science became prominent in Chinese ecology, with techniques such as functional zoning deployed for the purpose of optimising socionatural systems. This resonates strongly with Dryzek's (2013: 62) observation that 'the key Promethean metaphor is mechanistic. Machines are constructed from simple components … [T]hrough the application of human skill and energy … they do useful things.' I argue that Sky River is Promethean in this sense: it is a mechanistic and techno-optimist vision of the atmosphere as a set of relations that can be modelled, modified, and optimised for human use.

The Sky River Project

The Sanjiangyuan ('Source of the Three Rivers' 三江源) area of Qinghai Province, on the Tibetan Plateau, encompasses the headwaters of the Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong rivers. Often referred to as China's 'water tower', its representation as a zone crucial to the country's ecological security has justified, among other things, the resettlement of more than 50,000 Tibetan herders (Yeh 2009). The state's interest in safeguarding ecological security also includes weather modification activities in the region. For example, the government claims that rain enhancement activities since 2006 have increased the area of two lakes at the headwaters of the Yellow River by 33 square kilometres and 64 square kilometres (Chien et al. 2017; Bluemling et al. 2020)—though, notably, the expansion of lakes is also one of the key effects of climate change on the Tibetan Plateau due to melting permafrost and glaciers and the fact that most of the lakes there are endorheic (closed-basin).

Launched in 2016, the Sky River Project promised to radically scale up weather modification by intercepting water vapour from the Indian monsoon over the southern Tibetan Plateau and channelling it to the parched Yellow River Basin

in northern China, where it purportedly would fall as rain over an area of 1.6 million square kilometres, thereby increasing water supply by 5–10 billion cubic metres annually (Chen 2018; Pike 2018; Zheng 2016; Yang 2018). Government reports called it an 'aerial corridor' for the SNWTP (Gan 2018), asserting an equivalency between ground and air transport of water.

The project was undergirded by several academic papers introducing the term 'sky river' (天河), led by Wang Guangqian, then president of Qinghai University and an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Wang et al. 2016; Li et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018). Their initial paper was quickly followed by the establishment of the Sky River Project, which was described as involving a network of 'tens of thousands' of cloud-seeding chambers on the Tibetan Plateau that would burn silver iodide, which would then be swept into the sky river (Chen 2018). Project proponents described the combustion chambers as being designed 'using cutting-edge military rocket engine technology' (Chen 2018). In addition, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), a major space and defence contractor, was slated to develop a network of satellites to monitor the monsoon and gather real-time atmospheric data, which would then be connected to the automated and remotely ignited and operated burners, to send precipitation northwards. The Xinhua News Agency quoted the president of CASC saying that the six-satellite network would be launched by 2022, after which the Sanjiangyuan area could be monitored once every hour. A model of the first of the planned satellites, Tianhe-1 (Sky River-1), was displayed at the twelfth China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition in Zhuhai in 2018.

Headed by Wang Guangqian and including researchers from Tsinghua University, the Qinghai Meteorological Bureau, and Qinghai University, the project was featured in Qinghai Province's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, receiving RMB53 million (US$7.7 million) from the province and Qinghai University, as well as RMB 1 million from Tsinghua University. In 2016, it was also designated as a 'national key research project' and accepted by the Ministry of Science and Technology as a project of international significance (Pike 2018). Initial tests were conducted in 15 ground operations in the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, including in Dari County, Golog, the Qilian Mountains, and the Kunlun Mountains (Gan 2018). In 2018, the *South China Morning Post* interviewed a project researcher who reported that 500 iodide burners had already been deployed in Tibet and Xinjiang, among other areas, and were showing 'very promising results'.

However, in late November 2018, the project attracted significant criticism. An article published by *ScienceNet.cn*, a website affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, quoted one Chinese scientist as saying: 'This is an absurd fantasy project with neither scientific basis nor technical feasibility' (Yang 2018). Another said: 'The decision-making department ignored the many doubts of meteorologists and insisted on quickly promoting the Tianhe Project.' Another argued: 'It is beyond the capability of human beings to make rain fall in the Yellow River Basin instead of the Yangtze River Basin' (Gan 2018; Yang 2018; Gan and Wang 2021).

In late 2018, investigative journalists from *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) visited the Tsinghua University lab responsible for the project but were not allowed to enter (Yang and Fang 2018). When they interviewed Shaanxi Zhongtian Rocket Technology Company, which manufactures the burners, they were told: 'The leaders think this project is not very convenient to talk about … I don't want to mention the "Tianhe Project" now' (Yang and Fang 2018). Since the end of 2018, there have been no new official pronouncements regarding Sky River's promises and achievements. A search of the official WeChat accounts of Tsinghua University, Qinghai University, and the Qinghai Meteorological Bureau turned up no references to Sky River. A retrospective account of Wang Guangqian's 10 years of achievements in 'counterpart support' at Qinghai University also contained no references to it (Guangming Daily 2021), and other sources suggest the project has been suspended (Gan and Wang 2021).

According to a US-based atmospheric scientist familiar with the project, as of 2022, Wang's team is continuing its research on Sky River weather modification in Qinghai, but in a greatly scaled

Silver iodide burning chamber in Shigatse, Tibet Autonomous Region. PC: China Meteorological Administration.

back way, and with a new focus on precipitation microphysics in addition to weather modification. Their research has been deliberately shielded from the public eye due to the controversy that erupted in 2018.

Sky River as a Promethean Concept

The papers by Wang and his colleagues assert a distinction between the well-known concept of 'atmospheric rivers' (大气河流)—flowing columns of condensed water vapour that transport most water vapour outside the tropics—and the 'sky river' (天河), which they define as 'highly structured water conveyance systems' at the regional and global levels (Wang et al. 2016: 656). This distinction was widely panned by atmospheric scientists in the *ScienceNet.cn* debate, as well as others I interviewed, all of whom said the sky river concept is no different from that of atmospheric rivers. In the words of one interlocutor familiar with the debate, it was just a 'big fancy exciting new name' used 'to obtain a large sum of funding'.

In addition to garnering funding, however, the goal of asserting Sky River as a distinct concept (even if not valid to atmospheric scientists) was to affirm an equivalency between the atmosphere and the ground to apply the same types of optimisation techniques used terrestrially. This is evident in claims that Sky River would be an 'aerial corridor' for the SNWTP. It is also plainly stated in one of Wang's co-authored papers introducing the goal of the Sky River concept: 'We proposed a concept of "Sky River" ... to explain how the atmospheric water *could be utilised*' (Wang et al. 2018: 110; emphasis added).

The original 2016 paper published in Chinese describes the significance of Sky River in terms of national economic development, ecological civilisation construction, national security, and geopolitics (Wang et al. 2016: 653). It argues that 'traditional water management techniques' have reached their limit for dealing with China's 'absolute water shortage'. Thus, 'the materialisation of cloud water resources through weather modification is a process of opening a new source to counter the "throttling" of surface water resources' (Wang et al. 2016: 653). Discussing the Sanjiangyuan area, they note:

> At present, the rate of conversion of natural precipitation is very low ... [I]f a new inter-basin water transfer model is developed

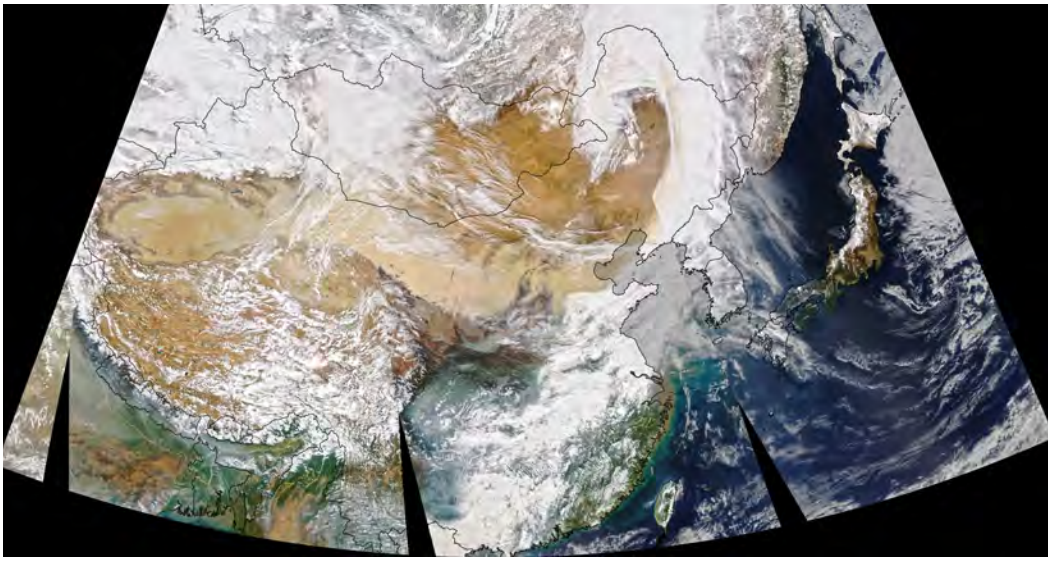
> through the use of cloud water resources, there is hope to solve the problem of the arid climate … [I]t is relatively simple and easy to modify the temporal and spatial distribution of natural precipitation through human intervention into the weather … Spatial water transfer can be conducted between the Yellow River Basin and the Yangtze River Basin, forming a new inter-basin transfer model, which would greatly ameliorate north China's serious shortage of water resources, enormously promoting the coordinated development of society, economy, and the environment. (Wang et al. 2016: 653)

The 2018 paper by Wang and his colleagues introducing the concept to the Anglophone literature is similar in its framing of clouds as 'atmospheric water resources', which should be coupled with conventional surface water resources in the 'water resource configuration infrastructure' (Wang et al. 2018: 110). To achieve 'comprehensive development of atmosphere–surface water resources', the authors use shallow water equations that are also used for modelling dynamics of flows in rivers, the ocean, and the atmosphere, and extrapolate from there to develop 'a new vision' of the water cycle (Wang et al. 2018: 109, 117). This assertion that sky rivers are generalised phenomena approachable through familiar fluid mechanics is, in turn, 'key to develop[ing] a novel strategy in developing atmospheric water resources by joint management of atmospheric and surface water resources' (Wang et al. 2018: 117). In short, the scientific endeavour is aimed at allowing surface and atmospheric waters to be modelled and managed together in the service of China's ecological security.

Promethean Dreams for the Nation

To the atmospheric scientists who publicly criticised the project, the problem appears to be the fact that the Sky River team is made up entirely of hydrologists, with no atmospheric science or meteorological expertise, and that this is what led to the overhyped concept and project. While this is no doubt part of the story, my goal here is to point to the Promethean thinking embedded within both the state-sponsored scientific endeavour and the scientific publications that underpin it. Though the deployment of Sky River may be suspended, the team behind it has not given up on its project. And, even without Sky River, there are already hundreds of silver iodide burners on the Tibetan Plateau—part of a vast bureaucratic machinery of civilian as well as military weather modification.

Moreover, Promethean stories about Sky River continue to circulate on Weibo and other social media sites—often described in nationalist terms. One post from June 2022, entitled 'China's Determination! Three Super Projects about to Be Unveiled, with a Scale Ranking First in the World', provides no new information about the project beyond the initial 2018 reports, but concludes with the declaration that 'once the project is complete, it will shock the world' (Science Knowledge Show 2022). A blogger who reported in 2021 on the suspension of the project noted that it could take 50 years to realise the 'transfer of water through the sky to fall as remote precipitation' but argued: 'If we do not do research on this project, it will not happen in China, but rather will be realised in a foreign country' (Changyun Hezu Shamo zbb 2021). As a third example, a video by a microblogger who often posts about infrastructure, states that once the project is complete, 'those foreign experts who made those irresponsible remarks [casting doubt on the project] will eat their words', and solicits support from viewers by asking: 'If you think our country's capital construction is awesome, please cheer them on in the comments!' (Aishang Kepu n.d.). The Promethean dream of deploying a distributed terrestrial–atmospheric–orbital network of silver iodide burners, satellites, and data to optimise the distribution of water resources across China lives on. ■



Edited Aqua MODIS mosaic of a dust storm over China covering a large part of the northern section, March 2021. PC: NASA (CC), edited by Stuart Rankin, Flickr.com.

Rise into Dust

Governing Land and Weather Systems in Contemporary China

Jerry ZEE

Since a season of successive massive dust storms in Beijing in the early 2000s, broad political experiments in mitigating dust events have, across the capital's airshed, reconfigured the problem of land degradation as one of large-scale weather intervention. Dust storms revealed the potential of large tracts of the continental interior to become airborne. Downwind of China, they have also sparked scientific, political, and technical attempts to make sense of China's rise as a story of both political economic ascendance and the literal rise of land into the sky. This essay examines the interface of terrestrial and atmospheric processes as it conditions experiments in governing weather systems and phenomena associated with Reform and Opening.

In early April 2001, two closely spaced pulses of the Siberian jetstream blew into semi-arid Inner Mongolia, whipping surface sands into the air. The western reaches of the region, at the frontier with Mongolia, were bare of grass. The convergence of years of drought, a mounting crisis of land degradation, and an unusually warm winter left vast tracts of the region's sands exposed in the early spring. In these conditions, an early thaw of sandy landscapes coincided with the onset of strong seasonal winds. An inbound temperate cyclone system blasted against the loosened earth, peeling the land from the ground as a dusty emission, and moving it as part of a rapidly evolving weather system. The two pulses of wind converged into

a complex of airborne dust that rushed towards Beijing. It swirled, over the next weeks, into a single storm whose geophysics and geochemistry would evolve along its planetary course.

Over the month, the cyclone surged eastward, filling seasonal airstreams with bursts of earthy colour. Its yellow rivulets moved in a complex trajectory of smooth lines and crinkling twists. These aerolitic choreographies—to borrow from Andrea Ballestero's formulation (2019)—reshaped a material sensibility conditioned by the sense that land is a stable entity. As the storm moved across northern China, coal smoke, soot, volatile organic compounds, and the industrial effluent of China's booming economy entrained into its mix, glomming on to particles of aerosolised earth, and altering the geochemistry of the storm. The winds quickly breached the dotted line of the Great Wall and, two days after forming in Inner Mongolia, fell over Beijing as a bout of dust weather—one of that season's 11 major dust events.

The weather had changed. The 2001 storms marked a moment in the stunning reframing of state environmental concern. They pointedly marked a shifting mood, both public and official, phasing the well-established 'develop now and clean up later' approach of earlier decades of Reform and Opening into something else, still undetermined. The increase in large-scale dust events—that is, the increasing propensity for earth and air to shift into permutations that obviated any clear distinction between land and sky—could be loosely tracked against the shifting environmental winds of different moments in the official historiography of China's socialism: weather patterns and political temporalities swooshed into one another. In the cataclysmic cycles of dynastic succession, anomalous weather—drought, flood, storms—could be leveraged politically as meteorological signals of divine will; the Mandate of Heaven on which dynastic legitimacy was based was, in this way, perched precariously on weather reports.

As 2001's season of dust storms was beginning to settle, wild speculation exploded across Beijing over the causes of and potential solutions for this dangerous mineral weather. Planners openly fretted over the expanses of mobile desert sands lurking and lurching at the threshold of the capital. The possibility of Beijing's burial by advancing dunes or particulate matter unloading from the sky was openly discussed in official circles and on state media. Catastrophic seasonal dust storms and a mounting crisis of particulate air pollution that was quickly becoming a signature of Chinese cities appeared as meteorological aspects of Reform and Opening—a time most often narrated through rapid economic development. Indeed, in 'the first decade of the new millennium dust storms and air pollution evolved into one of the most widely and controversially debated environmental issues in the People's Republic of China' (Stein 2015: 321).

Dust in Motion

Moving dust, and the meteorological shifts it portended, forced a pause in the central government's environmental reckoning as it rearranged the relation of the Chinese capital and the country's distant interior into multiple points on a strange new weather system trajectory. With the country on the threshold of a long-awaited 'Chinese Century' (Pieke 2014), these storms—in all their noxious particulate density—were the country's interior passing over itself. In its surge towards the battered capital, the crisis of dust had become a reliable feature of a strange new meteorological normalcy: modern weather. In the spring of 2001, the Chinese Meteorological Agency noted that northeast Asia was in the middle of its most intense season of dust storms, in both intensity and frequency, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Well into the third vertiginous decade of Reform and Opening, in 2001, Beijing was pummelled by more than ten consecutive dust storm events, sweeping in on winter and spring winds from the desiccating interior of the Chinese continent. The vaunted ascent of China—the long goal and *raison d'état* of multiple modern Chinese states—found its curious meteorological double in the land phasing into sky and passing over itself as a continent of dust. These two rising Chinas—one geopolitical and the other geological—roiled together in the parade of dust events that,

Guangzongsi, Inner Mongolia during a sand storm. PC: Martin Angerer (CC), Flickr.com.

by 2001, had come to mark the northeast Asian spring through the erratic time-spaces of a China lifted by and falling out along the patterned wind.

What is 'territory' when the land that undergirds it can become part of a weather formation? Environmental governance—long oriented around land degradation and the shifting more-than-human economies of grazing, farming, and foraging in Inner Mongolia—was becoming part of a new problem: how to keep inland territory solid and, more specifically, how to re-engineer the social and geophysical features of China's interior so they would not generate dust storms that could reach Beijing and other important places. That is, environmental governance aiming to confront the conditions of dust storm formation would replicate a familiar geography of power—the centre and its peripheries—but now through the question of environmental vulnerability to weather; and governance would come to see land itself as a potential dust event. That is, *terra firma* had become a goal, to be tentatively achieved through experiments in reengineering the physical, social, ecological, and other properties of the earth, always with a view to its interaction with potential Beijing-bound winds. Solid land was only one possible phase of physical matter.

If a dust storm indicates the capacity of land to phase into an aerosol, of a Chinese desert upwind of Beijing to pass over it as a desert in the sky, what could 'weather' mean as an emerging category of political attention and anxiety?

The first decades of the twenty-first century were increasingly aligned, politically and meteorologically, with major dust events and attempts to modulate them. The remaking of the weather—long

a political goal—would shape new experiments in governing and living in Reform and Opening as ad hoc meteorological practices. Forestry officials, state environmental engineers, and cadres dispersed across Beijing's airshed would be tasked with devising methods for binding the earth to the ground. And for herders in the Inner Mongolian cradle of dust storms, artists, and city denizens in the capital, and those far downwind of China, being swept into these strange new weather worlds created new ways of interacting with space, state, and landscape (Zee 2021).

In western Inner Mongolia, long-running experiments in sand control and dune fixation—developed to stem the advance of mobile deserts—were redeployed as the basic infrastructural installations for the engineering of a dust-proof land–weather system. Straw grids and other windbreaking and sand-catching techniques joined large-scale fencing—already in place thanks to sedentarisation and land reform campaigns since the 1980s (Williams 2002)—to transform the earth's surface, which was now imagined as an interface with dust-kicking winds. Developed originally to protect marginal farmland from sand encroachment and to keep creeping sands from causing derailments on desert-crossing railway lines, these techniques were part of a broader governmental shift in orthodoxy that continually related the transformation of local land in such so-called cradles of dust storms to the eventual remediation of meteorological phenomena downwind.

Alongside physical installations in the landscape-turned-dustscape, existing programs of socialist redistribution, policing, and government were redeployed, on an experimental basis, in the development of potential model approaches to transform herders into forestry and landscape engineers. As official explanations of land degradation have long targeted herders as ecologically irrational land users—a designation tinged irrevocably with ethnic and racial derision—the remaking of local economies was central to state attempts to quickly replace herding with enterprises that would ultimately help reshape the geophysical features of former pasturelands. They also sought to exorcise the spectre of social instability involved in the attempt to rapidly transition herding into more 'rational' land uses that would support the modes of land–air transformation that were deemed necessary to protect Beijing, several hundred kilometres downwind.

Governing the Weather

I suggest that all these interventions and logics are illustrative of the emergence of a specific notion of weather—and not simply 'pollution'—not just as an atmospheric problem to be resolved, but also as part of a new way of thinking about and governing the relationships between land, air, (often minority) populations, plants, animals, and infrastructure across large distances. This is because questions of meteorological emergence—dealing with strange new atmospheres—disclose and demand modes of state concern that do not resolve into the anthropocentric policy mechanisms of punishing 'polluters'. The notion of pollution relies on a much more discreet sense of locatable human agency that largely obscures the complex interactions of history, landscape, and air patterns while kicking particles into the air, where they are distributed across a wide scale and into bodies of all different kinds.

Changing the weather is an existential concern for planet and state. A nascent politics for controlling airborne particulate matter—codified and technicalised in an air pollution plan for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, occasioned by the spectacle of a dense sky—took shape alongside longstanding anti-desertification and sand-control programs in China's upwind areas, addressing different moments in the aerosol dynamic of a dust storm. This more general demand occasioned in the shifting gradients of urban particulate matter should be understood both politically and geophysically as an attempt to manage and engineer the weather—the historically dynamic contents, geophysics, and relations of atmosphere and its relentless imbrication with social and political life. Such weather transformations are evident across Asia, as in the cloud manipulation programs in China (Chien et al. 2017) and the broader history of climatic control that Yuriko Furuhata (2022)

traces through Japanese imperialism and Cold War relations. In this, dust becomes not simply a curious material signature of a changing weather system, but also one site among others where the weather is increasingly approached as something that demands manipulation, modulation, and intervention.

Dust had become an increasingly quasi-existential problem of the Chinese contemporary: inauspicious clouds. Along dust-transporting airstreams that subjected prosperous coastal China to the outcomes of land degradation in the interior, the geo-meteorology of dust was prompting experiments and reconfigurations of Chinese life and politics; if land and air could fall into a kaleidoscope of terrestrial and meteorological permutations, so, too, could the worlds that would take shape around them. Strange weather made the formation and dynamics of dust storms into an architecture for a political apparatus that drew together disparate sites across the airstreams and weather-worlds of northern China as moments in an aerosol process, punctuated at points where broken land could phase into dust weather.

A Weather Report

Let us close by considering the weather report as a genre of governmental reimagination of the objects of its concern and potential intervention. And how tracing out weather systems could generate a set of scales and relations that muddle political designs on the 'environment' that limit it to the stability of territory, at the expense of the air above.

7 April 2001: Two days after the formation of the dust event in China's interior, the dust cloud arrived over the major cities of the northeast, where, at daybreak, it was seen as an anti-optical event, with ground-level observers describing the dust by what they could not see. The density and intensity of the dust cloud made buildings disappear and eclipsed the morning sun. At the same time, NASA's Earth Observing Satellite registered the cloud of dust from near-earth orbit, recording it as a continent in the sky, rising and crinkling into its own airborne topography and occluding the China below. Ridges and valleys formed in the sky, topped with their own clouds, all furrowed in radial reference to the cyclone-eye of the weather continent.

8–10 April 2001: By what aerosol scientists positioned just outside Chinese territorial waters described as sheer good luck, the fourth experiment of the International Global Atmospheric Chemistry Program—the Asian Pacific Regional Aerosol Characterisation Experiment—coincided with the April 2001 event. It caught the cloud as it passed over the Pacific ground experiment stations and monitoring sites in Asia downwind of China, at Gosan on South Korea's Jeju Island and Iwakuni Airfield in Japan. Combining aircraft-mounted monitoring, satellite photography, and Lidar, scientists were able to collect extensive data on the content, trajectory, and chemical-physical dynamics of this dust event (Huebert 2003). They quickly characterised it as a model event to describe Chinese land as part of a weather system—a meteorology contingent on several geophysical, historical, and political factors. The continent's interior passed, aerosolised, over its downwind neighbours, and scientists collected it as raw material to characterise China's rise into dust. Having gathered traces of China's interior as dust, mixed with industrial effluent from across the mainland, experimental characterisation of the aerosol recast Asia as a landmass that is also a highly specific set of geochemical signals.

Days later, South Korean diplomats, brokering the renormalisation of political relations with their upwind neighbour, would remark on this storm as profound material proof of the intractable and inescapable reality of northeast Asian relations, folding the geophysics of storms into the geopolitics of the Cold War, which continues, formally, to this day across East Asia. The wind and its earths passing over regional seas on whose names no-one can agree.

14 April 2001: Aircraft observations over the Pacific Northwest concluded that aerosol particulate matter that would eventually be called the 2001 Asian Dust Event had passed into US airspace at least two days previously and would continue to scatter over the continental United States as a rain of Asian land. It was eventually determined that

for the duration of the event, it would introduce a mass of particulate matter over the United States equivalent to all domestic daily emissions (Jaffe et al. 2003: 501).

18 April 2001: The *Denver Post* reported on a column of dust 13 kilometres thick over the Rocky Mountains as the 'latest import from China' (Schrader 2001), colliding the anxieties of a de-industrialised heartland with a nascent meteorological nativism—the pre-echo of trade wars to come. The cloud, as it traced out trans-Pacific and hemispheric airstreams, extended to more than 3,200 kilometres—the largest documented dust event since 1979, which was the first full year of the social and political experiments in China that have come to be known as Reform and Opening. Between one massive event and another, the history of political reform and the endurance of the Chinese Communist Party were bookended by two massive clouds of earth: the weather that shifted the Chinese contemporary into the whorl of continents thrown over hemispheres. ■

Tankeng Dam on the Ou River, located 24 km west of Qingtian, Zhejiang Province, China. PC: Matt&MoMo (CC), Flickr.com.

Prometheus Brings Water

Development and Fix-Fixing in China

Stevan HARRELL

Nowhere is the Chinese Party-State's Promethean thinking more vividly apparent than in its continuous proclivity to build more and bigger water projects. And where these projects create problems, the solution is not to remove the projects but to build further projects, to construct 'fixes to fix the fixes'. From Yellow River conservancy in the first years of the People's Republic of China to ever-expanding water projects in the early twenty-first century, storing, releasing, and moving water have brought Chinese social-ecological systems to a condition of severe technological lock-in, decreasing the resilience of these systems to extreme weather, extreme policy, and other 'natural' disasters.

When Deng Xiaoping proclaimed in 1992 that 'only development is a solid truth' (发展才是硬道理) (Guang'an Ribao 2016), he was not saying anything new. Not only did his remarks accord with those of capitalist development theorists like W.W. Rostow (1960) and with the ambitious goals of both late-Qing self-strengtheners and the Republican modernists who followed them; they were also in complete agreement with the ambitions of his own party in its earlier, more explicitly socialist age. The 1949 Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (全国政协基础纲要, CPPCC) proclaimed:

> The basic principle for the economic construction of the People's Republic of China is … to achieve the goal of developing production and a flourishing economy … to promote the development of the entire society and economy. (CPPCC 1949: Article 26)

Even in 1973, at the height of the Cultural Revolution—a period when, later narratives argue 'revolution' precluded 'development' (Zweig 1989: 192)—Michel Oksenberg could write: 'One major purpose of the Chinese Revolution is to build a prosperous and strong country. Economic development is a major aim of any program undertaken in China' (1973: 13–14).

Chinese Communist leaders have thus always shared Promethean ideals with postwar capitalism. Assuming human ingenuity can solve all problems, including those of extracting more value—measured in calories, water, or money—from natural ecosystems, both capitalists and communists have often failed to recognise that those systems themselves have limits. What differed between the likes of Rostow and the likes of Mao was not the desirability of development but the means deployed to accomplish it (Schmalzer 2014: 78–79). If, for Rostow and similar thinkers, the primary obstacle to development was technological, for Mao, it was political: if the relations of production could be rearranged to 'liberate the productive forces', those forces could be channelled into growth, rather than into parasitic exploitation by national elites and Western imperialists. The goals were the same.

Two other inheritances have contributed to Prometheanism in Chinese Communist thought. One of these is very old: Confucian humanism. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted the slogan 'Human determination will triumph over nature' (人定胜天), it was not, as many have assumed, to say that human destiny is to conquer nature, but rather that human plans (人定) can overcome natural obstacles (Wu 2014). Communists used this age-old saying to implicitly deny that nature (天) could ever place limits on human activity. During the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), the failure to recognise these natural limits was encapsulated in the slogan 'The product of the earth will be as great as the courage of the people' (人有多大胆, 地有多大产) (Liu 1958), prompting all sorts of well-known nutty schemes, from ploughing up the earth to a depth of more than 1 metre (Zhong 2011) to melting down cooking utensils to 'make' steel (Wagner 2011).

Marxism, through its critique of capitalism, reinforced and focused Chinese Communist Promethean thinking. For example, commentators demonstrated through impeccable logic that environmental pollution was a capitalist problem. Capitalists, in pursuit of profit, had to cut costs and thus neglect the environmental harm of their activities (which was true enough in many, many cases, and something that Marx himself pointed out; see Schneider 2015), while communist economic planners, in pursuit of the public interest, would not degrade the environment (Whitney 1973: 107). The only problem with this argument was that the logicians neglected to look out the window. The first 20 years of development in the People's Republic of China (PRC) not only brought forth pollution, but also, more importantly, failed to align development plans to maintain the resilience of China's ecological and social systems, leaving them continuously vulnerable to natural and political disturbances.

The Trade-Off between Development and System Resilience

Systems ecologists define resilience as the ability of a system to withstand a disturbance or perturbation and continue functioning (Holling and Gunderson 2002: 28). Resilience is maintained by buffers, which can be ecological, infrastructural, institutional, or cultural. For example, an agro-ecosystem can be buffered against extreme weather events by wetlands, fallowing, crop diversity, dikes, regulations, access to outside products, or ethical values. Typically, development removes ecological buffers by reclaiming unused lands, planting monocrops for their higher caloric or market values, discharging more pollutants than air or water can dilute, and so on. This increases stress on institu-

tional and infrastructural buffers. If previously, for example, overflow basins contained Yellow River floods (Pietz 2015), reclaiming those basins for agriculture or industrial development necessitates dikes, drainage canals, dredging, and institutions to regulate these structures and processes.

Development does not diminish resilience in a linear way, however. Low levels of development can sometimes increase resilience, as when formerly farmed steep slopes are converted to terraces, thereby both increasing agricultural yields and reducing erosion. Or a reservoir can conserve water for irrigation use in times of drought while holding back potential floodwaters in times of unusual rainfall. But past a certain level of growth, development almost always decreases resilience. Terracing will not work on the steepest slopes, and encroaching on the edges of a reservoir by cultivating new fields will diminish the amount of rainwater the reservoir can hold, meaning that a smaller storm could bring just as big a flood. Figure 1 shows the curvilinear relationship between productivity and resilience in agricultural development.

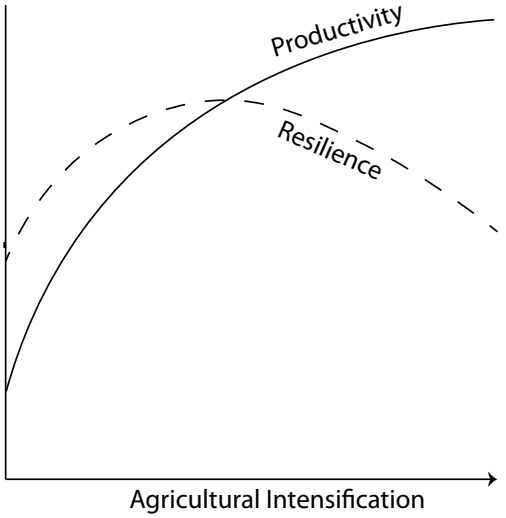


Figure 1: At low to moderate levels, agricultural intensification can increase resilience. Past a certain point, the relationship turns inverse, and more intensive systems become more vulnerable to disturbances.

CCP Promethean thinking is thus not just about failure to recognise natural limits on productivity. It is also about failure to recognise that as development alters ecosystems past a certain level, it also diminishes their resilience. Irrigation canals built in the 1950s to increase water supply to fields on the North China Plain raised the water table and made agricultural areas more vulnerable to waterlogging after excess rainfall. Later, having basically exhausted surface water supplies in the same area, the turn in the mid-1960s to groundwater irrigation using tube-wells drew down the water table and created cones of subsidence, making urban buildings more vulnerable to cracked foundations and causing sinkholes to open in urban streets decades later. Monocrop agriculture made rural communities more vulnerable to crop diseases, as when Panama disease (or Fusarium wilt) wiped out large areas of banana plantations in Guangxi in the 2010s (Liu 2018).

If development, however, is 'the only solid truth'—if increasing productivity is the sole or primary goal of agricultural, industrial, and land-use policy—then it is easy to ignore limits on productivity and diminishing resilience and apply the Promethean principle that 'humans left to their own devices will automatically generate solutions to problems' (Dryzek 2005: 67), even to those problems that humans have created by their own dismissal of natural limits and ecosystem feedbacks. Thus, the strategy of the fix to fix the fix.

Fixing the Fix

Recognising that development can lead to decreased resilience and vulnerability to disasters, one solution might be to retreat from the development that brought about the diminished resilience. But this contradicts both the slogan about solid truth and, more substantively, the legitimacy of the regime, which since 1980 has rested ever more on its ability to bring material prosperity. Hence, nothing can be de-developed, no matter how much vulnerability it has occasioned. So, the solution to the problems caused by a technological

fix is another fix, and fixing the fix has become the primary strategy of environmental planning in the PRC. This strategy is evident across the board, but particularly in waterworks and water conservancy. Three examples are emblematic of fix-fixing and even fix-fixing-fixing.

1. Sanmenxia

In 1953–54, Chinese planners formulated the General Plan for the Yellow River to prevent flooding and convert many of the rainfed fields of the North China Plain to irrigated agriculture (Pietz 2015: 158–74). The plan included several dams, including two on the Yellow River, at Liujiaxia in Gansu and at Sanmenxia (三门峡, or Three Gate Gorge), a narrow spot on the Yellow River in Henan, about 100 kilometres downstream of where the river turns eastward and begins its flow across the North China Plain. Soviet engineers helped plan the dam, which was begun in 1957 and completed in early 1961.

By late that year, it had become evident that planners had seriously underestimated the amount of silt that would be trapped behind the dam. Less than a year after the dam was completed, sediment deposits had already reduced the capacity of the Sanmenxia reservoir by half, causing the area of the reservoir to expand far beyond its planned limits and the channel of the river to widen upstream near the confluence of the Wei River, which flows out of Shaanxi and into the Yellow River right at the bend. Water backed up into the Wei River Valley around Xi'an, flooding farmland and causing widespread salinisation (Pietz 2015: 225; Shapiro 2001: 62–63). Siltation raised the level of the Wei River so much that it buried an important bridge, and a new one had to be built. By 2003, some stretches of the Wei River had become—like much of the Yellow River further downstream—a 'hanging river' (悬河), with its bed higher than the surrounding plain (Tan 2003), increasing vulnerability to floods; and, indeed, floods displaced Wei Valley farmers for several months in the autumn of 2005 (Wang and Wang 2011). Reduced flow, along with sediment that clogged the turbines, rendered the dam almost useless for power generation.

The adverse effects of Sanmenxia were not limited to upstream areas and tributaries. Sediment trapped behind the dam slowed the flow of the river, so that in addition to reducing power generation, the Yellow River downstream slowed so much that more sediment was deposited in its bed rather than being carried to the sea (Bi et al. 2019: 973).

Even advocates of big water projects admitted that building Sanmenxia was a mistake. Zhang Guangdou, one of the engineers who worked on the original project (and also on the giant Sanxia 三峡, or Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangtze), admitted in a 2004 television interview that 'Sanmenxia was a mistake, and I am not the only one to say so' (Pietz 2015: 302). Qi Pu, a senior engineer at the Yellow River Resources Institute and usually a big advocate of water projects, told a group of touring ecology students that 'the idea to construct Sanmenxia was fundamentally flawed' (Wang and Wang 2011).

However, the presence of the dam itself had created a technological lock-in (Perkins 2003) or path dependence (Arthur 1994)—the short-term costs of removal would far exceed the costs of a fix. So, the solution was not to undo the mistake and remove the dam, but rather to build another dam to fix the fix. The Xiaolangdi (小浪底) dam, 130 kilometres downstream, was completed in 2000, and a process called water–sediment regulation opened sluice gates annually there and at Sanmenxia, creating a series of artificial floods to flush out concentrated sediments (Li et al. 2017: 162). This process has resulted in a buildup of sediment at Xiaolangdi and reduced sediment further downstream, changing the sediment regime there once again, from deposition to erosion. As dams and devices were built upstream, even the size and shape of the river's delta changed, first growing, then shrinking, and after water–sediment regulation began, growing again (Wang et al. 2010; Wu et al. 2017). Whether there will be a further fix to fix the fix to fix the fix remains unclear at the time of writing.

2. Poyang Lake

Lying just south of the Yangtze River in north Jiangxi, Poyang (鄱阳湖) is invariably described as 'China's largest freshwater lake'. But that depends on the season. During the dry seasons of autumn and winter, Poyang is primarily fed by five rivers draining into it from the south, while its waters flow out into the Yangtze. The lake's autumn surface area in recent years has been about 900 square kilometres. When the Yangtze runs high, however, the flow is reversed and the river backfills the lake, quadrupling its size to an average annual maximum of about 3,700 square kilometres (Wan et al. 2018: 99). Even this yearly maximum is smaller than the lake's historical size, which was reported to be about 5,100 square kilometres in 1949.

Flooding in the Poyang region increased after the founding of the PRC in 1949, as deforestation along the lake's tributaries increased sediment flow into the lake and seasonal high flows in the Yangtze also increased with upstream deforestation, adding to the summer backflow of the Yangtze into Poyang (Shankman and Liang 2003).

Enter the great Sanxia (三峡) or Three Gorges Dam. Before Sanxia was completed, hydrological forecasters predicted that building the dam would increase flows in the Yangtze in the early summer, when the Sanxia reservoir level was being lowered to make room for possible upstream floodwaters, at the same time as heavy rainfall in the Poyang watershed would raise the lake level. In combination, these would increase the danger of summer lake floods, even as disastrous river floods like those of 1998 would become less likely. But the forecasts were inaccurate. After Sanxia was built, the average annual summer and autumn lake surface dropped about 2 metres (Mei et al. 2015: 2), and the dry season began to start earlier in the autumn and extend later into the winter than previously (David Shankman, personal communication). As a result, wetlands shrank and grasslands expanded, potentially affecting habitat for large numbers of migratory birds that overwintered in the area (Burnham et al. 2017). A long-submerged Ming-period causeway emerged and was touted as a tourist attraction, dubbed the Thousand Eye Bridge (千眼桥) (Mei et al. 2015: 1).

Some of the technological fixes that brought about this situation could be fixed by removing the cause. In particular, sand mining around the lake mouth, which increased the wintertime gradient between the lake and the river and thus increased the outflow and lowered the lake level, could be halted (Lai et al. 2014). But sand, as a component of concrete, was a key raw material for building China's cities, as the urban population increased from about 20 per cent in 1980 to 65 per cent today. And, anyway, Sanxia was there to stay, meaning there would need to be a fix to fix that gigantic fix. Thus, authorities proposed building a 3-kilometre-long sluice wall across the lake outlet, retaining water in the lake during the winter and purportedly protecting fishing, shipping, and wetlands (Ives 2016).

Controversy over the sluice wall was still raging when the middle-Yangtze region experienced its highest-ever rainfall in early June 2020, bringing about major floods and raising the heretofore declining lake level of Poyang to a record high (BBC Chinese 2020). Contrary to hydrological experts' previous predictions, lake floods and river floods could happen at the same time after development had removed ecological buffers. As a result, in early 2021, the Jiangxi Government's detailed plans for the sluice wall were included on the list of national large-scale water projects (Diao 2021). Whether this latest fix will fix the multifarious harms brought about by the former fix remains to be seen.

3. The National Water Network

As early as 1953, Mao Zedong pontificated: 'There is a lot of water in the South and not much water in the North; if it's possible, it would be OK to borrow a bit of water [南方水多, 北方水少, 如果可能, 借点水来也是可以的]' (Crow-Miller 2015: 180). By the 1990s, previous fixes—including increased irrigation, growing municipal water use, and ground-

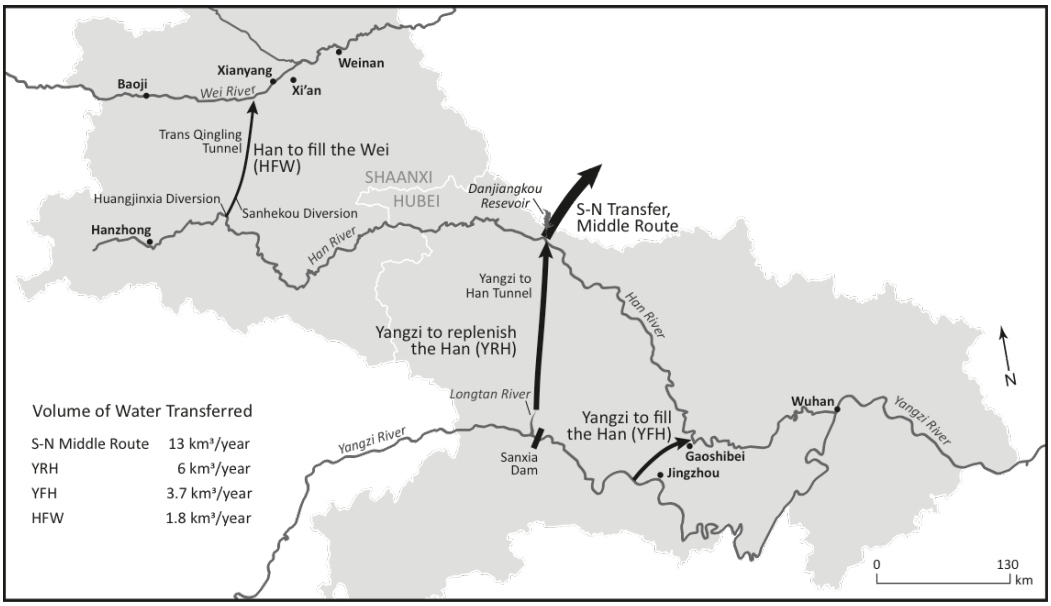


Figure 2: Relationships among water fixes in central China. Map by Lily Demet Crandall-Oral.

water drawdown—had exacerbated the disparity, and clearly a further fix was needed. It came in the form of the South–North Water Transfer (南水北调) Project, which would transfer water from the Yangtze watershed to that of the Yellow River by two routes: one from the Danjiangkou Reservoir, where the Dan and Han rivers meet in northern Hubei, and another along the Grand Canal in the east (a third route through the mountains in the far west was postponed for the time being). Critics expressed considerable doubt that the project was necessary or desirable, pointing out that conservation and more efficient use could save a lot of water, and that delivering Yangtze water to the north at low cost would create a moral hazard and disincentive to conserve or economise (Berkoff 2003). Besides, there would be problems with pollution along the eastern route especially (Tang et al. 2014), and the central route could deprive farmers in the sending area of some of the water they needed for their crops (Webber et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, the fix-fixing mentality prevailed and, by 2014, the north was 'borrowing' an annual total of about 27 cubic kilometres of southern water. The lowered flow of the Han River was a particular object of concern, so between 2010 and 2014, Hubei authorities built one of the first fix-fixing fixes: the 'Taking the Yangtze to fill the Han' (引江济汉) project—a 67-kilometre open tunnel from Jingzhou between the Sanxia Dam and Wuhan to Gaobeishi Township, about 100 kilometres upstream.

This fix fixed only the final stretch of the Han between Gaobeishi and Wuhan, doing nothing for the middle reach between Danjiangkou and Gaobeishi. In addition, the Wei River Valley was becoming increasingly water-deficient, and the best way to get water to that region would be the 'Taking the Han to fill the Wei' (引汉济渭) project, which will take about 1.8 cubic kilometres per year from two tributaries of the upper Han in the Hanzhong region of Shaanxi, well above Danjiangkou, and divert it through a 75-kilometre-long tunnel as much as 2,100 metres deep under the Qinling Mountains to serve the Wei Valley cities of Baoji, Xianyang, Xi'an, and Weinan, as well as surrounding farms. So that fix will soon exacerbate the shortages in the middle reaches of the Han.

Never fear: a fix to fix the fix to fix the fix began construction in July 2022 (Hubei Daily 2021). The 'Taking the Yangtze to replenish the Han' (引江补汉) project will divert about 3.8 cubic kilometres annually from the Longtan River, a left-bank tributary of the Sanxia reservoir about 7 kilometres above the dam, to the Han River immediately below the Danjiangkou reservoir—a site chosen to avoid lowering the quality of water carried to northern China along the Middle Route (Danjiangkou Online 2021). Figure 2 illustrates the relationships among all these water fixes.

Xiaowan Dam, Lancang (upper Mekong) River, China. PC: Guillaume Lacombe/Cirad (CC), Flickr.com

These water fixes are China's most spectacular, but they are far from unique; the national agenda contained 172 large-scale water projects in 2014 and the State Council announced another 150 in 2020 (Zhang et al. 2022). These included big transfer projects in Zhejiang, Yunnan, and even Guangdong, which receives more than 1,500 millimetres of rainfall every year (People's Government 2019; Guangdong 2019; Central Yunnan Water Delivery 2018). Although it is not yet approved, there is even a serious proposal to bring desalinised seawater 2,000 kilometres to solve 'water shortage problems' in Xinjiang (CCTV 2019). The total preliminary budget for what is now officially dubbed the 'national water network' (国家水网) is about RMB3 trillion (Zhang et al. 2022).

Promethean solutions to water allocation problems were not inevitable, and whether completing the national water network will ultimately increase or decrease resilience against extreme weather events is not clear. After all, we can only evaluate the resilience of a social-ecological system in retrospect, after a disturbance happens. What we do know is that the livelihoods of citizens in Hubei and Shaanxi are ever more dependent on infrastructural buffers—dams, canals, and tunnels—and on the institutions that regulate and maintain that infrastructure. Dependence on the path of an ever-expanding water transfer network has brought the water system to what resilience ecologists call a 'rigidity trap' (Holling and Gunderson 2002), where continuation of the system is dependent on infrastructure and institutions. If the institutions break down, the infrastructure will follow, and even though the costs of maintaining the infrastructure continue to rise, there is no choice but to maintain it; and, given that it has brought about further problems, there is no choice but to build further fixes.

Reconsidering Prometheanism

It would be remiss and simplistic to assert that further fixes have been the only approach to the problems brought about by rapid development in the PRC. Authorities have addressed certain serious environmental problems effectively by removing their causes; air pollution has decreased dramatically since 2015 through reducing coal-burning, regulating the sulphur content of gasoline, and shutting down many of the most polluting sources. After deforestation reached dangerous levels from the 1950s to the 1970s, forest cover has more than doubled in the past few decades. The state has recognised that technological fixes will not fix everything and embraced a general goal of building an 'ecological civilisation' (生态文明). But the Promethean mentality remains, especially when water is involved.

It would also be simplistic to condemn the Promethean mentality generally. Chinese citizens now enjoy more comfortable, secure lives than ever before, primarily due to development. But overemphasis on material growth through technological fixes can lead to the pursuit of short-term goals and ignoring long-term consequences. The Yuan Dynasty scholar Lin Yuan (林远) was clearly worried about Prometheanism and its effect on resilience when he critiqued a design for—yes—a water project: 'Aim for small advantage and wreck a great plan, fret over short-term success and leave behind long-term suffering' (射小利, 害大謀, 急近功, 遺衰患) (Lin n.d.). ■

Yangtze River near Yichang, Hubei.
PC: Berd Taller (CC), Flickr.com.

Manipulating Water in China

Michael WEBBER

Chinese academics and officials argue that the country must store water to overcome seasonal fluctuations and move water to rebalance regional differences in supply and demand. As well as supplying water, however, such projects protect the political and economic status of powerful municipalities, stimulate Chinese economic growth, and proclaim the power and administrative capacity of the state. Underpinning Promethean water management is a hidden 'empire'—China's water machine—that assembles the capacities of corporations and institutions in an international network that facilitates state schemes. Yet, fixed infrastructure and their deterministic projections collide against shifting water demands and political interests and require subtle reconciliation of competing interests.

Water, it is said, comes in three modes: too much, too little, or too dirty. China's floods, droughts, and high levels of pollution reflect this adage. More than 11 per cent of the country is subject to floods—an area that includes one-third of its farmland and two-thirds of its population (Ma et al. 2010). On average in the 2000s, drought affected more than 24.5 million hectares of China's land area annually, which is roughly equivalent to the total land area of the United Kingdom and more than double the area so affected in the 1950s (Wang et al. 2012). In South China, 20 per cent of the monitored sections in the Yangtze and Pearl River basins have poor water quality; in northern China, all major river basins have experienced water quality degradation, and the proportion of monitored water sections that are ranked poor ranges from 50 per cent in the Yellow River Basin to 78 per cent in the Hai River Basin (Jiang 2009).

Figure 1: Existing and planned routes of the South–North Water Transfer Project. PC: SeoulSolution.kr.

For thousands of years, China's rulers and its people have attempted to control floods and to drought-proof crops through irrigation. They have paid less attention to controlling pollution (and so shall this essay). Dams, canals, and tunnels are concrete manifestations in the landscape of human attempts to manipulate the flow of water—Promethean re-makings of the Earth's waterscape. They are regularly lauded as the greatest feats of the societies that launched them, moving water from where it is abundant (or overabundant) to where governments want it. Within China, the official view is that the country must store water to overcome seasonal fluctuations and move water to rebalance regional differences in supply and demand. This view has driven a rapid expansion in the number of dams in China and the beginnings of a scheme to develop a water network for the whole country. In 2015 and in the period covered by the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–20), 172 key water resource projects were identified, with at least 16 of these being interbasin transfers. According to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, China must divert even more water to its arid north and invest in even more water infrastructure; opening more canals to deliver water northwards will 'support economic and social development and optimize China's national development strategy' (Reuters 2019). In July 2020, the State Council announced that 150 major water resource projects would be promoted, at a cost of RMB1.29 trillion.

China is not alone in constructing such huge projects. In 2018, researchers identified 34 existing water transfer megaprojects, 26 under construction and another 50 planned, on every continent except Antarctica (Shumilova et al 2018). These projects would together transfer more than twice the annual discharge of the Yangtze River. The world—not just China—is on a water transfer building spree that promises to re-engineer the global hydrological network. An eco-modernising agenda would raise the efficiency with which water is used, through ever smarter ways of saving water, increasing acceptance of water reuse, and continued investment in desalinisation. In contrast, these projects represent Prometheanism, re-engineering the world of water to suit human desires.

Virtually all Chinese academic writing about interbasin water transfer projects explicitly or implicitly regards them as obvious ways of resolving spatial discrepancies between water

supply and demand. This 'obvious necessity' is perhaps clearest in the case of the South–North Water Transfer Project (SNWTP, 南水北调工程), the two existing routes of which carry water from the Yangtze River north to Hebei and Shandong provinces, Beijing, and Tianjin. Writers explain that ecological protection and economic and social development in the Yellow River Basin and the North China Plain depend on water resources (a review of such writing is provided in Webber et al. 2021). However, the Yellow River and other principal rivers are said to be short of water, which severely constrains economic and population carrying capacity.

China's per capita water resources are only one-quarter of the world average, while the per capita water resources of the North China Plain are only one-quarter of the China-wide average, which is interpreted to mean that the Plain suffers from severe 'resource-based' water scarcity.

Groundwater has been used to maintain the region's development, which has led to environmental problems such as ground subsidence and secondary soil salinisation. The common view—and the view of many of China's governments—is that China must rely on interbasin transfers to solve the constraint of this imbalance between north and south (Xinhua 2014). In the words of prominent Chinese geographer Liu Changming, as reported by state news agency *Xinhua* (2014):

> China's per capita water resources are low—only one-quarter of the world average. A special characteristic is uneven spatial and temporal distribution, with much agricultural land but little water in the north and little agricultural land but more water in the south. In addition, the water resources are concentrated in the summer. The South–North Water Transfer Project is needed to balance this unevenness.

In its current configuration, China's SNWTP has the capacity to transfer 25–30 billion cubic metres of water per annum over 1,150 kilometres (eastern route) and 1,260 kilometres (central route). It binds into a single network four major river basins, six provinces, three megacities, myriad bureaucracies, and more than 700 million people. These routes were operating by 2014. The eastern route takes water from the Yangtze River upstream of Shanghai and diverts it north via a network of pumping stations, rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and canals, including the historic Grand Canal. It can supply 15 billion cubic metres of water per annum

Figure 2: View from pumping station on the eastern route of the SNWTP, mid-2017. Note the fences to keep people out. PC: Sarah Rogers.

to the provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui, Shandong, and Hebei, and the City of Tianjin. The central route takes 10 billion cubic metres of water per annum from the Danjiangkou Reservoir on the Han River (a tributary of the Yangtze) through (and supplying) Hubei, Henan, and Hebei provinces to Beijing and Tianjin.

The level of the Danjiangkou Reservoir was raised 13 metres to increase its storage capacity and to enable the water in the canal to flow by gravity—a task that involved the resettlement of at least 340,000 people and major land-use changes in the catchment to improve water quality. Plans are being developed by the Ministry of Water Resources (MWR) to nearly double this volume of transferred water through a western route that would extract water from rivers in southwestern China, including the Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra, Lancang/Mekong, and Nu/Salween rivers, and deliver it into the Yellow River. The basic rationale of the entire project is to transfer some of the relatively more abundant water in the Yangtze River Basin to northern regions where water is less abundant. The same logic is used to justify the 'Red Flag Project', which would divert up to 200 billion cubic metres of water annually from the same rivers into Xinjiang (Zhang 2020). It is argued to be a fundamental component of the sustainable development of the Chinese nation—one of the truly stupendous ideas for manipulating nature in China.

Nova Roma

As Liu Changming explains in the quote above, the official justification for such projects is that they move water to where it is needed. They apparently offer the possibility of continued growth and increased prosperity in northern China, a region that has been plagued by water shortages even as its relative shares of China's population and gross domestic product (GDP) have increased over the past 50 years. Though much of the water shortage in China is a matter of the quality of water rather than its quantity, dams, canals, and tunnels do move water into places where demand is high.

But megaprojects meet many more demands within China than simply the supply of water. First, they protect the political and economic status of the Beijing municipality. In the face of arguments

Figure 3: Outlet from Danjiangkou Reservoir, the starting point of the central route. Note the fenced off pristine landscaping—a modern vision of China. The big sign reads 'South–North Water Transfer: Benefits the Country, Benefits the People'. PC: Zhao Yue.

that the capital of China should be moved south to places where there is more water, the Beijing municipality has lobbied strongly for, and invested heavily in, such infrastructure as the SNWTP. Second, projects such as this, but also those for flood mitigation and irrigation, are an important component of the infrastructure spending that stimulates Chinese economic growth. Spending on water infrastructure currently amounts to about RMB800 billion per annum, which, according to Wei Shanzhong, Vice-Minister of Water Resources, contributes 1.2 percentage points to the growth of GDP and creates 3.9 million new jobs (Hou 2022).

Such projects also proclaim the power and administrative capacity of the state. Zheng (2019), in what can only be interpreted as a metaphor for current Chinese water infrastructure investment, argued that in the Roman Empire, large-scale water conservancy projects certainly provided water resources to the citizens; but they also met the political needs of the Roman rulers in proclaiming the power of the state. Large water supply projects demonstrated the administrative legitimacy and obligations of the Roman Empire and revealed the generosity of the empire and city managers to its subjects: the empire constructed its ideological power through water. Abundant clean water became identified as an essential feature of Roman life: aqueducts, public baths, flush toilets, and fountains transplanted the Roman cultural model to conquered lands, opening a gap between the cultures of Rome and those of other nations. Whereas Prometheus stole fire to ignite civilisation, Rome—and now China—used water to mark and sustain it. The supply of clean water was—and remains—a source of ideological power.

Underpinning China's entire approach to water management—and especially the construction of expensive, concrete-heavy infrastructure like the SNWTP—is a network of Chinese and non-Chinese government and business organisations that Han Xiao and I have termed the 'Chinese water machine' (Webber and Han 2017). This machine comprises state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as Power China and Energy China, research institutions like the China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research, the MWR, key universities (including Hohai and Tsinghua), domestic and foreign water-supply companies (such as Beijing Capital Group and Suez), provincial governments, international development banks, foreign contractors, and equipment manufacturers, as well as international organisations like the International Commission of Irrigation and Drainage, the International Water Resources Association, the World Water Council, and the International Hydropower Association.

The linkages between these enterprises, ministries, universities, and foreign organisations emerged through personnel transfers and flows of money, materials, and plans during the construction of huge projects like the Three Gorges Dam, and they are supplemented by interactions within water-related international forums. The time and energy invested in data flows, conversations, material and monetary flows, construction, training, and sponsorships of conferences enable the Chinese water machine to draw on global and multinational sources to set the conditions for human–water interactions in the country. The water machine is the institutional means through which the preference for large infrastructure rather than improvements to management is perpetuated to resolve China's water dilemmas. The machine creates a vision of a managed water system that demands investment and other resources, feeding the growth requirements of corporations. Codes of conduct set standards for planning, construction, and resettlement (as well as creating work for sustainability assessors). The water machine's activities thus expand members' capacities and enable them to perform the tasks of water management.

The existence and operations of this China water machine mean that the interaction of governments and corporations is not one of master and servant, of corporations doing governments' bidding or governments responding to corporate needs. Water management in China is an enterprise in which governments, corporations, and commercial and university interests are brought into alignment in an approach that is agreed on within the machine, subject to the opposing interests of other actors. Likewise, the overseas activities of the machine and its members are not to be understood in terms of government-promoted national cham-

pion SOEs being encouraged to invest abroad in strategically important regions like Africa. They are instead the outcome of a network of interacting actors mutually influencing one another's actions. Furthermore, Chinese water management and its preference for large-scale infrastructure are not simply a matter of Chinese preferences and action; instead, Chinese corporations, like Chinese governments at different levels, are enrolled in a global web of relations, in which the idea for a project might be developed with an international consulting firm, some finance is provided by an international development bank or a sovereign fund, critical components are supplied by European or US manufacturers, and environmental and social impacts are assessed by a panel of Chinese and international consultants.

Certainly, the supply of water through dams, canals, and tunnels is a source of ideological power, marking places as civilised or, in modern language, 'developed' (Zheng 2019). Throughout history, it has helped sustain empires and regimes. But in contemporary China that supply is underpinned by another, hidden 'empire' that makes such megaprojects possible: the Chinese water machine assembles the capacities of its members in an international network that enables the state to demonstrate its power and concern about citizens' wellbeing.

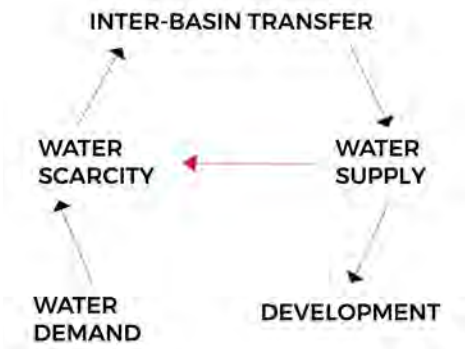


Figure 4: What I have previously called the 'universal truth': interbasin transfers increase the supply of water in the recipient region, but that supply creates the conditions for further development, which, in turn, raises demand. As demand continues to grow, scarcity reappears.

Prometheus Interrupted

Despite—or perhaps because of—the large number of interests that are enrolled in large-scale infrastructure schemes in China, such projects are not without their difficulties. Dams, irrigation schemes, and interbasin transfers are conceived of as projects—things in themselves. Yet, from the point of view of supplying water to users, such projects do not exist in isolation, but must be integrated into an overall water management plan that provides a regional overview of the total water supply system. Such an overview must be provided by river basin commissions that are responsible for integrated water resource management (and by provincial and lower-level governments, which are responsible for implementing central government policies and actually providing the water to users). So, the operators of the SNWTP, for example, have only to extract water from sources and deliver it along canals; provincial governments must combine SNWTP water with water from other sources to supply the different demands of multiple users who are scattered over a landscape.

Thus, since it began to operate in 2013, the eastern route has faced many challenges. In Shandong Province, for example, these include failures to achieve planned water use quotas, difficulties in constructing local auxiliary projects, high prices, and high charges imposed on cities. The implementation of this project in Shandong reveals an acute divergence of interests between the central government, the provincial government, and individual cities. The story of the SNWTP in Shandong is one of a piece of fixed infrastructure and its deterministic projections bumping up against the fluidity of water demand and local political economy—a seemingly technical, rational project suddenly requiring all manner of politically inflected choices to be made and competing interests to be reconciled.

However, the story of water management in China is not merely a tale of concrete and its limitations. In the past 20 years, the MWR has put a lot of effort into developing a framework for managing water that involves two hands: the hand of government with its centrally directed, concrete-heavy,

supply-focused approach, and the hand of the market, in which more local, demand, and efficiency-focused modes of management become important. The Water Law of 2002 promised a national water plan and China now has a national water rights framework that specifies that rights to water are not ownership rights but use rights. Current regulations specify abstraction permits, which are administrative management tools that are not legally recognised assets. These permits are granted by the MWR (or its delegates, the river basin commissions) to provinces and municipalities, which in turn grant abstraction permits to prefectures and cities, and so on all the way down to corporations, water user associations, irrigation districts, water companies, local autonomous groups, or individuals.

The MWR has now laid out a framework within which governments and markets together manage the country's water resources (DRCMWR 2019). Governments, it says, should protect the interests of agricultural irrigation water users to avoid excessive conversion of agricultural water to other industries. The government is also the spokesperson of the river basin or regional environment and leads the allocation of regional water quantity indicators. Local governments, the MWR emphasises, must meet the needs of water for the environment. Under the long-term policy of 'Building a Water-Saving Society' (建设节水型社会), the government must control total water consumption; within these constraints, water rights, prices, and markets can, the MWR argues, optimise the allocation of water resources so that the external

Figure 5: The state of irrigation canals on the North China Plain, early 2010s. The new system of transferable water permits allows governments and corporations to pay to upgrade such irrigation infrastructure to conserve the water that would otherwise seep 'wastefully' into the ground. In return for their investment, the governments or corporations are allowed to acquire the water that is saved. Source: Michael Webber.

effects of water use can be reflected in costs and the market mechanism can be used to motivate people to save water and protect the water environment.

In other words, China's central water management agency visualises a complementary rather than competing role for both governments and markets, for both central direction and allocation by price. The political power of the north of China, the central government's continuing fixation with infrastructure investment, and the organisational strength of the Chinese water machine together ensure, however, that this sophisticated framework for water management means that more, not less, concrete will be laid to constrain the country's rivers or to divert them in the future. In the first half of 2022 alone, China began the construction of 22 major water conservancy projects, expected to cost RMB176.9 billion (roughly US$25 billion). Premier Li claimed in a speech to the seventh World Conservation Congress on 3 September 2021 that China respects, conforms to, and protects nature, and upholds the concept of an ecological civilisation; nevertheless, the government's actions imply that a Promethean manipulation of nature is understood to be compatible with this respect for, conformity to, and protection of nature. ■

The Commune's Fishpond, Dong Zhengyi (董正义), 1973

Prometheus and the Fishpond

A Historical Account of Agricultural Systems and Eco-Political Power in the People's Republic of China

Sigrid SCHMALZER

Recent environmental projects of the Chinese state, including the preservation of 'agricultural heritage' and the promotion of 'ecological civilisation', are inspiring people from around the world. However, these endeavours are deeply embedded in two ideologies that foster technocratic and growth-oriented approaches to managing the natural environment: economic thinking and systems thinking. Meanwhile, the Chinese state's very active involvement in these projects has increasingly served to limit the critical standpoint found among many proponents of ecological agriculture elsewhere. While state support for sustainability provides opportunities for much excellent scholarship and science, ecopolitics in China is also enhancing the power of an oppressive, technocratic state.

In September 2014, the village of Digang in Huzhou, China, hosted a symposium titled 'The Traditional Culture of Mulberry-Bordered Fishponds and the Development of Ecological Civilisation'. It was meant to celebrate the recent selection of this 'excellent man-made ecological system' as a model of Nationally Important Agricultural Heritage (中国重要农业文化遗产). The choice was well made: few examples so beautifully demonstrate the capacity of traditional agricultural practices to achieve sustainable productivity. In the mulberry-bordered fishponds (桑基鱼塘), 'mulberries are planted on dikes; fish are raised in ponds; leaves are picked to raise silkworms; silkworm detritus feeds fish; pond mud fertilises mulberries; [and so] fish grow fat and silkworms strong' (Silkworm and Mulberry Bulletin 2014). Documented in impe-

rial-era literature, this 'system' further offers a tangible example of 'ecological civilisation' (生态文明)—the ideal of engineered harmony between humans and nature that has risen steadily in political prominence during China's reform era, culminating with President Xi Jinping's endorsement in 2013 and its incorporation into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2018 (Goron 2018). The related projects of agricultural heritage and ecological civilisation promise that, by tapping the brilliant traditions and ongoing innovations of the Chinese people, the Chinese Communist Party can lead China, and the world, into a more prosperous and sustainable era.

It is hard to find fault with such an inspiring vision. If there is a flaw in the paradigm, it is one that the public is often inclined to embrace: the techno-optimistic mentality that humans can solve the twin crises of poverty and ecological destruction through better engineering. And if there is a political danger, it is abstract and indirect: the threat that ecological interventionism legitimises political authoritarianism, and holism masks totalitarianism, empowering the state to pursue a wide range of projects that are destructive to both society and nature (Li and Shapiro 2020). Not only are such arguments hard to explain, they also are politically uncomfortable in the context of the 'new Cold War', in which charges of authoritarianism and totalitarianism risk pathologising the PRC using recognisable tropes from the anti-communist past (Karl and Lanza 2021). And yet, we do need to be able to critique the Promethean techno-optimism that portrays unending growth as compatible with sustainability. And we must be able to critique examples of 'eco-authoritarianism', like that of the state-sponsored sedentarisation of pastoralists in western China—a move justified by (contested) claims about the ecological damage done to grasslands through pastoralism and which serves state economic goals while transforming traditional ways of life (Bum 2018).

In truth, the flaw in the paradigm and the political danger it poses are products not just of China's specific constellation of politics and ideologies, but also more broadly of global capitalism and modernity, and as such are by no means absent in the United States and other Western countries. As in other parts of the globe, in China, ecological agriculture is historically rooted in two ideologies, economic thinking and systems thinking, both of which have the potential to encourage technocratic and growth-oriented approaches to managing the natural environment. And yet, it is hard to deny that these tendencies are especially powerful in China, where the state's very active role and its utter commitment to technocracy and growth impede the kind of critical standpoint found in ecological agriculture circles elsewhere—and this inhibition has increased dramatically under Xi's leadership (Goron 2018).

The risk that ecopolitics in China will further empower an oppressive, Promethean state is thus profound. At the same time, the legitimacy the state provides to ecological agriculture opens real opportunities for people seeking to make positive change. The question, in China and beyond, is how effectively people will be able to check oppressive forces and mitigate environmental crises through just and equitable means.

Late Imperial Era: Ecological/ Economic Thinking

Supporters of ecological agriculture in China highlight the destruction wrought by modern industrial agriculture and promote various forms of traditional knowledge to restore balance. China has long enjoyed a global reputation for ancient farming wisdom based on holistic philosophy, so it is not surprising that Chinese proponents of environmentally sustainable farming have sought to document that history and mobilise its authority, projecting the ecosystems concept back on to people of earlier times. An example can be seen in Figure 1: building on the mulberry–silk–fish cycle, the chart further shows how pigs, sheep, and grain fit into the 'ecological agriculture' at work in Huzhou during the late Ming Dynasty (Min 2000: 13).

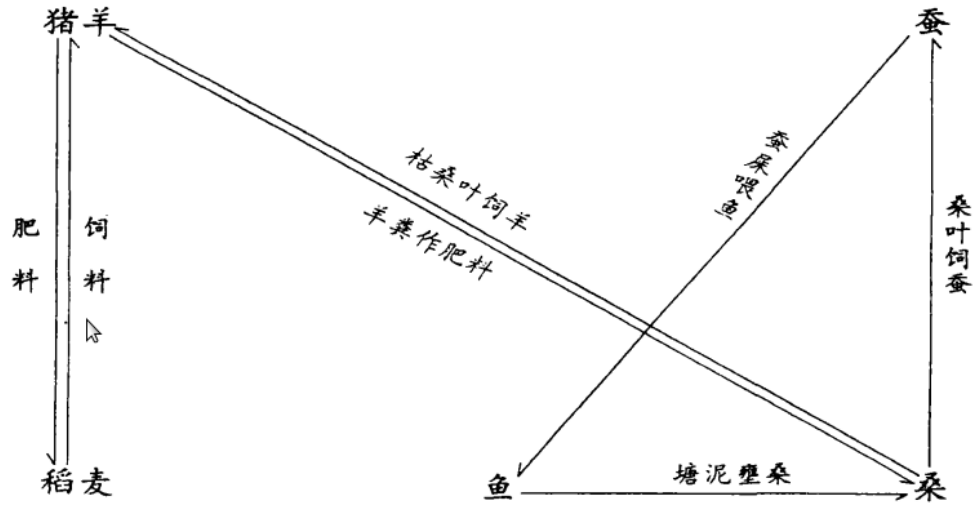


Figure 1: Chart showing how pigs, sheep, and grain fit into the 'ecological agriculture' at work in Huzhou during the late Ming Dynasty. PC: Min (2000: 13).

However, texts from the late imperial period do not demonstrate much interest in ecological systems. Rather, their authors were explicitly concerned with running profitable farms in the context of a commercialising economy. As a commonly quoted text from the sixteenth century summarised a similar set of practices (using fruit trees instead of mulberry): 'He placed dozens of cash boxes in his room and every day placed the income from each source in different boxes, some for fish, some for fruit ... His income was thrice what could be earned from fields' (Li 16th C). In fact, before they came to the attention of environmentally minded scholars, such texts were used by economic historians as proof that China was already developing 'sprouts of capitalism' prior to nineteenth-century Western intrusions (Shang 1955).

The economic focus, and indeed commercialism, of these imperial-era texts does not appear to bother scholars promoting ecological agriculture in China. In this, they are arguably more in tune with the history of ecological thinking than any would-be critics. Ernst Haeckel coined the term 'ecology' in 1866 and defined it as 'the body of knowledge concerning the *economy of nature*'—a phrase used also by Charles Darwin (Worster 1994: 192; emphasis added). An interest in farm economy would thus by no means preclude a budding concept of farm ecology: if we are going to fish in Chinese history for a concept of 'ecology', we would do well to recognise that in the West the concept emerged from Victorians who were conceiving of it in terms of their own rapidly commercialising economy. That commercial economics and ecology are closely intertwined in Chinese thinking today is thus not at all strange, but the uncritical preservation of this influence nonetheless has profound political consequences.

Mao Era: Systems Thinking

In 1958, economic geographer Zhong Gongfu described the mulberry-bordered fishponds in language that continued to centre on economic management but within a new framework: 'This is a cultivation system with tight production links ... a cultivation method with three-fold, organically linked production involving planting mulberries,

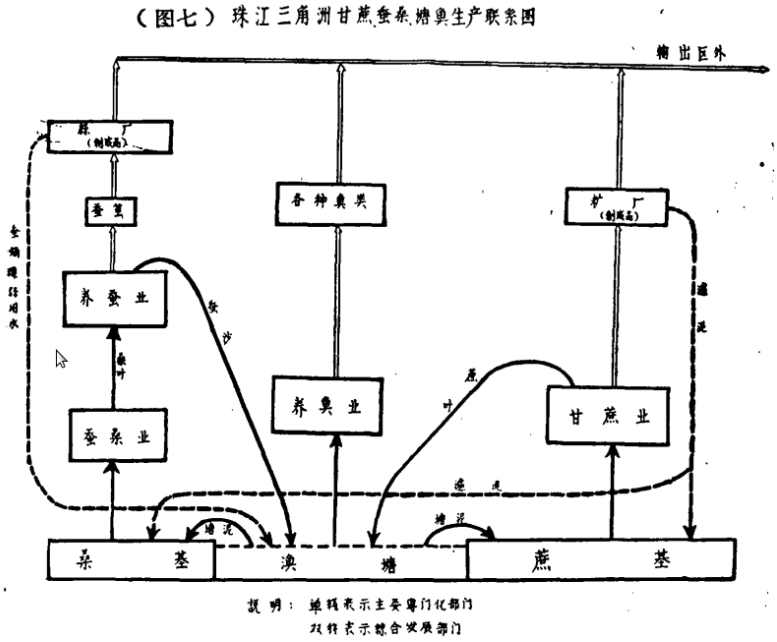


Figure 2: Zhong Gongfu's 'production links chart'. PC: Zhong (1958b: 245).

raising silkworms, and raising fish. It is a perfect, scientific agricultural production technology and business management system' (Zhong 1958a: 259). To capture the practices as they had grown in recent decades to include sugar production, he created the 'production links chart' reproduced in Figure 2. His understanding reflected not only concepts specific to the political economy of 1950s China, but also the global phenomenon of systems thinking, which in the mid-twentieth century was transforming knowledge of nature and society around the world (Hammond 2003).

In China, systems thinking built on a Marxist concern for the dynamic relationships of parts within a whole: policies focused on bringing diverse things 'together' (结合), 'undertaking simultaneously' (并举), 'integrating' (综合), 'developing holistically' (全面发展), and 'walking on two legs' (两条腿走路)—so much so that I argue we should see integration as a core scientific-political value of the Mao era, alongside mass mobilisation, self-reliance, and the primacy of practice (Schmalzer 2021). Some of the most fundamental principles of Maoist political philosophy emphasise such synthesis—for example, the unity of theory and practice, along with the call for cadres to combine political and technical expertise to become 'both red and expert' (又红又专) (Schmalzer 2019). Agricultural science is full of more specific examples: 'three-in-one' (三结合) scientific experiment groups combined technicians with modern scientific expertise, old peasants with the wisdom of practice, and political cadres with reliable ideology; agricultural scientists emphasised the wisdom of a traditional practice of 'bringing together land use and land nurture' (用地养地), by which they meant continually returning nutrients to the soil that provides the harvest; and Mao Zedong himself promoted the integration of agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry. Meanwhile, integrated production complexes (综合体) were communes designed to diversify agricultural production and manufacturing, maximising the efficiency of production links (Figure 3).

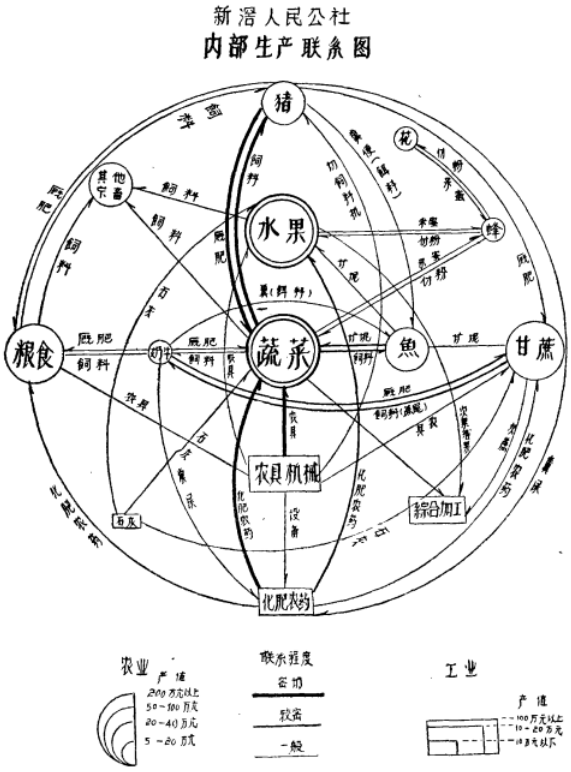


Figure 3: Diagram of an integrated production complex. PC: Third-Year Economic Geography Majors, People's Commune Research Group (1960: 36).

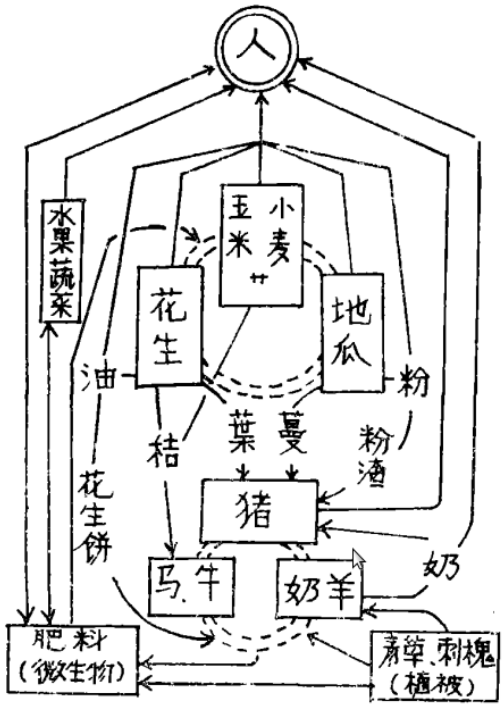


图 3　金县农业生态系统结构简图

Figure 4: Diagram representing the 'structure of the agroecological system'. PC: Shen (1975).

In the mid-1970s, as Chinese scientists began a new wave of greater interaction with their US counterparts, the term 'agroecology' made its first appearance in China. The field was then developing rapidly in the United States, growing out of a confluence of ecosystems theory, the environmental movement, indigenous studies, and rural development studies—and in explicit opposition to the United States' promotion of the Green Revolution overseas (Altieri 1983). Many of its early proponents had strong connections to Latin America and especially to leftist political struggles in that region. In its emphasis on systems thinking, its popularity among leftist circles around the world, and its appreciation for the kinds of aquaculture–agriculture integration long practised in China and promoted by the PRC, agroecology was extraordinarily well suited to the intellectual and political environment of Mao-era China.

In 1975, an article published in the *Journal of the Tieling Agricultural Institute* (铁岭农学院学报) titled 'On Agroecological Systems and Using the Land while Nurturing the Land' made clear this affinity (Shen 1975). The article, penned by Shen Hengli, an agronomist at the forefront of the agroecology movement, included a diagram that strikingly resembled the 'production links charts' of earlier decades (Figure 4), but bore the label 'structure of the agroecological system' (农业生态系统结构). The author credited Mao with providing a 'scientific foundation' for research into agroecological systems by calling attention to the 'dialectical dependency relationships' uniting

agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry. He further applied Marxist analysis to the old adage 'Many pigs, much fertiliser, much grain' (猪多、肥多、粮多), which he described as an 'oft-mentioned dialectical system': if the agroecological patterns were fully explicated, humans could intervene in any of the links and so cause a transformation of the whole system—in Marxist terms, a 'qualitative leap'. The author went on to criticise agricultural practices under capitalism, which fostered a 'metaphysical' approach that oversimplified the relationships between humans, cultivated land, and production; he posited instead that 'the material humans reap is the result of the integrated utilisation of the agroecological system'. And he argued that agroecological research was scarce in capitalist countries because agriculture was controlled by landlords and capitalists who pursued a profit motive and therefore practised 'plunder-style production'. This sharp critique of capitalist ideology and profit-oriented agriculture testifies to a convergence in the mid-1970s between Chinese and Western leftist agroecological perspectives.

Deng Era: Ecological Engineering

Shen's left-critical approach did not become influential in China as agroecology took hold in the 1980s. Rather, what continued across the 1978 political watershed, as China embarked on its economic reforms, was systems thinking. So well documented as the basis of the reform era's One-Child Policy (Greenhalgh 2008), systems engineering also became the foundation for agroecology and the related fields of ecological engineering and agroecological economics—all of which took off during the Deng Xiaoping era because they offered the Promethean promise that through engineering humans could manipulate natural systems to deliver ever-increasing economic growth. Tellingly, Zhong Gongfu's 1958 production links diagram on the mulberry–silk–sugar–fish system rose to iconic status during this period, becoming a test question on college entrance exams (Middle School Student Library Editorial Group 1986).

Strong support for agricultural systems engineering came from the very top. In 1981, Deng's speech writer and architect of the economic reforms, Yu Guangyuan, extolled mulberry-bordered fishponds as an example of 'artificial ecosystems' that generated 'virtuous circles'—that is, feedback loops that, in contrast to 'vicious circles', were positive both in the sense that they were self-reinforcing and in the sense that they had good outcomes (Yu 1981: 10). The classic example, as already noted, was the loop captured in the adage 'Many pigs, much fertiliser, much grain'. One of Yu's more imaginative suggestions involved an ecological cycle linking polluted water, water hyacinth, earthworms, and sables. He had visited a farm that used water hyacinth to clean polluted water and then composted the hyacinth to fertilise the fields. Concerned that the pollution would carry into the crops, Yu devised a solution: first feed the water hyacinth to earthworms, which concentrated the pollution in their own bodies and left behind excellent fertile soil; then feed the polluted earthworms to sables, which were used for their furs and not for their meat, creating a productive outcome while protecting human health (Yu 1984).

Meanwhile, the increasingly influential missile scientist and systems theorist Qian Xuesen was adding his voice to the call to systematise agriculture. Qian argued for industrialisation based on traditional agriculture: using the sun for energy and the photosynthesis of plants as the foundation of a production system integrating crops, aquaculture, and industry, and then enhancing the effectiveness of that system by entering the 'middle links' and making use of the materials produced there. He described it as 'big agriculture that is integrative and based on intensive high-level knowledge and technology' (Qian 1984: 7).

Some early reform-era writings continued to highlight the links between agroecology and Marxist systems theory, claiming, for example, that 'systems agroecology is simply the concrete and dynamic expression of materialist dialectics in agricultural science' (Wu 1981). But by the late 1980s, thanks especially to Qian Xuesen, systems

theory was ideologically dominant enough to rest on its own base, so technocracy rather than Marxism became the pervading framework in ecological agriculture texts. As one 1990 article put it, a 'unique feature of Chinese ecological agriculture' was its 'emphasis on the deeper development of the ecosystem's internal capacity', which meant 'employing the food chain network and transforming waste products into resources so as to augment the ecological niche [充实生态位]' (Sun et al. 1990: 4). The authors further highlighted the 'incorporation of agricultural production into the national planned economy to guide the harmonious development of agricultural production and environmental construction'. This involved 'systemic and holistic optimisation' and the 'unification' of the three priorities of economy, society, and ecology through the application of systems engineering.

Admittedly, whether in the United States, China, or elsewhere, agroecology is an inherently interventionist branch of ecology: its premise is that the human activity of altering the environment to grow food can be pursued in a manner consistent with basic ecological principles. But the Chinese literature nonetheless displays an unusual emphasis on manipulation and control rooted in its specific political context. In the United States, the driving force of agroecology emerged from the coalescence of leftist political movements in the natural and social sciences, including a sharply critical position relative to the Green Revolution and other US state projects. In China, the state facilitated the development of agroecology alongside the related fields of ecological economics and ecological engineering. Indeed, ecological agriculture more generally has meshed seamlessly with, and formed an important pillar of, the overarching reform-era state emphasis on engineering the natural and social worlds through systems science. This weakens its ability to challenge the Promethean faith that through totalising interventions the state can compel natural cycles to support perpetual economic growth.

Hu and Xi Eras: Heritage and Civilisation

The early twenty-first century saw the emergence of 'agricultural heritage'—a project of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The FAO defines Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) as 'a living, evolving system of human communities in an intricate relationship with their territory, cultural or agricultural landscape or biophysical and wider social environment' (FAO 2022). China has been a very active player in the project and has secured more GIAHS sites than any other country. In keeping with decades of scientific writing on agricultural systems in Chinese journals, Min Qingwen, a leader in the field, explains:

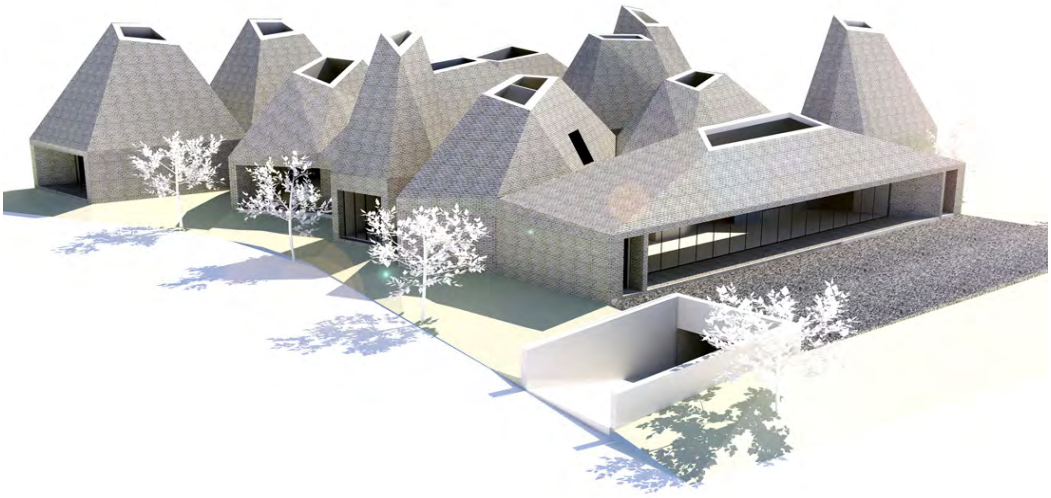
> These hybrid agricultural systems are Chinese agriculture's distinctive characteristic, reflecting the harmonious relationships between humans and nature in Chinese traditional culture. They emphasise the holistic and connected roles among the multiple component parts in complex biological-social-economic systems, and they place agriculture, forestry, horticulture, animal husbandry, aquaculture, and other activities into an interconnected system. (Min et al. 2011: 1019)

Without impugning any sinister motive or disrespecting the often excellent work that such scientists are doing, critics of the current PRC state will be quick to notice that while attractive from an ecological perspective, the frequent evocation of 'harmony' (和谐) in this discourse risks enhancing a powerful state tool used to squash political activism: any dissident can be accused of disrupting social harmony, to the extent that people jokingly refer to being censored as being 'harmonised'.

With the rise of President Xi, the concept of ecological civilisation has skyrocketed in political significance. On the one hand, it broadens the

state's purview, establishing a totalising vision for top-down state intervention not only in society but also in nature, not just at a local level but also nationally or even globally. Evoking 'civilisation' gives the platform additional power: it ties past, present, and future together while claiming a moral weight rooted in the most enduring cultural values. On the other hand, state promotion of ecological civilisation expands opportunities for scientists, scholars, and others to pursue environmentalist projects. And yet, of course, working in concert with state ideology also blunts any would-be critical edge: their projects cannot help but shore up state power even as they achieve their specific ecological objectives. The political leadership will allow environmental action when it strengthens state power, or at least stays modestly on the sidelines, but never when it threatens economic growth or party authority.

Reflecting on the history of ecological agriculture in China, an ever-deepening emphasis on economic and systems thinking, together with a very weak critical standpoint, has seriously limited the ability of this would-be 'alternative' to challenge the state's Promethean juggernaut. The mulberry-bordered fishponds may continue to inspire, but we should be highly sceptical of the 'virtuous circles' they supposedly represent; there is something decidedly 'vicious' about both the promise of unending economic growth and the state power it enables. ■



This villa is located in plot ORDOS project Architects: MOS – Michael Meredith, Hilary Sample. PC: archdaily.com.

Situating the 'Science' Craze in China

The Stillbirth of Simulated 'Villas' in *Ordos 100*

Xinmin LIU

This essay focuses on the widespread techno-science craze in contemporary China, examining its complex and often misguided role in the country's pursuit of 'urbanism' as a benchmark of modernisation. Drawing on Chinese scholar Tian Song's invitation to be vigilant against an unreflective faith in science, the article looks critically at the technicist mindset of many Chinese technocrats through the case of the now aborted Ordos 100 project.

In *The King of Trees*, a semi-autobiographical tale by Ah Cheng, Li Li, the leader of a group of sent-down youths working on a state-owned plantation in Yunnan, southwestern China, is asked by his group members why he is so resolved to cut down the giant tree known locally as the King of Trees. He answers: 'Its location is not *scientific*!' (Ah 2010: 43; emphasis added). He then shares his 'scientific' expertise with the group by explaining that the giant casts too much shade over the trees around it, thus hindering their normal growth. It later turns out that Li's real intent was to take the lead in clearing the mountainside of all vegetation (including the King of Trees) and then revegetate it with rubber trees, which are a fast-growing cash crop and will bring in more revenue to the state plantation. Indeed, before this discussion, Li had

explained to his group members: 'The growth cycle of plants means that the new *supersedes* the old. It's *a law of nature*' (Ah 2010: 14; emphasis added).

Li's attempt to replace the mountain's vegetation occurred during the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside' movement (上山下乡)—a campaign that mobilised urban youth to relocate to rural and frontier regions of China in the 1960s and 1970s (Bonnin 2022). One goal for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 'sending down' these youths was for them to receive 'hands-on' ideological lessons by working alongside peasants and ethnic minorities to 'reshape' (改造) the natural world so that nature would answer to human needs.

Vegetative Modernism

When Li refers to science, his concept of being scientific is confined to a purely instrumental application of technological knowhow to generate economic value—value that is conflated with societal progress. Professionally trained specialists and technocrats in China have long been espousing this conception of science, framing it through utilitarian goals of power and wealth for the good of humanity. Speaking of the role of science as a double-edged sword, Tian Song, a notable scholar in the philosophy of science in China, offers a pointed view on the ambiguity of science in Chinese public discourse:

> Science is a broad and loose concept; it is usually conjoined with technology in use. In this way, science and technology as a compound word [科学技术] has made it utterly easy and handy to denote meaning in a mixed-bag and secretive stand-in fashion …Often the word is used as an adjective for being righteous, intelligent, effective, proven, authoritative, and so on. (Tian 2014: 17; my translation)

Unsurprisingly, to the mind of the Chinese technocrat, such thinking seems to grant political safety and moral immunity to a technology-minded person. Tian defines this typical mindset as 'technicist'—that is, a view that gives personal choice the authority of a scientific truth as long as the decision-maker is technically trained. In Tian's view, these technocrats have indulged their faith in science and technology to such a degree that they have turned their trust in technological ways of doing things into a kind of cult (2014: 23).

Tian also directs his critical scrutiny to the technocrats' obsession with a positivist conception of science as a teleological destiny. He writes: 'We used to believe that science could ensure a bright future on our behalf. Better still, science was a self-propelling force in the service of human progress. It could move the human society ahead' (Tian 2014: 23). How do science and technology fulfil this promise? This question brings us back to Li Li's remark in *The King of Trees* about replacing the old with the new as part of the laws of nature. He uses the word 'supersede' more in the sense of 'supplant'—that is, getting rid of the useless and establishing the useful in its place. Li's claim reveals the conceptual locus of his thinking about making historical progress, which resembles the pattern of dynastic rise and fall in Chinese history—a dynamic also often compared to wheels rolling on tracks that cannot be turned back, which is the CCP's favoured metaphor for making progress along a linear, lockstep law of irreversibility. This has been precisely the CCP's strategy for across-the-board cleansing of socialist China's political system, which has led to disruptive elimination of the old ideology and drastic construction of the new. It is therefore no surprise that Li chose not to use the natural seasonal cycle of growth, fruition, decline, and rebirth.

A case in point is the fluid and evolving meaning of the CCP's 'Four Modernisations' (四个现代化), which initially included the modernisation of industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology. When the policy was first issued in 1954, it placed singular emphasis on the urgent need to modernise the technical knowhow of science and technology. Even though policymakers have lately shifted gears at the state level and begun remedying environmental crises, as well as runaway speculation in finance and housing

investment, a myth continues to hang over the heads of many technocrats about the triumphalist potential of science and technology.

Educating Scientific Triumphalism

Educated in the 1950s, these technocrats were given Soviet-style training that relied heavily on the separation of technological subjects from other branches of learning, especially humanism. This approach broke down college education into subject areas (院系分家) such as 'Railroad College', 'Petroleum College', 'Postal and Telecommunication College', and thus reset higher education during the decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. True to this narrow approach, these technocrats have robustly internalised a single-track, linear, and lockstep logic that can be characterised by its belief in direct causality, irreversible progress, and technicist triumphalism. It entails the following.

First, their logic is linearly mapped along a single track because they believe that, when measured with the pace and trajectory of Western nations' supremacy, China has 'lagged' in the race to modernise and now must catch up. Thus, logically, they must aim for the various milestones of technological modernity—that is, making nuclear weapons, building aircraft-carriers, developing space science, and inventing cutting-edge digital technology. While this proves that their modernity is centrally determined by evolving technology, we must ask: 'Does it mean that this is the only path to becoming modern?' And: 'What, after all, constitutes modernity?'

Second, their logic is lockstep because they are convinced that—since the West has demonstrated a proven path to technological supremacy—they can emulate this model by becoming wealthy and powerful before all else. Once they gain the advantage of technological prowess, they will surely be in a better position to tackle environmental crises. Of course, implicit in this is the acceptance that China will experience the same catastrophic deforestation, air, water, and soil pollution and loss produced by the Western model of industrialisation and urbanisation. Can China afford to pay so dearly just to be technologically superior?

Third, their logic is teleological in the sense that they believe technological supremacy alone will guarantee China's smooth arrival at the destination. These technocrats have subscribed to the idea of science as triumphalist in its projected outcomes and irreversible as a law of human progress. Likewise, they trust that the logic of science is an innate and singular force and conceive of technological supremacy as a universal panacea. We cannot but be reminded of the naivety of this approach and the precarity of this path of technological triumphalism, particularly in the face of the numerous technocratic disasters that have occurred in the name of modernising China.

A recent case in point is the infamously short-lived Ordos 100 housing project in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, which can perhaps best be engaged with through the documentary *Ordos 100* (鄂尔多斯) (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012).

Villa Crazy? A Stillbirth of Urbanism

Curated by Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, the 2012 documentary *Ordos 100* depicts the high-growth residential boomtown of Kangbashi District in Ordos City, Inner Mongolia. It offers an investigative and personal view of the early phases of the planning and construction of the Ordos 100 project near Kangbashi District in 2008. Ai Weiwei's Beijing-based FAKE Design company helped coordinate the daily activities of the overseas architects but he devoted most of his time to working behind the camera. The project was funded by private developers who had been trained as hydraulic engineers and investment from Ordos City officials, in collaboration with 100 renowned architects from 27 countries. The architects' role was to design 100 villas for a newly designated area billed as the Cultural Creativity Zone (文化创意区)—a cultural and ethnic showcase. Ostensibly, this project aimed

to achieve a new type of urbanism that would show how a high-growth frontier city like Ordos could transition into a culturally rich phase of growth.

Ordos's case for constructing path-breaking forms of urbanism for the entire nation, and even globally, rested on what were seen as the city's advantages: 1) its economy had lately taken off due to coal, natural gas, and rare earth mineral extraction through state-owned and private enterprises, producing wealth to bankroll a host of cultural enrichment activities; 2) it occupied a vast stretch of steppe with a small human population, resulting in high levels of wealth per capita; and 3) it hosted a colourful and diverse human tapestry of Mongolian, Chinese Muslim, and Han ethnic and cultural heritages. The Ordos 100 project was, however, never completed and now serves as an exemplar of failed Western-style urbanisation.

The documentary has some poignant moments that provide insight into the ambitions of this megaproject. At the inaugural press conference, the hosts of Ordos 100 introduced to the invited architects the blueprints for the completed project. The depiction of lush foliage and a lake took the audience by surprise, because all they had so far seen was the desert-like terrain around Ordos. When they asked about the available resources, such as water, the hosts simply replied: 'When you complete your designs and we build the villas, there will be water', implying that their ambitions for the project were sealed in future reality (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012: 14:03 mins). Not only did the project never reach completion, but also (with a few exceptions) construction did not start on the buildings that had been designed, and the designated lots remain vacant. It was later revealed that the investors pulled the plug on the project when they discovered unusual features in the participating architects' designs to cope with seasonal sandstorms, the severely cold winters, and the shortage of water (Ulfstjerne 2016). Despite their brief stay in Ordos, but true to their professional integrity, the architects relied on their liv*ed* experiences in their responses to the physical environment in which they were working—something that became clear to me after viewing some of their completed blueprints posted on the internet. It is therefore logical to presume that the investors withdrew their funding *in medias res* because the designs diverged from their imagined outcomes for the 'villas'.

The Chinese term 'villa' (别墅) has a complex lexical history, with its best-known usage by Wang Wei (c. 693–761 CE), a Tang Dynasty landscape-loving Buddhist poet. Wang used the term in a famous poem about his rural estate, which most scholars agree was half-fictional to express his yearning for an escape to a dream-like rustic home. Translated into today's internet lexicon, the word is a simulation of the poet's dream home and, to the Chinese netizens already addicted to visual hyperreality, it has morphed into a rallying cry for a speculative frenzy in real estate investments like the Ordos 100 project. The frenzy was supercharged by media images imported from the West of expensive stand-alone mansions—prompting a craze for similar Western-style landmark buildings. It is no surprise, then, that Chinese investors in Ordos regarded the construction of luxury Western-style villas as an express ticket to material wealth and political gains. In the context of urban modernist progress, such villas represented the desirable living standard. In the eyes of the technocrats, moreover, they would also bring about exceptional career opportunities and bring honour and respect from their peers at home and overseas. As Bianca Bosker mockingly writes: 'In this respect, the generation of perfect copies of Western achievements … can serve as a potent symbol of the *civilizational superiority* of the "counterfeiters"' (2013: 25; emphasis added).

Questions remain, however. Can Western-style villas, albeit flawlessly made, symbolise the superiority of the counterfeiters just by way of reverse engineering and replication? Related, too, are questions about urbanism itself. If urbanism is a technological mechanism out of the Western modernisation toolkit, can non-Western nations duplicate it without having to worry about the pitfalls it entails? These questions can be explored by looking at the pivotal roles played by Ai Weiwei as a supervisor of the project's day-to-day operations and as the clear-eyed curator quietly directing and editing behind the camera. Early in the documentary, Ai is seen chatting with architects freshly arrived in Ordos from overseas; he spells out how

he envisions the villa-building project as 'a movement' that 'is about communicating' and the 'exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences'. He declares: 'We are not interested in producing architecture. We are more interested in human conceptual exchange. It'll be more exciting because we are not talking about fixed projects' (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012: 2:32–3:41 mins). This is a far cry from what the city officials and investors were hoping to achieve through urbanism.

Beyond Stillbirth: A Lesson in Simulating Urbanism

Ironically, Ai's time yielded the conceptual fruits he envisioned, despite the untimely cancellation of the Ordos 100 project by the investors. Ai's brainchild was delivered precisely by aiming the camera at his individual meetings with the architects, their questions and answers at the group sessions, and their thoughts shared among themselves. Prompted by their professional expertise and various cultural backgrounds, these architects lost no time in voicing their ideas about the project's social and cultural contexts. Gilles Deleuze says insightfully: 'Machines are social before being technical' (1986: 13). In the same vein, the architects swiftly converged on the negligence of the project leaders in not providing context for the villas' design. Their initial questions are aimed at the 'contextual vacuum' during the project's early phase. Among them, Francisco Pardo from Mexico addresses the size of the lots designated for each villa: '[A] house 1,000-square metres big is a house for the rich people' (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012: 10:52 mins). Clearly, Pardo is concerned that the hosts have not explained why such large villas are to be built in a frontier town. Sharon Potbard of Israel directly correlates the lot size to the social relationships of the future owners: 'The main difference between a villa and a house … has to do with questions like "Who cleans your house?" "Who cooks your meals?" "Where does this guy [the villa owner] work?" "What are his living conditions?"' (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012: 17:34–41 mins). As a socially engaged architect, Potbard does not mince his words about his inner concern: 'I'm helping the Chinese to build or rebuild a class society in the context of China's actual system, which is communist or socialist on the one hand, but capitalist on the other' (10:32 mins). Relating to the post-Apartheid rebuilding of his nation, South African Mokena Makeka emphasises the need to avoid the negative impacts of urbanism:

> It's about making urban spaces that are comfortable for people. It's about bringing dignity to the people because the difference between those who have a lot and those who have little is quite big. We have the same thing in South Africa … Urban design, urban planning, when they are done well, it frees up the architects to do just what the architects are good at. (Ai and Herzog & de Meuron 2012: 19:02–39 mins)

These are insightful questions and it is not surprising that some of those asking are from the Global South, such as Mexico and South Africa, because the contextual vacuum they encountered in Ordos was similar and easily relatable to their design careers. What is striking is that the documentary shows no indication that the local officials and investors attempted to respond to or act on these issues. The contextual vacuum on which the documentary dwells at the outset bodes ill for the fate of the project. Yet, this arguably, and ironically, fulfils what Ai Weiwei intended for the project—that is, to bring China and the rest of the world face-to-face in a conceptual exchange in the hope of making the modern world a better place in which to live regardless of one's ethnic or cultural heritage, or access to wealth and power.

In conclusion, what Ordos 100 offers us are costly but useful lessons. At the level of the project's civil planning, we now know that creating zones of attractive mansions and other landmarks based on foreign templates is risky, unworthy, and irresponsible; this is especially true when such buildings are perceived as a template that can be applied globally without attending to the ethnic and social conditions such as those in a frontier town. Even if local investors have been successful

economically and have accrued huge wealth, that wealth does not automatically beget ethnic and cultural enrichment. At the level of equating science with universal progress, it is unscientific to assume that foreign design ideas can be replicated anywhere without properly assessing the local climate, topography, vegetation, other natural resources, and human conditions. As such, the model of Western urbanism as a benchmark of modernisation can only fail if it is applied without consideration to local conditions in China. ■

My references to the Kangbashi boomtown as the ethnic and cultural backdrop for Ordos 100 are mostly drawn from Max D. Woodworth's 2011 study in Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*. I hereby acknowledge my indebtedness to the author.*

Blue sky in Beijing, 2016. PC: Kentaro Iemoto (CC), Flickr.com

Geoengineering the Sublime

China and the Aesthetic State

Jesse RODENBIKER

Geoengineering for aesthetic and utilitarian ends, this essay argues, is part and parcel of the banal operation of state power in contemporary China. In contrast with Kantian articulations of the sublime, turn-of-the-century thinkers like Zhang Jingsheng and contemporary Chinese politicians and scientists espouse an ecological sublime undergirded by mechanistic and utilitarian logics expressed through techniques of altering earth systems. Intervening in earth systems to produce an experience of the ecological sublime, therefore, operates as an aesthetic modality of power—one that positions the Chinese State as the mechanistic producer of beauty and utility in nature.

If you walked through one of China's megacities in the past few decades, the sky was most likely grey. Air pollution reached record highs; haze was omnipresent. The skies over major cities, including Beijing, exemplified this banal aesthetic feature of urban life. Living with pollution became commonplace—in part because of China's role as a global manufacturing centre. For decades, China has been a factory for the world. Processes of industrial production in China are inextricably interlinked with embodied emissions, consumption, and profits of the Global North, particularly in places like the United States and Western Europe (Bergmann 2013). These global relationships of production and consumption contribute

Foggy sky in Beijing, 2013. PC: @green_kermit (CC), Flickr.com

significantly to China's grey skies. In addition, coal has been the predominant source of energy in China's cities, further darkening the dusky dome above.

Concerns about the effects of air pollution on human health crystalised in Chai Jing's personally narrated 2015 documentary, *Under the Dome*. After its release, the film made waves, garnering hundreds of millions of views and rallying a public outcry for greater official efforts to mitigate pollution (Chai 2015). It was quickly censored. Grey skies and the adverse effects of pollution on human bodies, it turns out, are not only of concern to Chinese society, but also highly sensitive matters to the Chinese authorities. The documentary contributed to increasing the visibility of rampant pollution and the harmful effects of state-directed development on the natural world and everyday life.

In contemporary China, the politics of visibility are paramount. As such, the aesthetic forms of the sky—its colour and material consistency—have become matters of official government intervention. State weather-control systems routinely seek to transform the material nature of skies across China's territory. When the Chinese authorities decide to turn the sky from grey to blue, bureaucratic levers are pulled and the clanking gears of technoscientific intervention and social control are put in motion—with more or less effect. When the Chinese Government desires precipitation, scientists and environmental engineers seed clouds (云种散播) with silver iodide (see Yeh's essay in the current issue). Local officials demand the closure of factories. Environmental engineers control air quality in close contact with local authorities. The Beijing Weather Control Office, for instance, is tasked with controlling not only Beijing's sky, but also the air over Hebei Province and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Nearly 40,000 scientists and bureaucrats work in this government office dedicated to the dream of geoengineering the sky.

Geoengineering entails deliberate, large-scale intervention in earth systems—often the introduction of a chemical element or technical device—to alter environmental conditions toward specific ends. I consider state efforts to beautify the natural world through geoengineering interventions in earth systems as geo-aesthetic engineering.

Examples of geo-aesthetic engineering in China abound. The 2008 and 2022 Olympic Games, as well as the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation (APEC) and 2016 G20 summits, are examples of international events that brought the levers of geo-aesthetic engineering into action to beautify the sky. These events, when the eyes of the world were looking at China, were accompanied by comprehensive campaign-style government intervention that halted construction, manufacturing, industrial production, and motor vehicle traffic, while scientific efforts to alter earth systems turned towards the aerial (Shen and Ahlers 2019).

Blue skies are fabricated through scientific techniques and the everyday exercise of state power. Sky aestheticisation, brought about through the marriage of science and state power, visually projects the politics of a 'Beautiful China' (美丽中国)—President Xi Jinping's commonly used ideological phrase to describe the project of national landscape aestheticisation.

China's Ecological Sublime

While most visible during high-profile events, geo-aesthetic engineering is part and parcel of the banal operation of state power in contemporary China. The tandem mobilisation of scientific techniques and government intervention over the economy, society, and beauty is the hallmark of the Chinese authorities' Promethean ideology. Sociopolitical theorist John Dryzek (2005: 67) describes Prometheanism as the 'belief that humans left to their own devices will automatically generate solutions to problems—and that an invisible hand guarantees good collective consequences'. The fusing of science and state power is fundamental to contemporary China's ideological stance that technology in service of government will overcome environmental problems.

Problems like urban pollution—floating particulates blocking an otherwise blue sky—are considered problems addressable through techniques of state-led scientific intervention. Geo-aesthetic engineering bolsters the position that technological solutions backed by strong government intervention can remedy human-induced environmental problems and produce beauty. Aestheticising the sky is but one example among a panoply of commonplace bureaucratic processes aimed at beautifying China's landscapes.

Since Xi took office, the ideology of constructing a Beautiful China has become a central pillar of the country's political platform and state ideology. The Eighteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 articulated the project of constructing a Beautiful China alongside the construction of an 'Ecological Civilisation' (生态文明建设). The forum describes the Beautiful China project as enhancing the beauty of the environment, society, and everyday people. Since Beautiful China became a key part of CCP ideology, the number of scientific papers and studies employing the concept has increased significantly. New evaluation systems, scientific methods of aesthetic measurement, and forms of spatial planning have been proposed by China's scientists (Fang et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2020).

This coalescence of state aesthetic ideology and scientific techniques and practices, while formidable, is not unprecedented. In fact, while the current campaign is new, the notion of building a Beautiful China did not originate with the changing of the guard from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. In the transition from the Qing Dynasty (1636–1911) to the Republican era (1912–49), many schools of thought emerged with their own prescriptions for forging the 'new' China. Among the ideas advanced was that of the 'aesthetic state'—a state with the express purpose of fostering beauty in society and across the national landscape. One of the key progenitors of this vision was Zhang Jingsheng (1888–1970), a Chinese intellectual and aesthetician.

After studying in France at the University of Lyon, Zhang returned to China to take a teaching post at Peking University. In the early 1920s, he delivered a series of lectures on the notion of the aesthetic state, which he termed a 'government of beauty' (美的政府). Melding Confucian Classicism with German Romanticist philosophy, Zhang described an aesthetic state as a government that teaches how to appreciate beauty to guide society toward ultimate happiness and personal attainment (Zhang 1998; Lee 2006). The role of the government, in Zhang's theoretical formulation, is

to foster a commonsense appreciation of beauty in the world by shaping society and nature through 'science'—whether it be the science of life cycles, commerce, sex, or everyday life.

Zhang even went as far as to detail numerous aesthetic duties to be undertaken by specific government offices. He imagined an entire bureaucratic system organised around the aestheticisation of society and national space. Indeed, science, state power, and aesthetics are interwoven in Zhang's articulation of the aesthetic state—much like in the contemporary discourses of constructing a Beautiful China and an Ecological Civilisation.

It is useful, at this point, to differentiate ecological articulations of the sublime in China from the sublime as conceived in Western contexts. In Western countries—particularly in Europe—the sublime is often associated with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which connotes qualities of greatness in an object via modalities of the noble, the moral, or the splendid (Kant 2003). 'Part of the sublime experience for Kant', literary scholar Christopher Hitt describes, is the 'realization that we mortal creatures ... are entirely dependent on forces greater than we are' (1999: 607). In this context, the predominant forces to which humanity is subject are often construed in relation to the divine or abstract external forms of 'nature'.

In Chinese articulations of the sublime, however, whether at the turn of the twentieth century or in the present, the state is paramount. The state inhabits a key role in engineering society and nature, thereby shaping the sublime experience in relation to government-sanctioned utility. Moreover, in contrast with Kantian articulations of the sublime, turn-of-the-century thinkers like Zhang Jingsheng and contemporary Chinese politicians and scientists espouse an ecological sublime undergirded by mechanistic and utilitarian logics. According to these logics, if the appropriate application of science and technical intervention is applied and backed by a strong state apparatus, a desired outcome will result in a predictable, mechanical fashion. For instance, the state can turn the sky blue. Or it can literally make it rain. The geoengineered results elicit awe in the capacity of the government to transform the natural world, thereby advancing socio-environmental governance. Intervening in earth systems to produce an experience of the ecological sublime, therefore, operates as an aesthetic modality of power—one that positions the Chinese State as the mechanistic producer of beauty and utility in nature.

Intervening in Earth Systems

A resurgence of the aesthetic state in China has come at a time when societies the world over are grappling with questions of how to live in the Anthropocene. How can states help prevent our most dystopic projections of climate crises? How can they intervene? Such questions underlie China's climate geoengineering programs.

China leads the world in financing, researching, and developing geoengineering technologies. Geoengineering, it must be stressed, is not about mitigating climate change or adapting to a low-carbon energy future—elements common to the green transition. Rather, geoengineering entails counteracting socionatural processes through deliberate interventions in earth systems.

While until recently on the fringes of science, geoengineering has exploded into mainstream global discourse over the past few decades. Scientists the world over have proposed spraying chemicals into the stratosphere to deflect sunlight, seeding clouds to induce rain, and dumping iron sulphates into the ocean to spur ocean fertilisation. China's Ministry of Science and Technology has forwarded millions of dollars to fund national geoengineering research programs. While the efforts of this research largely centre on modelling the effects of geoengineering on sea levels, polar ice, and human health, there are also several ongoing government-orchestrated projects to alter the climate through technoscientific interventions.

For instance, in 2018, China's state-owned Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation launched the world's largest weather-control system across the Tibetan Plateau. Thousands of machines strategically placed along the plateau and ridge of the Himalaya release silver iodide particles into the sky. These particles induce weather manipulations across an aerial region of

more than 1 million square kilometres. The state suggests that these weather-altering measures will increase precipitation by as much as 10 billion cubic metres per year, thereby contributing to ameliorating drought in parched regions of China's west (Chen 2018; Watts 2020).

China, which is among the most water-poor nations in the world, must quench the thirst of the globe's largest population. Moreover, as the world's largest consumer of water, China is a net virtual water importer (Hou et al. 2018). 'Virtual water' refers to water hidden in the goods and services traded between places. But virtual water imports are not enough. Seeding the sky to induce rain is an intervention in earth systems that the state supports to address chronic water shortages. Another intervention, introduced in 2016, is the Sky River (天河) Project—an initiative discussed in detail by Emily Yeh in her contribution to the present issue of the *Made in China Journal*. This project aims to utilise existing geoengineering infrastructure to redirect up to 5 billion cubic metres of water vapour towards water-starved regions of the Yellow River Basin (Zheng 2016).

Climate geoengineering is not only well under way but also has become institutionalised within Chinese state approaches to socio-environmental governance. In addition to the interventions in aerial systems discussed above, ecological expressions of state power in terrestrial contexts are widespread. Land zoning initiatives, such as ecological redlining, have become national policy and are routinely portrayed as central to building an Ecological Civilisation and a Beautiful China. Central government mandates to zone 20 per cent of land for ecological protection have introduced conservation planning techniques that extend the territorial reach of municipal states over rural hinterlands and transform the livelihoods of residents (Rodenbiker 2020). Ecological states—state formations expressed and constituted in relation to ecology—are now widespread across mainland China (Rodenbiker forthcoming).

While the central government portrays a homogeneous environmental policy framework, various local state and private actors compete to benefit from environmental engineering projects. Across China's north and west, for instance, the state, in cooperation with private corporations, has undertaken extensive interventions to transform desert landscapes. These include seeding the desert with drought-resistant plants to help control the sandstorms that plague Beijing (Zee 2022). Colloquially referred to as the 'Great Green Wall' (绿色长城), the Three-North Shelter Forest Program (三北防护) is a series of plant-based shelter strips designed to control the sands of the Gobi Desert.

In the early 2010s, China's artificial plant coverage exceeded 500,000 square kilometres, making it the largest human-engineered desert forest landscape on Earth. Efforts to build the Great Green Wall, however, have largely produced monocrop landscapes across once diverse desert ecologies. Yet, despite drastic transformation of local ecologies, such projects find widespread support within Chinese society—in part, because of the strong ideological associations surrounding campaigns to beautify China and build an Ecological Civilisation (Schmitt 2018). Those who have visited the Great Green Wall, such as acclaimed photographer Ian Teh, have described the spectacle of billions of trees planted in the desert as impressive and awe-inspiring (Mallonee 2017). Teh's photographs depict landscapes that engender a sublime experience of earth system intervention. Such large-scale approaches to transforming nature, however, are not limited to China's mainland; increasingly, they are finding traction globally.

Global Environmental Futures

In 2021, China hosted part one of the Fifteenth United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), which was themed 'Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth'. The conference placed Ecological Civilisation front and centre on an international arena. The targets proposed in the current version of the COP 15 Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework are of global consequence. At the time of writing, the framework calls for 50 per cent of the Earth's surface to be set aside for spatial planning for functional land/sea use and 30 per cent set aside for conservation.

Fifteenth United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP 15).

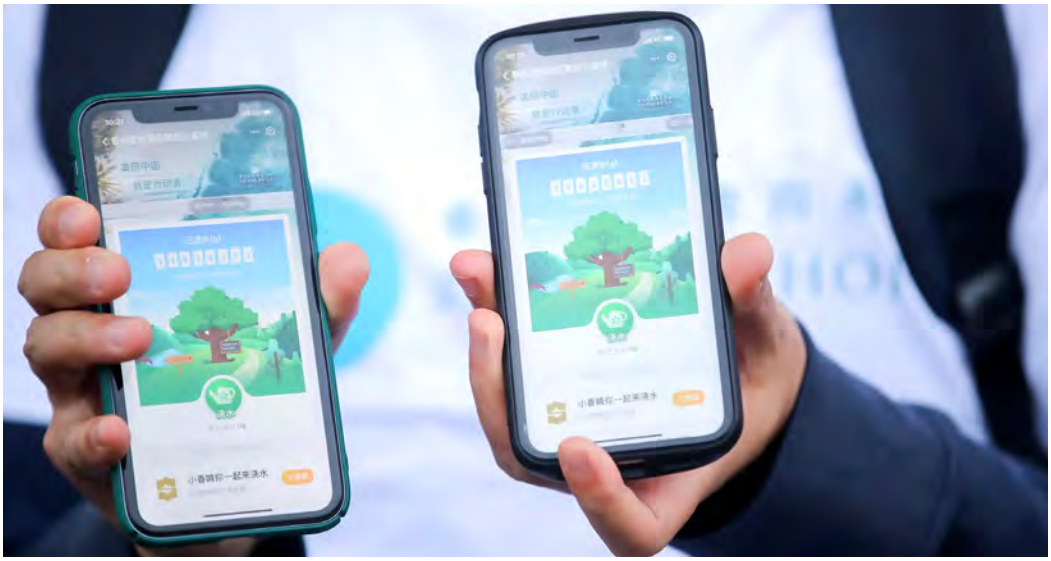
Such large-scale technical interventions would substantially affect not only global ecologies but also people living in areas zoned for conservation. How might global efforts to build 'ecological civilisations' transform ecologies and societies the world over? What roles will ecology and aesthetics play?

Considering the ecological sublime in Western contexts, Hitt writes:

> In an age in which humankind imagines that it can ensure its own survival through technological means—that it will ultimately win the war with nature—the sublime is more relevant than ever before … In addition to altering fundamentally our relationships with the natural world, technology has assumed an integral role in the ideology of the sublime. (Hitt 1999: 618–19)

In recent years, the Chinese State has grafted techniques of earth system intervention on to an ecological sublime. But China is not alone. Laura Martin (2022: 230), writing on the rise of ecological engineering and offsite mitigation, observes that: 'To many, it seems entirely possible to genetically engineer coral and fund tree planting in Costa Rica, but virtually impossible to reduce carbon emissions in the United States.'

Techno-optimism is widespread indeed. Yet, what is often overlooked is how the aesthetic modes through which earth system interventions are framed and understood reinforce the ideology that science will stave off the worst of environmental disaster and societal collapse. In an age of digitally curated representations, the optics of geo-aesthetic engineering shape how publics perceive earth system interventions and the states that orchestrate them. Ecological states, after all, depend on it.■



Ant Forest Mobile App. PC: Shangri-la.com.

The Promethean Ant Forest

Alibaba's App as a Financialising Environmental Tool

Giulia DAL MASO

Ant Forest is a Chinese app developed by Alibaba that claims to leverage its technology to solve environmental problems within and beyond China. By financialising and gamifying individuals' carbon footprints with scores and rewards, it allows users to participate in tree planting as they consume online. Through the frame of 'environmentality', this essay discusses how Ant Forest manipulates the environment as a site of financial and biopolitical calculation. In contrast with accounts of Chinese authoritarian environmentalism, the article calls for a wider reckoning with the ongoing process of nature's financialisation, which is both reinforcing and reinforced by forms of sovereign and governmental power.

Ant Forest is a Chinese app that connects users' behaviours to an environmental protection scheme. Developed in 2016 by Ant Group's Alipay—an affiliate of Alibaba's gigantic mobile-payment platform—Ant Forest has gamified carbon footprint tracking, allowing users to participate in tree planting and conservation as they consume online. If you buy sustainable products, choose paperless options, take your bike instead of your car, and correctly manage your waste, you are rewarded with virtual green energy points that go towards planting and growing a real tree. Significantly, Ant Forest matches virtual experience with reality. By collaborating with a Chinese nongovernmental organisation (NGO), the app claims it has managed to plant trees covering

112,000 hectares and protect 12,000 hectares of conservation land in Inner Mongolia in north-western China (UNEP 2019).

Ant Forest promises to leverage digital technologies to solve environmental problems on a large scale. It has promoted its business model beyond China's borders by partnering with e-wallet GCash, which is an extension of Alipay's multiple branches in the Philippines. GCash has replicated Ant Forest under the name GCash Forest, which has further partnered with the Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the United Nations Development Programme's Biodiversity Finance Initiative, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), promising to plant 365,000 seedlings across the country. Like Ant Forest, GCash Forest allows users to plant trees via their mobile phones by earning green energy points.

Precisely because it embodies Prometheanism in the sense of an 'unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome environmental problems' (Dryzek 2013: 51), Ant Forest has been heralded by the international community as the best green fintech product to tackle environmental issues (UNFCCC 2019). In 2019, the United Nations bestowed on Ant Forest its highest environmental honour: the Champions of the Earth award. It praised Ant Forest as the best and largest private sector green initiative in China, which not only is able to foster 'massive individual efforts to tackle climate change' but also 'fundamentally [redesigns] how we interact with the planet by leveraging technology' (UNFCCC 2019). Thus, in contrast with globally circulating racialised narratives of a high-tech dystopic and eco-apocalyptic China, Ant Forest seemed to have globally redeemed China as a champion of environmental goals and solutions.

In dialogue with recent debates about the Anthropocene and the role of Western modernity in the development of technological exploitation of nature (Descola 2013; Danowski and de Castro 2017), philosopher Yuk Hui (2016) has engaged in a genealogical exercise that shows how a Chinese historical relationship to technology stems from more diverse premises than a Western Promethean attitude. Perhaps as a provocation, it would be interesting to ask him whether Ant Forest could be an example of a virtuous Chinese approach to developing technology—one that brings 'new meanings and forces to our epoch' (Hui 2016: 318), as the app claims to do.

Furthermore, given that the app claims to embody the Chinese slogan of Ecological Civilisation (生态文明), it theoretically promotes an ideal harmony between humans and nature that taps into Chinese classical texts and Marxist theories of people-focused 'ecocentrism' (生态中心主义)—something to be undertaken by developing new forms of technology and energy that are less environmentally destructive than those in the West (Pan 2006; Hansen et al. 2018). In theory, given that China's economic objectives are less impeded by the vested interests of private capital, there should be greater potential for these kinds of developments (Gare 2012). As noted by Sigrid Schmalzer in this issue of the *Made in China Journal*: '[I]t is hard to find fault with such an inspiring vision.' However, she also mentions that 'if there is a flaw in the paradigm, it is one that the public is often inclined to embrace: the techno-optimistic mentality that humans can solve the twin crises of poverty and ecological destruction'. As I will explain in this essay, providing these solutions is what green finance and the type of environmental disciplining it is producing promise to do.

Rather than a perfect match between technology and environmentalism, Ant Forest emerges as a paradigmatic case to explore the evolution of digital platforms within the new shade of 'green' in which global financial capital has cloaked itself. It thus might be better explored and contextualised from a distance from its 'Chinese-ness' and within the particular role fintech is assuming in the growing and ubiquitous financialisation of capitalism (Bernards 2019; Hendrikse et al. 2018; Pollio and Cirolia 2022). This is not an example of the type of authoritarian environmental intervention with which China is often associated (Li and Shapiro 2020), nor is it a virtuous Chinese technological deployment in harmony with an ecological model of civilisation, but it is a type of global environmental power that operates at the subjective and financial levels.

Specifically, by looking at Ant Forest through the prism of 'environmentality' or 'eco/green governmentality' (see also Dal Maso and Maresca 2021), I underscore how Ant Forest does not embody a monolithic sovereign or governmental power. Rather, it matches and mobilises moral and symbolic ecological scenarios (Dal Maso et al. 2022) that reinforce the ongoing process of financialisation in that it allows distinct financial logics to spill over into people's environmental behaviours and decision-making. In this sense, Ant Forest performs as a governmental tool—a decentralised form of technical governance active at the microlevel, which is nevertheless functional to the legitimacy and ruling capacity of the Chinese Communist Party both within and beyond China's borders (Gruin 2021).

China's 'Ecological Turn' in the Realm of Financialisation

It is striking to see how, after the past 150 years of modernisation, which culminated in unprecedented economic growth largely achieved by burning half the coal consumed in the world (Shapiro 2012), China has a new ambition: to transform itself from the 'factory of the world' into an example of green sustainability. To achieve this, China has chosen financialisation as a key driver to reach its ambitious environmental objectives. The declared aim of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021–25) is to 'expedite the transition of China's growth model' (NDRC 2022) to one of green development through a powerful nexus with green finance. New guidelines explicitly appealing to the idea of the Ecological Civilisation evaluate the activities of both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private actors while engaging in domestic and overseas investments (NDRC 2021).

In line with this development, Ma Jun (2018), Chief Economist at the People's Bank of China and the main proponent of Chinese green finance, has argued that China requires RMB2–4 trillion (US$315–630 billion) in green investments to address its environmental challenges. However, 'given that the government alone can't bear those costs and can only provide a maximum of 15 per cent, the rest must be provided by private capital through the financial system, with the development of the green products' (Ma 2018). What this official declaration conveys is that the Chinese capacity to achieve its environmental objectives depends on the involvement of private capital, which should provide 85 per cent of the costs.

To advance this process, China has already emerged as a carbon-market leader in the global architecture of market-based solutions to the planet's environmental degradation—a trend that has been encouraged since the Kyoto Protocol. Recently, the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment introduced mandatory data-reporting requirements for companies that will be included in its carbon emissions-trading system. By systematising the pricing of Chinese corporations' negative externalities into the web of green metrics, the financialisation of emissions effectively abstracts carbon, and thus the problem of pollution, from its real space and time, inserting it into the space–time compression that finance enacts (Knox-Hayes 2013; MacKenzie 2009).

Ant Forest claims to transpose the logic of carbon markets at the subjective level. The app rewards users' green actions with points that are proportional to the carbon footprint avoided by changing the actions they otherwise would have taken. As a value-making process, it turns users into 'prosumers', blurring the lines between capital and labour—and between consumption and production—and thus redefining social relationships according to new processes of financial extraction (Wang and Tan 2020).

As I have explored elsewhere, in China, this process finds its roots in the final phases of the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping, when the opening of the stock market by the state led to the rise of a multitude of individual Chinese investors, the so-called *sanhu* (散户, literally 'scattered players') gripped by stock fever (股票热) (Dal Maso 2015, 2020; Hertz 1998). This was the result of the powerful alignment of sovereign forces and financial mechanisms in the making of a biopolitical regime in which the adoption of the 'financialisation of everyday life' (Martin 2002) re-engineered post-socialist subjects and

instilled desires driven by financial logic. From dispenser of labour (during Maoism), the state transmuted to dispenser of profits (from Deng's reforms onwards) via financialisation and stock market trading, particularly by 'inviting' individuals to invest in shares of SOEs.

By owning and controlling the capital market, the state has been able not only to use financialisation to exert political control (Petry 2020), but also, by turning people's savings into SOE assets, to convert a huge amount of people's finances into its own (Dal Maso 2020). In parallel, given the increasing grip of the government on big fintech—its convoluted relationship with Alibaba being the striking example—the state has also benefited from the diffusion of fintech to a wider range of the population, capitalising on the conversion of data into profits.

As such, the state has strengthened its position as a major shareholder (Wang 2015)—a shareholder in the 'people'—which actively seeks to make citizens and organisations compliant with the visions and rationales of the country's investment strategy (Loubere and Brehm 2022). Yet, this path has also brought to the fore new contractual obligations with the population.

Given the increasing discontent of ordinary citizens about environmental issues, China's new domestic and global political legitimacy also centres on meeting environmental demands (Lora-Wainwright 2013; Bruckermann 2020). From being simply investors and consumers, people are now being asked to become 'responsible investors' (负责任的投资者) who are socially trustworthy and willing to spend their finances on green products.

The largest tech companies, like Tencent and Alibaba, have developed e-wallets, offering risk-free digital transactions to online consumers. They have effectively gained a form of duopoly for digital payments that has leapfrogged the card-based system and risks exceeding and disintermediating the banking system via the use of QR codes through peer-to-peer transactions (Klein 2020). Alibaba was one of the first companies to initiate a private credit system through its Sesame Credit, along with a handful of other government-sanctioned (but short-lived) tech company social credit pilot projects (Loubere and Brehm 2022). In this scheme, customers acquire score-based data linked to purchases they make within the Alibaba Group ecosystem. High scores mean 'trustworthy' profiles, which translate into rewards from Ant Financial's loans and services.

Ant Forest has rewritten this model through the addition of environmental and gaming features. It offers a way of 'gamifying' the positive externalities of green behaviour, transposing non-game contexts such as everyday conduct and tree planting with game elements, and thus defining the action of a free player in a ruled space (Zeng 2022). The app offers its users access to satellite images taken by remote-sensing cameras in the areas where these trees are successfully planted. Here, users can see positive changes happening; it is a virtual zooming that immerses users in a world in which complications and disruptions are not conceived (Nguyen 2020). As some users told me, these actions make them feel like they have accomplished something and less anxious about climate change. The app also works as an incentive to plant more and more trees, as users try to accumulate scores and exchange them with friends, who can in turn plant and water their trees by donating or collecting green points.

In this format, Ant Forest makes the technology of the app become the technology of the self, moulding its users to act not only consciously but also subconsciously. To a certain extent, gaming compromises their rational decision-making around complex environmental problems. The scores and rewards of the app channel libidinal impulses into the pleasure of responsible green consumption and green lifestyles. In this formula, concern for the environment is appeased by means of 'green consumption'. It thus lightens users' perceptions of the catastrophic impact of climate change, which in turn shields the government from its political responsibility for it. As the literature on environmentality suggests (Luke 1995; Fletcher 2017; Rutherford 2017), Ant Forest adopts a governmental model that seeks to address environmental management and climate change by modifying individual behaviours, thus rendering the environment a site of biopolitical calculation.

A worker waters Mongolian Scots pine at Duguitala Town of Hangjin Banner in Ordos, north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. PC: Xinhua.

Environmentality and Scalability: Ant Forest in the Philippines

According to Meng Yan, Ant Financial's Global Head of International Partnerships:

> Ant Forest shows that digital technology has an incredible power to mobilize people in support of sustainable development and the fight against climate change. This movement goes beyond borders and is at our fingertips through our mobile devices … We're more than happy to open up our technology and expertise … to make the world a better place. (Sustainable Digital Finance Alliance 2019

The development of the subsidiary GCash Forest in the Philippines stems from this premise. As Prometheus committed to bringing the light of knowledge to humans, Ant Forest lands in a foreign territory as the champion of environmental causes.

Through its technology and expertise, it conveys universal moral conduct beyond borders and channels narratives and practices *en masse* that are in synergy with a global environmental discourse backed by global organisations such as the United Nations and the WWF. Appealing to a de-territorialised, neutral, and culturally homogeneous environmental expertise (Ulloa 2017), Ant Forest forges alliances between market-based financial actors (Lai and Samers 2021) and brings a universally accepted hierarchical order to the production of environmental knowledge (Li 2007; Mitchell 2002). In line with Prometheanism, Ant Forest portrays financial and economic fixes as the solution. The invisible authoritarian expertise of the app overshadows the reality underpinning its function.

In the Philippines, GCash Forest is promoted as an app that will raise a generation of 'green heroes' and as the easiest tool with which to deal with the environmental crisis. Users can become heroes merely by engaging in green behaviours from the comfort of their—admittedly environmentally smart—urban life. As one of the users I interviewed told me, he can now take care of the environment without having to leave the city. At the same time, the app allows him to know more about the natural landscape of his country. Thanks to the app, he can see himself as a subject

of improvement who is more active and knowledgeable about environmental causes. Yet, he seems glad to keep the reality of deforestation at a distance; abstracted from local and power forces, and amenable to technical rectification (Li 2007) only from above.

The app offers a way to protect its users from the complexity of environmental disasters, including the multiple problems that come with afforestation. In this exercise, there is no mention that the Philippines is one of the most severely deforested countries in the tropics, that practices of deforestation and logging trace back to colonial times, that these practices have serious implications for the survival of indigenous people, and that the loss of cultural community is tightly linked to the loss of biodiversity. As reported by an activist working for a local NGO whom I interviewed:

> [T]he problem is that even if they do plant trees, this does not mean that the trees remain standing after they leave. Most of the Philippines' once rich forest is gone and it has been proven that forest recovery through artificial means never coped with the destruction rate.

Philosopher Thi Nguyen explains that the way in which game features overlap with real-life features is at the core of what he describes as 'value capture'. This indicates a simplified encounter with the environment that transforms everything into a levelled and simplified pattern of reward and punishment, expressed through scores and metrics. Like capitalism, games 'reward the relentless and single-minded pursuit of victory' through extremely narrow value systems (Nguyen 2020: 192), omitting complexity and what is worthwhile in the relationship between life and nature. What Ant Forest and GCash Forest convey is a model of financialisation of prosumers that aligns with the financialisation of tree planting, abstracting the real problem of deforestation to something that has no origin in the country's historical social and power relations and is detached from the specificity of the area it claims to rescue.

Far from being a Chinese phenomenon, the deployment of such technology to tame the social and natural realms seems to be part of a world-making capitalist project that points to a new cycle of capital accumulation, coloured green. Yet, undisputedly, the Chinese State is using this to strengthen its political control and its domestic and international legitimacy. Because of the enthusiasm it has provoked in the international community, Ant Forest stands not only as an exception to the global apprehension about oppressive Chinese technology and the common attitude that sees China's association with technology 'projected into anxieties about China, and to an extent vice versa' (Bratton 2021: 54, cited in Franceschini and Loubere 2022: 21), but also as a challenge to the dichotomy of global eco-racialisation that associates China with the perpetuation of eco-apocalyptic events, as though they were detached from the circuits of capital valorisation (Litzinger and Yang 2020).

As Jason Moore states: 'No civilization has been more Promethean than capitalism in its aspirations of domination and management of something usually called nature' (2022: 415). Prometheus sacrificed his life to bring fire to humans. Ant Forest is only one among the multiple tools that capital has employed in its insatiable demands (Marx 1976; De Angelis 2001), sacrificing 'cheap' nature—including human nature (Moore 2015)—under its new green and gamified veil. Yet, by giving rise to new articulations of the real and the virtual, and the human and nonhuman (the latter being both nature and technology), Ant Forest brings risks and opportunities to the production of new subjectivities. By flirting with and zooming in and out of diverse realities, these will hopefully counteract and resist capital's extractive power. ■

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to Alessandro Maresca for his suggestions that have improved the essay. The work was supported by the European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 101024555 (CHINGREEN).

Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

Speculative Landscapes, Promethean Mirages, and Eco-Poiesis

Corey BYRNES

In recent years, familiar or seemingly 'traditional' landscape forms have provided artists working in China with legible ecocritical modes. This essay expands on an earlier account of what the author describes as documentary and illusionistic 'Chinese landscapes of desolation' by outlining an additional mode: the speculative. Speculative landscapes look forward to a time (fast approaching but eerily similar to our own) when the impacts of ongoing environmental crises have definitively reshaped the world. In bringing the future to the present, this mode offers a rebuke—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—of the techno-optimist assumptions of unlimited growth that define Promethean thought.

It has become common over the past decade or so to encounter vaguely familiar or seemingly 'traditional' Chinese landscape forms updated to represent contemporary environmental problems. In a 2019 article, I argued that many of these artistic 'Chinese landscapes of desolation' fall into two overlapping categories, the documentary and the *trompe l'oeil*, both of which are intended to function as ecocritical modes capable of changing how viewers see and act in the world (Byrnes 2019a). Whereas the former offers objective views of environmentally compromised landscapes, the latter reflects on China's environmental

predicament by presenting illusionistic images of mountains and waters that appear 'traditional' but are in fact built out of trash, ruins, effluent, or smog.

Artists working in these modes imagine the world in different ways, but they participate in a shared representational enterprise: they deploy aesthetic landscape forms to make claims about the relationship between people and their physical surroundings. What distinguishes them is how (and how fully) they draft the viewer into the fiction of their plausible realism. In other words, how wedded they are to a contemporary frame and to 'real' places, people, and environmental problems. Where *trompe l'oeil* landscapes by artists such as Yao Lu (姚璐), Yang Yongliang (杨泳梁), or Xu Bing (徐冰) are often wilfully playful and approach the present through the past, documentary landscapes by artists such as Edward Burtynksy or Wang Jiuliang (王久良) generally take themselves very seriously, persuading viewers of the urgency of our current predicament through images of the way things undeniably are. The documentary landscape asks viewers to look hard so they might see and think differently about the world as it is. The *tromp l'oeil* landscape asks viewers to look at the present through the lens of the past to reflect on the world as it once was and no longer is.

This essay expands the landscape of desolation to include an additional mode: the speculative landscape. Like 'the documentary and [the] trompe l'oeil, with which it often overlaps, the speculative reflects powerful anxieties about the present, though it privileges the viewer's interpretive agency by projecting contemporary problems into a strange and often horrifying future' (Byrnes 2019a: 155). Where documentary sometimes pushes viewers to 'fall into line' with its pose of objectivity, the speculative is more likely to ask viewers to self-orient with respect to a new or imminent (un) reality. Though its frame of reference is often the present, the speculative is ultimately a fictional mode that offers images of a possible future. In this sense, it is equally well suited to representing ongoing environmental crises, which are marked both by scientific indeterminacy and by anxiety about that indeterminacy, as it is to imagining a future that is simultaneously endlessly deferred and already upon us. The speculative landscape looks forward to a time (fast approaching, far distant, or eerily like our own) when the spatial and social impacts of climate change and environmental degradation have radically reshaped the world as we have known it. In bringing the future to the present, artists working in this landscape mode rebuke—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—the techno-optimist assumptions of unlimited growth that define Promethean thought. If Prometheanism imagines the future in terms of ever-increasing trends—'increasing parkland, croplands, and forests, increasing life expectancy, increasing crop yields and fisheries catches'—that can be 'extrapolated indefinitely into the future', the speculative landscape imagines the reversal of those trends and a physical world that places definite limits on growth (Dryzek 2013: 63). As I argue in my conclusion, the speculative landscape mode is best understood as a form of creative 'eco-poiesis'—a term appropriated from the scientific literature on terraformation—that mirrors in order to distort the world-building fantasies offered by Promethean discourse.

This essay offers an initial account of the eco-poietic speculative landscape mode as it appears in the China-focused work of two contemporary artists, the US-based painter Ji Yun-fei (季云飞) and the Beijing-based documentary filmmaker Zhao Liang (赵亮). Until recently, Ji's work has centred primarily on the interaction of historical traumas with the displacements and dispossessions that are reshaping relationships between people and places in contemporary China. Ji draws deeply on the figurative and landscape traditions of Chinese art, though he is also well known for producing fantastical images busy with ghosts and monsters that evoke not only Chinese traditions of the strange, but also European artists such as Goya, Bosch, and Picasso (Fitzgerald 2004; Tsai 2012; Chung 2016; Adler 2016; Byrnes 2019b). The past and the present, the everyday and the strange, the living and the spectral are linked in many of his works by a skein of psychic and bodily traumas.

In some of his recent work, Ji has turned his attention to environmental problems that require a subtle but striking reorientation away from the retrospective and towards the speculative. In the painting I discuss below, *An Account of Wen Village*

(文村记事), Ji combines the narrative logic of the long handscroll format with a fragmentary textual narrative to tell the story of a changing climate, a doomed village, and the mirage-like appearance of a ghost city—a form of urban speculation that Christian Sorace and William Hurst (2016: 305) describe as 'the extreme pathological expression of [a] syndrome of phantom urbanisation'. Ji's texts neither simply describe what the image shows—the latter often 'omits' events, including the appearance of the ghost city, which are described in the text—nor provide the reader with a didactic frame for determining the connection between representational landscapes and real environments. Instead, image and text stand in a looser juxtapositional arrangement that allows the viewer/reader to speculate on the relationship between the painting's fictions and its claims to documentary authority, between the time of artistic creation and that of circulation, and between the sequence of events described in the text and those figures and landscapes depicted in the image.

Speculative landscape aesthetics and the phantasmagorical effects of speculation in land and real estate are paired to different effects in Zhao Liang's 2015 experimental documentary film *Behemoth* (悲兮魔兽), in which the human thirst for resources is figured as a monster and mines, foundries, and empty 'ghost cities' serve as settings for a retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Zhao's work, the *Divine Comedy* serves as a template for mapping processes and spaces of extraction, production, and consumption on to an eschatological narrative of environmental desolation. Dante's Paradise, the ultimate Christian object of speculation and deferral, becomes Zhao's ghost city, the ultimate object of financial speculation—a space designed for a populace that is unlikely to arrive.

Leaving Home

Beginning in the late 1990s, Ji Yun-fei, who was born and grew up in mainland China but has lived primarily in the United States since the 1980s, began producing paintings that imagined the social and spatial impact of the Three Gorges Dam and reservoir. When Ji, who was based in Brooklyn at the time, first turned to this topic, he imagined the gorges as a disaster zone, an almost post-apocalyptic wasteland of ruined buildings and scattered migrants. After travelling to the region, he began to develop a more self-consciously documentary style that gave far greater prominence to figures framed by landscape elements rather than lost within them (Byrnes 2019b). Though the Three Gorges Dam project has caused widespread environmental damage, most artistic responses to it have centred primarily on the social impacts of the dam. Ji's work is no exception.

The depiction of demolition and displacement (拆迁) has become one of the hallmarks of socially conscious visual culture in China in the past two to three decades (Wu 2004, 2008, 2012; Byrnes 2019b). It is only relatively recently that artists such as Ji have started to connect the social crises caused by China's economic development and the artistic forms that have developed to represent those crises with local and global environmental problems. Figures in Ji's recent works are now just as likely to be environmental refugees as they are economic migrants or villagers displaced by a dam. In many ways, the visual language of demolition and displacement has been repurposed to create environmentally conscious art with a strong social consciousness. On the level of form and content, there is little to separate Ji's work on demolition and displacement from his more recent ecocritical art. What distinguishes the latter, however, is its treatment of time. Whereas Ji's late Three Gorges paintings primarily document the ongoing displacement of people as well as ties between the dam project and various historical traumas, his more explicitly environmental art presents a speculative vision of how ongoing climate change and pollution will radically reshape the relationship between people and their surroundings, even when framed as records of past events and lost spaces.

In the 2011 two-scroll painting *An Account of Wen Village*, which is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art under the title *Last Days of Village Wen* (see Ji 2011), Ji subtly combines fantastical imagery and documentary-like text with his signature adaptation of Chinese landscape and figural painting styles to create a prospective

record of displacement that makes it impossible to distinguish between the effects of climate change and the dictates of officialdom. Produced using traditional ink and colour pigments on mulberry paper, the paintings are mounted as handscrolls, introduced by calligraphic titles, and stored within specially built, silk-covered boxes, fully replicating the physical format of traditional Chinese paintings as connoisseurial objects (see Figure 3). The title inscription on both scrolls includes a date—the tenth month of the *guisi* (癸巳) year (2013)—and informs the viewer that the title was inscribed by Yun-fei. The mounted paintings as well as the colophons that conclude the second scroll include inscriptions that indicate that Ji completed both text and image in the *xinmao* (辛卯) year (2011).

The painting depicts a village erased by migration, forced displacement, drought, floods, freak windstorms, and wailing ghosts. The first scroll, which closely resembles several of Ji's Three Gorges images, opens with two villagers—a woman carrying bamboo chairs, a bamboo stool, and an umbrella and a man bearing a bundle and a stick—walking through a partially flooded landscape (see Figure 2). The colours in this section, which takes up nearly half of the first scroll, are muted and the first six figures are simply outlined in black ink and accented selectively with light-coloured ink washes. Near the middle of the scroll, the flooded landscape gives way to solid ground and a group of displaced people living in the open surrounded by their possessions (see Figure 3). The figural and landscape elements of this section are more boldly delineated and coloured and this section has a greater density and level of detail than the preceding one. The final section of the scroll is marked by a series of grey boulders and a cloud-like negative space. At the left-most edge of the scroll, the two figures who walked into the image reappear to walk out of it (see Figure 4). Now, however, they are more boldly outlined and coloured.

Figure 1: Ji Yun-fei, An Account of Wen Village [Last Days of Village Wen] scrolls and storage box.

Why do these figures reappear at the end of the scroll and why are they depicted in greater detail there? Have they already walked through this part of the image and thus gone through a process of displacement and relocation that the scroll represents retroactively? Are they the future of a narrative that Ji is telling in the image or does their repetition suggest a circular temporality, a process of displacement that has no real beginning and no end, that begins with official policy and continues with environmental catastrophe, one blurring into the other?

In contrast with the documentary-like quality of the first scroll, the second revels in fantastical imagery of strange machines, floating skeletons, Red Guard ghosts on political campaigns, goat-headed monsters, enormous insects, crabs, and bird-headed creatures (see Figures 5–6). Rather than a lateral continuation of the landscape Ji depicts in the first scroll, the second seems to provide a vertical perspective: either a look through the everyday to its otherworldly substrate or the exposure of its invisible spectral epidermis. This enigmatic image comes to an end with a group of four figures (two men and two skeletons) flying into empty space (see Figure 7), though the scroll itself concludes with six textual records that describe a series of trials and strange events. These short texts are written in everyday language with a temporal and spatial specificity that gives them a dry, matter-of-fact tone. This is, as the painting's title suggests, a *jishi* (记事): an objective record (记) of events (事) that occurred in the places and at the times listed.

(Left) Figure 2: An Account of Wen Village [Last Days of Village Wen] (detail), 2011. Yun-Fei Ji (Chinese, b. 1963). Pair of handscrolls; ink and colour on Xuan paper; painting only: 34.6 x 657.8 cm (13 5/8 x 259 in.); painting only: 34.6 x 610.8 cm (13 5/8 x 240 1/2 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2012.99. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

(Bottom) Figure 3: Detail from the first scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

While this episodic narrative begins prosaically enough with a reference to the breaking of an eight-month-long drought, it gets stranger as it goes, combining the everyday with the surreal and supernatural in accounts of irregular weather patterns, tales of strange happenings, local ghosts, and a 'fantastical' scene of a flooded landscape. In the second entry, we learn that the villagers have 'demolished their own homes and moved temporarily into tents … in a clearing in the wheat field', though we never learn why. This displacement seems to be the primary focus of the first scroll, though there is nothing that resembles a wheat field in that image. Are the villagers in the image and the text the same people? Are they environmental migrants, or have they been displaced by some official development program, as suggested by the fifth entry, which describes an ailing party secretary who is being pressured by a spectral county magistrate to speed up the process of 'demolition and relocation'?

The fourth and sixth texts centre on events that are not obviously depicted in either scroll.[1] The fourth text (*Raising Fish*) describes an unpredictable climate swinging wildly between punishing drought and catastrophic flooding. These conditions destroy the fish-farming operation set up by those villagers 'who chose not to leave Wen Village to work as migrant labourers'. This reference to a stage of migration preceding both government displacement and environmental migration suggests that the destruction of Wen Village is both a repeatable event and an overdetermined one. The final text, which seems to refer to the same flood described in the penultimate record, describes a 'fantastical scene' (奇景):

> Over the course of the river 30 *li* south of the village, during a massive summer flood, atop the mist covered waters that stretched as far as the eye could see, there sometimes appeared a fantastical scene of brightly illuminated skyscrapers.

(Right) Figure 4: Detail from the first scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village. (Bottom) Figure 5: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

Figure 6: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

Figure 7: Detail from the second scroll of Ji Yun-fei's An Account of Wen Village.

This mirage evokes the illusory floating islands of Penglai (蓬萊), Fangzhang (方丈), and Yingzhou (瀛洲)—home to immortals and their secrets—which tempted early emperors to send exploratory missions into the open seas off China's coast, though it also points towards forms of speculation that are currently reshaping China (Zheng 2012: 15). The glowing, towering city that appears out of the misty waves evokes forms of 'anticipatory urbanism' or 'phantom urbanisation' fuelled by government policy and real estate speculation and exemplified by the phenomenon of the mostly unoccupied 'ghost city' (Woodworth 2018; Sorace and Hurst 2016). As suggested by the supernatural procession in the painting's second scroll, however, this city is likely to be occupied by the still-present ghosts of Wen Village's recent past.

The final line of text on the painting tells us that Ji wrote out the colophon in the ninth month of the *xinmao* year (2011), just three months after the drought that dried up the villagers' river and the flood that killed the fish they had been raising. Simultaneously a record, a narrative, and an image, *An Account of Wen Village* treats the surreal and supernatural as everyday occurrences and the everyday as increasingly surreal. Though it depicts and narrates a sequence of events in the years leading up to 2011, the present of the painting is merely a conduit between a past that has not yet passed (figured both by the ghosts of the second scroll and by the repeated figures of the first) and environmental futures occupied by the painter as recordkeeper (who inscribed the scrolls in 2011 *and* 2013, after the disappearance of the fictional village) and the painting's viewers. The past in Ji's speculative fiction is not past both because it is tied to the present of the artist's creation and because it imagines unfolding and future environmental change. The repeatable experience of unrolling the image and re-reading the narrative made possible by the handscroll format, along with the circularity implied by the repeated figures in the first scroll (see Figures 2 and 4), keeps that future in a state of endless suspension.

Speculation and the Speculative

An Account of Wen Village is a retro-speculative document of the economic, social, and environmental forces reshaping rural China. It places the viewer in a simultaneously speculative and retrospective position from which to consider a narrative future that is both always unfurling and forever situated in the past. When we look at Ji's image and read its texts, we occupy the future on which they vaguely speculate, although, to the extent that climate change continues to unfold in

unpredictable and increasingly devastating ways, we are also forced to continue Ji's retro-speculative project, simultaneously looking back to places that are disappearing or no longer exist and forward to an uncertain future. In this sense, Ji's environmentally focused art is part of his extended artistic meditation on the persistence of the past and the inexorability of change.

In contrast, Zhao Liang's 2015 film *Behemoth* engages less with the temporal disorientation caused by displacement and climate change and more with the spatial and environmental consequences of economic growth, rampant consumption, and real estate speculation. Set in the open spaces of Inner Mongolia, Zhao's film imagines not only the degradation of a previously green and thriving landscape (which he associates with Mongolian nomadic traditions) but also the production of a completely new landscape of desolation—one that is markedly inhospitable to humans (see Figure 8). A loose retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the film traces an eschatological journey from the hell of open-pit mining, through the purgatory of poverty and black lung, and on to Paradise, which takes the form of one of China's famed ghost cities (see Figure 9). As in Dante's early fourteenth-century poem, *Behemoth*'s narrator is led by a guide, though instead of the Roman poet Virgil, Zhao casts a silent, mirror-toting coalminer who wheezes as he picks his way through the ruined landscape (see Figure 10).

In his cinematic adaptation of Dante, Zhao has removed almost all the writing. There is no dialogue in the movie and the narrator speaks only periodically, usually to introduce some shift in the journey or the focus of the film. His brief reflections on the environmental destruction wrought by human avarice are often introduced by still shots of a man in a foetal position on the ground or standing naked in the landscape (see Figure 11). These shots seem to figure not only the vulnerability and innocence of the narrator, who finds himself caught within a dystopic dreamscape, but also the inadequacy of the landscape of desolation, which Zhao fractures in post-production to create an even more disorienting and inhospitable ground for the figure. The landscape of desolation in *Behemoth* not only fails to offer stable ground for the human, but also embodies it in darker ways. In Zhao's depiction of coalmining, for example, workers are swallowed by the earth even as they work to hollow it out. The same workers inhale the coal that they pry free, taking the formerly invisible elements of the landscape into their lungs, where it becomes inseparable from the body (Sorace 2016: 41).

Figure 8: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

Figure 9: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth

While the film is sensitive to the uneven distribution of harm on which Promethean energy regimes and forms of consumption depend, it is also designed to expose the complicity of the individual in the collective madness of our moment. Dante's dream journey may end with his vision of God, but the narrator in *Behemoth* ends his journey with his realisation that he is not dreaming and that the monster of the film's title—a biblical creature who consumes 1,000 mountains a day—is us: 'This is not a dream, this is us. We are that monster, that monster's minions' (这不是一个梦, 这是我们. 我们是那魔兽, 那魔兽的爪牙). If the previous green landscape that the narrator imagines at the beginning of the film embraces and supports the human figure, Zhao's landscape of desolation is another beast altogether. In place of a vision of world-building grounded in Greek mythology, Zhao Liang offers a biblical account of world destruction—Behemoth as the true face of Prometheus.

The monster is the debased remainder of the thing we have consumed; it is the thing that consumes us; it is a landscape we have created in our image; it is us. It is also a landscape reshaped by real estate speculation, the creation and sale of a massive volume of unoccupied housing in the hopes that the value of these properties will increase. *Behemoth* is designed to show how speculation as a form of rampant consumption creates not only the readymade desolation of the ghost city, but also environmentally ravaged sites of resource extraction and industrial manufacturing. The urban 'heaven' that takes the place of Dante's Paradise in *Behemoth* is no longer an object of Christian speculation and longing, but rather a vision of the emptiness and environmental ruination caused by the economic instrumentalisation of futurity.

Eco-Poeisis

In closing, I would like to propose a term that captures the logic of the speculative landscape of desolation as a response to Promethean thinking: eco-poiesis. This neologism, which pairs the ecological prefix 'eco-' (from the Greek *oikos*, meaning family, property, and home) with the Greek-derived suffix 'poiesis' (to form, or make), was coined to describe the 'process of establishing an ecosystem, or biosphere, on a lifeless planet' (Haynes and McKay 1992: 134). In scientific terms, 'poiesis' describes the natural formation of some-

Figure 10: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

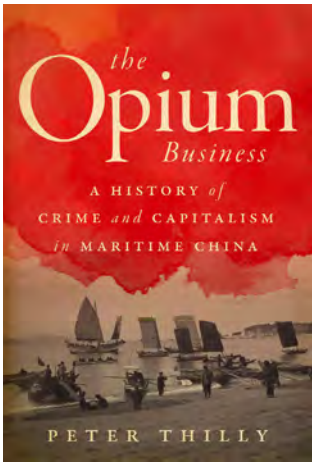
Figure 11: Still from Zhao Liang's Behemoth.

thing, 'especially of various organic substances', though eco-poiesis uses it to imagine an anthropogenic process of atmospheric transformation (OED Online 2022a). For scientists studying terraformation, eco-poiesis is an essential step in a much longer process of creating Earth-like conditions on a planet like Mars. Considering new climate change science, eco-poiesis seems to offer a classic techno-modernist fix—the creation of a 'Planet B' through productive rather than destructive climate change—diametrically opposed to most humanistic and post-humanistic environmental thought.

My use of the term similarly foregrounds the creative agency of humans but resituates *poiesis* in philosophical and literary terms as 'creative production, especially of a work of art' (OED Online 2022b). In this sense, my eco-poiesis resonates strongly with the capacious definition of 'ecopoetics' offered by Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne, for whom the term 'encompasses experiments in community making, ranging from poetry and the visual arts, literary criticism, and performance to walking, foraging, farming, cooking, and being alongside each other, whether human or other than human, in space and place' (2018: 3). While I am inspired by Hume and Osborne's conception of ecopoetics, I have opted for the Greek *poiesis* rather than the English poetics to maintain a connection to the techno-optimist vision of human agency implied by scientific uses of the term. My eco-poiesis diverges from the techno-optimism of terraformation to characterise the creation of works of art that reflect an ecological consciousness, but it also encompasses the creation of works of art that imagine the dark side of eco-poiesis: anthropogenic climate change, habitat destruction, and generalised ecological collapse. Ji's and Zhao's works do not offer reparative models for 'being alongside each other … in space and place'. Instead, they force us to stay with the horrors of climate change and environmental destruction. They show us how and why creative production in its many different modes is especially well suited to imagining the Promethean forms of eco-poiesis that threaten the life of the planet. ■

[1] In the years after the completion of An Account of Wen Village, Ji produced separate images depicting some of the events described in these records as well as an additional long handscroll entitled The Move of Wen Village (Adler 2016).

CONVERSATIONS



The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China (Stanford University Press, 2022).

The Opium Business

A Conversation with Peter Thilly

Margherita ZANASI, Peter THILLY

Peter Thilly's new book, *The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China* (Stanford University Press, 2022), focuses on the nitty-gritty of the opium trade in Fujian Province from the 1830s to 1938. Its main goal is to shift our attention from the still-prevalent overarching narratives of national humiliation and anti-imperialist moralism generally linked to the Opium War (1839–42). Thilly, instead, places the opium trade in China within its immediate business context, as local actors operating on Fujian's maritime commercial networks—from petty smugglers to established powerful commercial lineages, representatives of imperialist powers, and government officials—pursued profits in response to market trends and business opportunities. Opium, in fact, was treated as any other commodity and often traded along with such common goods as tea, fried noodles (*bami*), and sugar. What made opium special was not just its unparalleled profitability but also its illegal status, which forced traffickers to work around, compromise, and—starting with the *de facto* legalisation of opium in 1858—collaborate with the 'regulatory and moral' (Thilly 2022a: 3) system created first by the imperial government and later by the unequal treaties, as poignantly illustrated especially in Chapters 3 and 4 of the book. This local bottom-up approach to the opium trade opens interesting new views that are explored in this conversation with the author.

Margherita Zanasi: Before we take up some of the main themes of your book, I would like to talk about sources. In the Introduction, you mention you had difficulties finding the documentation needed to support your arguments. Could you talk about what made sources hard to find and how you overcame this problem? What research strategy did you develop?

Peter Thilly: Finding sources for this book was challenging. Opium, after all, was a business that people wanted to keep secret. The danger, as I saw it, was writing another history of the state and the institutions of opium prohibition. From the beginning, I was determined to do my best to write about the people who bought and sold the drug, but other than the Jardine-Matheson Company, most opium traders did not leave behind business correspondence. The challenge was therefore to find state materials that are either voluminous enough or detailed enough to offer a window into the unknown world of the opium trader.

What I found were three major flashpoints—the 1830s, 1870s to 1880s, and the 1920s to 1930s—that each generated small explosions of detailed sources surrounding state crackdowns on opium traders. In each case, I scrambled to supplement and triangulate with other sources—so, for example, the first chapter (on the 1830s) revolves around a major opium case from the Qing archive that was witnessed and recorded by British opium traders working for Jardine-Matheson. Chapter 5, which I wrote about in the *Asia-Pacific Journal* this month (Thilly 2022b), uses sources from the League of Nations Archive, the British National Archives, the Fujian Provincial Archives, and Chinese newspapers from Singapore and Xiamen to try to piece together what remains a frustratingly incomplete story about a massive illegal export trade that was entirely uncovered in the historical scholarship. So, the other major factor that made sourcing this book complicated is that the study takes place over a long century of rapid technological and political transformation, and the archives as a consequence change quite dramatically across the chapters.

MZ: How does your book expand and complicate our understanding of the Chinese opium trade?

PT: This is a question I have been asking myself for almost 15 years. One goal I had from the very beginning was to organise the book around a legible and useable chronology of opium's history in China, which I felt would be a baseline service to the field. The first four chapters of the book do this, explaining how the business changed over time through its initial rise as a contraband item, through 20 years of what I call 'negotiated illegality' after 1843 and the opening of the treaty ports, through another 50 or so years of *de facto* legality, between 1860 and 1906, and after that into a new period of uneven and often unsuccessful prohibition, characterised by increased state efforts to control the business from the top down.

When I set out on this project, I also felt I could help demystify opium, make it less 'special', to see some of what was surely a more complex reality behind the metanarratives we are all familiar with. I wanted to see what would happen if we studied opium as a commodity—a regular item of exchange and consumption in the late imperial and then modern world economy. But as the sources told me over and again, opium was 'special' in its moral and legal status. Understanding the contours and implications of this special status became an opportunity to say something new, by explaining the uniquely thorny relationship—antagonistic, and yet co-dependent—that developed between the opium business and the people and institutions of state power.

The book is one that re-explains China's transition from huge multi-ethnic empire to a fragmented republic, but this time as a story of how drug dealers grew and maintained their power. It is the sum total of an effort to try to understand the agency of opium traders—businesspeople, 'gangsters', and capitalists—in the construction of the modern Chinese political economy. Opium traders shaped the Qing state's approach to legalising and taxing the drug. When the drug was fully brought out into the open in the late 1850s, the people at the heights of the opium business worked with officials to determine tax rates and quotas. The most successful won bids to collect those taxes and to regulate the transport and distribution of the drug. Opium traders made themselves indispensable as sources of state revenue and, through this process, created vast fortunes and helped shape the world as we know it.

MZ: Your book helps the reader understand the many layers of Western imperialism in China, clearly differentiating between the big powers' moralist discourse and their official dealings with the Imperial and Republican governments on the one side, and the inventive and unorthodox strategies deployed at the local level as Western representatives faced practical problems on the other. This theme emerges clearly in your discussion of the many ambiguities in enforcing the unequal treaties.

PT: In trying to think as an opium trader might, I developed a vision of Western imperialism in China as a context for doing business: shifting over time, but at each moment a playing field that could be manipulated by people with the right resources and savvy. The book is intended to contribute to our collective understanding of opium in China, which is to say that I do not diverge from the accepted (and true) narrative that the British Empire profited immensely from opium, that it forced the Qing state at gunpoint to legalise the drug, and hamstrung their efforts to tax and, later, prohibit the drug. This has all been said before. As a social historian of crime and business, I have avoided belabouring longstanding questions of national culpability and humiliation, and instead tried to understand how it all worked. Your comment hits the nail on the head as far as what captured my interest in the sources: multilateral relations in the treaty ports between British officials, Qing officials, Chinese merchants, and foreign merchants were complicated and unpredictable. I am really looking forward to reading Stacie Kent's forthcoming book on this. In my treatment, local Qing and foreign authorities in the treaty ports were involved in constant negotiation and compromise, and the ways that people found to enhance their individual power and profit can offer us a roadmap into these local negotiations of sovereignty and revenue.

MZ: Administrative corruption is another important theme in your discussion of China's opium business. You describe corruption as taking various forms, from the simple greediness of local officials to institutionalised practices aimed at solving economic problems, as exemplified by shady practices linked to tax farming. How do these stories contribute to our understanding of the role played by corruption in Imperial and Republican China?

PT: This is a great question because there is such a rich historiographical background here on corruption in China from the distant past all the way to the present day. I am not the first to point out that the line between taxation and bribery can be really, really difficult to draw. One of the issues I encountered was not having the sources to fully understand what happened with the money collected by state actors. And that matters if we are determined to draw hard lines in the sand about legitimate governance and corruption. What percentage of opium taxes at any given moment was used as 'legitimate' state revenue, and what was held back as personal profit?

In the story that opens the book, there is a rural coalition of opium smugglers whose leaders charged a fee, which they called a *lijin* [釐金], which is a term usually understood as a long-distance transport tax. Their *lijin* was a fee on all opium sold by subsidiary investors in the organisation. Was this a protection fee—racketeering—or was it a systematised bribe going to a member of the local state? What if, as in the port cities and on the coast, this was an opium fee that was channelled in part to the pockets of Qing officials, and in part diverted to public goods, like orphanages, or resettlement and compensation for the victims of lineage feuds? From beginning to end, opium and its capital circulated in ways that defy our attempts to draw firm distinctions between public and private, and this itself should be a lesson about how impactful the margins and grey areas of legality can become.

MZ: Capitalism is often used as a vague umbrella category or simplistically identified with a general response to market trends. Could you explain the capitalist features of the Chinese opium business? What does it add to our understanding of capitalism? Why 'business' instead of 'trade'?

PT: This is a question that keeps me awake at night. As you note, 'capitalism' as a concept has the potential to distract rather than clarify. This is due to both definitional imprecision and legitimate differences in the world views of people who believe in ahistorical models and people who do not. I am of the latter persuasion, and I tend to talk about capitalism in terms of a periodisation of how businesses have interacted with the state historically. I view the concept of a 'free market' as fundamentally mythological; think about how central lobbying has been to the success of big business in the United States. These are people who clearly have not seen themselves as actors in a free market. So, for me—someone inter-

ested in the history of money and power—I think of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a historical moment when the technological foundation emerged for private individuals to accumulate and mobilise vast fortunes, which they used in part to try to influence the state in ways they deemed financially advantageous.

The book is called *The Opium Business* because, ultimately, the word 'business' captures the subject of inquiry better than any other. A book about the 'opium trade' would by nature be more global in scope, covering production in India and transport to China. My favourite books that fit that description are the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Here, I wanted to learn how the people in one small but particularly active region built and maintained their businesses over time—how they navigated illegality in the 1830s, the legalisation of the drug after 1860, and the reintroduction of prohibition after 1906. This is a book that explains how a major industry expanded and survived the transitions of the modern era. When I think about what was 'capitalist' about the opium business what comes to mind most immediately are the 'opium kings' of the early twentieth century: people who achieved incredible levels of vertical integration, overseeing and profiting from cultivation, manufacture, and distribution on both local and global levels. These are people who reinvested their profits, diversified their portfolios, maintained violently extractive relationships with labour, and made every effort to shape their relations with the state in an advantageous way.

So, if 'success' in capitalism is determined by a person's ability to continuously maximise their acquisition of profit, the story of opium illustrates how 'success' was in no way contingent on fair play. Manipulation, evasion, or outright flaunting of rules coincided with and advanced together with the creation of laws, regulations, and moral systems at least nominally intended to protect people and institutions against the depredations of profit-seekers. I suspect this is a core feature of modern capitalism, and not an aberration.

MZ: Do you think that different forms of capitalism inspired different approaches to the opium trade? For example, how did attitudes to opium differ between Fujian's mostly commercial economy (can we call it capitalism?) and the budding industrial capitalism of treaty ports such as Shanghai? Could we say, for example, that in Fujian, opium *was* the business, while in Shanghai, the business was industrial production and opium was a convenient source of capital? And is your story antithetical to the image of the treaty ports' industrialists as determined to 'save China through business'?

PT: Fascinating question. Opium was not 'the business' in Fujian, at least most of the time. The tea trade, especially in the northern half of the province, was more important, and in southern Fujian the maritime traders who dealt in opium were highly diversified. But there were of course geographic reasons the trade surged in Fujian at particular moments, in the 1830s and 1920s especially, stemming

from the province's close connections with Southeast Asia. You are right about Shanghai—though the question of how important opium capital was in Shanghai's development is one worth exploring, especially for people interested in the Shanghai capitalists. Hankou is another place that was for a few decades dominated by the opium business, when Chiang Kai-shek began his attempts to create a national centralised monopoly supplied from that city. That to me would be the most interesting comparison with southern Fujian, because of how both places assumed crucial roles in the opium supply chain following changes in state regulations. That Hankou's supply was domestic and Xiamen's (mostly) foreign might generate some new insights. Tianjin is another place of interest here, and Miriam Kingsberg (2013) has written a lot about attitudes towards opium during that port's period of Japanese rule.

The question of attitudes is one that I generally avoided in the book, for better or worse. The main reason is something akin to what we might call 'political correctness'; people in the Chinese press *never* said anything interesting about opium, because they all said the same thing. Newspapers proved to be a terrible place to learn about the opium business, because they simply did not acknowledge it in the same way as other businesses. The press in Xiamen and Hankou, I would hypothesise, were equally strident about the scourge of opium and silent about the local notables who profited from it. Interestingly, the Chinese-language press in Singapore was much less delicate in their treatment, and a lot of what I wrote about the opium business in Xiamen in the 1920s and 1930s I learned from Singapore newspapers.

Regarding the final question: I do not think opium's history changes much about how I understand the project of treaty port industrialists to save China through business. What if opium regulation had been just a little less corrupt and a little more centralised? I have evidence of tens of millions of dollars pocketed from what could have been state revenue—and what I have seen is just the tip of the iceberg. I do not have the answer for how states *should* regulate opium, but I am open to the idea that this enormous source of revenue could have been mobilised in a more productive way—one that dovetailed with the industrial projects designed to improve people's lives.

MZ: In placing the Chinese/Fujianese opium business in a global context, you stress the transnational maritime networks along which it developed. You also compare it with today's narco-capitalism. Could you elaborate on this comparison? In China, narco-capitalism appears to have been state-centred, departing from the private business model of today. In China, in fact, the opium trade became an important, although hidden, feature of the state's modernisation drive, while today's narco-capitalism seems to form an obstacle to economic development. China also seems to have differed from today's narco-capitalism in

terms of criminal status and its relationship with the state. In other words, did the involvement of the state change the criminal status of the opium business and, consequently, its relationship with the authorities?

PT: This is a great conversation to have and I will do my best not to annoy people who know much more than me about these other parts of the world and narco-capitalism today. But the heart of my answer is that state involvement varies across times and locations. Tajikistan in the 1990s, for example, has been described as a 'narco-state' because of the role of state officials in turning the country into a transit zone for heroin from Afghanistan (Paoli et al. 2007). The government in North Korea is another interesting place to look here.

Returning to China in the early twentieth century, the story of opium should not be understood in a top-down way, as the result of deliberate choices by people in positions of state power. If we look at negotiations between Xiamen's naval authorities and the chamber of commerce about the introduction of 'opium prohibition bureaus', for example, we see the buyers and sellers of opium holding the upper hand and forcing the state to accept their terms. So, I agree that narco-capitalism in China was state-centred, but all illegal drug trading is state-centred in the sense that it is only profitable because of state regulations. The extent to which state actors get involved in the business varies and, in some cases, states actively create policy to harness and develop an illegal drug industry. Appreciating the fluidity and following the trajectory of the state–business relationship is the most interesting reason to think across time and space and compare such places as Mexico in the 1980s and Fujian in the 1920s.

MZ: Returning to the issue of imperialism, could you elaborate on how your discussion of Japan's takeover of the opium business in East Asia contributes to our understanding of the changing nature of imperialism in the early twentieth century?

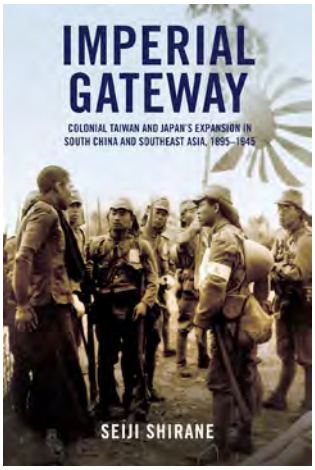
PT: This is another huge and fascinating conversation to me. I am eagerly awaiting James Gerien-Chen's forthcoming book on Japanese imperialism in Taiwan and south China, and that will really help expand our understanding of what happened in this region over the first half of the twentieth century. Did Japan 'take over' the opium business, though? I describe in Chapter 6 of the book how Japanese-protected businessmen took over the city's opium trade, but these were local people—some of them had never even been to Taiwan—and their profits were personal. My understanding is that the Japanese Government extended protection to people in the opium business because they were interested in converting any people of means in south China to Japanese citizenship, with long-term goals for dominating trade (in all goods) between Southeast Asia and China. So, opium here was just one part of the pie, and its

destabilising effects on local society were, I suppose, an ancillary benefit to those in Japan who wanted to increase Japanese influence by any means.

I really like the idea that you suggest here, however, that this was an important transitional moment in the history of global imperialism; this all coincides with Japan's slow disillusionment with the international order and the 'Great Powers' after World War I. British and American consuls in previous decades had been very concerned about the bad reputation that might reflect on them due to the lawbreaking behaviour of protected Chinese citizens from Singapore or the Philippines. The Japanese consuls in Xiamen after World War I did not seem to fret about how they were perceived by other consuls within the treaty port community.

MZ: Finally, what are the most important things you would like the reader to take away from you book?

PT: We have covered all the important threads of the book, so I will just say this: I got into this line of work because I like reading good stories, and I chose this project for the same reason. This book is full of real, sometimes quite weird, individuals and I hope that their stories can remind readers of the humanity at the heart of opium's history, which includes a great deal of violence and destruction. ■



Imperial Gateway: Colonial Taiwan and Japan's Expansion in South China and Southeast Asia, 1895–1945 (Cornell University Press, 2022) is open access on the publisher's website and on Amazon Kindle. It is also available in paperback (40% discount + free shipping code: 09EXP40).

Imperial Gateway

A Conversation with Seiji Shirane

Jeffrey WASSERSTROM, Seiji SHIRANE

How does one write the history of an empire? One approach is to focus on plans made in a metropole and carried out by armies and colonial officials in nearby or distant locales. Another highlights struggles in those targeted locales carried out by people threatened by imperial actions. And yet another combines a top-down concern with powerful figures in the metropole and military manoeuvres with a bottom-up interest in rebellions and everyday forms of resistance. All these strategies have been used to good effect in works on the Japanese Empire on which Seiji Shirane builds in *Imperial Gateway: Colonial Taiwan and Japan's Expansion in South China and Southeast China, 1895–1945* (Cornell University Press, 2022). What is most exciting, however, about his exhaustively researched, cogently written, and carefully argued new book is that Shirane treats Taiwan as both a place transformed by plans hatched in and people deployed from Tokyo and a launching pad for other imperial projects. He also offers a sophisticated analysis of the varied roles that different sets of people with ties to Taiwan played in the rise and fall of the Japanese Empire. The result is a work that makes major contributions to not only different fields in East Asian studies but also the literature on modern Southeast Asia.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom: The question the late Philip Kuhn used to ask after many Fairbank Center presentations in the early 1980s—the time when I first started attending academic talks—still strikes me as an apt one to open Q&A sessions at events as well as interviews about books. He used to ask speakers what surprised them most about the research they did for the presentation they had just given. What surprised you most as you were carrying out the research that resulted in *Imperial Gateway*?

Seiji Shirane: At the beginning of my project, I focused on Sino-Japanese relations between colonial Taiwan and South China. However, I soon realised that Japan's imperial advances in South China and Southeast Asia were intertwined and could be more effectively studied together. In studying colonial Taiwan's regional ties, my interest in Sino-Japanese relations went beyond the conventional focus on central China (Shanghai, Nanjing) and northern China (Manchuria, Tianjin). The Taiwan Government-General archives located in Taipei, which became publicly available in the 1990s, offered insight into how Japanese colonial leaders promoted Taiwan as a gateway to extend geostrategic, economic, and military interests

across the strait into South China. The Taiwan Government-General took advantage of the island's geographical proximity to and cultural affinities with South China—especially the shared Han Chinese populations—to elevate its strategic importance in Japan's southern empire. Japanese colonial leaders in Taiwan not only viewed South China and Southeast Asia as geographically connected, but also the Japanese terms *Nanshi Nan'yō* (南支南洋) and *Nanpō* (南方) collectively referred to them as one extended unit. I ended up devoting a third of the book (a chapter each on the prewar and wartime periods) to Southeast Asia. I did not really set out to write a transregional and comparative study of Taiwan's role as an imperial gateway into South China and Southeast Asia, but that is where my sources led me.

JW: Before asking my second question, I will note that your answer to my first might have interested Kuhn because he spent much of his career focusing on events inside China, but then due to an unexpected set of developments wrote a book about the Chinese diaspora, in which he naturally ended up dealing with Southeast Asia. Anyway, on to my next question. In his very interesting review of Ong Soon Keong's *Coming Home to a Foreign Country: Xiamen and Returned Overseas Chinese, 1843–1938* in the *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Chien-Wen Kung suggests we see that book as part of a set that also includes Melissa Macauley's *Distant Shores* (Princeton University Press, 2021) and Shelley Chan's *Diaspora's Homelands* (Duke University Press, 2018). What links them, he argues, is that each 'underscores the importance of Chinese migration and diaspora to the emergence of modern China and of viewing the south as part of a larger transnational maritime world'. Just as 'modern Chinese history, conventionally conceived, has benefited immensely over past decades from the so-called "Inner Asian Turn"', he muses, the recent 'turn toward the oceans and overseas Chinese societies' has had a similarly salutary impact on the field. I initially approached *Imperial Gateway* as part of a wave of exciting new work by scholars such as Kelly Hammond and historians of Manchukuo that examines the Japanese Empire in novel ways. But as I read it, your book could equally be seen as part of the development Kung has in mind. Of course, books can be part of more than one 'turn' or wave, but I wonder how you see *Imperial Gateway* fitting into these trends or genres.

SS: My book certainly tries to engage with the transregional and 'oceanic turn' in modern Chinese history. Over the past few decades, new works on Chinese migration, diaspora, and Sinophone culture have re-examined dynamic networks between South China and Southeast Asia in non-essentialist ways. With some exceptions, however, this new scholarship has yet to capture the attention of historians of Japan, which is surprising given how integral these ties were to Japan's empire. As early as the 1910s, Japanese colonial leaders in Taiwan sought to mobilise the Han Taiwanese as imperial liaisons for Chinese-speaking populations in Southeast Asia with whom they shared linguistic and native-place ties. During the Asia-Pacific War, tens of thousands of Han Taiwanese served in Japan's military occupation as interpreters, prison guards,

agricultural advisers, and company employees, often in positions of power over resident ethnic Chinese. Incorporating the story of the overseas Taiwanese as 'second-class imperialists' thus sheds new light on wartime Southeast Asian hierarchies and the intermediary role that Taiwan played in Japanese–Southeast Asian relations.

As for the field of studies of the Japanese Empire, I am in dialogue with recent works that increasingly highlight intra-imperial competition and interregional networks of personnel and commodities. Until the 2000s, the field focused on bilateral relations between Japan and its colonies. Conventional studies treated each colony as a discrete unit and highlighted vertical relationships between the Japanese metropole and its respective colonies. While much attention has been paid to bureaucratic rivalries in Tokyo, especially regarding Japan's occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and the leadup to the Asia-Pacific War in 1941, the role of colonial governments in Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan and their sub-imperialist aspirations have mainly been ignored. In dialogue with recent books illuminating Japanese bureaucratic competition between Korea and Manchuria, my book examines how the Taiwan Government-General's objectives for the southern advance were not necessarily aligned with those of the Tokyo central government. I analyse both the synergies and tensions between the Government-General's expansionist ambitions and Tokyo's imperial priorities, especially those promoted by the Foreign Ministry, army, and navy.

In addition, over the past decade and a half, historians of Japan's empire have increasingly studied mobile networks between colonies as well as in regions outside the formal empire. Along with growing scholarship on Korean migration to Manchuria, historians have traced Taiwanese mobility across the East and South China seas. Building on such works that challenge the spatial and analytic boundaries of the empire beyond Japan's territorial limits, my book seeks to weave together macro-narratives (intragovernmental and imperial rivalries) and micro-perspectives (those of Japanese and colonial subjects on the front lines of southern expansion). Rather than privileging a top-down narrative of state governance or a bottom-up story centred on colonial subjects, I try to illustrate how Japan's empire-building and on-the-ground activities by local actors were mutually constitutive processes.

JW: How important was oral history to your project, as there are some intriguing references to interviews scattered throughout the book?

SS: Although some Taiwanese subjects—educated elites and anticolonial activists—left written records about Japan's southern expansion, few Taiwanese in prewar South China and Southeast Asia left contemporary records. To explore the activities of individuals, I turned to reports from Japanese, Chinese, and Anglo-American offi-

cials in East and Southeast Asia, as well as local newspaper coverage. Oral histories were critical to the book's second half on wartime South China and Southeast Asia. I relied heavily on several volumes of oral testimonies by Taiwanese civilian and military personnel transcribed by historians of Academia Sinica's Institute for Taiwan History in the 1990s and 2000s. Oral histories compiled by the National Archives of Singapore since the 1980s also offered Singaporean perspectives on the wide range of roles played by Taiwanese personnel during the wartime occupation. There are methodological challenges, especially with using postwar Taiwanese oral histories and memoirs, which retrospectively interpret events through the lens of late twentieth-century views toward the Republic of China, People's Republic of China, and Japan. Still, such sources allowed me to incorporate firsthand experiences of Han and indigenous Taiwanese subjects missing in Japanese official archives.

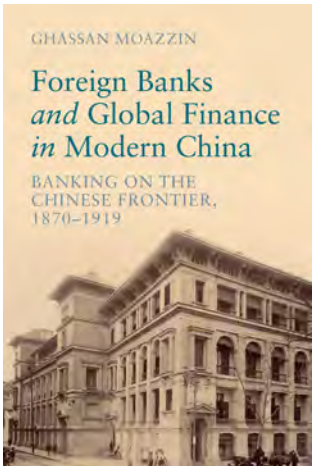
JW: How do you think about the field of Taiwanese history and its relation to Chinese history, Japanese history, or both these fields? Does it still seem marginalised, increasingly relevant, or perhaps both marginalised and relevant? And how does the answer to these sorts of questions vary if we think about the state of the field in Taiwan itself versus in other settings?

SS: At the crossroads of multiple empires over several centuries, Taiwan is critical to our understanding of East and Southeast Asian history. One can only answer some of the questions I had about the island and its residents by looking at their connections to mainland China, Japan, Southeast Asia, the United States, and beyond. Through the 1990s, Anglophone scholarship framed colonial Taiwan and its residents as peripheral to Japanese history. However, the past few decades have given rise to a new wave of studies that no longer privilege Japanese colonial perspectives but instead place equal, if not more, emphasis on Han and indigenous Taiwanese actors. My book builds on this wave to help decentre the study of Japan's empire, shifting the focus away from the metropole by taking Taiwan seriously as a multi-ethnic site of political, social, economic, and cultural transformations with amorphous networks extending across East and Southeast Asia.

The research for this book was only possible with access to the collections of primary sources and the thriving field of Taiwanese history within Taiwan. My work is heavily indebted to pioneering scholarship by Chung Shu-ming and others at the flagship Institute of Taiwan History in Academia Sinica. The institute has collected a wealth of Japanese and Taiwanese sources and published oral histories, memoirs, and diaries that have revolutionised the field. Chinese-language sources (primary and secondary) are thus indispensable for Anglophone scholars working on colonial Taiwan.

JW: Now that there is increased interest in exploring the complexities of Hong Kong's period under British rule, do you see possibilities for new kinds of comparative work that brings together the fields of Hong Kong history and Taiwanese history? That seems an intriguing idea to ponder as discussions of Hong Kong and Taiwan are increasingly entwined in debates about contemporary geopolitics.

SS: Present-day Hong Kong and Taiwan are critical comparative case studies for journalists and political scientists. But as you point out, despite exciting new work on colonial Hong Kong and Taiwan, there needs to be more comparative historical work on the two regions. My book on Taiwan as a gateway for Japanese imperial networks between the island, South China, and Southeast Asia might pair well with recent monographs highlighting colonial Hong Kong as a trans-Pacific node for migration, goods, and capital. In the introduction, I briefly go over the similarities and differences in Taiwan's role as an imperial gateway compared with Japan's other colonial territories in Korea, Manchuria, and Micronesia. There is still much work for future historians to analyse the connections and comparisons among colonies across the Japanese and Western empires. ■



Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China (Cambridge University Press, 2022)

Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China

A Conversation with Ghassan Moazzin

Matthew LOWENSTEIN, Ghassan MOAZZIN

Ghassan Moazzin's *Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China: Banking on the Chinese Frontier, 1870–1919* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) is a scrupulously researched and riveting story about the Deutsch-Asiatische Bank (DAB), a German bank that was active in China between 1890 and World War I. The DAB rose to become the peer of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) and a major underwriter of Chinese Government debt. It also built a successful commercial business, financing international trade between China and the West. The book draws on intensive archival research from Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and Taiwan, leaning especially heavily on the rich collection of archives in the two European countries. It challenges the received notion of foreign banks in China as being mere expressions of foreign imperialism, highlighting instead Chinese agency and the interdependence between foreign bankers and their Chinese customers.

Matthew Lowenstein: The DAB was one of the most important banks in Chinese and, arguably, global financial history. Yet, before you started researching it, almost no-one had heard of it, and even scholars in the subfield—myself included—were mostly ignorant of its significance. Why was this bank ignored for so long? What did the focus on HSBC—almost to the exclusion of all other foreign banks—obscure? How and why was the DAB different from other foreign banks?

Ghassan Moazzin: I think there are broadly two reasons why the DAB has received relatively little attention so far. First, while the DAB and other foreign banks have of course also been covered at times in the previous literature, Frank King's four-volume commissioned history of the HSBC remains the most widely read work on foreign banks in China, which, in turn, naturally drew much attention to the HSBC. Second, the HSBC simply was the leading foreign bank operating in China at the time. Something we see in the case of the DAB is that it represented a new form of foreign bank when it entered China in 1890, as it united the interests of the German capital market. More broadly, what I think is naturally lost by paying too much attention to the HSBC is the breadth of different foreign banking institutions operating in China in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the narrative of *Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China* centres on the DAB, one of the things I hopefully managed to do in the book is to give an idea of this diversity.

ML: You draw on a wide array of state and bank archives from Germany, the United Kingdom, and China. How did you track down these collections? Did you notice any other interesting materials that you think merit further scrutiny?

GM: As I guess is true for many historians, the archival research was probably the most pleasant part of working on this book, and I was luckily able to draw on many Chinese, English, and German-language archives in the process. In terms of the European archives, tracking them down was relatively easy. Not only are archives in the United Kingdom and Germany comparatively open and convenient to use, but I found that these archives contained a wealth of information on the China-related activities of the DAB and other foreign bankers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As for the Chinese side of my story, thanks to the kind help of Professor Mao Haijian, I was able to spend an extended period as a visiting scholar at East China Normal University in Shanghai, which allowed me to visit and use many archives and libraries in mainland China. In addition, a stint at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, where I was kindly hosted by Professor Chen Yung-fa, proved very useful in collecting additional Chinese sources. As for interesting materials that might be useful to other historians, a general piece of advice I have for those working on Chinese business and economic history is to look at the wide range of foreign sources on the Chinese economy that are available, especially as Chinese archives often remain difficult to access. Moreover, I would encourage scholars to not only look at English-language archives, but also explore sources in languages other than English, such as the rich sources available in German and Japanese archives and libraries.

ML: The concept of the treaty ports as a 'frontier' is innovative and highly insightful. It allows us to, as you say, 'highlight both the complex nature of the environment they operated in and the fact that these banks exemplified much of the ambiguity of the frontier on China's coast' (p. 10). How is a frontier different from a border? Were treaty ports a *European* or a *Chinese* frontier—or perhaps a mix of each in distinct ways?

GM: In the book, I draw on the work of Robert Bickers, Christian Henriot, and others who have discussed frontiers and frontier spaces because both the environment of foreign banks on the China coast and the activities of foreign banks in the period I examine were full of fluidity and contradictions, and thinking of the DAB (and other foreign banks) as a 'frontier bank' is a useful heuristic device

for overcoming and complicating simplistic analyses of foreign banking in modern China. The China coast was a space marked by Sino-foreign interaction where Chinese and foreign power intersected, so that it cannot easily be branded as 'Chinese' or 'European'.

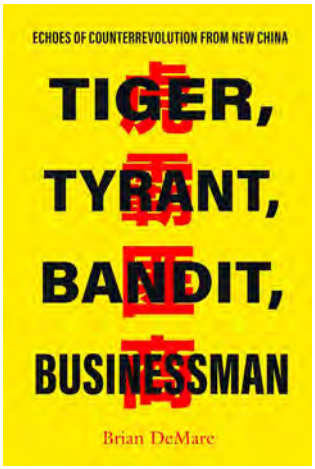
ML: In World War I, the bank's delicate position as an honest broker pursuing good business without regard for national prejudice became untenable. The Allies essentially purchased China's entry into the war and all but forced the Chinese Government to let British officials liquidate the bank at bargain-basement prices. This story is told in riveting detail and high suspense in your final chapter. It also leads to a highly nuanced understanding of political risk. What does this tell us about the nature of political risk more broadly?

GM: This chapter indeed was a lot of fun to write in part because it provides such a sharp contrast to the rest of the book in that it really is World War I when the globalised world of the China coast came up against the hard realities of war and many things that until then had been taken for granted—be that cooperation among foreign banks or transnational friendships—suddenly came to be questioned. Moreover, the war also generated a lot of wonderfully interesting stories related to individual bankers. These range from the generous treatment Heinrich Cordes, one of the most prominent German bankers, was given in Chinese captivity to the adventures of Alfred Eggeling, a colleague of Cordes who fled Beijing and dressed as a monk to escape arrest.

As for political risk, the final chapter shows that when it came to major geopolitical events such as war, there was only so much foreign businesses in China could do to manage political risk. While elsewhere in the book I show how foreign banks were quite adept at managing political risk during and immediately after the 1911 revolution, the DAB's attempts to use their financial resources to avert a Chinese entry into the war eventually were unsuccessful. Without generalising too much, I think working on the DAB and the book has certainly made me somewhat more sceptical of the ability of multinational companies to manage global geopolitical shifts and the political risk that such shifts engender.

ML: Reading this book, I had a sense of a moral as well as a business narrative. The German bankers really believed that by integrating China into the global financial system, they were serving China as well as Germany. Today we live in an era of increasing isolationism. China, the United States, and to an extent Europe are sceptical of migration, free trade, and the idea of an internationally integrated economy. What does the story of the DAB tell us about the ideal role of banking and trade? Can capital truly be global and is this an ideal to which it is worth aspiring? Or will nation-states always force bankers to pick a side?

GM: As a historian, I am hesitant to generalise too much about issues such as the 'ideal role of banking and trade' or global capital flows. However, a lesson I have taken from working on the case of the DAB, writing *Foreign Banks and Global Finance in Modern China*, and reading other scholarship is that a backlash against globalisation creates problems for globally operating businesses. In recent years, international banks have fallen victim to the increasing political tensions among nation-states and now face new obstacles in their global operations. Here, the HSBC and current calls for breaking up the bank are a good example, of course. Similarly, if tensions between the United States and China further escalate in the coming years, it will be interesting to see how internationally involved Chinese banks will deal with these tensions and possible sanctions or other consequences. The manoeuvring that some Chinese banks did due to Western sanctions on Russia this year might already foreshadow such issues. ■



Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution from New China (Stanford University Press, 2022).

Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman

A Conversation with Brian DeMare

Ivan FRANCESCHINI, Brian DeMARE

The rural county of Poyang in northern Jiangxi Province goes largely unmentioned in the annals of modern Chinese history. Yet records from the Public Security Bureau archive hold a treasure trove of data on the everyday interactions between locals and the law. Drawing on these largely overlooked resources, in *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution from New China* (Stanford University Press, 2022), Brian DeMare follows four criminal cases that together uniquely illuminate the dawning years of the People's Republic of China.

Ivan Franceschini: Your book is based on four criminal casefiles produced by security officers in Poyang County, Jiangxi Province, in the early years of the People's Republic of China, each of which is related to a different investigation into counterrevolutionary activities in the area. What challenges did these sources present and how did you deal with them?

Brian DeMare: The documents contained in the four casefiles are, by a wide margin, the most difficult and burdensome sources I have ever encountered in my two decades as a historian. Their authors often wrote in non-standard or incorrect characters, creating a continuous stream of textual problems. A mistake I found in the book's third casefile, 'The Case of the Bodhisattva Society', provides a fine example: entering a wrong name into their records, security officers accidently obscured the identity of an important victim. Their mistake vexed me for years until I came across the victim's correct name buried in a long list of local martyrs. As a historian, there is nothing quite like the rush of solving a longstanding archival mystery. These moments, however, are hard-earned.

The most challenging aspect of these documents is that none of them can be taken at face value as 'true'. Every voice in this archive is suspect. Witnesses stressed their innocence at every turn. And security officers had rigid preconceptions about rural society and the citizens they charged as 'counterrevolutionaries'. There is no way to truly solve these textual problems. My strategy was to bring the reader into the process of working with these documents and reveal a bit of insight into the craft of history. Navigating the casefiles is no easy task, but the reward is an intimate view of rural revolution through a multiplicity of fascinating and real-life characters.

IF: Why did you choose to arrange the book around the stories of four individuals (the tiger, tyrant, bandit, and businessman of the title), rather than a perhaps more straightforward chronological approach?

BD: My process of working with the individual casefiles led to the book's unique structure. At the start of the project, my main goal was a comprehension of the basic contours of each case. This required putting together a timeline of events. The casefile narratives grew naturally through the process of writing, as archival finds enriched and challenged my understanding of the events of the four cases. Workshopping the book with my students confirmed my belief that the process of rural revolution was best told through a series of smaller stories centred on individual experiences. This also allowed me to put a spotlight on the amazing characters I discovered in the documents. Then one of my readers suggested that the book would benefit from a timeline that wove all four casefiles together. I quickly discovered that lining up the various dates of crimes, arrests, and executions revealed the contours of the arrival of Communist power in the countryside. This is an important story that I explore in the book's conclusion.

IF: In the book's subtitle, you refer to 'New China'. What do the stories included in the volume tell us about continuities and discontinuities between the new state established by the Communists and earlier regimes?

BD: When my modern China survey course reaches 1949, I always pause to discuss the many similarities between the Republic and the People's Republic. But from the perspective of Poyang citizens, the local People's Government was a radical innovation, starting with its promise to serve the people. Work teams brought the state ever deeper into the countryside through mass movements, political, and legal campaigns designed to root out the old elite. The power of New China caught some Poyang villagers by surprise. Big Tiger, a major player in the book's second casefile, lived in a tight-knit mountain community. Far from the county government down in Poyang Town and surrounded by his influential and protective family, he had been used to getting his way. Bureaucrats serving previous regimes had long desired to extend the reach of the state to communities such as his but had been consistently stymied by families and other local networks. As readers will discover, Big Tiger would realise that the cadres of the People's Government were able to flex their muscles in the most remote of mountain communities.

IF: Regarding this issue of continuity and rupture, I was particularly intrigued by your discussions of the 'weaponisation' of language not only by the newly established Party-State but also by ordinary citizens. Old derogatory terms like 'bandits', 'evil tyrants', and 'fake' officials

were now used in new ways, to support the Communist project to reorganise Chinese society from the grassroots. At the same time, ordinary citizens appropriated this new language in their petitions, accusations, and self-defences. However, you also mention that 'the labels the party handed out were often ill-fits for the citizens who endured them, but all too often the label mattered more than reality' (p. 52), and you argue that 'the weaponized words of the revolution became especially dangerous as they became disconnected from the reality of the rural scene' (pp. 77–78). How did a discourse that in many ways was so detached from reality manage to take root so quickly in Chinese society? What does this tell us about the relationship between language and power?

BD: Poyang citizens were quite adept at using the Party's rhetoric in the statements they made when dealing with the new regime's legal system. They quickly understood that language and power were now inseparable. By mastering weaponised words, Poyang citizens appropriated the power of the state for their own aims. It is striking how easy it was for rhetoric to displace reality. In the book's final casefile, an innocent man is nearly executed for a host of unsavoury crimes he never committed. In the end, the Communists got it right and released him from jail. But the fact he was so easily transformed into a counterrevolutionary underlines how the power of these weaponised words was rooted in their flexibility. Some weaponised words, such as 'bandit', had long been used with little regard for reality. And new terms like 'counterrevolutionary' and even 'landlord' found surprising applications in Poyang villages. As I argue in the book, this was not a phenomenon unique to Poyang, but in fact a defining feature of the Chinese Revolution.

IF: From phantomatic secret societies coalescing around holy statues to ghosts of undead landlords roaming the countryside, from Daoist fortune-tellers predicting the death of Mao Zedong to rumours about an impending Nationalist return, another recurring theme in the book is that of superstition and 'fake news'. How did the new Communist powerholders deal with that challenge?

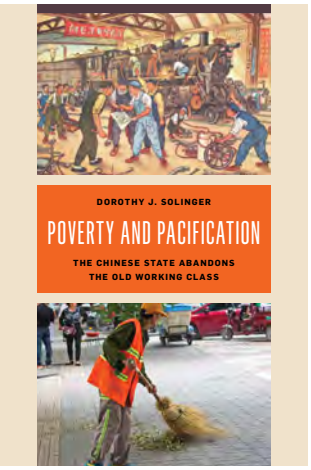
BD: There is no doubt that during this moment of regime change, policing the line between true and false was essential for the Communists. But the scope and intensity of superstition and rumour in the Poyang countryside made this a challenging task. While I expected to find some rumours, such as the oft-told tale of the imminent return of the Nationalists, others surprised or even shocked me. The legend of a landlord coming back from the dead to roam the mountains and threaten the new regime was particularly fascinating. In response, Poyang security officers travelled to the landlord's home village to dig up his grave, revealing his rotten corpse. This extreme commitment to dispelling rumours suggests that, for the Communists, command of the truth was essential to their command over the countryside.

IF: In all the casefiles on which you worked, only one woman is mentioned, and it is in a less-than-flattering way, in relation to an affair she had with the criminal Big Tiger. What does this absence from the official record tell us about the situation of women in those early years of the People's Republic?

BD: The lack of female voices in the casefiles was a tremendous disappointment but not a surprise. The crimes at the heart of the cases—murder and counterrevolution—are typically male endeavours. That made the tale of Miss Zhao, who found herself entangled with Big Tiger, all the more fascinating. Her ability to navigate her lover's downfall and criminal prosecution while divorcing her husband highlights both her personal agency and the centrality of women and sexuality in village China. She appears in the documents because her personal ties with Big Tiger helped directly lead to his trial, but there is nothing in the casefile that suggests she was otherwise noteworthy. I have come to believe that women played important but hidden roles in all of the book's four casefiles and invite readers to think about the many women who helped shaped Poyang history.

IF: In the gallery of characters you portray, is there one you favour? I found myself sympathising with Merchant Zha, the protagonist of the fourth casefile, a poor fellow who had terrible luck and made all possible wrong choices at the wrong time.

BD: The book starts and ends with two great characters. The first casefile features Scholarly Wu, a Confucian gentleman who nearly found himself marching with bandits to take on the People's Liberation Army. And I close the book with the case of Merchant Zha, who as you mention was an outsider dogged by bad luck. These two men suffered no shortage of misfortune, but luckily Scholarly Wu and Merchant Zha both had their day in court. In their testimonies, they insisted on their innocence, and I was lucky enough to find their voices in the archives. Discovering and sharing the voices of these two fascinating but flawed rural citizens has been one of the highlights of my career as a historian. Perhaps that's why these days I find myself most thinking about Kuang Number Four, the peasant who unwittingly played a decisive role in the downfall of what security officers called the Bodhisattva Society. Because his testimony is missing from the archives, his voice has been lost to history—a small tragedy in the epic story of China's revolution, but a tragedy nevertheless. ■



Poverty and Pacification: The Chinese State Abandons the Old Working Class (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

Poverty and Pacification

A Conversation with Dorothy J. Solinger

Jenny CHAN, Dorothy J. SOLINGER

Dorothy J. Solinger's latest book, *Poverty and Pacification: The Chinese State Abandons the Old Working Class* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), is dedicated to 'all of those whose lives were wrenched' in globalising China. Solinger is passionate about working people, including rural migrants and laid-off urban workers, as reflected in her decades-long commitment to activism and scholarship. As Chinese workers—to this day hailed as masters of the nation—were laid off during successive waves of economic restructuring in the 1990s and 2000s, they often found themselves depending on minimum livelihood allowances (最低生活保障, or *dibao* 低保 for short), desperate to make a decent living in a pitiless job market. With an eye on the new urban poor, Solinger offers a reassessment of China's quest for wealth and power at the turn of the new millennium.

Jenny Chan: In *Poverty and Pacification*, you focus on the plight of laid-off urban workers (下岗工人), who are middle-aged and older and who lack formal education and marketable skills, and were thus poorly positioned to achieve success in the new labour market following the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. Your work describes the emergence of the new urban poor as not merely the inevitable outcome of marketisation, but rather as a state-led process in which reform-minded politicians chose a different path of national development and capital accumulation. Can you provide some background about this state initiative and its impact on the older cohorts of workers in state-owned enterprises and collective firms?

Dorothy J. Solinger: I argue that China's imminent entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO)—which took place in late 2001, but which had been under negotiation by then for some 15 years—drove the Chinese rulers to order weaker enterprises across the country to dismiss tens of millions of less qualified, but previously lifetime-secure, workers, especially from 1995 to 2004. The politically driven indigence that resulted derived from the ways in which these leaders imagined development and thrust the nation on to a specific path of 'modernity' that cast aside older workers who were over the age of 35 as of the mid-1990s, relegating many of them to a new status as the urban poor. These are people who had been deprived of secondary schooling (and beyond) during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when most schools were shuttered, and who generally had been consigned to mastering just

one simple, antiquated machine for all their working lives. This emerging urban poor class thus became the artefact of the enactment of official preferences for a new political economy in line with WTO membership. Accordingly, I contend that throughout the past quarter-century, the appearance of working-class hardship in the metropolises—and the manufacturing of an urban underclass—has not been accidental, but rather a result of the urban working class being deliberately discarded.

JC: In the 1990s, young rural migrants were often seen as adaptive and productive, while urban state workers of the older generations were denigrated as backward and inefficient. The ideological values of 'equity and collectivity' had long been supplanted by 'efficiency and competitiveness'. When laid-off workers, retirees, and pensioners took to the streets to demand unpaid wages and benefits, the state eventually responded by offering some assistance, such as the *dibao* program. Can you please explain the objectives and content of this policy?

DS: The *dibao* was billed as 'social assistance' (社会扶助) and the 'third line of defence' (第 三条 保障线), after two previous attempts to forestall protests over job loss and—minimally—to shore up the livelihoods of dismissed workers had failed. These earlier plans were labelled 'the Reemployment Program' (再就业工程) and 'unemployment insurance' (失业保险), neither of which could amass sufficient funds to fulfil their objectives. In the speeches of top officials, including then premier Zhu Rongji, the *dibao*, pioneered in Shanghai in 1993 and instituted nationwide in 1999, was plainly described as having been created to stave off political/social instability and turmoil that could derail the regime's project of enterprise reform (Ding 1999). One writer in the journal *Chinese Civil Affairs* (中国民政) even went so far as to refer to the *dibao* as a 'tranquiliser' (定心丸) that would permit the state enterprises in Shenyang's Tiexi District—a site of massive layoffs—to go forward without obstruction (Ding 1999: 7). Without it, this essayist unabashedly penned, 'these people must become a burden that the enterprises would find it hard to throw off … possibly arousing even larger social contradictions' (Ding 1999: 7).

Dibao standards (低保标准) are a minimal threshold for bare subsistence, or poverty line, determined locally, usually at district or city level. The goal of the *dibao* program was to provide for urban residents whose household's per capita income failed to reach this threshold. The method was to supplement household income with a subsidy (补助) to the extent necessary to bring their per capita monthly income up to the level deemed requisite for basic survival in their city or district of residence. The project was proudly labelled by its publicists a 'standardised, legalised, social guarantee system'—a characterisation more aspirational than actual (Ding 1999). The idea behind the policy amounted to supplying impoverished individuals

with funds that were 'just enough to keep body and soul together', in the words of a leading scholar researching the program within China, Tang Jun (2002: 4).

Indeed, the overall outlay was fundamentally terribly stingy, with the handouts barely marginal. And even after a sizeable increase in the number of recipients from 1999 to 2003 (from 2.8 million up to 22.5 million), those served in the cities still accounted for under 5 per cent of the non-agricultural (that is, urban-registered) population. Yet, as numerous economists have calculated, the truly impoverished urban population might well have been more in the range of 8 to 10 per cent (Wang 2003; Zhang and Peng 2014: 44).

JC: The great labour upheaval was a foreseeable consequence of the capitalist road taken by Deng Xiaoping and his successors. The state chose to push for modernity and protect the rising market economy by throwing more than 60 million state-sector workers out of work. Drawing insights from E.P. Thompson and Elias Canetti, you show that China's urban workers were cast aside as a policy choice to achieve the reformists' political and economic agenda. In the context of that policy choice, what role does *dibao* play in policing and pacifying these displaced workers?

DS: Local implementers found the *dibao* scheme to be a success in achieving their economic goals. In interviews conducted by Chinese scholars in both Changsha and Chongqing (Han 2012: 372, 426), local program staff contrasted the time before the scheme had been installed with the situation afterwards: 'At the time of the transformation of state enterprises, the *dibao* played an absolute stability role,' said one. Another related how bridges had been blown up and streets destroyed before the system was implemented, but thereafter 'the anger wasn't so great, and the *dibao* had a very big role in social stability'. So, for the authorities, given their aim of mollifying the outrage among the past, now retrenched, proletariat, the *dibao* was a kind of victory, the nuisance that the wrath from laid-off workers had earlier occasioned having been largely resolved. This judgement surely held for the local cadres who administered the program and who dealt directly and daily with its beneficiaries; it was the case for central leaders as well, it would appear, given the scheme's gradual reduction after about a decade, as demonstrations diminished and eventually disappeared.

JC: In 2006–07, to maintain social stability, social assistance schemes were extended to the rural-registered populace. However, there have been massive cuts in the number of *dibao* beneficiaries, dropping from an all-time high of 75.86 million (22.8 million in the cities and 53.06 million in the countryside) in 2011 to 43.17 million in 2019. At the same time, rural poverty alleviation has drawn greater public attention in the Xi Jinping era. What are the reasons behind this policy shift and the dramatic cutback in the number of *dibao* beneficiaries?

DS: It is difficult to be certain about why the leadership under Xi Jinping switched its primary focus to the poor in the rural areas after coming to power. References to Xi's much-heralded campaign to wipe out poverty in the country have not usually mentioned that it has had *only* rural destitution as its target. But this is indeed the case. It is not so often noted that it was the impoverished population in the countryside that was 'lifted up'. Indeed, rural poverty declined from 94.2 million in 2000 down to 36 million in 2009, a rapid reduction, such that the national poverty rate—but, again, only in the rural areas—fell from 10.2 per cent to 3.8 per cent over those years (Dou 2016). In 2011, just on the eve of Xi taking power, the government set forth a 10-year project to further reduce poverty in the rural regions, with the result that by mid-2020 a claim was put forth that 850 million people had been 'raised out of extreme poverty' (Dou 2016; Hernandez 2020).

One can only conjecture about this changed emphasis. Perhaps it was the result of ongoing disturbances in the countryside (mostly over land grabs); perhaps it occurred because it was simpler to transfer sums to whole agrarian regions at one time than to pick out the poor, neighbourhood by neighbourhood or household by household, in urban areas. The rationale has not been offered publicly, to my knowledge.

Cities, contrariwise, have seen a huge cutback in *dibao* beneficiaries: they dropped from 23.5 million in 2009, at their peak (in the midst of the Global Financial Crisis, when many jobs were lost), down to 7.25 million in 2021. Again, the cause behind this decline has not been made clear, except for claims that those taken off the rolls had received their pensions or found jobs. My book examines these claims statistically and finds them quite wanting. One can only surmise, as I suggested above, that the policy was considered a success, even as other social groups, such as college graduates and migrant workers, turned boisterous. Another conjecture is that the leaders decided that the *dibao* was best reserved just for the truly desperate, such as the members of the old *sanwu* (三无)—those without a source of livelihood, a legal supporter, or work ability—which scattered data suggest may be the case.

JC: Policy implementation is conflict ridden. You show how local cadres often fail to explain clearly the *dibao* norms or the rationale for the disbursement of *dibao* funds. They also exercise discretion in mitigating risk by giving *dibao* monies to 'troublemakers' who may not be the neediest. At the worker and local state interface, how did *dibao* households attempt to defend their rights, interests, and dignity? Can informal work, outside the parameters of China's labour law system, sustain the basic needs of these poor households?

DS: First, it is not only 'troublemakers' who are favoured, though that is an argument made with credible support in Jennifer Pan's fine 2020 book, *Welfare for Autocrats*. But my work showed that this is just one of the perversions of the policy. Grassroots cadres control the flow of information about new policies and modifications of old ones, and so are well positioned to inform only some people about the program, as well as to direct funds not necessarily to the poorest, but to people with whom they are close and with whom they sympathise, not just with those whom they find fearsome. In fact, there is even a name coined for that practice: *qingbao* (情保), meaning favouring dear ones with the assistance.

Another deviation from policy is that city governments whose administrative capability and resources are in short supply may dole out money as a function of the amount of resources the city's financial officers have decided to allocate to this project. Unfortunately for potential recipients, leaders with the power to determine that sum tend to rank the *dibao* as a low priority (Leung and Xu 2015: 88).

The existence of quotas for neighbourhoods and for higher administrative levels presents another obstacle to providing those in need with support. The slogan 'guarantee as much as possible the allowance for all who deserve it' (应保尽保) was purportedly the operative order for dispensing the *dibao* beginning in 2001. In fact, multiple sources have confirmed that instead a train of quotas beginning in Beijing is passed down the hierarchy, with decisions reached on restrictions and upper limits at every administrative level. This is not openly announced and so has been surrounded with some speculation. A 2013 study surmised that, 'It is likely that there is a budget for the program, and that officials cannot accommodate more applicants than the budget allows. There's suspicion that there's an undisclosed ceiling on *dibao* payments' (Chen et al. 2013: 333).

The process was already implicitly revealed in a 2005 policy paper, which explained that: 'We have to use insufficient funds to set the numbers of people [who will get funds]; there's a man-made control of the *dibao* numbers' (Hong 2005). The statement implied that in practice it is predetermined quotas at least as much as need that regulate who become recipients. Relatedly, in August 2008, a university professor in Wuhan affirmed in an interview with me that the city Civil Affairs Bureau first calculates how many recipients it has decided the city should have. Next, the bureau wrangles with its peer urban bureaus—for instance, arguing that increases in prices influence people's livelihood and thus affect stability, and in

this way presses for a rise in the threshold line or for funds to cover more applicants. But its success is by no means guaranteed, as it must compete for funding with other and perhaps more favourably placed bureaus.

Five years later, the same evidence was offered by a high-level official at the Department of Social Assistance at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, when he acknowledged in an interview that I conducted in September 2013 that quotas do exist in the allocation of the *dibao*. He specified that local governments place caps on the numbers of citizens who can obtain the grant, as follows: 'The local *dibao* norm is set in direct relation to a locality's funds. A lot of [city] departments together decide on how much money to give to the *dibao.* All the bureaus [in the city government] debate about this. Finally, the city leaders decide [on a level of outlay for the city's *dibao* as a whole].'

As for the strategies employed by *dibao* households defending their rights, interests, and dignity, in general their responses have been expressions of anger and only on an individual level. Along these lines are accounts that mention 'throwing and smashing'; 'sleeping on the ground and won't get up'; 'everywhere making chaos, staying around in the room, maybe lying down and not moving … and wanting to go to cadres' homes to eat' (Han 2015: 134). Community officials in Lanzhou in July 2010 described to me the sorts of nuisance that the occasional dissatisfied person stirred up when angry: they would 'stand in the doorway obstructing our work and cursing us. We have to send for the community's civil police to get them to shut up. They come one by one.' In Wuhan, a community *dibao* manager imparted this story during an interview in August 2008: 'They threaten community managers that they'll jump off the Yangzi Bridge or go to Beijing to petition [which could damage an official's career].' As researchers in Shanghai explained during a discussion at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in June 2013 citing one distraught, harassed local cadre: 'If they stir up trouble [闹] or petition [上访], local leaders will become afraid and give the *dibao* to the troublemakers [刁民].' As another community official described the situation:

> We're a punching bag, dealing with the lowest stratum of people … he [referring to a *dibao* applicant] thinks they're in the right and should get the *dibao*, if we explain the requirements, they don't pay attention to you, very many people pound the table, glare at you, a common occurrence. (Han 2015: 303–4)

And can informal work sustain their basic needs? Many *dibao* recipient families are by no means shirking work. One of my interviewees, whom I met in August 2007 in Wuhan, was quite representative. A man of 44, reflecting on his possibilities, despairingly offered this defeatist perspective:

> We all grew up in the city, didn't eat any bitterness [没吃苦] and didn't do any heavy physical labour. Now in the labour market there's some construction work and it all demands rather a lot of such labour. They wouldn't want us 40-year-old laid-off workers, and there's some work that, if you give it to us to do, we couldn't manage such intensity, eventually we'd just damage our health and have to take medicine, and trying to work would become even more untenable.

The same sentiment appeared in a conversation in Chongqing with a 45-year-old woman, who had been laid off along with her husband. The questioner asked: 'Did you want to take the *dibao*?' The respondent replied:

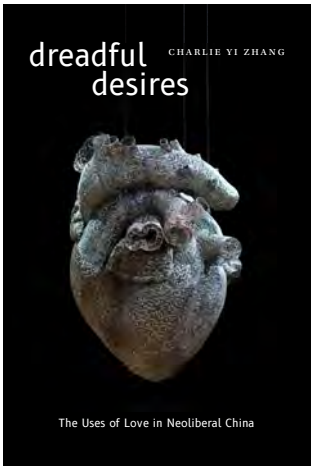
> No, I wanted to work, now I'm old, going out to look for work, people ask your age, once you say 45 or 46, they don't want you. I'm embarrassed to take the *dibao*, working is definitely better, why would you want to take the *dibao*! Other people will think if you take the *dibao* you must be very poor, but now there's no way because society already has become this way … if you don't take it, go out to look for work, how can you do it, because age limits you, women all must be under 40, over 40 they don't want you, so at this age we can only drift along, there's some years before retiring, there is no way. (Han 2015: 273)

JC: In comparative perspective, China was less generous in its provision of social assistance than many nations in the European Union, where the level of welfare provision could be as high as 50 to 60 per cent of per capita income. During 2006 and 2019, China's urban *dibao* ranged between 15 and 18 per cent of national average disposable income. Is there a way for disadvantaged citizens to fight for stronger social protection? What about rural migrants and the masses of the poor?

DS: I don't believe that there's a way for these rejected older workers to fight for and attain better welfare allocations. I am sorry to say that the Chinese Government no longer cares about them. On occasion rural migrants have improved their situations to a small extent, such as with regard to wages, but I am not aware of welfare enhancements. Perhaps some managed to get some of their overdue pension contributions paid in.

JC: The subtitle of your book is *The Chinese State Abandons the Old Working Class*. According to the logic of certain schools of economic thought, when a national government provides credit to underperforming public sector enterprises, debt builds up and unfair competition between the state and non-state sectors deepens, weakening the economy. How would you defend your critique of the Chinese state's abandonment of the old working class against the logic of neoliberal economics? Was there an alternative path that might have led to greater social and economic justice?

DS: I cannot dispute a claim that these once less qualified but secured-for-life labourers, their dated machinery, and their obsolete factories constituted a drag on the national economy and its rulers' move to modernise, especially in the case of those money-losing state-owned firms that were fed endless inputs of state investment and loans. But surely the workers could have been seriously retrained and far better provided for once their jobs were taken from them. ■



Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China (Duke University Press, 2022)

Dreadful Desires

A Conversation with Charlie Yi Zhang

Shui-yin Sharon YAM, Charlie Yi ZHANG

In his new book, *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Duke University Press, 2022), Charlie Yi Zhang explores how the Chinese State mobilises love to regulate the affective economy and life choices of its population. Affective notions of love, Zhang demonstrates, are constructed in a way that bolsters nationalism, heteronormativity, and neoliberalism—forces that render upward mobility unattainable for many. Through ethnographic research and critical analysis of Chinese popular culture, Zhang argues that working-class Chinese people are motivated to work towards a good life that they can never quite achieve. As Ari Larissa Heinrich remarks in his endorsement of the book, *Dreadful Desires* 'offers to do for love in China what Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, does for hope'. It prompts readers to consider how love can be weaponised to support oppressive systems of gender, class, and sexuality.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: Why did you choose to focus on affect and emotion—specifically, love—to examine the neoliberal Chinese State?

Charlie Yi Zhang: I first came to the United States for graduate school in the fall of 2008. Right after I started my graduate studies at Arizona State University, a financial meltdown took place in the United States and soon raged across the world. Its disastrous consequences spawned heated debates over the neoliberal model of market fundamentalism, which was considered to have paved the ground for the crisis. While the United States and Europe were mired in the financial trouble and ensuing recession for years, China pulled itself swiftly out of the turmoil through a $586 billion stimulus package. Acting as a benevolent lender, it also morphed into a saviour of the Western world. With the support of larger policy toolkits, long-term state planning, and higher allegiances of enterprises to the government, the China model was embraced by critics of the Western neoliberal paradigm as the alternative to solve the worsening economic problems at the time. But as someone who grew up during China's transformation since the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, I see its social upheavals as part of, rather than external to, the global neoliberal restructuring. I decided to pursue this topic in my dissertation and explore how China has become an integral part of the global neoliberal system while simultaneously emerging as an 'Other' to it.

Undoubtedly, the so-called China model has kindled enduring interest and curiosity among academics. Many scholars propose new frameworks—such as 'State Capitalism', 'Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics', 'Contagious Capitalism', or 'Market Leninism'—to capture and explain China's dazzling development as a top-down process of structural changes. Informed by anthropologists such as Aihwa Ong, Lisa Rofel, and Stephen Collier, I take a different approach, hoping to develop a grounded and holistic view showing how market subjects—or '*Homo economicus*'—are created within a tightly controlled society to liberalise the economic system and fulfil the marketising transition. I find Michel Foucault's framework of biopower and biopolitics useful for my project, which provides me with a tool to engage with how identity-induced categorisation shapes individualities and realigns Chinese people's self-regimentation with a mode of social life that is mainly driven by the market rather than by the state. Like some critical scholars, such as Pun Ngai, Yan Hairong, and Everett Yuehong Zhang, I use Foucauldian analytics to trace how categories of gender, sexuality, and class are manipulated and deployed as governing techniques to create different subjects for exploitative use by capital and the state—a shift of self-governance that lays the ground for structural changes.

I also find the Foucauldian framework inadequate to develop a full picture of the dynamic process through which the gendered, sexualised, and classed biopolitical instruments are translated into individual subjectivities in line with the neoliberalising agenda. As Foucault suggests, the *raison d'être* of neoliberal governance is to create rational subjects who are motivated to maximise their personal interests to sustain market competition as the central mechanism to organise and administer the whole society. But as my fieldwork shows, the sacrificial love for their family, instead of calculative rationality to optimise personal interests, is the major driving force that motivates many rural workers to take on detrimental and even life-threatening jobs. This form of love generates thick affective attachments, moving them out of themselves, often against their rational calculation, towards the good-life dream that this love is expected to help them realise. In other words, they are reproduced as 'irrational' dream-pursuers willing to work for all but their own wellbeing, contributing to a seemingly inexhaustible source of labour for the collective interests of the state and capital.

Scholarship of affect studies is vital for me to reframe my conception of neoliberalism. Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) offers a formidable example elucidating how neoliberalism works not only through calculative rationality, but also through affect to modulate and orient our sensibilities and sense-abilities. Neoliberalism, she suggests, is not just 'a world-homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests, such that their singular actions only seem personal, effective, and freely intentional'; but also, more importantly, takes shape through 'the messy

dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present' (Berlant 2011: 15). As our shared historical present, neoliberalism is 'a thing that is sensed and under constant revision' through what Berlant calls 'a fantasy of the good life' (2011: 3). With the promise of 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality … durable intimacy … [and] meritocracy' (Berlant 2011: 3–4), this fantasy energises and forages in the postwar restructuring in Europe and the United States by plunging people into the endless search for a good life that often ends up being disappointing rather than fulfilling.

My book can thus be seen as an intervention to the claim of universal rationality as the epistemic foundation of neoliberalism and ideological leverage of its global domination. It interrogates the ways in which the Chinese State appeals to and re-creates emotive attachments surrounding the family-centred form of love, and integrates rationalised biopolitical control with pre-emptive conditioning of affective tendencies to energise and stabilise China's transition from socialism to neoliberalism. Showing how affect, particularly that of love, and rationality are implicated with each other through manipulative production and reproduction of gendered, sexualised, and classed disparities, I discern and dissect the central mechanism as what I call the 'difference-making machinery' that plays a key role in enabling and sustaining the unfolding of neoliberal relationships in the Chinese and transnational contexts. Like the workers interviewed for this project, I came from a lower-class background and left my home at an early age, then moved out of China and across the Pacific Ocean in my late twenties to pursue my good-life dream. I share their conflicted feelings about the love-ignited aspiration and fully identify with them. I feel obligated to unpack this love-informed mirage that is essential to China's neoliberal transition.

SSY: In your book, you examine a wide range of cultural artefacts and ethnographic data. Can you tell us more about your methodology? How did you decide what data to collect and analyse, and how did you deploy an intersectional feminist approach?

CYZ: I was trained in gender and sexuality studies—an interdisciplinary field that is driven by issues of social inequality and foregrounds the promotion of social justice as its goal. Instead of being trained in established epistemological paradigms and methodological trajectories, we approach social problems from multiple perspectives that require methodological flexibilities to develop a holistic view for solution. As mentioned above, my book project aims to identify and unpack the mechanism that both integrates China into and separates it from the global neoliberal system, which calls for multidisciplinary resources and mixed analytical tools to engage the dynamics between structural changes and people's mundane lives for a holistic understanding of China's social upheavals. In this

light, the book is divided into two parts. The first part probes the temporal and sociospatial registers of the affective structure of love to demonstrate how desires for a good family life are orchestrated in ways to serve the interests of the state and capital. It focuses on public culture as the major object of analysis, attending to the intertextual and extratextual modalities of transnational discursive exchanges as they circulate between China and other parts of the world to plot the genealogies and topologies of love as meted out of the phantasmagorical vectors of gender, class, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. The second part examines how affectively registered love and rationalised biopolitical regulation are coordinated by the bifurcated engineering of differences of gender, sexuality, ethno-race, and class to complement each other in sponsoring China's neoliberalisation and neocolonial expansion, while spawning unending contradictions that create room for subsistence and survival for subaltern groups, such as migrant workers and well-educated urban women, who are considered to be 'unlovable' and 'unable to love'. This part draws on formal interviews, informal conversations, focus groups, and participant observation, and supplements and cross-references the empirical data with the findings of the discursive analysis shown in the first part. Drawing on a variety of materials, it keeps track of people's quotidian lives as the grounded effects of the difference-making machinery to illustrate how it subtends and upholds the transnational neoliberal system and spawns fissures and ruptures for substantive social change.

As noted by many feminist scholars of colour and transnational backgrounds, another limitation of Foucault's analytics of biopower and biopolitics is its one-layered, sexuality-focused, and flattened scope. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (2008) proffers a lucid revelation showing how other biopolitical parameters, such as gender and race, interconnect and interact with sexuality to build a multidimensional and multidirectional controlling and regulative system that she calls the 'matrix of domination'. This apparatus has expanded its vectors wildly and relentlessly across nation-state boundaries in the age of globalisation and taken a far more complicated shape to set up, distribute, and administer variously organised disciplinary and regulatory regimes to substantiate and invigorate neoliberalism's global reign. Taking cues from women of colour and transnational feminisms, I posit that the difference-making machinery has knitted a multidirectional and multidimensional network to shore up the daily operation of global neoliberalism. Via the intertwined parameters of gender, sexuality, class, and race/ethnicity, new patterns of disparities are generated in transnational settings to pit the working majority against one another for manipulative uses by capital to squeeze the most out of their labour value. In the meantime, social hierarchies are reproduced through this power-web at local levels to alienate the marginalised majority from each other, thwart their collective energies that can shake the institutionalised systems

and established apparatuses skewed towards capital and the elite minority, reinforce the market-centred paradigm of governing, and perpetuate the uneven distribution of benefits and opportunities across the globe. To capture and unmask this machinery's cross-border operation, I take an intersectional approach to build a nodal point—'a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities' (Cho et al. 2013: 788).

Its analytical sharpness for structural and systemic inequalities notwithstanding, the intersectional approach, as Jasbir Puar (2007: 212) points out, also suffers a lacuna in that it

> demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification.

To redress this problem, queer or colour analysis proffers a methodology of 'working on and against categories' that José Esteban Muñoz (1999: 11–12) calls 'disidentification', and strives to 'enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance' to transform 'a cultural logic from within'. Echoing the call for the integration of intersectionality and the queering methodology, I remain attentive to the messiness, interstices, and built-in connections of different and differentiating biopolitical parameters that are seen as self-evident, pre-established, and beyond meaningful scrutiny. Moreover, showing that emerging patterns of difference in gender, sexuality, class, and race/ethnicity are relational rather than oppositional, my goal is not to re-create normative biopolitical parameters to perpetuate neoliberal dominance, but to call for concerted endeavours to move beyond the status quo for concrete social change.

SSY: Part of your book is based on ethnographic research and interviews with rural migrants, local farmers, and workers. What aspects of their experiences do you think need to be further amplified to develop a more robust understanding of neoliberal China?

CYZ: Most of the fieldwork about the migrant worker communities was completed in the spring and summer of 2012 when China's neoliberal economy reached its apex in the so-called Golden Age—that is, the first post–WTO-entry decade under the leadership of President Hu Jintao (2003–13). Building on this empirical work, I provide some relatively positive accounts of the lives of workers in my book. For instance, the divergent *modus operandi* of the biopolitical system and affective structure of love have spawned the relative labour crisis that severely impacted the export-processing

and construction industries in China. This labour shortage contributed to some concrete changes for those at the lower end of the labour division, such as improved working conditions and increased incomes. However, the enlarging rift between China and the Western world and, in particular, the intensifying geopolitical rivalry with the United States and the Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated the economic decoupling process. As a result, many manufacturing jobs have been relocated to countries in South and Southeast Asia, and the real estate bubble in China appears to be bursting. Undoubtedly, migrant workers and rural residents bear the brunt of the recession, and many of them are struggling with the economic hardships, which are further compounded by the Chinese Government's stern zero-Covid policies. New empirical work is much needed to reflect the new trend. Moreover, my analysis predominantly focuses on the life stories of the migrant workers who are impelled by their love for the family to work away from home while the lived experience of those left behind at home by them—namely, their children and ageing parents—is barely discussed in the book. I hope to address this lacuna in my future work to develop a more robust understanding of contemporary China.

More importantly, as President Xi Jinping secured his third term at the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022, there are more signs that the Party-State is ready to retreat from the market-driven neoliberal model and revert to the autarkic socialist planned economy as China is mired in aggravated socioeconomic and geopolitical predicaments. Building on the sophisticated surveillance system powered by digital technologies, the Chinese State is now equipped to achieve real-time control across Chinese society in ways that the Maoist regime was never able to and to re-establish the self-reliant economic system if pressure keeps mounting and explodes into irrevocable consequences. Scholars should continue to engage with the changes that derive from the restructuring process and keep a critical eye on emerging patterns of disparities spawned by China's transition from neoliberalism to what Xi calls 'socialist modernisation'.

SSY: Your book attends to the ways in which gender normativity, patriarchy, and heteronormative intimacy bolster Chinese neoliberalism and nationalism at the expense of marginalised workers and working-class people. Why is an attuning to gender, sexuality, and affect important in understanding political economy and nation-building?

CYZ: As Aihwa Ong (1999) and Nancy Fraser (2009) both point out, the dominant framework in the studies of neoliberal globalisation treats it as either homogenising economic rationalities or cultural dynamics that shape human identities of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, and subjectivities. Indeed, as a set of contingent practices to solidify self-serving market fundamentalism as the first and fore-

most principle to reconstitute social life and human subjects and identities, neoliberalism, according to Foucault, steers and stewards global restructuring through the interpenetrating deployment of two forms of power: on the one hand, disciplinary power that centres on singular bodies to individualise human beings as self-interest–driven subjects to live the marketising *telos*; and on the other, sovereign power that targets the collective body of the 'population' to subtend, permeate, and perpetuate social institutions and infrastructures to create conditions and delimitations for the living of the marketising *telos* by the individualised subjects. The differing and often contradictory *modus operandi* of disciplinary and sovereign power for managing human populations and individual lives, as my book shows, are among the roots of unresolvable tensions between the national and the global as instantiated by the recent rising nationalist backlash against globalisation surging around the world.

My book traces the daily workings of the identity-grounded machinery of difference-making, the dynamics and processes of organising and configuring these differences to actualise neoliberal materialities and discursivities into subjectivities and lived experiences, while simultaneously mapping the contingent ruptures, cracks, and crevices within the machinery for transforming that actuality into otherwise. As the central argument of the book proposes, it is through the intersection of gender, class, sexuality, and race/ethnicity that a transnational network of power has been woven to drive and uphold global neoliberal restructuring. The disciplinary power wrought through gender, sexuality, class, and race/ethnicity produces differences across nation-state borders for capital to capture and turn into new opportunities for profit. Building on these identity categories, the network also generates new differences to redraw and patrol boundaries to perpetuate the unequal distribution of interests produced along and within nation-state borders. The intersectional system of difference-making lays a network that grounds the transversal flow of disciplinary and sovereign power to serve global neoliberalism: the former generates and reinforces differences to ground the latter for preserving and protecting vested interests, and the latter reconfigures and consolidates conditions, infrastructures, and institutions for the cross-border operation of the former to create new differences for more benefits. In brief, serving as the nexus, the network incessantly morphs and mutates to tackle the contradiction and tension emanating from the tug of war between the border-crossing disciplinary power to claim more interests that abounds in the global and the border-affirming sovereign power to restructure vested interests grounded in the national.

SSY: While the book focuses on China, you have taken a decidedly transnational approach to your analysis, placing the Chinese State in conjunction with transnational neoliberal forces and right-wing nationalist politics. In my reading, doing so helps mitigate two damaging

tendencies: romanticising China, and constructing a rigid binary between China and the West. Can you speak more about the importance of situating China's political economy in a transnational context?

CYZ: In recent years, we have seen that nationalism, particularly extremist forms of nationalism, is on the rise across the world, prompting waves of backlash against economic globalisation. In his incendiary and vituperative inauguration speech in January 2017, Donald J. Trump portrayed a bleak picture of the United States and depicted millions of Americans as victims of globalisation. Promising that 'the American people' under his aegis would 'be forgotten no longer', he brought into light an inward-looking, nationalist–populist vision for remaking the country (Trump 2017). Just three days prior to Trump's inauguration, Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his plenary speech at the World Economic Forum meeting at Davos, made a different comment on globalisation and fervently defended its benefits. A major beneficiary of the globalised economy and victimiser of the working poor that Western politicians lambast frequently, China, in Xi's words, is poised to take the mantle of leadership abandoned by Trump's United States to push forth the globalising process, marking a sharp departure from the nationalist tidal wave in the developed world. Four months later, Xi opened China's own globalisation forum with a $78 billion pledge that well befits its self-projected new role as the advocate and founder of a 'Community of Common Destiny with Mankind' (人类命运共同体) (Mardell 2017).

However, despite their contrasting world views and tones, Trump and Xi converged towards an identity-paved road that they lay out to lead their nationalist/globalist envisioning into fruition. Trump—stunning both the left and the right—rode a racist, xenophobic, misogynist, and ableist campaign into the White House, vowing to upend identity-based 'political correctness', raze the established bureaucracies, and bring jobs back to salvage struggling US workers to 'make America great again'. Comparably, Xi's plan to 'comprehensively deepen China's reform' and build a new growth model is undergirded and bolstered by gendered and classed biopolitics. In the policy package that he proposed in 2013 to initiate the most far-reaching economic reform since 1978, the plan to relax the population control of the One-Child Policy and the household registration system (*hukou*), among others, attracted the most attention. As I show in the book, building on the intersectional biopolitics of gender and class, the Chinese State developed an array of policies for the calculated management of the population and created an enormous pool of hyper-exploitable migrant workers to transform China from an economic backwater into one of the world's most vibrant workshops.

These issues provide a starting point for my book: what is the mechanism that has integrated China into, but meanwhile set it

apart from, the global network of capital dominated by the West until recently? Using a developmental powerhouse with continental proportions like China as a lens, what larger picture can we capture to apprehend the mechanism that has informed and enabled globalisation and, more recently, surging nationalist/antiglobalist uproar? Given the disturbing arrangements built on this mechanism, what are the conditions in which new forms of livelihood and sociality can emerge, survive, and thrive? And, if we believe all social life is material, grounded, and embodied on a daily basis, how can critical scholars committed to social change uncover and access these potentialities for a love-enabled future?

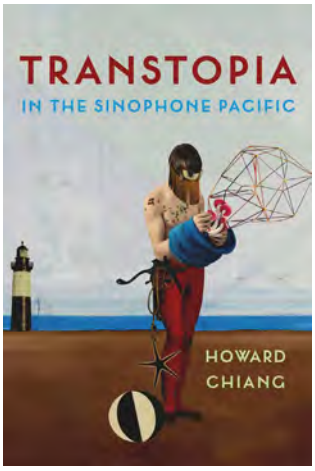
Centring on China's social transformation, my book aims to cast new light on the underengaged interrelationship between neoliberal economics and the cultural politics of identities and subjectivities. The lack of analytical and methodological frameworks to fully account for and scrutinise, much less disrupt, this relationship creates the conditions for our current vexing conundrum. It leaves ample room for right-wing politicians like Trump to turn the presumably pluralist 'identity politics' on its head into a hateful, masculinist, and white-supremacist nationalist discourse and package it into a 'pro-labour' populist narrative—a strategy that secured his electoral victory—and to deepen and harden the privatising, deregulating, and welfare-slashing neoliberal agenda. It also enables autocratic rulers like Xi to manipulate identity-induced differences to reshape the Chinese population and individual lives to charge the economic enterprise and push forward its imperialist expansion, which, in turn, is justified by a self-righteous narrative of globalism/cosmopolitanism. The critical understanding of this relationship, as I see it, is the first step to build an alternative path that will lead us beyond the status quo to a better future.

SSY: Over the past few years digital state surveillance has proliferated, in China and elsewhere. How has that influenced the affective attachments of Chinese people and those in the Sinophone world? What affective trends do you expect to see in the future?

CYZ: In the conclusion of the book, I briefly discuss the new paradigm of governance that is emerging in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown in the book, the Chinese State constantly resorted to the established disparities of gender, class, sexuality, and ethno-race to structure and regulate individual subjects and populations to fuel and sustain China's neoliberal transition. In the face of the unrelenting challenges to and resistance from marginalised groups, it now strives to utilise state-of-the-art digital technologies and build an omnipresent surveillance system to fortify its manipulative management of the Chinese people by subjecting the gamut of emerging potentialities and affective tendencies associated with living to maximum control and real-time processing. With

bio-molecular and organic qualities and textures opened for unencumbered access and ceaseless processing by the state, the body 'no longer inhabits disciplinary spaces, but is inhabited by them' (Puar 2017: 57), and the bodily habitation of the backwardly identified gendered, classed, sexualised, and ethno-racialised differences gives way to full-scale inhabitation of the body to mine granular variation and infinite mutation for future utilitarian differences. The goal is to trace all trails of human lives and living to forestall their actualisation into real crises and better garner their potentialities for the benefit of the Chinese State.

I elaborate on this new mode of pre-emptive governance in a new article that is forthcoming in *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Zhang and Zhang 2023). Using as an example Health Code, a smartphone-based application for contact tracing and risk assessment that has served as the Covid-19 health passport in China, we discuss how the pre-emptive social regulation that targets data rather than human subjects (through identity categories) has become a dominant mode of governance as China faced boiling crises spawned by its decades-long neoliberal practices—even before the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. Via a brief review of China's transition from socialism to neoliberalism, we demonstrate how the tenet of citizenship shifts from 'biological/biopolitical' to 'biometric' as the state's political and economic agenda shifts along the process. Using media coverage and comments from social media as primary sources of analysis, we also explicate how the use of Health Code helps the state consolidate the new mode of pre-emptive governance, turning the relatively stabilised temporal basis of biological/biopolitical citizenship into fragmented temporalities to tighten social control. It improves the state's capacities of self-revamping and self-preservation and provides more options to harness people's biopolitical values but disrupts the habituated way of living and further marginalises the groups with diminishing re/productive values. As a result, *tangpingism* (躺平主义, which means lying flat or doing nothing and promotes a minimalist lifestyle that rejects any consumption beyond the basic needs of subsistence) has become popular among many Chinese people. By reducing life to a minimum level with barely any contributions to the biopolitical agenda, this way of living is seen as 'subversive' by the state and poses a damning threat to the technologically engineered system of biometric citizenship aiming to fully register and harvest people's life values. It can thus be viewed as a creative form of nonviolent resistance against the state apparatus empowered to prime the scope of life potentials for its own benefits and has piqued dramatic responses from the state. It has also been adopted by many people across Sinophone societies, including pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, as a nonconfrontational strategy to push back against the increasingly intrusive Chinese state power. ■



Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific (Columbia University Press, 2021)

Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific

A Conversation with Howard Chiang

Shui-yin Sharon YAM, Howard CHIANG

Howard Chiang's *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (Columbia University Press, 2021) articulates a methodology that connects Sinophone Studies with transgender history. Specifically, Chiang argues for the need to 'reorient the way transness and queerness are understood in the field of Asian studies' (p. xii). Drawing on transnational archival materials and cultural artefacts, he demonstrates the intimate ties between geopolitics, gender mutability, and queer and trans performances across time and national boundaries. In this conversation, he elucidates on the impetus behind this project and its implications.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: In the book, you write: 'I use transtopia to refer to different scales of gender transgression that are not always recognizable through the Western notion of transgender' (p. 4). What prompted you to make this ontological intervention? Does using transtopia as an analytical lens necessitate particular methodological approaches?

Howard Chiang: In light of its Western origins, the notion of transgender carries a cultural baggage that needs to be denaturalised. We all know that the very presence of gender norms and conventions conditions the prospect of their subversion and, at various points in time or space, there is evidence of social actors crossing the borders of gender to varying degrees. However, I am not sure that transgender, as an umbrella category, is the best way to capture or describe those historical phenomena. In fact, some readers of my earlier edited volume *Transgender China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) suggested that the examples in the book were simply 'not trans enough'. That was the main reason that motivated me to find a different conceptual framework to describe these variegated experiences of gender transgression. As David Valentine's book *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Duke University Press, 2007) has shown, a social and intellectual movement coalesced around the category of transgender only by the 1990s. So, this recent genealogy of the term must be taken into consideration as we rethink our approach to queer history, especially in a cross-cultural context. Rather than necessitating a particular

methodological approach, using transtopia as an analytical lens entails an epistemological overhaul that decentres the categories we think we already understand.

SSY: Throughout the book, you identify the ways in which transness is articulated and performed differently in transnational contexts. This seems to be informed by your notion of 'strategic structuralism' (p. 20). You argue that 'social categories, like the category of transgender, have no intrinsic nature and carry no inherent value' (p. 20). By deploying strategic structuralism, however, we can at least 'provisionally accept the structuralist foundations for social cohesion as a strategy for collective representation' (p. 20). Without this concept, it will be difficult to illustrate how trans subjects are connected across time and place. Can you say more about why and how this concept is useful in your own work, in queer and trans* studies? While strategic structuralism can be mobilised to facilitate coalition by highlighting 'emergent modes of solidarity' (p. 20), can it also be deployed as an oppressive tool against non-normative bodies?

HC: Readers familiar with postcolonial theory will recognise the similarity between what I call 'strategic structuralism' and what Gayatri Spivak once called 'strategic essentialism'. If, for Spivak, the strategic deployment of essentialism serves a political purpose, I want to think about how we can render certain subjects or events as trans by not relying on a core notion of identity. Like I said, if the conceptual potency of transgender really took off in the closing decades of the twentieth century, it makes little sense to suggest that earlier historical actors, especially non-Western subjects, identified as transgender (or trans for that matter). However, if transtopia performs the analytical work of identifying the structural trends and patterns in which transness, as we currently perceive it, assumes salience, this opens a horizon of critical inquiry that can also serve a political end, especially coalitional ones. Although I do not identify as transgender in the traditional sense of the term, I comfortably claim a transtopian standpoint. This is because my affinity with folks who self-identify as trans is now routed through the coordinates of a shared commitment to anti-transphobic justice. Such reorientation in subject positions allows us to challenge the structural and conceptual issues that continue to be passed as normal in transphobic discourses. And you are absolutely correct on the possibility of strategic structuralism being deployed as an oppressive tool. Just like the way cisgender and heterosexist essentialisms have operated as a pervasive tool of repression throughout human history, transphobia has never ceased to work in structural terms. Thus, my hope is that transtopia can respond accordingly by dismantling structural transphobia. I invoke the 'strategic' dimensions of transtopia because I know that, for many, transgender identification is deep-seated and no less real than transtopian desires.

SSY: You borrow concepts and language from mathematics and science when describing your own methodology. What do those frameworks allow you to do that concepts from the more conventional humanities do not?

HC: On a fundamental level, I want to discourage the disciplinary division that permeates the sciences and the humanities. As we know, the prioritisation of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects over the humanities and social sciences is characteristic of most modern universities. By borrowing concepts and language from mathematics and science to throw light on cultural and historical phenomena, I hope to demonstrate the heuristic import of cross-disciplinary dialogues, especially those conversations that upend the hierarchy between STEM and the humanities. This not only de-territorialises certain concepts, such as titration, it also positions their use-value beyond a purely scientific discipline (for example, quantitative chemistry). So, rather than seeing this method as allowing me to do something that conventional humanities concepts do not, I would instead call attention to the underlying intellectual preoccupations that cut across disciplinary divides. The fact that scientific concepts such as surjection, asymptotes, and isomerism and poststructuralist theories of assemblage and supplementarity share an aim to deduce certain underlying structures of a system suggests that the animosity between the sciences and the humanities is as much constructed as is the system these disciplines seek to understand.

SSY: While most existing work in trans studies focuses on the history of sex science in the West, you have made a very compelling case connecting the historical development of sexology transnationally. How does understanding this confluence extend current research and discourse in queer and trans* studies or trans historiography more specifically?

HC: The relationship between sexual science and the formation of gender and sexual minority discourse and subjectivity nests a long history of scholarly debate. I teach some of this material in my undergraduate survey course, 'Sex, Science, and Society: A Global History', at the University of California, Davis. Most recently, critics in trans studies have offered a proliferating interpretation of this relationship, which can never be reduced to either purely repressive or liberatory in nature. The way my book captures the global dimension of sexual science, especially in relation to queer and trans formations, is intended to extend this discussion. Above all, the various examples offered in the book seek to complicate the meanings of both 'science' and 'transness' in transregional contexts. That there are other experts in sexology situated outside the West and a diverse range of subjects in trans historiography imply the need for a more nuanced approach—even a more coeval understanding of

how historical events interrelate. At the very least, it should caution against a presumed universalism often found in claims made by scholars of trans studies and sexual science in the West.

SSY: In Chapter 2, you outline several reasons Queer Studies needs Sinophone Studies, rather than China Studies. Specifically, you argue that Sinophone Studies prompts us to interrogate China-centrism, Han-centrism, and the oppressive colonial practices of the Chinese State. A Sinophone lens also allows for more acute transnational attunement in our analysis of gender and sexuality—one that, as you suggest, emphasises 'minor-to-minor relationality' that is not subjugated to China, Japan, or the West. What trends did you observe in Queer Studies that prompted you to make this intervention?

HC: This question presumes a degree of familiarity with Sinophone Studies, which may still be rather foreign to some readers. So let me begin by just defining Sinophone Studies as the study of Sinitic-language communities and cultures around the world, especially in response to the hegemonic production of nation-states and colonialism. One of the most important interventions of recent queer theory has been the questioning of the way queerness helps to maintain the apparatus of nation-states. I am thinking of, for instance, the theory of homonationalism developed by Jasbir Puar and others. At the same time, the expansion of queer or colour critique and queer settler colonial studies has pushed me to think about issues such as race and indigeneity in a comparative framework. China scholars do not talk much about race, or indigeneity for that matter, so I have been very puzzled by claims that seek to centre China or China Studies as a way to unsettle the Western bias of queer theory. Not that it is a disingenuous project, but it often turns a blind eye on issues such as comparative racialisation and the oppression of native indigenous populations (the People's Republic of China does not implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). In contrast, Sinophone Studies calls attention to these issues, including the notable problem of Han-centrism that continues to plague the field of queer Chinese Studies and other mechanisms of minoritisation ignored by Asia scholars. These issues are explored further in the volume I am currently editing, *Queering Taiwan Studies*, based on a conference that I co-organised with Shu-mei Shih at the University of California, Los Angeles, earlier this year, as well as my current work on racial capitalism and trans indigenous studies in Taiwan.

SSY: What kinds of scholarship or inquiries would you like to see emerge from the queer Sinophone method you propose?

HC: There are so many possibilities here and, as the co-editor of the Global Queer Asias book series published by the University of Michigan Press, I am already receiving many interesting submissions that reflect these new and exciting trends. One direction would be a deeper engagement with Sinophone Southeast Asia and its interaction with other regions in the world, including East Asia and Asian America. The work of Ting-Fai Yu and Wen Liu represents a promising development in this regard. Another direction would be to think about how Sinophone theory helps scholars to deconstruct the forces of oppression within neoliberal China, and the scholarship of Hongwei Bao, Shana Ye, and Charlie Zhang exemplifies this rich engagement. I am also hopeful that more critical attention to race, indigeneity, ableness, diaspora, religion, sexual conservatism, and cross-disciplinary approaches will chart fresh horizons in the field. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

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