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Beyond the Great Paywall

A Lesson from the Cambridge University Press China incident

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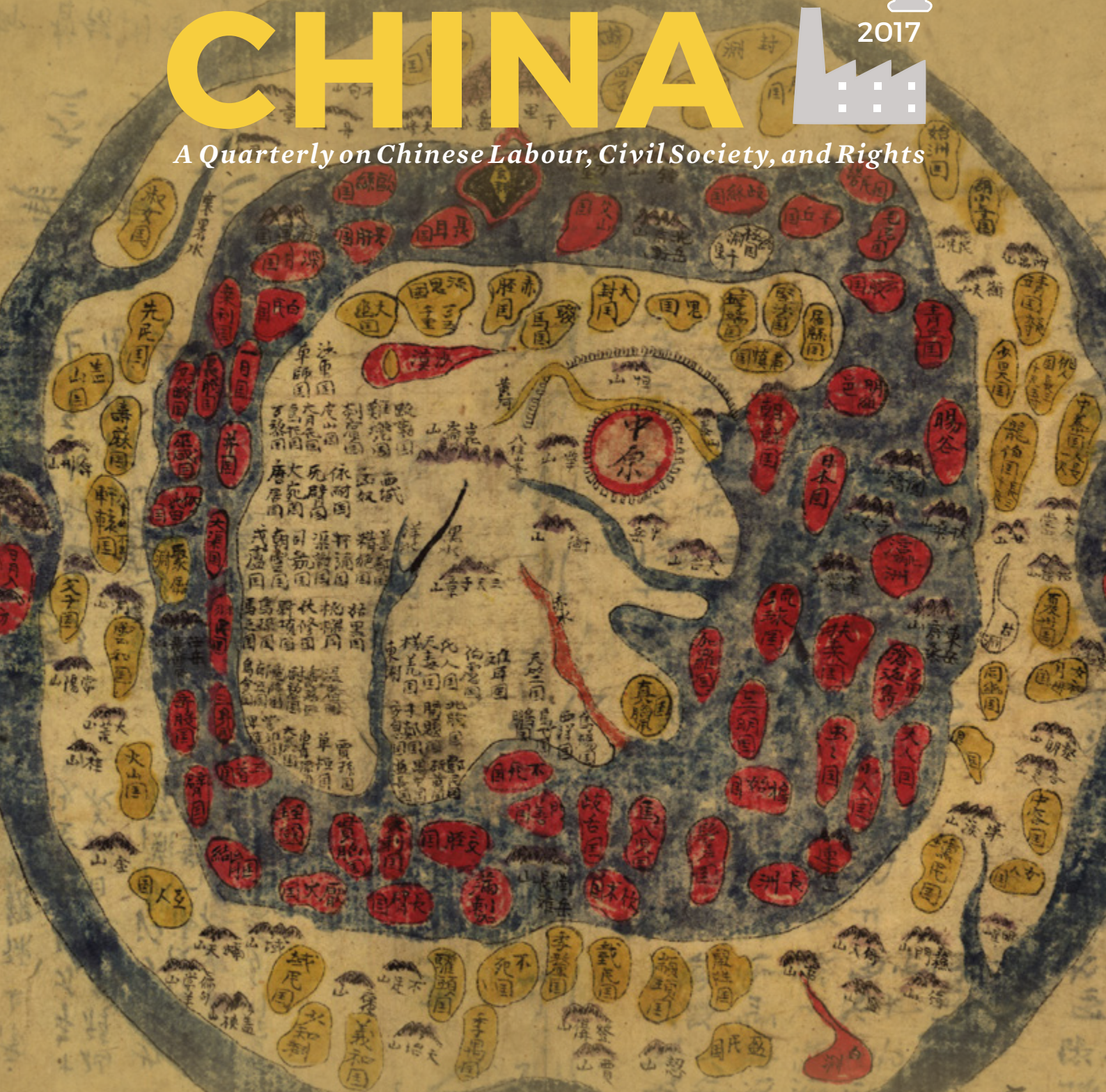
MADE IN CHINA



2017



A Quarterly on Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights



VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3:

CHINESE LABOUR IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Chinese World Map, Ming Dynasty



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Prague National Gallery (P. 72)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL (P. 5)

CHINESE LABOUR IN A
GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

BRIEFS (P. 6)

CHINA COLUMNS (P. 10)

THE MENTAL HEALTH
COSTS OF REPRESSION
(P. 12)

Nicola Macbean

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING
OR UNIVERSAL BASIC
INCOME (P. 16)

Kevin Lin

#iSLAVEat10 (P.20)

Jenny Chan

FOCUS (P. 24)

CHINESE MULTINATIONAL
CORPORATIONS IN EUROPE:
RACING TO THE BOTTOM?
(P. 26)

Zheng Yu

Chris Smith

LIQUID LABOURSCAPE (P. 32)

Antonella Diana

OUTSOURCING
EXPLOITATION (P. 34)

Ivan Franceschini

TRADE UNION REFORM IN
ONE-PARTY STATES: CHINA
AND VIETNAM COMPARED
(P. 42)

Anita Chan

PROSPECTS FOR US-
CHINA UNION RELATIONS
IN THE ERA OF XI AND
TRUMP (P. 48)

Katie Quan

FORUM (P. 54)

TREATING WHAT AILS
THE STUDY OF CHINESE
POLITICS (P. 55)

William Hurst

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS
BLOOM (P. 60)

Christian Sorace

BEYOND THE GREAT
PAYWALL (P. 64)

Nicholas Loubere

Ivan Franceschini

WINDOW ON ASIA (P. 67)

IN THE SHADOW OF KEM
LEY (P. 69)

Astrid Norén-Nilsson

WORK OF ARTS (P. 72)

AI WEIWEI'S #REFUGEES
(P. 73)

Giorgio Strafella

Daria Berg

COLLECTING THE RED ERA
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA
(P. 78)

Emily Williams

ACADEMIC WATCH (P. 84)

MEDIA POLITICS IN CHINA
Maria Repnikova

Chinese Labour in a Global Perspective

In today's globalised and interconnected world, Chinese labour issues have become much more than merely a local matter. With China's political and economic power increasing by the day, it is imperative not only to assess how this growing influence affects labour relations in other countries, but also to abandon an 'exceptional' view of China by engaging in more comparative research. In this sense, the study of Chinese labour indeed provides a powerful lens—or perhaps a mirror—to further our understanding of the contemporary world and our potential futures.

With this aim in mind, in this issue of *Made in China* we publish a series of essays that either frame Chinese labour comparatively or examine its transnational implications. In **Chinese Multinational Corporations in Europe**, Zheng and Smith challenge the widespread perception that Chinese investments are undermining labour standards in Europe. In **Liquid Labourscape**, Diana looks into the governance experimentations in a Chinese special economic zone in Laos. In **Outsourcing Exploitation**, Franceschini compares wages, expectations, and needs of Chinese and Cambodian garment workers. In **Trade Union Reform in Two One-Party States**, Chan assesses the prospects for union democracy in China and Vietnam. Finally, in **Prospects for US-China Union Relations in the Era of Xi and Trump**, Quan reconstructs the bumpy history of exchanges between American and Chinese unions, and suggests possible ways to foster mutual engagement in the current political climate.

In the spirit of adopting a 'global' line of inquiry, we include a Forum consisting of three pieces that deal with the future of research on contemporary China in the West. In **Treating What Ails the Study of Chinese**

Politics, Hurst makes an argument for freeing political studies of China from isolation by engaging in comparative research. In **Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom**, Sorace responds by arguing that in addition to making China more relevant to global political studies, we should also consider how the study of China can help us rethink the study of comparative politics at a more basic level. In **Beyond the Great Paywall**, Loubere and Franceschini argue that commercial academic publishing poses a fundamental challenge to academic freedom when it comes to research on contemporary China, and propose open access publishing as a viable alternative.

This issue also includes essays related to labour and civil society. In **The Mental Health Costs of Repression**, Macbean looks at the toll that the latest crackdown is taking on the psychological wellbeing of human rights lawyers in China. In **Collective Bargaining and Universal Basic Income**, Lin compares these two strategies in relation to the empowerment of Chinese workers. In **#iSlaveat10**, Chan reviews ten years of struggles at Foxconn, the Taiwanese-owned contractor of Apple. The Window on Asia section includes an essay entitled **In the Shadow of Kem Ley**, in which Norén-Nilsson considers the recent politicisation of Cambodian civil society. The cultural section comprises two essays. In **Ai Weiwei's #Refugees**, Strafella and Berg offer their take on the latest endeavours of the Chinese artist. In **Collecting the Red Era in Contemporary China**, Williams looks into the archival practices of Chinese collectors of Maoist memorabilia and how they relate to historical memory. We conclude by interviewing Maria Repnikova about her new book on Chinese journalism, *Media Politics in China*.

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The Editors

**JUL/SEP
2017**

Liu Xiaobo Passes Away and Liu Xia Goes Missing

On 13 July, the activist and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo passed away at the age of sixty-one in the First Hospital of China Medical University in Shenyang. Much to the anger of his friends and supporters, his ashes were buried at sea, off the coast of Dalian. Liu had been imprisoned since 2009 for ‘inciting state subversion’, but in June was granted parole to receive treatment for advanced liver cancer. Requests from Liu and his family to receive medical treatment outside of China were denied. After the funeral, Liu’s wife—the artist Liu Xia—went missing for over a month, only appearing in a YouTube video to say she was mourning her husband’s death outside of Beijing. The disappearance of Liu Xia, who has been under house arrest since 2010, sparked further international condemnation of the Chinese government. Chinese authorities denied detaining Liu Xia, claiming that she was a ‘free citizen’, and suggesting that she had not communicated with family or friends due to her grief. In early September, Liu Xia was reported to have returned to her Beijing home. However, her supporters remain concerned about her mental health, as she is reportedly suffering from depression induced by years of captivity, surveillance, and the death of her husband. *NL*

(Sources: **BBC; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The Guardian; The Washington Post**)

Continuing Repression of Human Rights Lawyers and Activists

In the past three months, the Chinese government has continued its repression of human rights activists and lawyers. There is little doubt that this is an orchestrated national campaign. During a conference at the National Judges College in Beijing at the end of August, Minister of Justice Zhang Jun called on lawyers to refrain from engaging in protests, criticising judges and courts, and speaking or acting for personal gain or to boost their reputation. A couple of weeks later, the Ministry of Justice launched investigations into the conduct of several lawyers and law firms across China, including the firm of prominent human rights lawyer Mo Shaoping. In August, human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong and online activist ‘Super Vulgar Butcher’ Wu Gan went on trial for their crimes of subversion of state power. On 11 September, Taiwanese activist Lee Ming-cheh went on trial and pleaded guilty to charges of subversion in a televised confession. Alarming, there has since been no public information on his whereabouts. Likewise, lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who has been under house arrest since 2014, is now reported as missing and is believed to be in police custody. Labour activists do not fare any better. After initially being detained in May 2015, labour activist Liu Shaoming was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for ‘inciting subversion of state power’ in July. Similarly, in August, Lu Yuyu, a former migrant worker who documented mass protests in China, was sentenced to four years in prison on charges of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ (he is currently appealing the sentence). To conclude on a more positive note, human rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong and labour activist Meng Han were both released from prison, after serving sentences of four years and twenty-one months respectively for ‘gathering crowds to disturb public order’. *TS & EN*

(Sources: **BBC; China Labour Bulletin; Front Line Defenders; Human Rights Watch; Ministry of Justice; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; South China Morning Post; The Australian; The New York Times**)

University Apologises for Forced Internships

In July, Shenyang Urban Construction University offered a public apology to a second-year student pressured by the university into a three-month internship at a Foxconn factory in Yantai, Shandong province. The university had told her that, had she refused to comply, she would not have been able to graduate. To deal with rising labour costs, in recent years Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn has struck several deals with Chinese secondary vocational schools and universities to hire students as paid interns in its factories. This young workforce has often voiced dissatisfaction about cramped accommodations, inadequate meals, and a type of work that they consider to be unrelated to their studies. Since the apology, the Department of Education in Liaoning province—the area where the University is located—has ordered an investigation and halted such internships at public universities. Foxconn has also issued a statement, saying that the company had fully complied with the existing laws and regulations, and that interns had been fully informed about the programme and had the right to leave at any time. However, the company has a history of hiring interns that goes back at least a decade (see Jenny Chan's article in this issue). Back in 2012, the Taiwanese manufacturer was criticised by labour rights groups for exploiting forced internship labour, but the company denied all allegations of wrongdoing. Only one year later, in 2013, as more evidence from investigations emerged, Foxconn had to admit that student interns worked overtime and night shifts at its Yantai factory. Even at that time, students reported that they had no choice but to take part in the factory internship programme if they wanted to graduate. Considering what happened in Liaoning, it appears that the new regulations issued by the Ministry of Education to protect student interns in 2016 have had little effect in curbing these kinds of abuses. *KL*

(Sources: **Financial Times**; **Ministry of Education**; **South China Morning Post**; **The New York Times**; **Sina**)

Village in Beijing Charges Migrant Workers

In July, the rural village of Qiuxian in Beijing's Daxing district announced plans to start charging migrant residents two thousand yuan (about 295 USD) per month. The document released by the village leadership stated that the fees collected would be used to pay for public sanitation, tap water, public security, and electricity, but also made it clear that the levy will 'fulfil the target of having zero migrants in our village.' Those who do not pay will be denied services and evicted. While some legal experts have questioned the legality of the measure, the village's decision is best understood in the context of the Beijing government's policy to place further restrictions on its migrant population. In April, the authorities indicated their intention to cap the city's population—now at twenty-two million—at twenty-three million 'long-term residents' by 2020. In recent years, the capital has moved its secondary bureaucracies and university campuses to cities in neighbouring Hebei province. Moreover, in 2016 alone, thirty million square metres of small shops, restaurants, and fruit stands considered to be 'illegal constructions' were dismantled, with another forty million square metres set for demolition in 2017. Schools for migrant children on the outskirts of Beijing have been forced to close, and car-sharing services have been restricted to local drivers, thus excluding migrants. While China is pursuing migrants' integration and urbanisation as an engine of economic growth as it transitions away from low-end manufacturing, rural migrants are encouraged to stay away from mega-cities like Beijing and Shanghai, and instead settle in second-tier and provincial cities. *KL*

(Sources: **Caixin Global 1**; **Caixin Global 2**; **Caixin (Chinese)**; **Financial Times**; **South China Morning Post**)

Maternal Leave Extended in Thirty Provinces

Since the amended Population and Family Planning Law in January 2016 universally allowed married couples to have a second child, 30 provinces and regions have required employers to extend paid maternity leave. In these areas, on top of the nationally mandated 98 days, female employees are now entitled to an additional leave of 1 to 3 months. In more prosperous municipalities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as provinces like Zhejiang and Jiangsu, female employees are now given 128 days paid leave after the birth of a child. A number of provinces such as Hebei, Liaoning, Sichuan, and Shandong allow female employees 158 days of paid maternity leave. While Henan and Hainan provinces have seen the largest increase, from 98 days to 190 days, the longest leave is to be found in the Tibet Autonomous Region where female employees are given one year of paid maternity leave. While this is good news for millions of female workers, *Beijing News* reported that many women still face difficulties in claiming this right, as many companies adopt internal policies aimed at restricting the frequency and timing of pregnancies, and impose hefty financial penalties for violators. This highlights the persistence of gender discrimination in China, in spite of the many laws and regulations that forbid it. In practice, women are disadvantaged for having children, a situation that has serious ramifications for the government's plans to encourage population growth in an ageing society. *KL*

(Sources: **Beijing News (Chinese)**; **Los Angeles Times**; **Shanghai Daily**; **SupChina**)

China's Influence Abroad under Scrutiny

In September, HRW released 'The Costs of International Advocacy', a report that scrutinises China's activities at the United Nations (UN). According to the Report, at numerous points throughout 2017, UN agencies have made concessions towards China on matters related to human rights and civil society. For instance, in January, UN officials sent home an estimated three thousand staff and NGO representatives on the occasion of a keynote speech by President Xi Jinping in order to prevent their attendance at the session. In another incident in April, security officials removed ethnic Uyghur activist Dolkun Isa from the UN headquarters in New York while he was attending a forum on indigenous issues. In July, Isa was also stopped and briefly detained by the police in Rome acting on a request from Chinese authorities who consider him a terrorist. Such instances have raised questions regarding the UN's apparent capitulations to China's demands. Dismissed by the Chinese authorities as 'groundless' and 'biased', the Report was released in the middle of heated controversies about China's growing influence abroad. Australia is a good case in point. Since the summer, Australian media have reported on Australian political parties accepting million of dollars from Chinese businessmen, and on Chinese students 'infiltrating' Australian universities to spy on—and eventually intimidate—their classmates and lecturers. This has led to repeated calls from Australian scholars and politicians for more public scrutiny of Beijing's interference in the local tertiary education system, as well as for the increased supervision of commercial partnerships with enterprises linked to the Chinese government. *TS & EN*

(Sources: **ABC News**; **Canberra Times**; **Global Times**; **Human Rights Watch**; **News.com.au**; **Radio Free Asia**; **Reuters**; **Sydney Morning Herald**)

Beijing Attempts to Censor Foreign Academic Publications

In mid-August, Cambridge University Press (CUP) conceded that it had acted on a request from Chinese authorities to block 315 articles from the Chinese website of *The China Quarterly*, one of the most prestigious and long-running international China Studies journals. CUP's decision prompted outrage in the academic community and beyond. After a few days of petitions and threats of an academic boycott, CUP reversed its decision and agreed to make all the censored articles available free of charge worldwide. While the scholarly community was successful in pressuring CUP, this incident has exposed the serious challenges that are facing academic publishers operating in the lucrative Chinese market. It has since been revealed that LexisNexis, a provider of legal, regulatory, and business information, withdrew content in China at the request of the authorities. Moreover, in anonymous interviews at the Beijing International Book Fair in late August, other commercial publishers admitted to engaging in self-censorship in order to retain access to the Chinese market. Meanwhile, there have also been disturbing revelations that the censors are engaged in systematically deleting historical articles from Chinese journals that do not toe the current ideological line. Beijing has responded defiantly to the international condemnation, inviting Western institutions to leave China if they do not want to follow Chinese rules, and warning that all imported publications 'must adhere to Chinese laws and regulations.' For more on the implications of the CUP incident for academia's involvement with the commercial publishing industry, see Loubere and Franceschini in this issue. *NL*

(Sources: **Global Times**; **Reuters 1**; **Reuters 2**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **The China Collection**; **The Guardian 1**; **The Guardian 2**)

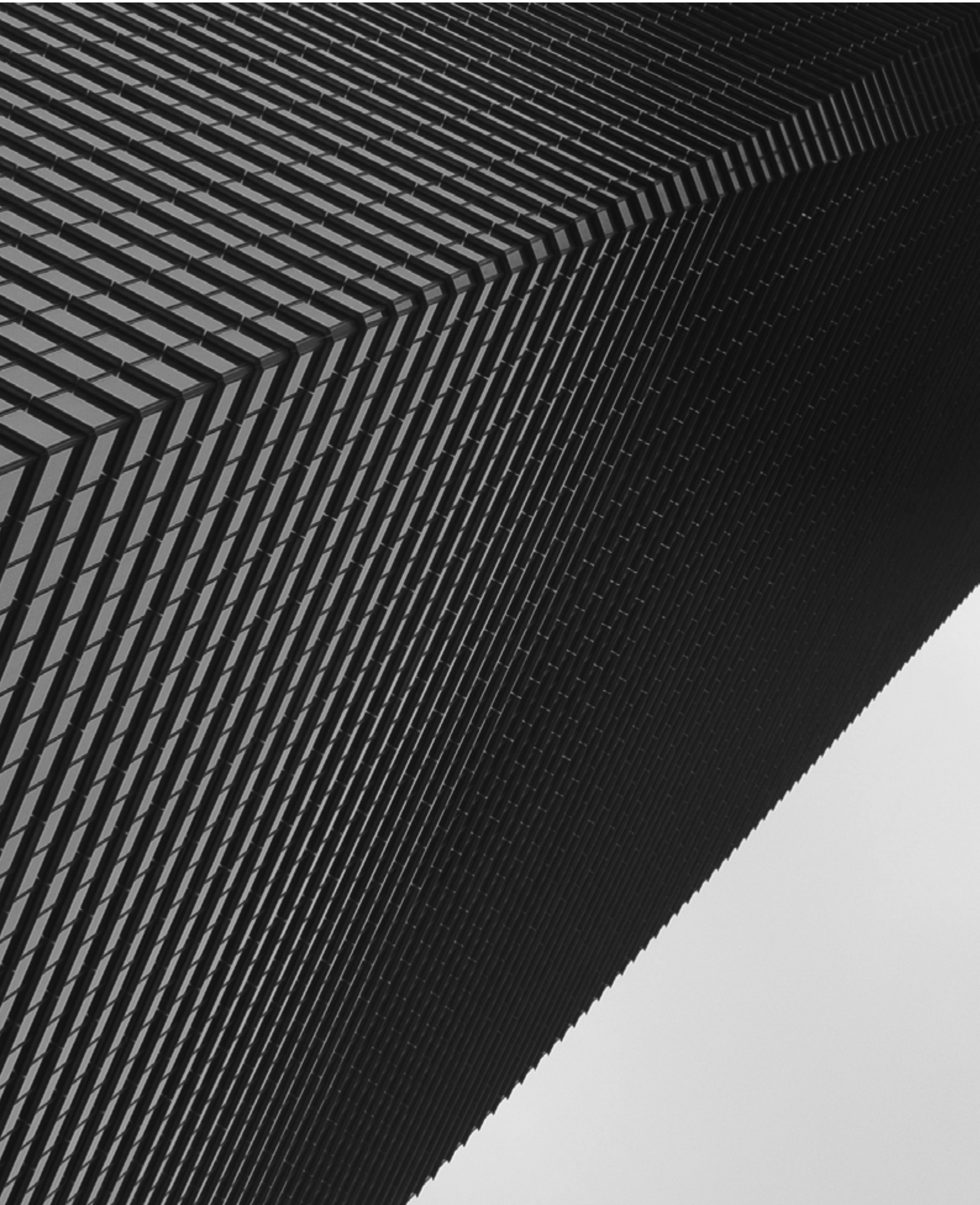
Political Activists Jailed in Hong Kong

On 17 August, Hong Kongese political activists Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Alex Chow—all in their twenties—were found guilty of unlawful assembly in relation to their involvement in the 2014 'Umbrella Movement', and jailed for six to eight months. The sentences also disqualify them from running for the city's legislature for the next five years. The three activists played leading roles in the popular mobilisation in 2014, which was triggered by the Chinese authorities' decision to rule out open nominations for the election of the new Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017—elections that were eventually won by Carrie Lam, a favourite of Beijing. One year ago, in 2016, the trio was sentenced to non-jail punishments, including community service. But the Department of Justice demanded a review of the ruling, seeking imprisonment. This reversal has been widely interpreted as a sign of increasing political interference from Beijing—a claim denied by the local authorities—with many questioning the independence of the city's judiciary. In response, on 20 August, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Hong Kong to express their discontent with the decision. New protests erupted on 1 October—the day that marked the sixty-eighth anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China—with protesters wearing black to call for the release of the 'political prisoners'. Wong, Law, and Chow are not the only ones who are facing prosecution: according to observers, since the 2014 protests there have been at least thirty-nine cases against twenty-six pro-democracy leaders, twenty-one of which are still ongoing. *IF*

(Sources: **CNN**; **Kong Tsung-Gan Medium**; **Reuters**)



CHINA COLUMNS





Cartoon: Badiucao

The Mental Health Costs of Repression

Nicola Macbean

Chinese civil society activists and rights-protection lawyers are experiencing unprecedented levels of repression. The relentless pressure, as well as the acts of police violence and torture, has made many fearful of the consequences of their work. This is, inevitably, taking a toll on the mental health of activists. While psychological counselling services in China have expanded in recent years, most counsellors are reluctant to work with politically sensitive clients. This essay examines the need for the human rights community in China to develop the skills to address the mental health challenges of activism.

Early in the morning of Thursday 9 July 2015 police hammered on the door of Wang Yu's apartment in Beijing and took her away. Within days, hundreds of Chinese lawyers were called in for questioning by the police or the local lawyers' association. While the majority of lawyers were released within hours, many were detained for days, months and, for some, now years. The '709' incident, as it became known, is the most high profile systematic hounding and prosecution of Chinese human rights defenders in recent years.

For over a decade, feminists, democracy activists, workers' representatives, rights defence (*weiquan*) lawyers and NGO staff have endured the threat of crackdowns and imprisonment as a deterrent to their activism. The authorities also deploy **less high-profile measures** to intimidate, harass, and punish activists: parents are bullied, old boyfriends approached, children are prevented from attending school, landlords are pressured into rescinding rental contracts, and high profile activists are not allowed to travel overseas. The police periodically step up the pressure on human rights defenders with unscheduled

visits to offices and homes, monitoring meetings, photographing visitors or installing surveillance cameras. Almost anyone working in the civil rights field has been invited by the police ‘to drink tea’ (*he cha*), a euphemism for an interview or a rebuke. More insidious is the unseen surveillance: the monitoring of social media and the hacking of email and private messaging.

The Psychological Toll of State Repression

Disappearances and the fear they induce have long been a governance tool of the Chinese Communist Party. Yet, the current level of repression appears unprecedented. The authorities seem to hope that relentless pressure will deter activists while the new **Overseas NGO Management Law** cuts off the main source of funds to civil society. As domestic NGOs disband or are closed down, activism and the continued defence of human rights increasingly takes place on an individual or small scale. While this seems to offer some protection, working from home cuts off individuals from the conviviality and support of colleagues. Although social media partially offsets the physical isolation and need for social interaction, the constant stream of news detailing incidents and related calls for support can themselves be a source of stress.

Human rights defenders share many of the same concerns as other over-burdened families in China: unsafe food and air pollution, school and job insecurity, and the costs of medical care. On top of this they must deal with shifting Party attitudes to their work. Considerable time and effort are dedicated to analysing the local and national situation to determine whether a particular case, report or activity will cross an invisible red line bringing a knock on the door late at night.

For the human rights community, increased

levels of repression pose three significant mental health challenges: managing day-to-day anxieties; anticipating and preparing for the possibility of detention; and responding to the use of torture and ill treatment. Individuals face varied levels of risk and will also react differently to the impact of pressure by the authorities. Human rights defenders can learn to improve their personal security and build their confidence in handling police harassment and abuses. Courage and preparation, however, will not be enough. To sustain the work of the human rights community, the mental health costs of activism should be understood and addressed.

Access to Psychological Support

A number of NGO staff have turned to China’s growing ranks of psychological counsellors for help in addressing feelings of stress and anxiety. For some the experience has been unsatisfactory. In the words of one young woman, the counsellor was unable to understand her fear of the police. To the counsellor such a fear was not only outside her realm of experience, but seemed irrational. Some counsellors are unwilling to help human rights defenders, seemingly worried that ‘political sensitivity’ may be contagious. There is equally a lack of trust on the part of many human rights defenders towards mainstream psychologists. Moreover, as a service to the wealthier middle classes, counselling in China does not come cheap. On an NGO salary it would be difficult to afford regular sessions.

In recent years small peer support groups have started to meet. These gatherings provide participants with a psychologically safe space to share and work through their feelings and experiences. Peer support groups are a cost-effective response to the need for counselling. They have the added benefit of building stronger relationships within the

human rights community. Although peer support groups lack expertise, by bringing people together who have shared experiences, they provide an opportunity for participants to learn from each other. Several groups now integrate attention to mental wellbeing into their broader human rights work.

Experience suggests that peer support groups are most effective when group facilitators have the chance to continue developing their own skills. These include not only logistical skills to arrange meetings in the current climate, but also how best to respond to the varied needs of the group and individual members. A simple, but very valuable, skill is helping participants learn relaxation techniques to help manage stress, including deep breathing and visualisation. Some activists need to learn to take time off and introduce small pleasures into their weekly routines.

Many human rights defenders have tried to keep their activism separate from family life. They believe this will stop spouses or parents from worrying and protect their family from police pressure. Several years ago, the wife of a prominent imprisoned activist described a young woman she had met who had no knowledge of her husband's activism. When he was detained she was completely unprepared. She knew none of his friends, had not met any *weiquan* lawyers and had no idea what to do. Peer support groups have encouraged human rights defenders to become more open with their families and seek their understanding, even if they cannot always enjoy their full support.

The **'709' wives** have shown immense courage demanding accountability from the authorities for the detention of their husbands. Together with the **Feminist Five**, these wives have challenged gender stereotypes among activists and opened up new opportunities for the participation of family members. Strong and open relationships among close friends and family are needed to sustain activism for the long haul. They are also important when

the frustration experienced by frontline human rights defenders may be expressed in anger or violence in the home. Support group leaders also need to recognise when professional help is needed.

Observation suggests that fostering active listening is one of the most important skills for facilitators. While activists routinely use social media to report threats, beatings or other abuses, there are few opportunities to talk about the experience and how they felt being treated in this way. The development of active listening skills has helped survivors of police brutality to be able to tell their stories in their own words and at their own pace. Reflecting on one such conversation, a lawyer shared the relief he felt describing in detail, for the first time, his experience of being detained and beaten by the police: 'No one asked me before how I felt'.

Surviving Torture and Violence

Active listening skills are not only important in peer support groups, but also among those lawyers whose clients have been tortured or subject to other forms of ill treatment. Working within the constraints of a brief meeting in the detention centre, lawyers are often quick to interrupt a conversation and offer their opinion. A former detained activist, while grateful for several visits from lawyers during his thirty-day detention, nevertheless complained that the lawyers never really listened to him. Improved communication skills among lawyers are essential where traumatised clients have difficulty recounting their experience in the logical manner that the law expects. As human rights lawyers have become targets of police abuse, forging increased mental health awareness is helpful on both a professional and personal level.

Engaging with survivors of torture is a particular challenge for support groups. Many released prisoners and other human rights

defenders have been subjected to torture, but there are no specialist rehabilitation services in China. Many survivors are also prevented, by public security, from travelling abroad to meet with psychologists based outside mainland China. Members of peer support groups can, therefore, be at the forefront in engaging with survivors. Sensitisation training on the impact of torture, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the risk of re-traumatisation is starting to help lawyers and other human rights defenders develop more psychologically aware communication skills. Survivors require sufficient time to heal and process their traumatic experience before they are encouraged to speak out.

Human rights lawyers have helped to raise awareness of the **use of torture**. The apparent increase in the use of ‘clean’, particularly psychological, torture is a direct response to growing public disquiet at police violence. **New legal measures**, such as the exclusion of illegally obtained evidence, are of little use if procurators and judges ignore allegations that unbearable psychological pressure was applied to secure a confession. Increased understanding of the impact of torture will help challenge the impunity with which interrogators use violence and threats to secure the cooperation of detainees.

Overcoming the Divided Self

Increased mental health awareness, and better skills to handle stress and fear, enhance the resilience of human rights communities to endure unprecedented repression. Recognising the toll on mental health experienced by many human rights defenders does not ‘pathologise’ dissent. Nor is fear of the police in China irrational. And greater psychological resilience to withstand repression does not normalise police brutality. On the contrary, it helps ensure that human rights defenders have the inner

strength to continue challenging police abuse and illegality by the authorities.

Many ordinary citizens in China display a divided self in which politically sensitive opinions are repressed to allow the individual to get on with their life. With their commitment to universal values, human rights defenders challenge this tension between the true self and a public persona that supports an increasingly repressive Party. Attention to mental wellbeing has encouraged greater emotional honesty among human rights defenders, and their friends and family. It is helping strengthen the human rights community through building stronger interpersonal networks. Talking about feelings helps human rights defenders articulate a language of optimism and human values in the face of a destructive repression. It is the belief in the rightness of their cause that helps sustain their work. Those of us outside China should ensure that they can continue to develop these essential skills and support each other at a difficult time.

Nicola Macbean

Nicola Macbean is the Executive Director of The Rights Practice, a UK-based NGO that supports those working for human rights. Nicola has worked closely with Chinese lawyers and other human rights defenders, and has implemented projects helping to combat the use of torture and the death penalty.



Which way to go?
Photo: 123RF.com

Collective Bargaining or Universal Basic Income: Which Way Forward for Chinese Workers?

Kevin Lin

The loss of political support for collective bargaining has stripped the Chinese labour movement of one of its few unifying forces. In light of this decline, in a recent essay Eli Friedman has argued that collective bargaining should be replaced with universal basic income (UBI) as a common goal of the movement. But would UBI be able to play such a role? What may be gained or lost by mobilising around UBI? To respond to these questions, this essay compares the two strategies with regard to a number of crucial aspects.

In an eloquent and provocative **essay** included in a **previous issue** of *Made in China*, Eli Friedman analyses the state of the labour movement in China, focussing in particular on the failure of the institutionalisation of collective bargaining. Given the loss of political support that collective bargaining seems to have experienced in China in recent years, Friedman makes an argument for replacing it with universal basic income (UBI) as a political goal of the labour movement. This is not to say that in his opinion collective bargaining will disappear or will no longer be useful, or that UBI is on the immediate horizon; rather, he believes that in the current circumstances alternative political goals and projects such as UBI should be seriously considered, even if they may seem utopian for now.

An Impasse in the Chinese Labour Movement

Friedman's essay provides an occasion for serious reconsideration of the goal and strategy of the Chinese labour movement. This is particularly necessary at a time when the activism of Chinese workers seems to have reached another impasse due to the double challenges of political and economic tightening. The movement led by Chinese migrant workers is autonomous in two senses: it is autonomous in relation to the official trade union—the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)—and it is also autonomous in that workplace-based industrial actions are independent of each other. The result is an independent, unco-opted, but also fractured movement. The notion of collective bargaining, one of a few clearly articulated goals that are widely-shared by worker-activists, grassroots labour organisations, industrial relations scholars, the government, and the ACFTU, has provided this highly fragmented movement with a sense of direction, bringing together the

efforts of a diversity of individuals, groups, and institutions.

While there is near consensus on the importance of collective bargaining for Chinese workers, not everyone is in complete agreement about the goals of collective bargaining or the forms that it should take. Some advocate for it to contain labour conflicts, others see it as a convenient tool to resolve labour disputes, while some hope to empower workers. In other words, collective bargaining has always been a contested idea, but differences have generally not been publicly voiced for strategic reasons. Herein lies the continual appeal of this strategy in debates on Chinese labour over the last decade, whether they are among workers, scholars, policy-makers, or activists. In this sense, the replacement of collective bargaining as a legitimate goal may strip the movement of one of the few unifying forces. Would UBI be able to play a similar or even more strategically sound role? What may be gained or lost by mobilising around UBI as the goal? To respond to these questions, I compare the two strategies with regard to a number of crucial aspects.

Workers (Dis) Empowerment

How to build workers' power should be at the heart of any strategic consideration. Is collective bargaining furthering this goal? Scholars have identified **two forms of collective bargaining**: 'collective bargaining by riot' and 'party-state-led wage bargaining'. These two strategies have divergent goals: the former emerges only after workers stage collective actions and demand direct negotiation with management, and it thus contributes to building workers' collective power, confidence, and capacity; the latter is an effort led by the party-state to preemptively institutionalise wage bargaining, primarily aimed at containing labour conflict.

While 'party-state-led wage bargaining' seems reactive at best, and its institutionalisation is rarely successful, 'collective bargaining by riot', beyond the immediate goal of resolving workers' grievances, is a critical practice of workers' self-organisation and self-governance.

In contrast, the ability of UBI to build workers' power is less direct. As Friedman argues, it may require labour unrest leading to ungovernability to bring forward UBI as a political compromise, but this does not necessarily presuppose worker self-organisation and self-governance, nor does it present obvious opportunities to exercise collective power. There is no doubt that UBI, if designed and administered well, will provide employees with economic security and more bargaining power to negotiate working conditions, as well as with increased freedom and capacity to pursue other social and political goals outside employment. However, such security and freedom will still be threatened by the thorny issues of freedom of association and assembly, things that will not necessarily be brought forward by UBI. In fact, it is not impossible that UBI may actually preclude these possibilities. In terms of empowering workers, collective bargaining seems to hold an advantage over UBI.

Sources of Support

Any goal, if it is to be accepted by the movement, will firstly need to be discussed, understood, and broadly supported. Collective bargaining was able to gain acceptance for a number of reasons. First, collective bargaining, in the simplest form of negotiating with employers, is often a logical demand of workers in collective disputes; second, it is seen as an inevitable component in the mature industrial relations system toward which China should be moving; and finally, it is broad and ambiguous enough as a concept and practice to attract the interest

of different constituencies. However, as Friedman has described in his essay, belief in the adequacy and plausibility of collective bargaining has perceptively declined in China. At the same time, due to the lack of better alternatives, it has been difficult to register opposition to it.

In comparison, UBI, while gaining momentum globally, is little known and discussed in China. Whereas collective bargaining has a long history—both positive and negative—in industrialised and industrialising countries, UBI does not have a lot of historical precedents, nor current instances of successful adoption beyond early local-level experimentations. A **recent article** looking for any UBI-type programme in China, cites the example of the minimum income guarantee (*dibao*). *Dibao* is a welfare scheme that is extremely selective in the target population of disabled and elderly people, and which provides only a very modest income supplement. It is unlikely to be expanded in the near future, nor, given these limitations, is it likely to serve as a good model for UBI. Proponents of UBI may thus have to look for inspiration elsewhere. This uncertainty over what form a Chinese UBI could take, and what the effects and consequences would be, present a large hurdle for its advocates.

However, while China's **social welfare system** is fragmented and unevenly enforced, there has been impetus in the last decade and a half to improve and expand welfare, in contrast to decades of cuts and ideological assault in the West. For this reason, an extension of the current system to include UBI may encounter less resistance in China, and could, in fact, even galvanise a movement behind it. However, while China should still be able to provide a fiscal basis for expanded social welfare—despite its slowing economy—even a small amount per person would be a gigantic undertaking for the government, with any future debt-crises risking to undermining the UBI project altogether. Furthermore, the country currently has a low unemployment

rate and wages have been growing, albeit more slowly than in the last decade. Lack of employment, which prompts a lot of the debate on UBI, is thus arguably not the most urgent issue for workers.

Building Momentum

Finally, where would the momentum come from? The practice of collective bargaining takes place at the workplace, and its momentum stems from workers' collective actions within the factories, where the pressure is most direct and concentrated. Here, workers have the capacity to play a direct role in shaping the bargaining process, even though the pressure from management is enormous. This bottom-up drive is the most important reason that ensures the legitimacy and longevity of collective bargaining as a movement goal. But today, as Friedman observes, such momentum seems to be slowing down. The manufacturing industry is offering less space for industrial workers to negotiate wages, and we often see workers simply demanding severance pay due to factory closure or relocation, without getting a chance to negotiate for better salaries or labour conditions. The political tightening over **civil society organisations, lawyers, individual labour activists**, and even people who were merely **documenting protests**, constrains the transfer of experience and knowledge, undermining the very foundation of the support for collective bargaining.

In comparison, UBI is a policy instrument that is designed by and negotiated at the highest echelons of the party-state, where workers cannot exercise direct power or influence. In the past, the ACFTU might have played a role in lobbying for the protective Labour Contract Law, and it is still possible that under the right circumstances it may choose to advocate for better welfare policies or even UBI. In these scenarios, would workers be able to have any say in a

UBI initiative, or would they have to rely on the official union or other bureaucratic actors? Moreover, we are no longer simply talking about migrant workers in industrial workplaces: UBI will and must necessarily be a national debate, encompassing broad sections of the population, across sectors, regions, and employment categories. It may take a social movement broader than only workers to advocate for UBI, the building of which is a task as exciting as it is challenging.

A Golden Age Remnant

Where does this leave us? Faith in collective bargaining is evidently in crisis. Enterprise bargaining, if it happens at all, is rarely sustained over time. Any attempt to move beyond enterprise bargaining, toward sectoral or regional wage setting and bargaining, has not seen much success besides in a few celebrated cases—for example in **Zhejiang** province. Recently, there also has been a more **radical rethinking** of working-class formation in Asia. It may be argued that the kind of trade union movement under which collective bargaining is institutionalised is unique to the golden age of post-war capitalism in the early-industrialised countries. At a time when trade unionism and collective bargaining have been in serious decline for decades in the West, it is reasonable to reconsider this strategy.

Still, collective bargaining remains relevant. For the foreseeable future, industrial workers in China will surely continue to demand to bargain collectively with management, whatever form these negotiations may take. While it should not be the only goal, it should still serve as a legitimate instrument in industrial relations, particularly in order to build collective capacity. There is also a distinct possibility that interest in collective bargaining will be rekindled, with the issue returning to the political agenda, in the event of a successful bargaining after an

unexpected, socially significant strike—and almost all prominent strikes of the last decade in China have been unexpected.

However, the limit of enterprise bargaining is clear, and at best this should only be an intermediary goal. It may be useful to revisit sectoral and industry-wide collective bargaining as an alternative, or as the next step in a wider collective action strategy. Or, it may be strategic as a movement to combine such goals with advocacy for specific **legal changes**, such as strengthening anti-retaliation measures to protect workers who complain about illegal working conditions, or imposing criminal sanctions and personal liability for employers. No single goal is likely to be sufficient, nor is it likely to gain the approval of all participants in the movement. In fact, collective bargaining, UBI, and the other approaches outlined here may well be complementary to one another. At the current impasse, critical engagement with a range of goals and strategies will better inform the labour movement's strategies, providing it with coherence and direction.

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Foxconn dormitories in Shenzhen.
Photo: Jordan Pouille

#iSlaveat10

Jenny Chan

In January 2017, Apple celebrated the tenth anniversary of the launch of the first model of the iPhone. After a decade, has Apple's extraordinary profitability been coupled with any greater social responsibility? Are the Chinese workers who produce the most lucrative product in the electronics world seeing improved working and living conditions? This essay provides some answers by focussing on two issues: freedom of association and the situation of student interns.

On 9 January 2017, Apple celebrated the tenth anniversary of the iPhone's debut with an event entitled 'iPhone at Ten: The Revolution Continues'. Since its launch in 2007, the iPhone has remained the company's flagship product and biggest income generator. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of Apple's revenue came from sales of the smartphone. The iPhone is supposed to be revolutionising not only mobile phones, but also corporate social responsibility (CSR). In 2015, when *Time magazine* crowned Apple CEO Tim Cook as one of the world's one hundred most influential people, writer John Lewis hailed Cook's ability to push Apple to 'unimaginable profitability—and greater social responsibility'. What he did not mention was the reality of social irresponsibility confronting Chinese workers who make Apple products.

When discussing the labour rights abuses associated with the production of the iPhone, the name that continually resurfaces is that of the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn Technology Group (hereafter Foxconn). Its collaboration with Apple started back in 2002, as the company was on its way to becoming **China's leading exporter of high-tech electronics**. Initially, Foxconn was contracted to build Macs and iPods. Then, in 2007, the contract was extended to include the first-generation of iPhones. In 2010, when Foxconn was confronted by a **spate of worker suicides** in its factories in Shenzhen, the company was the sole maker of iPhones. After this, however, Apple—following the common practice of pitting suppliers against each other to maximise profit—shifted some of its production to Pegatron, another Taiwanese-owned supplier where labour costs are allegedly even lower.

Since 22 September 2017, Apple has been selling iPhone 8—'a new generation of iPhone', as they market it—on the global markets. Has Apple's 'unimaginable profitability' been coupled with any 'greater social responsibility'? Are the Chinese workers who

produce the most profitable product in the electronic world seeing improved working and living conditions? In this essay, I will attempt to provide some answers with a specific focus on two issues: freedom of association and the situation of ‘student interns’.

Freedom of Association Denied

The Apple Supplier **Code of Conduct** explicitly highlights the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Unfortunately, although codes of conduct produced by many multinational companies and industry associations pledge to honour workers’ rights to form trade unions, in China the process is dominated by management in the workplace, and is ultimately controlled by the state through the branches of the only trade union whose existence is allowed in the country, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

Foxconn’s resistance to any call for union democracy emerged in several instances. This was particularly evident in the wake of a riot that erupted at a Foxconn plant in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, at the end of September 2012. In that case, the fury of the workers was triggered by their exasperation with company policies. In the months leading up to the release of the iPhone 5, they had only one day off a month. Also contributing to their grievances was the militaristic security imposed by the company at the male workers’ dormitory. When company guards beat two workers for failing to show their staff IDs, and kicked them until they fell to the ground, the workers reached a breaking point. To deal with the fallout, Foxconn announced ‘a special day off’ for all eighty thousand workers and staff at the facility. On the same day that the riot occurred, Tim Cook **assured the world** that retail stores would ‘continue to receive iPhone 5 shipments regularly and customers [would be able to] continue to order online

and receive an estimated delivery date’. But as international news media published articles with blaring headlines like ‘**China Apple Factory Riot**’ and ‘**Riot Reported at Apple Partner Manufacturer Foxconn’s iPhone 5 Plant**’, Apple was compelled to reassure consumers around the world that it was not running sweatshops. It was then, amidst the factory-wide riot, that a twenty-one-year-old worker wrote **an open letter** to Foxconn’s Chief Executive. The letter ended with the following words: ‘Please remember, from now on, to reassess the responsibilities of the company union so that genuine trade unions can play an appropriate role’. Still, even on that occasion, this bottom-up demand was **completely ignored** by the company management.

While over the years there have been union elections at Foxconn, these initiatives have been mostly a formality to demonstrate Foxconn’s supposed commitment to Apple’s CSR principles. In an interview with a Foxconn worker in March 2015, I asked about the union election that had taken place earlier that year:

Not many workers knew about the company union elections. The promotional posters were placed in the dark corners in the factory. The management did not do it for our information. They did it to complete the standard process only.

On several occasions, supervisors manipulated the elections by explicitly instructing workers to cast their votes for designated candidates. Out of fear of retaliation, workers followed the managerial instructions. As one worker candidly admitted to me:

We’re asked by our supervisors to check the right box. What’s laughable is that all the candidates are complete strangers to me. Afterwards, I checked the information about the winner, and found out that he’s a senior

manager from the same department [as me]! But I've never heard of him. I believe that all the winners were handpicked by the senior management.

In the words of another worker: 'After all, we have no idea who's running for the elections. Perhaps only our boss knows about them!' This does not mean that workers are not aspiring to have their own organisations. In the course of my multi-year research project, Foxconn workers have repeatedly made calls for democratising the company union. I argue that having a democratic, representative trade union, instead of a management-dominated one, is critical to ensure workers' rights.

Student Workers at Foxconn

Without independent labour representation, for years Foxconn has been able to get away with using 'student interns' who are not legally recognised as employees, and are often forced by their schools to work at the company's plants. In 2010, following China's economic recovery from the global financial crisis, 28,044 student interns from over two hundred technical and vocational schools all over China were assigned to the integrated Digital Product Business Group (iDPBG)—a Foxconn business group that exclusively serves Apple—to work alongside Foxconn employees in Shenzhen. This was a six-fold increase from the 4,539 interns who, according to **Foxconn's internal magazine**, had been assigned to Foxconn's Shenzhen plants in 2007. During the summer of 2010, **Foxconn** employed 150,000 student interns nationwide—15 per cent of its entire million-strong Chinese workforce.

In recent years, China's leaders have sought to boost labour productivity through expanded investment in vocational training. The number of vocational high school students doubled from 11.7 million in 2001

to 22.4 million in 2010, even as regular high schools still enrolled a larger number of students than vocational high schools nationwide. Vocational schools follow a work-study model that emphasises the integration of education with production, as stated in China's 1996 **Vocational Education Law**. They offer employment-oriented courses for eligible applicants who have completed nine years of schooling. **The official goal** for 2020 is to recruit 23.5 million students—50 per cent of the nation's senior secondary student population—into three-year vocational programmes.

In this, Foxconn saw an opportunity to exploit student interns. A 2011 **company statement** claimed: 'Foxconn cooperates with vocational schools to provide students with practical skills training that will enable them to find employment after they graduate from these programmes'. But Foxconn has said nothing either about the contents of its training programmes, nor about its skill evaluation methods. Working hand in glove with local governments, Foxconn has simply **violated China's internship regulations** designed to protect students and assure that their career needs are served.

In the words of a sixteen-year-old Foxconn student intern whom I interviewed in 2011:

Come on, what do you think we've learned standing for more than ten hours a day manning machines on the line? What's an internship? There's no relation to what we study in school. Every day is just a repetition of one or two simple motions, like a robot.

To this day, the company not only recruits students regardless of their field of study, it also routinely recruits them much earlier than is legally allowed, while they are still in their first or second year, rather than their final year of vocational school. Even worse, these so-called internships are often extended from three months to a full year to meet production needs, with scant regard for

the students' training needs.

Under mounting pressure, in 2016, the central government finally took some measures to protect the basic rights of student interns. Vocational schools were instructed to manage student internships in accordance with **new regulations** that came into force on 11 April 2016, superseding the 2007 Administrative Measures. Under this new regulatory regime, the duration of workplace-based internships should not exceed six months. Moreover, the regulations not only require that student internships provide substantial educational content and work-skill training, but also mandate comprehensive labour protections for student interns, such as eight-hour working days, no overtime and no night shifts. Above all, no more than 10 per cent of the labour force at 'any given facility', or no more than 20 per cent of the workers in 'any given work position', should consist of student interns at any point in time.

However, in spite of these legal improvements, the government has left intact incentives for corporations to continue to prioritise internship programmes as sources of cheap labour. With the passage of the 2016 Regulations, the statutory minimum level for paying interns is clearly specified: 'Wages shall be *at least* 80 per cent of that of employees during the probationary period'. In other words, employers are still permitted to give student interns only 80 per cent of the income offered to full employees on the job, whether or not students' productivity is less.

Ten Years On, the Campaign Continues

Global supply chains are *not* benign spaces of transnational trade. While rooted in local terrains, proliferating labour struggles in China have to simultaneously confront forces of global capitalism and the Chinese state. Workers are protesting and striking, labour rights groups are issuing

statements demanding that corporations accept responsibility for worker abuses, and engaged scholars are analysing the structures of domination that drive labour control and eventually spark resistance. In solidarity with Chinese workers and student interns, and in an attempt to focus the spotlight on the ongoing illegal practices of Foxconn, Hong Kong-based advocacy group **Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior** (SACOM) has marked 2017 as the year of the global anti-sweatshop campaign '#iSlaveat10—No More iSlave'.

However, in spite of these transnational initiatives, the most important driving force for change remains the workers themselves. The current protests in localised and dispersed sites of resistance across China need to develop further through intra- and inter-class lines and across the urban-rural divide, growing into a more broadly based social movement. It is the evolving consciousness and praxis of the new generation of Chinese workers that will shape the future of China and global capitalism.

Jenny Chan

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Chinese Labour in a Global Perspective

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Spiral staircase. Photo: pxhere.com

Chinese Multinational Corporations in Europe: Racing to the Bottom?

Zheng Yu
Chris Smith

As the scale and scope of Chinese investment in Europe increases, it is important to understand how Chinese multinational corporations organise their workplaces on the continent, and what this entails for their workforce. This essay examines three key issues: the level of Chinese investment in comparison to investment from other countries; the extent to which employment models developed in China are transferable to European workplaces; and whether or not Chinese firms prefer using home practices to manage their workforce in Europe.

The arrival of Chinese firms in Europe has elicited both excitement and anxiety. New investors with funding from the Chinese state present a challenge to an open market in crisis and to Europe's faltering welfare capitalism model. A typical narrative depicts Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs) as exploiting institutional loopholes, and undermining local laws, regulations, and norms. In terms of employment relations, a widespread concern is that labour standards may be lowered by those Chinese MNCs that break rules on working hours and health and safety; use coercive forms of labour control, including withholding wages to inhibit mobility, and taking deposits to control migrant workers; ignore or suppress trade unions; and pay wages below subsistence levels, including through the employment of prison labour on construction and civil engineering projects. A further concern is that employment practices adopted by Chinese firms will influence the way that non-Chinese MNCs and local firms manage their workforce, with the fear that Europe will see a deterioration in working conditions across the board. However, despite such negative speculation, we actually know very little about what it is like to work in Chinese MNCs. As the scale and scope of Chinese investment increases, we need to better understand how Chinese MNCs organise their workplaces in Europe, and what this means for labour on the continent.

To avoid an over-simplistic reading of the impact of Chinese investment on work and employment in Europe, this essay will examine three key questions. First, we ask how influential Chinese investment is in comparison to investment from other countries. Focussing on this question allows us to evaluate the ability of firms to introduce employment practices from their home country to the host society. Second, we ask to what extent employment models developed in China are transferable to the European workplaces. Addressing this question will

help determine the appropriate methods for studying Chinese firms overseas. Third, we question whether Chinese firms prefer using home practices to manage their workforce in Europe. Exploring this final issue prompts us to consider the various options Chinese firms have when it comes to deciding employment practices to be adopted in foreign countries.

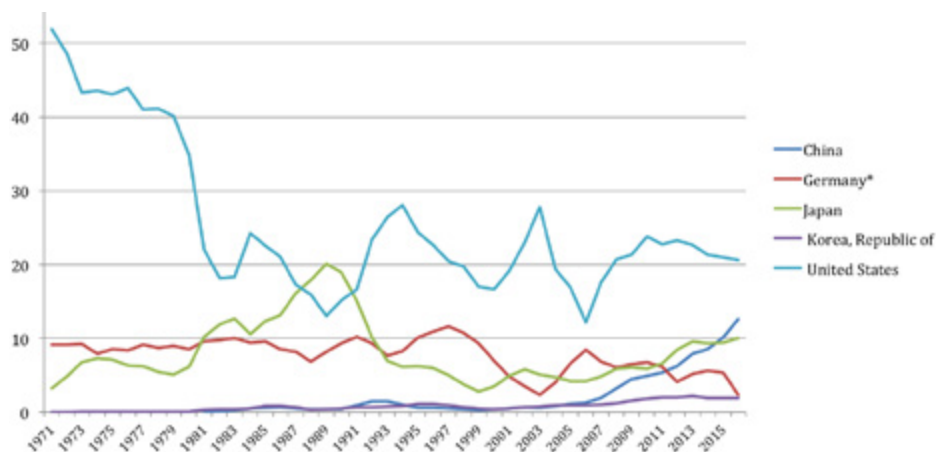
Debating Foreign Direct Investment

The debates on how foreign direct investment (FDI) may reshape employment relations in Europe are nothing new. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were similar speculations over the ‘Americanisation’ of European businesses. Likewise, in the 1980s and early 1990s, when Japanese firms challenged American firms in becoming the main source of FDI, there was intense discussion about the ‘Japanisation’ of the manufacturing industry in Europe. In both previous waves of FDI, the perceived transformation of employment relations was at heart of the debates. Although there were criticisms of the intensification of work pressure, there was also a sense that European companies needed to learn from the much more celebrated employment models that contributed to the American and Japanese

companies’ success overseas.

Compared to American and Japanese companies, Chinese firms have never been the single dominant force of capital expansion. The **total stock of Chinese outward foreign direct Investment (OFDI)** accounts for just 4.9 per cent of the worldwide OFDI stock and one fifth of American OFDI stock by end of 2016. It is true that the scale of Chinese investment overseas has grown rapidly in the past ten years, at an **average rate of 40 per cent**, and that the outward flow of FDI from China as a proportion of the total OFDI flow worldwide has expanded at a steady pace (see Figure 1). Together with American OFDI (light blue line) and the Japanese OFDI (green line), Chinese OFDI (dark blue line) has become one of the major sources of capital flow worldwide. Within the European Union’s (EU) twenty-eight countries, however, China accounted for just over 2 per cent of the FDI inflow in 2015 and 1 per cent of total FDI stock **by the end of 2015** (see Figure 2). Given that the scale of Chinese investment in Europe remains relatively small, we would expect Chinese firms to exercise control and influence over employment practices at workplace level, rather than having large scale impact on employment relations at national or cross-national level.

Figure 1
Country-based OFDI as a Percentage of World Total OFDI (flow, three-year average)

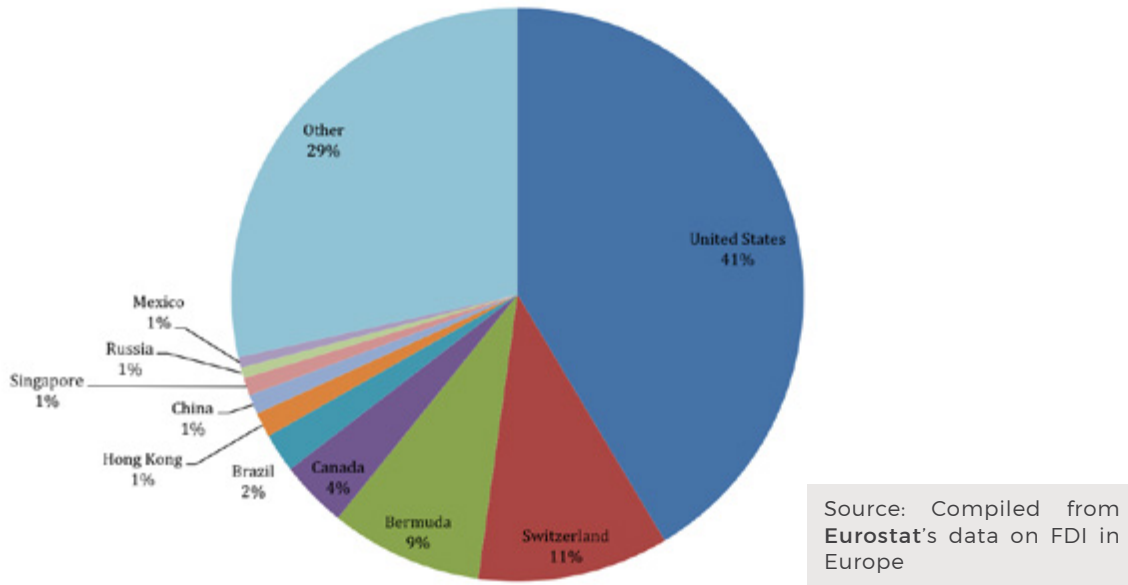


* The calculation German OFDI before 1990 was based on data from the Federal Republic of Germany

** The figure for 2016 is end of year data rather than the three-year average

Source: Compiled from UNCTAD’s statistical data on global outward FDI

Figure 2
Top Ten Countries as Source of FDI into the EU (flow, three-year average)



Differentiated Foreign Employment Practices

It must be assumed that any new employment practices introduced by Chinese firms will be **contested by local workers** and their representatives by referring to the local 'norms' of employment relations. Moreover, given that China is a less advanced economy with a smaller collective force of investors in Europe, employment practices exercised by rival MNCs from other countries may be used by Chinese firms as key references to effectively manage the local workforce. Therefore, studying the impact of Chinese investment on local employment relations will need to take into account the application of established practices, as well as experimentation with emergent practices in the new regional spaces of differentiated European labour markets.

This prompts the question of whether there is a set of Chinese indigenous employment practices that could potentially be used as a model for Chinese MNCs moving into the

European market for the first time. China's move from a socialist to a capitalist state has passed through several experimental stages, and has embraced a number of developmental models. As a result, there are significant differences in the way Chinese firms manage their workforce. Many state-owned companies have maintained some legacy of the old Chinese socialist personnel system, which means that the terms of employment are based on a mixture of permanent, contractual, and ad hoc labour relations. Private companies and foreign investment companies have developed their employment practices in response to transitions in labour markets. For this reason, employment practices of Chinese MNCs are typically fragmented, adopting elements of modern human resource management, continued paternalism, and coercive labour control.

In addition to ownership-based differences, geographical differences in labour market conditions have facilitated **sub-national employment models** to emerge. For example, the '**Guangdong model**' is based on manufacturing contractors employing mainly migrant workers and supplying owners of

international brands. Firms adopting this model engage in OFDI by acquiring supplier or client firms in the global production network. In contrast, the '**Wenzhou model**' has relied on small family ties and personal networks to generate growth and to accumulate funds for investing overseas. We cannot really say that there is a single or dominant model that has been adopted by Chinese MNCs abroad. For this reason, a firm-focussed approach is more likely to offer insights on why certain employment practices were adopted, modified, or abandoned.

The Myth of National Models

Whenever a new player enters the international space we should avoid overemphasising the employment models employed by their compatriots and instead focus more on the choices made by the individual firms themselves. Among Chinese firms in Europe, we can see that certain firms may be in favour of adopting some of their home practices especially those firms that are under wage, labour supply, or consumer market pressures in China. However, it is also true that some Chinese firms' internationalisation is of a more hybrid nature, aiming to perpetuate employment practices which prevail in China, as well as replicating 'successful' experiences of other firms in the new host territory. In particular, when firms are able to secure continued access to a pool of inexpensive and well-trained Chinese workers, they can bring much of their workforce overseas through an intra-firm transfer system allowed by some European countries' immigration policy. For instance, Huawei, a major Chinese telecommunications firm and a forerunner in terms of investment in Europe, demonstrates the benefits of sourcing a young labour force from China. Controlled by a **performance reward system** administrated and remunerated by the

parent firm, the workforce is hardworking, motivated, and efficient.

However, firms like Huawei are exceptional cases, and employing a Chinese workforce in Europe may be a temporary phase. Changes in labour costs, productivity, and other labour market conditions in the future will undoubtedly trigger reassessment of such employment practices. Additionally, pressure from local trade unions, the media, and the general public has the ability to force Chinese firms to rethink their employment policies and assess the possibility of targeting alternative sources of labour.

New entrants into a country can also operate in a space where employment practices can be implemented with less local pressure. This is particularly true in some special economic zones, where exceptions are given by the host country as an incentive to attract foreign investors. However, employment terms may or may not be included in such exceptions and can be subject to change, requiring firms to search for viable alternatives to the practices they are used to. This point can be illustrated by the **case of China Shipping Group's investment** in upgrading two container terminals in the Greek port of Piraeus. At the beginning of the rebuilding project, the firm recruited Chinese construction workers. However, the local dockworkers union organised **several rounds of strikes**, demanding the termination of any hiring practices that denied local workers' access to work. In response, the firm withdrew the majority of Chinese workers, replacing them not with local Greek workers, but instead with migrant workers from within the EU hired through employment agencies. The aim was to maintain a flexible supply of labour and to exclude local union members from the workforce. This example points to the fact that on-going industrial conflict might lead to further changes in employment practices. Firms operating in a space created outside local norms can change the 'rules of the game' and their ability to transcend such norms

cannot be overstated. In regional labour markets, targeting EU migrant workers is a common practice of firms in sectors characterised by intense cost competition—such as construction, logistics, and services.

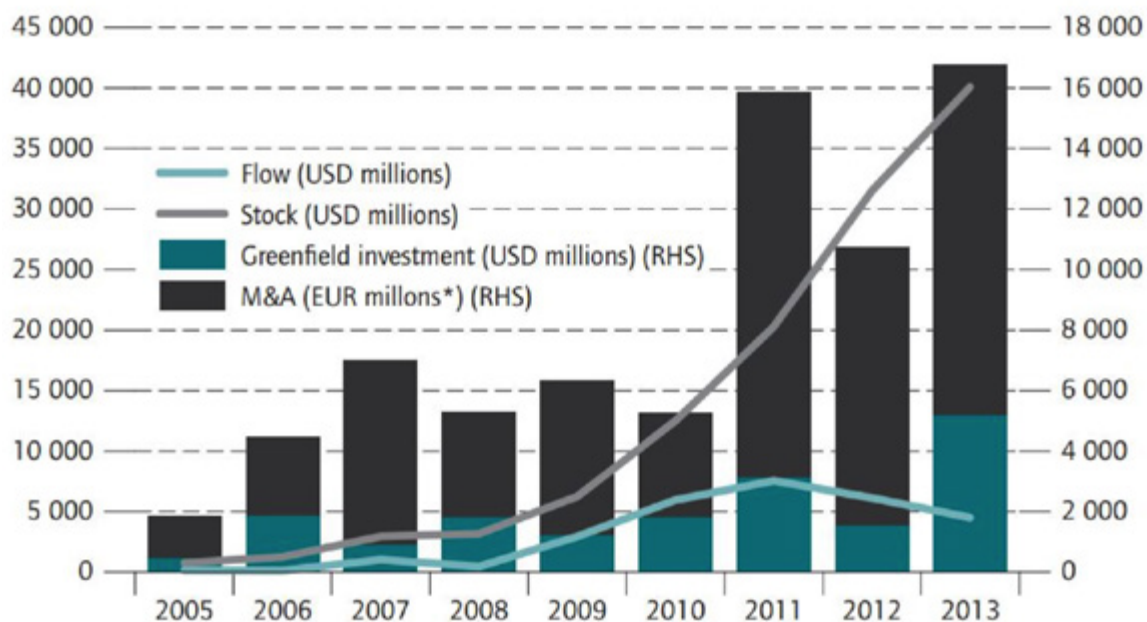
It is also possible that some Chinese firms invest in Europe in an attempt to move away from home-country practices and thus develop new ways of working in host societies. Especially in more developed economies, the incentives for investment from Chinese MNCs are often linked to upgrading technological and management capabilities, seeking novelty in products and services, and improving the way work is organised. Because of this, they try to maintain subsidiary autonomy and some stability by focussing on organisation, development, and learning. This trend is reflected in the composition of Chinese MNC investments in Europe, with merger and acquisition (M&A) having become in recent years a major mode of Chinese MNCs entering Europe (see Figure 3 below).

For instance, **Volvo Cars**, a Swedish automobile manufacturer acquired by Geely, is one of the cases where most existing employment practices have been maintained as the Chinese acquirer attempts to improve their market position, productivity, and management know-how by learning from the more developed subsidiary firm. For Chinese MNCs undertaking large-scale M&As, it makes sense to incorporate existing employment practices, at least in the short-term—particularly if they see the acquired European subsidiary as having the potential to be key contributor to future revenue, a source of advanced technology, or a model management system.

Rethinking the ‘China Model’ of OFDI

The examples highlighted in this essay suggest that it is misleading to depict Chinese

Figure 3
Entry Modes of Chinese Investment in the EU



Source: Dreger, Schüler-Zhou, and Schüller, 2017

MNCs as being exporters of lower labour standards from China to Europe. In fact, Chinese firms in Europe are diverse in the way they engage with the local workforce. This is because Chinese firms have followed multiple routes of developments and their motives for internationalisation vary. Employment practices that seem to have been brought in by the Chinese firms evolve and transform in workplaces in Europe. Against a background of casualisation of employment relations with the resurgence of neo-liberalism across European labour markets, new entrants (Chinese firms) have found more space to negotiate with existing institutional players (national states, trade unions, employment agents) to develop divergent employment practices.

Research elsewhere shows that Chinese firms are extremely pragmatic, adaptive, and willing to work with local institutions. For example, Chinese firms are found to **take a practical approach** in resolving industrial confrontations in some developing countries, changing remuneration policies in response to local workers' opposition to practices such as continuous overtime and flexible working. While Chinese managers are often seen as championing '**job insecurity, hard-work and self-sacrifice**' as key to China's economic success, they show strong sensitivity to the country conditions as well. When engaged in engineering and construction projects in developing countries, Chinese firms tend to emphasise the relevance of management practices and applicability of past experiences to new situations.

To understand the complex impact of Chinese investment in Europe, future research would do well to examine more fully the dynamics and diversity in the way Chinese firms manage their overseas workforces. Much more research is needed to see how Chinese MNCs negotiated with various institutional players for workforce composition, working conditions, and employment terms. Ethnographic case studies

are most likely to enrich our understanding on this front. In addition, comparative case studies across a range of sectors and countries will also be useful to allow us to uncover what underpins the Chinese firms' ability to access labour and mobilise workers.

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The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone is located in northwest Laos, on the border with Myanmar and Thailand. Photo: Patrick Truscott, Flickr

Liquid Labourscape: Ad Hoc Experimentation in a Chinese Special Economic Zone in Laos

Antonella Diana*

Chinese-established special economic zones in Laos have been criticised as being sites of neoliberal exception, sustained by a Chinese logic of self-entrepreneurship and self-determination—or a soft version of colonial-era extraterritoriality. This essay argues that such areas are, in fact, a frontier space of post-socialist ad hoc experimentation, within which the Lao state haphazardly tests new socioeconomic and governing mechanisms under authoritarian rule in order to produce revenue and perpetuate its power over Lao citizens and territory.

*Antonella is grateful to Josto Luzzu for providing logistic support and research assistance during her fieldwork in 2015.

In the northwest corner of Laos, where the confluence of the Ruak and the Mekong rivers marks the border with Myanmar and Thailand, lies the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ). This is one of twelve special and specific economic zones across Laos, all of which are areas where **Chinese investments** feature prominently. The GTSEZ was established in 2007 on a ninety-nine-year land concession of three thousand hectares granted by the Lao government to Golden Kapok, a private Chinese firm owned by Mr. Zhao Wei, a casino tycoon from Heilongjiang province. Amounting to 700 million USD as of 2015, the firm's investment resulted in the construction of a new conurbation whose economy revolves around the casino business. The Lao government and the foreign company jointly rule the area. In this essay I will draw on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2010 and 2015 in order to explore how this new governance model has affected labour dynamics in the zone, and to shed new light on the alliance between Chinese capital and the Upper Mekong states.

A Frontier Space of Post-Socialist Ad Hoc Experimentation

Chinese-established SEZs in Laos have recently been at the centre of media and scholarly debate. Two main analyses have emerged in academic literature. One, put forward by **Santasombat Yos**, draws on Aihwa Ong's **previous work** and defines the GTSEZ as a site of neoliberal exception, sustained by a Chinese logic of self-entrepreneurship and self-determination. This is coupled with 'state socialism from afar', which has caused deprivation and disempowerment of Lao people through a process of 'accumulation by dispossession'. The other, represented by **Pál Nyíri**, sees the land concessions granted to Chinese companies for SEZs in Laos as a soft version of **colonial-era extraterritoriality**,

and criticise them for eroding ‘the boundaries of citizenship’.

My research suggests that neither the neoliberal nor the crypto-colonial soft-extraterritoriality view fully captures the current political and socio-economic dynamics of the GTSEZ. The former arbitrarily applies a universal neoliberal framework to the Lao and Chinese authoritarian post-socialist contexts; the latter, underestimates that shared sovereignty has been an on-going governance pattern in the Upper Mekong since pre-colonial times (Diana 2009). Drawing on interviews with different actors within the GTSEZ, participant observation of the lived labour experiences of residents, and an analysis of official documents from the Lao government, I argue that the GTSEZ is, in fact, a frontier space of post-socialist ad hoc experimentation. In it, the Lao state haphazardly tests new socioeconomic and governing mechanisms under authoritarian rule in order to produce revenue, and renew and perpetuate its power over Lao citizens and territory.

Evidence of this post-socialist experimental approach can be found in official documents produced by the Lao government. In these bureaucratic texts, SEZs are described as sites for testing a new modernisation and industrialisation model by attracting both domestic and foreign investment with the aim of integrating Laos into the regional economy. SEZs are subjected to special investment promotion policies and have autonomous economic, financial, and legal systems. In the GTSEZ, the experimental policies are implemented by a Management Board and an Executive Board, each constituted by Lao state officials at different levels and representatives from the Chinese firm. The boards are charged with jointly planning development interventions, issuing and enforcing regulations, as well as managing the zone on a daily basis. However, the zone’s administration and management remain under the ultimate supervision of the Lao

national government.

However, both a 2012 official report by the Lao government and later indiscretions from employees in the zone’s administration during my fieldwork in 2015, reveal that the zone’s experimentation was dysfunctional and ad hoc when put into practice. More than the subjugation of Laos to Chinese interests, the operation of the GTSEZ was tinged with illiberal and authoritarian undertones from the Lao state, a situation that belied the ‘neoliberal’ and ‘crypto-colonial’ views described above. Day-to-day co-ruling unfolded through on-going frictions over decision-making between the Chinese and Lao counterparts, as well as through obstruction by the Lao government of the Chinese firm’s plans. It was rumoured that high-level Lao officials kept Mr. Zhao in check by constantly asking for money in return for concessions on project advancement. The committees’ lack of administrative capacity contributed to casual and chaotic governance. This kind of ad hoc rule allowed the Lao government to secure its sovereignty over the zone.

Liquid Labourscape

The inconsistency between political rhetoric and socio-economic reality was also manifested in the labour sphere. A Lao prime ministerial decree from 2010 indicates that SEZs should create employment for the zone’s residents and allow them to have a sustainable income. The **Lao Labour Law**, amended in 2013, and the new **Law on Investment Promotion** of 2009, in theory, guarantee a number of labour rights and regulate the investors’ activities. However, my empirical research found that in the unstable administration of the GTSEZ, these legal resolutions were arbitrarily or barely enforced. Ad hoc experimentation produced what I call a ‘liquid labourscape’, a labour scenario characterised by inequality, casualisation, and lack of regulation—

especially on matters concerning rights and safety.

In the GTSEZ's liquid labourscape, Chinese investors' treatment and remuneration of labourers was unequal and informed by a discourse of productivity that reflected an evolutionary view of socioeconomic development, tinged with racism, whereby nationals from 'more developed' countries were framed as more productive and therefore more-deserving than nationals from 'less developed' states. At the top of the wage-labour hierarchy stood the twenty-seven Ukrainians and one Russian who worked at the casino as VIP room managers, supervisors, and, in one case, as a receptionist. By virtue of being Europeans—and thus being presumed to have a higher level of civilisation and skills—they received salaries that ranged between 1,000 to 1,200 USD. Below them were around 1,000 to 1,500 mainland Chinese. Considered to be the most hard-working, rule-abiding, smartest, and civilised among the Asian employees, they were employed as skilled labourers in the casino, taking care of hospitality, recreation, or administration. Given their perceived higher 'quality' (*suzhi*), they received monthly salaries that varied between 600–800 USD. Lower in the hierarchy were the Thai employees, considered to be rule-abiding and relatively civilised, followed by the Lao, who were regarded as lazy, uncivilised, and stupid. Finally, at the bottom were the Burmese, viewed as hard-working and submissive, yet coming from a poor country and having dark skin. Only 40 Lao, a dozen Thai, and a couple of hundred Burmese workers were employed at the casino as croupiers, receiving wages of about 100 USD a month. A dozen of the Lao employees, who worked as interpreters, middlemen, or clerks in the zone's administration or in the casino, earned between 200–300 USD per month. About 400 Burmese performed unskilled jobs, such as gardening, cleaning, waitressing, and construction, for salaries ranging between 70–100 USD a month.

Although the Lao Labour Law sets the daily working time limit to eight hours and guarantees one day of rest per week, most employees worked for ten to twelve hours a day and had only two unpaid days of leave per month. With the exception of the Europeans, none of the employees in the casino or in other service sectors in the zone had employment contracts. Most worked short-term, without life or health insurance. Many interviewees complained about being mistreated and forced to work overtime by their Chinese employers. Indeed, labour conditions within the zone did not differ much from those found elsewhere in Laos. The Lao state officials' loose or lack of control contributed to reducing the gap between the GTSEZ and the rest of the country. These dynamics confirm that Laos' SEZs are not zones of neoliberal exception, but rather spaces of 'normalised' post-socialist inequality and lack of rule of law.

Strategies of Survival: Resistance, Resilience, and Reinvention

Paradoxically, the liquid nature of the zone's labourscape enabled residents to devise creative modes of survival. These took the form of resistance, resilience, and reinvention. Expressions of resistance to the Chinese-Lao joint rule came from many Lao citizens who resided in or around the Zone. One such case can be seen in the actions of the residents of Khuam, a village that had been relocated in 2008 in order to make space for the construction of the Zone's business neighbourhood—a move that left a few without land and jobs. In 2014, residents gathered on the streets to demonstrate against the committees' proposal to take more land for the construction of an airport. Although the Lao Army cracked down on the demonstrators, the protest was successful in halting the airport plan. The government's backlash notwithstanding, dissent continued

in a concealed way in virtual and real life. A Lao man showed me a Facebook page where netizens exchanged satirical pictures and posts that contested Chinese investments in Laos, and even mentioned an uprising being organised by overseas Lao to free Laos from the yoke of Chinese investment. In general, except for the few Zone employees mentioned above, Lao residents refused to work for the Chinese due to the long working hours and discrimination that this involved.

Additionally, several locals demonstrated their resilience to land and labour deprivation. Many started to learn Chinese language or send their children to study in China, in order to accrue a ‘**cultural capital**’ that could help them profit from the newcomers. A few established social connections with the Chinese, which in some cases resulted in love affairs or marriages, and in others turned into business collaborations. A few other Lao locals ventured into independent small business to capitalise on the Chinese presence. For instance, Sai, a Lao middle-aged woman from Khuam village, responded to the Chinese taking away her farmland by opening a food stall in the market across from the casino in 2015, serving both Lao and southern Yunnan style noodles for employees and visitors. Within a short time Sai’s entrepreneurial effort was rewarded with a booming business and considerable revenue.

Many Burmese migrant workers found social redemption in the Zone by reinventing themselves. Some turned to meta-amphetamine smuggling from across the Mekong. This illegal activity allowed them to earn five to ten times as much as they would have in the more repressive and unequal context of Myanmar. A few young Burmese were able to save money not only to support their families back home, but also to pursue their studies at the university in Yangon. Some others became businesses owners. This was the case of Phon, a young man from the Shan States who had worked as a kitchen hand in a Chinese restaurant. In two years

he had learned how to cook Chinese food and become fluent in the Chinese language. After his employer returned to China, Phon took on his former boss’s business with his sister, and opened a restaurant across from the casino. Marketing his cuisine as Chinese-Burmese fusion, within a short time Phon’s business had become quite profitable. Much like for the resilient Lao and other creative Burmese, for Phon the Chinese presence in the zone had paved the way for upward social mobility.

Winds of Change?

This article has unravelled the political and labour contradictions born out of the partnership between Chinese capital and the Lao state in the GTSEZ. It has suggested that rather than being a site of neoliberal exception or crypto-colonial extraterritoriality, the GTSEZ is a frontier space of ad hoc experimental governance and liquid labour. Paradoxically, experimentation and liquidity have allowed many Lao and foreign residents to devise a new creative SEZ existence. A **recent article** in the Vientiane Times has denounced the lack of protection and precarious conditions for many Lao workers in sites where foreign companies operate. There is some hope that, under the rule of the allegedly progressive Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, elected in 2016, political rhetoric may be turned into an actual upholding of worker’s rights. This could be a good opportunity for the Lao state to use Chinese capital to construct a more equitable SEZ labourscape.

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Cambodian garment workers.
Photo: @iloasiapacific on Flickr.com

Outsourcing Exploitation: Chinese and Cambodian Garment Workers Compared

Ivan Franceschini

In recent years, much has been written about how increasing labour costs in China are pushing investors to move labour-intensive production to other countries where wages are still low. But what does this shift in global capital trends entail for workers? How do the workforces in these new outsourcing destinations fare compared to their Chinese counterparts? In order to gain a better understanding of the human cost of this latest capital flight, this essay compares garment workers in China and Cambodia, considering the wages they receive in relation to the context of their expectations and needs.

In recent years, much has been written about how increasing labour costs in China—among other factors—are pushing investors to move labour-intensive production to other countries where wages are still low. Due to its moderate capital requirements, low level of automation, and minimal demands in terms of skills, the garment industry is one of the sectors in which China's loss of competitiveness is felt most acutely—especially as other countries, such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia, adopt policy after policy to entice foreign investors. But what does this shift in global capital trends entail for workers? How do the workforces in these new outsourcing destinations fare compared to their Chinese counterparts? There is no easy answer to these questions. Indeed, while the past two decades have seen a broad theoretical debate about the consequences and extent of the global 'race to the bottom' in labour standards, not much attention has yet been paid to the human costs of the wave of capital flight that is taking place in the wake of China's industrial upgrade. To address this gap, in this essay I will compare garment

workers in China and Cambodia, considering the wages they receive in the context of their expectations and needs.

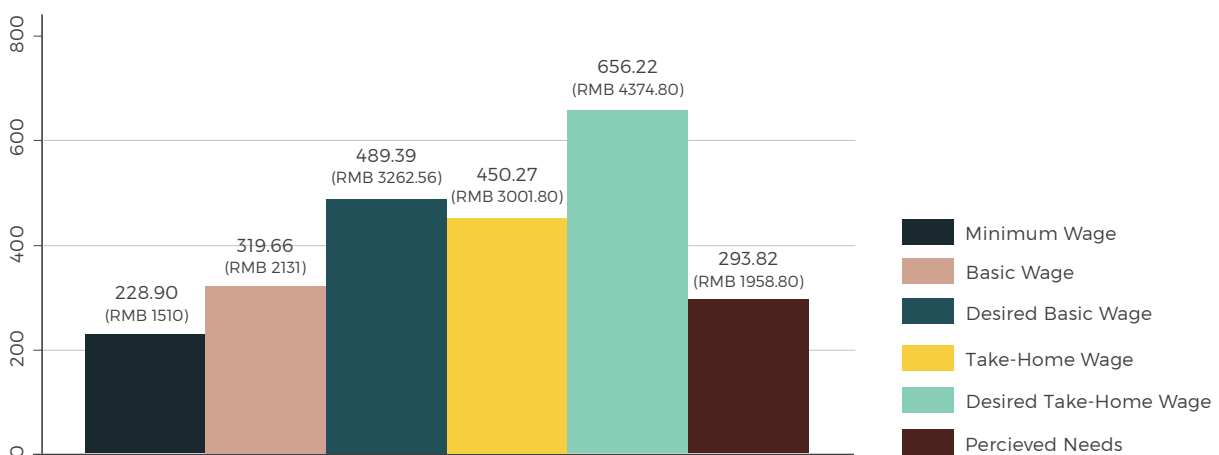
The choice of these two countries is dictated by the fact that the garment industry in China and Cambodia is at two different stages of development. While China remains the undisputed global leader in the industry, with its **2015 exports** worth approximately 274 billion USD, there are **already signs** that the Chinese garment sector is unravelling due to rising labour costs, as the country embarks on an ambitious path of industrial upgrading. The Cambodian garment industry, on the other hand, was only established in the mid-1990s, when Cambodia finally emerged from more than two decades of chaos, and maintains a positive outlook. Having started from barely 80 million USD of exports in 1996, in 2015, the Cambodian garment sector had become a **6.8 billion USD industry**, the ninth largest in the world. Of course, the weight of the two industries within their respective local economies is very different. While the garment industry today plays a relatively minor role in China—in 2015 only 12 percent of the Chinese merchandise exports were in the garment sector—Cambodia’s economic growth remains heavily dependent on garment production, with about 610,000 workers employed in the sector in 2016 and as much as 80 percent of the country’s total

merchandise exports in the same year being garment and footwear products.

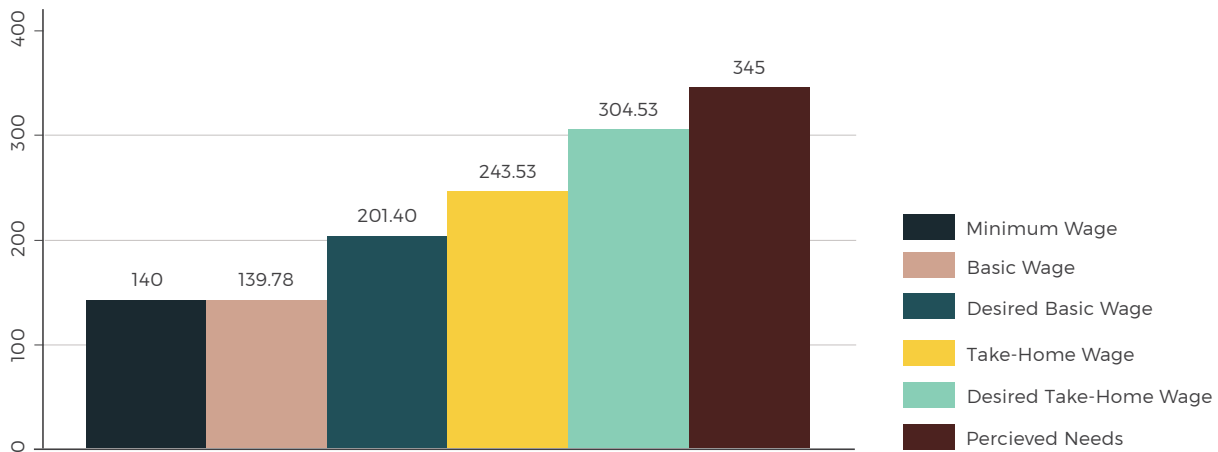
To explore these different contexts, during the summer of 2016 I undertook two surveys. The first was conducted in June and July 2016 at three Hong Kong-owned garment factories in Dongguan, Guangdong province. These factories employed 2,000, 1,000, and 800 workers respectively, and I was able to collect a total of 250 completed questionnaires. The second survey was carried out from July to September 2016 in three Hong Kong-owned garment factories in Phnom Penh, where most of the Cambodian garment industry is concentrated. In this case, the factories employed 5,700, 2,100, and 1,100 workers, and I collected a total of 291 questionnaires. To avoid interference from the management and possible biases in the responses of the workers, all respondents were approached outside the factory without prior knowledge of their employer. Most often, the meetings took place in the safety of their accommodation after their shift had ended or in restaurants around the factory during their lunch break. The quantitative data were supplemented with forty semi-structured interviews with garment workers employed in the sampled factories in both countries, plus additional interviews with local lawyers specialising in labour disputes, union leaders, and labour activists.

Wage and Perceived Needs per Month in China (in USD)

The amount in RMB has been converted into USD at the exchange rate of 3 July 2016, 1 RMB = 0,15 USD



Wage and Perceived Needs per Month in Cambodia (in USD)



Basic Guarantees

The two graphs that accompany this essay summarise my findings. The first aspect to consider when comparing the two countries is the level of wages guaranteed by law, i.e. the local minimum wage. This is depicted in the first column in both graphs. According to the Chinese labour legislation, local governments in China are allowed to decide their own minimum wage through a process of tripartite consultation between local labour departments, the official trade union, and business associations. In setting the amount, these actors have to consider several factors, including the cost of living, the percentage of social security contributions paid by the workers, the average salary in the area, the unemployment rate, and the local level of development. At the time of the survey, the minimum wage in Dongguan was set at 1,510 RMB (roughly 229 USD) per month. In Cambodia, in 2016, authorities announced their intention to pass a **Minimum Wage Law** that would lay the foundations for a ‘universal minimum wage’ to be determined every year through ‘tripartite consultation’. However, currently only the garment and footwear sector is covered by a minimum wage, which is

the same for the whole country. The amount is decided every year by the central government on the basis of the recommendation coming from a tripartite Labour Advisory Committee composed of 28 representatives. Of these, 14 come from the government, 7 from the employers associations, and 7 from the unions (5 of which are considered pro-government). At the time of the survey, the Cambodian minimum wage was set at 140 USD per month.

While in China there are no reported strikes related to minimum wage, in Cambodia the issue is at the centre of much controversy. In early January 2014, massive strikes and demonstrations of garment workers protesting over the government’s refusal to raise the minimum wage ended in a **bloodbath** after the intervention of the military police. Due to the increasing repression of civil society and independent unions by the Cambodian authorities (see also Norén-Nilsson’s essay in this issue), the following years have seen no more mass demonstrations during the minimum wage negotiations. Nevertheless, the raises that were granted by the government have continually fallen short of the expectations of independent trade unions and workers—with the exception of 2017, when the ruling party, concerned about its performance at the impending national

elections, actually granted a **minimum wage rise** in line with the demands of the unions, which will go into effect next year. In 2016, for instance, independent unions pushed for a new monthly minimum wage of no less than 171 USD, but the government settled on a **figure of 153 USD**, far closer to the 147 USD proposed by the garment employer association. This was far lower than the 177 USD that some local and global trade unions and advocacy groups had been demanding as a ‘**living wage**’ for Cambodian garment workers since 2014. In light of these controversies, it is unsurprising that the draft Minimum Wage Law mentioned above introduces severe restrictions on the ability of independent unions to negotiate for higher minimum wages. One example of this is the inclusion of **clauses** that allow for fines of up to 1,250 USD for those ‘creating obstacles or putting illegal pressure on discussions to determine the minimum wage’, or up to 2,500 USD for anyone who ‘incites activities against the declaration of the minimum wage.’

Why do negotiations about the minimum wage elicit such different responses from Chinese and Cambodian workers? The reason can be found in the second column of both graphs, which depicts the basic wage, i.e. the monthly amount that the factories guarantee to the workers regardless of their actual workload. While the Cambodian factories offered a basic wage that coincided with the minimum wage, in China the basic wage was significantly higher (41.1 percent more) than the legal minimum. The explanation for this disparity can be found in the cyclical ‘**labour famines**’ (*mingonghuang*) that have hit coastal areas in China, including Guangdong province, since the early 2000s. With many young Chinese rural women deciding to stay home to raise a family or to look for a job in townships closer to their hometowns, companies in labour-intensive sectors such as the garment industry have no other choice than to offer salaries higher than the legal minimum in order to attract workers. This

means that while increases in the minimum wage in Cambodia have a direct impact on the income of the workers, in China workers already receive higher basic salaries and therefore do not have a large stake in the government’s decisions on the matter. Most importantly, it shows that due to reasons related to demography, as much as to local development, Chinese workers have much more bargaining power than their Cambodian counterparts—a much more threatening prospect for investors than a difference of a few dozen dollars in the minimum wages.

Expectations and Perceived Needs

Minimum wages are simply a bottom line that is somehow supposed to protect workers from extreme exploitation, providing them with the guarantee of an income at times when production slows down due to the paucity of orders. As such, they do not reflect the actual level of remuneration that the workers receive, which in both China and Cambodia largely depends on the amount of overtime work. The Chinese workers in my sample worked an average of 10.3 hours a day from Monday to Friday, plus an average of 9.9 hours on Saturdays, with only Sundays off. This is a clear violation of the national labour law, which states that workers should work no more than 8 hours a day and 44 hours a week, with a maximum of 36 hours of overtime a month. In Cambodia, the workers worked 9.7 hours a day from Monday to Saturday and got only one day off every two weeks, another clear violation of the national legislation, which allows for 48 hours a week, with no more than 2 hours of overtime a day.

Due to the large amount of overtime, workers in both countries were able to earn more than the local minimum wage. This can be seen clearly from the fourth column of both graphs, which depicts the take-home wage, i.e. how much the workers were

actually paid after taxes and other deductions for social security. In absolute terms, Chinese garment workers received much higher take-home wages compared to their Cambodian counterparts. While the Chinese workers in my sample were given an average take-home wage of 3,001.76 RMB (roughly 450.30 USD) a month, Cambodian workers were paid only 243.53 USD, a gap which would most likely widen if the survey also included the costs born by the companies for social insurance and other welfare-related expenses, burdensome in China and almost non-existent in Cambodia. In this sense, the assumption that rising labour costs underscores industrial relocations from China to other countries indeed has a strong foundation.

Significantly, both workforces were not satisfied with their remuneration levels. The third column of both graphs shows the desired basic wage, i.e. the response to the question ‘in a situation in which you have to work only 40 hours a week [48 hours in Cambodia] and do not have to work overtime, how much do you think a reasonable salary would be?’ Comparing the desired basic wage with the actual basic wage highlights that workers in both countries thought it reasonable to receive much higher wages for working only ordinary hours, with the Chinese workers wanting 53.1 percent more and the Cambodian workers wanting 44.1 percent more. The same frustration emerged when the workers were asked about their desired take-home wage. The question, depicted in the fifth column of both graphs, was formulated as such: ‘Considering your current workload, how much do you think would be a reasonable salary for you?’ While Chinese workers considered 4,374.80 RMB (roughly 656.20 USD) to be a reasonable amount, 34.1 per cent more than their take-home wage, Cambodian workers desired 304.53 USD, that is ‘only’ 25 per cent more than what they were currently making.

Still, the roots of this dissatisfaction cannot be understood without considering

the perceived economic needs of the two workforces, which are displayed in the sixth column of the graphs. As mentioned above, international advocacy groups and Cambodian independent unions have been campaigning since 2014 for a living wage of 177 USD per month. An unpublished survey undertaken by several unions and NGOs in Cambodia in June 2016 found that workers in Phnom Penh needed around 142 USD a month for their living expenditures. Yet, as **Dennis Arnold** has noted, ‘workers’ politics and livelihood concerns [in Cambodia] include and extend beyond the (peri-) urban factory floor to rural households.’ For this reason, in my survey I decided to go beyond basic living expenses and ask: ‘On average, how much do you think you need every month to cover the basic living expenses of yourself and your immediate family (your partner, children, parents, or other people whom you have to support)?’

The responses were surprising, considering that living costs are much higher in Dongguan than in Phnom Penh. Cambodian workers felt they needed an average of 345 USD per month, more than the 1,958.80 RMB (roughly 293.80 USD) required by the Chinese workers. One initial explanation for this counterintuitive finding is that most Cambodian workers came from extended families—besides their parents, 84.2 per cent of them had three siblings or more—with most family members remaining in the countryside to engage in agricultural work. A second reason is that while 82.4 per cent of the Chinese workers in my sample lived in a dormitory provided by the factory—evidence of the persistence of the so-called ‘**dormitory labour regime**’ in today’s China—and thus paid only a symbolic fee for water, gas, and electricity averaging 122 RMB (roughly 18.30 USD) a month, Cambodian workers had to find private accommodation outside the factory, paying an average of 34.40 USD monthly. Chinese workers also had access to much cheaper food, paying 311.57 RMB (approximately 46.70 USD) for their

meals on average, compared to the 71.66 USD paid by Cambodian workers. This disparity in expenses clearly affected the amount of funds sent home. While Chinese workers were able to remit 1,724.90 RMB (roughly 258.70 USD) a month, i.e. 57.5 per cent of their take-home wage, Cambodian workers could only send 67.55 USD, i.e. 22.2 per cent of their take-home wage.

A Matter of Survival

What does this comparison tell us about the implications of the decline of the garment industry in China? First, it says that labour costs—as shown by the data on minimum wages and take-home wages—are indeed much higher in China than in Cambodia. This situation is further compounded if we consider the likely impact of the various costs related to social security and welfare that the companies must bear—costs which are substantial in China and almost non-existent in Cambodia. Even more important, in order to face the challenges posed by demographic trends and local development, garment factories in China today often have no other choice than to offer better conditions than the legal minimum wage in order to attract workers. This is in stark contrast to Cambodia, where most employers have no incentive whatsoever to provide anything more than to what they are legally bound. In such a context, although China still offers advantages in terms of infrastructure and the availability of raw materials, investments in labour-intensive industry are likely to continue to desert the country.

Second, my survey demonstrates that by relocating from China to Cambodia, investors perpetuate dynamics of exploitation. This emerges clearly from the data regarding the expectations and perceived needs of the workers in the two countries. While the Chinese workers in my sample were finally able to earn wages higher than what they felt

they needed, their Cambodian counterparts still earned much less than their perceived needs. It was definitely not a coincidence that wages were never at the top of the list of the workers' concerns during my interviews in China, while they regularly came up in my conversations in Cambodia. This does not mean that Chinese garment workers are happy with their remuneration—on the contrary, as we have seen, they still deem wages 'unreasonable' in light of their workload. Still, there is a fundamental difference between dissatisfaction due to the perceived unfairness of the economic treatment experienced in the workplace, as I found in China, and a deeper concern about the ability to provide a basic level of subsistence for oneself and one's family, as I encountered in Cambodia. It is this kind of human cost that employers should bear in mind when deciding to relocate from one country to the next in their unending quest for lower costs and higher profits.

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Silk Factory, Central Highlands of Vietnam.
Photo: Justin Button

Trade Union Reform in One-Party States: China and Vietnam Compared

Anita Chan

This essay compares the prospects for union reform in Vietnam and China. In Vietnam, heated debates about how to reform the trade union and the industrial relations system have been ongoing for more than a year, ever since the government signed the now defunct Transnational Pacific Partnership Agreement. That the debate continues among the top leadership and within government bureaucracies indicates that there is no lack of willingness to reform. In China, on the contrary, the Chinese party-state and the official unions are taking the route of suppression of labour activism, indicating grim prospects for union reform.

As I understand it, the new President of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour is enthusiastic about continuing efforts to ‘renovate’ grassroots unions even if the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement does not go forward... In addition, I understand that the Ministry of Labour has moved forward with creating a new division of industrial relations that will administer the registration of independent unions.

An ILO Consultant
2 March 2017

From the [Chinese] trade union’s standpoint we do not welcome labour NGOs. We even feel antagonistic towards them. My own feeling is about the same. The union has always taken them as a serious enemy.

An informal employee of the Chinese trade union
4 January 2017

These two comments embody the current concerns over the problems that the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) are facing in their respective countries. In Vietnam, **heated debates** about how to reform the trade union and the industrial relations system have been going on for more than a year, ever since the government signed the now defunct Transnational Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) with the United States in February 2016. Vietnam’s eagerness to become a member of the TPP was due to the promising prospect of quick economic gains connected to the membership. In light of this, there was consensus in the government and the VGCL on the need to enter into this international pact despite the TPP’s Chapter 19, which required Vietnam to ensure freedom of association. If the TTP had been implemented, workers would have been permitted to set up their own unions and affiliate themselves to union federations of their choice. This would have meant a fundamental change in Vietnam’s political structure necessitating relevant laws to be revised and new institutions created. In

order to support this complicated process, the United States government had already earmarked **four million dollars** to fund the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in the development of a **plan for the reform of industrial relations** in the country within five years.

Sceptics, die-hard critics of one-party states, and those who would have been losers in the new deal—such as the **American trade unions**—believe that Vietnam signed the TPP for purely economic reasons, and that genuine freedom of association for Vietnamese workers is unlikely to materialise. When Donald Trump withdrew from the TPP in February 2017, scepticism heightened. Indeed it seems that the factions within the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the VGCL that have not been so supportive of dismantling the monopolistic trade union system are now backtracking. At the time of writing, freedom of association is still under discussion in Vietnam, albeit not as urgently as before. Still, as the quote from the ILO Consultant indicates, the issue is not yet dead and drawing up a programme for trade union reform is now seen as the more urgent task. Had Vietnam been motivated only by economic interests, then these initiatives would have been dropped entirely. That the debate continues among the top leadership and within government bureaucracies indicates that the willingness to reform is also self-motivated. This essay points to the fact that signing the TPP was not a decision solely made on the spur of the moment with economic gains in mind, but also has deeper historical roots.

To strengthen my argument, I will compare Vietnam with China. As **many other scholars** (including **myself**) have already discovered, China is an **excellent comparator** for Vietnam. Both countries are Asian, socialist, one-party states steeped in market socialism, and they are both often criticised as being authoritarian.

The countries' ossified political structures share many common characteristics borne from their Marxist-Leninist origins, but in as much there are **varieties of capitalism**, there are also varieties of socialism. Having recognised their similarities, identifying their differences and tracing the root causes of their divergences allows us to understand both systems better.

The second quote at the beginning of this essay is taken from an interview with a young university graduate hired by a city-level trade union in Guangdong province. Only one year earlier, for the first time the local government had launched a **massive crackdown** that saw the arrest and interrogation of some twenty labour NGO activists. The quote—as well as those arrests—shows that, while the Vietnamese are debating how to liberalise the trade union system, the Chinese party-state and the ACFTU are taking the route of suppression. Thus, the prospects for trade union reform in the two countries are very different. But before analysing these prospects, we need to examine the historical roots of why these two one-party states are not equally authoritarian.

Historical, Political, and Structural Differences

While both the Vietnamese and Chinese unions have been conceived of as **Leninist 'transmission belts'** between the higher echelons of the party-state and the masses, with an additional role as dispensers of social welfare, in many respects the ACFTU is much weaker than the VGCL. The ACFTU has been in a subservient status under party-state domination since 1949, bereft of any élan of resistance. For eleven years, from 1967 to 1978, it was even disbanded. After Deng Xiaoping came back to power in 1978, he re-established the ACFTU and gave it some magnitude of autonomy, but to this day it remains no more than a very weak bureaucracy. The VGCL, on

the other hand, has a **history of militancy**, first against French colonialism and then against American invasion. As **Gabriel Kolko** has written, ‘All wars more or less transcend the control of those leading them...’ Because of the war, the union had stronger ties with its constituency. In the South, **trade unions battled** against American and Vietnamese capitalism. After the war ended in 1975, a legacy of militancy remained, so much so that when I interviewed quite a high-level trade unionist in the mid-1990s, I had the feeling I was talking to a trade union official who still possessed some revolutionary commitment, unlike those Chinese union officials who tended to just spout the Party line. South Vietnam had never been totally absorbed into the fold of the socialist bureaucratic subservient structure when *doi moi*—that is ‘renovation’, an expression equivalent to China’s ‘reform and opening up’ (*gaige kaifang*)—began in the mid-1980s.

Both the ACFTU and VGCL tried to wrest more power from their respective party-states in the late 1980s. While the ACFTU failed to gain anything following the **suppression of the Tiananmen Uprising** in 1989, the VGCL, in contrast, achieved some independence a year earlier at its **1988 Congress**. The then secretary general of the CPV declared that union cadres might voice their ideas independently of the Party and management. Thus, when I first began doing research on Vietnam I was surprised to discover that *Lao Dong* (Labour), the official newspaper of the VGCL, carried articles in which the union openly staked positions that were different from those of the Party and of MOLISA. One consistent public debate up to this very day has been the VGCL’s argument that the minimum wage is set too low for workers’ needs. Never has such kind of public discussion appeared in the Chinese *Workers’ Daily*, the ACFTU’s mouthpiece, where all Chinese bureaucracies speak with one voice—that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If there were any internal debates on these issues in China,

they took place behind closed doors. This difference in the trade union publications alone indicated that in Vietnam there was some room for transparency, and that the VGCL had some space to act independently.

One reason why the VGCL could enjoy this space is partly related to the trade union’s organisational structure. The Chinese and Vietnamese administrative systems are similar. In both countries, the Party has control over the appointment of leading union cadres at each level. Leading cadres are also subjected to **two management systems**, what the Chinese authorities call ‘branch dictates’ (*tiaotiao zhuanzheng*) and ‘area dictates’ (*kuaikuai zhuanzheng*), with ‘branch’ referring to ministerial hierarchical chain of commands, and ‘area’ referring to a command system under the Party at the same hierarchal level. However, while the Chinese bureaucracy is dominated by ‘area dictates’, Vietnam is more inclined towards ‘branch dictates’. In other words, the VGCL’s line of command from the top to various lower level unions can override the interests of the Party at the same levels. This permits the VGCL to carry out its assigned mission to represent and protect workers’ rights without being trumped by the priorities of the local party-state for economic development. In China, in contrast, local unions are under the control of the local party-state and thus tend to collude with employers, a situation that makes it difficult for them to help workers even if they are so inclined. The difference is further amplified by Vietnam’s traditional **sectoral trade unions** that have a vertical line of command. In China, sectoral industrial unions do exist but they are so weak that they are almost irrelevant.

Different Attitudes and Ways of Handling Strikes

Since the mid-2000s, both countries have been plagued by wild-cat strikes, especially

in the labour-intensive export sector. None of these strikes is organised by official grassroots trade unions, and they are thus ‘leaderless’ strikes. China has chosen to be silent on the legal status of strikes and, without functioning formal channels to resolve their grievances, going on strike has become the only possible strategy for workers to call attention to their plight. Vietnam, in contrast, recognises the right to strike on condition that workers follow a cumbersome application procedure. However, the process is so laborious that out of the several thousands of strikes that broke out in the past two decades not even one can be considered legal. This situation may lead one to conclude that the concession of a legal right to strike is irrelevant in preventing strikes from breaking out.

The difference, therefore, is not in the law but in the authorities’ attitude to strikes. Since strikes in Vietnam are officially recognised as a right of the workers—even if they do not comply with the pre-strike procedures—when a strike breaks out, the local Department of Labour and the local trade union immediately arrive on the scene, lambast the management for violating the laws, and negotiate on behalf of the workers. The police too rush to

the scene, but they just stand by in case the strikes descend into violence. Once workers’ demands are met—usually this happens in a couple of days—production returns to normal.

As for China, since the party-state does not recognise strikes as a right of the workers, the local authorities’ attitude towards strikes is generally hostile. They are seen as potentially socially and politically destabilising, and thus anathema to capital investment and economic development. The local union arrives on the strike scene to quell the disturbance rather than to act as a representative of the workers. The police is apt to use force, especially if workers take to the streets. In such a context, Chinese workers see the union, local government, and management as colluding against them. In fact, the attitude of Chinese workers towards the union is not only one of mistrust, but antagonism. Vietnamese workers on the other hand see the primary union as representative of their rights despite its weakness. Here are the surprising **results of a survey** that **Wang Hongzen** and I undertook in 2007.

Vietnamese and Chinese Workers’ Attitudes towards Factory Trade Unions

Do you think the trade union in your workplace represents workers’ interests?

	Vietnam	China
Yes	894 (85%)	100 (10%)
No	58 (6%)	203 (20%)
Don’t know	100 (9%)	672 (67%)
Missing	2 (<1%)	33 (3%)
Total	1054 (100%)	1008 (100%)

In other words, though their union is weak, the vast majority of Vietnamese workers still tend to think of the union as an ally rather than an antagonist.

Different Countries, Different Systems

To summarise, though their workplace union is weak, the two countries are quite different historically, politically, and culturally. On the whole Vietnam is more pluralistic while China is more monolithic. These fundamental preconditions lead to a divergence in the formation of the system of industrial relations. The situation in Vietnam is much more conducive to learning from and working with foreign countries and organisations. For many years, the MOLISA and VGCL have been working closely with international organisations, the most important of them being the ILO, which played an important role in helping and advising Vietnam to revise the strike regulations included in the 2012 Labour Code. They have also been partnering with two trade union support and solidarity organisations: the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Australian Union Aid Abroad (APHEDA). The Australian Public Sector Union also helped the VGCL when it was setting up its public sector union in the early 1990s.

Vietnamese trade unionists, unlike their Chinese counterparts, are used to addressing foreign trade unionists and labour activists as brothers and sisters. It reflects their self-identity as comrades in the international trade union community. The TPP, therefore, should not be seen as the root cause, but as a trigger of Vietnam's decision to reform its industrial relations system, including setting up a system that recognises freedom of association. In fact, it was the VGCL that proposed to the party-state to accept this demand of the American government. The VGCL felt confident enough in its own ability

to compete for the loyalty of Vietnamese workers with emerging new trade unions. In mid-2016 during our field research, we saw the relevant Vietnamese bureaucracy stakeholders, in collaboration with the ILO, rolling out programmes of social dialogue and collective bargaining at various administrative levels. There was open discussion that some workers had already agitated to set up new independent unions and the urge was not to suppress them, but to revise the relevant laws to make them reflect this new reality. At the behest of the ILO, Vietnam is consolidating a peak tripartite system. Minimum wage and other labour standards are now set at the national level after intense debate between the three parties—government, employers, and unions. The emphasis of the programme is on strengthening the trade unions' power and their ability to negotiate at different levels. Training on social dialogue techniques is aimed at instructing union officials to identify themselves as representatives of the workers and dissociate themselves from management domination. The ILO's tripartite system is beginning to take shape in Vietnam. However, it seems that the VGCL is on the losing end. After the **new minimum wages** for various regions were announced in June 2017, the VGCL openly complained that they were too low to meet workers' needs.

In the past two years, the ACFTU has also been in the midst of reforms. Programmes to reform the union in China are not unprecedented, but time and again not much has changed. **Direct elections** of workplace union committees, campaigns to establish workplace collective bargaining, and the setting up of amalgamated unions at the district or village level for scattered small workplaces have all failed to effect any noticeable changes, except in isolated cases. With strikes breaking out unabated, particularly in Guangdong province, the ACFTU has been blamed for its incompetence in keeping the labour peace.

Meanwhile under Xi Jinping the Chinese

authorities have intensified their repression of labour activism; labour NGOs have been harassed and some of their staff have been arrested. Foreign contacts are controlled and closely monitored. According to authoritative internal sources, Xi has lambasted the ACFTU, blaming it for having alienated itself from the workers. The unions are criticised for four types of ‘ossification’—they are said to have become bureaucratised, hedonistic, behaving like royalty, and acting like functionaries. A new round of reform has been ordered—union officials are to be at one with the people, with more grassroots and amalgamated unions to be set up to provide workers with more services. At the same time, the role of the CCP at the grassroots is also being strengthened, with the Party being cast as the overseer of the union reform.

In January 2017, we had a chance to observe how this programme is being carried out in an industrial zone in Guangdong province. The city union has used its own resources to recruit a dozen or so young university or college graduates to staff one of the zone’s community centres. From here they provide social services, run social club activities, and disseminate some labour law knowledge to the workers in the neighbourhood. The office is open until late at night, unlike a regular trade union office that only opens during normal work hours. It is hoped that workers who are active in organising social activities will ultimately become labour activists. If a strike involving more than one hundred workers breaks out in the neighbourhood, it is not the task of the office staff to intervene. They have to wait for the local union and authorities to come to resolve the problem by themselves. The reason why this type of work cannot be taken care of by a regular grassroots trade union office, we were told, is because the union is held back by its own organisational inertia. For all intents and purposes, these grassroots union outposts resemble youth centres and community centres. It is through these services that the city union hopes to be

able to satisfy the assigned responsibility of being at one with the masses. But it is not the regular trade union staff who is tasked to do this—it is their surrogates. At best, one can characterise this programme as social work trade unionism.

Anita Chan

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Xi Jinping and Donald Trump during one of their first official meetings.
Photo: Businessinsider.com

Prospects for US-China Union Relations in the Era of Xi and Trump

Katie Quan

Under the presidency of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, relations between trade unions in the United States and China have come to a virtual standstill. To understand how we arrived at this point, and what can be done to break the impasse, this essay briefly reviews the historical development of union relations between the two countries. In order to achieve this, it draws on voices of those labour leaders in the United States who have been direct participants in efforts to develop early contacts with their Chinese counterparts.

In October 2013, Richard Trumka, President of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO), visited the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to establish **formal bilateral relations** between unions in China and the United States. This visit signalled an historic shift in labour policy, from Cold War-style hostility to normalisation of relations. Some American labour activists hoped that it might further lead to collaboration on joint activities, such as collective bargaining. That collaboration would be a significant step forward in labour solidarity and building a global labour movement.

However since then progress towards building relations has been decidedly slow. There have been only a couple of official exchanges with the AFL-CIO, and activities sponsored by Change To Win (CTW), the splinter group of the AFL-CIO that first began relations with the ACFTU a decade ago, have decreased. Some American labour leaders have noted that the ACFTU has become less interested in collective bargaining since Xi Jinping's campaign against corruption began. Now, given Donald Trump's election as US President with his agenda to weaken the

American labour movement and start a trade war with China, it is fair to ask whether there are any prospects for progress in relations between unions in China and the US, and if so where.

To understand the American perspective on the relationship between the US and Chinese unions, I will briefly review the historical development of relations between workers in the two countries. Then, I will address more recent union relations based on information obtained through semi-structured interviews with a dozen labour leaders in the US who have been direct participants in efforts to develop those relations. Finally, I will discuss the challenges and opportunities laid out by my informants and draw conclusions.

A Troubled History

The root of American attitudes towards Chinese labour have been shaped by race, class, and ideology. Since the nineteenth century there have been xenophobic fears of the ‘**Yellow Peril**’ represented by Chinese workers, as well as arguments that workers of European ancestry should cast their lot with American business and shut out Chinese workers. These fears were compounded in 1949, when China became a communist state and an ideological enemy, resulting in antipathies that linger to this day.

After World War II, the Cold War set in, and the world was divided into two main ideological camps: the communist and the ‘free world’. In 1949, American unions led a split in the **World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)**—a global union that aspired to bring together unions from all over the world into a single organisation—to form the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), an alliance of free world unions. Meanwhile, the WFTU came to be known as the federation of communist unions, to which the ACFTU was affiliated. Back then, divisions in the international

working class mirrored ideological debates among nation-states. The ICFTU consistently criticised the ACFTU for not being a free and independent trade union, and therefore declared that it was not an ‘authentic’ voice of Chinese workers.

However, in 1979, when China opened its doors to foreign investment and diplomatic relations with the US were established, the material basis for this divide changed. Multinational corporations raced to China to take advantage of the low-cost labour. Factory conditions were appalling and workers were exploited, causing outcry among international consumer and human rights activists, and drawing criticism of the Chinese government and its unions for not protecting workers. At a time when international labour solidarity might have meant American workers reaching out to workers in China, American unions continued to refuse to have anything to do with Chinese unions, repeating the Cold War rhetoric that they were neither independent nor authentic. Meanwhile, some left-leaning labour organisers worked quietly in the background to coordinate worker-to-worker exchanges between US and Chinese workers, hoping to build solidarity.

The Tiananmen Incident in 1989 proved to be a setback for these budding relations. The crackdown on the protests was viewed worldwide on cable news in real time, and its brutality reinforced what many American labour unionists had believed all along—that despite capitalist markets and openness to meeting foreigners, China was still an authoritarian state that did not respect human rights. The AFL-CIO response was to support a few Chinese labour activists in exile, and to continue to boycott relations with Chinese unions.

At that time, American unions supported campaigns targeting international brands, pressuring these companies to accept corporate social responsibility in their supply chains. The theory was that the brands had power to control labour conditions in

factories that manufactured their products. In Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, these cross-border campaigns, mostly led not by unions but by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), had modest success in supporting worker organising. However, with respect to China—where an increasing share of the world’s export manufacturing was taking place, and where supply chain organising strategies might have had an impact on the global economy—no NGO ever figured out how to get brands to pressure the Chinese government to allow workers to organise themselves.

Another response of American unions was to push for trade sanctions against China. Arguing that the low labour standards in China undercut American jobs, the AFL-CIO sought to block China from entering the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and from receiving Most Favoured Nations status under Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with the US. Using the race card once again, the **AFL-CIO’s petition against PNTR** painted a dehumanised picture of Chinese workers as willing slaves who were willing to work for practically nothing, thus undermining the standards of American workers. It argued that sanctions would force the Chinese government to improve conditions for Chinese workers. So at the turn of the twenty-first century, racist stereotypes of Chinese workers that were common over a century before were still being used, and policies from the Cold War era that ended nearly half a century before still kept Chinese and US workers divided.

First Engagements

Meanwhile, global labour activists continued to organise worker-to-worker exchanges. In 2002, Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), participated in an exchange that was facilitated by Kent Wong for the Asian

Pacific American Labour Alliance (APALA), a constituency group of the AFL-CIO that was formed in part to break through racial stereotypes of Asian workers. Stern was later criticised by AFL-CIO leaders for having visited China, but he was firmly convinced that China was important to the global economy, and he was determined to develop relationships with the ACFTU. Importantly, he was an activist union leader, so he was looking not just to have fraternal affiliations, but also to find ways to collaborate on joint action. One of the issues that SEIU continuously raised with the ACFTU was its concern about Walmart. In 2005, **SEIU** was heavily involved in the American labour **campaign against Walmart**, and Stern hoped that there was a way for US and Chinese unions to collaborate.

In 2005, when SEIU and other unions broke away from the AFL-CIO to form the CTW federation, Andy Stern persuaded other CTW leaders to go to China to see things for themselves and to propose joint action. One of these leaders was James Hoffa, president of the Teamsters union, and an active opponent of PNTR for China. Staffed by veteran international labour activist Tim Beaty, Hoffa’s approach to relations with Chinese unions was open but cautious. As Beaty told me in an interview in February 2017:

I did have an idea that by going to China, talking directly to folks, even in formal contexts, about leadership elections, how we collectively bargain, that maybe there would be an opportunity to see an alternative way. We might get discussion, contribute to the process of change inside the ACFTU, and create a different consciousness, broaden alternatives and possible reforms. Maybe this would legitimise people who had more democratic idea of getting workers involved. I have no idea that that has happened. Maybe I was naïve.

Another CTW leader who travelled

to China, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) President Joe Hansen, was interested in the connections that Chinese unions had with the same employers. Early on he was concerned about the impact of Chinese companies selling pork to the US, and later in 2013, he became concerned when the Chinese company Shuanghui International purchased Smithfield Food, an American meat processor where the union had won an organising campaign after a long and bitter battle. Shuanghui, now known as WH Group, **recognised the union**, added 38,000 workers to the payroll, and has continued the collective bargaining relationship.

In other words, from the early 2000s, CTW unions stepped into uncharted territories to try to get to know the ACFTU and find out what kind of relationship and joint action was possible. The Teamsters hoped that engagement would lead to labour solidarity as they practice it with other countries, but repeatedly found that the ACFTU side was not interested in providing information or writing letters of solidarity. UFCW also hoped that there could be joint work with the ACFTU on mutual employers, but found little interest at the regional level, though a proposal for a research survey sent ripples that were felt worldwide. SEIU built deep relationships that made important headway in the Walmart campaign, but found that unionising China's Walmart workers did not actually provide workers with a voice. These unions found that their concepts of solidarity might be very different from those of the ACFTU, and that their goals for developing relationships and activities might not be exactly the same.

AFL-CIO and China

In 2011, the ACFTU made a bid for a seat on the governing body of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which placed the AFL-CIO in the middle of an international debate. Many American and international unions

opposed the bid on the grounds of the old ICFTU arguments that it was not independent and not authentically representatives of Chinese workers. On the other hand, other labour movements supported the bid, on the grounds that the ACFTU is the official union of China and it represents the largest working class in the world. In this path-breaking vote, the AFL-CIO abstained, paving the way for the ascendance of ACFTU to the ILO governing body.

The AFL-CIO decision was advanced by its International Affairs Director, Cathy Feingold, who in an interview I had with her in January 2017 rationalised: 'We thought constructive engagement was important, but we could not fully endorse, because of human rights and other issues.' In the end, the decision paved the way for Feingold to begin a process of building relationships with ACFTU leaders at the ILO, and making plans for AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka to visit China. Her efforts bore fruit in September 2013, when Trumka and a small group of AFL-CIO staff made the **first official AFL-CIO visit to China**. Though this visit was relatively low-key, it was nevertheless historic, given the hostile relations that had existed between US and Chinese workers in the previous decades.

In spite of the goodwill expressed during Trumka's visit, progress in building relationships between Chinese and American unions has been slow, for both AFL-CIO and CTW unions. Both federations say that exchanges are cordial, though veteran China labour hands like Josie Mooney and Kent Wong in interviews I had with them in January and February 2017 say that frank conversations are more difficult since there have been many changes in union leadership in both countries, and trust relationships have to be rebuilt. According to my interviewees, in recent years there have been some tensions, like with the Chinese government's 2014 criticism of the AFL-CIO's decades-long support for the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, through its international education arm, the

American Center for International Labour Solidarity. The ACFTU has also voiced displeasure with the City University of New York's grant from the US State Department to do labour education in China.

One new development involves union relations at **Chinese firms investing in the US**. In 2016, Chinese companies invested nearly 54 billion USD in the US in various industries, which was up 359 percent from the previous year. There is no systematic data on how these investments are affecting labour relations, but there are at least some cases, like the Smithfield Foods case mentioned earlier, which appear to indicate that Chinese employers are not necessarily anti-union. In such a context, once again attempts have been made to build relationships between Chinese and American unions *vis-a-vis* a common employer. Instead of building the relationships by building union-to-union ties, this strategy relies on the employer as the bridge between the unions, at least initially.

The Larger Picture

Relations between unions in the US and China are one aspect of the larger picture of global capital and global labour. Presumably, if the labour movements in the US and China were strong, and relations between the two countries were strong, they could muster a countervailing force against multinational capital. Towards this end, some American unions have attempted to establish relations with unions in China to work on joint campaigns against common employers. While in the process they have broken through some stereotypes and misconceptions about China and Chinese workers, in general they have found the ACFTU to be welcoming and cordial, but perhaps not so interested in joint campaigns against common employers aimed at worker empowerment. In spite of this, American unions remain committed to searching for ways to work with Chinese

unions.

Under the current presidencies of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, it is possible that these fledgling attempts at building relationships will be further set back. Under Xi, the Chinese government has cracked down on human rights and labour activists, and has put NGOs under the administration of the Public Security Bureau, its domestic security agency. This may make the ACFTU less interested in sharing information with American unions about activating workers, particularly with regard to coordinating collective bargaining and strategic campaigns. Meanwhile, Trump's current agenda includes a myriad of threats to lower labour standards, eliminate collective bargaining rights, and substantially weaken union influence. American unions are currently preparing for major defensive battles, and have already announced substantial staff layoffs and financial cutbacks. Given these challenges to their survival, they may have little resources left for international solidarity.

One area that might have complex consequences is international trade. Donald Trump has already announced that the US will withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), decrease its role in the World Trade Organisation, and hold China accountable for currency manipulation. He has even hired Peter Navarro—producer of the fervently anti-China film *Death by China*—as his chief trade adviser and many observers are concerned that they intend to start a trade war with China. Some US unions, like the autoworkers and steelworkers, are cheering Trump's positions on trade (even as they face decimation from Trump's domestic labour policies), because they believe that trade barriers will bring back jobs to American workers. It is hard to say at this point if trade barriers will cause American firms to reinvest in the US, without knowing what the specific policies and comparative costs will be. In any case, it will be important to watch out for racial stereotyping that has been used to

advance support for protectionist trade in the past.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping has stepped into the vacuum left by Trump's retreat from global trade, and is proposing that China lead the world's new economic order. Among many concerns, this raises the question as to whether China would consent to a labour clause as a core chapter in these international trade agreements, something that global labour activists have spent many years fighting for, and have actually achieved in cases like the TPP. These labour clauses have varied in effectiveness, but in some cases they have provided the basis for workers to advance rights, like freedom of association in Vietnam. Given China's poor record on labour standards enforcement domestically, it would be a surprise if it agreed to a labour clause in international trade agreements. Of course, the ACFTU would be bound to support Xi's position because it is subordinate to the Chinese Communist Party, but this position would also be consistent with views that were expressed to American trade unionists on numerous exchange visits.

In an era when relations between unions in the US and China do not progress or even regress, what is to be done? According to veteran labour activist Apo Leong, whom I interviewed in January 2017, 'Over the years we've seen political windows open and close, and during the closed periods labour organisers need to continue foundational work that will put them in a better position to advance when the political window opens.' For American and Chinese unions, this might mean that both sides should continue to have official exchanges, while understanding that the pace of engagement may not accelerate. It also suggests the need to evaluate where some gains can be made, perhaps in areas of mutual interest other than strategic campaigns, like health and safety or labour law. Aside from high level official exchanges, US and Chinese unions might also consider increasing lower level dialogues among union members and

staff aimed at strengthening friendship—such as member-to-member visits, staff internship exchanges, and technical and research exchange. After all, US-China union relationships will continue to be critical to labour power in the global economy, but given the current political climate, organisers need to be more strategic than before and ensure that the one step forward is not undone by two steps backwards.

Katie Quan

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FORUM

The Future of Contemporary China Studies

The study of contemporary China is currently facing formidable challenges. On one hand, there is the long-standing theoretical problem of how to make China studies more relevant to mainstream disciplines, overcoming the double trap of isolationism and exceptionalism. On the other, academic freedom is increasingly under threat by the rising economic and political power of the Chinese authorities. Not only foreign and domestic researchers working on politically sensitive issues—including the topics at the core of our journal—face increasing difficulties in carrying out fieldwork in China, but the Chinese Communist Party has also stepped up its censorship effort, in the attempt to pressure international academic publishers into self-censoring unwelcome content. All of this is happening while the Chinese authorities are pushing their own discursive agenda abroad, showering foreign academic institutions with much needed funding to carry out activities in line with the priorities of the Party. The three contributions included in this forum explore these challenges, triggering a discussion that we hope will continue in the following issues.



Le Prêtre Marié (The Married Priest), René Magritte, 1951

Treating What Ails the Study of Chinese Politics

William Hurst

For almost as long as political science has existed as a discipline, the study of Chinese politics has been afflicted with a chronic disease. Depending on one's perspective, this malady's manifestations have amounted to either neglected isolation or arrogant exceptionalism. To treat this illness, it is important to set aside any rigid orthodoxy and to encourage and celebrate diversity and bold experimentation.

For almost as long as political science has existed as a discipline, the study of Chinese politics has been afflicted with a chronic disease. Depending on one's perspective, this malady's manifestations have amounted to either neglected isolation or arrogant exceptionalism. At root has been a tendency of China scholars to recount everything they could learn about one village or neighbourhood, one leader, or one army group, without context or comparison, assuming the wider world would care simply because their research was about China; and then the wider world took little notice. Regardless of whom one believes may have been to blame, students of Chinese politics have been searching for curative remedies for at least the past forty-five years.

During the 1970s and 1980s, it was en vogue to deploy macro-models of Chinese politics, both to compensate for our field's relative data paucity and to make findings more readily intelligible to non-area specialists. Even when such models had names like

‘Mao in Command’, they still represented first attempts to ‘replace proper names with variables’. Yet, just as the last of these older-style model debates was raging (between proponents of ‘civil society’ and ‘corporatism’ perspectives), a number of scholars sought to introduce greater methodological rigor and better demonstrate the validity of their findings by making use of dramatically more advanced survey techniques and quantitative analysis than had ever before been common in the China field. From about 1990–2005, this trend did indeed bring some greater visibility to at least some parts of the field, though it began to bump up against some limits of data availability, research costs, and political strictures and risks. Survey research remains important, but it proved not to be a panacea.

Roughly contemporaneously, from around 1995–2010, some other scholars (including this writer) tried to make the study of Chinese politics more systematic, accurate, and ultimately generalisable by advocating for a new emphasis on subnational comparative analysis within China. Whether they compared regions, elements of the bureaucracy, social groups, or even time periods, these colleagues hoped that step-by-step disaggregation and more careful attention to China’s internal diversity might refine the specification of hypothesised causal processes and mechanisms and enable testable claims about their scope of generalisability. As with the survey tradition, this had the potential to allow concepts and theories to travel more readily, not only into China from other parts of comparative politics but also in the opposite direction. Yet, Chinese politics never became anything close to a net exporter of theory or concepts during this period.

Racing for a Cure

Faced with the ongoing relative otiosity of prior therapies, alongside the stress of an ever

more competitive and vagarious job market, a new generation of students has gravitated toward a different approach—one that is predicated on a sea change in the China field. Over more or less the past decade, Chinese politics has gone from a data-poor field to one overflowing with all manner of observable phenomena that can be examined, counted, aggregated, or analysed. In part, this has been driven by a technological revolution in both the output of content and techniques for ‘scraping’ or otherwise ‘mining’ it, allowing the endless torrent of terabytes produced by and for the Internet to be converted into useful sets of ‘big data’. In part, it has also been based on other innovations, such as the use of field experiments and a greater propensity than among most of their predecessors for today’s graduate students and junior scholars to collaborate closely with leading quantitative researchers based in Mainland China. The preferred regimen of the new generation is thus to play in what could be called the discipline’s methods arms race, deploying ever more stunning technical tools and operations in hopes of impressing the discipline as a supreme virtuoso after the current fashion (or fad), outshining all others, landing a good job, and then making one’s mark.

Yet, while the shiny object so many are reaching for may be a brass ring, it is no silver chalice. Today’s younger scholars are certainly landing jobs, but the Holy Grail of bringing Chinese politics into the core of political science remains elusive and the concentration and compression of new research into increasingly small-bore methodological debates and frameworks risks the perverse effect of rendering the field even more marginal and less relevant. At its worst, scholarship in the new mould can amount merely to taking up concepts or hypotheses uncritically from American politics or haphazard corners of comparative politics and testing them out with bigger and bigger Chinese datasets and fancier and fancier

methods. Such research can end up asking the wrong questions, cutting itself out of the most essential conversations even before it has settled on findings. All of the current emphasis, for example, on discerning through experiments how mayors or other local officials in China's consultative authoritarian system respond to claims from different social groups has produced some impressive, even virtuosic, articles. But all such work is predicated on the assumption that China's is indeed a consultative authoritarian system. Of course, the really important question is whether consultative authoritarianism describes China very well at all (I do not think it does, but I would welcome a healthy debate). The obsessive focus on methods occludes the fact that a great deal of research can be misguided (and thus at best trivial and at worst wrong) from the get-go. Unfortunately, if such work predominates, Chinese politics can appear from the outside as mundane, epiphenomenal, or even vapidly irrelevant. China specialists are relegated still further toward the edges of the discipline, even as they lose their area studies moorings, and slowly drift toward abject obscurity.

Even at its very best, embracing the methods arms race constitutes but one candidate sanative treatment. The mad dash toward it since about 2010, however, has left other potential contenders neglected. There are many other ways we might bring the study of China's rich historical experience, internal diversity, unique institutional landscape, and dynamic economy and society into conversation with the rest of political science. It is high time we pay attention to one of these: cross-national comparative analysis.

Cross-National Comparison: A Refreshing Therapy

When I speak of cross-national comparison, I do not mean the type that was popular

several decades ago and sometimes amounted to throwing hundreds of country-case (or even worse country-year) scores into a statistical package and seeing which broad claims might stick (e.g.: democracies do not fight, unions strike less under left-leaning governments, etc.). Rather, I wish to advocate for careful paired comparison of China with other individual countries or small sets of countries. Combining this with careful, historically and contextually informed, work on China's domestic politics—whether quantitative, qualitative, subnationally comparative, or other—has the potential to let us export ideas and arguments at least as well as brandishing the latest technical tools to test others' hypotheses.

Broadly speaking, there are four ways to undertake the kind of cross-national work I am advocating. I call them: shadows, mirrors, partners, and apples. I have listed these in increasing order of both their risks and difficulty and of their potential dividends. Shadow comparisons are the sort that one finds in the concluding chapters of old books—not only the ones about China, but also many with titles like 'XXX's Party System in Comparative Perspective'. After offering the reader a study of politics in a single country (e.g. China), authors would pad a last chapter full of vignettes about how the arguments might be applied to another country or set of countries, almost always based entirely on a very superficial reading of a thin set of secondary sources. This is not useless (I have done it), but it is of limited utility. Still, it remains all too rare in the writing of China specialists. Mirror comparisons involve a much more nuanced look at one or two countries that in some important way reflect China's political reality as analysed or explained in the main body of a work. This might involve at least a chapter or two, also likely (but not necessarily) drawn from secondary sources, that delve into considerable detail to examine how causal processes and mechanisms uncovered in the

rest of a book play out in a critical case or set of cases for testing whether they might travel beyond China's borders. This has become popular in recent work on India and other large countries, but has remained largely unexploited by students of Chinese politics. More common in studies of international relations, partner comparisons revolve around the study of China's relationships with a particular other country or set of countries (e.g. Japan or the Soviet Union). Such comparisons usually become the main focus of the books based on them and often (but not always) can require relatively in-depth and extensive, though tightly focused, fieldwork and/or primary source research in a country other than China. Apples comparisons carry by far the highest costs and risks, but also the greatest potential rewards.

In an apples comparison, a researcher endeavours to compare China and some other country (or set of countries) side-by-side as co-equal units; that is, to compare 'apples to apples'. Doing so in a way that remains faithful to the immense internal diversity and complexity of politics in China requires nothing short of training up fully in the language, history, and politics of another country (or multiple other countries), to at least a roughly similar level of expertise that the researcher had acquired on the China case. This means many years of language study, at least a small library's worth of reading, and even more time spent on the ground in the field in a new country. There is thus little chance that any single scholar can cultivate more than one or a very small number of apples to compare with China during his or her career. Apple comparisons can be tricky and are often complicated by uneven access to data, vastly divergent political strictures or economic contexts, or the absence of key actors or events in either China or the apple comparator; furthermore, not every apple will be suitable for comparison with China on all possible research questions or areas. Nevertheless, investment in developing

apple comparisons can be incredibly fruitful. Such a method enables one to deploy most-similar and most-different systems designs simultaneously (one within each case and the other between), for example, to compare subnational units or phenomena across national boundaries, and to test the limits and scope of generalisability not only in terms of broad causal arguments but also very precisely of specific causal mechanisms. Concepts developed to characterise elements of Chinese politics can be refined in the full light of another case before being offered as wares for export to a broader comparative politics audience.

Comparing China with Southeast Asia: A Modest Proposal

When China scholars have attempted comparisons—of any of the four types just discussed—they have often selected India or Russia as comparators. These are certainly not bad choices, but they are difficult in important ways and lacking in a certain kind of comparative advantage. With secondary literatures and area studies scholarly traditions as vast or even larger than those on China, Russia and India require an especially large amount of up-front investment to get up to speed. Research on these countries has also tended to favour a similar sort of disaggregation, close-to-the-ground fieldwork, and a 'splitting' (as opposed to 'lumping') approach to that which has classically characterised much work on Chinese politics. In this, they lack any comparative advantage that might be conferred by having strengths complementary to the China field's. Thus, adding new innovation or knowledge through comparative analysis is particularly difficult. Though one could certainly look elsewhere (from Mongolia to Mexico) with excellent results, I propose that many countries of Southeast Asia (Myanmar,

Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia) can be especially apt comparator cases for the kinds of cross-national work on China I am advocating.

The study of politics (as opposed to culture, history, or society) in Southeast Asia has suffered from an opposite pathology to that which has plagued the China field. Rather than assuming the wider field would care about their findings because they were rooted in the study of Southeast Asian countries, specialists on that part of the world have too often tended to assume the field would never care about their findings because they were derived from the study of Southeast Asia. This has led a lot of scholarship to focus tightly on what is generalisable or exportable about Southeast Asian countries' experiences or outcomes, rather than what is unique; never to miss the forest for the trees, but often to emphasise the broad shape of the landscape without even naming the tree species present. In sum, Southeast Asian politics offers a comparative advantage as a comparator area because it has focused on exactly the areas the China field has neglected or been weak in and has tended too often to neglect exactly the areas (e.g.: local variation, subnational politics, etc.) on which the China field has done well. Also, none of the countries of Southeast Asia have area studies or secondary literatures of similar volume to those associated with Russia or India (indeed, other than those on Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, secondary literatures on Southeast Asian countries' politics and history are comparatively quite small). The costs are thus relatively low, the comparative advantages obvious, and the payoffs potentially very high for using Southeast Asian countries as comparison cases to bring the study of Chinese politics into closer dialogue with the rest of political science. I very much hope more students and colleagues will heed this call to consider delving into these and other country cases

seriously for this purpose.

All Hands Needed on Deck

To conclude, I do not intend this essay to be any sort of definitive or final statement. Rather, I hope it may spark important conversations. I am more than happy to be corrected or invited to rethink any and all aspects of what I have said here. My greatest aspiration is to motivate colleagues and students to think more expansively and daringly about what is possible and desirable in terms of Chinese politics research. There is nothing wrong with technical sophistication in one's methods and there is absolutely a rightful place for research using 'big data', experiments, and other new tools. But we must prevent the stifling homogeneity of the methods arms race from becoming completely ensconced and crowding out all other work (especially by younger or emerging scholars). Diversity and bold experimentation must win out over any rigid orthodoxy if we have any chance to put our patient's illness fully into remission.

William Hurst

William Hurst is Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, where his work focuses on dimensions of Chinese and Indonesian politics including: political economy, social movements and contentious politics, labour politics, and the politics of law and legal institutions. He is the author of *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (Cambridge 2009) and *Ruling Before the Law: The Politics of Legal Regimes in China and Indonesia* (Cambridge 2018, forthcoming).

Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom

A Response to William Hurst on the Field of Chinese Politics

Christian Sorace

In his powerful essay, William Hurst raised the question of how to make the study of Chinese politics relevant to the discipline of political science. Yet, the prevailing question should not be ‘how do we make China relevant to the discipline?’, but ‘how can the study of China help us rethink the study and practice of comparative politics?’

In his essay ‘Treating What Ails the Study of Chinese Politics’, included in this issue of *Made in China*, William Hurst raises the question of how to make the study of Chinese politics relevant to political science. I applaud and entirely agree with Hurst’s diagnosis that the study of Chinese politics risks falling into obscurity if it focuses obsessively on methodological sophistication at the expense of substantive questions (personal disclosure: Hurst was my dissertation advisor and remains a close friend). I would, however, like to offer a different remedy for some of the field’s other symptoms. The primary question should not be *how do we make China relevant to the discipline?*, but *how can the study of China help us rethink the study and practice of comparative politics?*

About half way through his essay, Hurst puts his finger on a key issue: although scholars may have access to ‘bigger and bigger Chinese data sets and fancier and fancier methods’, what research questions are they posing? What kind of work is being done with these data, and in the service of



Traditional Chinese Watercolor Painting, Unknown author.

what kinds of arguments? As Hurst puts it, ‘such research can end up asking the wrong questions, cutting itself out of the most essential conversations before it has settled on findings.’ Hurst’s preferred solution to these trends is cross-national comparison, grounded in linguistic competence and time-intensive fieldwork, especially (though not exclusively or even necessarily) with countries in Southeast Asia. While I am not opposed to this approach (in fact, my new research project is a cross-subnational comparison of urbanisation patterns in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and several localities in China’s Inner Mongolia), Hurst’s proposed corrective stops short of a more radical and exciting possibility to overhaul the study of comparative politics.

What China Can Teach Us About Ourselves?

What can we learn about politics from how it is conceptualised and practiced in China? Recently, in my Politics of China undergraduate seminar, comparisons between China and the United States kept spontaneously arising in conversation. On the one hand, reference to the US is inevitable, as it is the frame of reference for most of my students. On the other hand, our discussions readily leapt to technologies of control and discursive production in China alongside those in the United States. During our class on Communist Party propaganda, my students directed the conversation to instances of US patriotism, public discourse after 9/11, and the current political banishment of **NFL Quarterback Colin Kaepernick**. Although these measures were not government-imposed, they are still forms of control, policing behaviour, and silencing or erasure of dissident voices. In examining *practices* that cut across both authoritarian states and democracies, we can start asking difficult and uncomfortable questions about our own

political environments.

While still acknowledging and studying respective institutional and historical contexts, we can de-exoticise China and tease out commonalities as well as differences. I suggest that we examine practices—at least in addition to institutions or bounded comparative units—as a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Comparative politics can be (among other things) about generating experiences of the *uncanny*—or the disturbing recognition of familiarity in an unfamiliar place. It is salutary to be reminded that we may not be as democratic as some would like to believe. Conversely, this practice-oriented approach can also limn *differences* between political systems, and remind us why some of our beloved conditions of possibility may be in need of passionate defence against those who desire to extinguish them.

An inspiration for this methodological approach is **Lisa Wedeen’s claim** that there can be democratic practices in authoritarian states (a claim which cannot be seen if one is only looking at institutions as units of comparison based on deeply engrained binary and normative assumptions about how those institutions organise political life)! In the China field broadly construed to include political theory, **Leigh Jenco’s project of building ‘global theory’** is based on the premise that thinking born in local conditions can ‘produce new and broader insight into social and political conditions elsewhere.’ Jenco’s own work (and the collective projects she has organised) are welcome antidotes to the tendency to indiscriminately apply Foucault to everything (I write this half-jokingly as someone who loves Foucault’s work and often references it). Will comparative political scientists working on China engage ‘global theory’? Sadly, probably only a few, as the intra-disciplinary boundaries between comparative politics and political theory stifle research projects that attempt to do two things at once (perhaps I am being hyperbolic but it

is in order to emphasise a point). In the field of comparative politics, **Maria Repnikova's excellent new book** starts from in-depth empirical analysis of how critical journalists understand and pursue their own work, and its relationship to the state, and on that basis she demolishes the stereotype of an inevitably, and normatively, adversarial relationship between the media and state.

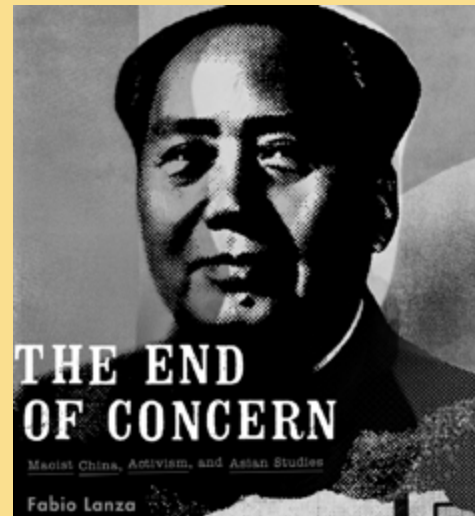
Reinforced Structural Marginalisation

What Hurst calls 'the methods arm race' is structurally reproduced by the conditions of training graduate students, journal gatekeeping, and career prospects. Is it irresponsible to train a graduate student to adopt a qualitative methodological approach to Chinese politics? Which disciplinary venues will they publish their findings in? Will mainstream political scientists recognise their work as genuinely comparative and not as some hybrid whose language is at the margins of intelligibility? Will they fall through the cracks of heavily policed disciplinary boundaries? Under these institutional conditions, to encourage a qualitative approach that interrogates the definitions and practices of the political in China, would set a PhD student down a path of obscurity and increase the difficulties of landing a tenure-track position in an already cut-throat environment of neoliberal competition. Of course it is possible to make it work, and I would like to think of myself as a positive example (and there are others who often land in different disciplines), but the question remains: is it *advisable*? Over the years many people have attempted to dissuade me (with a few notable exceptions) from pursuing a qualitative approach and line of questioning precisely out of concerns for my future 'hire-ability'.

The bizarre thing is that nearly everyone admits in private conversation that the field is

READING SUGGESTION

Fabio Lanza's *The End of Concern* (Duke University Press, 2017)



In 1968 a cohort of politically engaged young academics established the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS). Critical of the field of Asian Studies and its complicity with the United States' policies in Vietnam, the CCAS mounted a sweeping attack on the field's academic, political, and financial structures. While the CCAS included scholars of Japan, Korea, and South and Southeast Asia, the committee focussed on Maoist China, as it offered the possibility of an alternative politics and the transformation of the meaning of labour and the production of knowledge. In *The End of Concern*, Fabio Lanza traces the complete history of the CCAS, outlining how its members worked to merge their politics and activism with their scholarship. Lanza's story exceeds the intellectual history and legacy of the CCAS, however; he narrates a moment of transition in Cold War politics and how Maoist China influenced activists and intellectuals around the world, becoming a central element in the political upheaval of the long 1960s. (Buy the book [here](#))

going in the wrong direction, even some of the people at the forefront of the ‘methods arms race’! I have heard this refrain of discontent from people across the academic spectrum: junior, senior, qualitative, quantitative, top-tier research university, small liberal arts colleges, and so on.

The question is: *what are we going to do about it?* Are we going to organise the same conferences and panel themes ad nauseam out fear of rejection? Are we going to allow big data to do the work of thinking for us? The reason I am passionate about this topic is that China is a place with endless lessons to teach us about our lives as political creatures and a world held in common. Methodology can shape (and sometimes constrain) what kinds of questions get asked, and what other kinds do not get asked. It therefore bears upon how we think about and engage the world, and we must engage it reflexively, critically, and forthrightly.

To achieve the modest goals I propose, it does not matter whether one’s preferred method or tools are quantitative or qualitative. What is essential is to direct methodological antennae toward what is happening on the ground in China. Rather than approach China as a case that might confirm or disprove political science puzzles generated in other institutional contexts, we should allow our research questions to develop in response to and conversation with the contexts they seek to explain. In other words, *inductively building theory from the ground up* that can then speak back to other contexts and support a more robust understanding of politics the world over.

Conclusion: A Call for Intellectual Generosity

I am not attempting to preach that everyone must abandon the church of big data for the gospel of qualitative transcripts—I like to think of myself as *methodologically*

ecumenical. There is excellent work being done in both camps, across them, between them, and beside them. Unfortunately, a deficit of intellectual generosity and curiosity prevents certain kinds of questions from being asked. Of course, no one can be expected to have a limitless archive, or to read everything that comes across one’s desk with careful consideration. There is never enough time in the day to read all that one wants to read, let alone articles and books with faint relevance to one’s own interests. That is not something that can be changed. What can be cultivated is a willingness to be surprised in one’s own convictions about what counts as ‘political science’ based on the realisation that an interesting question is after all an interesting question.

Christian Sorace

Christian Sorace is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Colorado College. His research focuses on the ideology, discourse, and political concepts of the Chinese Communist Party and how they shape policies, strategies, and governance habits.



Photo: Oleksandr Mudretsov, 123rf.com.

Beyond the Great Paywall

A Lesson from the Cambridge University Press China Incident

Nicholas Loubere
Ivan Franceschini

*On 18 August it was revealed that Cambridge University Press had complied with the demands of Chinese government censors to block access on its website in China to hundreds of 'politically sensitive' articles published in its prestigious *The China Quarterly* journal. The ensuing debate has generally overlooked the problematic nature of the commercial academic publishing industry. Isn't it time to take the profit motive out of the equation and to rediscover a certain measure of idealism in academia?*

On 18 August it was revealed that Cambridge University Press (CUP) had complied with the demands of Chinese government censors to block access on its website in China to over **three hundred 'politically sensitive' articles** published in its prestigious *The China Quarterly* journal. This move was met with outrage in the academic community and beyond, with scholars criticising the Chinese government for the unprecedented extension of its heavy-handed censorship into foreign-language academia, and CUP for acquiescing to the demands. Prompted by this harsh response, on 21 August CUP reversed its stance, restoring access to the censored contents for its Chinese audience and making them **available free of charge for all**. While the reversal is certainly welcome and highlights the power that coordinated action on the part of the academic community can have, we feel that the ensuing debate has overlooked an issue of fundamental importance: the problematic nature of the commercial academic publishing industry. While CUP is listed as a charitable organisation, it is also a highly profitable operation. It brings in hundreds of millions of pounds in yearly revenues, and has extensive **commercial interests** in the Chinese market. As such, it should be unsurprising that they would be tempted to submit to such a request in order to preserve their access to Chinese consumers, even if we find it distasteful that they framed their choice as a pragmatic effort to continue **long-term engagement with China**. In light of this, we believe that this incident should not only be viewed as the exceptional capitulation of one specific publisher to China, but also as representative of a wider capitulation of academic publishing to commercial interests.

The Contradiction of Contemporary Academic Publishing

While there is certainly plenty of well justified outrage to go around, this incident

exposes a paradox at the heart of contemporary academic publishing and its supposed role in the promotion of academic freedom—the fact that academics are required to hand over their research, which is usually supported by public funding, to publishers whose primary goal is to earn profit rather than make the material freely accessible to as wide an audience as possible. In addition to the *The China Quarterly*, most of the main journals in China Studies are currently published by major profit-oriented publishers—such as the *China Journal* (University of Chicago Press), the *Journal of Contemporary China* (Taylor & Francis), and *Modern China* (SAGE). These publishers charge exorbitant prices for access to the articles. For instance, Taylor & Francis charges **forty-two USD** for twenty-four-hour access to an article in the *Journal of Contemporary China*, effectively blocking anyone who does not have access through an institution that pays for the costly subscription. It might even be argued that this oppressive paywall system represents a different—and probably even much wider and more noxious—form of censorship than any imposed by the Chinese government. Indeed, while CUP's capitulation would have blocked access for a relatively small number of Chinese academics, the vast majority of Chinese citizens (as well as citizens elsewhere) are already blocked by the 'great paywall' of profit-oriented publishing.

It is important to remember that that academic publishing was not always like this. Many academic journals used to be published by scholarly associations or universities that were not seeking to maximise profits, but were rather aiming to simply cover their operational costs in order to further research in their fields. Journals also used to be motivated by broader academic ideals that went beyond the simple aspiration to achieve a higher 'impact factor'. This idealism justified the request that scholars provide the unpaid labour needed to keep these publications in operation by serving on editorial boards

and doing peer-reviews—i.e. the work that actually makes the publications academic.

Open Access as a Viable Alternative

While the current situation is undoubtedly dire, there are obvious and workable alternatives to this system. A number of university presses, such as Amsterdam University Press and UCL Press, now offer open access options for their authors, and ANU Press is fully open access. Since scholars already do the editing and peer reviewing for all academic publications free of charge, the same people who populate the editorial boards of top journals and send out peer review requests could, conceivably, do the same work for open access publications. In fact, there are already a few successful examples of high quality open access journals in China Studies. For instance, the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* (JCCA) is published open access by the German Institute of Global and Area Studies. The JCCA has a highly respected editorial board, and its submissions undergo the same rigorous peer review process as any profit-oriented publication. The operation of the JCCA is facilitated by an open source publishing software called Open Journal Systems, which automates the submission process and much of the other work done by large publishers. The success of the JCCA points to the fact that, with a small budget to hire editorial assistants and a dedicated group of academics, it is possible to produce top-quality and rigorously peer-reviewed publications that are open to everyone and not profit-oriented. Unsurprisingly, however, the JCCA is not given its due recognition by the academic publishing establishment. It is not listed in Thomson Reuters' Social Science Citation Index nor is it given an 'official' impact factor by the corporation. This makes the journal a risky choice for early career academics needing to publish articles

that ‘count’ for tenure. It is also unclear how monographs published by open access university presses are viewed by tenure committees.

In short, there are options available for academics to publish rigorously peer-reviewed journal articles and books that are open to a much wider audience. Our first attempt at a ‘proper’ open access academic publication—the *Made in China Yearbook 2016: Disturbances in Heaven*, published by ANU Press this February—was downloaded more than four thousand times in only the first two months after publication, far more than the standard print run of three to five hundred copies produced by traditional publishers. In our opinion, besides leading to rightful condemnations of the censorship of the Chinese authorities and the vacillating behaviour of CUP, the recent incident should give academics pause when considering how to publish academic research, as well as the kind of academic work they engage in with the publishing industry. It will take senior academics to lead the way by establishing open access journals with quality editorial boards that ensure the highest standards—i.e. the work that is already done free of charge for large profit-oriented publishers. Senior academics should also explicitly signal to early career scholars and their institutions that high-quality open access publications are worth just as much as their profit-oriented counterparts for tenure and promotion.

Rediscovering Idealism

Ultimately, while the academic community should rightly be outraged over CUP’s initial capitulation to China’s demands, and worried about the increasing ability of Beijing to silence discourse it does not agree with both within and outside China, we believe that this incident exposes a much more serious threat to academic freedom represented by the wholesale adoption of commercial

modes of academic publishing. CUP may have reversed its decision to capitulate to the Chinese censors, but there is a significant risk that other publishers, prompted by the same commercial incentives, will opt to self-censor. Indeed, under the condition of anonymity multiple publishers at the Beijing International Book Fair in August admitted to censoring content, and **LexisNexis** has also been revealed to have **removed products** in China at the request of the censors. As the country’s economic might continues to grow, the party-state will find itself with more and more ability to directly influence the content of multinational profit-oriented publishers seeking access to the huge Chinese market. In this environment, the only way that we can preserve academic freedom from overreach from governments or other powerful economic actors is to take the profit motive out of the equation by rediscovering a certain measure of idealism and ensuring free access to our scholarship.

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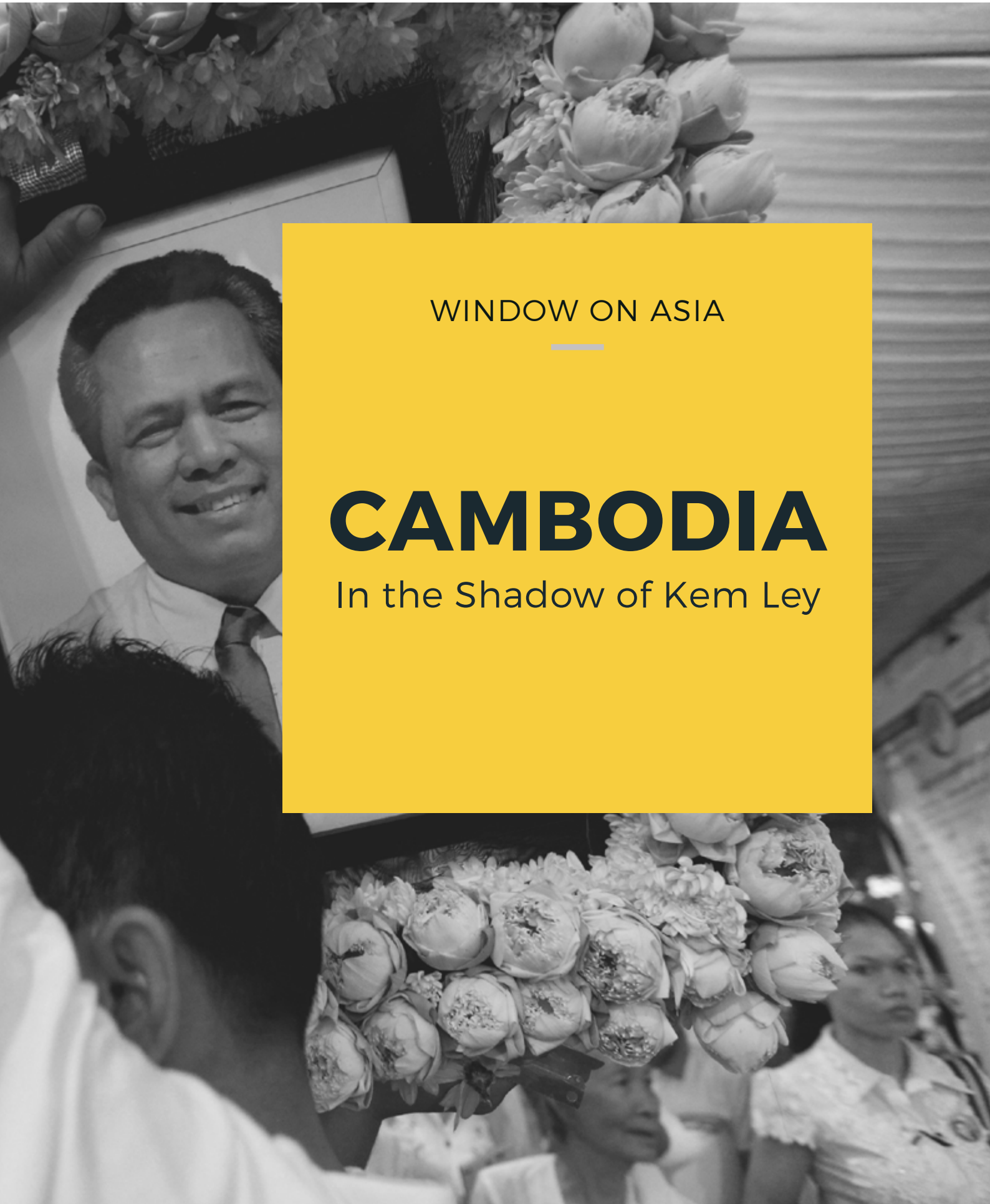
Ivan Franceschini

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WINDOW ON ASIA

CAMBODIA

In the Shadow of Kem Ley





Kem Ley's funeral procession in July, 2016' Photo: Rappler.com

In the Shadow of Kem Ley

Is Civil Society the Solution to Cambodia's Woes?

Astrid Norén-Nilsson

The assassination of political analyst Kem Ley in Phnom Penh in July 2016 suggests that civil society touches a nerve of great sensibility in today's Cambodia. Cambodian democracy is currently experiencing its tensest period in two decades. If civil society plays a role in this context, it is not primarily within the traditional confines of the associational realm. Rather, in looking for a civil society challenge to party politics, we will have to shift our attention away from NGOs to the tentative emergence of social movements and to the fledgling grassroots democracy movement which Kem Ley himself spearheaded.

On 10 July 2016, independent political analyst and grassroots organiser Kem Ley was **shot dead** while having his morning coffee at a Caltex petrol station in central Phnom Penh. Two weeks later, an estimated two million people took to the streets to join in **his funeral procession**. This was the first mass social mobilisation to take place in Cambodia after **the early 2014 crackdown**, which had reined in the **largest anti-government protests** in at least fifteen years.

In 2016, Cambodian civil society played a very different role in the making of the mass mobilisations compared to previous demonstrations. In 2013, the unprecedented fearlessness with which ordinary Cambodians took to the streets seemed to be evidence that civil society was entering a new era. Though protesters were motivated by a diverse list of grievances, at that time Cambodia was marked by a sharp polarisation between the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), with the latter claiming the right to interpret and represent demands for 'change'. On the contrary, in 2016, people came out to pay their respects to a civil society veteran who had sought to

radically transform Cambodian politics by reforming both political parties according to civil society principles.

Kem Ley's assassination and subsequent martyrdom suggest that civil society—as an untapped potential—touches a nerve of great sensibility in today's Cambodia. Cambodian democracy is currently experiencing its tensest period in two decades: since the CNRP came within reach of an electoral victory over the CPP in 2013, the two main parties have been locked in a life and death struggle. If civil society plays a role in this context, it is not primarily within the traditional confines of the associational realm. Rather, in looking for a civil society challenge to party politics, we will have to shift our attention away from NGOs, to the tentative **emergence of social movements** and to the fledgling grassroots democracy movement that Kem Ley spearheaded.

The Limitations and Possibilities of Cambodian Civil Society

Ever since their appearance in the early 1990s, Cambodian NGOs have taken on a large share of the functions that typically belong to the state. Still, they have always had to face serious limitations in their work. While recognising the value of the resources and services provided by NGOs for national development, the CPP has circumscribed and undermined NGOs that focus on governance and human rights issues, as well as independent youth organisations and trade unions. Most often, the relationship between the Cambodian state and civil society is understood to be **competitive**, with the CPP government shaping and restricting the environment in which associational activity can emerge. **Others argue** instead that the relationship is mutual, with NGOs and other civil society organisations (CSOs) confined to pursuing their objectives through

manoeuvres within the space provided by the state.

Accompanying a gradual decline in foreign aid, the Cambodian state is now attempting to restrict the space available to a growing civil society. In August 2015, a highly controversial **Law on NGOs and Associations** was passed, restricting civil society's right to freedom of association and expression, and enabling the government to shut down organisations that criticise it. Less than one year later, in April 2016, the **Trade Union Law** was passed, which provides protection and support to government-backed unions while undermining independent unions.

In October 2014, within this stifling overall context, a number of civil society veterans, with Kem Ley at the centre, initiated the 'Khmer for Khmer' advocacy group—a network of civil society leaders and activists who pledged to promote democratic party politics by engaging citizens in the political process. The ambition of the Khmer for Khmer network was to achieve the democratising potential of civil society, not from inside the shrinking space allowed by the state, but by exporting civil society actors and principles to party politics. Their aspiration to bring forward political change via grassroots empowerment represented an extension of the international NGO **discourse on empowerment**.

Kem Ley and his associates reckoned that two decades of the burgeoning NGO sector had produced a huge potential for grassroots leadership—a force that had not yet been felt by the political system. Cambodian democratisation, they reasoned, would benefit from inserting civil society leaders into the Cambodian political system. It was with this aim in mind that in August 2015, the founders of the Khmer for Khmer network launched the Grassroots Democracy Party (GDP). The Party was meant to provide an avenue for ordinary Cambodians with good leadership skills—typically civil society leaders—to enter the political field. Significantly, it was

not only the initiators and leaders of the GDP who had long-term experience working with NGOs and other CSOs, but also most party rank-and-file activists.

‘Grassrootism’ as Party Politics?

The movement for grassroots democracy not only reflects disillusionment with the limitations circumscribing traditional civil society work in Cambodia, but it is also an attempt to break down these constraints by entering the all-important arena of party politics. In this sense, it points to the absolute primacy of party politics for effecting change in Cambodia today. On top of the Khmer for Khmer network’s agenda was the creation of microparties around the country—local development parties set up to empower those at the grassroots to become policy-makers. Though these have been slow to take off, the GDP was intended as an umbrella party for one hundred micro-parties that were to be established.

This suggests that the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Cambodia in 1993 has been a success, to the extent that there is a widespread belief in the country that hope for political change resides in political parties. Still, the grassroots agenda relates uneasily to party politics. Early on, the Khmer for Khmer network denied speculations that it would create its own party, claiming that its mission was only to build and strengthen grassroots political leadership. The group then subtly changed its course with the establishment of the GDP, which was set up to function as an incubator for the practice of ‘intra-party democracy’. The aim was to nurture democratic leaders within the political party to work as a team, rather than rely on top leaders. In this sense, ‘grassrootism’ is a principle that could be emulated by other political parties. Indeed, in my interviews with GDP activists, many have stated that

they envisage grassroots mobilisation being taken up by all Cambodian political parties in the future.

Yet, this all-encompassing ambition, which involved the transformation of all political parties, underscores a fundamental ambiguity in the creation of a particular political party vehicle for the grassroots agenda. Upon the creation of the GDP, Kem Ley distanced himself from the new party, only taking on an advisory role similar to the one he maintained for the CNRP. My interviews with his associates suggest that Kem Ley dissociated himself from the GDP precisely because he maintained an aspiration to change the Cambodian political landscape without participating in a specific political party. Kem Ley primarily aspired to be a coordinator among actors: his idea was to connect himself with different groups in society so as to be a focal point for the organisation of change.

Kem Ley aspired to be a charismatic leader who could reach out to, and be accepted by, all different societal groups. This would set him apart from other charismatic political leaders, such as the CNRP’s Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, who took a partisan, oppositional stance. The ambition to apolitically or consensually represent all of society is a vestige of civil society thinking, and one that eclipses the party political avenue.



Cambodian opposition leader Kem Sokha was arrested in September 2017.
Photo: Yahoo News

Roads Ahead

Civil society as an animating idea that transcends the confines of associational life is an important force in today's Cambodia, but one that has not quite found its place. The politicisation of civil society by civil society activists themselves is an attempt to find an outlet for these grassroots energies. A grassroots model of democracy could disrupt the unequal relationships between ordinary citizens and local-level authorities that has been fundamental to the CPP's hold on power, particularly in this context where the existing pattern of local-level politics is already being undermined by demographic change. A civil society model of citizenship may be more explosive than that of political opposition.

Yet, ironically, the potential for bottom-up grassroots democracy is so intimately tied to the charismatic leader championing it—Kem Ley—that his assassination has eclipsed its prospects, at least for the time being. Whilst two million Cambodians turned out for Kem Ley's funeral in 2016, the GDP won merely five seats out of more than eleven thousand in the commune elections that took place in 2017. This is not the first time that a massive turnout of Cambodian citizens at the funeral of a beloved, charismatic leader fails to translate into political momentum. At Norodom Sihanouk's **funeral procession** in February 2013, about one million people poured into the streets to mourn the King-Father. Yet, in national elections the same year, the royalist party FUNCINPEC for the first time failed to win a single seat, and the party has since all but disintegrated. The lesson is that in Cambodia today charisma is a powerful political force, but political opportunity does not outlive charismatic individuals. The CPP is acutely aware of the potential for charismatic leadership to undermine the party's authority. Since February 2017, **five leaders of CNRP** have been deposed—three of whom were arrested.

Amendments to the Law on Political Parties in July 2017 have criminalised interaction between parties and convicts, with the aim of erasing individual leaders from the political scene. This has been a largely successful strategy in that it has rendered long-time opposition leader Sam Rainsy less visible on **all-important social media**, with CNRP activists now afraid to interact with Rainsy's page. A mere two months later, in September, his substitute Kem Sokha was arrested on **charges of treason** and now languishes in jail. For what concerns the GDP, the unassuming profiles of its current top troika—Yang Saing Khoma, Sam Inn, and Yeng Virak—put definite limits on the prospects of the fledgling grassroots movement they now lead. Still, civil society sensibilities are evidently close to today's popular aspirations. In such a fragile and tense context dominated by political parties, the dilemma for civil society leaders will be how to rebuild a bridge of intensely felt popular ambitions in the absence of a charismatic leader.

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WORK OF ARTS

Ai Weiwei's #Refugees

Giorgio Strafella
Daria Berg

After spending years advocating for human and civil rights in China, Ai Weiwei is now employing his artistic abilities and his sizeable social media presence to sensitise the West to the plight of the refugees who attempt to reach Europe from the Middle East and Africa. In doing so, he is putting European governments rather than the Chinese state 'on trial' while adding a 'transcultural' dimension to his work. Still, even his most recent endeavours stem from the same philosophy he has espoused throughout his career.





Ai Weiwei's #Refugees

A Transcultural and Transmedia Journey

Giorgio Strafella
Daria Berg

At least **5,079 people** died in the Mediterranean Sea during 2016 while attempting to reach Europe's shores. While many Europeans have responded to the struggle of the refugees and other migrants from the Middle East and Africa with either **fear** or **indifference**, a Chinese *artiste engagé* based in Berlin has employed **installations, documentary filmmaking**, as well as a sizeable **social media presence** to try and sensitise the West to this on-going tragedy. Ai Weiwei represents **one of the most influential figures** in the global art scene and his exhibitions attract **hundreds of thousands** of visitors around the world—since 2015 even **in China**, although his recent shows in Beijing do not feature his most explicitly 'political' artworks. His stature as an artist notwithstanding, it was Ai Weiwei's advocacy of human and civil rights in China—and the price he paid for his outspokenness, including **eighty-one days in jail** and a **brain haemorrhage**—that established him as a celebrity dissident in the West at the end of the past decade. Ai Weiwei's most critical

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art and activism now address the condition of refugees, rather than Chinese society, putting European governments rather than the Chinese state ‘**on trial**’ while adding a ‘**transcultural**’ dimension to his work. Nevertheless, as we shall argue in this essay, Ai Weiwei’s most recent work stems from the same philosophy he has espoused throughout his career.

Clarity and Awakening

Ai Weiwei **states** that ‘freedom of speech, human rights are related to my early struggle, or my family’s or the whole generation’s struggle, in fighting for those basic rights.’ As every Chinese person who has ever heard of Ai Weiwei knows, he is the son of **Ai Qing** (1910–1996), a famous poet imprisoned by the Kuomintang in the 1930s for his leftist

activism. Despite the mutual admiration between Mao Zedong and Ai Qing, the Communist Party persecuted him between 1957 and 1978, exiling his whole family from Beijing to the western provinces. At the onset of the Reform and Opening era in 1978–1979, Ai Weiwei joined an experimental artistic movement known as the **Stars Group** (*Xingxing*). After the authorities shut down the Stars Group exhibition in Beijing on 1 October 1979, artists, poets, and intellectuals staged street protests demanding **freedom of expression** and fusing artistic creativity with political activism. Ai Weiwei’s early encounter with Western society also contributed to shaping his political and artistic sensibilities. While living **in New York** between 1981 and 1993, Ai Weiwei studied the works of artists who still greatly influence his art to this day—such as Warhol, Beuys, Duchamp, and Kosuth. During this time, he also witnessed



Ai Weiwei’s *Laundromat* (2016) as currently exhibited at the National Gallery in Prague (Trade Fair Palace). Photo: Giorgio Strafella, 14 April 2017.

the limits of, and the struggle for, civil rights in a Western democracy.

Ai Weiwei's theoretical writings on art published since the mid-1990s reveal the roots of the disposition and method that one finds in his on-going exploration of the refugee crisis as well as in his earlier works. In a 1997 artistic manifesto entitled **'Making Choices'** (*zuochu xuanze*), the artist wrote that art ought to embody a critical reflection of the actual human condition and the 'awakened' artist's 'vigilance on society and the crisis of humanity.' Here Ai Weiwei envisages a new modernist movement founded on the liberation of humanity and the victory of the 'humanitarian spirit' (*rendaozhuyi jingshen*), coupling a critique of traditional definitions of art with a reflection on the existential condition that should lead to doubt, befuddlement, and finally 'awakening' (*juewu*). Awakened artists, he hopes, will in turn awaken the rest of society by exposing reality 'unpolished and unvarnished' and its intrinsic 'terror, emptiness, and boredom.' Rather than leading to cynicism and inaction, this stance is closely linked to Ai Weiwei's activism in that he believes artists who do so become a **'virus' of change** by priming society to imagine and desire change. As **Ai Weiwei wrote in 2013**, first 'you need people to recognize they need change. Then, you need them to recognize how to make change. Finally, change will come.' Echoing **the wider intellectual debate of those years**, in the 1990s, Ai Weiwei already rejected both emulation of the West and nativism as inadequate standpoints, advocating instead civic engagement, creative independence, and the courage to affirm the value of human life.

Centred around the values of 'clarity' and 'awakening', the approach described above represents what we have termed **'communication activism'** and permeates Ai Weiwei's art as well as his social media communication (e.g. blogging, tweeting, etc.). Ai Weiwei designs both so that instances of

oppression and injustice hit the audience with maximum brutality and effectiveness, delivering a clear message and eliciting compassion. His art **documenting and mourning the death of schoolchildren** in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake reflects this methodology (e.g. *Remembering*, 2009), as do his recent installations in Amsterdam (*#SafePassage*, 2016), Berlin (2016), Florence (*Reframe*, 2016), New York (*Laundromat*, 2016) Vienna (*F Lotus*, 2016), Copenhagen (*Soleil Levant*, 2017), and Prague (*Law of the Journey and Laundromat*, 2017), all related to the refugee crisis.

Denouncing European Indifference

In 2015, the Chinese government returned Ai Weiwei's confiscated passport. It is hard to speculate under what conditions his passport was returned, except that **he promised** to inform the Chinese authorities of any upcoming exhibition. Even though Ai Weiwei appeared to make **relatively benign statements** regarding the Chinese legal system to **the German press**, he continues to **denounce censorship in China**. It is worth remembering that Ai Weiwei has been long critical of US and European authorities, criticising civil rights abuses in the United States and showing support for **Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden**, and even **Julian Assange** on social media.

Shortly after Ai Weiwei relocated to Berlin **looking for 'a normal life'**, he left on a journey around the Mediterranean Sea to document the conditions of refugees and migrants in the region. Ai Weiwei's portrayal of their lives, their odyssey, and their clashes with the European authorities have reached a global audience through various artistic mediums, a constant stream of Instagram and Twitter posts, and now also a documentary film (*Human Flow*, 2017). Furthermore, news media and online art magazines have

conveyed images of that art to an audience much larger than the number of people who could see it in person. It is worth noting that during the years when Ai Weiwei aimed his activism mainly at the Chinese Party-state (i.e. 2008–2014), news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *CNN* played a key role in establishing his celebrity status. As **Chloe Preece wrote in 2015**, they framed Ai Weiwei as ‘a political hero/martyr’ who fought for freedom of expression against a repressive regime—a narrative that provided ‘reassurance of the West’s ideological superiority’ and thus contributed to his popularity among their audience/readership. Ai Weiwei’s art and activism with regard to the plight of Middle Eastern and African refugees—a plight exacerbated by the policies of European countries, which he accuses of culpable indifference—undermines that narrative and partially recasts his media persona from one extolling the virtues of Western political systems, to one lambasting the moral paucity of their current leaders.

On the other hand, the portrayal of refugees in Ai Weiwei’s photographs—and occasionally even in his artworks—tends to decontextualise its subject. Similar criticism was raised against his **appropriation of the image of Alan Kurdi**, a child who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Greece, and his recent documentary film *Human Flow* (2017). Ai Weiwei’s Mediterranean journey mainly reached us via a stream of snippets and images usually provided with little background information or references. In particular, portraits of refugees on Ai Weiwei’s Instagram commonly lack details with regard to where they were taken, by whom, or the identity of those portrayed: Who are the men and women appearing next to Ai Weiwei in his selfies? The same questions could be asked of the photographic wallpapers in *Laundromat* and *Law of the Journey*. Moreover, on social media Ai Weiwei intertwines refugee-related fragments—photos, headlines, data, etc.—

with equally fragmentary peeks into his professional and private life, including selfies and images of exhibitions, famous friends, press photographers, his son, and so on. Images of life in refugee camps alternate seamlessly with snapshots from the glamorous life of a celebrity artist. Some of the latter could be read as portraits of the artist as a celebrity, à la Warhol, the difference being that Andy Warhol posed as politically neutral while Ai Weiwei as hyper-political. When one looks at Ai Weiwei’s photo-blogging as a whole, it appears to translate his preference for clarity and transparency into a one-man reality show. Drawing on **Preece’s analysis**, one may view this as the artist’s ‘celebritised selves’ constructing and managing authenticity as a pillar of the Ai Weiwei brand.

Not unlike Ai Weiwei’s work on the Sichuan earthquake, his artistic endeavours on the refugee crisis develop a narrative that **‘unfolds across multiple media platforms**, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole’ and where **‘each medium does what it does best.’** Ai Weiwei’s ‘transmedia’ narrative on the refugee crisis unfolds beyond the artwork across platforms, such as: Instagram, where one can pore over a first-person **documentation-cum-spectacle** of the journey that brought about the works of art; Twitter, where one can peruse the artist’s own selection of news articles on the issue and thereby appreciate its importance; interviews in newspapers and magazines in which the artist expounds his vision; YouTube videos; a documentary film; etc.

A Lost Battle?

One would expect the sophisticated web of content offered by such a **‘transmedia storytelling system’** to multiply the power of Ai Weiwei’s communication activism. But Ai Weiwei himself appears to have identified a crack in this **mode of activism**. The centrepiece in one of his most recent

installations, *Law of the Journey*, consists of a seventy-metre long overcrowded **lifeboat**. Currently displayed in Prague, the lifeboat is suspended in the hall of the Trade Fair Palace, which Nazi Germany utilised during the Second World War as an assembly point for Jewish prisoners before deporting them to the concentration camp of Terezín. The visitor enters the hall from the short side facing the front of the lifeboat. A series of quotes are arranged on the floor across the entire room in a way that forces the reader to walk backwards towards the opposite side, where the exit is located. One of the last quotes, right behind the stern of the lifeboat, is an extract from *Letters to Olga* (1988) by Vaclav Havel and it reads: ‘The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.’

When addressing the scandal of the children who died when poorly built schools collapsed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Ai Weiwei’s adversary was a Party-state that regarded even the *number* of said children as a sensitive piece of information. The simple yet brave act of researching their identities through a collective effort and then hanging the list of the children’s names on a wall as a piece of art—as Ai Weiwei did in the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* (2009)—sends a clear and shocking message that compels the viewer to demand more transparency and accountability from the Chinese government. With his work on the refugee crisis, Ai Weiwei brings a method designed and honed under that regime to a continent where most citizens have access to exhaustive data and reportage on the issue, but few demand their governments to respond to it by saving as many human lives as possible. As Ai Weiwei may have realised when he added that quote on the floor of the Trade Fair Palace, European indifference and prejudice may be at least as stubborn and difficult to defeat as the Chinese Party-state.

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Figure 1: View of the exhibition in Chaoyang Park Beijing, August 2017. Author's photo.

Collecting the Red Era in Contemporary China

Emily Williams

Since the 1980s the Chinese Communist Party has condemned the Cultural Revolution as ‘ten years of chaos’. Nevertheless, so far there has been very little discussion on the topic in the public sphere in China. This essay looks into how private collections of red relics can be used to confront this void in China’s recent past. It argues that collected objects play a much more complex role in history production than we may think, as they contribute to the construction of narratives, put forth counter-narratives, and fragment the very idea of historical narrative altogether.

The summer of 2017 saw the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of China’s People’s Liberation Army. The occasion was marked not only by a massive rally that was streamed live on television—an unequivocal **display of military power** overseen by President Xi Jinping—but also by a number of exhibitions. This fact, in and of itself, is unsurprising, given the boom in museums and so-called ‘red tourism’ in China in recent years. One such exhibition was held at the Urban Planning Museum in Beijing’s Chaoyang Park, and was significant, less for its content and curation than for its organisers: it was a collaborative effort between the government of Chaoyang district in Beijing, the well-known flea market of Panjiayuan, and the Red Collectors

Committee of the China National Collectors Association.

The Red Collectors Association is a nationally approved body that brings together collectors of Maoist material culture. For this exhibition, they provided over 1,500 so-called ‘red relics’ (*hongse wenwu*), drawn from the private collections of association members from around the country. Somewhat peculiarly, the exhibition almost entirely excluded discussion of the objects themselves, using them as simple accessories for the broader narrative that was expounded in great detail on the walls of the exhibition. While it could be argued that in doing so the curators missed an opportunity to add an extra layer of interest to their exhibition, such a strategy is perhaps not surprising given the sensitivity that surrounds the writing of modern Chinese history. Indeed, while the curators worked hard to portray the red relics as an intrinsic part of China’s ‘red legacy’, in reality these relics occupy a somewhat contradictory place in contemporary China.

‘Red relics’ are objects from the ‘Red Era’,

a term that can indicate any period after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, but most often refers to the decades between 1949 and 1976. Many collections are strongest in objects from the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a highly controversial period that saw the production of abundant and hugely diverse material culture. Since the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution has been condemned by the CCP as ‘ten years of chaos’, but it continues to be the subject of both celebratory and condemnatory memories in China. These contradictory remembrances are well known, even if there is little discussion on the topic in the public sphere. For example, the Cultural Revolution was not mentioned at the Chaoyang Exhibition, except for brief mention of the country’s foreign policy at that time. If we want, therefore, to understand how collections can be used to confront China’s recent past, we need to look beyond public exhibitions, and consider the practices of China’s red collectors.



(left) Figure 2: A photograph of Chinese President Xi Jinping in the entrance hall of the exhibition. The second quote reads: ‘Utilise red resources, develop the red tradition, and pass on the red gene well.’ The exhibition tried to position the red relics on display as part of the ‘red resources’ Xi mentions. (right) Figure 3: Posters depicting some of the Ten Marshals and, below, a selection of military medals. Photos taken by the author.

Fragmented Narratives: Li Jun

Collected objects play a much more complex role in constructing historical narratives than we may think. We might be tempted to think of a collection as a systematic accumulation of historical traces. By acquiring and then protecting these remains, the collector ensures the survival of these remnants of history, and thus ensures historical continuity. However, theorists, such as **Susan Stewart**, problematise the relationship between history and a collection, and argue that the collected object, rather than preserving history, in fact destroys it. Indeed, the implicit search for an internal relationship between the present and the past that is embedded in the act of collecting is marked by an absolute disruption, whereby entering a collection, the object must be removed from the context from which it previously derived value and meaning. The relationship, then, is not rooted in historical reality, but rather represents an aesthetic denial of historical value. For this reason, **Stewart** calls a collection the ‘total aestheticisation of use value’, and the place where history is transformed into space: a transformation that is marked most profoundly by the establishment of

boundaries. According to **Jean Baudrillard**, a collection is defined by the establishment of a series—sets into which objects can be classified, defined by the collector, and with reference to the collector. In other words, in the classic manifestation of a collection, classification does not put forward an historical narrative, but rather fragments any such narrative through serialisation.

Cultural Revolution objects, despite their origin in perhaps the most anti-capitalist period in modern Chinese history, lend themselves remarkably easily to the commodification that serialisation necessitates. For instance, Li Jun, a collector from Ningbo, Zhejiang province, began collecting Mao badges five years ago, primarily as a hobby and as a way to relieve the stress of his high-level job in a fashion company. According to an interview that I had with him in June 2016, since then he has acquired over thirty thousand Mao badges, as well as military and labour medals. He stores them in immaculately organised stacks of shelves in his spacious modern flat, organised primarily by aesthetic similarity. There are trays of young Mao on his way to Anyuan, Mao in wheat fields, Mao in every imaginable pose and in front of every imaginable background, all neatly arranged (see Figures 4 and 5).



(Left) Figure 4: A selection of Li Jun's Mao badges. (Right) Figure 5: 1950s military medals and the accompanying 'meritorious medal certificate', which contains details of their original owners. Images supplied by Li Jun, 2017



(Left) Figure 6: Beijing collector Dong Zhongchao in front of his shelf of enamel mugs, which are organised thematically. (Right) Figure 7: While Dong started off collecting posters, he now collects anything that reflects the red aesthetic of the Mao years. Image supplied by Dong Zhongchao, 2016.

Leading figures in the Collectors Association encourage members to do research on and through their objects. Li argues that the work units (*danwei*) and military units listed on the back of many badges can be a starting point for understanding cultural production during the Cultural Revolution. But, in fact, organising badges by appearance does not encourage their insertion into a historical narrative, but rather into an aesthetic series in which history is fragmented and objects gain their importance only from their appearance and their similarity (or dissimilarity) to their neighbours.

Badges have been a popular collectible in China since the early 1990s, and to be considered a collector of any merit, one must have some ten thousand unique objects. But the real way to distinguish oneself in this highly competitive field is to complement bulk objects with more rare examples. In Li's case, the pride of his collection is a small number of model worker medals and military medals, primarily from the 1950s. These are marked out by Li's attempt to historicise them: he not only collects the medals, but also tries to acquire the personal documents

of each medal's former owner. In doing so, he is able to attach a personal narrative to the objects, but the process also highlights the historical distance between their original context and the present.

Image-Driven Archiving: Dong Zhongchao

Other collectors deal with the problem of historicisation in different ways. Beijing collector Dong Zhongchao—whom I interviewed in 2016 and 2017—began trading and then collecting Mao-era posters in the 1990s, but in the 2000s he started to expand the scope of his collection. It now includes all sorts of daily life objects, such as mugs, plates, basins, teapots and thermoses, textiles and clothing, mirrors, toys, and other items that similarly share the Maoist aesthetic of the time. Alongside this, he also collects things such as Mao busts and other sculptures, editions of the Little Red Book, and Mao badges, but Dong makes no discursive or practical distinction between these and those daily life objects, mixing them all together



(Left) Figure 8: Dong's storeroom, containing statues, mirrors, a television, a bicycle, and myriad other objects. (Right) Figure 9: Dong's archival strategy: matching imagery from posters with objects from daily life. Photo provided by Dong Zhongchao, 2016.

both on the shelves and in his conversations.

Compared to Li's ordered trays, Dong's memorabilia are stacked and heaped in an overflowing storeroom, as well as scattered throughout his home. But his collection is also meticulously digitised, and it is in his digital collection that his conception of history becomes apparent. In addition to organising his objects thematically, by place, or by period as is common in many collections, Dong takes particular pleasure in matching up his items with correspondent visual depictions in propaganda posters (see images 9 and 10).

It could be suggested that this type of archiving practice seeks to legitimise the imagery presented in the posters by demonstrating that the materiality of the life depicted in the posters can be recollected. Possessing the physical objects visible in posters seems to endorse the historicity of the poster image, suggesting the reality of the objects depicted in it. But the strategy also works the other way around, as an attempt to heal the fissure in the relationship between past and present by using the poster imagery to provide the missing context for the collected objects. This strategy has a number

of implications for the conceptualisation of the relationship between collected object and historical narrative.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that modern historical consciousness is formed by taking objects that are contemporaneous with us and seeing them as 'relics' from the past. Doing this limits the historical object's power because it denies the possibility of a lived relation with the present—any impact the object still has is just an effect of the past. Thus, the historical object is doubly denied agency: firstly, by its removal from the context in which it originally had meaning; and secondly, by its reconceptualisation as a 'relic'. Dong's approach attempts to restore an agency to the object: combining the actual objects with their visual portrayal in posters is an attempt to construct a new, more active way of engaging with both posters and real objects, transporting the viewer back to the Mao era, and reaffirming the validity of the values of that time, a period that he sees as characterised by greater equality compared to the corruption and individualism of contemporary Chinese society.



Figure 10: Dong's efforts to match poster imagery with objects goes beyond just objects of 'daily life'. Photo provided by Dong Zhongchao, 2016.

considered collectively, they represent one of the ways in which contemporary China is attempting to deal with its difficult recent past.

Total Recall?

Susan Stewart argues that the problem with trying to use relics to overcome the gap between past and present is that objects recall not the experience lived, but the experience voluntarily remembered. However, in today's China, where public discussion of memories of the Cultural Revolution remains limited, it is precisely memories, including those expressed through collecting practices, which are needed. While the Chaoyang Exhibition presented a clear narrative of the military's smooth rise to power and prominence, other collecting practices hold the possibility of telling more complicated stories. That these stories lack coherence is not a bad thing. Indeed, what is needed are multiple, overlapping, even conflicting narratives. If we understand the archival practices of red collectors as exercises in historical memory and as forms of historical writing, we can appreciate them for their diversity. Objects and their collections construct narratives, put forth counter-narratives, and fragment the very idea of narratives altogether. When

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ACADEMIC WATCH

Media Politics in China Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism



Maria Repnikova's new book *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) challenges conventional understandings of the role of critical journalists in authoritarian regimes, painting a picture of reporting in China as a balancing act of creativity, experimentation, and restriction. For our Academic Watch, we spoke with her.

Recently, much attention has been given to Xi Jinping's reaffirmation of the media as the Party's mouthpiece (houshe). Your book complicates this identity. What can studying the media in China reveal about China's political system?

Maria Repnikova: My book demonstrates that other than the traditional mouthpiece role of the media, an alternative function of media supervision (*yulun jiandu*) has been promoted in the official discourse in the past three decades. The analysis of *yulun*

jiandu reasserts and complicates the model of consultative authoritarianism—a defining framework for analysing China's political system in the past decade, which suggests that the Party's consultations with societal forces work to improve governance and legitimise the regime. My book shows that in endorsing and tolerating some media supervision in the form of investigative and critical reporting, the authorities intended to better gauge and respond to public sentiments. At the same time, the party-state has treated this channel with significant ambiguity. Namely, the authorities have resisted institutionalising media supervision, have deployed ad hoc inventive restrictions against journalists, and have only addressed media investigations at a superficial level, burying systemic issues in the discourse of state responsiveness. In the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, for instance, the authorities reacted to media investigations of the school scandal by quickly rebuilding the damaged schools and publicly promoting reconstruction efforts. However, they did not address the accountability failures of local officials highlighted in media reports, and forbade the media from further investigating this issue. To this day, the Wenchuan disaster remains a sensitive topic for media practitioners. This doesn't render media investigations meaningless, as journalists still dare to report on public discontent without legal protection from the state, and at times these reports even trigger an official and public reaction to important societal issues. Nonetheless, my book calls for more critical rethinking of the framework of consultative authoritarianism to account for the state-directed nature of these feedback channels or consultations, which significantly limit the scope of societal input into policy-making.

Your book offers a powerful critique of the discourse that sets the relationship between authoritarian governments and media in terms of control/domination and resistance/democratisation. What do you find troubling about this framework?

MR: This framework is problematic because it fails to account for the myriad interactions between the media and the state that reside in the dichotomy between complete suppression and romanticised revolutionary activism. In particular, it diminishes the creative agency of media professionals who are trying to manoeuvre within the web of complex regulations and informal pressures, as well as incentives, from authorities. It further ignores the presence of grey zones where sensitive, but semi-permissible, issues continue to be probed by journalists and media activists in China and other authoritarian contexts. Most authoritarian regimes allow for limited media pluralism—how this works (especially in comparative contexts) can inform us as much about the political limits set out by the state, as about the nature of contestation on the boundary, or the ways in which actors operating on the margins can push the limits whilst still remaining part of the system. In stepping beyond the framework of control and dramatic resistance, we are able to better investigate the lived realities of Chinese citizens, their ambitions, struggles, and imaginaries—these realities in turn paint a more complex political picture than one of pure resilience or collapse.

In your book, you argue that the ambiguous rules and grey areas of the permissible in China leave space for creativity, improvisation, and boundary testing by journalists and editors. Is that still the case in Xi Jinping's China?

MR: The grey zone has definitely shrunk under President Xi, with state control intensifying at all levels of media management. At the same time, creative improvisation by journalists and editors persists. Whereas the influence of the once famous *Southern Weekend* has declined, for instance, a new Shanghai-based outlet, *Pengpai*, also known as *The Paper*, has published some successful investigative and in-depth reporting in recent years, including the well-known investigation of Zhou Yongkang, as well as quality reporting on the 2015 Tianjin explosion and the contaminated vaccine scandal.

Party media also still continue to carry out internal investigative reporting (*neican*) domestically and, now, internationally. Creative journalistic efforts are also evident at the Beijing-based *Xinjing Bao* and *Caixin* magazine, as well as at online platforms like *Tongxun* and *Sohu*. Moreover, as traditional reporting has come under pressure, new inventive forms of expression have emerged, such as creative non-fiction, online talk shows, futuristic novels, and more. The resilience of the ingenious spirit never ceases to amaze me.

Given all the challenges they face in their profession, why would someone in today's China want to be a journalist?

MR: Some of the motivations for becoming a journalist mirror those in other countries. Most young journalists I spoke to are curious, eager to see more of the world, prefer movement and adrenalin to staying still—they are risk-takers. In China, however, there are also political and somewhat idealistic motivations driving the more critically-oriented media professionals, including a desire to help ordinary people through their reporting, to hold some officials (typically at the local level) accountable, and to help gradually improve China's governance—especially when it comes to the management of hot social issues such as food safety, environmental degradation, societal inequality, and natural/man-made disasters. Many journalists I spoke to resemble a mix of activists and entrepreneurs rather than strictly media professionals—they are at once reporters and opportunistic civil society actors finding loopholes in the system to get their voices heard. Most recently, journalists are also motivated by having shares in the media business, which has led to an exodus of many journalists from state-owned outlets into new media ventures.

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