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MADE IN CHINA

2017

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BALANCING ACTS

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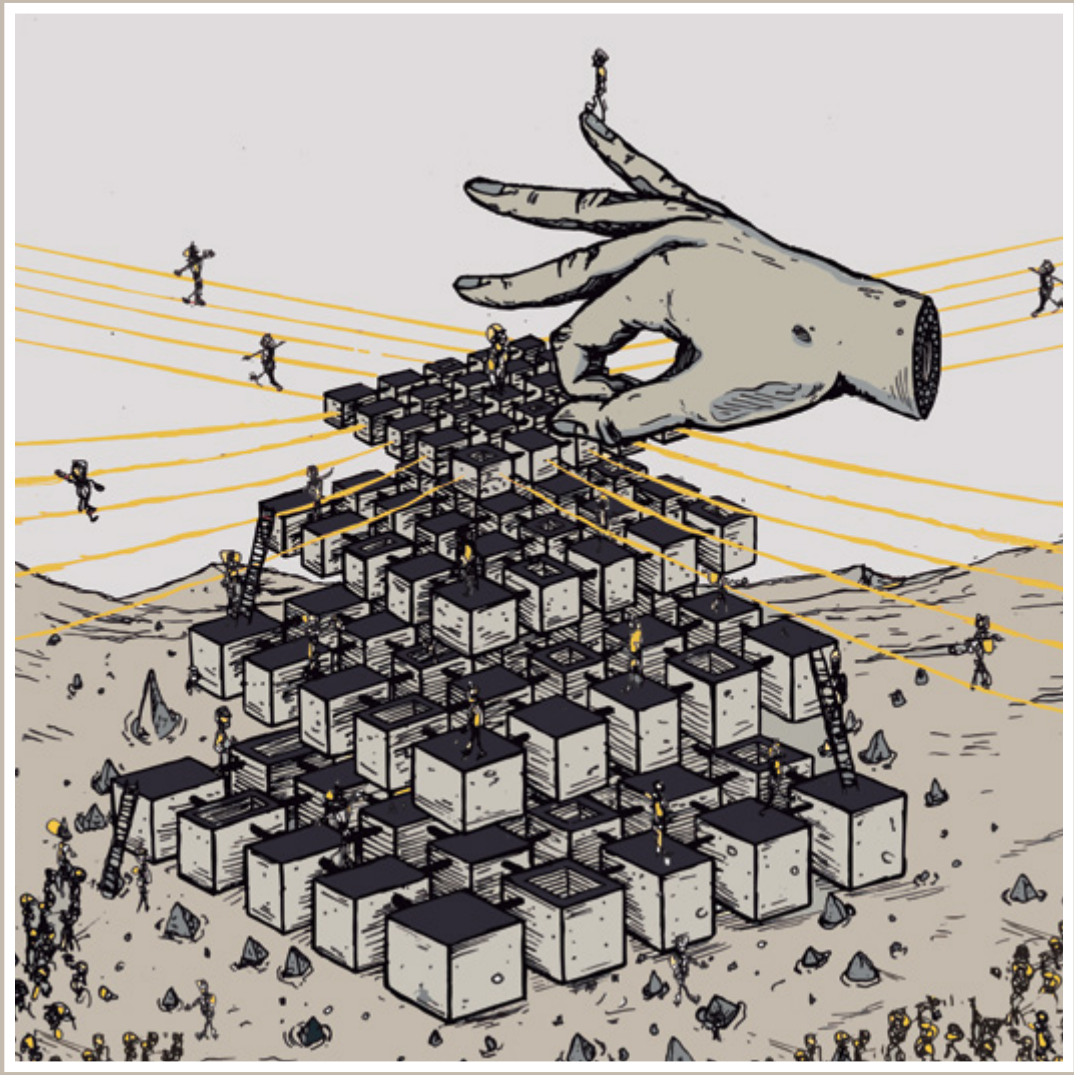

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MADE IN CHINA

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Balancing Acts: Precarious Labour in Contemporary China

On 18 November, a fire broke out in a popular housing block inhabited mostly by migrant workers in Beijing's Daxing district, killing nineteen. Citing the need to ensure safety, in a matter of days the local authorities forced tens of thousands of 'low-end people' (*diduan renkou*) to abandon their dwellings in the suburbs of the Chinese capital, showing absolutely no regard for their livelihoods. Families who had moved from all over China—and had, in some cases, lived in Beijing for years—were effectively thrown out on the street and left to their own fate in the freezing northern winter. In just a few days they lost everything, a cruel reminder of the precarity inherent to the life of the Chinese migrant.

This issue of *Made in China* includes a series of essays that examine different declinations of precarity. We open the thematic section with two essays that frame precarity in general terms. In **A Genealogy of Precarity and Its Ambivalence**, Coin presents a brief conceptual history of precarity, focussing on the evolution of precarious labour over the past three decades. In **Work Precarisation and New Inequalities**, Perocco looks at the vicious circle that links precarity and migration. Shifting our attention to China, in **Class and Precarity in China**, Smith and Pun question the nexus between these two concepts, demonstrating that the boundary between regular and non-regular work is far from static. In **From Dormitory Regime to Conciliatory Despotism**, Siu probes the new social, technical, and gendered divisions of labour inside Chinese garment factories. In **The Precarity of Layoffs and State Compensation**, Solinger looks into the policy processes that have led to the emergence of urban poverty in China and at the prospect of poverty alleviation. Finally, in **How China's Environmental Crackdown Is Affecting Business Owners and Workers**, Fuchs and Schmitt describe the human consequence of China's intensified environmental crackdown in Chengdu.

This issue also includes two essays on Chinese society. In **Migrants, Mass Arrest, and Resistance in Contemporary China**, Ma considers how migrants are commonly perceived as criminals in China and assesses how this bias is reflected in mechanisms of crime control, as well as in the judicial and correctional systems. In **Counting Contention**, Elfstrom explains why it is so difficult to find accurate data about strikes in China. The Window on Asia section features two pieces. In the first, **Boom or Bust in China's Jade Trade with Myanmar?**, Møller outlines the history of commercial exchanges of jade between China and its southern neighbour, and gauges the impact of the recent anti-corruption drive on this market. In the second, **In the Absence of a Peasantry, What, Then, Is a Hong Kong Farmer?**, Lou ponders the reasons for, and implications of, the absence of a discourse about peasantry in the former British colony.

The cultural section comprises three essays. In **Industrial Landscapes of Socialist Realism**, Smith surveys the fate of a very peculiar form or socialist art in China and North Korea; in **Datong, Forever in Limbo**, Kinkel reviews *The Chinese Mayor*, a documentary about a politician and a very ambitious plan; finally, in **Resurrecting the Dead**, Franceschini ponders the contemporary relevance of *Old Tales Retold*, Lu Xun's final oeuvre of fiction. We conclude by interviewing Ching Kwan Lee about her new book on Chinese labour in Africa, *The Specter of Global China*.

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The Editors

OCT/DEC 2017

Chinese Communist Party Holds Nineteenth National Congress

Between 18 and 24 October, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its Nineteenth National Congress. In his three-hour-long Report, General Secretary Xi Jinping heralded the dawn of a new era for socialism with Chinese characteristics, an age in which the contradiction between 'unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life' has replaced that between 'the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production'. While not directly referring to workers, the Report went to great length to highlight the many achievements of the CCP in improving people's livelihoods (*minsheng*). Xi cited as evidence of these improvements the fact that government policies have lifted sixty million people out of poverty. He also recognised that employment is key to people's livelihood, citing the steady creation of thirteen million urban jobs per year. The Report recommended policies to facilitate and improve the quality of employment, including expanding skills training and encouraging entrepreneurship. Since urban citizens have seen their incomes increase at a faster rate than China's economic growth, with the 'middle-income' group continuing to expand, the CCP called upon the government to play a role in income redistribution to narrow income disparity. Furthermore, Xi pointed to the success of establishing a better social security system, with efforts to expand the coverage of healthcare, pensions, unemployment insurance, and affordable housing. Xi concluded this section of the Report by pointing out that because of these efforts, society is stable and national security is strengthened as a result.

Despite the Report's claim that China is led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry, references to workers are few and far between. In the entire text, 'migrant workers' (*nongmingong*) are mentioned only once, in a passage that encourages migrants to maintain multiple avenues for finding employment. The Report also made no mention of the household registration system (*hukou* or *huji*), a fundamental issue for rural migrants. References to 'workers' (*gongren*) are only made to state that the country is led by the working class, and to call on the CCP to expand membership among many groups, including workers. There is one further, brief reference to 'employees' (*zhigong*) in relation to improving the old-age pension system for urban employees.

The most explicit reference to labour relations comes in a section on the tripartite collective negotiation mechanism. This tripartite system has been promoted since the 1990s, but has only taken on a sense of urgency in the last decade, as more and more workers have organised themselves to demand higher pay and better conditions. The Report states that a tripartite mechanism in which the government, official union (representing workers), and enterprises negotiate wages and labour conditions will contribute to a more just and orderly income distribution, as well as to more harmonious industrial relations. However, it must be noted that the push for tripartite collective negotiation has stalled in recent years and that the Report makes only one reference to trade unions, where it demands that mass organisations become more political, progressive, and mass-based, in order to more effectively serve as transmission belts between the Party and workers. In sum, it appears that even in the new era there will be very little that is new for China's working class. *KL*

(Sources: **Party Congress Report in Chinese**; **Party Congress Report in English)**

The Good Samaritan Law Comes into Effect

On 1 October, the General Rules of Civil Law—a collection of general principles of Civil Law—came into effect. Article 184 is generally referred to as the 'Good Samaritan Law', stating that those who attempt to aid others in emergency situations will not be liable under any circumstances. This clause aims at solving the dilemma of people who, after helping an injured person, end up falsely accused by the victim of having caused the injury in the first place. The scope of the article has been the subject of numerous discussions that have resulted in Chinese legislators producing different drafts of the rule over the years. The core of the controversy concerns the definition of gross negligence in the process of rescue, and the general tendency of Chinese law to look at anyone connected to a loss to share that loss, regardless of their level of fault. The provision comes in the wake of a number of incidents widely reported by the Chinese media, in which either bystanders showed egregious indifference to suffering, or victims who had received assistance sued their helpers. One of the most iconic cases took place in Nanjing in 2006. That year, a young man named Peng Yu helped an old woman to get to the hospital after she was injured while getting off a bus. In return, he was sued for his troubles. In that case, the court decided against him, stating that 'no one would in good conscience help someone unless they feel guilty', causing a public furor (although in 2012 it turned out that Peng was actually guilty). In 2011, China was shocked by the case of Wang Yue, a two-year-old toddler who passed away after having been run over by two vans while being ignored by passersby. More recently, in June this year, a video went viral in China, in which a woman was hit by a vehicle and then was left unaided until a second vehicle killed her. *EN*

(Sources: **BBC**; **Caixin; China Digital Times; National People's Congress; The China Collection; The New York Times; Xinhuanet**;)

Human Rights with Chinese Characteristics?

On 7 December 2017, about three hundred participants from over fifty mostly developing countries gathered in Beijing for the 'South-South Human Rights Forum'. In his opening address, President Xi Jinping reiterated that 'human rights must and can only be promoted in light of specific national conditions and people's needs.' The initiative took place after another string of harrowing events. On 17 October, the Chinese authorities claimed that Gui Minhai—a Hong Kong bookseller who mysteriously disappeared two years ago in Thailand before resurfacing in mainland China, imprisoned on charges related to a drunk-driving incident that had occurred more than ten years earlier—had been released, but since then there has been no further news about his whereabouts. In early November, the police in Liaoning province arrested human rights lawyer Li Yuhan on unknown charges. On 7 November, dissident writer Yang Tongyan, who had been in detention since 2006 and had nearly completed a twelve-year sentence for subversion, died from a brain tumor barely three months after having been released on medical parole. Later the same month, two more activists—lawyer Jiang Tianyong and Taiwanese human rights activist Lee Ming-che—were respectively sentenced to two and five years imprisonment on subversion charges. There has been little reaction from the international community. In late October, foreign media reported that a human rights panel at the United Nations had called on China to release and compensate three prominent human rights activists—Christian church leader Hu Shigen (condemned to seven and half years in detention), lawyer Zhou Shifeng (condemned to seven years in detention), and the aforementioned Xie Yang. On 10 December, international Human Rights Day, the European Union Delegation and United States Embassy to China both released statements expressing concern about 'China's ongoing denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms'. *IF*

(Sources: **China Change**; **China Digital Times**; **China News Service**; **EU Delegation to China**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **The Guardian 1**; **The Guardian 2**; **The New York Times**)

China Continues to Extend Influence over Foreign Publishing and Universities

In the months following the uproar caused by the Cambridge University Press censorship fiasco (see **Loubere and Franceschini** in *Made in China* 3/2017), the Chinese government has continued to exert pressure on foreign publishers operating in the country. In late October, it was revealed that Springer Nature, one of the largest commercial academic publishers in the world, had capitulated to the Chinese censors, blocking access to at least one thousand 'politically sensitive' articles on their Chinese website. The publisher defended the decision by saying that only 1 percent of total content had been 'limited', and claiming that it was necessary to comply in order to avoid wider restrictions. In mid-November, Australian academic Clive Hamilton went public saying that Allen & Unwin withdrew his forthcoming book *Silent Invasion: How China Is Turning Australia into a Puppet State*, due to fears of defamation litigation. In late November, SAGE Publishing warned that they might be required to censor content or be pushed out of the Chinese market. The increasing assertiveness of Chinese censors and their zeal to push foreign publishers to self-censor in order to access the large Chinese market has resulted in numerous headlines and petitions. However, despite the high-profile coverage, the response from the wider academic community outside of China-focussed social sciences has been largely apathetic. Beijing's efforts to influence foreign academia have not been limited to the publishing sphere. In mid-November, over two thousand foreign-funded joint venture universities in China were instructed to set up party units and give the new party secretaries a role in decision making through seats on institutional boards. This decision comes at the end of a year filled with continuous controversy about Chinese influence in higher-education institutions abroad. *NL*

(Sources: **BBC**; **Financial Times 1**; **Financial Times 2**; **Financial Times 3**; **Reuters**; **The New York Times**)

Beijing Evicts 'Low-end Population'

On 18 November, a fire broke out in the basement of an apartment block inhabited mostly by migrant workers in Beijing's Daxing district, killing nineteen and injuring eight. Around four hundred people lived in cramped conditions in the two-story structure. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the city authorities launched a forty-day campaign to inspect and demolish buildings that unlawfully mixed residential and industrial facilities, as well as overcrowded apartments. This led to a wave of evictions that mostly affected the migrant population of the Chinese capital, with thousands of migrants forced out of their residences and left homeless in spite of the cold temperatures. As part of the campaign, officials also shut down small plants, shops, and restaurants, in some cases going as far as to cut electricity and water without any notice. While state censors were quick to take control of the media narrative, for a few days Chinese social media was abuzz with discussions and denunciations of how the crackdown was targeting Beijing's 'low-end population' (*diduan renkou*), a term that first appeared in official debates a few years ago referring to those who work in low-end service and manufacturing jobs, and that more recently has come back in vogue in relation to plans to cap the capital's population at twenty-three million by 2020. Since the beginning of the campaign, the crackdown has drawn widespread condemnation from the Chinese public. Some migrant communities took to the streets in an attempt to resist, and more than one hundred intellectuals signed an open letter demanding an end to the evictions. Even some state media have been unusually critical. On 27 November, Beijing Communist Party Chief Cai Qi declared that the campaign should not be carried out in a simplistic and hasty manner, and that those evicted should be given time to move out. While addressing serious problems of safety, the campaign is also part of a broader move to change the face of the Chinese capital. IF

(Sources: **BBC**; **Caixin Global**; **China Digital Times**; **China Media Project**; **People's Daily**; **Quartz**; **Reuters**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**)

Foxconn Entangled in Another Scandal

On 21 November, Foxconn came once again under the spotlight following a media investigation into its forced use of seasonal student interns. The *Financial Times* uncovered that three thousand high school students from the local Urban Rail Transit School had been forced to work eleven-hour shifts at the company's plant in Zhengzhou, Henan province, to produce the new iPhone X. Since the early 2010s, Foxconn has been repeatedly criticised for illegally using student interns (see **Chan's essay** in *Made in China* 3/2017). As recently as July this year, a university offered a public apology for forcing its students into a three-month internship at a Foxconn factory in Yantai in Shandong province (see the brief in *Made in China* 3/2017). While admitting the violation of the rules regarding overtime, the company insisted that student internships were voluntary, a fact that was contradicted by the *Financial Times* investigation. The next day, on 22 November, Foxconn announced it had taken immediate action to address the violations. However, by that time, as the busy season from August to December was coming to an end, the use of student interns had already become unnecessary. Such practices have been found across electronics manufacturers. In October, the Hong Kong-based labour rights group, Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour, reported that vocational school students were forced to work at Quanta Computer, which supplies global brands such as Apple, Acer, Hewlett-Packard, and Sony. Local governments have been complicit in allowing such practices to prevent businesses from relocating to other regions where labour is cheaper and more flexible. *KL*

(Sources: **Financial Times 1**; **Financial Times 2**; **Sina News (Chinese); The Guardian**)

New Implementation Rules for the Counter-espionage Law Released

On 6 December, the State Council released the Implementation Rules for the Counter-espionage Law that had come into force earlier in November 2014. The new Rules significantly enhance the powers of the State Security, which already had gained significant clout under the original legislation. In particular, according to Article 8 of the new Rules, the State Security gains the power to investigate acts of subversion that are not necessarily related to espionage, including situations involving 'fabricating or distorting facts, publishing or disseminating text or information that endangers national security, or creating, transmitting, or publishing a/v products or other publications that endanger national security'; 'using religion to carry out activities endangering national security'; and 'foreign individuals [violating] the relevant provisions, not [heeding] discouragement, and, without authorization, [meeting] with mainland persons who have conduct endangering national security or who are strongly suspected of having conduct endangering national security'. Article 6 also expands the concept of 'funding' espionage to include providing funding to those who engage in espionage even if the money is not used for that aim and the funder is not aware of the illegal conduct. This will significantly reinforce the hand of the State Security in dealing with activists and NGOs working in politically sensitive areas, as well as serve to intimidate their foreign donors. As noted in previous issues of this journal, since Xi Jinping has come to power, the Chinese leadership has displayed increasing concern with matters of national security. In 2013, the Chinese Communist Party established a new secretive National Security Commission, and in November 2014, the Chinese government passed the Counter-espionage Law, followed a few months later by the National Security Law. Since 2016, 15 April has been labelled 'National Security Education Day', i.e. a day for raising public awareness about national security issues. *IF*

(Sources: **China Law Translate 1**; **China Law Translate 2**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**)

CHINA COLUMNS

Photo: Yi Cheng Sun, **Flickr**

Migrants, Mass Arrest, and Resistance in Contemporary China

Ma Tian

In today's China, migrant workers are commonly perceived as criminals. This essay examines how this bias is reflected in mechanisms of crime control, as well as in the judicial and correctional systems. It also looks into the strategies adopted by migrants to cope with this kind of discrimination by the law enforcement bodies.

In Chinese society today, migrant workers are commonly perceived as criminals. This can be clearly seen in various mechanisms of the crime control regime, with the migrant population being stopped and searched more frequently than local populations, and experiencing a disproportionately high rate of police arrests and pre-trial incarceration. Migrants are also more likely to receive longer sentences, to be denied parole and probation, and to receive discriminatory treatment in the correctional system.

To address existing biases in the arrest rate of migrant suspects, between 2011 and 2015 more than twenty first-tier cities in China initiated legal reforms. Still, when I was doing fieldwork in major cities in the Yangtze River Delta back in 2015, prosecutors explicitly acknowledged that in their daily work they simply followed the principle of 'arresting all' (*yilv shiyong jiyaxing qiangzhi cuoshi*) when it came to migrant suspects. In their

opinion, the reforms were 'totally infeasible, contradictory, and utterly ridiculous.' Similarly, policemen I interviewed in Ningbo during that period affirmed that they had never even heard of the new legislation. Apparently, the ambitious reform programme outlined in official legal documents had essentially come to naught. This failed reform highlights how *hukou* status still plays a fundamental role in determining how the police and judicial bodies in China deal with different types of suspects.

Hukou Disparity in Arrest Decisions

It is a fact that prosecutors in China are more prone to issue or approve an arrest warrant for migrant suspects. For instance, according to internal documents of the local Procuratorate, in Ningbo in 2010, the arrest rate for the migrant population was 368 arrests per 100,000 people—7.36 times higher than the rate for local residents. In light of this, the police find it easier to target migrants, as their arrest is more likely to be officially sanctioned. This dynamic of mutual reinforcement not only engenders discrimination against migrants, but also leads to a disproportionate arrest rate within this social group—in fact, we can talk about this phenomenon as being a form of 'mass arrest'.

Far from being simply the result of the personal preferences of individual police officers, this bias has been systematised, rationalised, and legalised. Article 5.6 of the **Quality Standards for the Examination of Arrest Requests by People's Procuraturates** provides specific procedural instructions to legal professionals, mandating that if 'the criminal suspect has no fixed residence, or commits crimes from place to place or in different places, and does not possess the conditions for bail or residential confinement', he shall be arrested. One of my interviewees, a prosecutor from a district procuraturate in Shanghai, confirmed that it was this link between the absence of a 'fixed residence' to a 'non-local *hukou*' that resulted in the establishment of standardised arrest guidelines in China. In this way, the creation of a causal link between migration and criminality has resulted in a major bias in the approval rate of arrest warrants targeting migrants.

Besides being legalised and institutionalised, this logic is also enshrined in routine everyday practice. Migrants are discursively equated with crime, and thus with instability and danger. Given the risk that migrants could 'run away', positive arrest decisions targeting this kind of suspect are justified as essential to ensure the defendant's return for subsequent proceedings. However, this apparent necessity is, in actuality, based on an illogical assumption formalised through the law.

Coping with Police Discrimination

My research shows that the benefits of the judicial reforms of the early 2010s have not trickled down to migrants. When suspected of a crime, they still found themselves stuck in the Kafkaesque position of being subject to relentless interrogations and arrests due to their *hukou* status rather than actual misbehaviour. In such recurring circumstances, migrants have no choice but to cope with the police strategically.

Article 10 of the **Regulations on Detention Centres of the People's Republic of China** stipulates that criminals have to go through a health check prior to detention, and lists three medical conditions under which they cannot be detained: a) Mental illness or acute infectious disease; b) Other serious illnesses that may be life-threatening while in custody or for which they can not take care of themselves (this does not apply to those

Chengdu, North Train Station. Photo: Phoootoooos, **Flickr**

who are extremely dangerous to society); and c) Pregnancy or breastfeeding of children less than one year old. Taking advantage of these legal guarantees, many migrants attempt to place themselves into these scenarios in order to evade arrest and detention. The most common coping strategies include putting oneself in a **life-threatening situation** for male migrants, and pregnancy or simply cuddling a baby for female migrants.

In my interviews, the police continually complained about how 'crafty' (*jiaohua*) migrant suspects are nowadays. They vividly described their encounters with migrants who, in order to avoid arrest, swallowed blades, coins, keys, zips, screws, nails, nail clippers, and even saws. These occurrences were regarded as complicated and difficult to resolve. A policeman told me a story about a migrant 'thief' who used to carry nails with him at all times. 'After we caught him, he swallowed the nails instantly. The detention centre (*kanshousuo*) carries out X-ray checks for all incoming detainees before taking them into custody. If they see things like these in their stomach, they will not accept them.' Under these circumstances, he continued, 'We had to let him go… After being released, he continued to steal. Then he went through prosecution and trial. Although the court sentenced him to prison, the jail still did not want to take him. What can we do? He continues to steal, but our hands are tied. There is nothing we can do.'

This process of 'othering' was repeated in encounters between the police and suspects, enhancing the discursive framing of migrants as having violent and irrational tendencies. In some cases, this discourse overlaps with other narratives and concerns related to specific ethnic minorities. For instance, Muslims from Xinjiang are often marked out for their 'savageness and aggression'. As one police officer told me: 'We caught several people from Xinjiang. Once he put some blades into his mouth, and then chewed the blades. Lots of bloods came out of his mouth, I was frightened to death, we just let him go.'

Female migrants often use motherhood to avoid arrest. In his **master's dissertation**, Li

Weiming found that in Shanghai numerous organised crime groups from Hunan province recruit women who are pregnant or have a small baby. A woman told Li how she came to join the group: 'My townsfolk told me that nowadays pregnant women are all doing this. They said: "You are pregnant. What a pity if you don't do this!" ' Sometimes, women have abortions after months of pregnancy, and then get pregnant again just to stay out of jail.

Blurred Morality and Resistance

This essay certainly does not intend to glorify migrant coping strategies, or suggest that migrant suspects are activists leading a non-violent life in a context of apartheid. However, their actions cannot only be understood as a devious way to avoid criminal charges. From feigning illness to skipping a class, to soldiers deliberately harming themselves in order to escape the war; from espionage agents taking a cyanide pill to avoid torture, to people grabbing a baby at the very last minute to gain a seat on a lifeboat, it is never easy to distinguish between courageous acts and irresponsible cowardice. These examples all demonstrate that resistance is a complex set of actions that go against an established order. In other words, resistance—or the act of saying no—is, by its very nature, contentious.

Facing the real possibility of arrest and pre-trial incarceration, migrant suspects look for alternatives for self-redemption. There are two layers of 'resistance' in the coping strategies outlined in this essay. The first layer lies within the offender's noncompliant behaviours during his or her interactions with the police. In this case, rather than being verbally or physically aggressive, the resistance is actually non-violent. It is a tangible, subtle, even silent act. The second layer resonates with the idea of resistance or rebellion in cultural criminology. As Jock Young pointed out in *The Criminological Imagination*, 'resistance is always there'. Self-harm and pregnancy should also be seen as 'forms of resistance' against discriminative policing. At a disadvantage in the criminal justice system, migrant suspects change their own bodies to resist the asymmetrical power relationships between themselves and those administering 'justice'. For these subversive migrants, nails in the stomach and foetuses in the womb become a type of protection from discriminatory incarceration.

Ma Tian

Ma Tian is a dual PhD Candidate at Utrecht University and the University of Kent, in the Doctoral Programme in Cultural and Global Criminology. Her research explores how internal migrants are criminalised in China, with a focus on the relationship between migration and crime, punishment and governance.

Mesmerised by Numbers
Photo: Hsing Wei, **Flickr**

Counting Contention

Manfred Elfstrom

In the past few years, a growing number of academics and activists have launched projects aimed at counting contention in the realm of Chinese labour. This essay explores the power and limitations of such efforts, detailing the inevitable data problems involved in any quantitative approach to documenting protests in China. It also examines the ethics involved in how we collect such data and the questions we ask of it.

In August 2017, activist Lu Yuyu was sentenced by the Dali City People's Court to four years in prison for 'picking quarrels and stirring up trouble' (*xunxin zishi zui*). Together with his partner Li Tingyu, who was detained but then eventually released, Lu had collected information on thousands of 'mass incidents' (*qunti shijian*). These incidents encompassed a broad range of Chinese contentious politics, from pitched battles between farmers and thugs hired by development companies, to taxi drivers parking *en masse* along roadways in protest against high fuel prices; and from migrant workers threatening to jump from bridges, to retirees gathering to condemn pollution. Li and Lu posted the information they gathered on social media and blogs under the name **Wickedonna** (also known as *feixinwen*, non-news). Their reports usually took the form of short, two- or three-sentence descriptions of confrontations, paired with photos or videos. But the activists also calculated monthly and yearly totals of periods of unrest, accompanied by brief analyses.

It is impossible to know what, exactly, triggered the initial detention of the pair in June 2016. Drawing data of this sort together in one place was clearly unsettling for authorities. But *what* exactly was so troubling about it? One possibility is that making individual stories of conflict so accessible was dangerous. The activist Huang Qi was detained half a year earlier because of his work curating similar tales on his website 64 Tianwang. Most likely, though, the sheer *number* of incidents Lu and Li recorded undercut government narratives related to the creation of a 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*) and bringing about the 'great revival of the Chinese people' (*zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*). After all, the government itself used to sporadically make public annual incident counts, but it stopped doing so in 2005, presumably because the numbers conveyed a negative impression of where the country was headed.

Wickedonna represented a particularly dedicated and courageous effort at counting Chinese unrest. However, a growing number of academics and activists have launched similar projects—albeit mostly from the safety of universities and non-governmental organisations located outside the mainland. These projects include **an extensive dataset** covering all types of disturbances put together by Chen Chih-Jou of the Academia Sinica; my Ash Center colleague **Li Yao's dataset of all the mass incidents** reported in *Boxun* between 2001 and 2012; the **'China Environmental Protests & Accidents'** map covering 2005 to present; **China Labour Bulletin's (CLB) strike map** of workplace unrest from mid-2011 to present; my **own** *China Strikes* **dataset** covering the Hu–Wen decade; and **the Global Labour Conflicts collection** hosted by the International Institute of Social History in the Netherlands, which combines the maps from CLB and myself for its China section.

In this essay, I will explore the power and limits of such efforts with regard to Chinese labour issues. I will begin by contrasting the practices of digging deep (qualitative research) versus counting (quantitative research), and posit that both have their virtues. Then, I will detail the inevitable data problems involved in any quantitative approach to documenting protest in China, while arguing that these problems, although serious, should not deter researchers. Finally, I will examine the ethics involved in how we collect such data and the questions we ask of it.

Digging Deep versus Counting

Research about Chinese labour politics to date has tended to involve in-depth fieldwork (digging deep). Scholars have worked on production lines themselves or interviewed strikers in cafes outside factory gates. They have also put in less adventurous, but sometimes equally demanding, time navigating the Chinese bureaucracy to buttonhole labour officials and trade union leaders. This is as it should be. To a certain extent, you have to physically be 'there' to 'get it'. There are also good reasons to be suspicious of statistics in labour studies. Quantitative data introduces the temptation, often subconsciously, to begin to make the sorts of assumptions about rational individuals and limited options that have led mainstream economics astray. Numbers, moreover, necessarily omit the voices of workers themselves. No econometric take on the industrial revolution, for example, will ever have the humanity of **E.P. Thompson's exploration** of the many forces that 'made' the English working class. And most basically, with regard to China in particular, reliable quantitative data is simply not available for many aspects of the country's economy and society.

Nevertheless, counting unrest, where it is possible, serves at least two important purposes. First and most importantly, it can give us a sense of the general trends that underlie individual cases and how those trends interact—an imperfect sense to be sure, but a sense all the same. While a close analysis of a single strike at a single factory can challenge our ideas of how things 'work' in China and provide us with important clues as to the mechanisms of change at the grassroots level, we should not use a single case—or five or ten or twenty cases—to make claims about how *most* conflicts play out. Labour scholars generally include in their qualitative work various asides about limited external validity, but they nonetheless too often leave the distinct impression that they are really talking about where China *as a whole* is headed, caveats notwithstanding. You simply cannot do this with a country so big and complex.

Second, and this is maybe not so obvious, the process of counting itself is illuminating. Reading strike report after strike report can

help you develop a rough sense of what the norms are for conflicts, something which is hard to come by if you are not yourself involved in activism on the ground. At the very least, you develop a feel for the norms of *reporting* a conflict. Thus, for example, I have noticed that coverage of public bus strikes in Chinese state media tends to take the following form: 'Today, many people waited for their buses for hours but none came. This reporter went to the bus station to investigate. Drivers were standing around. They had several important complaints. When asked about the issue, the transportation bureau said that they were putting together a team to investigate….' Then, when you read something that deviates from the expected story arc, it makes you take notice. You know that it is an outlier—and you wonder what has changed.

Counting contention has yielded useful findings in other labour contexts. For example, sociologist **Beverly Silver's** *Forces of Labor*, which describes how worker militancy chases particular industries around the globe, continues to be a touchstone for many scholars (and has been translated into Chinese, winning it a new circle of readers there). **Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly's examination** of the size and frequency of strikes in France from approximately the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries draws together national politics and shop floor dynamics in an illuminating manner. **Graeme Robertson's study of Russian labour protests** under Yeltsin and Putin similarly documents fascinating interactions between workers and elite actors in a hybrid regime. Works like these do not rely on perfect data (Silver's World Labor Group dataset uses articles from *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London to cover unrest the world over), but they are nonetheless revealing. There is no reason this work should not be extended to the world's second largest economy and largest working class. However, any quantitative approach to China must be balanced by extra close attention to the data problems and ethical issues involved in how we go about gathering and using numbers. I turn to these next.

Data Problems

If we are to begin counting, we must address the problems with the data available to us upfront. The most obvious problem is with totals. Everyone naturally wants to know how often, and in what numbers, workers are protesting in China. However, it is unlikely that any individual or institution actually has this information—not even the Chinese government. CLB has tried to be clear that their strike map likely only represents a small sample of the full 'population' of unrest occurring. Nonetheless, media outlets have repeatedly treated the CLB map as a more or less accurate measure of year-to-year changes in contention. This problem has sometimes extended to scholars. At one point in her **thought-provoking 2016 article** in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, which was the focus of **a discussion** in a previous issue of *Made in China*, Ching Kwan Lee contrasts CLB figures with numbers she obtained from the Shenzhen City Labour Bureau and Ministry of Public Security in the 1990s and early 2000s, concluding that 'the current period is actually witnessing a decline, not a rise, in strikes'. But surely the government sources Lee cites, while themselves imperfect, convey a more complete picture than CLB. Although her broader point stands—there was a lot of protest before, too, and academics are overstating today's conflict—the precise comparison made is thus inappropriate.

Other problems relate to more subtle issues of bias. Although a surprising amount of information is reported from poorer and more remote parts of the country, more data will always be available for a place like Guangdong than Gansu. Guangdong, in particular, is home to a relatively open press (especially the Southern Media Group),

scores of bloggers and social media gadflies, and foreign journalists—and it abuts Hong Kong. Whether the imbalance in reports from different places is wildly out of sync with the imbalance in actual instances of unrest is a question that is important but almost impossible to answer. There are also biases in terms of sources. Dissident media outlets are unsurprisingly better at documenting violence against workers by police or thugs, whereas state media makes sure to always describe the steps taken by officials to resolve a dispute. There may also be biases that manifest themselves over time, as censorship tightens and slackens, and news cycles come and go. Statistically, these issues can be dealt with by using only one source for all reports (so that the biases are predictable), by including fixed effects, by zeroing in on dynamics in a particular region, or by seeing what happens when all observations with more than a certain number of incidents are dropped (to ensure that the story is not just related to one of the hotspots). The main thing, though, is to be honest about the data's limitations.

The Questions We Ask

Not all the dangers of counting relate to issues of samples versus totals or bias in terms of sources or cycles of reporting. We should also consider the real-world impact of what we are trying to learn with quantitative data. As with qualitative research, sometimes the easiest questions to answer are not the ones that matter most. Moreover, focussing on certain issues over others means serving certain interests over others. Traditional studies of strikes by labour economists have focussed on the number of incidents, number of participants, or the number of workdays lost. These figures are tracked by many governments (although not China's) and obviously have a big impact on an economy. But why not put more energy into **rigorously documenting** the different types of worker claims made? Claims may matter more to discussions of class consciousness. When you have thousands of 'dots' representing disputes marked on a map—the default of software programs like the one I use for my *China Strikes* map—it is natural to wonder why they cluster in some places and not in others. However, workers and their allies may not need lessons about what *causes* mobilisation. Instead, they may be more interested in its *consequences*: which tactics are effective and which are not, where in the country breakthroughs are possible, etc. In contrast, state authorities and businesses have an intense interest in understanding the roots of contention: they just want to stop protests! As has been well-documented in the media, big data is now being harnessed to track individuals and groups in China in disturbing ways, such as via the country's proposed new social credit system. The American military, meanwhile, is devoting substantial sums to predicting social upheavals with its Minerva grants. The protest maps assembled by labour researchers are unlikely to be as comprehensive as these projects and so should not raise the same level of concern. But research can always be turned to multiple purposes. It is important for scholars to ponder what purposes their research *most easily* serves. This sort of awareness is the least we owe people like Lu Yuyu and Li Tingyu who have sacrificed their freedom to document what is happening.

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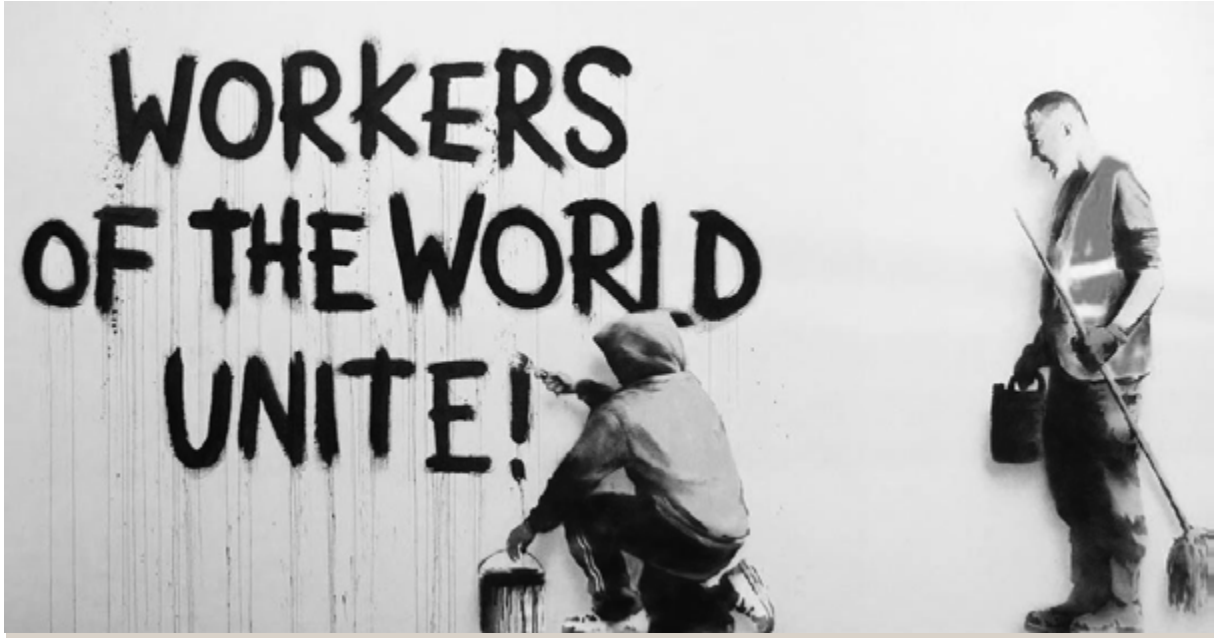
FOCUS

Precarious Labour in Contemporary China



Workers of World Unite! Graffiti by Banksy

A Genealogy of Precarity and Its Ambivalence

Francesca Coin

Focussing on the conceptual evolution of precarious labour over the past three decades, this essay provides a genealogy of the notion of precarity. On the eve of the fourth industrial revolution, when precarity has become the norm and fears of a jobless society have alimented a dystopian imaginary for the future, this historical reconstruction seeks to identify those elements that have shaped the material conditions of workers as well as influenced their capacity of endurance in times of growing uncertainty.

My generation—or probably most individuals who were born since the late 1970s—has often perceived precarity as a generational curse, and looked at Fordism as a time of social and labour stability. On the contrary, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter's article ***Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception*** reminds us that for us to understand precarity, we must move beyond such approaches to see Fordism as an exception and precarity as the norm. In fact, the 1960s and 1970s were decades of uncertainty. The Federal Reserve's monetarist experiment in 1979 transformed labour into an adjustment variable of its monetary policy. In this context, the de-standardisation of salaries and the individualisation of contract relationships came with an overall transformation of governance and labour management that tied income to profit and transformed labour into the shock absorber for capital risk. Since then, casualisation of employment, insecure income, and labour dislocation became the defining traits of labour relations. Time softens the hard edges in our memories, but accounts from those years provide descriptions of a society in

turmoil, mired by plant foreclosures and rampant job losses.

In the United States, the monetarist experiment suddenly brought unemployment to levels unseen since the Great Depression. In several cities, manufacturing plants that had been the symbol of industrial growth either shut down, introduced severe cuts in the workers' salaries, or started laying off employees. Modernity seemed to be going downhill rapidly. In several industrial cities, unemployment peaked at over 20 percent in the early 1980s, often leading people to flee to other places to find work. In some instances, manufacturing jobs vanished into obsolescence due to technological changes; in others, they drifted overseas in the search for cheaper labour. In retrospect, we know that what was happening was a major global restructuring of labour relations. Over the past decades, the increase in productivity allowed by science and innovation became the catalyst for a transformation in labour relations characterised by a growing distance between emerging clusters of high-tech industries and the Global South's dependency on technologically advanced multinational corporations. Inequality was not limited to macroeconomics but was reflected in the growing cleavage between a higher rank of high-tech specialists and a growing reserve of low-skilled precarious workers.

The Experience of the Italian *Autonomia*

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Italian leftist movement *autonomia* turned to Marx's ***Grundrisse*** to define this transition. In this work, Marx foresaw that innovation and technology would become a direct force of production and allow employers to become relatively independent of the labour force. In other words, capital could use 'the inanimate limbs' of science and technology to restrict necessary labour, hence transforming innovation into a curse likely to increase unemployment and social insecurity. At the same time, the purpose of technology would not only be the limited to the accumulation of wealth. On the contrary, the general intellect could use technology to improve the conditions of production and liberate time—what Marx defined as 'the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free.' The fact is that the 'inanimate limbs' of science are not outgrowths of nature, Marx warned. 'They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand,' and in this sense 'they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high'.

During the 1960s and 1970s, these prophetic words became the distinctive tune of a generation. The diffuse intellectuality that took to the streets turned to the *Grundrisse* to decipher the historical transition they were enduring. No longer wanting to be constrained within the space and time of the plant, Italian *autonomia* posited itself as an embodiment of the 'general intellect' that felt an urge to liberate society from its chains. The simplicity of their slogans beautifully explains the complexity of their interpretation.

'Zero work for income
Automate all production
All power to living labor
All work to dead labor'

The revolution is over,
we've won'
A/traverso, 1977 (**Franco 'Bifo' Berardi**).

Despite the cultural distance that separates us from those years, it must be said that recent literature has rediscovered those perspectives. From Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' ***Inventing the Future: Post-capitalism and a World without Work*** to Paul Mason's ***Postcapitalism: A Guide to***

Our Future, intellectuals have turned to these interpretations in order to compensate for today's social and political impasse. Liberation from labour and the 'struggle to be human and educated during one's free time', emerge in Mason's analysis as the vision of a post-capitalist society that can grow inside the old one.

Highland Park Ford Plant, the first factory in history to assemble cars on a moving assembly line. Photo: AutoTraderClassics.com

From Utopia to the Race to the Bottom

The problem in these visions is that they never came true, and the enchanting idea of a world free from work left room for a generalised race to the bottom where labour was often not only unfree but unpaid. The transition to post-Fordism could be defined as a general dismantling of the time and space boundaries established by Fordism. According to **Antonio Negri**, the mass worker that characterised the years of Fordism gave way to the 'social worker'—an individual whose life was entirely put to work. While industrial capitalism was founded on large factories, specialised in the production of mass, standardised goods and marked by a clear separation between the time of production and the time of consumption, post-Fordism annihilated such divisions. In the social factory, the creation of value extended beyond the factory walls to embrace the whole of society.

In this context, the question became what type of organisational mechanisms of control could be used to supervise a labour force that was ever more fluid and free to move beyond space and time constriction. In 1978–1979, Michel Foucault's course at the Collège de France, ***La naissance de la biopolitique***, analysed how the breakup of time and space constrictions that was typical of a disciplinary society transformed governance and management. In a post-Fordist society, governance became micro-political and used new techniques to enforce discipline. Deleuze spoke of a '**society of control**'characterised by the use of salaries to justify the coercion of individuals into a new relation of dependence. In this context, precarity became 'the **growing insecurity** brought on by the flexible management of the global work force within post-Fordist. Today's Uber drivers or social media 'prosumers', in some instances, embody this shift. The notion of the '**prosumer**' refers to the 'progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer', a definition that is often used to describe 'prosumer capitalism' and the management's attempt to outsource informal labour to consumers—a mechanism that defines both corporations such as Ikea and the political economy of social media. The progressive blurring of the line that separates leisure and work, as well as production and consumption, have come to define a type of capitalism marked by precarity—as manifested in the proliferation of temporary and casual labour, delocalisation and subcontracting, occasional labour, labour on demand, and unpaid work.

The New Dangerous Class?

Over the past ten years, the representation of precarity has been ambivalent. In his widely discussed book, Guy Standing describes the precariat as '**the new dangerous class**' and

maintains that the precariat is not merely a distinctive socio-economic group but rather a neologism that combines an adjective 'precarious' and a related noun 'proletariat', to describe 'a *class-in-the-making*, if not yet a *class-for-itself*, in the Marxian sense of that term'. Standing's representation of precarity refers to the early 2000s. During the 2005 May Day protest in Milan, for example, over one hundred thousand people took to the streets to voice the needs of the global precariat. These very assemblies and moments of collective action were considered pivotal in globalisation politics and crucial for the precariat to find its own voice. In her **genealogy of precarity**, Maribel Casas-Cortés looks at the activist networks that emerged in those years as 'a Deleuzian politics of unfixed alliances' that transformed the precariat into a political subject capable of intertwining identities and demands. In this sense, she drafts a set of concepts that could agglomerate social groups—from immigrants to young, educated locals—and a set of demands to be posed to governments. Intertwining the struggles of migrants, women, and precarious workers, Maribel Casas-Cortés argues that precarity seemed to represent 'a strategic political proposal intended to use Deleuze's "tool box" to change society', as maintained by a EuroMayDay organiser that she interviewed. At the same time, it is absolutely evident that there is a tremendous distance between those empowered accounts of precarity and the conditions of social insecurity that have continued to afflict labour over the years.

Today, employment insecurity has evolved into conditions even more challenging. The widespread use of unpaid labour in the 'internship economy' and the prospects of uncertainty accelerated by the gig economy, obscures the idea of the precariat as a dangerous class and emphasises the raising insecurity facing it. As I look at the labour market from the rotten heart of Southern Europe, I wonder whether the artificial description of precarity as a political subject did us any good. The bitterness of an unfulfilled revolution during the 1970s probably found comfort in representations of the precariat as a dangerous subject, but at the same time such narratives permitted a general underestimation of the violent forces confronting labour. It is going to take a very different sense of urgency and determination to reverse the conditions of exploitation that have become the new normal.

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Immigrant farmers in the Italian countryside. Photo: eunews.it

Work Precarisation and New Inequalities: The Role of Migration

Fabio Perocco

In the neoliberal era, precarity has become a general condition in the life of workers. The structural precarisation of labour is a global process, which has taken place heterogeneously according to national contexts, sectors, qualifications, and labour market stratifications. This essay looks at precarity from two angles: the impact of it on migrant workers and the role of migration in the exacerbation and extension of it.

Turning precarity into a general condition in the life of workers is one of the most important social transformations of the neoliberal era. The structural precarisation of labour is a global process, which has taken place heterogeneously according to national contexts, sectors, qualifications, and labour market stratifications. Besides young people, low-skilled older workers, and women, it has mainly affected migrants, who have suffered from labour precarity combined with the weakness of their legal and social status. At the same time, immigration is also involuntarily an agent of spreading and widening precarisation—often a testing ground where new forms of precarity are trialled before being extended to other groups of workers.

In this essay, I look at precarity from two angles: the impact of it on migrant workers and the role of migration in the exacerbation and extension of it. I first analyse the process of structural precarisation of labour, highlighting how it has become even more extreme in recent years. I then examine the precarisation of migration in Europe over the past two decades and its role in paving the way for a wider enlargement of precarity. Finally, I consider the Italian context as a striking example of this two-fold process. This analysis is highly relevant if we wish to better understand what has been happening in China since the onset of the reform era. In fact, while the Chinese context has arisen from a specific set of conditions (economic, social, political, and cultural), it nevertheless presents many similarities with the Italian context regarding the social transformations, the new inequalities, and the conditions of migrant workers.

Precarity 2.0

One of the cornerstones of the great social restructuring of the past three decades is the **widespread and intense transformation** of

the organisation of work and of the labour market—a *composite* yet *unitary* process. The features of these transformations may be summed up as follows: 1) organisational flexibility, i.e. the set of methods—from lean production to outsourcing, from just-in-time to new management—which have produced the fragmentation and acceleration of production processes; 2) the systematic application of informatics and robotics to the production process, which has increased the polarisation of work and the de-skilling of a number of workers; and 3) the structural precarisation of labour.

As one of the cores of neoliberal policies, the precarisation of labour is a *prerequisite* and a *carrier* of the intensification of labour exploitation required by the rules of the global economic order in response to the constant decrease of accumulation rates and recurring economic crisis. The fracture in the unity of the labour contract, the restructuring of labour law, the introduction of a plethora of contract types with different conditions and rights, are all part of a process which is broader and deeper than a mere reduction of guaranteed work spaces. Following a few decades in the wake of the Second World War, which saw the attainment of relatively stable and secure jobs, a radical and extreme commodification of labour has taken place.

The structural precarisation of labour has several consequences—including new stratifications, the growth in wage inequalities, the impoverishment of many groups of workers, the increase in the army of reserve workers (with the creation of a reserve of the reserve), the unconditional adaptation of workers' lives to the organisational needs of private companies and public bodies, the alteration of social rights which have been readjusted for the benefit of companies, and the deterioration of psychological and physical health as precarity gradually destroys people. Atypical contracts, at first applied among migrants, have fragmented and disconnected the labour force, enabling the general devaluation of labour, denying the role of workers in the process of production. The consequences have been so dire that rather than describing this as simply *commodification of labour*, in extreme cases we can actually conceptualise it as the *nullification of labour* and of the worker, who does not have and does not need to have anything guaranteed, who—exactly as migrant workers in racist representations—have zero rights.

With the recent economic crisis and the consequent radicalisation of neoliberal policies, labour precarisation has further expanded and deepened, going beyond precarity as it was known in the recent past. Now, precarity 2.0—typified by vouchers, meal tickets instead of wages, serial internships, volunteering, unpaid work, zero-hour contracts, temporary work, posted workers, fake cooperatives—has transcended the original boundaries of precarious labour, replacing a segment of the 'first generation' precarious jobs and becoming the norm.

The precarisation of labour, both in its old and new versions, has been unleashed on workers unevenly. The first, most affected, were migrants, young people, low-skilled and low-educated female workers with children, older workers affected by company restructuring, and then other low-skilled workers more generally—i.e. those who constitute the most vulnerable segment of the European working class. These groups, which do not constitute an individual class of their own, have experienced increased impoverishment and marginalisation, and their foreign components have also been the subjects of racist campaigns.

Precarisation of Migration in Europe

Across the majority of mainland Europe, the precarisation of labour has markedly affected migrants. There are at least three primary

reasons for this: the migration policies of many European countries; the role attached to migration in European capitalisms and in the operation of the labour market; and the rise of anti-migrant racism in the 2000s.

In several European countries, migrant workers are subject to **a *double precarisation***, both in the work and legal sphere. With regard to the legal sphere in particular, the migration policies of many countries subordinate the migrants' right of abode to the existence of a work contract, and also tie their social rights to their migration status, thus stratifying social rights. These principles have contributed to the return of the 'guest worker', which has taken place in a context of flexible capitalism with all its fragmentation and polarisation. The generalisation of the bond between the residence permit and the work contract during a period of structural economic crisis and casualisation puts migrants in a perilous and blackmail position, forcing them to accept any work conditions. The interaction between these two dimensions has produced, compared to the previous decades, a larger and deeper precarisation of migrants' conditions. These migrants, torn between the *rigidity* determined by migration laws and the *flexibility* produced by labour laws, have found themselves as 'guest workers' attempting to navigate a context of economic stagnation, characterised by atypical contracts and the general weakening of the workers' movement. Thus, if for the 1960s and 1970s we may talk about a relatively stable work regime, in the following decades the reality is that of a precarisation of the very process of work insertion and, on the social part, the enhancement of exclusion or segregation factors.

Historically, migration has been allocated the role of a **reserve army and social buffer** against possible crises within European capitalisms. In the last decade, this has intensified, so that migrant workers have been the first group experimented on with regard to the shift to precarious work and to the most extreme forms of precarity. In the meantime, the operating mechanisms of the labour market—selection, concentration, and specialisation—have continued to channel a good share of migrant workers into the most precarious and less paid sectors. This means that, in Europe, their working conditions—from access to work to unemployment, from tasks to wages, from classification to mobility—still present disparities compared to national workers. There are **large swaths** of unemployment, underemployment, 'over-education', and atypical contracts—all of which have become **higher in percentage** over time, and which have grown alongside crises.

The rise of institutional racism has increased precarisation and reduced social rights. The anti-migration offensive has supported migration policies characterised by a mix of identity and security elements—aimed at curbing social rooting, and at supporting temporary and fluctuating migration, following the requests for a just-in-time workforce. The return of assimilationism, both in policy and rhetoric, has required maximum social adaptation by migrants to the conditions to which they are subjected. Mass media, in creating a racialised depiction of society, has served to produce a differentiation in the public representations of migrants which is functional to the differentiated exploitation deriving from their stratified precarity. Slogans and discourses focussed on a necessarily temporary presence, preference for national workers, and on a subordinated integration of migrants in the name of social inferiority, have paved the way for the precarisation affecting a vast majority of migrants as a racialised class segment of the European working class.

At the same time, the role of migration as a carrier of precarisation must be highlighted. The labour market is segmented, but the spreading of precarity among migrant workers has been a factor of the multiplication and enlargement of precarity that has affected

a remarkable share of workers. In this framework, migration policies have played an **important general role** in paving the way and anticipating **comparable labour laws**.

The process of downward convergence of migration policies—starting slowly in the 1970s and 1980s, and gaining momentum in the 1990s and 2000s—has affected a fair share of European states and has seen the confluence of the different migration policies into **one single migration policy**, which is *selective*, *restrictive*, and *repressive*, and which balances new migrant arrivals according to the needs of the labour market. Such processes have been accompanied by unceasing denigration campaigns targeting different groups of migrants, which have ended up affecting migration as a whole and, subsequently, a large share of the world's labour, dividing it along distinct lines of differentiation.

In this context, where migration is encouraged by the market and discouraged by institutions—according to a role play aimed at the social and political exploitation of migrants—the real purpose of this downward migration policy is not a complete stop to immigration, but rather an unstable, vulnerable immigration, which serves as a general devaluation of labour. Historically, the use of a migrant labour force has been one of the main leverages for the devaluation of the labour force as a whole. By lowering the cost of labour and by offering an ultra-flexible workforce, migrants are forced into a subordinated position, and are **liable to blackmail** by migration policies and institutional discrimination. Today, this specific situation has turned migration into a laboratory where the manufacturing system has experimented with new forms of organising work—conceived of as a means of increasing profitability and productivity—which have led to replacing secure jobs with precarious ones.

Migration and labour policies increasingly aimed at precarity have gone hand-in-hand. The creation of an institutionally weak and precarious proletariat, of an underclass of temporary workers replacing each other in constant rotation and circulation, has not only allowed the experimentation with new forms of labour exploitation to spread, but has also favoured a new global regulation of work relations and contracts in the name of stable precarity. The production of undocumented migrants, for instance, is an integral part of the structural precarisation of labour.

The Italian Case

The hectic pace of labour market reformation, which has taken place in Italy over the past two decades, has legalised all forms of precarisation, many of which were first trialled on migrant workers. From the **July 1993 agreement** between the Government and trade unions, which paved the way for fixed-term and temporary employment, to the **Jobs Act in 2014**, which has institutionalised precarity by turning it into the norm rather than the exception, the task of creating a precarious labour market has been carried out in a bipartisan fashion through the promulgation of a long list of laws and provisions that have affected both 'work flexibility' and 'employment flexibility'.

Simultaneously, immigration law has gradually established the connection between residence permits, work contracts, and housing—institutionalising a migrant work model based on forced illegality and social precarity. **Law 40/1998** has explicitly legitimised the existing social practices, confirming that undocumented migration is unavoidable for migrants and that regularisation can only happen afterwards (with amnesties or specific decrees) according to the will of the employers. **Law 189/2002**—which dictates that residence is strictly subordinated to employment—has redefined, restrictively, the prerequisites to right of abode with the introduction of a 'stay contract', thus creating a form of immigration

that is extremely susceptible to blackmail. This has placed the vast majority of migrants in a condition of structural, legal, and social precarity solidified by the labour law itself. The creation of an unbreakable bond between employment, residence permits, and housing guarantees means that migrants' destinies are, to a large extent, in the hands of the employer—the only person who may legitimately ask for a working permit for migrants and who has the subjective right to ask for a residence permit. **Law 94/2009** has further worsened migrant conditions by introducing a point-based residence permit, articulated in credits. As in a game of snakes and ladders, during the validity of the residence permit, migrants can obtain or lose points that will count towards the permit's renewal.

The fragmentation of residence permits types and the multiple durations of residence permits stipulated by immigration laws—combined with the different kinds of atypical contracts stipulated by labour laws—have determined a marked *stratification of the legal and social status* of migrants. In other words, different types of migrants are granted, with several categories with different rights and conditions, which trigger a *hierarchy of precarity* within the very same migrant populations.

Pedagogy of Precarity and New Forms of Casualisation

Throughout the 1990s migrants have been channelled into the worst jobs, especially in labour-intensive sectors, with a high rate of irregular work. The shift to the industrial sector of the 2000s has entailed an improvement in the condition of migrant workers, yet they still take up proportionally more low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Migrant participation in the official labour market has increased, but the racial segmentation of the labour market has grown, and is matched by labour segregation and ethnicisation in the manufacturing processes. The manufacturing system, characterised by small and medium units, drawing on the more unstable or marginal segments in the labour market, has had a permanent reserve of cheap workers with which it could support the new forms of organisation of work. The working experience of migrants—with regard to tasks, classification, wages, accidents, and social security—presents **severe disparities** in comparison with national workers. Among them, we encounter the **highest rates** of unemployment (16.2 percent for migrants versus 11.4 percent for national workers), underemployment (11.7 percent versus 4.2 percent), over-education (40.9 percent versus 21.6 percent), contract precarity, and intermittent work.

Within this situation, we find *mass socialisation to precarity*. As migrants enter the labour force, running the gauntlet of irregular work and undocumented migration before reaching a minimally stable situation, they often spend a long period experiencing the most exploitative labour practices in the country. In a sense, this can be considered a sort of 'warming-up' phase for permanent uncertainty and social inferiority. This stage, which affects migrants differently according to various factors, prepares them for a lifetime of precarious work. This is the cornerstone of Italy's labour migration regime. This *pedagogy of precarity* is a pillar of the subjugation of migrants that began in the 1980s and 1990s, and was institutionalised in the 2000s. In terms of socialisation, it has enlarged to create a sort of halo effect that has affected other groups of workers, who at first had witnessed the precarisation of migrants thinking it would only be limited to them.

In this context, migrants have been the 'guinea pigs' for new forms of precarisation. Work paid with vouchers—used in Italy until March 2017 and currently under reform—is just one example. This is a remuneration arrangement for accessory occasional work

that entails a remuneration of ten euros per hour before tax. Vouchers have no relation to a work contract, do not guarantee a day off, paid leave, sick leave, unemployment benefits, maternity or marriage leave, family benefits, nor loss-of-job indemnities. At first, in 2003, they were used for a few occasional activities carried out by specific categories (after-school tutoring, side jobs for students, and retired people), but later found wide application in sectors featuring a high rate of migrant labour—including domestic work, care work, and seasonal work in agriculture (harvesting). In 2015, **115 million vouchers** were sold, corresponding to 1.1 billion euros, a third of which were used in the construction sector, and half in trade, tourism, and services. Vouchers then became a 'universal' tool, across all sectors, used for several jobs and for activities that are not necessarily occasional, and has partly replaced fixed-term precarious contracts. From a remuneration arrangement, it transformed into an employment arrangement, but in such evolution cases, the work relation no longer exists, channelling workers into a situation of extreme precarity.

Advocating a Global Social Citizenship

There is a close connection between work transformations and alteration of social rights, between labour precarisation and social rights stratification. The effects of organisation flexibility and of contract precarity are not only visible in the hyper segmentation of the labour market and the rapid growth of under-employed people, but can also be seen in the erosion of labour rights and the restriction of social citizenship. In the case of migrants, labour precarity entails a considerable exclusion or segregation factor, as the exercise of social rights is often subordinated to the work contract or the residence permit. The return of the 'guest worker' and the preference by states and markets for temporary migration, have favoured—in an era of structural precarity—a limited and conditional acquisition of social rights, generating new forms of inequality and a framework of stratified rights. All of this is supported by a **strong xenophobia** in the **name of the welfare state**. The attack on the social rights of the citizen has been going on for at least two decades as a fully-fledged state policy aimed at altering the very structure and functions of these rights. Even though it started in the migration sphere, it has not been confined there, and has expanded to other segments of the population. For this reason, it is high time to consider the idea of a global social citizenship that may curb this downward slide into a future defined by structural precarity.

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Heavily-loaded Chinese migrant worker starts the journey home for Chinese New Year. Photo: @dcmaster, **Flickr**.

Class and Precarity in China: A Contested Relationship

Chris Smith
Pun Ngai

The increasing precariousness of labour forces globally has prompted some to argue that a new 'precariat' is emerging to challenge the privileges of the securely employed 'salariat'. This divergence within the working class has been depicted as more significant than the traditional conflict between labour and capital. This essay examines these discussions in China, where precarity is increasingly being employed as a theoretical tool to explain the fragmentation of labour in the country.

There is a general trend in capitalist societies with regard to the nature of employment contracts and relations. The old promise of formal or continuous employment following a probationary period is no longer the norm. It is increasingly harder to get into work, with competitive selection tournaments and rotating internships; and when employed, the length and security of contracts are changing, with zero hour contracts and agency work growing, and direct employment by the firm diminishing for new workers. These trends have prompted some to argue that a new class of precariously employed workers (**the precariat**) is emerging to challenge the 'privileges' of those who are securely employed. This internal conflict within the working class has been projected as more important than conflicts between labour and capital. This essay looks at these debates in China, where some writers are beginning to apply these ideas to argue that there is a structural bi-furcation in the Chinese working class.

The Precariat Thesis and China

In his conceptualisation of the rise of precarious work, **Guy Standing** suggests that internal divisions within the working class, between those in regular/standard employment, judged as being a privileged 'salariat', and those excluded from standard employment contracts, considered as a disadvantaged 'precariat', forms the main 'class divide' in contemporary capitalism. However, as **Jane Hardy** has pointed out, the problem with arguing that workers on regular jobs 'are a privileged group' is that it 'completely denies the realities of life in the public sector, which has faced commodification, marketization and taken the brunt of austerity.' Looking back at the history of capitalism, well-defined and comprehensive employment security was only

enjoyed by labour for a relatively short period of time (from the 1950s to the 1970s) and only in advanced economies. In fact, the category of precariat is extremely diverse, including students, temporary and contract workers, elderly workers, migrant and immigrant workforces, as well as workers with very different skill and educational levels. Thus, members of the precariat are defined by their lack of secure contracts. The thesis stresses divisions between the two groups, or empirical examples of collaborations between workers on different contracts. Standing provides no empirical evidence that people in insecure employment identified themselves as part of a separate class. This hints at the fact that 'precariat' is an academic term with little traction in people's lives and self-identification in class terms.

The employment situation in China follows some of these generic trends, but also has distinctive characteristics that allow close examination of the claim that the precariat is a separate new class. In 2014, China had **772.5 million employed persons,** 274 million of whom were rural 'migrant workers' (*nongmingong*). These migrants are excluded from many basic social benefits because of the country's restrictive household registration system (*hukou*), which is used by employers to segment workers by different contracts, even though they generally perform similar types of work.

In the case of China, we find that there is a contradictory movement with regard to regular and insecure work. On the one hand, legislation has increased security for regular workers in mass production and mass service industries, where more regular forms of employment have been recognised and protected by law. On the other, the very same legislation has also created incentives for employers to use agency or dispatched workers and bring in non-regular workers. Additionally, many self-employed rural migrants are involved in the informal sector, or are employed in the formal sector but appear to have informal working conditions. Increasingly, urbanised migrant workers continue to be denied equal citizenship and welfare rights, and hold rural *hukou* in perpetuity. The *hukou* system 'makes' workers, but not stable urban working class communities. Proletarianisation is separated from urbanisation, and working class community development, which is a typical process in most modernisation projects, is highly fractured in China.

Student Interns, Agency Workers, and Formal Workers

In a recent attempt to apply the precariat concept to China, **Chunsen Yu** offers a more detailed empirical assessment of the value of the idea. While we are critical of some of his argument, what his work shows is that the boundary between regular and non-regular work is often crossed. Against a static view of classes of employee, the China case is dynamic and the inflexible concept of the precariat singularly unhelpful. In particular, Yu focuses on the objective conditions of insecurity of rural migrants and uses three indicators of precariat status—non-signing of long-term labour contracts, irregular payments of wages, and non-provision of social security. These conditions are looked at through three elements of 'precariat migrant worker class'—student interns, agency workers, and regular workers, which are explored in an empirical study of these workers in seven multinational companies operating in two regions of China: the Liangjiang New Area in Chongqing, and the Longhua and Futian districts in Shenzhen.

In Chongqing the local government promoted 'school–enterprise cooperation' but according to Yu's findings—which contradict official data that says formal workers are the majority of employees—60 percent of the assembly line workers he interviewed were student interns. Reinforcing the **findings**

of others, student interns in his sample performed unskilled regular work that bore no relation to their studies. They also worked for less pay, facing the double burden of factory work and school supervision. Yu documents that student interns in Chongqing had no choice but to comply with their schools' internship arrangements with hi-tech factories and other types of manufacturing factories.'

Categorising students as part of the precariat because of their insecure employment means ignoring the major element of their status, i.e. the fact that they are undergoing vocational training and hence work only for the short-term. Although they often do not receive specialist training in their chosen field, this does not change the fact that they are structurally temporary workers who plan to pursue their career elsewhere. This is a constrained, transitional labour force. Yu bemoans their lack of commitment to work and the struggle by this section of the so-called precariat, but this is largely due to the abuse of the internship system by colleges and employers, and it is hardly surprising to find members of this group wishing to leave employment that does not match their area of study or their career aspirations.

Due to this mismatch, student interns show a high level of dissatisfaction with factories, and are disengaged with both labour processes and collective action. Yu's research reveals that the majority of his student interns were confused about their identities, as they saw themselves as students, not full-time workers. At the same time, though, they were engaged in hi-tech factories and treated as full-time workers doing assembly line work.

Agency workers face a different set of problems. Working through an agency sets up a triangular relationship between workers and employers. This can add complexity to these relations, as well as fraud, as bogus employment agencies can easily dupe young migrants, taking fees without providing work. Problems can also arise in the event of a labour controversy, as employers and agencies dispute responsibility for health and safety failings. In Yu's research, some companies used a limited number of agencies, generally just the larger ones, while others had a more diverse approach, hiring workers through several commercial labour agencies. Some companies maintained that they offered a temporary-to-permanent pattern of work, with workers having the opportunity to become formal workers after a probationary period, but when Yu spoke to agency workers, they disputed this easy transition. Instead, for them an 'agency labour regime' meant little control over work allocation and schedules, as well as regular reassignments to different types of jobs and easy dismissal.

Still, this and other accounts that stress the negative effects of agencies in forming barriers to secure work ignore the fact that workers possess labour mobility power and they can change agencies if things don't turn out well. Given the large number of agencies in China, there is fierce competition between them for labour, a situation that creates bargaining power for workers. While agencies may try to avoid recruiting workers who change jobs frequently, the high levels of turnover mean this rule is difficult to apply.

Finally, regarding formal workers, while they have regular employment, they also face specific problems. For instance, they are forced to change their jobs frequently, due to factors that include variations in production seasons; the practice of loaning employees (*zhiyuan*) to other departments or factories; the tradition of changing workers' job specifications and labour relationships (*fenliu*); as well as an abusive labour regime that involves the use of 'constructive dismissal', active pressure to take on unwanted tasks, and limited job security. Posted workers often lose out financially. For example, enrolment at Foxconn was effectively compulsory, with formal workers being punished with reduced overtime if they did not participate. According to Yu, factories

routinely violate labour contracts to change formal workers' work, content, and locations, effectively 'selling' labourers from the original factories to other factories or firms.

Problems with the Precariat in China

The idea central to the precariat thesis, that there is a class divide in terms of the employment conditions of the salariat and precariat, falls at the first hurdle. All workers are insecure in China, and precariousness is not evidence of a separate class, but part of the general condition of waged labour in the country. Take the issue of high labour turnover, seen as indicative of precarity. In fact, labour turnover is high for all groups and in part expresses the **mobility power of labour**—and, as such, it has been a central mechanism for improving wages and conditions. Jobs were more precarious in the 1980s and the 1990s than in the new millennium when precariousness acquired structural significance. More recent protection, if not standardisation of employment relations, due to state labour policy and legislation, has coincided with more labour resistance and collective actions. More importantly, precarity has been the fate of two generations of migrant workers, but in terms of labour disputes and collective actions, we witness much more in the new or second generation, as indicated by **numerous empirical studies**. For instance, **Pringle** notes that in the 2010 dispute at a Honda transmissions factory in Foshan, agency workers were a critical part of the action.

The official categorisation of peasant workers—wage labourers with rural household registration—keeps their social status and class identities ambiguous. Taking a specific path of proletarianisation, the new generation of migrant workers has gradually become aware of their class position and participated in a series of collective actions. The migrant workers are now experiencing a **deeper sense of anger and dissatisfaction** than that of the first generation, accompanied by the realisation that the return to their hometowns is more problematic.

To conclude, precariousness as a process is a useful concept, 'precariat' is not. At different times, precariousness is a more or less important attribute of being a worker. The idea that security is fixed and settled is unhelpful as is the idea of a new class called the 'precariat'. The processes of creating non-standard forms of employment are recognisable across work with different forms of status, from unskilled to more white collar and professional occupations. More importantly, we need to look at interactions between workers on different contracts in production relations, and not invent employment differences that confuse employment status and social class. Class is about ownership relations, and structural class relations between labour and capital.

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Dormitory buildings, Dongguan.
Photo: NIcnet.org

From Dormitory System to Conciliatory Despotism: Changing Labour Regimes in Chinese Factories

Kaxton Siu

China's manufacturing model has been built on the exploitation of migrant workers under a despotic labour regime. But is that still the case? Based on extensive research in the Chinese garment sector, this essay argues that while draconian controls persist up to this day, the situation of China's migrants has undergone dramatic transformations that encompass not only changes in the workers' demographic profile and everyday life practices, but also new social, technical, and gendered divisions of labour inside factories.

This article draws substantially on the author's forthcoming article 'Labor and Domination: Worker Control in a Chinese Factory,' in *Politics & Society*, DOI: 10.1177/0032329217714784.

For the past three decades, China's export-led manufacturing model has been built on extensive exploitation of its migrant workforce under a despotic labour regime. Draconian controls persist, and it is easy to view both Chinese migrant workers and the ways employers subordinate them as static and unchanging. Yet the situation of China's migrants has undergone a dramatic transformation—a shift that encompasses not only changes in their demographic profile and everyday life practices, but also new social, technical, and gendered divisions of labour inside factories.

This transformation presents a formidable challenge for any conceptual understanding of how factory regimes and management controls have changed under global capitalism. How do managers exert control in Chinese factories? What are the characteristics of China's current labour regime? To examine these changes, in 2010, I lived with several young male migrant workers for six months in a small apartment near a garment factory in the Pearl River Delta (PRD).

Focussing on labour-intensive, foreign-owned factories where tens of millions of migrant workers have worked since the early 1990s, in this essay I trace the changes embodied by reform policies and practiced by managers and workers. My findings reveal that since the mid-2000s new modes of domination—crystallised into a new labour regime that I call 'conciliatory despotism'—have combined coercive power with new workplace tactics and production strategies.

Continuity and the Developmental Trajectory of Post-Socialist Chinese Labour Regimes

While **extant studies** have noted how the emphases of labour regimes shift in line with changing patterns in the capitalist economy

and society, the emerging Chinese labour regime of 'conciliatory despotism' has had a unique developmental trajectory. On the one hand, it incorporates new measures of control that allow factory managements to adapt to changing global production environments and to a domestic economy marred by labour shortages. On the other, it inherits a series of despotic disciplinary measures that were developed during the first exploitative wave of capitalist manufacturing in China during the 1990s, when foreign companies took advantage of the vulnerability of rural migrants under an apartheid-like urban household registration system that was itself a legacy of the Maoist period.

My research highlights the coexistence of institutional continuity and a change in the labour-intensive factories of post-socialist China. While the Chinese state still engages in labour law non-enforcement and employers still rely on strong disciplinary measures to reinforce their managerial practices, in the past few years the Chinese state has relaxed the major institution that determined migrant workers' lives in urban areas in the 1990s: the discriminatory, restrictive household registration system (*hukou*). At the same time, real wages have risen substantially and, consequently, workers are no longer financially desperate and vulnerable. For instance, in response to workers' capacity to afford to live outside factory dormitories, away from the constant control of their employer, local residents have constructed apartment buildings that enable migrant workers to find alternative accommodation outside factory compounds. Labour shortages have also compelled employers to recruit more young male migrants, resulting in new gendered divisions of labour and workplace politics on the shop floor. As a result of these new changes, managers and policy-makers have had to devise new mechanisms of 'soft control' to conciliate workers' grievances.

Beyond the Dormitory Labour Regime

A great deal of China's export industry is clustered in Guangdong province. Until recently, the Chinese authorities tightly implemented the *hukou* system to control the mobility of migrant workers in **much the same way** as the South African government used the pass system in the days of apartheid. By restricting peasants to the countryside, the state could control not only urban growth but also the status and identity of individuals.

Without an urban registration, rural migrants needed a permit to remain away from home, and they could only secure this if they had an employer. Police in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) regularly checked their permits on the streets, a situation that not only intensified migrants' fear of unemployment but also pushed them to get factory jobs at any condition in order to become registered 'workers' and remain in the region. Taking advantage of this situation, factory management drew up shop floor and dormitory rules alongside physical punishments to discipline and penalise migrant workers in order to transform them into **docile and disciplined subjects**.

Outside factories, in the public sphere, the state wielded the power to control the inflow of migrant workers; inside, managers held sway over their lives. Workers from the countryside were normally required by their employers to reside inside the factory grounds, in crowded dormitories that often accommodated eight people in a single room. Factory dormitories and production lines were interlinked, in what Chris Smith and Pun Ngai have defined the '**dormitory labour regime**'. The dormitory was an extension of the point of production, and factory management could flexibly utilise and prolong work hours, thus maintaining a great breadth of control over the working and non-working time of the employees.

But this despotic dormitory factory regime no longer prevails today, as employers have lost their monopoly over the housing of the workers. In the early 2000s, local villagers in the PRD began to demolish their old houses to construct cheap, ugly apartment buildings. They did so in order to profitably rent out rooms to migrants who did not want to live in factory dormitories. Still, if workers were finally able to escape the dormitories, this was only because of **major changes** in their own standing vis-à-vis management.

Labour Famine and Worker Empowerment

A fundamental change that occurred is that today migrant workers are no longer desperate to keep their jobs. As the factories in China relentlessly expanded in number and size year after year, the stream of young rural migrants no longer exceeds the ever-growing need for workers. Since 2003, factory jobs have been readily available, and employers have been competing to find workers. Facing labour shortages, local governments in industrialised districts no longer seek to control the movements of the workers. Migrant workers today do not need to obtain work permits to stay in the PRD region, though they still are supposed to obtain temporary residence permits, which are seldom checked in the streets.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, for most types of production work, factory managers were willing to employ only young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, on the ground that they have nimbler hands, are more obedient, and easier to manage. The factories were not interested in older rural women in the belief that by the age of twenty-four most of them would return to their home village to get married and have a child. But the number of young rural women in China was not limitless, and as the number of factories kept expanding, labour shortages of young women became evident. For this reason, since around 2003, employers could no longer allow themselves to be too choosy and had to **start employing women in their early thirties**, as well as young men.

The competition to recruit workers has had at least one other effect: over the past twelve years, the real wages of migrant workers have more than tripled in Shenzhen, China's leading centre for the export industry. By the late 2000s, migrant workers in the southern metropolis could afford to regularly eat meals with vegetables and meat, to snack regularly at fast-food outlets, and to eat sometimes at small cheap restaurants; they could afford smartphones; could afford to dress attractively—and could afford to talk back or quit work if harassed. This needs to be put into context, though. They were still very poor, and by urban Chinese standards their hourly wages were considered quite low. Moreover, urban residents still refused to engage in blue-collar work in factories where migrants worked. In their shared rental apartments, double-decker beds were crowded together. When I lived with a group of male migrants, my housemates decided to save even more money by sharing the same mattress with another worker, each sleeping in shifts.

Towards Conciliatory Despotism

My study of a garment factory in the PRD reveals that all control mechanisms are embedded in a wide array of factory rules, regulations, practices, customs, production hierarchies, divisions of labour, and systems of production. Each of these modes of domination assumes different forms, with mechanisms ranging from despotic to the tactical and strategic. Coercive power includes punishment, disciplinary measures, and restrictive resignation and leave policies. Workplace tactics and strategies include

affective personal ties and face-giving, (collective) bargaining, and encouragement of competition among workers. Over time, social, technical, and gendered divisions of labour and the production hierarchy have been altered.

The use of punishment and disciplinary tools, affective personal ties, face-giving tactics, hidden collective bargaining, and competition among workers jointly determine the extent to which workers are dominated. The ways these mechanisms combine and the extent to which each of them has been brought into play has changed over the past decade. Extracting extra work time is one of the major aims of the despotic apparatuses, and exploitation is evident to workers who are forced, for instance, to do unpaid overtime. In a changing labour environment, though, a new shop-floor culture comprising of new strategies to control workers' emotions, dispositions, and rationalities, seemingly speaks against the literature in Chinese labour studies from an earlier decade which emphasised the **blatant coercion** of a despotic labour regime.

How does all this change our understanding of contemporary Chinese practices? My research has shown that despotic controls alone are no longer able to maintain factory order, and that a new regime of 'conciliatory despotism' has been taking shape to replace the older dormitory labour regime. 'Conciliatory' refers to the incorporation of new mechanisms of soft control in normative forms of shop-floor tactics and production strategies, aimed at creating a shop-floor culture which mediates direct confrontations, gives workers a sense of give-and-take over the production process, and boosts individual productivity through competition.

Of particular importance to this conciliatory approach is the fact that line leaders and supervisors have to invest in affective ties with rank-and-file workers, and to devise effective interactive tactics whenever there are emotional outbursts. Different from the situation in the 1990s when despotism prevailed and management had no interest in appeasing workers, these affective ties—though thin, fragile, and still based mostly upon cold market relations and coercive power—are part of a new stage of development in China's labour-management relations. Such ties are strategically activated by low-level members of management to mediate workers' discontents in a context where coercive power alone is not effective enough to control employees.

Workers today can readily find jobs elsewhere and thus are able to respond to excessive coercion by leaving the factory. Thus, low-level managers, in dealing with emotional outbursts, invoke Chinese cultural norms through face-giving tactics to maintain factory order. Giving workers 'face' entails temporarily considering workers not as subordinate tools for production, but as human beings to be respected (at least nominally). Unlike the situation in the 1990s, where management in Chinese factories considered rural migrants to be 'uncivilised' subjects in need of disciplining by modern factory rules and practices, the unequal power relationship between managers and migrants is slowly shifting towards a more 'humanised' social bond through which both rank-and-file workers and low-level management are increasingly able to influence the outcomes of the labour process in China.

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'State of Surrender', Yunnan. Photo: @mimokhair on **Flickr**

The Precarity of Layoffs and State Compensation: The Minimum Livelihood Guarantee

Dorothy J. Solinger

When discussing the outcomes of China's economic development, the poverty that can still be found in Chinese cities is seldom mentioned. While the Party-state is indeed making a token effort to sustain the victims of this destitution, these people and their offspring will never be able to escape this manufactured poverty. This essay looks at the policy process that led to this outcome and at the prospects for poverty alleviation in Chinese urban areas.

When discussing the results of China's 'miracle' development over the past four decades, it is common enough to hear about the large numbers of rural Chinese citizens—especially those residing in designated poor counties—who have been 'lifted out of poverty' by the policies of the government, or about the surging numbers of the 'new middle class', or else, often enough, about the infamous urban-rural income divide—which suggests that all those in urban areas are well off if they have the good fortune to hold an urban household registration. But, by contrast, we hear almost nothing about the poverty and attendant precarity found in the cities, which the state itself has engendered. The state makes a token effort to sustain the victims of this destitution, but it is clear they will never be able to escape this manufactured poverty, nor will their offspring. How many of them are there and how did this transpire?

Manufacturing Precarity in the State Sector

It is easier to document the regime choices and the process that produced this outcome, and to describe the programme intended to maintain the status quo, than to estimate the number of people affected. But tens of millions would be a fair guess. The choices of the Chinese leadership had much to do with China's aim for a type of modernity characterised by participation in global competition, spurred on by the country's preparation to enter the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the late 1990s. The lot of China's laid-off workers, therefore, rightly fits within the rubric of the types of precarity attending the life of labourers around the world. This shift towards integration into the global economy overlapped with an official diagnosis of the failure of the planned economy and of its unsuitability for participation in the modern world market, which was ultimately responsible for driving huge numbers of state-owned firms into the red by the mid-1990s.

As a consequence of those glances both ahead and into the past, on the eve of China's accession to the WTO the decision makers at the helm of the state determined that firms losing money were not just a significant drain on the state budget, but also—and perhaps even more critically—incapable of competing in the world market, due to their unskilled workforces and obsolete technology. For this reason, they had to be shut down, with their workers dismissed from their jobs in droves. Figures vary, but in recent years **most observers** agree that the total of those let go may well have exceeded sixty million.

So a project termed 'enterprise restructuring' (*qiye gaizhi*) was set into motion from 1997 to 1999, following the principle of 'grasping the big and letting go the small' (*zhuada fangxiao*). This amounted to allowing the smaller firms, and those in non-strategic sectors, to fail; it also meant permitting the more successful enterprises to take over anything of value from the weaker ones—primarily by way of mergers or buyouts. Complex arrangements sometimes ensued, but the upshot for my argument here is to highlight the emergence of mass unemployment for many millions of older—that is over the age of thirty-five!—state workers, whose education was deficient because of the closure of schools during the Cultural Revolution. Deemed worthless, these people were often forced to make do on their own. Certainly, a huge increase in urban poverty occurred at that time, affecting perhaps some 15 to 20 percent of the urban population if dependents of the laid-off workers are included, and nothing serious has been done to remove this blight.

A hastily assembled plan called the 'Re-employment Project' (*zaijiuye gongcheng*) was put into action in 1998. It was supposed to be underwritten by enterprises, localities, and 'society', with the aim of supplying training, finding jobs, and distributing 'basic livelihood allowances' (*jiben shenghuofei*) for the furloughed. But in fact, many workers received no funds, and even for those who did, the amount they were given was grossly inadequate. Moreover, indebted or bankrupt firms were not able to contribute to the collections, and the rate of re-employment even after a few years fell **below 20 percent**.

Minimum Livelihood Allowance as a Tranquiliser

Workers responded by **protesting vociferously** in many cities, disrupting traffic, business, and local administrations. Central leaders understandably became anxious, first about the instability itself, and then about what they deemed to be the likely impact on their visions of enterprise 'reform', and what such disorder might spell for discouraging foreign investment. The judgment of the political elites was that a 'tranquiliser', in

the form of a 'minimum livelihood allowance' (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang,* or *dibao*), was to be provided to all urban citizens whose families' average household income fell below a locally set poverty line. Thus, the leadership expanded a scheme pioneered in Shanghai in 1993, decreeing that it was to be adopted in every city by the fall of 1999. The sums dispensed were trivial, whether considered as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), or as compared with average levels of disposable income in the various localities.

The programme is means-tested, meagre, and stigmatising. It entails cash transfers, requiring no contributions, but it also sets no conditions, such as demanding that mothers ensure that their children see doctors and go to school (as is the case for other social relief plans elsewhere in the world). Thus, it seems indifferent as to whether it lays out a path to eventual, inter-generational departure from penury.

As of the mid-2000s, soon after the birth of the programme, about 4 percent of the urban populace was being served, a percentage that remains pretty much the same today nationally. But at that time **independent investigators** figured that something like twice that percentage of the people had net incomes below the poverty line in their own cities. More than that, yesterday as today, a frequently bemoaned 'preference for friends and relatives' has placed the allotments into hands that do not deserve it, overlooking often enough those who do need assistance.

In addition, as the years passed, by the end of the decade able-bodied unemployed people were advised to find work for themselves, even as the labour market was decidedly unfriendly to these 'aged', under-educated, and sometimes disabled or ill former workers. Many of them were unable to leave their homes, as they had no choice but to tend to their own sick, infirm, and young, since their scant incomes prohibited them from hiring any help.

Perspectives from the Beneficiaries

How do the recipients of this assistance experience their situation? The following excerpt reveals how they struggle to get along. When asked what they would like to see the government do for them, here is what a recipient said:

> Recipient: First, supply some regular jobs; second, when you do a little business, shouldn't the government's policy tilt to you? If the government doesn't help, we certainly don't have the strength to assist ourselves.
>
> Interviewer: To help the recipients of *dibao* throw off poverty, are jobs the root cure?
>
> Recipient: Yes. Otherwise, just give more money, but it's not possible, giving us one third of the average wage is not possible. If the state's finance really has this ability, why can't it adjust employment policy? I feel that at the present stage the state should raise [our allowance] a little, price inflation now is so severe! The prices of so many things have risen, how can this be tolerated? The recipients of *dibao* are already very low on money, you could give them a little more. Public officials and government cadres don't care about inflation, if you give them two hundred yuan [at the time of the interview, that would have been about twenty-five USD], or five hundred yuan, it won't count for much. But for the recipients of *dibao*, if you give them ten yuan or twenty yuan it has a function. But the state can't simply give you more money, so I say it's employment. Really getting rid of the *dibao* would be good. Having some stable work instead, wouldn't that be even better?

The programme often comes under suspicion because people assume that it enables laziness and a reluctance to work. And yet other interview subjects agreed with the sentiments of the interviewee

quoted above. In 2010, a beneficiary of the programme in Guangzhou—a man who was half-paralysed and had both high blood pressure and diabetes—still wished to work. In his words: 'Because I'm too old and sick, if you were a boss you wouldn't look for a forty-year-old sick person, it's this simple.' Similarly, another recipient in the same city at the same time declared that: 'Everything requires a high educational background, but I only have primary school education, so naturally they won't hire me. Talented people are numerous; they won't take me. You say go to sell things, but that needs start-up money (*benqian*). Private businesspeople won't hire us, and private bosses have no reason to ask a sick, old person to work, right?'

A Cultural Explanation

Once laid off from enterprises, older workers are seen as of no use. So it is felt that it is best to keep them barely alive, but not as a part of society. It is better to leave them unemployed and stuck in their homes, out of sight. Do not waste resources, let them die off, is the implicit message. So let's view the laid-off, sick, and older urban people as metaphors for Mao's society. It seems that those people, along with that society, should be obliterated. The market is modern, and it cannot absorb them. Modern is middle class—a state that is impossible to reach for these laid-off workers and their children.

And there has been no real effort to help them break out of their impoverishment, as an inter-generational cycle of poverty gears into motion. True, Party leader Xi Jinping promises an end to poverty in the near future, but it is only rural poverty to which he alludes, which, as noted above, can be addressed by targeting funds and services to whole areas of the countryside. There has been almost no mention of the urban poor. Thus, while the future of China can be viewed as a beautiful dream, the past remains depicted as a nightmare, filled with poverty, backwardness, and obsolescence. The poor are the antithesis of the dream, of the market, of economic growth, of progress, and glory. When multitudes of the old 'masters' of society (as state workers were labelled in the past) raged in the roads, the *dibao* was established to calm them down. But a policy devised mainly for stability waned as the beneficiaries went back home, out of sight. So as the project achieved its political purpose, its funds have diminished, relatively speaking. This is a tale of poverty and of precarity that never gets told.

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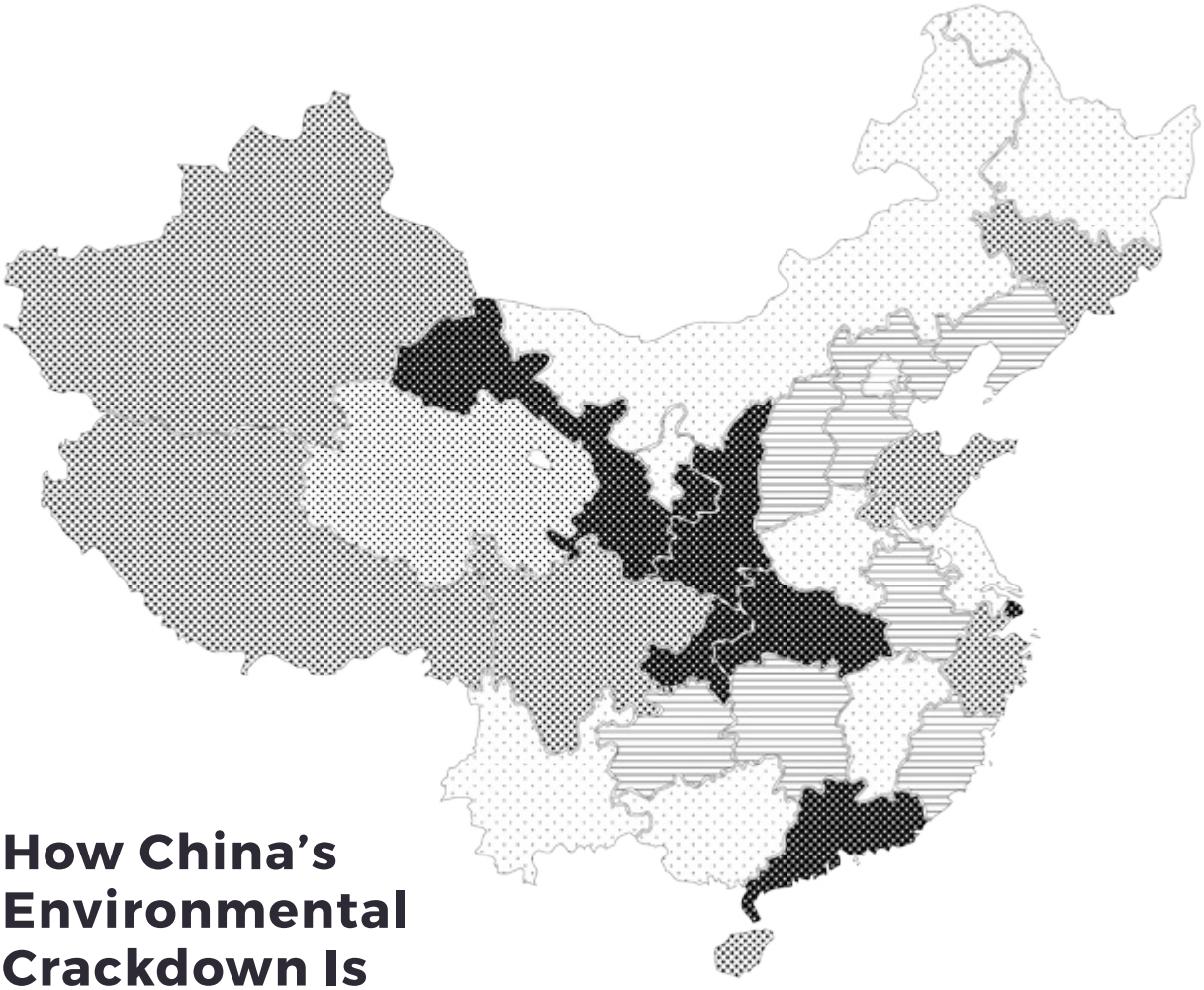

Map of China's Central Environmental Inspections.

- 1st Round: 12 July–19 August 2016;
- 2nd Round: 24 November–30 December 2016;
- 3rd Round: 24 April–28 May 2017;
- 4th Round: 7 August–10 September 2017.

How China's Environmental Crackdown Is Affecting Business Owners and Workers: The Case of Chengdu

Daniel Fuchs
Edwin Schmitt

The recent Party Congress has seen an outpouring of support for strengthening environmental protections. This has come amid an intensified environmental crackdown that has seen surprise inspections of mostly smaller and older factories across the country. While these activities have received some attention in the Chinese media, at present very few reports can be found in English. To fill this gap, this essay explores the implications of the campaign for workers and business in Chengdu.

The Nineteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has seen an outpouring of support for strengthening environmental protections—a theme which was central to **Xi Jinping's opening speech**. This event comes amid an intensified environmental crackdown across the country. Beginning in late July, drawing on the vivid metaphor of 'cutting with a single knife' (*yi dao qie*), the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) began a

surprise round of environmental inspections of factories in the Jing-Jin-Ji region, the area that encompasses Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei province. The focus was primarily on smaller and older factories, which are recurring violators of environmental regulations. These inspections quickly expanded to all the provinces, with the MEP publishing **notices in the People's Daily** explaining that this protracted period of strict observation will become the 'new normal'. While these activities have received some attention in the Chinese media, at present **very few reports** can be found in English. In this essay we focus on the implications of this latest campaign in Chengdu. However, it is clear that this is a nationwide shift in policy implementation with implications for all of Chinese society.

A Play in Four Acts

While the past three months have seen the implementation of stricter controls, a four-stage series of **routine environmental investigations** began in July 2016. The real crackdown began during the third-stage, with an **especially damning report** of Tianjin officials on 29 July 2017. The critique of the typically powerful Tianjin officials resulted in an unprecedented number of follow-up environmental inspections orchestrated by local Environmental Protection Bureaus across the country. As a consequence, an increased number of factory closures occurred in provinces that had been visited by the central inspection teams over the previous months. These recent closures have already begun to impact **China's export business**. On 13 September, while one of us was interviewing a logistics manager for a vehicle manufacturer in the United States, the manager asked us for information about the recent factory closures in China. He had received multiple emails from suppliers in China explaining that deliveries would be delayed and prices would be increased due to the environmental inspections. Additionally, suppliers in China informed the manager that these price hikes would be permanent, as the environmental policies now in place were intended to be enforced indefinitely. Similar reports have been published on **cargo shipping blogs**. **Bloomberg** has also recently noted that with thousands of factories suddenly closing there will be major logistical disruptions as the peak consumerist period in the US and Europe arrives before Christmas. However, as of yet very little information about what is actually happening on the ground in China has been reported.

Since we have both conducted research in Chengdu, we will draw from recent concrete examples found in that city. As we will show below, some factories were closed even before the completion of the fourth and final stage of the central environmental inspections, which began on 7 August 2017 and included Sichuan, with a **heavy focus on Chengdu**. The local authorities issued an **urgent call** for all government agencies to collaborate with the inspectors, but insisted that factories were not to be shut down without proof that the law had been broken. Any violators were to be fined heavily and potentially forced to close. In total, the inspection team ended up disciplining **1,023 officials**. According to one of our informants within the Sichuan Environmental Protection Bureau, there is a great deal of fatigue within the various local environmental protection agencies. This is due to the fact that these offices are forced to continually implement follow-up inspections with the same number of people and same limited resources that they had before the central inspection teams arrived. Regardless of this, as of the time of writing, the local inspections continue with no apparent end in sight.

Naturally, the business community has greeted this pressure with mixed feelings. This was evident in the circulation of many fake news reports of damages to China's economy due to the delays and price

increases caused by the inspection teams. One informant who spread such information admitted the inspections had no impact on their own business, but simply felt it was important to support other business owners in China by reposting calls for the removal of the strict policies. There have also been false reports that the MEP reversed these policies in response to the outcry from business owners. **One report** misconstrued the purpose of an MEP press conference to claim that the central authorities had never required local governments to use a 'cutting with a single knife' style in the implementation of the new policies and that factories could now return to normal operation. In fact, the conference made no mention of allowing factories to restart operations, but stressed that the crackdown would not tolerate the closure of entire economic sectors without proper evidence. As mentioned above, from the very beginning the provincial authorities in Sichuan province issued a warning to inspectors not to close factories without proof of a law violation. When the business community started complaining about 'unfair' practices during the inspections, **China Environmental News** sent a reporter to provide in-depth coverage of the impact of the policies on different industries. The reporter claimed that not all factories or businesses of a given industry or service were being closed, but rather that environmental bureaus in Chengdu were specifically going after those companies that were in violation of the law. However, none of this reporting has paid any attention to the impact of the crackdown on the workers within the factories or businesses that have been closed.

Evidence from the Footwear Industry

To gain a better understanding of the impact these environmental inspections have had on local businesses and workers, we will now take a closer look at Chengdu's footwear industry. The local footwear sector experienced a period of successful economic development in the first decade of the 2000s. Industrial relocation from China's coastal provinces and a large, relatively cheap, skilled workforce have enabled Chengdu—together with Chongqing—to become the fourth largest footwear production base in China, behind the traditional and primary production centres in Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian provinces. Footwear companies in Chengdu focus on the production of medium to low-end quality women's leather shoes. In particular, the industry cluster in Wuhou district has been officially labelled 'China's Capital of Women's Shoes' (*zhongguo nüxie zhi du*). The structure of the industry—consisting mainly of small and medium enterprises, and many unregulated or unregistered workshops—as well as its proximity to the city centre, has unsurprisingly made this footwear cluster a major target for environmental inspections.

According to **official media reports**, by 30 June 2017, 7,600 'scattered, polluting enterprises' (*sanluanwu qiye*) in Chengdu had been 'temporarily' closed because of environmental inspections. By the end of October 2017, this number should reach a total of 9,400 firms. While we do not have access to independently verifiable figures with regards to the footwear industry, several online accounts point to a massive wave of closures. By mid-August, more than 90 percent of the estimated 3,000 footwear companies in Chengdu's Wuhou and Shuangliu districts had been ordered to halt production. In addition, the few remaining firms that had been allowed to stay in business were confronted with **difficulties** in doing so, as most of their supplier factories were also affected by production stoppages.

It is important to note that 'temporary' closures of footwear firms are in line with environmental policy, but also with broader urban planning objectives and local industrial development strategies. Since 2007, with the

adoption of the so-called '**one capital, two parks**' (*yi du liang yuan*) guideline, it has been official policy to focus on the establishment of an R&D base as well as a trade, information, and service center for the footwear industry in Wuhou District. Manufacturing facilities were encouraged to undergo industrial upgrading and/or to relocate to footwear industry parks in the peri-urban counties of Chongzhou and Jintang. This policy of upgrading and relocating has since then intensified with the establishment of industrial parks in rural parts of Sichuan province (for example, Anyue, Lezhi, and Santai) and the urban planning objective of transforming Wuhou District into a **development hub** for creative industries. Seen from this perspective, the recent rounds of environmental inspections highly increased the pressure on business owners who have, thus far, been reluctant to either invest in upgrading, or to move further away from Chengdu. This pressure weighs more heavily now that even the MEP has **explicitly linked** the environmental inspections to the broader national objective of industrial upgrading.

'Stand firm! Shoe factories, we are with you'. This picture was circulated during the environmental crackdown by the footwear supplier company and B2B platform Zhao Mi Dou, which is operating in Chengdu.

Collective Resistance

Confronted with forced production halts, business owners have organised themselves under the guidance of the so-called 'Chengdu Footwear Business Association' (*chengdu xieye tongye gonghui*), a platform for local footwear producers and suppliers established in 1998. The Business Association undertook an investigation across the local industry, and on 21 August sent a **detailed report** to the municipal authorities urging them to pay attention to the extent of the closures, the number of workers driven into unemployment, and the economic losses generated by the environmental inspections. Over the following weeks, **several meetings** between business and government representatives took place. While acknowledging the unavoidability of large-scale relocations out of Wuhou and Shuangliu districts, the Business Association demanded **more time** to prepare for the relocations and was granted **permission to resume production** in the meantime. Arguably, one of the most interesting aspects of this collective effort by business owners was how they tried to advance their position by pointing to the danger of social instability. In **another report** delivered on 21 August, the Business Association warned that the current situation of tens of thousands of unemployed shoe factory workers might lead to 'mass incidents' (*qunti shijian*).

In fact, **collective protests** by workers pushed into unemployment due to recent environmental inspections have been documented in Tianjin, as well as Shandong, Hunan, and Hebei provinces. However, similar public protests could not be verified

感谢政府的努力，以环保之名，化工厂停了，塑料厂停了，砖瓦厂停了，沙石场停了，铸造厂停了，楼也停了，矿也停了，木板厂也停了，养殖业也停了，各种货物价也涨了，货源还断了，货车也停了，工人也都停工了，做生意的也快关门了，今年成立乡里的空气质量达到了可食用级别了，大家可以放心喝西北风了！被点赞转发下去

A frequently shared comment found in WeChat groups discussing recent factory closures.

Translation: Thanks to the hard work of the government, in the name of environmental protection, chemical plants, plastic factories, brick factories, gravel pits, steel foundries, construction sites, mines, lumber yards, and the livestock industry have all been shut down. The price of all kinds of goods have increased, sources of goods have dried up, trucks have stopped deliveries, workers have all been laid off, even business owners are about to close shop. This year's air quality in the city and the countryside has reached a 'safe to eat' level of cleanliness so everyone can relax and 'drink up' that Northwest Wind! If you like this, share it.

in Chengdu's footwear industry. Since the beginning of August, workers in several factories where we conducted research started to express their anger at the closure of their workplaces and the ensuing uncertainty they faced. One way of expressing their frustration was to share videos of protests by unemployed workers elsewhere. They would also share unverified accounts and rumours about physical clashes between inspection teams and workers in the area. The most widespread form of articulating dissent on social media was to write and share cynical comments and poems (See the example above) directly criticising central state policy and the 'specialists' sent to enforce environmental protection at the expense of the livelihood of the workers.

Besides expressing their frustration on social media, the immediate reaction of many shoe factory workers was to go back to their rural homes and wait there until work in Chengdu could be taken up again. Many are rural migrant workers who can easily reach their villages within hours. This has been a common strategy for local shoe production workers in recent years when there is no work available due to reduced production orders. Towards the end of August, as it became clear that most of the small- and medium-sized factories in Wuhou district would not resume production, an increasing number of workers began to move on to new footwear industrial parks further way from Chengdu. Whether these relocation processes succeed remains to be seen. Fieldwork conducted prior to the environmental crackdown suggested that the majority of rural migrant workers employed in the footwear industry were determined to stay in the urban area, while the younger generation (under the age of thirty) is particularly reluctant to take up these precarious factory jobs.

It should also be stressed, however, that the local government(s) in Chengdu deployed a broad range of measures to ease tensions and aid unemployed workers. According to **official media reports**, by the first week of August, the municipal authorities had already organised forty-nine job fairs in the districts that were most severely affected by company closures and successfully provided 6,000 new job opportunities. In addition to job fairs, a special government hotline that promised to help workers find re-employment within forty-eight hours was set up. Finally, every company that agreed to employ workers affected by the recent closures has been promised subsidies of 5,000 yuan per job/year over a period of three years, with the

government paying the employer's share of social security contributions for the newly employed workforce.

Beyond Formalism

The recent environmental crackdown will likely have real, long-term consequences for both China's business owners and workers. While it may take some time to know for sure, we do not expect that factories will be allowed to return to business-as-usual once they restart production or move to a new peri-urban location. **Reports** that were issued during the central inspections in Sichuan show that while Chengdu was the initial focus of the crackdown, ultimately the whole province was strictly scrutinised. The Sichuan Provincial MEP continues to collect complaints from the public and strictly enforce the law by **punishing violators with fines and litigation**. Moreover, all of these activities are **continuously being updated online** with a remarkable degree of transparency, including what appear to be full formal complaints made to local MEPs across the province, along with explanations of how the agencies have responded. Against this background, **available media reports suggest** that environmental inspections (including factory closures) have also taken place in the more recently established footwear industry parks. This is also referred to by a representative of the new industry park in Anyue who was **quoted in the Sichuan Daily** as saying: 'In the admission process [of firms intending to relocate to the park], we are also demanding that company owners upgrade with regard to production and environmental protection.'

In other words, this does not appear to be an example of local officials engaging in 'formalism' by requiring factories to close while investigators from the central government are in town. Instead, the local government appears to recognise that environmental closures are tied to larger calls for upgrading manufacturing systems and reforming economic production. While it will undoubtedly not be a perfect transition, the state is clearly attempting to pair re-employment services with strict enforcement of environmental regulations. Perhaps this is a prelude to the kind of governing strategies to expect from both the central and local governments now that the Nineteenth Congress of the CCP has concluded. In the near term, we will all need to pay closer attention to this intersection between environmental protection and industrial transformation.

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WINDOW ON ASIA

MYANMAR
HONG KONG

A trader sells small pieces of jadeite from Myanmar's Kachin State in the jade bazaar in Ruili, a border town in China's Yunnan province. Photo: Henrik K. Møller

Boom or Bust in China's Jade Trade with Myanmar?

Henrik Kloppenborg Møller

Since 2014, declining economic growth and Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign have led to decreasing demand in certain markets for jadeite—the highest valued type of jade in China. But while institutional factors may explain these short-term fluctuations, historical continuity and cultural imaginations underpinning Chinese demand suggest that the jadeite market boom in China is not quite over yet.

In November 2015, I was seated at a tea table with a group of jade traders in an alleyway shop in Shanghai. The traders were discussing risks and opportunities of different types of investments. This was after the crash that saw the Shanghai Composite Index (SCI) fall by more than 20 percent for two consecutive months from July to August 2015, causing Chinese investors to lose about **five trillion euros**. The owner of the jade shop was convinced that with time his stocks would gain value. His daughter, on the other hand, had not invested in the stock market, because she felt that it was akin to gambling. 'It is much safer to invest in jade,' she said, 'Jade will always keep its value.'

As an object of economic value, jadeite (*feicui*)—the highest valued type of jade in China—seems subject to boom and bust cycles in China's current economy, not unlike stocks, **real estate**, or **gold**. While jadeite has seen spectacular price rises in the past three decades, parts of the industry took a blow in 2014, which Chinese traders generally ascribe to two factors: **declining economic growth** and Xi Jinping's **anti-corruption**

campaign. However, institutional factors are not sufficient to understand the long-term trajectories of the markets for jadeite in the Chinese context. Jadeite is considered a sub-type of jade (*yu*), which in the form of nephrite has been valued in China for at least **eight thousand years**. Over this long history, jade has assumed culturally specific connotations and properties that make it highly desirable for Chinese customers—a situation that may suggest that its markets are not likely to disappear.

Jadeite Trade in the China–Myanmar Borderlands: A History

Jadeite has reportedly trickled into China from mines in Myanmar's Kachin State since the **thirteenth century**. Legend has it that the material was first imported into China's Yunnan province along one of the ancient caravan trade routes that linked Yunnan with Myanmar and India. Supposedly, a Yunnanese muleteer picked up a stone in Kachin state and put it in his saddlebag as a counterweight to his cargo. Back in Yunnan, **the stone fell to the ground and broke into pieces**, revealing a green interior. But jadeite did not leave a strong impression in China until the Qing emperor Qianlong (1735–1796)—who was **obsessed with jade**—started to demand large-scale imports of the stone as tribute from the Burmese King Bodawpaya in 1788. Emerald-green jadeite with high transparency and translucency was then called 'Imperial Jade' (*diwang yu*). Today these Qing-era criteria still function as **a standard** to evaluate the quality of jadeite types.

In 1860, during the Second Opium War, French and British armies sacked the Summer Palace in Beijing. On that occasion, many jade artefacts—including Burmese jadeite—were looted and brought to Paris and London. In 1863, French mineralogist A. Damour determined the chemical properties of this 'new' jade, and named it jadeite. Jadeite is chemically distinct from the more common nephrite jade, which is mined especially around Hetian, in China's Xinjiang province, but both materials are considered to be jade due to their **similar observable properties**. After the communist takeover in 1949, the Myanmar-China cross-border trade withered, and the bulk of the jadeite trade was diverted to other routes. One route went through Myanmar's Shan State to markets in the northern Thai city of **Chiang Mai**, which catered specifically to buyers from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Alongside local ethnic groups, remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist troops in Myanmar's Shan State also **transported the stones**, which were locally taxed by different ethnic armies. Another route saw jadeite brought to Rangoon, and then shipped to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Different Kachin tribes have **taxed jadeite** in the Kachin State for centuries. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which was established in 1961, and has since fought the Burmese military for greater autonomy for ethnic Kachin in the Kachin State, took control of the mines in 1963, and centralised taxation.

With the opening of border crossings between China and Myanmar for trade in the early 1990s, increasing Chinese involvement in natural resource extraction in Myanmar, and a gradual shift in demand towards mainland China, **jadeite transport shifted** towards routes that run overland from the Kachin State into China. The main point of entry became the border town of Ruili in Yunnan province, which since 1990 has seen the establishment of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for border trade, as well as upgraded infrastructure in the form of highways and a projected railway line.

Following a ceasefire agreement between the KIA and the Myanmar military in 1994, the Myanmar military government gradually took over the most profitable jadeite mines in Kachin State, and leased mining concessions

to their cronies and to Chinese investors. By 2002, the Myanmar military government had offered up to nearly one-fifth of the area of Kachin state for **private mining concessions**, and by the mid-2000s, the government required all gemstones produced by joint ventures to be sold at annual government-organised auctions in Yangon and later Naypyidaw, as this was the easiest way to tax all sales.

Total taxes in Myanmar amount to around 30 percent of the estimated sales value of a stone, and a similar import tax is officially levied at the Chinese border in Ruili. In practice, both taxes are often lowered or avoided by bribing officials, valuators, and border guards, or by smuggling the stones across the border—it is estimated that **up to 80 percent of the stones** that are brought to China enter the country illegally. A report by **Global Witness** estimated that the value of official jade production in Myanmar in 2014 was 31 billion USD, a figure equal to 48 percent of Myanmar's official gross domestic product and 46 times the government expenditure on health for that year. The bulk of that jadeite goes to China. Meanwhile, the native Kachin people have lost crucial revenues from the jadeite mines, while facing rampant heroin addiction, HIV infection, environmental degradation, and dangerous working conditions in **the mines**. In June 2011, **the ceasefire between the KIA and the central government collapsed**, and the ensuing violence resulted in the death of thousands of people and the displacement of around 100,000 civilians in the state.

Ethnic Stratification in Ruili's Jadeite Trade

In 2013 and 2014, I conducted fieldwork among jadeite traders and carvers in Ruili. The city's registered population was 187,000 as of 2012, comprising Han Chinese (57 percent), Dai (30 percent) Jingpo (7 percent), as well as a host of other minority groups. There are also around 35,000 unregistered Burmese, including some 15,000 Rohingya in Ruili. Around 60 percent of the Han Chinese are locals, while the rest are immigrants from cities in eastern Chinese provinces with long traditions in jade carving and trading—such as Henan, Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu, and Guangdong. A local government official I interviewed in 2013 estimated that at least 50,000 people in Ruili are directly involved in the formal jadeite trade, a figure that does not include freelancers. The city hosts six major jadeite markets and around 8,000 shops. Many traders are organised in jade trade associations based on ethnic or regional affiliation.

Thanks to their broader access to investment capital and buyers in coastal China, Han Chinese control the largest companies. Some traders buy jadeite boulders at the government-organised auctions in Naypyidaw; others purchase stones in Mandalay, which are later brought into Ruili by professional transporters who take advantage of personal connections at government checkpoints. A subset of traders have stones smuggled in directly from the mines in Kachin state. People of Kachin/Jingpo ethnicity mainly work as suppliers, while Shan/Dai peoples operate as shop owners, and the Rohingya and Bamar as cutters, polishers, and street vendors. Some Rohingya and Bamar act as middlemen, selling stones for others. Depending on profits, they usually receive 10 to 15 percent of the sales price. Others catch customers in the street and bring them to shops, where they receive 20 to 30 percent of the profit on deals they facilitate. Some purchase jadeite for themselves and sell it in the street.

Traders say it takes around 10,000 yuan in start-up capital to set up a small business as a mobile vendor. However, the real profits are in the trade of high-quality stones, which is much more capital intensive. In the Han trader community, operational capital usually comes in the form of informal credit between traders—often with jadeite used as security—

as banks do not provide loans for this activity. As a general rule, you can borrow 50 to 70 percent of the estimated value of the jadeite you deposit with the creditor at a monthly interest rate of 3 to 5 percent.

What Is the Future of China's Jadeite Trade?

In 2013, Ruili's jadeite trade was booming. Caravans of buses arrived daily, delivering tour groups to the doorsteps of jadeite companies, which paid a percentage of their profits to the tour guides. Some traders said that jadeite prices had been rising up to 300 percent annually since 2009, and most believed prices would continue to rise, not least because supply was diminishing due to the conflict in Kachin state, and because the mines were allegedly depleting. However, when I arrived in Ruili again in 2014, the tour buses were gone, trade was slow, and many smaller shops had closed down. Traders ascribed the market implosion to the slowdown of the Chinese economy and to Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. Jadeite is a favoured form of gift and payment for illicit favours in China. As economist **Thomas Naylor, who has studied illicit trade in gemstones,** points out: 'In their role as financial assets, gemstones have particularly desirable characteristics. High in value relative to bulk, they are easy to hide and to smuggle; they are universal and very liquid; and they can be sold via marketing networks whose members share an affinity for "discretion".' In the anti-corruption era, few people dared to engage in illicit transactions using jadeite as a currency.

However, jadeite traders with enough capital to sit out the market slowdown or to divert their investments were still optimistic. While demand for medium-priced jewellery had taken a blow, prices for high-grade jadeite were still rising. In 2013, the owner of a large jadeite company where I did parts of my fieldwork used to specialise in selling medium-priced jewellery to tourists. The following year, he closed down that company and started a new one with a Chinese man from Myanmar, who had acquired mining licenses in the Kachin state. A stone excavated from one of these mines weighed more than six tonnes and was sold to a Shanghai investor for 600 million yuan, roughly 90 million USD. Echoing other traders, the company owner said that there would always be a demand for jade in China.

This has to do with traditional Chinese beliefs regarding the function of jade in **the corporeal and spiritual lives of people**. Jade is believed to have at least six functions: stimulate good life energy (*qi*), absorb bad life energy, and condition blood pressure; protect people from accidents; bring good luck; transmit spirit (*ling*) and karma (*ye*) between people, for example as gifts and inheritance objects from mother to daughter; help people contemplate the universe and their place in it; and make people feel at peace. While institutional factors may explain the slowdown in the Chinese market for medium-priced jadeite jewelry since 2014, the persistence of these beliefs suggests that China's jadeite market boom may not be over yet.

Henrik Kloppenborg Møller

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Hong Kong farmers working in the field. Photo by Loretta I. T. Lou.

In the Absence of a Peasantry, What, Then, Is a Hong Kong Farmer?

Loretta Ieng Tak Lou

Given the social and political significance of 'the peasant' (nongmin) *in modern Chinese history, it is surprising that the term nongmin is largely absent in Hong Kong, where discourses about individual farmers* (nongfu) *are far more prevalent. In tracing the modern etymology of Chinese peasants and the history of Hong Kong agriculture, this essay argues that the lack of 'class' consciousness makes Hong Kong farmers even more vulnerable to the unceasing wave of urban sprawl.*

Given the significance of 'peasants' (*nongmin*) in recent Chinese history, I was surprised to find that the term nongmin is pretty much absent in Hong Kong, where I have been researching the local green living movement since 2012. In China, nongmin is an expression of social and political importance. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the term nongmin not only refers to people whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, but is also **incorporated into China's administrative classification**, along with other status groups such as workers (*gongren*) and urban residents (*jumin*). In her article '**What, Then, Is a Chinese Peasant?**', Mindi Schneider demonstrates that nongmin is a complex and multi-layered concept of multifarious meanings. For example, when it is a legal and administrative category, nongmin reflects the rigid separation between rural and urban hukou. As a cultural signifier, the term connotes 'low quality' and 'backwardness'. Indeed, Chinese peasants have been increasingly made the **scapegoat for China's food security and food safety**

problems. As such, although the peasantry is an indispensable part of the political discourse and economic development in the PRC, they remain one of the most socially marginalised groups in China today.

In Search of a Hong Kong Peasantry

Although the term nongmin can be found sporadically in writing, I have never heard people in Hong Kong, including those who actually engage in farming, use it in conversation. Instead, local people use 'farmer' (*nongfu*) to refer to individuals who plant vegetables and fruit. Depending on where, how, and why they farm, those engaging in agricultural activities in Hong Kong can be further differentiated into urban farmers (*dushi nongfu*), **organic farmers** (*youji nongfu*), and leisure farmers (*jiari nongfu*), as well as others.

Obviously, the vastly different historical trajectories of China and Hong Kong contribute to the lack of nongmin discourses in the former British colony. One reason that the expression is not more prevalent in Hong Kong has to do with how the term was constructed and loaded with its current meanings in mainland China during the twentieth century. According to **Myron Cohen**, nongmin was one of the many loanwords from Japan that entered China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like other similar **linguistic imports** that were borrowed to express the flood of new ideas and new social phenomena at that time, nongmin was a '**modern word**' that was readily available for cultural and political elites to assign new meanings to it. Before then, the word was **nowhere to be found even in the most authoritative Chinese-English dictionaries**. Indeed, individuals who worked in the farm were more commonly referred to as *nongfu*, *nongding*, *nongjia*, and *nongren* (translated into English as farmers, labourers, agriculturalists, etc.). As the rural population came to be known as nongmin in the mid-twentieth century, the term was constructed as a major obstacle to national development. However, under the influence of Marxism, nongmin uprisings had come to represent a major revolutionary force that had the potential to overthrow the old feudal society.

Due to Hong Kong's colonial past, local farmers (*nongfu*) were not subjected to this radical 'nongmin project'. It could be said that Hong Kong farmers' identities more closely resembled Chinese farmers before the mid-twentieth century, in that they were primarily tied to agricultural work and the household without the **class and revolutionary referent**. Indeed, **archival records** suggest that during the 1920s and 1930s, Hong Kong farmers' household economy, housing arrangements, and social practices differed little from their counterparts in Guangdong before the advent of the Communist's 'nongmin project'. Although many traditional Chinese customs had begun to fade away in urban Hong Kong and in mainland China, especially after the Communist revolution of 1949, **peasant practices were preserved** in rural New Territories well into the 1970s.

Trials and Tribulations

Up until the 1960s, farming provided a **means of livelihood** for the majority of the indigenous inhabitants, as well as the thousands of mainland Chinese refugees who settled in the New Territories as rice, vegetable, and livestock farmers in the aftermath of World War II and the Chinese Civil War. After the wars, subsistence agriculture was actively promoted by the colonial government and the Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association (KAAA), a charity founded in 1951 by Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie to alleviate poverty and create social stability. Working with the Agricultural and Fisheries

Department, KAAA provided money and introduced various assistance programmes to Chinese refugees, such as setting them up as pig farmers and offering them interest-free or low-interest short-term loans. The Kadoorie brothers believed that philanthropy alone was not enough, so the goal of their organisation was to help the new arrivals to stand on their own feet and become self-sufficient farmers. And they succeeded. As the Chinese refugees settled in their new home and farms in the New Territories, they supplied an **ever-growing percentage** of the colony's food. At one point during the leftist riots in 1967, the **self-sufficiency rate** of locally grown vegetables peaked at 48.8 percent after the PRC curtailed food supplies to Hong Kong, forcing the colonial government to rely heavily on local produce.

Beginning in the late 1950s, Hong Kong's subsistence agriculture came to an end when paddy rice farming went into **a sharp decline**. What is interesting, though, is that following the demise of paddy rice farming, there then came what **Hoi Lung Lau** describes as 'the most prosperous period of Hong Kong agriculture' in the early 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to the growing demand for fresh vegetables and flowers from the urban middle class, Lau believes that the superior quality of Hong Kong vegetables accounted for the agricultural boom. As his interviewee vividly recalled: 'As Chairman Mao made them put all the effort into growing grains, farmers in the mainland had gotten out of practice of growing tasty vegetables!'

Unfortunately, this golden era of agriculture did not last long. At first, farms were hit by labour shortages as villagers in the New Territories sought higher paid manufacturing and office jobs in the city. Later, when China opened up its market in 1978, manufacturing factories were relocated to China while Hong Kong repositioned itself as Asia's financial hub with a thriving real estate market. Consequently, many farms were lost to urban sprawl and the total area of arable land continued to decrease. Meanwhile, the increased import of food from China caused Hong Kong's food self-sufficiency rate to plummet dramatically, driving local agriculture to the brink of extinction. By the 1980s, Hong Kong no longer produced rice. Although fresh vegetables are still grown in the New Territories, the total proportion of local vegetables declined from **40 percent in the 1960s** to **2.3 percent in 2013**. Today, 90 percent of the food supply in Hong Kong is imported, with the majority of it from the PRC.

The Emergence of a New Kind of Farmer

As incidents of food scandals soar in China, Hong Kong people have become increasingly concerned about their heavy dependence on China for their food supply. While other factors, such as the **rise of local consciousness**, are also responsible for the Agricultural Revitalisation Movement (*fugeng yundong*), food safety is no doubt a major catalyst. With help from land activists, environmentalists, and local food consumers, Hong Kong farmers have joined in the movement against unbridled urbanisation and unchecked developmentalism. Even though the farmers usually prefer to take a back seat and let the activists do the actual organising, during the process of mobilisation, farmers in Hong Kong have learned to redefine their social and cultural identity by emphasising their contribution to sustainability and their role as defenders of Hong Kong's remaining farms.

In contrast to the *nongmin* in China, who continue to suffer from all kinds of stigma and discrimination, *nongfu* in Hong Kong seem to have overcome the bias that farming is an inferior occupation. Since the first mobilisation against land-grabbing in 2008 (also known as the **Choi Yuen Village Incident**), Hong Kong farmers have assumed

a more dignified image. Today, farmers in Hong Kong no longer consider agriculture as an obstacle to Hong Kong's socioeconomic development—a metanarrative that has held strong until very recently. Rather, they have come to see agriculture as an indispensable element of the city, an idea that was clearly articulated during the first Hong Kong Agricultural Forum in 2013.

Farmers without Class Consciousness

Despite their new cultural identity, Hong Kong nongfu do not wield any more political power than the nongmin in the PRC. In a way, Hong Kong farmers could face extinction even sooner because they lack the class consciousness that unifies the peasantry in China. After all, it is much easier to eliminate some 4,600 farmers, most of which are tenants without land ownership, than to eliminate an entire peasant 'class' without causing some social unrest. Moreover, despite their close affinity with land activists, in reality Hong Kong farmers lack political power to influence agricultural policies. For one, their 'professional representative' in the Legislative Council is elected by a small group of elite members, who are ardent partisans of the government's pro-growth developmental strategies.

To pacify farmers and to show governmental commitment to supporting local agriculture, the government inaugurated a Hydroponic Centre in 2013 to promote the benefits of growing vegetables in a controlled environment. While vertical hydroponics appears to support local agriculture and responds to Hong Kong people's increasing demand for 'clean vegetables', the practice is highly unpopular among farmers in the New Territories, who see it as a plot to uproot them from their land, allowing the government to continue to push forward its urbanisation agenda. Speaking at the Hong Kong Agricultural Forum in 2013, TV, a farmer at the Ma Po Po Community Farm, made an analogy between farmers and vegetables on a plate of barbecued pork rice (*char siu faan*): 'Unorganised farmers are like the two pieces of side vegetables on the plate. Finance and real estate are the barbecued pork and we all want more of that. However, we also know that eating too much meat is no good for our health, so we add two pieces of vegetables on the side. The side vegetables are like our farmers and our local agriculture. They are good on display, but they are dispensable.' Indeed, Hong Kong farmers may have escaped the stigma and discrimination associated with their nongmin counterparts in the PRC, but in a city where an inch of land is worth an ounce of gold, they might not be able to escape being devoured by the unceasing wave of urban sprawl that is bound to happen over the next fifteen years.

Loretta Ieng Tak Lou

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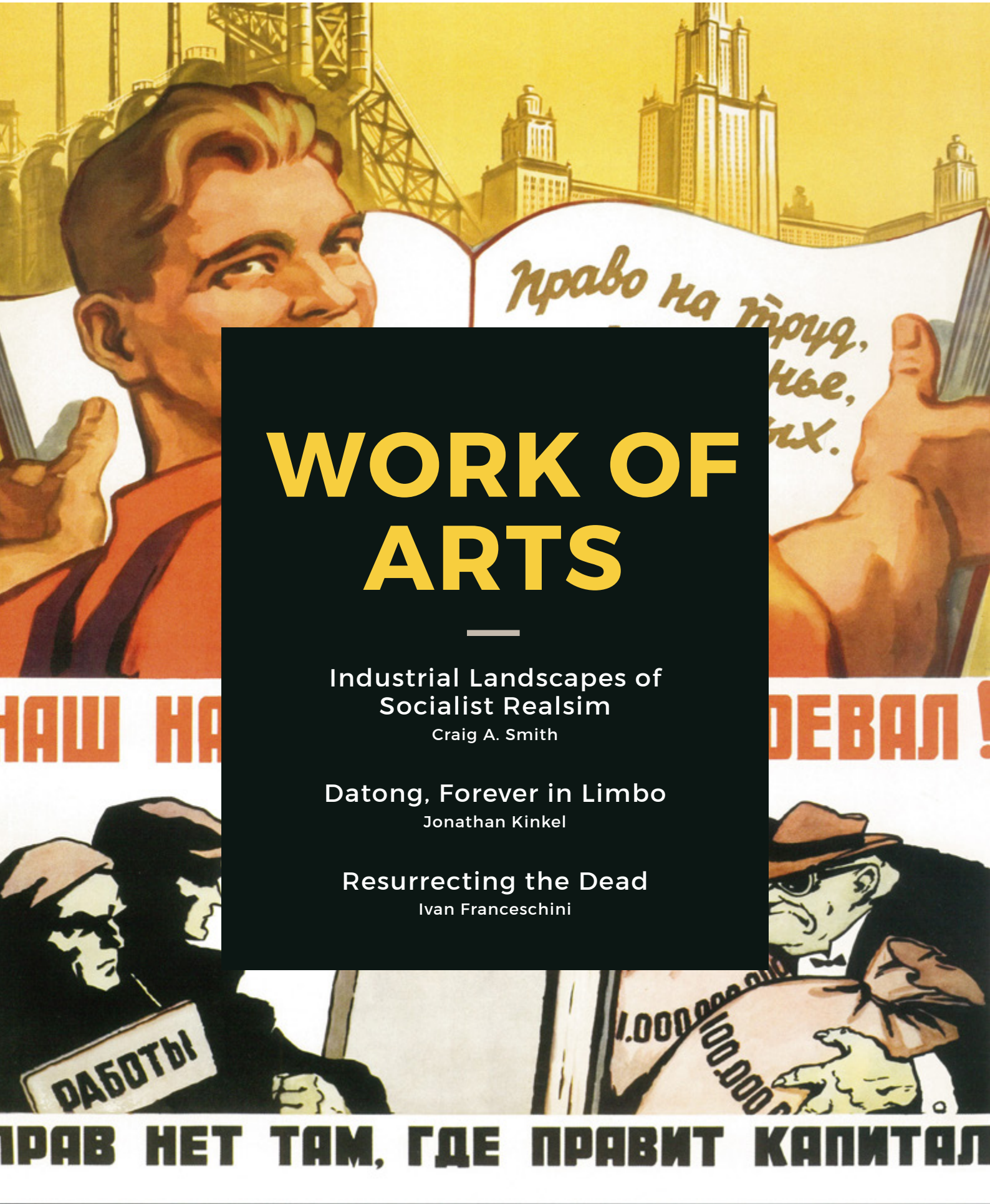


WORK OF ARTS

Industrial Landscapes of Socialist Realsim
Craig A. Smith

Datong, Forever in Limbo
Jonathan Kinkel

Resurrecting the Dead
Ivan Franceschini

Industrial Landscapes of Socialist Realism

Craig A. Smith

Although industrial landscapes today appear as one of the most alien of art forms, it was once a fundamental component of socialist realist painting. This essay examines the legacies of two masters of the genre in China and North Korea—Song Wenzhi (1919–1999) and Chōng Yōngman (1938–1999)—and demonstrates how different revolutionary histories have led to a divergence in legacy and achievement.

Previous page: 'As a Nation, We Won Our Rights, Our Dream. Not So Where Capital Reigns Supreme,' E. Maloletkov, Moscow 1957.

To many in the twenty-first century, the industrial landscape appears as one of the most alien of art forms. Yet, the billowing fumes of endless smokestacks or the web of piping from a glistening petroleum plant once made the best representatives of socialist realist painting. Socialist realist art portrayed ideal life in socialist states—anchored in communism, class-consciousness, and loyalty to the party and the people. While many Soviet works showed elements of the genre decades earlier, artists and theorists from the Soviet Union only began officially promoting socialist realism as a 'true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development' at the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, leading to its spread around the world. The genre then arrived in China and Korea as an already stylised form with a long history. While in the People's Republic of China (PRC) it fell into oblivion during the reform period, it still continues to dominate in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) today.

In the Soviet Union, artists included industrial landscapes in the background of propaganda and artwork. The backgrounds reflected the life, and idealised the ambitions, of the working class. There was a marked emphasis on *klassovost*, sometimes translated as class-consciousness. Exemplars of the genre also showed *partinost*, loyalty to the party and its principles, and *norodnost*, the ambitions of the people or nation. While socialist realist industrial landscapes remained at the margins of the socialist realist genre in the Soviet Union, in the PRC and the DPRK, both of which have a long artistic tradition of landscape painting, these industrial scenes became the focus of artists' work for a short time in the mid-1970s. This essay examines the legacies of Song Wenzhi (1919–1999) and Chōng Yōngman (1938–1999), the most accomplished artists of industrial landscapes in the two countries, showing how different revolutionary histories have led to a divergence in legacy and achievement.

'Taihu's New Look', Song Wenzhi (1979)

Song Wenzhi and Industrial China

In China, it was Song Wenzhi who produced the most popular examples of socialist realist industrial landscapes. Song was a classically trained artist with a strong background in landscape painting. Although he was forced to spend the first years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in a factory, he resumed painting in 1972. In 1973, he was appointed deputy director of Nanjing's Provincial Fine Arts Work Team. There, he continued to create beautiful landscape paintings. However, his art began to show elements of industrial modernity, sublimely sliding between traditional Chinese landscapes and socialist realist images of industry.

In many of Song's paintings, he introduced modern elements as a subtle but dominating feature, such as in 'Taihu's New Look' (*taihu xinzhuang*). Song only fully surrendered to the industrial landscape genre in a few paintings, producing images that not only stand out as excellent examples of traditional Chinese painting, but also remain iconic reminders of the time. Of these, the most memorable is his 1975 masterpiece 'Daqing Blossoms along the Yangzi River' (*yangzijiang pan daqing hua*). Through Song's reformed classical technique, mountains metamorphose into factories and flowers blossom as the billowing clouds from a forest of smokestacks.

Song did not continue with the genre. Whatever compelled him to create these paintings—whether it was the watchful eye of his superiors, the pull of a revolutionary 'market', or his own experiences at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution—at the end of the Maoist era he turned back to traditional landscapes. While continuing to sketch the occasional power line, he never returned to the subject of industrial beauty. The genre had no place in the opening up and reform period that China entered in 1978.

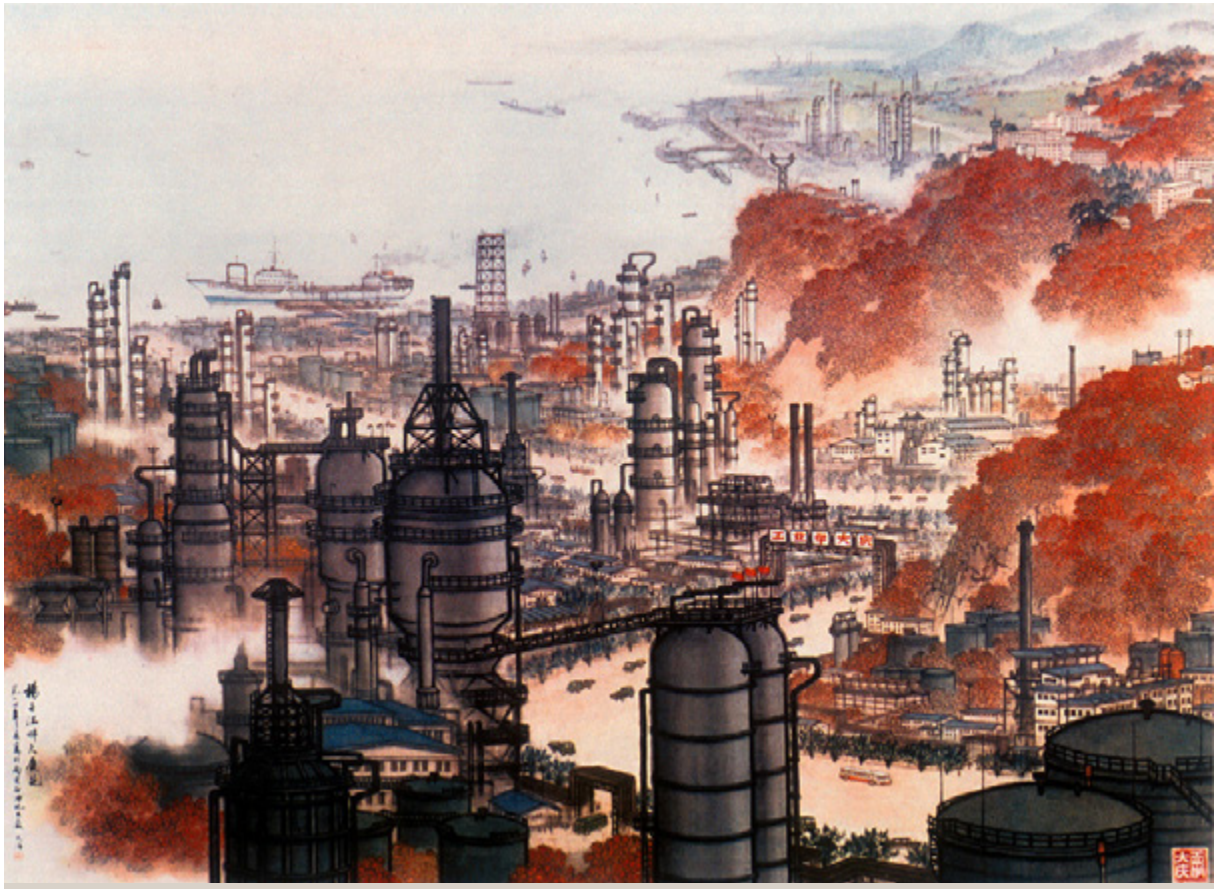
This was not the case in the DPRK, however, where the revolution never ended.

Chōng Yōngman's Depiction of History and the Workers

In 1973, just two years before Song painted 'Daqing Blossoms', one of the most celebrated North Korean painters Chōng Yōngman produced an industrial landscape that captivated the country and led to a reconsideration of the genre of ***Chōsonhwa*** **(Korean Painting**). Largely due to the historical, artistic, and ideological success of 'Evening Glow over Kangsōn Steelworks' (*gangseon-ui-no-eul*), Chōng later became vice-president of the Mansudae Studio and a chairman of the central committee of the Korean Artists Federation.

The Kangsōn Steel Mill was the birthplace of the Chollima Movement, an ideologically driven productivity campaign initiated by Kim Il-sung when he visited the mill in December 1956. Unlike China's Great Leap Forward and the Stakhanovite Movement of the Soviet Union, North Korea's Chollima Movement has remained at the centre of national identity. The *chollima* refers to a horse of unimaginable speed in East Asian legends, indicating the astounding potential of the North Korean worker. Images of the horse are still evident everywhere in North Korea today, but Chōng's painting of the factory is just as much a symbol of this decisive period in DPRK history.

'Kangsōn Steelworks' was Chōng's most important work, marking a departure from the simple and powerful ink *Chōsonhwa* and creating an iconic image that is still a common sight today. The image once featured on the



'Daqing Blossoms along the Yangzi River', Song Wenzhi (1975)

(1)

(2)

(3)

(1) 'Evening Glow over Kangsŏn Steelworks', Chŏng Yŏngman (1973). (2) 'The worker and the soldier race forth on a chollima. A strong, great nation! Wishing everyone a Happy New Year, 2010.' (3) The ten won bill of the DPRK.

ten *won* bill; it also serves as a backdrop for New Year's posters, and greets visitors to the Korean Museum of Art in Pyongyang. Moreover, the use of 'Kangsŏn Steelworks' in official media ensures that tourists to North Korea inevitably come across this mesmerising painting in either its original form, or as the background for numerous posters that have since incorporated the classic painting in their own imagery.

Real and Ideal Beauty

Socialist realist landscapes should concentrate upon the ideal reality—rather than the real reality—for the worker, the scientist, and the farmer. Nowhere is this better achieved than in the DPRK. The socialist realist industrial landscape has long fallen out of fashion in Russia, and no longer has a place in post-socialist China, where images of smokestacks are reminders of the problems of air pollution, rather than of the glorious worker. However, the landscape still holds its symbolic value in Pyongyang, where the state glorifies the role of the worker in the continued struggle to maintain and improve the nation and the Party.

'Once Again, Let's Improve the Life of the People by Producing All Sorts of Things!'

Although Song Wenzhi adapted traditional Chinese art in an innovative and a compelling fashion to produce beautiful paintings of the country's industrial accomplishments, Chōng Yōngman's 'Kangsōn Steelworks' has stood the test of time. Up to this day, it continues to captivate the people due to its vivid portrayal of industrial beauty, and finds official support due to its ideological correctness in relation to the political discourse of the ruling Party. The piece's relationship to the historical significance of the Chollima Movement cements it as an exemplar in socialist realist art—uniting the ambitions of the Party, the nation, and the working class in a way that could not be achieved in the context of China's more contentious and complicated revolutionary history.

But Chōng's achievement is not only ideological. Even before global concerns with climate change, few found beauty in images of polluting gases billowing into the air. However, those of us who have stood on concrete rooftops and watched the sun set in a torrent of colours filtered through a wall of effluvia know that these paintings are more than markers of material development. They are beautiful works of art.

Craig A. Smith

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Still from *The Chinese Mayor*, directed by Zhou Hao, 2015.

Datong, Forever in Limbo

Jonathan Kinkel

The 2015 documentary The Chinese Mayor *by Zhou Hao documents the story of Datong, Shanxi province, as its leaders embark on an ambitious plan to transform the city into a tourist destination. Still, although the filmmakers devote sustained attention to the relocated residents and their demolished homes, the film is no exposé: it is mostly intended to educate an international audience on the internal workings of the Chinese policy-making process.*

The history of the city of Datong, Shanxi province, plays a crucial role in *The Chinese Mayor*, a 2015 documentary by producer Zhao Qi and director Zhou Hao. The filmmakers explain at the outset that Datong was an imperial capital sixteen centuries ago, but at the turn of the twenty-first century it had become the most polluted city in China. Under his tenure as mayor of Datong from 2008 to 2013, Geng Yanbo had an ambitious plan: transform the city into a destination for visitors and capital by rebuilding the ancient city wall, thereby restoring the city's rich cultural and historical heritage. The only catch? As many as half a million people had to be relocated from their homes in order to complete the project.

The Chinese Mayor documents the city, its leaders, and its residents as the project unfolds, and although the filmmakers devote sustained attention to the residents relocated and the homes demolished to make way for the mayor's ambitions, the film is no exposé. According to Zhao, **the film primarily aimed** to educate an international audience on the internal workings of the Chinese policy-making process and to stimulate new ways of thinking about China. In accomplishing these goals, the filmmakers embed themes

of tradition, grievance, and desperation that colour contemporary China's complex patterns of state-society relations. This approach provides rare glimpses into contemporary China's political system—a fact to which their 2015 Sundance Special Jury Prize for Unparalleled Access attests—as well as into China's distinct political-legal tradition. The filmmakers also strive to shape their rare footage into a coherent narrative with Mayor Geng at the center and the residents of Datong, who are ultimately left in limbo by larger political machinations, in supporting roles.

Concession Via Confrontation

Unsurprisingly, the mayor's grand plan to rebuild cultural Datong's old city wall encounters fierce resistance from several residents faced with the demolition of their homes. Recounted using extensive footage of the mayor's daily life and interactions with displaced citizens, the filmmakers tell a story of demolition and displacement familiar in many parts of the world, but which takes on a different hue in the context of China's unique tradition of ruler-subject relations. Datong's culturally themed land redevelopment is the mayor's brainchild, and he supervises or intervenes when necessary in the distribution of new apartments built to replace the demolished ones. Assigning a new flat to this or that citizen becomes the mayor's preferred method of gaining individual compliance with the forced relocations.

The narrative hinges on the development of a series of characters who express direct grievances to the mayor in the street or at demolition sites. In tears, one woman confronts the mayor while falling repeatedly and explains that due to her medical problems, she needs an apartment near her daughter's workplace. The mayor and his staff instruct her to wait ten days for a new apartment

A citizen complains about official misbehaviour.

and assure her that they will address her concerns, on the condition that her medical situation can be confirmed. Another resident displaying facial injuries finds the mayor on the street and claims to have endured a beating from a deputy leader during the premature demolition of his home. After some squabbling, a member of the mayor's staff promises the man an apartment in what sounds like an idyllic community, 'Willow Garden'. An elderly resident, identified as 'Hua', confronts the mayor in separate scenes outside the mayoral residence (which, according to subtitles, is located in a military compound 'for safety reasons'). Instead of walking past her, the mayor listens to Hua's requests for compensation for her destroyed house and her arguments that she cannot climb the stairs to the sixth-floor apartment provided by the government. Mayor Geng tells her that she is asking for too much, but once he is in his car with his staff, he discusses whether he can get her an apartment on a lower floor.

Direct, impromptu interaction between citizens and government is not unique to Datong's demolition, but is rooted in a tradition of grievance and dialogue that has in some form mediated the relationship between ruler and subject in China for millennia. In the influential historical narrative *Zuo's Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*), which dates back to the late fourth century BC, a politician

reasons that it is better to learn from citizens' grievances than to silence them: 'I have heard of reducing grievances by means of loyalty and kindness; I have not heard of preventing grievances by exercising power… doing so would be like trying to prevent a river from overflowing with a dike… so I listen to criticism as a remedy.'

The influence of this tradition was also explicitly recognised at the beginning of the Communist era, when 'the right to make written or oral complaints' (*shumian konggao huozhe koutou konggao de quanli*) to organs of the state was enshrined in Article 97 of the original **1954 PRC Constitution**. Though far from justiciable, the right to confront the state in this manner embodies the uniqueness of the Chinese political-legal system—it is among the few sections of the original Constitution of the People's Republic of China that was not lifted directly from the 1936 Soviet version.

Desperation in the Narrative

The tradition of citizens' direct confrontation of government officials also survives in today's China in part because official channels for legal grievances are either inaccessible or easily subject to elite manipulation. A prominent supporting character in the film is identified as Hui, who is distinguished by her extensive legal knowledge and litigious outlook (in one scene, she recites State Council decrees for the camera from memory). Hui questions whether the demolition of her family's home exposes broader contradictions in Chinese society: 'Should I tell [my son] to trust the law and the government, and stand up for his rights? Or should I just tell him to give up?' When she confronts the mayor directly, Hui challenges his claim that her house was constructed illegally: 'That's a problem caused by the government. How come the government wasn't supervising before but blames the fault on us now?' The mayor replies feebly: 'Who never made a mistake?' Shortly thereafter, with Hui's appeals to China's Supreme People's Court finally denied, the camera surveys the demolished ruins of her house.

Hui argues with mayor Geng.

Scenes like these, in which citizens with seemingly legitimate claims cannot save their homes, build an aura of desperation that is carried forward as several characters in the film threaten suicide or indirectly reference death. One unidentified character resists the demolition of her brother's house and describes her brother and their family's forced relocation by saying: 'He ripped his belly open with a knife… I'll kill myself too… Let the corrupt rich guys live. We're not living!' The desperation of the mayor's own family also renders palpable the anxieties of people affected by the mayor's grand plans. For instance, Mayor Geng's wife confronts him at meetings and phones him repeatedly to bemoan their diminished family life: 'Have you [the mayor] had enough of living? Look at you.' In response, the mayor's calm, even affable demeanor comes off as ominous given the desperation of those surrounding him. When Mayor Geng tries to reassure his wife that he is not overworked, she replies: 'Are you trying to kill me?'

An Unfamiliar Resolution

As the mayor's promises of new housing add up, and with desperation rising, an unanswered question looms in the background: what will happen if these pledges of new, alternative housing go unfulfilled? Near the end of the film, the central government 'rotates' (*ganbu jiaoliu*) Mayor Geng to a new post as Mayor of Taiyuan, before the completion of Datong's massive relocation and construction project. For the Western audiences targeted by the film's producers, rotation of mayors is most likely an unfamiliar concept. In China, however, the rotation of mayors and other local officials to several-year stints in different localities **has long been a hallmark of China's Communist** nomenklatura system, a feature designed to prevent government officials from establishing parochial fiefdoms borne from close ties with local elites.

A young boy inquires about the protests that followed the mayor's abrupt departure from Datong.

To convey the import of the mayor's abrupt departure, the film employs a conversation between a young boy holding a golden toy machine gun and a woman (presumably the boy's mother). Amid large street demonstrations blocking traffic in protest at the mayor's transfer, the boy asks: 'Why are they stopping the buses?' She replies: 'They're asking for housing. No one will give them housing after Mayor Geng leaves. So, they're unhappy.' This explanation injects ambiguity into the film's resolution, as it is more cynical than the protesters' seemingly sincere chants of 'Come back, Mayor Geng!'

In these final scenes, where it is unclear whether Datong is furious over broken housing promises or distraught to lose a respected leader, the residents of Datong emerge as more sympathetic than the title character. Intriguingly, this tension is perhaps reflected in the alternative titles of the film—in some places the title is simply *Datong* instead of *The Chinese Mayor*. In contrast with the purgatory into which large, publicly financed reconstruction projects throw the relocated residents of cities like Datong—not to mention the three billion USD debt the mayor leaves behind—the rotation does not portend major consequences for Geng. In fact, the mayor ultimately plans to complete his political legacy in an even larger city, Shanxi's provincial capital Taiyuan, with a chance to dislocate even more residents: 'I wish I could have completed all my plans in Datong. But since I've been transferred, I'll create a "Cultural Taiyuan".' In the end, while the filmmakers' primary narrative intention might have been to capture the struggles faced by an idealistic mayor, they ultimately found greater success telling an historically infused story of affected residents, compelled to make sense of the debt-fuelled and politically engineered limbo thrust upon them.

Jonathan Kinkel

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Lu Xun's mortuary portrait, 1936.

Resurrecting the Dead

Ivan Franceschini

Lu Xun today lives a new life in his homeland as well as abroad. However, given the vastness and unevenness of his oeuvre, not all his works receive the same attention. In particular, one collection of short stories stands out for their neglect: Old Tales Retold, *a series of comic sketches based on ancient Chinese myths and legends published shortly before his death. This essay focusses on this semi-forgotten pearl and its relevance for today's readers.*

On several occasions during his lifetime, Lu Xun (1881–1936) expressed concern over what would happen to his legacy after his death. As **Eileen J. Cheng** has noted, 'Lu Xun was acutely aware that after the death of the subject, texts representing the dead may take on lives of their own, as posthumous accounts can no longer be challenged by the deceased subject. Indeed, his writings self-consciously deal with the ethics of narration and the limits of representation, as he pondered over the following questions: Who has the authority or "sanction" to narrate? Can a text truly represent a subject, or does it, in the end, just betray it?' Beyond the issue of people using his name for personal gain, Lu Xun worried that his writing would be distorted and manipulated to further factional and ideological battles. Sadly, his worst fears were to come true. In **a eulogy** written for the first anniversary of the writer's death, Mao Zedong hailed him as 'the sage of modern

China' (*xiandai zhongguo de shengren*), on par with Confucius, 'the sage of feudal China'—an ironic fate for an intellectual who had spent his life attempting to break the ancient philosopher's hold on Chinese society. This was the first of several speeches and articles in which Mao would appropriate Lu Xun for his political cause. That he was successful in this manipulation can be seen from the fact that after 1949, while the writer's former disciples and friends were falling victim to purges and violence, Lu Xun's name and oeuvre were used to justify **any kind of foulness**.

In spite of this, Lu Xun's legacy managed to survive and today the writer lives **a new life** in his homeland as well as abroad. In China, over the past decade citations and photos of Lu Xun have appeared frequently on the Internet as Chinese netizens mobilised to denounce the latest injustice perpetrated by officials—be it the **suppression of land protests**, the **muffling of critical voices**, or the **hypocrisy and abuses of the ruling class**. Images and characters from Lu Xun's work still appear in the conversations of ordinary people, from the 'iron house' (*tiewu*) where people are sleeping, unaware that they will soon be devoured by a fire raging outside, to the 'cannibalistic ethic' (*chiren de lijiao*) of Chinese society; from the scoundrel Ah Q, to the failed scholar Kong Yiji. I remember my surprise when, during a meeting at a women rights NGO in Beijing a few years ago, one activist referred to the 'bloody mantou' (*xue mantou*)—a trope from one of Lu Xun's most famous short stories, which has come to indicate the gullibility of common people, always ready to believe in the existence of absurd miraculous remedies for their problems—to complain about the obtuseness of those who refused to follow her advice.

Abroad, there has been a flourishing of **new translations** of Lu Xun into foreign languages, with the latest—a collection of essays entitled ***Jottings under Lamplight***—having been published only a couple of months ago. This has been accompanied by the appearance of several critical studies of remarkable breadth and profundity, such as Gloria Davies's ***Lu Xun's Revolution*** (2013), Eva Shan Chou's ***Memory, Violence, Queues*** (2012), and Eileen J. Cheng's ***Literary Remains*** (2013), to mention just a few. However, given the vastness and unevenness of the writer's oeuvre, not all his works receive the same attention. In particular, one collection of short stories stands out for their neglect: *Old Tales Retold* (*gushi xinbian*), a series of comic sketches based on ancient Chinese myths and legends that Lu Xun published shortly before his death. It is on this semi-forgotten pearl—and its relevance for today's readers—that this short essay will focus.

The *Old Tales Retold*

Old Tales Retold includes eight, short comic stories based on episodes drawn from Chinese classics. In them, we find divinities depicted as ordinary human beings, such as the goddess Nüwa, who creates mankind out of sheer boredom only to get annoyed with her creation immediately thereafter. Legendary heroes face ordinary challenges, such as an aged Hou Yi, a mythical archer who had saved the world, who has to deal with a disgruntled wife and a backstabbing disciple; or Yu, the legendary tamer of the floods, who is confronted with the jeers of incompetent scholars and corrupt officials. Some figures come straight out of the historical annals, such as Bo Yi and Shuqi, two elders who met a tragic end because of their stubborn observance of Confucian morality. Others are the stuff of legends, such as Mei Jianchi, a young boy who resorts to black magic to avenge his dead father. Obviously, there is no lack of philosophers. Laozi, Mozi, and Zhuangzi appear as main characters in three of the tales. Confucius features only in an ancillary role—an absence that is far from surprising if we consider what Lu Xun wrote in 1926 in the **afterword** to his collection of

essays Graves (here translated by Theodore Huters): 'As for my thinking, I have often been poisoned by Zhuangzi and Hanfeizi, at times quite casually and at others quite vigorously. I read the Confucian books earliest and most thoroughly, but they for some reason seem to have little connection with me.'

Since their publication in January 1936, the *Old Tales Retold* never enjoyed particular renown among critics. Many were puzzled by a work so far from the realism of the writer's earlier fiction. In his preface, Lu Xun himself expressed scepticism about the literary value of this oeuvre: 'Most of these tales have been written in a rush, and fall short of the name 'story' as defined by literary criticism…. Moreover, having less respect for the ancients than for contemporaries, on occasions I could not avoid facetiousness.' Indeed, only a few months before drafting the bulk of those stories, the writer had been involved in **a polemic** with Lin Yutang and other proponents on the importance of 'humour' (*youmo*) in literature, going so far as to **paraphrase Kierkegaard** on the dangers of writing for the sheer amusement of the public:

> A theatre catches fire. The clown steps to the front of the stage to announce the fact to the audience, who think it a joke and applaud. Then the clown announces again that there is a fire, but they roar with laughter and clap more loudly than ever. No doubt the world will end amid the general applause of these laughter-loving people who take everything as a joke. (Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang)

While the Chinese critical debate has featured endless theoretical arguments about narrative techniques and on whether this book should be considered satire or historical fiction, discussions among the few scholars based outside China who did not dismiss this work as irrelevant have been more sanguine. In 1961, in his ground-breaking **A History of Modern Chinese Fiction**, C. T. Hsia described the Old Tales Retold in these terms: 'In his fear of searching his own mind and disclosing thereby his pessimistic and sombre view of China at complete variance with his professed Communist faith, Lu [Xun] could only repress his deep-seated personal emotions in the service of political satire. The resulting levity and chaos … mark the sad degeneration of a distinguished if narrow talent for fiction.' The following year, another giant in the study of modern Chinese literature, Jaroslav Průšek, **retorted**: '[Lu Xun's] pictures [in the Old Tales Retold] have, namely, a multiplicity of meanings, every moment relating to a number of layers of reality, their changing hues reminiscent of a winding scarf of rainbow colours. In this many-facetted iridescence lies the individuality and originality of Lu [Xun]'s artistic technique, which C. T. Hsia is unable to grasp….' This rebuttal did not convince Hsia, however, who penned **another response** reiterating his opinion, citing Lu Xun's own self-deprecatory preface as evidence of the scarce value of the book.

Why Read the *Old Tales Retold* Today?

If even Lu Xun himself supposedly did not believe in the artistic significance of his Old Tales Retold, why rediscover this often overlooked book today? There are at least three reasons. First, these stories offer a glimpse into intellectual debates in Republican China that still bear relevance to China today—particularly with regard to the relationship between politics and tradition, individuals and society, and conservation and innovation. Second, by portraying ancient sages and legendary heroes not as hieratical semi-deities but as flawed human beings, Lu Xun undermines a certain kind of 'orientalist' discourse that to this day remains widespread in foreign media and academia (does this ring any Bell?). Although **Ann Louise Huss** has—

not without reason—associated the writer's ridicule of these figures to the physical and psychological violence against intellectuals that would be carried out during the Cultural Revolution some four decades later, the humour of the Old Tales Retold undeniably provides a powerful antidote against the tendency to take the classics too seriously and to read everything related to China through pseudo-Confucian lenses. Finally, and most importantly, these tales, in their minimalism, offer a corrosive critique of any attempt at manipulating Chinese tradition for political purpose.

At its recently concluded Nineteenth Congress, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has amended **its Constitution** to include the 'promotion of the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding Chinese traditional culture' in its mission. And it is not a secret that 'Chinese traditional culture'—or at least an emasculated version of it—is at the core of the CCP's effort to promote China's soft power abroad, not least through a network of more than **five hundred Confucius Institutes**. In a curious assonance, in 1927, in one of his **most pointed essays** against Chinese tradition, Lu Xun wrote of the Chinese classics as a 'soft knife' (*ruan daozi*), saying that the reason they are so fearsome is that readers are not alert to their danger, as they see them as being harmless. Towards the end of his life, in an essay entitled '**Confucius in Modern China**' published in 1935, he further elaborated on why he felt the need to attack the ancient philosopher in his writings:

> Revulsion for the monk leads to distaste for the habit, and the exploitation of Confucius as an instrument to gain a certain end becoming once more transparently obvious, the desire to dethrone him grew the more potent. Therefore, when Confucius is dressed in perfect dignity, articles and works exposing his flaws are bound to appear. Confucius though he be, he must have his flaws. In normal times no one would pay them any heed, because a sage is still a man, and as such they may be forgiven him. Yet if the disciples of the Sage come forth and start prating, telling us that the Sage was this and was that, and therefore you must be likewise, people will not be able to keep from laughing out loud. (Translated by David Pollard)

In times like these, when Chinese tradition is once again resurrected to serve dubious political purposes, it is more important than ever to rediscover the irony and sarcasm of the Old Tales Retold. This is necessary not only to remind ourselves to maintain an approach to Chinese tradition devoid of dogmatism, but also to undermine the hegemonic effort of the propaganda of the CCP and the shallow authoritativeness of today's orientalists. While it is impossible to know whether by doing so we are betraying Lu Xun's intentions, there is a good chance that he would not have minded this opportunity 'to make the ancients out as more dead than they already are'.

Ivan Franceschini

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ACADEMIC WATCH

Ching Kwan Lee on *The Specter of Global China*

Over the past decade, China's increasing presence on the African continent has been a source of global debate, excitement, and anxiety. In her new book *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago University Press, 2017), Ching Kwan Lee draws on six years of in-depth fieldwork to ask a new set of questions.

Public debate on 'China in Africa' has tended to be rather hyperbolic in tone, and often fixates on China as a new colonial power. This book poses a different set of questions. Can you talk about why a shift in focus was necessary?

Ching Kwan Lee: Even though terms such as *scramble*, *empire*, and *hegemony* resonate with many people's fears and preconceptions, we run into serious definitional, empirical, and historical problems when we deploy them analytically, and not just for their rhetorical and political effects. Just consider some basic facts: there is so far no military occupation by China in Africa, no chartered companies with exclusive or sovereign trading rights, no religious proselytising—all things that typically accompanied colonialism over decades, if not centuries. To date, one would be hard pressed to find empirical evidence even of China's informal 'imperial influence' in Africa. Rather, the phenomenon of global China is about China seeking spatial and political fixes to its resource and profit bottleneck, in the context of a national and global over-accumulation crisis, with no preordained or guaranteed outcome. For me, what is theoretically and politically significant about China in Africa is not the millions of migrant entrepreneurs or private companies from China. These types of investors hail from different countries (not just from China) and are found in many parts of the world (not just Africa). What is most intriguing is Chinese *state* investment, and the question is whether it represents a variety of capital that is different from global private capital—whether it has peculiar interests, practices, and ethos. If so, does it bring distinct potentials or perils to African development?

The key finding of this study is that Chinese capital in Africa can, indeed, be different in nature than global private capital. Can you briefly outline the defining features of Chinese capital's divergence?

CKL: Through a sustained comparison between Chinese state capital and global private capital in Zambia's copper and construction sectors, I found that these two types have divergent imperatives of accumulation, driving them to run different regimes of production, which in turn were enabled by different ethoses of management. Specifically, Chinese state capital is characterised by a logic of encompassing accumulation (i.e. profit making, extending China's political and diplomatic influence, and gaining source access to strategic minerals) as opposed to global private capital's profit maximisation. Whereas Chinese state capital runs a production-driven regime of labour exploitation, global private capital operated a finance-driven regime of labour exclusion and casualisation. Whereas collective asceticism has animated

the Chinese managerial ethos, individualistic careerism has defined that of its global private counterparts. Counterintuitively, Chinese state capital, rather than being more dominant and influential, has made more compromises to accommodate Zambian state and labour demands than global private capital has. This has happened in copper mining, in which a political synergy between the Zambian state and society has emerged during a period of rising commodity prices and resource nationalism, but not in construction, a sector marked by a lack of state strategy and labour capacity.

What implications does the distinctness of Chinese capital have for labour movements in Africa?

CKL: One of the key arguments I made in the book is that Chinese state capital is every bit as adversarial as global private capital, yielding to labour's demands only under extraordinary pressure. Organised labour in Africa has the best chance of gaining concessions from Chinese state capital in sectors that are considered by all the stakeholders as strategic, and where workers are most organised. My comparison between mining and construction makes it very clear that it is miners but not construction workers who could compel the Chinese to reverse the trend of casualisation. This was because Chinese state capital, as opposed to global private capital, wanted to accumulate political capital in addition to financial capital, and was more place-bound by its desire to access raw materials at their source rather than just sell commodities for profits. Zambian miners' collective action, when supported by societal and state pressures, could therefore yield more concessions from Chinese state investors than other private ones. In construction, African labour is rather disorganised and the construction industry is considered of marginal significance to Zambia's national development. Neither state nor society rallied behind construction workers' scattered struggles. I guess the lesson for African organised labour, as is true for African states, is that they have to understand the unique sets of imperatives of Chinese state investment and develop their developmental agendas to engage and bargain with China.

This book is also a call for the field of China Studies to 'abandon its methodological nationalism' and reconceptualise China globally. Why is this important, and what methodological and theoretical reorientations does this require?

CKL: Outbound Chinese state capital is just one instance of global China. China's global reach is taking many forms in many arenas: migration, global media networks, higher education, scientific research, regional and global multilateral credit institutions, expansion of Chinese NGOs abroad, and so forth. To understand China's global impact in these areas, scholars cannot artificially seal Chinese phenomena within China's geographical borders. This applies not just to topics that are intrinsically international or regional. Even subjects that may appear purely 'domestic'—such as rural development, land grabs, social movements, corruption, governance, and elite politics—are seldom really so. For instance, land grabs in China have their dynamics and causes rooted in the Chinese political economy, but they are part of a global wave of land dispossession afflicting Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, partly caused and exacerbated by a new round of speculative investment in food and agriculture by global financial capital, or by state-sponsored projects of building global cities. Comparing, connecting, and contextualising domestic Chinese phenomena with what is happening elsewhere will yield deeper and fuller understandings of events within China and, more importantly, what makes them 'Chinese'.

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