

MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 3, ISSUE 4, OCT-DEC 2018

TO THE SOIL

The Labour of Rural Transformation in China



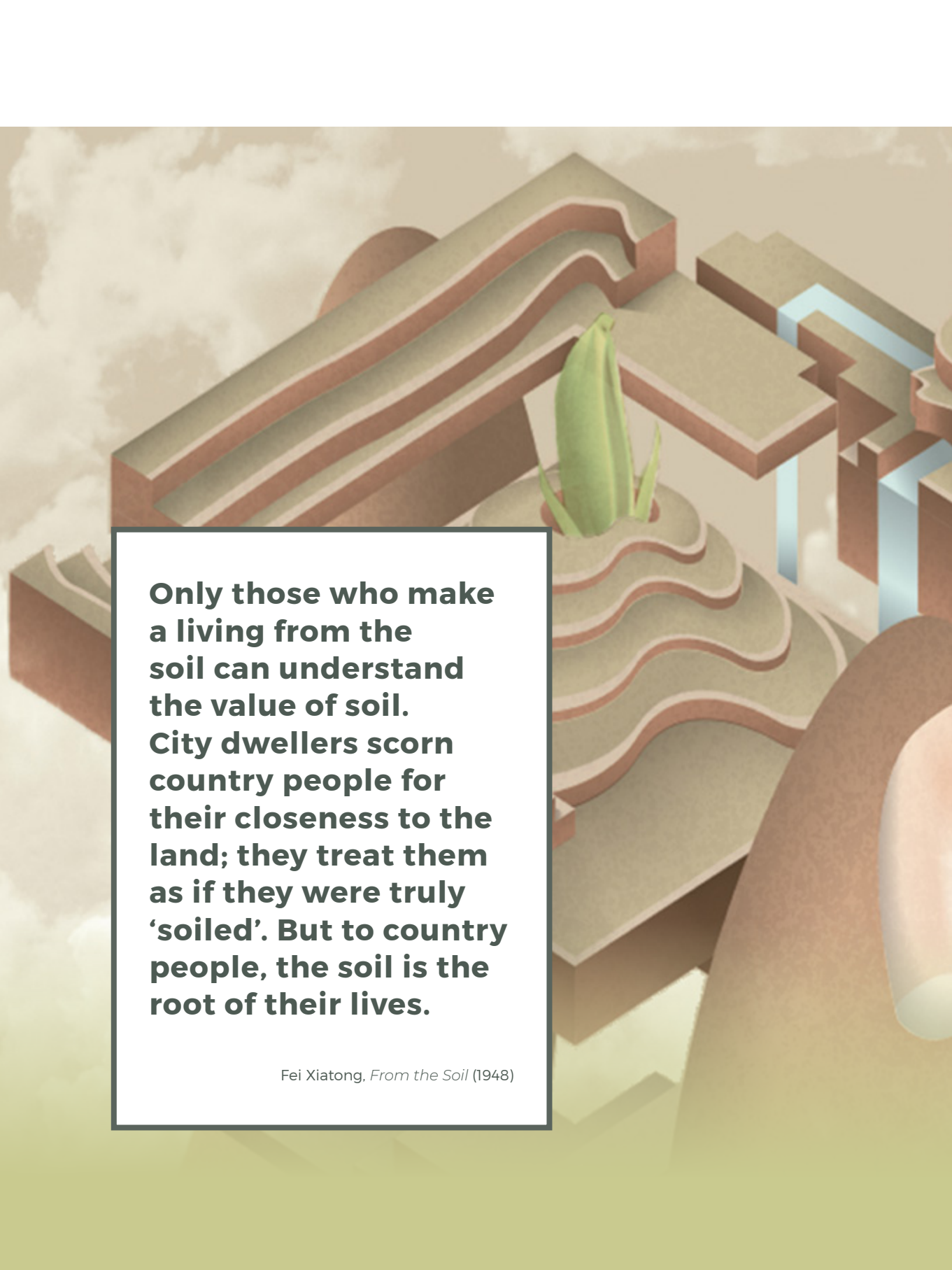
MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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CHINA RESISTE
mismatched shards of China



Only those who make a living from the soil can understand the value of soil. City dwellers scorn country people for their closeness to the land; they treat them as if they were truly 'soiled'. But to country people, the soil is the root of their lives.

Fei Xiatong, *From the Soil* (1948)



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To the Soil

The Labour of Rural Transformation in China

In December 2018, the Chinese authorities commemorated the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, an event generally hailed as the beginning of the country's rise as a global economic and political power. These four decades of unprecedented economic growth and transformation have been rooted in a fundamental socioeconomic restructuring. Contemporary China has changed from a largely agrarian society predominantly inhabited by peasants, to a rapidly urbanising one, characterised by a floating populace moving back and forth between rural and urban spaces, which are in a continuous state of flux. Going hand in hand with China's ascent into modernity is the subordination of rural areas and people. While rural China has historically been a site of extraction and exploitation, in the post-reform period this has intensified, and rurality itself has become a problem, best typified through the ubiquitous propaganda about the need to revitalise the countryside, and ongoing attempts to reconstruct rural areas in a new image.

This issue of *Made in China* focuses on the labour that these attempts to restructure and reformulate rural China have entailed, and the ways in which they have transformed rural lives and communities. In the special section, **Tamara Jacka** shows how the development trajectory of modern China has been underpinned and enabled by the exploitation of the 'inside work' of rural women. **Jane Hayward** examines how rural land reforms in China are being driven by the imperative of capital accumulation. **Thomas Sætre Jakobsen** bemoans the fact that China labour studies' bias towards urban contexts is neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands in the countryside and the workplaces of the city.

Sarah Rogers reflects on poverty resettlement projects to try to make sense of the intent and impact of such large-scale interventions on both the lives of individuals and the transformation of the Chinese countryside as a whole. **Marina Svensson** describes her experience at the Third Ningbo International Photography Week, which this year focussed on documenting rural transformations and processes of urbanisation. **John Aloysius Zinda** highlights how scholars and journalists alike tend to place environment and labour in separate boxes and seldom consider the labour of environmental protection or the people who perform it. **Daniele Dainelli** presents 'Domestic Archeology', a photographic project on the Chinese countryside that took him seven years to accomplish. Finally, **Nicholas Loubere** interviews **Brian DeMare** about *Land Wars*, his latest book on land reform in Maoist China.

The issue includes op-eds on the Jasic crackdown by **Au Loong Yu**; the perplexities regarding investing in China among German policymakers by **Lucrezia Poggetti**; and the latest controversies surrounding the self-censoring behaviour of some international academic publishers by **Nicholas Loubere** and **Ivan Franceschini**. In the China Columns section, **Ulrike Reisach** examines the variegated landscape of Chinese investment in Europe, while **Wolfgang Mueller** presents the results of a survey he conducted in Chinese-invested companies in Germany. The Window on Asia section offers two essays by **Johan Lindquist** and **Elisa Oreglia**, which respectively look into the 'like economy' of click farms in Indonesia and the spread of WeChat among Internet users in Myanmar. In the cultural section, **Yvan Schulz** reviews Wang Jiuliang's documentary *Plastic China*.

We wrap up the issue with a conversation with **Gianluigi Negro** about *The Internet in China*, his latest book on the development of the digital sphere in the Chinese context.

The Editors

BRIEFS

Oct-Dec 2018

OCT/DEC 2018

The Chinese Trade Union Holds Its National Congress

Between 22 and 26 October 2018, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) convened its Seventeenth National Congress. In delivering his Report on the Economic Situation in front of the convened unionists, Premier Li Keqiang re-emphasised the role of the ACFTU as a ‘transmission belt’ between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese workers. Politburo member Wang Huning reiterated the obligation of the ACFTU to motivate, unite, and guide Chinese workers under the Party’s leadership. The Congress passed some amendments to the Constitution of the ACFTU. One remarkable change lies in the addition of ‘sincerely serving the mass of workers’ to the Union’s earlier mission of ‘protecting the legal rights of the workers.’ Union officials said this change was largely in response to the evolving contradictions in Chinese society. Another noteworthy amendment pertained to the incorporation of Xi Jinping Thought as an essential part of the ACFTU’s guiding ideology. In endorsing this amendment, the Congress reaffirmed the core status of President Xi Jinping in the CCP. Similar rhetoric also prevailed during the Twelfth National Congress of the All-China Women’s Federation, convened in late October. In his speech at the Congress, President Xi asserted that upholding the leadership of the Party was fundamental to advancing the cause of women in China and realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. *N Liu*

(Sources: ACFTU; China Labour Bulletin 1; China Labour Bulletin 2; Sohu; The State Council; Worker.cn; Xinhua 1; Xinhua 2)

Fare Thee Well Private Economy?

As China celebrates the 40th anniversary of the launch of economic reforms in December 2018, concerns grow about the Chinese government’s commitment to further liberalise the economy. Despite their economic contributions over the last four decades, private firms in China find themselves embroiled in an ever-challenging situation, plagued by slower economic growth, tighter credit lines, tougher regulations, and stronger Party interference. These hardships have resulted in at least ten private firms being nationalised by state-owned enterprises in the first nine months of 2018. Some Chinese intellectuals went as far as to publicly assert that private companies should be eliminated from China’s economy considering that they had completed their job of helping China prosper. Amid these arguments, President Xi Jinping reiterated the government’s support for private firms in October. His assurance was, however, quickly called into question. In early November, authorities in Beijing first banned the executive director of Unirule, a liberal think tank, from travelling to the United States to attend a symposium on China’s economic reforms, and then revoked the business licence of Unirule, forcing it to suspend all its activities. Such occurrences show how the current Chinese leadership has become increasingly intolerant of dissenting views, not only in the political realm, but also on economic matters. This can be seen in the latest attempt at rewriting Chinese history, as evidenced by an exhibition titled ‘The Great Revolution’ that opened at the National Museum in Beijing on 13 November to celebrate the anniversary of economic reforms. While Xi Jinping enjoys numerous displays about his achievements, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s economic reforms, is much less visible at the exhibition, and other key actors of the past decades, such as Zhu Rongji, China’s former reformist premier, are nowhere to be seen. *N Liu*

(Sources: Economic Information Daily; Financial Times; The New York Times; Radio Free Asia; South China Morning Post; Wall Street Journal; Xinhua)

China's Human Rights Record in Xinjiang under International Scrutiny

In November 2018, China's human rights record was scrutinised by the United Nations Human Rights Council. In a process known as a 'universal periodic review' (UPR), the nation in question must demonstrate its ability to follow previous United Nations (UN) recommendations and answer questions posed by other states, NGOs, and other institutions. On 6 November, China was called to address human rights issues including its treatment of ethnic minorities, specifically Uyghurs in Xinjiang; its crackdown on lawyers and activists; as well as issues regarding civil, religious, and press freedoms in the country. Unsurprisingly, China has responded by defending its human rights record, deeming the UN assessment to be 'politically driven' and 'fraught with biases'. China's worsening human rights record has increasingly drawn international scrutiny. The UN's high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, has requested direct access to Xinjiang amid growing concerns over China's treatment of the Uyghur minority. In addition, spearheaded by Canada, 15 western ambassadors have issued a letter requesting Xinjiang's Communist Party leader to meet with them and provide an explanation of the alleged human rights abuses. Such actions have been rebuffed by Beijing, with the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying claiming that the ambassadors have exceeded their diplomatic capacities. While this heated exchange was still in the making, internationally renowned photographer Lu Guang went missing while visiting Xinjiang. He has not been heard from since. Moreover, in early December reports from international media began detailing the emergence of a forced labour regime in factories attached to re-education camps in Xinjiang, prompting new criticisms. *TS*

(Sources: **BBC**; **The Guardian 1**; **The Guardian 2**; **The Independent 1**; **The Independent 2**; **Radio Free Asia 1**; **SBS News**; **South China Morning Post**; **The New York Times**; **United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner**)

As One High-level Official Disappears, Nobody is Safe from Repression

In the last quarter of 2018, China's human rights record continued to deteriorate. October began with the disappearance of a high-level official—Meng Hongwei, then President of Interpol and Deputy Minister of Public Security in China, who was reported missing after travelling from France to China on 5 October. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection has since stated that Meng is being investigated on allegations of taking bribes. On 5 November, rights groups released a statement urging the Chinese government to release 'cyber-dissident' Huang Qi who was arrested in 2016 on charges of 'leaking state secrets'. His condition has drastically declined during his time in custody. It is reported that Huang suffers from chronic kidney disease, hydrocephalus, and heart disease. In the same month, Fengrui, the Chinese law firm raided at the start of the 709 campaign in July 2015, was officially shut down. On 29 November, Li Wenzu, a 709 campaigner and the wife of detained human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang, was barred from leaving China. She was on her way to Sweden, where she was to receive the Edelstam Prize for outstanding contributions to advancing human rights. At the end of the month, authorities in Guangdong formally arrested two individuals who witnessed the beating and stripping of human rights lawyer Sun Shihua. Since September, Sun has pursued a complaint after being beaten, illegally detained, strip-searched, and drug-tested for seven hours in the provincial capital. Lawyers are not the only victims of state repression: in mid-November, a Chinese author known by the pen name Tianyi, was sentenced to over 10 years in jail for writing and selling a 'pornographic' erotic novel that featured gay sex scenes; and in early December, Xu Lin, a musician who sang about the late Nobel peace laureate and political prisoner Liu Xiaobo, was given a three-year jail term. *TS*

(Sources: **ABC News**; **Radio Free Asia 1**; **Radio Free Asia 2**; **Radio Free Asia 3**; **Reuters**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**)

Hong Kong under Siege

The political situation in Hong Kong is increasingly tense, as the former British colony's special status under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement appears to be faltering. The inauguration of a high-speed railway connecting Hong Kong to Guangzhou on 23 September and a new bridge that links Hong Kong to Zhuhai and Macau on 23 October has raised fears among Hong Kongers that closer linkages to the mainland will allow the Chinese government to exert more control over their society. These fears are mainly rooted in the decision to enforce mainland Chinese laws at the West Kowloon Terminus in Hong Kong, which critics argue will eventually undermine the independent judicial system of Hong Kong. The deterioration of Hong Kong's political situation was also apparent in a string of other incidents. In early October, Victor Mallet, Asia News Editor at the *Financial Times*, was first denied renewal of his work visa in Hong Kong and then refused entry to the city one month later, a de facto expulsion ostensibly related to his chairing a public meeting with a leader of an independentist party in the city. On 3 November, an exhibition by Badiucao, a Chinese-Australian political artist, was cancelled in Hong Kong over 'threats' from Chinese authorities. One week later, Ma Jian, a renowned Chinese writer residing in England, had two scheduled speeches at literary festival in Hong Kong cancelled due to his criticisms of the Chinese government—the events were later rearranged as the hosts changed their mind at the last minute. Adding to these worrisome situations was the trial on 19 November of Chan Kin-man, co-founder of the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, and of his fellow campaigners. Although the trial is still pending, the controversies surrounding the proceedings, along with the other aforementioned contentious events, have already stained Hong Kong's image as a beacon of freedom in Asia. *NLiu*

(Sources: **ABC; CCTV.com; Financial Times; Hong Kong Free Press; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The Guardian; Washington Post; Xinhua**)

Jasic Crackdown Widens

In early November 2018, more than a dozen students and recent college graduates who had expressed their support for the Jasic mobilisation were detained. Staff of a social work organisation in Shenzhen and two employees of a district-level ACFTU branch in the same city were also caught up in the crackdown. Those who were detained earlier—including one NGO staff member and three workers—continue to be held incommunicado. This latest development followed weeks of harassment against those students and activists who had mobilised to demand the release of those detained during the summer. A number of prominent Chinese universities attempted to block Marxism clubs on campus—with which the Jasic student supporters are affiliated—from renewing their registration. In response to the university's punitive actions against a dozen of its students, Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations took the unprecedented step of suspending an academic labour exchange programme with People's University in Beijing. This action drew a rebuke from the *Global Times*, which accused Cornell of echoing Trump's strategy against China. Following the arrests in November, a number of renowned Marxist and left-wing international scholars, including Noam Chomsky, issued personal statements in support of those detained, and announced their intention to boycott China's officially-sponsored Marxism conferences. In spite of mounting international solidarity, the situation for labour activism in China remains dire. In another recent instance of state repression, on 7 November, riot police in Shenzhen assaulted and pepper-sprayed former blast workers with silicosis who were protesting to demand compensation for their occupational disease. *KL*

(Sources: **China Daily; Financial Times; Global Times; Guardian; Reuters; Radio Free Asia; The New York Times**)

OP-EDS



Jasic workers holding a banner that reads: "Jasic workers pay tribute to Chairman Mao."

The Jasic Mobilisation

A High Tide for the Chinese Labour Movement?

Au Loong Yu

In July this year, 89 workers at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology Co. Ltd demanded the right to set up a workplace union. In the past decade there has been an explosion of strikes in Shenzhen, and this dispute is one of the many where workers have demanded better working conditions, owed wages, unpaid social insurance, and severance pay. Yet, the Jasic case is unusual in that it was supported openly by a group of some 50 self-proclaimed Maoists and Marxist university students, along with a small group of older citizens. Coming from different parts of China, they organised themselves into a 'Jasic Worker Support Group' and descended on Jasic to stand in solidarity with the workers who were battling the police.

At the height of the Jasic campaign, these old and young Maoist supporters held up photos of Chairman Mao and a banner reading 'To Be Good Students of Chairman Mao Forever'. They created a website—which has now been removed from the Internet—called 'Vanguard of the Era' (*shidai xianfeng*) calling for more support for their cause, 'for the sake of the working class's awakening, for the sake of Chairman Mao!' (Wu 2018). As the images that accompany this article show, they uploaded photographs of themselves on social media posing in Maoist-like revolutionary heroic postures, disciplined and determined to fight for their cause. One of them posted an article entitled 'Where Has Jinggangshan Gone? On the Jasic Struggle and the Future of Revolutionary Revival' (Luo 2018). Referring to the mountain where Mao first established his guerrilla base in 1927 and to Mao's revolutionary strategy of 'encircling cities from the rural areas' (*nongcun baowei chengshi*), it proclaimed 'Jinggangshan is here right now at Jasic and in all industrial areas.'

Although Jasic supporters might not really be advocating for an armed uprising, they do believe that the time is ripe for leftists in China to escalate worker struggle from economic to political. The very moment the Maoists got involved, the

The Jasic case is unusual in that it was supported openly by a group of some 50 self-proclaimed Maoists and Marxist university students, along with a small group of older citizens.

⁽¹⁾ Part of this essay first appeared in Chinese in the Mingpao Daily, 30 August 2018. A more lengthy discussion on the issue by the same author will appear in the January 2019 issue of New Politics (newpol.org). All information reported here comes from the Internet or personal contacts.

incident quickly escalated from a workplace trade union organising drive to a political struggle against local officials. The heroic campaign was quickly and violently suppressed. Four workers were arrested, charged with disturbing the peace, and are now awaiting trial. At the time of writing, 28 supporters remain either under house arrest or have been forcibly disappeared (HRIC 2018). As for the students, after they went back to their universities, they were interrogated, disciplined, investigated, threatened, and in some cases expelled. In the past three months, more than 20 students have been fiercely manhandled—some were beaten up, some were attacked and kidnapped by thugs right on campus, and some have simply disappeared. How are we to assess this unprecedented incident in which students and workers struggle together across institutions, across provinces, across generations, and across class boundaries?

Professor Pun Ngai at the University of Hong Kong has argued that the Jasic mobilisation is a movement of ‘unity between workers and students’ and is of ‘historical significance’ (Pun 2018). Indeed, the case is significant because it was the first time in the past few decades that students have emerged in such a high profile and organised manner to support a worker protest. This stands in sharp contrast to what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989, when intellectuals and students cordoned themselves off from the workers at the very beginning of the protests. After the democratic movement of the late 1980s failed, intellectuals soon split into two main groups: Liberals (*ziyoupai*) and the New Left (*xinzuopai*). Both of these groups subscribed to the false dichotomy of ‘state versus market’, while remaining indifferent to the plight of the working masses. At best, only a handful of the New Left intellectuals adopted a rhetoric of ‘fairness’ in their writings by counterposing the liberal slogan of ‘prioritising efficiency’ for future reform with ‘prioritising justice’ instead. As for the students, they simply retreated to their study. It was not until the 2009 Guangzhou sanitation workers strike that workers began to receive some support from students, who mostly participated as individuals, rather than as a coordinated group. Thus, the fact that in the Jasic incident, more than 50 students put themselves at risk by acting in solidarity with the workers was indeed a new development.



Jasic workers holding Mao's picture.

Nevertheless, Professor Pun goes on to make two other points that I have reservations about. Firstly, she commends the incident as having a second historical significance in that for ‘the first time the workers consciously organised a trade union.’

The factory has just over a thousand workers. So the fact that 89 workers signed on to request a labour union be established—with 20 remaining in the struggle after the crackdown—is significant, particularly considering the difficulty of labour organising in this type of context.

The reality is that there have been numerous cases of workers going on strike to demand the re-electing or establishment of workplace unions. For example, as early as 2004–05, workers at the Shenzhen Japanese company Uniden went on strike five times in one year. They finally succeeded in setting up a union but it was quickly suppressed. Other examples were the Ole Wolff case in Yantai in 2006, the Yantian Container strike of 2007, and last but not least, the Nanhai Honda strike of 2010.

Secondly, she remarks that ‘the actions of the Jasic workers also show that Chinese workers have already transformed from purely economic subjects into political subjects with class consciousness.’ True, the protest was initially quite promising. The factory has just over a thousand workers. So the fact that 89 workers signed on to request that a labour union be established—with 20 remaining in the struggle after the crackdown—is significant, particularly considering the difficulty of labour organising in this type of context (Zhang 2018). However, is it possible to conclude that the average Chinese worker has become a ‘political subject with class consciousness’ based on the actions of a less than 100 people in a single workplace?

Now that the suppression of students has captured the attention of the international media, it is worth looking at the origins of these Maoist student groups in a bit more detail. The re-emergence of Maoist ideology among the younger generation can be traced to the turn of the century. At that time, some older Maoists in North China began to resist the privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) from behind the scenes. They also invited rural migrant activists and students to their classes and trainings. In 2005, they founded the ‘China Labour Research Web’ (*zhongguo gongren yanjiu wang*), later renamed ‘Red China’ (*hongse zhongguo*), which was closed down by the authorities in 2010. At that time, these Maoists prioritised SOE workers over rural migrant workers as they regarded the former as more ‘revolutionary’ and the latter as lacking class consciousness. They mostly focussed their activities around the SOE workers in the North, and if there were Maoist NGOs working in the South they maintained a very low profile. The current rise of a new generation of young Maoist students engaging so deeply in the Jasic struggle indicates the Maoists are turning their attention to rural migrant workers in the South. That in the Jasic case they have decided to adopt a tactic of high-profile confrontational resistance, was evidence of their determination and commitment given the highly repressive situation.



Jasic workers young and old.

Earlier this decade, ‘Red China’—along with ‘Utopia’ (*wuyouzhixiang*), a Maoist website founded in 2003 by the well known Maoist/Nationalists Fan Jinggang and Han Deqiang—had placed their hopes in Bo Xilai to lead a left turn in the Party. For instance, Minqi Li, an academic based in the United States and a theoretician of ‘Red China’, placed great expectations in Bo as ‘the last significant faction that was in opposition to neoliberal capitalism’, and argued that ‘by purging Bo Xilai from the Party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership may have foregone their last and best opportunity to resolve China’s rapidly escalating economic and social contradictions in a relatively peaceful manner’ (Li 2016, 183 and 38).

The fall of Bo in 2012 shattered these hopes, and since then the two labels ‘Left Maoists’ (*maozuo*) and ‘Right Maoists’ (*maoyou*) have become common currency in online debates. This means that the Maoists have definitely split into at least two camps: Right Maoists continue to advocate for the support of the Party, as summed up in the slogan, ‘Defend the Party and Save the State’ (*baodang jiuguo*), while Left Maoists, such as ‘Red China’, have become more radical in criticising the Party, having finally come to recognise that a qualitative transformation to capitalism has taken place in China. Since the rise of Xi Jinping onwards, they have become more explicit in advocating resistance from below while continuing to try to win over leading Party cadres through the invocation of the ‘socialist’ principles enshrined in the Constitution or in Mao’s work.

Although the Maoists have accumulated a lot of experience in the North in supporting the rights of SOE workers, their experiences cannot be applied to the workers in the private enterprises of the South without being substantially adapted. When the SOEs underwent privatisation in the late 1990s to early 2000s, the workers sometimes directly confronted corrupt local officials who were responsible for the theft of public property. They deployed the revolutionary ethos of the CCP to legitimise their political resistance. This was natural and was even sometimes useful. But in the private companies of the South it is different. The conflict is chiefly one between employees and employers. Moreover, the revolutionary ethos of the CCP is less likely to resonate with migrant workers, and so if actions escalate into political resistance the workers are less likely to be motivated. Therefore, in the Jasic case, as in many other cases, when the local government cracked down on workers the struggle turned political. But when looking at the possibility to escalate this type of struggle one must also ask the question: are workers fully prepared for a political confrontation? Experience already tells us that in this specific case they were not.

Although the Maoists have accumulated a lot of experience in the North in supporting the rights of SOE workers, their experiences cannot be applied to the workers in the private enterprises of the South without being substantially adapted.

The Chinese authorities in reality do not have any interest in ‘socialist’ principles, nor in Mao or Maoism. While Xi Jinping continues to demand that the people learn from Marxism, Leninism, and Mao’s Thought; paradoxically, the Party-state continues to crack down on any independent and collective efforts to seriously study the classic texts of the left, and ramps up its attacks even more when these efforts carry an aspiration to sympathise with the working people. Repressing the resurgence of Maoism among the people is not new. Back in 2004 the Zhengzhou police arrested and charged local Maoists who tried to assemble to pay tribute to Mao. The Party-state’s crackdown on the Jasic workers and students today is just another incident reminding us that the CCP has long since betrayed its own founding doctrine and is hostile to anyone who wants to interpret Maoism differently from the officially sanctioned line.

There is much for us to learn from the Jasic case. It should be the catalyst for us to begin a long overdue public debate on the situation and strategy of China’s labour movement in the midst of a crisis-ridden society. Whereas previously labour constituted a silent majority which remained basically absent from the debate between Liberals and the New Left, the Jasic case reminds us that the situation is changing, that more workers now want their voices to be heard, and that a debate on all these issues is increasingly urgent. ■



Li Keqiang and Angela Merkel.
PC: Supchina.com

Bracing for China's Systemic Competition

A View from Germany

Lucrezia Poggetti

The attitude of the German business community vis-à-vis China is increasingly torn between short-term profits and long-term strategic interests. While China has been Germany's largest trading partner since 2016, with commercial ties registering a total of 186.6 billion euros in 2017 (Nienaber 2018), a forthcoming strategy paper of the Federation of German Industries (BDI)—Germany's most influential industry association—is urging German companies to reduce their dependence on the Chinese market (Barkin 2018a).

The Paper highlights the long-term challenge posed by China's state-driven economic model, as part of which state-subsidised companies take advantage of the openness of Germany's economy, easily outcompeting German businesses playing by market rules. 'We are facing a systemic competition between our open markets approach and China's state-driven economic model,' a draft of the upcoming Report reads, calling for a discussion across politics, society, and industry.

BDI's newfound position comes closer to that of some German political elites, who have been warning against the systemic challenge that China's authoritarian system poses to liberal democracy, not only in economic, but also in political terms. It also goes hand in hand with the EU's and other larger member states' increasingly assertive tone in their requests for access to the Chinese market, in line with the Chinese leadership's promises for greater openness.

One day after the BDI Report—which has been in the pipeline since spring 2018—was publicised by Reuters, the EU listed rather specific expectations for China's future opening up (EEAS 2018). These came ahead of the China International Import Exhibition, an event that supposedly showcases China's commitment to market opening. The EU's requests addressed various examples of China's discriminatory behaviour against foreign companies and unfair practices, from market access barriers created by intrusive cyber-security regulations, to subsidies under the industrial policy Made in China 2025. These requests were also echoed by the French and German ambassadors to Beijing in a joint op-ed for *Caixin* (Ripert, von Goetze 2018).

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China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 was interpreted as a first step in the direction of economic liberalisation. Western countries also hoped that economic reforms would be followed by political opening.

Overall, this concerted effort and toughening up of European political and business elites signals an intention to move away from the quiet approach taken thus far, which has not produced the results that were hoped for. In fact, the idea that an accommodating attitude would have gently pushed China to follow through on its free trade rhetoric and eventually transform itself into a market economy has turned out to be mere wishful thinking.

The wait and see approach of German economic and political actors, just like that of those in most Western advanced economies, started with the beginning of China's reform and opening-up four decades ago, in 1978. Since then, various moments in history have nurtured the hope that, eventually, China would turn into a fully-fledged market economy.

China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 was interpreted as a first step in the direction of economic liberalisation. Western countries also hoped that economic reforms would be followed by political opening. Notably, the 2002 East Asia Concept of the German Federal Foreign Office, drafted only one year after China's entry into the WTO, stated Germany's support for 'China's transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and human rights' (Auswärtiges Amt 2002).

Promises to loosen control measures made by Chinese officials in Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Olympics, along with the 2013 Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), pledging a stronger role for market forces into China's economy, further raised expectations. More recently, Xi's Davos speech in January 2017, which promoted China as a champion of free trade and globalisation amidst US protectionism under Trump, was also welcomed with hope by western political and economic elites.

The Nineteenth Party Congress of October 2017, and then the National People's Congress in March 2018, can be considered watershed moments in prompting German business lobbyists to devise alternative strategies to limit dependency on the Chinese market.

Up until October 2017, many thought that reforms might materialise. By contrast, the Nineteenth Party Congress showed the CCP's confidence in its state-driven political and economic system, and even its exportability to other countries. This set out more clearly the Chinese central leadership's intention to strengthen its grip on power, including through further control over the economy. With the abolition of the presidential term limits in March 2018, the consolidation of authoritarian rule in China has become even more evident.

As Xi Jinping committed to put China back at the 'centre of the world stage', Beijing's increased assertiveness and control started to show. This also hit German businesses directly.



Former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel.
PC: Olaf Kosinsky, Wikimedia Commons.

As Xi Jinping committed to put China back at the 'centre of the world stage', Beijing's increased assertiveness and control started to show. This also hit German businesses directly. In November 2017, the CCP's announcement that it would start installing Party cells into foreign firms operating in China led German industry representatives to warn that German firms might reduce their activities in the Chinese market (He 2017). To make things worse, in February 2018 the CCP asked for an apology from Daimler, leveraging the feelings of 'the Chinese people': the multinational had quoted the Dalai Lama in a Mercedes-Benz ad on Instagram, a social media platform that is censored in China and thus cannot be accessed by users in the Mainland (Wee 2018).

These cases added up to already-existing issues in commercial ties, such as China's intrusive cybersecurity legislation, which puts foreign enterprises operating in China at a disadvantage.

In the meantime, China's rare openings have remained selective, meant to appease European criticism about China's reluctance to follow through on its promises to open up. Especially amid the ongoing US-China trade spat, China has been trying show goodwill as it looks for European partners to counter the US. Deals signed with German chemical giant BASF and carmaker BMW in July 2018 can be seen in this light (Croft 2018). Rather than an indication of China's opening, they are the result of bespoke backroom deals.

With its updated strategy on China, BDI is now adjusting to a reality in which it has become evident that China has no serious intention to open up. While the draft Report clarifies that German businesses have no interest to fence China in, its words echo the rhetoric of some German political leaders who have been warning against the challenge that China's state-driven political and economic system poses to liberal democracy.

For example, speaking at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in February 2018, former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel stated that: 'China is developing a comprehensive systemic alternative to the Western model that, in contrast to our own, is not founded on freedom, democracy and individual human rights' (Auswärtiges Amt 2018). The same view has been bolstered by the President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble, and by senior Members of Parliament (Braun 2018).

And while the Federal Foreign Office still aims to strengthen the rule of law and improve the human rights situation in China, now it has also started to brainstorm ways of dealing with an increasingly authoritarian partner. This will mean adjusting strategies for China's domestic situation, but also for third countries, where Beijing is a competitor that can export its repressive approaches.

On China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), too, the rhetoric of German business and political elites seems to be increasingly converging. Still, BDI has to balance the different interests of its members. While a general interest of larger German companies to seek selective, profitable opportunities under the BRI label persists, German SMEs, the backbone of the country's economy, have so far been excluded from BRI. Others openly endorse the initiative, like business conglomerate Siemens, which dedicates a whole Beijing office to BRI.

In its Report, BDI describes BRI as an attempt by Beijing to establish geopolitical influence and shape third markets according to its own interests. In response, it suggests carrying out a 'diplomatic offensive' from Berlin and Brussels, to reach countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa.

This description of BRI resonates with what Gabriel said at the MSC, when he argued that 'the initiative for a new Silk Road ... stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system to shape the world according to China's interests.'

The EU itself has come up with its own Euro-Asian connectivity strategy, announced in September 2018 (EU 2018). While it is open to cooperation with China, it also represents a challenge to the Chinese government's approach to pursue infrastructure diplomacy, with Europe's own commitment to standards and sustainability.

However, if Europe wants to show that it is serious about promoting a type of connectivity that is sustainable, comprehensive, and rules-based, projecting confidence and unity of purpose will be key. Ideally, European member states would follow suit. For example, when they are pressured by China to sign a BRI MoU, they should respond by setting their own terms for any form of cooperation on BRI. If anything, they should use China's appetite for high-level endorsement of the initiative ahead of the second Belt and Road Summit, planned for April 2019, as leverage to advance their own interests.

Continuing to push China more assertively to seek common ground with European interests will also help to avoid the escalation of tensions into a trade dispute, like the one currently ongoing between China and the US. To be sure, this is currently unlikely, in Germany and Europe. BDI itself only recommends limiting dependence on the Chinese market, being fully aware that China remains an important trade partner. Nevertheless, problems should be tackled before tensions arise.

In the United States, too, contentious issues in trade relations remained long unaddressed in the hopes that a quiet approach would be rewarded by China with market access. Ultimately, continuous disappointment led to the current escalation of a

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trade war, in which hawks like Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro, previously silenced by a more China-friendly business community, seized the opportunity to take over.

Moreover, European business and political leaders should also keep using strategic momentum created by the US-China trade dispute, and China's need to 'make concessions' in a sign of goodwill, to woo European partners. They should also take the level of coordination reached through negotiations for an EU investment screening mechanism as the starting point for a healthy practice of intra-European exchanges on other topical issues in relations with Beijing.

Jointly debating risks and opportunities associated with China's involvement in Europe's 5G infrastructure could be one. Indeed, a new concern currently being debated in Germany is China's National Intelligence Law, which forces all Chinese organisations and citizens to cooperate in the country's intelligence work. Chinese telecoms giant Huawei, which is bidding to build 5G infrastructure in Germany and Europe, would operate under this law (Barkin 2018b).

Looking ahead, a stronger posture in the promotion of European values and interests vis-à-vis China should be upheld beyond economic issues and expanded to other problematic aspects of Europe's relationship with China, such as extensive human rights violations and concerning developments in Xinjiang. So far, the desire for cosy business ties with China has largely muted strong, public rhetoric on 'uncomfortable' topics that Beijing is unwilling to discuss. Now, a more assertive stance on economic issues could lay the groundwork for a more confident position on other values-related issues in the relations between Europe and China. ■



PC: *The Pipeline of Book Censorship*, <https://tavaana.org>

How the Chinese Censors Highlight Fundamental Problems in Academic Publishing

Choosing Pathways to Validity and Relevance for Chinese Politics Research

Nicholas Loubere and Ivan Franceschini

Heads of major international organisations and world-famous actresses are not all that has been disappearing in China in recent months. According to a complaint recently posted online by several scholars, Springer Nature—the world’s largest academic publisher—is guilty of removing ‘politically sensitive’ content published in the *Transcultural Research* book series from their Chinese website at the request of the Chinese authorities (MCLC 2018). When confronted by the editors of the series, the publisher countered that they were merely following local laws and pointed to the fact that Chinese sales had increased in the wake of the act of self-censorship. This craven willingness to submit to censorship once again highlights the fact that

academic freedom and integrity are simply incompatible with the current structure of the commercial academic publishing industry.

We have been here before, and not that long ago. In August 2017 the academic community was scandalised by the revelation that Cambridge University Press (CUP) had capitulated to the Chinese censors, blocking access to 315 articles in the prestigious journal *The China Quarterly* (Phillips 2017). At that time, this act of censorship was met with widespread protest and threats of a boycott, with CUP eventually reversing its decision (Kennedy and Phillips 2017). The CUP incident was a dramatic demonstration of both China's increasing assertiveness and confidence, and the lengths that academic publishers are willing to go to in order to maintain access to the Chinese market. Unsurprisingly, it was later discovered that CUP was not alone, as anonymous interviews with commercial publishers revealed widespread practices of self-censorship in China (AFP 2017).

In October 2017 Springer Nature itself had admitted to 'limiting' at least 1,000 articles on their Chinese website at the request of the Chinese government. At that time the publisher declared: 'We do not believe that it is in the interests of our authors, customers, or the wider scientific and academic community, or to the advancement of research for us to be banned from distributing our content in China' (Reuters 2017). The most recent incident reveals that Springer Nature has not only refused to change their position with regard to this self-censorship over the past year, but that they are willing to continue working at the bequest of the Chinese censors in order to maintain their position in the Chinese market.

Unlike with CUP, there has not been the same level of outrage or a concerted global campaign targeting Springer Nature. The editors of *Transcultural Research* hope to change that. They have discontinued their agreement with the publisher and have called for the academic community 'to take all the steps necessary' to make it clear that this behaviour is unacceptable. However, up until now the story has failed to gain much traction in the media, and it seems that a full-scale boycott of publishers that engage in such practices is not forthcoming.

On the surface, this apathetic response to the erosion of the core value of academic freedom by one of the main global players in the sector is puzzling. However, it should be understood in the wider context of the academy's acquiescence to commercial modes of publishing that have turned the dissemination of scientific results into a highly profitable and exploitative

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business. Springer was at the forefront of the commercial revolution that in the post-WWII period saw academic publishing transformed from a varied landscape of small-scale journals and books published by a variety of institutions or professional societies, into a vast market raking in higher profits than Google, Apple, and Amazon. This profit is achieved through a ‘triple-pay system’ where the public: a) funds the research; b) funds the salaries of the authors, editors, and peer-reviewers; and c) purchases the published output through university library subscriptions (Buranyi 2017). To make matters worse, the research is then locked behind outrageously expensive paywalls, making it inaccessible to the public that financed it in the first place (Monbiot 2018). This system blocks access to academic research much more efficiently than any government censorship regime could dream of (Loubere and Franceschini 2017).

While the current situation is obviously absurd, particularly considering that the Internet allows for the easy and cheap dissemination of scientific findings, it is nevertheless a status quo that has proven very difficult to effectively contest. While there are open access movements, they often seek to operate through the existing publishing system, rather than outside it, for instance by paying publishers for the right to put articles online without any restriction.

The profit-oriented publishing industry has been highly effective in limiting the space available to challenge its domination. Commercial entities control the journals, the citation indexes, and the official ‘impact factors’ that are used to rank journals. The ability to publish in the ‘top journals’—as defined by this system—is crucial in order to find an academic job, achieve tenure, get promoted, and successfully apply for funding (Heckman and Moktan 2018). Additionally, the number of articles published in top journals plays an important role in the university ranking systems (which are also commercially owned). This has made it extremely difficult for academics to extricate themselves from exploitative relationships with publishers like Springer Nature.

In this context, where academic subjugation to profit-oriented publishers is the normal state of affairs, we should not be so surprised at the indifference with which Springer Nature’s candid admission of profit-driven self-censorship was met. After all, in a market system that prizes profits above all

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else, this decision makes perfect sense. Even the challenges to CUP and now Springer Nature fail to address the fundamental reasons that academic publishers are casually jettisoning the supposedly sacred value of academic freedom in the search for higher profits. Calls to boycott publishers in order to threaten their bottom line might work if their commercial interests are actually threatened by the boycott, but it only does so by feeding into the same profit-seeking mechanisms that prompted the bad behaviour in the first place. It does not deal with the fundamental crisis in academic publishing—that profit-oriented publishers will prioritise profit at the expense of core academic values.

This is a harsh reality to confront, but one that we must face up to if we are to properly understand what these incidents mean for the future of academic publishing. We are now in a new normal, where academic publishers willingly and unapologetically capitulate to the interests of powerful actors in order to maintain market access. It is not enough to just react to outrageous incidents or engage in isolated boycotts against individual publishers. The only option is to collectively extract ourselves from the exploitative relationships that undermine our academic values and to reclaim academic publishing through truly open, free, and non-profit-oriented modes of academic dissemination. ■



CHINA COLUMNS





Chinese Yuan notes.
PC: Alex Segre (Flickr.com)

Strategic Considerations of Chinese Investors in Europe

Ulrike Reisach

The growth of Chinese foreign acquisitions in Europe has attracted interest from businesses, media, and governments, raising concerns about potential transfers of knowledge and unclear linkages with Chinese governmental plans and subsidies. Still, it is important to bear in mind that each acquisition presents different backgrounds, strategies, priorities, and operational procedures. Some investments are business-driven, others are private; some fit the Chinese government's plans and some do not.

Chinese investors have adopted practices similar to their European counterparts: they grasp opportunities to enter new markets and internationalise their brand names, production facilities, staff, and operations in order to make more profits in new places. The globalisation and opening of world markets over the past decades has brought a new level of competition, which has overstrained several smaller- and medium-sized industries in both Europe and China. Not all companies have been adaptive enough or had the courage, strategic foresight, money, staff, and skills to expand their business at the right time, to the most promising places, and with the appropriate partners.

The Spread Your Wings Campaign started in China in 2001, the year of China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since then, many Chinese companies went abroad in an attempt to increase their sales and manufacturing capacities (Reisach 2008, 47). More recently, much attention has been dedicated to Chinese investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a project of the Chinese authorities that seeks to further connect China to South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. In this essay, I will focus on Chinese investments in Europe, highlighting how investors formulate business strategies while adapting to national needs and initiatives.

National and Business-related Goals

Some investments are driven by the political priorities of the Chinese state. For instance, the need to feed an increasingly demanding Chinese population triggers investments such as those of the state-owned conglomerate ChemChina, which in 2016 purchased Syngenta (Switzerland), a global leader in fertilisers and herbicides. In the previous 10 years, ChemChina had also acquired 40 percent of Rosneft in Russia and 25 percent of Pirelli in Italy. The company has also gained complete

ownership of Krauss-Maffei Plastic Material Machine Building in Germany and Rhodia and Adisseo with their fertilisers and additives to animal food in France.

But not all investments are motivated by the state. Internationalisation means diversification, new opportunities, and new challenges. Since the Chinese market is partially saturated and extremely competitive, it seems like a good idea to expand to markets which allow further growth. Tariffs make products more expensive and Chinese products do not always have the best reputation, therefore building up locations in the target market is a promising option. In choosing their locations in Europe, Chinese investors try to combine complementary strengths with needs. For instance, the town of Prato near Florence, Italy, is a prominent example of the Chinese fashion industry's migration to Europe (Chen 2011). The decline of local industries and the take-over by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs went hand-in-hand, and at the same time were caused and enabled by the new global paradigm of open markets (Adamo 2016).

Preferred targets in industrial regions of Europe embrace the automotive industry (including robotics), machine building, electronics and microelectronics, energy and environment, information and communication technology, software, chemical, pharmaceutical, and health-related companies (Hanemann and Huotari 2015 and 2017). Most of the investments come from Chinese industrial companies in a similar field. If the target seems attractive enough, these investors do not hesitate to move into new fields. This was the case when Midea, a huge Chinese manufacturer of household appliances, took over Kuka, a German industry robot company. Since Midea offered much more money than any other investor, the Chinese company was able to acquire one of the German industrial gems. This purchase caused some concerns as to whether the complete openness for foreign acquisitions was desirable for all sectors. Ultimately, an amendment regulation referring to the German foreign business

law was created which now requires state permission for takeovers of companies in key telecommunication infrastructure and other technologies, which have the potential to endanger state security (BMW 2017). Similar debates took place at the European Union level, when Germany, France, and Italy called for a EU-wide mechanism for more rigorous control of foreign takeovers (Alderman 2018).

Many industrial investments are driven by an interest in the special technology of a company, their brand names, and overall reputation for good quality. Chinese investors are keen to expand in new technological fields with the help of foreign acquisitions. Acquisitions mean technology transfers to both the Chinese company's headquarters and also to their other subsidiaries (Yu and Dowling 2018). Those often integrate the new technology into their product portfolio, offering it as 'superior quality', made in Europe, with a higher price. At the same time, they open the gateway to China for companies which had been too small and not prepared for the huge and dynamic markets in Asia. This was the case when the private Chinese heavy equipment company Sany decided to purchase the concrete-pump producer Putzmeister in southern Germany in 2012. Sany admired Putzmeister for its technology, and for the skills of its workers (Jiang 2015). Sany was also planning a further expansion in Europe, so the former owner of Putzmeister, Karl Schlecht, was happy to hand over his company to a much larger entity that guaranteed the job security of his employees (Schlecht 2012).

China's industry is on its way to move from 'Made in China' to 'Created in China', developing, publishing, and patenting its own innovation, in order to conquer world markets with high-quality products or services (State Council 2016). The number of Chinese patent applications has increased significantly, and so have their scientific publications. But not all of these patents and publications show the desired quality. Therefore, quality instead of quantity has been propagated as the 'new

normal' for China (Zhang 2017), and the economic growth is supposed to be more qualitative than quantitative.

Small and Medium Acquisition Targets and Greenfield Investments

Chinese investors often acquire small- or medium-sized companies (SMEs) because they are cheaper and, as a consequence, less risky. Moreover, this kind of investment does not require complicated approval procedures in China nor does it usually trigger big debates in the target country. Often, acquisition targets have gone through the hands of several investment funds before, resulting in asset sales (or sale and lease back practices) with high profits for the funds but significant problems for the remaining industrial 'skeleton'. This kind of cross-border investment started through the opening of capital markets after the turn of the century. It is, therefore, not so surprising that after a decade of being picked apart by vulture capitalists, what is left of these companies usually welcome industrial investors from China who, for the first time, give them a perspective and let them expand their production facilities and workforces. For instance, in 2010 the German sealing and rubber products company Saargummi actively searched for a 'saviour' of their company in order to preserve jobs in their region. Finally, they found their desired investor in Chongqing Light Industry and Textile (CQLT), a Chinese stock market-listed company mainly owned by the megacity of Chongqing. CQLT is a major supplier for the Chinese car industry and through Saargummi it gained additional international subsidiaries in places such as Brazil and the Czech Republic.

Start-up or green field business investments in Europe allow for easy access to the European Common Market and immigration through business visas. The competition is

not as fierce as in China, and the regulation is transparent and predictable. In the European Common Market with its free internal trade, it makes sense to establish a European holding in a low-tax location (Andrejovská et al. 2017, 1007–12). Chinese investors' European holdings or businesses benefit from regional subsidies, e.g. targeting job creation. Some of those businesses run well and employ local and Chinese workforce, while others seem not to be very active.

Personal Goals and Private Investments

Several Chinese conglomerates or rich individuals like to purchase luxury targets, such as cinemas, tourism agencies, shopping malls, or vineyards (Meyer 2016). This trend slowed in June 2017, when critics of Chinese foreign acquisitions became louder in the United States and Europe, and when the China Banking Regulatory Commission started assessing Chinese banks' exposure to debt raised by overseas acquisitions. First, large Chinese investors were asked to re-evaluate their foreign acquisitions (Giesen and Schreiber 2017). This was a call to stop debt-financed foreign acquisitions in fields that cause much public attention and are not directly supporting the government's long-term goals. Among others, Dalian Wanda seems to follow this advice and is reported to be exploring stake sales of their Hollywood film studio and sports assets (Wu et al. 2018).

Chinese private investors have also been quite active in European real estate markets, in cities such as London, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Prague, Berlin, and Munich. Similar to previous strategies in the United States and Canada, they seek European capitals, university cities, or holiday destinations to invest their money in promisingly profitable and attractive assets. Since the Chinese real estate market has become extremely competitive and expensive, and countries like Australia and Canada have

restricted foreign real estate investments, it makes sense for wealthy Chinese citizens to invest in Europe.

Working and living in Europe is a strong motivation for many Chinese business persons to invest in the continent. Some EU countries sell passports to people who invest certain sums in order to raise revenue for the state. The relatively low cost is a tempting opportunity for Chinese investors who want to get rid of complicated visa requirements and obtain a permanent residence or citizenship in the EU. They enjoy several things which they cannot receive in China: the freedom of movement throughout Europe, the landscape and clean air, access to the health care system, and access to the schooling and university system for their families. In China, these things are only accessible through hard work and study, social connections, and large amounts of money. In this sense, it is often easier and cheaper for some Chinese investors to try their luck in Europe.

Additionally, small entrepreneurs are suffering from a highly dynamic and competitive market in China. They often run several businesses in parallel, usually together with family members. Running a business might be risky due to complex rules that differ in each Chinese province and are subject to frequent change. This and the current anti-corruption campaign leads some entrepreneurs to think that having a second or third location and place to live in Europe is a kind of insurance, just in case they run into difficulties at home. This kind of motivation might be understandable, but is risky for European business partners: a seemingly rich entrepreneur might suddenly run out of funding and backing in China. This was the case when D'Long, a conglomerate which had been one of the biggest private Chinese companies, tried to acquire the German aircraft manufacturer Fairchild Dornier in Oberpfaffenhofen, near Munich. From the first contacts in 2004 until 2010, media reports said that the Chinese investors had promised to finance a more than tenfold increase in staff numbers in order to develop

a new class of regional aircrafts. The promised funding never arrived and it turned out that the Chinese Banking Regulation Commission was investigating speculative money transactions of the conglomerate.

The Chinese Approval Process as a Filtering Mechanism

Chinese investors need an approval to transfer money abroad. The National and Provincial Development and Reform Commissions run a tight evaluation process together with the Ministry of Commerce, before a Chinese company is allowed to make a foreign acquisition (Reisach 2016b, 8). This procedure has been established to avoid illegal money transfers and to make sure that Chinese investments abroad make economic sense. The approval process was developed after failures of Chinese takeovers made the headlines in Europe. In recent years, the process has been standardised, regional bodies have been made responsible, and President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign seems to have had an impact, with European partners seeing fewer cases of high-volume mis-investments. Indeed, as Mueller's study in this issue of *Made in China* shows, most industrial investments are regarded as quite satisfying. If there are 'black sheep', in most cases they are not well-known state-owned companies but individual investors who do not get support from the Chinese government and the local embassy. The reason for this is simple: the failure of a company introduced or supported by high ranking Chinese officials involves a loss of face. As respondents in our research said: 'The Chinese government doesn't like bad headlines from investments that don't perform' (Reisach 2017b).

Successful applicants usually get favourable terms, such as insurance coverage or special support through funds that have been created

to support economic and technical cooperation with foreign partners. Nevertheless, there are still Chinese investors that appear in Europe without going through these formal procedures. Sometimes it is Hong Kong or Taiwanese individuals or companies that are not subject to these rules, or overseas Chinese and private companies from mainland China that are registered in Hong Kong or in some tax haven. In those cases, the provenience of the money is usually not transparent and foreign partners would be wise to be careful.

Leadership Style and Decision-Making

Large Chinese companies are often very hierarchical, while smaller private ones are usually led by a founder/owner who runs the ‘company family’, like a good father. The structure of power, governance, and relationships inside and outside the company is decisive for success. This fits well with the leadership style of many medium-sized industrial companies in Europe. In my research, most of the partners in Chinese-acquired industrial companies whom I interviewed, especially representatives of the workers’ council, said that they do not see any or much change in how the companies are being managed (Reisach 2017b). These results were confirmed by interviewing the CEOs and representatives of the Chinese owners. In general, board members see many commonalities in planning and decision-making.

Regarding planning and decision-making, Chinese investors carefully check business and investment plans, as well as manufacturing technologies, staff, and sales. Sometimes discussions take more time and need more explanation, but basically the interests are similar. Regarding strategies, most Chinese investors, especially the big state-owned ones, are investing in new manufacturing lines and subsidiaries in third countries such as

those in Eastern Europe, Central and South America, and Asia. They use the brand name, language skills, and international management experience of their European subsidiaries to enter these markets.

In several cases, the new Chinese owners even open a subsidiary in China for their European acquisition as a kind of incentive for the local management to get more active in China. This ‘bride gift’ lets European managers experience the opportunities and dynamics of the Chinese market, and stimulates know-how transfer to ‘their’ subsidiary in China (Reisach 2017b, 32). Members of worker councils and unions are also welcomed into the Chinese mother companies, because they are able to spread the information that the Chinese owner company is impressively large and modern. This reduces fear and builds trust between the new owners and their current and future European affiliates.

Many Chinese companies lack staff with international management experience (Backaler 2015, 77–95 and 165). They often recruit Chinese natives who live and work in Europe as supervisors and board members for their European acquisitions. These Chinese already know the language and business culture and act as intermediaries between the Chinese headquarters and the European subsidiary. Several subsidiaries are bundled together in European holding companies and registered as limited liability companies (Ltd.), run by Chinese and European board members. This facilitates the sharing of expertise and motivates European managers. Tax and legal liability advantages reduce the risk and create additional benefits for all parties. Quite often, these entities are no longer recognisable as being Chinese in the statistics. They act according to EU law and can hardly be differentiated from other mixed investors on the market.

A Level Playing Field?

The European Union advocates free trade in order to foster exchange, cooperation, and innovation. Access to the European market is relatively easy for Chinese companies because Europe follows the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) principle of non-discrimination (WTO 2018). Chinese investors benefit from the openness of European markets, externally and internally; a low level of regulatory pressure; support from the Chinese state; low prices of European SMEs and their reputation for high quality products; innovative technologies; and a good cash flow through holding structures in low-tax locations in Europe. European companies do not enjoy these kinds of benefits if they enter the Chinese market. Their main incentive remains the size and growth of their sales in the Chinese market, and the hope for fair treatment as partners.

When China accessed the WTO in 2001, it was still more or less a developing country that needed and promised a step-by-step adaption of the WTO's rules. Most foreign companies that wanted to invest in China had to form a joint venture with a Chinese company as majority shareholder. These restrictions have been lowered in 2018 for car manufacturers, but investment in telecommunications and media, architecture and engineering, strategic infrastructure, as well as financial intermediation and insurance are still restricted for foreign companies in China (OECD 2015). Similar tendencies can be observed in the digital sphere: foreign companies need to team up with a Chinese partner in order to enter the Chinese market, whereas Chinese apps spread out along the 'digital silk road' and enter European markets without such regulations (Reisach 2018; see also Oreglia in the present issue of *Made in China*).

This imbalance requires several direct forms of action. First, a joint EU approach in dealing with and regulating large-scale investments or investments in sensitive industries (no matter where they originate from) while keeping up the core principle of free market access—here, EU

member states still have quite different national sentiments and rules. Second, digital business needs more regulation. This is not a China-specific but international issue, and national or EU institutions cannot put this in practice while using a free and unregulated global Internet. This highlights the system difference we are observing: the Chinese government regulates the digital sphere, emphasises its cyber-sovereignty, and uses supervision to keep Internet activity under control. Western democracies usually do not like this approach, as it is perceived as directive and strict, but on the other hand, the consequences of complete freedom and openness have also revealed certain weaknesses. Going forward, it will be interesting to observe which systems and which methods will prevail.

Outlook

After a phase of strong European investment in China following the country's accession to the WTO in 2001, the direction of foreign investments has changed. Chinese entrepreneurs have matured and gained experience in international markets. They are increasingly setting industrial and digital standards, and may even become leaders in their respective spheres. Europe is an attractive partner for developing, sourcing, and selling products; for science, technology, and management experience; and for responsibility, environmental protection, and quality of life. It is sometimes complex and has internal challenges, but is advanced and more stable than Central and South Asia or Africa. If the European Union member states cooperate, they can use their comparative advantages and balance European and Chinese interests e.g. in standardisation, intellectual property rights protection, and cyber security affairs. Indeed, during turbulent times in world trade, it is advisable to work on future-oriented fields that foster a mutually fruitful Eurasian cooperation. ■



Angela Merkel
and Xi Jinping.
PC: Activist Post

Chinese Investors in Germany

A Threat to Jobs and Labour
Standards?

Wolfgang Mueller

While the German economy is generally quite open to FDI, Chinese investors in the country have been facing widespread mistrust, a feeling reinforced by concerns related to transfers of know-how and the relocation of jobs to 'low-cost' China. In order to gather empirical evidence about the actual impact of Chinese investment in Germany and confront prejudice, Wolfgang Mueller carried out a survey on 42 of about 70 Chinese-invested companies in the country with more than 150 employees, covering the manufacturing, logistics, and service sectors.

German industry, especially the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that constitute the so-called 'Mittelstand', has been a target of Chinese foreign investment for some time. But according to data from the German Central Bank, in 2018 the proportion of German foreign direct investment (FDI) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) compared to Chinese FDI in Germany remained 16 to 1 (Jones 2018).

In general, the German economy is relatively open to FDI. But since private equity funds and other financial investors entered the FDI arena in the early 2000s, there has been an increasing

public awareness about the impact of foreign investment on labour and society. This has culminated in the coining of the term ‘locusts’ (*heuschrecken*) to describe financial investors in light of their habit of cutting jobs and dismantling companies after a takeover. In the case of Chinese investors, those reservations are reinforced by concerns related to transfers of know-how and the relocation of jobs to ‘low-cost’ China.

To gain empirical evidence about the real impact of Chinese investment in Germany and confront prejudice, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, a German foundation affiliated to the German Trade Union Confederation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund; DGB), commissioned me to conduct a survey on the implications of China’s FDIs for employment and working conditions in German companies acquired by Chinese investors (Mueller 2017). The study was finished in early 2017 and covered 42 of approximately 70 Chinese-invested companies (including ‘green field’ investments) in the manufacturing, logistics, and service sectors. Each company had no less than 150 employees, and in total employed more than 55,000 people. In this sense, we can say that the results presented here are representative.

Chinese investors covered by the study include both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies. Most Chinese investments focus on the mechanical engineering and automotive sectors, but investments in environmental technology are also relevant. The study was based on structured interviews conducted on the phone, plus face-to-face interviews with worker council members or trade union officials. These worker representatives are the basic and most reliable source of information on labour issues within German companies and are normally also well informed about the latest corporate developments.

Codetermination and Workers’ Participation

My survey found that after the entry of Chinese investors, the codetermination culture at the factory and company-level, as well as the collective agreements, remain essentially unchanged or, in some cases, even improve. Fears of widespread job losses do not materialise, and while know-how is indeed being transferred to China, at the same time the research and development capacities expand of the companies in which the Chinese have invested.

According to employee representatives whom I interviewed, Chinese investments are generally long-term, compared to the short-termism that dominates western management culture. Even under significant economic difficulties, in some of the companies that I investigated the investors maintained a long-term perspective and further investments were being made.

From the point of view of investors from China, although labour relations in Germany are quite opaque, they seem to grasp codetermination and collective agreements as part of the institutional arrangement of their investment. There are also indications that some investors consider codetermination and workers’ participation as an assurance of quality production. For them, the worker council seems to represent the skilled workers and the quality work they do—in other words, exactly those intangible ‘assets’ that prompted their decision to invest in Germany in the first place.

Wherever Chinese investors have taken over companies with established worker representation bodies, these structures have remained untouched. Wherever previous owners had hitherto successfully thwarted the founding of worker councils, the company has remained free of worker councils after the entry of Chinese investors. Similarly, green field investments, especially in the information technologies and telecommunications, have

not yet led to the founding of worker councils—although in the telecom service companies that Huawei and ZTE have acquired from Vodafone and Telefonica, existing worker councils have thus far not been touched.

In some cases, contacts between representatives of the Chinese investor and the worker council in the targeted company were established well before the takeover was completed. Such contacts happened not only with companies that Chinese investors saved from bankruptcy, but these contacts—sometimes actively pursued by the Chinese side—suggest that the support of the workers is important for the decision to commit to the investment. In some cases, regular contact is established between representatives of the Chinese investor, the worker council, and the German trade unions active in the company. This might express an appreciation of the Chinese side for worker councils that is not common among other foreign investors in Germany.

As in some other European countries, German laws stipulate that public companies adopt a two-tiered governance structure consisting of a management board and a supervisory board, with workers taking up representation on the supervisory board. Insofar as the acquired companies already have supervisory boards, the Chinese investors have sent their representatives to sit on these bodies. In some cases, representatives from labour on supervisory boards report on intensive communications with the Chinese representatives.

This is especially true of Chinese SOEs. My interviews show that the Chinese representatives on supervisory boards perceive the employee representatives primarily as spokespersons of the acquired company. They regularly seek their opinions regarding the situation of the acquired company and on upcoming decisions. In this regard, it seems that representatives of the Chinese SOEs appreciate the trade union even more than most previous

owners. However, it is consistently reported that the workings of the supervisory boards suffer from language problems.

Attitude towards Existing Collective Agreements

My survey highlights that collective agreements already in place are not affected by Chinese investors. In some of the companies where there were no collective agreements, this was because previous owners had successfully prevented or terminated them. In some cases I examined, worker councils, the union, and the workers were trying to establish collective bargaining coverage after the takeover. Resistance against such initiatives did not come from the Chinese investor but from the German management that had been kept in place, with their experience in ‘concession bargaining’. Employee representatives repeatedly reported that management demanded concessions from the employees in return for a new contract and for safe jobs, referring to alleged pressure from China. But that pressure from China could never be substantiated.

So far, there are no documented cases of interventions by Chinese investors against collective bargaining. On the contrary, when the German management of a mechanical engineering company left the employers’ association and recalled the collective agreement in 2011, the workers went on strike against that move. On that occasion, the parent company from Beijing intervened and pressed for a return to the collective agreement.

As with the worker councils, the acceptance of collective agreements and their higher standards is quite different in Chinese companies in the information technologies and electronics industry. Huawei and ZTE in Germany are not bound by collective agreements. Whether the recent conclusion of a collective agreement between IG Metall and

Huawei TS for the former Vodafone services division marks a rethink in this regards will become apparent in the near future.

In the takeover process of the German robotics maker Kuka by privately owned Chinese company Midea, the worker council and trade union succeeded in getting concrete commitments and guarantees regarding locations, the temporary exclusion of redundancies, and further investment in Germany. In addition, the Chinese investor agreed to a binding timeframe to ensure that the commitments are respected until 2023. Similar binding job protection agreements have been signed in other Chinese-invested companies.

Some economists—for instance Jean-Marc F. Blanchard (2016)—question the quality of such guarantees, especially their legally binding nature. It should be noted that: a) there is currently no evidence that Chinese investors are particularly unreliable; b) such longer-term guarantees are rather rare in corporate takeovers and the same claim could be levied against other investors as well; and c) such commitments are very important for the action of worker councils and unions because they can generate considerable pressure in spite of possible legal shortcomings.

Corporate Development

Chinese investors use considerable funds to make the acquired companies fit for the future. They invest not only in research and development, but also in new production facilities and plants. This applies to both SOEs and private companies. Even in cases where it was apparent that the Chinese investor had significantly overpaid, suggesting they would try to cut costs to offset losses, future funding and continued investment was nevertheless forthcoming. Sometimes the new investors also had to beef-up the working capital to keep the acquired company going. To the delight of the employee representatives and much to the

astonishment of some German managers, the new owners sometimes shoulder investments that the previous owners had shied away from.

On balance, headcount development across the companies has so far been positive. Jobs are being added not only in research and development, but also in production. The focus of the new owners and the main shareholders is not limited to margins, but resides primarily in revenue growth. This focus on growth applies to all industries and is confirmed in many interviews.

One possible explanation is that the companies sold to Chinese investors are already ‘lean’ after years of downsizing and cost cutting. However, this can only partially explain the fact that job cuts have not been on the agenda. Rather, the SOEs and private investors from China apparently pursue other goals than the vendors: they want to grow with the help of the acquired companies.

So far, there is no evidence of the much-feared job relocations to China. For instance, when an SOE took over an insolvent, medium-sized specialty vehicle manufacturer, the members of the worker council were very much concerned about the jobs. The representatives of the SOE made it clear that they wanted to buy that company precisely because of the label ‘Made in Germany’, and today the new owner has created more than 100 additional jobs.

Transmission of Know-how

A major concern in the public discourse in Germany about the dangers of Chinese FDI is related to the outflow of know-how to China, with the consequent loss of technological leadership. Many employee representatives talk about training programs for employees from China and support from Germany in setting up new production lines and new research and development departments in China. Yet, they also mention that the quality of processes and products transferred to China

often leaves much to be desired despite the fact that, in some cases, the transfer of know-how has already been going on for years.

Ultimately, however, the question of the future viability of Chinese-invested companies is not determined by the transfer of know-how. It is about whether the new investors or owners of these companies invest in research and development, i.e. whether further know-how is being built up in Germany. In this regard, my interviews reveal that Chinese investors are by no means cutting development budgets, but are investing more in the advancement of know-how in Germany than the old owners.

Adopting a long-term view, Chinese investors want German quality and know-how, and have an appreciation for skilled workers. They know that the know-how in companies is first of all from accumulated experience that cannot simply be transferred through a USB stick. That is why they want motivated employees to remain in the business—a longer phase of uncertainty with the ensuing discouragement of employees is not in their interest.

Dealing with Crises

Chinese investors in general accept longer periods of drought. They do not demand immediate staff readjustments following reduced sales. For worker councils, but also for the German management, such an experience is rather uncommon. Even existing collective agreements are initially left untouched, in some cases in spite of years of losses. Some worker representatives pointed out that the patience of Chinese investors is atypical. If a restructuring of the company is finally inevitable, necessary adjustments are developed in consensus with employee representatives. There are also reports about contradictions between the management favouring quick solutions and hard cuts, and the Chinese investors. In at least one case, restructuring plans were scrapped by the investors.

The employee representatives whom I interviewed showed little concern about how Chinese investors would behave in the event of a crisis. There is more uncertainty about future developments in China and how these will impact investment. So far, Chinese investors—especially the SOEs—seem to have unlimited liquidity at their disposal. This has contributed significantly to the positive mood among employee representatives and employees of Chinese-invested companies in Germany. But there are fears that this course might change should developments in China force Chinese investors to re-evaluate their investments in Germany.

Incidentally, Chinese investments in Germany and Europe and the commitments made by Chinese investors are also an issue in China. There have been discussions in Chinese media that some investments have been overpriced, for example in the case of Kuka. Reportedly, Chinese blogs have been debating whether China pays too much to protect jobs in Germany.

How to Communicate with Chinese Investors?

In many cases, especially in companies without a supervisory board including labour representatives, worker councils or trade unions have virtually no contact with the Chinese side. The investor remains invisible, and the German management remains mostly unchanged after the investors' entry. This lack of communication with the Chinese investor is a problem for the worker representatives whom I interviewed. They regard a direct channel of communication with representatives of the investor as important, especially as the interests of the local managers and the Chinese side are sometimes different.

Therefore, some worker councils or unions have actively tried to contact the Chinese investor. Thus far, the Chinese side has generally responded positively to these

initiatives. In one case, the boss of a Chinese SOE was astonished that the union had contacted him and had expressed a positive assessment of the takeover.

Once a direct contact has been established, the worker council can use this channel and turn directly to the Chinese side in critical situations—e.g. when there are massive problems in the company or in the event of a substantial conflict with local managers. In many cases, the establishment of a direct channel between the Chinese investor, the worker council, and the trade union also includes reciprocal invitations to join worker or corporate meetings. In some cases, contacts are also being established with the company union in the parent company in China.

Nevertheless, many representatives whom I interviewed complained about a general lack of understanding on industrial relations and codetermination on the Chinese side. This deficit should urgently be addressed, especially since the number and volume of Chinese investments in Germany and Europe is likely to increase further in the future.


Dispelling Misconceptions?

The overall picture of labour relations in Chinese-invested companies in Germany that I presented is astounding in view of both the widespread reservations about Chinese investments and the often negative experiences with corporate takeovers by financial investors.

This could partially be explained as stemming from the fact that Chinese investors do not have much experience with FDI yet, nor with Western management practices. China's private companies and SOEs have been following the 'going out' strategy for about a decade now. So far, they have little capacity and experience to manage the companies they invest in and integrate them into their corporate structures. They therefore leave the management untouched.

They have also different strategic interests compared to financial investors. China's SOEs are investing in the long term. They provide cushions for corporate crises and finance future investments. They want a bridgehead for their international expansion and for the acquisition of technology, process, and management know-how. Private investors, who also pursue strategic industrial interests with their foreign acquisitions, act in a similar way. In the context of the Made in China 2025 programme, German industry has a special appeal for China. This also applies to the acquired companies in which they develop 'stripped-down' products for China and for the world market. Through German products, Chinese investors also want to get rid of the cheap image that still clings to Chinese products.

Most importantly, the results of my survey raise a fundamental question: whether the Chinese investors represent another breed of capitalism—an alternative to the dominant Western model of neoliberal capitalism and the management practices associated with it. To answer this question by properly taking into account all the important political, economic, and societal implications associated with the continued expansion of Chinese investment in Europe and elsewhere, further studies are necessary. ■



FOCUS

To The Soil



Artwork by Marc Verdugo.



Inside Work

The Hidden Exploitation of Rural Women in Modern China

Tamara Jacka

Conventional wisdom holds that China's modern development has been powered by urban industry and commerce. The agrarian family economy, combining home handcraft production and domestic work with small-scale agriculture, is commonly seen as a remnant of the past. This essay proposes a different understanding of the development trajectory of modern China as being underpinned and enabled by exploitation in the agrarian family economy, especially of rural women.

Picking Tea at Gingko Village, 2016.

*Men rule outside, women rule inside
(nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei)
Ancient Chinese saying*

In conventional wisdom, China's modern development has been powered by urban industry and commerce. The agrarian family economy, combining home handcraft production and domestic work with small-scale agriculture, is commonly seen as a remnant of the past; a separate sphere that lags behind and is dependent on the modern economy, dragging it down rather than contributing to it.

In this essay, I propose a different understanding of modern development in China as being underpinned and enabled by exploitation in the agrarian family economy. My focus is the exploitation of rural women, working in what is understood in China as the ‘inside’ sphere. I use the word ‘exploitation’ here in the Marxist sense, to refer to the unpaid appropriation of labour power, achieved by not compensating workers for the full value of the goods they produce (Zwolinski 2017). I focus on the exploitation of rural women through ‘inside work’ because I believe it to be unjust, and because it provides the necessary foundations for other forms of unjust exploitation. Yet it has received little attention from scholars and activists.

One might think that ‘inside work’ is the same as what, in the industrialised West, is understood as a private sphere of unpaid domestic or reproductive work, in contrast to a public sphere of paid production. And indeed, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in 1949, it introduced to rural China an ideological gender division of labour very similar to that of the modern West. But before that, the Chinese outside/inside division meant something quite different from the Western public/private division. A growing convergence between the two has been one of the main mechanisms through which the state and capitalists in China have exploited rural women undertaking inside work. A mapping of modern Western conceptions of activities in the private sphere as unproductive and insignificant onto Chinese conceptions of inside work has been particularly important in this regard.

In the rest of this essay, I sketch out the transformations between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries through which this ideological convergence has occurred, and discuss how it has enabled the state and capitalist exploitation of women in inland, rural China. To illustrate key trends, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Gingko village, an agrarian community of 1,750 people, located in the foothills of the Dabie mountain range in

south-eastern Henan province. Work patterns in Gingko village are typical of relatively poor, Han villages in central China (for details, see Jacka 2017).

Late Nineteenth Century to Late Twentieth Century

In Europe, modernisation involved a shift from an agrarian family economy to an urban industrial economy, within which emerged an ideological split between families’ place of residence—the ‘private sphere’ of unpaid reproduction and consumption—and industrial workers’ place of work—the ‘public sphere’ of paid production. But early Chinese modernisation was different. It involved considerable commercialisation within the framework of the agrarian peasant family economy and much less industrialisation.

In imperial China, the state-promoted gender division of labour between outside and inside coincided closely with another ideological gender division between farming and textile production, as expressed in the saying ‘men plough, women weave’ (*nan geng, nü zhi*). Officials equated feminine inside work primarily with textile production, especially spinning and weaving. Women’s inside textile production and men’s outside agricultural work were equally valued as fundamental to an economic and political order centred on family self-sufficiency. Both cloth and grain supported subsistence and tax payments, as well as being sold (Bray 2013, 93–120). Equal valuation of women’s and men’s work did not, however, translate into gender equality in the family. In fact, commercialisation in the late imperial period coincided with an increasingly hierarchical neo-Confucian gender ideology, increased stress on women’s seclusion in the inside sphere, and the maintenance of male family heads’ control over the products of women’s labour (Gates 1989; Bray 1997, 252–72).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a perception grew among the political elite that women's home-based textile production was dying out. They believed, as did foreign observers, that such production was collapsing in the face of competition from imported cloth and China's newly emerging cotton mills. As recent studies have shown, though, machine-made yarn did not entirely replace home spinning. Furthermore, while the demand for homespun relative to factory-produced cloth declined, the absolute demand increased as a result of population growth and rising urban living standards (Eyferth 2012, 374). In 1934–36, 24 percent of rural Chinese households were engaged in spinning and weaving. In the central provinces where cotton was grown, home-based weaving was even more common: across Henan, roughly 60 percent of all rural households wove cotton cloth (Peng Zeyi 1957, cited in Eyferth 2012, 374).

That elite perceptions were at odds with this picture may have been due to regional variations, as well as the invisibility of village women working inside their homes. The vision of reformers may also have been clouded by a desire for modernity and a belief, derived from European modernising processes and ideology, that modernisation entailed industrialisation and the demise of village handcrafts.

Reformers appear also to have taken on the Western perception of the private sphere as being one solely of consumption and reproduction. Liang Qichao, for example, complained: 'Out of two hundred million women, every one is a consumer, not one is a producer. Because they cannot support themselves but depend on others for their support, men keep them like dogs and horses' (Liang Qichao 1898, cited in Eyferth 2017, 371). As Jacob Eyferth has pointed out, this statement is extraordinary in the context of late imperial China, as it was underpinned by ideas about gender and work that were very new. It is understandable only if we assume that Liang was imposing a Western ideological model of a modern economy, split between 'producers' in

industry and 'consumers' (and 'reproducers') in the home. Yet at the time, China's industrial sector was tiny, the vast majority of the population belonging to an agrarian family economy in which women as well as men were both consumers *and* producers (Eyferth 2012, 371–72). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that significant industrialisation occurred, and a Western-style public/private split emerged.

With collectivisation in rural China in the 1950s, a division between public production and private reproduction was institutionalised through a divide between paid production for the collective, and a private sphere of unpaid work. A key element of collectivisation was the mobilisation of women into public, collective labour. In Ginko village, as elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s, able-bodied women all worked full-time in collective production. But they were not recognised as full workers; they most commonly received 60 to 80 percent of a man's payment. This exploitation of women in 'public', 'outside' collective labour—crucial to the state's appropriation of rural resources for the ultimate goal of rapid industrialisation—was compounded by a yet greater exploitation of women in 'private', 'inside' labour.

Through the Maoist period (1949–78), some attempt was made to alleviate women's burden of domestic duties by running collective dining halls, but these generally only lasted for a few years during the Great Leap Forward (1958–61). The state also discouraged home-based spinning and weaving by providing coupons for the purchase of factory-made cloth, the aim being to maximise state appropriation of both raw cotton and women's labour in collective production, and prevent their diversion to village families. But the coupons were insufficient for families' needs, so women continued to spin and weave their own cloth (Eyferth 2012, 387–89).

Aside from this, the state paid almost no attention to women's work in the inside sphere: it was as if it did not exist. And yet, rural families could not have survived, and the labour power necessary for collective production could

not have been reproduced, were it not for the work of women caring for children and others, cleaning, producing food, and making clothes, bedding, and shoes. During this period, women toiled for almost as many, and in some cases more, hours in such inside family duties as in collective production.

I stress that women's supposedly 'unproductive' inside duties continued to involve textile production, including spinning and weaving, and the sewing of clothes, shoes, and bedding, as well as domestic work. Almost all women in Ginkgo village born before the 1960s spun and wove right through the collective period and, indeed, well into the post-Mao period. Even in the mid-2010s, elderly Ginkgo village women showed me cloth and cloth shoes they had made, and the dismantled parts of wooden spinning wheels and looms, stashed away with other junk less than a decade previously.

Most Ginkgo village women born after the mid-1960s did not spin or weave. Nor did they sew clothes. Some of their mothers sewed clothes by hand, but this generation mostly had clothes made by one of just a handful of local women who owned a sewing machine. However, through the Maoist period and into the post-Mao years, women of all ages sat with needle and thread each night, long after other family members had gone to bed, patching clothes and sewing cloth shoes and bedding (see also Hershatter 2011, 193–95).

It could be argued that the Maoist state's failure to more fully liberate women from their inside work limited its ability to exploit women in collective production. Perhaps if women had not lost so much sleep caring for and clothing their families, they might have had longer lives and more strength for collective work. But the state did not see women's inside work as either a contribution or a cost—it did not see it as 'work' or 'labour' at all (Hershatter 2011, 186). 'Unpaid and invisible as it was, women's textile [and domestic] work underpinned socialist accumulation, as much as it underpinned the reproduction of village life' (Eyferth 2012, 391).

1980s to 2010s

With decollectivisation and marketisation in the 1980s, rural women gradually stopped making their families' clothes, shoes and bedding, and bought them instead. But married women still devoted much time to domestic work, including care-work, as well as agriculture. They were supported in this by a post-Mao regime, which repudiated key features of Maoist development strategy and ideology, including its efforts to recruit women into the public sphere. Henceforth, a 'natural' gender order, restoring women to the inside sphere, was promoted (Jacka 1997, 88–89).

As before, the characterisation of inside work as 'unproductive'—as domestic duties, rather than real work—enabled the gross exploitation of the women responsible for such work. But the ideological emphasis shifted: whereas previously it was pretended that inside work did not exist, in the post-Mao period married women were enjoined to be good mothers. With the one-child policy, being a good mother meant having fewer children, but there was also an emphasis on the need for mothers to nurture 'quality' children, with 'scientific' child-rearing and education (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 237–44).

In the countryside between the 1980s and 2000s, responsibility for inside 'mothering' work was increasingly taken by grandmothers. Farming, too, was taken over by middle-aged and elderly women and men. Interestingly, agriculture increasingly came to be perceived not as outside production, but as inside reproduction. These trends were associated with the emergence of large-scale outmigration of villagers seeking waged work in domestic and transnational capitalist enterprises in urban and coastal China's construction, industrial, and service sectors.

In its initial phase, rural outmigration was undertaken primarily by young men. But across inland China by the late 1990s, most adults of both sexes under the age of 50 worked as wage labourers away from home for most of

the year. The majority went out alone, leaving behind wives, mothers, and grandparents. The latter group could generally earn less money in the city than younger workers, so for many it seemed more rational to stay in the village to tend the fields and care for family dependants (Jacka 2017).

In Gingko Village in the 1990s and 2000s, women generally migrated in their late teens and then returned to the village to get married and have a child (or two). When the child was just a few months old, he or she was handed to a grandmother, so the mother could continue to earn a wage as a migrant worker. Consequently, women in their 60s and 70s, who had previously raised three to six children but expected an easier life in their old age, now found themselves instead responsible for multiple grandchildren. There was also a sizable number of Gingko village women aged between 30 and 60 who effectively subsidised younger family members' migration by staying in the village to care for children, the frail elderly, the ill, and the disabled.

These village carers also did a great deal of farming work to provide food for their families and earn some cash. However, rice production for the market was unmanageably labour-intensive for middle-aged and elderly women burdened with care-work. Some villagers stopped planting rice and grew less labour-intensive crops; some contracted their paddy fields to others; and some simply abandoned them. But even those women who abandoned most of their land still raised chickens, grew vegetables, peanuts, and canola, and picked tea.

They also worked as underpaid farm labourers. Agricultural businesses often preferred to hire female labourers because, as in the collective period, the assumption was that their work deserved less pay than men's. In Gingko village, female farm labourers were paid 20 percent less than men. These women's work was vital to their families, for it not only supported the women themselves, but also covered (grand)children's costs. Most migrant

workers remitted some money to their rural families, but few could cover the full costs of their children's upkeep.

However, the economic contribution of women's agricultural work was not recognised. From Gingko villagers' point of view, migrants working outside (the village) were the breadwinners, while agriculture increasingly became associated with women's inside domestic work, and perceived as 'mere' subsistence and reproduction. And while the state viewed migrants' work in outside production as vital to the economy, if it saw women's work in agriculture at all, it was as a 'problem' for food security. Initially, the supposed problem was that women and the elderly were poor farmers: policy makers were not much concerned with the wellbeing of overworked villagers, but they did worry about declines in agricultural production. From the late 2000s, that concern morphed into one about land: elderly villagers had to get off the land, so it could be contracted to capitalist farmers, who would merge villagers' small plots into large tracts, suitable for 'efficient' mechanised crop farming (Ye 2015).

From the mid-2000s, the state also worried about the 'problem' of grandmothers raising children left behind by migrant parents. No appreciation was expressed for the contribution grandmothers made through their care-work. Instead, scholarship, policy documents, and the media were full of concern about left-behind children's supposed problems in school, poor health, accidental drownings in village ponds, and other misfortunes (e.g., Wang 2015). All these problems were blamed on the failure of 'backward' grandmothers to properly care for their charges. Bent as it was on raising the quality of the next generation, the state was particularly concerned that older rural women had little or no schooling. Motivated in part by this concern, the state pulled resources out of village schools and closed down many, forcing rural parents to send their children to urban boarding schools (Murphy 2014, 35).

By the 2010s, rural parents too had become alarmed by media horror stories about left-behind children. They also worried about the poor quality of their children's education in urban boarding schools as well as village schools. For many, the solution was to have young mothers remove caring and schooling duties from grandmothers and boarding schools, become carers themselves, and send their children to urban day-schools. Through the 2010s, it became increasingly common for women, who had resumed migrant waged labour when their babies were small, to return home when their children reached school-age and become *peidu mama* or 'mums accompanying [children] to school'. Together with their children, they moved to a rented apartment in a nearby town or city, so the children could attend a superior urban day-school (Tang, Liang, and Mu 2017). Other former migrant women in better-off families bought an urban apartment and remained there after marriage and childbirth.

In Gingko village, as a consequence of these trends, enrolments in the village primary school declined from 100 in 2013 to four in 2017. Most village women with school-aged children lived during the week in the nearby town or county city. None of these women had full-time paid jobs, but some picked up part-time, casual work or ran small businesses. Some returned to the village on weekends to tend land and care for the elderly. Others stayed in town, their parents or parents-in-law joining them there for varying lengths of time, to help care for small children or receive care themselves.

Were these women appreciated for the quality care they provided children, the elderly, and others, and the sacrifices they made in giving up their migrant work? No. On the contrary, some media articles reported that *peidu mama* were envied for being able to afford to withdraw from migrant work (Tang, Liang, and Mu 2017), while others stigmatised them as idle, 'loose' women, engaging in gambling and prostitution because they had 'nothing else to do' (Wu 2016).

A Hidden Engine of Economic Growth

In sum, in the post-Mao period as before, rural Chinese women undertaking inside work have been unrecognised and severely exploited. Between the 1980s and 2000s, middle-aged and older women's unpaid or under-paid inside labour in care-work and agriculture was crucial to the wellbeing of rural families, for it freed younger women and men to migrate in search of waged work. And for the state and capitalists it enabled a double saving: not only could they save on education, the provision of care, and other aspects of social reproduction; in so doing, they could grossly exploit rural migrant workers, paying them wages so low as to have been otherwise unsustainable.

In the 2010s, the state's exploitation and denigration of older rural carers came home to roost: young women increasingly felt compelled to give up their migrant jobs to take over care of their children, so the pool of cheap rural labour available to domestic and transnational capitalist enterprises shrunk. But by then, transnational capitalist enterprises seeing new, even cheaper sources of labour in other countries had already begun moving elsewhere. Faced with this and other concerns, the Chinese state embarked on a new development strategy, oriented more toward domestic consumption. The shift of rural women out of paid production into reproduction was a bonus, not a problem. It both reduced unemployment pressures and created a new group, who boosted consumption and reduced demand on state revenues by providing free care services and subsidising quality education. Yet again, the hidden exploitation of rural women in inside work, marginalised as not real work, was key to state power and capitalist, economic growth. ■



China's Land Reforms and the Logic of Capital Accumulation

Farmer and buffalo in a rural village in Hubei Province.
PC: Tauno Tohk

Jane Hayward

This essay briefly examines how rural land reforms in China are being driven by the imperative of capital accumulation. It looks at how policies of agricultural land transfer, new rural community construction, and the urban-rural land linking system, are all too often driven by the urban real estate industry in league with local governments and agribusinesses, rather than by villagers themselves.

China's integration into the world market, and its ever-tightening embrace of the logic of capital, is manifested in the ongoing mass reorganisation of land—both urban and rural—to create spaces for capital accumulation. This short essay will discuss how these processes are taking place in three ways: through agricultural land transfers, new rural community construction, and the urban-rural land linking system. Since the late 1950s, China's urban-rural relations have been organised on the basis of the household registration system, or *hukou*, under which Chinese people are allocated either a rural or an urban registration permit. Mobility between the countryside and cities has been restricted, and urban and rural land is governed under different systems. Urban land

is state-owned, and its use rights can be sold on the market. Agricultural land is collective, and cannot be sold. Access to public services, including healthcare and social security, has been determined by the *hukou*. Those living in the cities have enjoyed far better facilities, while those in the countryside have had to rely on their collective land rights as a form of guaranteed livelihood. This system, originally intended to preserve resources in the cities for urban industrialisation, institutionalised an unequal urban-rural relationship under which living conditions were, and continue to be, harsher for China's peasantry.

The *Hukou* Under Market Reforms

Following the start of market reforms in 1978, agricultural land was reorganised from the large communes of the Mao period to what was known as the household responsibility system. Ownership remained collective while the management rights to plots of land were contracted out to village households for production. Special Economic Zones were set up in China's eastern and southern coastal cities which attracted large amounts of foreign investment. The *hukou* system slackened as local governments turned a blind eye to peasants flooding into these areas in their millions, providing cheap labour for the export industry. Rural-urban migration accelerated further after the mid-1990s following fiscal reforms which stemmed the flow of money from the central government to the rural localities, redirecting it instead into urban industrial projects. Rural cadres were compelled to replenish their coffers by squeezing peasant households with extra taxes and fees, and also by expropriating plots of collective farmland to lease to developers in lucrative but often illegal deals. As a result, living conditions for China's peasantry deteriorated sharply. More and more people were forced to seek low-paid work in the cities. Once there, due to the *hukou* system,

they were discriminated against as second-class citizens and denied access to many basic facilities.

By 2002, China's countryside was in a state of emergency marked by impoverished households, corrupt local governments, and lack of investment in infrastructure. Large swathes of farmland risked the double jeopardy of abandonment by migrating villagers and illegal requisitions. China's entry to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, which would see agriculture exposed to world market competition, threatened to make matters worse. In order to address this crisis, a new set of policy guidelines was introduced under the slogan 'combined urban-rural planning' (*chengxiang tongchou*). This called for a complete renegotiation of the hierarchy between city and countryside, and the even distribution of the fruits of China's reforms across both urban and rural areas. Broadly speaking, the overhauling and modernisation of the countryside was to be achieved by the inward flow of capital investment, and the outward movement of people into towns and cities. This was intended to equalise the urban-rural wealth gap—the urban areas which had benefited up until now would 'pay back' the countryside, while former peasants would be able to enjoy the benefits of urbanisation and modern life.

Agricultural Land Transfers

Meanwhile, Chinese policymakers fiercely debated how to reorganise agricultural land. A strong cohort resisted calls to privatise it outright on the basis that individual peasant households with little bargaining power in the face of largescale corporations would too easily be separated from their property rights, leading to widespread landlessness and extreme poverty, as had already occurred in many other parts of the world (Hayward 2017, 528–31). Instead, at the key meeting of



Construction work in a rural village in Hubei.
PC: Tauno Tohk

the Third Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee in October 2008, China's leaders formally recognised the practice of land transfers (*tudi liuzhuan*). This meant that land remaining nominally under collective village ownership, and under contract to peasant households, could be 'transferred' (leased out) to third parties. These measures in effect divided the dual land rights of the household responsibility system into three—ownership, contract, and management rights—a system which has come to be known as the 'separation of three rights' (*san quan fen zhi*).

This shrewd innovation seeks to scale up the scattered household land plots by consolidating them in the hands of a smaller number of highly skilled, professionalised farming entities—usually large farm households or agribusinesses. The result is a quasi-land market, albeit one that functions under restricted conditions. While this brings more capital into the countryside, it amounts to the manipulation of the institution of collective property such that peasant land entitlements can more easily be exploited in the interests

of capital accumulation. The rental fee paid to peasant households may be more than they would make by working the land themselves, but it is not high, and studies have reported on the coercive tactics which may be used to get unwilling villagers to transfer their land (see Gong and Zhang 2017).

New Rural Community Construction

Meanwhile, rural villages are being reorganised under programmes of 'new rural community construction' (*xinxing nongcun shequ jianshe*). The goal is to 'civilise' villages by subjecting them to modern urban planning practices (Bray 2013, 54). Under this programme, village layouts are landscaped and reorganised on the basis of 'three concentrations': segregated zones of scaled-up agricultural land, consolidated industrial areas, and dense housing settlements (Bray 2013, 55–56). This means that, with a view to

organising the village in a more ‘rational’ way, traditional houses scattered around the village are demolished and villagers are relocated into high-rise tower blocks, freeing up village land for agricultural or industrial use to attract outside investment. These ‘community construction’ projects are expensive and, since local governments are already short of funds, financing them is not easy. Local officials may demand that peasant households, many already struggling on low incomes, pay for the projects themselves, driving them into debt. Alternatively, funding may come from corporate donors, with the donor then securing the management rights to the freed-up land. Surveys have shown that such deals are often made by corporations in league with local governments, bypassing village participation and against the wishes of householders. Once in the tower blocks, villagers have access to modern facilities such as water, sanitation, gas, electricity, and Internet access. However, with the associated fees and the low income from the land which is now leased out, many villagers find that their net expenditures have risen, rather than fallen (Rosenberg 2013; Cui and Sun 2014).

Urban-Rural Land Linking System

Both of these institutional transformations are closely bound up with a third: the urban-rural land linking system, or ‘linking system’ (*guagou*) for short. This hinges on China’s shortage of agricultural land. Despite the country’s vast land area, a relatively small amount of it is suitable for agricultural cultivation. The central government has decreed it should not fall below a minimum level of approximately 1.8 billion *mu* (1 *mu* is about 0.16 acres). Due to China’s extraordinary rate of urban expansion, by 2005 China’s agricultural land had fallen almost to this level already. This means that no more agricultural land can be used for urban development,

unless a corresponding plot elsewhere of equal size is brought *back* under cultivation—for example, land which was previously fallow or had been built over. Any such *new* plots can be ‘swapped’—added to a regional system of land quotas and auctioned to urban developers, allowing them to build on a plot of agricultural land elsewhere—generally in a more lucrative location on the borders of a city or township.

This ingenious system is designed to facilitate urban development without reducing the national agricultural land area, while enabling villagers to benefit financially from urban development elsewhere (Cui 2011). Yet, as a number of surveys have indicated, the system incentivises the widespread exploitation of rural assets in the interests of both urban and agrarian capital. While peasants continue to have little bargaining power in the exchanges, many cases have been reported of peasants losing their homes against their will, and for little or sometimes no compensation. Meanwhile, local officials have every incentive to auction land areas exceeding their assigned quota to gain extra funds (Chen and Ma 2012).

Alliances and Accumulation

While many of these changes appear to be geared towards the modernisation of the countryside and the improvement of peasant livelihoods, the overriding logic governing these processes, all too often, is that of capital accumulation. What is crucial is how the land linking system ties transformations in the countryside to processes of urbanisation in and around townships and cities. Thus, these rural transformations are themselves being driven largely by the urban real estate industry, in alliance with agribusiness and local governments in need of land revenue. These work together to shift peasants off their land, out of the villages, and into cities, while they may have little say in the matter (Zhan 2017). ■



Beyond Proletarianisation

The Everyday Politics of Chinese Migrant Labour

Thomas Sætre Jakobsen

In China as elsewhere, labour studies typically focus on visibility, organisation, and collective endeavours taken on by workers and their organisations to improve the collective situation of the labouring class as a whole. The privileged site for these overt manifestations of labour movement politics remains focussed on urban areas in general, and on manufacturing work in particular. This essay argues that this view is reductive, in that it only takes migrant labourers seriously as political actors once they enter the urban workplace. This risks neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands in the countryside and the workplaces of the city.

'Different Dusk'.
PC: Mingjia Zhou

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, labour scholars focussing on China have started questioning the modernist narrative of the movement of peasants from farm to factory. The migrant condition in contemporary China has been reconceptualised as a form of politics of disillusionment, replacing 'the old promise of formal or continuous employment' (Smith and Ngai 2018, 44), and with precarious employment being characterised as the 'new normal' for Chinese workers (Lee 2016). This urges us to reflect upon the opportunities for alternative political visions for Chinese rural migrant workers. Familiar narratives concerning labour politics typically focus on visibility,

organisation, and collective endeavours taken on by workers and their ‘political arms’, such as labour unions or political parties, to improve the collective situation of the labouring class as a whole. The privileged site for these overt manifestations of labour movement politics remains focussed on urban areas in general, and on manufacturing work in particular. This is probably the reason why rural migrant workers toiling in the workshops of foreign subsidiaries in the industrial Sunbelt of Southeast China have taken such a prominent position in academic and popular discourse on China’s working class (Chang 2009; Pun 2005).

Yet, little evidence of a self-assertive labour movement at a higher level than the single workplace exists in contemporary China (Lee 2016). If the political imaginaries attached to the path of proletarianisation give rise to the political aim of mobilising around the imagery of the ‘proper job’, then scholars and activists need to raise the question of what emergent political imaginaries arise from the ‘new normal’ of precarious work. In this essay, I first argue for the need to look beyond proletarianisation as a prism for understanding the politics of labour migrants from the countryside to urban China. Building from this, I suggest that everyday practices of mobile precarious labour provide a fruitful point of departure for sketching emergent political imaginaries. Finally, based on fieldwork in Yunnan province, I focus on a young generation of smallholders to highlight how autonomy *from* wage-work becomes central to the formation of their aspirations.

Beyond the Inherited Class Maps

‘Old’ ideas (Ferguson 1999; Rigg 2012) about the transition towards capitalism linger as an often-unspoken background element in the debates among labour scholars over the scope for labour mobilisation and the development of a working-class consciousness among Chinese migrant workers (e.g. Frenkel and Yu 2015; Pun

and Lu 2010; Solinger 2012). That is, both in the literature on Chinese migrant workers and in the international literature on smallholders who move from farm to city, there is a tendency to perceive short-term work arrangements and precarious labour as a temporary phenomenon. Informal work used to be perceived as probationary, something to be overcome on the inevitable path towards proletarianisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation (Breman 2013; Huang 2011). Peasants typically enter the mainstream of labour studies only as they become ‘true’ workers, proletarians, motivated to improve their lot through collective action in the workplace (McMichael 2008). What is problematic about this way of perceiving labour mobilisation and working-class consciousness is that it only takes migrant labourers seriously as political actors once they enter the urban workplace. This risks neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands in the countryside and the workplaces of the city (Day and Schneider 2017). Significantly, China’s household registration system (*hukou*) contributes to these arrangements, as most of the workers who enter Chinese cities from the vast rural hinterlands are unable to get a permanent residency in the city.

However, the ‘new normal’ regime of precarious work suggests that simply removing the barriers to permanent urban citizenship will not spontaneously produce an urban working class. While there is no conclusive research on how the Global Financial Crisis affected smallholders’ labour mobility, data suggests that the ‘new normal’ regime of precarious work also affects workers’ aspirations. This is seen as rural migrants now travel shorter distances for work than they did a decade ago (Loyalka 2012). Significantly, many—if not most—rural migrant workers who became unemployed in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis returned to their smallholdings (Chan 2010). While this was a temporary arrangement, it threw into stark relief the continued importance of the smallholding for the reproduction of labour in

China (Jakobsen 2018). This highlights the fact that, for the foreseeable future, the Chinese peasant working class will continue to be produced *between* farms and urban workplaces.

Everyday Politics

Where does this leave us in terms of conceptualising the politics of labour? The intervention of Partha Chatterjee (2006, 40) provides a particularly important contribution here, as he advances the idea of ‘political society’ that he distinguishes from ‘civil society’ or the politics of right-bearing. Considering that political society involves claims to habitation and livelihood by ‘groups of population whose very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law’, Chatterjee argues that the politics of a migratory peasant labour force are ‘political in a way different from that of the elite’ (2006, 39). This is suggestive, as it opens up space for conceiving politics as a broader category of action than overt forms of mobilisation. Rather, the ‘covert, informal and often individual acts ... attempted to maintain or better their position’ (Walker 2009, 295) are brought into purview. These practices are political, in the sense that they are engaged in by workers similarly situated as a precarious mobile workforce who deliberately struggle to bring about a different kind of everyday life (Das and Randeria 2015).

This notion of everyday politics is instructive for two reasons. First, it expands the scope of class struggle beyond the industrial proletariat and thus does not see the urban workplace as the only site of class formation. Second, it breaks with the tendency to only recognise the struggles of workers as a form of politics during overt forms of collective action, such as strikes or demonstrations. Moving beyond proletarianisation, means broadening our repertoires of interpretation in order to articulate the not yet articulated political imaginaries found in the street and in the fields.

Thus, the practices, aspirations, and livelihood arrangements of migrants become important, as they provide the seeds for alternative political imaginaries under ‘the new normal’ of precarious work. And while wage-work might have become the most important source of livelihood for many—if not most—Chinese peasants, from a household and individual perspective, land, labour, and social benefits still make up a patchwork of livelihood resources allowing for the everyday and intergenerational social reproduction of the household to take place. From this point of view, a multiplicity of unfinished or unarticulated labour politics is highlighted, where minor acts of defiance, avoidance, friendship, as well as a multiplicity of livelihoods, emerge as political projects where autonomy *from* wage-work is but one possible trajectory.

Mobile Lives and Multiple Livelihoods

In the countryside adjacent to Kunming where I undertook fieldwork for this article, families rely on a mixture of subsistence production and cash crop cultivation. In the villages of Kaoyan and Baicai—which I named after the localities’ main cash crops, tobacco and Chinese cabbage respectively—emigrating for work was very uncommon before the mid-1980s, and even until the early 1990s only a few unmarried men left the villages to work. These pioneers typically graduated from primary school, worked a few years on their parents’ plots, and when the time for marriage was approaching or other siblings started working the land, they left for Kunming to look for employment. Kunming is conveniently positioned about two hours away by car making it possible for migrants to work seasonally. When these men later married, they typically settled down on the farm and lived the whole year in the village, waiting until their offspring

grew up to resume their seasonal migrations to the city. In the early 1990s, some unmarried women also started leaving for work.

Looking at today's younger generation—roughly those between 16 and 30 years old—a very different life trajectory emerges. These youths usually spend three more years in school than their parents, before either completing or abandoning middle school to start working outside the village. Once starting middle school, few of them return to work on their parents' farm, as they live at the school during weekdays and only return home during the weekends. When they start working, few of them adopt the seasonal mobility patterns of the previous generation. Rather, they remain in Kunming or other cities the whole year, unless there is some special occasion to go back home. However, in spite of their prolonged absence from the countryside, they still remain very much dependent upon their villages for long-term material support. When they became sick, exhausted, or unemployed, they return to Baicai or Kaoyan to recuperate and reduce their dependence on commodity markets, as they can survive through home-grown food and rearing livestock. Moreover, when they get married they typically return to their village to raise children for a few years, before once more leaving to work in the city.

Against the background of these shifting mobility patterns, there is the gradual emergence of capitalist relations in the villages. First, in the 1980s villagers saw increasing costs for farm inputs, as these were 'liberated' by allowing them to operate based on the price mechanisms of supply and demand. Second, in the 1990s, heavy taxation pushed smallholder farming to its limits, a situation that lasted until 2006, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) phased out these taxes in the aftermath of widespread protests. More recently, since 2008 the CCP has promoted policies of 'new-style agriculture' (*xinxing nongye jingying tixi*). This signalled a shift away from food security being achieved through initiatives aimed at making peasants stay on the land to produce grains, towards

those aiming to modernise agriculture through scaled-up and input-intensive farming. These policies are part of a larger focus on urban-rural integration (*chengxiang yitihua*), which emphasises investment into the human capital of the countryside in order to transform the rural populace into 'proper' urban subjects and provide increased opportunities to compete in urban marketplaces.

Urban-rural integration is manifested through initiatives aimed at bolstering education, initiating a rural medical insurance system, and direct cash transfers to end users, such as pensioners, disabled people, or poverty-stricken families. As a result of these agricultural and human capital policies, guided by the imperative of letting the market set the 'correct' prices in rural areas, labour and land are increasingly becoming commodified. However, land is not abandoned, and family members who have emigrated still regularly return to their homes during transition periods or times of crisis. More recently, government cash transfers for poverty alleviation have fed into the mixed strategies employed by rural households to support themselves and their next generations. This multiplicity of livelihood strategies, combining wage-work with smallholder farming and government transfers, provides families with some autonomy from the ups and downs of the labour market. Especially if compared to communities where farmland has been expropriated (Chuang, 2015).

Aspirations

The youth born and raised in the countryside that I spoke to during my fieldwork, voiced their feelings of indeterminacy regarding their future in terms of work and citizenship. Although they were not optimistic about the prospects of returning to their farms as a means of earning a livelihood, they nevertheless chose to retreat to their hometowns whenever they got sick, exhausted, or went through life-course transitions such as marriage or

parenthood. These youths generally hesitated when confronted with questions over how they perceived their future homes and workplaces, thus revealing their ambiguous positions. As unofficial workers, non-urban subjects, and with diminishing opportunities of returning to the farm in order to live a satisfying life, their aspirations were short-circuited towards focussing on improving the present.

Part of their hesitation also stems from their difficulty in perceiving a future either as an urban working subject or a returned farmer. Unlike the army of *nongmingong*—a category applied to rural migrant workers in post-Mao China’s industrial heartland—the peasant workers whom I interviewed in Yunnan lack any official category to facilitate their self-identification. This ambiguity in terms of self-perceived identity was evident in the story of Mrs Li, aged 22, whom I met in one urban village in Kunming. The village was inhabited mainly by rural migrant workers, and had some public buildings, including schools, a police station, and a post office. Mrs Li explained how, after five years of shifting between petty-capitalist workplaces characterised by low wages and intrusive management, she had doubts as to whether wage-work would provide her with a satisfying life. She nonetheless felt that returning to the farm without other sources of income was not an option. She foresaw a future where she would return to the farm at some point, but in order to do that she felt the need to work hard in order to save up for the tough times to come. The pragmatic realism conveyed by this kind of testimony reflects an awareness among rural youth that there is no way to get ahead in the urban workplace, accompanied by an acknowledgment that smallholder farming has gradually been emptied of its symbolic and material value.

In terms of domination and resistance, their bosses usually control the workplace with a strict hand, illegally forcing the workers to pay a deposit that will only be reimbursed if the employee does not leave their job for an entire year. Moreover, many have experiences of being scolded for minor mistakes in workplaces

where workers seldom receive proper training, are commanded to work outside of ordinary hours, and are frequently not paid on time. This situation fuels resentment and sparks a yearning among these young workers for a livelihood not tied to a ‘proper’ job. The younger generation of interviewees typically construct a sharp distinction in terms of levels of freedom between working for the boss (*da gong*) and working on the farm. They often explained how in their hometown ‘there are fewer restrictions and more freedom’ and that ‘people control you when you work outside, but when you are at home, you are at your own command.’ Nonetheless, they distanced themselves from popular ideas about the ‘rural idyll’ through elaborate stories of the drudgery and physical toil of tilling their parents’ plots.

This younger generation furthers its interests through individual acts of defiance, such as rejecting the commands of their bosses when these feel like a violation of their sense of fairness. There are also some tactics of avoidance, such as returning to the farm when their bosses make unreasonable demands on them. However, the most important tactic the interviewees employ to further their interest is to ‘vote with their feet’ (*yi jiao toupiao*), by changing workplace frequently. While from a managerial point of view this is considered to be a problem of high turnover, I would argue that this kind of mobility needs to be understood as part of the repertoire of political acts of resistance for the younger generation of workers. This generation entered the urban labour market under difficult circumstances: on the one hand, with declining prospects for staying on the farm; on the other, against the backdrop of the ‘new normal’ of precarious work that individualises and pits workers against each other in a highly competitive environment.

In sum, the interviewees did not become subdued by the requirements of their work or ephemeral consumption desires. Nor did they retain a sense of nostalgia for smallholder farming. Rather, they demonstrated a desire for more freedom from the relations of work by

claiming forms of subsistence autonomy within a space of limited possibilities. This points to how the formation of expectations, while being informed by the experiences of yesterday and the constraints of the present, might involve limited openings for envisioning other possible futures.

Broadening the Horizon

In conclusion, the notion of working-class politics in contemporary China often tends to focus exclusively on its most visible manifestations, such as the appearance of strikes or riots in urban contexts. This rather constrained view of labour politics often leads to the assumption that we are witnessing a transition of Chinese peasant workers towards proletarianisation and increasing working-class consciousness. However, relying only on these narratives to interpret the current geography and history of class-making in China potentially distorts our understanding of its present trajectory. That is, by laying claim to what is possible in the future based on historical experiences—typically modelled on Western history—we risk losing sight of the emergent projects, aspirations, and common experiences that constitute the potential building blocks for different types of solidarity and resistance among rural migrant workers in China. ■



Manufactured Modernity

Dwelling, Labour, and Enclosure in China's Poverty Resettlements

New resettlement
communities in Southern
Shaanxi. PC: Sarah Rogers

Sarah Rogers

Between 2016 and 2020, the Chinese authorities will have resettled nearly 10 million people throughout China's inland provinces with the aim of eliminating absolute poverty in rural areas. Looking at the case of Southern Shaanxi, this essay reflects on specific poverty resettlement projects, and Chinese resettlement practice more broadly, to try to make sense of the intent and impact of such large-scale interventions on both the lives of individuals and the transformation of the Chinese countryside as a whole.

I first encountered resettled farmers in 2005 to the west of Hohhot in Inner Mongolia. The resettlement village in which I conducted research was the new home of Han Chinese herders from several natural villages who had been moved down off the mountains and into a consolidated settlement near a major highway. Herding had been banned and the mountains effectively enclosed for environmental protection. While people still travelled back to their old villages to tend ancestral graves, they were now embedded in the dairy economy, raising small numbers of cows and selling the milk to Yili Group—a massive state-owned dairy producer. It was in Inner Mongolia and later in Shanxi province that I learnt about the Chinese

practice of resettlement *as* development: these people were not in the way of a dam or major infrastructure project, they were relocated seemingly for their own benefit and to protect a ‘fragile’ environment. Hundreds of thousands of Han and ethnic Mongolian herders were resettled in this way. Herding was once a highly visible livelihood activity in places like Inner Mongolia and throughout the Loess Plateau. These days, while narrow trails still visibly criss-cross the hillsides, a herder with his or her livestock is a rare sight indeed, largely supplanted by industrial livestock production.

Thirteen years on and I am still conducting research in resettlement villages, nowadays in southern Shaanxi and central Gansu. Much has changed in the way that resettlement projects are managed. Perhaps most notably, the scale has only intensified: 2.4 million people are being resettled this decade in just three prefectures in Shaanxi under the Southern Shaanxi Relocation and Settlement Project (*shan nan yimin banqian anzhi gongcheng*). A total of nearly 10 million people are being resettled between 2016 and 2020 throughout China’s inland provinces (NDRC 2016). One of the key reasons for this escalation is the central government’s stated goal of eliminating absolute poverty in rural areas by 2020, which has been accompanied by massive commitments of funding and intense pressure on local officials to achieve poverty reduction targets. In what follows, I reflect on specific



New resettlement communities in Southern Shaanxi. PC: Sarah Rogers

poverty resettlement projects, and Chinese resettlement practice more broadly, to try to make sense of the intent and impact of such large-scale interventions. Why does China turn to resettlement as a solution to so many of the country’s ills? And what role is resettlement playing in the ongoing transformation of the Chinese countryside?

Dwelling

One of the most visible and calculable changes in the lives of resettled farmers is where and how they dwell. Poverty resettlement projects in southern Shaanxi (see images) attempt to manufacture an entirely new way of living. Formerly living in sprawling homesteads with several built structures in which extended families, animals, machinery, and stored crops resided, resettled farmers now occupy high-rise apartments with precise measurements of 60, 80, or 100 square metres. Nothing grows except ornamental trees and flowers, and the odd indoor plant, and no livestock can be found. Unlike most old farmhouses, these apartments feature kitchens connected to gas cooking and with proper ventilation, as well as indoor bathrooms with showers and flushing toilets. Local officials are rightly pleased to show outsiders through soon-to-be-occupied apartments (for which household contributions are now capped at 10,000 RMB) and models of various sized apartments complete with toy furniture. Compared to the ‘dangerous’ conditions in the village, here people can live in a modern, clean, and safe way.

On one level this all makes perfect sense. The condition of housing in poorer villages is often hazardous, particularly to women cooking inside with firewood. And who, having spent any time in a Chinese village, can decry an indoor toilet? But as critical scholars, it is our role to pose additional questions. Why is it that people *have to move* to enjoy these benefits? Why is it not possible for such ‘development’ to take place *in* villages? What has changed such

that some villages are suddenly considered uninhabitable and some environments fragile? And if people must be moved because of natural disasters or poor infrastructure, why are they not reallocated farmland or given any space to grow vegetables or raise animals?

That the nature of dwelling is so abruptly transformed points to the various motivations and networks of interests that underpin poverty resettlement projects. First, for reasons of food security, land use in China is circumscribed to the point where any loss of farmland to urban or industrial development must be compensated by an equal conversion of land somewhere else into farmland. This quota system means that sprawling rural residences (*zhai jidi*) are suddenly of great interest to local officials. By relocating farmers to high-rise apartments, demolishing homesteads, and converting this residential land to farmland, a land quota is freed up allowing for urbanisation somewhere more profitable.

Second, under intense pressure to meet the 2020 poverty target, local officials, and the evaluation system within which they are embedded, lean towards visible, quantifiable changes in people's lives. Relocating a poor household from an old farmhouse to a modern apartment fits the bill perfectly: once relocated, with an asset and a new job (see below) you are no longer poor. Third, resettlement drives a construction boom from which local governments, state-owned enterprises, private firms, and local labourers all reap the benefits. It is difficult to make sense of the proliferation of high-rise resettlement communities without reference to these intersecting motives.

Labour

Resettlement can also transform the nature and place of people's labour. While earlier resettlement projects like the ones in Inner Mongolia seemed more about agricultural intensification and embedding smallholders within domestic and international supply

chains, the imperative to alleviate poverty is now driving a focus on off-farm wage labour. To paraphrase local officials: resettlement allows people to have a 'stable' life with a salaried job.

Back in the old villages, farmland is often transferred to cooperatives or agribusinesses, where some resettled farmers might return to work seasonally or simply receive an annual dividend as shareholders. The new settlements, however, often lie alongside purpose-built industrial parks, tourism sites, or agricultural processing facilities, where poor people are prioritised for low-skilled jobs that guarantee a wage of at least 1,500 RMB a month. Such 'public welfare' positions also include jobs as gardeners, cleaners, and security guards in the new communities, and are aimed at guaranteeing that at least one person in a poor household has a salaried job and is developing new skills. Given income is so critical to how China measures poverty, these subsidised positions are used as evidence of 'shedding' poverty.

One way of interpreting poverty resettlement, therefore, is that it is designed to bring a low-cost labour force into close proximity with capitalist enterprises, many of which are incentivised to move inland by rising wages in wealthier provinces, but also through the use of sweeteners offered by local governments. Farmland is not necessarily fully appropriated, though, and can only be used in certain ways, which means that poverty resettlement—following Julia Chuang (2015)—might lie somewhere between David Harvey's accumulation *by* dispossession and Giovanni Arrighi's accumulation *without* dispossession. Resettlement certainly dovetails neatly with the central government's stated preference for larger-scale farms run by 'new agricultural operators' (*xinxing nongye jingying zhuti*)—i.e. anyone but smallholders.

To better understand the impact of these structural forces, we might also examine labour in terms of work practices, or what Ingold (2000) calls the 'taskscape'. While rural household livelihoods have long been composed of both agricultural work and off-

farm labour, resettlement is an attempt to accelerate a shift from the rhythms, tasks, and places of agricultural production and subsistence to those of wage labour and consumption. I say attempt, because in reality things are of course much messier.

In the new industrial parks, some older men and women spend their days indoors on repetitive low-skilled tasks, while younger men might earn slightly more doing higher-skilled metalwork. Those working in walnut or dried tofu processing factories must undergo training to ensure they behave in the necessary way and abide by sanitary regulations. Wages are used to purchase not just the basics, but also the food that is no longer grown. However, given the low pay on offer locally, most young people continue to work in larger cities or in far-flung provinces. Some young women stay behind in the new apartments to care for children and the elderly (see Jacka's essay in the current issue). Others completely reject these new rhythms and in doing so complicate the clean rural/urban break envisaged by authorities. It is typically the elderly who choose to stay in their village homes and continue the labour of growing vegetables, tending fruit trees, and raising livestock, leaving their allocated apartments to the next generation. Furthermore, resettled people's household registration (*hukou*) is not transferred, meaning their medical insurance, pensions, and voting rights are still tied to the village. For some time to come, therefore, there will be continued movement between these places as people negotiate new or modified patterns of work, care, and citizenship.

Enclosure

If, as one resettled farmer described, almost all families have people who have stayed behind in the original villages, then extensive poverty resettlement in China's mountainous areas might not so dramatically cleave the urban from the rural. However, there is little doubt

that the various interests that are tied up in this latest resettlement campaign are seeking to fundamentally remake rural localities.

Poverty resettlement is often linked to poor environmental conditions. Farmers must be resettled because the landscape is 'unsafe', suddenly incapable of supporting livelihoods, or because they now reside in a designated water conservancy or biodiversity zone. Entry into some of these areas is now prohibited. Poverty resettlement is also linked to extensive land transfers to agribusinesses. If land usage rights are transferred and farmers receive rent or dividends, then it kills two birds with one stone: poor households have a new income stream, and the way is smoothed for larger-scale operators. People's reluctance to let go of their old homesteads is the one major sticking point: local officials are now asking people to sign agreements that the old structures will be demolished within three years with the promise of a subsidy. With the farmhouses gone, large-scale operators making decisions about land use, an influx of urbanites enjoying some country respite, and only seasonal farm labour available for former residents, the Chinese countryside will have been remade.

The nostalgia of outsiders would be unhelpful here. After all, China's mountainous villages can be places of deprivation, illness, toxicity, sexism, and gruelling labour. But that does not preclude a diagnosis that through enclosure, resettlement is an attempt to erase what came before. A dwelling perspective posits that a landscape 'is constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves' (Ingold 2000, 188). From such a perspective, while poverty resettlement projects may seek to (yet again) remake human-environment relations in rural China, the practices, memories, and stories of the landscape cannot be so easily expunged. ■



Managing the Anthropocene

The Labour of Environmental Regeneration

Ladu View: Fields and community-managed forests in northwestern Yunnan. PC: J.A. Zinda

John Aloysius Zinda

Since 2010, China has seen new carbon markets, closures of polluting factories, and expanded efforts to regenerate degraded landscapes and protect wildlife in intact ecosystems. All of this entails a great deal of labour. Yet when reporters or researchers discuss China's environmental management efforts, they may chronicle policies, regulatory actions, infrastructures, carbon figures, or impacts on humans and animals, but they seldom say much about the labour of environmental protection or the people who perform it. This is because scholars and journalists alike tend to place environment and labour in separate boxes.

Undoing environmental calamity takes a lot of work. For decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its agents in the Chinese state have been grappling with the material consequences of socialist extractivism followed by state capitalist economic expansion. Lurching growth machines disgorged catastrophic floods, smog blankets, depleting aquifers, poisoned soils, dead rivers, cancer villages, eroded slopes, creeping deserts, and silent forests. Even as top leaders stressed that they must 'develop first, clean up later' (Hilton 2013), by the late 1990s Chinese state authorities were investing large sums in planting trees on denuded slopes. The next decade saw effectual restrictions on major pollutants and expanding biodiversity conservation efforts. Since 2010, China has

seen new carbon markets, closures of polluting factories, and expanded efforts to regenerate degraded landscapes and protect wildlife in intact ecosystems.

All of these efforts entail a great deal of labour. To implement pollution controls, someone needs to perform inspections and analyse monitoring data. Constructing canals and other infrastructure takes millions of worker-hours. Planting trees means moving seedlings, digging holes, and tending plantations. Wildlife conservation requires watching animals, plants, and people, and associated tourism operations employ guides, drivers, shopkeepers, and custodians. Yet when reporters or researchers discuss China's environmental management efforts, they may chronicle policies, regulatory actions, infrastructures, carbon figures, or impacts on humans and animals, but they seldom say much about the labour of environmental protection or the people who perform it.

That environmental labour garners little attention is no surprise. Scholars and journalists alike tend to place environment and labour in separate boxes. Distinctions between nature and humanity may not be as stark in Chinese culture as in the West. Still, in China as elsewhere, in conversations about environmental management, people tend to be absent or appear as either incorrigible destroyers or nature's saviours. Given that many think of environmental regeneration as a matter of getting people out of the way so that nature can recover, it is hard to expect much attention to the people who do the labour of environmental regeneration. This state of affairs makes it all the more important to highlight to train the spotlight on these people's experiences.

Environmental labour is especially salient in the Chinese state's efforts to manage landscapes. These projects almost invariably summon the residents of rural communities in those landscapes to patrol, manage, or restore ecosystems. Much of this work happens in formally protected spaces. I will use the terms 'parks' and 'protected areas'

interchangeably to refer to a broad array of units, from national nature reserves to wetland preserves to local forest parks, that have rules intended to constrain human activity in the interest of conserving or preserving objects of environmental, cultural, and historical importance. A great deal of environmental labour also takes place outside of protected areas, in lands and waters that belong to rural collectives. In the following pages, I show how environmental labour plays out in efforts to protect intact ecosystems, to restore environments judged degraded, and to remove people and their labour from restricted lands.

Labour of Protection

We scurried through the brush. The two young women trailed quick, wiry Feng, who scampered between tree trunks and bamboo culms. We had been hiking all day, checking research transects for signs of the giant panda that trudge the ridges. Clad in green camouflage gear, Feng guided us with cheer and courtesy.

'Quick, come over here!' Feng called out. The rest of us clambered up. Feng held back a few bamboo fronds and pointed down to three balls of green fibrous muck. 'Panda scat!' The women scribbled in their notebooks. Nearby, Feng pointed to several truncated stalks likely chomped by the same animal.

Wanglang National Nature Reserve had hired Feng after a stint in the military. He and his cohorts, most of them ex-soldiers, do much of the reserve's day-to-day work. They walk transects, monitoring signs of pandas and other wildlife as well as watching for poachers and people grazing cattle in the park. They keep track of the infrared-triggered cameras that take pictures when animals' body heat sets them off. Much of their time goes to assisting researchers like the two doctoral students from Beijing—leading them through the woods, helping with their observations, and tending to their instruments.

This work is physically demanding, but government pay is steady, and room and board are covered. It also equips men from rural areas without much schooling with technical skills. They work scientific instruments and log data on computers. Back in the nature reserve office, professional analysts process and analyse the data.

In other parks, alongside full-time staff, people living nearby perform conservation labour. Baima Snow Mountain National Nature Reserve in Yunnan hires residents of villages within the reserve to patrol for poaching, illegal timber harvest, and fire control. These residents, usually men, must walk set routes, filling in checklists to return to park management offices. This means days of walking through forest and meadow. For locals, that burden may not be especially onerous. Depending on the season, villagers can work patrolling in with gathering mushrooms or medicinal plants, or start from pastures where they graze yaks and cattle in the summer. Why hire locals? First and foremost, they know the land. Locals need little guidance to find their way along patrol routes. They know where poachers or timber harvesters are likely to go. This familiarity can cut both ways. Working for the reserve can mean regulating their kin and neighbours, in which case patrollers' loyalty may not be with the reserve. Another reason for employing locals is that, with little education and with housing and agricultural livelihoods in the village, they may not demand high wages compared to personnel hired from outside.

Parks with tourism operations employ local residents in many more ways. They run shops and guesthouses, drive buses, sell tickets, and do custodial work. As with patrolling, residents present a convenient and low-cost labour pool. But they also raise challenges. Tourism operations often make use of land residents farm, graze, and harvest. That can mean limiting these uses. Moreover, seeing parks and outside entrepreneurs make large sums using land that had belonged to their village collectives, residents often demand a cut. Protests and drawn-out negotiations are common. Villagers

in Pudacuo National Park in Yunnan secured annual payments from the park, guaranteed employment, and investment in village infrastructure. That guaranteed employment usually means a household member being hired to gather trash and clean out toilets. Residents receive preference for other jobs but usually lack qualifications for higher-paying jobs as tour guides, which go to people from other localities who have vocational training. While not directly related to conservation, tourism labour underpins these parks' management by making possible the activity that managers really care about, revenue-generating tourism. Managers also argue that tourism contributes to conservation by giving residents 'alternative livelihoods'. The idea is that with income from tourism, residents will no longer rely on grazing livestock or harvesting forest products. However, if a household has time and people available for the work, its members often prefer to continue using forests and meadows, treating tourism income as a supplement (Zinda et al. 2014). Where tourism does displace resource use, it is more common that by imposing restrictions on farming and livestock husbandry, park management forces residents into tourism alternatives.

The labour of environmental protection is not limited to formal protected areas. Across China, 60 percent of forestland belongs to rural collectives, usually villager committees. A substantial proportion of these forests are designated 'public benefit forests', managed to maintain ecological functions like erosion control and habitat provision. In much of the country, members of rural communities are charged with this work. Administrative villages employ forest guards (*hulinyuan*) who oversee forest stewards (*senlin guanhuoyuan*) recruited from hamlets within each village.

In north-western Yunnan province, forest stewards and forest guards are assigned to prevent forest fires, control illegal harvest of timber and other forest products, and assemble their neighbours to implement forest conservation projects. Specific duties and arrangements vary across locales.

Forest stewards and forest guards with whom I have spoken with report that patrolling forests takes most of their time. Forest stewards have to walk the forests under their charge once or twice a week, more in the dry autumn and winter, when fire risk is greater. Depending on the size of a community's forests, that could take a few hours or a full day. Once a month, an administrative village's forest guard leads all the village's forest stewards upslope to patrol state forests abutting village lands. They often spend several days and nights in the woods.

While patrolling takes up time, enforcement is the harder part of the job. When harvest season arrives, forest guards have to keep watch for people burning chaff, a common practice that breaks down plant matter and releases nutrients into the soil. At every hint of smoke, one has to rush out, put out the fire, and reprimand the person who set it. One forest guard speaks of having to disrupt funeral rituals: 'It's happened three times this year. After someone dies, they take their old clothes up the mountain and burn them. When that happens, if I discover it, I call them up right away—please, can you understand, this could cause a forest fire, at least don't do it by the forest.'

Whether the issue is fire, cutting down protected trees, or digging up the forest floor to gather mushrooms, forest guards and stewards are supposed to confront the perpetrator. Minor infractions bring only a warning, but serious ones must be reported to the township forestry office, which may impose a fine or other penalty. Enforcement actions can stir up tension—especially if stewards impose them preferentially. They can also cause trouble for people who use forests because they depend on them. Often, rules for forest use imposed from above conflict with customary practices and present needs. Strict limits on harvesting live pine trees for firewood can mean long forays into the forest. Forest guards and stewards can find themselves caught between official duties and relationships with kin and neighbours.

Forest stewards are compensated from funds given to communities as 'ecological benefit compensation' (*shengtai xiaoyi buchang*) for maintaining forests for the public good. Because these payments are based on forest area, stewards in villages with large forests, and thus more area to patrol, are paid more. Given the amount of time they spend patrolling, this remuneration is less than a day's pay for wage labour in nearby towns. This and the hassles of meetings and enforcement make many reluctant to serve as forest stewards. There is a lot of turnover. Forest guards are paid more—around 2,000 yuan a month—and tend to keep their positions for a decade or more.

Labour of Restoration

Environmental labour goes beyond holding off poachers and fires on intact wildlands. Rural dwellers are at the front lines of the CCP's efforts to restore degraded environments. This is nowhere clearer than in the thousands of villages whose residents have been enlisted to plant trees in endeavours like the Returning Farmland to Forest Programme (RFFP, also known as the Sloping Land Conversion Program and Grain for Green Programme) and the Three-Norths Shelter Forest Program. In the RFFP, state authorities called on some 30 million households to retire erosion-prone farmland and plant trees there in exchange for annual payments. The programme's primary goal was to reduce the amount of soil washed into riverbeds, where it could build up and worsen floods or deposit behind dams. In the process, state agents aimed to restore forest habitats, sequester carbon, alleviate poverty, and transform agriculture.

Government reports and large-scale studies suggest that the RFFP and related programmes have brought modest net increases in tree cover and income. However, when researchers examine implementation on the ground, they often find situations contrary to official reports: failed plantations, forests that are

actually fruit orchards, and uneven delivery of payments (Zinda et al. 2017). The RFFP has increased tree cover and assisted poor farmers in many places, but more is going on than official accounts disclose.

Firsthand observers also reveal the considerable labour that tree-planting has required. In Yunnan, people would have to pick up seedlings at a delivery point, then haul them up to the village on horseback. There followed several days of digging holes, placing seedlings, and shovelling on dirt and fertiliser. In the years that followed, smallholders were responsible for making sure these seedlings flourished by fertilising, pruning, and managing pests.

It was an uphill battle. Tree varieties poorly suited to the area languished. As one farmer recounted: 'At first where the walnuts were doing poorly, the government distributed seedlings for replanting. But there weren't enough, so we had to go into the forest and find them. It would take two days to gather up seedlings in the forest, then another two to plant them. We had to do this every year for three or four years.' Year after year, people tracked into the woods to gather new seedlings and plant again. Beyond the RFFP, people who dwell in landscapes targeted for rehabilitation do much of the work of implementing efforts to control desertification, restore wetlands, revive wildlife populations, and reverse rangeland degradation.

Labour Removal

It takes a lot of labour to restore landscapes, but many restoration projects also remove labour. State authorities urge or order people, along with their crops and livestock, to be removed from a landscape. This can take place through bans on resource use in particular areas while people remain in place or through wholesale resettlement. While grazers, gatherers, and smallholders do not always use resources in benign ways, in many cases they manage landscapes to ensure that plants and

animals they use stay abundant, enriching biological communities. The removal of this labour transforms these landscapes, and not always beneficially. In the name of grassland restoration, tens of thousands of nomadic herders have been resettled. This has been done in spite of evidence that mobile grazing often does not degrade rangelands, and can enhance them (Cao et al. 2013)—in part because settlement makes these groups of people more easily subject to surveillance (Yeh 2005).

Protected areas, set up to limit human activity, are commonly sites of labour removal. Officially, most nature reserves have core and buffer zones where productive activities are not allowed—but across China, thousands of villages are located within these zones. Protected area managers facing hundreds or thousands of residents in their jurisdictions take varied approaches. In the Jiuzhaigou National Scenic Area in Sichuan, authorities banned grazing and farming. Not only did this make residents dependent on tourism, but it changed ecosystems. Absent yaks and herders, meadows once rich in grasses, forbs, and shrubs turned into uniform stretches of pine (Urgenson et al. 2014). Managers at Pudacuo National Park let residents continue farming and grazing, incorporating their agricultural labour into the tourism attraction. Tour buses pause to let visitors view herders on the high pasture, and a hotel near Lawzong village releases tourists to observe smallholders at work in their fields. Still, residents are not always allowed to stay. State authorities recently announced that between 70,000 and 80,000 people would be resettled from a reserve for tigers and snow leopards in north-eastern China (Standaert 2017). In a broader wave of 'ecological migration', government agencies are uprooting entire villages in poor and remote areas to resettle residents in urbanised settings. In addition to their impacts on the people concerned, these removals of labour—as well as the knowledge people have acquired through dwelling in these places—have profound and varied impacts on biological communities.

Working for Ecological Civilisation

Environmental regeneration is labour-intensive. People do it through work in offices, fields, and forests. Analysts following expenditures, policy impacts, and vegetation measures often overlook these activities that accomplish environmental intervention on the ground.

Given the importance of this work, we need to ask, what are the conditions of environmental labour? In some cases, like tourism in protected areas, environmental workers are wage labourers working for corporations. Their working conditions and concerns present analogies with wage work elsewhere. Yet, far from the factory floors that dominate most labour scholarship, the kinds of domination and contestation that take place in tourism attractions are little known.

But much of the labour of protection and restoration is not wage work. People who patrol protected areas and village forests receive payments that are often effectively lower than wage employment. Compensation for reforestation and landscape management targets environmental impacts more than the work itself. Working conditions are difficult to gauge, too, as environmental labour intertwines with other livelihood activities in landscapes. As people are increasingly compelled to manage environments for the state's environmental mandates, and to do so in a transactional way, alienation from the landscapes within which they dwell is likely to follow.

Recognising environmental labour is all the more important as the CCP unrolls its proposal to create an 'ecological civilisation' (*shengtai wenming*). With this policy rubric, Party leaders recognise that managing China's economy and society for growth only cannot continue. From forest cover to air pollution to energy to hydrology, state authorities are implementing projects that use regulations alongside market instruments to promote durable ways of using resources. They also propose inculcating

citizens with 'ecological culture' (*shengtai wenhua*) centred on thrift and care for nature (Geall 2015).

Discussions of ecological civilisation move beyond a picture of the world that pits humans against nature to a recognition that the social and the biophysical are always intertwined—a sensibility that may resonate with people who speak of 'socio-natures' or the 'anthropocene' epoch. Rather than embrace humility, as some participants in these discussions have urged, Chinese authorities have seized the anthropocene, declaring that nature must and will be managed by technocrats. In visions of ecological civilisation, from now on China's natures will be defined, built, and maintained by humans, in the vision of the CCP. This is no longer a matter of conquering nature, but of establishing flexible mechanisms of monitoring and response around complex and unpredictable social and environmental processes. Technocratic monitoring, maintenance, and intervention will require more environmental labour. Who does this labour and how will have lasting repercussions for the people and the landscapes involved. ■



Rural Transformations and Urbanisation

Impressions from the Ningbo International Photography Week

Marina Svensson

From late October to early December 2018 the Third Ningbo International Photography Week was held at Dongqian Lake in Zhejiang Province. Under the theme Village Images, the exhibition documented rural transformations and processes of urbanisation from a variety of perspectives.

Tao Lina, 'Traditional rural life in Taizhou, Zhejiang.'

On 27 October 2018, the Third Ningbo International Photography Week opened at the Dongqian Lake Art Centre. Despite the suggestion in its name, the Festival ran significantly longer than a week—until 5 December. The event was curated by photographer Fu Yongjun, currently a lecturer at the Zhejiang University of Media and Communications, but for many years a photojournalist and editor at the Hangzhou newspaper *Dushi kuaibao* (*City Express*) and an accomplished photographer. This year's overarching theme was *Village Images*

(*xiangcun yingxiang*), divided into 12 sub-themes (see below for examples). It displayed works by some 300 Chinese photographers, and also included images taken by foreign photographers in China over the last century. The call for contributions was posted on several websites and platforms—such as *Jinri toutiao*, one of the largest mobile content platforms in China today—and thus received a lot of interest from amateurs, established photographers, artists, and students. Fu Yongjun also invited celebrated photographers such as Zhang Xinmin—whose photographs from Liukeng village, Jiangxi province, were originally published in book form in 2000—and Wang Yong, who has documented photo studios and photographic practices in the countryside. Zhang Xinmin’s black-and-white images have become iconic representations of the dramatic changes of village life during the reform period. In Imperial times, Liukeng was a rich village with successful merchants and a large number of literati (*jinshi*), but is today poor and marginalised with a large segment of the population engaging in migrant work in urban areas. The Photography Week’s opening weekend included conversations with, and talks by, Zhang Xinmin and Taiwanese photographer Ruan Yizhong, who is well known for his work documenting rural transformations and urbanisation in Taiwan.



Participants in the ‘Photographic investigation of Hengkantou village, Ningbo, Zhejiang province’ at the photo festival.

Through their images, the exhibition’s photographers revealed both continuities and rapid changes. They depicted traditions, social and economic life, and rapid developments in villages in different parts of China—including Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangzhou, Zhejiang, Hubei, Shanxi, Sichuan, Shandong, and Xinjiang—with a particularly large number of contributions coming from Zhejiang. Sub-themed exhibitions included *Inheritance*, addressing different types of handicraft and traditions, and *Country Fair*, focussing on the thriving and diverse local markets, and their cultural and religious contexts in the midst of recent changes. Another of the sub-themes focussed on villages in Songyang, Zhejiang, where local photographers have documented the rich local cultural and social life over a number of years. In preparation for the festival, Fu Yongjun brought a group of interested photographers, scholars, and young people to Hengkantou, a ‘red’ village in Ningbo with a strong revolutionary heritage that has become known for its successful economic modernisation. They spent an intensive week documenting different aspects of the village, such as rural leadership, economic changes, and also cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

Several of the sub-themes addressed different aspects of rural transformation, with a particular focus on how villages have been impacted by patterns of urbanisation that have given rise to the phenomenon of ‘villages embracing the cities’ (*xiangcun baowei chengshi*) and ‘villages in the city’ (*cheng zhong cun*). One exhibition called *Scenes* (*changjing*) included works by 14 photographers who documented physical and visual changes with respect to architecture, the emergence of new kinds of landmarks and monuments, and advertisements, signs, and slogans. One exhibition entitled *Urban and Rural* (*cheng xiang*) included works by 15 photographers who documented social and physical encounters between villages and cities. In many parts of China, it is not always so easy to distinguish between urban and rural places—in the outskirts of cities one often finds



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(1) Dong Pin, 'Demolitions in Leqing, Zhejiang.'
(2) Zhang Xinmin, 'Family portrait in front of an ancestral portrait, Linkeng village, Jiangxi province.'

(3) Poster for the sub-theme Urban and Rural (cheng xiang) with photo by Luo Jinqing.



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semi-rural spaces and life co-existing with, or rapidly being engulfed by, city life and high rise buildings. In a series called *Temporary Vegetable Farmer (linshi cainong)* photographer Luo Jinqing documents farmers who use small plots of land left between new urban buildings to grow vegetables. This series was motivated by his own experience of living in such in-between spaces and buying vegetables from elderly farmers who maintain their attachment to the land and persist in cultivating small plots.

Several photographers trained their cameras on a recent trend of demolitions of entire villages in Zhejiang province. Dong Pin documented the demolition of a village outside of Leqing that only took two months to accomplish. Her photographs of people sitting on the ruins of their homes or looking out from their soon to be demolished houses are imbued with emotional distress and displacement brought about by rapid urbanisation and its non-transparent practices. Another photographer, Liu Yanfeng, documented life in a village outside of Lin'an before its demolition. The speed of demolitions in the city has given rise to the special term 'Lin'an speed' (*lin'an sudu*). Tao Lina's photographs document the changes of a village in Taizhou as a result of

the establishment of a so-called economic development zone and the construction of a new village.

In another sub-theme, *Spring Breeze (chunfeng)*, young photographers born in the 1990s provide new artistic interpretations of village life and urbanisation. Zheng Haoying, a photographer from Hangzhou, exhibited a series called *Empty Chairs* depicting forgotten villages in the city. Whereas in the sub-theme *Long Scrolls (chang juan)*, photographers were given a one-metre-long paper roll to fill with images of one village. Chen Jianxin, one of those participating, documented urbanisation around Leqing and people's attachment to the land. This is clearly shown in one of his photos, where an ancestral hall is surrounded by high rises and factories. This is a common sight in the Wenzhou area, where lineages remain strong and ancestral halls are preserved and remain central to community life.

The photo festival showed that the countryside remains a source of deep attachment and inspiration for Chinese photographers who are very concerned about rural developments. It is also obvious that cultural and religious life holds a fascination, although many photographers also addressed social and economic changes and challenges to traditional life, including urbanisation itself. ■

Chen Jianxin, 'Ancestral hall and rural life in the outskirts of Wenzhou, Zhejiang.'





Domestic Archaeology

Daniele Dainelli



All Photos by Daniele Dainelli.

The Domestic Archaeology Project is the outcome of seven years of work, from 2009 to 2016. During this period, I undertook dozens of trips to the countryside—exploring the lives of those living in the rural hinterlands of the coast, inland areas, and the western provinces.

In our contemporary era, characterised as it is by change and transformation, rural areas in China are being progressively abandoned. This change is radical, relentless, and epic. It somehow parallels the path of humanity in modern history—a path that has seen the gradual abandonment of the rural way of life in favour of an urbanisation often imposed from above.

Through the juxtaposition of imposing natural landscapes and intimate representations of objects taken from the daily life of rural dwellers, I attempt to show the contrast between these images of indoor solitude and the immensity, enormity, and variety of the land.

In the pictures that I took indoors, I try to give the spectator a tangible sensation, as if it was possible to touch the objects, to feel the textures, the essence, and the soul of these things. At the same time, in the landscape pictures, I attempt

to portray the magnificence of the scenery, exasperating and aggravating every little detail through a digital process that allows me to obtain an enlargement of up to three or four metres. Every landscape is composed of 30 to 50 images of medium digital format joined together with the help of the photo stitch technique. Through this method, I can give a precise idea of spaces and distances, providing a more precise representation of reality.

Since the very beginning, I was intensely drawn to the objects I found inside the dwellings of these inhabitants living at the end of rural history: clothes, shoes, bottles, cooking utensils, items grouped together or isolated from the others, hanging on walls as if they have been there for centuries.

I was so fascinated by the ‘archaeological’ aspect of these objects and by what they tell us about the passing of time that I eventually started collecting them. To this day, I still preserve them exactly the way they were when I first acquired them. In this gallery, I share some of these material possessions—a fleeting glimpse of a life that is already gone before it has disappeared.



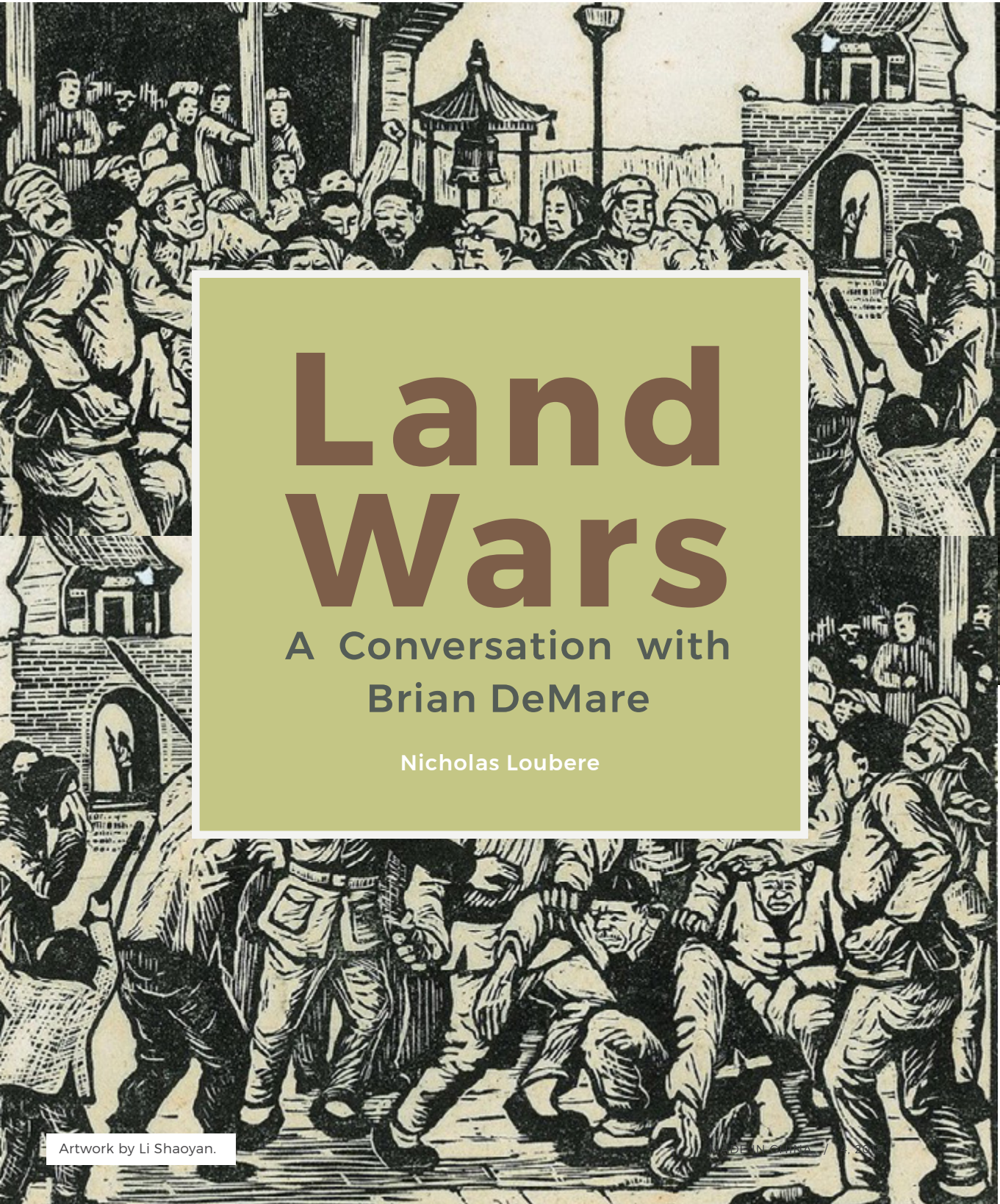












Land Wars

A Conversation with
Brian DeMare

Nicholas Loubere

Land Wars

A Conversation with Brian DeMare

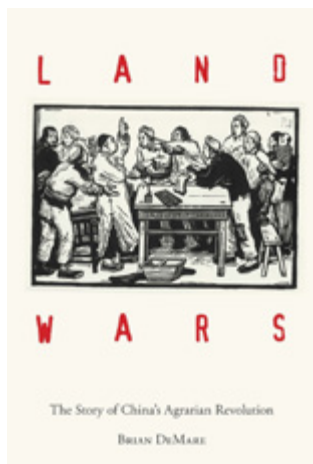
Nicholas Loubere

The Maoist land reform campaigns were an integral element in the Chinese Communist Party's rise and subsequent ability to maintain power. In *Land Wars*, Brian DeMare weaves together historical and narrative accounts, providing a detailed picture of how the land reforms shaped the lives of those involved, as well as communist rule in China.

Nicholas Loubere: Maoist land reforms did not happen in a void. Can you tell us about the agrarian revolution's historical antecedents and the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party portrayed the movement as it was occurring?

Brian DeMare: For Chinese farmers, ownership of land and access to fields have always been existential issues. In the aftermath of the imperial era, Chinese reformers and revolutionaries were well aware of the importance of the 'land problem': some farmers prospered, but many lacked land and struggled to make ends meet. The Nationalist and Communist parties recognised the need to reorganise agricultural holdings, but leaders in both parties were hesitant to focus on rural poverty. Under Sun Yat-sen, the Nationalists had issued a call to give 'land to the tiller'. This was a popular slogan, but after the rise of Chiang Kai-shek the Party increasingly relied on village landlords and rural power-holders. These men had little interest in agrarian reform. As for the Communists: true to the tradition of China's urban elites, which sadly continues until today, they viewed villagers as backward and uneducated. They sought to carry out a proper Marxist revolution by organising the urban proletariat. As one early Communist leader argued, farmers did not want collective ownership, but their own private property.

The total failure of the Communists' urban revolution, however, encouraged some Party members to rethink rural revolution. Mao Zedong was at the forefront of this trend, conducting extensive research into village life. Mao's studies revealed much about rural life, but his famous 1927 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan' owed more to fiction than fact. This document established the narrative framework of rural revolution: ideologically awakened peasants find liberation by forcibly overthrowing landlords, whose



Land Wars, Brian DeMare, Stanford University Press (forthcoming in 2019).

ownership of excess land made them evil men. Mao also framed possible reactions to peasant activism: anyone who opposed this righteous movement would be swept aside by the revolution. The Party always presented rural revolution as fundamentally good. There was little denying that during land reform and other rural campaigns many villagers were beaten or killed, but according to Mao's narrative, any violence that occurred was largely the result of the feudal past. Peasants needed to vent their pent up anger over generation after generation of exploitation; landlords and other class enemies, meanwhile, were said to carry out counterrevolutionary plots that also led to violence and death.

NL: *Land Wars* utilises a unique narrative structure to investigate rural revolution. Can you discuss this approach and the connections between narrative and history?

BD: The structure of the book grew out of my experience researching and teaching land reform over the last decade. Reading accounts of land reform, I was struck by the standardisation of the work team experience over the long course of agrarian revolution. During the course of land reform, the Party went from fighting for their lives in the Civil War to state building during the first years of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet the process of land reform remained remarkably consistent, always faithful to the narrative first presented in Mao's Hunan Report. In the classroom, meanwhile, I found that my students were most interested in how land reform functioned in practice. Turning my classroom into a hypothetical hamlet and dividing students into work team members, peasants, and landlords has proven highly effective for explaining the stakes of the revolution.

My goal in *Land Wars* is to capture the Maoist narrative of rural revolution, while also exploring how the campaign continually shifted as the Communists defeated the Nationalists and established an ever-stronger grip on local societies. The first chapter discusses the formation of work teams, largely staffed by urban intellectuals. The Party instructed these teams to bring an established revolutionary script to life. Subsequent chapters look at how work teams organised the poorest villagers to 'speak bitterness' about their difficult lives, a process that helped work teams place villagers into Maoist classes. In the chapters of *Land Wars*, as was the case in Mao's blueprint of rural revolution, everything leads to fierce class struggle, which in turn leads to peasant liberation.

Peasant liberation was not just a literary device. Many peasants benefited from land reform, and the promise of liberation rallied many concerned Chinese citizens to the Communist cause. But in my research I found cleavages between Maoist narrative and

the historical record. The story of agrarian revolution hinged on the plot device of fierce class struggle. Any mention of ‘peaceful’ land reform was roundly criticised: only the public venting of class hatred could awaken the peasant masses. Because class struggle demanded class enemies, work teams had to produce landlords and rich peasants in every Chinese village. Because many villages lacked a true exploiting class, peasants could find themselves mistakenly and illegally cast as class enemies. The centrality of struggle encouraged widespread violence that all too often was abused by local cadres in pursuit of wealth and power. And the idea that land reform would bring about liberation was belied by the simple fact that, in many places, there was simply not enough land to go around.

NL: The book’s narrative structure grows out of three classic literary texts that depict the land reform in very different ways. Why did you choose these works to frame your presentation of the Chinese agrarian revolution?

BD: The intersections of narrative and history have long fascinated me, and the Party’s framing of China’s agrarian revolution convinced me that *Land Wars* was a perfect chance to weave together the literary and the archival. Choosing narrative texts to inform the structure of the book, however, was immensely challenging.

Much ink has been spilled on rural revolution. From the Communist perspective, many ‘red classics’ depict land reform, including *Red Leaf River*, one of my favourite operas to emerge from the Civil War years. I ultimately chose Ding Ling’s *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* because I find her treatment of rural classes to be particularly nuanced. For example, her depiction of Heini, a landlord daughter, highlights the tensions between class and family. For the anti-Communist perspective, I naturally turned to Zhang Ailing. Zhang, known in the West as Eileen Chang, penned *Love in Redland*, a largely forgotten novel that includes a highly critical account of the process of land reform. This book, which follows an outline penned by Americans working for the United States Information Service, the precursor to the CIA, is also a product of Cold War ideology, helping balance Ding Ling’s own ideological bent.

I suspect my decision to include William Hinton’s *Fanshen* alongside these two novels will raise a few eyebrows. One of the most important books ever written about rural China, *Fanshen* is a gripping read, but it is no novel. Hinton described his opus as a ‘documentary’ of rural revolution, based on his first-hand observations. Over the years, however, I have increasingly noted the connections between *Fanshen* and the Party’s own framing of rural revolution. Hinton accepted Mao’s rural class scheme, even believing the worst about those who owned larger plots

of land. And while he never shied away from documenting the violent excesses of land reform, he saw this as a minor problem in the pursuit of *fanshen*: the total liberation of China's peasant masses.

My hope is that we will continue to read and assign *Fanshen* in the teaching of contemporary Chinese history. It is the book that cemented my own interest in rural revolution—it is still a great read and has much to teach future generations of students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. But we must continually rethink the text by considering how it functions as a work of propaganda.

NL: You talk about how Mao's conceptions of class were uneasily mapped onto the countryside. Do you think the agrarian revolution actually led to a fundamental and emancipatory transformation of rural life in China? What legacies has the Maoist land reform left us with today?

BD: It is impossible to overstate the importance of agrarian revolution to the course of modern Chinese history. Mao and his comrades came to power through a rural strategy, redistributing property to win over land-hungry farmers. After winning the Civil War, massive rounds of land reform cemented the establishment of the PRC. And because the liberation of the peasant masses remains important to the Party's legitimacy, the Communists resist attempts to examine the dark side of these rural campaigns. A true accounting of land reform must begin by linking the campaigns to the Maoist class system that left Chinese villages bitterly divided throughout the revolutionary era. Long after collectivisation erased nearly all markers of social differentiation in the countryside, Mao's class system endured.

A few years back, I met with an elderly man who was eager to talk all things land reform with me. Then living in Beijing, he had been brought up in the countryside and had strong opinions about the Party's various campaigns. A young boy during land reform, he had only one memory of the campaign: a popular rumour that a local landlord, condemned to death, defiantly feasted on lard before his execution. A fascinating rumour, but for my confidant in Beijing far more important had been the arrival of Maoist classes. He had been classed as a poor peasant but one of his good friends was declared a rich peasant's son. This distinction had a profound impact on the course of their lives. He attended college, served in the People's Liberation Army, and was now living the good life with his second wife. His friend had long ago died in their home village, never having the opportunity to improve his lot.

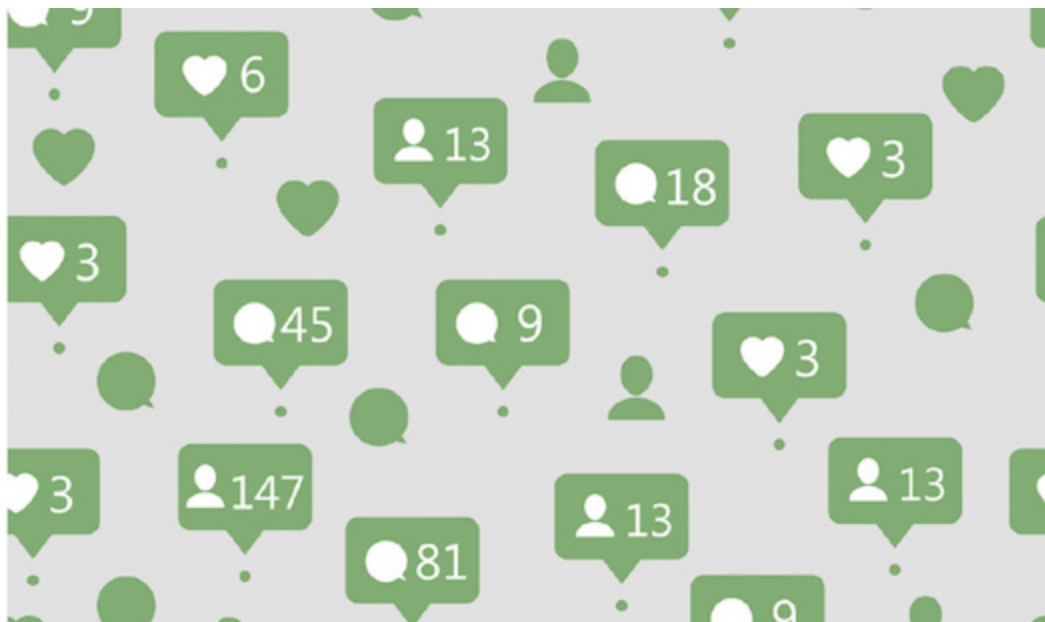
Like all things in China, the legacy of land reform resists easy characterisation, but the violence of these years and the stubborn persistence of the Maoist class system have shaped the course of the PRC. The violence of agrarian revolution, which the Party blamed on the forces of feudalism and counterrevolution, left scars on work team members and villagers alike. And the fates of generations of villagers were shaped by the class decisions made in a few short weeks during land reform. *Land Wars* is the first book on the entirety of China's land reform campaigns, but there is much more research to be done. ■



**WINDOW
ON ASIA**



PC: Benjamin Canizales



Illicit Economies of the Internet

Click Farming in Indonesia and Beyond

PC: Shutterstock.com

Johan Lindquist

Click farms are often considered either a form of fraudulent online marketing or as a type of exploitative digital labour based on an illegitimate business operation that produces ‘click spam’. There has, however, been limited research on how these entities operate, who the actors are, and how the market is organised. In an ethnographic spirit, this essay takes click farmers not as an aberration, but rather as a starting point for approaching the ‘like economy’.

Herman lives deep in densely urban Tangerang in the western part of sprawling greater Jakarta. With more than 30 million people, Jakarta is not only one of the largest urban agglomerations in the world, but also characterised by an increasingly intense use of social media. In 2012, it was named the world’s most active Twitter city (Lipman 2012). Today the same is true for Instagram Stories (Instagram 2017), a feature that allows users to post images and videos that disappear from view after 24 hours. Indonesians are among the world leaders in time spent on the mobile Internet—Internet services accessed from handheld devices—around four hours per day (Google Temasek

2017). For many people in Indonesia today, ‘connecting to the Internet’ means using social media platforms. As Merlyna Lim (2018, 163) puts it, ‘Facebook, in fact, is more popular than the Internet.’

Herman, who is in his early thirties, has lived through these changes. After dropping out of college he spent years teaching himself basic programming and money-making schemes, such as the sale of gaming accounts, in the Internet cafés that were pervasive in Indonesia before the rise of smart phones. With the advent of social media, he began to sell followers, first on Twitter around 2012 and more recently on Instagram, which is increasingly becoming the dominant platform in the country. With a handful of friends and neighbours he has developed a successful and illicit online business—using second-hand computers, a rotating proxy service, a Singapore-based server, and a software application that he rents from a programmer—in order to engage in the highly competitive and volatile market centred on manipulating ‘like’ buttons, views, follower counts, and popularity rankings. The main groups of buyers are online shops, influencers, and politicians. People like Herman, with an impressive digital and entrepreneurial competence, but faced with a limited labour market, are at the heart of an economy with low start-up costs that connects transnational chains of actors and technologies engaged in the production, distribution, and sale of followers.

Click Farms and Follower Factories

In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that there is a major global market for purchasing followers on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. So-called ‘click farms’, or ‘follower factories’ (Confessore 2018)—persons or companies selling likes, views, and followers via unregulated online marketplaces—are at

the centre of the controversy surrounding the digital ‘like economy’ (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Previous research by scholars and journalists suggest that the majority of click farms focussing on US social media platforms are based in Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India, while most click buyers are concentrated in North America and Europe (Clark 2015, Farooqi et al. 2015).

Click farms have been considered either a form of fraudulent online marketing or as a type of exploitative digital labour based on an illegitimate business operation that produces ‘click spam’ (Casilli 2016; Clark 2015; see also Brunton 2013). Click farms or factories appear to localise and control ‘clickwork’. This has furthered the notion that ‘click farms are the new sweatshops’ (DePillis 2014)—and hence, a major problem of unregulated labour specific to the global South. Both views maintain that click farms operate out of a particular territory—‘offshore’ entities in geographical, legal, and socio-cultural terms—and need to be regulated, either because they harm industries or workers. Click farms thus appear as an ethically dubious other, outside of legal regulation.

There has, however, been very limited research on how these entities operate, who the actors are, and how the market is organised. In an ethnographic spirit, and in collaboration with media scholar Patrick Vonderau, I have attempted to respond to this popular perception of the ethical dubiousness of these entities through a form of ‘ethical inversion’, in which click farmers such as Herman are taken not as an aberration, but rather as a starting point for approaching the ‘like economy’.

Economies of Clicks and Likes

Beginning in Indonesia—a country where I have conducted extensive research—I have met and interviewed several dozen individuals

involved in the like economy. Using search terms such as *jual follower* (sell follower) reveal a wide range of sellers who can easily be contacted, for instance through WhatsApp. Among those I have interviewed, there is a large degree of geographical concentration in the Jakarta region, but some are based in larger university cities such as Bandung, Pekanbaru, Yogyakarta, and even one in Amsterdam in Holland. The great majority are young men in their late teens and twenties who are in college or have recently dropped out. The oldest, who have generally been around since Twitter boomed in 2011 (such as Herman), are in their early thirties. Most are from relatively stable lower middle-class backgrounds with parents who are entrepreneurs, office workers, or teachers. They are all self-professed *autodidakt* (self-taught), having learned how to sell followers using YouTube tutorials, Google Translate, and Internet forums. Many started out as teenagers, selling accounts for games such as World of Warcraft.

These individuals are part of an extraordinarily complex market that takes shape across national borders. Herman is at the very centre of it. He runs a website—let's call it *jualfollowers.com*—in which members register and then are able to log in. He has about 800 registered resellers, of which around 400 are active. He also sells directly to customers, but at a higher price. Once logged in, members can choose products from an extensive menu, which includes different kinds of Instagram followers at varying prices—female, Indonesian, Brazilian, etc. When resellers have made their choice and paid, usually through a top-up system, they can enter their customer's Instagram user ID and the followers are gradually transferred to that account. In the process, resellers make a profit, often of at least 100 percent. Much of this reselling can be done off of cell phones. Many who engage in the market do so temporarily or on the side, particularly on the level of resellers who buy from Herman.

Manufacturing Followers

Herman accesses followers in different ways. So-called *aktif* followers are real Indonesian accounts, which can be accumulated through exchange sites or sites that offer free followers in return for access to user IDs and passwords. Herman has a stock of several thousand *aktif* Indonesian followers, which he can resell. There is a significant risk, however, that the individuals who control these accounts will change their passwords or decide to unfollow the accounts to which they have been sold. So-called *pasif* followers, in contrast, are generated and developed by bots, software applications that run automated scripts, and are thus 'fake'. *Pasif* followers are of varying quality and are priced accordingly. For instance, those that lack photos and posts—and are easily identified as fake and thus at high risk of being shut down by Instagram—are cheaper than those that have a more elaborate identity and content, making them more difficult to identify as fraudulent. Herman purchases these followers from so-called SMM (social media marketing) websites such as JustAnotherPanel.com (JAS), which are located outside of Indonesia, much in the same way that his resellers do with him, thus engaging in a comparable form of arbitrage. Websites such as JAS have a so-called open API (application programming interface). Through a simple procedure that requires no programming skills, Herman can create an interface between his website and JAS that allows for a seamless integration so that followers can be purchased and resold automatically. This seamlessness is temporarily disrupted during Instagram's security updates, as the whole international market temporarily comes to a standstill.

Indonesian sellers such as Herman have limited knowledge of these international websites, but guess that they are also resellers and that the actual production of followers takes place elsewhere—perhaps in India, Russia, or Turkey, which have stronger programming and hacker cultures than Indonesia. A common

conspiracy theory is that Instagram itself is the source of the fake follower business and that the most successful players have help on the inside (I have not entirely convinced Herman that I myself am not a spy from Instagram). Many of my informants, who focus strictly on Indonesian buyers, mainly for lack of English-language skills, fantasise about scaling up and becoming part of an international market, with the promise of increased profits.

The Manual Labour of the Click Economy

Among significant sellers such as Herman—who has a fluctuating turnover of around 15,000 USD per month—there is an attempt to create forms of automation. As noted, this does not require significant programming skills, except when there are security updates. For this reason, sellers like Herman who do not have these skills need to collaborate with programmers who deal with these necessary updates, or rent their software applications. There are, however, also critical forms of manual labour. Herman has a team of eight people who work in shifts around the clock. One group engages in customer service with resellers and other buyers, primarily through WhatsApp, responding to pricing queries or dealing with problems concerning the transfer of followers. If more than 50 percent of the followers Herman has sold disappear within 30 days, he offers a free refill. A second group engages in marketing through the production of price lists and related information that is widely distributed on social media, for instance through a large number of Instagram accounts. In particular, they experiment with different ways of having top posts for hashtags such as #jualfollower. Like many of the larger actors on the Indonesian market, Herman mainly uses friends, neighbours, or family members as staff, who work on the top floor of his house. He pays them a salary and frequently offers bonuses in order to improve their work performance,

which pushes their salaries over the legislated minimum wage in the Jakarta region of around 250 USD per month. Most of the staff are also resellers and it is not unusual for them to move on and start their own businesses.

Engaging with current discussions about click farms and digital sweatshops through people like Herman allows for a degree of reconceptualisation. First, the labour that underpins click farming is not so much centred on ‘clicking’ as it is on developing new forms of automation that decrease the reliance on manual labour. Manual labour becomes necessary primarily with regard to customer service, marketing, and occasionally data-entry when automation breaks down. Although Herman keeps the bulk of the profits, he pays his workers relatively well. Rather than considering this as a strict form of exploitation—as a ‘sweatshop’—it may be more productive to understand these as evolving, but unstable forms of patron–client relationships that depend on certain forms of trust and intimacy. Second, there is a rhizomatic form to the market, with unstable chains of sellers and producers. Evidence suggests that followers are not produced in one site, but take shape in a process of assembly. Once the follower becomes a commodity in itself, it can be sold and resold along multiple levels of sellers and resellers. As such, the fake follower market is strikingly similar to other forms of transnational markets, which characterise contemporary supply-chain capitalism. ■



Chinese Digital Ecosystems Go Abroad

Myanmar and the Diffusion of Chinese Smartphones

Elisa Oreglia

Myanmar's recent economic opening has prompted a dramatic upsurge in access to mobile phone and Internet technologies. Lower-cost smartphones finding their way across the border from China often have limited Burmese language support and come with WeChat and other Chinese apps preinstalled. This situation is resulting in a localised form of China's digital ecosystem with Burmese characteristics.

Shan state, in northeastern Myanmar, is an important artery of commerce, connecting the country with its most important trading partner, China. Natural resources, agricultural products, and manufactured goods are carried across the border through formal channels and through the informal economy in a variety of ways. Recently, there has been a new addition to this already complex kaleidoscope: WeChat. The Chinese instant messaging/social media app that has become the staple of smartphone use in China—with over a billion monthly active users in 2018 (Statista 2018)—is finding

Artwork by
Krish Raghav
(<http://krishcat.com/>).

new, enthusiastic adopters among Shan state traders, who have figured out creative ways of adjusting functions aimed at the Chinese market for their own purposes. Take WePay for example—one of the most popular features on WeChat, this built-in payment feature that makes purchasing and transferring money in China so convenient is not available in kyat, the Myanmar currency. And yet there are Burmese traders, shop keepers, and buyers who regularly use it to conduct business both within Myanmar and across the border with China, ending up with Chinese renminbi stored in their WeChat account that theoretically cannot be cashed out and converted into kyat. They have devised clever workarounds to do so: they can cash the renminbi out through informal agents that are based in Myanmar but have business (or family) contacts in China, for a small fee; or they can buy the equivalent value in products in China that they will then import back to Myanmar. The money never materialises: it becomes a creative encounter of digital payments, barter exchanges, and cross-border trade.

Breaking the Isolation

These are very recent developments in Myanmar, a country that has been going through decades of turmoil and international isolation. Until 2014 or 2015, retail commerce was a slow and cumbersome affair. Many small town and rural business people did not have a phone—be it a landline or a mobile—and had to rely on visits from travelling agents, or go themselves to wholesale markets, typically by bus on dangerous roads or by train on slow railway lines. Myanmar had been rather secluded from the outside world during the years of the military dictatorship (1964–2011), which had not only censored media and communications, but also neglected basic infrastructure, making it exceedingly difficult and expensive for people to get and use landlines, computers, and mobile phones,

among other things. Telecommunications were a state monopoly, run by Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications. In 2010, there were only 594,000 mobile phone subscribers in the country, equal to 1.14 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, and 493,314 landline subscribers, or 0.98 per 100 inhabitants (ITU 2017a and 2017b). The cost of SIM cards was out of reach for most people, hovering around 2,000 USD in the late 2000s, and still in the hundreds of dollars in the early 2010s. Private landlines were exceedingly rare, especially outside major cities, so people used public phones, which were also expensive and unreliable. Communication for either personal or business purposes was not easy.

The situation started to change in 2011, with the economic liberalisation program carried out by the new government. Censorship of media was dropped and the telecommunication market was opened to foreign operators—with Norwegian company Telenor and Qatari company Ooredoo winning the licence to build and operate new mobile networks. Both companies started service in August 2014, with results that went well beyond the most optimistic expectations. The price of SIM cards dropped almost overnight to 1.5 USD, and people started to acquire both SIM cards and mobile phones at a swift pace. The number of mobile subscription went from 6,832,380 in 2013 (12.83 per 100 inhabitants) to 29,029,342 (54.05 per 100 inhabitants) in 2014 (ITU, 2017b), and reached an impressive 89.8 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2017 (ITU 2018), while fixed telephone subscriptions still languished at about 514,385 (ITU 2017a). The country has gone mobile, not only in terms of phones, but also in terms of Internet access, with 75.1 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2017 (ITU 2018).

As a consequence, the number of mobile phone shops has grown as exponentially as the number of users of mobile phones. But while cities and bigger towns feature shops that would not be out of place in any urban area in wealthier countries, more rural and isolated places have to make do with small shops that

offer a very limited choice. An urban shop will provide the whole gamut of phones, from the latest Samsung and Apple smartphones, costing around 1,000 USD, to entry-level feature phones at 15 USD and everything in between. These phones are all imported legally, sold with full warranty, and might offer native support for Burmese language—or at least come with a Burmese font keyboard installed—not a given in a country that has long been plagued by the existence of two incompatible ways of inputting and rendering Burmese: Zawgyi and Unicode. A rural shop, on the other hand, will sell mostly Chinese brands that occupy the mid- and low-end of the market. The prices for smartphones range from 35 USD at the lowest end, to 180 USD at the upper end. Some are budget models of well-known brands such as Huawei, its subsidiary Honor, and Oppo. Others are ‘local’ brands, whose phones are made in China, and whose commercial distribution, marketing, and sales are managed by Chinese entrepreneurs—for example a brand called Kenbo, which (potentially by design) shares its name with a very popular brand of motorcycles. Others still are Chinese brands like Coolpad, Gionee, Vivo, Meizu, and Zopo, typically unknown in the West, but that have been gaining significant market shares in emerging economies. While these phones are cheap, and can provide smartphone capabilities and Internet access to people who would otherwise be excluded, there are trade-offs in terms of durability and usability.

A New Internet Underclass?

The overall experience of mobile phone users who buy the cheaper kind of smartphones begins not only with a much smaller choice in terms of brands and features, but also with salespeople who might not know exactly what they are selling—some general goods stores simply add a few phones to their inventory, and do not provide any kind of support nor advice—

and with phones that might have been imported through informal channels. This was—and still is—particularly true in Shan state, where porous borders mean that there continues to be a significant amount of goods being smuggled in from China, including mobile phones, in order to avoid import duty (Wai 2014).

These phones are usually purchased in Chinese shops, and are not meant for the export market; while their operating system is the now ubiquitous Android, it is often the Android adapted to the Chinese market—that is, without the default suite of Google apps that come pre-installed, which are instead substituted by Chinese apps. These phones are adapted to the Myanmar market before being sold, but they maintain traces of the Chinese Internet ecosystem: the operating system is a mix of English and Chinese, rather than Burmese, even after the default language is switched to English (at the time of my research, there was no operating system in Burmese at all). This creates a set of challenges even for people who are literate—but in their own native language rather than in English or Chinese. They range from difficulties in navigating the phone interface and understanding ‘housekeeping’ messages, such as notices of available updates, warnings regarding memory or performance, etc., to serious obstacles in using text-based interfaces, such as SMS or search. The journey to mobile Internet use, thus, often starts in an environment that is unfamiliar, as most people did not have any experience with digital devices before getting their smartphone, and in a language (or two) not well known, or completely unknown. Even as these challenges are negotiated and work-arounds are developed, there are still barriers related to access, since connectivity is still patchy outside urban areas, the network can be very slow at peak usage times, and data cost can be significant, especially for people with limited budgets.

While affordable smartphones and the fast build-up of infrastructure have allowed millions of people to go online, mobile-only Internet access is not the panacea that it was expected

to be in the early days of the debate on the so-called digital divide. More people have access to the Internet, but their Internet looks quite different from the one that users in wealthy, urban areas across the world take for granted. The ‘Emerging Mobile Internet Underclass,’ as Napoli and Obar (2014) called it, is using an Internet with lower levels of functionality, less content, more closed platforms, and more difficulties in creating content and looking for information than people using computers. While not all these issues were equally relevant in Myanmar, the point remains that smartphone use, and Internet use through smartphones, present serious challenges to new users, and the combination of default settings and intermediaries make a significant difference in how people are able to leverage their devices. What is pre-installed on the phone is key, as many people that face the budget and technical challenges I mentioned above will not install new apps, or if they do they will do so through intermediaries, e.g. the many shops that offer ‘download and maintenance’ support, for a fee.

A WeChat for All Seasons

Smartphones coming from China often have WeChat preinstalled, and Shan state already has a significant WeChat user base due to the commercial ties with China, meaning that the app is quite widespread for both business and personal use. Its features are also a particularly good match for mobile Internet users with low levels of literacy and on bad networks: much can be done by using a combination of photos, voice messages, videos, emoticons, and even the built-in Chinese to English translation capability. A market vendor I interviewed said that she took photos of the goods she needed to re-order, and sent them to her existing suppliers, who then shipped the packages via bus. The added bonus for her was that she could compose her ‘order’ regardless of the state of the network, which at the time was so overloaded as to be often unusable during the

day, knowing everything would be sent later on, typically at night. She received a call from the bus station when her goods arrived, and went to collect them without having to wait for the agent to come and visit, or having to travel to the suppliers herself. In her case, the payment was done through the bus operator, that worked as a sort of payment clearing house for local businesses (Oreglia and Srinivasan 2016). Other bigger traders were doing international business using the same tactics. Relationships were established with suppliers (or buyers, in the case of agricultural products and natural resources) in person, which served to create the initial trust, but subsequently carried out via WeChat, including WePay payments.

Thus, WeChat, the quintessential symbol of the Chinese Internet, is being adopted and adapted in other countries. In general, the connection with China remains, as most of the use that I have witnessed has included some kind of trade link with the country. What is remarkable, however, is that this is happening outside the localisation strategy of Tencent—which launched WeChat in Burmese in 2015—and is mostly parallel to, rather than fully integrated with, the formal economy. The WeChat usage I have observed is either in Chinese or in English, but for the users it did not matter much: they rarely explored options outside the main instant messaging area, and their way of using the app bypassed written language almost entirely. The goods bought and sold on the app were sometimes bought legally, but often illicitly smuggled in or out of Myanmar, and currencies travelled equally fluidly across borders. As both the app and Chinese smartphones find a large user base in the Global South, it will be interesting to see whether the Chinese Internet becomes a sort of ‘second Internet’, as former Google CEO Eric Schmidt put it (Kolodny 2018), quite independent from the one led by the United States, or whether a new hybrid will emerge, that will mix Chinese and US technology with local business and social practices. ■



WORK OF ARTS

Plastic China

Beyond Waste Imports

Yvan Schulz



Still from *Plastic China*
by Wang Jiuliang.

In the last two years, the issue of waste exports to China has attracted considerable media and public attention. As a result, awareness of the social and environmental impact of the global trade in recyclables has increased substantially, both within and outside of China. Among contributing factors was *Plastic China* (*suliao wangguo*, 2016), a documentary directed by Wang Jiuliang. Since its release, the film has become indissociable from the issue of waste exports, and it gained even more prominence after July 2017, when the Chinese government announced a wide-ranging ban on ‘foreign waste’ (*yang laji*) (Liebman 2018). However, the film’s relevance extends far beyond the issue of waste management. In this essay, I argue that *Plastic China* should be considered as a rich social commentary and critique, and interpreted in the light of China’s tradition of independent documentary-making in the reform era.

China Wasting Away

Wang is a recognised authority on the topic of waste in China. He rose to prominence a few years ago thanks to his first film, *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (*laji weicheng*, 2012), which revealed the existence of a great number of unauthorised and unmonitored dumpsites around Beijing. The film also alerted people in China to the dangers of haphazard waste management, and drew attention to the sheer mass of waste generated by a city the size of Beijing.

Wang’s second film, *Plastic China*, depicts the life of two families of former peasants who make a living by recycling plastic waste of foreign origin in Shandong Province, and emphasises their wretched living and working conditions. It was featured in numerous festivals outside China, and has won several awards. In China, the film went viral in

January 2017 before quickly disappearing from the Internet—thereby following a pattern that affects most of Wang’s work (Zhao 2017).

Wang’s first two films reveal the strong influence of what some refer to as China’s ‘new documentary movement’ (Berry and Rofel 2010). This is obvious in, among others, his choice of topic (China’s economic growth and opening to the world as experienced by the country’s underclass), his relationships with subjects (long-term involvement, much like that of an anthropologist), and his cinematographic style (observational realism involving on-the-spot and spontaneous shooting, a director who stands behind the camera, and the absence of voiceover). *Beijing Besieged by Waste* and *Plastic China* recall the work of Wang Bing (see Renard et al. 2014 and Persico 2010) and Zhao Liang (see Sorace 2017), among other leading Chinese independent filmmakers.

With *Plastic China*, Wang aimed to raise awareness of his homeland’s role in the global waste trade, and expose its negative repercussions on the Chinese population and environment. In 2014, Wang released an early, less narrative but more explanatory version of his documentary addressed at the media, in which he clearly frames the issue as environmental dumping. That same year, he expressed his intention to undertake a follow-up project on waste imports beyond plastics, which he tentatively titled *Dumping Ground of the World* (*shijie de laji chang*) (Liu 2014). It is therefore not surprising that *Plastic China* is generally invoked, both within and outside of China, in connection with the global capitalist system that, for many years at least, allowed relatively rich countries to pass the burden of pollution on to China.

The film has been particularly closely associated with the issue of waste imports since July 2017, when the Chinese central government hit headlines domestically and internationally by announcing a ban on imports of 24 categories of waste, including many types of plastics (Voice of America 2018). Several experts I engaged with in recent months put forward the idea that the film prompted

officials in Beijing to take this kind of action, or at least influenced them significantly (see also Lü 2018). What is certain is that the film can serve as a justification for the outright ban on waste imports—irrespective of whether Wang ever regarded a ban as the proper solution to the problems he documented in his film. In this sense, *Plastic China* has arguably played a key role in the recent evolution of the trade in recyclable waste.

However, the film is all too often reduced to its function as a tool for denouncing environmental dumping. This is regrettable, for two main reasons. First, this narrow focus fails to do justice to the richness and complexity of Wang’s second, cinema version of *Plastic China*, which—unlike the first version targeting the press—constitutes a broad social commentary and critique. Second, this prevents us from understanding why the film was censored in China, when the denunciation of waste imports actually fits with the Chinese state’s increasingly restrictive policies on this issue since the 2010s. To compensate for this narrow focus, we need to look beyond the predominant reading.

***Plastic China* as Commentary and Critique**

One first reason why *Plastic China* should be considered as a comprehensive reflection on the contemporary condition in China is that this is consistent with the director’s intention. In one interview about the film, Wang stated that: ‘China is a country that is facelifted, concealed, faked and unnatural. In other words, though it looks good exteriorly, it has a lot of interior problems’ (Kanthor 2017). In another one, he explained, in reference to the film’s title that:

The [word] ‘plastic’ here has two meanings: first it refers to the plastic waste, but at a deeper level it refers to the weakness beneath our surface prosperity; the way plastic surgery only improves appearance, not the reality. Years of rapid growth have made China appear prosperous, but pollution is having a huge impact on health ... while China’s growth appears incredible, it is actually cheap and fragile. (Liu 2014)

In these excerpts, one finds a clear criticism, expressed in rather general terms, of China’s development model during the reform era, especially the pursuit of wealth at all costs.

Another factor that justifies adopting a broad interpretation of *Plastic China* is the wide range of social issues addressed by Wang¹. First of all his film tackles the problem of labour exploitation. The prosperity of China’s coastal regions relies on a massive inflow of migrant workers from the interior, who rarely have much bargaining power regarding their working conditions. In the film, Peng Wenyuan—who comes from Sichuan province, belongs to the Yi ethnic group, and is almost illiterate—complains repeatedly about his salary. He asks Wang Kun, his boss and the owner of the recycling workshop the Pengs work in, for a raise. But Kun—who is Han, from Shandong province, and can read and write—refuses, telling Wenyuan that he can always leave if he is not satisfied. In the cinema version of *Plastic China*, the concept of labour exploitation applies more clearly within China and even among former peasants than it does between China and the highly industrialised countries from which waste is imported. Thus, in a way, Wang departs from the perspective of environmental dumping. His focus on the daily life of two families in a shared domestic space, where exploitation unfolds in an intimate setting, allows him to give an otherwise commonplace phenomenon a particularly raw and emotional dimension.

In connection with this, the film represents a reflection on the legal status and living conditions of China’s ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*). In China, rural migrants are generally registered in their place of origin but spend most of their time living far away from their hometowns. During the reform era, this has prevented them from enjoying key rights and public services in their place of residence. Since 2014, China’s household registration system (*hukou*) is being eased with a view to, among other things, give migrants better access to healthcare and education. However, implementation of this reform only begun several years into the shooting of *Plastic China* (which lasted from 2011 to 2016), and remains patchy to this day. The Pengs’ precarious existence and the fact that they are basically left to fend for themselves is striking for both Chinese and foreign viewers. Among the film’s many harrowing scenes is that of Peng’s wife giving birth to her fourth child in the Wangs’ garden, with what looks like a total absence of medical assistance. The film does not tell its audience how this situation came about, but it is easy to associate it with rural migrants’ generally limited access to healthcare.

The documentary is also a meditation on issues of gender inequality. The picture of China’s gender regime that emerges from *Plastic China* is one of entrenched patriarchy, at least in the countryside, where boys are still valued more than girls (*zhongnan qingnü*). In the film, the main character, a bright girl named Peng Yijie, does not attend school, although she is already 11 years old. Viewers learn that this has to do with her status as a migrant, her family’s meagre earnings, and her father’s alcoholism. However, it is also strongly implied that Yijie’s gender played a role in her parents’ decision to neglect her education. At some point, Wang Kun pushes for Yijie to attend a local kindergarten, even offering to cover the costs, yet Yijie’s father, Peng Wenyuan, refuses, preferring that she continue to sort plastics, do household chores, and take care of her younger siblings. This contrasts with the situation of Wang Qiqi, Kun’s son,

who is sent to the kindergarten so that he can pick up literacy skills early on in the hope that he will get access to a high-earning job later in life, ideally in an office in Beijing—it should be noted, however, that Qiqi is not only a boy, but also an only child.

A further issue highlighted in the film is that of conspicuous consumption. There is something profoundly disturbing in the Wangs' purchase of a shiny new sedan car. The family obviously lives on very little, and Wang Kun, the breadwinner, has a possibly serious affliction that affects his capacity to work, and remains undiagnosed and untreated, partly because he fears that seeking medical attention could result in high expenses. Yet, towards the end of the film, the Wangs spend their entire savings—and even borrow money—to purchase a vehicle for which they seem to have little practical need. Acquiring this potent status symbol allows them to have the feeling—and give others the impression—that they have achieved wealth, and moved up the social ladder. The question remains, however, whether this was worth the enormous sacrifice in financial security, and viewers are left wondering what will happen to the family if Wang Kun is diagnosed with a serious illness.

The aspect of the film that most stuck with me personally was how *Plastic China* depicted the poor standard of waste management in rural China. Some scenes in the film take place in a dumpsite, where waste is burned in the open, or next to a river, where it accumulates. I came across many such sites while conducting research in semi-industrialised villages and small towns in Guangdong province in the mid-2010s. Some of them were located in rural recycling hubs, but many were not. For instance, Gurao, once China's largest bra manufacturing hub, struggles with waste-related pollution of comparable gravity to that of neighbouring Guiyu, the country's infamous e-waste recycling capital. Work done by environmentalists Chen Liwen and Mao Da from China Zero Waste Alliance (*ling feiqi lianmeng*) suggests that waste management is either lacking or highly inefficient in the

Chinese countryside as a whole, and that much remains to be done in this field (Chitwood 2018).

The film also resonated with the study of China's so-called 'informal' recycling world that I conducted in the mid-2010s (Schulz 2018). Through my interviews with self-made entrepreneurs who live in the countryside or have rural origins, I came to the conclusion that, as a rule, these people did not enjoy any support from state authorities for changing their methods or upgrading their facilities in order to cause less pollution, and better protect workers. There were virtually no incentives to comply with environmental and safety regulation, and local authorities made little effort to improve the sector—in large part because officials at the village or town level had a stake in rapid, unbridled economic growth. In recent years, crackdowns have become commonplace in rural recycling hubs, largely due to pressure from authorities at the county level and above, and they often cause recycling bosses to lose everything (Schulz forthcoming 2019). Such a context makes it very risky for the latter to adopt a long-term perspective and invest in new equipment or techniques. This also explains why Wang Kun's plastic recycling workshop, like many others, relies on manual labour and a couple of unsophisticated and antiquated machines.

***Plastic China* and the Chinese Condition**

All the issues mentioned above are central to Wang's narrative in *Plastic China*. It is important to stress that, while these features of China's contemporary condition can be observed in rural recycling hubs, they are not unique to these places. Indeed, they cut across borders and sectors of economic activity. An important implication is that improving the lives of the people who live in rural recycling hubs and engage in waste sorting and processing requires more than putting an

end to waste imports—especially if imports are substituted with domestic waste, of which there is no shortage in China.

This brings us to the topic of censorship. If *Plastic China*'s message really boiled down to nothing more than a plea against waste imports and the pollution they cause, then the film would not be an obvious target for the Chinese censors. After all, this type of message is consistent with recent official discourse and practice, which lay great emphasis on environmental protection, leadership in global trade, and national sovereignty. If anything, there is considerable overlap between Wang's film and the 'foreign waste' rhetoric that accompanies state authorities' action in the field of transboundary movements of waste since the early 2010s, and predates the ban announced in July 2017. Moreover, *Plastic China* contains virtually no direct criticism of any government, state-owned enterprise, or other powerful entity—a key difference with *Under the Dome* (*qiong ding zhi xia* 2015), another documentary on China's environmental predicament that also went viral and disappeared from the Internet in a matter of days.

Yet, something in *Plastic China* must have bothered Chinese censors, and prompted them to intervene. In the absence of any recognisably subversive content, I would argue that it was the image of China conveyed by Wang's bleak and shocking depiction of the country's recycling sector that struck a nerve. Since taking office as president, Xi Jinping has striven to distinguish his government from the previous one. He has vowed to break with the past, and usher in a 'new normal' (*xin changtai*)—later morphing into a 'new era' (*xin shidai*)—in which the country's true wealth would reside in 'clear waters and green mountains' (*lushui qingshan*), and its prosperity would rely on moderate and sustainable growth. It is against this backdrop that *Plastic China* came out in 2016. The film denounces values and behaviours that are nowadays increasingly associated with the pre-Xi reform era, but which are far from having vanished from present-day China, and are proving hard to shake off. It reveals

the huge challenges faced by Xi's project of 'poverty eradication' (*xiaochu pinkun*). The story of a girl's sacrificed youth, in particular, works as an allegory that flies in the face of Xi's watchwords and signature concepts of 'rejuvenation' (*fulxing*) of the Chinese nation and 'Chinese Dream' (*zhongguo meng*): Yijie's life involves a toilsome present and an uncertain future marked by moments of hope inevitably punctuated by despair. Her dreams are daydreams, a way for her to escape the harsh reality she experiences on a daily basis. They take her elsewhere, to a place where she can picture a better life, and—most damning of all—it looks like this could be abroad.

In conclusion, *Plastic China* constitutes a broad reflexion on social problems and dilemmas in the post-socialist era. The film clearly belongs to China's 'new documentary movement', which has created an important space for social commentary and critique since the early 1990s (Berry and Rofel 2010). There are clear signs that this space is shrinking nowadays, yet this does not stop many independent filmmakers from pursuing their mission (Berry 2017). Despite censorship, Wang Jiuliang has managed to reach a wide audience with *Plastic China*, and have considerable impact. Immediately afterwards, he embarked on a new project. Interestingly, it does not look further into waste imports, as Wang had originally planned, but instead addresses construction and real estate's impact on the surface of the earth, in particular through mineral extraction and the desolate landscapes it produces in China (Wang 2016). Once again, though, Wang has a holistic way of tackling the issue, and his real concern is China's changing relationship to the land under capitalism—a broad project if there ever was one. ■

(1) I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Marina Svensson and other participants in the 2018 Made in China Summer School, who pointed to several of these social issues and helped me become more aware of them.

The Internet in China

A Conversation with
Gianluigi Negro

Ivan Franceschini

For the past couple of decades, the Internet has been one of the most contentious arenas for public discourse in China, a site of confrontation between authorities eager to exert control and users attempting to re-appropriate discursive spaces. In his book *The Internet in China: From Infrastructure to Nascent Civil Society* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), Gianluigi Negro explores the development of the Internet in China through a historical approach that combines political economy, cultural, and public studies.

Ivan Franceschini: In the book, you describe the evolution of Internet governance since the 1990s. What are the main innovations introduced under the administration of Xi Jinping?

Gianluigi Negro: In my opinion, Xi Jinping introduced three main innovations. The first is a stronger role for the state. The establishment, in 2017, of the Cyberspace Administration of China directed by president Xi himself, the enactment of the Cybersecurity Law later in the same year, and the promotion of the social credit system are just a few examples that reflect a more concrete attempt to institutionalise the Internet under a clearer legal framework, a process that had started with the previous leaderships but that has been quite unsuccessful so far. The second innovation is the rising role of Party ideology in the Internet economy. The slogan ‘all the media should have “Party” as its family name’ (*meiti xing dang*) covers also the Internet, especially online news media. The promotion of an integrated communication strategy, for instance through the launch of the China Media Group (CMG, *zhongyang gaungbo dianshi zhongtai*), also known as Voice of China (*zhongguo zhi shen*), puts online media in a central position. CMG is not only the result of a merger of the former China Central Television, China National Radio, and China Radio International, but also an impressive investment in media convergence that might lead to the *broadcastisation* of the Internet with the potential effect of reducing the plurality of voices in the media, as well as limiting the online discussion. Finally, the third innovation consists of the rising role of China in the global debate on the



The Internet in China, From Infrastructure to Nascent Civil Society, Gianluigi Negro, Palgrave Macmillan 2017.

future governance of the Internet. The Chinese authorities have been advocating for a model based on the concept of ‘Internet sovereignty’ (*wangluo zhuquan*), which puts the government at the top of the decision-making process, over private and civil society sectors. In the past decade, China has played an increasingly important role in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the most authoritative international multilateral and intragovernmental institution in media governance. For instance, in 2014 Mr Zhao Houlin was appointed ITU secretary general (he was recently re-elected for a second mandate), while in 2017 Professor Jiang Song from Tsinghua University was appointed editor-in-chief of ITC Discoveries, the new scientific journal of the organisation. In other words, under the presidency of Xi, China has not only been further promoting its vision of Internet governance at the domestic level, but it has also been contributing actively to the shaping of the political and scientific international discussion.

IF: In one of the chapters of the book, you discuss how people in China use the Internet. Did you notice any significant difference with the way Internet is used in China and, say, in Europe or the United States?

GN: Yes and no. The Chinese Internet can be considered unique in that its market is characterised by domestic players that in some cases perfectly match the needs of Chinese users. Think, for instance, about the success of the e-commerce and delivery services in megalopolises like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The lifestyle of white collar workers, the usage of Internet mobile communication (97 percent of Chinese users navigate the Internet from a mobile phone), as well as the structure of Chinese cities give rise to specific needs. To contrast, in both Europe and the United States the smaller size of the cities, a lower mobile Internet penetration (65 percent in the EU in 2017), not to mention a relatively underdeveloped online payment infrastructure could explain a different attitude, at least in the realm of e-commerce services. As for other media, the Internet cannot be analysed without taking into account the economic, social, political, and historical situation at the local level. On the other hand, as several observers have pointed out, we are facing a global trend in polarisation of public opinion. In China we have witnessed several cases of nationalism, such as the uproar over the recent Dolce and Gabbana advertisement, while in both Europe and in the United States there are growing concerns regarding online haters and the spread of fake news.

IF: In the late 2000s, cyber-utopian discourses about the Internet in China were quite widespread. Do you think that kind of optimism is still warranted today?

GN: True, in the late 2000s cyber-utopianism was quite popular. Again, this was the result of a period of a general openness that extended to academia and the whole of society. Foreign intellectual influences about technological determinism should also not be discounted in this regard—with works like Nicholas Negroponte’s *Being Digital* and Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Way* being translated and introduced to the Chinese public. At that time, a number of Chinese intellectuals expressed the belief that the Internet had the power to support pluralism and forms of democracy in the country. Indeed, in the 2000s there was an active debate on blog platforms. This trend also had economic origins, as between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s there was severe competition among different Internet services in various online markets. The possibility to express personal opinions on different blog platforms gave Chinese bloggers the chance to continue expressing their political views on different service providers when their blogs were shut down.

Nowadays, the Chinese academic and social discussion regarding the Internet looks different. From an intellectual perspective, it should be noted that exchanges with foreign countries are very limited and two of the most widely read books related to the Chinese Internet are a biography of the Alibaba Group founder and executive chairman Jack Ma and a history of Tencent. The two books celebrate the achievements of Alibaba founder Ma Yun and Tencent CEO Ma Huateng, providing examples for the readers to follow with strong nationalistic undertones. The Internet economy also is very different. Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent are now ‘three kingdoms’ (*sanjutou*) that have established a ‘stable oligopoly’ over the Internet in China. This is a situation which, on the one hand, has reduced the variety of platforms available to Chinese users, while on the other hand facilitates the ability of both companies and government to keep online discussion under control. In this regard, it is important to note the mushrooming of online public opinion centres, such as the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre (*renminwang yuqing jianceshi*), tasked with collecting and analysing online discussions. In other words, the patterns of political control have changed. Ten years on from the historic online chat of former President Hu Jintao at the online newsroom of the People’s Daily, the impression is that the Chinese authorities have further developed their skills in channelling the public opinion (*yulun yindao*) —or, to use President Xi’s words, are doing their best to occupy the ‘main battlefield of public opinion struggle’ (*yulun douzheng de zhu zhanchang*).

However, the time of technological determinism is over not only for China. Edward Snowden's leaks in the summer of 2013 and the failed 'Twitter revolutions' during the Arab Springs, contributed to the development of new research trends such as digital dystopia, balkanisation of the net, and spinternet, which emphasise the role of governmental and private business stakeholders in influencing public opinion, as well as other technological, commercial, political, nationalistic, and religious factors that are splintering the Internet at geographic and commercial levels.

IF: There has been some talk about the death of blogging in China. Is that the case? What about their micro-successors?

GN: Calling it a death is probably overstating the matter, but the fact that blogging was not even inserted into the list of the preferred online activities of Chinese Internet users in the last Report of the China Internet Network Information Centre is definitely an ominous sign. Equally significant was the decision of NetEase—which less than a decade ago was one of the leading online platforms in China—to shut down its blogging service in August 2018. In general, the Chinese market is changing very fast. Between 2012 and 2013, some observers even predicted the impending end of Sina Weibo—the main platform for microblogging in China—because of the terrific growth of Wechat and, more recently, Tik Tok. As in the United States and in Europe, in the last decade video and visual communication has grown dramatically, eroding the time that users spend on, and the attention they pay to, online written texts and stimulating a process of gamification. However, to this day microblogging remains one of the preferred activities of Chinese Internet users, with 337 million of users—42.1 percent of the online population—using microblogs. At the beginning of this year there were speculations of an imminent closure of Sina Weibo due to political reasons. However, as a media historian, I prefer to see this 'normalisation' of the microblogging service as a natural continuity of blogging. Today it is more difficult to read online investigations like those of Zuou Shuguang, Wang Xiaofeng, and Sister Hibicus just to name a few 'citizen reporters' who made the headlines in the previous decade. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo has played and is still playing an important role like in publicising cases, such as the explosion in the harbour of Tianjin in August 2015. More recently, Sina Weibo also played an important role in fostering online debate about the #MeToo movement. In this sense, the platform might be still considered a public square. ■

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