

# CONTRADICTION

## 矛盾

EDITED BY

Linda Jaivin AND Esther Sunkyung Klein

WITH Sharon Strange

**CHINA STORY**  
**YEARBOOK: CONTRADICTION**

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## 本书概要

# 2021

新冠疫情已逾两年，在去年刊行的《中国故事2020年鉴：多事之秋》中呈现出来的种种危机已然演化为中国社会及其势力影响范围内的多重矛盾。

中文『矛盾』一词自古有之，生动地描绘了一把能穿透万物的矛和一面不能被击破的盾自相抵触的形象。该词所描述的广泛现象，可用英文中的争端、冲突、抵触、失调、分歧、反驳、反对和拒绝等词来表达。《中国故事2021年鉴：矛盾》将这些一攻一守、棋布错峙中摩擦与碰撞一一呈现。

矛盾这一主题在社会、文化、环境、劳工、政治和国际关系等不同领域以不同方式上演。大国不一定能成功地支配小国；专制主义、父权体系和科技控管等看似不可抗拒的力量，却遇上了充满活力和惊人毅力的抵抗或融合；掌权者们为构建和掌控过去与现在的单一宏伟叙事所做的努力，则面临着来自相反角度叙述故事的强大呼声。《中国故事2021年鉴》为认识中国和世界历史上这风云变幻、矛盾重重的时刻提供了一条简捷而明了的通道。

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# 引言



# INTRODUCTION





**FROM CRISIS TO CONTRADICTION:  
NEW NORMALS**

Linda Jaivin and Esther Sunkyung Klein

At the end of 2020, a year of multiple crises, the world breathed a (surgically masked) sigh of relief. All hoped that 2021, the Year of the Ox, would be more stable and less fraught than the wildly scurrying, disease-bearing Rat Year that was 2020. The first vaccines for COVID-19 were in production. In the United States, a new president was about to move into the White House, prompting optimism that, among other things, frictions between Washington and Beijing could be managed better. While countries like Australia, with its coal-addled leadership, still dragged the chain on climate action, the People's Republic of China (PRC) appeared to be getting serious about it, with a new Five-Year Plan giving practical shape to its goals of reaching peak carbon by 2030 and net zero by 2060.

The relief was short-lived. As the year progressed, crises hardened into contradictions. Vaccines saved lives, but not enough of them got into arms around the world in time to prevent new, viciously transmissible variants from arising. The Biden White House did not do crazy talk, but its China policies were not so different from those of Trump's administration. For all China's talk about peak carbon, it continued to rely on coal when it came to the crunch. Other long-standing contradictions involved economic trade-offs between market vitality and government intervention. There was also considerable tension between State and Communist Party Leader Xi Jinping's 习近平 desire for Chinese culture and civilisation to flourish, and once again achieve the global recognition for brilliance they once had, and his insistence that artists, writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals take direction from ideologues.

Contradiction: conflict, clash, paradox, incongruity, disagreement, rebuttal, opposition, negation. In Chinese, all these can be translated as *maodun* 矛盾 — a spear opposing a shield.

## COVID Zero, Delta Dawn

The defining crisis of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, evolved into one of the messier contradictions of 2021. Countries with the means to do so acquired, produced, and distributed newly available vaccines. Insufficient attention to the needs of the developing world, however, left poorer nations unprotected — an unjust situation that predictably fostered new variants of the virus. The PRC did better than most in both vaccinating its population and helping others; by the end of December 2021, according to the *Global Times*, 85.64 percent of its total population, or nearly 1.3 billion people, had received two shots of a vaccine.<sup>1</sup> Beijing also supplied 1.2 billion doses to more than 100 countries and international organisations including COVAX, either commercially or as donations.<sup>2</sup> Of these, around 200 million went to African countries and, in November, Xi revealed he would be donating 600 million more while also setting up joint production facilities on the continent to manufacture another 400 million.

The spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant, which emerged in late 2020, however, outpaced the global vaccination effort. The arrival towards the end of 2021 of the even more transmissible Omicron variant showed the pandemic was going nowhere (or rather, everywhere) fast. But even as other governments abandoned the goal of suppression, the PRC continued to pursue ‘COVID Zero’. When Zhang Wenhong 张文宏, China’s leading infectious disease specialist, suggested China might have to learn to live with the virus, official media and online ‘Little Pinks’ attacked him as a ‘traitor’ and even accused him of ‘colluding’ with Western forces to undermine China’s COVID-19 response. The Communist Party of China (CPC) does not like to be contradicted.

The Party-State ramped up already stringent quarantine regulations and imposed strict snap lockdowns, including one in October at Shanghai’s Disneyland. High-speed trains literally stopped in their tracks when crew members were identified as close contacts.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the year, the authorities locked down the entire city of Xi’an.

Big data was at the core of the PRC's response, with a mandatory phone app controlling citizens' access to shopping centres, transport, and other public spaces through a traffic light system: green meant good to go, yellow signalled contact with a case and the need to test and isolate, and red indicated a positive COVID test result. The use of technology to monitor and control the spread of COVID in 2021 provided a foretaste of a broader push for 'smart governance', as Sue Trevaskes and Ausma Bernot discuss in their chapter 'Smart Governance, Smarter Surveillance' (pp.17–30) — a story that is certain to grow in significance in coming years.

## Wild Times

The origins of COVID-19 remained a mystery. By year's end, most scientists and intelligence agencies around the world considered highly credible the theory that it had arisen as the result of zoonotic (species-to-species) transmission, probably from a horseshoe bat to another as-yet-unidentified species to humans, and that it had spread from a Wuhan wet market. The politicisation of the issue by right-wing China hawks in the US and Australia, who promoted the theory that it had leaked from a Chinese virology lab (also a possibility, although less likely) and might even have been a biological weapon (highly unlikely), infuriated Beijing. In January, the Chinese authorities tightly restricted a World Health Organization investigation team's access to information and resisted efforts by scientists around the world to access data crucial to understanding the origins of the virus. Such secrecy further energised the production of florid conspiracy theories on all sides. We may never know the answer.

Close contact between humans and animals of a different kind is the subject of Becky Shu Chen's 'Roaming Elephants and a Conservation Wake-Up Call' (pp.107–111). She writes about the herd of wild elephants that went walkabout in south-western Yunnan Province and the humans who looked out for them — or had their crops smashed or eaten

by them — along the way. There are charming elements in the story, but it also points to a darker contradiction, between the human desire to cultivate land and wild animals' need for natural habitat.

The tale of the elephants is one of three stories in a special Focus section in this year's *Yearbook on Environment*. Natasha Fijn's 'Pastoralists, Zoonotic Diseases, and the Anthropocene across Inner Asia' (pp.101–105) surveys the impact of climate change on traditional herding practices and public health on the Mongolian steppe. Uchralt Otede's 'Ulagai Wetlands: A Dry and Thirsty Place' (pp.113–116) exposes the contradictions among policy, rhetoric, and reality in a fragile Inner Mongolian wetland. It remains to be seen how quickly and well China's new Wetlands Protection Law, passed in December 2021, will work to resolve such conflicts.

In late 2021, the Chinese government set aside 231,000 square kilometres of land for national parks, and enormous new renewable energy farms were in the works. Beijing also launched a US\$232 million fund for biodiversity protection in developing countries. And the PRC, which generates 53 percent of the world's coal-fired power, pledged to stop building new coal plants overseas. But in October, after a national electricity shortage rationed heating and electricity to homes and factories in parts of the country, the state rushed to finance and facilitate coal-mining, production, and supply. Total coal-fired capacity under consideration or construction in the PRC in 2021 exceeded that already online in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In July, excessive rainfall in central Henan province led to catastrophic flooding, resulting in more than 300 deaths. Enduring images from that crisis included harrowing scenes of packed subway cars in Henan's capital, Zhengzhou, slowly filling with water. The contradiction between continued economic growth and climate change mitigation is not unique to China, but according to the China Meteorological Administration's own *Blue Book on Climate Change* 中国气候变化蓝皮书, released in 2021, rising temperatures and other effects of climate change, including extreme weather, are affecting China more than the global average.<sup>5</sup>

## Contradiction from Ancient Times to the Present

As Esther Sunkyung Klein explains in ‘Contradiction and the Stubborn Bystander’ (pp.3–6), the Chinese expression for contradiction, *maodun*, comes from an ancient parable about a weapons seller in a marketplace boasting that his shield could repel any spear — and his spear could pierce any shield. It is a story with philosophical and political resonances.

The expression acquired fresh layers of meaning around the turn of the twentieth century. Chinese intellectuals used it in translating the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and other revolutionary thinkers who perceived contradictions in terms of opposing forces creating a dynamic for change. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 distinguished between ‘antagonistic’ and ‘non-antagonistic’ contradictions. Only revolution or war could resolve the first, which existed between the exploited and the exploiters — for example, the working class and capitalists, or colonised peoples and imperialist powers. ‘Non-antagonistic contradictions’, by contrast, could be resolved through synthesis and, when appearing within the Communist Party itself, by ‘criticism and self-criticism’. In Maoist times, the process of ‘criticism and self-criticism’ — never gentle — grew increasingly violent, until it exploded into the street warfare and mass ‘struggle sessions’ of the Cultural Revolution.

In each phase of revolution, the CPC identified a ‘principal contradiction’ in society. This changed from class struggle under Mao to ‘the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production’ under Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 — the first leader of the post-Mao reform age. This shift justified Deng’s program of economic Reform and Opening Up to the outside world, which began in the late 1970s. In 2017, Xi identified the new ‘principal contradiction’ as the tension ‘between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life’.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, he revealed a

program of ‘common prosperity’ to address it, while insisting there would be no return to Mao-style egalitarianism.

In her chapter ‘A Kaleidoscope of Contradiction’ (pp.43–53), Delia Lin shows the ways in which the CPC’s definition of contradiction breaks with that of the ancients — rejecting an earlier empirical tradition in favour of ‘monolithic belief’ in Leninist dialectical contradiction. This new approach to contradiction, she argues, shapes and limits the range of policies and solutions to problems available to the Party-State.

When Xi announced it was time to ‘clean up and adjust excessively high incomes and rectify income distribution’, billionaires and CEOs responded with a frenzy of conspicuous donations to causes including agricultural development, universities, and poverty alleviation. Evergrande, the property development behemoth that had symbolised seemingly unstoppable economic growth, meanwhile, teetered on the brink of collapse for much of the year, bringing into sharp relief some of the structural contradictions casting shade on China’s growth model.

This *Yearbook* includes a special Focus section on Labour, with a look at the fallout from the contradictions between labour and capital that the revolution supposedly put right but which economic reform restored by stealth. Katherine Whitworth paints an intimate portrait of a group of migrant workers living on the edge in ‘The Sanhe Gods’ (pp.57–63). Kevin Lin’s ‘Overwork, Pointless Work, Avoiding Work, and Legal Work: The Contradictions of Labour’ (pp.65–73), meanwhile, highlights the role of big tech in labour issues, from the desire of tech workers to ‘lie flat’ to the ways in which gig workers are organising to fight exploitation.

Despite big tech’s centrality to the PRC’s ambitions for superpower status in science and technology, the sector has been in the firing line since November 2020. The Party-State began applying largely dormant antitrust and other regulatory laws to companies such as TenCent (creators of the ‘everything app’ WeChat) and the ride-hailing platform Didi. In 2021, the government also expressed concern about tech companies’ collection and use of citizens’ private data, and the vulnerability of that data in the

context of companies trading on foreign stock exchanges. In November 2021, China's first Personal Information Protection Law entered into force. Governmental bodies as well as private companies now have obligations under the law to obtain consent for the collection and use of individuals' data — albeit with plenty of exemptions for official bodies, especially on questions of national security and law enforcement.<sup>7</sup>

The Party-State's campaign to rein in 'the barbaric growth of capital' 防止资本野蛮生长<sup>8</sup> aims to rectify social as well as economic problems. Hence the clampdown on the for-profit tutoring sector, which reinforced the privileges of wealth. Authorities in Beijing announced plans for a free online tutoring platform that would come with time limits, thus simultaneously addressing another concern of parents about the burden of school-related pressures on their children's mental health. The Party also launched the Clear and Bright campaign to clamp down on 'idol' fan clubs and other aspects of celebrity culture, and it severely restricted the access of minors to online gaming, concerned by the effects of both on young people's cultural tastes, self-discipline, and study habits.<sup>9</sup>

Social engineering remained an important tool for the Party in 2021 in other areas as well. Fertility rates in the PRC today rank among the lowest in the world, partly thanks to the restrictive One-Child Policy introduced in the 1980s. The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan called for a new strategy to address the looming demographic crisis of an ageing population and promote population growth, including a Three-Child Policy. The Party needs young people to marry and reproduce. But for young women, who have fought hard for social and economic independence, having children could jeopardise their ability to advance in or even keep their jobs. Despite men being able to access fourteen days of paternity leave, the burden of childrearing (and housework generally) still falls primarily on women. A Communist Youth League survey of around 3,000 unmarried urban young people aged between eighteen and twenty-six, found 44 percent of the female respondents were either unwilling to marry or simply not keen. The most cited reason, at 69 percent, was not wanting children.<sup>10</sup> In



‘How the “Garlic Chives” Grieved: A Song for China’s Three-Child Policy’ (pp.171–177), Annie Luman Ren translates and annotates a viral song parody, based on an eighteenth-century novel, that responds to the Three-Child Policy from a young woman’s point of view.

The contradiction between prosperity and control is not easily resolved; it has deep roots. In 1983, after Deng launched his Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign to swat the ‘flies and mosquitoes’ of Western liberal behaviour and culture that had flown through his ‘open door’ from the outside world, Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) founding director Geremie R. Barmé wrote words that still resonate today:

To fling the doors of economics wide open and still expect to retain control of the people’s minds by using methods from the 1950s is the essential paradox of contemporary China, and the dilemma of her leaders. The Communist Party sees its main enemy in Western influences, heedless, for the moment, that China’s economic cure may well be the root-cause of her ideological disease.<sup>11</sup>

## Controlling History

Among the symptoms of ‘ideological disease’, one that attracted much attention in 2021, was ‘historical nihilism’ 历史虚无主义 — in essence, telling the China story (and the CPC’s story in particular) in any way that deviates from the official line. To combat ‘historical nihilism’, the CPC persevered with its long-standing program of rewriting history. In June, on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Party’s founding, the *People’s Daily* published a summary titled ‘Major Events of the One Hundred Years of the Communist Party’ 中国共产党一百年大事记. When the CPC celebrated its ninetieth anniversary, it published a similar list. But as David Bandurski of the China Media Project has pointed out, the 2021 version was ‘more than just an update’; it was a ‘revision’.<sup>12</sup> The idea of

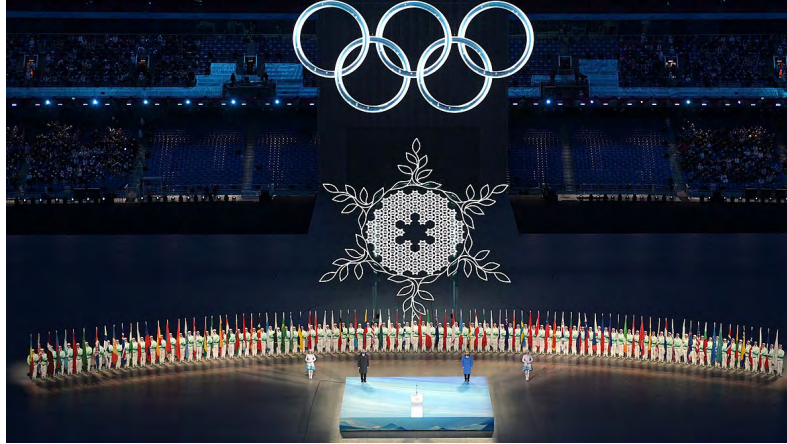
‘political reform’ — mentioned twice in the previous document — did not rate a single mention in 2021, and most references to human, civil, and political rights also vanished.

Several months later, the Party produced a ‘resolution’ on the ‘Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century’. It was only the third such resolution adopted by the party. The first, issued in 1945, secured Mao’s central position in the CPC. The second, in 1981, did the same for Deng. Two-thirds of this third resolution was devoted to Xi Jinping, naming him twenty-two times, versus eighteen mentions of Mao and six of Deng. Xi’s power continued to grow in 2021. State media broadcast the Standing Committee of the Politburo taking an oath of loyalty to both the Party and Xi personally. He appeared well on track to assume a historic third term as state president and party leader in 2022 (ending a post-Mao tradition of limiting party leaders to two terms).

The Party’s centenary celebrations included several major cultural productions, including the Korean War blockbuster film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and the popular television series *The Age of Awakening* 觉醒年代, which was about the Marxist intellectuals who founded the CPC in 1921. Ideologues promoted ‘the return of Red values, heroism, and unyielding mettle’ 紅色回歸, 英雄回歸, 血性回歸.<sup>13</sup> The space for even polite differences of opinion, let alone actual dissent, continued to shrink in 2021: after journalist Luo Changping 罗昌平 dared to contradict *The Battle at Lake Changjin*’s interpretation of history, he was arrested and charged with defaming revolutionary martyrs.<sup>14</sup> New school textbooks issued in 2021 stressed patriotism, ideological education and the study of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. In ‘Patriotic Language and the Popular Use of History’ (pp.9–12), Qin Yang looks at the use and misuse of historical expressions of patriotism today.

The CPC has been trying with less success to control the narrative abroad about issues such as its industrial-scale repression of Uyghur culture, language, and religious practice in Xinjiang. More information emerged in 2021 revealing Xi’s role; he personally told those carrying out

**The Beijing Winter Olympic Games in Opening Ceremony**  
Source: Presidential Executive Office of Russia



‘the struggle against terrorism, infiltration, and separatism’ in the region to show ‘absolutely no mercy’.<sup>15</sup> By 2021, a number of organisations and countries, including the US, were describing the Party-State’s actions in Xinjiang as ‘genocide’. David Brophy’s chapter ‘Purging Xinjiang’s Past’ (pp.77–89) looks at the ‘history wars’ in Xinjiang and their casualties. These include two Uyghur textbook editors who in 2021 were handed suspended death sentences for work that once enjoyed official approval. There were signs the practice of mass detention in Xinjiang was giving way in 2021 to formal incarceration for some, and forced labour for others. It remained to be seen the extent to which the new CPC leader in Xinjiang, Ma Xingrui 马兴瑞, would shift the focus from ‘stability’ (policing) to economic growth.

In December, the US put further Xinjiang-related sanctions into law. It also announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022, in which it was joined by Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian 赵立坚 condemned the boycott as ‘grandstanding’ and ‘political provocation’. Yet thanks to tightly controlled official media and Internet censorship, as Yun Jiang explains in ‘Sanctions, Boycotts and Counter-Boycotts’ (pp.93–97), many Chinese citizens have been led to believe Western countries are inflicting economic punishment on the PRC simply out of hostility to and fear of China’s rise.

Chinese media had a trickier challenge in controlling the domestic narrative around the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. For one thing, it had to smooth over the sharp contradiction between Beijing’s desire to maintain good relations with the country’s new fundamentalist rulers and its own ongoing attacks on Islamic religious expression in Xinjiang. In ‘Joy and Fear: Chinese Media and the Taliban’s Victory in Afghanistan’

(pp.249–253), Fengming Lu surveys the PRC media’s coverage of this politically delicate issue.

One of the worst missteps in the PRC’s official messaging occurred in May. India, with whom relations remained tense due to border conflicts, was struggling to contain a fierce and deadly second wave of COVID-19. A legal body of the CPC posted an image on its Weibo account of a recent Chinese rocket launch juxtaposed with a photo of the cremation of COVID-19 victims in India. The caption read: ‘Lighting a fire in China vs lighting a fire in India.’ The international backlash was severe and swift. Significantly, many Chinese citizens were appalled as well. Even the editor of the hyper-nationalist *Global Times* and original ‘Wolf Warrior’, Hu Xijin 胡锡进, criticised the post, writing: ‘Hold high the banner of humanitarianism, show sympathy for India, and firmly place Chinese society on a moral high ground.’ Had China reached peak Wolf Warrior? The following month, Xi instructed diplomats and others to promote the image of a ‘credible, loveable, and respectable China’. With Hu Xijin retiring as editor in December, it is unclear whether the characteristically narky *Global Times* will become more ‘affable’ in the future; the PRC’s messaging needs, after all, are frequently contradictory.

Across the Taiwan Strait in Taiwan, history was at the centre of a cultural reckoning with the legacy of trauma from the island’s long period of martial law. Among other things, there was debate over what to do about all the statues of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 and other symbols of the decades of oppression, as Craig A. Smith reveals in ‘Making the Past into this Moment: Historical Memory in Taiwan’ (pp.209–213).

In Hong Kong, enforcement of the new National Security Law saw the near-complete suppression of dissent, as Beijing abandoned its promise of relative autonomy under the One Country, Two Systems arrangement for at least fifty years after the territory’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. ‘Hong Kong: A Year in Contradictions’ (pp.121–143) is a month-by-month chronicle highlighting the contradictions between the Hong Kong government’s rhetoric and its actions. As editor Esther Sunkyung Klein

has noted, our anonymous Hong Kong-based contributor's technique echoes that of the Han-dynasty historian Sima Qian 司马迁, whose history of the autocratic First Qin Emperor juxtaposed the emperor's boastful words (preserved as inscriptions on stone steles) with the escalating signs of civil unrest in the empire. In 2021, Hong Kong ceased to be the centre of cultural and intellectual freedom and vigour it had been within the broader Sinophone world since the first half of the twentieth century.

## Troubled Waters

Beijing's increasingly militant insistence on 'recovering' Taiwan in 2021 ran up against hardened Taiwanese determination not to be recovered. Taiwanese Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng 邱國正 described Taiwan's situation in 2021 as the most dangerous he had seen in forty years of service. The strategic consequences of the tensions spread well beyond the Taiwan Strait, as Benjamin Herscovitch writes in 'Taiwan and the War of Wills' (pp.203–207). Taiwan is likely to remain a flashpoint into 2022 as the US and its allies, including Australia, continue to ponder the question of how far they would be willing to go to defend Taiwan's autonomy if the island comes under attack.

Because most Taiwanese perceived Donald Trump as a great friend to Taiwan, they greeted the election of Joe Biden with apprehension. The profound impact of Trumpism on Taiwan's political life and public debate is the subject of Wen-Ti Sung's chapter 'Taiwan: Renewed Faith in the Liberal International Order' (pp.187–199).

Taiwanese diplomacy suffered a blow towards the end of the year when Nicaragua switched its diplomatic ties to Beijing. Among the dozen-odd countries still maintaining formal relations with Taipei are several Pacific nations, but they are being heavily courted by the PRC. Denghua Zhang describes 'China's Quest for a Good Image: The Pacific Example' (pp.225–229) in his forum.

The depletion of fish stocks by the PRC's massive fishing fleet is not helping that quest. Graeme Smith's 'Fishy Business: China's Mixed Signals on Sustainable Fisheries' (pp.217–222) delves into the politics of seafood.

In South-East Asia, as Gregory V. Raymond writes in 'Seeking Stability Amid COVID and Civil Conflict' (pp.147–151), the picture is complicated, with South-East Asians neither 'passive observers' nor 'victims of a geopolitical tug-of-war between the two great powers', as some commentators would paint them.

Contradictions intensified in some areas — Australia and New Zealand, for example, as Jason Young writes in his chapter 'Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia in the "New Era of Chinese Diplomacy"' (pp.233–245) — and melted away in others, such as Russia, as Kevin Magee writes in 'China and Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition' (pp.255–261), providing valuable background to many contradictions the PRC would face in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which occurred just as this book was going to print. The PRC's relations with Canada thawed somewhat after that country allowed detained Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou 孟晚舟 to return to China and Beijing almost simultaneously released the imprisoned 'two Michaels', Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. In 'Controversial High-Profile Detention and Prosecution of Foreigners' (pp.30–38), Lili Song surveys what 2021 brought for foreigners held in China against their will as part of what is sometimes called 'hostage diplomacy'.

In the US, some argued for a complete decoupling from the PRC, but it appeared there would be cooperation at least on the climate crisis after presidents Xi and Biden spoke by phone in September. The White House said the two leaders acknowledged 'the responsibility of both nations to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict'.<sup>16</sup> Beijing's report of the call stressed, by contrast, that 'engagement and dialogue' had to be based on respect for 'each other's core concerns'.<sup>17</sup>

How those 'core concerns' differed became apparent in December, when Biden hosted a global 'Summit for Democracy'. Refuting Washington's

presumptive role as the defender of democracy worldwide, Beijing issued a White Paper titled *China: Democracy That Works*, which argued that dictatorship and democracy were not contradictory.<sup>18</sup>

## Never Too Busy for a Culture War

In November, Wang Meng 王蒙, an eighty-seven-year-old writer who served as China's Minister of Culture under Deng from 1986 to 1989, published an impassioned and witty essay on WeChat. In it, he criticised the commercialisation of culture, the promotion of culture as spectacle, 'dragon worship', and other examples of 'cultural froth' that he said evinced 'an empty culture, a pallid and soulless culture, a lamentable culture'. He stressed: 'Culture is not about fanciful rhetoric and lyrical recitation, about tasteless posturing. It is not about flirting with your charms.'<sup>19</sup>

The following month, Xi called on Chinese artists and writers to have 'cultural confidence' 文化自信, 'firmly grasp' the theme of national rejuvenation, use their work to foster patriotism and promote 'reform and innovation'. He said they should 'serve the people and socialism and let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend'.<sup>20</sup> Those old enough to remember would know Mao used that same phrase in 1956, following it one year later with a huge purge of China's cultural and intellectual world that consigned hundreds of millions of people (including Wang Meng) to labour camps.

For all Xi's exhortations on 'cultural confidence', it became clear it was possible to have too much of it, especially if you were a member of the LGBTQI community, an 'effeminate' man, a feminist or even just a 'mouthy' woman. Pan Wang takes us into the trenches of the gender wars that ripped across the Chinese Internet in 2021 in her chapter, '(Wo)men's Voices, Rights, and the Vision of the State' (pp.155–167).



China's version of cancel culture claimed a victim in director Chloé Zhao

Source: Gage Skidmore, Flickr

China's version of cancel culture, meanwhile, claimed a victim in Chloé Zhao, the director of *Nomadland*, only the second woman, and the first woman of colour, to win an Oscar for directing. The *Global Times* initially called Zhao, who had immigrated to the US from China, 'the pride of China'. But when some netizens discovered a 2013 interview in which she described China as a place 'where there are lies everywhere', the censors scrubbed all news of her win, her film, and even the Oscars from the public record.

Another woman who went from official hero to zero — this time in a matter of minutes — was the tennis star Peng Shuai 彭帅. The #MeToo movement in China was much in the news in 2021, but there was little justice for women who dared to complain about sexual harassment by powerful men. None of the accused was more powerful than recently retired former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli 张高丽. Peng posted a detailed and agonised account of their relationship on Weibo, alleging Zhang had pressed her to have sex when she did not want to. The post disappeared within twenty minutes, then she disappeared as well. Her subsequent reappearances have been highly stage-managed; the more state media insists there is nothing to see here, the more people have seen.



## A Note from the Editors

It would be remiss to conclude an overview of the year's events without mentioning the passing of one of the greatest China scholars of the contemporary age, Professor Jonathan Spence of Yale University, who died in December, aged eighty-five. Spence wrote accessibly on subjects ranging from the history of the Qing to the 'memory palace' of an Italian Jesuit in the court of the Ming. He was mourned across the Sinological world, and on both sides of the Taiwan Strait — no contradiction of views there.

The *China Story Yearbook* is a project initiated by the CIW at The Australian National University. It has always been the approach of the *Yearbook* to view political and economic developments as part of a greater picture that encompasses society, personalities, and culture — a picture that is illuminated by considerations of language and history. Our ongoing reference to the China Story 中国的故事 reflects the principle set out by CIW founding director, Emeritus Professor Geremie R. Barmé, that China's story is not only the version portrayed by the CPC, but also a story that includes the diverse perspectives of a multitude of others, within and outside the People's Republic of China who are dedicated to understanding the complexities of China through its language, history, culture, politics, economy, society and, most importantly, its people.

Co-editors Esther Sunkyung Klein, Linda Jaivin, and Sharon Strange are enormously grateful to all our contributors, to Jan Borrie for copy-editing the book, to Chin-Jie Melodie Liu for typesetting the book and for the artwork on the internal pages, to Teresa Prowse from ANU Press for the cover design, and to the two anonymous referees for taking the time to read and comment on it before publication.

# 论坛

**FORUM:  
OLD TALES,  
NEW APPLICATIONS**



Contradiction and the

Stubborn Bystander

ESTHER SUNKYUNG KLEIN

Patriotic Language and the

Popular Use of History

QIN YANG



# CONTRADICTION AND THE STUBBORN BYSTANDER

Esther Sunkyoung Klein

THE CHINESE TERM for contradiction that we have chosen as the theme of this volume, *maodun* 矛盾, is a figurative one: the image at its heart is that of a spear and a shield. The origin of the expression lies in a story transmitted to us by the philosopher Master Han Fei 韓非子 (d.233 BCE), though he may not have invented it. The story goes that a weapons dealer was drumming up business in the marketplace. Holding up one of his shields, he bragged that it was so sturdy no spear could pierce it. A short while later, he raised one of his spears and bragged that it was so sharp no shield could withstand

it. An attentive bystander then asked him, ‘What would happen if you used your spear to pierce your shield?’ 以子之矛陷子之楯, 何如.<sup>1</sup> The weapons dealer had no way of responding and the expression *maodun* (or sometimes *zixiang maodun* 自相矛盾) has passed into the language, with the meaning of ‘self-contradictory’ or, eventually, ‘internally conflicted’.

Wishful thinking often leads people to propound two different beliefs that, logically, cannot both be true. Master Han was using the parable of the spear and the shield to criticise Confucians of his day for exaggerating the accomplishments of the legendary

sage kings — ancient precursors to modern-day cults of personality. Confucians claimed the Sage King Yao 堯, among his many brilliant deeds and virtues, had ‘made the people peaceful and civilised’ 平章百姓 and ‘harmonised all the myriad states’ 協和萬邦.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, traditions about the Sage King Shun 舜, Yao’s eventual successor, say that before he became king he resolved border disputes among the tillers of Mount Li (in today’s Shanxi province) and conflicts over fishing rights along the Yellow River purely by the force of his virtuous example. How could societal conflicts be so severe that Shun’s deeds should count as marvellous, wondered Master Han, if the realm had already been fully harmonised by the sagely governance of Yao?<sup>3</sup> It is in this context that Master Han proposed the parable of the weapons dealer.

Readers of the parable tend to focus on the embarrassment of the weapons dealer, whose speechlessness is admittedly very satisfying. His ideological descendants learned from his mistakes, however. When robust debate in the court of the Han Emperor Jing 漢景帝 (r.157–141 BCE) brought out contradictions in the theory of Heaven’s Mandate — contradictions

that threatened to shake the very legitimacy of imperial rule — the emperor silenced the debaters with the words: ‘No-one would say you have an uncultivated palate if you eat meat but don’t eat [toxic] horse liver. And no-one would call you stupid if you discuss learning without discussing the changing of the Mandate’ 食肉不食馬肝，不為不知味；言學者無言湯武受命，不為愚。<sup>4</sup> The historian adds that no-one ever dared to publicly debate the matter again. It is worth remembering, perhaps, that the weapons dealer in the story is holding a spear. Even if his spear and shield are not quite what they are cracked up to be, they are still weapons.

Master Han himself — one of history’s great apologists for the absolute power of the monarch — suffered an ironic fate: he was imprisoned and killed in an ancient version of *bei zisha* 被自殺 (‘being suicided’) at the soon-regretted whim of the most powerful monarch of the age.<sup>5</sup>

Those who deal in personality cults, impenetrable shields and omnipenetrating spears are not always kind even to their supporters. They also exploit our natural tendency to tolerate and even enjoy exaggeration.



**Chinese soldiers brandishing sturdy shields and spears**

Source: Judith Bluepool, Flickr

Whether or not we approve, their talk is rousing. The Communist Party of China (CPC) can claim that at the very outset of its reign, it ‘put an end ... to the rule of a handful of exploiters over the working people’, while in the same document, the November 2021 *Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century*, it also congratulates itself on having more recently ‘intensified efforts to address corruption that occurs on the people’s doorsteps ... and root out all corrupt officials’.<sup>6</sup> That is just what you do if you are holding so sturdy a shield and so sharp a spear. If no-one has the power to make you test one against the other, who is to say a contradiction even exists?

It is the attentive bystander who says it, or writes it or, in the last resort, silently witnesses and preserves in memory the events of lived experience. In Emperor Jing’s court, it was the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 who recorded the debate about the question of imperial legitimacy and he also recorded the moment of its silencing. He left a record of that debate even if it might have seemed futile in the moment. Attentive bystanders are the heroes of stories like that of the court debate or Master Han’s tale of the weapons dealer.

Confucius’s follower Master Meng 孟子 (372–289 BCE), also known in English as Mencius, once claimed: ‘It would be better not to have documents than to believe everything they say’ 盡信書，則不如無書. He objected to

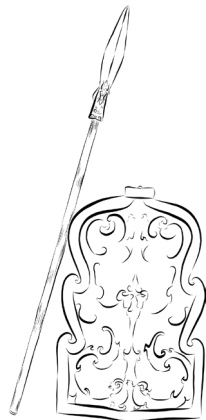
an account of the virtuous King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (r. 1042–1021 BCE) battling the irredeemably wicked last king of the Shang 商 dynasty (1600–1046 BCE). There it was recorded that the blood of King Wu’s enemies ran so deep that ‘pestles floated in it’ 血流漂杵.<sup>7</sup> ‘The benevolent leader has no enemies under heaven’ 仁人無敵於天下, Mencius argued, and as ‘the most benevolent was attacking the most unbenevolent’ 以至仁伐至不仁, there could not have been such bloodshed.<sup>8</sup>

The ancient document as we have it today — perhaps rectified in response to Mencius’s objections — specifies that the blood was shed by those in the vanguard of the Shang army turning to flee and fighting their way back through the ranks of their comrades.<sup>9</sup> The first-century philosopher Wang Chong 王充 (27–c.97 CE), a great proponent of plain and literal speaking, is just as sceptical about this version. It is not just the military implausibility he objects to either, but also the physical

implausibility: blood, even a great deal of blood, just does not work that way; it soaks into the earth. Besides, why would soldiers be carrying pestles into battle in the first place?<sup>10</sup>

We can laugh at the flat-footed literalism of the stubborn bystander, wink at each other and shrug at how he just does not get it; it is a metaphor! Or, like the CPC is wont to do, we can complain that by rudely puncturing the overblown rhetoric of culturally sacred scriptures, the bystander is *hurting the feelings* of those who propound them. All the same, such literal arguments do have the power to make other bystanders realise there must be a literal truth. The pestles either were there or were not there; they either floated or did not float. Either the shield can withstand the spear or the spear can pierce the shield. It is possible to lose the mandate by being too cruel a ruler or it is not. Whatever the case, it is up to bystanders to notice — and speak — the truth.







# PATRIOTIC LANGUAGE AND THE POPULAR USE OF HISTORY

Qin Yang

ON 4 MAY 2021 — Youth Day in mainland People’s Republic of China — an anonymous user posted a video entitled ‘The imperious oaths throughout the Chinese dynasties’ 各朝代的霸气宣言 on TikTok (known in China as Douyin 抖音). In modern Chinese, ‘imperious’ 霸 — sometimes translated as tyrant, hegemon or despot — has positive connotations such as leadership and excellence but can also imply domineering and intimidation. The video shows a group of middle-school students playfully reciting and performing in turn historical oaths about defending Chinese territory at all costs against foreign threats.

Against the background of combative military music, the students put on dramatically aggressive looks and use assertive body language. These non-verbal elements compound the commitment to defence in the oaths.

The video was also posted on YouTube on the same day and reposted under the same title a week later on Bilibili, a popular video platform that young people in China call the ‘B Site’ B站. By October, it had received a thousand-plus views on YouTube and more than 2,000 views on Bilibili.<sup>1</sup> The script of the classroom video is mostly based on a few videos posted over the previous few years on Bilibili featuring

historical slogans. In one video series, called ‘Miss Jin talking about history’ 瑾姑娘讲史, ‘Miss Jin’ reads aloud the six ‘most imperious’ speeches in Chinese history to pay tribute to the greatness of the Han people.<sup>2</sup> In another series, called ‘Weird tastes of history’ 怪口历史, the host presents ‘heroic speeches that will make your blood boil’ 让人热血沸腾的豪言壮语 against a background of clips featuring historical battles recreated from television.<sup>3</sup> These videos have received 146,000 and 95,000 views, respectively.

The reception of these historical slogans online cannot compare with patriotic videos about China’s history, culture and contemporary achievement, the most popular among which have each amassed millions of views as well as patriotic affirmations in the comments.<sup>4</sup> The generally lukewarm response, and sometimes even resistance, to historical slogans on social media, by contrast, might reflect younger netizens’ preference for stories of achievement over slogans of defensive wars.

Although grouped together as patriotic rhetoric, some of the slogans’ original meanings and historical contexts do not fit the present conditions particularly well.

The slogans used usually starts in the ancient Western Zhou dynasty (1100–771 BCE) with a quote from the early classic *Book of Odes* 诗经: ‘There is no territory under Heaven which is not the king’s; there is no man within the borders of the land who is not his subject’ 普天之下, 莫非王土; 率土之滨, 莫非王臣.<sup>5</sup> The misuse of this quatrain as a bold declaration of total sovereignty traces back to the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). The philosopher Mencius pointed out that the lines had been written as part of a complaint about unfair workloads,<sup>6</sup> yet Mencius could not stop the continued misquotation of this line in political discourse. The esteemed minister of the Western Han Sima Xiangru 司马相如 (c.179–117 BCE) quoted it when proposing the emperor exert control over non-Han tribal people in the south-west of the country.<sup>7</sup> Given the historical misuse of this quatrain to assert territorial claims, social media users are merely following tradition to appeal to a modern audience.

The militant slogan representing the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) comes from the Western Han General Chen Tang 陈汤 (? – 6 BCE). In 36 BCE, on a mission to the Western Regions, Chen attacked the nomadic Xiongnu



The 'Those who offend us Chinese will be eliminated no matter how far away they are' on the tag line on the *Wolf Warrior II* poster  
Source: Chris, Flickr

barbarians who had long hassled the Han's northern border, but he did so without approval from the central court. Although he won the battle, his action caused huge controversy at court. To defend himself from accusations of arbitrary use of military force, Chen argued: 'Those who openly offend the Great Han will be eliminated no matter how far away they are' 明犯强汉者, 虽远必诛.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent imperial edict had to explain Chen's military action, but it did so with caution, acknowledging the huge burden military campaigns placed on people's livelihoods. Chen Tang's slogan represented only one view in the court's discussions at the time. Stripping the slogan from its complex historical context, two nationalist Chinese action blockbusters — *Wolf*

*Warrior* (2015) and its sequel, *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) — adapted it for their tag line: 'Those who offend us Chinese will be eliminated no matter how far away they are' 犯我中华者, 虽远必诛.

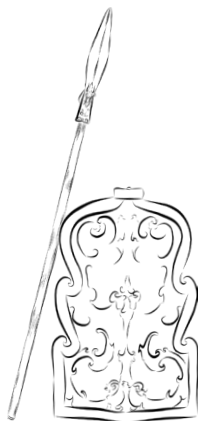
Another instance of a slogan being misused is even more inapt; representing the Song dynasty (960–1276 CE), it reads: 'Each and every inch of the mountains and rivers is [worth] that amount of blood' 一寸山河一寸血. It was used as Chiang Kai-shek's 蒋介石 conscription slogan in 1944, but it can be traced back to the speech of an enemy of the Song regime. In 1123, the Northern Song struck an agreement with the rising Jin dynasty of the Jurchens (a non-Han Chinese ethnicity) in the north-east to join forces against the Khitan Liao kingdom (907–1125 CE), which had mostly been

in peaceful rivalry with the Song on its northern border. After the defeat of the Liao, the joint force disputed whether the old Song territory of Yan 燕 (present-day Beijing) should be returned to the Song. Zuo Qigong 左企弓 (c.1051–1123 CE), a Liao minister who surrendered to the Jin, advised the Jurchens against surrendering Yan to the Song, remarking: ‘Each and every inch of the mountains and rivers is [worth] that amount of gold’ 一寸山河一寸金.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, although it is in fact an *anti*-Song slogan, this line was used to represent the Song in the 2021 classroom video.

These military slogans are, despite this slip, heavily Han-centric. They namecheck all the major dynasties with Han ruling houses while leaving out non-Han dynasties. For example, the Mongol Yuan, which ruled over the vastest territory in China’s history during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was left unreferenced. The Manchu Qing, the last imperial dynasty, which ruled for almost three centuries from 1644 to 1911, was also excluded from the recitations. Chinese netizens

typically ridicule the Qing dynasty in online forums for its weakness and failures in dealing with foreign threats; its final seventy years, starting with the First Opium War in 1839, belong to the ‘Century of Humiliation’ that is at the centre of China’s patriotic education. A satirical comment on Bilibili proposed to represent the Qing with the statement: ‘For those who offend our Tartar Qing [韃清 *dá Qīng*, a sardonic pun on Great Qing 大清 *dà Qīng*], we will either relinquish land if they are close or pay war indemnities if they come from afar.’

Some netizens have expressed caution about decontextualising rhetoric from history. Most online comments, however, are enthusiastic. At a time of stress in international relations, Chinese citizens, especially at the grassroots level, are turning to history for inspiration. The popular use of historical military rhetoric in contemporary China helps to create, using Benedict Anderson’s term, an ‘imagined community’ of guardians of China, to protect it from threat.









# 1



**SMART GOVERNANCE,  
SMARTER SURVEILLANCE**

Ausma Bernot and Susan Trevaskes

Xi Jinping's 习近平 regard for socialist buzzwords and phrases is legendary. The China Dream 中国梦, the Four Comprehensives 四个全面, The Party Leads Over Everything 党是领导一切的, and, more recently, Common Prosperity 共同富裕 are a few of the more popular framing devices for Xi's ambitious agenda. But in terms of its ability to encapsulate precisely what is happening on the (political) ground in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and reflect the Party-State's raw ambitions, there is one in Xi's lexicon that rules them all: Modernisation of Governance Capacity 治理能力现代化. This phrase, adopted as the main theme of the Fourth Plenum of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Nineteenth Central Committee held in 2019,<sup>1</sup> is now helping to direct and shape new developments in big data and smart surveillance in accordance with socialist ideology, reaching into every part of people's everyday lives. Aspects of comprehensive smart surveillance are now being written into national development goals and law, thus creating a full package of surveillance, social and economic development, ideology, and governance.

## Governing 'Over Everything'

Unlike many of the other rhetorical flourishes that make up Xi's repertoire of ideological jingles, Modernisation of Governance Capacity is a catchphrase that is true to its name. Much has been said about the current party leadership's rejection of all things democratic and liberal. But under Xi, the paradigm shift has not merely been about limiting pluralism and protecting against the infiltration of democratic ideas; it has also been about assertively constructing a new system of governance 'over everything'. The building bricks of this emerging Leviathan include large volumes of big data, cloud computing, and smart governance 智治 — an umbrella term for a scaffolding of data platforms, regulations, and surveillance aids for social governance. Modernisation of Governance Capacity, in the words of a veteran Central Party School scholar Zhang

Weiping 张蔚萍, is ‘a giant, systemic project involving the economy, politics, culture, society, ecological civilisation, and Party-building, among other fields’.<sup>2</sup>

According to Xi, Modernisation of Governance Capacity provides a concrete, institutional framework for the China Dream of National Rejuvenation.<sup>3</sup> It is now baked into all current plans of the Party and the government, including the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan adopted in March 2021. This plan builds on the Party-State’s existing Internet Plus 互联网+ initiatives, described by Premier Li Keqiang 李克強 as ‘a new driving force for economic development’. Internet Plus uses big-data innovations in cloud computing, the Internet of Things (IoT), and mobile Internet to improve government services, regulate the market to spur economic growth, and strengthen social supervision and management processes.<sup>4</sup> From 2021 to 2025, big data will also enhance a vast array of existing e-governance platforms that aim to make citizens’ interactions with government, especially at the local level, much smoother. Initiatives include, for instance, the provision of smart apps that improve access to government services and social benefits, especially for the vulnerable and disadvantaged, such as the rollout of digital social security cards for migrant workers.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it was big data that powered the key measures that successfully contained COVID-19 in the PRC in 2021, prompting authorities to boast of the ‘superior nature of their political system’ 制度优越性 in protecting the lives and welfare of their citizens. In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis created an automated information loop between national, community, and individual collection and use of data.<sup>6</sup> At a national level, the State Council and the National Health Commission were the key actors, hoovering up epidemiological big data mined from hospitals and self-reporting patients and collating this along with travel movements recorded by public transport providers and geolocation tracking from mobile phones. At the level of the individual, people across the nation downloaded quick-response health codes that were developed to algorithmically determine the individual

level of COVID-19 infection risk. That level of risk was then converted into a colour-coded QR code, a Health Code 健康码, which could be accessed via the popular WeChat or Alipay apps. It was ordered like a traffic-light system: a green code allowed individuals to leave home and access public spaces, such as shopping malls and workplaces, whereas a yellow or red code necessitated self-isolation.<sup>7</sup> Community-level surveillance initiatives included physical checks of individuals' Health Code data by community volunteers or security staff to ensure each residential neighbourhood could enact up-to-date COVID-19 prevention and control measures.

The COVID-19 crisis accorded community authorities, such as staff at local police stations, an opportunity to patch up gaps in their data on the local population. Residential committee volunteers, together with local police, combed neighbourhoods, 'leaving no blind-spots, not missing a household, and not leaving out a single person'.<sup>8</sup> These efforts improved governance capacity by enabling local authorities to collect data of unprecedented accuracy on the residents in their area. Likened to a carpet covering every inch of the floor, the comprehensive sweeps of population data and registration of populations in 'carpet-style management' 地毯式管理 have enabled local monitoring of all aspects of people's lives, from the purchase of groceries to employment status.

Smart governance is making government service functions and processes — at least at the local level or where administrative bodies are dealing with non-political matters — increasingly transparent to society. It is also making society increasingly transparent to the Party-State. By design, improving the provision of health, financial, administrative, and other services through cloud-based e-government platforms makes the behaviour of governing authorities relatively less bureaucratic and more transparent to citizens. Premier Li has called for a reduction in the administrative layers between citizens and government services as well as within the government bureaucracy, thus achieving 'lean government'.<sup>9</sup>

The other side of the transparency coin is the development of a vast array of cloud-based databases and other tools for Internet Plus Monitoring

互联网 + 监管. These online tools are used to detect and punish undesirable social behaviour and to predict and prevent criminal behaviour (perceived or real). Increasingly, they also aim to mould all citizens to the ideological contours of what the Party calls Socialist Core Values 核心社会价值.<sup>10</sup>

Xi Jinping's governance capacity-building program is not merely about improving surveillance coverage for the sake of 'maintaining stability'. Another key function is moral education: connecting the China Dream to programs designed to 'harmonise' the values and behaviours of individuals into one non-pluralistic whole. Technology increasingly provides seamless incorporation of moral ideology into governance. The best-known examples of this are social credit systems. These can be described as systems of light behavioural engineering because they impose clear penalties for behaviours deemed 'untrustworthy'. 'Trustworthiness' 诚信 (also translated as 'honesty and credibility') is also connected to the Party-State's ideology through the concept of Socialist Core Values. A set of sometimes overlapping initiatives at provincial and city levels and involving Internet businesses, social credit systems monitor legal records, money management, and social behaviours: repayment of debts, criminal and administrative penalties, or charitable giving, among others, would all be included. Each regional authority has its own social credit system that decides what behaviours can negatively or positively impact an individual's social credit score; a good credit score reflects the financial trustworthiness of a person and can entail some rewards, such as the ability to book a hotel room without a deposit. In more extreme cases, a bad credit score may prevent an 'untrustworthy' person from taking a train or plane.<sup>11</sup> Gradually rolled out on a fragmented and experimental basis from 2016, these provisions will soon be nationally standardised. In July 2021, the National Development and Reform Commission published draft provisions titled the 'National Basic List of Punishment Measures for Untrustworthiness'.<sup>12</sup> The draft provisions propose that social credit scores be applied to individuals and legal persons to create a Public Credit System that will contain eleven types of information, ranging from fulfilment of

credit commitments and policy contracts to evaluations of honesty and trustworthiness, with rewards and punishments to be determined by local authorities.

In short, we find that digital provision of social services works in symbiosis with surveillance technology to build the Party-State's governance capacity, allowing surveillance creep to occur. We saw this symbiosis at work in the era of COVID-19: 'carpet-style' management checks on populations allowed police to monitor the movements of fugitives, floating populations, and migrant workers 流动人口.<sup>13</sup> Governance capacity-building enabled the repurposing of health-oriented administrative surveillance for broader monitoring of target populations.<sup>14</sup>

## Transparency, Stability Maintenance, and Smart Governance

The Party's vision — its promise to the people — is to realise the China Dream of National Rejuvenation, constructing a nation whose citizens can enjoy long-lasting moderate prosperity and a harmonious society. For this grand vision to be realised, the Party-State moulds all social and economic activity; it 'leads everything' 领导一切. However, to lead everything, the Party needs to see everything. This necessitates a high level of acquiescence from 1.4 billion individuals whose everyday lives under the eyes of surveillance cameras interact with cloud databases and the IoT, and with smart cards for mass transit, online communications, and e-government in their pockets.

Part of the China Dream of a life of prosperity and harmony requires the Party-State to expand government services and improve accountability through greater transparency. But the precondition for living the China Dream's good life is widespread social stability 社会稳定. Sustaining social stability locks the Party into ever-expanding social governance 社会治理 initiatives to monitor and control the movement and behaviour of citizens.



Old-fashioned Mao-era neighbourhood committees combine with new-fashioned Xi-era technology to form a system of high-level surveillance. These days, the organisational approach to community surveillance is through grid management 网格化管理 — a system of urban grassroots governance, creating ‘population units’ for digital supervision and management.<sup>15</sup> Although different provinces, and even different cities, have varied systems of grid management, each system divides residential areas into grids of around 10,000 square metres (one hectare), although the actual size varies depending on population density or predicted public safety risks. The system also maps the grid area with computerised programs and connects it to local police and public service bureaus. Each grid requires a set of public servants, such as a grid manager, supervisor, police staff member, and firefighter.<sup>16</sup> Last, the grids also employ grid members from the local residential community. The grid management system combines on-the-ground monitoring activities (of visitors, for



Community volunteers ensure COVID-19 control measures are enacted  
Source: Ming Xia, Flickr

example) by grid staff and volunteers overlooking the daily lives of households with increasingly automated surveillance technology.

To expand governance capacity to its fullest, the July 2021 joint Central Party Committee and State Council's 'Opinion on Strengthening the Modernisation of the Grassroots Governance System and Governance Capabilities' urges local authorities to strengthen smart governance by integrating the system of grid management with various tools of digital governance.<sup>17</sup> Smart governance enhances the powers of the police, prosecution, and courts, and promises to integrate current systems to develop 'one-stop' conflict and dispute-mediation centres. It also promises to improve the delivery of government services more generally.<sup>18</sup> The recent focus of the Party-State on smart governance sets broad guidelines for experimentation with smart surveillance that officials across the country who are keen to impress their superiors are likely to take onboard.

In the words of Chinese political scholar Minxin Pei 裴敏欣, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission is the Party's 'domestic security taskmaster'.<sup>19</sup> It oversees all law-and-order operations and the adoption of laws across the PRC. According to its Secretary-General, Chen Yixin 陈一新, smart governance is one of the key technological aids of Xi's governance capacity-building efforts, particularly at the grassroots level.<sup>20</sup>

Chinapeace.gov.cn, which is the Political and Legal Affairs Commission's website, abounds with examples of smart governance initiatives. For instance:

- In 2021, Chongqing Municipality's police bureaus adopted a mini-app, available via China's super-app WeChat, for conflict mediation. The mini-app allows Chongqing residents to report conflicts — anything from community disagreements to land disputes. Lawyers on online duty respond and facilitate conflict resolution via a virtual 'mediation room'.<sup>21</sup>

- In 2021, Daqing city in Heilongjiang province adopted a grid management system that allows reporting of safety hazards such as broken streetlights to grid staff via an app. Communities receive artificial intelligence-generated ratings based on their safety, and a ‘five-star safe community’ rating can be achieved if grid staff respond to safety issues quickly and efficiently. A low rating would reflect poorly on the performance of government servants seeking promotion.<sup>22</sup>
- Guizhou rural communities have installed subsidised video surveillance cameras to reduce the number of ‘blind-spots’ in rural video surveillance. Local police officers have subsidised the cost of video surveillance for rural residents, encouraging the building of ‘smart villages’.<sup>23</sup>
- Prefectures and towns in Guizhou province have started using public security groups on WeChat to respond to community queries and reports. Some of the mentioned incidents include a successful search for a lost child, reporting dangerous behaviour by neighbours with suspected or confirmed mental health issues, hotels reporting guest registration records, and incidents of theft.<sup>24</sup>

The Central Committee, the State Council, and the National Health Council further embedded smart governance technologies in daily life in 2021 by urging local authorities to expand their use of smart applications 智慧应用 to promote community safety and wellbeing. The Central Committee argued that such smart applications could mobilise the masses by creating access to the social governance software and expanding online channels for public participation.<sup>25</sup> Such public participation could extend to government services, access to legal and conflict-mediation resources, gathering public opinion, crime prevention, pandemic prevention and control, and caring for elderly people living alone. Various iterations of

such smart applications were created across cities in China according to local community needs and requirements.

## Resolving Some Contradictions, While Making Others Invisible

The examples above make it clear that smart governance is central to the Party-State's efforts to detect and punish what it considers undesirable behaviours, to predict and thus prevent criminal behaviour, and to mould social behaviour to better fit the ideals of socialist morality. A key focus of smart governance is the requirement that police, government, and party organisations at the local level combine efforts to 'resolve social contradictions' 化解矛盾纠纷 — that is, social conflicts as well as illegal and criminal behaviours.

As all-embracing as the above examples may seem, many communities in China are not yet totally transparent to the Party-State. In September 2021, the Political and Legal Affairs Commission instructed local authorities to address blind-spots in community surveillance through smart technology. Secretary-General Chen also urged them to improve intragovernmental networking and the sharing of social governance information resources. Such directives put pressure on local authorities to hasten the rollout of smart applications for social governance and employ smart monitoring for early detection of hidden security risks at the grassroots level.<sup>26</sup>

The Political and Legal Affairs Commission directed local authorities to facilitate the extension of smart platforms as part of the Snow Bright Project 雪亮工程, a surveillance system that taps into a network of smart video cameras with the justification of caring for the safety of the people.<sup>27</sup> In the pilot village of Linyi where Snow Bright was first trialled, the local residents could observe live video surveillance footage on their screens and report any security concerns by a press of a television remote button.<sup>28</sup> In 2021, the project is mostly complete; it now covers both urban and rural

communities. It aims to monitor, for policing purposes, surveillance blind-spots, village entrance and exit points, and public and high-traffic areas, such as urban–rural junctions, areas previously largely excluded from video surveillance initiatives. Snow Bright builds on the capabilities of the previously implemented Skynet Project 天网工程 of primarily urban surveillance that incorporates a network of smart surveillance cameras that can ‘talk’ to each other through a set of artificial intelligence capabilities.<sup>29</sup> The network may entail number plate and facial recognition software that can detect unlawful or ‘high-risk’ behaviours, such as cars making U-turns at busy intersections or non-residents entering gated communities.

Year on year, smart governance initiatives further integrate big data into the mechanics of everyday governance. Known in surveillance studies as ‘social sorting’, surveillance technologies sort targets of information-gathering activities — in particular, ‘undesirables’ such as people with criminal records, or poor populations — into categories via the practices of monitoring. In the PRC, agencies charged with social governance tasks — notably, the Public Security Bureau — can apply higher levels of surveillance and monitoring to ‘target populations’ 重点人口,<sup>30</sup> including fugitives, prostitutes, drug users, and political activists. Once target populations are identified, their whereabouts, communications, and behaviours can be tracked and any threats to national security — real or perceived — can be identified and contained early. Some of the negative results of social sorting are social marginalisation, isolation, or even segregation.<sup>31</sup>

As new information technologies allow authorities to detect and censor anti-regime sentiments early, especially across social media, the expression of dissent becomes more difficult.<sup>32</sup> In 2021, the changing landscape of freedoms in Hong Kong illustrated how the system heightens the costs of dissent through the closure of critical media such as *Apple Daily*, strict monitoring of online communications, and the extradition of anyone who does not obey the rules to the mainland for processing by the

judicial system there. Access to more information on target populations allows for intimate, 24/7 monitoring. The Uyghur and other minorities in Xinjiang region face biometric, communications, and financial surveillance that has been weaponised by predictive analytics. These interconnected surveillance systems can trigger a police response when they identify behaviours labelled as signs of extremism, such as visiting a mosque or planning travel.<sup>33</sup>

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the extent of smart governance in China, it is important to reflect on non-technologically defined blind-spots in policing specifically and social governance more broadly. China's high-tech governance efforts are still far from perfectly coordinated and managed. Issues of regional interoperability, lack of training, and the unequal or inadequate allocation of resources to implement the ambitious goals of the central government commonly plague new systems of smart governance. Combined, they make current social governance efforts much less totalising than the frequent Orwellian or *Black Mirror* metaphors imply.

## Conclusion: Building a Comprehensive Surveillance State

Surveillance capabilities increasingly incorporate technological inventions, the effectiveness of which depends on the sociopolitical environment in which they operate. Instead of asking an essentialist question of whether individual digital capabilities in China are inherently bad or good, we have focused here on the symbiotic nature of technological interactions between the state and citizens. Digital tools both improve social welfare and service options for citizens and expand the capacity of the Party-State to 'lead everything' by making society transparent to it and thus easier to control.

**China's surveillance regime is sophisticated in its predictive policing technologies**

Source: Steve Jurvetson, Flickr



Grasping the complexity and reach of surveillance technologies in the PRC requires understanding that, in many if not most segments of society, citizens perceive such technologies in a positive light. The technologies help people feel safe or give them better access to government services, which they also make more efficient. China's home-grown technology talent can boast considerable achievements — creating the world's first quantum computer and besting Facebook and Google in facial recognition systems, for example. As a result of the latter, the PRC became the first country to introduce a facial recognition payment system for purchasing consumer goods. It has also developed its autonomous (self-driving) vehicle industry at lightning speed.

The Party-State's governance capacity-building cements in big-data capabilities that permeate all aspects of social life. And in 2021, most citizens overall were not, it seems, pushing back against the march of ubiquitous digital governance.<sup>34</sup> Of course, we would not expect to see large-scale pushback. Not only are severe penalties imposed for going against any aspect of the system, but also China's surveillance regime is already sophisticated enough in its predictive policing technologies to be able to quickly squash any social unrest.

That includes pandemic-related unrest that other countries have struggled to contain. The pandemic remained under control and, even with harsh lockdowns, overwhelmed hospitals, and censored whistleblowers, by 2021, many citizens expressed pride and satisfaction in the Party-State's success in managing the virus. The Chinese economy — despite being buffeted by trade wars, energy crises, and

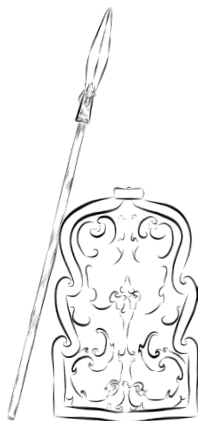
other problems — has continued to expand, together with a growing appreciation of the role digital surveillance technologies occupy in managing crises.

Deploying big data as the vehicle of national governance capacity-building has also enabled the Party-State to promote a morally defined ‘socialist civilisation’ — for example, making it mandatory for party members and members of key professions to spend time every day on an interactive party-built app for studying Xi Jinping Thought. Big data makes participation compulsory and resistance difficult if not impossible. Therein lies the ‘contradiction’ 矛盾 for the people living under the big-data cloud of smart governance. Big data allows them to live more convenient and efficient lives. But the invisibility of surveillant coercion that is constructed on that convenience obscures the vast reach of the Party-State. That invisibility also makes life more convenient and efficient for those whose job it is to police social behaviour.

With the help of smart technology, police can reduce the need for face-to-face meetings (including police-issued ‘invitations to drink tea’), personal confrontation, and other forms of intervention in real life. Systems of surveillance also have a deterrent effect on crime, traffic violations, and financial offences, such as non-repayment of loans.

But automated surveillance has its risks. Punishment through data surveillance can inflict long-term social harms such as marginalisation and the segregation of some people from the larger society, not only on individuals but also on the very social fabric of trust in the Party-State on which the Party relies for legitimacy. Time will tell whether people will tolerate the continued expansion of such behavioural regulation — or whether smart governance, designed to enhance social stability, may threaten it in the end.





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FORUM: JUSTICE



Controversial High-Profile Detention  
and Prosecution of Foreigners

LILI SONG



# CONTROVERSIAL HIGH-PROFILE DETENTION AND PROSECUTION OF FOREIGNERS

Lili Song<sup>1</sup>

ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2021, Meng Wanzhou 孟晚舟, Huawei's chief financial officer, returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Canada. On the same day, Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor left the PRC for Canada. Media reports described these events as a Cold War-style hostage exchange.<sup>2</sup>

The bare bones of the Meng Wanzhou–two Michaels saga are as follows: Canada arrested Meng on 1 December 2018 on an extradition request from the United States and a week later the PRC detained the two Michaels on spying charges. Kovrig is a former diplomat and was the North-

East Asia senior adviser for the think tank International Crisis Group when he was arrested. Spavor has been described as an entrepreneur who travelled between the PRC and North Korea. Spavor and Kovrig were tried on 19 March and 22 March 2021, respectively, in closed court sessions, as is required by PRC law in cases involving state secrets.<sup>3</sup> Canadian officials were denied access to the trials. Spavor was convicted in August; Kovrig's verdict was pending when he was released.

Canada and the PRC clearly stated their conflicting views on the Meng Wanzhou–two Michaels saga at the UN

General Assembly on 27 September 2021. According to Canada, it ‘applied Canadian and international law in response to a request for extradition of [Meng]’. It had ‘observed the rule of law, and two Canadian citizens paid a heavy price for this commitment’.<sup>4</sup> In response, the PRC insisted that Spavor and Kovrig committed acts endangering Chinese security, denied any link between their arrests and Meng’s, and claimed the ‘true purpose’ of Meng’s arrest ‘was to surprise Chinese high-tech enterprises and companies as a way to hold back Chinese advancement in terms of science and technology’.<sup>5</sup>

There may have been another casualty of the saga, at least from the Canadian point of view. On 10 August 2021, the High People’s Court of Liaoning Province upheld the death penalty for Canadian Robert Schellenberg, who was caught with 222 kilograms of methamphetamine in 2014 and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for drug smuggling in November 2018 by a court in Dalian.<sup>6</sup> On 15 January 2019, the Dalian court retried the case and sentenced him to death.<sup>7</sup> Canadian Ambassador to the PRC Dominic Barton claimed the new sentence was ‘part of a geopolitical

process’, linking it to Meng’s arrest in Canada<sup>8</sup> — a claim government spokespeople denied and condemned.<sup>9</sup> As of 20 December 2021, Schellenberg’s case was under review by the People’s Supreme Court, as is required by PRC law before death sentences can be carried out.

Canada clearly was not the only country lamenting China’s treatment of its nationals in 2021. On 27 May 2021, Chinese-born Australian citizen Yang Hengjun 杨恒均 was tried on espionage charges.<sup>10</sup> Yang, a writer and self-described ‘democracy peddler’, once worked for the PRC’s Ministry of State Security. He had been detained since January 2019.<sup>11</sup> In a statement on 21 May 2021, Australia expressed concern about the lack of procedural fairness in Yang’s case and demanded access to Yang’s hearing.<sup>12</sup> In response, the Chinese Embassy in Canberra asserted the PRC was handling the case ‘strictly in accordance with law’ and demanded Australia respect China’s judicial sovereignty and refrain from interfering in any form in Chinese judicial authorities’ lawful handling of the case’.<sup>13</sup> Yang’s case was heard in a closed session. The PRC Foreign Ministry advised Australian diplomats they were not permitted to attend the



**The PRC government claimed that Meng's arrest 'was to surprise Chinese high-tech enterprises'**

Source: Web Summit, Flickr

trial because the case involved state secrets.<sup>14</sup> As of 20 December 2021, a verdict had yet to be announced.

Just a few months earlier, on 5 February 2021, the PRC authorities formally arrested Chinese-born Australian citizen Cheng Lei 戚蕾 on suspicion of illegally supplying state secrets overseas.<sup>15</sup> Cheng, a well-known news anchor with the China Global Television Network, a state-run English-language news service, had been detained since August 2020. Few details of Cheng's charges were published, sparking speculation that her arrest was politically motivated, given the backdrop of a deteriorating China–Australia relationship.<sup>16</sup> Asked in 2020 whether she thought Cheng was 'being used as a pawn by China', Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said 'that sort of premise' was 'speculative, at best'.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in

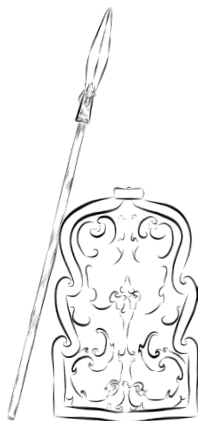
a statement on 13 August 2021, Payne said the Australian Government was particularly concerned about the lack of transparency about the reasons for Cheng's detention.<sup>18</sup> In response, the Chinese Embassy in Canberra issued a statement demanding Australia 'respect China's judicial sovereignty and refrain from interfering in any form in Chinese judicial authorities' lawful handling of the case'.<sup>19</sup> As of 20 December 2021, Cheng's court hearing was yet to take place.

On 26 September, two days after the release of Meng and the two Michaels, American siblings Cynthia and Victor Liu, who had been banned from leaving the PRC since 2018, when they were twenty-seven and nineteen years old, respectively, were finally allowed to return to the United States.<sup>20</sup> No charges had ever been formally made against them. They claimed

the PRC had held them to lure back their father, Liu Changming 刘昌明, who is one of the PRC's top-100 most-wanted fugitives, to face fraud charges. A US State Department spokesperson indicated that the Liu siblings were subjected to a coercive exit ban.<sup>21</sup> A PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson defended the ban, saying the siblings themselves were suspected of economic crimes.<sup>22</sup> Despite the proximity of their release to that of Meng's, a White House spokesperson dismissed speculation of any connection between the two events.<sup>23</sup>

The above incidents serve, *inter alia*, as reminders that human rights and the rule of law are issues on which the PRC and the West have long held fundamentally different views. With frictions developing between the PRC and the Five Eyes powers (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) in recent years, constructive dialogue and engagement are likely to become even more challenging in these already difficult fields.







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# **KALEIDOSCOPE OF CONTRADICTIONS**

Delia Lin

The phrase *maodun* 矛盾 encompasses numerous related concepts and feelings in English, including contradiction, tension, conflict, paradox, dilemma, inconsistency, animosity, enmity, and estrangement. The well-known story of *maodun* told in the legalist text *Han Fei Zi* 韩非子 (see Forum, ‘Contradiction and the Stubborn Bystander’, pp.3–6) is aimed at critiquing ‘self-contradiction’ in Confucian presuppositions to argue for the legalist principles of *fa* 法 (law) and *shi* 势 (power).<sup>1</sup> The Communist Party of China (CPC) adopts the Leninist theory of dialectical contradiction to identify the major forces at opposition in society 主要矛盾 — or ‘the principal contradiction’, as it is often translated — to achieve its political goals. As I explain below, this abandonment of the legalist understanding of *maodun* for a monolithic ‘politics-first’ approach inevitably exacerbates rather than eases the kaleidoscope of social contradictions.

## Legalist and Logical Contradictions

The story of *maodun* is widely taught throughout schools in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to explain self-contradiction in logic. A weapons dealer from the state of Chu was boasting in the market that his spears (*mao* 矛) were so sharp they could pierce anything and his shields (*dun* 盾) were so strong nothing could pierce them, only to find himself stunned by the embarrassing question, ‘What if you stab your shields with your spears?’ What is not taught is the context in which the story is told and what it means to Chinese political thought.

The story appears twice in the legalist text *Han Fei Zi*, attributed to Han Fei (c.280–233 BCE), one of the representative political philosophers of the legalist school 法家. Contrary to Confucian governance, which assumes the necessity of a moral ruler and the malleability of human nature through repeated practices of decorum and ritual propriety, legalism is a school of political thought emphasising the absolute authority of the ruler and uniform enforcement of regulations and punitive codes. In both instances,

*maodun* is used as an allegory to highlight self-contradiction in the logic of key Confucian principles. The first appearance is in the chapter ‘Nan Yi’ 难一, where the philosopher Han Fei rejects the Confucian principle of ‘transformation through moral teaching’ 德化, which says that a perfectly moral ruler can transform the people and bring order to society by setting a moral example. Han argues that the Confucian exaltation of the mythical, saintlike Emperor Yao 尧 (traditionally, c.2356–2255 BCE) and his equally revered successor Emperor Shun 舜 (traditionally, c.2294–2184 BCE) is as self-contradictory as the weapons dealer’s claims about his spears and shields, for if Yao’s project of moral transformation had genuinely worked to eliminate problems in society, Shun would not have needed to continue with the same task of solving those problems. Han Fei proposed that the more effective way of governing the people and rectifying their wrongdoings was strict enforcement of clearly stated laws and regulations.

Han repeated the story of *maodun* in the chapter ‘Nan Shi’ 难势 to illustrate the insoluble conflict between the Confucian premise that good governance required a saintly ruler 贤治 and the practical aspects of the establishment of power 势治. Han rejected the former and promoted the latter, arguing that exceedingly saintly rulers such as Yao and Shun were rare — as were exceedingly cruel and ruthless rulers such as King Jie 桀 of Xia (traditionally, c.1728–1675 BCE) and King Zhou 纣 of Shang (traditionally, c.1105–1046 BCE), both of whose tyranny was traditionally regarded as leading to the collapse of their dynasties. Most rulers were ordinary humans, Han Fei stated, and so good governance could, and should, rely not on the appearance of a saintly ruler but on the projection of authority from a powerful position to ensure enforcement of the law 抱法处势. With laws and the power to enforce them, even an ordinary ruler can govern well. Han did not dismiss the risk that the legalist principle of *shi* might bring chaos to society if a cruel and ruthless ruler came to power; he argued, however, that this would rarely happen.

In the two instances where he used *maodun*, Han Fei savvily revealed the paradox of exaggerating the accomplishments of a godlike, saintly

ruler and the inherent incompatibility between the exaltation of such a ruler and effective law enforcement. But Han's excessive emphasis on law and power, with attention neither to the need to constrain that power nor to the role of morality within institutions, made his own thesis paradoxical as well: how can effective law enforcement be realised when the ruler is above the law, and how can social stability be maintained if the law serves no moral end other than protecting the power of the ruler? Notwithstanding the strengths and shortcomings of Han's argument, I suggest his use of *maodun* as an allegory for logical fallacies is based on what then passed as commonsense rationalisations. The CPC's quest for a Sinicised socialism led it to replace this rationalisation with a monolithic belief in Leninist dialectical contradiction — the logical validity of which they do not see as open to debate.

## Sinicised Leninist Dialectical Contradiction

In his seminal work on the development of the communist movement in China leading to the ascendancy of Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951), Benjamin Schwartz suggests the Maoist extension of Marxism-Leninism, as the general trend of Marxism in its Leninist form, had been not towards 'enriching' or 'deepening' the doctrine, but rather towards its 'disintegration'.<sup>2</sup> The CPC under the leadership of Mao drifted from the original premise of Marxism-Leninism; it was neither 'the vanguard of the proletariat' nor a 'peasant party' in the Marxist-Leninist sense, but an elite of professional revolutionaries organised along Leninist lines, who had risen to power by mobilising the dynamic of peasant discontent.<sup>3</sup> Schwartz maintains that, despite this movement towards ideological disintegration, five core elements of Marxism-Leninism became integral to Chinese communism.<sup>4</sup> The first element was the Chinese communists' own subjective conviction that they were unswerving Marxist-Leninists despite actions that by most



standards would be seen as diverging from classical Marxism-Leninism. The second was the Leninist faith that the Communist Party's leadership was the chosen instrument of history whose purpose was to lead China to successful socialism. The third was the Leninist theory and practice of party organisation — a tightly organised elite striving towards power by identifying itself with the discontent of the masses — ensuring the place of the party as the agent of historical redemption. The fourth was a tendency towards totalitarianism. The final element was the Leninist doctrine of imperialism, which was so attractive to the founders of the CPC and the Chinese intelligentsia, infused as they were with hatreds and resentments aroused by nineteenth and twentieth-century Western imperialism. Schwartz summarised Mao's strategy as one that asserted the right and power of a revolutionary vanguard party organised in accordance with Leninist principles and animated by faith in Marxism-Leninism to rule.<sup>5</sup>

This highly practical strategy of focusing on monolithic faith rather than ideological alignment with classical Marxism-Leninism continues. One would be disappointed if one hoped to find consistency in the CPC's definitions of or approaches to 'socialism' or 'democracy' throughout its 100 years of history. These concepts have undergone so many unpredictable transformations and re-formations they have become insubstantial while remaining symbolically important. They are deployed to support the subjective conviction that the CPC is Marxist-Leninist and the chosen instrument of history, representing the will of the people to lead China to greatness through Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 中国特色社会主义. In the year-end CPC Politburo study session called the Democratic Life Meeting 民主生活会, held on 27–28 December 2021, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping 习近平 urged party members to increase their own faith in the Party's history 增强历史自信 and to unify everyone's thought and action 统一思想、统一行动 around such faith.<sup>6</sup>

To celebrate the Party's centenary in July, the Party Central School conducted an open lecture series entitled 'Red Classics in the One Hundred Years of the Party's History' for the nation's ninety-five million party



In the year-end CPC Politburo study session, Xi Jinping urged Party members to increase their own faith in the Party's history

Source: Raymond Cunningham, Flickr

members. The lecture series hailed two texts, *On Practice* 实践论 and *On Contradiction* 矛盾论 — which were allegedly authored solely by Mao in 1937<sup>7</sup> — as the Party's methodological and philosophical foundation. The lectures credit these texts with not only saving the CPC from major setbacks in the 1920s and early 1930s, but also guiding its successes from the revolutionary period through to the Xi Jinping era.<sup>8</sup>

*On Contradiction* establishes a Sinicised version of Lenin's notion of 'dialectical contradiction', which sees all development and life as resulting from the interdependence of the contradictory aspects present in all things and the struggle between them. Following Lenin and Stalin, Mao emphasises the importance to the Party of identifying the 'principal contradiction' in society and the principal aspect of the contradiction as the basis for formulating its key policies.<sup>9</sup> For example, Mao states that in a capitalist society, the principal contradiction is one between the

bourgeoisie and the proletariat. At the beginning, the bourgeoisie may be the principal — that is, the dominating — aspect of the (principal) contradiction, but eventually they will be overthrown by the proletariat, who will then become the main force of social development.<sup>10</sup>

The CPC's success thus comes from the 'correct' and 'scientific' identification of principal contradictions during critical transitional periods. The Marxist scholar Han Zhenfeng 韩振峰 of Beijing Jiaotong University has outlined four principal contradictions that the Party has 'correctly' recognised and identified: between imperialism and the Chinese nation during the New Democratic Revolution Period (1919–1949), between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, that is, between socialism and capitalism after the founding of the PRC, between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production in the Deng Xiaoping-led Reform Era and, finally, between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life, as announced by Xi Jinping during the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC in 2017.<sup>11</sup> Each of the principal contradictions justifies its period's key policies and goals, from revolution in the pre-liberation period, class struggle, and cultural revolution in the post-1949 Mao era and economic development in the Deng era to the 'third distribution' system (in which high-income individuals and enterprises give back to society through voluntary gifts and donations to the Party and state) and 'common prosperity' in the Xi era.

This Sinicised interpretation of Leninist dialectical contradiction may reinforce belief in Marxism-Leninism among the party faithful, but it creates a circular argument in the Party's narrative logic. Because the principal contradiction is defined as the driving force of change and development, the Party's ability to identify it demonstrates both its greatness and its legitimacy in directing the nation's development. Yet insistence on the Party's infallibility in identifying the principal contradiction precludes logical and rational debate, such as the one in which Han Fei engaged against the Confucians, as well as a less monolithic

interpretation of society's *maodun*, which might be multiple. This makes it difficult to find consistent, systematic, sophisticated, and effective solutions to complex problems. In their work on corruption in Beijing public hospitals, for example, Yujian Fun and Zelin Yao have discovered that medical crimes and corruption primarily arise from the contradictory expectations of the state that hospitals will pursue socialist values in care and at the same time adopt capitalist methods of administration.<sup>12</sup> Deng Xiaoping asserted that there was no fundamental *ideological* contradiction between socialism and a market economy. Fun and Yao's work reveals that, nonetheless, there is a fundamental *practical* contradiction between socialism and the market that creates the structural basis for corruption.<sup>13</sup> However, this practical contradiction, which does not fit into the theory of the principal contradiction, is neglected by state media in favour of an argument focusing on the relevant actors' moral failings.<sup>14</sup>

## Ubiquitous Contradictions

Contradictions are everywhere. A monolithic solution or analysis applied to issues arising within an increasingly complex society is bound to create and exacerbate structural contradictions. For the past decade, economist Wu Jinglian 吴敬琏 has been arguing that China's economic and social contradictions are reaching a critical point because of unsustainable growth, the gradual decline of the benefits of an export-led growth strategy and excessive state interference in the market and prices.<sup>15</sup> Wu argues that China's sustained success in economic reform relies on the government reforming itself into a limited and efficient one based on the rule of law. If it does not, economic and social catastrophes — including greater corruption, a broader wealth gap, intensified social unrest and weaker ability to govern — are inevitable.

Scholars have long observed that Chinese legal institutions operate under a basic contradiction: rule of law versus party supremacy in all



**Exhausted by the rat race, many would rather 'lie flat'**  
Source: Gauthier Delcroix, Flickr

matters, including the interpretation, application, and enforcement of the law in terms of both general principles and the outcomes of particular cases.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as legal scholar Ling Li 李玲 argues, courts must perform as both a pliant political agent and a legal institution with agency.<sup>17</sup>

Maintaining a contradictory double character is common in society as well. Not only celebrities but also many ordinary Chinese Weibo users have two accounts: a public-facing one 大号 and an anonymous one 小号. While the former reveals the user's identity to the public and is used to attract fans and perform a public persona, the latter hides the user's identity from the public — sometimes from even their own friends and family. Using an anonymous account, a celebrity, for example, can 'secretively' follow their own fans and comfortably project their personality as opposed to their persona. It is of little surprise that while the Party is calling for its cadres and young people to 'play a central role' C位担当 in building the nation's 'new era' — 'C位' being slang for the central position on stage (in a band, for example) — many, exhausted by the rat race and multiple external demands on them, would rather 'lie flat' 躺平, curtailing their goals and ambitions (see Forum, 'Overwork, Pointless Work, Avoiding Work and Legal Work: The Contradictions of Labour', pp.65–73).<sup>18</sup>

Chinese society today is caught between contradictory values. The Socialist Core Values 社会主义核心价值观<sup>19</sup> require Chinese citizens to prioritise patriotism above all else, but this increasingly puts them in conflict with other important values, such as trust and respect, which enable interdependence in social relationships, both personal and professional. This collision of values is exemplified by the online firestorm in December 2021 over the sacking of journalism lecturer Song Gengyi 宋庚一 from Shanghai Aurora College 上海震旦职业学院. One of her students had covertly recorded part of a lecture in which she argued that a journalist should question statistical claims, including the evidence in support of the government's official death toll of 300,000 for the 1937 Nanking Massacre. The lecture took place during the week when China marked the eighty-fourth anniversary of the massacre — one of the most infamous war crimes of the Japanese occupation during World War II.<sup>20</sup> In the video, Song also suggests one should not dwell in hatred forever and that, while mourning, one should also reflect on the causes of war. The student edited the video, reported it to the university administration and shared it on Weibo. In the video, you can hear the student snickering, saying, 'Good, good, we can report this.' Soon after the video was made public, not only did the college sack and reprimand Song, but also state media such as the *Global Times* and *People's Daily* quickly joined in the condemnation. The *People's Daily* castigated Song as 'not worthy of being a teacher' and even 'not worthy of being a Chinese national'.<sup>21</sup> This incident went viral on Chinese social media. Netizens expressed concerns about official endorsement of Cultural Revolution-like snitching 举报 on people for perceived political offences. Many condemned the Aurora student who made the video public as a despicable 'dobber' 告密者, while others hailed him as a patriotic hero. On 18 December, the *Global Times* published an article describing the student as a brave 'whistle-blower' standing up against historical nihilism.<sup>22</sup> The commentary further enraged netizens who found his actions contemptible. Subsequently, the authorities banned the topic on social media. Any social media user commenting

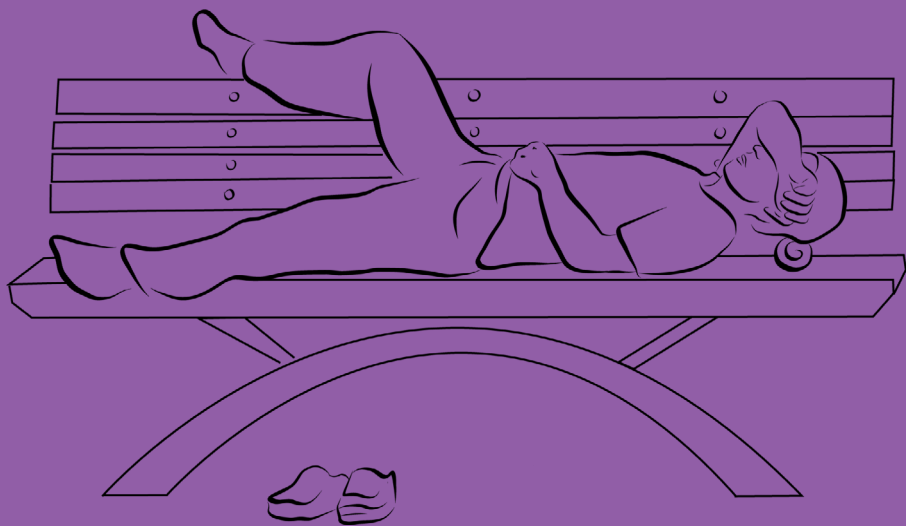
on the Aurora teacher controversy runs the risk of having their WeChat or Weibo accounts blocked or removed. After netizens reported that a teacher from a rural school in Hunan Province, Li Tiantian 李田田, had posted a sympathetic message on Weibo on 17 December 2021, local authorities reportedly forced their way into her home and took her to a psychiatric institution despite the fact she was four months' pregnant.<sup>23</sup> Li sent urgent online messages seeking help while she still had access to her mobile phone. Thousands of supporters persistently shared and discussed her story online while demanding her safe release. Nine days later, on 26 December 2021, a post on Li's public Weibo account stated that she was safe and had been returned home. Netizens called Li's release an illustration of 'the active onlookers' power' 围观的力量.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Legalist philosopher Han Fei used the parable of *maodun* to illustrate logical contradictions within Confucian reasoning. Early Chinese communists transformed *maodun* into a Sinicised form of Leninist dialectical contradiction. This gave the Party the monopolistic power to identify the principal contradictions in society to justify its major policies and political goals for change and development, while still demonstrating its unswerving Marxist-Leninist convictions. Yet such a monolithic approach, by emphasising a subjective and changing attitude as determined by prevailing party needs, is inadequate to address and resolve the multitude of contradictions in society. All societies are full of contradictions. The scale and intensity of these contradictions are only exacerbated in the absence of an open, logical, and rational debate about how to understand and resolve them. Benjamin Schwartz stressed that the feeling of solidarity in belief was a force that should not be underestimated;<sup>25</sup> devoid of the beacon of reason, however, the question remains whether it will inevitably lead to new crises that will be all the more tragic for having been foreseeable but also unavoidable if party policy, as determined by the leader, is infallible.

# 观点

FOCUS: LABOUR





The Sanhe Gods

KATHERINE WHITWORTH

Overwork, Pointless Work,

Avoiding Work, and Legal Work:

The Contradictions of Labour

KEVIN LIN



# THE SANHE GODS

Katherine Whitworth

**M**IGRANT WORKERS seduced by the dazzling prosperity of the east coast of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have long travelled from poor villages and provincial townships to cities such as Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing in the hope of crossing the threshold into urban life with all its riches. China's Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, released in March 2021, reinforces this vision of imminent prosperity. Shenzhen's own Five-Year Plan, promulgated in June 2021, promotes the southern city as a centre for technological development and urban renewal.

This story considers the impact of these plans on a group of migrant workers colloquially known as the 'Sanhe Gods' 三和大神. It situates the Sanhe Gods and their difficulties in the context of 2021 policies, which focus on prosperity but omit mention of those who will shoulder the burden of its achievement — those living at the very edges of urban life. The Sanhe Gods may no longer be the symbol of the marginalised in Shenzhen because the physical spaces they occupied have been erased, but they have adopted another identity, another story, as their everyday precarity persists. Or, as one online commentary put it:

'Tomorrow and tomorrow, how many tomorrows will come?'<sup>1</sup>

### Introducing the Sanhe Gods

Sanhe Gods is the name given to a group of mainly male migrant workers trapped by circumstance in the harsh precarity of China's rapid economic growth. 'Sanhe' comes from the name of one of the two dominant labour recruitment agencies in the area that have sent millions of workers to a wide range of labour-intensive industries across the Pearl River Delta. The use of 'god' is affectionate and carries a sense of irony and self-ridicule. It suggests that through an existence detached from material pleasure, they have attained the desired state of enlightenment described in the Buddhist scriptures. However, the philosophy most associated with the Sanhe Gods is 'Work one day and play for three' 干一天, 玩三天. This creed rejects the control capital exerts over labour through long-term work contracts by its followers only accepting jobs that are completed and paid for in a day.

Since the 1990s, the labour markets in Shenzhen have attracted migrant workers from all parts of

China. The ready supply of labour, and the favourable tax and regulatory environment for capital, set the stage for the city's transformation into 'the Silicon Valley of hardware', where everything from iPhones and Sony PlayStation consoles to Amazon Kindle e-readers are manufactured.

In 2011, the municipal government declared the establishment of the Longhua New Area 龙华新区. The district of Longhua sits in the geographic centre of Shenzhen, where a 'people's commune' existed less than forty years ago. More recently, it became one of the main production bases in Shenzhen, home to telecommunications equipment giant Huawei Technologies and Taiwan's Foxconn. The area's industries have helped power President Xi Jinping's 习近平 Made in China 2025 strategy, announced in 2015, which aimed to turn the country into a technology superpower. Over time, Jingle Market 景乐市场, the area tucked between Longhua Sanlian Road and Donghuan First Road in Longhua, evolved into an 'urban village'<sup>2</sup> — a precarious ecosystem of day-labourers, recruitment agencies, cheap hostels, noodle stalls, and Internet cafés (serving the dual purposes of

entertainment and ‘accommodation’ in the form of comfortable gaming chairs that can be accessed at any time of the day or night for the minimal cost of Internet usage fees).

For the Sanhe Gods, Longhua had become a ceaseless conveyor belt that looped back on itself; it sustained their life at the margins of existence but at the same time confined them there, not providing opportunities to move away or to change their precarious state. Gathered in Longhua, the Gods created their own community, with accepted cultural norms and a particular vocabulary. They took day jobs here and there, sometimes taking longer-term jobs at factories in neighbouring provinces when desperate enough. When the monotony of working on a production line at a

‘shady factory’ 黑厂 (one with poor working conditions, which does not pay the minimum wage, and/or makes unauthorised deductions for food and accommodation from wages) became unbearable, or they had accumulated enough savings, they would quit and return to life in Longhua. This act was known as ‘pick up your bucket and run’ 提桶跑路. The bucket is one of the few possessions of a God (and in fact, most migrant workers);<sup>3</sup> it is typically red, symbolising that it carries good fortune. In Mandarin, the tense of the phrase ‘pick up your bucket and run’ is vague. It can refer to an act in the past or the future but can also imply a present continuous occurrence — a state of suspended animation running endlessly between jobs, bucket in hand. Thus, the phrase



**Workers are sent to labour-intensive industries across the Pearl River Delta**

Source: Sung Ming Whang, Flickr

holds conflicting connotations, simultaneously connoting ‘challenge failed’ and ‘future opportunity’.

The existence of the day-labourers in Longhua has been romanticised as a lifestyle of ‘living in the moment’, but behind the romance is an undeniably grim socio-structural reality. Typical characteristics of the Sanhe Gods include being ‘left-behind children’ (children who remained in rural regions in the care of extended family while their parents migrated to work in urban areas)<sup>4</sup> and having only a junior high school education. Many are in debt, have sold their ID numbers for fifty to 100 yuan on the black market to people wanting to register fraudulent companies, or have obtained online fraudulent loans<sup>5</sup> and cannot afford the fare home. The Sanhe Gods refer to this state of extreme destitution as *guabi* 挂逼. The characters used here literally mean ‘hung and pressed’, but they stand in as homonyms for the slang ‘dead c\*\*t’. The term does not have the equivalent harshness of the English and is more akin to calling someone ‘povo’. With a daily wage of 100 to 200 yuan, they can only afford plain ‘*guabi* noodles’ or a clear broth for four yuan or water for two yuan.<sup>6</sup> It is hard to consider any tomorrow.

## China’s Plan for Tomorrow

China’s Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for socioeconomic development officially aims at ‘improving the quality and effectiveness of development’, ‘maintaining a sustained and healthy economic growth’, and the ‘acceleration of the modernisation of the industrial system’. However, for the first time since the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in 1953 — modelled after those of the Soviet Union — the plan does not include a specific growth target for gross domestic product (GDP). Instead, it specifies that GDP and other major economic indicators should be kept in a ‘reasonable range’ and an annual growth target will be set based on the specific conditions each year. This strategy aims to ensure that overall labour productivity grows faster than GDP, prices remain stable, and the urban unemployment rate is kept under 5.5 percent. To accelerate the development of a modern industrial system and develop the real economy, the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan also sets out a strategy for boosting manufacturing power, focusing on several core industries, including aviation and high-speed rail, high-end

medical equipment, and robotics.<sup>7</sup> There is no mention of the labourers who will sustain this development.

Shenzhen's Five-Year Plan, which puts a local spin on the national goals, provides for the city investing more than 700 billion yuan in hi-tech research and development. The city will also upgrade 100 square kilometres of industrial parks and renovate another 100 square kilometres of 'industrial land'. Low-value-added factories will be phased out and replaced with advanced, hi-tech plants. The value of the local economy is expected to reach four trillion yuan (AU\$852 billion) by 2025 — up from 2.8 trillion yuan in 2020. Shenzhen's per capita GDP is forecast to hit 215,000 yuan in 2025 (AU\$45,795).<sup>8</sup> The plan expresses concern for people's livelihoods, with targets for disposable income, the supply of public housing, and a reduced unemployment rate. However, the blueprints gloss over the question of who will build Shenzhen's tomorrow.

Official data show that rural to urban migration had already started to slow before the outbreak of COVID-19 and, in 2020, migration declined for the first time. Despite the pandemic being largely contained throughout 2021, and movement across the

country permitted, millions of people did not return to urban areas for work. As of the end of March 2021, there were still 2.46 million fewer migrant workers in China's major cities than the same period in 2019. Instead, the data show that migrant workers are staying closer to home — usually within the same province. In 2021, the floating population within provinces was 251 million — an increase of more than eleven million (or 85 percent) from 2010, whereas the interprovincial floating population only increased by about thirty-nine million (45 percent) during the same period.<sup>9</sup> This trend is undoubtedly the result of several factors but, in Shenzhen at least, government policy, financial development, and industrial reforms are key among them.

### **Tomorrow Follows Yesterday and Today**

As Shenzhen prospered in the early 2000s, housing prices and labour costs began to rise. Its labour-intensive manufacturing industry began to close. The profit margin of the manufacturing industry centred on the production of smartphones had also shrunk. From 2009 to 2016,

many factories moved production lines to other cities with lower costs of living, including Yantai, Chongqing, and Zhengzhou.<sup>10</sup> With the exodus of manufacturing, Longhua and its human resource agencies slowly became a ‘talent transfer centre’ for the factories of the Pearl River Delta; in other words, moving, and often selling, migrant labour to factories in other locations. In 2018, Shenzhen launched its ambitious ‘Urban Village Comprehensive Management Action Plan 2018–2020’ 深圳市人民政府办公厅关于印发深圳市‘城中村’综合治理行动计划（2018–2020年）的通知，<sup>11</sup> which aimed to ‘eliminate various safety hazards’ within more than 1,600 urban villages across the city by the end of July 2020. Longhua district and the urban village around the Jingle labour market were target areas for this gentrification policy. The cheap hostels were demolished in batches, city administrators began targeting unlicensed agents offering temporary employment, and regulations were introduced limiting Internet cafes to daytime operation only.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit the area, Sanhe was well on the way to being ‘harmonised by the government’ 被政府和谐的

— a satirical phrase that references former president Hu Jintao’s 胡锦涛 Harmonious Society Policy and serves as a euphemism for censorship or the destruction of things deemed undesirable or threatening to the government.<sup>12</sup> Factories, and the migrant workers who sustain them, had already been priced out of Shenzhen. The pandemic of 2020 simply expedited the gentrification process. To prevent the spread of the virus, Internet cafes were closed and the Sanhe Gods, along with the homeless, were moved off the streets into rescue stations operated by the Longhua District Government in two middle schools. These rescue stations provided free board and lodging and access to job opportunities organised by the neighbourhood office. During the peak of the pandemic, the two rescue stations accommodated thousands of people. In early 2021, recruitment agencies such as Sanhe and Huahui 华汇, which had played such an important role in the earlier development in Shenzhen, withdrew from the Jingle market.<sup>13</sup>

Jingle is working hard to frame its ‘struggle culture’ 奋斗文化<sup>14</sup> (the English equivalent is ‘hustle culture’) in a positive light. Evidence of the



exploitation and hardship left by the Sanhe Gods on the district's façades has been either demolished or written over with phrases such as 'Struggle in youth, a brilliant future to come' 奋斗青春, 精彩未来 and 'If you don't work hard, no-one can give you the life you want' 你不努力, 谁也给不了你想要的生活. In the southern area, 'fight' 拼 has become the theme, with 'Fight unrestrainedly, chase dreams' 放肆拼搏, 追逐梦想 and 'How can you win without fighting hard' 没有拼命哪能博得喝彩 emblazoned across the walls in public spaces.<sup>15</sup> On the walls outside rental houses are 'Management Supervision Boards' 网格管理监督牌 that display the photos, names, and mobile phone numbers of the relevant 'Responsible Policemen', 'Responsible Building Managers', and 'Building Fire Safety Responsible Persons'. QR codes give potential renters access to the security rating of the rental apartments according to a traffic-light system. Many properties have installed video access controls and have been fully leased to a well-known real estate company, transformed into long-term rental apartments with monthly rents that can be more than

thirty times the total monthly earnings of a Sanhe God.<sup>16</sup>

### **Tomorrow for the Sanhe Gods**

For most of the Sanhe Gods, the erasure of Jingle does not spell the end of lives spent in suspended animation at the edge of subsistence. Many cannot return to their place of origin. The 'left behind children' have no close family to whom they can return; the children who left family behind to seek their fortune feel that admitting their failure would be too great a loss of face and so stay away. Yet, there is now no place for them in the gentrified Jingle and surrounding areas in Shenzhen. Kunshan China Garden 昆山中花园, Wuxi Chunchao Road 无锡春潮路, and other industrial zones have become the new hubs of desperate existence. Posts on Weibo call 'brothers' to these new urban villages, where there are still electronics factories with production lines that require large numbers of workers and offer the possibility of a tomorrow that resembles yesterday. Those who were once Gods in Sanhe have become 'Red Bucket Roamers', forced to pick up their buckets and go wherever they can continue eking out a precarious, 'hanging' existence.



# OVERWORK, POINTLESS WORK, AVOIDING WORK, AND LEGAL WORK: THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LABOUR

Kevin Lin

ON 25 AUGUST 2021, the Supreme People's Court and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) issued a joint document that included the legal judgements in ten labour dispute cases.<sup>1</sup> The document was intended to provide guidance for rulings in similar future cases. The first case on the list, and the one that galvanised the most public interest, relates to the unfair dismissal of a parcel delivery worker for refusing overtime. Zhang, the worker, was hired by an unnamed courier company in early 2020 with a probation period of three months and

a monthly salary of 8,000 yuan. The working hours were 9am to 9pm, six days a week, which is at least 17 hours over the legal weekly limit or double the legal monthly limit — a classic example of the '996' work culture first experienced by tech workers in 2019 but increasingly prevalent across many other sectors. After two months but still within his probation period, Zhang decided to refuse this schedule on the grounds of the overtime being excessive and illegal. In response, the company terminated his contract, blaming Zhang for being unable to fulfil the conditions of his employment.

Subsequently, Zhang submitted his case to the Employment Dispute Arbitration Commission. He asked for 8,000 yuan in compensation for the illegal termination of his contract. The commission determined in Zhang's favour and instructed the company to pay the compensation. In addition, the commission referred the case to a local labour supervisory body so it could issue the company a warning and require it to update its contracts to accord with China's labour laws. The court document concludes by reaffirming the Labour Law of the PRC, which stipulates overtime cannot exceed three hours a day, or thirty-six hours a month, and any employment contract in violation of the law is void by default.

The Supreme People's Court document, immediately picked up by Chinese media, was widely interpreted as a not-so-subtle warning to companies about the illegality of the '996' work culture. It is pertinent to note that the Labour Law cited by this ruling was promulgated as far back as 1995; subsequent amendments did not alter any of the provisions relating to overtime. In other words, the law has been very clear on the question of what constitutes illegal overtime for more

than two and half decades. Unpaid and excessive overtime — which is endemic in the export-oriented industrial sector — was the focus of factory workers' rights advocacy for much of that period. In any other year, such an obscure arbitration ruling would most likely have received no notice.

The degree of media attention is best explained by the fact that work in all its manifestations has become increasingly central in the Chinese public consciousness. Whether it manifests in the emerging disquiet over the treatment of delivery workers, exasperation at the work-until-you-drop culture among white-collar tech workers or the sense of exhaustion among the broader working population, work — overwork, pointless work, avoiding work, and withdrawal from work — is today at the core of China's social contradictions. New generations of workers are growing more and more uneasy, impatient, and angry at the degradations of work and the failed promises of social mobility. This has compelled the Chinese authorities to tackle these issues more forthrightly. The Party-State has voiced strong support for basic labour rights

under existing laws and has pushed companies to abide by them.

Labour rights advocacy by grassroots organisations, however, has been made all but impossible following years of tightening restrictions over civil society.<sup>2</sup> The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) 中华全国总工会 has been under pressure for a decade from both the central government and workers to improve labour rights protections and workplace union representation. But social stability and economic growth have taken absolute precedence politically so the ACFTU no longer pushes hard to increase workers' representation in the workplace and, at best, provides only a narrow range of legal services to workers. Beyond the ACFTU, open advocacy for labour rights entails substantial risks for both individuals and organisations. Since 2015, dozens of labour activists have been arrested and more than a dozen non-governmental organisations (NGOs) devoted to labour rights have closed. But ongoing conflicts, especially in non-manufacturing sectors, continue to drive workers to demand better treatment. However, many of these conflicts have been left unresolved because of the absence of

institutional mediation by either the ACFTU or grassroots labour rights organisations that channel workers' grievances, while the legal channels are not yet adequately equipped to handle cases in the newest economic sectors.

These contradictions in labour relations continue to emerge, growing in part out of China's economic restructuring away from low-cost manufacturing towards the tech and service sectors, with the former leading the national drive for more high-tech production and innovation, while the service sector supports it by providing services and absorbing the workforce made obsolete by economic restructuring. Labour disputes are now more likely to involve platform labour (ride-share, delivery, and other workers who are connected with customers by an online platform or app) and office workers. While these disputes remain few compared with past strikes and other collective actions by factory workers, their symbolic impact has been significant because more people have personal interactions with platform workers and some have been directly affected when such workers strike — all of which has helped raise public awareness of the issue. Over the years,

local authorities have become adept at resolving factory disputes, but they are less experienced in dealing with platform and office workers. Moreover, many of the newer issues resonate far beyond the workplace or any sector, spilling into the public domain.

### Unstable Platforms

Platform labour, for many workers, is the promise that has failed most spectacularly. As China shifted away from low-wage manufacturing employment, platform work — such as with ride-hailing Didi 滴滴打车 and food delivery services Meituan 美团 and Ele.me 饿了么 — offered to not only absorb the surplus workforce but also provide better pay and more autonomy, including flexibility in terms of hours.

In reality, platform work in China as elsewhere is predicated on working extended hours and submitting to impersonal algorithmic control. It is arguably even more oppressive than factory employment because of the constant monitoring of its workers' location and activity. The autonomy and flexibility that supposedly come with this type of work evaporate under such surveillance. Once companies

began to cut rates of pay and shorten mandatory delivery times, resulting in more penalties and fines, it did not take long for delivery workers to organise collective actions. They did so despite the supposed weakness of their position — the existence of plenty of others ready to take their place if they lost their job — and geographic dispersion.<sup>3</sup>

A wave of strikes by platform-based express delivery workers hit companies in China's burgeoning e-commerce industry in October and November 2020 across several cities.<sup>4</sup> Even though deliveries became particularly important during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers nonetheless saw their conditions worsen. One of the first strikes took place on 12 October, when a group of delivery workers in Changsha demanded to be paid wages owed to them after their local delivery station, which was responsible for paying them, closed. Several strikes across Shanghai, Fujian, and Hubei provinces followed. Some of these strikers were also owed unpaid wages. Others were protesting the lowering of delivery fees, which made already marginal incomes even more precarious, or increasingly severe fines

for late delivery. While not reaching the militant level of industrial workers' actions that shut production at the height of China's labour movement in the late 2000s and early 2010s, several waves of strikes by platform workers over the past two years, which have affected logistics chains, put the platform economy on notice.<sup>5</sup>

Patterns of corporate behaviour and worker reactions in the platform economy show remarkable similarities across the globe.<sup>6</sup> Companies start out offering generous incentives to both workers and customers, but once they consolidate a near-monopolistic market position, they withdraw these incentives, introduce cost-cutting measures, and tighten control over workers. Wherever the platform economy becomes dominant, workers start to organise themselves into informal networks, associations or unions. But the problems are intractable without addressing the underlining issue: the recommodification of labour.

The platform economy recommodifies labour by redefining those who provide the labour as independent contractors, removing legal protections embedded in formal employment relationships. It is not

just a matter of legal ambiguity but also an attempt to create a new norm for employment relations. Globally, platform workers have pushed back, asking not only for better pay but also to have their status reclassified as employees so that legal protections can apply. In China, platform workers have mostly focused on pay and have not called explicitly for reclassification. However, the Chinese authorities themselves have made efforts to classify platform workers as employees. The document issued by the Supreme People's Court and the MOHRSS specifically asserted that China's labour laws do not permit exceptions for the platform economy.

In China, the migrant workers who constitute the core of platform workers have made real gains over the past four decades in labour protection, but the conditions of the platform economy threaten to take away some of their gains.

### **Tech Problems**

Many tech workers are employed by the same giant e-commerce and tech companies as delivery workers, though they might never meet except at the point of food or parcel delivery.

Once much sought-after, positions in tech companies such as Alibaba and Huawei have steadily declined in prestige. Companies began running into financial difficulties in 2018 and 2019, ushering in rounds of layoffs and voluntary redundancies. Partly in reaction to this decline, young people began to rebel against the 996 work culture that no longer affords them the same pay and benefits.

Online mobilisation by tech workers for labour rights in early 2019 came as a surprise to managers, who did not expect such high-earning employees to embrace activism.<sup>7</sup> Although only a minority of tech workers played the role of core labour organisers of the online campaign, a significant number responded to the mobilisation and it is likely a wider group of white-collar workers were at least sympathetic. Tech workers may be at the most extreme end of this work culture, consistently expected to work more and more hours for the firms to stay competitive, but white-collar workers more generally are often subject to similar conditions. Tech and other white-collar workers see themselves and their middle-class professional jobs as increasingly ‘proletarianised’,

with their work hours and feelings of exploitation resembling those of rural migrant workers. Indeed, many have identified themselves as ‘migrant workers’ 打工人 who work merely in the ‘internet big factories’ 互联网大厂.<sup>8</sup> This explains the strong resonance in Chinese society generated by the online mobilisation. In 2021, giant tech and e-commerce companies were feeling the squeeze from the US–China trade conflict as well as a wide-ranging regulatory crackdown by the central government on issues ranging from data security to monopolistic and predatory lending practices.

It is not a coincidence that in the same period, slang related to dissatisfaction with work suddenly gained popularity, such as ‘involution’ 内卷, which signifies a sense of stagnation or losing an unfair competition, and ‘lying flat’ 躺平, which means deliberately withdrawing from the competition entirely, knowing one cannot win.<sup>9</sup> The reality is the option of lying flat simply does not exist. Economic and social pressures compel people to work harder and longer despite feeling stuck and unable to escape. The threat — even the half-joking threat — of lying flat, as expressed in a variety of cat memes and





Slang related to dissatisfaction with work, such as 'lying flat', have gained popularity  
Source: Gauthier Delecroix, Flickr

other forms of online expression, has alarmed authorities. An opinion piece in the state-backed *Guangming Daily* commented that while the reasons for lying flat are understandable, it is not good for China's social and economic development.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion around 996 and working hours has transcended the legal confines of labour rights. It is about much more than overwork. It has spilled into a broader debate about quality of life. In particular, the discussion of 'involution' demonstrates that people are instinctively grasping at structural constraints and barriers.

### **An Imperfect Union**

The Party-State has begun to take increasingly assertive action to pressure tech companies on workers'

rights, issuing stern warnings to delivery companies and tech giants to sign labour contracts and provide social security to employees. It has also pressured companies to create trade unions affiliated with the official ACFTU in their workplaces. Didi and JD.com were the first such companies to announce the establishment of unions in 2021, and other companies will likely follow suit, if only nominally.

A decisive feature of China's state-society relations today is that the institutions that could mediate labour conflicts are either absent or constrained to formal roles, like the ACFTU, which is institutionally subordinate and answerable to the government. The ACFTU has pulled back significantly from its more reformist drive of the early 2010s to represent China's migrant

factory workers. It has not to date established a strong foothold among workers in either platform or tech companies. Grassroots labour rights activism, meanwhile, continues to be suppressed. Rights-based labour NGOs are the only independent representatives of workers in China and, since 2015, all have come under increasing state and police control as part of the attack against the influence of ‘foreign forces’ in China. The authorities’ moves to shut or otherwise subdue labour NGOs seems to be motivated by concerns about NGOs’ ability to organise workers independently, leading to actions with the potential to be economically destabilising and harmful to social ‘harmony’. Such actions have been so successful that the only NGOs that remain have been reduced to providing social services (usually as part of state-funded social welfare programs) and no longer play any proactive role in mediating conflicts.

Yet the conflicts around labour rights have become more prominent than at any time since the Foxconn workers’ suicides in the early 2010s. Such conflicts are embedded in a set of broader public concerns about equality, fairness, and social

mobility. One of the most intractable contradictions of all is that between the growth imperative that keeps the Chinese economy running and the social imperative of maintaining a degree of popular support by sharing out its benefits more equitably. Is there a way out that satisfies both growth and common prosperity?

More equal distribution of incomes and wealth is possible. Inequality and wealth distribution are back on the Communist Party of China’s agenda, after taking a back seat for much of the past decade to plans such as ‘dual circulation’ (involving the stimulation of the domestic economy), which was aimed at restoring economic growth. In 2021, Xi Jinping’s 习近平 promotion of ‘common prosperity’ turned the focus to a more equitable distribution of the fruits of economic growth. It targeted high-profile entertainers for tax evasion and companies for mistreating their workers. It is far from certain whether these actions, even if they are followed through, will have a significant impact on economic fairness and work culture. Addressing the contradictions more thoroughly would require a radical transformation of the economy and the balance of workers’ power vis-a-vis

that of capital, which the government has not shown any willingness to do.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, even if economic growth can be maintained while improving economic equality, growth itself is increasingly coming up against environmental limits. In the face of the climate crisis — perhaps the ultimate contradiction of all — the growth imperative itself must be called into question. The Party under General Secretary Xi has committed itself to sharply reducing China's carbon dioxide emissions. If the electricity shortages and blackouts of early

October 2021 are any indication, balancing the energy demands of growth with the imperative to deal with the climate and environmental emergencies may lead to hard choices and impact people's lives in ways we are only starting to grapple with. Figuring out how to redistribute economic resources more fairly, protect the rights and dignity of workers, and reduce environmental destruction should take precedence over devotion to the economic growth that has contributed to all the above problems.



三



3





# **PURGING XINJIANG'S PAST**

David Brophy

In 2021, the Chinese Party-State's multidimensional assault on Uyghur society continued. While much international commentary has centred on high-tech innovations in policing and surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC), for the political and intellectual elite in Xinjiang, the campaign has resembled more of a classical Stalinist purge, targeting those — often party members — deemed insufficiently sincere in their ideological commitment. As two professors at Xinjiang Normal University noted recently, with approval: 'Xinjiang has seen a large number of "two-faced people" and "two-faced factions" punished in the fields of public security, prosecution, law, education and publishing, and propaganda and culture, so as to cleanse the political, religious, and ideological atmosphere.'<sup>1</sup> With the apparent scaling back of the mass re-education program, the harsh sentences still being meted out to those perceived as disloyal warrant attention.

One of the first such 'two-faced factions' to be exposed was in the education sphere, with an investigation targeting officials and scholars who were responsible for Uyghur-language school textbooks that were deemed to carry noxious pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist messaging. Two editors were eventually given suspended death sentences, while others were given sentences ranging from fifteen years to life in prison.

Details on this case were scant until the China Global Television Network (CGTN) included it in the fourth of a series of propaganda films released in 2021. The films were designed to rebut international criticism and substantiate Party-State claims of a looming terrorist menace in Xinjiang. From prison, the editors were shown confessing their sins and acknowledging the 'harm' the textbooks had done to Xinjiang's children. Some of the offending publications were displayed, set alongside more recent 'healthy' textbooks that have replaced specifically Uyghur content with material designed to inculcate a pan-Chinese patriotism.

Intense censorship of political and religious themes has existed in Xinjiang for a long time. What, then, were the dangerous narratives these books had been propagating? What sort of subversive code had their





**Ehmetjan Qasimi's full portrait with the ETR star and crescent moon medallion**  
Source: Ibekolu, Wikimedia

editors been able to insert into them? CGTN gave us only a snapshot of the evidence, but we can assume they were doing their best to build a strong case, with the support of the security agencies.

It is even more telling, then, that the evidence presented was thin and unconvincing. In one shot, for example, a publishing house employee points to a page in a textbook displaying a photograph of Ehmetjan Qasimi (d.1949). Ehmetjan was the president of the second East Turkistan Republic (ETR), or the Three Districts Revolution 三区革命 as it is known inside

China, which existed in western Xinjiang from 1944 to 1949. Given Mao Zedong 毛泽东 praised this movement as ‘part of the democratic revolution of the entire Chinese people’, Ehmetjan has enjoyed relative protection as a historical figure. The same portrait of him adorns the cover of his late wife’s memoirs, published in Chinese in 2011. The only difference is that for that book, the image was cropped above his chest. The crime of the textbook editors, evidently, was to include the full portrait, showing Qasimi’s ETR medallion with its star and crescent moon — symbols now exclusively associated with Uyghur separatism.

A second segment of the documentary refers to a legend about seven girls driven off a cliff by assailants whom a publishing house employee identifies as ‘Han Chinese’. The implication here is that the editors were deliberately stirring up ethnic tensions. But in fact, the shot clearly shows that the textbook describes the aggressors not as Chinese but as Manchus — that is, soldiers of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE). Whether the documentary’s misinterpretation was deliberate or an error is hard to say. But given the text, the only possible ‘crime’ here was the choice to include

in this textbook a story of resistance to Manchu rule — a common and officially sanctioned trope in the wider world of PRC letters.

The fate of these Uyghur intellectuals thus provides a window on to the precarious position of Uyghur historical narratives in contemporary Xinjiang. While the topic of Uyghur resistance to communist rule after 1949 is obviously a taboo one, Uyghurs have, until recently, enjoyed certain limited space in which to cautiously cultivate national pride in historical acts of resistance to the predecessors of the Communist Party of China (CPC): the Qing and the Kuomintang. The case of the textbooks shows us that this space is now rapidly disappearing.

## History Wars in Xinjiang

The historiography of Xinjiang inside China has come a long way since the founding of the PRC, when trends in Soviet scholarship were influential. Before 1949, Chinese communists who studied in the Soviet Union were exposed to the work of historians such as Prokopii Il'ich Fesenko, who served as Soviet consul in Chöchäk (Tacheng 塔城, in northern Xinjiang), before lecturing at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. His *History of Xinjiang* (1935) was the first effort to write a history of the region from a Marxist point of view, placing events in the context of global political and economic trends, and interpreting political conflicts as expressions of class struggle. Peasant rebellions play an important role in his narrative: 'The period from 1765 to 1862,' he wrote, 'was a period of continual peasant uprisings in the southern part of Xinjiang and Eastern Turkistan, which the Chinese mandarins suppressed by the cruellest methods.'<sup>2</sup>

As Moscow stepped up its intervention in Xinjiang in the 1930s and 1940s, rendering the province an effective 'satellite' of the Soviet Union, these episodes of rural militancy were reinterpreted as evidence of a long-standing *national* struggle of the Uyghur people. When the Soviet Union backed the formation of the second East Turkistan Republic in

the mid-1940s, Uyghur intellectuals on Soviet soil were given a free hand to author books and articles in Soviet Uyghur periodicals such as *Truth of the East* presenting this fledgling state as the culmination of a fight for liberty from Chinese rule — at that point represented by Chiang Kai-shek's 蒋介石 Kuomintang.

The ETR's contribution to mid-century Uyghur intellectual life is well known. Less well known is the influence its books and articles had on Chinese authors writing about Xinjiang in the early PRC. Given Mao's endorsement of the ETR, and the fact its historiography carried the imprimatur of Soviet historical science, ETR works were an obvious resource for Chinese historians in the early 1950s seeking an alternative to the Kuomintang's historiography of China's north-west. Pro-ETR publications informed, for example, Turkologist Guo Yingde's 郭应德 *Outline History of the Uyghurs* (1952). Its second chapter, on the 'The national liberation movement of the Uyghurs since the Qing', begins: 'Under the bloody rule and feudal oppression of the Manchu-Qing regime and the reactionary Kuomintang, the Uyghur people waged a struggle for more than a century for their freedom, happiness and liberation.' Guo celebrated episodes of independence such as the decade-long rule of Yaqub Beg, whose emirate eventually fell in 1876 to Qing general Zuo Zongtang's 左宗棠 reconquest of Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup>

Little did Guo know, however, that just as his book was being published, a conservative turn was working its way through the postwar Soviet academy, bringing with it a critique of what were now deemed 'nationalist deviations'. Naturally, this campaign extended to Soviet writing on Xinjiang. Intellectual gatekeepers denounced a 1951 book on Uyghur migration into the Russian Empire as glorifying Yaqub Beg's 'feudal khanate', and likewise maligned earlier Muslim uprisings against the Qing as imperialist plots. In 1954, a volume of translations of these writings was published in Beijing, and Guo and like-minded colleagues had to retract their positive appraisal of anti-Qing resistance in Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup> In 1958, Burhan Shahidi 包尔汉, chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous

Region Government, weighed in with his own characterisation of Yaqub Beg as a reactionary tool of British and Turkish imperialism, and the debate was effectively settled.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split ended PRC reliance on the Soviet line in historiography, among other things, but did little to change such verdicts. To accompany its critique of Soviet 'revisionism', the CPC decided it now had to produce its own official narrative on Xinjiang, and to this end commissioned a group of scholars to write a *Concise History of Xinjiang*. A draft of the first volume, covering ancient history, circulated internally from 1965 onwards, but as with many intellectual ventures of this period, the Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966, delayed its completion. It was not until 1980 that the complete three-volume *Concise History* was published.

The *Concise History* offers something of a compromise between statist PRC narratives and Uyghur national perspectives. It begins with the familiar mantra that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of China from ancient times but avoids trying to substantiate this questionable claim. Its structure reflects Marxist historical sociology, taking the story from slave society, to feudalism, to the abortive bourgeois revolution that brought down the Qing dynasty. Projecting the Qing-period political construct of 'Xinjiang' into the past, and positing a timeless national unity, it describes Tang empire-building as the 'Tang *unification* [统一] with Xinjiang' (my emphasis). Yet it also recognises that in this period 'the Uyghurs became the main nationality [民族] of Xinjiang'. In the second volume, on modern history, the involvement of the peasantry gives nineteenth-century anti-Qing uprisings a progressive dimension, but Zuo Zongtang's reconquest of Xinjiang for the Qing is also described as a 'righteous' deed.

This historiographic compromise has been a source of tension inside and outside the academy since the 1980s, and in 2005, a new *Comprehensive History of Xinjiang* was commissioned to revise Xinjiang's past in line with contemporary political priorities. By 2016, there were reports that the *Comprehensive History* was close to completion, but it has still not been

published, possibly reflecting ongoing turbulence in the field. What we do have is a series of reports on conferences dedicated to its various volumes, which give us a sense of its revisionist mission.

Unsurprisingly, given the growing critique in China of the system of national minority autonomous regions, one theme that emerges in these reports is a negative evaluation of past forms of local autonomy in Xinjiang. At a conference that discussed the Qianlong Emperor's eighteenth-century enfeoffment of local Muslims as *jasaq* (princes), for example, 'participants believed that the *jasaq* system was not beneficial for the progress of local society'. In a similar vein, the Republican history conference affirmed that 'replacing the *jasaq* system with a [Chinese-style] county administration conformed to the people's wishes and the trend of historical development'. Tellingly, in the conference on contemporary history, the *Comprehensive History*'s editor-in-chief, Wu Dunfu 吴敦夫, highlighted the need to account for 'certain problems in the party's nationalities policy at the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s' — a period when Beijing is felt to have shown relative respect for the provisions of national autonomy in regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet.<sup>6</sup> These developments help to contextualise the case of the 'poisonous teaching materials' 毒教材.

## The Seven Maidens

The legend of the Seven Maidens is today linked to a concrete historical event: an anti-Qing uprising in the Tarim Basin town of Uchturfan 乌什 in 1765 — the first to occur after the Qing invasion of the region. The story has also come to be associated with a particular shrine in the vicinity of Uchturfan, known as the 'Tomb of the Seven Maidens'.

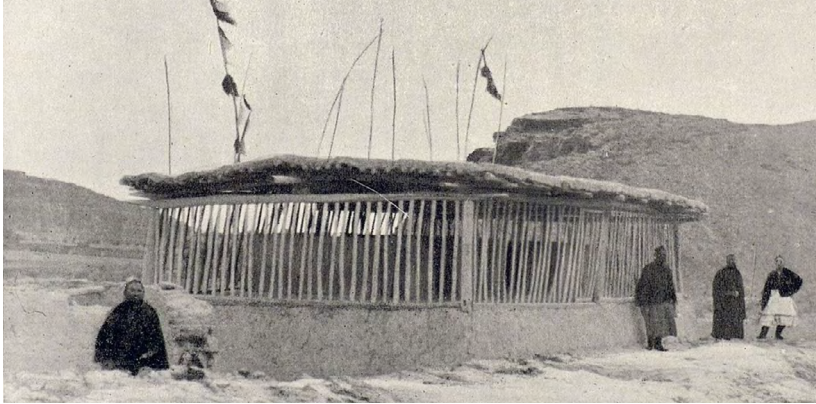
As with many of Xinjiang's shrines, the story surrounding this one has evolved with time. There are in fact various shrines dedicated to 'the seven maidens' in Xinjiang, and they occur elsewhere in the Islamic world, too: shrines to 'Seven Girls' exist in Manisa in Anatolia, in Tehran

and across Egypt. The precise origin of this popular trope is unknown, but it may lie in the pre-Islamic folklore of the Middle East. In the late Qing, the *shaykh* of the Uchturfan shrine told visitors that the seven girls were seven daughters of the Prophet Sulayman (Solomon).<sup>7</sup> Scholars see the identification of such locations in the Tarim Basin with figures from the prophetic tradition as part of the Islamisation of the region, with Islamic stories and legends relocated to Xinjiang.

If the shrine originally came into existence as part of the Islamisation of the Tarim Basin, its identification with events of the eighteenth century is the product of a second, more recent rereading of Xinjiang's landscape. Throughout the twentieth century, guided by a desire to consolidate a new national narrative, Uyghur scholars hypothesised links between shrines of obscure origin and figures from an emerging canon of Uyghur literature and history. A shrine outside the town of Opal, identified in the 1980s as that of eleventh-century scholar Mahmud Kashgari, is one such celebrated rediscovery.

There is some evidence that, by the 1940s, a cemetery on the outskirts of Uchturfan was associated with the martyrs of the 1765 anti-Qing uprising, but it was not until the late 1970s that local scholars publicised a putative link between the Tomb of the Seven Maidens and this historical event.<sup>8</sup> Then, in the early 1980s, Uyghur writer Ibrahim Qurban penned a long verse retelling of the story of this uprising, which consolidated the new narrative of the Seven Maidens as anti-Qing heroines and disseminated it to a wider Uyghur reading public.<sup>9</sup>

Ibrahim's book played an important role in confirming the story of the Seven Maidens as part of an emerging canon of Uyghur historical narratives that were eventually to be incorporated into school textbooks in the early 2000s. The Chinese state today, in criminalising the dissemination of such textbooks and the stories they contain, is thus undoing the work of Uyghur intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s to flesh out a distinctly Uyghur historical narrative within the already tight strictures of PRC orthodoxy.



**Tomb of the Seven Maidens**

Source: N.N. Pantusov, 'Musul'manskie mazary v g. Uch-Turfane i okrestnostiakh ego (v kitaiskikh predelakh)' [Muslim Mazars in the City of Uch-Turfan and its Environs (within Chinese Borders)], in *Sbornik v chest' semidesiatletia G.N. Potanina* [Collection in Honour of G.N. Potanin's Seventieth Birthday], Saint Petersburg: V. Kirshbaum, 1909

## The East Turkistan Republic and Ehmetjan Qasimi

The imprisoned editors in the CGTN documentary have likewise fallen foul of shifting historical winds on the East Turkistan Republic. Alongside the portrait of Ehmetjan Qasimi, president of the ETR, the offending textbooks also included excerpts from popular novels describing the founding of the ETR: Abdurakhman Qahar's *Waves on the Ili River* (*Ili dolqunliri*) and Zordun Sabir's *Motherland* (*Ana yurt*). Published with official approval by state publishing houses, such books sustained memories of Uyghur political militancy that are now taboo.

The CPC has not yet explicitly contradicted Chairman Mao's positive evaluation of the East Turkistan Republic, but pressure to do so has been building. Amid the deteriorating political situation in Xinjiang, Han nationalists have called online for the Party to 'disavow' 否定 the ETR as a separatist venture.<sup>10</sup> Scholarly revaluations have not been so drastic, but academic discussion now tends to highlight Soviet support for the ETR,

and incidents of anti-Chinese violence, as a way of discrediting it. At a *Comprehensive History* conference in 2013, participants pointed out:

[N]ewly released archives show that the Soviet Union instigated the Three Districts Revolution for its own interests and always remained in control of its course. In the early days, they stirred up religious fanaticism and ethnic opposition, even bloody riots, and advocated independence [from China].<sup>11</sup>

In the end, most participants ‘considered it undesirable to fully endorse or disavow the Three Districts Revolution’ and ‘unanimously agreed that Chairman Mao Zedong’s conclusion should be maintained in evaluating it’.

The debate has continued since. In 2018, Uyghur scholar Mehmud Abduweli published an article in the journal *Western Regions Studies* defending the official line — that the ETR was a progressive, popular movement that had willingly allied itself with the CPC against the warlord Sheng Shicai 盛世才, the reactionary Kuomintang, and imperialist aggression.<sup>12</sup> In response, in 2019, a group of Peking University anthropologists published an article disputing these claims point by point, claiming the ETR was neither anti-warlord, anti-Kuomintang nor anti-imperialist, but rather the fruit of a conspiracy between the Soviet Union and Uyghur nationalists to bring Xinjiang into Moscow’s sphere of influence.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they held that the ETR did not implement progressive social policies and therefore its status as a ‘democratic revolution’ was in question. Mao, they pointed out, had been ignorant of the degree of Soviet involvement as well as the local political landscape, and his endorsement of the ETR was best seen as a strategic move to facilitate its integration into the PRC.

The authors here tack as close as one can to opposing Mao’s position while claiming still to uphold it. What must be directly rejected, they insist, is any view of the Three Districts Revolution as an ‘autonomous national



liberation movement’. Without doing so, ‘it will be impossible to make substantial progress in anti-separatist theory and policy’.

Such trends in the PRC academy naturally leave the figure of ETR president Ehmetjan Qasimi in a vulnerable position. Ehmetjan, these authors point out, had many Russians on his staff and was not personally involved in liaison with the CPC. ‘There are many queries about the identity and behaviour of Ehmetjan,’ they conclude, ‘which need to be further investigated.’

Publicly, commemoration of Ehmetjan in Xinjiang is becoming a thing of the past. In 2014, during an event marking the sixty-fifth anniversary of Ehmetjan’s death in a plane crash while en route to Beijing, provincial party secretary Zhang Chunxian 张春贤 praised him as a martyr and a ‘glorious fighter in the liberation cause of the people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang’.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, by contrast, there was no similar public event to mark the seventieth anniversary of Ehmetjan’s death. Between these two anniversaries, of course, came the purge and coercive ‘re-education’ of much of the Uyghur intellectual elite, along with the imprisonment of the editors of the ‘poisonous teaching materials’. Their case strongly indicates the current direction of official views on Ehmetjan and the ETR.

## Conclusion

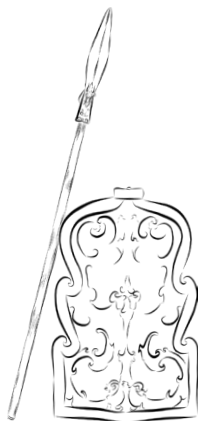
In the Soviet Union, the radical edge of much early post-revolutionary history writing was soon blunted by the Stalinist orthodoxy that the expansion of the Russian Empire was a good thing for the peoples it conquered. Likewise, in China, the view that the boundaries of the PRC represent a natural, historically justified and desirable state of national unity has long constrained alternative views. What we see today, though, is the policing of this standpoint with unprecedented vigilance. Embodying this turn, the forthcoming *Comprehensive History of Xinjiang* will aim to substantiate once and for all the claim that Xinjiang has been part of

China since time immemorial, by seeking to fit the region's highly complex history into a traditional Chinese dynastic chronology.

Precedents for such a historical narrative exist in Republican-era scholarship. In response to the rise of Soviet influence in Xinjiang in the 1930s, Zeng Wenwu wrote a *History of China's Administration of the Western Regions*, a narrative of Chinese rule in Xinjiang stretching back to the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE). This work is in many ways a prototype for the *Comprehensive History*, though now Uyghur nationalism and radical Islam, not the Soviets, serve as the bogeymen. One of the *Comprehensive History's* themed volumes promises a 'true chronicle of the anti-separatist struggle in contemporary Xinjiang'.

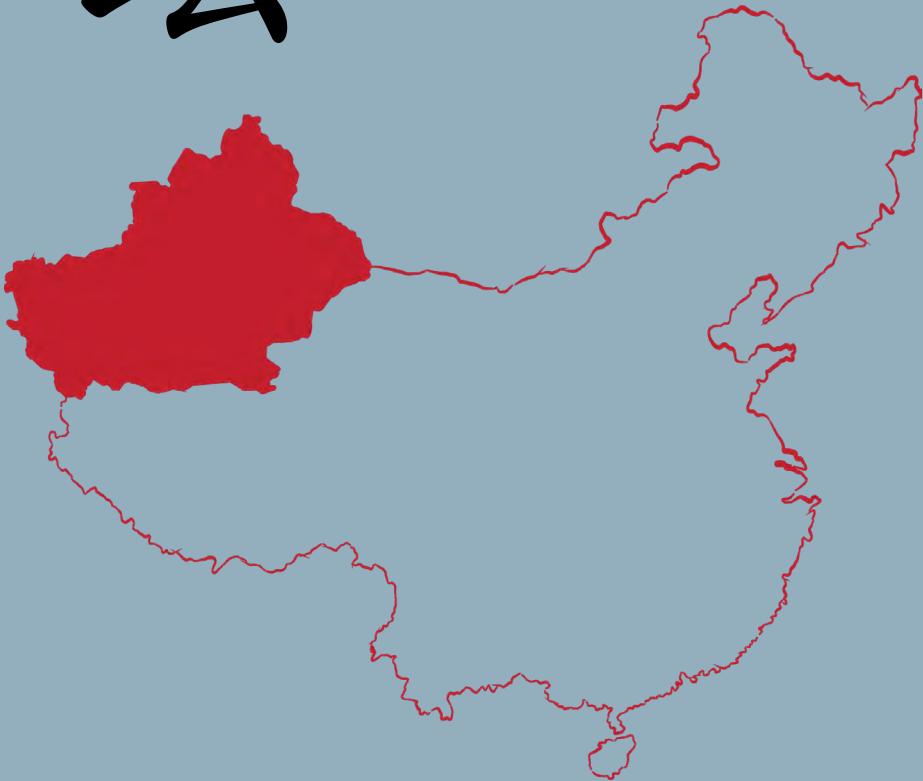
Observers of Chinese nationalities policy will be familiar with recent debate surrounding proposals for a 'second-generation nationalities policy' 第二代民族政策, which saw strong critiques voiced of even the limited constitutional provisions of national autonomy. As we see, the same critique of national autonomy is having an impact on history writing, too. The shifts in this sphere might be described as the emergence of a 'second-generation Xinjiang historiography'.

Tragically, such shifts can leave those once in relatively safe positions exposed and vulnerable. In the case of these textbooks, the axe fell on Education Department officials Sattar Sawut and Alimjan Memtimin, directors of Xinjiang Education Publishing House Abdurazaq Sayim and Tahir Nasir and writers and editors Wahitjan Osman and Yalqun Rozi. Their story, though, is not unique; we can assume that similar dynamics have been at work in the disappearance and/or imprisonment of many other Uyghur intellectuals — victims of what is effectively the cultural decapitation of Uyghur society. Outside China, Uyghur PEN is dedicated to keeping track of writers and academics who have been swept up in the ongoing purge, while family members of individuals are campaigning for their release. Not only their release, but also their political rehabilitation will be necessary before any semblance of normalcy returns to the Xinjiang academy.



# 论坛

**FORUM:  
XINJIANG AND  
THE WORLD**



Xinjiang: Sanctions, Boycotts,  
and Counterboycotts

YUN JIANG



# XINJIANG: SANCTIONS, BOYCOTTS, AND COUNTERBOYCOTTS

Yun Jiang

**T**HE HUMAN RIGHTS violations in Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have generated a backlash in many countries in the West, from governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and groups of ordinary citizens.

One of the first high-profile targets of the backlash was Disney's 2020 live-action remake of *Mulan*. A social media campaign called for a boycott of the film when viewers noticed that the credits thanked Xinjiang Government entities implicated in human rights abuses, including the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau (XPSC).

Also in 2020, the United States imposed sanctions on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, the XPSC, and several Chinese state and party officials. They did this under the *Magnitsky Act*, a US law that enables the government to sanction foreign individuals and entities for human rights abuses. The sanctions mean that if those individual or entities have assets in the United States, they will be frozen; additionally, no American citizen can do business with them.

In March 2021, the United States, the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom, and Canada imposed further, coordinated sanctions, including travel

bans and asset freezes against several Chinese officials. Such coordinated, targeted sanctions deliver a strong message to the PRC on behalf of the international community. In practice, however, they are unlikely to change the overall human rights situation in the PRC.

Surprisingly, many Middle Eastern countries have supported the PRC's policies in Xinjiang, even though they predominantly target Muslims and prohibit many expressions of Islamic faith. There are credible reports of Uyghurs being forced to eat pork, men being punished for growing a beard, and women punished for wearing a head covering. Yet the Saudi Crown Prince said his country supported China's 'counterterrorism' efforts in Xinjiang. Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country, also supports the PRC government's policies in Xinjiang. And in Turkey, members of the Uyghur diaspora have protested China's actions in Xinjiang, but the Turkish President has emphasised his respect for China's sovereignty on this issue.

In retaliation for the coordinated sanctions by the four Western jurisdictions, the PRC imposed countersanctions in the same month. From its perspective, any form of

sanction against its government or the Communist Party of China (CPC) constitutes unacceptable interference in China's internal affairs and necessitates retaliation. However, unlike the list of US, EU, UK, and Canadian targets, the PRC has sanctioned individuals who are not government officials or politicians, including NGOs.

Among those sanctioned by the PRC are two scholars who work on Xinjiang, Adrian Zens, a German researcher, and Jo Smith Finley, an academic from the United Kingdom. Both have published research on the human rights situation of non-Han people in Xinjiang. Also sanctioned is the German think tank the Mercator Institute for China Studies, which has published reports on human rights in the PRC, including one on 'China's coercive policies in Xinjiang and what Europe should do about them'. The PRC Government accused them and others of harming 'China's sovereignty and interests and maliciously spread[ing] lies and disinformation'.<sup>1</sup>

The sanctions targeting researchers working on China may shape future research choices among academics. Even before this round of sanctions, researchers in the China



field generally, not just on Xinjiang and other politically sensitive areas such as Tibet, were already facing an increasingly restrictive and sometimes hostile working environment. Chinese authorities have made historical archives increasingly inaccessible to outsiders. Fieldwork has become risky, and it is harder for researchers to find interviewees who are willing to respond. The PRC Government has also become more reluctant to issue visas for researchers whose work may reflect negatively on the government or the CPC. The rise of ‘hostage diplomacy’ (see Forum, ‘Controversial High-Profile Detention and Prosecution of Foreigners’, pp.35–38) lends another layer of anxiety, especially to any research that might be construed as touching on the national interest — the definition of which is widening all

the time. Such restrictions — explicit and implicit — on scholarly research and exchange may discourage people from pursuing China studies, leading to less-nuanced understanding of China overseas.

Apart from the Magnitsky sanctions, the United States banned all cotton and tomato imports from Xinjiang starting in January 2021, citing concerns about the use of forced labour. In March, ‘supporting Xinjiang cotton’ 支持新疆棉花 became a viral movement on Chinese social media, leading to a boycott of several foreign clothing brands, from H&M to Burberry. Many celebrities — including actors Yang Mi 杨幂, Dilraba Dilmurat (of Uyghur ethnicity) and Angelababy 楊穎 — joined in by ending their relationship with Adidas. These boycotts have also led to the logos of



**‘Supporting Xinjiang cotton’ became a viral social media movement**

Source: Can Can, Flickr

these companies being blurred out on Chinese TV programs.

It was a Weibo post from the Communist Youth League that instigated this round of popular boycotts. The post appeared on 24 March, two days after the US-led coordinated sanctions were announced, and republished a September 2020 statement by Swedish multinational clothing retailer H&M that it was ‘deeply concerned’ by reports of forced labour in Xinjiang and would not source cotton from there.<sup>2</sup> Sweden, as part of the European Union, was one of the jurisdictions sanctioning China.

Many Chinese consumers were genuinely angry that Western brands were boycotting Xinjiang cotton and called for ‘support for Xinjiang cotton’. However, this may largely be attributed to the way the Party has framed the issue, as one of Western hostility to China and interference in Chinese internal affairs. The underlying reasons companies were boycotting Xinjiang cotton were never fully explained as the Party heavily censors information about its policies in Xinjiang. At the same time, the social media accounts of the PRC Government promote sleekly produced videos

about how great life is in the region. Therefore, the narrative of Western hostility to a rising China may appear credible to many.

Some Chinese citizens have tried to voice their support for ‘Xinjiang people’ online,<sup>3</sup> but were censored and their accounts banned, along with any discussion of the real reasons for the boycott.

For foreign companies operating in the PRC, not using suppliers in Xinjiang allows them to exhibit corporate social responsibility, comply with modern anti-slavery laws and enhance their global reputation, and sales. On the other hand, Japanese retailer Muji has promoted its use of Xinjiang cotton, which ensures its reputation and sales in China. Ultimately, businesses have had to choose where their values (and markets) lie.

In June 2021, in response to both Xinjiang-related sanctions and US sanctions on Chinese technology companies, the PRC enacted the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law (AFSL). The Party perceives foreign sanctions as a form of interference that must be countered to preserve ‘national sovereignty’ and the country’s ‘development interests’.<sup>4</sup>

Parts of the AFSL mirror aspects of the European Union's Blocking Statute, which prohibits EU citizens and companies from direct or indirect compliance with foreign laws; currently all the items on the specified list are related to US sanctions on Cuba and Iran. The EU statute does not recognise the 'extraterritorial application of laws adopted by third countries', considering such applications contrary to international law. Affected EU citizens or companies can claim compensation under the Blocking Statute.

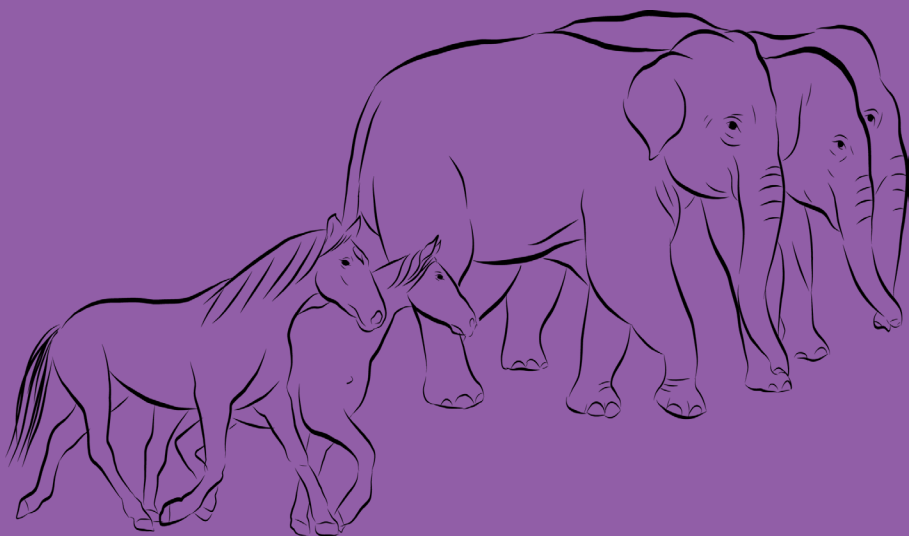
However, the scope of the PRC's AFSL is broader and more ambiguous. The law does not include a list of foreign legislation to be counteracted but allows for measures against

entities or individuals for 'conduct that endangers [the] nation's sovereignty, security, or development interests'.<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that the PRC has enacted countermeasures against foreign sanctions, as have many other jurisdictions around the world. However, their scope poses increased risks for foreign companies operating in China. For example, Chinese companies may try to seek damages from foreign companies which attempt to comply with the sanctions.

One small silver lining from all this is that the world is finally paying attention to what is happening in Xinjiang and the broader human rights violations occurring in the most populous country in the world.

# 观点

FOCUS: ENVIRONMENT



Pastoralists, Zoonotic Diseases,  
and the Anthropocene across  
Inner Asia

NATASHA FIJN

Roaming Elephants and a  
Conservation Wake-Up Call

BECKY SHU CHEN

Ulagai Wetland: A Dry  
and Thirsty Place

UCHRALT OTEDE



# PASTORALISTS, ZONOTIC DISEASES, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE ACROSS INNER ASIA

Natasha Fijn

**I**N THIS AGE OF the Anthropocene, as humans overuse landscapes and resources, we are placing increasing pressure on the species with whom we share complex, multispecies ecologies. The flow-on effects from a changing climate have led to unexpected consequences, including the emergence, or re-emergence, of lethal diseases. It is difficult for epidemiologists to pinpoint the exact origins of viral emergence, such as in the case of COVID-19. When viruses and bacteria have an ability to cross species barriers, they are known as zoonoses, often crossing from both domestic and wild mammalian species into humans.

Although mammals are recognised as the carrier species for many zoonotic diseases, there has been little attention on the implications of the multispecies entanglements between herding families and the animals they live among in pastoral contexts.

A mobile pastoral approach to health and illness is based on daily herding practices including the care, nurturing, and movement of animals, while oriented towards the prevention of illness and disease.<sup>1</sup> The pastoral lifestyle of many herding families across the Mongolian Plateau (which includes peoples of Mongol heritage in Mongolia, the People's Republic of

China and Russia) not only provides a wealth of practical experience of the nurturing and medicinal treatment of herd animals under extreme environmental conditions, but also exposes both humans and multispecies herds to deadly zoonotic diseases, including different forms of influenza, anthrax, brucellosis, tick-borne diseases, rabies, and the plague.<sup>2</sup>

Different places around the world are affected by climate change in different ways. The Australian continent, for example, is experiencing high temperatures and increasingly frequent droughts, resulting in extreme fire events, such as the devastating Black Summer bushfires of 2019–2020. Herding communities across Inner Asia are experiencing extreme weather events, too, but in the form of devastating snowstorms and fluctuating winter conditions, resulting in the widespread death of herd animals — a phenomenon known to Mongols as *dzud*. This occurs when there are rapid fluctuations in temperature, resulting in a thick layer of ice forming on the ground. Herd animals are unable to feed on the dried stalks of grass beneath the snow and ice that they rely on to get through the winter. *Dzud* has historically been

recorded in a cyclical pattern every five to seven years on the Mongolian Plateau. With climatic warming of 1–2° Celsius, herders have been dealing with the consequences of *dzud* on a more frequent basis, particularly if there has been drought the previous summer.<sup>3</sup> When whole herds perish, herding families have no choice but to abandon their way of life and make the difficult move into urban centres, with few prospects for a prosperous future.<sup>4</sup> This change to more extreme climatic conditions inevitably alters the dynamics of the grassland steppe ecosystem and the multiple species that live on it.

One such implication of climate change is the re-emergence of anthrax as a lethal zoonotic disease across the Mongolian Plateau. In the mountainous regions in the past, the ground remained frozen as permafrost throughout all seasons. But with unusually high temperatures in summer in recent years, the permafrost has begun to melt. In Siberia, the intact remains of Ice Age creatures have emerged from the melting permafrost, including woolly mammoths, sabre-toothed cats, and cave bears.<sup>5</sup> All are remarkably preserved, even still possessing thick





**The pastoral lifestyle of many herding families across the Mongolian Plateau is based on daily herding practices including the care, nurturing, and movement of animals, while oriented towards the prevention of illness and disease**

Source: Natasha Fijn

coats, despite having been extinct for thousands of years. In one instance, in Russia in 2016, a 75-year-old reindeer carcass melted out of the permafrost, releasing deadly anthrax bacteria into the surrounding soil. This then struck down a reindeer herd grazing nearby and subsequently infected herders who were tending them. The outbreak resulted in the death of a twelve-year-old Nenets boy.<sup>6</sup>

The grassland ecosystem in Mongolia is remarkably intact compared with much of the rest of Eurasia, with both domestic and wild ungulate species roaming free and with the potential to come into contact with one another — and with humans. Mongolia is home to one of the last places where gazelle can be sighted on the grassland steppe, although

the population has been declining rapidly. Their migration routes cross the border between Mongolia and Inner Mongolia in China, but they are increasingly subject to hunting pressure on both sides of the border. Herds of gazelle share the grassland steppe with multiple species of herd animal, including horses, cattle, camels, sheep, and goats. Anthrax has been resurfacing in gazelles, leading to contaminated soil that then infects domestic herds grazing on the same grassland. This results in herding families becoming infected, too.<sup>7</sup> The recent re-emergence of cases of anthrax is an indication of how changes in soil conditions on the grassland steppe, hastened by climate change, have set off a cascade of impacts on other species, including

pastoral families who rely on the grassland steppe for survival.

The emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan in China has sparked a heightened global awareness of the health and ecological risks associated with intensive industrial agriculture and the flow of multiple species across borders. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and coronaviruses were likely to have existed previously in bat colonies but then spilt over into another species — possibly threatened pangolins, civet cats or ferrets — as secondary hosts, which then inadvertently came into contact with the infected bats and subsequently humans through the trade in these vulnerable species across international borders.<sup>8</sup>

Like the later global spread of the coronavirus via humans flying on airlines, migrating birds, such as ducks and geese, also spread new forms of influenza. In 2009, avian influenza (H5N1, or bird flu) was recorded in waterfowl migrating along the Central Asian Flyway. First, birds in South Asia became infected, then later, these same infected birds were identified on a lake in Qinghai in China. Through satellite tracking of these tagged wildfowl, researchers subsequently located the

infected birds after they had died in the vicinity of remote freshwater lakes as far north as Mongolia and Siberia.<sup>9</sup>

Through gene reassortment, influenza viruses can recombine and mutate into new, more virulent forms, emerging in different carrier species.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, new strains of influenza have increasingly been found in pigs, ducks, and chickens raised in cramped conditions on huge, industrial-scale farms in China. Meat production is an important part of the Mongolian economy, but for the consumption of chicken and pork by urban residents, the country relies largely on imports from neighbouring China. Consequently, Mongolia has had cases of swine flu (H1N1) through trade across the border, with some lethal cases in humans in the capital of Ulaanbaatar as recently as 2019.<sup>11</sup>

A highly infectious respiratory disease, equine influenza, occasionally surfaces with outbreaks in horses and camels in herding encampments across Inner Asia. Genetic recombination of this influenza strain could potentially result in dire consequences for biologically and culturally significant equid and camelid populations.<sup>12</sup> The threat extends to closely related endangered species protected within

conservation reserves in Mongolia and China, such as the wild horse (Przewalski's horse, or *takhi*), wild ass, and Bactrian camel — all vulnerable populations with unique genetics.

In Mongolia, multispecies herds are largely self-sufficient, free-ranging and mobile, while the herding community has retained long-held philosophies about health and traditional forms of medicinal treatment across species and generations. Confronted by the threat of the re-emergence of ancient zoonotic diseases, such as anthrax, or new virulent forms of coronavirus and influenza, there is a public need to recognise that these zoonotic diseases have a cascading effect on biocultural communities, particularly remote, rural herding communities that are the most sparsely populated on the planet. What happens over the

border in China, where animals are intensively managed, inevitably has far-reaching consequences for rural communities and the surrounding ecology across Inner Asia. The zoonoses narratives within this piece exemplify the need to think beyond country and species boundaries to reorient our focus towards the wide-ranging, human-induced ecological impacts across species and habitats with the accompanying consequences for interspecies health and well-being. With the ability of herding families to exist with potentially lethal zoonotic diseases and their adaptation to extreme environmental conditions over thousands of years, through mobile and free-ranging methods of managing multiple species, there is the potential to learn from this different way of living in a rapidly changing world.



# ROAMING ELEPHANTS AND A CONSERVATION WAKE-UP CALL

Becky Shu Chen

A HERD OF FIFTEEN wild Asian elephants in the south-west of the People's Republic of China (PRC) made global headlines in 2021. They had left their nature reserve in Xishuangbanna, in Yunnan province, not far from the border with Myanmar and Laos, a year earlier. By early June, they had trekked more than 500 kilometres north to the outskirts of Yunnan's capital city, Kunming, which is home to 8.4 million people. A team of trackers using everything from hi-tech drones to strategic drops of bananas then began helping guide them home, notifying villagers along the way of the herd's imminent arrival

and cutting power supplies where necessary to keep the elephants from being electrocuted or causing fires. Safeguarded by some 25,000 personnel and 150,000 temporary evacuations,<sup>1</sup> these elephants had crossed the Yuan River 元江 safely by August and eventually returned to their historical natural range after an exceptional journey of 1,300 kilometres. It is a sign of the impact of human activity on ecosystems, characteristic of the period that scientists call the Anthropocene.

'Cute' 可爱, 'gentle' 温顺, 'intelligent' 聪慧, and 'human-like' 像人一样<sup>2</sup> were popular perceptions of a public hooked on daily reports

and even livestreams of the herd's progress. This is even though these elephants — which can grow to four metres tall, weigh five tonnes, and run at twenty-five kilometres per hour — raided crops (approximately US\$1 million worth), broke into shops, and destroyed property and infrastructure. Their journey was a troubling sign of the poor health of the natural world. An unprecedented drought had hit South Yunnan in 2020 — the most severe climate-related disaster of the past five decades. The drastic shortage of natural food in the forests likely prompted their march to regions that they had not occupied in modern times.

Public knowledge in China about wild elephants calls to mind, in an uncommonly literal way, an old

parable of blind men touching an elephant 盲人摸象, in which five blind men each touch only one part of an elephant but insist they understand it in its entirety: the one who touches the trunk thinks it is like a snake; the one who touches the leg thinks it is like a tree; and so on. Urban dwellers in the PRC, as elsewhere, develop their ideas about elephants through films, Disney or other cartoons, or zoo experiences. Wildlife in general is romanticised and personified, but genuine awe and comprehension of the wildness of nature are missing. The term 'nature-deficit disorder', which dates to 2005, describes the alienation of humans from nature. With direct experiences of nature — as opposed to ones mediated by modern technology including



**Shrinking habitats have increasingly driven elephants into human landscapes**

Source: TchinChine, Flickr

television and even phone screens — increasingly rare, many people have a compromised understanding of the challenges of, and thus the necessity of support for, wildlife conservation. The conservationists' more holistic perspective that habitat loss, which in this case resulted in human–elephant conflict 人象冲突, is the primary threat to Asian elephants' survival is new to most people.

To deal with the wandering elephants, the provincial and local governments prioritised campaigns to teach people safe behaviour around them. Yunnan's provincial government set up round-the-clock drone teams to monitor every movement of the northbound herd, which included two babies born en route. With the help of the drones, the emergency response team could warn villages and towns of their arrival, contain the curious crowds, and keep them from approaching, surrounding, or teasing these wild giants. People were evacuated from their path to avoid direct interactions with the elephants.

Farmers who had never seen an elephant in their village, such as in Yunnan's Yimen and Jinning counties, voluntarily gathered crops to welcome the new arrivals. But elephants have

more typically terrorised villagers who have had to cope with their encroachment, as encapsulated by the expression 'talk of elephants and the colour of one's face changes' 谈象色变.

Formerly, the elephants of Xishuangbanna were so shy of people they were considered mysterious. They lived inside isolated and 'island-like' nature reserves. In Yunnan, these reserves have been increasingly encroached on by agriculture and rubber plantations since the 1970s. Growing populations of both humans and elephants have accelerated demands on and competition for land and resources, especially as shrinking habitats have increasingly driven elephants into human landscapes and exposed them to more appealing human crops. Fields of rice, corn, and sugarcane have provided vast amounts of easily accessible, nutrient-dense food in compact areas; for the elephants, it was like finding a sweetshop right on their doorstep.

Researchers discovered that Yunnan's elephants had developed a preference for living in a forest matrix with multiple land-use practices, rather than in strictly protected intact forest.<sup>3</sup> Increasing numbers of elephant herds had started roaming

outside reserves, becoming frequent visitors to neighbouring communities.

Conservation commitments, including bans on killing, have led to the successful recovery of the populations of several wildlife species in China, including the giant panda, Amur tiger, and Tibetan antelope, as well as elephants. The number of wild elephants doubled from 140 in the 1970s to 300 in the 2020s — a total still less than 1 percent of the global Asian elephant population. Growing elephant populations are slowly dispersing into their historical natural ranges and establishing new territories. Meanwhile, natural forests are increasingly encroached on by humans for cultivation or other uses accompanying broad-scale socioeconomic changes, such as a shift from traditional subsistence livelihoods to industrialised and more intensified farming practices. Damage to high-value cash crops further decreases local tolerance of coexistence with wildlife. The recovery of large, conflict-prone, and potentially dangerous wildlife populations creates new dilemmas for conservation efforts, especially when they negatively impact local communities. These dilemmas are not restricted to China: the grey

wolves of Yellowstone National Park in the United States, for example, are in a similar situation.

In Yunnan, inevitably, interactions and conflicts between the two strong and intelligent species have increased since the 1990s. After locals had to turn in their firearms following the launch of China's wildlife protection law in 1989, the elephants of Xishuangbanna gradually lost their fear of people and became habituated to highly tempting farmed food.

Even before the recent exceptional long-distance dispersal event, overlapping activities had resulted in increasing encounters between people and elephants, including on the narrow paths typical of the countryside. Human injuries and deaths became common: between 2011 and 2017, elephants caused thirty-two deaths and 159 injuries across Yunnan province.<sup>4</sup> Wild elephants can be especially dangerous when protecting their young.

There are many potentially tragic scenarios familiar to the people who live close to elephant habitats. An elephant herd might be resting in the woods when farmers come to tap rubber in the morning mist. Motorists, including motorcyclists, might not



be aware of a solitary male elephant approaching from around a corner. Villagers coming home in the dark might walk directly into the elephants' territory. Fear and anxiety can fill communities. Angry or frightened farmers might shoot an elephant, preemptively or in retaliation. Protecting people and their livelihoods is thus essential to long-term conservation outcomes. In the past decades, governments, researchers, and non-governmental organisations in China and other countries with Asian elephant populations have been diligently seeking solutions to keep the giants away from human settlements. The story of the Asian elephants epitomises the problem of animals coming into conflict with people in shared landscapes, which occurs in China and elsewhere, with

animals including tigers, leopards, wolves, bears, crocodiles, primates, and pythons.

The wandering elephants boosted global interest in and sympathy for wildlife threatened by—human caused—anthropogenic environmental changes like habitat loss and climate change, and they present a unique opportunity for a conversation about human-wildlife relations. We who work in wildlife conservation are hopeful that the public in China as elsewhere becomes aware of the line between an imagined conservation utopia and the real challenges faced at the frontline, and becomes part of the conservation journey, helping to channel more resources to help communities turn conflicts 矛盾 into coexistence 共存.



## ULAGAI WETLAND: A DRY AND THIRSTY PLACE

Uchralt Otede

‘WETLANDS AND WATER’ was the theme of World Wetland Day, 2 February 2021. The People’s Republic of China joined the intergovernmental Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) in 1992. China’s State Council issued the China National Wetlands Conservation Action Plan and announced its List of China’s Important Wetlands 中国重要湿地名录 in 2000.<sup>1</sup> The Ulagai Wetland 乌拉盖湿地 is one of the nine wetlands in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region on the list. The Ulagai River (Ulgain Gol in Mongolian) is one of the largest inland rivers in Inner Mongolia. It originates

on Bogd Mountain, on the western side of the Greater Khingan Mountains in north-east China and flows south-west through the jurisdiction of the Ulagai Administration Bureau 乌拉盖管理区. It then turns to the west towards Uliyasutai Town 乌里雅斯太镇, and the river’s lower reaches gradually sink into the East Ujimqin Grassland to form large wetlands and lakes. At least, that has long been the case.

The Government of Xilingol League classified the Ulagai Wetland as a protected area in 2001 and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region’s government approved the establishment of the Ulagai Nature

Reserve in 2004. It extends protection to wetland ecosystems, rare and endangered animal and plant species, and natural landscapes. However, in this case, the wetland protection policies exist only on paper. The reality is the Ulagai Wetland, which covers a total area of 315,714.2 hectares (3,200 square kilometres),<sup>2</sup> has become a dry and thirsty place due to a large reservoir on the river's upper reaches.

The Ulagai Reservoir was built in the territory of the Ulagai Administration Bureau in 1980 to aid agricultural development. Over the following two decades, because the reservoir continued to discharge water downstream, there was no obvious harm to the wetland ecology. The turning point came in 2003, when the Xilingol League Government decided to develop extensive coalmining and coal chemical industries. As a result, the water usage pattern of the reservoir changed and supplies for the mining and coal chemical industries were given priority. The Ulagai Administration Bureau rebuilt and expanded the reservoir in 2004. Construction of the Ulagai Industrial Zone, an area of 30 square kilometres, began two years later. The expanded reservoir, with a total storage capacity

of 248 million cubic metres, was designed to provide 47.6 million cubic metres of industrial water annually, via a 4-metre-wide canal. However, the real water consumption of the Ulagai Industrial Zone far exceeded what was anticipated, straining the capacity of the Ulagai Reservoir to supply water to industry and allow sustainable flows downstream. In 2010, Ge Jiangtao 葛江涛, a news reporter from *Oriental Outlook* 瞭望东方, a state-run weekly magazine, wrote a special report titled the 'Death of Ulagai Wetland' 乌拉盖之死, revealing that the operators of the Ulagai Reservoir were so focused on supplying industrial water they had not released water downstream for six years.<sup>3</sup>

In 2015, *Focus Report* 焦点访谈, a widely watched TV program on the national China Central Television, reported in depth on the serious damage caused by the Ulagai Reservoir to the wetland. It talked about how there used to be many lakes (*nuur* in Mongolian) in the Ulagai Wetland, which is why the region has so many placenames incorporating *nuur*, including Yikhe-nuur ('Big Lake'), Tsagan-nuur ('White Lake'), Bayan-nuur ('Rich Lake'), Tod-nuur ('Clear Lake'), and Aralynn-nuur ('Island



**In contradiction of the evidence of its own inhabitants, the Ulagai Wetland in 2021 remains officially a place with abundant water**  
Source: An Lee, Flickr

Lake’). By the time reporters from *Focus Report* conducted their field investigations, these lakes had dried up and become saline and alkali land, on which many plants cannot grow.

Among the people featured in the *Focus Report* was a herder named Baatar and his family. They had originally lived in Yikhe-nuur before the lake dried up and the desertification of their traditional pastureland forced them to leave. Song Xianfang 宋献方, a water resources expert from the Institute of Geographical Resources of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, told *Focus Report*

that the internationally recognised safety line for river ecosystems is maintenance of 40 percent of the runoff flow. However, the water demand in the Ulagai Industrial Zone is far greater than the amount of water the river can provide without harm to its ecosystem.<sup>4</sup>

In May 2020, the herdsmen of the Ulagai Wetland collectively made a formal complaint to the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Ecological Environmental Protection Inspector 内蒙古自治区生态环境保护督察组. This is part of a dispute that spans several decades between the herdsmen

of East Ujimqin Banner and the Ulagai Administration Bureau. They claimed the Ulagai Reservoir was damaging the wetlands and grassland ecology in the river's lower reaches through the water allocations to industry. In June, the local herders also posted photos and videos on social media of the dry surface of the Ulagai Wetland and called again for the release of water from the Ulagai Reservoir.

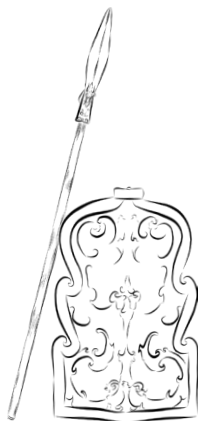
Chen Jiqun 陈继群, a Beijing-based Chinese painter and a well-known environmentalist who is passionate about the preservation of the Inner Mongolian environment and cultural traditions, detailed the crisis in the Ulagai Wetland on the website of his nongovernmental organisation (NGO), Echoing Steppe 曾经草原.<sup>5</sup> The NGO had previously carried out an investigation into the crisis in the wetlands, in 2008–2009. Chen mobilised an informal network of friends and classmates in Beijing, and successfully convinced many news media to report on the crisis in the wetland, including *Focus Report*.

Officials of the Ulagai Administration Bureau, where the reservoir is located, officially responded to the herders' complaint on 14 August 2020, saying it was not based

in fact. The Ulagai officials insisted the reservoir is focused on flood control and water is released to fulfill the needs of both ecology and tourism. They said the reservoir has effectively guaranteed flood control, drought mitigation, and ecological downstream water supply for many years.<sup>6</sup>

On 3 February 2021, the day after World Wetland Day, the *Inner Mongolia Daily* published a report entitled 'Inner Mongolia's wetlands area reaches more than six million hectares'. The report said the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region had certified and implemented its wetlands protection policy and achieved significant results in wetland protection and restoration. The 6 million hectares of wetlands, it said, accounted for 5.08 percent of the total land area of the region.<sup>7</sup>

These data, however, were taken from the autonomous region's 2014 wetland resources survey report; therefore, the extent of wetland areas in Inner Mongolia, including the Ulagai Wetland, on the official database will not be changed until the next national survey has been completed. In other words, in contradiction of the evidence of its own inhabitants, the Ulagai Wetland in 2021 remains officially a place with abundant water.







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**HONG KONG: A YEAR IN  
CONTRADICTIONS**

On 30 June 2020, the National People's Congress (NPC) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) passed the National Security Law (NSL) for Hong Kong that criminalised secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces, as well as any act that aids, abets or incites others to commit those offences. It expanded police powers and contained a presumption against bail for suspects arrested under the law. That same day, Carrie Lam 林鄭月娥, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), assured the UN Human Rights Council that the NSL would 'only target an extremely small minority of people who have breached the law, while the life and property, basic rights, and freedoms of the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong residents will be protected'.<sup>1</sup>

# 2021

# JANUARY

Police arrest fifty-five pro-democracy politicians who had taken part in a primary run-off election in July 2020 ahead of Legislative Council (LegCo) elections due in December of that year (but ultimately postponed until December 2021 on public health grounds). The authorities declare the primaries — in which 600,000 Hongkongers cast a vote — constituted ‘subversion’ under the NSL. Of those arrested, forty-seven will be formally charged with subversion. The court grants bail to only fifteen of the accused; the other thirty-two remain in jail as of the end of 2021, awaiting trial.

The Civil Service Bureau announces that all government employees — more than 177,000 people, from civil servants and teachers in government-run schools to beach lifeguards — must sign a declaration of loyalty swearing to uphold the Basic Law and pledge allegiance to the Hong Kong SAR or face dismissal. Any acts of dissent or expressions of support for the 2019 protest movement are regarded by the authorities as a breach of this oath of loyalty. The Union for New Civil Servants, formed during the 2019 protests, disbands, concerned that association with it could jeopardise its members’ employment.

# FEBRUARY

The government requires district councillors to swear to uphold the Basic Law and pledge allegiance to the government; any who are deemed to have violated their oath (including retrospectively) will be barred from office. More than 300 district councillors, elected in the pro-democracy landslide 2019 district council elections, are forced out of office.

Patrick Li Pak-chuen 李百全, a career civil servant with no experience in media or broadcasting, is appointed Director of Broadcasting at public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK). Responding to criticism of RTHK by the government and pro-Beijing press, Li suspends shows, axes episodes of current affairs programs covering contentious political issues and replaces presenters.

# MARCH

The NPC Standing Committee passes the ‘Decision on Improving the Electoral System of Hong Kong’. Under the reformed system, a new Candidate Eligibility Review Committee and the Committee for Safeguarding National Security will screen all prospective election candidates for patriotism and loyalty. The Election Committee that selects the chief executive is expanded from 1,200 to 1,500 seats with more seats given to representatives of government-linked organisations, and corporate voting replacing individual voting for many seats. The LegCo is increased from seventy to ninety seats; the number of seats elected on a universal suffrage basis is reduced from thirty-five to twenty; professional and industry groups, known as functional constituencies, have thirty seats (reduced from thirty-five); and the Election Committee will choose forty seats from among their own number.

Outdoor advertising across the city is emblazoned with a new government slogan: ‘Improve Electoral System, Ensure Patriots Administering [sic] Hong Kong’ 完善選舉制度 落實愛國者治港.

Former Democratic Party legislator Ted Hui-chi Fung 許智峯 goes into exile in Australia.

Pro-Beijing politicians and media accuse M+, Hong Kong’s new museum of visual culture, which is due to open in November, of breaching the NSL by planning to display work by dissident artists including Ai Weiwei 艾未未. Carrie Lam says she is sure museum staff can tell the difference between freedom of expression and works ‘meant to incite hatred ... and undermine national security’, warning: ‘We will be on full alert in watching such matters.’<sup>2</sup>

# APRIL

Former legislator and barrister Dennis Kwok 郭榮鏗, one of four pro-democracy Former legislator and barrister Dennis Kwok, one of four pro-democracy legislators ejected from the LegCo in 2020 for allegedly violating his oath of loyalty, goes into exile in Canada.

Hong Kong celebrates its inaugural National Security Education Day on 15 April 2021. National-security themed events are held at schools throughout the city. At a police training college open day, Hong Kong police drop British-style marching in favour of the mainland-style goose-step.

Nine of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy politicians and activists are convicted of organising and participating in an unauthorised peaceful protest, in which hundreds of thousands took part, on 18 August 2019. Pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai 黎智英 (aged seventy-three), and former lawmakers Lee Cheuk-yan 李卓人 (sixty-four), 'Long Hair' Leung Kwok-hung 梁國雄, Cyd Ho 何秀蘭, and Au Nok Hin 區諾軒 are sentenced to between eight and twelve months' imprisonment. Martin Lee 李柱銘 (eighty-two), who is widely regarded as the 'father of Hong Kong democracy', barrister and former lawmaker Margaret Ng 吳靄儀 (seventy-three), and former lawmakers Albert Ho 何俊仁 and Leung Yiu-chung 梁耀忠 (both in their late sixties) are given suspended sentences. On the same day, Lai, Lee Cheuk-yan, and former Democratic Party chair Yeung Sum 楊森 (seventy-three) are also sentenced to between six and eight months prison (Yeung's sentence is suspended) for participating in an unlawful assembly on 31 August 2019.

Following criticism of the recent reforms to the electoral system, the government further amends Hong Kong's electoral laws to make it a criminal offence to publicly incite others to not vote or to cast blank or spoiled ballots, punishable by up to three years' jail.



# MAY

Ten pro-democracy politicians and activists — including Jimmy Lai; former legislators Lee Cheuk-yan, Albert Ho, Cyd Ho, Sin Chung-kai and ‘Long Hair’ Leung Kwok-hung; Yeung Sum and activists Figo Chan, Avery Ng and Richard Tsoi — are sentenced to prison terms ranging from fourteen to eighteen months on charges of organising and participating in an unauthorised assembly in connection with a protest held on National Day in 2019.



**Pro-democracy  
media mogul  
Jimmy Lai is  
sentenced to  
imprisonment**  
Source: Studio  
Incendo, Flickr

# JUNE

Police ban the annual 4 June vigil in Victoria Park on public health grounds. Chow Hang-tung 鄒幸彤, barrister and vice-chair of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, is arrested and charged with inciting others to participate in an unlawful assembly after allegedly publicising the banned vigil on social media.

A seventeen-year-old school student and a forty-five-year-old woman are arrested and remanded in custody for alleged conspiracy to produce seditious publications after they reportedly photocopied and distributed leaflets promoting Hong Kong independence.

At the request of the Hong Kong police, Israel-based internet platform Wix disables the website of Hong Kong dissident group '2021 Hong Kong Charter' on national security grounds. A few days later, Wix restores the website, saying the suspension was a mistake.

Five hundred police raid the offices of pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily*. CEO Cheung Kim-hung 張劍虹 and editor-in-chief Ryan Law 羅偉光 are arrested and, together with proprietor Jimmy Lai, are charged under the NSL with colluding with foreign forces to impose sanctions or engage in hostile activities against Hong Kong and China. Later, prosecutors charge four additional *Apple Daily* executives, editors and writers for the same crime. All seven are denied bail and remanded in custody. Police say the charges relate to more than thirty articles published by *Apple Daily* since 2019 — some pre-dating the enactment of the NSL — however, they decline to identify the offending articles. John Lee Ka-chiu 李家超, Hong Kong's then-Secretary for Security, warns 'ordinary journalists' to 'keep a distance' from the staff of *Apple Daily*: 'You should cut ties with these criminals before it's too late to repent.'<sup>3</sup> Carrie Lam describes the issue of 'press freedom' as 'completely irrelevant' to the case.<sup>4</sup> Days later, national security authorities freeze the company's assets and bank accounts,

forcing it to cease operations. *Apple Daily*, founded in 1995, publishes its final issue on 24 June 2021 with a print run of one million copies, all of which sell out within the day.

Police arrest a man in his Mong Kok flat after a passer-by reports a banner with the slogan ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ hanging on a drying rack outside his window. Police arrest another man for ‘acts with a seditious intention’ and offences under the NSL after stickers bearing protest slogans are found on the front door of his flat in Chai Wan.

In a government reshuffle, Commissioner of Police Chris Tang Ping-keung 鄧炳強 is promoted to the post of Secretary for Security. The incumbent secretary, John Lee Ka-chiu (a former police deputy commissioner), is promoted to Chief Secretary — the second-highest position in the Hong Kong government. The three most senior positions below chief executive are now held by former members of the uniformed services. (Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Erick Tsang Kwok-wai 曾國衛, is a former director of immigration.) Pro-Beijing legislator Alice Mak Mei-kuen 麥美娟 comments: ‘If it’s a police state, why not? I don’t think there’s any problem with a police state.’<sup>5</sup>

Official statistics reveal Hong Kong’s population has dropped 1.2 percent in the twelve months since the NSL was introduced, with net outward migration of over 89,000 people — the largest population decline in at least sixty years.<sup>6</sup>

# JULY

Police ban the annual 1 July protest march on public health grounds. On the evening of 1 July, fifty-year-old Leung Kin-fai 梁健輝 stabs a police officer before killing himself by plunging the knife into his own heart. The officer suffers a punctured lung.

A meeting of Hong Kong University's student union holds a moment of silence for Leung in appreciation of his 'sacrifice'. Following criticism from government and university authorities and the pro-Beijing press, union leaders apologise, retract the motion and resign. The university administration eventually withdraws recognition of the student union and evicts it from campus, declaring the university is not 'a safe haven outside the law'.<sup>7</sup> Police arrest four undergraduate student union leaders aged eighteen to twenty and charge them with 'advocating terrorism' under the NSL. Kevin Yeung 楊潤雄, Secretary for Education, insists the government 'respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom'.<sup>8</sup>

Police arrest five leaders of the General Union of Hong Kong Speech Therapists for publishing a children's book depicting the Hong Kong people as sheep and the police and the Beijing authorities as wolves invading the sheep's peaceful village. Two of the group — speech therapists Lai Man-ling 黎雯齡 (twenty-five) and Melody Yeung Yat-ye 楊逸意 (twenty-seven) — are charged with 'conspiring to print, publish, distribute, display or reproduce seditious publications' with the intention to 'bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection' against the government and the administration of justice in Hong Kong.

The Cannes Film Festival screens the Hong Kong protest documentary *Revolution of Our Times*, directed by Kiwi Chow 周冠威. In November, the film wins best documentary at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards. The film cannot be screened in Hong Kong under new film censorship guidelines.

Numerous civil society professional groups that grew out of the 2014 Umbrella Movement — including the Progressive Lawyers’ Group, Progressive Teachers’ Alliance, Médecins Inspirés (representing the medical profession), HK Psychologists Concern, Financier Conscience (representing the finance industry), and Act Voice (representing the actuarial profession) — successively disband.

Carrie Lam comments: ‘I’d honestly ask you, what sort of freedoms have we lost? What sort of vibrancy has Hong Kong been eroded [sic]?’<sup>9</sup>

Tong Ying-kit 唐英杰 (twenty-four) becomes the first person convicted of crimes under the NSL. Tong rode his motorcycle during protests on 1 July 2020 flying a ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ flag before accidentally running into police who tried to stop him. Tong is found guilty of terrorism and inciting secession and sentenced to nine years’ jail.

Hongkongers gather in shopping malls to cheer on fencer Edgar Cheung Ka-long 張家朗 as he wins Hong Kong’s first Olympic gold medal in twenty-five years at the Tokyo Games. A man is later arrested by police after being captured in video footage of the celebrations booing the Chinese national anthem during the medal ceremony — a crime under Hong Kong’s National Anthem Ordinance.

# AUGUST

A song ostensibly about leaving a party early, ‘Gotta Go’ 係咁先啦, by local hip-hop artists MC \$oHo 蘇致豪 and KidNey 許賢, is the hit song of the summer:

I'm heading off	走先喇
Gotta go	係咁先喇
Let's hang out next time	下次再玩㗎
See you later	再見喇
Gotta go	係咁先喇
See you next time	下次見啦吓 <sup>10</sup>

The pro-Beijing press criticises the government's Arts Development Council for funding cultural organisations they say violate the NSL and labels three council members ‘troublemakers’; the three — actor Indy Lee 李俊亮, artist Chris Chan 陳錦成, and musician Adrian Chow 周博賢 — resign their positions, citing concerns for their safety.



**Hip-hop artists MC \$oHo and KidNey**  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Prominent political artist and activist Kacey Wong 黃國才 announces he has gone into exile in Taiwan in a video ‘Dear Hong Kong’ letter, bidding farewell to the city with a rendition of Vera Lynn’s ‘We’ll Meet Again’.<sup>11</sup>

Justice Anthea Pang 彭寶琴, one of the panel of three High Court judges who convicted and sentenced Tong Ying-kit in his NSL trial, is promoted to the Court of Appeal.

The Democratic Party announces its vice-chairman Lee Ming-tat 李永達 has gone into exile in the United Kingdom.

In advance of elections for the council of the Law Society of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam echoes warnings by state media that the solicitors’ self-regulatory professional body should avoid being ‘politicised’: ‘If the Law Society allows politics to hijack their legal profession, the government will ... consider severing its relationship with it.’<sup>12</sup> One candidate withdraws his candidacy, citing threats to his and his family’s safety. Pro-establishment candidates win all available seats.

The Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union, founded forty-eight years ago and with 95,000 members representing more than 90 percent of the city’s educators, disbands after PRC state media described it as a ‘poisonous tumour’ that must be ‘eradicated’ and the Education Bureau declared it would no longer recognise the union.

The Civil Human Rights Front, a coalition of civil society groups that had organised numerous protest marches since its founding in 2002, including the annual 1 July march and many protests during 2019, announces its dissolution following pressure from the authorities and pro-Beijing press. The 612 Humanitarian Fund, which collected public donations to subsidise the legal, medical and welfare expenses of arrested protesters, dissolves after facing similar pressure.

Carrie Lam disputes the notion that the government is engaging in a ‘crackdown on civic society’, saying: ‘We respect civic society.’<sup>13</sup>

Albert Wan 溫敬豪, the owner of the independent English-language bookshop Bleak House Books, announces:

It is with great sadness that I need to announce that Bleak House Books will be closing ... The backdrop to these developments is, of course, politics ... [My wife] and I can no longer see a life for ourselves and our children in this city.<sup>14</sup>

Huang Liuquan 黃柳權, Deputy Director of the State Council’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, proclaims that Hongkongers ‘are now universally patriotic, their hearts are set on development, and the place is teeming with positive energy’.<sup>15</sup>



# SEPTEMBER

The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China chair Lee Cheuk-yan and vice-chairs Albert Ho and Chow Hang-tung appear in court charged with inciting subversion under the NSL. They are denied bail and remanded in custody. Police freeze the assets of the group and raid the Alliance's premises, removing exhibits from the shuttered 4 June museum, including a large cardboard cut-out of the iconic 'Goddess of Democracy' statue, which they haul into a police van.

The Hong Kong government amends the Film Censorship Ordinance to provide for censorship of films on national security grounds, empowering authorities to ban films and impose penalties of up to three years' jail for screening a banned film. Documentaries are singled out for 'even more careful consideration', with censors instructed to be vigilant for 'any biased, unverified, false or misleading narratives ... and the tendency of such contents to lead viewers to commit or imitate any act or activity endangering national security'.<sup>16</sup> Edward Yau Tang-wah 邱騰華, Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, commenting on the new censorship rules, insists that '[b]oth the NSL and the Basic Law state clearly that the freedoms we treasure, like the freedoms of speech and creation, are protected'.<sup>17</sup>

Police arrest four members of the group Student Politicism, all aged between eighteen and twenty, on charges of conspiring to incite subversion, partly by 'systematically providing resources to like-minded people who are jailed' and 'recruiting followers in prisons'. Confiscated evidence includes bulk supplies of M&M chocolates, crackers and sanitary pads intended for jailed protesters — despite all these appearing on the Correctional Services Department's list of approved items that may be given to inmates. All four are denied bail and remanded in custody.

Prisoner welfare group Wall-Fare, founded by former pro-democracy legislator Shiu Ka-chun 邵家臻 (who had previously done time on public order charges arising from the 2014 Umbrella Movement), disbands.

The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, founded in 1989 in support of the Tiananmen Square-based pro-democracy protests and organisers of Hong Kong's annual 4 June vigil, disbands. *Xinhua* welcomes the news of its disbanding and that of other groups as 'an inevitable historic trend' that 'reflects the voice of the people of Hong Kong'.<sup>18</sup>

The China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, a civil society group formed in 2007 by pro-democracy lawyers in Hong Kong to support and advocate for human rights lawyers on the Mainland, disbands.

Speaking at the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club, pro-government legislator Regina Ip 葉劉淑儀 says: 'I think the freedom of expression is still alive and well ... Hong Kong *Stand News*, all these websites are still carrying on as usual ... I don't think there is any really undue suppression of the expression of freedom in Hong Kong.'<sup>19</sup>

Secretary for Security Chris Tang 鄧炳強 warns that celebrating Taiwan's 'Double Tenth' national day (marking the anniversary of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution) in Hong Kong may constitute the crime of secession under the NSL, adding: 'If you really want to split Taiwan from China in your heart, we will definitely find evidence to prove what you're thinking in your heart ... If you don't have such intention, why are you celebrating this day?'<sup>20</sup>

Executive councillor Bernard Chan 陳智思 states: 'The NSL has made very little dent to Hong Kong's status. All the financial companies made tonnes of money in Hong Kong last year, so that has not impacted them at all.'<sup>21</sup>

# OCTOBER

On the 1 October National Day holiday, 8,000 police are deployed to the streets of Hong Kong to ensure official celebrations run ‘in a safe and orderly manner’ according to police.<sup>22</sup>

The Hong Kong delegate to the NPC, Tam Yiu-chung 譚耀宗, says enactment of proposed additional national security legislation in Hong Kong under Article 23 of the Basic Law ‘will impact only a small group of people’.<sup>23</sup>

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, founded in 1990 and representing almost 100 pro-democracy unions with a total of around 145,000 members, announces it will disband, citing political pressure and threats to its leaders’ safety, after being attacked in the pro-Beijing media.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong Student Union, founded in 1971, dissolves because of the university’s decision to sever ties with the group, alleging it had made public statements in breach of the NSL.

Radio host and pro-democracy activist ‘Fast Beat’ 快必 Tam Tak-chi 譚得志 goes on trial for ‘uttering seditious words’. Prosecutors allege that his chanting of popular protest slogans such as ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ and ‘Five Demands, Not One Less’ at street stalls from January to July 2020 incited hatred and contempt of the central and Hong Kong governments.

With many of its leading figures in exile or in jail awaiting trial on NSL-related charges, the Democratic Party of Hong Kong, which had fielded candidates in every LegCo election since 1995, announces it will not be contesting the LegCo elections in December. Carrie Lam observes: ‘If a political group says it will never take part in Hong Kong’s elections and will not join the political system, then that’s a bit strange.’<sup>24</sup>

Seven pro-democracy activists — former lawmakers Wu Chi-wai 胡志偉, Leung Kwok-hung, and Eddie Chu Hoi-dick 朱凱迪; former district

councillors Andy Chui Chi-kin 徐子見 and Tsang Kin-shing 曾健成; and activists Figo Chan 陳皓桓 and Tang Sai-lai 鄧世禮 — are sentenced to between six and twelve months' jail on unlawful assembly charges in connection with an unauthorised protest on 1 July 2020.

At the annual Hong Kong marathon, a heavy police presence scrutinises the attire of runners at the race entrance. A woman with the 'Hong Kong/Add Oil' ambigram logo (popularised during the 2019 protests) printed on her shorts is banned from participating for 'wearing political clothes'. Another runner is forced to cover a tattoo of the logo on his leg.

Amnesty International closes its two offices in the city, including its regional headquarters. Chair of Amnesty's International Board, Anjhula Mya Singh Bais, says: 'This decision, made with a heavy heart, has been driven by Hong Kong's NSL, which has made it effectively impossible for human rights organizations in Hong Kong to work freely and without fear of serious reprisals from the government.'<sup>25</sup> The pro-Beijing politician Holden Chow Ho-ding 周浩鼎 comments: 'It is outrageous for any organisation to smear the NSL by unnecessarily closing their branches here.'<sup>26</sup>

The Hong Kong judiciary announces it will construct a new 'mega courtroom' to cope with 'cases related to social events' that will be capable of accommodating up to fifty defendants, 100 legal representatives, and 100 people in the public gallery.

Bishops and religious leaders from the Mainland's official state-backed Catholic Church hold a day-long meeting with senior Hong Kong Catholic clergy to brief them on Xi Jinping's 習近平 vision of religion with Chinese characteristics.



The 'Hong Kong/Add Oil' ambigram logo  
Source: Supplied by author

# NOVEMBER

Police arrest four people aged between sixty-one and eighty-five in the Mong Kok shopping district for displaying a yellow banner printed with the words 'We want genuine universal suffrage' in Chinese, along with a yellow umbrella.

Ma Chun-man 馬俊文, a thirty-one-year-old food delivery worker, is sentenced to five years and nine months' imprisonment for inciting secession under the NSL for shouting pro-independence and anti-government slogans in public. He is the second person to be sentenced under the NSL and the first convicted for pure speech acts.

Hong Kong police announce that, in the twelve months since its launch, the 'national security hotline' has received more than 200,000 tip-offs from the public.<sup>27</sup>

Tony Chung 鍾翰林 (aged twenty) becomes the third person sentenced for crimes under the NSL, receiving a three year and seven month prison sentence for inciting secession, as well as money-laundering offences. The court finds Chung had promoted Hong Kong independence on social media and through the activism group Studentlocalism.

Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) issues arrest warrants for pro-democracy politicians Ted Hui Chi-fung 許智峯 and Yau Man-chun 丘文俊, both of whom are living in exile outside Hong Kong, for posts on social media inciting people to not vote at the upcoming LegCo election.

# DECEMBER

Kevin Yeung 楊潤雄, the Secretary for Education, states: ‘If we all have the right thinking [in relation to the NSL], we have nothing to worry about. Some worry about stepping over the red line or a narrowing of personal space — it’s impossible.’<sup>28</sup>

ICAC Commissioner Simon Peh 白韞六 states the ICAC is studying whether the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute has violated election laws by including an option of casting a blank vote in a public opinion survey on election voting intentions. Erick Tsang, Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, warns the *Wall Street Journal* in a letter to the editors:

I am shocked by your statement that ‘boycotts and blank ballots are one of the last ways for Hong Kongers to express their political views’. Please be advised that inciting another person not to vote, or to cast an invalid vote ... is an offense ... We reserve the right to take necessary action.<sup>29</sup>

In advance of the LegCo election, ten people are arrested for allegedly inciting others to cast blank votes or not vote, including at least three arrested for sharing Ted Hui’s social media post.

Eight pro-democracy politicians and activists — Jimmy Lai; leaders of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, including chair Lee Cheuk-yan, vice-chair Chow Hang-tung, executive committee member Simon Leung Kam-wai 梁錦威, and liquidator Richard Tsoi 蔡耀昌; former Democratic Party chairman Wu Chi-wai; former LegCo member Leung Yiu-chung; and activist and journalist Gwyneth Ho 何桂藍 — are sentenced to prison terms of between four and fourteen months for participating in and inciting others to join the banned

**Chow Hang-tung,**  
vice-chair of the  
**Hong Kong Alliance**  
**in Support of**  
**Patriotic Democratic**  
**Movements of China**  
Source: Voice of  
America, 汤惠芸,  
Wikimedia



4 June vigil in 2020. In her statement to the court in her defence, Chow Hang-tung calls the court's decision 'one step in the systemic erasure of history, both of the Tiananmen Massacre and Hong Kong's own history of civic resistance'.<sup>30</sup>

In response to parents' complaints that six-year-olds have been traumatised by a screening of graphic footage of the Nanjing Massacre in a primary school 'patriotic education' class, an Education Bureau spokesperson says: 'History is history, we cannot avoid it.'<sup>31</sup>

The first LegCo election under the new electoral system is held on 19 December 2021. Of the thirty-one pro-democracy legislators who successfully won seats in the previous LegCo election in 2016, twelve are in jail, five are on bail awaiting trial on NSL-related charges, four have left Hong Kong and are living in exile and the remainder have 'withdrawn' from politics. The election records the lowest turnout in Hong Kong's history, with only 30 percent of the electorate voting (compared with 58 percent in the previous LegCo elections in 2016 and 71 percent in the district council elections of 2019). Informal votes form 2 percent of votes cast — also a record high.

In the dead of night, two days before Christmas, University of Hong Kong administrators send in workers to dismantle and remove Danish artist Jens Galschiot's 'Pillar of Shame' sculpture. The eight-metre-high sculpture, depicting a pile of corpses and commemorating the 1989 massacre in



University of Hong Kong administrators removed the 'Pillar of Shame' sculpture  
Source: YKevin1979, Flickr

Beijing, had been in place since 1998. Overnight on Christmas Eve, a replica of the 'Goddess of Democracy' statue that had been in place for more than a decade is removed from the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong; Lingnan University administrators remove a wall relief sculpture commemorating 4 June, while City University administrators instruct the student union to remove a 'Goddess of Democracy' replica from the campus.

More than 200 police officers raid leading independent online news outlet *Stand News*. Six people — among them two editors, as well as former board

members barrister Margaret Ng and activist pop singer Denise Ho 何韻詩 — are arrested by national security police on charges of conspiracy to print or distribute seditious materials with the intention to bring hatred, contempt or to excite disaffection and discontent towards the authorities. Police cite interviews with dissident figures and protest-related news reports they said were inaccurate or biased as being among the offending articles, with Senior Superintendent of the Police National Security Department Steve Li 李桂華 warning reporters: 'When you handle the



views of some guys who may have a problem with national security, just [don't] be biased.'<sup>32</sup> That afternoon, Stand News dismisses all staff and announces it is ceasing operations with immediate effect.

Responding to international criticism of the arrests, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says:

Those who engage in activities that endanger national security ... under the cover of journalism are the black sheep tarnishing the press freedom ... Since the implementation of the NSL, Hong Kong has returned to the right track, and the press freedom has been better protected in a more secure, stable and law-based environment. It is a fact that all the fair-minded cannot deny.<sup>33</sup>

Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng 鄭若驊 says the criticism is 'in blatant violation of international law', adding: 'It is indisputable that the free flow of information in accordance with the law has always been well-respected in Hong Kong.'<sup>34</sup>

In the course of 2021, Hong Kong government officials have written more than 130 letters to foreign media outlets, including the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Economist*, complaining about their coverage of the NSL and electoral system reforms. The most common words used in these letters include 'inaccurate', 'misleading' and 'baseless'.<sup>35</sup>

# 论坛

**FORUM:**

**SOUTH-EAST ASIA**



Seeking Stability Amid COVID  
and Civil Conflict

GREGORY V. RAYMOND



# SEEKING STABILITY AMID COVID AND CIVIL CONFLICTS

Gregory V. Raymond

**I**NTERNATIONAL POLITICS is rarely crisp and clear-cut, but working out where the cluster of ten diverse middle and small powers that make up South-East Asia stand in relation to the great powers, especially the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States, can be excruciating. Western and especially US commentators worry the United States is 'losing South-East Asia' to China.<sup>1</sup> But most scholars of South-East Asia, not to mention the region's inhabitants, reject such binary assessments, especially those that render South-East Asians as passive observers or victims of a geopolitical tug-of-war between

the two great powers. Instead, they see South-East Asian states 'hedging', pursuing policies of equidistance between China and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Hedging in the case of South-East Asia involves maximising the economic benefits from China's rise while retaining the security benefits from association with the United States. Efforts to retain autonomy in the face of outside pressure are an important source of regional identity. Insofar as there was a common South-East Asian identity at all before colonialism and the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, it probably reflected shared

historical experiences of seeking to borrow culturally from, and trade profitably with, larger states such as India and China, without sacrificing local rule.<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, South-East Asian countries, with few exceptions, had little inclination to choose between the United States and China. On the one hand, they sought to capitalise on Chinese trade and investment to develop, while retaining their autonomy and sovereignty. (In 2020, two-way trade between China and South-East Asia was worth US\$731.9 billion and Chinese investment was worth US\$14.36 billion.)<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, they continued quietly to enjoy the presence of US deterrent capabilities in the background, while remaining wary of pressure from Washington on matters of human rights and democracy. Fifteen separate US military commands reside in Singapore, for example, including the headquarters of the US Commander Logistics Group Western Pacific and the US Military Sealift Command Far East.<sup>5</sup> Singapore's Changi Naval Base regularly hosts US aircraft-carriers, littoral combat ships, and P-8 Poseidon maritime

surveillance aircraft.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, a senior Thai military officer told me:

We don't want the Chinese to do what they want, that's why we appreciate the US coming into the region to be another big guy on the block. To make sure the one big guy we have is not pushing people around.<sup>7</sup>

While China is often perceived as bullying and high-handed, especially by those unfortunate enough to have conflicting territorial claims or maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, it also represents economic opportunity, and is a permanent fact of life. As Singapore's Lee Hsien Loong 李显龙 told Australia: 'You need to work with the country. It is going to be there, it is going to be a substantial presence.'<sup>8</sup>

Even for the four mainland South-East Asian states without claims in the South China Sea (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand), China is still a powerful and sometimes problematic neighbour. One reason is its control of Mekong River flows, the fisheries of which feed around 60 million people across the Mekong Basin.<sup>9</sup> Another is its undeclared support for armed

**Anti-coup  
protestors**  
Source: Mghla,  
Wikimedia



ethnic-based organisations such as the Wa State in north-east Myanmar. The Wa State has adopted Maoist practices such as struggle sessions, uses the Chinese renminbi as currency and Putonghua as its official language, and resists incorporation into the Union of Myanmar.<sup>10</sup>

Myanmar presented China with its biggest South-East Asian foreign policy challenge of 2021. The outbreak of civil conflict following General Min Aung Hlaing's 1 February military coup against the government of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy jeopardised important Chinese interests. These included infrastructure and investment — current and planned — including the multi-billion-dollar China–Myanmar Economic Corridor linking Yunnan and Rakhine State. Even before the coup, in 2020, China had constructed a 2,000-kilometre razor-wire-topped fence along its border with Myanmar to limit exposure to COVID-19 and reduce transnational drug trafficking,

which has been a problem since the 1960s, with the Golden Triangle area of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos still accounting for most of the world's methylamphetamine production.<sup>11</sup> After the coup, China assembled troops along the border, potentially to protect infrastructure such as the oil pipeline running from the port at Kyaukphu to Kunming.<sup>12</sup> Yet China's unwillingness to condemn the coup, as well as reports of daily unmarked flights between Yangon and the south-western Chinese city of Kunming — possibly to arm or assist Myanmar's military — fuelled rage among anti-coup protestors.<sup>13</sup> In March, protestors burned down several Chinese factories in Yangon.<sup>14</sup> The situation continued to deteriorate, and the fighting escalated, with the Myanmar military's 350,000-strong force by June arrayed against a coalition of ethnic-minority armies with some 80,000 troops.<sup>15</sup> With no peaceful resolution in sight, China's goals to build its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) transport corridors

through Myanmar to the sea remained out of reach.<sup>16</sup> The corridors were an essential part of the PRC solving its Malacca Dilemma — so-called because US forces stationed in Singapore could execute a blockade of China’s seaborne trade at the Straits of Malacca should conflict ever erupt.

In terms of foreign policy objectives, managing China’s image amid the COVID-19 crisis in South-East Asia was a close second to protecting the PRC’s interests in Myanmar. Many South-East Asian states controlled the virus effectively in 2020. But the advent of the highly infectious Delta variant has seen states like Thailand — which was relatively complacent about securing vaccines for its population — go from showcase to basket case in the space of a year.<sup>17</sup> Vietnam, which is in a similar situation, was experiencing outbreaks across the country.<sup>18</sup> Yet Thailand, Vietnam, and other South-East Asian states have been grateful for China’s assistance, especially its vaccines.<sup>19</sup> These have formed the mainstay of South-East Asian vaccination programs in 2021, with some 190 million doses delivered by September (enough for first doses for 28 percent of South-East Asia’s population).<sup>20</sup> These were both sold

(to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) and donated (to Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos), with a mix of sales and donations to Myanmar and the Philippines.<sup>21</sup> There is an awareness in the region that the efficacy of the Sinovac vaccine is lower than the Western equivalents; Singapore, for example, was reluctant to fully recognise Sinovac, with one official stating there was a ‘significant risk of vaccine breakthrough’.<sup>22</sup> But Sinovac provided a buffer while stocks of AstraZeneca, Pfizer, and Moderna gradually arrived through various avenues including production under licence (in Thailand) and the COVAX program.<sup>23</sup> China can portray this as another instance of it reaching out and assisting its South-East Asian neighbours in a crisis, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 reminded his regional counterparts this year.<sup>24</sup> Given memories of Western indifference in moments of need, especially during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, this has been a card worth playing. But overall, with Sinovac’s efficacy in doubt but the vaccine at least available, China’s COVID assistance to South-East Asia has been neither a raging success nor a conspicuous failure. More research will be needed to understand how this



enormous crisis will shape South-East Asian attitudes towards both China and the West in the longer term. South-East Asian states, preoccupied with controlling infection, have been reluctant to join the West in pressuring China over the origins of the virus, but this scarcely amounts to a vote of confidence in the PRC.

By late 2021, the Biden administration had woken up to the need to compete. Together with the increasingly active Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) coalition of regional democracies (Australia, the United States, India, and Japan), the United States aims to deliver one billion doses (expected to be a single-dose Johnson & Johnson product manufactured in India) by the end of 2022. The United States and its allies may yet prove the most important providers of public goods and, embarrassingly for China, goods of superior performance.<sup>25</sup>

South-East Asians want no part in a new Cold War. Their main concern in 2021 was managing the pandemic while attempting to give ASEAN a role in addressing the Myanmar crisis.<sup>26</sup> The year saw several China-ASEAN summits, attended by officials at ministerial level and

below and addressing the problems of the pandemic and economic recovery. China's diplomats noted the concurrence of thirty years of ASEAN-China relations and the centenary of the Communist Party of China, and ritualistically emphasised the importance of negotiations towards an agreed code of conduct in the South China Sea. Given this is the biggest point of tension in South-East Asia-China relations, these interminable negotiations offered some, if minimal, hope that even if the dispute cannot be resolved, it can continue to be managed without escalating to conflict.<sup>27</sup>

Outside high-level diplomacy, China continued to change facts on the ground in 2021. Chinese engineers working on the BRI's first important infrastructure project in South-East Asia, the Laos-China Railway, took no break for COVID. Consequently, the railway, which joins the Lao capital Vientiane directly with Kunming began operations on 3 December 2021.<sup>28</sup> As another step towards entrenching a Beijing-centred regional economy through strategic infrastructure-building, this moment may prove to be among the most consequential of the year.



# 五



5



**(WO)MEN'S VOICES, RIGHTS,  
AND THE VISION OF THE STATE**

Pan Wang

‘Contradiction’ 矛盾 was a hallmark of gender and social relations in 2021. Along with a rising wave of feminism in fields ranging from comedy to podcasting, gender wars erupted in cyberspace between feminists and anti-feminists, with both sides fighting with greater anger and intensity than before.

Not coincidentally, 2021 also saw renewed attempts by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to revive and promote traditional ideals of femininity and promote a more rugged masculine ideal. Party and state policies interacted with increasingly diverse views in Chinese society itself about gender, women’s rights, and men’s roles. As a result, heated debates erupted over the interpretation of men’s and women’s social, economic, and familial roles, as well as their respective rights and interests.

## Feminists Win Battles Against Sexism

Despite setbacks such as the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ in 2015 for campaigning against sexual harassment on public transport, feminist voices have grown stronger in recent years. Following the ‘Occupying Men’s Toilets’ and ‘Bloody Brides Against Domestic Violence’ campaigns of 2012, the #MeToo movement that began in 2018 and the #SeeingFemaleWorkers campaign on Weibo during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020,<sup>1</sup> Chinese women (and men) continued to speak up in 2021 for women’s rights, interests, and gender equality while calling out those who promoted harmful stereotypes or ideas.

In January, PurCotton, a Chinese manufacturer of cotton products, made an online advertisement that featured a young woman being stalked on the street at night. She pulls out a PurCotton cleaning towelette to wipe off her makeup. Her naked face immediately turns into an unattractive male’s face, the word ‘vomit’ 呕吐 appears on the screen and the stalker is successfully scared off. Tens of thousands of netizens, women’s rights groups, and Chinese media lambasted the ad for objectifying

women and for victim-blaming, as well as implying that sexual assault has to do with women's appearance, rather than power and violence.<sup>2</sup> The company eventually removed the ad and issued a formal apology, although as the *Global Times* observed, their 'two-page statement irked netizens even more, as the rest of the "letter" boasted about the company's products and brand'.<sup>3</sup>

Also in January, China's popular video-sharing platform Bilibili streamed a Japanese anime series titled *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*. Among other things, the main character, a thirty-four-year-old man, steals a woman's underwear and, in another scene, uses his mental powers to give an under-age girl an orgasm at a funeral. On 1 February, a top male live-streamer on the site sharply criticised the series, while other users accused it of insulting and objectifying women and trading in sexual exploitation.<sup>4</sup> Many Bilibili users went on to expose a number of other videos containing sexist and misogynistic content, and urged netizens and advertisers alike to boycott the site.<sup>5</sup> Among companies that cut ties with Bilibili were cosmetics brands UKISS and Spenny, sanitary pad vendor Sofy, and skin care company Lin Qingxuan.<sup>6</sup> This push, together with a campaign of criticism from feminists on China's social networking site Douban,<sup>7</sup> ultimately led to Bilibili removing from its platform the four episodes that had been shown and stopping the release of a fifth.

The spotlight fell on another company the following month. On 24 February, the thirty-one-year-old (male) celebrity talkshow host Li Dan 李诞 posted an ad on Weibo for Ubras, a Chinese underwear brand that calls itself the 'pioneer of One Size underwear' and claims in its advertising that it is about 'embodying the true and natural beauty of you'.<sup>8</sup> The ad described the company's products as women's 'lifesaving garments', allowing career women to 'win easily [without any effort] in the workplace just by lying down'.<sup>9</sup> While the ad was riffing on a popular slang term for slacking off, the implication was that women achieved workplace success by using their sexuality.<sup>10</sup> One Weibo user commented: 'I find it particularly disheartening when it comes from a lingerie brand

that's supposed to empower women.'<sup>11</sup> This backlash grew into calls for a boycott of Ubras, leading to apologies from both Li and the company.

A similar controversy, in which seemingly no-one responsible realised the offence being caused until there was an uproar, surrounded an exhibition of work by Song Ta 宋拓 titled 'Uglier and Uglier' 校花 (Campus Flowers) at the OCAT Shanghai art museum in June. Song, a thirty-three-year-old male artist, had secretly filmed 5,000 young women on a college campus. He edited the footage into a seven-hour video, displaying their photos with numerical scores given for attractiveness.<sup>12</sup> The exhibition (which ran from 28 April to 11 July 2021) went viral online and stirred public outrage, as did Song's comments from a 2019 interview in which he said it was unusual 'to find so many ugly women at only one school'.<sup>13</sup> On Weibo, the hashtag 'SongTaCampusFlowers' 宋拓校花 attracted around 100 million views by mid-June, with users condemning it as 'violating people's privacy' and a 'disgusting display of Song's misogyny'.<sup>14</sup> The museum eventually acknowledged that the work was 'disrespectful and offensive to female friends' as well as a possible invasion of their privacy, made apologies to the public, removed the exhibition, and closed the museum temporarily.<sup>15</sup> These incidents exposed the sexism emanating from the rapid marketisation and commercialisation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, they also manifest rising awareness around gender inequality and Chinese feminism's growing strength.

Sexual harassment cases are also associated with China's corporate drinking culture. After a female Alibaba employee detailed how she was sexually assaulted by a client and raped by her male boss during a work trip, police failed to file charges. Only after 6,000 Alibaba employees signed a letter demanding action against sexual misconduct in the workplace did the company fire the boss in question — but not before also dismissing ten employees who had helped publicise the woman's accusations on social media.<sup>16</sup> This scandal not only mirrors Kate Manne's depiction of the 'himpathy' phenomenon ('the flow of sympathy away from female victims towards their male victimizers') in her book *Down Girl: The Logic of*



Heated debate surrounded the arrest of Chinese-Canadian singer-actor Kris Wu  
Source: GEM\_Ady, Wikimedia



*Misogyny*, but also underlines the close ties between power, male privilege and violence against women.<sup>17</sup>

The picture is further complicated by the heated debate around the arrest of Chinese-Canadian singer-actor Kris Wu 吴亦凡 in late July on charges of rape. Some claimed the arrest of the thirty-year-old singer, about whom rumours and allegations of sexual harassment had been swirling for two years, was a major win for women's rights activists. Others, including many of his fans, denied his misconduct and defended him, demanding that brands including Porsche and Bulgari reinstate him as a brand ambassador and even suggesting they fundraise for Wu's legal proceedings and band together to break him out of detention.<sup>18</sup> This led to Internet and media regulators intensifying their crackdown on 'unhealthy' celebrity culture and online fan clubs;<sup>19</sup> authorities removed thousands of 'problematic' accounts related to Wu on social media.<sup>20</sup> While far more serious than allegations of sexism, Wu's case blurred the battle lines between feminists and anti-feminists, revealing the anger, anxiety and apprehension of the public when influential individuals' actions are suddenly put under a microscope, and scrutinised by a large number of people.

## The Cyberspace Gender Wars

As feminist voices made themselves heard, an increasingly heated 'gender war' erupted in cyberspace. Feminists used terms such as 'straight man cancer' 直男癌, while men threw around insults such as 'feminist whores' 女权婊, and women accused other women of being 'married donkeys'

婚驴 who conformed to patriarchal rules and submitted to their husband's will after marriage.<sup>21</sup> As arguments intensified around women's rights, men's rights and feminism, netizens divided into various camps.

One ongoing debate centres on 'surnaming rights' 冠姓权. In April 2020, a woman shared on Weibo how she sued for divorce after her husband refused to give their baby her surname.<sup>22</sup> While her post, on 26 March, generated more than 240,000 likes and has been shared more than 47,000 times, others described it as extreme 'feminism with Chinese characteristics', arguing that women demand equal rights but do not bear equal responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> The following month, some feminists mocked the internet celebrity and comedian Papi Jiang 姜逸磊 as a 'married donkey' after a Weibo user named 'Enhe-I' 恩和-I pointed out that Jiang's newborn baby had inherited her husband's surname.<sup>24</sup> The post went viral, and the corresponding hashtag became one of the most searched in May.<sup>25</sup> In October, television host Zhang Shaogang 张绍刚 was criticised following his interview with the father of Chinese actress Jin Sha 金沙 (a.k.a. Kym) on the variety show *Meeting Mr Right* 女儿们的恋爱 on Mango TV. Zhang told Jin Sha's father it was embarrassing to hear him say his daughter had her mother's surname.<sup>26</sup> The incident triggered heated discussion on Weibo, with the corresponding hashtag generating 400 million views, and many comments indicating Zhang had ruined his public persona.<sup>27</sup>

Equal surname rights are enshrined in China's Civil Code (2020: Article 1,015).<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, children in China inherit their father's surname, ensuring the continuation of the paternal line.<sup>29</sup> Although women typically and historically kept their own surnames after marriage, they were considered part of their husband's families. Because they could not continue their own family's ancestral lines, they were thus seen as less valuable than sons/men. In the wake of the One-Child Policy, which was introduced in 1979, and a subsequent rise in female infanticide, the CPC introduced the 1980 Marriage Law, which stipulated that '[C]hildren may adopt either their father's or their mother's surname' 子女可以随父姓, 可以随母姓.<sup>30</sup> In August 2021, published statistics revealed that 7.7 percent

of babies born in the PRC the previous year had their mother's surname; the percentage was even higher in the cities.<sup>31</sup> Others used the combined surnames of their parents.<sup>32</sup>

Yang Li 杨笠, a female comedian who appeared on the stand-up comedy series *Rock & Roast*, sparked another controversy, in September 2020, when she joked about men and their egos: 'How can he be so average, yet so full of confidence?' 他那么普通却又那么自信? After men trolled her viciously, another comedian cautioned her not to test men's limits. Yang replied: 'Do men even have limits?' 男人,有底线吗? She gained many (mostly, but far from exclusively, women) supporters, but online, men abused her for being what they called an aggressive 'female fist' *nüquan* 女拳 (a derogatory term that is a homophone for 女权, 'female rights/power', but is the equivalent of 'feminazi'). They denounced her for 'sexism', 'man-bashing', and 'creating gender-based antagonism'.<sup>33</sup> In response, Yang's supporters accused the critics of being 'oversensitive', 'fragile', and 'lacking a sense of humour'.<sup>34</sup> Joe Wong 黄西, a Chinese-born American comedian who appeared on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show* and the *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* before moving back to China in 2013, supported Yang: 'It totally makes sense for Yang Li to take a well-deserved piss out of men, whose voices are consistently elevated above women's in society.'<sup>35</sup>

Such controversies reflect the narrowing pathway for the growth of feminism in China. Although Mao Zedong 毛泽东 famously said that 'women hold up half the sky', in the new China, the CPC is not comfortable with any movement that comes from the grassroots or challenges authority and it censors social media hashtags like #MeToo along with 'sensitive words' including 'feminism' and 'LGBTQ'.<sup>36</sup> Where the battle lines might be drawn was suggested by comments from another, far more conservative, male comedian and law professor, Chu Yin 储殷, who wrote that 'gender politics from the West' threatened 'the unity of the working class' and fanned 'hatred against straight men'.<sup>37</sup> He also posted a video on Douyin (China's TikTok) in which he asked how special a man needed



**Decades after Mao said, 'women hold up half the sky', space for women's rights movements remains limited**

Source: Stefan R. Landsberger, Chinese Posters.net

to be to please Yang Li, saying, '[Y]ou're probably the ugly one after you wash off your makeup.' (Yang has said that 'a joke can only get laughs for one reason. Because it resonates.')<sup>38</sup>

In late March 2021, Zhang Kunwei 张坤纬, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate from China's prestigious Tsinghua University, posted a dating profile with his photo on Douban. He labelled himself 'an ordinary man', despite his qualifications and income of more than 50,000 yuan (A\$10,000) per month — six times what the average public service employee would earn in a year — and

previous work experience at JPMorgan and Google.<sup>39</sup> He had given up the high life, he explained, to teach in his hometown in Shanxi province. The post went viral, with more than 400 million views on Weibo in ten days.<sup>40</sup>

Unexpectedly, Zhang was 'body-shamed' and interrogated by netizens on Douban. Some female users denigrated Zhang, who was overweight, as 'ugly' 丑 and 'greasy' 油腻 (a word used by many women to describe middle-aged 'mediocre and sleazy' men, typically chubby, sweaty, and/or narcissistic).<sup>41</sup> Others quoted Yang Li's famous catchphrase, questioning why 'he is so mediocre but still so confident'.<sup>42</sup> Zhang was also called out for presuming that women would be attracted to his wealth, even though he had supposedly given all that up for the simple life of a teacher. Another Douban user commented: 'Who cares if you are highly educated or not? Are women with doctorates less humiliated? Don't you know how harsh it [the society] is on women's bodies?'<sup>43</sup> Others defended Zhang and called out

his ‘feminazi’ critics for their double standards. Zhang himself responded by writing an article bemoaning the ‘unprecedented pressures’ faced by men, whom women valued for ‘working hard and earning money’, and how hard it was for a man like him to find a partner. The conflict exposed the mounting pressures and anxieties faced by men and women around their looks, gendered expectations, and marriage in contemporary China.

## Enter the State

The state closely scrutinises feminist online campaigns and rhetoric. The Chinese government has removed various feminist accounts in previous years and shut ten feminist forums on Douban in April 2021 alone, including ‘Can’t break a broken can’ 破罐子不摔 and ‘Catchup gender equality sisters’ 性别平等姐妹.<sup>44</sup> It has also banned the phrase ‘6B4T’, which derives from radical feminist forums in South Korea. ‘6B’ refers to not having sex with men, not having a boyfriend, not marrying men, not having children, not buying sexist products, and offering support to single women. ‘4T’ refers to rejecting standards of beauty, hypersexual depictions of women, religion, and pop ‘idol’ culture. The movement encourages women to step away from ‘the influence of male-centred political culture, and then form a full range of female culture and female power’.<sup>45</sup>

The Chinese government has many reasons to crack down on these forums. First, a ‘female-centred culture’ poses an implicit threat to China’s male-dominated political order. Second, given the existing gender imbalance in the population (105.7 males to every 100 females in 2020), if an increasing number of women choose not to marry, even more millions of men will be ‘squeezed out’ of the marriage market, resulting in social instability and almost certainly increased numbers of sexual offences, including human trafficking for prostitution or forced marriages.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, the CPC wants women to have more babies, not fewer. Data from China’s 2020 national population census show the country’s

birth rate has tumbled to its lowest level since the 1960s despite the easing of the One-Child Policy; there were 12 million newborns in 2020 — down from 14.7 million in 2019.<sup>47</sup> On 31 May 2021, China launched its Three-Child Policy, with the intention of triggering a baby boom. Whereas the One-Child Policy had a rocky start because many people, especially in rural areas, wanted more sons, this policy faces resistance for the opposite reason. On Weibo, of the 31,000 people who responded to a poll by the state's Xinhua News Agency that asked whether they were ready for the Three-Child Policy, 28,000 selected 'I am not considering it at all'.<sup>48</sup> While welcoming the freedom to have more children, opponents believed it was 'too little, too late', especially given the soaring cost of raising children.<sup>49</sup> A number of women worried that having more children could make it impossible to achieve work–life balance and result in them facing further discrimination in an already male-oriented job market.<sup>50</sup>

Even mild versions of feminism challenge the Party's increasingly conservative vision for Chinese women; on multiple occasions, Xi Jinping 习近平 has reminded the nation of the virtues of traditional families and femininity. In 2013, he encouraged women to take the initiative to care for the elderly and shoulder the responsibility for educating children.<sup>51</sup> In 2016, he described 'wifely virtue' 妻贤 and 'motherly kindness' 母慈 as exemplary qualities for Chinese women.<sup>52</sup> In 2019, Xi said women had a unique role to play in the preservation of family values,<sup>53</sup> while on International Women's Day in 2021, Xi exalted motherhood by saying: 'Without women, there would be no human race and no society.'<sup>54</sup>

## A 'Masculinity Crisis'

Having set out what it expects of women, the Party has also laid out strategies for men. On 8 December 2020, China's Ministry of Education issued a notice in response to a proposal from Si Zefu 斯泽夫, a top policy adviser objecting to what he saw as the widespread 'feminisation' of male

adolescents. According to Si, many young boys had become ‘weak, timid, and self-abasing’. He claimed this trend would endanger the survival and development of the nation itself unless it was ‘effectively managed’.<sup>55</sup> The official notice set out a plan for cultivating masculinity in boys, from kindergarten to high school. The stress was on building physical strength: increasing the number of physical education classes, recruiting and training more gym teachers, vigorously developing sports like soccer, and testing students more comprehensively in physical education.<sup>56</sup>

On Weibo and other platforms, discussion focused on the dangers of the ‘feminisation’ 女性化 of young boys — exemplified by the pretty-boy Chinese male actors and pop stars dubbed ‘little fresh meat’ 小鲜肉, whose female fans refer to them fondly as ‘wife’ 老婆, ‘sister’ 妹妹, and ‘princess’ 公主.<sup>57</sup> Others urged parents to do more to encourage boys’ masculinity. One commented: ‘[M]en are not like men, but a bunch of fake women, what do you think this nation will look like?’<sup>58</sup> The implicit message was that effeminate boys weakened China, echoing the popular saying that ‘the strength of a country depends on its youth’ 少年强则国强, from Liang Qichao’s 梁启超 article ‘On the Young China’ in February 1900.

At the same time, feminist voices were quick to label the government’s message sexist. One comment cut straight to the heart of the matter with the question: ‘Is “feminisation” now a derogatory term?’ Some argued for a healthy diversity of human character and individual difference. Others questioned the necessity of the proposal, pointing out that for all the attention given to ‘building up boys’ masculinity’, there was seemingly ‘no time to popularise sex education’ or teach young people the wrongs of ‘sexual harassment’.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, traditional ideals of masculinity in China largely centred on the idea of ‘being delicate, pale, and pretty’, which had little to do with the kind of ‘hard men’ the Party seeks to promote today.<sup>60</sup>

This is in fact just the latest ‘masculinity crisis’ to concern the Party in the post-Mao era. Worries about whether Chinese men were ‘manly’ enough became a social anxiety in the 1980s. In 1985, *First Blood* became one of the first Western films to publicly screen in China, sparking

discussion about why China had no cinema idol like Sylvester Stallone. The following year, Shanghai playwright Sha Yexin 沙叶新 stirred the pot of unease with his play *In Search of a Real Man* 寻找男子汉. This led to an agonised debate that simmered on through the 1990s about whether Chinese men had enough 'steely yang energy' 阳刚之气. Anxiety about Chinese masculinity erupted again in 2016 around the gender-specific textbook *Little Little Manly Man* 小小男子汉, published in Shanghai, which aimed to help boys aged ten to twelve understand gender differences and sexual psychology and enhance their life skills.<sup>61</sup> It aimed to change 'the tendency of male students to lack masculinity, and be outperformed and overshadowed by girls at primary and secondary schools'.<sup>62</sup> Praised by some, it was criticised by others for propagating gender stereotypes.<sup>63</sup> By this point, the Party had determined that masculinity was a social problem in need of state intervention. In 2019, the State officially banned male artists wearing earrings, with censors awkwardly having to blur men's ears in photos and even television programs. In September 2021, cultural authorities banned the appearance of 'girlie guns' 娘炮 (who were defined as 'men whose appearance, personality, posture, behaviour, mentality, and facial expressions are distinctly feminine') on both television and streaming sites so as to purge 'morally flawed' acts.<sup>64</sup> There are now various training programs and vacation camps aimed at strengthening boys' physical strength, toughness and resilience, and popular self-help books such as *Putin: The Perfect Man in the Eyes of All Women* (2013), in which the author, Liu Xiang 刘翔, presents Russian President Vladimir Putin as a role model for Chinese men seeking to boost their masculinity.<sup>65</sup>

Living in an era that is heavily influenced by 'flowery men' 花样美男 culture (popularised by 'soft masculinity' or 'metrosexual' males who take care of their physical appearance through 'feminine' means such as using makeup and other beauty products or even having cosmetic surgery)<sup>66</sup> and fan culture modelled on that in the J-pop and K-pop worlds, as well as more mainstream visibility of feminism, will China's younger generation of boys choose to follow the 'hard masculinity' model prescribed by the state?



## Conclusion

Overall, despite an ongoing crackdown, censorship and vicious trolling, 2021 witnessed the mainstreaming of feminism in China as women like comedian Yang Li used their popularity to put gender-related questions into the public sphere, and more and more women came forward to call out sexual harassment, discrimination, and body-shaming via a variety of e-platforms including podcasts, Douyin videos, and online forums. A number of young men, too, took up the feminist cause of defending women's rights and calling for gender equality. It was highly polarising. Feminists who 'opened fire' on men or 'crossed the line' incurred the wrath of the patriarchy, from online trolls to the ruling authorities. Men were caught between staying 'average but confident' and being mocked by feminists or embracing their feminine side and going against the will of the state.

When the powerfully built woman athlete Gong Lijiao 巩立姣 won China's first gold medal for shotput during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, China's state-run *CCTV* host described her as a 'manly woman' 女汉子 and even asked her whether she had plans for 'a woman's life'. Gong, causing her supporters to despair at the seeming necessity of conforming, replied she would lose weight and get married and have children as 'it's the path one must take in life'.<sup>67</sup> It is uncertain who will be the winner in this tug-of-war between feminists and the masculinist patriarchy. But feminism has taken root in China, and the feminists will not be easily silenced.

# 论坛

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# HOW THE 'GARLIC CHIVES' GRIEVED: A SONG FOR CHINA'S THREE-CHILD POLICY

Annie Luman Ren

IT WAS ONLY FIVE years ago that the Communist Party of China abandoned its controversial one-child policy in favour of two children. Now, alarmed by the ageing population and declining birth rates in the People's Republic of China, the Party further relaxed its family planning measures on 31 May 2021, allowing couples to have up to three children.

Chinese netizens reacted to this new policy with a mixture of mockery and dismay. Among the posts on Weibo, a popular social media platform, was an untitled song written in the form a parody of a commentary on an eighteenth-century song from

the famous novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 (also known as *The Story of the Stone* 石頭記). The post briefly became a sensation before being censored.

As a way of preserving this response to China's three-child policy, I include a full translation of the song here. But to understand its cultural significance, we first need to go back 3,000 years, to the 'Three-Hundred Songs'.

Legend has it that on the second month of each year, the king of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) would send royal scribes to all his vassal states to collect folk songs. This allowed him

to keep abreast of popular sentiment and any complaints his subjects might have about the governance of his feudal lords. Court musicians then reworked these songs so that the rhymes conformed to a standard dialect and could be performed for the king. Known as the 'mores' of the states (literally, 'wind' 風), they were preserved alongside songs performed during court ceremonies ('elegances' 雅) and state rituals ('eulogies' 頌). Even after the power of the Zhou had waned and its vassal states fought for domination, diplomats from those states customarily exchanged quotations from the songs before turning to business; those who failed to recognise an allusion from the songs were mocked.

Despite the lack of evidence, many believed it was Confucius (551–479 BCE) who selected and edited these songs from more than 3,000 to the received version of 305, known as the 'Three-Hundred Songs' 詩三百. Confucius saw his age as one of political turmoil and moral decay. For him, these songs were repositories of the cultural memory of the Zhou: a golden age in which peace and harmony prevailed. To speak in the diction of the songs was

to 'perform the memory of classical culture — a memory "transmitted not created"'.<sup>1</sup>

Confucius was largely responsible for shaping the Chinese obsession with the past manifested through literary memory, a tradition that is very much alive today. As Geremie Barmé has observed, without knowledge of the Chinese literary tradition, contemporary scholars are often 'ill-equipped to understand, translate or engage with such daily essentials as online discussions, coded commentaries or sometimes even newspaper headlines'.<sup>2</sup>

In a commemorative essay, Barmé recalls his first Chinese lesson with the great Pierre Ryckmans (pen-name Simon Leys, 1935–2014) and how, under Ryckmans' instruction, each word opened the door to 'a mini-memory palace' where 'words, history, literature and philosophy freely intermingled'.<sup>3</sup> The character *hao* 好, used in the simple greeting *ni hao* 你好, is made up of two elements: *nü* 女 ('woman', 'female', 'daughter') and *zi* 子 ('child', 'son', 'person'; an ancient suffix for 'a learned man'; 'seed'; 'copper coin' or 'small thing').<sup>4</sup> It is also the first character in the *Hao liao ge* 好了歌 (literally, 'Hao-Liao Song'), which

is featured in the first chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* — a work recommended as the starting point for ‘any understanding of Chinese psychology, culture, and society’.<sup>5</sup>

In the novel, the character Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱 (homonym for ‘true events concealed’) loses his home and all his possessions in a fire on the same night that his daughter is kidnapped. Bereft and forced to live at the mercy of his tight-fisted relatives, Zhen encounters a limping Taoist on the street, singing a song:

Men all know that salvation  
should be won,  
世人都曉神仙好，

But with ambition won’t have  
done, have done.  
唯有功名忘不了，

Where are the famous ones of  
days gone by?  
古今將相在何方，

In grassy graves they lie now,  
every one.<sup>6</sup>  
荒塚一堆草沒了。

The words *hao* (‘won’) and *liao* (‘done’) are repeated as end-rhymes through another three stanzas, urging listeners

to see beyond the illusion of earthly ‘reality’. Masterfully translated by David Hawkes as the ‘Won-Done Song’, the English translation further calls to mind these lines from Ecclesiastes (1:9): ‘What has been is what will be/ and has been done is what will be done/and there is nothing new under the sun.’<sup>7</sup>

In a flash of spiritual illumination, Zhen Shiyin composes a witty reply to the song before strolling off into the wide world with the lame Taoist. Two hundred years later, Zhen’s words can still be evoked by those who share his disillusionment with ‘reality’ — in this case, a version of reality enforced by the Party-State.

The untitled song about China’s three-child policy — a parody of Zhen’s commentary on the ‘Won-Done Song’ — is a powerful example of how the past (manifested through literary memory and allusion) is still used to describe experiences of the present. Like the ‘Three-Hundred Songs’, this parody successfully captures the voices of ordinary citizens, whose concerns and frustrations demand to be recorded and heard by those in power.

My translation closely follows the rhyme and metre used by Hawkes. I

have also broken the song into sections to explain its references.

## I.

Mean hovels and abandoned halls  
Once filled with babies' calls.  
陋室空堂, 當年育嬰場;

Bleak haunts where weeds and  
willows scarcely thrive  
Where school-districts parents  
used to strive.  
衰草枯楊, 曾為學區房。

Data from the 2020 census show China's population grew at its slowest rate since the 1950s during the past decade. In an effort to boost the birth rate, the government introduced a series of drastic measures to lower education costs, including cracking down on private tutoring companies and severing the tie between home ownership and access to education, thereby lowering the demand for 'school district houses'.<sup>8</sup>

## II.

This body of mine is drained of all  
vitality  
Whilst my spine can no longer  
support the future pillars of  
society.

一身三高腫痛心髒病, 腰椎早撐不起脊梁。

Those who expound the joys  
of having two children and the  
merits of three  
Even as they speak, my locks  
grow white and my hairline  
recedes

說什麼二胎好, 三孩香, 不見我頭頂  
光, 鬢成霜?

Once, I could read, play video  
games, and binge on TV shows  
Now, three children and four  
elders are all I know.

婚前追劇看書打遊戲, 婚後三兒四  
老成天忙。

'Nine-nine-six'; 'Cooling-off  
phase';

This is how life passes by.  
996, 冷靜期, 死去活來屍骨涼。

At others' short lives I used to sigh  
Not knowing that I, too, would  
meet the same fate.

正嘆他人命不長, 哪知自己沒兩樣。

According to the *People's Daily* 人民日報, 96 percent of deaths of people between the ages of thirty and fifty in China are caused by heart attacks or strokes.<sup>9</sup> Many have blamed the brutal '996' work culture for these sudden deaths. The 'cooling-off phase' refers





**The one-child policy resulted in a huge gender imbalance**

Source: Gauthier Delecroix, Flickr

to the provision in a 2020 law aiming to lower divorce rates. It requires couples filing for separation from the start of 2021 to undergo a month-long ‘cooling-off’ period before their request can be processed.<sup>10</sup>

### III.

To the couple with a son,  
Without a house and car, a wife  
he'll have none.

生兒子，要房要車娶不起；

To the bride who met the ‘perfect  
one’,  
Perhaps your misery has just  
begun.

擇佳婿，誰承望遇到一隻中山狼！

The one-child policy, which was in place for decades, resulted in a huge gender imbalance. In 2020, there were about 30 million more men than women of marriageable age looking for a partner.<sup>11</sup> This created extra financial pressure on the parents of sons to pay for the bride’s dowry and provide the newly-weds’ housing.<sup>12</sup> Although the competitive marriage market has increased women’s bargaining power, domestic violence and abuse remain a sombre reality for many women once they are married. China’s Domestic Violence Law of 2016 has proven to be largely ineffective, ‘creating barriers at every step, from evidence-gathering, to winning in court, to seeing protection orders properly enforced’.<sup>13</sup>

## IV.

Those who complained of  
overpopulation yesterday  
Want to sow more seeds today.

可笑昨嫌人口多，今盼韭菜長；

But how the 'garlic chives'  
grieved:

We have no money, no property  
And no juice left to be squeezed!

奈何韭菜汁已盡，沒錢又沒房。

Garlic chives 韭菜 are commonly used in Chinese cooking. The 'Three-Hundred Songs' also mention a sacrificial ritual involving lamb and chives. Because chives are easy to grow and can be harvested many times, in contemporary slang the term has come to mean victims of phoney investment schemes who have been exploited multiple times or sacrificed on the altar of market capitalism. From 2018, many Chinese netizens began self-identifying as chives and referring to China as the 'Chive State' *jiu zhou* 韭州 — a pun on the ancient term 'nine states' 九州, meaning the nation. Exploitation or deception committed by any government, company or organisation against individuals is known as 'harvesting chives' 割韭菜.<sup>14</sup>

## V.

In such commotion does the  
world's theatre rage:  
As each one leaves, another takes  
the stage.

Why not just lie flat on the floor?  
And be done for!

亂哄哄你方唱罷我登場， 不如都來  
就地躺。

Each of us with that poor girl may  
compare

Who sews a wedding-gown for  
another bride to wear.

甚荒唐，到頭來

都來為他人做嫁衣裳！

Most of the lines here are taken straight from Zhen Shiyin's philosophical contemplation. Although Zhen was an old man commenting on the vanity and meaninglessness of life, his words resonate with many young Chinese today who are trapped in 'involution' and non-stop competition, and only want to 'lie flat' (drop out and do nothing). The Party considers 'lying flat' shameful.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Marxist literary critics have condemned the nihilistic undertones of the 'Won-Don Song' as well as Zhen Shiyin's commentary.

VI.

This is why I say:

所以說:

Bewed you not, beget you not:

And hale old age shall be your lot!

不嫁不娶, 芳齡永繼;

莫生莫養; 仙壽恆昌.

These final words are inspired by the characters carved on a jade talisman wore by the novel's protagonist, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉. Chinese talismans often contain writings, for the written script is thought to have magical power. This is another reminder of the importance of the literary tradition in Chinese thought.



# THE SHOW MUST GO ON: LIVESTREAMING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CHINA DURING COVID-19

Yujie Zhu

SINCE THE BEGINNING of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed everyday life around the globe into a ‘new normal’, with lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the cancellation of mass gatherings. Stay-at-home orders have dramatically changed the way people live and work, with a particularly significant impact on cultural practitioners and folk artisans.

The banning of large-scale festive events and closing of public spaces have caused many cultural performers and artisans to lose vital sources of income. Yet Chinese arts practitioners have been able to adapt to the pandemic’s

economic challenges relatively quickly and easily, using short videos and livestreams to promote their art and sell cultural products. Compared with other countries, the Chinese situation has two distinct features.

First, the livestreaming and short-video industries were already well established and prolific in the People’s Republic of China before the pandemic began. Numerous online platforms, including Kuaishou 快手, Douyin 抖音, and Taobao Live 淘宝直播, were already reaching a large number of people, covering diverse age and occupational groups, with a collective user base of more than 550 million in

2021.<sup>1</sup> The second feature is an online rewards system that allows Chinese viewers to buy virtual gifts (ranging from one yuan to tens of thousands of yuan) for their favourite Internet celebrities. Throughout the pandemic, cultural practitioners and folk artisans in China have benefited from existing financially supportive online infrastructure and cyberculture. Practitioners — whether singers, embroiderers, traditional dancers or handicraft makers — thus could continue to work and earn income through product sales and rewards, while audiences, both urban and rural, interacted with them and gained comfort from the experience and continuation of cultural practice.

Some cultural practitioners had already entered the livestreaming market and gained many followers before the pandemic began. For instance, the Seven Fairies of the Romantic Dong Family 浪漫侗家七仙女 were earning up to 1,500 yuan per day by livestreaming ethnic culture on Kuaishou in 2019 (156,000 followers then; currently more than 1 million).<sup>2</sup> The Seven Fairies is the brainchild of a young ‘poverty amelioration’ official sent to an economically impoverished but culturally rich village in the Miao and Dong Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture in Guizhou province in 2018. They are named for a local legend in which seven heavenly beings bring song and happiness to local women. Their videos cover many



**Livestreaming ethnic culture began before the pandemic**  
Source: United Explanations, Flickr

aspects of ethnic Dong customs, from singing Dong-language folk-songs to modelling traditional costumes, preparing local cuisine and enjoying 'long-table meals'. They sell everything from clothing to rice to their viewers and, by 2021, the *People's Daily Online* was able to report that they had lifted their village out of poverty.<sup>3</sup>

While established performers easily continued their businesses throughout the lockdown period, others had to learn how to use the Internet to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. Many time-honoured Chinese brands turned to livestreaming and e-commerce while their brick-and-mortar stores remained closed. A Beijing shop called Neiliansheng 内联升 has been making handmade cloth shoes since 1853; its footwear is officially recognised as part of China's national Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). In the past two years, it has substantially raised its profile by embracing livestreaming and e-commerce. In the shop's first livestream at the end of February 2020, viewers watched an artisan making a traditional 'thousand-layer sole' 千层底 shoe in detail. Although the first livestream generated only 3,000 yuan in sales, this was equivalent to a half-

day's turnover of an offline store during the off-season.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it effectively promoted the brand's shoes — originally made for officials of the emperor's court — to online viewers who wanted to know why cloth shoes could cost several hundred yuan when common versions cost perhaps one-tenth of that amount. A separate broadcast featuring wedding shoes brought Neiliansheng 1.6 million 'likes'.<sup>5</sup> The brand has since regularly hosted livestreams and made active use of this new business model.<sup>6</sup>

Major e-commerce and short-video platforms, working with governments of different levels, have also hosted events bringing together culture and the economy. Kuaishou, for example, has launched hashtags such as #ICH World #非遗江湖, inviting 'innovative, pioneering and fashion-sensitive youth representatives' to help create a more youth-friendly and trendy approach to promoting ICH.<sup>7</sup> In June 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Commerce, and more than ten online platforms organised a grand online ICH shopping festival, attracting around 10 million shoppers and selling more than 12.61 million yuan of ICH products.<sup>8</sup>

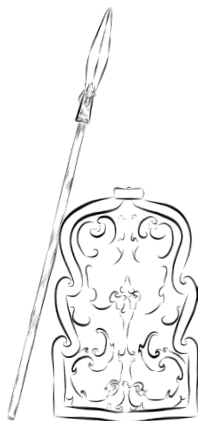
While the official ICH industry often reflects elite social practices or 'high culture', online livestreaming allows different social groups, especially young people and women, to present their cultural practices to an exceptionally broad audience. Diverse in content and form, these performances introduce new elements such as fashionable video filters and stickers to attract audience attention, breaking down the distinction between high and low culture. Moreover, online ICH livestreaming highlights the 'tangible' — the products for sale. This gives rise to a distinct community around cultural production and consumption.

Digital technology provides artists, especially young ones, with new ways to interact with society and earn a living. It can improve social equity, offering Chinese people a space to share and access cultural heritage while helping build resilience among cultural communities affected by the pandemic. On the other hand, the online environment favours people who are Internet-savvy over others such as the elderly and those with little or no Internet access. The Seven

Fairies, coming from an impoverished backwater, could not have done what they did without the help of the young official and the team he collected for them.

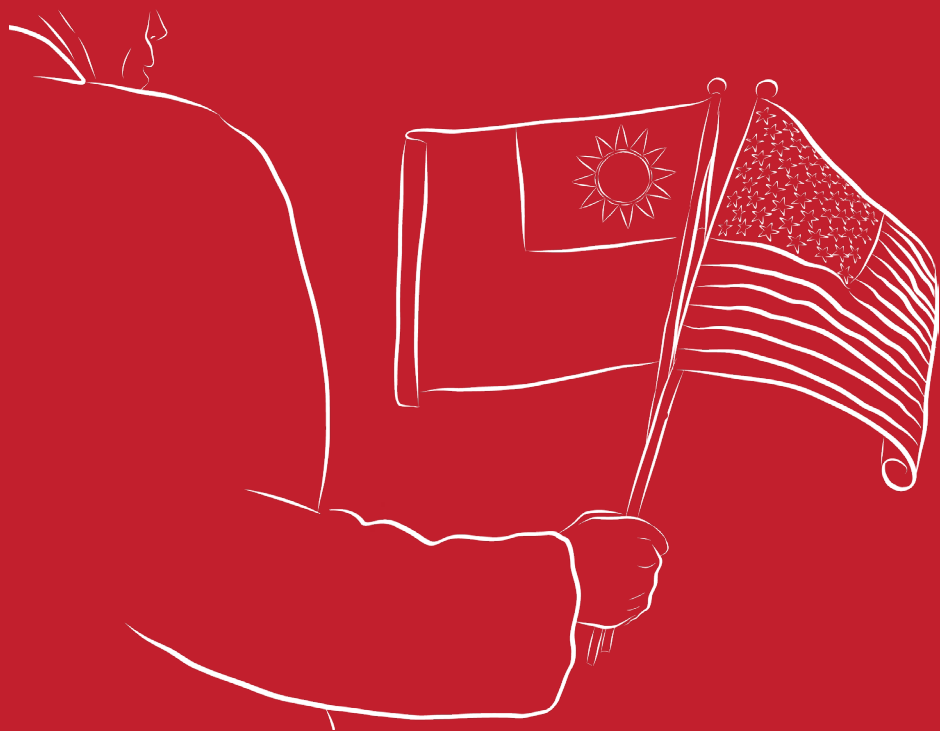
As with traditional arenas of cultural production such as filmmaking and book publishing, the state controls and strictly regulates Chinese cyberspace. The various levels of government have increased Internet surveillance and intervention. Ethnic-minority culture may be attractive and saleable online, but the management and even definition of ethnic minorities have become a politically sensitive area, as the Communist Party of China, with its anxieties around separatist movements, seeks to promote the notion of a broader 'Chinese' ethnicity. So, even though ethnic 'exoticism' is a big factor in drawing viewers to livestreams such as those of the Seven Fairies, there are strict rules about the use of minority languages in videos and livestreaming.<sup>9</sup> Cyber communities based on online performance and livestreaming more generally must negotiate state power and control no less than their real-world analogues.



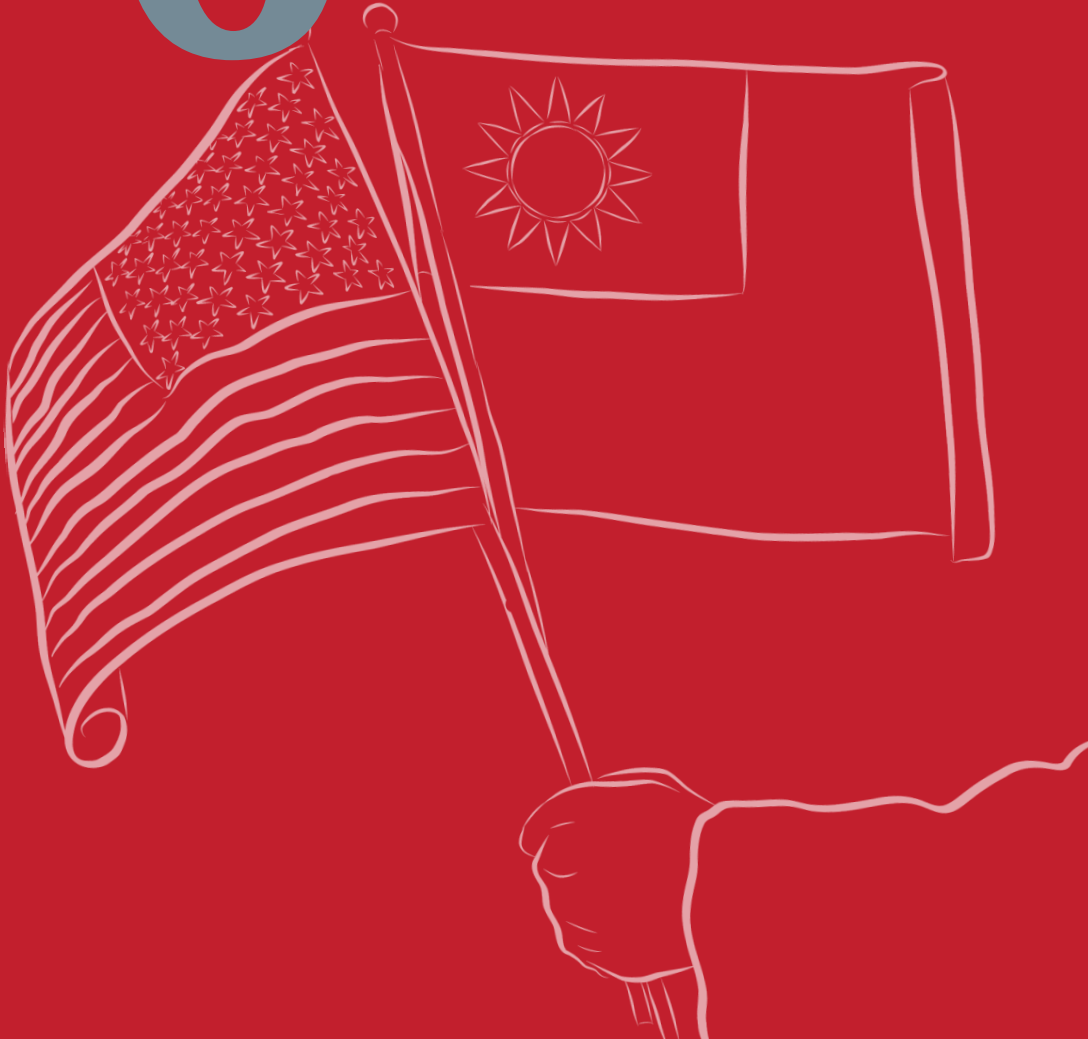




六



6



**TAIWAN: RENEWING FAITH IN  
LIBERALISM AND THE LIBERAL  
INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

Wen-Ti Sung

Taiwan's experience of 2021 was one of living with and then partially overcoming the anxiety over Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election of November 2020 — specifically whether that would diminish US support for Taiwan — as well as managing the Trumpist imprint on Taiwan's domestic political discourse.

As the vote-counting for the American presidential election was under way on 4 November 2020, Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) convened a meeting of its top-level decision-making organ, the Central Standing Committee, with President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 presiding. Two Standing Committee members in attendance wore masks printed with the words 'TRUMP: 2020 KEEP AMERICA GREAT'. President Tsai clarified during the meeting that Taiwan would respect the wishes of the American voters and her party had worked with and would continue to work with both political parties in the United States.<sup>1</sup> She added that her government thanked both the Republican and the Democrat parties in the United States for what she stressed was their *bipartisan* support for strengthening US–Taiwan relations in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

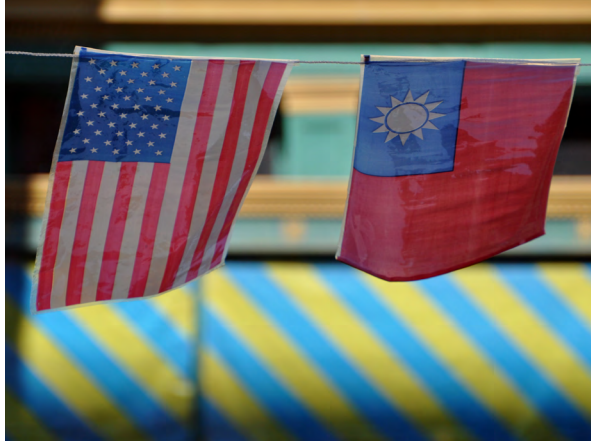
But the symbolism was clear. A significant portion of Taiwanese society believes the increasing closeness of US–Taiwan relations over the preceding four years was due in large part to former president Donald Trump. For example, one of the Trump mask-wearing DPP Central Standing Committee members openly praised Trump as 'the most pro-Taiwan US President in forty years',<sup>3</sup> while the general secretary (equivalent to caucus whip) of the DPP's legislative caucus also euphemistically noted at the time that, should a different US administration come into power, he would need to observe closely whether the level of US support for Taiwan would remain as strong as during the Trump years.<sup>4</sup>

Their logic seems to be essentially 'the adversary of my adversary is my friend'. In their eyes, despite Trump's many inconsistencies and reversals regarding policy on the People's Republic of China (PRC), his launching of the US–China trade war and various Trump administration officials' frequent criticisms of the Communist Party of China (CPC)

were convincing evidence that Trump, more than any American president in recent memory, was Taiwan's friend.

The transition from the Trump administration to

the Biden administration affected Taiwan on two levels: domestic and international. Domestically, Taiwan's public sphere had moved towards a greater embrace of Trump-inspired conservative politics during the late Trump years. Its legacy contributed to political polarisation and increasing national 'securitisation' of domestic political processes, which continued even after Biden took power. Internationally, the faith in Trump combined with the end of his presidency led to heightened initial suspicion of the new US administration's intentions towards Taiwan, leading to fear of strategic abandonment by the United States.



**Taiwan 'hearts' Trump**  
Source: Kevin Harber, Flickr

## Taiwan 'Hearts' Trump

After the Trump administration launched the US–China trade war in 2018, the result was a downturn in the US–China relationship to an extent not seen in decades. For years, Beijing had been applying diplomatic and economic pressure on international institutions, multinational corporations, and other countries to deny Taiwan's DPP government funding, recognition, and cooperation. Beijing scored such wins as excluding Taiwan from observer status in the World Health Assembly and the International Civil Aviation Organization after 2016, as well as persuading Nicaragua to switch official diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing at the end of 2021.

In contrast, Taiwanese society welcomed official visits by high-profile members of the Trump administration, including the Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar and Undersecretary of State Keith Krach. They also were pleased with then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's last-

minute press release (issued 11 days before he stepped down) on 'lifting self-imposed restrictions on the US–Taiwan relationship'.<sup>5</sup> They further pointed to the passage of important legislations, such as the *Taiwan Travel Act* (2018) and the *Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act* (2019), as evidence of the Trump administration's love for Taiwan — even though these were bipartisan acts by US Congress, not the Trump White House alone.

A significant portion of Taiwanese society therefore saw the Trump administration as a uniquely sympathetic partner, and many would have preferred Trump to have won a second term.<sup>6</sup> A *Global Views Monthly* poll released in October 2020, for example, showed that 53 percent of Taiwanese believed a Trump election would be more beneficial to Taiwan's interests, in contrast with only 16 percent for Biden.<sup>7</sup>

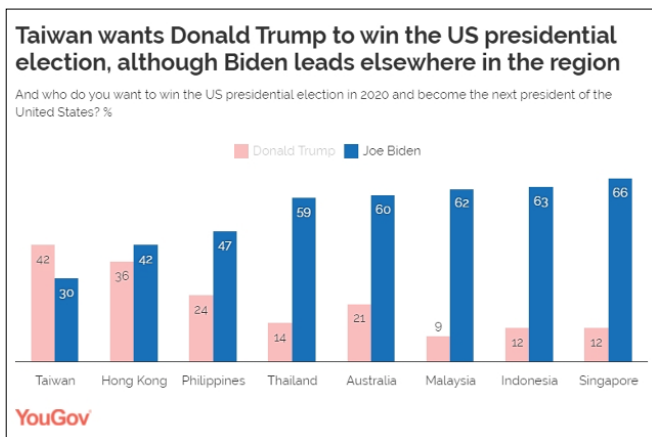
It follows that many Taiwanese people initially viewed Biden with suspicion and worry. A survey of public opinion in eight countries and regions in the Asia-Pacific in October 2020 (a month before the US election) by YouGov, a British internet-based market research and data analytics firm, revealed that only in Taiwan did more people want Donald Trump than Biden to win the US presidential election.<sup>8</sup>

In Taiwan, however, there was a significant difference in support for Trump between the two main parties. A Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation poll in October 2020 showed that while 82 percent of the ruling DPP's supporters preferred to see a Trump victory, only 19 percent of the supporters of the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) wanted to see Trump win.<sup>9</sup>

## Polarisation in Taiwanese Public Discourse

Taiwan is divided into two primary political camps. One is the pan-Green coalition, which is led by the DPP and in recent years has favoured stronger alignment with the United States. The other is the pan-Blues coalition, led by the KMT, which tends to explore a more equidistant position





**Figure 1: A Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation poll, October 2020 — ‘Who do people in Asia-Pacific want to win the US presidential election?’<sup>10</sup>**  
Source: YouGov.com

between the United States and China. A strong Taiwanese affinity for the Trump administration continued to affect Taiwan’s domestic politics and international relations well into 2021.

Before the Trump era, having undergone a relatively peaceful democratic transition in the 1980s and 1990s — which Taiwanese proudly called ‘the silent revolution’ 寧靜革命 — Taiwan generally enjoyed a relatively tolerant public sphere. Also, thanks to the continued pride Taiwan takes in its largely state-led economic modernisation (following what is sometimes called the ‘developmental state’ model), Taiwan previously did not have a strong instinctive antipathy towards left-of-centre ‘big-government’ policies.

Yet, domestically, support for Taiwan by the Trump administration and his Republican Party gradually created a receptive audience in Taiwan for political conservatism, especially of the conspiratorial and far-right variety. Numerous émigré mainland Chinese dissident writers became exceptionally popular right-wing commentators in Taiwan’s media.<sup>11</sup> Collectively, they attempted to shift the ‘Overton window’ — the range of ideas perceived as acceptable and legitimate in political discourse — to the right.<sup>12</sup> Often, they labelled anyone who was to the left of the

hard right as unwitting ‘useful fools’ or ‘stooges’ of hostile authoritarian actors, or as consciously treacherous, Freemasonic or ‘globalist capitalist cabal’ conspirators.

Accordingly, Taiwan’s social media landscape during this period saw the popularisation of derogatory terms such as *zuojiao* 左膠 (‘leftard’) and *baizuo* 白左 (‘white leftists’), as well as new coinages such as ‘Apple-owning leftard’ 果粉型左膠 (roughly similar in meaning to the term ‘champagne socialist’) — terms that, ironically, are also popular among the nationalist ‘wolf warriors’ crowd in Beijing. The emerging use of such new politically loaded labels and the vilification of different opinions thus threatened to reduce the space for civility and tolerance of honest disagreement.<sup>13</sup>

This trend is having a deleterious effect on Taiwan’s public sphere and the quality of its political rhetoric. Taiwan’s ruling party, the DPP, historically represents two political traditions: political liberalism and Taiwanese nationalism. So, for example, in line with its liberal bent, in recent years, the DPP successfully promoted the legalisation of same-sex marriage and, in line with its Taiwanese nationalist bent, has encouraged a more assertive, Taiwan-centric national imagination — advocating, for example, for the public-school curriculum to dedicate more time to local Taiwanese history and languages.

The embrace of Trumpist discourse appears to have weakened the rhetorical purchase of political liberalism, thus leaving Taiwanese nationalism as the path of least resistance when the DPP picks its tool for political mobilisation. Taiwan’s latest plebiscites illustrated this phenomenon.

## Direct Referendums and Partisan Politics

Taiwan held its seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth referendums on 18 December 2021. The four propositions were restarting Taiwan’s fourth nuclear power plant, banning imports of US pork

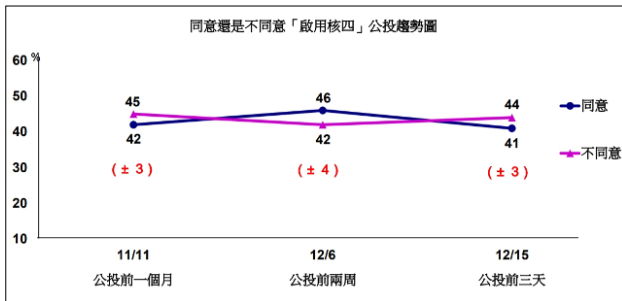
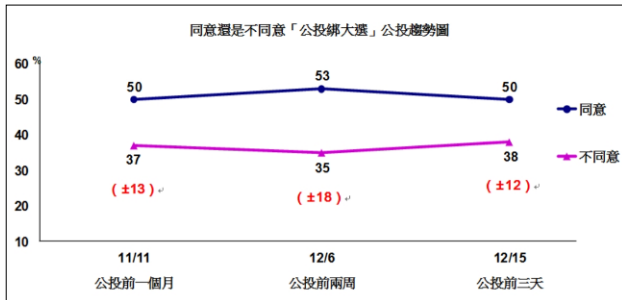


Figure 2: Results from Taiwan's TVBS opinion survey: The topic with the highest support (top graph) was the timing of future referendums — almost 10 points higher than the topic with the lowest support (bottom graph), which was restarting the fourth nuclear power plant<sup>15</sup>  
Source: TVBS

containing ractopamine, requiring future referendums to be held on the same day as general elections if within six months of election day, and protecting the Datan Algal Reef off Taiwan's north-western coast by stopping the construction of a proposed liquefied natural gas terminal in the vicinity.

A popular opinion survey by Taiwan's TVBS,<sup>14</sup> conducted three days before the referendums, showed a wide range of views on the above topics. The topic with the highest support (50 percent for 'yes', 38 percent for 'no') was the timing of future referendums — almost 10 points higher than the topic with the lowest support, which was restarting the fourth nuclear power plant (41 percent 'yes', 44 percent 'no').

Yet, when votes were cast, all four propositions were rejected. Moreover, the results showed virtually identical support for the four topics, with the most popular proposition (combining future referendums

with elections, which received a 48.96 percent ‘yes’ vote) separated from the least popular (restarting the fourth nuclear power plant; 47.16 percent ‘yes’) by barely 1.8 percent.

Preferences shown in the opinion poll failed to reflect the results because the voters ultimately cast their ballots less according to their own nuanced policy preferences and more according to the positions advocated by the party they supported.

Both major political parties in Taiwan, the DPP and the KMT, urged their voters to conduct the referendum equivalent of ‘straight-ticket voting’ — that is, to vote either ‘yes’ to all propositions (KMT) or ‘no’ to all (DPP). In the end, only 41 percent of the electorate voted. It was the lowest turnout for a referendum since 2008, and significantly lower than any other Taiwan-wide ballot (elections as well as referendums) in memory — with the sole exception of the 2005 National Assembly election, which was the first to introduce ‘party lists’, meaning electors voted for political parties rather than individual candidates.

The lower turnout meant, rather than a representative expression of the whole society’s policy preference, the ballot results disproportionately represented the diehard party faithful on both sides who bothered to show up to vote. The referendums ceased to be an opportunity to gauge public sentiment on specific policies and inform policymaking. Rather, they became a way to test the two leading political parties’ mobilisation strength — to see which side was better at ‘rocking the vote’.

During the referendum campaign, the KMT adopted a ‘scorched-earth’ position, calling on its supporters to vote ‘yes’ on all four propositions as a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the ruling DPP. The KMT’s slogan was ‘Cast four Yes votes; make Taiwan more beautiful’ 四個都同意, 台灣更美麗.

The ruling DPP meanwhile called on its supporters to vote ‘four Nos’. President Tsai Ing-wen’s official Facebook page issued numerous posts calling on ‘Team Taiwan’ to ‘step up’ 台灣隊站出來 and ‘cast four No votes; make Taiwan stronger’ 四個不同意, 台灣更有力. Treating the ballots as a battle, she asked supporters to ‘defend the referendum,

defend the by-elections, and hold the line of defence for Taiwan' 守住公投, 守住補選, 為台灣守住防線.

The significance of this is twofold. First, as a relatively new liberal democracy that only fully emerged from the shadows of authoritarianism in the mid 1990s, Taiwan is a great but unfinished democratic experiment. It has a plethora of newly available democratic tools at its disposal and a vibrant civil society bursting with long-repressed political passions. Instruments of direct democracy such as referendums are best used as an occasional corrective to major policy injustices or to allow the expression of fundamental value preference on questions that political elites are not best placed to answer. Yet, in Taiwan, they can take the shape of pitched, partisan battlegrounds.

The plebiscite, although an instrument of direct democracy, often becomes an extension of indirect democracy (party politics). Not only have Taiwan's referendums often been intricately tied to party agendas, but also recall elections have become increasingly commonplace. Between January 2020 and January 2022, there were 14 recall elections.

Ideally, recall elections are triggered only when elected officials are so egregiously malicious or incompetent that for the health of the polity their removal cannot wait until the next election.

Yet, in 2016, changes in the law significantly lowered the turnout requirement for recall elections. To recall an official only required that there be more 'yes' (recall) votes than 'no' votes, and that the number of 'yes' votes must represent more than 25 percent of eligible voters. In addition, the legislative change lowered the 'trigger condition' for recall elections; they now require signatures from only 10 percent of eligible voters in the politician's electoral district.

This lower threshold for recall elections, coupled with escalating political polarisation, has incentivised political parties and their affiliates to increasingly leverage recall elections as a low-cost way to reverse their losses in elections (by removing incumbent officials early in their tenure and triggering rematches). At minimum, recall elections can generate

unfavourable publicity to weaken political opponents. Either way, the supercharged frequency of elections undermines those targets' mandate to govern, while keeping the Taiwanese airwaves and society constantly in a 'campaign mindset'. This can potentially distract everyone — parties, the media, and the electorate — from substantive policy discussions.<sup>16</sup>

## Rise of National Security Concerns

Rising political polarisation may also be a consequence of increasing anxiety about national security. There has been a resulting tendency to 'securitise politics' and, increasingly, to use national security metaphors in political rhetoric. An example of the latter is, as aforementioned, during the latest referendum the DPP referring to itself and its supporters as 'Team Taiwan' and calling on its supporters to defend and 'hold the line on behalf of Taiwan' 為台灣守住防線. Although all those on both sides of the referendum were Taiwanese, the use of 'Team Taiwan' implied that those who opposed the DPP's position must therefore not be on 'Team Taiwan'.

This concerning trend highlights how the growing prominence of the 'Taiwan issue' has taken a toll on Taiwan's domestic politics. If the perception of the growing Chinese military pressure against Taiwan has drawn greater international concern for and engagement with Taiwan, it has also fuelled domestic political dynamics in Taiwan that place a premium on 'rallying around the flag'.

The emphasis on security justifies a narrative that all available resources must be mustered to strengthen the state so it can defend Taiwan against an existential military threat. Viewing Taiwan's situation solely or predominantly through this lens, however, can blur the boundary between domestic and international issues. An unfortunate corollary is that any domestic political position at odds with that of the incumbent government may be framed as diminishing the state's capacity to provide that protection. Thus, the line between 'constructive criticism

of the government’ and ‘weakening the government’s ability to provide for Taiwan’s security’ sometimes blurs.

The heavy shadow this national security discourse casts over Taiwan’s domestic politics, however, comes not only from the increased Chinese military pressure in the Taiwan Strait and the perceived effects on Taiwan of US–China strategic competition (see Forum, ‘Taiwan and the War of Wills, pp.203–207), but also from another Trumpian legacy: anxiety about how dependable a friend the Biden administration will be to Taiwan.

## **‘Beijing Joe’ and Managing Taiwan’s Abandonment Complex**

The sense of camaraderie felt by many DPP supporters and others in Taiwan towards the Trump administration, who they saw as tough-on-China and unprecedentedly friendly towards Taiwan, meant they initially greeted Biden’s election with apprehension.

That sense of unease persisted in spite of the DPP government’s attempts at ‘firefighting’. For example, President Tsai swiftly congratulated Biden on his win in November 2020. As early as 8 November, she retweeted the message Biden had sent her when she won her second term in office, in which he had praised Taiwan’s ‘free and open society’ and said the United States should continue ‘strengthening our ties with Taiwan and other like-minded democracies’.<sup>17</sup> Two days after the US Congress certified Biden’s victory on 6 January 2021, Tsai’s spokesperson, Xavier Chang 張惇涵, extended President Tsai’s best wishes to both the president-elect and vice-president-elect Kamala Harris, saying she looked forward to continued strengthening of the bilateral relationship.<sup>18</sup>

Yet many commentators in the Taiwanese public sphere, in the mainstream media and on social media alike still appeared to have bought into the narrative that since Trump was ‘tough on China’, whoever was ‘tough on Trump’ (Joe Biden) must therefore be ‘soft on China’ and possibly

even eager to ‘sell out Taiwan’ 賣台 if the price was right.<sup>19</sup> That kind of thinking continued to reverberate in Taiwan through 2021.

Ironically, both the pan-Green and the pan-Blue camps shared the apprehension about the transition to the Biden administration, though there were differences in detail.

The pan-Greens media generally distrust Biden as ‘the anti-Trump’. They are concerned about the influence of so-called leftist ideas on the Democratic Party — for example, the concern for climate change as represented by the slogan ‘Green New Deal’. They worry that to elicit cooperation from the PRC on climate, the United States will sell out Taiwan or otherwise marginalise its importance more generally. This sentiment is also powered in part by the aforementioned rise of anti-left-of-centre domestic discourse. Second, the pan-Greens are concerned by the Democratic Party’s close focus on the Russian threat (as embodied in their repeated concerns about alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, the Steele dossier, the Robert Mueller investigation, and so on). Some segments of the DPP worry that, unlike Trump, the Democrats will see Russia as a greater foreign and security policy threat to the United States than China. They imagined the United States under a Democratic president would return to a policy of benign neglect of Taiwan.

For the pan-Blues, a fundamental inclination to seek cooperation with China inclines them also to predict that the United States will sell out Taiwan to seek accommodation with Beijing, according to the logic of the ‘US–China grand bargain’ and ‘Finlandisation.’ The fact that such arguments still grace the pages of important American publications such as *Foreign Affairs* magazine and *The New York Times* has not helped.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, some pan-Blue-leaning commentators believe the United States under Biden will seek rapprochement with Russia. Following a US–China–Russia ‘strategic triangle’ analytical framework, they predict the United States will want to gang up with Russia to gain a two-against-one advantage against China. When the US does engage an ideologically alien Russia out of strategic convenience as predicted, the United States’ ‘values-



based diplomacy' will be exposed as but empty rhetoric. Therefore, Taiwan cannot count on US support based on shared liberal-democratic values.<sup>21</sup> According to this logic, should Beijing initiate a cross-Strait war, the United States could not be relied on to come to Taiwan's aid, so Taiwan had better find ways to placate Beijing and turn down the heat in the relationship before the cross-Strait tension reaches a crisis point. Therefore, some pan-Blues believe, to proactively pursue its own interests and protect itself from potential betrayal by the United States, Taipei needs to seek rapprochement with Beijing.

## Conclusion

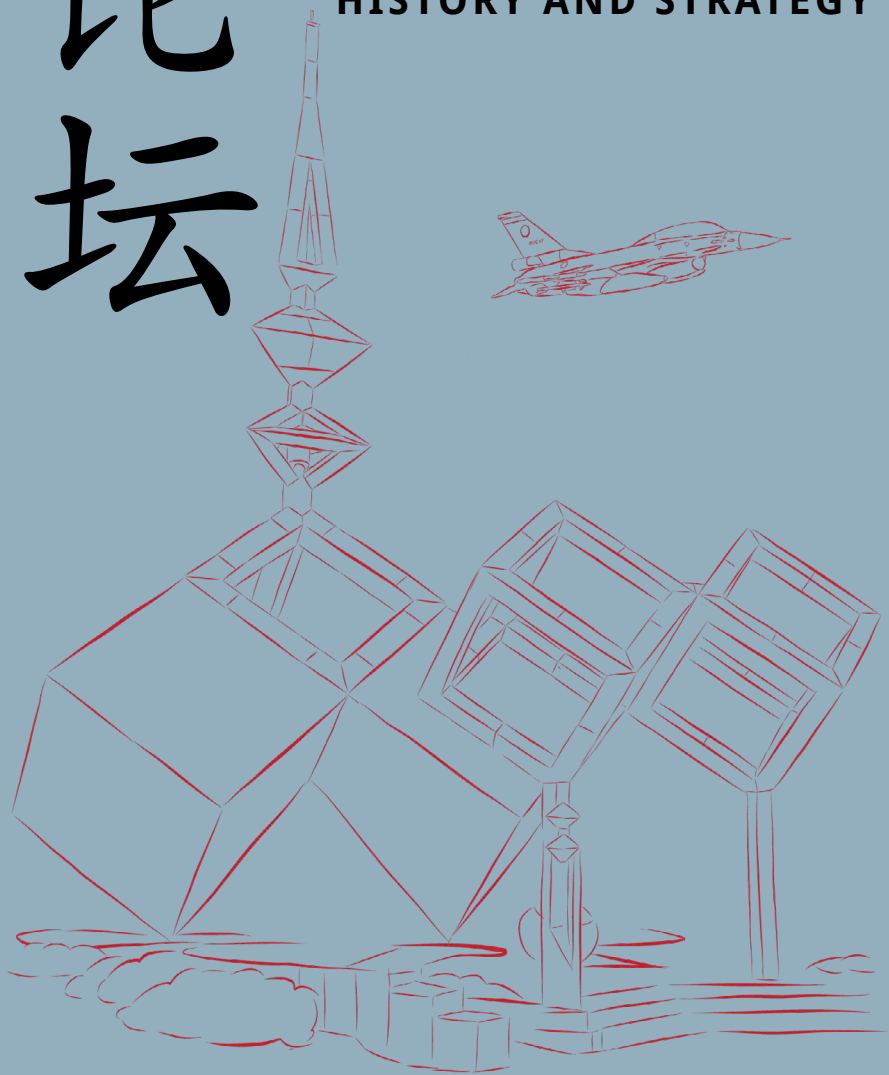
Many Taiwanese on both sides of the political spectrum were apprehensive at first about whether they could trust the Biden administration. American officials appeared at different moments to reassure Taipei that they would not abandon the island, but they stopped short of overtly changing the United States' long-standing posture of 'strategic ambiguity' on Taiwan.<sup>22</sup>

In 2021, Taiwan paradoxically experienced both rising international visibility and heightened fear of strategic abandonment. In 2021, joint statements issued by the leaders of the G7 summit, the United States–European Union high-level consultation, and several other prominent international groupings all expressed interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. For some countries, it was the first time they had directly expressed a stake in Taiwan's peace and stability in such a prominent international setting. Yet, despite this increase in international support, for many Taiwanese, 2021 was a painful journey of overcoming their anxiety about the Biden administration's commitment to Taiwan and managing their recurring fear of abandonment.

# 论坛

FORUM:

HISTORY AND STRATEGY



Taiwan and the War of Wills

BENJAMIN HERSCOVITCH

Making the Past into this Moment:

Historical Memory in Taiwan

CRAIG A. SMITH



# TAIWAN AND THE WAR OF WILLS

Benjamin Herscovitch

FOR DECADES, THE HARD deterrent effect of US military power combined with initially explicit but later ambiguous US security guarantees helped preserve Taiwan's *de facto* independence. Now, as the combat capabilities and military know-how of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rapidly advance, a growing number of countries are contributing political, economic and military support to this long-standing US-led effort to deter moves by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to force Taiwan to come under its jurisdiction — an 'issue' Beijing considers an 'internal affair'.

Japan, Australia, and other US allies such as France and Canada are more actively building ties with Taipei, integrating Taiwan into the international diplomatic architecture and making naval transits of the Taiwan Strait. Such measures seek to increase the reputational, diplomatic and military risks for the PRC of armed aggression in the Taiwan Strait.

Perceptions of increasing assertiveness by Beijing internationally, the re-emergence of ideologically tinged great-power competition and the downward trajectory of many countries' bilateral relations with the PRC have fuelled stronger support for

Taiwan. But the growing commitment to deterrence has probably primarily been spurred by the uptick of the PRC's efforts to isolate and intimidate Taiwan. The PRC has successfully persuaded Solomon Islands and Kiribati to cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan and stepped up its efforts to exclude Taiwan from multilateral organisations and trade agreements, including the World Health Assembly and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact. On the military front, the PLA Air Force has been regularly crossing the Taiwan Strait's *de facto* median line since 2020, with flights into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) reaching unprecedented levels in 2021.

In response, the United States and its partners are pursuing a much tougher, tactically varied, and increasingly multinational deterrence effort. They have amplified diplomatic messaging about the strategic and political importance of Taiwan, despite Beijing decrying these moves as 'external interference'. In 2021, Canberra and Washington for the first time jointly labelled Taiwan a 'leading democracy and a critical partner' and committed themselves to 'strengthen

ties' with Taipei.<sup>1</sup> Politicians and former officials and lawmakers from the United States and many of its allies have initiated increasingly regular, high-level, and widely publicised meetings with Taiwanese counterparts and lobbied for the Taiwanese Government's participation in multilateral institutions. An expanding range of countries that are not formal US allies, such as India and New Zealand, are also contributing to quieter forms of deterrence by incrementally deepening their political and economic ties with the island.

But these deterrence policies are coming under increasing pressure. The PLA has continued to hone its combat readiness and maintain the pace of its military capability acquisitions. Speculation is mounting that Xi Jinping 习近平 is shortening the timeline for unification. Meanwhile, concern is growing in the United States and among its partners about the risks of military miscalculation or accident in or around the Taiwan Strait and the unimaginably destructive dangers associated with cycles of escalation.<sup>2</sup> Deterrence could inadvertently precipitate large-scale, high-intensity, and even nuclear war in the Western Pacific. War games and heated policy

discussions weigh the costs and benefits of responses to possible PRC aggression in the Taiwan Strait. The power and behaviour of the PLA are shaping both diplomatic and military responses and ethical calculations regarding the risks of aiding Taiwan.

As the power balance shifts in the PRC's favour over the coming years, debates about the dangers of deterrence are likely to become an even more prominent political issue. The PLA Navy has already surpassed the US Navy in numbers of battle-force ships and is acquiring additional high-end combat capabilities, including more aircraft-carriers, destroyers and ballistic missile, and nuclear-powered attack submarines.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the US Department of Defense assessed that

'China has already achieved parity with — or even exceeded — the United States in ... shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems'.<sup>4</sup> Combined with the huge geostrategic advantage the PRC enjoys — Taiwan is roughly 11,000 kilometres from the US West Coast but less than 200 kilometres from China — these PLA capability gains will further shift the cross-Strait military balance in the PRC's favour. Even if the PLA does not intend to initiate large-scale military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the mere existence of its increasingly potent ability to start and win a war significantly increases the pressure on the deterrence strategies of the United States and its partners.



**Concern is growing around the Taiwan Strait**  
Source: US Pacific Fleet, Flickr

For many liberal democracies, it is morally justified — even imperative — to deter the PRC from taking Taiwan by force. Beijing’s successful efforts to hobble Hong Kong’s autonomy bolster the moral case for acting to preserve the liberal-democratic rights and freedoms of nearly 24 million Taiwanese. An ongoing economic rationale for deterrence is Taiwan’s critical place in global semiconductor supply chains, while the island remains an invaluable piece of geostrategic real estate that would further enhance the PLA’s naval and air force power projection deep into the Pacific Ocean if it came under the PRC’s control.

But Beijing’s active struggle to shape global public opinion on Taiwan is also seeking to push policymakers and the public to abandon deterrence policies.<sup>5</sup> To advance the narrative that Taiwan should be under the PRC’s control, Beijing uses to its advantage the long story of at least partial Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE) administration of Taiwan. Beijing and its proxies are seeking to muddy the case for supporting Taiwan with contested historical and political claims, presenting the cross-Strait status quo as a historical injustice that must be rectified. They emphasise that Japan

relinquished sovereignty over Taiwan, which Tokyo had held as a colony since 1895, to China at the end of World War II. The government of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 and the Kuomintang fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the communist victory on the mainland ended the Chinese Civil War. Chinese diplomats and state-controlled media outlets seek to use this complex historical record to discount Taiwanese and international voices that assert Taiwan’s contemporary rights to maintain its own distinct international identity and determine its own political future.

Despite these growing pressures, deterrence appears to be working. The PLA is so far content to fly into the southern reaches of Taiwan’s ADIZ, conduct amphibious assault exercises, and test-fire missiles into the South China Sea. But deterring the PLA from military conflict in the Taiwan Strait ultimately amounts to persuading the PRC to continue avoiding aggressive actions that it judges are in any case unnecessary, militarily inadvisable, and politically dangerous.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the PRC’s deep and abiding interests in Taiwan will endure. Taking Taiwan is a prerequisite for Beijing’s overarching goal of the ‘rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, and the PRC has a range of



immediate and longer-term priorities in Taiwan. Foremost among these is deterring Taiwan from declaring *de jure* independence, while also deterring the United States and its partners from any kind of military intervention. But even in scenarios short of military conflict, the PRC seeks to deter the policy of deterrence itself; it seeks to persuade the United States and its partners to stop supporting Taiwan. Beijing enjoys a structural advantage in this psychological battle. With every PLA Air Force flight across the *de facto* median line, febrile foreign and defence policy debates combined with the visual spectacle of fighter jets and bombers spur yet more anxiety about the potential horror of war with the PRC. As a result, policymakers and the general public may eventually make the fateful choice to leave Taiwan to face the PRC alone. Such an outcome would profoundly destabilise the cross-Strait status quo, with

predictably disastrous consequences for Taiwan and its liberal democracy.

None of this is it to say that debates about the possible dangers of deterrence should be conducted *sotto voce* to avoid panic. But the psychological contest over the Strait is likely to intensify in the years and decades ahead. For deterrence to succeed, there needs to be, beyond an enduring and credible threat of military action should any invasion or attack occur, sang-froid and moral fortitude — namely, a willingness to hold the line and provide ongoing support to Taiwan despite the dangers of further angering the PRC and being entangled in cross-Strait military contingencies. The future of the Taiwan Strait and many millions of lives on both sides could yet be determined not by military combat, but by a battle of wills waged through media imagery, popular political narratives, and public debate.



# MAKING THE PAST INTO THIS MOMENT: HISTORICAL MEMORY IN TAIWAN

Craig A. Smith

**T**AIWAN IS ON A CRUCIAL mission to define the narrative of its traumatic modern history. At the centre of this trauma is the 228 ('Two-Two-Eight') Incident 二二八事件, which began with a routine police shakedown of black-market tobacco sellers on 27 February 1947. Less than two years earlier, at the end of World War II, the governance of Taiwan had been transferred from Japan to the Republic of China under the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT). On that February day in 1947, Taipei police, representatives of this Nanjing-based government, violently beat a woman selling tobacco on the

street, confiscating her goods and her money. This incited the anger of a public frustrated with the corruption and ineptitude of the newly arrived government, whose officials could not speak Taiwanese and seemed to belong to a different culture.<sup>1</sup> A brief and violent uprising spread across Taiwan.

In response, war-hardened KMT troops massacred thousands of people across the island. Police also arrested Taiwanese elites, accusing them of treason and collusion with the communists, and brought Taiwan under authoritarian rule and martial law. Then, in 1949, following his defeat by the communists in the civil war

on the mainland, Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 led the KMT's followers and army to Taiwan in a strategic 'retreat'. For another forty years, the government maintained martial law, curtailing freedoms, and enforcing the absolute authority of the KMT. During these four decades, the government strictly forbade any discussion of these killings or the period of White Terror that followed. In 1951, the authorities constructed purpose-built facilities on remote Green Island to house thousands of political prisoners. In the 1960s, the KMT government remade the Military Justice Academy 軍法學校 in the Taipei suburb of Jingmei 景美 into military courts with additional holding areas for political prisoners. These courts tried thousands of cases, including the 1979 trials of the well-known democracy advocates arrested in what is now known as the Kaohsiung Incident — a turning point that led to widespread condemnation of the government across Taiwanese society.

After martial law ended in 1987, a flood of literature, historical writings, film, and art replaced decades of silence. A new historical memory developed alongside the post-1987 democracy movement and free elections that led to the

KMT losing power for the first time in 2000 to Chen Shui-bian's 陳水扁 Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Stories of atrocity and suffering under the KMT were told and retold in an increasingly inclusive account of shared victimhood: a national trauma narrative. Telling this story in ways that unite Taiwan's society and highlight ongoing injustice has been cathartic.

In 2021, Taiwan's government funded the translation of influential stories of the political violence into English; President Tsai Ing-wen's 蔡英文 DPP is sponsoring the internationalisation of a previously silenced narrative. But the politics of Taiwan's historical memory remain complicated and divided.

When martial law ended, activists and artists shared two important goals. One was the destruction of all elements of the authoritarian system. The other was to reconstruct suppressed historical memory. These goals of destruction and reconstruction were intertwined with politics at the time, and remain so today.

Beginning in the 1980s, an ever-expanding body of literature now known as '228 literature' 二二八文學 retold stories of atrocity from various



228 Incident (The Terrible Inspection) by Huang Rong-can 黄荣灿, woodcut print, 1947  
Source: Wikimedia

perspectives. This obsession with a violent event is the textbook definition of cultural trauma.<sup>2</sup> Catharsis involves identifying oppressed groups and writing them into this national trauma narrative in acts of resistance and reconciliation.

Early 228 literature posited the incident as a political or ethnic (mainland Chinese versus Taiwanese) conflict. Writers soon began using the incident, however, to highlight issues of gender and sexuality as well as the oppression of the island's indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup> Representation in the national trauma narrative symbolised legitimisation as a constituent of the nation itself.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, members of the Taiwanese diaspora began contributing to the narrative. Taiwanese Americans

began writing novels in English about multigenerational trauma as experienced in diasporic communities. Many examples of 228 literature were already available in translation, with Ch'en Ying-chen's 陳映真 seminal 1983 short story 'Mountain Road' translated by Rosemary Haddon as early as 1991. In May 2021, Cambria Press, the foremost publisher of Taiwan's literature in translation, published two English-language collections of Taiwanese short stories: *Transitions in Taiwan: Stories of the White Terror*, edited by Ian Rowen, and *A Son of Taiwan: Stories of Government Atrocity*, edited by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin 林麗君.

The government-sponsored National Human Rights Museum supported these publications.<sup>4</sup> The museum, established in 2010, includes

two White Terror memorial parks — one in Jingmei and the other on Green Island. In 2020, the museum published a four-volume Chinese-language compilation of short stories about the White Terror and 228, titled *Making the Past into this Moment*.<sup>5</sup> The editors of the 2021 English-language collections mentioned above chose stories for translation from these volumes. Although *Making the Past into this Moment* was not the first such collection, it was the first sponsored by a government institution — an important turning point in the construction of Taiwanese historical memory, and part of larger government efforts to explore this history and pursue justice.

After years of pressure by activists to establish some form of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (as in South Africa), in 2018, Tsai Ying-wen's administration established the Transitional Justice Commission (TJC) 促進轉型正義委員會 to investigate injustices that occurred between 1945 and 1992. The TJC has since established an impressive online database, uncovering the truth behind thousands of cases of injustice by digging through and declassifying once-secret documents. Its mandate gives

it considerable power over historical memory, allowing it to deal 'with authoritarian symbols' and preserve 'the sites of historical injustices', such as in Jingmei and Green Island.<sup>6</sup> It has ordered the removal of hundreds of statues, including of Chiang Kai-shek, and other symbols of authoritarian rule, including changing the names of parks and schools, and identified others for future action.

Many have praised the TJC's efforts to exonerate those who were unjustly sentenced to prison or death. But some of the commission's decisions have sparked anger and confusion — possibly none more so than its proposal, in September 2021, to remove the famous statue of Chiang Kai-shek from his Memorial Hall in the centre of Taipei.<sup>7</sup> Guarded by a goose-stepping honour guard, the towering 6.3-metre bronze statue is Taiwan's ultimate symbol of authoritarian rule. Yet many are uncomfortable with the idea of erasing such a significant part of Taiwan's history. They have proposed a variety of other remedies, including contextualising the statue and memorial hall with texts and images that highlight Taiwan's transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

For proponents of the KMT and its many associated organisations, the removal of this statue exemplifies the injustice of transitional justice. They are also alarmed by Tsai Ying-wen's establishment in 2016 of the Ill-Gotten Party Assets Settlement Committee (CIPAS) 不當黨產處理委員會. CIPAS has ordered the transfer of billions of unethically accumulated New Taiwan dollars. These include a court order for the Central Motion Picture Company to pay NTD950 million (US\$34.2 million) to the government in 2021, and the dissolution of numerous organisations such as the National Women's League, which was established by Chiang Kai-shek's wife, Soong Mei-ling 宋美齡, seventy years ago. KMT hardliners are more opposed to these financial and organisational changes than to the TJC's revision of historical memory. They acknowledge the need for justice but feel the DPP is utilising these so-called independent committees to seek revenge and political gain.

Just like the academics and translators working on the Chinese and English book compilations mentioned above, those in the TJC enjoy academic freedom in their work. But efforts to present the narrative of KMT atrocities to global audiences have political

ramifications for Taiwan. The DPP has long utilised the 228 Incident to political advantage domestically, but its efforts to promote this discourse globally indicate a desire to have the national trauma narrative play a role in defining Taiwan for people around the world. This will inevitably impact global perspectives of Taiwan's autonomy and statehood. It provides a story of Taiwan's rise as a democratic nation in contradistinction with China and justifies the quest for recognition of sovereignty or independence. Events in 2021 indicate the potential significance of such a narrative. Lithuania's decision to allow a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius (leading to Beijing recalling its ambassador and downgrading its embassy) was ostensibly based on economic realities. But such political changes are never made independent of intellectual and historical contexts. The writing of trauma narratives, the resolving of past injustices, and the returning of ill-gotten assets are constructing a historical memory that redefines Taiwan in both domestic and global imaginations.

# 观点

FOCUS: THE PACIFIC





Fishy Business: China's Mixed  
Signals on Sustainable Fisheries

GRAEME SMITH

China's Quest for a Good Image:  
The Pacific Example

DENGHUA ZHANG



# FISHY BUSINESS: CHINA'S MIXED SIGNALS ON SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

Graeme Smith

**M**Y INITIATION INTO the politics of the demand for Pacific seafood in the People's Republic of China (PRC) began with a Packard Foundation-funded project led by former colleagues from the University of Technology Sydney. Our focus was the humble, slow-moving sea cucumber, or *bêche-de-mer* (BDM), the dried body wall of the echinoderm that is beloved throughout the Chinese world (and almost nowhere else). BDM, also known as trepang, was the iron ore of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Australia-China trade, with trade between Macassans and Aboriginal peoples pre-dating white

settlement. In the nineteenth century, ships from Mother England offloaded their unfortunate convict cargo and filled their holds with BDM harvested in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and beyond,<sup>1</sup> as well as sandalwood from Tonga, Fiji, and elsewhere in the South Pacific.<sup>2</sup> This made the return journey far more profitable than the outward one.

The title of our final report, *Interactive governance analysis of the bêche-de-mer 'fish chain' from Papua New Guinea to Asian markets*,<sup>3</sup> resembles many people's first culinary experience of sea cucumbers: a bit

bland. The story was anything but bland, however.

From exporters in Milne Bay in eastern Papua New Guinea (PNG) preyed on by local pirates to importers in Guangzhou and Hong Kong frustrated by the variable quality of the final product, and PNG provincial government officials struggling to manage the industry, the supply chain is rife with problems. Or, in the case of PNG, the *dormant* supply chain, because sea cucumber populations had crashed under the pressure of demand from buyers in the PRC. On finding that nearly all stocks had dropped by more than 80 percent in the previous five years, the PNG Government imposed a fishing ban in 2009 that stayed in force for eight years — a story repeated throughout the Pacific, including in Tonga and Vanuatu.

Because of the historical ubiquity of sea cucumbers in the South Pacific before 2009, BDM was the main source of income for half a million villagers across PNG's coast and islands, driven in part by the appetite of China's officials and growing middle class for luxury seafood.<sup>4</sup> One of the first impacts of Xi Jinping's 习近平 anti-corruption and austerity campaigns was that BDM became

more affordable.<sup>5</sup> At its peak in the mid-2000s, PNG was the world's third-largest supplier for the Hong Kong market. From Tonga to Tuvalu, divers were taking ever-greater risks at greater depths to access valuable species such as the white teatfish sea cucumber — often with deadly consequences. After the PNG fishery abruptly closed, hunger stalked places like Milne Bay. Villagers — by then accustomed to spending weeks at a time fishing on remote coral reefs — had made the economically rational decision to neglect their subsistence gardens for this more lucrative trade. With sea cucumber fishing banned, they and their families found themselves struggling on one meal a day and relying on unappetising 'starvation foods' like banana suckers (secondary shoots from the banana palm). Even PNG's Chinese community was affected; with no cash flowing into the coastal and island communities, Chinese-run trade stores (see the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Forum, 'Dreams of Prosperity in Papua New Guinea', pp.131–136) found themselves struggling, and many shopkeepers simply returned to Fujian, leaving some villagers with a long trek just to buy basic goods.

While it provided a livelihood for many in PNG, the trade in sea cucumbers paled in comparison with the lucrative tuna trade. The tuna trade has less impact on island communities because the boats are generally crewed by foreign nationals and tuna cannot be accessed on a commercial scale without huge upfront investment. But the trade is not without danger, as shown by a series of investigative reports funded by the Judith Nielson Foundation in 2021.<sup>6</sup> These detail the suspicious deaths of fishery observers at sea, including on Taiwanese-flagged vessels, and the observers' near impossible role in ensuring boats fish according to the rules when the regulators they represent are often thousands of kilometres away and facing a captain and crew looking to maximise their earnings. Of the sixteen unsolved deaths listed on the Association for Professional Observers website, nine were men from PNG, Fiji, and Kiribati.<sup>7</sup> With the emergence of the PRC's distant-water fishing (DWF) fleet as the dominant one in the Pacific, the reflagging of ships and the proliferation of shell companies further hinder transparency, including about their impact on fish populations.

The exact size of China's DWF fleet is unknown. A 2020 report by the UK-based global think tank Overseas Development Institute claimed China had 16,966 DWF ships, even though PRC sources put the number at or below 3,000 vessels.<sup>8</sup> China is indisputably the world's largest DWF fleet — and the most prone to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, even outstripping the notorious Taiwanese fleet. A 2021 report to the US Congress, cited China and Taiwan alongside Costa Rica, Guyana, Mexico, Russia, and Senegal for illegal fishing, bycatch of endangered species, and shark catches on the high seas.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubting the enthusiasm of PRC state actors for accessing Pacific fishing grounds; a recent Ministry of Commerce investment guide to PNG enthusiastically described its exclusive marine fishery zone:

[A]pproximately 2.4 million square kilometers ... an important Pacific fishery, rich in tuna, prawns, lobsters, reef fish and sea cucumbers. The tuna catch is about 150,000 to 200,000 metric tons, accounting for about 20–30% of catch in the Pacific and 10% of the world's total catch .

PNG looms large in China's DWF ambitions, and in its goals to develop a 'blue economy' and become a 'maritime great power',<sup>10</sup> as announced by former president Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 in 2012 and embraced by Xi Jinping within the framework of the Maritime Silk Road. Much of the rhetoric around these issues is impenetrable, even by Communist Party of China (CPC) standards, with boilerplate modernisation jargon ('build a great maritime power' 建设海洋强国) layered on top of catch-all expressions like 'blue economy'. But whereas the rhetoric of the Hu era pointed to the intrinsic value of environmental protection, today, the focus is more on the economic benefits of an unpolluted environment,<sup>11</sup> as captured in Xi's phrase 'green water and green mountains mean mountains of gold and silver' 绿水青山就是金山银山 from his marathon work report to the Nineteenth CPC Congress in 2017.

The issues plaguing the PRC's DWF sector draw out familiar themes in Chinese politics: the impossibility of strictly regulating PRC enterprises far from home, the requirement to appear to be a 'responsible great power', and the obligation to secure resources for the domestic market — a shift from

'going out' to 'coming home'. Also: never get between a local government and a subsidy.

Three provinces dominate the DWF sector: Zhejiang, Shandong, and Fujian. The DWF sector started out largely controlled by a state-owned enterprise, the China National Fisheries Corporation. Over time, private operators came to dominate the sector, albeit backed by provincial and city governments anxious to generate revenue and find work for fishers laid off in the restructuring of China's domestic fishing fleet.<sup>12</sup> In the early Hu era, the DWF sector's lobbying efforts paid off and it secured lucrative fuel subsidies that helped make the industry profitable.<sup>13</sup> All three provinces have established DWF bases to support fishing on the high seas and in exclusive economic zones. These provincial governments, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture under the broad umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, are making a major effort to build DWF bases to provide the PRC fleet with processing plants and other infrastructure; a recent Pacific example was the refurbishment of the SinoVan fisheries plant in Vanuatu, funded by a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China. The plant,

officially launched by Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai in 2019, will be run as a joint venture between China National Fisheries Corporation and the Government of Vanuatu.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing Index* produced by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime in 2019, the PRC topped the list of the ten worst-performing countries.<sup>15</sup> Herein lies the contradiction for the CPC: the Party wants China to be a 'great maritime power', with the seafood, employment, and revenue that come with it; but it also wants to avoid a reputation for being a dodgy global operator, particularly in the waters of developing nations. The central government has even taken measures

to rein in IUU fishing: setting up a blacklist of violators, trialling its own observer system on boats, and even putting a moratorium on squid fishing. But new technologies are bringing to light both the ingenuity of rogue mainland fishers in avoiding detection and the ineffectiveness of new regulations. A recent report published by the global Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)<sup>16</sup> used a maritime intelligence predictive tool called Windward to visualise the activities of China's DWF fleet off Ecuador's Galapagos Islands, where the sheer size of the PRC fleet prompted widespread alarm in 2020.<sup>17</sup> The CIMSEC report reveals not just the staggering scope of China's high-seas fishing — with a fleet of up to 350



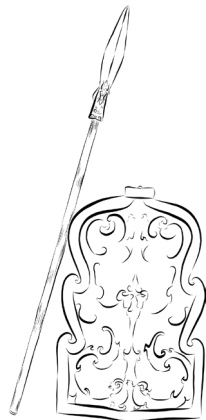
**Activities of China's DWF fleet off the Galapagos Islands prompted widespread alarm**  
Source: Pixabay

vessels active off the Galapagos for several months from July 2020 — but also the diverse array of tactics used to dodge the letter of the law: ships ‘going dark’ as they enter Ecuador’s protected fisheries, catch being transhipped to refrigerated cargo ships or ‘reefers’, reflagging of the ships to other nations such as Panama, and even changing their reported draughts and registered lengths to obscure their activities. Further complicating the picture is the partial militarisation of the fleet, enabling it to act as a kind of third sea force after the Chinese navy and coast guard, particularly in disputed areas such as the Senkaku Islands.

Like many environmental issues in the PRC, the central government faces the dilemma of how to balance conflicting interests. Private companies now dominate the DWF fleet and the state has little ability to regulate canny operators. If the central

government continues to subsidise companies that encourage excessive fishing, the message to provincial and city governments will remain mixed. If provinces like Fujian, Shandong, and Zhejiang benefit from ships bulging with squid, albacore, and shark fin (which, though banned from state banquets almost ten years ago, is still considered a delicacy in the south of the PRC), it is unlikely anyone will be closely checking logbooks when the boats come in. As for sea cucumbers, Palau’s President, Surangel Whipps Jr., has decried — to little effect — China’s unwillingness to answer his nation’s calls to end the illegal harvesting of sea cucumbers in Palau’s territorial waters, saying they ‘don’t seem to care and that is unacceptable. They should take responsibility for their people, and it is like they encouraged them by ignoring them. It’s not good.’<sup>18</sup>







# CHINA'S QUEST FOR A GOOD IMAGE: THE PACIFIC EXAMPLE

Denghua Zhang

**I**MAGE-BUILDING continued to top the Chinese government's international agenda in 2021. In May, President Xi Jinping 习近平 instructed officials of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to work towards improving 'the appeal of Chinese culture, the affability of China's image, the persuasive power of Chinese discourse, and the guiding power of our international public opinion efforts'.<sup>1</sup> Despite Beijing's efforts, there are significant mismatches between China's self-claimed achievements and its performance as witnessed by peoples of the Global South and even

as assessed by some scholars within the PRC.

Persistent international calls for more transparent investigations into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the heightened geostrategic rivalry between China and the United States and its traditional allies and partners, have led Beijing to ramp up efforts to engage with the Global South. Its goal is to project a benign image as a responsible great power.

Not surprisingly, a focus for China in 2021 was proactive COVID-19 diplomacy centred on the delivery of vaccines and medical supplies. Employing a whole-of-government

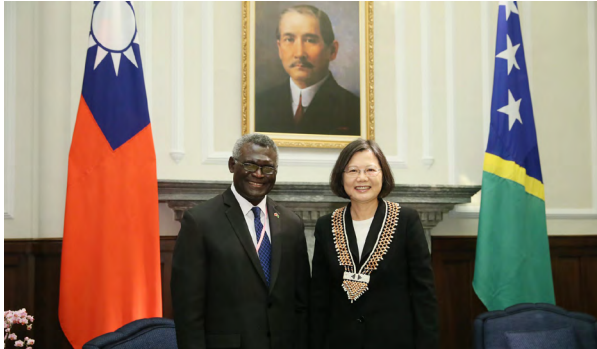
approach involving administrative bodies at different levels, diplomatic missions, companies, and other actors, the PRC increased its assistance to developing countries in the fight against the pandemic. Wang Yi 王毅, Minister for Foreign Affairs, who also oversees the China International Development Cooperation Agency, boasted in August 2021 that the PRC had donated Chinese-made vaccines to more than 100 countries and sold more than 770 million doses to more than 60 countries. China, he said, aimed to supply two billion doses overseas by the end of 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Another priority of China's diplomacy in 2021 was the continued promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build a 'community of shared destiny'. Promoting the BRI was China's focus at the 2021 conference of the Boao Forum for Asia.<sup>3</sup> According to China's Ministry of Commerce, China's direct investment in BRI partner countries grew by 8.6 percent in the first half of 2021.<sup>4</sup> On the ground, Chinese contractors have been working long hours to catch up on BRI projects delayed by pandemic-related travel restrictions and lockdowns.

The Pacific Islands — fourteen sovereign nations and seven

territories with a total population of thirteen million people, and one of the most aid-dependent regions in the world — could be considered a test region for the effectiveness of China's efforts. In recent years, traditional development partners in the region, such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, have stepped up their efforts to engage with Pacific Island countries to counter China's rising influence in the Pacific. The region has become a playing field in the power game between traditional development partners and China in the broader Indo-Pacific. While the approach of traditional development partners typically demands reforms in governance, the PRC focuses instead on economic links (trade, commercial loans, aid, and investment), and this is naturally appealing to leaders of many Pacific Island states.

In 2021, Beijing focused on delivering China-made vaccines to the Pacific region. Of the ten Pacific Island nations that have diplomatic relations with the PRC (another four have relations with Taiwan), China has donated Sinopharm vaccines to four: Solomon Islands (in April 2021, 50,000 doses), Vanuatu (in June 2021, 20,000 doses; in November 2021,



**Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sogavare's visit to Taiwan**

Source: Office of the President, Flickr

80,000 doses), Papua New Guinea (in June 2021, 200,000 doses), and Kiribati (in September 2021, 60,400 doses). In Papua New Guinea, in particular, China and Australia competed for influence through vaccine roll-out programs, with Australia delivering 28,000 AstraZeneca doses as of July 2021 and pledging a total of one million doses.<sup>5</sup> As of July 2021, Australia had also donated 63,000 and 20,000 AstraZeneca doses to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, respectively.<sup>6</sup> While most of those taking Chinese vaccines in Papua New Guinea are members of the Chinese diaspora, Vanuatu Prime Minister Bob Loughman and Solomon Islands Deputy Prime Minister Manasseh Maelanga received Sinopharm jabs to boost the general public's confidence in vaccination. However, it is unclear whether media reports about the

lower efficacy of Chinese vaccines have had an impact on the uptake of these vaccines in the Pacific.

With respect to the BRI in the Pacific, Chinese contractors have sped up the progress of projects such as the China-funded National Sports Stadium in Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and his deputy attended the ground-breaking ceremony for the stadium in May 2021.<sup>7</sup> This multi-million-dollar stadium is highly significant in terms of China's diplomatic efforts, as it was one of the main aid commitments made by China to the Sogavare government following its decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in September 2019. It will be used to host the 2023 Pacific Games. The project contractor, China Civil Engineering

Construction Corporation, has committed to completing the project as scheduled.

For all such efforts on the part of Beijing, local perceptions of China remain mixed in the Pacific, contradicting China's claims of success. The public response of Pacific Island governments to China's diplomacy is more positive than that of many non-governmental actors such as civil society organisations and academics.<sup>8</sup> China's aspirations in the region provide governments with options both for development assistance and for bargaining power with traditional development partners who have concerns about China's motives and growing influence. In particular, Pacific Island officials have welcomed Chinese aid in infrastructure building, which is vital for broader development. Compared with non-governmental actors in the Pacific, and to minimise any negative impacts on bilateral relations, Pacific Island government officials tend to avoid openly discussing debt issues in relation to Chinese loans to their countries.

Based on the preliminary results of the author's research, non-governmental actors in the Pacific have much more nuanced and, in

many cases, critical views of China. For example, a survey of twenty-one law degree students at a university in Fiji in 2021 revealed that 38 percent (eight) had concerns about their country's participation in the BRI. Some suspect China is using the BRI as a cover to achieve larger geostrategic aims while others worry that Fiji is becoming over dependent on China. Similar concerns can be found in the literature.<sup>9</sup> On the survey question of which countries (including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, and others) are important to Fiji (multiple choice), thirteen of the surveyed twenty-one students included Australia in their answers, eleven included New Zealand, while only seven included China. In other research, the author surveyed eighty-eight students studying international relations at a university in Papua New Guinea in 2021. Forty-five students expressed concerns about the BRI in the country, citing inadequate transparency and accountability for the projects, the need for rules and regulations to protect affected people in project areas, the need to use more local contractors, and the opacity of China's strategic intentions behind BRI projects.

Even within the PRC, scholars hold a more nuanced view of China's achievements in the Pacific than the Party-State. In a survey of thirty-nine Chinese scholars of Pacific studies conducted by the author in 2019, twenty-four gave a score between 60 and 79 on a scale of 100 points for the performance of China's Pacific diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> Take Chinese aid to the Pacific region as an example. These scholars suggested Chinese actors should increase their engagement with local communities, develop a better

understanding of local conditions and needs, and provide tailored assistance to the region.

Image-building is never an easy task. For China to deliver foreign aid such as medical supplies and stadiums is one thing, but to win hearts and minds is another. The latter demands a much better understanding of and sensitivity to local conditions and expectations. Otherwise, the contradiction between China's image-building expectations and reality will remain.

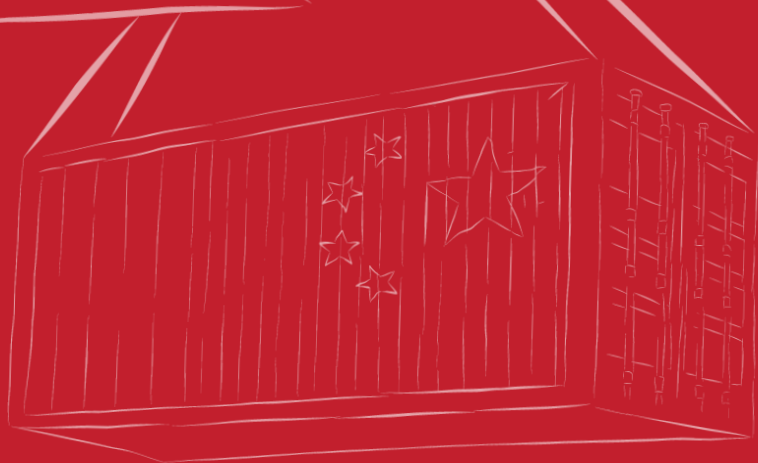




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7



**AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AND  
AUSTRALIA IN THE 'NEW ERA OF  
CHINESE DIPLOMACY'**

Jason Young

The Taniwha, like the dragon, has the ability to understand the essence of its environment and changing conditions — as well as the ability to adapt and survive. After all, as custodians and kaitiaki [guardians], Taniwha are intrinsically linked to the well-being and resilience of people, the environment, and the prosperity from which all things flourish.

Nanaia Mahuta, ‘He taniwha he tipua, he tipua he taniwha — The dragon and the taniwha’<sup>1</sup>

‘Great-power diplomacy’ is a tiring reality of international politics. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has entered a New Era of Chinese Diplomacy 新时代的中国外交,<sup>2</sup> and the United States has elevated strategic competition with the PRC to a *de jure* position.<sup>3</sup> New Zealand politicians exclaim that ‘[i]t is not getting any easier to be a small country’ and seek new ways of dealing with what they describe as ‘an increasingly complex global environment’.<sup>4</sup> Key to that is management of two contradictions: the incongruence between the world view promoted by the PRC government and that underpinning bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand; and the incongruence between the PRC’s increased power and New Zealand’s efforts to maintain the regional status quo. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 believed ‘development arises from internal contradictions’ 内部矛盾引起发展<sup>5</sup> and promoted struggle 斗争 between competing interests to this end. New Zealand’s relations with the PRC suggest the return to an emphasis on struggle<sup>6</sup> in the era of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy 习近平外交思想 has narrowed the scope for bilateral cooperation.

## Two Events

On 25 January 2021, New Zealand's trade minister and the PRC's commerce minister signed, via video call, an upgrade to New Zealand's free-trade agreement (FTA) with the PRC. After the original signing in 2008, trade grew rapidly and New Zealand's trade deficit shifted to a surplus. Negotiations to upgrade the FTA began in 2016, following the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) of 2015. New Zealand's negotiations concluded in October 2019, but it was not until early 2021 that the agreement was finally signed. The timing proved challenging due to New Zealand's absence from a joint statement of concern by the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia about the arrests of pro-democracy politicians and activists in Hong Kong less than a week earlier,<sup>7</sup> and contrasted starkly with the mounting challenges in Australia's relationship with the PRC.

Asked for comment on Australia in a post-signing interview, the New Zealand Minister for Trade and Export Growth, Damien O'Connor — forgetting diplomacy 101 — decided to weigh in:

I can't speak for Australia and the way it runs its diplomatic relationships, but clearly if they were to follow us and show respect [to the PRC], I guess a little more diplomacy from time to time and be cautious with wording, then they too, hopefully, could be in a similar situation.<sup>8</sup>

These remarks unleashed a storm of criticism. Jeffrey Wilson of the Perth USAsia Centre argued New Zealand was 'deliberately criticising Australia to play to a Chinese audience'.<sup>9</sup> Elaine Pearson, the Australian Director of Human Rights Watch, asked whether 'speaking with more diplomacy' equalled 'silence on China's human rights violations'.<sup>10</sup> In hindsight, the statement represents the last gasp of a school of diplomatic thought on China that was once dominant in New Zealand, as it was in Australia. As

former New Zealand prime minister John Key put it in 2019: ‘If we treat that relationship properly, we will continue to prosper off the back of that.’<sup>11</sup>

The second event occurred during a rare speech on the relationship by New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, quoted at the start of the chapter. The address employed the metaphor of the ‘taniwha and the dragon’ or ‘two dragon relations’ 双龙关系, as some Chinese media dubbed it.<sup>12</sup> Mahuta emphasised New Zealand’s bicultural, values-based foreign policy<sup>13</sup> and promised a ‘predictable approach through diplomacy and dialogue’. She raised difficult issues such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, development aid in the Pacific, and cybersecurity, and stressed that New Zealand makes ‘decisions independently, informed by our values and our own assessment of New Zealand’s interests’. This was consistent with the government’s stated goal of having a ‘mature relationship’ with the PRC.<sup>14</sup> It also echoed former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd’s *zhengyou* 诤友 philosophy, which was that of a friend who would nonetheless speak hard truths when necessary.<sup>15</sup>

In the media question and answer session that followed her speech, Mahuta commented on expanding the remit of the Five Eyes alliance. New Zealand had recently failed to add its name to a fourteen-country joint statement on the outcome of the World Health Organization’s investigation into the origins of COVID-19,<sup>16</sup> leading to the accusation that, in the words of Will Glasgow and Ben Packham in *The Australian* newspaper, ‘New Zealand shuts its eyes to appease China’.<sup>17</sup> Mahuta stated New Zealand would not ‘invoke the Five Eyes as the first point of contact on messaging out on a range of issues that really exist outside of the remit of the Five Eyes’ and New Zealand preferred to raise human rights concerns through multilateral forums. The next day, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated New Zealand would use ‘appropriate platforms’ to raise democracy and human rights concerns with the PRC and asked: ‘Is that best done under the banner of a grouping of countries around a security intelligence platform?’<sup>18</sup>

**Nanaia Mahuta employed the metaphor of the 'two dragon relations' to describe New Zealand's foreign policy**

Source: US State Department, Freddie Everett, Flickr



Political fallout across the Tasman prompted a hasty announcement of the biannual Australia–New Zealand Foreign Minister Consultations between Mahuta and her Australian counterpart, Marise Payne. Executive Director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and an outspoken critic of the PRC, Peter Jennings, called for New Zealand to be removed from the intelligence-sharing agreement.<sup>19</sup> William Stoltz, a visiting fellow at the National Security College at The Australian National University, demanded Australia ‘reset the relationship’ with New Zealand.<sup>20</sup> Commentators in the PRC, like Wang Miao 王淼, a reporter for the Chinese edition of the *Global Times* with experience reporting from both New Zealand and Australia, praised New Zealand for refusing to be ‘anti-China foot soldiers for the United States’ 美国反华的马前卒.<sup>21</sup> An anonymous op-ed in the English edition of the *Global Times* suggested New Zealand was distancing itself from the ‘anti-China clique’ (the Five Eyes) to ‘yield concrete benefits’.<sup>22</sup> Before half the year was out, two events had exposed deep contradictions in New Zealand’s relations with the PRC.

## **A Place Beyond the Transformative Power of Civilised Behaviour**

In the New Era of Chinese Diplomacy, PRC officials seek to increase ‘international discourse hegemony’ 国际话语权, push back against non-PRC narratives, and ‘tell the China story well’ 讲好中国故事.<sup>23</sup> As we will see, officials have pushed back strongly on human rights concerns raised by New Zealand. This has strained the relationship and reignited debates

about whether New Zealand is over dependent on Chinese markets, whether New Zealand is vulnerable to economic retaliation for these positions and whether there should be a trade diversification strategy. For small countries, disagreeing with great powers can come at considerable cost, as demonstrated by the US withdrawal, more than three decades ago, from its alliance commitment to New Zealand under the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) in light of New Zealand's nuclear-free policy and the implications for visits by US Navy ships; the United States has a policy of 'neither confirming nor denying' which of its naval ships is carrying nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 80 percent of New Zealanders support trying to 'promote human rights in China, even if it harms economic relations'.<sup>24</sup>

This position is underpinned by growing awareness of Aotearoa New Zealand's own colonial history and the importance of efforts to address historical wrongs and their institutional legacies. In her 'Taniwha and the dragon' speech, Mahuta pledged that as 'New Zealand's first indigenous female foreign minister', she would 'bring forward a perspective founded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi [the Treaty of Waitangi] and our bicultural pillars' and advocate for 'the recognition and inclusion of all peoples — including indigenous and ethnic minorities'. This is a position anchored in diplomacy and dialogue but also one that makes it 'necessary to speak out publicly on issues' such as Hong Kong and the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

In May, officials from the Embassy of the PRC in New Zealand and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region co-organised an online discussion titled 'Xinjiang is a Wonderful Land' 新疆是个好地方.<sup>25</sup> Shewket Imin 肖开提·依明, Director of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and Wu Xi 吴玺, the PRC's Ambassador to New Zealand, gave speeches followed by glowing testimonials and propagandistic videos about how rosy life was in Xinjiang. An online question and answer session followed and highlighted the distance between the views of PRC officials and the New Zealand

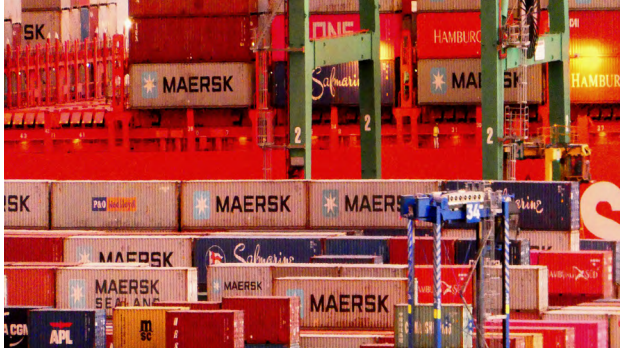


media. Similar events held in other countries, including Australia, elicited comparable media reactions.<sup>26</sup>

The New Zealand event attempted to address official statements, deepening public concern, and media criticism of the PRC's policies in Xinjiang. Mahuta and Payne had issued a statement in March raising 'grave concerns' about 'severe human rights abuses' in Xinjiang and had called for the PRC 'to grant meaningful and unfettered access' to 'United Nations experts, and other independent observers'.<sup>27</sup> Chinese officials were tasked with countering this view by 'telling the China story well', but New Zealand media and politicians were not swayed. Near the end of the event, and following strained exchanges between the media and the hosts, Gerry Brownlee, foreign affairs spokesperson for the opposition National Party, suggested to the Chinese Ambassador that 'the effort appears to be to say, "nothing to see here, move on"' and concluded, 'I am more concerned now than I have been at any point'.<sup>28</sup>

This ill-conceived public relations exercise clearly backfired. It helped reignite calls in New Zealand to introduce legislation that would allow the government to sanction countries autonomously based on human rights concerns<sup>29</sup> and demonstrated the limits of Chinese diplomacy in the New Era. The following month, in June, New Zealand joined Australia and forty-two other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, in a statement to the UN Human Rights Council raising serious concerns about Xinjiang.<sup>30</sup> A PRC-led counter-statement criticised this as 'unfounded allegations against China'.<sup>31</sup>

A spokesperson for the PRC Embassy attacked an earlier statement by New Zealand and Australia on the erosion of the electoral system in Hong Kong<sup>32</sup> as 'flagrant interference' 橫加干涉.<sup>33</sup> A similar response followed a parliamentary motion declaring 'grave concerns' about 'severe human rights abuses' in Xinjiang, which, as with a comparable one in Australia, controversially stopped short of declaring that they amounted to 'genocide'.<sup>34</sup> In early May, a spokesperson for the PRC Embassy called



The share of New Zealand goods exported to the PRC had grown, even during the pandemic  
Source: Jayhattric, Flickr

on New Zealand to ‘immediately stop this mistaken course of action’ lest it negatively impact the relationship.<sup>35</sup>

Such statements furthered speculation that the PRC would adopt measures aimed at punishing New Zealand economically, as it had done with Australia. (See the *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, Chapter 9, ‘Economic Power and Vulnerability in Sino-Australian Relations’, pp.259–274). The share of New Zealand goods exported to the PRC had grown, even during the pandemic, and amounted to more than 31 percent of New Zealand’s total exports in the year to June 2021.<sup>36</sup> Some industries (45 percent of water exports, 42 percent of sheep, 39 percent of seafood, 35 percent of dairy, 33 percent of beef)<sup>37</sup> and entities (almost 50 percent of exports by Māori authorities)<sup>38</sup> are more exposed than others. Trade is widely viewed as central to the economic prosperity of New Zealand’s small economy. What was initially seen as an opportunity to diversify New Zealand markets has, through the rapid growth of the trading relationship with the PRC, led to new concerns about overdependency on that market.

At the end of May, New Zealand joined as a third party to Australia’s World Trade Organization (WTO) case around the imposition of an 80 percent tax on barley from Australia. According to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade statement, New Zealand joined ‘to influence the interpretation and application of WTO agreements on matters that are

also of direct interest to us'.<sup>39</sup> Mahuta argued New Zealand 'cannot ignore ... what's happening in Australia' and warned 'it may only be a matter of time before the storm gets closer to us'.<sup>40</sup> She reminded business that reliance on 'any one market puts us in a very difficult position'.<sup>41</sup> Even so, New Zealand exporters continue to trade extensively with China. Prime Minister Ardern stated simply: 'Managing the relationship is not always going to be easy and there can be no guarantees.'<sup>42</sup>

The events of 2021 demonstrate that New Zealand may seek, as Mahuta has argued, 'to manage our disagreements' with the PRC, 'mindful that tikanga [proper conventions] underpinning how we relate to each other must be respected',<sup>43</sup> but there is no guarantee this can be achieved. Instead, as PRC officials have more vigorously defended state positions, the possibility of economic retaliation has been overtly signalled by both Mahuta and Ardern. It is unlikely that were he to visit New Zealand today, Xi Jinping 习近平 would still characterise the bilateral relationship as 'a model of relations', as he did in 2014,<sup>44</sup> though notably, this narrative remains strong in Chinese media.<sup>45</sup> Faced with consistent and increasingly public statements from New Zealand on human rights issues, PRC officials could now just as easily consider New Zealand in terms of an ancient concept that Geremie Barmé has translated as 'a place beyond the transformative power of civilised behaviour' 化外之地.<sup>46</sup>

## Seeing China with Another Eye?

At the end of May, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Queenstown for the annual Australia–New Zealand Leaders' Meeting. As shown above, media commentary in New Zealand, Australia, and the PRC leading up to the meeting played up the idea of a growing rift on China policy between the two allies. The visit was clearly planned to change that impression through a strong show of unity. The two leaders acknowledged 'an era of increasing strategic competition' and outlined their 'shared

commitment to support an Indo-Pacific region ... free from coercion'.<sup>47</sup> The following month, Ardern stated that the Pacific is New Zealand's place in the world but because it is an 'increasingly contested region ... we also see the Indo-Pacific as central to our interests'. Ardern went on to describe New Zealand's relations with the PRC as 'one of our most significant, but also one of our increasingly complex relationships'.<sup>48</sup> Two further events illustrate that complexity.

Just six days after this speech, the minister responsible for the Government Communications Security Bureau, Andrew Little, stated that New Zealand had 'established links between Chinese state-sponsored actors ... and malicious cyber activity in New Zealand' and was 'joining other countries in strongly condemning this malicious activity undertaken by the Chinese Ministry of State Security'.<sup>49</sup> This represented a rare official, public designation of the PRC as a malign actor.

Earlier in the year, the government had issued several country-agnostic security guides to protect members of the New Zealand Parliament, locally elected representatives, government officials and academic institutions and researchers against espionage, foreign interference and information theft.<sup>50</sup> Such changes reflect four years of public debate about and scrutiny of foreign interference in New Zealand — focused almost exclusively on the PRC. This debate was galvanised by events in Australia and the high-profile work of Anne-Marie Brady, whose 2017 publication, 'Magic weapons',<sup>51</sup> introduced a new and powerful narrative that PRC-linked activities in New Zealand were subverting democracy and sovereignty.

A further report from Brady argued New Zealand–PRC academic links were being exploited by the PRC for military purposes,<sup>52</sup> and created headlines when the University of Canterbury placed Brady under review, prompting a petition of support signed by 100 international scholars<sup>53</sup> and an ombudsman's investigation into the university's decision not to release information relating to the review.<sup>54</sup> Further controversy and speculation emerged in 2020 when two members of the New Zealand Chinese community died tragically in a car crash on their way to petition

parliament about concerns of influence by the Communist Party of China.<sup>55</sup> The 2020 retirement of two New Zealand MPs of Chinese ethnicity returned to the headlines in 2021 when unnamed sources claimed ‘that their exits from political life came after intelligence agencies flagged concerns about the MPs’ relationship with the Chinese Government’.<sup>56</sup>

These shifts are paralleled by changes in New Zealand public opinion. A Pew survey released in 2021 found 67 percent of New Zealand participants have an unfavourable view of China.<sup>57</sup> The annual Asia New Zealand Foundation survey, also published in 2021, found an increase from 22 percent to 35 percent of participants perceiving China as a threat.<sup>58</sup> Incidents of discrimination towards Chinese in New Zealand are on the rise. The Human Rights Commission found that ‘more than half of Māori and Chinese respondents experienced some form of discrimination [during COVID-19], and [that] Chinese had much greater concerns about their personal safety’.<sup>59</sup> In the 2018 census, 5.3 percent of the New Zealand population self-identified with the ‘Chinese ethnic group’, of whom almost three-quarters were born overseas.<sup>60</sup> The historical aspiration of white settlers to build an ‘ideal society’ led to discriminatory policies and racism towards Chinese settlers (and others) in colonial New Zealand.<sup>61</sup> Following acknowledgement of and an apology for these wrongs at the turn of the twenty-first century,<sup>62</sup> the conditions for a more inclusive and socially cohesive society emerged. The new era of strategic competition, replete with concerns about the PRC’s diaspora policy and foreign interference, threatens that cohesion.

A second event illustrates growing concern in government about the PRC’s positions on international law. In August, the New Zealand Permanent Mission to the United Nations submitted a note verbale to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, setting out New Zealand’s legal position on the South China Sea dispute.<sup>63</sup> This took a much harder line than previous statements. It affirmed New Zealand’s support for basic freedoms of navigation and stated there ‘is no legal basis for states to claim “historic rights” with respect to maritime areas in the South

China Sea’, as well as noting that Wellington regards the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award as ‘final and binding on both parties’.<sup>64</sup> The Permanent Mission of the PRC presented a counterstatement: ‘China does not accept the positions of New Zealand in its Note Verbale.’<sup>65</sup>

These events demonstrate growing unease in New Zealand about the PRC’s power and influence and the increasingly hawkish postures of other countries in the region. In December, the New Zealand Defence Assessment identified strategic competition (and climate change) as having ‘the greatest impact on New Zealand’s security interests’ as well as stating that ‘China’s rise is the major driver for this competition’.<sup>66</sup> Australia’s security alliance with the United States, its involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, India, and Japan (the Quad) and its decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS agreement in September present a posture of deterrence that has confronted this challenge in a way that New Zealand has not. Commentators like Wang Miao 王淼 argue that of all the Five Eyes partners, New Zealand alone can ‘see China with another eye’ 另眼看中国.<sup>67</sup> Others, such as Yu Lei 于镭, a well-known critic of Australian policy towards the PRC and the Director of the Pacific Island Research Centre at Liaocheng University, argue that New Zealand’s economic interests will ensure its absence from the broader competition over the regional order.<sup>68</sup> This is a misreading. As shown above, the New Era of Chinese Diplomacy has met resistance in New Zealand as it has elsewhere in the region. New Zealand’s alliance with Australia, for better or for worse, ties its response to that partnership.

In the long run, only an inclusive, rules-based regional order that is capable of constraining great-power adventurism can achieve lasting security and prosperity for small countries. That is the reason New Zealand and Australia expend so much diplomatic effort on coalition building in the Pacific and Asia, through initiatives like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and regional organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In 1926, Mao wrote: '[W]ho are our enemies and who are our friends?' 谁是我们的敌人? 谁是我们的朋友? This is the question regional leaders are now asking and, consequently, the conditions for inking inclusive regional initiatives are worsening. The regional order is shifting, but how remains unclear, suggesting that New Zealand and Australia need to prepare for many outcomes, including ongoing frictions with the PRC. In the words of Hedley Bull, Australia's most influential international relations scholar: 'It is better to recognise that we are in darkness than to pretend that we can see the light.'

## Coda

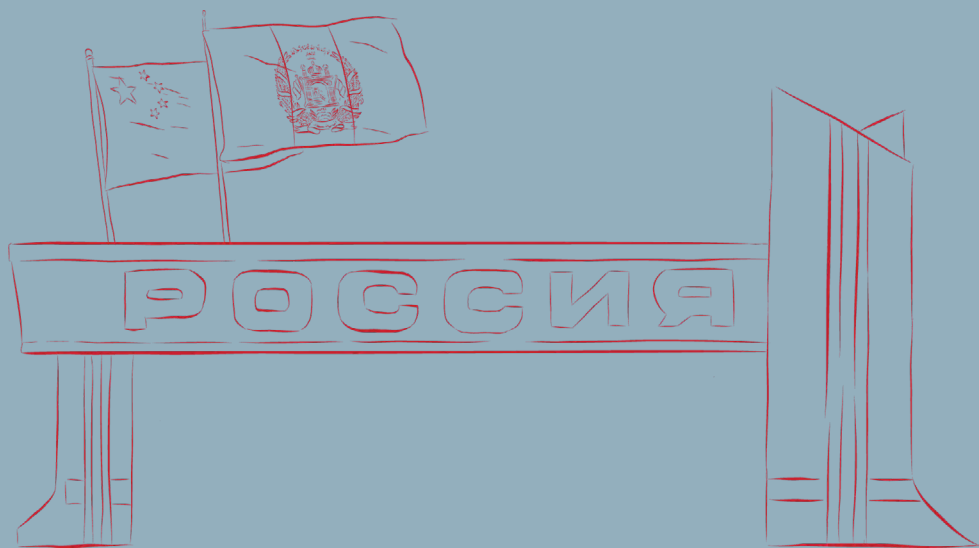
| *He waka eke noa*, 处境相同, we're all in this together.

PRC diplomats have embraced what Matthew D. Johnson, contributor to *Reading the China Dream*, describes as the 'common denominator' in all the policy formulations of Politburo Standing Committee member and leading political theorist Wang Huning 王沪宁 a 'shared vision of a China in which the Party rules indefinitely, and of a world in which China is a more influential power'.<sup>69</sup> Like the *taniwha*, with its ability to adapt to and survive changing conditions, New Zealand and Australia will need all their smarts as this New Era of Chinese Diplomacy beds in. As Allan Gyngell, President of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, reminds us, there are 'other tools' besides AUKUS 'for dealing with Beijing: persuasion, shaping, multilateral advocacy, and coalition building'.<sup>70</sup> In the spirit of *zhengyou*, it would be wrong not to end with the words that invoked such outrage in the Australian press. After all, in a broader sense at least, 'a little more diplomacy from time to time' can be a good thing.

# 论坛

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# JOY AND FEAR: CHINESE MEDIA AND THE TALIBAN'S VICTORY IN AFGHANISTAN

Fengming Lu

**T**HE 2021 FALL OF Kabul, marking the almost complete take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban, probably represented the most spectacular failure of US policy and military action abroad since the fall of Saigon in 1975. Given the current tensions and rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), many might assume the Chinese media — run almost exclusively by the state — would have gloated at the US failure and the Taliban victory. The Chinese media, which had limited resources in Afghanistan and relied heavily on second-hand materials, did mostly cast a negative light on the US

withdrawal, blaming the Americans for leaving a mess in Afghanistan after twenty years of war. However, its tone was carefully modulated to match Beijing's contradictory response to the Taliban's victory.

On the one hand, the fall of Kabul and the deaths of almost 50,000 civilians in the years since the US invasion in 2001 have served to illustrate the broader failure of Washington's efforts to export American-style democracy. Towards the end of 2021, the Chinese government increasingly and strategically exploited the case of Afghanistan in news reporting and propaganda to counterbalance the

international Summit for Democracy hosted by US President Joe Biden on 9–10 December ‘to renew democracy at home and confront autocracies abroad’ and the related rhetorical offensive on democracy versus autocracy.

Under the pen-name Zhong Sheng 钟声 (a homophone of ‘Voice of China’), for example, the *People’s Daily* published a series of editorials under the title ‘The Twenty-Year War in Afghanistan as a Warning to the United States’ 二十年阿富汗战争给美国的警示.<sup>1</sup> They were representative of state media rhetoric on Afghanistan. Consistent with China’s foreign policy and domestic propaganda, the main point of the editorials was that the US military’s intervention and efforts to implement Western-style democracy in Afghanistan were a complete failure. The editorials argued that those policies cost the US billions of dollars and left a total mess — not just in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> Yet they — and other aspects of Chinese press coverage and interpretation of the events in Afghanistan — do not simply replicate earlier reportage; they also are customised to fit the contemporary US–China rivalry. In one of the editorials, the author(s) argues: ‘The United States

claims itself to be the defender of “the rules-based international order”, but in fact, it has been the biggest destroyer of international rules and international orders.’<sup>3</sup> This directly counters US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s claim about defending the ‘rules-based international order’ at the March 2021 US–China Summit in Anchorage, Alaska.

While painting the Taliban victory as the overwhelmingly negative outcome of American actions in Afghanistan to reinforce the credibility of its anti-American domestic propaganda, the Chinese leadership is at the same time trying to maintain a reasonably good relationship with the Taliban regime. The Chinese Embassy stayed in Kabul throughout the turmoil. State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 has met with delegates of the Doha-based Taliban Political Commission several times. In Tianjin, China hosted a high-level delegation from the Taliban in July, about a month before the takeover, and another in September, following it.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese media has been restrained in covering negative news related to the Taliban takeover. For example, when reporting



**Chinese news media left out key details from the Taliban's December decree on women's rights, such as women's rights to go to school and work**

Source: Marius Arnesen, Flickr

on the Taliban's December decree on women's rights, Chinese news media, unlike their Western counterparts, did not mention what was left out of the decree, such as women's right to go to school and work.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the government is concerned about the Taliban's and other groups' potential to promote religious extremism or even terrorism in Xinjiang. The Communist Party of China is careful to not trigger discontent among the thirty million Chinese Muslims, nor does it wish to fuel rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. When discussing the anti-Taliban Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISK), state-

run television stations such as CCTV refer to it as 'the Khorasan branch of the extremist organisation' to avoid using the term 'Islamic State'.

China's involvement in Afghanistan is quite limited. The PRC shares only a short, 92-kilometre border with Afghanistan at the eastern end of the rugged Wakhan Corridor. The flow of people, including alleged terrorists, across the land border is extremely sparse and difficult, especially given the tight control over travel and mobility within Xinjiang; there is quite a low risk that terrorists or terrorism will enter China that way, at least in the

short term. Chinese firms and state-owned enterprises have committed to only a few large-scale investment projects in Afghanistan — totalling US\$630 million by the end of 2020. Most of these, such as the Mes Aynak copper mine, have been indefinitely paused for years. Thanks to China's limited interests and involvement in Afghanistan, as mentioned earlier, Chinese media has insufficient resources and capabilities to cover news there. As a result, in recent years, when covering US military atrocities outside Kabul, such as drone attacks on civilians, CCTV needed to rely on footage and even whole programs from *RT* — Russia's state-controlled international television network. The Chinese media's tone and agenda in Afghanistan have thus largely — perhaps reluctantly — aligned with those of Russia. The only Chinese reporter from the state-run CCTV/CGTN channel in Kabul withdrew right after the fall of the city. For almost three months, CCTV relied on local employees in Kabul or reporters in Peshawar, Pakistan, to cover the news. The first CCTV reporter returned to Kabul only on 15 November, three months after the fall of Kabul.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of 2021, as the situation in Afghanistan became less dramatic, Chinese media, like other international media, gradually lost interest in covering the daily events in Afghanistan. Increasingly instrumental and strategic in their coverage, they focused on the ideological quarrel with the United States, arguing that American efforts to export Western-style democracy have produced many more disasters than achievements. They also blame the United States, which has frozen Afghan assets since the Taliban's takeover, for the humanitarian crisis unfolding there.<sup>6</sup> Such observations reinforce Beijing's long-standing, and ironically nihilistic, rhetoric that contends that any attempt to change an authoritarian status quo — through democratisation or liberalisation, for example — will lead to chaos and catastrophe. A recent livestreamed program by CGTN called 'A reality check — Exporting war under veil of democracy', posted on 11 December, illustrates the difficulty of such rhetoric achieving any impact overseas: the 29-minute video from China's main outward-facing media outlet garnered fewer than 20,000 views on YouTube in its first week on the platform.<sup>7</sup> It is

also hard to judge how well the official line on Afghanistan is received by the Chinese domestic audience as any online push-back or criticism would be heavily censored.

Four months on from the fall of Kabul, Chinese state media reports on Afghanistan are marked by contradictory emotions of joy and fear, and its coverage continues to serve as a proxy for the ideological contest between China and the United States.

Yet how the relationship between Beijing and the Taliban will pan out is uncertain, partly because, as of year's end, Russia had not made its intentions clear, and it remains to be seen whether the Taliban is credibly committed to not export jihad to Xinjiang. In the meantime, the policy contradictions are likely to be reflected in the Chinese media's portrayal of current affairs in Afghanistan.





# CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE ERA OF GREAT-POWER COMPETITION

Kevin Magee

**T**HE BEIJING–MOSCOW axis is more aligned than at any point in the past sixty years. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia share a border of 4,000 kilometres and a history that has over the past 400 years seen periods of close cooperation and periods of tension and hostility, the latter leading to armed conflict in 1969. In the official Chinese view of history, tsarist Russia was one of the hostile actors in China’s ‘century of humiliation’ and a beneficiary of the series of unequal treaties that stripped sovereign land from the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE) and drained its treasury. On the other hand, after

the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union renounced Russian unequal treaty claims on China — the only foreign power to do so. The major historical irritant of defining the border was resolved to both countries’ satisfaction in 2008.

The bitter ideological arguments of the era following the Sino-Soviet split (1956–1989) are also long forgotten. Today, China and Russia enjoy an increasingly close and cooperative relationship across the military, economic, and diplomatic spheres, driven by common rejection of the US-led global order. The economic relationship has flourished,

with two-way trade reaching US\$107.7 billion in 2020.<sup>1</sup> In 1992, bilateral trade amounted to US\$5.85 billion. In the first eight months of 2021, two-way trade reached US\$89 billion — a 29.5 percent growth from the same period in 2020. China predominantly exports electrical and manufactured goods to Russia, while importing mineral fuels, oils, distillates, timber, and other raw materials.<sup>2</sup> China's energy imports from Russia quadrupled between 2008 and 2018 and continue to grow, albeit at a slower rate.

Officially, it is a comprehensive strategic partnership based on mutual interests and not an alliance with formal defence commitments. The joint statement signed by Xi Jinping 习近平 and Vladimir Putin on 4 February 2022 in Beijing emphasised that there were no limits and no forbidden areas of cooperation. While some observers still view the China–Russia partnership as tactical and transient — a ‘marriage of convenience’ — it has developed into a substantial anti-Western quasi-alliance or entente.

At the UN Security Council and other international forums, China and Russia have cooperated closely in direct contradiction of US and

Western interests. Between 2011 and 2020, for example, they jointly vetoed ten resolutions on the conflict in Syria sponsored by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The two countries have also cooperated on the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization, teaming up to thwart Western initiatives on human rights and the COVID-19 investigation.

Multilateral organisations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (an economic, political and security organisation stretching across Eurasia, the Indian Subcontinent and parts of the Middle East), and BRICS (an association of emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) provide platforms for joint cooperation with other non-Western powers.

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has visited Moscow eight times — more than any other world capital (he has visited Washington four times) — and he enjoys a good personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, which has smoothed the way to cooperation and overcoming frictions. Putin has visited Beijing fifteen times — seven of those since Xi has been in charge. All together counting meetings



**In June 2018, Xi awarded Putin China's first Friendship Medal**  
Source: President of Russia

at multilateral events, virtual meetings during COVID as well as face-to-face meetings the two leaders now have met 38 times. In June 2018, Xi awarded Putin China's first Friendship Medal 友谊勋章, honouring him as 'my best, most intimate friend'.<sup>3</sup> The two countries have established a direct link between the Communist Party of China's Central Committee Secretariat and the Russian Presidential Administration and there is extensive bureaucratic contact as well.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese and Russian leaders have said on several occasions that relations are the closest and best they have ever been. In June 2021, China and Russia agreed to extend the twenty-year China–Russia Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation 中俄睦邻友好合作条约 or Договор о Добрососедстве Дружбе и

Сотрудничестве Между Российской Федерацией и Китайской Народной Республикой first signed by Putin and former president Jiang Zemin 江泽民 in 2001.<sup>5</sup>

People-to-people relations have also flourished, and trust has developed off a low base. A joint Chicago Council on Global Affairs–Levada Analytical Centre survey in March 2021 found that 74 percent of Russians had positive views of China and 40 percent of Russians saw China as Russia's best friend; 53 percent of Russians believed the partnership with China had strengthened Russia.<sup>6</sup>

China and Russia are cooperating on telecommunications (with Russia's largest mobile operator working with Huawei to activate 5G networks), infrastructure, civil aircraft, space projects, weaponry systems, and high-

speed rail. Several major transnational infrastructure projects completed in the past two years promote economic linkages; they include rail and road bridges over the Amur River, ports on the Amur, new cross-border freight railway lines, and a nuclear power plant using transferred Russian technology. Roscosmos and China's National Space Administration signed an agreement on 9 March 2021 to build a joint research station on or around the Moon, based on their June 2018 bilateral cooperation agreement.<sup>7</sup>

Beijing provides Moscow with financing, naval diesel engines, and high-tech components for advanced weaponry including aircraft and missiles that it can no longer access in the West because of sanctions.<sup>8</sup> Eighty percent of China's arms imports, meanwhile, come from Russia, including the Su-35 fighter and S-400 missile system, as well as hypersonic technologies, radar, battle integration systems that link different services more effectively, nuclear propulsion for submarines, and night-vision capabilities for troops and armoured vehicles.<sup>9</sup> China's J-11 and J-15 fighters are based on Russian designs and, in 2019, Russia announced it was helping China develop a missile defence early warning system.

Russia and China have conducted joint military exercises since 2005. Thousands of People's Liberation Army troops took part in the 2018 'Vostok' exercise in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Chinese and Russian troops have since participated in major military exercises each year.<sup>10</sup> In 2019 and 2020, Russia and China conducted joint aerial strategic patrols over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea and naval exercises in October 2021 in the Sea of Japan.

Such close military cooperation allows both militaries to learn from the other's tactics and command and control. However, the level of interoperability remains low; the exercises are more about the political messaging.<sup>11</sup> While the two countries do not have mutual defence commitments, their military coordination and common disdain for US geopolitical interests could see them cooperating to distract the United States in a crisis such as over Taiwan or Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

The close relationship has delivered real benefits to both countries, especially the resolution of the border differences. This in turn has afforded Russia and China strategic depth and, with it, the ability to focus their defence needs on their respective

strategic competitors: the United States and its allies. Cooperation with China also gives Russia, the weaker partner, the extra political, diplomatic, and military heft it needs to compete effectively with the more powerful United States.<sup>13</sup>

Beijing and Moscow want changes to an international system that has handed both countries a permanently subordinate role, while allowing Washington to build a military alliance system that threatens their interests.<sup>14</sup> America is in a state of confrontation with China and Russia; China and Russia are strategic partners; and the US is bolstering the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to oppose Russia and simultaneously expanding and intensifying its relations with Indo-Pacific countries like Australia to check China.<sup>15</sup>

The US National Security Strategy published on 18 December 2017 designated both the PRC and Russia as strategic competitors and revisionist states. The strategy said the two countries were revisionist because they opposed the international rules-based order championed by the US and its allies and shared the ambition of 'displacing the US in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as widening its strategic

foothold in Europe'.<sup>16</sup> US President Joe Biden has maintained and expanded Trump-era policies, such as banning US investments in certain Chinese companies, blacklisting seven Chinese supercomputer entities, and revoking China Telecom America's service authority.<sup>17</sup> A wide range of commentators have described the US as wanting to maintain a unipolar world while the leaders of Russia and China consistently promote a multipolar world.<sup>18</sup> This US view was reflected in President Biden's statement on 25 March 2021: 'China has an overall goal ... to become the leading country in the world ... [but] that is not going to happen on my watch.'<sup>19</sup>

The greater the tensions between the US and either the PRC or Russia, the more closely the latter two countries have cooperated. The Ukraine crisis of 2013–2014 accelerated the Russia–China rapprochement, pushing Moscow to seek economic opportunities in China in the wake of Western sanctions. China's efforts to develop a high-tech weapons system to counter the US military's edge has, in turn, seen it seek more Russian assistance.<sup>20</sup> China has indicated its support for Russian opposition to the expansion of NATO eastward. China

has also refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and abstained in a United Nations Security Council vote demanding that Moscow stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops.

There are also issues on which the two countries do not see eye to eye. China does not recognise Russia's seizure of Crimea or its support for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. Nor does China recognise the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics. China is also neutral regarding the South Kuril Islands, which are owned by Russia and claimed by Japan. Russia is a major arms supplier to India and Vietnam and a traditional ally of both. China has not opposed these arms sales despite at times stressed relations with these countries. Russia does not accept China's position on the South or East China seas, yet the two sides are consciously working to address historical mutual suspicions, cultural prejudices, geopolitical rivalry, and priorities.<sup>21</sup> Many commentators suggested conflict over influence in the Central Asian states, especially those bordering Xinjiang, was inevitable,<sup>22</sup> but due to careful management this has not happened. Despite China growing stronger economically and militarily, both sides are conscious of the need

to manage the asymmetry in power; Russia would not accept being a junior ally of China; Beijing understands this and acts accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

The US has on occasion sought to divide Russia and China — such as Henry Kissinger did in 1971 — but without much success.<sup>24</sup> In March 2022, the US and its ally Australia called on China to pressure Russia to stop the invasion of Ukraine thereby splitting the partnership. The 2021 RAND Corporation report on China–Russia cooperation found there was little the US could do to change the overall positive trajectory of Sino-Russian relations.<sup>25</sup> The notion that the US might successfully entice Moscow to align with Washington overlooks the motivations that cement the Sino-Russian partnership: a shared, deeply adversarial relationship with the United States and a desire to thwart American hegemonic ambitions.<sup>26</sup> Russia carefully avoids being drawn into the US–China conflict. Beijing similarly steers clear of the conflict between Moscow and Washington.<sup>27</sup> The more pressure the US-led West applies to both China and Russia, the closer their strategic cooperation will become, and with it the imperative to resolve any potential differences.

This is a contradiction at the heart of US policy.

China has denounced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) between the US, India, Japan, and Australia as a 'Cold War relic' and Russia has criticised it as part of US-led 'anti-China games'.<sup>28</sup> China and Russia have also both been highly critical of the AUKUS partnership, formed on 15 September 2021. Former Australian ambassador to the US Joe Hockey said the day after the announcement that the new Australian nuclear submarines would be useful in countering both Chinese and Russian naval forces in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> That same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian 赵立坚 criticised the grouping as a reflection of an 'outdated Cold War zero-sum mentality' that 'intensified' a regional arms race.<sup>30</sup> Russian commentators have categorised the future Australian nuclear submarines as 'a new potential threat for Russia's Northern (Pacific) Fleet'.<sup>31</sup> Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev described AUKUS as a military bloc directed against Russia and China, and an early version of an Asian NATO.<sup>32</sup>

The development of AUKUS and the Quad and statements like

Hockey's are symbolic of a US-led challenge to China's and Russia's strategic interests that is deepening their cooperation. The China–Russia relationship proceeds largely based on mutual interests, the commonality of their leaders' world views, the complementarity of the two economies, and geopolitical considerations.<sup>33</sup> The Ukraine crisis has put the durability of the China-Russia relationship to the test. Despite extensive pressure from the US and allies for China to distance itself from Russia and oppose the invasion of Ukraine, China has not walked away from the Strategic Partnership with Russia reaffirmed in Beijing on 4 February 2022. The core of the partnership is based in collective coordination and opposition to the US and its allies' pressure on Beijing and Moscow. As long as the US regards China as a strategic adversary and opposes Beijing's national interests, the rationale for the Beijing-Moscow partnership will be overwhelming. With Russia growing more dependent on China, political ties intensifying, and little chance of serious bilateral conflicts, Moscow and Beijing's strategic partnership will demand increasing Western attention in the coming years.<sup>34</sup>





# CHRONOLOGY

*The following outline chronology covers some of the key events discussed in this book.*

## 2021

**5–6 January:** Hong Kong police arrest more than 50 prodemocracy politicians in Hong Kong — the first of hundreds of arrests during 2021 of civil society leaders, activists, journalists and others under the National Security Law. By the end of the year, student unions, trade unions and many civil society groups will disband and independent media shut.

**11 January:** After being blocked from entering the People's Republic of China (PRC) six days earlier, a team from the World Health Organization arrives in

Wuhan to investigate the origins of COVID-19, but Chinese officials limit their access to crucial people, data and places.

**31 January:** China's first Civil Code comes into force.

**11 March:** The National People's Congress endorses the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for 2021–25, which calls for environmentally sustainable and innovation-led development, energy and food security, a strengthened domestic market and the development

of 'smart governance' as steps towards the 'basic realisation' of socialist modernisation by 2035. It is the first Five-Year Plan not to prescribe a target for economic growth.

**22 March:** The United States joins the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada in imposing further sanctions on China over human rights violations in Xinjiang, including travel bans and asset freezes against several Chinese officials. The United States had already banned all cotton and tomato imports from Xinjiang in January. In June, the PRC enacts the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law; many citizens join the boycotts of foreign companies boycotting goods from Xinjiang.

**26 April:** Beijing-born Chinese-American director Chloe Zhao 赵婷 wins an Academy Award for *Nomadland*, but the news is censored in China because several years earlier she had told a journalist the PRC was a place where 'there are lies everywhere'.

**31 May:** The World Health Organization declares the Delta variant of COVID-19 a 'variant of concern'.

**31 May:** China's family planning measures are further relaxed to allow couples to have three children.

**2 June:** Following a backlash against 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the crackdown on civil society in Hong Kong, Xi Jinping 习近平 tells senior Communist Party of China (CPC) officials they need to cultivate an image of a 'credible, loveable and respectable' China and 'expand its circle of friends'.

**24 June:** After a police raid of its offices and the arrest of its founder and other journalists, Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* publishes its last issue. Hongkongers queue for copies, which sell out in a single day.

**28 June:** Moscow and Beijing agree to extend the 2001 China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation. Relations between President Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the PRC and Russia generally, including cooperation in technology and defence, grow increasingly close in 2021.

**1 July:** The Communist Party of China celebrates the centenary of its founding

in 1921 with nationwide celebrations, patriotic film and television shows and an education campaign. The date of the founding was closer to 23 July 1921 but, when they first thought to celebrate it, neither Mao Zedong 毛泽东 nor his comrades could remember the date, so they settled on 1 July.

**17–31 July:** Extreme wet weather leads to catastrophic flooding in Henan province; authorities report more than 300 deaths.

**16 August:** Chinese-Canadian singer-actor Kris Wu 吴亦凡 is arrested after allegations he raped 31 women, including minors. One of the most prominent of numerous #MeToo cases in 2021, it is also one of the few in which the accused does not escape punishment, although by year's end, his case had not yet come to trial.

**17 August:** In a speech to the CPC's Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs, General Secretary Xi describes 'common prosperity' as essential to socialism and necessary to balance growth and financial stability. Soon after, the committee calls for a 'reasonable adjustment' to 'excessive incomes' and demands China's

wealthiest citizens 'give back more to society'.

**1 September:** China's Data Security Law comes into effect. It focuses on protecting national security regarding cross-border data transfers but is not entirely clear on the subject of which data-processing activities might require review on national security grounds.

**15 September:** The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia announce a trilateral security pact, AUKUS. Beijing condemns the pact as a threat to regional security and the risk of nuclear proliferation.

**16 September:** A herd of elephants returns home to Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve after an epic journey of 18 months that took them to the outskirts of the provincial capital of Kunming. Their plight draws attention to the effects of land development on shrinking wildlife habitats more generally.

**24 September:** Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou 孟晚舟 is freed from detention in Canada after the United States drops its extradition request

against her. Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, imprisoned on charges of espionage but widely regarded as political ‘hostages’, are released to fly home the same day Meng returns to China.

**6 October:** Taiwanese Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng 邱國正, responding to escalating military provocations and activities around the island by PRC forces in 2021, describes cross-Strait tensions as the worst they have been in 40 years.

**25 October:** Amnesty International announces it will close its offices in Hong Kong, including its regional headquarters, by the end of the year. It says the National Security Law has made it ‘effectively impossible for human rights organisations in Hong Kong to work freely and without fear of serious reprisals from the government’.

**1 November:** The Personal Information Protection Law comes into effect. It covers the processing of personal data within Chinese borders. It increases privacy protections regarding data use by corporations but not necessarily when it comes to government agencies

and criminal investigations or issues of national security.

**2 November:** Tennis champion Peng Shuai 彭帥, a former world number one doubles player as ranked by the international Women’s Tennis Association, posts an agonised account of her relationship with retired Politburo elder Zhang Gaoli, accusing him of forcing her to have sex against her will. The post is quickly removed but sparks global outrage. Peng disappears from view, reappearing in what seem to be highly stage-managed photos and videos promulgated by the *Global Times* and other propaganda organs.

**11 November:** The CPC Central Committee adopts its third History Resolution since 1945. This one devotes approximately two-thirds of its text to confirming Xi Jinping’s leadership as vital to China’s rise. It enshrines the ‘two establishments’ — of Xi as ‘core’ leader and Xi Jinping Thought as official doctrine.

**15 November:** US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi meet virtually to discuss bilateral issues, challenges and cooperation, including on climate crisis mitigation.

**15 November:** The Beijing Stock Exchange, China's third, is launched. It will focus on innovation-oriented small and medium-sized enterprises.

**26 November:** The World Health Organization declares the Omicron variant of COVID-19 a variant of concern.

**27 November:** Hong Kong filmmaker Kiwi Chow Kwun-wai's 周冠威 documentary about the 2019 protest movement, *Revolution of Our Times*, wins best documentary at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards. Also screened at the Cannes Film Festival, the film cannot be shown in Hong Kong, where new laws allow films to be banned on 'national security' grounds.

**3 December:** Representatives from Laos and the PRC launch the \$5.9 billion railway link between the two

countries — the first segment of a railway line that, when complete, will connect south-western China with Singapore.

**9 December:** Nicaragua breaks off relations with Taipei to establish them instead with Beijing. Taipei now has full diplomatic relations with only 13 of 193 United Nations member states, plus the Vatican.

**16 December:** Hu Xijin 胡锡进, the controversial editor of the *Global Times*, announces his retirement.

**22 December:** The city of Xi'an is locked down after COVID-19 cases are discovered there, although 85.6 percent of China's population of 1.4 billion people have already had two shots of a COVID-19 vaccine.

**23 December:** US President Biden signs the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act into law; the US State Department's announcement refers to 'the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang'.

**24 December:** The PRC adopts its first Wetlands Protection Law.



# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION — From Crisis to Contradiction: New Normals

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## FORUM — Old Tales, New Applications

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## CHAPTER 1 — Smart Governance, Smarter Surveillance

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## FORUM — Justice

### Controversial High-Profile Detention and Prosecution of Foreigners

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## CHAPTER 2 — Kaleidoscope of Contradictions

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## FOCUS — Labour

### The Sanhe Gods

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## FORUM — Just Over the Border

### Joy and Fear: Chinese Media and the Taliban's Victory in Afghanistan

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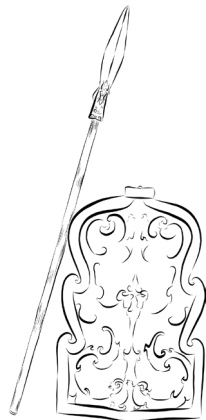
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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Ausma Bernot** is a PhD candidate in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University. Ausma's doctoral research explores the dynamic interaction between surveillance technologies and social context and questions the multifaceted conditions that allow for the totalisation of surveillance in China.

**David Brophy** is a senior lecturer in modern Chinese history at the University of Sydney. His scholarly interests centre on Xinjiang and the Qing empire, and he also writes about Australia–China relations. His most recent book is *China Panic: Australia's*

*Alternative to Paranoia and Pandering* (Black Inc., 2021).

**Becky Shu Chen** is a passionate wildlife conservationist. As the Technical Advisor of the Zoological Society of London, she has a substantial career focus on threatened species conservation, human–wildlife coexistence and environmental education. As a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Asia Elephant Specialist Group, Becky also supports transboundary and trans-sectoral collaborations on Asian elephant research and conservation.

**Natasha Fijn** is the Director of the Mongolia Institute in the College of Asia and the Pacific at The Australian National University. She has been awarded an ARC Future Fellowship (2022–26) to conduct a multispecies anthropological approach to investigating influenza with Mongolia as a field location.

**Benjamin Herscovitch** is a research fellow jointly appointed to the School of Regulation and Global Governance and the National Security College, both at The Australian National University. He is the author of the newsletter ‘Beijing to Canberra and Back’ and his research is focused on China’s economic statecraft and Australia–China relations.

**Linda Jaivin** is the author of *The Shortest History of China*, among 11 other books, a literary translator and editorial associate of the Australian Centre on China in the World.

**Yun Jiang** is the inaugural Australian Institute of International Affairs China Matters Fellow. She has been published and cited widely on China-related topics, with a focus on Australia’s policies on China.

**Esther Sunkyung Klein** is a guest editor of the *China Story Yearbook* in 2021 and is a senior lecturer in premodern Chinese studies at The Australian National University, focusing on Chinese philosophy and historiography. Her book, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song* (2019), traces premodern Chinese attitudes towards authorship and the representation of history.

**Lili Song** is a lecturer in law at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Her research focuses on refugee and immigration law.

**Delia Lin** is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies in the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on discourse, ideology and social governance in a changing China, with a special interest in the role imperial Confucian–legalist statecraft plays in Chinese governance today. Her monograph, *Civilising Citizens in Post-Mao China: Understanding the Rhetoric of Suzhi* (Routledge, 2017), critically examines how the discourse about human quality and shame is entrenched in contemporary Chinese politics.

**Kevin Lin** is a visiting fellow at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and researches migrant workers' collective actions, state-society relations and platform economy labour in China.

**Fengming Lu** is a lecturer in the Department of Political and Social Change and an academic member of the Australian Centre on China in the World, The Australian National University. His research interests include authoritarian politics and a range of topics in Chinese politics, such as elite politics, political selection, information and propaganda, and political economy. His works have been published in *Political Communication and Economics of Education Review*.

**Kevin Magee** is a policy fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World, The Australian National University. He had a long career in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade during which he was the Australian Representative in Taipei, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Deputy Head of Mission in Moscow. At different times, he was in charge of the department's dealings with bilateral relations with Russia and China. Kevin led the taskforce that established the

National Foundation for Australia-China Relations and was its interim CEO. His main research interests are China-Russia relations, cross-Taiwan Strait relations and the Australia-China bilateral relationship.

**Uchralt Otede** is a research fellow at the School of Culture, History and Language at The Australian National University. His research focuses on the grassroots environmental self-help movement in China and Mongolia.

**Gregory V. Raymond** is a lecturer in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University, researching South-East Asian politics and foreign relations. He is the author of *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (NIAS Press, 2018) and the lead author of *The United States-Thai Alliance: History, Memory and Current Developments* (Routledge, 2021). He convenes the ASEAN Australia Defence Postgraduate Scholarship Program and the Global China Research Spoke for the ANU Centre on China in the World and is ANU Press editor for the Asia Pacific Security series. An emerging research

area is the integration of the Mekong subregion with southern China, which he is exploring through multiple lenses including physical connectivity, geoeconomics and subregional community.

**Annie Luman Ren** is a literary scholar and postdoctoral fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World, The Australian National University. Her research focuses on the poetics of the mid-Qing novel *Honglouloumeng* 紅樓夢 (also known as *The Story of the Stone*) and, by extension, the poetic world of the Bannerman (*qiren* 旗人) that underpins this literary masterpiece.

**Craig A. Smith** is a historian of modern East Asia. He is Senior Lecturer of Translation Studies at the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute and the author of *Chinese Asianism: 1894–1945* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021).

**Graeme Smith** is a fellow in The Australian National University's Department of Pacific Affairs. His research explores Chinese investment, migration, military engagement, technology and aid in the Asia-Pacific. He also hosts the *Little Red Podcast* with Louisa Lim.

**Wen-Ti Sung** is a political scientist and sessional lecturer in the Taiwan studies program at The Australian National University; he is also a MOFA Taiwan Fellowship visiting scholar at the National Taiwan University. His research covers the US–China–Taiwan trilateral relationship, focusing particularly on US foreign policy think tanks, Chinese political norms and Taiwanese elections.

**Susan Trevaskes** is a professor of Chinese studies at Griffith University, specialising in the areas of Chinese criminal justice and politics and legal studies.

**Pan Wang** is Senior Lecturer in Chinese and Asian Studies at the University of New South Wales. She is author of *Love and Marriage in Globalizing China* (Routledge, 2015 and 2018). Her research areas include love, marriage and gender in China and Chinese media and communication. You can find her on Twitter: @panwang119

**Katherine Whitworth** completed her doctorate at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses include political legitimacy and social movements. She has written on people's perceptions

of government administration and policy implementation in the areas of labour relations and social welfare in China. Her current research examines contentious repertoires seen during the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

**Qin Yang** is a doctoral student at the Australian Centre on China in the World, The Australian National University. Her research topics include visual forms of classical commentaries in Song China and Chinese religious texts from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. From February 2022, she takes up a position as a postdoctoral research associate in the Classics and Archaeology Department at the University of Nottingham.

**Jason Young** is the Director of the New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre and Associate Professor of International Relations at Te Herenga Waka — Victoria University of Wellington. His research focuses on Chinese international relations and New Zealand–China relations.

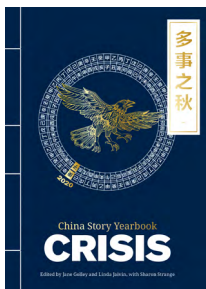
**Denghua Zhang** is a research fellow at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University. His research focuses largely on Chinese foreign policy, foreign aid and China in the Asia-Pacific, especially the Pacific.

**Yujie Zhu** is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, The Australian National University. His research focuses on ethical and political issues that emerge through cultural heritage, memory and tourism. His recent books include *Heritage Tourism* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), *Heritage Politics in China* (Routledge, 2020, with Christina Maags), and *Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018). He serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Anthropological Research*, *Cultural Geographies*, and the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*.





## PREVIOUS *CHINA STORY* YEARBOOKS



### **2020: *Crisis***

The China Story Yearbook 2020: Crisis surveys the multiple crises of the year of the Metal Rat, including the catastrophic mid-year floods that sparked fears about the stability of the Three Gorges Dam. It looks at how Chinese women fared through the pandemic, from the rise in domestic violence to portraits of female sacrifice on the medical front line to the trolling of a famous dancer for being childless. It also examines the downward-spiralling Sino-Australian relationship, the difficult ‘co-morbidities’ of China’s relations with the US, the end of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ in Hong Kong, the simmering border conflict with India, and the rise of pandemic-related anti-Chinese racism. The Yearbook also explores the responses to crisis of, among others, Daoists, Buddhists, and humourists — because when all else fails, there’s always philosophy, prayer, and laughter.



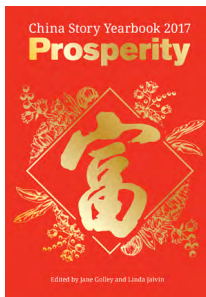
### 2019: *China Dreams*

The year 2019 marked a number of significant anniversaries for the People's Republic of China (PRC), each representing different 'Chinese dreams'. There was the centennial of the May Fourth Movement — a dream of patriotism and cultural renewal. The PRC celebrated its seventieth anniversary — a dream of revolution and national strength. It was also thirty years since the student-led Protest Movement of 1989 — dreams of democracy and free expression crushed by Party-State dreams of unity and stability. Many of these 'dreams' recurred in new guises in 2019. Xi Jinping tightened his grip on power at home while calling for all citizens to 'defend China's honour abroad'. Escalating violence in Hong Kong, the ongoing suppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and deteriorating Sino-US relations dominated the headlines. Alongside stories about China's advances in artificial intelligence and genetically modified babies, and its ambitions in the Antarctic and outer space, these issues fuelled discussion about what Xi's own 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation means for Chinese citizens and the rest of the world.



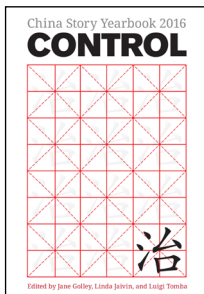
### 2018: *Power*

In 2018, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, by most measures, more powerful than at any other time in its history and had become one of the most powerful countries in the world. Its economy faced serious challenges, including from the ongoing 'trade war' with the US, but still ranked as the world's second largest. Its Belt and Road Initiative, meanwhile, continued to carve paths of influence and economic integration across several continents. A deft combination of policy, investment, and entrepreneurship has also turned the PRC into a global 'techno-power'. It aims, with a good chance of success, at becoming a global science and technology leader by 2049 — one hundred years from the founding of the PRC.



### 2017: Prosperity

A 'moderately prosperous society' with no Chinese individual left behind — that's the vision for China set out by Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping in a number of important speeches in 2017. 'Moderate' prosperity may seem like a modest goal for a country with more billionaires (609 at last count) than the US. But the 'China Story' is a complex one. The *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity* surveys the important events, pronouncements, and personalities that defined 2017. It also presents a range of perspectives, from the global to the individual, the official to the unofficial, from mainland China to Hong Kong and Taiwan. Together, the stories present a richly textured portrait of a nation that in just forty years has lifted itself from universal poverty to (unequally distributed) wealth, changing itself and the world in the process.



### 2016: Control

'More cosmopolitan, more lively, more global' is how the *China Daily* summed up the year 2016 in China. It was also a year of more control. The Communist Party of China laid down strict new rules of conduct for its members, continued to assert its dominance over everything from the Internet to the South China Sea and announced a new Five-Year Plan that Greenpeace called 'quite possibly the most important document in the world in setting the pace of acting on climate change'.



### 2015: Pollution

This *Yearbook* explores the broader ramifications of pollution in the People's Republic for culture, society law and social activism, as well as the Internet, language, thought, and approaches to history. It looks at how it affects economic and political developments, urban change, and China's regional and global posture. The Communist Party of China, led by 'Chairman of Everything' Xi Jinping, meanwhile, has subjected mainland society to increasingly repressive control in its new determination to rid the country of Western 'spiritual pollutants' while achieving cultural purification through 'propaganda and ideological work'.



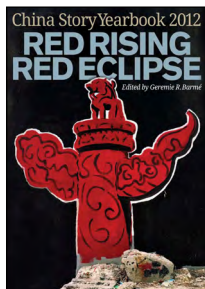
### 2014: *Shared Destiny*

The People's Republic of China under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and Xi Jinping, has declared that it shares in the destiny of the countries of the Asia and Pacific region, as well as of nations that are part of an intertwined national self-interest. The *China Story Yearbook 2014* takes the theme of Shared Destiny 共同命运 and considers it in the context of China's current and future potential.



### 2013: *Civilising China*

As China becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, it also expects to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and as a formidable civilisation. Through a survey and analysis of China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, mores, the Internet, history, and thought — in which the concept of 'civilising' plays a prominent role — *China Story Yearbook 2013* offers insights into the country today and its dreams for the future.



### 2012: *Red Rising, Red Eclipse*

The authors of *Red Rising, Red Eclipse* survey China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, human rights and economics, the Internet, history, and thought. This inaugural *China Story Yearbook* offers an informed perspective on recent developments in China and provides a context for understanding ongoing issues that will resonate far beyond the Dragon Year of 2012–2013.

