

MADE CHINA

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**THE CHINESE WORKER
GOES ABROAD**



MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere

AIMS AND SCOPE:

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

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL P.8

BRIEFS P.10

OP-ED P.15

FEAR IN THE CLASSROOM: HOW
HONG KONG'S NATIONAL SECURITY
LAW SUPPRESSES ACADEMIC AND
INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM P.15
Shui-yin Sharon YAM

CHINA COLUMNS P.24

MEDICAL DISTURBANCES AS A FORM
OF PATIENT ACTIVISM IN CHINA? P.26
Xiao TAN
Tianyang LIU

THE CHONGQING MODEL ONE DECADE
ON P.31
Yueran ZHANG

FOCUS P.41

MIGRATION AND THE GLOBALISATION
OF CHINESE CAPITAL P.42
NYÍRI Pál

AFRICA DRIFTERS P.48
Miriam DRIESSEN

DOING TIME, MAKING MONEY AT A
CHINESE STATE FIRM IN ANGOLA P.52
Cheryl Mei-ting SCHMITZ

THE DOUBLE-TONGUED DILEMMA:
TRANSLATING CHINESE WORKERS'
RELATIONS IN MONGOLIA P.58
ZHU Ruiyi

BUILDING THE NEW MACAU: A PORTRAIT
OF CHINESE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN
SIHANOUKVILLE P.66
Ivan FRANCESCHINI

REDEFINING 'LABOUR' MIGRATION FROM
A SINO-JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE P.74
Jamie COATES

ENCOUNTER ETHNOGRAPHY AND MAKING
THE 'MADE IN ITALY' BRAND: CHINESE
MIGRANT EXPERIENCES P.80
Elizabeth L. KRAUSE

LEGAL REMEDIES FOR CHINA'S OVERSEAS
WORKERS P.86
Aaron HALEGUA
Xiaohui BAN

FORUM P.92

TRANSFORMATION OF SHEN KONG
BORDERLANDS P.93
Mary Ann O'DONNELL
Jonathan BACH
Denise Y. HO

HONG KONG, CHINA: THE BORDER
AS PALIMPSEST P.94
Denise Y. HO

EMBODIED BORDERS: THE SINO-BRITISH
MARITIME FRONTIER, 1950-1957 P.102
Alice DU Liangliang

FROM THE THIRD FRONT TO THE SECOND
LINE: THE CONSTRUCTION SOLDIERS OF
SHENZHEN P.108
Taomo ZHOU

BORDER AT THE CENTRE OF MYTH:
FISHING VILLAGE, CAIWUWEI,
SHENZHEN P.114
Na FU

NARRATING MOBILITY AS AN
ACHIEVEMENT ON THE SHENZHEN-HONG
KONG BORDER P.119
Dodom KIM

THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF SPACE
WITHIN A VIRTUAL BORDER: THE HONG
KONG STOCK EXCHANGE'S TRADING
HALL P.125
Sben KORSH

POLITICALLY CORRECT MASKS: NAVIGATING
THE CHINA-HONG KONG BORDER DURING
COVID-19 P.132
Xin SUN

BORDER AS SLUICE: TOWARDS
A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE
SHEN KONG BORDERLANDS P.137
Jonathan BACH
Mary Ann O'DONNELL

CONVERSATIONS P.142

WORKERS AND CHANGE IN CHINA:
A CONVERSATION WITH MANFRED
ELFSTROM P.143
Ivan FRANCESCHINI

THE CHILDREN OF CHINA'S GREAT
MIGRATION: A CONVERSATION WITH
RACHEL MURPHY P.148
Nicholas LOUBERE

CONTRIBUTORS P.154

BIBLIOGRAPHY P.157

The Chinese Worker Goes Abroad

China's increased global engagements in recent years have been the source of unending controversies. While public attention generally focuses on geopolitical, economic, or even environmental issues, labour also plays an important part in emerging narratives surrounding the 'spectre of global China'. The media in countries that have received a significant influx of investment from mainland China has often complained about 'invasions' of Chinese workers, who are allegedly snatching away job opportunities from local workers. In many places, there are pervasive rumours that Chinese workers are nothing less than convicted felons sent abroad by the Party-State to expiate their crimes, which would explain why they seem to work without interruption day and night, at a pace that some believe no free person would deem acceptable. This has also led to concerns that workers from China are playing an important role in driving down labour standards in countries where institutions are weak and legal enforcement lacking. Inflows of Chinese workers have also been associated with surges in crime and prostitution that supposedly have wrought havoc on local communities. In the best of circumstances, these narratives flatten the figure of the Chinese worker abroad into that of an agent unwittingly promoting the agenda of the Chinese Party-State abroad; in the worst, they frame these overseas Chinese labourers as criminals. In so doing, the complex dilemmas that these workers face, their inner conflicts, and the rights violations that they themselves are subjected to go unnoticed.

The special section of this issue includes eight essays that we hope will contribute to overcoming these prejudices and provide

some glimpses into the subjectivities and the plight of Chinese workers toiling abroad today. **Nyíri Pal** recounts how the globalisation of capital from the People's Republic of China has been accompanied by a growing range of human flows. Since the late 1980s, flows of small traders selling consumer goods, labour migrants working on state projects, and students have expanded to much of the world and have been joined by expatriate managers and technicians, tourists, and lifestyle migrants. **Miriam Driessen** describes how increased mobility from China to Africa over the past two decades has given birth to the figure of the 'Africa drifter' (非漂). Employed and driven, yet restless and plagued by the lack of a sense of security, many Chinese who move to Africa for work, especially those attached to large-scale infrastructure projects, find themselves afloat, caught between remaining and returning. **Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz** challenges popular accounts of the expansion of Chinese capital in Africa as a rapid and exciting process of furious movement and violent transformation, showing how the experience of Chinese construction workers in Angola reveals repetitive rhythms of monotony and boredom. **Zhu Ruiyi** draws on her fieldwork at a Chinese-owned fluorspar mine in Mongolia to shed light on the tension between bilingual and monolingual Chinese workers in the Sino-Mongolian industrial sphere. **Ivan Franceschini** delves into the plight of Chinese construction workers in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, after a sudden ban on the online gambling industry led to the collapse of the local economy. **Jamie Coates** reflects on the experiences of Chinese people in Japan to offer some insights into how we should understand international labour migration in East Asia today. **Elizabeth Krause** draws on her ethnographic research among Chinese migrants working in the fast-fashion sector in Prato, Italy, to trace the contours of what encounters between the 'Made in Italy' and 'Made in China' labels have produced. Finally, **Aaron Halegua** and **Ban Xiaohui** examine the legal mechanisms available to protect the labour rights of overseas Chinese workers.

The issue also includes a forum titled ‘Transformations of Shen Kong Borderlands’ edited by **Mary Ann O’Donnell**, **Jonathan Bach**, and **Denise Y. Ho**. This collection of essays offers historical and ethnographic accounts of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong borderlands as sites where cross-border policies, situations, and aspirations continue to inform and transform everyday life. **Denise Y. Ho** recounts the dramatic political changes witnessed along the border over its 99-year history. **Alice Du Liangliang** explains how this process was not only administrative, but also entailed moving islanders to the mainland and settling boat-dwellers in harbours, offering critical insight into how the border increasingly came to anchor identities. **Taomo Zhou** focuses on the experience of the People’s Liberation Army Engineering Corps in Shenzhen to draw attention to the way multiple borders intersected in the embodied labour of this unusual group, which was transferred from the Third Front to help build the city. **Na Fu** explores how the border myth shapes daily life on both sides, arguing that the border should be interpreted as a web of meaning that is not reducible to its observed function. **Dodom Kim** examines how cross-border mobility operates in Shenzhen, focusing in particular on the structure of discourse that renders mobility a morally salient defining feature of the identity of the city. **Sben Korsh** offers a brief account of the recent history of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange’s trading hall, showing how this physical structure is an integral space within the economic border of mainland China—a border crossing facilitating the movement of corporate ownership between China and global financial markets. **Sun Xin** tracks how Chinese and Hong Kong nationalisms have materialised at the border, focusing on increasing efforts to make political allegiances visible. **Jonathan Bach** and **Mary Ann O’Donnell** conclude the forum with a reflection that conceptualises Shen Kong through the analytical lens of the border as sluice.

The issue opens with an op-ed by **Shui-yin Sharon Yam** on how the new Hong Kong National Security Law poses a threat to education and intellectual freedom that goes well beyond the boundaries of the city. In the China Columns section, **Xiao Tan** and **Tianyang Liu** offer a take on the phenomenon of ‘medical disturbances’ in China through the lens of patient activism, while **Yueran Zhang** revisits the Chongqing Model one decade after its demise. Finally, we conclude with conversations with **Manfred Elfstrom** and **Rachel Murphy** about their recently published books on labour unrest and left-behind children in China.■

The Editors

BRIEFS

Sept-Dec 2020

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Court Ruling Spells Setback for LGBTQ Activism

A Chinese court ruling in favour of a publisher of homophobic textbooks dealt another blow to LGBTQ advocates in China. On 3 September 2020, the Suyu District People's Court in Suqian, Jiangsu Province, issued a verdict on a case wherein an LGBTQ activist under the pseudonym of Xixi sued Jinan University Press (JUP) over textbook content deemed discriminatory against the LGBTQ community, including calling homosexuality a 'psychological disorder'. The verdict read: 'Publishing houses should regulate the quality of their books based on laws and regulations, but they are not responsible for censoring academic opinions or cognitive dissonance.' The court also told Xixi that while the two parties to the lawsuit held differing opinions on whether or not homosexuality could be classified as a 'sexual orientation disorder', the textbook did not contain 'factual errors'. While Xixi planned to appeal against the verdict, the court ruling marked a temporary end to a three-year-long lawsuit. Xixi, then a student at South China Agricultural University, first noticed the homophobic content in *Mental Health Education for College Students* in 2016, which described being gay as 'abnormal' and 'deranged'. Having reached out to JUP to no avail, she decided to take the issue to court in 2017. The initial hearing of the case was held on 3 July 2017, but the trial was then repeatedly delayed. While China stopped classifying homosexuality as a mental illness in 2001, Ge Ang, the lawyer representing Xixi, said some of the legal language remained ambiguous. (JL)

(Sources: QQ News; RadiiChina; Sixth Tone; Sohu; SupChina)

China Holds the Line on Xinjiang in Spite of International Criticism

In the last quarter of 2020, the Chinese authorities continued to defend their controversial policies in Xinjiang. In response to denunciations from scholars and civil society groups, in early September, Chinese officials acknowledged substantial declines in birth rates in Xinjiang but denied there had been forced sterilisations in the region. On 17 September, China released a white paper on employment and labour rights in Xinjiang, claiming that, 'through its proactive labour and employment policies', living standards in Xinjiang continued to improve. On 26 September, President Xi Jinping asserted at the Xinjiang Work Conference that the Party's Xinjiang strategy was 'completely correct' and called for 'continuing the direction of Sinicising Islam'. During a United Nations meeting on 6 October, Germany led a group of 39 countries to urge China to respect Uyghurs' rights, while Turkey separately expressed its concerns about human rights in Xinjiang. In response, Cuba and another 44 countries expressed their support for China's policy. On 7 October, Disney was embroiled in a public relations storm as it emerged that its *Mulan* movie was partly shot in Xinjiang. The company justified its decision to film there as made 'in the interest of authenticity'. Other Western companies found themselves having to justify their links to Xinjiang, as more evidence of forced labour in the region's factories and cotton production came to light. While H&M and the Better Cotton Initiative decided to cut ties with Xinjiang, in November, Volkswagen defended its decision to continue its car factory operation in the area. Meanwhile, in the United States, Apple, Nike, and Coca-Cola were reported to be lobbying against the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act*, which on 22 September 2020 passed the House by 406 to 3 votes. (JL)

(Sources: ABC News; BBC; CNN; Human Rights Watch 1; Human Rights Watch 2; Radio Free Asia; The New York Times; Xinhua; Yahoo)

A Permanent Crackdown on Lawyers and Activists

China's crackdown on dissidents and activists showed no sign of abating in the final quarter of 2020. In early September, the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) workers known as the 'Changsha Three' were secretly tried for 'subversion of state power'. At the same time, publisher and art curator Geng Xiaonan and her husband, who had supported Chinese dissidents, including Professor Xu Zhangrun, were detained in Beijing on suspicion of operating an 'illegal business'. On 22 September, Ren Zhiqiang, a real estate tycoon critical of the Communist Party leadership, was sentenced to 18 years in prison. While citizen journalist Chen Qiushi resurfaced in late September after his disappearance in February, poet Wang Zang and his wife were arrested in Yunnan for 'incitement to subvert state power'. On 7 October, Chinese-Australian Yang Hengjun was formally charged with espionage after being detained in Beijing for nearly two years. In a crackdown on illegal access to foreign websites, a person named Zhang Tao was admonished on 24 October for using a virtual private network (VPN) to visit *Wikipedia*. On 2 December, the Haidian District Court in Beijing began hearing a landmark case wherein Xianzi, a former intern at *CCTV*, accused Zhu Jun, a prominent TV host, of sexual harassment. An indictment sheet released on 16 November showed that citizen journalist Zhang Zhan faced up to five years in jail for spreading false information. The year ended on a dramatic note with both Zhang and lawyer Yu Wensheng sentenced to four years, for spreading false information and inciting subversion, respectively. Roughly at the same time, *Bloomberg News* employee Haze Fan and Chinese filmmaker Du Bin were detained, the former on suspicion of endangering national security and the latter for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'. (JL)

(Sources: ABC News; BBC 1; BBC 2; Human Rights in China; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The Globe and Mail)

Hong Kong's Autonomy Further Eroded

In the final quarter of 2020, Hong Kong saw its autonomy from Beijing further eroded. In September, the Hong Kong police announced new media accreditation rules, which critics said would severely curb press freedom in the city. On 24 September, prodemocracy activist Joshua Wong was arrested by the Hong Kong police but later released on bail. One week later, Chinese authorities in Shenzhen announced official approval for the arrest of 12 Hong Kong activists, who would face trial in mainland China after being snatched in late August when they allegedly attempted to escape to Taiwan by boat. At the end of December, 10 of them were sentenced to between seven months and three years in jail for illegal border crossing. While seven Hong Kongers were acquitted of riot charges in late October, student activist Tony Chung was denied bail, and Choy Yuk Ling, producer of a documentary about the 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks, was arrested by the Hong Kong police. A decision on 11 November by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress resulted in immediate disqualification of four prodemocracy lawmakers in Hong Kong, which triggered all the remaining prodemocracy lawmakers to resign in protest. On 2 December, prodemocracy activists Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Ivan Lam were jailed for their role in the 2019 protests. On 6 December, Ted Hui, a former prodemocracy lawmaker who fled to the United Kingdom following his resignation in November, said his and his family's bank accounts in Hong Kong appeared to have been frozen. On 11 December 2020, media tycoon Jimmy Lai became the first high-profile figure to be charged under the new National Security Law. On 23 December, he was granted bail, but then at the end of the month he was returned to jail. (JL)

(Sources: Al Jazeera; Hong Kong Free Press 1; Reuters; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; SupChina; Sydney Morning Herald; The Guardian; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; The Washington Post)

Express Delivery Workers on Strike

In the third quarter of 2020, couriers across China went on strike over unpaid wages and poor working conditions. These couriers are the backbone of China's ecommerce industry, whose logistics companies have been locked in an intense price war since May 2019. As a result, costs have been pushed down to local franchises that employ couriers to complete the last leg of deliveries, with many franchises unable to pay their employees. Couriers often lack formal employment contracts, making disputes difficult to resolve. Their protests intensified around the online shopping event 'Singles Day' (11 November), and news of the strikes spread over Chinese social media, with the hashtag #DeliveryWorkerStrike (#快递罢工) receiving more than 13 million views on Weibo. Food-delivery platform Eleme and online shopping platform Meituan were particularly targeted in the protests. It was reported that both companies had gradually decreased delivery times and added penalties for late deliveries, which led to a rising number of traffic injuries and deaths. In the first half of 2019, Shanghai police reported almost one incident per day involving food couriers. Recent investigations describe how couriers are forced to deliver up to 12 meals at once and rely on poor navigation systems that often direct them against traffic. Many couriers who are involved in accidents are unable to make insurance claims, forcing them to bear the costs out of pocket, and surveys show that their average income is not enough to meet their basic needs. In response to the protests, Eleme and Meituan published open letters vowing to improve conditions, but many observers remained sceptical about their willingness to address the underlying structural issues. For example, Eleme promised to extend delivery times, but only if customers selected that option on their order. (AK)

(Sources: China Labour Bulletin 1; China Labour Bulletin 2; Rest of World; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; QQ 1; QQ 2; QQ 3; QQ 4; Sixth Tone; South China Morning Post; TechCrunch; The New York Times)

As Shenzhen Legislates on Paid Holidays, Labour Unrest Erupts in Shanghai

Shenzhen's municipal government in October released new policies that purportedly aimed to better protect workers' wellbeing. The policies are outlined in a set of health regulations that combat air pollution, improve food safety, and support mental and physical health. One rule requires local businesses to enforce mandatory annual paid leave for their employees—the first provision of its kind in any Chinese city. While employees are already legally entitled to this leave, many in Shenzhen choose not to use it for fear of falling behind on work or facing consequences from management. Shenzhen's startup industry is notorious for its intense work culture—widely known as '996' (working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week) and, more recently, as '007' (working from 12am to 12pm, seven days a week). Some are sceptical that the new regulations will be enough to change workers' behaviour, since many companies remain hypercompetitive, project-based environments. More concerns were raised in early November, when the Supreme People's Court issued an opinion that allows the southern metropolis more autonomy to legislate in the labour field to ensure the competitiveness of its companies. While Shenzhen was making the news for its reforms, workers elsewhere were taking to the streets. In Shanghai in mid-December, thousands of temporary workers gathered outside the Taiwanese-invested Apple supplier Pegatron's facility in the city, clashing with the large numbers of police sent by the authorities to block their entrance to the factory. The trigger for the protest was the company's attempt to transfer thousands of workers to another facility in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province. Workers who refused to relocate would be fired and forfeit their bonuses, which could amount to more than 10,000 yuan—a substantial proportion of their income. (AK)

(Sources: China Labour Bulletin; Inkstone; Radio Free Asia; Reuters; SupChina; Supreme People's Court; ZOL)



OP-ED

Fear in the Classroom

How Hong Kong's National Security Law Suppresses Academic and Intellectual Freedom

Shui-yin Sharon YAM

On 30 June 2020, the Hong Kong Government announced that the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) would come into effect before the public had even laid eyes on its content. Since the law is broad and, some argue, purposely vague, it grants the Hong Kong and Chinese governments extrajudicial authority to criminalise dissenting voices under the guise of national security and anti-subversion (Wei 2020). Since then, the Hong Kong Police have used the law to deter street protests and criminalise activists, claiming that popular protest slogans such as ‘Liberate Hong Kong’ and ‘Disband the Police’ have violated the NSL because they are seditious (Amnesty International 2020; Wong 2020a). In conjunction with the suppression of protests and freedom of speech, the NSL has had a chilling effect in education. As the government crackdown on protests and dissent intensifies, teachers have borne the brunt of Beijing’s and Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s ire. Just a few days after the implementation of the law, pro-establishment lawmakers began calling for the installation of video cameras in classrooms to monitor teachers’ speech (RTHK 2020a).

At the same time, the threat the NSL poses to education and intellectual freedom extends beyond Hong Kong. The law has been used to target activists abroad, including a US citizen, Samuel Chu, who has been lobbying American lawmakers as the founder and director of the Hong Kong Democracy Council (Yang 2020). During the pandemic, classes in Hong Kong

and many other countries have moved online. The use of videoconferencing platforms and recordings intensifies the threat of surveillance and criminalisation transnationally for both teachers and students, which in turn encourages self-censorship. The co-occurrence of the NSL and online teaching during the pandemic prompts educators to drastically reexamine and adapt their pedagogical practices to protect the safety and privacy of students and instructors. At the same time, it poses complex questions about risk assessment, educational values, and local and transnational pedagogy: Can instructors—including those in higher education—protect themselves and their students from state persecution while fostering intellectual spaces for critical deliberation about politics and democracy? Is it ethical for instructors to self-censor or censor their students as a form of protection? How can we as educators navigate the tension between political persecution and intellectual freedom?

As a diasporic Hong Konger and educator, I write this essay to illustrate the severe impact the NSL has had on classroom spaces and pedagogical practices, both in Hong Kong and in a transnational context. As teaching becomes a politically high-stakes activity, this moment calls for educators across state boundaries to collectively create and enact praxis that provides educational spaces in which students can engage in open deliberation and cultivate information and media literacy; amplifies the voices and experiences of Hong Kong teachers without compromising their safety; and creates open-access information databases, bibliographies, syllabuses, and lesson plans to supplement textbooks that have been censored.

How the NSL Has Altered Student Activism

In 2019, Hong Kong students played a key role in the prodemocracy movement. During the protests, secondary school students organised large-scale assemblies, formed human chains outside their schools, boycotted classes, and sang ‘Do You Hear the People Sing’ over the Chinese national anthem on public occasions (Young Post Staff 2019). Under the NSL, such student activities are considered to be seditious and hence are prohibited. Articles 9 and 10 of the NSL stipulate that the Hong Kong Government will promote national security education and will take ‘necessary measures’ to supervise and regulate matters concerning national security in schools and universities. Classroom spaces, in other words, are now under state surveillance and control.

At the same time, the threat the NSL poses to education and intellectual freedom extends beyond Hong Kong. The law has been used to target activists abroad, including a US citizen, Samuel Chu, who has been lobbying American lawmakers as the founder and director of the Hong Kong Democracy Council.

A week after the passage of the NSL, the secretary of the Hong Kong Education Bureau announced that ‘schools are obliged’ to stop students from singing the protest anthem ‘Glory to Hong Kong’ and participating in all forms protest activities (Mullany 2020). Since then, the Education Bureau has repeatedly sent out letters to remind school administrators about the importance of educating students on how to abide by the NSL (Stand News 2020c). The Education Secretary also recommended schools call the police for support if they encountered recalcitrant students. By calling on the police to suppress activism and freedom of speech, the government has rendered classrooms dangerous places for student activists. During the protest movement in 2019, many students sustained significant emotional and physical injuries from police violence. Of the 9,727 people arrested during the movement, 40 per cent were students, 1,695 of whom were under the age of 18 (Stand News 2020c).

As classrooms have moved online due to the pandemic, the pressure for schools to censor students takes on a different form. In September 2020, a secondary school student at Heung To Middle School was suspended for displaying an image of the protest slogan ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ (光復香港，時代革命) as his profile picture on Microsoft Teams. The student took the image himself while working as a freelance journalist covering last year’s protests (Stand News 2020a). A week into the semester, the student’s homeroom teacher demanded that he replace the image. Despite doing so, the student was notified that he would be suspended for a week. The school also informed him that should he continue to study in the school after his suspension, his infraction would be reported directly to the government’s Education Bureau. The school cited the NSL to justify its harsh disciplinary action, claiming that the protest slogan was a form of seditious speech.

This example illustrates how the NSL has had a chilling effect, especially in digital learning spaces. Students cannot be sure whether or how their speech and actions will be recorded and used against them as evidence that they have violated the law. Online classrooms are particularly vulnerable to surveillance as students do not always know who is listening in on their conversations, including their peers’ parents, who may report them to the police. This is a grave and unfortunately very real concern because the 2019 movement has highlighted a generational divide between young prodemocracy activists and many older people who condemn the protests. Many protesters, some as young as 13, have had to leave home because their family members have turned hostile towards them.

The Education Secretary also recommended schools call the police for support if they encountered recalcitrant students. By calling on the police to suppress activism and freedom of speech, the government has rendered classrooms dangerous places for student activists.

The Impact on Teachers and (Self-)Censorship

Teachers are not exempt from the chilling effect induced by the NSL. In June 2020, at the cusp of the passage of the NSL, the same school that suspended the student for his profile picture decided not to renew the contract of a music teacher after she allowed students to perform the protest anthem during an exam (Chan 2020b). Since the movement began in June 2019, the Education Bureau has received more than 200 complaints about teacher misconduct related to the protests (Chan 2020a). The Education Secretary made clear that teachers would face serious repercussions should they violate the NSL.

Under the NSL, the boundaries between teachers' professional and personal lives are blurred. Some of the teachers who were reported to the bureau participated in the movement in a personal capacity. Several teachers were either forced to self-censor or sanctioned by the government for social media posts they made using their personal accounts (Stand News 2020b; RTHK 2020). In October 2020, former Chief Executive C.Y. Leung publicised on Facebook the names and personal information of 18 teachers who were prosecuted for protest-related offences, claiming that parents had the right to know of the teachers' 'misconduct' (Chan and Wong 2020). Posts like this are meant to deter teachers from participating in any form of anti-government activism. One teacher noted that, since the implementation of the NSL and the wave of complaints against teachers who support the prodemocracy movement, she and her colleagues have resorted to using four different Facebook accounts: a private one, one for students, one to receive and disseminate prodemocracy information, and one to 'pretend to be pro-government and pro-CCP [Chinese Communist Party] to prevent accusations' (We Are HKers 2020).

Since classes moved online, teachers have experienced heightened anxiety: they worry that they may be reported to the government by pro-Beijing parents and organisations who eavesdrop during class. They also worry that the software they use to teach may contain surveillance malware. One teacher, who prefers to remain anonymous, laments: 'This kind of Cultural Revolution-like snitching culture is toxic, and deters us teachers from talking to our students heart-to-heart ... All this dodging and hiding is but for a slight likelihood of survival' (We Are HKers 2020).

Liberal Studies teachers face the heaviest emotional and professional burden when deciding whether and how they should self-censor to avoid prosecution while fulfilling their pedagogical responsibilities to guide students through politically sensitive topics. Even before the implementation of the NSL, Lam and pro-Beijing organisations and media outlets repeatedly lambasted Liberal Studies as a hotbed of anti-government violence (Davidson 2020). More recently, the Education Bureau ordered teachers to respond with ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I don’t understand’ whenever a student raises a political question (Stand News 2020b). This overt suppression of intellectual freedom puts teachers in a bind. On the one hand, teachers want to abide by their professional beliefs and encourage critical deliberation of sociopolitical topics; on the other, they worry that any discussions tangentially related to current politics could result in sanctions and legal repercussions.

On 6 October 2020, an elementary school teacher was the first to lose their licence for allegedly spreading the ideology of Hong Kong independence (Wong 2020b). The government cited a worksheet and the teacher’s lesson plan as evidence. The offending worksheet invited students to consider source materials to answer questions such as: ‘In your opinion, what is freedom of speech? According to the [*Hong Kong Connection* episode on political censorship], what are reasons why some advocate for Hong Kong independence? What would Hong Kong be like without the freedom of speech?’ These questions were construed by the Education Bureau as being out of line because Hong Kong independence, according to Bureau Secretary Kevin Yeung, should not be up for deliberation at all. During a press conference, Yeung made it clear that, while this case was not reported to the National Security Office, the Education Bureau would discuss with the office how to handle future such cases (Su 2020). Given the harsh sentences prescribed by the NSL, Yeung’s statement is likely meant to intensify the law’s chilling effect among teachers in the classroom.

The red tape surrounding teachers’ freedom of speech and intellectual freedom in the classroom is further facilitated by the censorship of textbooks and other educational materials. Textbook publishers revealed that the Education Bureau strongly urged them to revise texts, erasing mentions of the June Fourth Incident, civil disobedience, the separation of powers, and images from the 2014 Umbrella Movement

(Ho 2020). Protest slogans such as ‘Hong Kong Independence’ and ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ are strictly prohibited by the Education Bureau as they are deemed to be in violation of the NSL. A teacher interviewed by the newspaper *Stand News* lamented that, while they would continue teaching relevant examples orally, they could no longer be sure whether the examples they used were appropriate given the political risk they incurred under the NSL (Stand News 2020b).

Alternative Possibilities and Limitations

The erasure of key political events from textbooks not only suppresses the intellectual freedom of teachers and students, it also facilitates collective amnesia among future generations with regard to incidents of state violence and repression. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that such suppression can successfully stamp out all dissenting voices and counter-ideologies among young students. During last year’s protests, secondary school students in Hong Kong repeatedly demonstrated their skilfulness in organising and participating in grassroots actions through social media and other digital communication platforms. As media scholar Zeynep Tufekci (2020) observes, Hong Kongers, including youth activists, are not only adept at using digital technologies to circumvent government suppression of information, they also developed critical media literacy over the course of the 2019 prodemocracy protests, learning how to incessantly fact check the validity of the information they received.

In addition to media and information literacy, the movement has given rise to ‘zine’ activism both online and offline. While textbook publishers and teachers may no longer be able to freely discuss politics with students, zine artists and distributors, such as ZINE COOP, continue to produce and circulate independent publications that promote democratic values and grassroots advocacy (Raicovich 2019; ZINE COOP Shop 2020). Hence, while the Hong Kong Government may succeed in using the NSL to suppress intellectual freedom in the classroom, grassroots activism has created alternative possibilities for students to engage with political ideologies, ideas, and information that the government deems threatening.

However, as the government now prohibits teachers from discussing any ideologies and examples that could challenge Beijing, students’ knowledge and information literacy regarding political discourse will inevitably be limited. Without the opportunities to engage in constructive political deliberation guided by educators and classroom activities that promote critical information literacy, Hong Kong students who seek

out suppressed information on their own could easily fall prey to persuasive mis/dis-information campaigns on the Internet. The government's suppression of intellectual freedom and free speech in the classroom, therefore, may backfire.

International Responses and Adaptations

Because the NSL can be used to prosecute people outside Hong Kong, its chilling effect reaches far beyond the Special Administrative Region's education system. For instance, scholars from other countries have already stated that they no longer feel safe conducting research and guest-teaching in Hong Kong (Chan et al. 2020). The chilling effect also affects scholars and educators who are not physically in Hong Kong or China. Since university classes in the United States and the United Kingdom have mostly moved online due to the pandemic, professors have taken various precautions to safeguard their students' safety, especially students from Hong Kong and mainland China.

Some professors at Harvard and Princeton universities, for example, choose to offer the following disclaimer about their courses on China: 'This course may cover material considered politically sensitive by China' (Craymer 2020). Risk disclosures like this one allow students to make an informed decision on their own based on the level of risk they are willing to tolerate. In addition to a disclaimer, several Chinese studies professors and universities, including Oxford University, have implemented an anonymous grading policy, in which students submit written work under a code, rather than their actual name (Al-Arshani 2020; Wintour 2020). In response to transnational online learning during the pandemic, Oxford University advises students not to record course content or share it with anyone outside class.

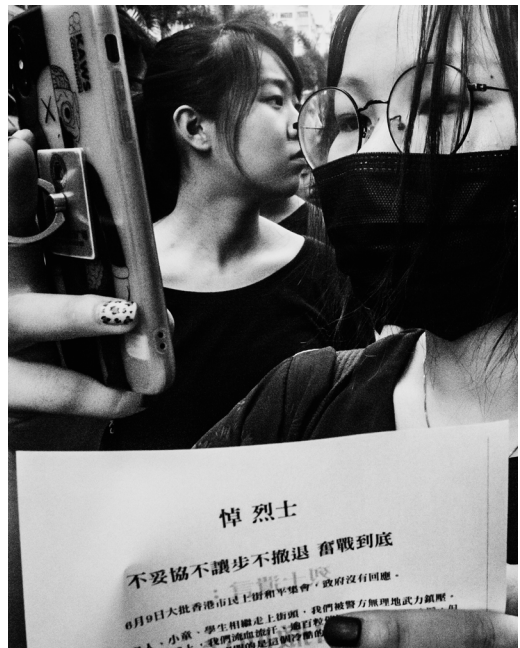
While some have criticised these policies as capitulation to Beijing and the NSL, they are meant to lessen the political risks Chinese and Hong Kong students face so they can more freely engage in critical deliberation of political content. According to Rory Truex, a professor of Chinese politics at Princeton University, given Beijing's suppression of intellectual freedom: 'We cannot self-censor. If we, as a Chinese teaching community, out of fear stop teaching things like Tiananmen or Xinjiang or whatever sensitive topic the Chinese government doesn't want us talking about, if we cave, then we've lost' (cited in Al-Arshani 2020). At the same time, we cannot overlook the risks to scholars and educators when they conduct research and teach subject matters that Beijing deems threatening.

According to Rory Truex, a professor of Chinese politics at Princeton University, given Beijing's suppression of intellectual freedom: 'We cannot self-censor. If we, as a Chinese teaching community, out of fear stop teaching things like Tiananmen or Xinjiang or whatever sensitive topic the Chinese government doesn't want us talking about, if we cave, then we've lost'

Truex is one of the co-authors of 'How to Teach China This Fall', an article that outlines strategies instructors and universities can take to safeguard intellectual freedom while taking into account the safety of students and instructors (Gueorguiev et al. 2020). In this article, the authors write that instructors employed by American universities also need to be protected in the context of the NSL. Faculty may face harassment, detention, or visa denial when they visit Hong Kong and China. The risk is heightened for instructors who have friends and family in China and Hong Kong. Hence, the authors recommend that university administrations offer clear guidance on risk assessment and communicate the kinds of legal support instructors will receive if they face political repercussions from their teaching.

Towards a Collective Praxis for Intellectual Freedom

The passage of Hong Kong's NSL renders the suppression of intellectual freedom and free speech a transnational problem. Educators who have the expertise and are not in imminent danger of state repression may take some steps to cultivate a new praxis for intellectual freedom. Scholars and educators who feel safe to do so can create alternative learning spaces on the Internet. For example, we could upload lectures or host webinars on censored topics and make them available to students in Hong Kong. To help Hong Kong students cultivate critical information and media literacy when they can no longer learn this in a formal classroom setting, educators can create open-access annotated bibliographies, self-guided lesson plans, and other learning materials for students to use privately. Finally, as teachers in Hong Kong face increased pressure to self-censor, we must amplify their voices by creating platforms where they can safely share their experiences and insights with each other and those abroad. While the NSL affects Hong Kong classrooms the most, this is a struggle in which we all must engage as scholar-activists and educators who value intellectual and academic freedom. ■



Hong Kong Protests in 2019.
PC: Jonathan van Smit.

A grayscale photograph of a riverbank. In the foreground, two people are on a muddy bank; one is crouching and the other is standing. The background shows a wide river and a hazy city skyline across the water. A large orange rectangle with a white border is centered over the image, containing the title text.

CHINA COLUMNS



Chongqing. PC: Johnatan Van Smit.



Medical Disturbances as a Form of Patient Activism in China?

PC: Chinavalue.net.

Xiao TAN
Tianyang LIU

In China, patients, their relatives, or organised groups sometimes resort to 'medical disturbances' (医闹, yī nǎo) as a way of expressing grievances. Drawing on existing scholarly accounts and our recent research, this essay provides reflections on this phenomenon through the lens of patient activism.

Zhang Meimei, a singer aged in her thirties, underwent two plastic surgeries at the Shenzhen Peng'ai Hospital in 2017. Unsatisfied with the outcome, she asked the hospital for compensation of 1.2 million yuan. After payment was refused and a series of disputes, on 14 July 2020, she led several people in a protest in front of the building, carrying placards showing photos of her unsuccessful surgery and various slogans, including: 'Shenzhen Peng'ai Hospital is black-hearted', 'Shenzhen Peng'ai Hospital inflicts

much suffering', and 'Return justice to me, Shenzhen Peng'ai Hospital!'. The protest attracted significant publicity on the crowded street; the hospital reported the protest to the police and accused Zhang Meimei of creating a 'medical disturbance' (医闹, *yi nao*) (Xiang 2020).

In China, the term *yi nao* was officially adopted in 2006, when the Ministry of Health made its first official statement on what the media described as an '*yi nao* incident' (医闹事件) in Yunnan Province: a group of unemployed people had organised a disturbance in a hospital to obtain compensation for medical malpractice (Ministry of Health 2006; D. Wang 2015). The term has since been commonly used to refer to a form of disturbance that involves symbolic actions taken in hospitals, such as gatherings, sit-ins, public displays of crying, cursing medical staff, raising banners, displaying patients' corpses, establishing funeral shrines, or blocking entrances (Liu and Tan 2020). The phenomenon of *yi nao* has attracted wide attention in Chinese society and has been discussed often in the annual Two Sessions (the meetings of China's top legislature and top political advisory body), where only major issues are discussed (Chang 2020).

The Logic of Yi Nao

In scholarly analyses, *yi nao* has frequently been attributed to various structural problems within the Chinese healthcare system. Cuts to state subsidies have forced hospitals to seek other sources of financing, and newly imposed pricing structures have incentivised hospitals to sell medicines and technology-based services to subsidise their losses. Consequently, the overprescription of drugs and unnecessary diagnostic tests has become prevalent, leading to widespread discontent with unfairly high prices (Blumenthal and Hsiao 2015). The quality of services in Chinese hospitals is frequently perceived to be

problematic (Hesketh et al. 2012). Treatment is seen as rushed, impersonal, and disrespectful (D. Wang 2015). Despite continuous efforts at health reform in the past decade, patients' satisfaction with clinical services remains low (Yip et al. 2019).

However, in the event of patient dissatisfaction, limited options for recourse are available and the existing channels are seen as biased (Hu and Zeng 2015; Pan et al. 2015; Zhang and Cai 2018). These structural problems have led some to adopt and justify *yi nao* as a way of protecting their rights when they believe they have been mistreated (there have also been cases driven entirely by economic interests). While some initiate *yi nao* with the help of their relatives and friends, organised groups will also stage a medical disturbance in exchange for money (S. Wang 2015).

In recent years, *yi nao* has been increasingly interpreted as a phenomenon that plays on the stability-maintenance (维稳) mentality of the government and hospital management (Luan and Meng 2012; Xiao 2016; Liu and Tan 2020). In China, stability maintenance is a top priority and involves a set of interrelated strategies, measures, and ideologies that aim to maintain the rule of the Chinese Communist Party and prevent any social disturbances (ranging from mass incidents to small-scale, less-controversial civic disturbances) that might threaten the status quo and the legitimacy of the ruling regime (Benney 2016; Xie and Liu 2019).

Despite the privatisation of financing since the 1980s, public hospitals remain closely tied to the government as their presidents are still appointed by the government and, as government cadres, are required to act in accordance with the core values and political agenda of the Party-State (Allen et al. 2014). They tend to adopt the same stability-maintenance mentality—prioritising social stability in decision-making, reflecting both the stability-oriented political structure and individual officials' behavioural and ideological preferences. During *yi nao* incidents, public hospital management and local governments

try to avoid any disruption to social stability. Therefore, they may choose to provide compensation as a pragmatic solution to appease the actors involved, which further incentivises people to resort to this type of action when discontent arises.

***Yi Nao* as a Form of Patient Activism?**

In the academic literature on civic engagement and popular politics in China, patient activism has been largely overlooked. Activism refers to individual or group readiness to engage in legal and nonviolent protest (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). Essentially, many of those involved in *yi nao* protests are demanding justice—in particular, from a healthcare system that is perceived as problematic and unfair, with an economically driven prevalence of overprescription, rushed and impersonal services, and an underdeveloped system of recourse. However, the agendas of *yi nao* actors are not always clear and consistent. These disturbances may be initiated by patients to defend their rights, but may also be exploited by organised groups, sometimes including gang members, to maximise their own profit. *Yi nao* frequently involves a series of publicity-attracting elements, with forms of performativity at their core to amplify the desired effect on the audience. Despite the ‘performative’ quality, *yi nao* cases can also be escalated and become violent, especially when carried out by organised groups. Crucially, while *yi nao* protestors usually frame their activities as an apolitical expression of discontent over unfair treatment, they may advance to perform types of public disruption that can be perceived as explicitly threatening social stability, thus transforming these actions into a political challenge.

Relatedly, *yi nao* is a manifestation of ‘activist citizens’, who differ from ‘active citizens’ in that they do not follow institutionalised rules

of civic participation, but subversively disrupt rules and routines within institutionalised contexts by transforming them into new sites of struggle (Isin 2008: 39). In other words, the creation of counterspaces through *yi nao* within institutionalised venues can be understood as a rupture in and interruption to the institutional makeup of society that render visible and audible new sites of claim-making. For example, *yi nao*’s creation of counterspaces usually involves highly visible and noisy intrusions into administratively controlled places in hospitals, such as by placing coffins and corpses in entry and reception areas, burning paper money, playing folk funeral songs, or raising banners. Disobedience through the production of counterspaces, therefore, is exploited to render the patient’s voice audible and make visible in the public sphere the perceived ‘wrongs’ they address. The radical nature of their actions also shifts the scale of visibility of the patient body politic, making their grievances a news story in the mainstream media.

However, *yi nao* is much less ambitious in its goals. The ultimate demand is typically economic compensation, rather than comprehensive reform of the healthcare system that would better promote justice and protect patients’ rights. Essentially, *yi nao* actors navigate their own concerns and needs and those of the government while capitalising on the political sensitivity of stability maintenance to fulfil their economic interests. That the regime is not especially threatened by *yi nao* is also evident in the fact that police are relatively tolerant of such incidents. In our review of cases of medical disturbances between the end of 2013 and the end of 2018, hospitals generally reported such situations to local police; however, it was only when actions became serious and violent that the police intervened (Liu and Tan 2020).

To some extent, it was exactly this relatively ‘benign’ approach by the authorities that led wronged patients to look on the government as their protector and provided a space for the emergence of *yi nao*. The government has tended to be more tolerant of *yi nao* actors

than of participants in other forms of social activism. In our study, we found that the leaders of such incidents were most likely to be given short-term administrative detention, ranging from one to two weeks, and only occasionally criminal detention for several months or years. There were frequently no consequences for those involved in *yi nao* other than the organisers.

What's Next?

Similar to the situation in many other areas, in recent years, the government's tolerance of *yi nao* has been shrinking. In the Amendment IX to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China in 2015, gatherings designed to disrupt the normal order of medical settings were defined as illegal. In July 2016, the National Health and Family Planning Commission, along with eight other state ministries, launched a one-year special hard-strike campaign to crack down on medical disturbances. On completion of the campaign, the commission and other government bodies issued new measures to maintain the normal order of medical settings and punish *yi nao* actors (National Development and Reform Commission 2018; National Health Commission of China 2017). Significantly, the National People's Congress approved the Law on the Promotion of Basic Medical and Health Care in 2019, which further bans any organisation or individual from threatening or harming the personal safety or dignity of health workers. Following these central government policies, local governments have also taken a less tolerant approach and the police have become more actively engaged in recent *yi nao* cases.

In fact, there has been much less news coverage of *yi nao* cases than in the past, either due to the waning of this phenomenon or because of increasingly strict censorship. Initially, *yi nao*'s apolitical goals and strategies playing on the stability-maintenance mentality of governments and hospitals created a space

for such protest. However, the involvement of radical and violent elements has contributed to *yi nao* being interpreted as a crime. With the more proactive recent approach of the Chinese Government, medical disturbances may be becoming a thing of the past. ■

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Chongqing, 2017. PC: Ivan G Shevchenko.



The Chongqing Model One Decade On

Chongqing.
PC: Jonathan van Smit.

Yueran ZHANG

One decade ago, Bo Xilai's 'Chongqing Model' was making headlines. Liberal commentators generally saw it as an expansion of authoritarian state power, while many on the left welcomed it as a counterpoint to China's capitalist turn. This essay examines what the model was really about, what it said more broadly about contemporary Chinese politics, and its afterlives under Xi Jinping.

Between 2007 and 2012, China observers around the world and a significant segment of the international left paid a great deal of attention to a city in China's southwest, Chongqing. Under the leadership of the municipal secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Bo Xilai, Chongqing's municipal government engaged in a set of extraordinary political practices, commonly known as the 'Chongqing Model' (重庆模式). It promoted a strong ideological message centred on 'common, shared prosperity' (共同富裕) and economic egalitarianism, and crafted policies that allegedly served redistributive purposes. It launched the high-profile 'Striking Black' (打黑) campaign to prosecute Bo's political

rivals and the city's entrenched wealthy elite in the name of cracking down on 'black' gangsters. It regularly organised, or encouraged people to self-organise, large public assemblies in which thousands gathered to sing classic 'red' songs of the Maoist era. It also displayed extreme intolerance towards those who criticised the state, sending some to labour camps.

Liberal commentators generally saw the Chongqing Model as an appalling expansion of the coercive abuse of authoritarian state power. Many on the left, in contrast, welcomed the model as a much-needed counterpoint to China's capitalistic turn in the reform era and the beginning of a more just and equitable mode of development. While the debate about how to make sense of the Chongqing Model became increasingly divisive, the model itself suddenly collapsed in 2012 in a series of sensational political scandals. Wang Lijun, a close associate of Bo, defected to the US Consulate in February that year after falling out with him. This led to the public revelation of the murder of a British businessman by Bo's wife. Bo was subsequently removed from office in March 2012 and eventually sentenced to life imprisonment on corruption charges.

Despite the significant attention garnered by the Chongqing Model during its unfolding and the dramatic manner in which it ended, serious reflections and re-examinations of the model have been lacking since 2012. What was the model about? Should we take the liberal and left narratives at face value? What did the model say about the broader picture of contemporary Chinese politics? Was there any connection between the Chongqing Model and China's post-2012 political transformations under President Xi Jinping? These questions have rarely been posed by China observers, which reflects an underestimation of the Chongqing Model's political substance and impact.

A research project I have conducted over the past few years allowed me to formulate some tentative answers to these questions. Even though the initial research question had nothing to do with the Chongqing Model, the

project ended up providing a crucial window through which we could look at the model in a detailed and comparative manner. In this piece, I draw on my research findings to discuss how we could rethink the Chongqing Model's political nature and its legacies for China's post-2012 political transformations.

Contrasting Modes of Taxation

In 2016, I set out to research China's politics of taxing private homeownership. Whereas a nationwide wealth tax on private homeownership has yet to be instituted, Chongqing and Shanghai launched a policy experiment to tax private homeownership starting from 28 January 2011. Official propaganda and media pundits tended to describe the experiments in the two cities as part of the same policy package. However, after analysing policy documents and looking at how the taxes were collected on the ground, I uncovered striking differences in the ways in which the two governments framed, designed, and enacted their tax.

First, Chongqing's officials explicitly framed their tax on private homeownership as an anti-rich redistributive measure. In April 2010, Huang Qifan, Chongqing's mayor, appeared in an interview to flesh out the rationale for and vision behind the tax. Speaking on behalf of the government, he stated that 'we will create zero tax burden on the poor ... provide tax breaks for the middle class ... and tax harshly the rich' (Huang 2010). This message was repeated in numerous official communications, tying the tax to an overall project of achieving common prosperity and equalising wealth distribution.

In contrast, Shanghai officials framed their tax as an emergency technical measure to solve the problems of an overheated housing market. The municipal government explained the tax as a way to adjust supply and demand and curb housing speculation, and always

discussed the tax together with other technical interventions in the housing market, such as limits on property purchases and mortgages. To reinforce this message, the municipal government put the Municipal Housing Security and Administration Bureau, rather than the financial and taxation bureaus that conventionally oversee tax policy, in charge of designing the tax.

Stark differences also surfaced in how the two municipal governments defined their taxpayers. While Chongqing imposed its tax on all existing privately owned luxury property, Shanghai devised a forward-looking, ‘cut-off date’ design: only if a Shanghai homeowner purchased a second property after the date on which the tax was enacted would they be required to pay an annual tax on the second property. Effectively, Chongqing’s tax targeted the richest in the city. An official in one of Chongqing’s local taxation bureaus half-jokingly said to me during an interview in 2017: ‘In Chongqing, whether you are rich is determined by whether you pay this tax.’ In contrast, Shanghai’s tax spared the richest and instead focused on the somewhat less-rich households that were still affluent enough to purchase a second property after enactment of the tax: the moderately affluent stratum among middle-class households.

The actual enactment of the taxes presented even more dramatic points of divergence. Chongqing’s municipal leadership instructed local taxation bureaus to devote a vast amount of resources and personnel to collecting its new tax, which severely impeded the collection of other taxes. Indeed, three policy researchers whom I interviewed separately in 2017 estimated that the negligible amount of money actually collected on the tax would not exceed the amount of resources devoted to collecting it. From the perspective of a cost-benefit analysis, devoting so many resources to collecting one tax did not make sense. However, Chongqing’s local taxation officials told me that the point was not how much money was actually collected, but to make the collection

process as publicly visible as possible, to ensure that ordinary citizens could see that ‘the government was on their side’.

Consistent with this logic, the state used publicly visible and confrontational methods to collect the tax, such as having official vehicles drive around rich neighbourhoods to process payments onsite and sending teams to intercept taxpayers at the airport. According to a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences whom I interviewed in 2017, the tax officials would display large and visible banners, such as ‘Taxpayers, welcome back!’, when intercepting people at the airport. During such operations, the tax officials proactively interacted with bystanders and even invited ordinary people to join them. In November 2011, the state made a move that was highly unusual among China’s tax collection practices at that time: it publicised the information of the 13 property owners who had not paid their tax on time. By announcing this information to the public, the state effectively called on the masses to participate in shaming and surveilling these people, who were portrayed as enemies. In other words, Chongqing’s municipal government constituted the collection of this tax as a crucial rallying point for mass mobilisation.

In contrast, the Shanghai government took great care to get potential taxpayers to perceive the tax as an economic constraint, which was to be coped with by making calculated, strategic decisions privately and individually. The ‘cut-off date’ design had a clear individualising effect. For those moderately affluent households that were planning to buy a second property, their reaction on hearing about the tax would be to rethink their purchasing plan and make the most economically sensible decision given this new parameter. The technical framing of the tax also made it intuitive for those moderately affluent households considering the purchase of a second property to imagine they might actually benefit from the tax because it was supposed to help tame the housing boom and make property cheaper.

The differences between Chongqing's and Shanghai's modes of taxing private homeownership were highly systematic. Chongqing's municipal government embedded its tax in an ideological message of economic egalitarianism and utilised the tax as a means to mobilise the masses and build popular support for the state. Shanghai's municipal government, on the other hand, did everything it could to frame its tax as an economic and technical, rather than political, matter and to ensure that potential taxpayers responded to the tax in economic and individual, rather than political, ways. Underlying the contrasting modes of taxation, therefore, were two different political logics, which hold important implications for understanding the Chongqing Model.

The Chongqing Model Reconsidered

The 2011 tax experiments in Chongqing and Shanghai were not engineered by the central government. In late 2009, Chongqing's municipal government proposed to the central government, without prompting, that it would like to experiment with taxing private homeownership. The Chongqing officials who reached out to the central ministries explicitly conveyed the fact that Bo was behind the initiative, according to an informant I interviewed. This suggests that Chongqing's municipal leadership envisioned the tax as part of the unfolding Chongqing Model. Therefore, it is crucial to ask: what does the tax tell us about the political nature of the Chongqing Model more broadly?

Taking the tax experiment seriously leads me to doubt both the liberal and the left narratives. If we follow liberal commentators in understanding the Chongqing Model as an expansion of coercive and authoritarian state power, the tax experiment itself—never mind the manner in which it was adopted—makes little sense. Furthermore, the liberal emphasis on the model's coercive and authoritarian face

cannot explain how it managed to consolidate a considerable amount of popular support in Chongqing. In fact, multiple international media outlets, including *The Washington Post*, the *BBC*, and *Reuters*, have reported anecdotal evidence that Bo's popularity among the masses remained very strong even after he was removed from office in 2012 and sentenced to life imprisonment on corruption charges (Richburg 2012; Grammaticas 2013; Wen 2017).

The left narrative, on the other hand, depicts the Chongqing Model as a substantial endeavour to address widening economic inequality through redistribution and explore a broad-based, pro-poor developmental path. However, if what happened with the tax on private homeownership is any guide, the actual degree of economic redistribution achieved under the Chongqing Model was extremely questionable, even though the discourse of egalitarianism played a prominent role. The primary concern for Chongqing's municipal leadership, it seems, was not how much material difference could be made to reduce economic inequality, but the political and symbolic effects of purported inequality-reducing, pro-poor measures.

I therefore argue that we should understand the Chongqing Model first and foremost as a project of mass political mobilisation that drew the masses into believing an ideological vision that identified the municipal government, and especially a charismatic state leader, as the champion of the people. This sense of collective identity between the people and the state was developed as the masses were mobilised to actively participate in various political activities. These were, of course, mostly orchestrated by the state, but within certain limits there was also some room left for spontaneous organisation.

Behind the emphasis on mass mobilisation and political participation was the subtle understanding that neither state coercion nor policies that led to material betterment would be enough to cultivate long-lasting political identification between the people and the state; instead, such identification could only be built when the masses themselves participated



Chongqing, Dongshuimen Bridge. PC: Ivan G Shevchenko.

in politics. In other words, through mobilised participation, the Chongqing Model sought to reshape citizens into political subjects who identified with the state.

Public assemblies to sing ‘red’ songs, therefore, should be understood as a form of mobilised participation. It does not really matter whether those who were mobilised to participate in the assemblies did so voluntarily (many did not). As long as they were mobilised to participate, they became part of the large-scale political spectacle professing support for the state, and the very experience of participating in such a massive spectacle was itself instrumental in cultivating a sense of political identity and loyalty (Wedeen 1999). Moreover, Chongqing’s municipal government took great effort to fuse political spectacle with everyday life, encouraging

people to ‘sing red songs, read red classics, tell revolutionary and uplifting stories, and text exhortative maxims’ in their daily lives (Zhao 2012). In a sense, political participation became indistinguishable from everyday routines, quietly and subtly contributing to the construction of new political subjects.

Similarly, the ‘Striking Black’ campaign utilised state violence as a means for mass mobilisation. In a signature victory of the campaign, a Chongqing court sentenced to death the city’s former police chief, who was convicted of being a ‘protection umbrella’ for various crime groups. Shortly after his execution, many people put up street banners or lit firecrackers in celebration. It is unclear whether Chongqing’s residents organised such actions on their own or were instructed by the state to do so, but it is clear that the ‘Striking

Black' campaign was very much intertwined with an effort to mobilise the masses to publicly identify with the state as the champion of the people against 'corrupt' elites. At the same time, Chongqing's municipal government encouraged the general public to report to the state any criminal activity (Cabestan 2011; Huang 2011), emphasising that social participation was indispensable to the success of the 'Striking Black' campaign.

The Chongqing Model even encouraged the masses to collectively participate in non-institutional political actions. In November 2008, thousands of taxi drivers went on strike to protest excessive fines, insufficient fuel supplies, and a low pay schedule. In a highly unusual move, Bo started to coordinate different municipal agencies and taxi companies to address the strikers' concerns immediately after the strike started. Two days after the strike, Bo held a highly publicised and televised roundtable dialogue with strikers during which he acknowledged that they 'had reasonable discontent' and the government 'should first of all examine and reflect on what we have done wrong'. In stark contrast to the Chinese Government's usual approach to handling protest and contention, Bo openly endorsed the legitimacy of mass collective action and signalled that the state would be willing to take seriously the sentiments expressed through such action. This gesture effectively redefined collective action as no longer something that challenged or opposed the state, but as a form of political participation that connected the grassroots to the state.

Chongqing's ideological message of 'common, shared prosperity' and economic egalitarianism should thus be understood as part of this broader project of mass mobilisation, rather than in its own right. Putting forward an ideological vision in which Chongqing's middle and low-income sectors saw the state as their champion made the state-led mass mobilisation all the more effective, as political participation was rendered more appealing. The same logic also applied to

redistributive economic policies, such as the tax on private homeownership. These policies provided opportunities for the state to present itself as the champion of the people and encourage further mass political participation; whether they actually redistributed wealth was not much of a concern.

In sum, the mobilisation of mass political participation was at the heart of the Chongqing Model—a project to cultivate long-lasting popular support for the municipal government and its leader, Bo Xilai. A variety of concrete mobilisation techniques (many of which were, of course, reminiscent of those widely used in the Maoist era), an ideological message, redistributive policies, and the exercise of state violence were all constitutive elements of this project. This model formed a sharp contrast with Shanghai's governing style, as seen through the handling of its tax on private homeownership: the state doing everything it could to make its policies appear apolitical and technocratic, while encouraging ordinary citizens to think and act in apolitical ways.

The Landscape of High-Level Political Competition

Many commentators have characterised the Chongqing Model as Bo Xilai's attempt to strengthen his position in the political competition for China's highest political office—more specifically, membership of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee—in the 2012 leadership turnover (for example, Zhao 2012). However, it is not obvious why Bo would resort to mass mobilisation; after all, leadership competition in post-Mao China did not have a visible relationship with popular sentiment. Therefore, it is puzzling why Bo would take the trouble to launch an all-out mass-mobilisation project if he was serious about competing in China's elite politics.

My research provided some clues to this puzzle. A retired official from the State Administration of Taxation whom I interviewed recounted what happened when Chongqing officials reached out to the central fiscal ministries about their proposal to tax private homeownership:

When Chongqing's top leadership reached out to us saying they were planning to experiment with the tax, the Ministry of Finance officials were very happy; we were very happy, too. We wanted to help Chongqing to make this happen ... But at the same time, we were really concerned that, given the fact that Bo had so many enemies within the central leadership, the central leadership might not approve of this plan. Chongqing's people said Bo was also concerned about this, and this was why they worked so hard in the previous two years to rally lots of support from every corner of the society. If the central leadership did not approve, Bo was ready to use this support to put pressure on them. They said that in the hypothetical worst-case scenario, if the central leadership did not want to approve, they could just announce the plan to the public and demonstrate how popular it would be, so that the central leadership would have no choice but to approve.

And this is basically what happened: the Chongqing Government publicly announced the initiative and rallied popular support around it long before receiving approval from the central leadership.

What this suggests is that Bo's resorting to mass mobilisation should be understood as a response to his marginalised position in China's high-level politics or the fact that he 'had so many enemies'. In the major cycle of leadership turnover in 2007, Bo, then the minister of commerce, was assigned to the post of Chongqing's CCP secretary rather than promoted to a higher position within the

central government. Multiple media sources, as well as a US State Department cable obtained by WikiLeaks, suggest this assignment was a deliberate move by some top national leaders, such as then premier Wen Jiabao and vice-premier Wu Yi, to thwart Bo's political ambition and marginalise him politically. What is significant about this is not only the job assignment itself, which amounted to a demotion, but also the fact that some of the top national leaders were vehemently against Bo. Therefore, it makes sense to see Chongqing's mass-mobilisation efforts as an extraordinary yet desperate move by a marginalised politician. Rallying grassroots support was a way for Bo to counter and pressure those forces opposed to him within the political establishment. Riding on popular momentum to disrupt the political establishment's conventional rules of the game represented Bo's attempt to find a path forward in a political competition that was stacked against him.

Bo's employment of the mass-mobilisation strategy did make other competitors nervous, including those who had occupied more advantageous positions, such as Yu Zhengsheng, then Shanghai's municipal CCP secretary. In 1997, Yu was promoted directly from a prefecture-level leadership position in Shandong Province to a ministerial post in the central government—a highly unusual promotion. Four years later, he was promoted further to become the Party secretary of Hubei Province and appointed a member of the CCP's Politburo. At that time, it was rare for a first-time Party secretary of an inland province to be appointed to the Politburo. On top of these two extraordinary promotions, in 2007, Yu was assigned to be Shanghai's Party secretary. This was widely seen as another significant promotion, signalling a high probability that he would enter the Politburo's Standing Committee in the next turnover.

However, according to officials in the central fiscal ministries who interacted with Shanghai's leadership at that time, Yu paid close attention to, and felt somewhat

threatened by, Chongqing's moves as the Chongqing Model unfolded. The central fiscal ministries strategically exploited this anxiety to encourage Shanghai to launch its own tax experiment alongside Chongqing's. Therefore, the tax experiment there represented a reactive move by the Shanghai leadership to steal Chongqing's thunder.

For Shanghai, a reactive position did pose constraints. As Chongqing had already finished designing most of the specifics by the time it proposed its plan to the central government, Shanghai was under tremendous pressure to design a tax as quickly as possible and launch it at the same time as Chongqing. Therefore, Shanghai's policymakers were first and foremost concerned with finding the most politically convenient way to enact the tax and prevent political discontent as much as possible. Shanghai therefore adopted a depoliticised approach to the tax, the logic of which was consistent with the conventional way in which the Chinese Government dealt with a host of thorny policy issues in the reform era, including the housing privatisation reform that Yu oversaw as the minister of housing and construction in the late 1990s.

More broadly speaking, the Chongqing Model threatened not only individual competitors in China's elite politics, but also the CCP's political establishment as a whole, as it sought to bring formidable popular energy to bear on high-level political competition. Once the masses were mobilised to actively participate in politics and embrace a particular political vision, no-one knew how much energy this would unleash, whether such energy would surge beyond anyone's control and develop a momentum of its own, or what disruption such energy would cause to the established political order. The Chongqing Model was indeed highly successful at mass mobilisation and building popular support for Bo Xilai, and this very success constituted a crisis for China's high-level politics. This fundamental tension underlined the dramatic and unexpected events in 2012 that marked the Chongqing Model's demise. Indeed, even after

Bo's downfall, the popular energy cultivated through years of mass mobilisation displayed a degree of resilience and could not be easily extinguished—as some in Chongqing even entertained the idea of 'saving' Bo by staging massive collective actions. This post-crisis situation loomed large as Xi Jinping took over the CCP leadership in 2012.

Chongqing's Legacy in Xi Jinping's 'New Era'

Despite its official demise in 2012, the Chongqing Model, it seems, has had a significant afterlife. Many of its mass-mobilisation techniques have since been incorporated into and enhanced by the CCP under Xi Jinping's leadership. On the one hand, the Chinese Party-State stepped up repression, surveillance, and the exercise of political coercion generally. On the other hand, it has become much more attentive to, and skilled at, mass political mobilisation than it was over the preceding two decades, as evidenced by, for example, how it mobilised youth and stemmed pro-regime sentiments through digital means. Similar to the Chongqing Model, the post-2012 political order features a mutually constitutive relationship between coercion and mobilisation: the masses are mobilised to celebrate the crackdown on dissident voices and some corrupt elites, as well as to strengthen this coercive apparatus by reporting to authority anything that looks politically suspicious.

Also similar to the Chongqing Model, today's state-led mass mobilisation is not a completely top-down project in which people passively receive what the state imposes on them. Instead, the success of this mobilisation hinges on the fact that people are shaped into political subjects who spontaneously engage in political activities expressing identity with the state. These subjects, sometimes derisively labelled the 'Little Pinks' (小粉红), derive a sense of agency and meaning from such political participation. Furthermore, in the post-2012

political order, we also see a greater role being played by ideological messaging, more emphasis on a singular charismatic leader, and a much closer intertwining of political participation and everyday life—all of which seems to have been taken from Bo's playbook in Chongqing. Even though I can only speculate, there does seem to have been a deliberate learning process in which various mobilisation strategies that Bo pioneered or revived were copied and consolidated in Xi's 'New Era'.

At the same time, the elements of the Chongqing Model most threatening to the CCP's elite interests were dropped. Any tolerance of potentially contentious collective action, as displayed by Bo during the 2008 taxi drivers' strike, is now absent. Also gone is the aggressive ideological messaging around economic egalitarianism and anti-rich sentiments. If there is an ideology that holds today's mass-mobilisation project together, it is a pro-state ideology enmeshed in nationalist chauvinism.

Therefore, one could perhaps argue that the relationship between the Chongqing Model and the post-2012 political order under Xi's reign amounts to what Gramsci calls a 'passive revolution': when the political establishment faces a formidable challenge based on grassroots popular mobilisation, those trying to defend the establishment tend to not completely extinguish this challenging force. Instead, they selectively absorb and incorporate some elements of the insurrectionary challenge to make the status quo more resilient, while firmly rejecting those features that are most subversive and threatening.

This perspective makes it possible to understand the political transformations under Xi Jinping not as happenstance caused by one political leader, but the result of China's reform-era political history. It is important to recognise that the political order of the two decades after 1989 had a depoliticising face as well as a capitalistic one. On the one hand, the CCP tended to create widespread political apathy by framing both its policy actions and ordinary citizens as apolitical,

similar to how Shanghai handled its tax on private homeownership. On the other hand, it pushed forward a set of structural changes in the economy that created a particularly brutal version of capitalism. Both of these faces gave rise to deep contradictions. The CCP's depoliticising tendency created a void in which people's underlying desire for meaningful political participation remained unfulfilled. At the same time, the version of capitalism it instituted engendered increasingly appalling economic inequality.

These contradictions were exactly what provided the exploitable openings for something like the Chongqing Model and enabled it to succeed in winning so much grassroots support. Combining mass mobilisation with egalitarian ideology, the Chongqing Model quickly garnered enough popular energy to appear threatening to the CCP's political establishment. Responding to this crisis, Xi's post-2012 regime had to selectively incorporate many elements of the Chongqing Model into its governing style. The political transformations under Xi, therefore, were at least in part an indirect and unintended consequence of the depoliticising, capitalistic order that characterised the first two 'reform' decades after 1989. ■





FOCUS

The Chinese Worker Goes Abroad



Migration and the Globalisation of Chinese Capital

NYÍRI PÁL

The globalisation of capital from the People's Republic of China has been accompanied by a growing range of human flows. Since the late 1980s, small traders selling consumer goods, labour migrants working on state projects, and students have expanded to much of the world and been joined by expatriate managers and technicians, tourists and lifestyle migrants. These flows play different roles in the global geography of capital from China, carrying with them distinct modalities of labour relations that involve both Chinese and non-Chinese actors.

'Pilots', Shanghai.
PC: photorobsmith.com.

As with the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth, the rise—or, rather, the return—of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to global economic and political prominence has been accompanied by new migrations within, from, and to China. These have been facilitated by the global economic transformation that followed the end of the Cold War but go back to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. The Maoist regime of closed borders—which had never been as hermetic as

its Soviet prototype—began to loosen in the mid-1970s, when a trickle of family members of pre-World War II migrants to Hong Kong, Macau, North America, and Europe—overwhelmingly from rural Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian provinces—were allowed to rejoin their relatives as family reunion immigrants. After 1977, official policy permitted family members of overseas Chinese, as well as those overseas Chinese who had previously returned to China, to emigrate. In addition, an increasing number of university students and faculty were permitted to pursue postgraduate studies abroad. Although this was intended to develop science and technology in China, most of these students did not return.

Beginning in 1979, some state companies were given the licence and encouragement to send workers abroad, mostly to work on construction contracts, as a way of generating foreign currency. The scope of contract work has since expanded to services, agriculture, shipping, and manufacturing, while the numbers of those in the construction sector have expanded owing to the increasing role of Chinese companies in road, railway, and dam construction across the world (Zhang 2020). According to official figures from the China International Contractors Association (cited in Nyíri 2018: 706), there were 820,000 Chinese contract workers abroad at the end of 2009. As a shortage of workers developed in China and wages rose, and as criticism of the use of Chinese labour on overseas construction projects intensified in the recipient countries, the outward flows of contract workers declined: in 2017, 522,000 Chinese went abroad, mostly to Asia and Africa (Ministry of Commerce 2018). As infrastructure projects in China slow, these flows may increase again, especially if the Belt and Road Initiative continues despite the global tightening of trade and migration barriers.

As several essays in this issue of the *Made in China Journal* demonstrate, the encounters of Chinese labour with places outside China can serve as a window into socioeconomic hierarchies and aspirations in China itself, as

well as a lens through which to view evolving Chinese understandings of the world. The nature of these encounters has been shifting as Chinese labour contracting expands to a broader range of geographies and projects and the composition of workers becomes more stratified due to subcontracting cascades, differences between state-owned and private companies, and the stratification between skilled workers/technicians and unskilled labour (see, for example, Driessen 2019). Numerically, however—in contrast to the early twentieth century—the significance of contract labour migration for post-Mao China has been limited as, since the 1990s, it has been eclipsed by various outflows of the highly skilled and the well-to-do. Along with students, these include three main groups: traders; growing numbers of highly educated transients, such as the expatriate managers and engineers supporting the worldwide expansion of Chinese companies; and affluent Chinese who choose to live abroad for lifestyle reasons. For this last, growing segment of the urban middle class, moving abroad has shifted from a money-making pursuit to a quest for a healthier environment, a more leisurely lifestyle, and happier childhoods for their children.

Traders

In 1986, China liberalised the issuing of passports, creating the possibility for individuals to go abroad on their own initiative (exit visas were abolished in 1996, and obtaining a passport became a legal entitlement in 2007). The number of Chinese citizens who went abroad jumped from 80,000 in 1986 to nearly 250,000 in 1989 (Nyíri 2018: 707). Chinese traders took advantage of the new provisions, combined with liberalised entry regulations and an unmet demand for consumer goods, to cross the border with the Soviet Union to sell low-price clothing and footwear there and in Eastern Europe. They tied their livelihoods to the ability of Chinese industry

to deliver products wanted elsewhere, acting as a grassroots vanguard for the subsequent global expansion of Chinese companies, and becoming some of the first to bank on what is now referred to as ‘China’s rise’.

Most early migrants were former employees of state enterprises who sought a way out of the economic recession and political uncertainty of early 1990s China. Along with millions of others who ‘jumped into the sea’ (下海, the period term for going into small business), they tested foreign waters. Although no reliable figures are available, at least hundreds of thousands of such entrepreneurial migrants settled abroad, establishing wholesale and retail chains across Eastern Europe, Africa, and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere.

With the subsequent growth of the Chinese economy, the appeal to the highly educated of such low-end entrepreneurship subsided. Instead, rural Fujian, Zhejiang, Henan, Hunan, and Sichuan provinces became new bases of a rapidly expanding entrepreneurial migration to Africa, South America, and mainland Southeast Asia. These migrants numbered in the hundreds of thousands and encountered increasing hostility. In addition to trading consumer goods, entrepreneurial Chinese migrants have in some countries (such as Argentina) taken over much of the food retail industry, while also investing in real estate and hotels. They also increasingly strive to become subcontractors and brokers to large-scale, state-financed infrastructure, extraction, and manufacturing projects carried out by Chinese companies.

The spatial organisation of this migration was centred on ‘Chinese markets’ or ‘Chinese malls’, where hundreds, sometimes thousands, of migrant traders served customers from across the region. Like ‘Chinatowns’ in earlier times, they also served as first points of orientation for new arrivals, as information exchanges, and as recreational environments. In time, these markets evolved into regional wholesale centres with an expanded range of Chinese-made goods, from electronics to household appliances, white goods, and construction

material. Dragon Mart, a 1.2-kilometre-long Chinese market in Dubai, has nearly 4,000 shops. These markets are connected by global Chinese-owned networks that provide formal and informal credit and logistics services.

Since the late 2000s, when overseas investments from China increased, some of the malls became bases for ‘logistics centres’—no longer mere hubs of migrant traders but clusters of larger Chinese companies seeking to gain a foothold in overseas markets and preferring bounded environments owned and managed by Chinese entrepreneurs and staff. These sometimes combine retail, exhibition, and office spaces with residential and recreational ones marketed to relatively high-income buyers in China. Such projects thus link entrepreneurial migration to the migration of expatriate managers and lifestyle migration. At the same time, they employ local workers—mostly women, often from marginalised groups such as foreign migrants or ethnic minorities. For such workers, Chinese market stalls or shops have offered ways to find informal employment in environments where their access to other jobs may be limited. Chinese traders often rely on locals as brokers and interpreters, which places them in relationships of trust but also generates conflict (Nyíri 2011; Giese 2013). In some rural locations, working at the Chinese shop is one of the few jobs available; the threat of the closure of village shops in Eastern Europe during the COVID-19 epidemic has left many employees in a desperate situation.

Expatriate Managers

In addition to blue-collar contract workers, the global expansion of the Chinese economy since the 1990s has resulted in the emergence of a sizeable class of expatriate managers, engineers, and technicians deployed by Chinese companies. Their ranks expanded with the three waves of Chinese corporate globalisation that moved from extractive industries to business-to-business technology and then to

consumer technology. The first expatriates tended to work on construction projects, in mines, and on oil rigs; later, they were joined by the staff of a few giant information technology (IT) companies. According to its 2010 annual report, the best known of China's globalised companies, Huawei, had offices in more than 140 countries and 21,700 foreign employees, with an overall 'localisation rate' (that is, the share of locally hired employees) of 69 per cent.

After the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) accelerated the acquisition of overseas businesses by Chinese capital, the range of geographies, industries, and types of companies employing expatriates expanded as smaller businesses ventured abroad. Many expatriate managers were tasked with building and managing local teams. This expanded scope of operations, in turn, needed a wider corporate services infrastructure, such as legal and accounting firms, contractors, and consultancies, both Chinese and non-Chinese-owned, which hired a fresh cohort of staff from China to handle the accounts of Chinese firms.

Until the early 2000s, Chinese expatriates tended to be middle-age men from state enterprises who lived in segregated compounds. The expansion of company profiles and locations has resulted in a shift towards young, mostly single men and women, often hired straight out of college either in China or in the West. The middle-class consumption and leisure habits of these employees, who tend to live in urban environments amid non-Chinese, are different from both traders and older state-enterprise managers. Their work interactions with non-Chinese are also of a different nature; while local employees tend to be *de facto* subordinate to senior Chinese managers and a degree of segregation and mistrust often persists between Chinese and non-Chinese employees, office interaction follows rules that, at least in principle, enforce a more equal relationship with local white-collar colleagues.

Relations with local workers on the shop floor remain a potential point of tension even as the location and sectors of Chinese manufacturing investments shift from poorer to

richer countries and from extractive to higher-technology sectors, but to what extent this is so is so far poorly understood. In some cases, Chinese managers bring more demanding labour regimes, but this does not always result in the sort of racialised antagonism that has been observed in some mines in Africa (Lee 2017; Nyíri and Xu 2017). Here, too, differences across locations and sectors and between state and private capital may be significant. In some places, locally born or educated ethnic Chinese play the role of intermediaries between the Chinese management and local workers. As Chinese companies turn into multinationals, develop regional and global networks of manufacturing, logistics, and research and development (R&D) facilities, and recruit an expanding pool of foreigners, reporting lines and labour relations increase in complexity.

Lifestyle Migrants

Since the 1990s, a small number of wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs and highly placed officials has sought to gain a foothold abroad to secure their families and their wealth in case of political or economic problems in China (Xiang 2016). The GFC of 2008 and the continued rise of incomes and real estate prices in China made such plans affordable for an increasing segment of the Chinese population.

Between 2009 and 2018, Chinese citizens accounted for half of all those granted EB-5 investor immigrant visas to the United States for employment-generating investments of at least US\$500,000; for 87 per cent of immigrants under Australia's Significant Investor Program (EB-5 Blog 2019; Department of Home Affairs 2020); and the majority of applicants under Canada's Business Immigration Program, which was ended in 2012 (Canadian Government 2014). So-called golden visa programs in European Union (EU) member states—including Spain, Hungary, and Greece—which require investments of €300,000 or more, attracted similar percentages of Chinese

applicants in the 2010s (Nyíri and Beck 2020). Immigrants from China became the largest foreign buyers of residential real estate in all of these countries. In a 2017 survey of Chinese millionaires (in dollar terms), 47 per cent said they were considering emigration (Hurun Report 2018). The United States was their favoured destination, followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and EU member states offering a ‘golden visa’.

Increasingly, investment-immigration schemes attract not only the very wealthy but also middle-class Chinese, who are motivated less by securing their fortunes and more by the desire to live a healthier or more satisfying life (Liu-Farrer 2016; Nyíri and Beck 2020). Many young couples, driven by a desire to raise their children in a more relaxed environment, finance the costs of migration by selling an apartment in China.

Chinese Capital and Labour Relations in the WeChat Diaspora

Each migration flow considered above is connected to the globalisation of capital from the PRC, yet they have distinct socio-demographic profiles and give rise to different sets of labour practices. The export of contract labour—originally a state-led effort to earn foreign currency but now tied to the global expansion of Chinese corporations—results in forms of precarity that highlight blocked pathways of social mobility in China’s domestic labour market but often go unrecognised as both employers and observers are more concerned with managing Chinese–local labour conflicts. Trade migration gives rise to small-scale, negotiated, highly local labour arrangements that have stayed below the radar of regulators and statisticians but in which some non-Chinese gain access to the networks, habitus, and tools of transnational Chinese commerce while Chinese traders acquire local



Pekingers in New York
(北京人在紐約).

social skills and networks. In contrast, mostly young, educated, and highly mobile expatriate Chinese managers are the vanguard of the PRC’s global capitalism. They both export and absorb management practices as they move between frontiers of Chinese capital, connecting places according to a logic that cuts across the old boundaries of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, North and South.

Finally, lifestyle migrants, as they channel PRC capital into the global consumption of real estate, travel, and leisure, help the globalisation of its financial and digital infrastructure. Popular Chinese literature and television of the 1990s were fascinated with the travails of the ‘overseas gold-diggers’ (海外淘金者). The heroes of these novels and TV dramas—most famously, Glen Cao’s *Pekingers in New York* (北京人在紐約)—were young men who worked their way up from washing dishes in Chinese

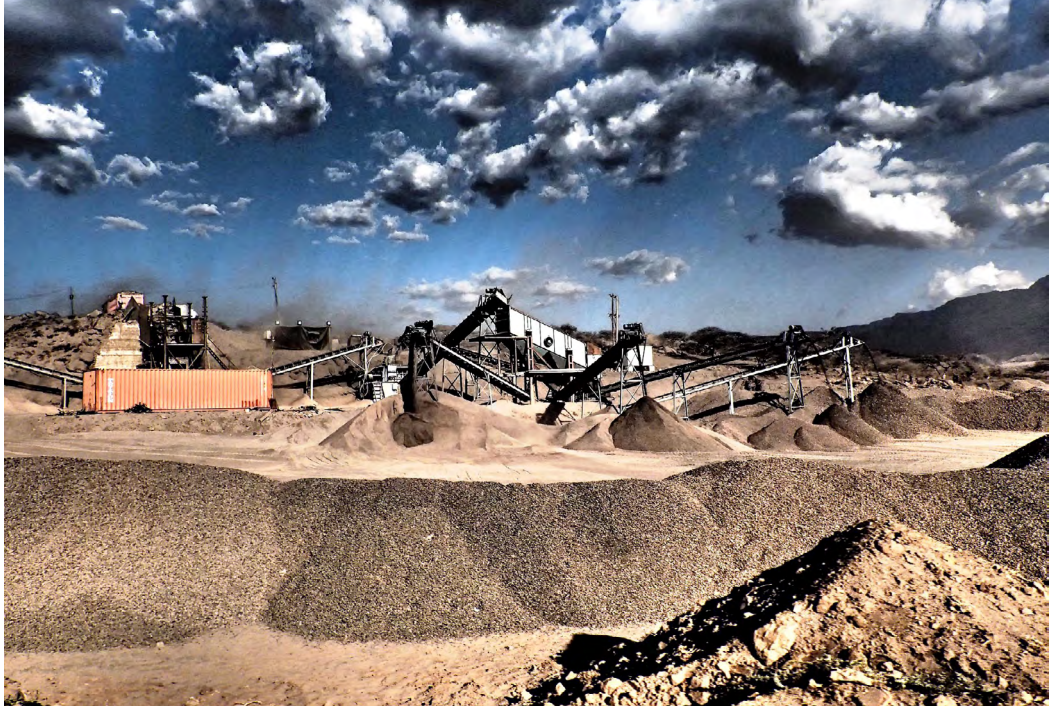


Where Are We Going, Daddy? (爸爸去哪儿).

restaurants to positions of power and money that commanded respect from the natives (Barmé 1995). Today's popular celebrity shows like *Where Are We Going, Daddy?* (爸爸去哪儿) feature wealthy Chinese partaking of the culinary and cultural pleasures of the same lands in which their predecessors toiled with such vengeance—and spur more middle-class Chinese to follow (Keane and Zhang 2017).

The transformation of gold-diggers into people of leisure signals this shift in the modality of engagement with the world, from production to consumption—or reproduction, if we see them as paragons of the new nuclear family ideal. Yet such shows, with the travel and migration they help fuel, are themselves fed back into a digital ethnic gig economy that straddles the 'WeChat diaspora' of lifestyle migrants as well as workers, traders, managers,

and students (another global human flow from China). This is an immense platform economy that ties together real estate agents, hotel and restaurant employees, travel guides, drivers, accountants, lawyers, media workers, advertisers, and myriad other service providers and proxy buyers (代购) through a system of information and payments channelled through China. Labour relations here are ephemeral and hard to pin down, but they have begun to transform the livelihoods of many in Southeast Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, shaping regional subeconomies that involve particularly, but not only, ethnic Chinese (Nyíri and Tan 2016). ■



Africa Drifters

Miriam DRIESSEN

Increased mobility from China to Africa over the past two decades has given birth to the 'Africa drifter' (非漂). Employed and driven, yet restless and plagued by the lack of a sense of security, many Chinese who move to Africa for work, especially those attached to large-scale infrastructure projects, find themselves afloat—caught between remaining and returning. Why do Africa drifters wind up in this uncertain state? And how can we link this type of mobility to developments in China?

Gravel Pit, Chinese
Construction Site, Ethiopia
PC: Jasmine Halki.

Hui (a pseudonym) was searching for emeralds when I first met him in 2017. On the side, he managed construction work on a road project in the homeland of the Nyangatom in southern Ethiopia. Short-tempered but generous, Hui was always bustling onsite, shouting orders, or waving directions when it was too noisy for his voice to carry. Now and then he called local labourers to the side to split stones.

Unable to look to his parents for financial support to get ahead in life, Hui had left China after graduating from college in 2010. He had joined a Chinese state-owned enterprise, lured by the promise of good pay. After five long years in Ethiopia, he returned to China and married. He decided to stay.

Hui's newly established business in China was, however, short-lived. He had taken a subcontract on a real estate project in his home province, Shaanxi. The contractor owed him more than one million yuan when the project was halted. Pressed to repay his debts and provide for his family, Hui left for Africa again.

Back in Ethiopia, he became restless. His salary was not quite enough. Only a fortune in gemstones, he believed, could help him craft a respectable life in China.

Afloat

Hui is one of the many *feipiao* (非漂, 'Africa drifters') who work on Chinese-run construction projects across Africa. His story is at once unique and illustrative of a large group of Chinese men—certified engineers and weathered builders alike—who seek to create a better life for themselves and their families in China by moving overseas. They hope to generate stability through mobility.

Following four decades of unprecedented migration from the countryside to the cities and beyond, governed by state policies that regulate and restrict settlement, mobility has become the norm in present-day China. For *feipiao*, mobility is a means to craft a fulfilling future and stake a claim to social presence in a rapidly developing society at home. Yet, why do Africa drifters, as Hui's story illustrates, continue to move? How can we define *piao* (漂 or 飘) mobility and explain its prevalence?

Chinese mobility to Africa gained pace in the early 2000s. It was facilitated by state-owned enterprises, which, prompted by Jiang Zemin's 'Going Out Policy' (走出去战略), had started participating in international tenders for infrastructure projects across Africa, initially funded by the International Development Association and other, mostly Western, donors. The threshold for migration was low. Chinese companies provided and arranged everything, including flights, housing, meals,

and medication. The majority of workers who joined this wave of migration were men, chiefly from rural backgrounds. They were first-generation peasant workers or their sons, like Hui, who was the first in his family to earn a college degree. Since the late 2000s, the Chinese Government and its development banks have started funding more and more projects, while domestic construction firms have expanded. Chinese activities in Ethiopia diversified into trade, hospitality, agriculture, and manufacturing. While some Chinese traders and entrepreneurs embrace a settler mentality (Lin 2014), the majority of Chinese engineers and builders attached to large-scale construction projects still view their stay in Africa as temporary. They hope to return to China.

The Birth of Drifting

The *feipiao* have grown out of a particular historical configuration, as have their predecessors and contemporaries, the *beipiao* (北漂, 'Beijing drifters'). The character 漂 describes a certain form of mobility—one that is constant, repetitive, and lacks clear direction (Zhou 2006: 55). The *beipiao* grew out of mass migration from the countryside to Beijing, combined with concerted efforts by the state to govern mobility (Zhang 2018). Those who were lured to the city found only a temporary home. *Beipiao*, much like their counterparts in other cities and regions across China, such as the *shangpiao* (上漂, 'Shanghai drifters') and the *nanpiao* (南漂, 'southern drifters'), remained outsiders (Yang et al. 2016).

What characterises drifters in China, and distinguishes them from their settled counterparts, is their lack of a local *hukou* (户口, 'household registration'), and the social security and sense of belonging attached to it. Their identity derives from not being or not belonging, trapping them in constant movement. They move from one place to

another, one job to another, and one opportunity to another, in an attempt to satisfy a longing for stability. Through their hypermobility, drifters at once transgress and submit to government mobility regimes. Indeed, many *beipiao* readily acknowledge that Beijing will never become their home.

Described as a generation (漂一代) or a social group (漂一族), Beijing drifters and Africa drifters are the children of their time. They are carried along by social currents set in motion by rapid development in China. *Feipiao* often mentioned a lack of agency or control. This is not to say that drifting is not attractive; it signifies freedom and can be exhilarating. In China, however, ‘drifting’ (漂泊) carries a negative connotation, describing the movement of the restless and the rootless (Hunt 2016).

From *Beipiao* to *Feipiao*

‘From a *beipiao* I have become a *feipiao*’, a Chinese purchaser in Ethiopia noted after he ended a phone call with his wife in the documentary *China in Ethiopia* (Zhou 2018). When life in Beijing no longer offered sufficient opportunities, Africa gave hope. A shifting migration frontier has brought domestic rural-urban migrants to destinations further afield—in Southeast Asia, Africa, South America, and beyond.

Whereas *beipiao* came of age in an era of rapid economic development, *feipiao* were born of a decade of slow growth and overcapacity, which has generated a spillover of not only commodities and technology, but also human resources. A competitive job market, skyrocketing house prices, and rising living costs in urban China push drifters further afield in search of better opportunities. Mobility has evolved into hypermobility.

Much like *beipiao*, *feipiao* remain on the move. In Africa, they are mere passers-by. The point of reference continues to be China, at least for

many. However, the very circumstances that drive *feipiao* to Africa pose a challenge for their return.

Social Tides

One reason *feipiao* are caught between remaining and returning is the expectation of upward social mobility created by four decades of economic growth in mainland China. Even if they cannot change their own lives, *feipiao* hope to improve the lives of significant others, such as their sons. ‘If I would have a girl, I would not need to come here,’ Bo (a pseudonym), a mechanic working for a Chinese state-owned company, admitted. Bo had relocated to Ethiopia at the start of 2020 for the sake of his four-year-old son. ‘I want to create a better life for my son, and have him enter a better social circle.’ Bo himself was born into a peasant family in Heilongjiang province.

Even though social strata in China are solidifying, the pressure for upward social mobility persists. The main reason for his move to Ethiopia is what Bo calls China’s ‘circle culture’ (圈子文化), which forces people to compare themselves with others and compels them to improve their lives at all costs. ‘We Chinese indulge in comparing oneself with others,’ he explained to me, blaming the Chinese obsession with saving face (or *mianzi*, 面子) and, ultimately, Confucius, for what he deemed to be a fatal habit. ‘In Ethiopia, it does not matter if you drive a shabby car or a good car, as long as you reach your destination with it,’ Bo explained. ‘In China, what matters most is the car you drive. Whether you drive a car worth 10,000 yuan or one worth 100,000 yuan makes all the difference.’

Apart from being pushed around by relentless tides, drifters suffer from a lingering sense of insecurity. Boasting college degrees, *beipiao* used to distinguish themselves from peasant workers along class lines. Echoing a renewed recognition of precarity across social strata in China, *feipiao* tend to downplay their status,

typically calling themselves ‘peasant workers’ (农民工) or ‘odd-jobbers’ (打工仔). A certified engineer in Ethiopia once referred to himself and his colleagues as ‘we, China’s low-end population’ (低端人口) when he relayed to me his colleagues’ fears of being unable to return to China, referring to the notion that gained currency after Beijing’s infamous eviction of migrants in 2017 (Li et al. 2018). ‘As long as we do not have a sense of security, we do not belong to the middle class,’ he asserted. In fact, he and many of his coworkers earn what could easily be counted as a middle-class income.

Popular narratives and academic studies have sought to define China’s middle class in terms of salary, profession, and consumption patterns (Goodman and Chen 2013). For this engineer, belonging to the middle class was determined not by annual income, but by something much less tangible: a sense of security. As the predicaments of Hui and Bo suggest, this sense of security is intimately linked to the wellbeing of one’s family. The lack of this ever so hard to obtain feeling made them poor men, who had no option but to continue drifting.

Huawei. Only the third group, who still worked unstable and poorly paid jobs, had not yet surpassed him in terms of salary.

Bin had moved to Africa to relieve his family of the debts they incurred for his mother’s cancer treatment. He grew up in rural Henan. He excelled in school, and later at university, but had to let go of his dream to continue his education. Since leaving for Ethiopia, Bin had been on the move. He hoped to catch up with society at home and move back. Meanwhile, his feeling of lagging behind was growing stronger.

COVID-19 has made return even more challenging. Many Chinese enterprises have curtailed the mobility of employees and postponed annual vacations to China. Flights are hard to get and prohibitively expensive. As doom scenarios of COVID-19’s impact on Africa are being disproved, anxiety is subsiding. The feeling of being discarded from a society that is leaving them behind, however, remains pertinent. ■

The Question of Return

‘Going back to China equals losing your job,’ one engineer claimed. He explained why many *feipiao* are reluctant to return, whispering: ‘Those who tell you they will go back to China are lying.’ Returnees may face a period of unemployment or are forced to compromise on a salary that is not quite enough to maintain the middle-class lifestyle they obtained by moving to Ethiopia.

I met Bin (a pseudonym), a talented young engineer, in Addis Ababa on the day he returned from his annual vacation in China in 2019. He admitted, somewhat melancholically, feeling ‘disappointed’ (失落). ‘I have been discarded,’ he concluded with a wry smile. His friends in China, he explained, belonged to three groups. Some worked in the start-up sector, others as salaried employees of big companies, such as



Doing Time, Making Money at a Chinese State Firm in Angola

Entrance to Chinese
compound, Luanda 2014.
PC: Cheryl Mei-ting
Schmitz.

Cheryl Mei-ting SCHMITZ

Popular accounts of the expansion of Chinese capital in Africa have presented it as a rapid and exciting process of furious movement and violent transformation. By contrast, fieldwork conducted among employees of a Chinese state-owned construction firm in Luanda, Angola, in 2013–14 reveals repetitive rhythms of monotony and boredom. This essay explores how Chinese migrant workers in Angola experienced their time abroad as work without life, despite spending much of their time every day engaged in non-productive activities. Justifying their deferment of ‘life’ with dreams of what their money would eventually buy in China, and attempting to contrast their own ‘hard work’ against an image of idle Africans or Americans, the Chinese men the author met in Angola were ultimately pretty bored.

In late 2013, I arrived in Luanda, the capital of Angola, for a year of research on the recent boom of Chinese investment and labour migration in the region. An acquaintance introduced me to Li Jun (pseudonym), a 27-year-old manager at a Chinese state-owned construction firm that I will call ‘The Angola Company’. His company, like many others, had come to Angola in the early 2000s under the auspices of the massive National Reconstruction Program established at the end of the 27-year-long Angolan civil war. The Angolan Government contracted Chinese companies to build infrastructure, paying for the projects with loans from Chinese financial institutions backed by Angolan oil. The arrangement was criticised by suspicious observers as a form of ‘new imperialism’, while

Chinese and Angolan state actors praised it as a pragmatic and mutually advantageous partnership.

As an ethnographer, I was less interested in casting moral judgement about 'China in Africa' than in understanding how China–Africa relations were experienced through everyday life. At one of our first meetings, I relayed this vague anthropological goal to manager Li. I wondered whether I might conduct participant observation at his company's base, which consisted of dormitories and offices built on the corner of a construction site. His response surprised me. 'I understand. You want to know not only how Chinese people work here, but also how they live. But,' he cautioned, 'you should know one thing: Chinese people do not *live* in Angola; we *only* work.'

In what follows, I explore why Chinese managers and workers at The Angola Company considered their existence in Angola to be a kind of non-life. They insisted on the all-encompassing nature of their work, although much of their time was occupied by non-productive activity, or what some would classify as 'leisure' (Veblen 2007: 33). Their days were indeed hard, but not because they were busily immersed in toil. Ironically, it was a repetitive, enforced idleness that they endured in the service of expanding China's global reach.

Temporary Machines

Li Jun's characterisation of the Chinese migrant experience in Angola was in part derived from the way many companies from China structured time and space for their workers. Like many Chinese companies in Angola at the time of my fieldwork, his employer followed a seven-day workweek, with days 'off' only on major Chinese holidays, like National Day or the Lunar New Year. Chinese employees repeated the same routine of waking up, going to a certain location for work, and returning to their dormitory, day

after day, for the entire length of their contract, which was typically one and a half or two years. They lived and worked on the company premises, and most staff were not permitted to leave the compounds after 6 pm. Had they been given permission to leave company grounds more often, employees would still not have been able to do much, since their salaries were paid into bank accounts in China, accessible only on their return. Many claimed to like this arrangement, saying that it allowed them to save more money and kept them physically safe.

Workers were thus available to work extremely long hours. In the past, construction sites were sometimes kept operational late into the evenings to meet tight deadlines. However, by the time I moved into a dormitory of The Angola Company, work appeared to be both all-consuming and strictly limited. Lunch breaks and midday naptime were religiously maintained, as was dinner time, meaning everyone had to be back at the dormitories before the canteen opened at 6 pm. The evenings were 'free' for employees to take walks in circles around the compound or play cards and drink beer in their dormitories. However, if one of the directors suddenly announced that one of us had been 'invited' to a drinking banquet with his business associates, it would have been unthinkable to refuse. One's time, therefore, even outside official working hours, was not completely one's own, and it could never be spent outside the social or physical space of the company.

In their recent ethnographies of Chinese labour in Zambia and Ethiopia, respectively, Ching Kwan Lee (2017) and Miriam Driessen (2019) quote Chinese migrants making comparisons to prison, citing the physical discomfort of their spare living conditions, restrictions on spatial mobility, lack of entertainment, social isolation, and the machine-like repetitiveness of their work. Chinese workers with whom I spoke also highlighted the inhuman quality of their working conditions, though usually through sarcastic comments rather than righteous cries

of injustice. ‘Chinese people here are like robots [机器人],’ Li Jun would often joke. ‘Every day at the same time we get out of bed, go to work, get off work, and go home, and at night we recharge our batteries!’ A technician in the engineering department, Han Han, told me, chuckling: ‘We are like machines, or the walking dead [尸体走肉]!’ It was only when he returned home, Han said, when he finally saw the arid landscape surrounding his hometown in northwestern China from the airplane window, that he felt he ‘came alive’ again (我就活了!).

Counting the Days

Anthropologist Xiang Biao has written about contemporary overseas migration from China as ‘a temporal rather than a spatial project’ (Xiang 2014: 192). Migrants, both those who actually find opportunities abroad and ‘would-be’ migrants who live in a state of anticipation, are driven by what they call a ‘last bus mentality’—the fear that they may be missing out on the wealth accumulation occasioned by China’s rapid development in the post-reform era (Xiang 2014: 191). For those desperate not to be left behind, a transformation in socioeconomic conditions would be brought about not by travelling to a new location and beginning life afresh, but rather by taking a detour through work abroad to skip ahead in the race for enrichment. Importantly, as Xiang emphasises, although migrants move across borders, their aspirations remain fixedly oriented towards China—the place to which they eventually return and where they resume full participation in life. From such a perspective, concerns such as ‘integration’ into a ‘host society’ become utterly irrelevant. What matters is only the future—a future firmly rooted in China.

If Chinese migrants considered their work in Angola merely a detour from life in China, what was the content of their work? When I began visiting The Angola Company regularly,

I assumed everyday life would be filled with bustling activity, that these men on the front lines of Chinese globalisation would be sweating under the hot Angolan sun, diligently building wealth along lines of South–South solidarity.

What I witnessed instead surprised me. I arrived in Angola at a specific moment, a decade after the beginning of postwar reconstruction, when, at least for The Angola Company, payments had been delayed on several government construction projects, and therefore work had slowed. Moreover, there were complaints that the construction market had become ‘saturated’ with Chinese competitors and was no longer the gold mine it had appeared to be when the company first arrived in 2005. While company headquarters attempted, slowly, to change their business development strategy and expand into other sectors, office staff and technicians languished, dawdling around the various compounds to which they were confined, their heads filled not with grand schemes of global expansion but with modest dreams about how, once back in China, they would spend the salary they still steadily earned. In this context, they had to find ways to pass the time.

An accountant, Ma Hui (pseudonym), had already been working in Angola for more than five years when I met him, but he spoke very limited Portuguese. Since I frequently helped with translation at the company, he asked whether I would be willing to teach him what I knew of the language. This request, however, was not primarily motivated by a desire to communicate with Portuguese-speakers. Ma explained: ‘It’s just that life is really *so* boring here. I just want to feel like I’ve *done something* over the next year, before I go back [to China].’ I agreed to help and, for the next few weeks, we met every day after lunch to read dialogues out of a Portuguese textbook. Ma Hui’s coworkers expressed genuine admiration at his commitment, reporting to me that he had stopped playing cards with them and instead spent his evenings reviewing vocabulary.

Less than a month later, however, Ma suddenly announced that he wanted to take a break from studying. ‘I think I want to wait until after Christmas to continue,’ he said. Then Christmas passed, and he said he wanted to wait until after Lunar New Year. After that, he revealed to me that he had become fully absorbed in a video game introduced to him by Wang Tao, a colleague in the logistics department. The game, played online with multiple participants all over the world, involved building up a fortified compound and amassing gold by attacking and plundering other players’ settlements.

‘Are these all your soldiers?’ I asked, staring at some squirming purple figures on the screen.

‘Yeah!’ he said proudly. ‘And this is *all my money*. Look how big Wang’s fortress is! Mine’s still pretty small, but I can build it up over time. I just want to feel like I’ve *done something* over the next few months, before I go back [to China].’

Through his attempts to pass time—first, by studying Portuguese, then by playing a game online—Ma Hui searched for a sense of accomplishment. Why would he need to intentionally seek this out, and through activities that I would assume fell outside the scope of his responsibilities as an accountant? The apparent emptiness of his workdays—in terms of both the availability of time for leisure activities and the experience of having achieved nothing—intrigued me. How could Chinese employees at The Angola Company be *both* working all the time *and* apparently not working at all?

Indeed, Ma Hui’s experience was not unique. Many of the several hundred Chinese men employed by the company spent their days in Angola engaged in activities that had nothing to do with company business: reading news on their phones or iPads, chatting and smoking cigarettes, tending to potted plants, watching movies, or making calls to friends and relatives in China. These were activities designed to fill time, or make it pass, as they counted down the days until they returned to

China and life as understood in any meaningful sense. Employees’ time at work, which was all their time as long as they were in Angola, did not have to be economically productive because, as long as they were abroad, they were ‘working’. What was apparently ‘hard’ about their situation was not the work itself (see also Driessen 2019: 161), but their social isolation, the monotonous schedule—so repetitive that everyone, including me, forgot what day of the week it was—and, ultimately, the boredom.

Globalisation through Boredom

Boredom, according to Baudelaire, involves ‘being caught in a dull state of permanent anticipation’; for Benjamin, it signifies ‘the atrophy of experience’ (both cited in Masquelier 2013: 481). This uniquely modern affect is thus intimately tied to temporality. As Edmund Leach (1968: 135) long ago proposed, time flow is ideally perceived through the alternation of qualitatively different experiences, such as mundane daily routines punctuated by festivals, which ‘create time by creating intervals in social life’. By contrast, boredom can be understood as ‘a state of being where the experience of time dissolves or stops being of relevance’ (Musharbash 2007: 307). More specifically, Leach argued that the experience of time involves recognition of two distinct processes: first, people notice repetitions—of water dripping from a roof, for instance, or the chime of a clock marking an hour’s passage—that are in some sense the same thing, but with a difference; second, people recognise change over the course of a life cycle, such as the universal process of birth, ageing, and death (Leach 1968: 132). The combination of endless repetition alongside progressive change is what allows one to feel movement through time (Masquelier 2013: 482). By contrast, amid the boredom of, for example, unemployed youth in Niger or residents of an Aboriginal settlement

in Australia, what is experienced are not ‘new moments’ but ‘an endless repetition of the same’ (Musharbash 2007: 313).

Notably, many recent ethnographic accounts of boredom have focused on the experiences of the unemployed (see, for instance, Jeffrey 2010). Specifically, jobless young African men have emerged as a prominent population among whom to undertake studies of boredom. Whether in Ethiopia (Mains 2007) or Senegal (Ralph 2008), urban male youth who, lacking waged work, spend much of their time preparing and drinking tea, seem to exist in a perpetual state of enforced leisure. They ‘kill time’ (Ralph 2008: 15) not in anticipation of some expected social event, but because they find themselves caught in a permanent state of ‘waithood’, held back from participation in waged labour and therefore from the achievement of an ideal masculine adulthood (Masquelier 2013: 475; Dhillon and Yousef 2009). Another favoured setting for the anthropology of boredom has been among impoverished communities excluded from state services or made to wait indefinitely for them. In administrative offices from Argentina (Auyero 2012) to Latvia (Ozolins-Fitzgerald 2016), waiting is imposed on populations as a technique of governance, meant to induce passivity and subjection (see also Grill 2018).

By contrast, the bored men I encountered at The Angola Company were neither unemployed nor neglected by social welfare institutions. Instead, the enforced leisure they experienced was due to a state of total employment, work without life, in which their every daily need was met by the company. One might be tempted to read this situation as a legacy of Chinese socialism, through which individuals’ time would have been completely ‘captured’ (Verdery 1996) by the Maoist state to eliminate possibilities for subversive activity. In the twenty-first century, however, managers at this state-owned construction firm were more interested in competing against private companies on the Angolan market than they were in political ideology. The Party secretary of The Angola Company regularly urged

younger managers to become entrepreneurs rather than serve the Communist Party, and many employees openly mocked the idea of Chinese–African brotherhood, insisting they had come to Angola for one reason alone: to make money.

Making Work

Earning up to ten times what equivalent positions would have garnered in China, employees of The Angola Company could, over the course of a few years, amass enough savings to buy property, get married, acquire a private vehicle, or book an international vacation—all necessary ingredients for social survival in twenty-first-century China (see also Driessen 2019: 161). Moneymaking was not only central to these men’s purpose of working in Angola; it was also a core part of the way they defined work itself. After I had been living and working on company grounds for about a month, shadowing employees as they went about their daily routines, and accompanying members of the trade department to their offices every day to assist with translation, I decided I needed a change of routine. I wanted a regular period of uninterrupted time to write up and analyse my field notes, to read, and perhaps to visit people I knew outside The Angola Company, whether for fieldwork purposes or simply ‘for fun’. Some of my ‘coworkers’ at the company said they had noticed that I seemed tired. ‘We made the mistake of treating you like one of us,’ one of the young managers said sympathetically.

Despite their ‘work without life’ often appearing, to me, more like ‘work without work’, Chinese managers claimed the ability to work hard, and incessantly, was a particularly Chinese virtue (for just one example of the vast academic discussion of this question, see Harrell 1985). Although I considered reading and writing to be kinds of ‘work’, whenever I did take time away from the company, my coworkers would usually tell me, mockingly, to ‘have a good rest!’. They sometimes made

comments that I ‘needed to rest’ *because* I was American, not Chinese. In response, I asked whether all employees would not benefit from having at least one day of rest per week. Was it not possible, I asked, that this could even have the effect of making employees work more productively the rest of the time?

‘Actually, this idea of resting one day per week,’ one of the men explained to me, ‘it originally came from the West. If you think about it, before the Republican Period [1911–49], who ever heard of the concept of *rest*?’

‘That’s right,’ his coworker chimed in. ‘Some elderly men and women in China, they’ve probably never had a day of rest in their lives! They may have taken time off at Lunar New Year, but celebrating a festival is different from resting. Human beings always need an adjustment period.’ He addressed me directly: ‘If you grew accustomed to working every day you wouldn’t feel the need to rest either.’

The first speaker added: ‘Angola is a very good example of that. In the past, local people always had to rest on Sundays. They said they had to go to church to pray. Later, Chinese people told them, if you go to church is God going to give you a salary? Then they saw that Chinese people running businesses here stayed open on Sundays, and they also gradually began to open their shops on Sundays, instead of attending church.’

‘That’s right,’ his friend agreed. ‘They realised that if they did business on Sundays, they could make more money!’

Moneymaking requires exploitation—this is an old lesson from Marx, which the wage-earning men at The Angola Company knew well. Instead of a flurry of productive activity, however, Chinese businesses maintained their competitiveness through boredom—an all-encompassing kind of restriction that included enforced leisure. This system allowed for the total availability of labour, from both managers and workers, which could, in theory, be deployed to complete projects quickly as a highly disciplined and docile workforce. In practice, it was experienced as passive waiting, a deferment of life, justified through

claims about the particularly Chinese capacity for hard work. Boredom, in this case, was not imposed on company men as a form of discipline. Rather, what enabled employees’ exploitation and therefore moneymaking was the fact that their aspirations were always oriented elsewhere, so that progressive time, and therefore ‘life’, could be suspended, while work, which was actually an unenjoyable kind of leisure, could take its place for a year, two years, or ten. Ironically, Chinese expansion in Africa, so frequently depicted by journalists as rapid, exciting, and even violent, was experienced by those on its front lines as dull, repetitive, and monotonous—experiences similar to those anthropologists have observed among unemployed African youth.

At least this was how it looked from my perspective. From the perspective of the company employees, whether they were producing something or not, as long as they were earning wages, they were working, and as long as I was not, whatever I was doing could not count as ‘work’. They, more than I, were willing to admit that they engaged in ‘self-exploitation’ (Han 2015; see also Graeber 2018), and not for the vain ambition of intellectual achievement, but to make money—perhaps a much humbler goal. ■



The Double-Tongued Dilemma

Translating Chinese Workers' Relations in Mongolia

Chinese miner enters a drift. PC: Zhu Ruiyi.

ZHU Ruiyi

Despite the ostensible complementarity of the structural shortage of industrial labour in Mongolia and the excess thereof in China, Chinese workers have constituted a source of anxiety in post-socialist Mongolia. Drawing on fieldwork at a Chinese-owned fluorspar mine in Mongolia between 2018 and 2019, this essay sheds light on the tension between bilingual and monolingual Chinese workers in the Sino-Mongolian industrial sphere. While the monolinguals rely on the bilinguals to facilitate industrial production, they also regard the latter in a suspicious light.

Liu Xizhou, a Han Chinese truck driver in his late fifties from the Hohhot region in Inner Mongolia, is known among Mongols for his warm heart and his knowledge of the Mongolian language.¹ Over seven years at a fluorspar mine on the eastern plains of Mongolia, he has cultivated a local network of friends and acquaintances. Younger Mongolian workers call him *Ulzii ah* ('elder brother' in Mongolian), and many extended family members of factory workers and ex-workers who live in the nearby *sum* ('district') have heard of him. Liu often receives a barrage of personal requests for assistance from

Mongolian workers. To his Chinese colleagues, Old Liu's willingness to help Mongolian workers, particularly female workers, counts as a penchant for *liaisons dangereuses*.

One day, the sixty-year-old manager Old Wang, a native of Hunan province, paid a surprise visit to Liu's dormitory during dinnertime. Though they were never close, Liu invited Old Wang to partake in the hotpot he was hosting for friends—three Han Chinese workers and myself. After a few drinks, Old Wang threw a casual remark to Liu: 'You are popular with Mongolian women, aren't you? How many seeds have you sown in Mongolia?' The atmosphere became tense, as everyone understood the question's aggressive undertone. Liu put down his chopsticks and resolutely replied: 'Not even one.' Old Wang retorted: 'I don't believe it.' The other workers tried to deflect the tension by raising canned beers to toast: 'Bottoms up, bottoms up.' Liu tried to suppress his anger in front of the guests, but his flushed face gave away his true feelings. As soon as Wang left, Liu turned to speak to me and switched to Mongolian—a non-native language for both of us: '*Tuunii yarisan yum[iig] chi sonsson uu?*' (Have you heard his words?) Given our shared background as Chinese nationals, Liu's deliberate code-switching to Mongolian acknowledged my ability to empathise with his outrage from the in-between position of a Mongolophone Chinese.

1

This vignette exposes the tension between bilingual and monolingual Chinese workers in the Sino-Mongolian industrial sphere. Drawing on fieldwork conducted at a Chinese-owned mine and factory in Mongolia, this essay will reflect on the critical roles of language and translation as boundary-keeping and boundary-crossing practices in intra and interethnic labour relations. While the monolinguals rely on the bilinguals to facilitate

industrial production, they also view the latter in a suspicious light—often refracted through the issue of sexual intimacy.²

Although Chinese workers are to various extents aware that sexuality is a sensitive issue in the historical and contemporary politics of the Sino-Mongolian interface, some still choose to express themselves and build sociality through sexual banter in Chinese. Despite making such utterances, they take pains to prevent their incendiary speech from reaching their Mongolian counterparts. The bilingual Chinese workers—privy to the off-limits banter—attempt to strike a delicate balance between ethnic affinity, corporate fidelity, and genuine interethnic communication.

Between 2018 and 2019, I conducted 18 months of fieldwork among Chinese and Mongolian workers in the Mongolian extractive economy. In the early 1990s, as the Soviet influence faded with market liberalisation, Mongolia's economy became quickly entwined with that of its southern neighbour China, which rose to become Mongolia's largest export destination and import partner. Since the mining boom of the mid-2000s, a significant portion of the mineral resources extracted in Mongolia—such as iron ore, copper concentrate, zinc concentrate, coal, and fluorspar—has been exported to China. A large number of Chinese companies, varied in size and ownership, also flocked to the Mongolian mining industry. Despite volatility on the global minerals market, mining remains a pillar of the Mongolian economy.

Along with Chinese financial investment in the Mongolian extractive economy, Chinese workers flowed into Mongolia, where there is a chronic shortage of skilled industrial labour. While overseas branches of Chinese state-owned enterprises draw on their domestic employee pool or established labour contractors, private companies rely heavily on informal kinship and locality networks for recruitment. A number of Chinese labour migrants to Mongolia were workers who had been laid off during the privatisation and automation processes of the late 1990s and



Four workers carry an insulated water pipe across the snow-covered grounds of the mine.
PC: Zhu Ruiyi.

early 2000s in China. As mining companies in Mongolia promise higher salaries than equivalent employers in China, middle-aged Chinese workers arrive in Mongolia in search of an economic foothold to support themselves and their families. As a 53-year-old boiler operator at my field site fittingly put it: '[I'm here to] burn my remaining energy [发挥余热].'

2

The field site I describe here is a private fluorspar mine and factory in Mongolia. The mine was explored by Soviet and Mongolian geologists in the late 1980s. After the Soviets' departure, Chinese businessmen bought the mine and transferred it to the current mine boss, who subsequently built a processing plant on site. Since 2013, the mine boss has been recruiting heavily from among his relatives

and acquaintances for skilled labour. Of 25 Chinese workers, a majority were middle-aged men hailing from Hunan, Shandong, Jiangxi, and Inner Mongolia. Similar to many small-to-medium-sized enterprises in Mongolia, this factory's hiring process was highly casual. Without effective legal employment protection for foreign labour, Chinese employees relied heavily on their personal rapport with the boss and managers.

Because of Mongolia's legal requirements and prioritisation of employing Mongolian labour, Mongolian workers at my field site outnumbered their Chinese counterparts. Most were also younger, with an averaging 35 years old. Twenty per cent of the Mongolian workers were women. While Chinese workers occupied supervisory positions, Mongolian workers carried out manual labour as assistants. Recruited from the nearby district and industrial towns such as Bor-Öndör and Baga Nuur, most lacked relevant skills.



The mechanics feel relieved after spending three days fixing the engine of an extractor.

PC: Zhu Ruiyi.

Limited professional training at the factory, compounded by the high turnover rate, reinforced the status quo among unskilled and low-skilled labour.

Being abroad for the first time, Chinese workers initially faced unprecedented challenges. They did not expect to find themselves *de facto* illiterate on arrival in Mongolia. Without predeparture language training, many complained about their frustration with ‘not understanding anything’. Some had hoped to rely on the latest machine translation applications on their smart phones but were soon disappointed to discover that those applications either did not support Mongolian or failed to connect due to poor internet reception in rural areas.

The majority of the Chinese workers spoke only Chinese, with the exception of a few ethnic Mongol and Han workers from Inner Mongolia. An ethnic Mongol worker from Ulaanchab, Inner Mongolia, observed:

90 per cent of the names for industrial tools in the [Halh] Mongolian language spoken here are in fact Russian. If you take a look around the factory, ‘crane’ [*kran*], ‘excavator’ [*ekskavator*], ‘car’ [*mashin*], ‘petrol’ [*bienzin*], ‘diesel’ [*dizel*] ... are all Russian words.

This technical vocabulary was mostly new to him, as his own Mongolian language was largely infused with Chinese instead of Russian loanwords. The factory’s remote location and poor amenities hardly attracted long-term professional interpreters, who were more inclined towards urban and cosmopolitan settings. Due to the chronic shortage of professional interpreters, bilingual workers from Inner Mongolia, who were not recruited for their linguistic skills, would be asked to undertake an intermediary role and harmonise the inevitable industrial cacophony.

3

As the Chinese workers held leading positions, they demanded assistance with oral translation more often than their Mongolian counterparts. Without an interpreter, they could spend 10 times more effort to get a message across, with body language carrying high risks of miscommunication. Xu Jun, the crushing section lead, recalled:

Once I asked my Mongolian assistant to make a slanted connector for the ore crusher. I showed him many times the angle of slant with my gestures, but he *just* did not get it. Do you know what he gave me in return? A straight angle and a blank look. In the end I had to make one myself to show him what I meant. He instantly understood and raised his thumb, saying ‘*Sain, sain*’ [‘good, good’]. I didn’t know if I should laugh or cry.

He blamed the incident on the Mongolian worker’s ‘inflexible brain’ rather than acknowledging a communication failure for which both were responsible. Such refusals to share responsibility were not uncommon among monolingual workers. Linguistic miscommunication without timely mediation easily perpetuates essentialist stereotypes. After the incident, Xu Jun would always ask a bilingual person to bridge the linguistic gap. Even though the translation may be imperfect as the intermediary might not know particular technical terms in Mongolian, their colloquial translation of the key actions involved could help the listeners understand.

Liu Xizhou (or *Ulzii*), the protagonist of the opening vignette, is an example of a bilingual worker and occasional stand-in interpreter. During almost a decade in Mongolia, he built on the smattering of Mongolian he had learned in Inner Mongolia to become fluent in colloquial Mongolian. Unlike his Chinese coworkers, who preferred to live on the Chinese side of the dormitory, Liu, uniquely, chose to live on the

Mongolian side to avoid gossip and retain his ‘peace of mind’. As he seldom socialised with the majority of Chinese workers and often took food from the Mongolian dining hall instead of the Chinese one, he was seen as an oddball.

Once, Liu broke his typical silence towards Chinese coworkers following a minor incident. Feng Jinhua, a female laboratory technician, had excitedly broken the news of her discovery of what looked like curative wild herbs on the hills nearby. Not knowing what to do with them and where to find more, she approached Liu for advice. He took a quick look: ‘This is wild lily, indeed, used in Chinese medicine to make herbal infusions.’ Feng probed further: ‘You have been here the longest. You must know where to find more of them.’ Liu hesitated before saying:

Of course I do ... But here’s a word of advice for you if you want to keep foraging. The Mongolian workers have been talking about the holes you left after uprooting the plants. Uprooting plants and leaving holes on the ground is against Mongolian customs.

Liu explained: ‘Though they don’t use lily as we Chinese people do, they care about preserving the environment.’ Receptive to Liu’s words of caution, Feng promised to fill in the holes the following day. Speaking as a mine veteran and grassroots cultural expert, Liu’s words were heeded as consequential in terms of risk management, which effectively protected the reputation of the Chinese workers and the long-term prospects of the mining enterprise in the area.

4

While translation was crucial to facilitating industrial production and mediating interethnic relations, certain words, particularly those with sexual connotations, were carefully kept untranslated. Prior to their

arrival in Mongolia, most Chinese workers had already heard that sexuality was a sensitive issue in Sino-Mongolian relations. In the post-socialist era, economic structural weakness combined with the rise of nationalism gave rise to anxiety about biological reproduction and racial purity in Mongolia (Bulag 1998). The fear of foreign, particularly Chinese, economic and cultural encroachment manifested in the scramble to control women's bodies and reproduction (Billé 2014). The mining industry, in particular, provokes anxieties about the purity and protection of Mongolian soil. In addition to the fear that mining impoverishes Mongolian land and jeopardises its future, the concentration of Chinese men in industrial zones evokes bitter colonial memories. In the latter half of Qing imperial rule, when Chinese traders were allowed into Outer Mongolia, many lived illicitly with Mongolian women and produced mixed children, while fishing exorbitant interests on long-term debt (Dear 2014; Tsai 2017). Anxieties akin to those of the late imperial era resurface today.

The gender imbalance at the mine constituted fertile ground for such fears to manifest on a local scale. Even though employees did not interact much after work, each retreating to his or her dormitory, the shopfloor was perceived as a site of potential sexual encounters. Rumours about Chinese supervisors accosting Mongolian female workers circulated, which allegedly led to fistfights between angry Mongolian men protecting 'their' women and Chinese men defending their reputation.

Aware of the touchiness of sexuality, Chinese workers established an informal linguistic boundary by speaking only in Chinese when they indulged in sexual banter. To a number of them, talking about sex was a necessary release valve for pent-up frustration and desire exacerbated by their physical isolation from family life. 'We go home only once a year,' Old Wang claimed. 'Old men like me may put up with it, but how can you ask a younger man to endure this? It doesn't sit well with human nature.' However, the few 'younger men' blamed the sexual banter on senior Chinese

workers, who were, according to them, prone to speech impropriety due to a lack of education, coupled with an old-fashioned culture of abusing supervisory power.

I was often present when older Chinese men casually exchanged moralistic, if ethnocentric and sexist, remarks on Mongolian gender relations over dinner: 'There are too many single mothers in Mongolia because of alcoholism. Men here are so irresponsible that they abandon the women after impregnating them, without marriage or anything.' In their view, the loose Mongolian attitude to marriage stood in stark contrast to the stability of (idealised) Chinese conjugal relations, according to which the husband's economic provision is met by the wife's labour of care. Although they reunited with their families in China only once a year, they considered themselves responsible husbands on account of their regular provision of remittances. Their choice to contrast their responsibility with the stereotype of irresponsible Mongolian men reinforced their masculinity.

In the past, inexperienced interpreters had committed more than one *faux pas* by literally translating the content of the sexual banter into Mongolian, thus puncturing the linguistic buffer. When a couple of Mongolian female workers once went to their Chinese supervisor to ask for a pay raise, he jokingly replied: 'If you sleep with me, I will grant your wishes.' The interpreter at the time faithfully delivered the translation, and problems predictably ensued. The supervisor was furious at the interpreter for breaking the implicit consensus about not translating sexual banter, and for stirring interethnic discord by handing Mongolian workers a reason to accuse the Chinese supervisors of impropriety and malpractice. The monolingual Chinese workers expected the interpreter to act as a 'filter' for their foul language by relaying only appropriate information in Mongolian. Of all forms of workplace speech, sexual banter was specifically not intended for translation; it was a form of exclusive sociality among

Chinese male workers, without intending to create dialogic communication or illocutionary effects on their Mongolian counterparts.

When sexual banter was uttered, it was also used by Chinese monolingual workers to limit their bilingual compatriots' social proximity with Mongolian workers, particularly women. As in the case of Liu Xizhou, his coworker's insinuation of his sexual involvement with the ethnic other brought serious moral disquietude. Liu intimated that he never trusted those Chinese who operated within their own narrow frame of mind: 'They could never imagine genuine friendship between Chinese and Mongols.' The heavy consequence of sexual suspicion was often borne by Mongolian female workers, who could be dismissed for 'causing trouble' after becoming the target of rumours. Compared with the Chinese male workers, who were to varying degrees connected to the mine boss, the position of Mongolian workers' was more precarious. Additionally, coworkers and relatives of Mongolian female workers, particularly protective men, might attempt to control their conduct. A female worker's proximity to her Chinese supervisor could be used to accuse her of behaving inappropriately and betraying Mongolian solidarity. Tsegii, a lab worker in her mid-twenties, confided: 'I can't tell my family about the sexual banter and innuendo Chinese men make in front of me. I know my husband and brothers would beat them up. I don't want to make a mess at my workplace.' Contrary to the Chinese workers' belief that they could successfully contain sexual banter by limiting translation, its injurious effect was felt by their Mongolian counterparts. To save their jobs, Mongolian female workers were complicit in containing the transmission of inflammatory speech.

5

In addition to translation practices that, by restricting and regimenting the interethnic interface, allowed Chinese and Mongolian

workers to comfortably remain in their respective linguistic zones (see Pym 2012), the siloed residential arrangements at the factory also contributed to the majority of the workers avoiding learning the other's language. But there were a few individual exceptions. During my stay, I assumed the unofficial role of teaching both Chinese and Mongolian to those workers interested in developing their language skills, and picked up a handful of students. The workers were often interested in practical vocabulary associated with their particular professions. For instance, Dulmaa, a Mongolian kitchen hand, wanted to learn the names of staple foods and ingredients in Chinese so she could bypass the logistics supervisor when borrowing from or lending to the Chinese kitchen. She was surprised to discover that she already knew some Chinese thanks to loanwords in Mongolian. The names of many non-native vegetables—such as cabbage (*baitsaa*), parsley (*yanshui*), and leek (*juutsai*)—trace their etymological roots to Chinese, as do a few staple Mongolian dishes: fried dumplings (*huushuur*), steamed bun (*mantu/buuz*), and fried noodles (*tsuivan*).

In contrast, Chinese workers expressed relatively limited enthusiasm for learning Mongolian. Older workers nearing retirement thought the effort was not worthwhile because they did not wish to stay in Mongolia over the long term. Younger workers thought Mongolian had little use as a transferable skill, unlike English, which they regarded as a true cosmopolitan language. The 31-year-old Tao Xiaochuan was an exception. Despite remaining physically bound to the factory during his three-year stay in Mongolia, he was convinced he had gradually adapted to Mongolian society. Tao first asked to learn the Cyrillic alphabet, and then began to pick up words from work. As a boiler operator, he learned how to say 'turn on', 'turn off', 'start', and 'stop' on his first day. 'I understand so much more about my surroundings with each new word I learn,' he enthused. He initiated a virtual chat group for the Mongolian workers

in his section to enable instant communication, thus sparing him the need to be near the heater all day.

But in many of his Chinese coworkers' eyes, Tao was simply wasting time 'fooling around' with Mongols. To them, the closer one was to Mongols, the higher were the chances of contracting unwanted social obligations. They preferred sticking to the separate physical and symbolic social spheres as demarcated by the factory management. Laboratory technician Feng Jinhua remarked: 'Mongolian workers always ask you for something: cigarettes, alcohol, or money. They say it's borrowing, but you'll never see the repayment'—a sentiment of unreturned favours that resonated with many Chinese workers. As they felt incapable of holding the Mongolian counterpart accountable with Chinese customs, they chose to keep their distance and avoid social anguish. Liu's judgement seemed judicious: most monolingual Chinese workers were fundamentally dubious about the possibility of forming mutually beneficial friendships with Mongols. Whenever they needed to have contact with Mongols, they relied on the bilinguals to act as risk-free mediators.

6

In conclusion, embedded in the recurring anxieties about power imbalances in Sino-Mongolian relations, the contemporary Chinese-financed industrial sphere is often perceived in Mongolia as a hot zone for perilous encounters—rife with real or imagined sexual intimacy, linguistic misunderstandings, and cultural conflicts. The contrast between Chinese workers' monolingual and bilingual modes of communication illustrates the limits and possibilities of language when it is differently deployed. Faced with the risks of intercultural communication, maintaining tight linguistic boundaries may guarantee a degree of comfort that most find appealing. The minority

of workers who cross the linguistic boundaries, albeit in various capacities, encounter moral dilemmas indicative of the complex power dynamics in which they are embroiled. ■

[1] All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[2] Due to space limitations, this essay focuses only on the bilingual worker-interpreters without discussing the factory's professional interpreters. To illustrate the chronic shortage of onsite professional interpreters during my stay, there were only one or two at best, who were Inner Mongols, *huaqiao* (diasporic Chinese in Mongolia), or Halh Mongols who learned Chinese language at Mongolian universities or while living in China—the combination changed at different points of my fieldwork.



Building the New Macau

A Portrait of Chinese Construction Workers in Sihanoukville

Construction site with abandoned bungalows in the foreground, Otres Village, Sihanoukville. PC: Ivan Franceschini.

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Due to a massive and sudden influx of capital from China, much of which was invested in shadowy gambling operations, in just a few years Sihanoukville went from a dreamy, low-budget tourist destination on the Cambodian coast to Southeast Asia's 'new Macau'. When, in the summer of 2019, the Cambodian authorities banned online gambling, the local economy came tumbling down. As construction sites all over the city halted operation, workers, both Chinese and Cambodian, were hit particularly hard by the crisis. This essay looks into their plight.

One late evening towards the end of December 2019, as I was crossing some construction sites on my way back to the bungalow where I was staying in Sihanoukville, I noticed a small group of Chinese workers whom I had befriended a couple of days earlier gathering. They were surrounding their contractor, a man in his late forties, who was speaking agitatedly into his phone. As I got closer, I realised that his right arm was covered in blood and his face bruised. He told me he had just been assaulted

by some Cambodian workers to whom he owed a few hundred dollars in back wages. He complained about how he was caught between the four Chinese shareholders who owned the project and the workers he had brought with him from China, as well as his few Cambodian employees. His bosses had stopped paying in August and had since fled to China. The contractor kept calling them—when I first saw him that evening, he was leaving them messages on WeChat, in the hope of eliciting some sympathy—but the ‘big boss’ had long stopped returning his calls. Of the ‘smaller’ bosses, one had offered to pay US\$1,000 as a lump sum to all the workers—a ridiculous amount compared with what they were owed and the costs they had sustained for their living expenses and flights—while another kept complaining that she was also facing financial difficulties and asked for their understanding. The contractor was borrowing money here and there to pay at least part of what he owed to the workers to allow them to go back to China, but it was very difficult finding anybody willing to lend him anything.

While he was telling me this story, the workers around him nodded approvingly. They had been living for months in awful conditions in their now otherwise abandoned construction site, but they knew who to blame for their plight: those distant bosses who had fled to China. At that point, of around 80 workers employed on the site—which was supposed to become a karaoke club and apartment building with commercial spaces on the ground floor—only a dozen remained, some still hoping to recover the hefty sums they were owed, but others simply unable to afford the flight home. They also knew they were not the only ones suffering a similar fate in Sihanoukville.

Previously a dreamy tourist destination known for its sandy beaches lined with coconut palms, Sihanoukville, by the late 2010s, was gaining a reputation as Southeast Asia’s ‘new Macau’, bursting as it was with Chinese casinos, massage parlours, hotels, and restaurants—some already built but many more still under construction. Official

investment in infrastructure was accompanied by speculative capital funnelled into casinos and other entertainment venues—a bubble producing an annual revenue that industry insiders ‘conservatively’ estimated at between US\$3.5 and US\$5 billion a year, 90 per cent of which came from online gambling (Turton 2020). While Cambodian landowners were able to profit from this windfall by renting out or selling their properties to Chinese investors, locals unable to afford the rising rents and living costs were pushed to the margins or forced to leave the area altogether. In the middle of such upheaval, public security became a serious concern. Faced with repeated complaints about money-laundering, illegal gambling, kidnapping, and human trafficking allegedly associated with the flood of Chinese immigrants, in February 2018, the Cambodian Government launched a task force to address such problems. More radical measures were adopted in August 2019, when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen—allegedly also under pressure from the Chinese authorities—unexpectedly announced a blanket ban on all online gambling activities starting from 1 January 2020.

The surprising determination of the Cambodian authorities in enforcing the ban burst the speculative bubble, causing panic among Chinese investors. As casinos laid off thousands of staff, property prices plummeted, and real estate transactions sharply dropped, small businesses went bankrupt. With investors fleeing and the future profitability of investment suddenly called into question, construction sites all over the city stopped paying their employees and, in many cases, suspended operations altogether. Chinese and Cambodian construction workers—the people who were working the hardest, earning the least, and bore no responsibility for the speculative bubble—ended up paying a bitter price for the sudden reversal of fortune.

It was in the midst of this dramatic shift that I travelled to the area to conduct a survey in a sample of seven construction sites in Otres, a village on the outskirts of Sihanoukville.

A total of 185 questionnaires were administered between December 2019 and January 2020—95 with Chinese workers and 90 with Cambodian workers. The data were then complemented by 32 semi-structured interviews—22 with Chinese workers and 10 with Cambodian workers—as well as countless informal conversations with workers, contractors, vendors, and people living and running small businesses around the sites. Drawing on the information collected in those weeks, the present essay aims to shed light on the Chinese workers toiling in Sihanoukville by discussing four key aspects of their experience: precarity, money, law, and solidarity. Chinese construction workers abroad are all too often at the centre of deeply discriminatory discourses, whether they are depicted as an army of ants stealing jobs from local people or as the embodiment of Beijing's supposed imperial ambitions. To challenge this, it is more important than ever to restore these workers' humanity in public discourses of global China.

Precarity

Unsurprisingly, the life of the Chinese workers in Sihanoukville has been extremely precarious. They were hired through three main channels: introduction by family or friends who were already working for the company back in China (52 per cent of the respondents)—a method particularly common for the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which therefore ended up with a workforce largely comprising people from their home provinces; private agencies (34 per cent), which charged the workers an amount ranging between 3,000 and 16,000 yuan; or labour contractors (12 per cent)—often someone from their hometown with whom they had worked for years (this was mostly the case on small private sites).

Predatory recruitment agencies are quite common. For instance, some Chinese workers on one private site had signed a contract with the agency that bound them to stay on the job

for at least one year, no matter what, or they would lose a substantial deposit. They were also promised furnished accommodation with airconditioning—essential in a tropical climate like Cambodia's—but, on arrival, they found the only accommodation available was on the site itself, in the unfinished rooms of the future hotel. Not only were they without airconditioning, but they also had no beds or running water, and had to use a nearby field as an open toilet, which by then was covered in faeces. The only way to wash their clothes was in barrels of yellowish water, which they found disgusting. In addition, the managers had hired a local cook who could make only Cambodian food, which they could not bear. So, as well as having to buy their own food, they sometimes supplemented their diet by fishing for crabs and squid in the shallows on the coast. In spite of these appalling conditions, they were not deterred. As one of them told me: 'We don't mind to eat bitterness [吃苦], as long as we are getting paid.' Unfortunately, after a few weeks on the job, they were not getting paid either.

Informal employment was widespread in both private and state-owned enterprises. As many as 75 per cent of the Chinese workers did not have a written contract with their employer, contractor, or agency. To make things worse, even those Chinese workers who had a contract in most cases (79 per cent) had not been given a copy. When written agreements existed, they included clauses substantially unfavourable to the workers, as in the case of the workers cheated by their agency mentioned above.

Besides leaving the workers in legal limbo, employers had other ways to exert control over their workforce. Some private companies or agencies required workers to pay deposits ranging from 4,000 to 10,000 yuan. Moreover, widespread among both private and state-owned companies was the custom of taking away their Chinese employees' passports; 57 per cent of the respondents said their managers were taking care of their documents. However, the workers did not see any problem with this kind of arrangement, which appeared to be entirely voluntary. Indeed, most workers said they were

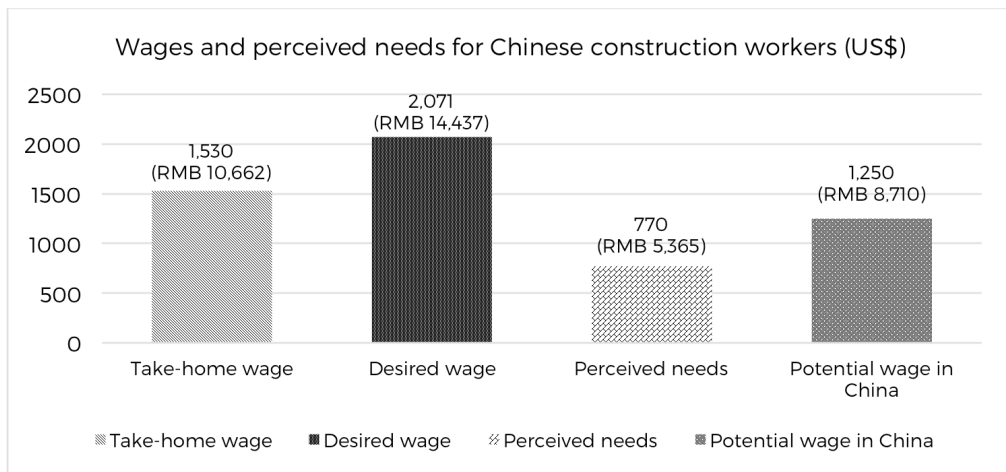
worried that, if they kept hold of the passport themselves, it would just disappear, lost in the chaos of their accommodation or stolen.

Money

Making money was the main motivation pushing Chinese workers to travel to Cambodia. Before the sites scaled down the work due to the crisis, Chinese workers and their local counterparts worked an average of nine hours a day, with one day of rest a week, although their work hours were subject to the vagaries of construction schedules. For a day of work, a Chinese worker received in the range of US\$50 to US\$72 (350–500 yuan)—against the US\$8 to US\$20 earned by the Cambodian workforce. There was a lack of clarity among the workers as to whether their employers paid extra for overtime. This depended on the site, with private sites performing significantly worse in this regard. Bonuses for attendance or performance were extremely rare. Even more troubling was the fact that employers did not provide any insurance or pay any social security; only 14 per cent of the Chinese

workers, all employed by SOEs, said their company had provided private insurance for labour-related accidents.

Graph 1 shows the financial situation of Chinese workers in more detail. Just like their Cambodian counterparts, Chinese workers lived in basic accommodation provided by the employer, in the case of SOEs, or on the construction sites, in the case of most private companies. In all cases, they did not have to pay for rent, electricity, gas, or water. On average, they earned US\$1,530 (10,662 yuan) a month, compared with the US\$2,072 (14,437 yuan) that they deemed reasonable in light of their current workload and the US\$770 (5,365 yuan) that they calculated they needed to cover the basic living costs for themselves and their dependants. This shows that, in ordinary times, they were able to save substantial amounts of money. This is reflected in their spending patterns. Since most construction sites housed canteens that provided subsidised meals for Chinese employees—although the food was rarely to their taste—the expenses for food and drinks were relatively small in proportion to the actual wage, accounting for an average of US\$172 (1,199 yuan) a month. This allowed them to use substantial amounts



Graph 1: Wages and perceived needs for Chinese construction workers (per month)



Another construction site in Otres Village, Sihanoukville. PC: Ivan Franceschini.

of their earnings for remittances (US\$880, or 6,130 yuan) and for leisure (US\$116, or 809 yuan), which included alcohol, prostitutes, and occasionally gambling in one of the low-end Chinese casinos in the area.

But did Chinese workers receive a better deal compared with what they would have earned by doing the same sort of job in China, therefore justifying their decision to migrate? According to my survey, had they undertaken a similar job in their hometown, on average, they would have been earning US\$1,250 (8,710 yuan)—that is, 22 per cent less than what they were earning in Cambodia. With the benefit of hindsight, however, many had come to doubt whether such an amount was worth the hassle of coming all the way to Sihanoukville. In many cases, they believed it was not: the weather was harsh, cases of wage arrears were too frequent, the cost of living for foreigners was too high, and the place was too dangerous. Indeed, 34 per cent of the respondents who had a history

of employment on construction sites in a broad variety of countries in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific complained that Sihanoukville was the worst situation in which they had found themselves.

Law

A few days after my evening meeting with the bloody contractor, another worker from the same site, a 60-year-old man from Jiangsu Province, stopped me in the street. Screaming and swearing, he wanted to reiterate that he and a dozen of his coworkers had not yet been paid and did not know what to do. Their bosses simply kept ignoring their calls and the contractor was powerless. They were now living in horrible conditions in the unfinished building on which they had been working, hoping to be able to go home before Chinese

New Year. Some had already bought their tickets, but others did not have the money for that. Bitterly, he compared his current predicament with his experience in Libya a few years earlier. He was there when war erupted and remembered how the Chinese Government had promptly sent a boat to evacuate him and his colleagues—a glaring contrast with the neglect he was now experiencing. He had paid around 9,000 yuan to an employment agency to come to work in Sihanoukville along with his son, but his son left after less than three months due to health problems and wage arrears. He was owed four months of wages but did not hold out much hope. He repeatedly complained that in Cambodia there was no law, so everything was pointless.

‘There is no law’ was indeed a constant refrain in my conversations with Chinese workers. The perception of lawlessness was further exacerbated by the stories of kidnappings and attacks targeting Chinese nationals that swirled around the Chinese expatriate community in Sihanoukville. Although Otres Village was relatively quiet in this regard, some Chinese workers refused to go out in the evening for fear of being targeted. This, and an ensuing feeling of powerlessness, emerges clearly from the survey. When asked whether they believed the local labour law would provide them with some protection in the event of a labour dispute, 98 per cent of the Chinese workers replied negatively. When asked what they would do in the event of a dispute with their employers, 47 per cent of the Chinese workers stated that they would do absolutely nothing and keep working, while 4 per cent said they would quit and look for a new job; 49 per cent said they would attempt to stand up for their rights.

However, this willingness to resist took a very peculiar form. Of those Chinese workers who said they would put up a fight, 93 per cent said they would seek help from the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh, with a tiny minority saying they would seek help from labour offices or the media. Sadly, it was only workers who had no experience of labour disputes

who expressed this confidence in the ability of the Chinese diplomatic mission to help them. Those who had previously experienced problems of wage arrears were unanimous in saying that the embassy was useless: not only was it too far away (no worker could afford to pay for a flight to Phnom Penh, and it took at least six hours to get there by car), but also Chinese diplomats had bigger fish to fry than to help random construction workers recover their wages.

Solidarity

Organised solidarity in the form of trade unions was nowhere to be seen. No unions were active on the sites included in the survey—a finding that reflects the general situation in Sihanoukville. Although some Chinese business and provincial associations had been trying to fill this void by offering to mediate disputes related to unpaid back wages, organising flights home, paying visa-overstay fines, and even intervening in cases of kidnappings (Kijewski 2020), their reach was very limited compared with the extent of the problem, and none of the people we interviewed in Otres had heard about them.

Even more worrying was the lack of solidarity between Chinese workers and their local counterparts. My research showed the existence of significant barriers between the two groups. As one Cambodian worker remarked: ‘We and the Chinese workers are just like oil and water: we work and live together but don’t mix.’ A first critical issue was the problem of communication: none of the Cambodian workers could speak any Chinese and none of the Chinese workers could speak Khmer. While working together, they had to rely on hand gestures to understand each other even for the most complicated tasks. Interpreters were nowhere to be found and, when available, usually followed higher-level managers or were themselves contractors. This led to frequent misunderstandings between

coworkers of different nationalities, with subsequent shouting matches in which nobody could understand what the other was saying.

The lack of a common language also limited the social interactions between the two groups outside the workplace. While we encountered one mixed couple of a Chinese male worker and a Cambodian female worker, and at least one Chinese worker who regularly hung out with his Cambodian colleagues using a translation app on his phone to communicate with them, such instances of interethnic bonding appeared to be quite rare; in addition, as we have seen, accommodation was largely segregated according to ethnicity. In total, 72 per cent of the Cambodian workers and 73 per cent of the Chinese workers said they had no interaction whatsoever with their colleagues of the other ethnicity outside the workplace; 20 per cent of the Cambodian and 26 per cent of the Chinese workers said they rarely interacted with each other outside the workplace, with those rare instances involving having a drink together or going for a walk on the beach.

However, the biggest divide between the two groups was the perception of unfairness related to differences in pay rates. As mentioned above, Chinese workers were paid substantially more than their local counterparts. While 88 per cent of the Chinese workers were convinced that the wage gap was justified—the common refrain being that they were more qualified, skilled, efficient, and supposedly had to face higher living costs—64 per cent of the Cambodian workers believed the gap was not justified at all. While some Cambodian workers explained their dissatisfaction along nationalist lines, the most common complaint was that they were working the same hours and doing the same tasks as their Chinese counterparts. In addition, there was a widespread perception that, although some difference in compensation might have been warranted due to the fact that the Chinese had come a long way and were more skilled, the current gap was much too wide—‘as far apart as earth and sky’, in the words of one Cambodian worker—and therefore unfair. Nevertheless,

none of the Cambodian workers who expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo planned to leave; they believed that everywhere was the same, and if they ended up working for a Cambodian boss, they might earn even less.

Some Chinese workers were very critical of how Cambodian workers were treated, but they constituted a tiny minority. One Cambodian worker recounted how one day a Chinese colleague had used hand gestures to ask him how much he was getting paid. With his fingers, he had responded that he was getting US\$14 a day and the Chinese man had gesticulated that that was not enough even to eat and that if he was paid that amount he would just stay home and sleep all day. A Chinese worker on another site pointed at some Cambodian workers who were finishing up some work nearby and told me:

Look at them, they get paid \$15 a day—less than 100 yuan—to do that work, and it is very hard work because those boxes are very heavy. Once I tried to tell the boss that he wasn’t paying them enough, that he should have given them at least \$20 to \$30 a day. He said that it was none of my business and I shouldn’t care.

The truth is that they would do that job for \$10 or even less.

To assess the potential for solidarity, the survey included one final question: ‘In case your Chinese/Cambodian coworkers did not get paid and decided to go on strike, *but you got paid*, would you be willing to go on strike with them in solidarity?’ Some 52 per cent of the Cambodian workers and 78 per cent of the Chinese workers answered no. However, these figures are not really indicative of a lack of solidarity, as many workers said they would not do it simply because the situation described in the question was absurd. Many Cambodian workers believed it would be impossible for their Chinese coworkers to not be paid, as they spoke the same language as the employers and had a much better understanding of the terms of employment. Chinese workers, on the contrary, thought it was impossible that Cambodian workers would not be paid, as they could always pick up the phone and the

police would come to their rescue. And yet, the truth was that many workers on both sides were not being paid what they were owed. It was this misperception that the other side was more secure that contributed the most to undermining worker solidarity.

the future of Sihanoukville holds, one can only hope that the Cambodian authorities will not repeat past patterns of exploitation. ■

Broken Promises

Many Chinese workers who had come to Cambodia believing in the empty promises of employment agencies and labour contractors found themselves stranded in Sihanoukville, owed months of wages, and living in horrific conditions. Their Cambodian colleagues toiled at their side, paid only a fraction of their wage, and barely making ends meet amid the rising living costs in this coastal city. Neither Chinese nor Cambodian workers were given written contracts and almost none of them had insurance or any other safety net. Language and communication barriers and segregation were used to prevent the emergence of a common front among the workers. In a situation in which local institutions and trade unions were extremely weak—if not nonexistent—these divisions substantially undermined worker solidarity, giving employers a free hand to exploit their workforce.

The gambling ban of August 2019 followed by the COVID-19 outbreak in the early months of 2020 might have put an end to the dream of Sihanoukville as a new Southeast Asian Macau. With the fate of the area now more uncertain than ever, the Cambodian authorities are trying to reshape the narrative by presenting the city as a new Shenzhen, going as far as to bring in experts from that Chinese metropolis to draw up a master plan for the city as a new industrial hub (Kunmakara 2020). What is apparently missing from the current discussion is how Shenzhen was built through the systematic exploitation of a migrant workforce sourced from the Chinese countryside. No matter what

This essay draws from the paper 'As Far Apart as Earth and Sky: A Survey of Chinese and Cambodian Construction Workers in Sihanoukville', recently published in *Critical Asian Studies* 52(4)(2020): 512–29. The paper includes a fuller set of data, as well as a more detailed discussion of the situation of Cambodian workers toiling in the construction sites at the centre of this essay.



Harajuku Intersection, Tokyo. PC: Raita Futo.

Redefining 'Labour' Migration from a Sino-Japanese Perspective

Jamie COATES

Increasing numbers of students, workers, and tourists around the world are challenging how we define labour migration. In particular, Japan was an early adopter of policies that have blurred the lines between migration and other forms of human mobility. As the largest non-Japanese group living and working in Japan, the experiences of Chinese people represent an important part of how we understand international labour migration in East Asia today. This essay reflects on ethnographic research conducted with young Chinese in Tokyo.

When I first studied Chinese in Beijing in 2003, I encountered a young man among a network of Chinese, Japanese, and English-speaking friends who would meet up in the park near Houhai when the weather was nice enough to drink outside. Xiaowu (a pseudonym) had just returned from two years of study in Japan, and I was impressed by his ability to switch between Japanese and Chinese in our conversations. He was one among many of the friends I made at that time, all of whom lived their lives moving

back and forth between China and Japan. From Japanese friends studying and working in China, to Chinese transmigrants and students, it was clear that the Sino-Japanese context was increasingly connected by everyday people.

During our conversations about Xiaowu's time in Japan, there were often pregnant pauses around the question of 'work', suggesting difficulties he faced that were uncomfortable to put into words. Despite his linguistic talents, his main job in Japan had been in a furniture recycling and refurbishment factory, working long hours sanding back the cracked lacquer on old tables and chairs. He had also done a variety of 'odd jobs' and alluded to an abusive manager as part of the reason he returned to China. He also explained on one occasion that his jobs were legally ambiguous because of the hours he worked.

Xiaowu's experiences piqued my interest and resonated with many of the stories I collected over two periods of fieldwork among young Chinese people in northwest Tokyo between 2009–11 and 2014–16. The stories of the young people I met and the Sino-Japanese labour migration context suggest the increasingly blurred distinction between labour migration and other forms of human mobility, and the rise of student-worker mobility as a stand-in for other local labour demands around the world.

Discomfort with 'Labour' and 'Migration' in Japan

Until very recently, the Japanese Government had repeatedly and explicitly rejected the notion of having an 'immigration policy', implementing relatively complicated workarounds for specific kinds of labour migration. As Glenda Roberts (2018) notes, the term *imin* (移民, 'immigrant') has remained taboo in political debates, despite repeated calls to explicitly address the issue by Japanese scholars, activists, and think tanks. In December 2018, the Japanese Diet passed a series of reforms that signified a new

step in Japan's approach to migration. The reforms outlined visa categories that would allow industries to import 'low-skilled' labour designated as 'specified skilled workers' to work in menial jobs such as construction, cleaning, and basic services. Now that Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has stepped down from office, these reforms are likely to be some of the more dramatic legacies of his wider economic initiatives, as they were designed to allow Japanese industries to address shortfalls in labour. However, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 mean it is still difficult to tell what the impact will be, as the new immigration rules only came into effect in April 2019. For now, to understand the context of Chinese labour migration to Japan, it is important to look back at the legacy of Japan's discomfort around the issue of migration in national political debates.

The historical reticence to discuss migration has often been bolstered by the perception among many powerful stakeholders that Japan is a nation made up of a single homogeneous ethnicity (Befu 2001) and is not an 'immigrant country' (Liu-Farrer 2020a). Compared with some other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, this perception may seem correct at first glance. For example, roughly 2 per cent of Japan's population held non-Japanese nationalities in 2017, compared with approximately 9 per cent in the United Kingdom. However, within major urban centres in Japan, these figures are less stark, with more than 10 per cent of residents in many of the major wards in Tokyo (such as Toshima and Shinjuku) holding non-Japanese citizenship. Furthermore, these figures relate to citizenship rather than ethnicity or other intersectional identities, and few researchers would suggest that Japan is 'homogeneous'.

The reason these perceptions are important to the question of Chinese labour migration is that they inform the idea that these forms of human mobility are somehow exceptional or merely temporary, which in turn shapes the expectations around the role of non-Japanese workers in Japan. To be 'foreign' in Japan

has typically meant being a temporary and expendable source of labour. Despite the vision of Japan as a closed society, however, the rate of transnational mobility to and from countries such as China has increased exponentially since the 1980s, with the number of registered Chinese citizens in Japan growing more than tenfold between 1985 and 2017. By the end of 2019, there were more than 800,000 Chinese citizens living and working in Japan, which made them the largest registered group of non-Japanese people. These figures do not include naturalised Japanese citizens of Chinese descent, and it has not included people from Taiwan since 2012. All together, it is estimated that there are more than one million Chinese-speaking people living and working in Japan today.

Education, Work, and Migration

Stories such as Xiaowu's show that issues related to labour migration to Japan are entangled with other supposedly separate kinds of human mobility. In my own research among young mobile Chinese who work within Ikebukuro, a popular hub of nightlife and Chinese businesses in northwest Tokyo, the relationship between study and labour migration was particularly apparent. In 2010, I lived in a small private dormitory in Ikebukuro—originally hoping to better understand the debates surrounding a proposal to have an area north of the main train station renamed 'Tokyo Chinatown'. My interest in the Chinatown proposal also provided me with a unique position to better understand how questions of labour, study, and migration intersected in this one small locale.

Coinciding with China's Reform and Opening Up policies, in the 1980s, Japan pivoted towards increased internationalisation (国際化, *kokusaika*), with the introduction of new migration policies and goals to promote Japan through international study. As Gracia

Liu-Farrer (2011, 2020a; Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019) has argued, from this period, different policies converged to create a system where educational migration has acted as a proxy form of labour migration. That is, many educational programs have been introduced to cover issues within Japan's domestic labour market. Alongside other schemes, such as a program that granted special rights to people of Japanese descent 日系 (*Nikkei*), these various proxy labour migration approaches suggest that Japanese legislators like to imagine that the flow of labour from overseas can be turned on and off like a tap. The 'faucet logic' of this approach was most stark in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis when, after fears that Japanese citizens might lose their jobs, a scheme was introduced that paid Brazilian *Nikkei* migrants nearly US\$4,000 to return to Brazil, with the caveat that they could not come back to Japan permanently. The program was later amended to restrict their return only after a period of three years. The dream of controlling the flow of labour migration is similarly embedded in programs that, at face value, are promoted primarily as opportunities to learn in Japan.

Perhaps the most notorious of these educationally channelled labour regimes are the 'trainee' and 'technical intern' programs that have been used to fill gaps in Japan's labour market or foster diplomatic relations with regions in neighbouring countries. Until recently, Chinese workers made up the largest portion of trainees in Japan, but recent increases in new migrant groups, such as Vietnamese, have changed these circumstances quickly. Much of Japan's seaside aquaculture, for example, depends on the seasonal work of trainee labourers who help process and package abalone, crabs, and kelp for domestic consumers. Similarly, exchange programs between China, Japan, and countries throughout Southeast Asia have long provided the care workers necessary to fill gaps in the aged care sector in Japan. Many of these trainee programs depend on companies based in China and, indeed, many of the people who help run

these brokering schemes were themselves once students in Japan (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Occasionally these brokered trainee schemes have been found to be highly exploitative, while some of the most intense discussions of ‘the problem with foreigners’ in Japan are often spurred by occasions where trainee workers are alleged to have broken the law. An extreme case occurred in Hiroshima in 2013, where the pressures many Chinese trainees face were brought to light after a 30-year-old Chinese worker allegedly killed his employer (Nikkei 2013).

Trainee schemes and national policies are important structural elements that shape the Sino-Japanese labour migration context, but they were rarely an issue with which I had to deal in my own fieldwork. Labour migration to Japan, although shaped by national policies, also appears to be very much localised in unique ways. Trainee-program brokers mostly work directly with local companies and regions in Japan, facilitating movements from a province in northeast China, for example, to Tochigi prefecture in Japan. Within my Tokyo field site, Ikebukuro, these schemes were all but absent because they often catered to rural and semi-urban parts of Japan, where different kinds of labour were in demand. Save for a few old hands I met who had previously worked as technical interns before going back to China and then years later returning on a different visa, the more common stories I came across were similar to Xiaowu’s: they had studied at a local educational institution while working within a system that implicitly tolerates legally ‘grey’ work arrangements even if explicitly regulating against them.

Japan was one of the first countries to introduce the right to work long hours while enrolled at an educational institution. For example, from the mid-1990s it was relatively easy to acquire a two-year visa to study in a local language school and work up to 28 hours a week in approved industries. Regulating this arrangement has been difficult. Employers can often hide the actual hours their employees work, and cash-in-hand jobs are a popular

way to fill short gaps in specific jobs. Indeed, over the past three decades there have been intermittent crackdowns and checks on ‘fake’ language schools that facilitated clandestine jobs in industries such as construction and waste management.

In 2010, I lived in a dormitory on the fifth floor of a commercial building shared with a group of Chinese students. My dormmates would work in jobs sourced through many of the local entrepreneurs operating out of Ikebukuro while studying in local language schools. At that time, an online company run by a naturalised Chinese man provided a vital advertising service for these arrangements. My dormmate Xiaochen (a pseudonym) was a 19-year-old woman from Fujian who, having not done very well in high school, decided to ‘try again’ by first studying Japanese and then applying to enter a small Japanese university. She worked very hard to support herself out of fear of being a burden to her family. In particular, Xiaochen had a knack for finding last-minute cash in manual jobs that made up for surges in demand among local Japanese businesses. From packing pamphlets at a printer during important events to helping prepare bento for convenience stores during seasonal festivals, Xiaochen engaged in an array of odd jobs similar to those mentioned by Xiaowu. On one occasion, she tried a cash-in-hand shift at a ‘girls bar’, where women encourage clients to drink more by playing games and chatting with them. A very slight woman and under the legal drinking age in Japan, Xiaochen struggled to keep up with clients on her trial shift and did not return.

From Student to Labour Migrant and Entrepreneur

While educational visas were often the main entry channel for the young people I met, many of them had transitioned on to other visas by the

mid-2010s. In 1989, Japan introduced a series of ‘skilled worker’ employment visas under labels such as ‘engineer’, ‘investor’, ‘professor’, and a general category of ‘skilled worker’ (*gino*), most of whom until 2013 were Chinese chefs, although they have recently been overtaken by chefs from Nepal (Kharel 2016). These visas have played an important role in facilitating the long-term settlement of Chinese in Japan, and often provide opportunities to transition from study to other kinds of work. In particular, while many of the young mobile Chinese with whom I worked in Japan returned to China, study and work were also a common pathway to staying longer in Japan. Ehmet (a pseudonym), a man in his late twenties from Xinjiang, had first studied sound engineering in a technical college in northern Japan, before graduating and signing up to a labour recruitment agency in Tokyo. The agency provided workers for local construction projects, and Ehmet would often spend his days doing a wide variety of menial tasks. He said he liked doing roadwork (修路) the most, as the managers of those teams were fun to work with. However, while Ehmet worked as a labourer during the day, he also played guitar and sang in several Chinese-owned bars at night. A talented guitarist who could perform Uyghur folk music, flamenco, and popular covers, his cash-in-hand work was technically illegal. Nonetheless, it was an important source of income, allowed him to imagine a future beyond construction work, and appeared to be common practice among nightlife businesses.

Many of the entrepreneurs with whom I spoke in Ikebukuro had studied in Japan before working for a Japanese company and then eventually building the capital to start their own business. In turn, they would employ new students as they arrived in Japan or would connect them to Japanese businesses that might have work for students in neighbouring areas.

I became close friends with people such as Dayuan, who had lived in Japan since the early 2000s. Originally from a city in northeast China, he had enrolled in a local technical college,

where he studied business while working in a small factory north of Tokyo, where he would shave pork carcasses before they went to be butchered in the city. Dayuan’s family, although not wealthy, was nonetheless well educated for their generation and held stable jobs. He had a fairly relaxed upbringing, was not used to this kind of physical labour, and found the experience incredibly frustrating. It was this moment of learning to ‘eat bitterness’ (吃苦), he said, that would later spur him to want to make a lot of money. After graduating, Dayuan worked for a major electronics retailer and used his connections with the company to organise some small trade deals between his hometown and the store in Japan. In addition, he privately sold items from his employer to friends and acquaintances using online contacts and the local postal service—a practice often called ‘sale by proxy’ (代购). He now holds permanent residency and runs several businesses that employ Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese students. In contrast to what his visa status might imply, Dayuan spends more time than ever travelling back and forth between China and Japan, his permanent visa status affording greater mobility than the temporary visas he once held.

While many local entrepreneurs in places like Ikebukuro facilitate recruitment into local Japanese businesses or employ students for cash-in-hand jobs, there are also exploitative practices that pit former labour migrants against those trying to transition from study to work. Indeed, on one occasion, one of my participants explained a scheme where students hoping to extend their time in Japan could pay money into other businesses and apply for ‘investor’ visa status. If they did not have the capital upfront, they could take it as a loan and then work off their debt through the supporting business. The system potentially left people open to highly exploitative situations where young graduates became indentured labourers in small businesses. However, other than this tale passed on by a friend, I was never able to determine how widespread the practice was. Stories such as these, however,

alluded to the unequal power relationships possible within these illegal, and legally ‘grey’, arrangements. Such stories suggested students often faced significant hardships while serving as ‘proxy labour’, but those who were about to transition from one visa to another were the ones in most danger of exploitation.

What Next?

From working long hours to working in sectors not deemed appropriate for those on a student visa, students have often filled many of the precarious gaps within Japan’s labour market. At the same time, ‘educational’ arrangements such as trainee schemes and internships have provided cheap labour for a variety of industries in Japan. Japan pioneered these approaches to labour migration largely because of its discomfort around presenting itself as a desirable immigration destination. Yet, the experiences of young Chinese in Japan in many ways reflect wider trends in international Chinese student mobilities and their relationship to precarious work (Martin 2020; Xu 2020). While these patterns are notable elsewhere, Japan continues to be a popular destination for young Chinese students and is one of the first destinations for many young Chinese looking to work overseas.

While countries such as Africa are increasingly drawing Chinese labour to new parts of the world, Japan’s proximity to China and its educationally framed migration schemes make it a popular first choice for many young Chinese urbanites, particularly those who cannot afford to go to places such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. These trends seem likely to continue (Liu-Farrer 2020b) and the visa policy reforms in Japan suggest we will see more temporary low-skilled labour imported into Japan soon. Prior to the disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were serious concerns that construction industries would not be able to complete major refurbishments across Tokyo

before the (now delayed) 2020 Olympics. At the same time, the bigger narrative surrounding these reforms was that they would partially address economic concerns about Japan’s ageing and shrinking workforce. With Japan having one of the world’s oldest populations and a declining birth rate, the question of labour has weighed heavily in many political debates over the past two decades.

The majority of the Chinese with whom I have worked in Japan are choosing to stay. After transitioning through a variety of different visa schemes, many are now applying for permanent resident status. Furthermore, they are slowly engaging more with the question of the rights of non-Japanese workers in Japan and consolidating their identities as transmigrants between China and Japan. What this means for labour migration remains to be seen, as unfortunately those who have obtained more stable legal rights appear also to be the ones who are brokering new forms of labour migration between the two countries. The question remains how migrant labour will be treated in the years to come, but there are glimmers of hope within these new developments. ■



Chinese New Year
Celebration in Prato, Italy.
PC: pratosfera.com.

Encounter Ethnography and Making the ‘Made in Italy’ Brand: Chinese Migrant Experiences

Elizabeth L. KRAUSE

Drawing on ethnographic research in Prato, Italy, a city known for its concentration of Chinese migrants working in the fast-fashion sector, this essay charts the contours of what encounters between ‘Made in Italy’ and ‘Made in China’ have produced. Grappling with the observation that place-based labels exist paradoxically in an intensely globalised world, it focuses on place-based histories to argue for a dynamic consciousness of place.

The history of the ‘Made in Italy’ brand can be traced back to the 1930s—a nationalist moment in Italian society. Autarky was in vogue. Borders were strict. Fascism coursed through the social soul. This cumbersome legacy was shed in brilliant fashion in the postwar era and only took hold on an international scale in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Made in Italy label came to evoke the Renaissance, its legacy of quality, and its connection to the Enlightenment.

As Chinese migrants set up shop in the Renaissance belt of central Italy with particular acumen from the early 2000s, the result has fuelled controversy as well as nurtured collaboration. In the historical industrial district of Prato alone, the Chinese migratory presence has meant substantial adjustments in institutions, whether healthcare services, public schools, politics, or the arts. In this essay, my goal is to chart several important contours of what the encounter between ‘Made in Italy’ and ‘Made in China’ has produced.

I draw on the method of *encounter ethnography*, which I developed for my collaborative project *Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion* (Krause 2018). In centring on encounters themselves, the method places all residents, regardless of citizenship status, on an equal playing field and thus offers a work-around to methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller 2012). Encounters are useful as an operational tool because they allow the ethnographer to cast an analytical gaze on points of intersection. They push attention on fleeting moments in which jarring differences in disposition may be present or surprising similarities in sensibility may converge. Encounter ethnography asks analysts to linger and to question common sense. After all, common sense is often a far cry from good sense (Crehan 2016; Gramsci 1971; Lan 2015).

Chinese Migrants in Prato

Prato has become famous for its concentration of Chinese migrants. It is estimated that between 25,000 and 50,000 migrants from China live there—the first number is official, the second includes migrants who live and work under the radar. In 2020, the city had a registered population of 195,089, of whom 42,371 (22 per cent) were classified as *stranieri* (‘foreign residents’)—well above the national average of 8.5 per cent. Registered Chinese migrants total about 58 per cent of official

resident foreigners (Comune di Prato 2020). Chinese migrants often settle and work in two industrial districts: Macrolotto Zero, near the old town centre, and Macrolotto Uno, in the sprawling outskirts of the city towards the towns abutting the verdant hills of Montalbano.

A majority of Chinese residents in Prato migrated from Zhejiang Province, specifically the city of Wenzhou—famous for its can-do economic model of development. The diaspora was driven by a desire not only to claim the status of overseas migrant, but also to gain access to opportunities for making money in Europe. In addition, Wenzhou migrants cared deeply about becoming their own boss and the autonomy it promised. The cut-and-sew sector of the Italian fashion industry was appealing because it required very little capital outlay to open a finishing workshop. This, in part, is why the Chinese have come to dominate the sector, known in Italian as *confezione*. It is also why there is a great number of Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato.

Chinese migrants developed a niche economy based on fast fashion. As of 2019, one in every three businesses in Prato registered with the local Chamber of Commerce was owned by migrants (Camera di Commercio 2020). Chinese migrants are diverse not only in terms of documented status, but also in terms of socioeconomic class, education, and occupation. Chinese-owned firms number more than 6,000. More than half (3,700) are categorised as cut-and-sew workshops. Compared with other migrant groups, Chinese entrepreneurs show a high percentage of women owners: 45 per cent, compared with 55 per cent men. Firms are increasingly diverse in type, and include fast-fashion wholesalers, textile factories, and support services, including real estate activities, restaurants, bars, and small retail shops.

That said, becoming successful in the fast-fashion sector requires tremendous sacrifice. Demands on time and lifestyle are particularly challenging—specifically during the pre-COVID-19 era. The Chinese who migrated to Prato tended to be young. Many couples

married and had babies. In the era before the tragic Teresa Moda fire of 2013, in which seven Chinese workers died, many workers lived in factory dormitories, which were not suitable for childrearing. For this reason, many parents sent their infants back to China to be cared for by grandparents. Elsewhere, I have argued that these young parents sought quality care for their children (Krause 2020). At the same time, this circulation of children allowed the parents to tap into non-capitalist relations that ultimately enhanced their global networks and underwrote capitalist value (Krause and Bressan 2018; Tsing 2013).

Encounter One: A Flood and a Flood of Metaphors

Tracing the encounter between Made in Italy and Made in China entails place-based histories of each of these labels. Both have their own stories and sets of metaphors. Both are filled with stereotypes, positive and negative—for example, an easy elegance versus ‘a horrifying kitsch’ (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019: 63).

When I began the project in 2012, I had a hunch that the Made in Italy brand served as a magnetic force drawing migrants from China. *The Economist* had identified Italy as ‘the world’s top-ranking exporter in textiles, clothing, and leather goods’ (London 2013). This made Italy stand out among developed economies. I wondered what sort of affinity Chinese migrants had with the Made in Italy label. I assumed the draw to work in the Made in Italy sector brought meaning to their lives or added symbolic capital to their work. My hunch was that they would find value working in a sector known for superior quality and design.

The imagined association between Made in Italy and the Renaissance in part explains the label’s resilience and prestige. In reality, this link amounts to a myth of continuity—one that

has nevertheless proven resilient in a globalised fashion industry. Especially important for the Made in Italy label was the historic flood in November 1966 that deluged Florence, submerging 1,300 works of art and millions of manuscripts. Paintings and sculptures were anthropomorphised as a ‘hospital’ was set up in the lemon house of Boboli Gardens. An international recovery effort served to educate a broad public about the value of Renaissance patrimony and its significance to Western humanism. The rescue operators found their *bella figura* in Jackie Kennedy, who was appointed honorary president of the US Committee for the Rescue of Italian Art. Fundraisers proliferated across the United States, from non-profit organisations to university campuses. Not unlike Trobriand Islanders’ *kula* shells or Scotland’s crown jewels, historical sentiment grew among American consumers for goods associated with the Made in Italy brand.

I can say with confidence that migrants from Zhejiang Province did not bring with them the same sense of historical sentiment for the Made in Italy brand. I worked with a research assistant to test this assumption. She was intimate with the migrant community, having migrated herself to Italy when she was around 10 years of age, and was not only fluent in Italian and Mandarin, but also a native speaker of Wenzhouese, the dialect of many Chinese migrants in Prato. We worked on an interview protocol that included questions about the value of working in the Made in Italy fashion sector. When we tested the protocol, this aspect proved nonexistent. It revealed two worlds encountering one another. The collision was jarring.

The research assistant insisted that the questions did not make sense to Chinese migrants from Wenzhou. She asserted that the questions were nearly impossible to translate and complicated to explain. I came to realise that the migrants did not have deep associations with the label. They understood Italy as a market in which exports were important. If, as a brand, the affinity with Italy helped exports,

that in turn boosted employment for the Italian economy and those working within its borders. The workers had little appreciation of the label's history.

The Made in Italy label originated in the fascist era. It resulted from an intensive nationalist politics challenging French hegemony in the fashion sector. The dictator Benito Mussolini closed borders and limited trade to reconstitute the industry. In part, this forced innovation in fibre and design. Fashion historian Eugenia Paulicelli (2004) argues that the fashion industry was one of the main industries that the fascist state targeted due to its potential to define *italianità* and to exalt a national sense of self. Of course, once fascism fell, the Italian industry worked hard to distance itself from its soiled political roots.

The Italian economy boomed with help from the postwar Marshall Plan, which funded industrial districts, such as the one supporting textiles and knitwear in Prato. Peasants abandoned the countryside and its hierarchical mode of sharecropping agriculture. Many dreamed of a freer life as they went to Prato to work in the factories and embraced militant egalitarianism. That dream reached its height during the labour struggles of the 'Hot Autumn' of 1968. The unintended result was a new era of diffuse industry. Sweater-making was outsourced locally to small industrial artisan shops. An Italian artisan, Antonio, recalled the long hours of work, saying: '*I cinesi siamo noi* [We are the Chinese].'

This metaphorical reckoning points to an awareness of structural similarities between Italian and Chinese migrants from different eras. One of our Chinese research participants, Peng, characterised his experience of becoming a worker in the fast-fashion industry as a 'fistful of tears'. The fist metaphor conjures up the unanticipated emotional struggles he encountered as a young migrant. Inside that fist was a world of hardship and suffering as well as high-mindedness and determination. Eventually, Peng got married. He and his wife, Lily, had a baby boy, whom they sent back to China to live with grandparents, and began

their own firm. Peng exchanged his youth for money. Also within that fist was a world of regional structures and sentiments that collided with and animated new globalised desires and experiences.

Encounter Two: The Gucci Debacle, or A Label's Value and Its Connection With Place

This sounds like a bad joke: to promote integration, a contemporary art museum hires a famous artist, known for his provocative work, only to censure the artist in the middle of the live performance.

Late into the evening of 22 June 2018, in the Macrolotto Zero neighbourhood at the heart of Prato's Chinatown, Rainer Ganahl's show was first interrupted by whistles, shouts, and swearing, and then cut off by the museum director. What had begun as a celebration of the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art's thirtieth anniversary, combined with a street festival to ease tensions between the city's Chinese and Italian communities, ended in accusations that the internationally renowned artist's work was offensive and superficial.

The artist's initial proposal had seemed innocent enough to appease multicultural sensibilities: 'Please, teach me Chinese—Please, teach me Italian.' The initiative was launched in the spirit of mutual understanding and cultural reciprocity. On the afternoon of 22 June, I strolled along Via Pistoiese through the 'Pop Art' street festival, passing food banks, children creating artwork, and Chinese adults preparing to perform—eight women dressed in flowing pink tunics over white pants flanking two men, one all in white, the other in a black tunic and white pants. The group stood picture-ready in the Piazza dell'Immaginario in front of its red wall with a triptych sequence of green leafy branches.

Late that evening, the artist arrived an hour and a half after his slotted performance time of 9.30pm. Despite a thinning crowd, the show created a stir as he began to screen video of a fashion show. ‘Models’ held signs that juxtaposed the words ‘Gucci a Prato’ and ‘Marx a Prato’. The metaphor short-circuited the distance between luxury and exploitation. The final surprise, however, came with a series of short clips that captured local scenes: a factory inspection inside a Chinese workshop and a well-known Chinese protest against inspections.

The performance and its message created cacophony. Institutional organisers reacted as though the message was a threat. A Chinese singer who had remained in the audience exchanged harsh words with the artist. Others later expressed to me their view that the worst offence was to censure an invited artist regardless of whether he was arrogant, tone deaf, or ill-prepared.

What struck me about this encounter was that the artist was invited to the heart of Prato’s Chinatown to engage in a form of storytelling, if you will. His story meandered beyond the soft lines of cultural exchange to send a hard but simple message: of exploitation. In a sense, what artists do is reflect their impressions of reality back on to a people, an era, a place. Inviting a virtual newcomer into that setting to send an oversimplified message of exploitation was bound to stir up controversy. (He was accused of trying to represent Prato merely by googling it and finding the headlines.)

One commentator suggested that local artists would have made for a better cultural exchange. Without a doubt, such an encounter would have looked different. Would it have reached a resolution? Would it have still been messy, loud, full of anger and misunderstanding?

Globalised Fashion and Place-Based Consciousness

Before the novel coronavirus pandemic, the economist Giacomo Becattini characterised Italy as suffering its worst economic crisis in 80 years. Famous for his work related to local development and industrial districts, Becattini acknowledged capitalism was a broken system. To ferry Italy beyond crisis, he elaborated a solution in his last book, *La coscienza dei luoghi* (*The Consciousness of Places*, 2015), that centres place-based knowledge. The book’s subtitle, *Territory as a Choral Subject*, offers vision through metaphor: voices find harmony in context. The future of a given place is moored to ‘authentic motors of development’: historical patrimony, infrastructure, and collective knowhow (Becattini 2015: 22–23). In practice, these voices may or may not be in harmony; they may be in conflict or have a polyphonic quality. The degree to which local economic development syncs with diverse human economies and local social relations remains an open question.

A hallmark of ‘made in’ labels is the connection with place. In a world where globalised supply chains have become hegemonic, and the hands behind those labels diasporic, any given consciousness of place becomes dynamic. Such dynamism may contradict the indexing of place, which conjures up particular associations, some of which are quite fixed—in essence, the opposite of dynamic.

The connection that is evoked between the Made in Italy label and the Renaissance relies on a myth of continuity. Postwar workers in the Made in Italy sectors largely migrated from rural regions and were hardly Renaissance princes. Nevertheless, the myth endures. It is a myth steeped in a particular place, commonly represented by landscapes with rolling hills covered in vineyards, olive groves, cypress trees, and even Medici palaces.

In the contemporary era, a complex set of international agreements shapes the contours of place-based labelling in Europe. A system of geographic indicators, such as protected designations of origin, signals quality products such as olive oil, salamis, and wine. Slow-food designations also exist for specialty products promoted in the interest of biodiversity. Such labelling apparatuses form an uneasy backdrop against which diasporic Chinese workers and entrepreneurs experience their lives. How are such residents' contributions to particular places considered?

I want to conclude with several points. First, place-based labels exist paradoxically in an intensely globalised world. Second, place-based labelling practices contain particular histories and generate assumptions about specific territories—whether a nation-state (for example, Italy or China), a region or province (for example, Tuscany or Zhejiang), or a city (for example, Florence or Wenzhou). And third, place-based labels are meaningful because of their connections with specific features—the soil, the air, the climate—and particular histories, legacies of cultural patrimony, and personal or collective knowhow.

As populations change, myths of continuity become harder to sustain. I am left wondering: what new forms of dynamic place-based consciousness are already emerging to include all players in a local society that is intricately and intimately connected to a globalised world? ■



Legal Remedies for China's Overseas Workers

Chinese Construction Worker in Khanbogd, Southern Mongolia.
PC: Bankwatch.

Aaron HALEGUA
Xiaohui BAN

The half-million Chinese citizens travelling overseas to work each year are often misled about the job, charged high recruitment fees, not paid wages, or injured on the jobsite. But what recourse do they have? An analysis of Chinese court decisions shows that workers, including those who use informal brokers, are sometimes able to receive unpaid wages or work injury compensation upon their return. However, practical obstacles like obtaining physical evidence or affording a lawyer still prevent many abused workers from obtaining justice.

In 2015, the Mongolian company Baoyingerile, owned by Mr Wu, contracted with Mr Liu to hire between 100 and 200 Chinese workers to build 16-storey residential complexes in Ulaanbaatar. Liu recruited a group of 112 Chinese workers from Hebei Province. After working long hours in the cold winds for three months, the workers were paid only a small portion of their promised salaries. Liu owed them more than 2.4 million yuan in wages but claimed that he could not pay because he was owed money by Baoyingerile. The Chinese workers protested by blocking the entrance to the construction site and confronting Liu. They also contacted the Chinese Embassy for assistance. However, as Baoyingerile claimed it had no money, the workers were only able to obtain a paper signed by Wu and Liu acknowledging the amounts owed. The workers returned to China, unsure whether they would ever be paid.

Over the past three decades, the number of Chinese working abroad has exploded. China's official statistics demonstrate that, while 57,900 Chinese workers were stationed abroad in 1990, this number grew to 424,900 by 2000, 846,600 by 2010, and 996,800 by 2018 (NBS 2019: 659). Nearly 40 per cent of these migrants work in the construction industry. The media increasingly reports on the hardships endured by these workers, such as not being paid, dying as a result of unsafe conditions, or paying large recruitment fees for these overseas opportunities. However, the limited scholarly attention that has been paid to this population of workers has generally come through a sociological or anthropological lens that focuses on the workers' lives abroad or their interactions with the local population.

The authors' research, alternatively, examines the legal mechanisms available to protect the labour rights of overseas Chinese workers. Does Chinese law offer any protection for such workers? And, if so, to what extent can workers avail themselves of these protections? This essay describes Chinese Government policies that regulate the dispatch of workers overseas and establish labour protections for them. However, it also notes that many workers choose to go abroad through informal, unregistered labour brokers who are not part of the regulated system. Nonetheless, the authors introduce several cases in which Chinese courts have demonstrated a willingness to provide a remedy for aggrieved workers after they return home to China, even if they went through such informal channels. This marks a positive trend. However, there still remain many workers who never file a legal claim due to a lack of evidence or inability to find legal representation.

Labour Abuses Suffered by Overseas Workers

The abuses commonly endured by overseas migrants often start before the workers have even left China. Most workers become aware

of opportunities through a labour broker or agency, which commonly charge a sizeable recruitment fee that must be paid prior to departure. Some desperate workers pay nearly 100,000 yuan upfront based on the promise of a good job abroad. In addition, brokers may require some type of security deposit to ensure that the worker will fulfil their contract or not abscond while overseas. As these workers often lack such funds, they are forced to borrow money from family and friends or, if that is not possible, from loan sharks at high interest rates. These lenders may require the worker to post collateral to borrow the money, such as their house or crops. Relatives who stay behind in China, such as spouses, may also be forced to guarantee repayment of the loan.

Labour brokers often make false promises or provide inaccurate information to workers about the conditions overseas. The intermediaries promise high wages, reasonable hours, safe work conditions, and comfortable living arrangements. But the reality is frequently quite different. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many workers will pay the required recruitment fees without obtaining a written contract defining even the basic terms of their overseas employment—such as the name of the employer, duration of employment, wage rates, or working hours. Workers may be told that they have the legal authorisation to work overseas, but later discover they lack the proper visas or permits.

In the case of Ms Wang, for example, she saw a broker's advertisement on WeChat promising a three-year visa to work as a masseuse in Malaysia earning 15,000 yuan per month, with the employer providing free training, food, and housing. Wang therefore paid a 35,000-yuan fee to secure the position. When it came to depart China, Wang learned she would only have a seven-day tourist visa. On arrival in Malaysia, she learned that the wage was only 5,000 yuan, and the employer planned to deduct from it the cost of the work visa application fee (*Liu Panpan and Wang Zhiqiang Contract Dispute Second Instance Civil Judgement* 2020). The pervasiveness of such fraudulent activities

is considerable. One Hubei company was found to have misled 930 victims into paying more than 30 million yuan in recruitment fees for fake overseas job opportunities, even charging one individual a fee of 150,000 yuan. The company's principals were eventually prosecuted and sentenced to imprisonment for three to seven years (*People's Procuratorate of Wuhan City, Hubei Province v. Tan Weiwen, Xiong Li, et al.* 2016).

Once overseas workers commence their employment, they face many of the same labour issues encountered by migrant workers within China. Excessive overtime and unpaid wages are pervasive problems, as experienced by the Baoyingerile workers in Mongolia. Work-related injuries are also common. There are also abuses more unique to workers travelling overseas. For instance, Chinese employers often confiscate workers' passports—ostensibly to ensure their safekeeping, but with the practical impact of making it impossible for workers to leave a bad employer. If a worker lacking a proper visa exhibits any disobedience, the employer may threaten to call local immigration authorities. Such employer practices can convert an exploitative work situation into a forced labour scenario. Another significant problem that arises in these overseas arrangements—which often involve a complex chain of employers and recruiters—is the ambiguity as to who bears ultimate responsibility for the payment of wages or purchase of work-injury insurance for these workers.

Government Efforts to Protect Overseas Workers

Prior to China's Reform and Opening Up in the late 1970s, only workers tied to state-owned enterprises were dispatched overseas and just a few vague policies governing this phenomenon existed. However, as Chinese citizens gained

the right to apply for passports and foreign travel restrictions loosened, more individuals sought better-paying jobs abroad, causing Chinese authorities to issue more detailed regulations (see also Nyíri's essay in the present issue). These regulations sought to establish the respective liabilities of the Chinese parent companies, intermediary labour agencies, and foreign employers in terms of ensuring the payment of wages, purchasing work-injury insurance, and limiting recruitment fees.

One set of rules pertains to what are essentially secondment arrangements, where an 'overseas project contracting enterprise' (对外承包工程单位, or OPCE) in China dispatches a worker to a foreign subsidiary. In such cases, regulations require that the Chinese parent company maintain a labour relationship with the worker. The second regulatory approach has been to permit only registered intermediary agencies—'foreign labour service cooperation enterprises' (对外劳务合作企业, or FLSCEs)—to recruit and organise overseas work for Chinese nationals, and then set rules governing these arrangements. No other entities or individuals are permitted to directly recruit individuals within China for work abroad. In 2002, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security issued a regulation obligating FLSCEs to provide written contracts, abstain from collecting excessive recruitment fees, and contribute to a reserve fund to compensate workers who are not paid their wages abroad. As abuses persisted, in 2012, the State Council promulgated stricter rules requiring that all labour agencies be registered and demanding that they purchase work-injury insurance, ensure workers have valid visas, pay wages, comply with labour standards in the destination country, and not collect security deposits.

The regulations provide FLSCEs the option of signing a 'labour contract' or 'service contract' with the worker. In the case of the former, the FLSCE would form a labour relationship with the worker, accept extensive liability for the worker's experience abroad, and be prohibited from charging a recruitment fee. By contrast, if the FLSCE signs a service contract with the

worker, the FLSCE may collect a fee for its services and it is the foreign employer who must form the labour relationship with the worker and take on the corresponding legal obligations. Technically, however, even where a service contract is concluded, the FLSCE may be held responsible for compensating unpaid or injured workers where the foreign employer fails to do so. The authors' research shows that FLSCEs almost exclusively choose to conclude service contracts, thus permitting themselves to charge fees.

In practice, however, there are many Chinese going abroad to work under neither of these two models. Instead, a large number of migrants find work through informal channels, such as through unregistered labour brokers. In 2017, the Ministry of Commerce even launched a special investigation to crack down on such intermediaries, but the practice continues. When workers use these informal channels, there is an increased likelihood of abuse by the recruiters, such as by collecting security deposits, charging high fees, providing misleading information about the conditions overseas, not providing written contracts, failing to purchase work-injury insurance, or arranging for workers to enter the host country on tourist or business visas. The use of these unregistered, informal intermediaries makes regulation more difficult and presents significant challenges for workers seeking redress after things go wrong.

Enforcement of Overseas Workers' Rights

When workers are abused overseas, it is extremely difficult to obtain redress while abroad. Workers generally lack knowledge about the host country and its legal system, do not know where to find help, and significant language barriers often exist. This proved to be true of the 112 construction workers in Mongolia, who returned to China with only a slip of paper.

What about enforcing the protections contained within the Chinese regulations described above? After arriving back in China, there are several channels open to workers seeking help, including police assistance, trade unions, the Ministry of Commerce's complaint mechanism, mediation committees, and other administrative bodies. Given the lack of any comprehensive data, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which workers approach these institutions or what results are achieved. By contrast, as a result of the government's effort to publish all Chinese court decisions in an online database, there are considerable data concerning judicial responses to workers who return to China and seek redress for unpaid wages, work injuries, or the repayment of recruitment fees.

The authors have identified a promising sample of cases from this database in which overseas workers have been able to obtain redress through the Chinese courts. For those workers who go abroad through a properly registered FLSCE, the courts are often willing to make those agencies honour their obligations under the regulations. For instance, when Mr Xu was not paid 80,000 yuan in wages by his employer in Angola, the court required the FLSCE that dispatched him there pay the money (*Xu Xiaozhong and Luoyang Songzhou Foreign Economic and Technical Cooperation Co. Ltd Service Contract Dispute Second Instance Civil Judgement* 2018). In another matter, a group of 48 construction workers signed an employment agreement with a construction firm in Beijing to work in Algeria. On arrival there, a separate company employed them, which collected a 10,000-yuan 'security deposit' from each worker and then failed to pay them their full wages. The Chinese court adjudicating the case found that, although the plaintiffs paid the security deposit and performed their work overseas, the Beijing firm had executed an employment agreement with the workers and was thus liable for the monies owed (Zhao 2016). Similarly, where OPCEs seek to evade legal responsibility by requiring workers to execute labour contracts

with their foreign subsidiaries (rather than with the OPCE in China), some courts nonetheless deem there to be a labour relationship between the OPCE and the worker and thus hold the OPCE responsible for remedying labour abuses, such as compensating work-related injuries (*China Overseas Engineering Co. Ltd and Dong Minggang Labour Dispute Second Instance Civil Judgement* 2018).

There are also cases in which the courts order a remedy for workers against an unregistered labour broker or an intermediary who did not comply with the appropriate procedures. The 112 unpaid migrants who worked for Baoyingerile in Mongolia filed a lawsuit on returning to China. Due to the numerous impracticalities, they did not sue the company in Mongolia; instead, they sued Mr Wu (the owner of Baoyingerile, who turned out to also be a Chinese national) and Mr Liu (the recruiter). The workers demonstrated that Wu and Liu did not go through the appropriate legal procedures to recruit them for overseas employment, and that it was therefore proper to find them liable for payment of the owed wages. The court was then able to mediate a settlement in which the two defendants together agreed to pay the amounts due (Yang 2020). In the other example, when Ms Wang brought a lawsuit regarding the masseuse job arranged for her in Malaysia, the court ordered that the broker return her recruitment fee because the work conditions did not match what she had been promised (*Liu Panpan and Wang Zhiqiang Contract Dispute Second Instance Civil Judgement* 2020).

Not all courts, however, are so generous towards workers who use informal or unregistered brokers. Some courts find that the obligations imposed on FLSCs do not necessarily apply to these unregistered intermediaries, and thus any dispute between the worker and the broker is simply a question of whether the contractual promises were fulfilled. Therefore, if the contract simply obligated the broker to arrange a job overseas, and the worker was given such a job, courts have found it proper for the broker to retain

the fee. A number of judges have also found that the worker should bear some fault for engaging such a broker. For example, Mr Ge signed a labour contract with an agency that lacked the proper qualifications to send workers to Angola. When he returned to China and sued the agency to compensate him for an injury suffered while abroad, the court held that the plaintiff bore some responsibility for not properly investigating the agency and therefore should not be compensated the full amount (*Ge Weibing and Nantong Far East Labour Cooperation Co. Ltd Service Contract Dispute Second Instance Civil Judgement* 2015).

Accessing the Courts

While the courts are providing important remedies for at least some workers, it is important to be mindful of the obstacles preventing many aggrieved workers from prevailing in court—or from ever filing a claim in the first place. One significant issue is workers' lack of physical evidence to prove their claims. The plaintiffs who worked in Mongolia were fortunate to have a signed statement affirming that they were owed wages by Mr Wu and Mr Liu. However, this contrasts sharply with the many workers who are never provided a written contract or may lack any evidence that even establishes the identity of their employer, let alone the specific amount they are owed.

Another serious obstacle for many workers is affording legal representation in China. The 112 plaintiffs who worked in Mongolia found a legal aid organisation, the Beijing Zhicheng Public Interest Migrant Worker Legal Aid Centre (北京致诚公益农民工法律援助中心), which agreed to represent them for no charge. The 48 workers who went to Algeria were assisted by the same organisation on their return to China. But such resources are limited, and most migrant workers cannot afford to pay a private lawyer. Bringing a lawsuit may also entail other costs, such as translating foreign

documents or travelling to the courthouse for a hearing, which may be prohibitively expensive for many workers.

There is also the problem of locating these informal brokers and finding their assets. In the case of the Baoyingerile plaintiffs, not only were they able to locate their recruiter, Mr Liu, but also they were fortunate that Liu had money that he was willing to put towards a settlement. Even when the defendant is found and a judgement is obtained, collecting money may still be difficult. For the family of one worker who died from malaria while working in Africa, it took an additional five months after a judgement was rendered to actually collect any money (*Fu Guiqun, Guan Moumou, Lin Shuoqiong Application for Enforcement in the Work Injury Insurance Compensation Dispute with Sichuan Qianheng Construction Engineering Co. Ltd* 2015). In short, while judges may be able to assist workers who file claims, a variety of obstacles and challenges prevent many aggrieved workers from ever making it to the courthouse steps or ultimately obtaining relief.

penalise workers who use informal recruiters but rather to compel these brokers to assume all the same obligations as a formal FLSCE. The common practice of Chinese OPCEs requiring workers to sign labour contracts with their foreign subsidiaries, rather than executing such contracts themselves, should be more strictly regulated, including fines or other penalties for OPCEs that wilfully evade their obligations. Chinese authorities can also provide know-your-rights education to migrants seeking to work abroad, including information on choosing a licensed labour agency, not paying exorbitant fees, demanding a written contract, and preserving physical evidence while overseas. China can also make legal aid services more readily available to overseas workers after they return home. Hopefully, China will take steps towards implementing such reforms. ■

Policy Recommendations

Migrant workers in China are extremely vulnerable, and those travelling overseas to work are even more susceptible to abuse. The Chinese authorities have responded by regulating the practice of sending workers overseas and creating protections for such labourers. Moreover, the Chinese courts are playing a positive role in enforcing those protections for many workers. However, the widespread use of informal or unregistered brokers as well as practical obstacles to accessing the courts limit the efficacy of the judicial remedy. Nonetheless, some of these limitations can be overcome by prudent policies. The Chinese judiciary can offer guidance to courts on handling cases involving informal brokers—for instance, instructing judges not to



FORUM

Transformation of Shen Kong Borderlands

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In August 1980, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was formally established, along with SEZs in Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. China's fifth SEZ, Hainan Island, was designated in 1988. Yet, in 2020, the only SEZ to receive national attention on its fortieth anniversary was Shenzhen. Indeed, General Secretary Xi Jinping attended the celebration, reminding the city, the country, and the world not only of Shenzhen's pioneering contributions to building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, but also that the 'construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area is a major national development strategy, and Shenzhen is an important engine for the construction of the Greater Bay Area' (Xi 2020). Against this larger background, many interpreted the General Secretary's celebration of Shenzhen as putting Hong Kong in its place, so to speak; Hong Kong may have contributed to the SEZ's development, but the region's future is being shaped in and through Shenzhen.

This forum offers historical and ethnographic accounts of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong borderlands as sites where cross-border policies, situations, and aspirations continue to inform

and transform everyday life. In political documents, newspaper articles, and the names of businesses, Shenzhen-Hong Kong is shortened to 'Shen Kong' (深港), suturing the cities together as specific, yet diverse, socio-technical formations built on complex legacies of colonial occupation and Cold War flare-ups, checkpoints and boundaries, quasi-legal business opportunities, and cross-border peregrinations. The following essays show how, set against its changing cultural meanings and sifting of social orders, the border is continuously redeployed and exported as a mobile imaginary while it is experienced as an everyday materiality. Taken together, the articles compel us to consider how borders and border protocols have been critical to Shenzhen's success over the past four decades. Indeed, we would argue, Shenzhen succeeds to the extent that it remains a liminal space of passage and transformation. As the Greater Bay Area once again remakes the region's cultural geography, the stories and voices herein provide food for speculative thought about today's Pearl River Delta, between and within China's domestic and international borders. ■

HONG KONG EXTENSION

Reproduction of the Map attached to the Convention between Great Britain and China signed at Peking on the 9th of June 1898



Hong Kong, China

The Border as Palimpsest

Denise Y. HO

In the late morning of 11 March 1899, Hong Kong's Colonial Secretary James Stewart Lockhart and Huang Zongxin, a representative of the Governor General at Canton in China's Guangdong Province, met in Lockhart's council chamber. Both men produced maps of China's Xin'an (新安) County as guides to their discussion of the boundaries of the New Territories—an extension of colonial Hong Kong into China's mainland. Unlike Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula, ceded in 1842 and 1860, respectively, as a result of the Opium Wars, the New Territories were leased in 1898 for a period of 99 years. But the 1898 treaty left the exact border to be determined. At this meeting and one following, Huang was concerned with technicalities of governance, like the collection of taxes and rents, the pursuit

of pirates in territorial waters, and the location of customs stations. Lockhart, by contrast, was interested in maximising British territory. He proposed a boundary line that would not only join Mirs Bay (大鹏湾) to the east and Deep Bay (后海湾, today 深圳湾) to the west, but also extend north of the Shenzhen River and encompass the market towns of Shenzhen (深圳) and Shatoujiao (沙头角) (Colonial Office 1898–1900: 118–22).

But when Lockhart and Huang concluded their negotiations, the British did not receive any more of Xin'an County, nor did they gain Shenzhen as a strategic base (Colonial Office 1898–1900: 32–33, 130–31). The Hong Kong–China border was established as the maritime high-tide mark in each bay, the Shenzhen River and its banks, and a remote frontier with

numbered stones marking the ‘Anglo-Chinese Boundary’. Two important understandings underlay the demarcation: that roads and waters were to remain accessible to inhabitants on both sides, and that the British would respect local customs and property (Colonial Office 1898–1900: 132–34).

Over its 99-year history and into the present day, the border witnessed dramatic political change. Beginning as a boundary between the British Empire and the Manchu Qing, the Hong Kong–China border went on to divide a waning imperial redoubt and Nationalist and later Communist China. With the 1997 Handover, it finally became an internal border, separating the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region from the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Throughout, the boundary has been both physical and imagined, though even the physical border could shift with the silting of waters and the rebuilding of fences. The border was once open and later militarised, with barbed wire and restricted zones. While local residents contended with its materiality, people across Hong Kong and in Xin’an—later Bao’an (宝安)—County still lived with the imagination of it, especially those with cross-border families. For those living on either side, the border was a liminal zone spatially and temporally, always due to return to Chinese territory.

International Boundary

Long before Lockhart and Huang marked the 1898 boundary, Hong Kong was already a node in international trading systems, serving as a conduit for Britain’s China trade as well as a channel for regional trade between North and South China, and between China and Southeast Asia. Historian Elizabeth Sinn describes Hong Kong as a ‘space of flow’, linking China with what she calls the ‘Cantonese Pacific’, sending thousands of emigrants to seek their fortunes in Californian goldmines and later receiving their bones for hometown burials (2013: 11, 47–50).

The lease of the New Territories accelerated the development of transportation networks, culminating in the building of the Kowloon–Canton Railway, with the British section opening in 1910 and the Chinese section in 1911 (Colonial Office 1907). A 1923 Chinese travel guide traces the railway journey, with the products for sale at each station revealing the modest agricultural communities that lined its path. On the Chinese side, Shenzhen’s market town offered sugarcane, birdseed, pears, dried oysters, and peanuts. On the British side, Sheung Shui station exported salt fish for bean cakes and miscellaneous goods (*Traveller’s Guide to the Kowloon–Canton Railway* 1923: 535–36). Though Bao’an County never had Hong Kong’s stature as an international port, it had numerous ferry routes that connected to Hong Kong, linked further up the Pearl River to Dongguan and Guangzhou, and brought in agricultural products from Huiyang and environs. On the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the county had three main public roads, with two more under construction and two in the planning stages (Department of Agriculture, Zhongshan National University 1937: 4–5). While people living along the physical border—like those in the divided village of Shatoujiao/Shatou Kok—endured the burden and expense of customs posts, others across Hong Kong and China benefited from the affordances of the border: the movement of people, goods, remittances, and more (Hase 1993: 157–61).

The Hong Kong–China border was thus a gateway for trade and migration. Between the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the Japanese occupation in 1941, Hong Kong’s population grew from 500,000 to 1.5 million (Faure 1997: 149). Hong Kong’s relative stability during China’s warlord period—before the establishment of the Nationalist government in 1927—coupled with its early industrialisation, made it a draw for Chinese labour, from men for its shipping industry to women in service work. The mobility of cross-border labour became evident in the seamen’s strikes of the 1920s, when protests against British imperialism linked Hong Kong’s

Chinese Seamen's Union with Chinese unions and the government in Guangdong. First in 1922 and then in 1925, striking Hong Kong workers simply crossed the border to China, where they had the opportunity to organise and rally public opinion (Tsin 2003: 78–80; Faure 1997: 166–74). But it was Japan's invasion of China in 1937 that caused Hong Kong's population to swell with wartime migrants, filling government-run refugee camps and straining the food supply. After Hong Kong fell to the Japanese on Christmas Day 1941, some refugees chose to return to China and crossed the border in the other direction. Ubiquitous in oral histories recorded in both Hong Kong and China are tales of flight, on foot and by boat. The oystermen who worked both sides of Deep Bay, for example, recall fleeing Shajing on the Chinese coast for Lau Fau Shan (罗浮山) on the Hong Kong side, returning like the tides after the Japanese passed through (Bai 2012: 27, 39–40).

As an international boundary, the Hong Kong–China border was both bounded and traversed by Chinese politics. Revolutionaries like China's 'founding father' Sun Yat-sen used Hong Kong as a base and political platform, while warlords came to Hong Kong to seek refuge from political enemies (Lary 2005: 158–59). During and after the Japanese invasion, Hong Kong was an important site for both the Nationalists and the Communists. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), driven underground and into the countryside by the ruling Nationalists, used Hong Kong both for organising military operations—including purchasing for the Eighth Route Army—and for propaganda and publishing (Loh 2010: 58–59). Perhaps the most symbolic cross-border political movement during this period was the anti-Japanese guerilla resistance, whose area of operation stretched from the Pearl River Delta into Japanese-occupied Hong Kong, and from the rural New Territories to urban Kowloon (Loh 2010: 59–63; Chan 2009). The East River Column—about 5,000 full-time soldiers under the direction of the CCP—became legend in local revolutionary lore

(*Bao'an County Gazetteer* 1960: 78–79). While later CCP history claimed the work of the East River Column was peasant resistance against imperialism, recent oral histories reveal a patriotism that was far simpler. New Territories villager Zhang Guanfu (Cheung Koon Fu, b. 1921), who joined the Shatoujiao/Sha Tau Kok squadron in 1943 by sailing across Mirs Bay to train at Yantian, remembers: 'Before I joined the guerrillas I didn't know anything ... I knew there was someone called Chiang Kai-shek and someone called Mao Zedong' (Cheung 2011). Later responsible for teaching literacy classes and manning the communication station in his home village, he remarked that joining the guerrillas was a matter of sheer survival: 'The guerrillas weren't doing anything bad, just saving the nation' (Cheung 2011).

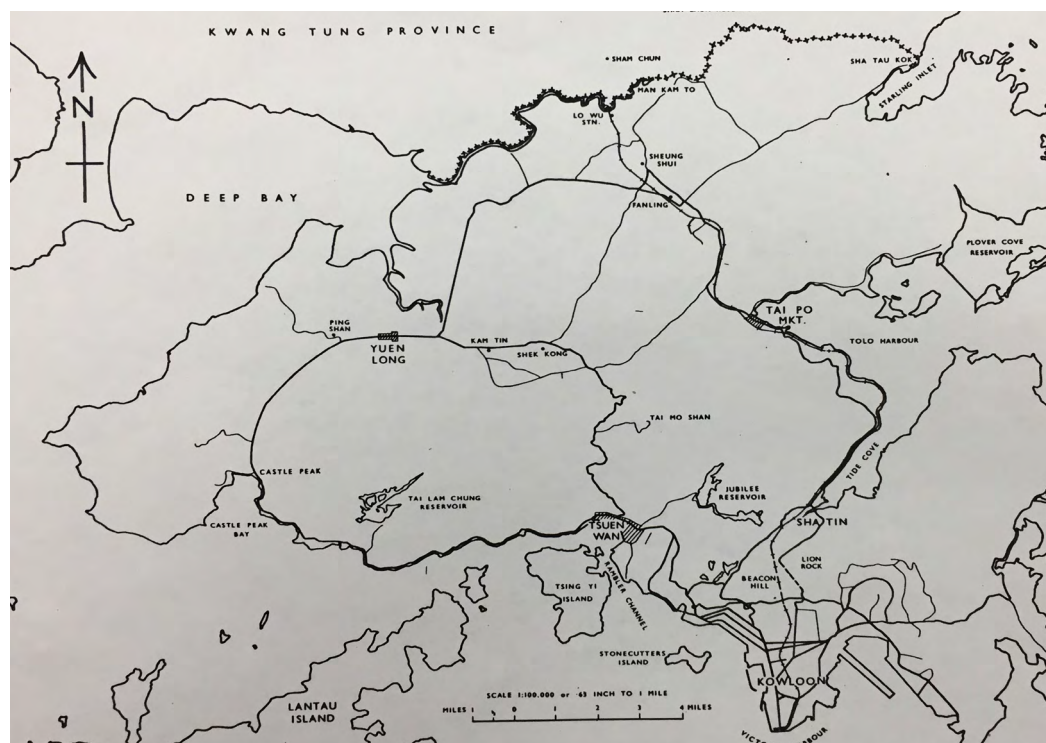
Ideological Line

Before the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Hong Kong–China border remained relatively open. But with the outbreak of the Korean War and the onset of the global Cold War, the border hardened. After the liberation of Shenzhen in October 1949, direct train and ferry services ended, with the automobile crossing at Wenjindu/Man Kam To (文锦渡) closing in May 1950. Travellers going in and out of China crossed at Luohu/Lo Wu (罗湖), disembarking from the train and crossing the border on foot (He 1993: 176). Both China and Hong Kong instituted a system of travel passes required to enter their respective frontier zones, with additional exit and entry permits required to cross the border itself. On the Hong Kong side, British officials instituted a quota system, allowing 50 Cantonese into Hong Kong per day, with entry permits required of all others (Director of Immigration 1965: 1–5). On the Chinese side, permits were required to enter Guangdong Province, exit papers were issued by the Shenzhen police, and a British entry permit was technically needed to pass the Chinese border officials—

though this last hurdle could be cleared with a bribe to the Yellow Ox Gang (CIA 1952). In addition to limitations on passenger traffic, the movement of goods was curtailed in 1950 and 1951 by an American and United Nations embargo related to the Korean War, as well as by the protectionist policies of the New China (Glennon et al. 1983: 1954–63).

The border as an ideological line was reinforced by restrictions on movement and goods. The divide between Hong Kong and China also hardened in material terms, with major construction on the Hong Kong frontier fence in 1952 and then at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 842-12-1). The land border was guarded, but not in a continuous line: on the Chinese side, it was patrolled by border soldiers and villagers in the People's Militia; on

the Hong Kong side, policemen were stationed at border posts. There were occasional flare-ups at the border, most notably at Shatoujiao/Sha Tau Kok in 1967. But everyday life along the frontier was characterised as much by porousness as by a boundary. Smuggling was pervasive, from China's encouragement to evade the Korean War blockade to streams of commodities that crossed in travellers' luggage (Thai 2018: 244, 253–59). Farmers on both sides of the border made daily crossings to work land on the other side—for example, Bao'an County peasants worked an estimated 4,000 *mu* (about 162 hectares) of land in the New Territories (Shenzhen Museum 2014: 247). In 1961, Bao'an County's Party Committee made small-scale cross-border trade a matter of policy, permitting residents within 10 kilometres of the border to make five trips a month, with



Map of Hong Kong's New Territories with border checkpoints and frontier, 1968. In *Hong Kong Disturbances, 1967* (Hong Kong Government Printer, 1968).

goods not to exceed 5 yuan in value (Shenzhen Museum 2014: 251–52). The Bamboo Curtain, like parts of the Iron Curtain, was more flexible than Cold War rhetoric allowed.

Indeed, for many whose families were divided by the Hong Kong–China border, it was less an ideological line than a bureaucratic barrier. Hundreds of thousands of people crossed at Luohu/Lo Wu every year, though regular traffic could decline in the face of China’s political campaigns: in 1965–66, there were 889,249 crossings, but with the Cultural Revolution the numbers for 1966–67 fell to 565,908 (Director of Immigration 1967: 98). While outside the frontier zones it was less typical to make frequent trips from Hong Kong to China, people did travel for significant family events such as funerals. It was also customary for border officials on both sides to relax restrictions during festivals like Chinese New Year, or when school holidays permitted children to visit their parents over the summer. For local officials in Bao’an County, ties with the diaspora were channels for village investment and opportunities for United Front propaganda. Hong Kong compatriots built schools and donated goods-in-kind; a diasporic newsletter provided information on how to invest in one’s hometown (*Bao’an Village Dispatch*, January 1959). At the height of China’s Great Leap Forward famine, individual care packages mailed via the Hong Kong Post numbered about one million per month in 1961, with record-setting months exceeding two million (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKMS 158-1-176; HKMS 158-1-214; HKRS 70-2-217). While the customs administration focused mostly on the land border and its customs stations, the maritime border was literally and figuratively a more fluid space. Nowhere was this more evident than in Deep Bay, where oyster beds could be separated by 20–30 metres (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 785-3-7), and in deep sea waters, where the Hong Kong Marine Police and the People’s Militia might communicate by Chairman Mao’s *Little Red Book* and together sing ‘Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman’ (Lok 2011). Oral

histories of the Hong Kong Marine Police and the Shajing oystermen both sound a familiar note: they view the discovery of escapees as rescue—the former offering biscuits and the latter rice (Lok 2011; Bai 2012: 141).

Internal Border

While China recognised the British border of Hong Kong in official terms (Guangdong Provincial Archives 204-2-22: 27), in certain contexts it was referred to as more of an internal border and a temporary condition. For example, in official histories such as the *Bao’an County Gazetteer*, descriptions of geography opened with the acknowledgement: ‘Since Hong Kong and Kowloon are still occupied [侵占] by British imperialists, our county is a strategic line of border defence’ (1960: 1). Chinese newspapers criticised Hong Kong’s immigration restrictions, describing them as an affront to traditional familial relationships and kinship ties (*Bao’an News*, 8 September 1956). Sometimes Chinese border guards would use such political rhetoric to thwart their counterparts. Hong Kong marine policeman Lee Fung remembers verbal battles as he tried to repatriate escapees through Luohu/Lo Wu: ‘They explained that Chinese people like to do tourism in China, and Hong Kong is a place in China, so therefore we in Hong Kong should welcome them’ (Lee 2011). Even during moments that could potentially evolve into international incidents, such as when the 1966 kidnapping of oystermen escalated all the way to Beijing, both the British Chargé d’Affaires and the Chinese Foreign Ministry affirmed a principle that ‘border questions be settled locally’ (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 934-8-111). Beyond the political rhetoric that treated the border as an ideological one, the practice of the border was pragmatic: when border fences crumbled because of soil erosion, it was easier to adjust the border than to rebuild the embankment; when residents were cutting too many holes in the fence, it was better to



Map of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and its Second Line. Courtesy of Denise Y. Ho, 2020.

paint existing holes to make them more visible (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 156-1-3766; HKRS 934-6-107).

The liminality of the border and the frontier zone was reinforced by continuing tides of migration from China to Hong Kong. In the 1960s, Hong Kong's Department of Immigration estimated that about 400 to 600 'illegal immigrants' arrived monthly, with the largest influx being just over 142,000 people in 1962 (Director of Immigration 1966: 8). In 1974, Hong Kong began to require that all Hong Kong residents carry identification cards and repatriated those entering illegally. A 'touch-base' policy remained until 1980, allowing those who made it to urban areas to stay (Faure 1997: 349–50). In the years leading up to 1980, thousands fled China via Bao'an County. The Shajing oystermen describe production teams and villages where more than half the population left, recall nights when hundreds

of people stood on the shore waiting for boats, and say of the flight that 'it was like a typhoon, fundamentally you couldn't control it' (Bai 2012: 149, 284). But concurrent with the tightening of the Hong Kong border was the construction of a new and official internal border in Bao'an County—one that encircled the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which was established in 1980. In 1982, construction began on this 'second line' (二线), eventually creating an 80-kilometre fence guarded by 163 watchtowers and permitting passage through eight—later, 15—checkpoints (Ma and Blackwell 2017: 129; *Guide for Entering and Exiting Shenzhen* 1986: 14). From 1984 until it fell into disuse about 20 years later, the 'second line' bounded China's experiment with Reform and Opening Up, allowing those within its limits to benefit from new opportunities and barring from entry those without the appropriate passes; the 'second line' was



Map of the Greater Bay Area. Hong Kong Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau.

officially decommissioned in 2010 (O'Donnell and Wan 2017: 44). In some ways, Shenzhen residents who had long been able to use the Hong Kong–China border to their advantage could now benefit from their position between the international border and the internal ‘second line’. The Shajing oystermen, for example, sold their wares on the Hong Kong side and purchased electronics and other manufactured goods, to be resold in Shenzhen and onwards to Dongguan and Guangzhou. With access to boats, navigational skills, and familial networks, they moved everything from electric wire to waterpipes, and bricks to concrete, when first Shenzhen and then the Pearl River Delta was ‘one big construction site’ (Bai 2012: 180, 150–51, 231, 269, 285–86).

With the creation of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 1997, the boundary between Shenzhen and Hong Kong became a domestic one. Indeed, the 1997 changes

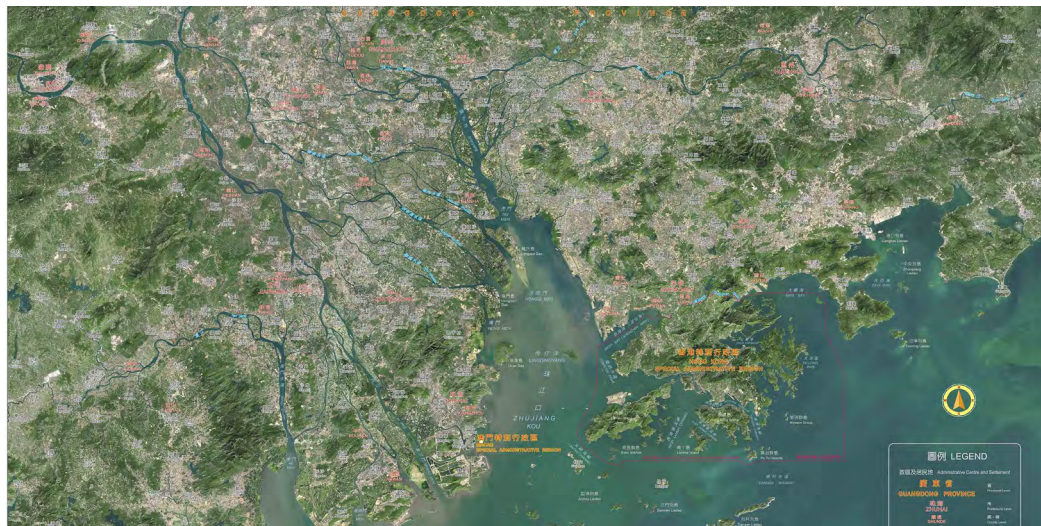
tightened many of the threads stitched since the reform era, including cross-border relations at the village level (O'Donnell 2001: 423). But multiple institutions of an international border remain: a customs regime limits the movement of goods, including publications; international travellers require visas to enter China from Hong Kong; and the legal systems of each territory apply up to the boundary. Yet other innovations aided by technology blur the border: dedicated immigration e-channels speed through regular crossers, Hong Kong telecoms allow dual telephone numbers, and a 2016 cross-border investment channel links the Hong Kong and Shenzhen stock exchanges. Thus, while the physical and political-administrative border has persisted, an increased daily flow of people, objects, and ideas has expanded the zone of the imagined border. Since the era of Reform and Opening Up, anthropologists have documented cultural divides, from differences

in cross-border consumption (Ma 2012) to the anxieties experienced by cross-border families (Newendorp 2008). But as anthropologist Helen Siu (2016: 348) points out, in the past decade rising standards of living in Chinese cities have created a middle class that has more in common with Hong Kongers, laying the foundation for a cultural lingua franca. The potential for integration rests on the shared cultural, economic, and social history of the Pearl River Delta. This is the bargain of China's idea of a Greater Bay Area, which is fundamentally a political project.

and Shenzhen—two megacities grappling with population pressures from below and political power from above—the challenge remains to create of the border a solution, rather than a problem. ■

Border Crossing

Yet historical experience demonstrates that borders are bridged not by political directive but by shared identities, familial networks, and mutual benefit. Chinese patriotism linked 1920s Hong Kong and Guangzhou and wartime resistance connected 1940s New Territories and Bao'an. A shared sense of destiny motivated Hong Kong students to join their Guangzhou counterparts in May 1989, with the same Shenzhen–Guangzhou train tracks serving as a site for a sit-in on 5 June (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 24 May and 6 June 1989). In the 1950s and 1960s, kinship and native-place networks provided care packages of food and remittances; these same channels were used to build factories and donate to hospitals in the era of reform. Since 1964, a material and symbolic system of mutual benefit is the East River–Shenzhen Irrigation Works, which pipes in Hong Kong's freshwater supply. However, such connections can be fragile. Unlike the 1898 proclamation to leave New Territories customs undisturbed (Colonial Office 1898–1900: 134) or the 1966 understanding to let local affairs in Deep Bay be resolved within the family (Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 934-8-111), the top-down implementation of a Greater Bay Area threatens to turn the border back into an ideological one. For Hong Kong



Embodied Borders

The Sino-British Maritime Frontier, 1950–1957

Landstat image of the Pearl River Delta. PC: Hong Kong Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department.

Alice DU Liangliang

Terror Shoals speaks of horror, the Lonely
Sea sighs in desolation
惶恐滩头说惶恐，零丁洋里叹零丁
— Wen Tianxiang

The area that is today known as the Pearl River Delta in fact comprises two deltas, which were historically referred to as the Pearl River and the Lingding Sea. The Pearl River is formed by the confluence of three rivers, the West, North, and East. It runs through the city of Guangzhou and discharges at Humen, the Bocca Tigris. The Lingding Sea extends from the mouth of the Pearl River through the corridor between Macau and Hong Kong and ends (more or less) near Outer Lingding Island in the Wanshan Archipelago (Zong et al. 2009). Westerners may have heard of the Lingding Sea indirectly through ‘Lintin

Island’, the common name for Inner Lingding Island (内伶仃岛), which historically marked the gateway to Guangzhou from the South China Sea. In Chinese, the Lingding Sea was made famous in the poem ‘Crossing Lingding Sea’ by the Song loyalist Wen Tianxiang. The poem imaginatively recounts the flight of the boy emperor Zhao Bing (r.1278–79) from Lin’an (present-day Hangzhou) to Yamen. The poem’s pathos is figured by the Song’s defeat at Yamen, where, despite being outnumbered 10 to one, the Yuan navy won a decisive maritime battle, ending the Song dynasty. However, the two landmarks in the poem, Huangkong Shoals and the Lingding Sea, are what suggest how northern armies experienced southern landscapes at the end of the thirteenth century. Huangkong Shoals translates as ‘Terror Shoals’—a reference to a famously difficult

passage on the Gan River in Jiangxi Province. Lingding Sea means ‘Lonely Sea’, referring to the vast and underpopulated edges of the empire.

Five hundred years later, the Lonely Sea was no longer an underpopulated frontier. Instead, pirates, privateers, and foreign navies were competing to seize control of the gateway to Guangzhou. Coastal villages and towns occupied both coasts of the Lingding Sea, while islands and bays had been claimed by smaller groups of fishermen and boat-dwellers, who were pejoratively known as *Tanka* (疍家). Living at the edge of agrarian society, these water-dwellers nevertheless controlled local waters and earned their living working for the highest bidder (Antony 2016). The 1898 Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory made maritime borders explicit; the United Kingdom did not simply lease territory from the Qing, but also (and more importantly) secured maritime access to Guangzhou. The convention did not, however, change the status of coastal, island, and water-dwellers, who were granted traditional water rights. During the war against Japan (1937–45) and the Civil War (1945–49) in southern China, the allied forces of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the United States relied on local water-dwellers to obtain intelligence and supply arms via ports in Hong Kong and Macau (Hou 2019).

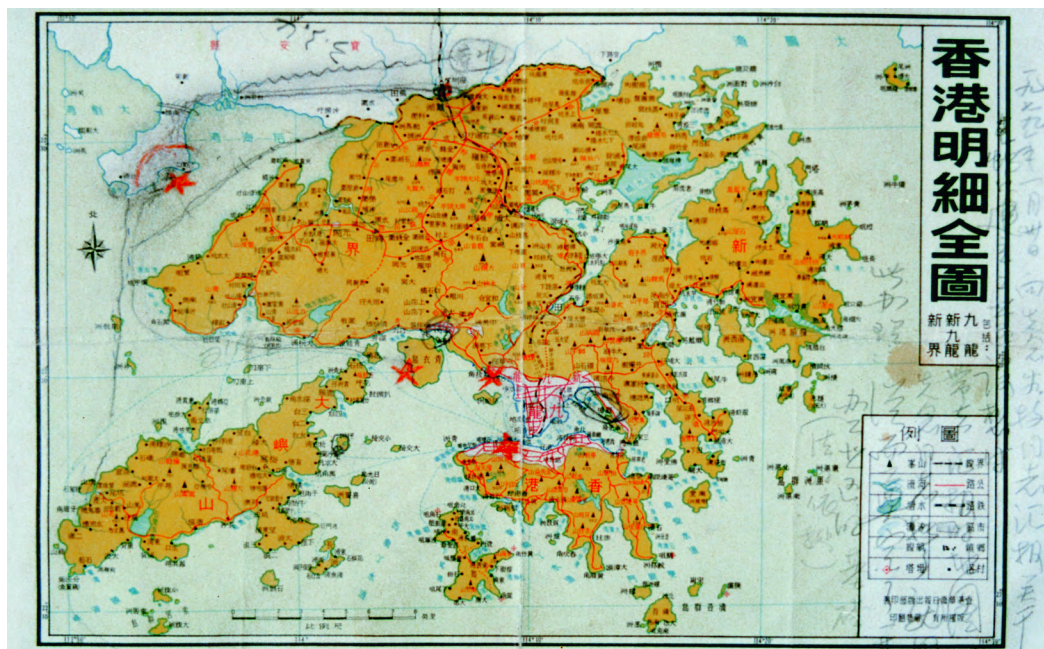
The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rose to power on the strength of its ground forces, only forming the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in May 1950, a month before the Korean War broke out. Unsurprisingly, the joint navies of the United States and KMT easily embargoed coastal China. Knowing that ground forces could not hold the coastline, Mao Zedong instructed People’s Liberation Army (PLA) leaders:

The army must leave the coastline, stay in appropriate places to conveniently annihilate the enemy ... They should train rather than guard the coastline. It is the responsibility of security teams and local armed forces to monitor spies and kill

bandits. Many Communists, after fighting for more than 20 years, have suddenly forgotten their experience, building fortifications everywhere [because] they fear the enemy like tigers. (Hou 2019: 248)

Instead, another strategy—one based on CCP experience in guerilla warfare and local organising—was necessary if the CCP was to wrest control of Chinese coastal waters from the United States and the KMT. Over the next few years, the CCP would rely on its experience of land reform (in 1950–52) and the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries (December 1950 – October 1951) to integrate water-dwellers into its maritime defence strategy, just as peasants had been integrated into its ground war strategy. This entailed resettling water-dwellers, while blockading Hong Kong via the islands of the Wanshan Archipelago. In turn, the consolidation of the coastal frontier occurred via the transplanted fishermen and islanders. Their bodies, settlements, and labour made the Sino-British border visible, asserting Chinese claims to the coastline.

The story of Fishing One Village (渔一村) highlights how these larger processes not only transformed the cultural geography of the Lingding Sea, but also laid the foundation for the establishment of the China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone in 1979. On the one hand, through the stories of Fishing One, we see how the so-called democratic fishing reform (alternatively known as 渔民民主改革 or 渔业民主改革) reshaped the cultural geography of the Lingding Sea. Previously, mobile ‘fishing despots’ (渔霸) had patrolled the water, but, after the fishing reform, boat-dwellers could no longer freely sail the seas. Instead, they worked out of fixed ‘fishermen villages’ (渔村), which the state could mobilise as necessary, effectively landlocking water-dwellers without giving them full status onshore. On the other hand, these stories also highlight how the region’s fluid borders were first consolidated through revolutionary methods. Once the borders were secured, later development of the coast became feasible precisely because the



Hong Kong map used by Yuan Geng to determine the location of the future Shekou Industrial Zone. PC: Author's collection.

coastline was *de facto* located within Chinese—and not British—territory. When Yuan Geng decided to establish the China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zone, for example, the port, industrial park, and its factories not only incorporated the coastline from the high-tide mark, but also extended the coastline through land reclamation into what (at the time) were acknowledged to be British waters.

Reorganising the Lingding Sea

In 1949, the Central Committee of the CCP entrusted the task of securing China's southern coast to Ye Jianying, head of the South China Branch Bureau. The situation was daunting. More than one million people, including boat-dwellers, inhabited the coastal waters of

Guangdong Province. Historically, these people had formed groups based on language and labour, enjoying relative autonomy from state oversight. Fishing reform in coastal waters (1951–54) and policy consolidation during the following three years (1955–57) allowed the CCP to occupy the southern coastline, pushing back against the historical frontier. The organisation of fishermen and territory was contemporaneous with the Socialist Transformation Movement (December 1951 to the end of 1956). Drawing on the ideas of the Agricultural Cooperative Movement, the Bao'an County Government encouraged fishermen to come ashore, aiming to enclose them within prescribed boundaries that simultaneously secured the coastline and improved the lives of the poorest fishermen. Once the fishermen were onshore, the government set up mutual aid groups, which were the embryonic form of fishermen's villages (渔民村).

In 1950, the leading organisation in Bao'an County was the Shashenbao branch of the Guangdong Military Administrative Commission (广东军事管理委员会沙深宝分会), with Qi Feng as director. There was debate over whether islands should be administered by the Bao'an Government or by the Military Commission. Ma Lun, the Bao'an County Secretary, for example, maintained that the Bao'an County Government should only administer the territory within its land borders, while the management of waters and islands fell under the purview of the Shashenbao Committee. As a result, local fishermen's groups were not placed within the Bao'an County Government (as Qi Feng had hoped), but within the Island Administration Bureau. The two fishermen's groups in Bao'an County became the East Island and West Island offices, corresponding to the county's eastern and western coasts. That year, there were about 600 people living on Inner Neilingding Island, including more than 120 fishermen. Due to military necessity, the PLA was stationed on the island and the islanders were relocated to Shekou and Xixiang.

In January 1951, Guangdong Province set up the Pearl River District Commission Office, Island Administration Bureau, and Post Reform Management Office (珠江区专员公署海岛管理局后改管理处). Responsibility for organising fishermen's work was transferred from the Shashenbao Border Committee to the Island Administration Bureau. Jurisdiction over Inner Lingding Island, the islands of the Wanshan Archipelago and coastal islands from Zhongshan, Dongguan, and Bao'an counties was transferred to the new bureau. The Island Administration Bureau's office was set up in Tangjiawan, Zhuhai (珠海唐家湾), a coastal subdistrict (乡) in Zhongshan County. In practice, this meant that, although Inner Lingding Island fishermen had been resettled in Bao'an and their cadres were considered part of the Bao'an Government, they were nevertheless to make annual trips to Zhuhai to report on their work.

The reorganisation of previously scattered islands under one administrative entity was an important step to organise fishermen. Zhou Enlai, first premier of the People's Republic of China, and Liao Chengzhi, the Hong Kong-based official in charge of the United Front and overseas Chinese, asked the relevant departments to help fishermen establish their homes on land. Once ashore, fishermen could be assigned a political identity, land resources, and finally be organised into villages, which was the most basic unit of rural administration. To this end, the Fishermen's Association Committee (渔民协会委员会) was established in 1951. Status in the Fishermen's Association was based on physical residence. Fishing families with a fixed residence on land were defined as 'fishermen' (渔民) and would ultimately receive *hukou* (户口; 'household registration') based on that settlement. Fishing families who had no fixed residence on land and travelled between harbours in Bao'an, Hong Kong, and Macau were defined as 'itinerant fishermen' (流动渔民), ultimately receiving identity cards in Hong Kong. The organisation of fishermen was also a mobilisation of resources. The local Party committee established a democratic reform committee, which worked with local cadres to organise a work team to develop and train activists among fishermen, teaching them to distinguish between the 'enemy and ourselves' (敌我问题). In the first stage of the fishermen's democratic reform (1951–52), local political groups dealt with the smuggling of intelligence and weapons to the United States, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

In July 1952, during the second phase of the fishermen's democratic reform, the Island Administration Committee transferred the governance of islands to Zhongshan County—an administrative shift from party to government. This shift emphasised location (rather than a specific mission) as the principle for governance. On this basis, on 19 November 1952, the CCP Central Committee issued a set of 'Instructions on Fishermen's Work', stating: 'Coastal fishermen should also divide

fishermen's counties and districts according to their fishing areas, with a port as the centre' (Chen 2019: 100). According to the relevant materials, the boundaries of the fishermen's county referred to the southern Lingding Sea and included most of the islands therein. The new county would be called Zhuhai, with its county seat at Tangjiawan. In July 1953, Bao'an County designated West Sea, East Sea, Nantou, and Yantian as pilot areas to carry out the local fishermen's democratic reform. Significantly, fishing areas crossed the maritime border. The West Sea, for example, included waters near Shekou and islands in the Wanshan Archipelago, as well as near Tsing Shan, Tuen Mun, on the northeastern coast of the Hong Kong New Territories. Similarly, East Sea waters included those near Yantian and Yazhou Bay as well as near Sai Kung on the northeastern coast of the New Territories. At this time, Bao'an County became responsible for the fishermen who had been relocated from Inner Lingding and Dachan islands to Shekou and Xixiang. This was the first appearance of 'Shekou' among Chinese administrative placenames.

From 1953 through to 1954, local Party representatives organised fishermen through campaigns in democratic struggle, democratic unity, and democratic construction. Fishermen were also encouraged to join the fishing trade union, the Fishing Association, the Communist Youth League, militia, and other organisations. Organisers united fishermen according to the logic under which peasants had been united, encouraging better-off fishermen to employ poor fishermen. Although fishermen could not be classified as 'poor' or 'middle-income' based on how many tools they owned (as was the criteria for classifying peasants), some fishermen owned boats and others did not. Fishermen with boats could work alone or were encouraged to employ one or two people. During the 1954 fishery cooperative movement (渔业合作化运动), whether or not one maintained 'fisherman' or 'floating fisherman' status was based on joining the cooperative and the sharing of boats. Most residents in

the Shekou area, for example, joined friends and family in the fishing cooperative, while those who chose not to join became itinerant fishermen, taking up residence in bays along the coasts of Hong Kong and Macau. In contrast to the West Sea area, there were more floating fishermen in Mirs Bay in the East Sea area.

The differences between fishermen and itinerant fishermen were not immediately consolidated but were settled over the course of the decade. Shekou, for example, is home to two fishing villages, the aforementioned Fishing One and Fishing Two (渔二村). The root of Fishing One was the Inner Lingding Island mutual aid group. Fishermen Wu Jindi, Zhou Dezai, and several others who had lived on Inner Lingding Island and owned houseboats (罟仔艇 or *Kwu Tzu* boats) became core members of the Inner Lingding Island mutual aid group after their relocation to Shekou. Their status allowed them to receive interest-free or low-interest loans from the Bao'an County Government to update their fishing equipment. Funds were also used to set up marketing cooperatives to help these fishermen sell their products. By 1954, cooperation and a guaranteed market meant that organised fishermen could expand their enterprises. In contrast, activist Zhang Meitou set up Bao'an County's first fishery production cooperative in Shekou with resettled boat-dwellers. With government help, the cooperative purchased new fishing equipment and began deep-sea fishing. However, unlike Fishing One, which comprised members from the same linguistic group and a shared home island, fishing cooperative members came from Haifeng and Panyu. Due to the differences in customs and languages, the cooperative dissolved in less than two years. Some of the Teochew-speaking fishermen opted to return to Haifeng and become farmers, while some of the Cantonese-speaking fishermen moved to Hong Kong, becoming itinerant fishermen. In fact, it was not until 1957 that the cooperative was successfully reorganised as Fishing Two Village (Shekou Museum of Reform and Opening Up 2019).

Onshore but Not of the Land

Although islanders, fishermen, and boat-dwellers were assigned ‘villager’ status, they did not enjoy the same treatment and historical rights as farmers. Specifically, while farmers continued to have rights to cultivated land and housing plots via collectives that were based on historical settlements, fishermen lost their historical rights once they were relocated. In Shekou, for example, islanders were given berths only at local typhoon shelter wharfs and were not permitted to build housing on land. The question of where Inner Lingding Islanders were entitled to land arose because their jurisdiction had not been settled. In 1952, when Zhuhai was split from Zhongshan and redistricted as the fishermen’s county, it was given jurisdiction over Inner Lingding Island. However, islanders were already residents of the Shekou and Xixiang areas of Bao’an County since their resettlement in 1950. Neither Zhuhai nor Bao’an was willing to take responsibility for giving the islanders onshore plots. In Shekou, the islanders’ housing situation was only resolved in 1970, when Shekou Commune allocated a section of coastal land belonging to Wanxia Village (湾厦村) to the islanders. In Xixiang, those who came on land did not remain ‘fishermen’. Instead, housing plots were created through reclamation of coastal fishponds and polders, which were known as *jiwei* (基围). Islanders, fishermen, and boat-dwellers on the western Bao’an coast (from Xixiang to Shajing) who received these plots became ‘*jiwei* people’, living in shacks at the edges of landed villages. The main livelihood of *jiwei* villagers was raising fish, shrimp, and crab in coastal polders. As land reform deepened, *jiwei* people were divided into village units; however, because they did not have a traditional land residence, these new villages were given revolutionary names, including Turn Over (翻身村), Labour

(劳动村), Freedom (自由村), Settled Happily (安乐村), Peace (和平村), Happy Together (共乐村), and Democracy (民主村) villages.

In 1979, China Merchants established the Shekou Industrial Zone, which was set up for logistics and basic manufacturing. The new entity inherited not only the reorganised coastline, but also the rights to plan and develop it. Fishing One Village took advantage of Reform and Opening Up to pursue private enterprise, including selling seafood in Hong Kong and Shekou. That same year, Inner Lingding Island was reassigned to Shenzhen City. In 1989, based on its historical relationship with Inner Lingding Island, Fishing One raised 13 million yuan and borrowed 9 million yuan to invest in the construction of a resort on the island (Shekou Museum of Reform and Opening Up 2019). However, due to the unclear jurisdiction, there were frequent conflicts among Zhuhai, Shenzhen, and Fishing One over what residual rights villagers had. During a provincial survey meeting in 1993, Fishing One’s head, Zhou Dezai, angrily exclaimed: ‘We were born and raised in Bao’an for generations, and all of a sudden we have become Zhuhai people. What is the basis of this claim? I’ll die with eternal regrets’ (Shekou Museum of Reform and Opening Up 2019). His words proved prophetic and he died soon after. Unfortunately, it was not until his death that the Guangdong Provincial Government made greater efforts to clarify administrative oversight over Inner Lingding Island. It did not, however, return the islanders’ native holdings and the resort project was ultimately abandoned. ■

(Translated by Mary Ann O’DONNELL)



From the Third Front to the Second Line

The Construction Soldiers of Shenzhen

The PLA Engineering corps entering Shenzhen in 1980.
PC: Zhou Shunbin.

Taomo ZHOU

Shenzhen is a migrant city, and every migrant must cross multiple borders—physical and administrative, social and cultural—to fully belong in the city. The 20,000 members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Engineering Corps (中国人民解放军基本建设工程兵), who arrived in Shenzhen between 1979 and 1982, were the earliest and largest batch of state-sponsored migrants during Reform and Opening Up. They repeatedly

crossed geographical and metaphorical boundaries throughout their long journeys. The majority of soldiers came from secret or semi-secret heavy industrial sites in what was known as the Third Front (三线)—landlocked regions such as Guizhou, Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai (AMCPLA 2015: 21). These regions played a key role in Mao Zedong's Third Front campaign—an economic strategy launched in the mid-1960s to strengthen China's national

defence as well as to address the regional disparity between the Pacific-facing coast and the underdeveloped interior (Meyskens 2020). In Shenzhen, the corps' skills, originally developed to serve the military industrial complex, were adapted for the construction of civilian infrastructure, including transportation, water supply and sewerage, and public and commercial buildings. They assisted the border guards from the People's Armed Police with erecting wired fences along the 'Second Line' (二线关)—the internal border separating the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) from the Chinese 'inland' (内地) (Ma and Blackwell 2017; Southern Weekend 2018). They built landmarks that represented Shenzhen's rapid growth, including the 20-storey Shenzhen Electronics Building and the 53-storey International Trade Centre (Du 2020: 167–70). But since their demobilisation in 1983, the ex-servicemen have benefited unevenly from Shenzhen's metropolitan development, arriving at drastically different levels of material wellbeing. This essay traces the PLA Engineering Corps' trajectory from the Third Front to the Second Line and their transformation from Mao's soldiers to Deng Xiaoping's market actors. It delineates the various borders—between the hinterland and the coast, the rural and the urban, the military and the civilian, the socialist planned economy and the capitalist market, and the winners and losers of China's economic transition—that they both crossed and constructed.

Maoist Motto, Dengist Design

By mobilising the Engineering Corps to participate in the civilian economy in Shenzhen, the Deng administration repurposed the builders of the Maoist militarised command economy to lay the groundwork for marketisation. The PLA Engineering Corps was established in 1966 for the purpose of

industrialising inland regions to protect China from perceived threats from the Soviet Union and the United States. Between 1966 and 1978, various regiments of the corps carried out projects such as the construction of the China–Pakistan Friendship Highway, the exploration for and extraction of uranium and gold in Xinjiang, and the building of oil and gas industries in the northeast and hydropower plants in the southwest (AMCPLA 2015: 28). However, in 1979, the Engineering Corps was operating under capacity due to a redirection of Chinese macroeconomic policies and a contraction of infrastructural investment. Meanwhile, in March 1983, Deng announced the decision to downsize the military in an effort to professionalise the PLA. To minimise the army's involvement in civilian affairs, the Engineering Corps was the first division to be demobilised (AMCPLA 2015: 584).

In 1979, Gu Mu, the director of the State Council's SEZ Office and the political commissioner of the PLA Engineering Corps, ordered the transfer of troops to Shenzhen to 'kill two birds with one stone': to channel the Engineering Corps out of active military duty and build infrastructure quickly and economically in the city. Whereas the Third Front construction projects were stalled, infrastructure building became an urgent issue in Shenzhen (Duan 2018: 2). The new city's geographical precursor, Bao'an County, was an impoverished border region best known as the gateway for illegal migration to Hong Kong. In 1980, the State Council created the Shenzhen SEZ and encouraged foreign investors to establish enterprises there. However, despite the allure of this new policy, the continuous flight of young, able-bodied males to Hong Kong meant Shenzhen lacked both the physical infrastructure to support economic production and the manpower to build it. After their arrival in Shenzhen, the PLA Engineering Corps jokingly codenamed the remaining residents—most of them women, children, and the elderly—as Division 386199 because, in the Chinese calendar, Women's Day is on 8 March,

Children's Day is on 1 June, and the Chongyang Festival, which honours the elderly, is on 9 September (Liu 2013: 20).

During the Mao era, the Engineering Corps was a highly disciplined and efficient labour force, known for their endurance under harsh working conditions. As this militarised labour transplanted the same engineering techniques and work style from the Third Front to the SEZ, 'Mao's invisible hand' extended its reach to the forefront of China's market reforms (Perry and Heilmann 2011). The Maoist norms of asceticism and putting work ahead of one's livelihood prepared the construction soldiers for their primitive living conditions in Shenzhen. The Engineering Corps slept in temporary bamboo huts set up at the construction sites, which barely protected them from subtropical downpours and heat and were frequently invaded by armies of rats, snakes, lizards, and mosquitoes (Du 2020: 163; Ma Chengli, Interview by author, 2019). Back in the interior, the soldiers had procured their own food and water by making use of local resources. The same principles of self-reliance and self-sufficiency guided the Engineering Corps in Shenzhen, as they recycled water from kitchens to outhouses and ate wild animals such as snakes (Meyskens 2020: 131; Liao 2003: vol. 1, pp. 48, 55). At the Third Front as well as in Shenzhen, intensive manual labour made up for the absence of modern machinery. When unclogging a sewer line in Shenzhen's city centre, the soldiers relied on basic tools such as shovels and pickaxes and, in particular, their bare hands (Meyskens 2020: 131–33; Shenzhen Museum 1999: 77).

In Shenzhen, the Engineering Corps continued to use militarised language to describe their construction of civilian infrastructure; they compared the construction site to a battlefield, equipment to weapons, and referred to themselves as 'seasoned soldiers fighting on the frontier of Reform and Opening Up' (战斗在改革开放前沿的老兵) (Meyskens 2020: 172; Liao 2003: vol. 1, p. 90). Despite the apparent mismatch between the soldiers' Mao-style rhetoric and the profit-seeking rationale

prevalent in reform-era Shenzhen, the PLA Engineering Corps served as a human buffer mediating the relationship between China and global capitalism. Although Deng resolved to put an end to the excessive ideological campaigns under Mao, he was 'determined to prevent political relaxation from leading the country to "bourgeois liberalization"' (Zhang 2015: 169). Similar to the communist cadres from the Southbound Work Team who arrived in Guangdong from northern China in the 1950s, the Engineering Corps members were reliable and trusted agents who embodied 'Deng's socialist spiritual civilization' and helped 'maintain China's communist heritage while pursuing needed economic reforms' (Vogel 1969: 51; Zhang 2015: 169). In Shenzhen, the PLA Engineering Corps was on a mission not only to build the physical infrastructure but also to consolidate the Party's authority at a remote outpost populated by 'worldly' Cantonese connected to Hong Kong through time-honoured clan and lineage ties (Vogel 1969: 21). Denise Ho's introductory essay in this special issue demonstrates that the borderland between Bao'an and Hong Kong has been a 'palimpsest' shaped by centuries of social, cultural, and economic exchanges. Yet this rich history did not colour the Engineering Corps' perception of Shenzhen as barren before their arrival. As Mary Ann O'Donnell (1999: 357) points out, the political discourses of these soldier pathbreakers played as much of a role as their labour in setting the horizon for Shenzhen's development.

The Wrath of the 'Pathbreaking Ox'

In 1983, the Engineering Corps was dismissed. At the initial stage of their demobilisation, the Shenzhen Government offered the veterans state-sector jobs, public housing, and urban household registration (*hukou*) (Duan 2018: 42–45). Among the 20,000 Engineering Corps in Shenzhen, around 8,000 Communist

Party cadres were recruited by the Municipal Government; the remaining 12,000 were employed by a new state-owned enterprise (SOE) named SEZ Construction Company (特区建设公司), which was later privatised and renamed Shenzhen Construction Group (深圳建设集团). The organisational structure of the Engineering Corps was preserved in the new cooperative framework: different regiments were transformed into subsidiary companies under the Shenzhen Construction Group in a wholesale fashion. For instance, Regiment No. 1 became Shenzhen No. 1 Construction Company, Regiment No. 16 became Shenzhen No. 2 Construction Company, and the political commissioners or regimental commanders were reappointed as general managers (AMCPLA 2015: 605). Despite the stability of their personnel composition, these repackaged entities received significantly reduced financial support from the state and faced fierce competition in the construction market (Liao 2003: vol. 1, 72–73).

To compete against private operators from all over China, the demobilised Engineering Corps reassembled their Maoist ethics and ‘guerilla-style’ management (Perry and Heilmann 2011: 7). One commander turned CEO concludes that the demobilised Engineering Corps’ greatest advantage was that its members ‘are soldiers and remain soldiers even after taking off their military uniforms [that is, after being formally dismissed]. The troops remain well coordinated, highly disciplined, and tightly managed’ (Liao 2003: vol. 1, p. 98). In the past, under the shadow of possible military conflicts between China and its Cold War rivals, the construction soldiers developed a combat style of round-the-clock operation. As civilian employees, they continued to exert themselves to the extreme to meet the demanding deadlines during Shenzhen’s infrastructure boom in the early 1980s—sleeping and working on construction sites during ‘wars of annihilation’ (歼灭战), while applying the ‘huge-crowd strategy’ (人海战术) to overcome technical deficiencies with large labour brigades working like ‘ants gnawing

on a bone’ (蚂蚁啃骨头) (Liao 2003: vol. 1, 38–43, 171). When erecting the Second Line, the demobilised soldiers used their muscle power to transport railings weighing 700–800 kilograms uphill (Southern Weekend 2018).

In the eyes of the former corps members, the ‘good tradition of the PLA’—soldiers being altruistic, honest, righteous, concerned about long-term public goods rather than short-term personal monetary interests—contributed to both their successes and their setbacks (Liao 2003: vol. 1, 71, 214). In 1986, the construction sector in Shenzhen was hit hard by a recession, leading to economic difficulties among the former soldiers (Du 2020: 180). When Shenzhen experimented with a tender bidding system, the financial structure of the SOEs as well as the veterans’ mentality prevented them from offering bribery or entertainment to the bid issuers or the brokers, putting them in a disadvantageous position compared with more flexible private enterprises. A regiment commander turned general manager once asked a broker whether he had a receipt when the latter asked for a 3 per cent kickback for a 150-million-yuan project. Baffled by this naive request, the contractor left, and the business was gone (Duan 2018: 215). Many demobilised construction soldiers felt betrayed because the Shenzhen Government failed to honour its promise to grant their SOEs favourable consideration when assigning government-directed construction projects. The government later altered its policy of open tender bidding for all projects and reserved some special quotas for the veterans (Duan 2018: 133).

Yet this temporary relief scheme did not stop the state’s push to turn the SOEs into self-financing enterprises. After Deng’s Southern Tour in 1992, the SOEs started their transformation into shareholding companies. By 2005, all the SOEs from the restructured Engineering Corps had been corporatised. One real estate company, Jian’an Group—considered to be of great strategic value—remains today under the control of the central government. The remaining companies have

either been sold to their leaders through the management buyout process or become hybrid firms with varying degrees of private ownership. Operations not considered as having core production functions but providing social welfare, such as small factories built for the corps' family dependants (家属厂), have been shut (PLA Engineering Corps Memory and History Materials Compilation Group 2015). The privatisation process widened the gap between rich and poor among the former construction soldiers and resulted in unsettled disputes and discontent that persist today. In the course of converting public enterprises into private property, members of the Engineering Corps in leadership positions or new entrepreneurial elites with connections took the opportunity to enrich themselves through insider dealing. In contrast, the relatively less-educated, lower-skilled employees were laid off with lump-sum payments that monetised their past services (买断).

The construction soldiers' varied experiences reflect the complex relationship between the previous socialist and the present market economy in China; their individual biographies are intertwined with China's marketisation under the influence of rising neoliberalism worldwide. In November 2005, more than 3,000 demobilised construction soldiers, angry with the meagre buyouts offered by the privatising SOEs, organised a sit-in outside the Shenzhen Municipal Government building and were ultimately dispersed by riot police (SCMP Reporter 2005). They targeted the city government not only because it represented state power, but also because the office compound was where a famous statue of a 'pathbreaking ox' (拓荒牛) was located. The PLA Engineering Corps identify the pathbreaking ox as their icon and distinguish themselves from Shenzhen's economic migrants who came to the city of their own accord. Having arrived in Shenzhen at a time when the city's future was uncertain and its status very low in the spatial hierarchy of China, the construction soldiers believe they deserved preferential treatment from the state as firstcomers. Yet

not every former construction soldier received material benefits that met such expectations. Those insufficiently compensated regard the changing reward mechanism from the 1970s to the present as unjust. When they were at the peak of their productivity, their income did not follow the market mechanism but was determined by state distribution; when their competitiveness on the labour market declined due to their age and low educational levels, they were expelled from the protective shell of the socialist system. Similar to the laid-off workers at industrial bases in the northeast, Shenzhen's former construction soldiers felt left out of China's economic liberalisation even though they built from scratch the very city that is emblematic of the success of reform (Lee 2007; Hurst 2009; Cho 2013). They, as individuals, have borne the social cost of China's market transition.

Borders Within and Without

On their arrival in Shenzhen between 1979 and 1982, the construction soldiers were under strict orders to not wear their military uniforms to avoid triggering fear and suspicion on the part of the British. In contrast with the active-duty soldiers defending state borders via hard military means, the Engineering Corps served as the soft, human buffer at the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, making the two places physically more similar but socially and culturally more different. In terms of urban development, they laid the foundation for Shenzhen's rise as a city of skyscrapers resembling Hong Kong. In terms of demographics, their relocation doubled the population living within the SEZ (Du 2020: 163). The influx of Mandarin-speaking ex-servicemen—the ideal socialist subjects who had internalised the Mao-era ethos of collective good, hard work, and frugal living—in Shenzhen diluted the influence of the local Cantonese, Hakka, and other dialect-speaking communities with longstanding commercial

and family ties with Hong Kong. This unique group of soldier migrants brought with them mentalities, a work ethic, and a sense of political belonging that constituted the social foundation for Shenzhen's reformulation of its cross-border relations with Hong Kong under reform.

The transfer and long-term settlement of the PLA Engineering Corps in Shenzhen are an important bordering technique of the government of the People's Republic of China; the lives of the construction soldiers after their demobilisation were shaped by the shifting boundaries of the urban-rural divide, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities within mainland China. All demobilised corps members who stayed in Shenzhen were offered urban household registration and assigned jobs in government agencies and SOEs. Compared with later cohorts of rural migrants, their status as legal city residents positioned them as privileged. However, during the SOE reforms, many veterans received inadequate financial support from the state given the sacrifices they had made. Their public protests in 2005, rather than turning them into an interest group that the city government must take into account, made them a 'problematic population' to be regulated for the sake of social stability. Once a core labour force of the militarised command economy under Mao, the construction soldiers were transferred to the geographical edge of the socialist state in the late 1970s and early 1980s; as Shenzhen became central to the state's representation and management of reform, many demobilised corps members were increasingly marginalised. They faced the painful irony of being excluded from the new economic opportunities inside the boundaries they helped build.

Today, the demobilised PLA Engineering Corps members are a heterogeneous group. Among them are creative and daring entrepreneurs such as Ren Zhengfei, the CEO of Huawei, the world's largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer (Duan 2014: 3–26). Wang Ju and Jiang Zunyu, two high-ranking Shenzhen government officials fallen from

grace due to corruption charges, are also former construction soldiers. Yet, beyond the success stories, veterans with low levels of educational attainment have experienced downward social mobility. According to my interviews, those who have retired comfortably believe that their former colleagues complaining about unfair treatment are only experiencing 'mild' economic difficulties and have 'brought misfortune on themselves' due to accidents, health problems, or divorces. By denying structural reasons for their grievances, such as how illnesses result from a lack of workplace safety and family separations were brought about by long-distance relations during the early years of market transition, the winners of China's reform replicate the state's narrative of market triumphalism. In light of the unstable cohesiveness among the former construction soldiers, one might argue that an internal border is emerging among this group after they crossed many borders together in the past as comrades-in-arms. ■



Border at the Centre of Myth

Fishing Village, Caiwuwei, Shenzhen

Photo montage of Caiwuwei Village.
PC: Caiwuwei research team for the 2013 Hong Kong Biennale, Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture, Curator Na FU.

Na FU

Walking alongside the Shenzhen River, overlooking the distinct difference between the two sides of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, one enters a space formed and captured by photography, maps, and monuments: Fishing Village (渔民村) in Caiwuwei, Luohu district. In fact, this is the famous ‘fishing village’ that Deng Xiaoping visited during his 1984 inspection tour of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which became the material basis for the city’s founding myth. However, in contrast to the fixed certainties

of the Fishing Village myth, nothing could be livelier than listening to the stories told by the villagers who have experienced the changes wrought by the border. Here, their families were torn apart, their land restructured, and their community reformed by newcomers. The story of Shenzhen’s success is only part of the villagers’ memories, because their natural bonds were originally aligned through kinship networks with other villages on both sides of the Shenzhen River, where connections were made through marriage, market exchanges,

local language, and farming. The border has changed the social and economic dynamics on both sides of the river, and imposed a political ideology that has transformed the space and its people. This is the story of Fishing Village's successes as it became a 'model' for inclusive growth. This is also a story about how villagers became millionaires through land development, while also taking on urban citizenship. More importantly, this is the myth about the Shenzhen miracle, where urban development has informed new identities.

Any villager can tell you how they formally and informally navigate the border, even as the meaning and political interests of the border have also transformed across time and space. They have lived on the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border by crossing and reimagining implicit and explicit boundaries between the two cities, as well as those between the village and the city proper. These borders are simultaneously material and imaginary, where different regimes of order are represented through degrees of visibility—the China–Hong Kong border, for example, is an actual fence with barbed wire, while the demarcation between the village and the city can only be discerned through local knowledge about architectural styles and familiarity.

In this essay, I examine representations of the physical border in relation to social interactions with the border itself to generate discussion about the formation of identity and its instabilities. As a material border, a 'thick' wall separates Fishing Village from the Frontier Closed Area of the Hong Kong New Territories. Yet as an imaginary border, a 'thinner' invisible border divides village and city structures, distinguishing those within Fishing Village and those without. This essay recounts three stories from the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, illustrating how differently situated bodies navigate the physical border, this iconic urban village, and the urban spaces between and beyond. I tell my story as an ethnographer peeking through the fence at the border of Fishing Village; the story of Mr Cheng, a shoe repairman, who works on the

invisible red line moving in and around the urban village and city proper; and the story of Mrs Wang, a Hong Kong aunty, who lives in Caiwuwei and crosses the border at Luohu every day. This allows me to track the visible, invisible, and often overlooked boundaries that structure everyday life between the cities.

The Border

Fishing Village is located on the northern banks of the Shenzhen River, where the villagers used to be fishermen on both the river and the tidal sea. It is a recent settlement and part of Caiwuwei Village—a large village comprising several hamlets—which became home to resettled fishing families in the early 1950s (see Du's essay in this forum). Today, Fishing and Caiwuwei villages are both considered 'urban villages' (城中村).

The location of Fishing Village was specifically chosen to connect with the Shenzhen River, the land on the other side of the river, and Shenzhen Bay, into which the river discharges before entering the Pearl River. Interestingly, there are hardly any walls on either bank, with the Shenzhen River serving as a natural border, which extends over vast untouched green space on the Hong Kong side. As such, the landscape itself manifests the separation of the cities. From the Hong Kong side, one has views of Shenzhen's high-rise cityscape, while from the Shenzhen side, the green fields and rolling hills of the Hong Kong Frontier Closed Area are breathtaking. This separation is recent and not absolute. Historically, Luohu and Futian districts in Shenzhen and the Hong Kong New Territories had a unified cultural geography. And even though the Sino-British border was drawn in 1898, it was not until the Cold War that different forms of segregation began to shape the physical border, separating Bao'an County (China) and the Hong Kong New Territories (United Kingdom). Locals, however, still remember serial flights across the border between the 1950s and the 1970s

(Ku 2004; Warner et al. 2005), when villagers swam across the Shenzhen River from Bao'an to Hong Kong in search of an escape from communism and relative poverty, dreaming of economic opportunities in the Crown Colony—a situation that came to be known as the 'Great Escape' (大逃港), with the Shenzhen River taking on a form of symbolism akin to a 'Chinese Berlin Wall'.

In terms of the geography of the period of Reform and Opening Up, Fishing Village is located near the historical Shenzhen Market and just behind the Bao'an County seat of government. During the early 1980s, as business and cross-border trade developed in Luohu and manufacturing developed in Nanshan, the banks of the Shenzhen River became a key connection between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, with export checkpoints set up at Wenjindu and Huanggang. Located on the banks of the Shenzhen River, villagers in Fishing Village suddenly had new opportunities. They smuggled in umbrellas, televisions, and even cars from Hong Kong to sell in the SEZ's booming markets, quickly accumulating capital that could be invested in the construction of a new village. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping visited New Fishing Village (渔民新村), which comprised 32 independent 'rural' homes in the middle of downtown Shenzhen. In addition to their houses, villagers showed off consumer luxury items that were not available even to ranking cadres in Beijing. Fishing Village was not only rich, but also its built environment and modern amenities made it an aspirational model for the rest of the country. This visit was publicised throughout China, making Fishing Village famous as the origin of Shenzhen's miraculous modernisation story.

On entering Fishing Village, it is possible to walk along a section of the physical barrier that separates Shenzhen and Hong Kong. This wall is short—only a couple of hundred metres long—and features a bas-relief series of images that recount the village's history. The storyboard provides a full account of Deng's 1984 inspection tour, when the village became a national economic model for successful

rural development. There are small openings between the bas-reliefs with steel bars; rather than acting as barriers, these spaces seemingly invite you to view what is on the other side.

Looking towards Hong Kong, there is an endless stretch of green. Where the openings between the walls are high, you can jump and catch a glimpse of the river. As you follow the storyboard along residential gates and factory walls, weaving between the walls, the other side seems distant and unreachable. Looking at a map of Fishing Village, it is clear that though the storyboard wall is not actually on the banks of the Shenzhen River, it is intimately connected to the border walls. Here, the feeling of segregation between the two cities is profound, and the small cracks feel not only like an invitation to look through, but also an imperative that the cities remain sundered.

Star-Crossed Borders

Aged in her late fifties, Mrs Wang always has a heart-warming smile when you see her. Since the 1980s, she has lived in Caiwuwei Village. At first, she lived in a three-storey residential building; then, after 1999, when the village demolished these small buildings and erected seven-storey tenements, she rented a two-bedroom apartment for herself. Since arriving in Shenzhen, she felt that her destiny lay with Hong Kong, where many of her friends live and, in fact, where she now holds a Hong Kong identity card. Early every morning, Mrs Wang spends an hour and half travelling to Hong Kong, where she works in a metro station. She takes the metro to the border at Luohu, passing two checkpoints and traversing a 50-metre-long indoor bridge over the Shenzhen River. On the other side of the border, she continues for another three metro stations. Every night, she returns home late to sleep. Her journey is part of her quotidian rhythm—a life composed of repetitive border crossings. How do we define her? Is she a Hong Konger, a mainlander, or a dual-citizenship holder?

Like Fishing Village, Caiwuwei has been shaped in and through the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. When talking with Caiwuwei villagers, it becomes clear that almost half of the village’s population has already migrated to Hong Kong, either via the Great Escape before the 1970s or as social or economic migrants after Reform and Opening Up. Mrs Wang’s story provides deeper insight into the ways the border creates a life as a permanent migrant—one’s identity suspended between borders. To tell her story is not to disregard or downplay the difference between regions. Rather, it raises questions of how we understand and imagine the border, instead of an obsessive focus on what lies on either side. We have already seen that the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border simultaneously integrates and separates the two cities. On the ground, this means that the border functions to the extent that it cultivates the idea—but not the practice—of separation.

Living Off the Border

Fishing Village and Caiwuwei are two of more than 300 urban villages in Shenzhen. Like the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, the boundaries between an urban village and the city proper are imagined as absolute, but in fact they create spaces for tactical appropriation and unexpected livelihoods. Consider, for example, the story of Mr Cheng. In his home village, Mr Cheng was a bicycle repairman, gaining skills that smoothed his transition to Shenzhen, where he has worked as a shoe repairman since the 1990s. Mr Cheng does not have a store and lives in a shared dormitory-style apartment in the urban village. He sets up shop under a tree on the pedestrian street in the same spot just outside Caiwuwei Village he has occupied for more than twenty years. Both city management workers and village security guards chase him away when he is within their jurisdiction. However, Mr Cheng—like other vendors—knows that this pedestrian space is safer for unsanctioned vending because it is on the

border. City management workers and village security guards avoid each other as a matter of practice; following an unspoken rule, neither city workers nor village guards will pursue vendors outside their own jurisdiction. Hence, Mr Cheng is safe on this spot, and all his clients know where to find him. Even with an illegal and ‘temporary’ shop, he always returns to the same location. He relies on this thin margin to support himself and provide a livelihood for his family back in his home village. Mr Cheng has never considered moving. During the urban renewal of Caiwuwei Village, he worked next to the construction site because his clients knew where to find him. Like other vendors, Mr Cheng’s livelihood depends on this border. As a group, they navigate among different spaces to find the right one, on the invisible border or beyond.

In Mr Cheng’s story, we see how boundaries not only perpetuate differences, but also are strategies for governing. On the Shenzhen control map, the border between the village and the city proper is an unequivocal red line, suggesting absolute separation between two systems. On the ground, however, the boundary is not obvious. Sometimes it is located at the back wall of a factory, sometimes along a fence of a residential community, but most commonly, the boundary is a pedestrian street, which also allows people to walk around the village as if the border was not there. In fact, it was only after 2004, coinciding with a period when the government started to reimagine urban villages, that these villages appeared on Shenzhen planning maps. This meant that, for the first 25 years of Reform and Opening Up, townships and villages rebuilt and expanded independently of city government supervision. Today, villages still coordinate security, fire stations, and property management offices within a prescribed neighbourhood—informally defined as an ‘urban village’, as this is all that remains of historical villages. Like the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, the red line has turned into an absent presence that one brushes up against without noticing, becoming visible in specific contexts, but vanishing as

people cross between the village and the city proper every day without noticing they have left one administrative territory and entered another.

The Myth of Separation

Mr Cheng's shoe repair stand navigates between different qualities of space, finding its boundary in the fragile points of entry to his informal business. Similarly, Mrs Wang's transregional daily activity may not directly challenge the political border. However, her movement—like that of others who cross the border to study, shop, visit family, and work—does generate social norms that in turn transform political discussions. Border villagers remind us that they are connected with Hong Kong through shared surnames and via the local Weitou dialect, and that they are also connected to the rest of the world as a result of international migration. This means that, as political borders have been created and reinvented through time and place, they inevitably change (Lahav 2004). The border's material form can be seen in the physical manifestation of a concrete wall or in the less concrete competition between architectural styles. The point is that these borders are neither built overnight nor permanent fixtures of the landscape. Rather, even if the border exists to segregate different ideologies, religions, and political subjectivities, it is still mediated by the invisible 'wall' of identity, which is formed through situated practices (Bach 2015). ■



Narrating Mobility as an Achievement on the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Border

A sign on the floor from one of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border checkpoints.
PC: Harald Groven.

Dodom KIM

‘Where are you from?’ Whenever this question is asked in Shenzhen, the usual expectation is that you will not hear ‘Shenzhen’ as a response. Rather, it is widely assumed that almost everyone is from somewhere else. As its nickname, ‘city of immigrants’ (移民城市), suggests, Shenzhen is widely regarded as a migrant-receiving destination. Mobility and migration no longer imply the ‘illegality’ they once did (de Genova 2002) and have been reconfigured as the key themes in the narratives of growth and flourishing in the city. At the municipal level, it is the arrival of migrant-

labourers and investments from overseas Chinese that has allowed the metropolis to grow. At a personal level, people often describe their arrival in the city with empty hands as a life-changing event, from which their current achievements stem.

What amplifies Shenzhen’s narratives of mobility are its proximity to Hong Kong and the hypermobility of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border zone. Many scholarly works in various disciplines from both sides of the border have presented numerous accounts of stowaway migrants, cross-border families, policy exchanges, and the enormous volume

of licit and illicit traffic in humans and goods between the two territories (see, for instance, Du 2020; Huang 2017; Lin and Tse 2005; Ma and Blackwell 2017; O'Donnell 2001). The characterisation of the border as porous and unpredictable allows for the description of the city as a liminal zone that leads to a world beyond the border—an understanding that is reflected not only in everyday conversation, but also in policy experimentations that have taken place in Shenzhen (O'Donnell et al. 2017).

Previous research compellingly demonstrates that mobility in post-Mao China has turned into 'the principle and *modus operandi* for value production' (Chu 2010: 10) and plays a significant role in defining identities (see, for example, Ong 1999). As Julie Chu (2010) shows in her ethnography of Fuzhounese transnational migration, even those who appear socially and legally to be peasants from rural backwaters overflow with cosmopolitan aspirations. They accept mobility as a 'condition of everyday life' and a 'practice to strive for' (Chu 2010: 10), whereas they experience immobility as a form of displacement and even a moral disgrace. In this essay, I elaborate on this insight by examining how cross-border mobility operates in Shenzhen—a liminal zone that can be characterised as both a destination and a corridor for further exits. In particular, I examine the structure of discourse that renders mobility a morally salient defining feature of Shenzhen identity.

Understanding Cross-Border Mobility through the Two-Way Travel Permit

Yilin moved into Shenzhen soon after graduating from a college in one of the provinces neighbouring Guangdong. After this move, she spent most of her twenties struggling to make ends meet, returning only occasionally to her hometown. During these years, her household

registration (户口, *hukou*) remained in her place of origin. It was only six years after Yilin had first set foot in Shenzhen that she finally decided to apply for a Shenzhen household registration and become a legal permanent resident. When she disclosed this decision, I asked what had prompted her to make such a move. Instead of giving a clear answer, she mumbled a list of possible reasons, including the fact that permanent residence in Shenzhen comes with a special Hong Kong travel permit. She was referring to the well-known regulation that allows Shenzhen's permanent residents to make frequent trips over the border: their Exit-Entry Permits for Travelling to and from Hong Kong and Macau (往来港澳通行证) do not expire after one or two trips. I found her answer startling because she had rarely, if ever, expressed strong interest in travelling to or living in Hong Kong. When I asked what she found attractive about the travel permit, she alluded to some generic impressions of Hong Kong, and made little effort to make her answer particularly convincing. I did not push her for further clarification, since I was aware that she had been undergoing a sort of quarter-life crisis while trying to establish her future plans—just like many young people I have encountered in Shenzhen.

Yilin's invoking of the Hong Kong travel permit is interesting in several aspects. First, it captures the way mobility can be articulated not only through materialised movements, but also through promissory ones that may be enacted at a later point. The Exit-Entry Permit, also known as the two-way permit, endorses the permit-holder to exit mainland China and enter Hong Kong or Macau through designated ports. Although the permit is likely to deliver on its promise and grant border access in most cases, its efficacy is ultimately subject to border checkpoint policies, political circumstances, and numerous other elements. For example, Hong Kong's COVID-19 travel measures practically invalidated many two-way permits, as their duration of stay falls short of the mandatory 14-day quarantine period (see also the notice on withholding the

processing of permits: Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau 2020). Considering the inherently uncertain nature of the permit, Yilin's account projects an idea of mobility that takes a subjunctive form, demonstrating the broad scope of experiences of migration and mobility.

Second, Yilin's account highlights the arbitrariness and inequality in how the border filters legitimate movement. While it is obvious that borders operate to generate different types of movement, what is peculiar here is the way the entitlement to cross the border is associated with the Chinese household registration system. Although the paperwork for the permit is known to be fairly straightforward, eligibility and application procedures are individualised based on one's legal and social status. The two-way travel permit for Hong Kong and Macau is endorsed by the Public Security Bureau in mainland China, and issuance of the permit for individual travel is limited to permanent residents of specific areas designated by the State Council. With the exception of Guangdong Province, the State Council lists 28 major cities in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Kunming, and Xiamen (National Immigration Administration 2019). A finer distinction is made for Shenzhen permanent residents, who can enter Hong Kong every seven days within the permit's period of validity through one of Shenzhen's exit and entry ports, which have expanded in number and services, most recently with the establishment of the West Kowloon Station control point at the newly built Express Rail Link (for a full list of border checkpoints, see Hong Kong Immigration Department 2020). Those who are not legally registered in the listed areas must join a group tour and follow a stricter protocol in choosing their transportation to make a leisurely trip to Hong Kong.

Moreover, it is notable that one of the key obstacles that mainland Chinese face in accessing Hong Kong is their restricted ability to make a legitimate exit from mainland China. Hong Kong border authorities have the capacity

to refuse entry to mainland Chinese residents, as exemplified by the rigorous surveillance of pregnant Chinese women. However, despite the travel permit's usage as a *de facto* landing permit, it is primarily managed by the mainland Chinese authorities. The peculiarity of the arrangement of Hong Kong travel permits stands out even more when compared with the travel documents required for Taiwan, which include not only the Taiwan travel permit (commonly known as 台湾通行证) issued by the Public Security Bureau of the People's Republic of China, but also the exit and entry permit (commonly known as 入台證) issued by the National Immigration Agency of the Republic of China (see National Immigration Administration 2020; National Immigration Agency 2020). Such an emphasis on filtering exits is rather unusual in the contemporary world, where most state authorities assert their monopoly over legitimate movements at entry rather than exit points. It is worth noting here that control of entrances is a relatively recent practice that proliferated globally only in the past century (McKeown 2008; Torpey 2000).

The two-way travel permit for Hong Kong and Macau provides blatantly differentiated treatment among mainland Chinese citizens, raising an interesting conceptual challenge to the way citizenship and equality are linked to border practices. According to McKeown (2008), exclusion and equality are the two pillars that uphold what we now imagine as common border surveillance practices. He argues that the global system of migrant identification and control, which began developing only in the late nineteenth century, asserts that 'civilised' countries deserve self-rule. Here, civilisation is measured against the degree of equality and rule of law that a country is believed to have achieved within its territory. It is this principle of self-rule and the language of civilisation that ideologically justify states wielding arbitrary power at the border to exclude non-citizens. This enables states to bring together a jarring combination of exclusion and equality without having to abandon liberal idealism (McKeown 2008: 1–15). Contrary to this globalised

ideological formula, however, the two-way travel permit represents a form of inequality among mainland Chinese citizens based on their registered status—a status that people are born into. Moreover, given how Hong Kong citizens have more or less unlimited access to mainland China through their ‘Home Return Permit’ (see Laidler and Lee 2015), the travel permit system reveals a lack of reciprocity among different jurisdictional authorities in the borderland.

Overall, the two-way travel permit appears to suggest the exceptional character of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border zone, which does not fall neatly in line with common practices at other international borders. After all, the border zone is exceptional in that the One Country, Two Systems policy has shaped the territorial landscape. Or perhaps it is the exceptional character of the so-called Socialism with Chinese Characteristics that defies the liberalist ideals that undergird the global system described above. However, despite all of these exceptionalities, the border zone extends to a historically constituted and globally shared discursive structure that assigns particular moral values to mobility.

Simulating Mobility as an Achievement

In Hong Kong Cantonese, the word *noidei* (内地, *neidi* in Mandarin) is a neutral term that indicates what lies across the border—that is, mainland China. It is at the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border that *noidei* begins; and this is where the rule of law, freedom, nonviolence, and all other values cherished by Hong Kong society as the core of its identity are understood to stop short (see Chang 2003, 2016; Newendorp 2011). Under this formulation, Shenzhen is rarely, if ever, distinguished from the rest of mainland China in any meaningful way. Shenzhen has been viewed as a gateway to the oppressive, authoritarian *noidei* regime. Decades before the kidnapping of the Causeway Bay bookstore

owners in 2015, or the Handover in 1997, people in Hong Kong referred to Shenzhen with two characters that had the same pronunciation as the name of the city in Cantonese: *samzan* (心震)—a place that strikes fear into one’s heart. In Shenzhen’s colloquial Mandarin, however, *neidi* is often said to start from the outskirts of Shenzhen’s Special Economic Zone rather than at the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. Although *neidi* can be interpreted as ‘inner regions’—in contrast to coastal areas—the characteristics claimed by Shenzhen suggest otherwise. Shenzhen’s self-characterisation presents a striking overlap with the extant discourse on Hong Kong’s identity (Chang 2017). Examples include describing Shenzhen as a place with more transparent bureaucratic and legal practices than the rest of mainland China, as a more open-minded and diverse city of immigrants, as a giant international metropolis that grew out of a small fishing village, and as an economically flourishing hub. The long list even includes the problematic epithet ‘cultural desert’ (文化沙漠) (Erni 2001; Cartier 2008).

This striking simulacrum effect allows Shenzhen to establish a temporal order that projects Hong Kong doubly as both its past and its future. Shenzhen perceives Hong Kong as having reached Shenzhen’s own goal of modernity and prosperity; and, at the same time, it domesticates Hong Kong into the regional past through the language of preservation and tradition (O’Donnell 2001). According to O’Donnell, ‘these complimentary displacements ... [are what] produce a nostalgia peculiar to ShenKong: a desire for a past that entitles contemporary Shenzhen residents to Hong Kong’s prosperity’ (2001: 425–26). Such a configuration leads to a linear, if not teleological, trajectory, projecting Shenzhen as a halfway point—literally a special (economic) zone—that the rest of mainland China must pass through in the historical arc of modernisation and development. This linear trajectory corresponds to the widely circulating idea of civilisation or civility (文明), which is understood as measurable in terms of quality (素质), degree of modernisation, discipline, and

so on (Anagnost 1997: 75–76). It is similar to the civilisation discourse that McKeown describes in that it enacts a critical evaluation of where society stands vis-a-vis the world.

This temporal order, which is established through collective reconstruction of memories and history, buttresses a moral understanding of how movements should be made in terms of their direction and tempo. Furthermore, the discourse of civilisation identifies human efforts and achievements as among the main driving forces of such movement. As mentioned earlier, Shenzhen's official narrative often attributes its speedy developmental success—that is, the 'Shenzhen miracle' (深圳奇迹)—to the arrival of labour and overseas capital, both of which invoke hardworking Chinese pioneers. Tales of migrant labourers—including not only domestic migrant workers, but also the overseas Chinese who were once migrant labourers themselves—are studded with stories of visionary heroes who displayed courage and cleverness under the most unlikely circumstances (for example, O'Donnell 2017), and with numerous accounts of people working overtime with diligence, speed, and efficiency to support their family and better their lives (for example, Huang 2017: 65–66; Pun 2005: 77–108). In short, it was not some inevitable destiny, but rather remarkable human effort and hard labour, that moved Shenzhen at miraculous speed towards the prosperity and modernity that Hong Kong projects.

This morally binding logic of movement extends to Shenzhen's discourse on citizenship. The city's most well-known slogan, 'Once you come, you are a Shenzhen' (来了就是深圳人), gestures to the city's openness and diversity. However, many of my interlocutors, including Yilin, noted that they do not feel they belong to the city. Their life accounts suggest that, rather than an entitlement granted by physical arrival, membership in the city is an achievable status, which might be gained through hard work and effort, and especially through education. This assumption is reinforced by the city's permanent residence system, which not only filters potential member-candidates

through minimum requirements of education or financial status, but also rewards qualified 'human talent' (人才) of certain education level or occupational background with immediate perks such as cash payments. While the city's legal membership program allows both the city and interested people to maintain forward momentum, it underlines the socioeconomic inequalities into which each person is born. A failure to maintain mobility towards and beyond Shenzhen—legally, financially, or socially—is understood as testifying to a lack of effort on the part of the individual. In other words, portraying mobility as an achievement justifies the city's high demands on its aspiring residents and the lack of reciprocity accorded to those who do not make it over the threshold.

It is this portrayal of mobility as an achievement that dominates the mobility regime in the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border zone. Rather than a natural human right for fellow compatriots, cross-border mobility is a perk that comes with Shenzhen membership—membership that is tied to the broader legal citizenship system in the household registration system. Moreover, as an achievement, mobility is naturalised as inherently good and morally desirable. Through an identification system that issues endorsements such as the two-way permit, mobility becomes a sign indexing people's moral value (Chu 2010). It is within the context of this moral significance that Yilin's earlier remarks revealing her somewhat uncertain desire for a two-way permit become more intelligible: Hong Kong remains an abstract sign that does not require concrete understanding, and a hypothetical destination that fuels the desire to maintain mobility.

Exits

After Yilin obtained her Shenzhen permanent residency, I interviewed her over an afternoon snack at the Café de Coral, a Hong Kong-brand fast-food restaurant. During our conversation, she remarked that she did not find Hong Kong

particularly attractive. Recalling our past conversation, I asked what had happened to her interest in the two-way travel permit. Laughing, she answered that over the past few months, she had undergone a transformation in her mindset and was no longer prioritising material values. This change had led to her diminishing interest in Hong Kong, since Hong Kong is a material society (物质社会) that does not offer much other than shopping.

During my stay in Shenzhen, many people spoke of Hong Kong in a way similar to Yilin's description. While some interlocutors continued to express optimism and enthusiasm about Hong Kong, others said the city was great only for food and shopping. Some even argued that life in Shenzhen was better, referencing the heavily publicised photos of 'coffin homes', snobby attitudes, and discriminatory behaviours of Hong Kong people towards mainland Chinese, as well as the fact that some Hong Kong permanent residents chose to reside in or frequently visit Shenzhen. These doubts about the value of cross-border mobility were further solidified when the anti-extradition law protests broke out in June 2019. Some Shenzhen residents blamed the protestors for making Hong Kong chaotic, while others blamed the incompetency of the Hong Kong Government for mismanaging its economy and making young people so desperate as to pour on to the streets. Very few people brought up the question of Hong Kong's identity—a topic that seems mostly unrecognised, if not too sensitive to raise. Whatever the diagnosis was, it appeared that there was increasing disillusion with Hong Kong, and a derailment of the city from the place it had held on the linear development narrative.

If indeed Hong Kong is losing its attraction as a destination, Shenzhen and its people will have to reconfigure the linear trajectory along which their city was imagined to be moving. But what will a different trajectory look like, and what will be needed to make such a reconfiguration? President Xi Jinping's recent speech in Shenzhen in celebration of the Special Economic Zone's fortieth

anniversary highlights integrated regional economic growth as the goal (Xi 2020). While the vision presents increased opportunities for some, it raises doubts and bitterness for others, including those who have been agonising over the possibility of making an exit from mainland China or Hong Kong. Whether purposeful or not, what is missing from the popular conversation is the potential vulnerability of Shenzhen's heavily depoliticised identity—one that was crafted in the image of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, the Occupy Central Movement, the anti-extradition law protests, and the more recent controversy over the National Security Law all demonstrate the untenability of endorsing values that lack rigorous examination of and wide reflection on their meanings and implications (Chang 2016). No matter how much positivity radiates from values such as economic growth, rule of law, openness, transparency, democracy, and innovations, they cannot prevail without substantiation by alignment with other moral values in ways that are meaningful to people's lives and political identities. In fact, amid the ongoing celebration of Shenzhen's growth and development, people like Yilin, now equipped with Shenzhen permanent residency, have already begun to question the value that Shenzhen membership can offer, and even to consider leaving the city altogether. ■

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The Enduring Importance of Space Within a Virtual Border

The Hong Kong Stock Exchange's Trading Hall

Exterior view of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.
PC: Sben Korsh, 2018.

Sben KORSH

In the first eight months of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally from China, the Hong Kong Stock Exchange still managed to raise more than US\$19 billion in initial public offerings (IPOs) of corporate stock. This sum was a remarkable return to form after the region was rocked by protests in 2019; less than 75 per cent of that amount was raised over the same period that year. These new corporate stocks now make up part of the exchange's total value, known as its market capitalisation, which hovers above

US\$5 trillion. About 80 per cent of this total value is in companies tied directly to mainland China (HKEX 2020). By facilitating the trade of Chinese companies, many of which are state-owned, the Hong Kong exchange plays an important role in the market-based ownership of China's economy. The trade of these mainland companies in Hong Kong raises new questions about China's borders: where are they, what gets out, and what gets in?



Entrance to Exchange Square and the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. PC: Sben Korsh, 2019.

The trading hall that houses the exchange is a single, double-height room of more than 4,000 square metres. It is located within an office complex built to house it, Exchange Square, which stands prominently within the Central District, the financial heart of Hong Kong, at the southwestern corner of De Voeux Road and Man Yiu Street. The windowless trading hall sits above the ground floor, level with Central's robust network of elevated walkways.

Although the trading hall is accessible only by appointment, the institution is certainly not hiding. The large mass of the hall is clearly visible from the popular walkway connecting the International Financial Centre and the Central Ferry Piers with the rest of Central. On the southwestern corner of the building, at the main entrance to Exchange Square, a glass-walled lobby is wrapped by a digital marquee that scrolls through the latest stock prices.

A pair of large multicolour screens bedecks each side, looping promotional ads with facts and figures about trading volumes. Along the southeastern corner of the hall, set into the building, is a covered walkway that exposes a small section of the hall, allowing people to freely walk up and peer in through a glass-walled entrance. This literal transparency into the exchange belies the aims of the modern-era exchanges' relationship with the public: the ability to invest in an ever-expanding financialised market economy—one that yields highly unequal outcomes. It is this aspirational idea of participation—that anyone could just walk into Hong Kong's stock exchange—that exemplifies what Cecilia L. Chu (forthcoming) terms the 'speculative governmentality' of Hong Kong.

What follows is a brief account of the recent history of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange's trading hall, examining the broad institutional changes and successive redesigns of the hall from 1986 to now. The first section is on the past iterations of the space and the political economy that informed them at the turn of the century, while the last three sections focus on the present. This short summation of the elite organisation shows how its trading hall is an integral space within the economic border of mainland China—a border crossing facilitating the movement of corporate ownership between China and global financial markets.

Into the New Millennium

Before the exchange existed in its current location, four stock exchanges operated in the Central District. The Hong Kong Government led a push to unify them, with the exchange leaders ultimately obliging and the Legislative Council passing the Stock Exchange Unification Ordinance in 1980 (Schenk 2017). The ordinance created a new enterprise named the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and bestowed it with a monopoly on all stock trading in the colony.

With the unified exchange formalised on paper, the next step was to find it a home. The government placed a prime harbourfront lot in the Central District up for bidding. Hongkong Land, a real estate company that owns much of the surrounding Central District, won the bid and built Exchange Square. While P&T, a prominent design firm based in Hong Kong, designed the wider complex, the exchange hired a smaller practice, Lu, Woo & Partners, to do the trading hall interior. The cavernous hall was squared with concentric rows of trading desks facing a prominent four-sided electric quotation board that hung from the ceiling above the open trading space below. The floor was swathed in red carpet and the walls were hung with squares of red sound-deadening fabric. In the southwestern corner, a viewing

platform on the second floor allowed the public to observe the trading below. In 1986, trading officially began in the purpose-built hall, beginning the contemporary era of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.

In the 30-plus years since, the stock exchange has assisted in the liberalisation of mainland China by aligning its corporate governance with global norms and integrating its corporations within global financial markets. As part of China's economic reform, new stock exchanges opened in Shanghai and Shenzhen, and both were given different listings. Shanghai received the 'red stocks', comprising the country's well-established corporations, and Shenzhen was given the emerging technology stocks. In her ethnography of the reform-era Shanghai exchange, Ellen Hertz (1998) argues that the government's near total structuring of the stock market prioritised its own interests first, with elite financiers benefiting second, and the general investing public last. This sort of top-down planning created functional differentiations not only between financial markets and actors, but also between urban economies—with cities like Shenzhen exploiting their exceptional status as a driver of economic growth (O'Donnell et al. 2017). When trading began inside Exchange Square in 1986, across the border, the first master plan for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was also put forward, formalising the country's material plans for increased cross-border integration with Hong Kong and its international connections.

Hong Kong was no different in this urban competition, pitching its stock market to the Chinese state as the enterprise with the proper capitalist expertise and facilities for it to use to enter global financial markets. At first, this strong market culture and unified technological infrastructure significantly contributed to Hong Kong's attraction of Chinese investment through what are called B corporations—companies traded and incorporated in Hong Kong but which maintained their true operations in southern China. Then, beginning in 1993, a new financial

product called H-Shares brought further integration by placing ownership of companies from mainland China directly on to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. These IPOs allowed China's state companies to sell stocks outside the mainland for the first time, theoretically offering nearly half of their ownership to capitalists around the world. The exchange has since hosted countless IPOs for China's state-owned enterprises.

The rise of global financial capital brought newer technological pressures to the physical space of the exchange. Beginning with the new fibreoptic and satellite networks introduced in the Exchange Square hall, it seemed possible that the need for a physical space to house the market might eventually be unnecessary. The Automatic Order Matching and Execution System was introduced in 1993, and updated again in 1996 and 2000, further facilitating the process of wholly digital trading. This process of automating the market was a long one, moving through a complex history of technology that laid the social infrastructure for today's amorphous markets (Pardo-Guerra 2020). With this smoothing of financial transactions came a new spatial relationship with the exchange; more trading began to take place offsite, especially on new digital trading floors inside the offices of investment banks and brokerage houses. As the number of traders on the floor of the hall dwindled, remodelling was required to befit an increasingly digital exchange.

As the stock exchange neared the new millennium, under pressure from the region's financial secretary, it merged with Hong Kong's futures exchange and three clearing houses under a new parent company named Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited (HKEX). In 2000, HKEX listed on its subsidiary company, the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (HKSE). This act of listing the exchange on the exchange itself is known as demutualisation; many other stock exchanges demutualised in the same period (Akhtar 2002). This transformed the HKSE from a member-owned non-profit into

a publicly traded for-profit company. This restructuring hypercharged the exchange's self-interest in its corporate identity.

The first major renovation of the hall came in 2006, with the opening of the renamed Exchange Trading and Exhibition Hall Complex. The global design firm Aedas won the commission to redesign the interior. From a singular trading floor, the hall was divided for multiple functions. The trading floor now occupied less than half of the space. The trading desks were arranged in a circle for 300 traders and their staff. According to the design lead of the project, Dmytriy Pereklita (2017), the renovation 'transformed the previously isolated facility into a welcoming boulevard that allows visitors an unobstructed view of the elliptical trading floor on one side, and access to the new exhibition & interactive educational media spaces on the other'. The space also included media booths that television stations could hire for broadcasting—scenes of the trading floor adding to a newscast's authority. The renovation took six months and cost HK\$50 million (Yiu and Kwok 2006).

The redesign provided extensive space for manifestations of the history and cultural aspects of the market. These spaces had a larger footprint than the trading floor itself. A new auditorium seating 180 people, for example, sought to create social cohesion by hosting communal lectures and conferences, while elsewhere visual displays narrated the exchange's history, and a souvenir shop catered to visitors.

Connect Hall

The most recent version of the hall has done away with the physical trading floor altogether, and the exchange hall is now primarily a space of congregation for the city's financial industry, and trading takes place digitally offsite. Yet even without a physical space for trading, the

hall continues to play the same transborder role between China and the global financial system. Most notably, the Stock Connect program facilitates stock trading between Hong Kong's exchange and the mainland exchanges in Shenzhen and Shanghai. Paradoxically, while new technologies allowed traders to work even when physically apart, the social functions of the trading hall grew. These functions have built on past forms of celebration and spectacle that aimed to solidify trust and goodwill among market investors and the broader public.

In 2014, 'the last time the exchange disclosed such statistics, trading at the hall made up a negligible 0.2 per cent of total turnover on the city's bourse' (Yiu 2017). Three years later, the trading hall was shuttered to allow the removal of the trading floor altogether. In-person trading in an established trading hall ceased nearly a century and a half after trading practices began in Hong Kong, and more than a century after traders first professionalised and moved indoors. The closure of the entire trading hall allowed for a three-month renovation, which transformed the space into the Hong Kong Connect Hall. As well as the new space, the exchange also released a new logo, graphic identity, and a strategic vision of 'connecting China with the world' (HKEX 2016).

This most recent iteration of the hall serves predominantly as a space for events related to stocks and finance, and for corporate receptions and conferences on various socioeconomic issues popular among elites. Such spaces have become the international norm in recent years, serving as symbolic centres of a stock market rather than as the material spaces of trading. The 'connect' in the new placename refers to the Stock Connect program, as well as the Bond Connect, a trading program with the China Interbank Bond Market that opened in 2017. These programs exemplify the Hong Kong Stock Exchange's strategic vision to act as a mediator between China and the world. From the nineteenth century to the present day, spaces for stock trading have played a part in

facilitating the transferral of power from Hong Kong as a paradigm of British imperialism to an emergent neoliberal China.

At the Connect Hall opening in 2018, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam explained: 'The Connect Hall has a double meaning, connecting all parties in the market while it also refers to the stock connect schemes between Hong Kong and the mainland' (Yiu 2018). The hall's current form increases its ability to function as a gathering point for the territory's financial community. The space is open for hire, with prices topping around US\$32,000 for a full day. This attracts key people from widely diverse economic sectors. We can see this play out through the Connect Hall's location tag on Instagram, where people post photos of their awards ceremonies for business students, charity auctions, and entrepreneurship, and corporate governance conferences. According to HKEX (2018), the new hall is 'designed for maximum flexibility, capable of simultaneously hosting multiple events'. Within the hall as well are expanded media booths for broadcasting directly from the exchange. All of these functions within the exchange hall allow the exchange to reach local, national, and global audiences.

Constant Improvement and Renewal

In the new Connect Hall, roughly one-quarter of the renovated area is devoted to an exhibition space called the Museum of Finance in Hong Kong. The space displays photographs and objects from the exchange's past alongside a sweeping financial history of China. The exhibition is curated by China's Museum of Finance, a quasi-nongovernmental organisation with close ties to the Chinese state that curates and operates nine museums of finance, banking, and money across the People's Republic of China, in close partnership with local governments and the Beijing administration.

The exhibition focuses most of its attention on the financial history of China. Notable is the history of currency, which takes up a large swathe of the space. Money, as an everyday object of material culture, is a popular subject for public audiences, yet currency's prominent inclusion in the stock exchange exhibition has multiple purposes. It stretches the museum's content beyond the corporate economy of the stock market and confuses it with the far-reaching economy of currency. It acts to present the notion of an unfettered stock market as integral to the economy of main street and not, as the left asserts, the financial economy.

Shortly after Connect Hall's inauguration, local papers covered a curatorial snafu found in the new exhibition. At the exhibition entrance, a large, curved wall displays the many iterations created from the Chinese root word for money, which originates from the word for shell coins. Some of the characters featured referred to wealth and winning, but some also held negative connotations about theft and bribery. Critics across social media picked up on the unflattering choice of words and, soon after the grand opening, the exchange covered up many of them (Cheng 2018). The incident revealed the exchange's present power as an institution, the influence of the mainland, and how the market space is perceived differently among mainland officials, the Hong Kong public, and elite financiers.

In an effort to smooth over this *faux pas*, a spokesperson for the exchange told a reporter: 'The construction of the exhibition centre is a systemic work that requires constant improvement and renewal' (Cheng 2018). Few phrases sum up the exchange's history better than this. This dialectic of constant change is reminiscent of what Amy Thomas (2012), in a seminal article on the London Stock Exchange, framed as the essential paradox of a trading hall: a trading hall houses the stock market, yet that market is also embedded within a vast material geography of the corporations traded therein. It is in the exchange's own attempted consolation of this paradox, its constant

improvement and renewal of the space to better fit the times, that the paradox of its existence becomes most evident.

Opening Ceremonies

In response to COVID-19, the Hong Kong Stock Exchange created a virtual format of its gong-ringing ceremony that marks the moment when a company is newly listed for trade on the exchange. The first such ceremony took place three days after an attendee of a traditional listing ceremony tested positive for the virus. The plans for a virtual ceremony had, however, been in the works for some time, with companies from mainland China having already taken their pre-listing 'roadshows'—a sales pitch to investors—online around the world. The typical pre-COVID-19 ceremony took place at the exchange hall in Central, where the strike of the gong marked the opening of the day's trading, and was preceded by a brief reception, press photoshoot, as well as speeches by executives of the listing company and representatives from the exchange.

The hall of the stock *exchange* is one staging of the stock *market*. In everyday life, the stock market is more often presented through news media across television, newspapers, and online (Clark et al. 2004). Talking heads and the stock ticker make up much of the public's perception of the market. Is it up? Or down? But it is in the physical premises of the exchange, inside the new Connect Hall, that it is able most directly shape perceptions of the market, especially through the IPO ceremonies, with triumphant speeches and champagne toasts.

The growing importance of the exchange's symbolic presence is best illustrated by these gong-striking ceremonies. The exchange began these ceremonies some eight years ago as part of a new series of services that included other forms of promotion to 'help listed companies gain additional visibility among investors' and therefore 'to assist listed companies seeking efficient and cost-effective access to capital'

(HKEX 2012). After becoming an entirely trader-less venue, the exchange acquired a new, larger gong. This new gong was inaugurated the same year the Connect Hall opened and is reportedly 80 per cent larger than its predecessor, weighing 200 kilograms, and costing US\$45,000 (Shenshen 2018); it was first used for the listing of Xiaomi, one of China's largest tech companies. The gong and renovated hall parallel a fundamental change taking place in many exchanges around the world: as trading goes virtual, the symbolic importance of the exchange hall has grown. The larger gong photographs better, increasing the drama of the action of striking it, therefore amplifying the intended symbolism of a company's listing, monumentalising the practice to gigantic proportions.

While the digital gong is less dramatic, taking the gong online is important to the Hong Kong exchange because of its cherished status as the global exchange capable of raising the most capital through IPOs. This top ranking is owed wholly to its relationship to corporations from mainland China—a relationship and status it aggressively seeks to maintain as the mainland's own exchanges in Shanghai and Shenzhen grow in both capability and global investor confidence. Through the Hong Kong Stock Exchange's online and animated gong of the COVID-19 era, we can hear the performance of integration that would normally be seen within the exchange hall. Given Hong Kong's increased integration and still rising importance within the mainland's economy, we will likely see ever-more spectacular spatial and aesthetic performances like this—new forms of identity construction that seek to shore up the Hong Kong Stock Exchange as an important border crossing between China and the world. ■



Politically Correct Masks

Navigating the China–Hong Kong Border During COVID-19

PC: Maritè Toledo.

Xin SUN

In Hong Kong and Wuhan, recent facemask-wearing policies have forced people to wear their political allegiance on their faces. In Hong Kong in 2019, wearing a mask was interpreted within the context of ongoing protests against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In Wuhan in 2020, the same action became a signal of the efficiency of the government in handling a public health crisis. Located between Hong Kong and Wuhan, Shenzhen has become an important site for the physical mediation between these opposing interpretative contexts. Indeed, the China–Hong Kong border is both an imaginary and a physical arrangement that takes material form when individuals cross from Shenzhen to

Hong Kong and back again. In this essay, I track how Chinese and Hong Kong nationalisms have materialised at the border, focusing on increasing efforts to make political allegiances visible. As we will see, the location of bodies—on the Hong Kong or the mainland side of the border—critically shapes the meaning and consequences of ‘not wearing a mask’.

To Mask or Not to Mask?

The 2014 ‘Occupy’ protests in Hong Kong were grouped around symbolic locations that were associated with specific demands. Occupy

Central, for example, aimed to pressure the government for electoral reform by occupying the city's economic centre. Similarly, Occupy Central expressed broad-based discontent with the hardline attitude of the Hong Kong authorities and police by surrounding Hong Kong Government buildings (Xiang 2015). Five years later, in 2019, the slogans 'Flowers Blooming Everywhere' (遍地开花) and 'Be Water' reflected a comprehensive social conflict that had not only spread throughout the city, but also permeated everyday interactions (Sala 2019; Yu 2019).

Protests against Hong Kong's Extradition Bill, for example, began peacefully on 9 June 2019. However, by 1 October 2019, violence and civil disruption had escalated in the Special Administrative Region. Many protestors wore facemasks to hide their identity while participating in unpermitted protests. In response, the Chief Executive in Council passed the Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation, aiming 'to facilitate police investigation and to serve as a deterrent against the violent and illegal acts of masked perpetrators' (HCAL 2945 2019). The regulation was passed on 4 October 2019, taking effect on 5 October at midnight.

On the afternoon of 5 October 2019, angry students gathered near the atrium of the Festival Walk mall, yelling the slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times' (光复香港, 时代革命). The students were protesting the imminent promulgation of the Face Covering Regulation by distributing free facemasks. The form of the protest forced pedestrians to wear their politics on their face with no neutrality possible; those who took a mask were assumed to be acting in solidarity with the students, while those who did not were assumed to be showing support for the government. I encountered the protest in the corridor that connects the campus of the City University of Hong Kong to the Kowloon Tong metro station via the mall. I was suddenly even more aware of my mainland status because masks had become a symbol, an attitude, and a political preference. In a profound sense, my decision

about whether to take a mask would reveal me to have a political stance, even if I wanted to remain neutral.

Unmasked in Wuhan

Roughly three months after that encounter, I prepared to leave Hong Kong to celebrate the Spring Festival with my family in Wuhan. At the time, I was not worried about the COVID-19 outbreak. Although Hong Kong had reported some cases imported from Wuhan, Wuhan's experts in disease control and government leaders had publicly said that the virus was not very contagious and that there was a low risk of human-to-human transmission. On 12 January, as I boarded a train at the West Kowloon Station, public service announcements reminded any travellers to Wuhan that they should prepare facemasks. The train stopped in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Changsha before arriving in Wuhan five hours later. However, despite the volume of travellers, few donned a mask.

On 23 January, after 830 confirmed cases and 25 deaths, and after human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 was confirmed, the Chinese Government abruptly locked down Wuhan, blocking expressways and banning flights. At that time, not wearing a mask in public was designated a behaviour that went against public security. Within one day, the number of infections surged to 1,287 and the lockdown was expanded to 16 cities in Hubei Province. Under such circumstances, masks became a measure of political competence, civil responsibility, and familial intimacy. During a press conference on 26 January, for example, Hubei Provincial Governor Wang Xiaodong mistakenly overestimated the production capacity for masks three times in public statements, downgrading estimates from 10.8 billion to 1.8 billion, to 1.08 million. Medical resources were in desperately short supply and 'appeals for help' from nurses and doctors burst out across social media. My pregnant sister asked me whether I could get

some masks for her husband, a doctor on the frontline. Grounded at home, I asked friends to buy masks from the Philippines, but my order was intercepted by Hong Kong customs officials because, as of 26 January, the Chinese Government had announced that all medical resources could only be distributed by the Chinese Red Cross—an inefficient bureaucracy directed and funded by the Communist Party. The Red Cross's inefficiency during the outbreak stirred harsh political critique seldom expressed so blatantly in China.

Criticism of the government's response to COVID-19 increased on 6 February 2020, when Doctor Li Wenliang, one of a group of 'whistleblowers' who later was disciplined for 'spreading rumours', passed away after having been infected at work. On 10 February, Wuhan residents were grounded at home and all public and private transportation was suspended. On 12 February, the daily count of confirmed cases rose to 14,840 (Liu 2020), reducing the government's credibility with respect to data transparency. The opacity of information, in conjunction with concerns about political stability, resulted in a further quarantine of urban systems. Rage and grief welled up among Chinese netizens, but the relative success of the Chinese authorities in containing the outbreak in China, along with the mishandling of the pandemic in some Western countries, created a hostile international environment, ultimately creating fertile ground for nationalism (Zhang, C. 2020).

One Pandemic, Two Systems

Against the backdrop of ongoing protests in Hong Kong, the COVID-19 pandemic consolidated and accelerated the spatialised trauma of 'One Country, Two Systems'. The first change wrought by the pandemic was the tightening of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. Since 5 February 2020, mainlanders have been required to quarantine for 14 days

in Hong Kong (GHKSAR 2020), while Hong Kong residents are required to quarantine for two weeks on arrival in China. Since 25 March 2020, all border checkpoints except Shenzhen Bay have been closed to private cars and buses. Although Hong Kong International Airport, the Shenzhen Bay Port checkpoint for flight transfers between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, and the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge have remained open, the number of Shenzhen–Hong Kong border crossings, normally around 8 or 9 million per month (and even higher during holidays), dropped to a mere 36,000 per month in March 2020.

Those who do cross the border are treated differently in Shenzhen than in Hong Kong, even though the public health emphasis in both cities is designed to track individuals. People who cross from Hong Kong to Shenzhen are quarantined the moment they pass through the Shenzhen Bay Checkpoint, even if they obtained a negative test result in Hong Kong within the previous 24 hours. They are placed on a bus, sent to an assigned hotel with no choice of food, and forced to pay the costs of quarantine themselves. After the 14-day quarantine ends, they remain under surveillance through the 'health QR code' app, which is downloaded on to mobile phones and can be scanned on entering public buildings. A green code means normal; yellow means you need to be observed; red means return to quarantine. Indeed, the state's capacity to track individuals has expanded with the pandemic, permeating everyday life as private trajectories become data within public security systems. Nevertheless, because the health QR code is used throughout the country, anyone who wishes to reduce restrictions on their domestic mobility must download the app. Indeed, nearly all of Wuhan's 9.9 million citizens participated in mass testing in May 2020 because they wanted to re-enter public life.

In contrast, in Hong Kong, those who cross the border are tracked only during the 14-day quarantine period. In August 2020, for example, I passed through the Shenzhen Bay Checkpoint with a tracking wristband that connected to an

app that was downloaded to my mobile phone, as required by the Hong Kong Government. Once through the checkpoint, I took a taxi to the metro, and then the metro to a hotel of my choosing. Within an hour of arriving at my hotel, I went shopping and returned to my hotel with a take-away meal I had ordered online. I may have come into ‘intimate contact’ with hundreds of people before I settled in the hotel, but it would have been impossible for the Hong Kong Government to identify who they were since, although I was trackable, my mobility was not limited. On the last day of my quarantine, I received a call from a Hong Kong officer, who reminded me that I could immediately uninstall the tracking app. In September, a mass testing program supported by the mainland stretched for two weeks, aiming to find previously unknown cases as well as to prepare for unveiling a health QR code that could be mutually recognised in Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong Province. Only about 1.78 million of the 7.5 million people in Hong Kong participated in the programme.

Border Infrastructure

The Mass Transit Railway (MTR) is not simply a means for spatially unifying Hong Kong; it is also the means through which Hong Kong is integrated into the mainland via Shenzhen. On 2 February 2020, four months after the Yuen Long incident—when a mob of alleged triad members indiscriminately attacked passengers at the Yuen Long MTR station, presumably as punishment for participation in protests earlier in the day—two explosives were found on a train at the Lo Wu MTR station, which is linked to the border checkpoint in Shenzhen (Mok and Cheng 2020). The foiled explosive attack of anger towards the government’s refusal to fully close the border to prevent COVID-19 spreading from the mainland to Hong Kong. The following day, thousands of Hong Kong medical workers went on strike, demanding a complete closure of the border to ‘save Hong Kong’ (Ip 2020). The strikes converged with the anti-



Kowloon Bay Station, Hong Kong. PC: Kwok Ho Eddie Wong.

mainland sentiment that had been escalating since the anti-Extradition Bill movement. From the protestors' point of view, the Hong Kong Government's proposal to address the pandemic had to display consideration for Hong Kong people, rather than subordination to Beijing. Hong Kong medical workers argued that if the border were kept open, they would soon be inundated with infected persons who would spread the virus. With limited medical resources, they refused to make sacrifices for an indifferent government, which, in their view, did not care about their lives. Carrie Lam, Chief Executive of Hong Kong, initially objected to a complete prohibition of mainlanders and a lockdown, criticising the medical workers' demands as discrimination and not in line with recommendations from the World Health Organisation (Cheung et al. 2020).

In contrast, mainland public health professionals frequently faced a conflict between acting with scientifically informed professionalism or obedience to their leaders (Mason 2016). This meant that on-the-ground responses to COVID-19 were city-specific. In Shenzhen, for example, experience combating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and a commitment to public health as a sign of modernisation compensated for problems that arose in other cities due to initial obfuscation around the pandemic. Shenzhen's public health department activated its centralised response the day after the city's health authority network detected widespread online discussions about a pneumonia of unknown cause on 30 December 2019 (Zou et al. 2020). This decision occurred on the same day that BlueDot, a Toronto-based startup, first recognised the novel coronavirus in Wuhan (Niiler 2020).

Shenzhen's first case was detected on 8 January 2020, suggesting that public health officers were working behind the scenes even before the first infected case imported from Wuhan to Shenzhen was publicly reported on 20 January (Bai 2020). By 7 February 2020, while Wuhan's medical system was struggling to cope with the chaos of large numbers of COVID-19 cases and limited public

transparency, Shenzhen had already produced and made available an online map of cases in the city. In addition, Shenzhen mobilised 720 public health personnel to find cases and perform contact tracing, with the result that the city recorded no local infections after 22 February 2020 (Zou et al. 2020). In contrast, more than 40,000 medical workers from all over China gathered in Hubei Province to suppress the outbreak, with more than 3,000 of them diagnosed with COVID-19 by 28 February (Zhang, L.-T. 2020).

Border Contradictions

Regulation of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border during the pandemic has revealed how easily cross-border infrastructure can be deployed to buttress competing—even contradictory—ideologies. In China, for example, it became common to explain foreign failures to contain COVID-19 as a failure of countries 'to do their homework' (抄作业) (Zeng 2020). The implication was that if foreign governments had emulated China's top-down strategy for responding to the virus, they would not have experienced high levels of infection. Similarly, in Hong Kong, measures to control the influx of people from the mainland overlooked Shenzhen's success in combating COVID-19, and assumed the city's experience was more like that of the rest of the country. The politicisation of the border and its deployment through mask-wearing protocols raises important questions about how One Country, Two Systems can be safely navigated on both sides of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border. ■



Border as Sluice

Towards a Cultural Geography of the Shen Kong Borderlands

Jonathan BACH
Mary Ann O'DONNELL

It is estimated that, by 2019, more than 30,000 students crossed the border from Shenzhen to attend school in Hong Kong. PC: ejinsight.com.

When global attention alights on the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, it tends to focus on the geopolitical significance of a boundary that has morphed from the Sino-British border, to the Cold War ‘Bamboo Curtain’, to the demarcation between ‘One Country, Two Systems’. Most recently, Shenzhen has been given a mediating role within the Greater Bay Area because the history of experimental restructuring in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has served as both model and means for China’s expansion in international logistics and trade. Thus, when seen from Beijing, the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border sharpens the edge of its national narrative, both separating and conjoining economic, regulatory, and eventually political systems, serving to both delimit and expand

them. In turn, regional governments and planning agencies tend to see the border technocratically, strategically integrating local economies into global chains of trade and consumption.

On the ground in Shenzhen, however, the border has visceral effects, anchoring identities and permeating everyday life via the daily minutiae of businesses that buy, sell, ship, receive, manufacture, and bank across the border, as well through the activities of second-home-owners, students, daytripping shoppers, families, and friends, who regularly cross the border in the course of the day. Yet unless you work at it, along it, across it, or have other reasons to go back and forth, the physical border is mostly an absent presence. And therein lies the rub: when we think of the border

in general, we imagine fenced enclosures, flood-lit checkpoints, and ritualised protocols that secure territory and national ambitions; the border as a wall. And, yes, this architecture is an important component of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border complex. However, as urban infrastructure, the border is less a faultline for state boundaries than it is a regulated form of connection and differentiation that locals refer to as ‘Shen Kong’ (深港). This expression combines the first character from Shenzhen (深圳, literally ‘Deep Ditch’) with the second character in Hong Kong (香港, ‘Fragrant Harbour’) to produce ‘Deep Harbour’. Notably, both characters contain the three-drop water radical, calling attention to the region’s watery origins and historical importance as the gateway to Guangzhou from the South China Sea. This neologism suggests a more fluid and porous condition than appears from a distance: the border as sluice.

In this brief concluding essay, we conceptualise Shen Kong through the analytical lens of the border as sluice. As the forgoing articles have shown, in a riparian and coastal region like the one where Shenzhen lies—with its tributaries, islands, coves, bays, fisherfolk, aquaculture, and shifting sands—controlling the relationship between water and land is at the heart of ordering space. Conceptualising the border as sluice, we submit, allows us to account for the border’s polyvalence, ambiguity, and power; its historical resonance and ongoing relevance, in addition to the ways in which the border comes to be embodied, transformed, and imagined. Consider, for example, those children who reside in Shenzhen but attend Hong Kong schools. As early as October 2000, the Hong Kong Legislative Council confirmed that 2,835 Shenzhen students attended school in the Special Administrative Region’s North and Yuen Long districts (Education Bureau 2001). By 2019, the number had grown to more than 30,000 students, many of whom attended schools that specifically catered to Shenzhen residents. Since Shenzhen *hukou* (户口; ‘household registration’) holders became eligible for annual travel passes between the

two cities, Shenzhen residents were able, for various reasons, to opt for a Hong Kong education. Within the border complex itself, there are designated lanes for students, who are brought to and from the border in ‘nanny buses’. The image of lines of young children at the border, neatly dressed in school uniforms and wearing identity card pouches around their necks, speaks to the banality of border crossing; the border is not a (simple) barricade, but rather an architecture for the regulated distribution of designated people. Thus, when figured as sluice, the Shen Kong border suggests how forms of urban liminality and concomitant identities can only be situated with respect to historical geographies, changing technologies, economic desires, and imagined futures.

Knock, Knock ...

Shenzhen’s border architecture operates at the conjunction of sea, land, and nation, coordinating two different regimes. The first border regime functions within that of international maritime logistics. As of 2020, the Port of Shenzhen was ranked fourth in the world in terms of container throughput, behind Shanghai, Singapore, and Ningbo-Zhongshan, but still ahead of Guangzhou (fifth) and Hong Kong (eighth) (Lloyd’s List 2020). That said, the combined shipping volume of the three Pearl River Delta ports makes the region an undisputed leader in the sector, not only buttressing the importance of the Greater Bay Area at home and abroad, but also shaping its physical form. In Shekou, Chiwan, and Yantian, container terminals dominate the view from seaside parks, while container trucks from neighbouring Dongguan and Huizhou flow into the city. Although container trucks have been diverted from the downtown area since 2006, they still dominate roads and neighbourhoods in subdistricts like Henggang that have not yet fully deindustrialised, reminding us not only of Shen Kong’s manufacturing origins, but also of its breadth. Shenzhen ‘brought in the foreign

and connected the interior' (外引内联), making any place within the SEZ a potential sluice; the city was designed to mediate between and isolate the fuzzy boundaries between 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' and the rest of the world. The second border regime regulates everyday border crossings between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. The land border between the two cities is only 33 kilometres long, while the much longer water border extends through Shenzhen and Mirs bays, merging with the Pearl River in the east and the South China Sea in the west, and incorporating smaller islands and marine waters. This is one of the busiest borders in the world, with ten checkpoints in Shenzhen and one in Hong Kong that are integrated into the public transportation networks of both cities. People cross the border mostly in cars, buses, and trains. The now-standardised ferry routes are less used, despite the panoramic views and thinner crowds they offer.

The essays in this forum have tracked how the establishment of the border and concomitant spatial reordering transformed the 'lonely' watery edges of empire into sluices for people, goods, and capital. Two sixteenth-century events informed the structure and purpose of these architectures. First, the Portuguese established the colony of Macau, bringing Western Europe into circuits of trade that had connected the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean for millennia. Second, the Spanish discovered silver in Potosí, Bolivia. For three centuries, Potosí *reales* would be the currency of international trade, accumulating in Guangzhou before the British began pushing opium to divert the flow of silver to London. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the Royal Navy sought, cajoled, and coerced water access from the Qing—from the deep harbours of Hong Kong to lesser concessions upriver to Guangzhou, turning the shifting borders of Xin'an into not only a crucible for trade and war, but also a point of departure for a diaspora that spread through Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. At the peak of British imperialism, as Denise Ho recounts in her contribution to this

forum, James Stewart Lockhart and friends set the Sino-British border at the high-tide mark of the banks of Shenzhen and Mirs bays, transforming piers and marketplaces into sites of cross-border exchange. Maritime access to Guangzhou made Hong Kong significant, strategic, and sustainable. Indeed, before the 1997 Handover, the Crown Colony's 78.8-mile (123-kilometre) water border was one of the few to consistently appear on international maps, as if dotted lines could stabilise a border that had been neither completely demarcated nor fully enforced.

The specificity of this cultural geography makes salient the impossibility of isolating the cities from one another. This is not merely a philosophical question, but also one of physical survival. Hong Kong imports 80 per cent of its water from Guangdong and all of it comes via Shenzhen. The image of water being delivered from the East River to Hong Kong spigots illustrates how cross-border infrastructures become flesh. The sluice here is a prosthetic that makes the national body and its multitudes materially possible.

... Who's There?

During the early Cold War, when China began to consolidate its maritime borders, the Sino-British border increasingly came to structure belonging and identity in the region. As Alice Du Liangliang explains, this process was not only administrative, but also entailed moving islanders to the mainland and settling boat-dwellers in harbours. To claim watery borders, it was necessary to ground islanders and boat-dwellers. This history offers critical insight into how the border increasingly came to anchor identities; on the ground, the border first became visible not as architecture, but as settlement. Indeed, Taomo Zhou's essay on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Engineering Corps draws attention to the way multiple borders intersected in the embodied labour of this unusual group, which had been transferred

from the Third Front to help build the city in between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ lines. Through their bodies, we see a palimpsest of the borders across the Maoist and Deng eras, between rural and urban, between mobilisation and demobilisation, and between classes as some thrive and others languish in the new market-oriented city. The borders in Zhou’s telling are often invisible—a theme that takes centre-stage in Na Fu’s exploration of the border myths that shape daily life. In common parlance, borders often appear as ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ to the degree they are permeable, but Fu suggests that a better metaphor would be thick or thin, with echoes of ‘thick description’, as in Clifford Geertz’s famous essay. Here, as with Geertz, the border appears as a web of meaning that is not reducible to its observed function. We have to look, as Fu, Dodom Kim, and Sun Xin do in their essays, at the cobbler setting up shop on the footbridge, the professional woman literally in pursuit of mobility through travel permits, or Xin’s dilemma over wearing a mask near the border.

Together, the essays in this forum suggest that Shen Kong facilitates not only the regulation of differences, but also the governance of (ongoing and unavoidable) differentiation. As Fu’s, Kim’s, and Sun’s essays show clearly, the infrastructures regulating border crossings are neither limited to border locations nor supervised only by state actors. We carry the border in our wallets and in our phones, we traverse it through virtual private networks (VPNs) and online transactions, and we inhabit its traces in the physical spaces we visit, even when, as with Sben Korsh’s example of the stock exchange, it serves mainly to remind us of how virtual things have become. In other words, within and against the proliferating border, our identities are formed through mutual acts of recognition and misrecognition. Suddenly, we find ourselves confronted by Victor Turner via both van Gennep and Althusser: we are at the threshold, but we can only cross over by identifying ourselves.

On Containing Multitudes

The Greater Bay Area comprises the 11 cities of the Pearl River Delta. The name in Chinese, 粤港澳大湾区 (*yuegang’ao dawanqu*), suggests a golden triangle, with Guangzhou at its apex and Hong Kong and Macau forming its baseline. It is an image that forces one to seriously consider what Shenzhen offers—what kinds of spatial and social mediation are needed to thrive in the post-Cold War era?

One approach to this question is to look at how the meaning of border-crossing shifted circa 1980. The special zone was, by design and by definition, a strategic deployment of liminality, for goods, money, and people. Identifiable neither as wholly ‘capitalist’ nor wholly ‘socialist’, the zone was itself a sluice through which the currents generated by Reform and Opening Up flowed into China from abroad, and through which export products left. Before 1979, crossing the border afforded the individual new status, including right-of-abode (in Hong Kong) or *hukou* (in Bao’an County). In contrast, since 1980, crossing the border might be seen as an inconvenient chore; one passes through quickly and efficiently. But here is the catch: crossing the border today does not entail a change in status. Instead, what was ‘foreign’ can remain excluded from local accounting. The transition from the Sino-British border before 1979 to the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border post 1980 thus signified a different kind of border—not one set up to protect already-existing territory from the outside, but one that created the new inside by allowing the outside to come in, on the condition that it remain liminal. The ability to accommodate multitudes that are in but not of the city, we suggest, is an effect of how the Shen Kong border operates as sluice at both the level of international logistics and the level of everyday life.

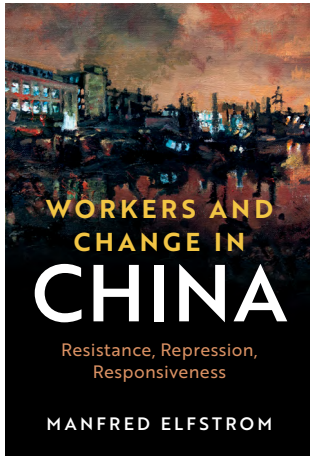
In Shenzhen's port areas, goods are stocked tariff-free in bonded warehouses awaiting transit to other locations. Exports travel from assembly line to ship via multinodal containers that can be transferred from dock to truck and back again. Money turns into bits and bytes and waits in accounts to be converted and transferred. Like goods and money, people, too, inhabit a special kind of liminal existence created by Shenzhen's borders. Except for the so-called Shenzhen second generation (深二代), who were born and raised in Shenzhen, most of the city's population remains either of the city or in the city, but seldom both. Indigenous Bao'an villagers were initially denied Shenzhen *hukou*, with their villages still under rural land law and not under municipal control appearing as blank spots on city maps awaiting development. They were thus 'of' the city but not always 'in' it. Their legendary shift from farmers to landlords led them to build tenement housing for the migrants who poured into the city to construct its buildings, cook its food, and work in its factories. This made villages home to a migrant population that was, conversely, 'in' the city but not 'of' it—the so-called floating population without *hukou* or often any authorisation to be there at all. Even today, it is estimated that more than half of Shenzhen's actual (in contrast to its legal) population lives in urban villages. In turn, these migrants often work for the privileged managerial class, who remain, in a different way, also 'in' but not 'of' the city; many have come to Shenzhen from other Chinese cities and, even on receiving Shenzhen *hukou*, still consider themselves native to elsewhere.

We have called the border a sluice, in part because it works like an obligatory passage point, forcing populations through its narrow openings, whether receiving state blessings for their exits and thus compliant, marked, and counted, or evading controls, smuggling, or crossing without permission. The hallmark of a sluice, a word derived via Old French from the Latin word *excludere* ('to exclude'), is that it never stops everything. In gold mining, the sluice separates gold from gravel, but it soaks

everything that tumbles through it as well. It channels the water, too, but water, as we know, finds its own way. Water also wears down structures. In her introduction, Ho points out how the border since its inception has been prophesising its own demise, since Hong Kong was, one way or the other, 'always due to return to Chinese territory'. Now that it has, during the phase of One Country, Two Systems, the border has been adapted seamlessly to the governance of differentiation. In terms of logistics, the water border that was central to British hegemony has dissolved, allowing for the emergence of an integrated regional system. In terms of the individual, however, the border can disappear when needed (for those on high-speed trains, nanny buses, or airport shuttles), just as it can materialise when needed (whether to stop those with or, as the case may be, without masks). Indeed, if anything is truly in and of the city, it is the border itself. Without it, there would be no Shenzhen, but like Shenzhen, it cannot stay still either. ■

The background is an abstract, textured surface resembling a painting or a heavily layered material. It features a mix of dark, muted colors like brown, grey, and black, with some brighter patches of red, white, and blue. The texture is grainy and uneven, with visible brushstrokes or layering. In the center, there is a solid, light orange rectangular area that serves as a backdrop for the text.

CONVERSATIONS



Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Workers and Change in China

A Conversation with Manfred Elfstrom

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

In his new book, *Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), Manfred Elfstrom delves into the paradox that sees the Chinese Party-State addressing workers' grievances while coming down increasingly hard on civil society groups and individual activists promoting labour rights. Examining both the causes and the consequences of protest through extensive fieldwork and statistical analysis, Elfstrom explores the daily evolution of autocratic rule, highlighting how pressure from the grassroots can translate into political change even in the most dire circumstances.

Ivan Franceschini: The past decade has seen a notable shift in the global discourse of Chinese labour. In the book, you mention that Chinese workers, 'once an object of foreign pity, the focus of sweatshop exposés and anguished editorials about the dangers of free trade ... gradually came to be seen in some circles as inspired militants worthy of emulation'. This change of narrative was most apparent around 2010, when the Nanhai Honda Strike and the Foxconn suicides made headlines all over the world. The new narrative, centred on the idea of the 'awakening' of the Chinese working class, remained somewhat dominant for the first half of the decade, at least until the crackdown on labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) of late 2015. In hindsight, what do you think was the reason behind this discursive shift, and how much of the optimism of those years was warranted?

Manfred Elfstrom: That sentence you quoted sums up the arc of my own experience with the workers' movement in China, going back further than just the past decade. I first came into contact with Chinese labour issues in the early 2000s, when I was involved in a very minor way in campus anti-sweatshop activism. At that time, workers in China really were thought of first and foremost as victims, at least by activists abroad. Later on, I interned with, and then briefly worked for, China Labor Watch, which investigates factories in China for labour law violations. The organisation brought media attention to some remarkable acts of worker resistance, but the focus was still on uncovering abuses and pressuring companies. Then, by the time of the Honda strike, I was working with Chinese grassroots labour NGOs and got caught up in the general excitement sparked by that mobilisation. I helped some Chinese activists

join international gatherings, and organisers from other parts of the world were very interested to hear what they had to say. Now, pessimism is pervasive and the global labour movement has moved on. China is seen as a hopelessly repressive place and people are focusing on problems closer to home. The discursive shift has indeed been big.

In general, this change in rhetoric has tracked what has been happening on the ground in China. Journalists, academics, and campaigners have not been ‘wrong’. However, there has always been a slight disjuncture between the general perception of where Chinese workers are and where the movement has actually stood. For instance, there were plenty of strikes and protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s—and not just by laid-off state-owned enterprise employees, but migrant workers, too. And some of these confrontations featured demands that went beyond minimal legal guarantees, even though such demands would become much more common later. Anita Chan documented some of this already in her 2001 volume, *China’s Workers Under Assault*. I start my book with a description of the Stella shoe factory protest of 2004. It involved a whole host of issues! For a period, Chinese labour NGOs were understood by many academics to be cautious, even conservative, groups. Then, scholars pointed to the emergence of what Chen Feng and Yang Xuehui call ‘movement-oriented labour NGOs’ that engage in informal collective bargaining. But NGOs had long been doing this kind of thing—just covertly. Perhaps everyone’s excitement following the Honda strike was overblown. As Eli Friedman has argued, because the Chinese state never allowed workers an institutional vehicle to lock in their voice at the factory level, much less nationally, their gains were never going to be as big as they might otherwise have been. But perhaps today’s pessimism is also exaggerated. Although labour NGOs have been severely repressed, strikes continue at a high level. *China Labour Bulletin (CLB)* recorded nearly 800 incidents in 2020. That is a lot by global standards, and *CLB* is only capturing a fraction of the total number. Moreover, when the Chinese Government is pushed, along with crackdowns, it responds with concessions here and there, even in this more hostile climate. The dance thus continues.

IF: In the book, you discuss some ‘recipes for resistance’. Can you explain what you mean by that?

ME: There is a rich body of academic literature analysing the reasons Chinese workers engage in collective action and why they prefer certain tactics over others. My book does not attempt to put forward another big theory in this regard. Instead, I use official statistics concerning formally

adjudicated labour disputes and my own dataset of strikes, protests, and riots between 2004 and 2012 to try to identify which factors tend to be correlated with what I describe as ‘contained’ versus ‘transgressive’ and ‘boundary-spanning’ activism. By ‘contained’, I mean relying mainly on litigation and petitioning, raising demands concerning basic labour standards, and organising via narrow workplace networks; by ‘transgressive’, I mean well-disciplined or cross-worksite strikes, demands relating to wage increases in excess of legal minimums or calls for things like union reforms, and organising that involves movement-oriented NGOs and other associations; and, finally, by ‘boundary-spanning’, something in between—more routine strikes, protests, and riots, wage demands, and drawing on the services of legally oriented NGOs. Here, I am borrowing categories of dissent established by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001), as well as the work of Kevin O’Brien. In general, I find that more capital-intensive industries with more high-skilled jobs are correlated with more contained activism, whereas light industry, construction, and transport are correlated with transgressive and boundary-spanning activism. And in contrast to scholarship from the early 2000s, I find that migrant worker density in a given area also correlates with organising taking a more transgressive and boundary-spanning form. I treat these factors as together forming a series of ‘recipes for resistance’ in the sense that you can swap out different ingredients—migrants can be present but not light industry, for instance—and arrive at the same outcome. In other words, beyond, I suppose, taking a somewhat materialist approach, I am not putting forward a mono-causal explanation for Chinese labour unrest. I am just trying to document the various things that tend to come together in a variety of configurations where unrest is present. My main interest in the book, though, is answering a different question: what effect has all this activism actually had? But you have to map out the possible causes of militancy in at least a cursory way before you can begin to talk about its consequences.

IF: One of the greatest contributions of your book is this focus on how workers in China contribute to shaping government policy. How do they manage to do that?

ME: Workers are forcing the government to develop in two contradictory directions at once: towards increased repressive capacity and increased responsive capacity. At a regional level, the different forms that resistance takes result in what I call different ‘regional models of control’. Where resistance remains largely contained or, at most, boundary-spanning, you see authorities adopting an orthodox approach that combines pre-emption of worker mobilisation, caution when it comes

to labour law and the programming of the official trade union—why rock the boat policywise and risk introducing disorder when things are already going well?—and subtle nudging to keep both labour and capital in line. In contrast, where resistance ranges from boundary-spanning to outright transgressive, authorities adopt a risk-taking approach that involves giving up on pre-empting everything and instead focusing on experimenting with novel, somewhat pro-worker policies, while coming down harshly on labour organisers and ordinary striking workers alike. I illustrate these models with case studies of Jiangsu's portion of the Yangtze River Delta (orthodoxy) and Guangdong's portion of the Pearl River Delta (risk-taking). More broadly, I use statistics to provide evidence that more strikes, protests, and riots are associated with more spending on the paramilitary People's Armed Police (repressive capacity) and more pro-worker or split decisions in mediation, arbitration, and court (responsive capacity).

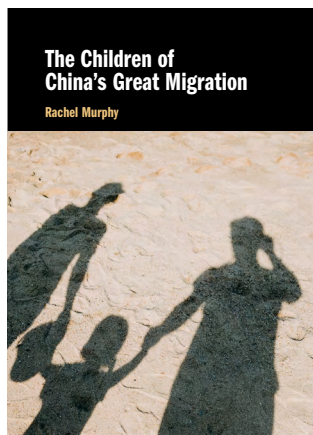
If the spark for all this comes from what workers are doing (or not doing), I argue that these developments are carried through the system by the bureaucratic incentives for officials to demonstrate to their superiors that they are doing something about unrest. This raises the question of whether individual officials might have an outsized influence on the state's reaction to unrest, both locally and nationally. Could this all just be an issue of who is in power where, rather than labour's actions? However, I use a brief study of Chongqing and its successive leaders, Wang Yang and Bo Xilai, to argue that elite politics only matter marginally. Some politicians may be more or less reformist or reactionary by nature, but whether they devote their attention to labour issues *per se*, rather than other items on their agenda, comes down to the level of unrest in their jurisdictions. Workers are ultimately the ones driving alterations in Chinese industrial relations, as well as, to some degree, society at large, even if the change to date has been of an ambiguous kind. In social science terms, labour is the key 'independent variable'.

IF: Your book is a call to move beyond the 'transitology' and 'resilience' approaches that have dominated scholarship on authoritarian regimes since the end of the Cold War. The 'transitology' paradigm treated dictatorships as only a way station on the road to democracy, while 'resilience' shifts the attention to the variety of mechanisms that autocrats possess for maintaining control. What are the shortcomings of those approaches and how do you overcome them?

ME: The transitology approach has been pilloried for a while now, so I do not see a lot of benefit in piling on the existing criticism. Buoyed by the rapid expansion of liberal democratic institutions after the Cold War, transitology assumed that

authoritarianism anywhere was, essentially, temporary. A scholar's task, then—to exaggerate a bit—was simply comparing and contrasting different forms of transitions. The problem was, of course, that many non-democracies continued their non-democratic ways and many new democracies reverted to different degrees of authoritarianism. Today's contrasting focus on the sources of authoritarian resilience has yielded many valuable insights, including when it comes to China. We have learned, for instance, how phenomena like partial rule of law, controlled urbanisation, unrepresentative legislatures, selective toleration of protest, and massive but still incomplete censorship bolster Chinese Communist Party rule. However, there is a danger of this form of analysis going too far. Every seeming 'bug' in the system comes to be treated as a 'feature' waiting to be discovered and explained. The Party appears as a master puppeteer. And, as a consequence, our picture of China and countries like it becomes static.

In my book, I try to sketch out a more dynamic process, one in which the state is constantly reacting to threats from below, and its reactions in turn constrain its options for future reactions, even as those reactions also hem in activists. I acknowledge that the Chinese Government is remarkably adaptable. But I argue that some of its adaptations should be thought of as warping state development over the long term. Money spent on public security is money not spent on social services, for example. Jennifer Pan makes a similar point in *Welfare for Autocrats* (2020), her new book on China's welfare system, in which she shows that the government's growing emphasis on political stability above all else has led *di bao* payments to be doled out on a political basis, thereby spurring protests by those who feel they are deserving of the payments based on their income but have nonetheless been denied them. Issues like this are not necessarily fatal flaws for the government. But they suggest that authorities are not fully in control and that the state is evolving in a contradictory manner. My book is not entirely upbeat or downbeat about Chinese workers' prospects. What it argues is that the situation is very much in flux and driven by bottom-up pressures more than anything else. ■



The Children of China's Great Migration (Cambridge University Press 2020).

The Children of China's Great Migration

A Conversation with Rachel Murphy

Nicholas LOUBERE

In recent decades, China has witnessed the largest movement of people in world history, with hundreds of millions of rural migrants floating between the cities where they work and the countryside where they make their homes. This has had dramatic implications for family life in rural China, and in the 2010s more than 61 million rural children had at least one parent who was a rural–urban migrant worker. In *The Children of China's Great Migration* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Rachel Murphy draws on long-term fieldwork in China's eastern interior to examine how this mass movement of people has impacted the left-behind children.

Nicholas Loubere: I would like to start by looking back to your first book, *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), which was published at the turn of the millennium. What are the major changes in domestic migration dynamics and their impacts on rural lives that you have witnessed over the past two decades?

Rachel Murphy: When doing fieldwork in Jiangxi Province in the mid to late 1990s, everyone I met assumed that after several years of working in the cities, migrants would return to their home villages and use their savings to build a house and help their sons with the costs of marriage. Villagers' attitude towards their children's education was also fatalistic. Rural parents often thought that because their offspring's chances to enter university were limited, if their children did not want to study then it was best that they left junior high school and went to work in the newly opening urban labour markets. Simultaneously, though, marketisation was increasing returns on education while migration was heightening rural people's awareness of the utility of learning; young migrants would tell their family members on the phone and during return visits: 'Let younger brother or younger sister study. Life outside is bitter for those without education.' But the increase in migration notwithstanding, most rural children still lived with one or both parents in their villages. Rural families would spend their evenings watching television together and cracking

melon seeds. Children's play also linked them to the village environment—for instance, they would hunt for small fish in the paddy fields.

By the 2010s, though, most rural adults longed to help their children secure a decent off-farm life and thought that migrating to earn money for their children's education and later urban housing costs was the way for them to do this. Rural people's hopes for their children's education were shaped not only by the expansion of labour markets, but also by the legacy of the nine years of mass compulsory education that had been rolled out in China's interior in the 1990s, as well as the post-2000s expansion of the country's higher education sector. Although rural students seldom gained places at reputable universities, anecdotes of some rural children's successes still circulated. When a child was in primary school and their skill at sitting exams had yet to reveal itself, rural parents dared to dream that their child might be one of the lucky few to study their way out of drudgery. But the intensification of educational aspirations also generated immense pressure on children. At the same time, parental migration depleted the practical and emotional support available to many children, derailing their efforts to study. The 2010s also saw ever more children living away from both their parents and their villages. For instance, in some rural regions in Jiangxi, children boarded at township-based schools from Sunday afternoon to Friday afternoon, starting at grade four or five, while over half of children lived separated from either one or both of their parents.

The development of phone technologies is a further significant change, though the effects on farmer-migrant worker families have been less than anticipated. In the 1990s, young migrants would return to their villages at Chinese New Year with pagers prominently attached to their hips. If a pager beeped, they would use a landline phone outside the village shop. But by the 2010s, most rural households had at least one mobile phone and, after the mid-2010s, these phones had video applications. Even so, because children and migrant workers studied or worked for long hours and most schools forbade students from owning mobiles, calls between migrants and at-home family members remained limited to several minutes on the weekends. Rural families' access to valued information, such as about decent vocational training possibilities for their children, also remained limited.

NL: This book represents a shift of perspective in the literature on livelihood migration from the migrants themselves to the children who have been left behind. What new insights does this give us into the social impacts of the mass movement of people in China, and beyond, in our contemporary era?

RM: In the 1990s, literature on internal migration in the Global South was dominated by themes of the ‘migration–development nexus’, remittances, and rural livelihood diversification. My first book drew on and contributed to this literature, exploring the linkages that labour migrants retained with their villages, return flows of resources to the villages, and returnee business creation. This research found that migration was not external to the villages. Rather migration and return were extensions of villagers’ existing livelihood diversification strategies, underpinned by values of loyalty to the family and the native place—values that rural people adapted in response to the vulnerabilities that they faced both in agriculture and in urban labour markets.

By the twenty-first century, though, scholars increasingly recognised migration as a relational process. My new book builds on this insight, exploring how labour migration and people’s social reproduction arrangements blended imperceptibly with deeply felt obligations to family, underpinned by cherished ideals about gender, motherhood, fatherhood, filial piety, and morality. It examines children’s experiences of daily routines of care in their families and in and around schools—these being the routines through which family and national strategies for capital accumulation cohered. Through these routines, children were subjected to their families’ and schools’ efforts to inculcate in them a sense of intergenerational debt that they needed to repay by studying diligently and behaving well. In this way, children and adults were bound to each other in ‘multilocal striving teams’.

The book emphasises that even as the spatial separation of rural families is portrayed in China’s policy discourse as incidental to modernisation, it is integral to a national strategy of development. The structures that prevent children from accompanying their migrant parents to the cities depress employers’ and municipal governments’ costs in competitive globalising markets. Meanwhile, inequalities in the education system reproduce class inequalities and the stratification of labour markets. The book’s privileging of children’s experiences highlights the emotional costs of both entrenched inequalities and a social and political preoccupation with capital accumulation. The voices of children, with their intuitive emphasis on interdependence and affection, if heard, could help to inspire alternative values by which to organise society. This observation applies not only to China’s eastern interior, but to all contexts where the state subordinates humans’ affective wellbeing and rights to family life to other agendas, and to all contexts where children are separated from their

parents because of the latter's inhospitable living and working conditions, primarily due to restrictions on certain people's movement and access to public goods and services.

NL: Can you tell us a bit about what it is like to do research with left-behind children over longer periods? Did you notice them changing the ways in which they perceive or articulate their experiences at different ages?

RM: Of the 109 children I interviewed, I followed 25 for five years, which permitted me to discern changes in their sentiments and perceptions. The first time I met most of these children, they were in primary school, the next time they were in junior high school, and by our third meeting several had reached the final year of junior high school while others had started either senior high school or vocational school. Two factors appeared to affect the evolution of their perceptions. First, as they grew older, they adopted more of the norms and repertoires of adults. Specifically, teenagers internalised an expectation that they needed to demonstrate their maturity, which in Chinese is expressed with the term *dongshi* [懂事] or 'understand things'. For instance, several teenagers laughed at the wretchedness of their younger selves when they had felt distraught at missing their migrant parents. Some teenagers also tried to deal with the accumulated resentment that they felt for being 'dumped' [丢] by endeavouring to understand their parents better.

Importantly, though, teenagers' capacity to overcome or reduce their resentment towards their migrant parents was mediated by a second factor: the teenagers' view of their prospects. Indeed, by the final year of junior high school, children's understanding of their prospects was crystallising. When teenagers could see a way out of drudgery, they were better able to accept that their parents' migration had been 'worth it'. For instance, some teenagers who made it to a coveted senior high school felt that their parents' sacrifice had given them their opportunity, which enhanced their emotional capacity to reconcile themselves to their left-behind pasts. But when promises of the parent-child striving team seemed elusive, teenagers sometimes identified parental migration as a significant factor behind their bleak prospects. Of course, teenagers who lived with both their parents could also feel estranged from them, usually because of resentments arising from strict study-related discipline. However, when parents and children were separated from each other because of migration, teenagers and parents interpreted tensions in their relationship with reference to this history of separation.

NL: The book examines the different ways children experience out-migration if they are raised by a single left-behind parent—mother or father—or their grandparents. Can you outline the ways in which these different familial configurations were experienced and the implications for the socioeconomic impact of rural-urban migration in contemporary China?

RM: Who migrates and who provides care, and the implications for children's lives, has received little scholarly attention. This is surprising because parental migration leads to a significant reconfiguration of families along gendered and intergenerational lines while local gender norms and familial culture mediate children's interpretations of their circumstances. In the 2010s in villages in Jiangxi and Anhui, strong patrilineal familial culture prevailed alongside rigid gender roles. 'Nurturer mother and breadwinner father' sat at the top of a notional hierarchy of family arrangements such that children were less accepting of a mother's migration than a father's migration, even as they may have longed for greater interaction with their fathers. By contrast, 'lone-migrant mother and at-home father' configurations so contravened local gender norms that this relatively rare situation usually indicated family vulnerability—for instance, a father's poor health or the parents' marital discord. Hence, children of lone-migrant mothers had to manage relationships in families that were deemed anomalous by both family insiders and family outsiders. This could help to explain some studies' findings of worse self-reported wellbeing among the children of lone-migrant mothers even than among children left behind by two migrant parents.

In the early 2010s, approximately 47 per cent of China's 61 million left-behind rural children had two migrant parents, and most lived with their grandparents. These children's circumstances differed, affected by factors such as the age at which they had been left with grandparents, the grandparents' age, whether the grandparents were paternal or maternal, whether a grandparent was widowed, the relationship between the middle generation and the grandparent caregivers, and the families' socioeconomic status. But these differences notwithstanding, children from skipped-generation families all actively tried to sustain meaningful relationships with both their grandparents and their migrant parents. They helped their grandparents in daily life even as they relied on them practically and emotionally as parent substitutes. The children also studied as best they could, seeking to win approval from their migrant parents. Meanwhile, children who visited their migrant parents in the cities during the summer holidays often helped them with chores; many of these children spent long days confined in a room with a television set and homework books until their migrant parents returned from their work shifts.

The book demonstrates that many children in rural China were profoundly affected by the migration of either one or both of their parents and by the intense pressures on them and their families to toil ceaselessly for dreams that all too often proved unreachable. As yet, though, we know little about the implications of this generation's childhoods for their relationships with their ageing parents, their attachments to their own future children, and the kind of life that they will forge as China's next generation of migrant workers and urban residents. ■

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