

CHINA FROM BELOW

CRITICAL ANALYSIS & GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

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Contents

Preface	5
The Editors	10
I. Current Contradictions	13
1 <i>Dong Yige</i> Gender Awakening, Care Crisis, and Made-in-China Feminism	14
2 <i>JS Tan</i> Tech Workers and Rising Class Consciousness in China	31
3 <i>Richard Smith</i> China's Engine of Environmental Collapse	44
II. Workers' Struggles and Racism Following the Covid-19 Pandemic.....	55
4 <i>Eli Friedman, Wen, and Pan</i> Labor Struggles During and After the Pandemic	56
5 <i>Gigi Mei, Kimiko Suda, Shan Windscrip, JM Wong</i> Confronting Covid-19 Racism. Asian Diaspora Organizing and Transnational Solidarity	75
III. China's Periphery.....	95
6 <i>Darren Byler</i> Terror Capitalism: The Enclosure of Uyghurs in Northwest China	96
7 <i>Brian Hioe</i> Taiwan's Left in the Era of Chinese-American Rivalry.....	111
8 <i>Promise Li</i> Facing the Right in the Hong Kong Movement	124

IV. China in the World and the History of Chinese Socialism.....	141
9 <i>Alfian Al-Ayubby and Y. Wasi Gede Puraka</i> Chinese Investments and Labor Struggles in Indonesia.....	142
10 <i>Isabella Weber</i> How China Escaped Shock Therapy. The Market Reform Debate.....	158
11 <i>Ralf Ruckus</i> The Communist Road to Capitalism in China	178
Afterword: Reflections on Positionality, Representation, and Practical Solidarity	195

Preface

Ralf Ruckus, Kevin Lin, Jule Pfeffer, and Daniel Reineke

Over the past decades, the People’s Republic of China has become the world’s second largest economy under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Today, the country has moved beyond its role as the “factory of the world,” strengthened its role as an innovation hub and expanded its economic as well as geopolitical influence across the globe. Meanwhile, the CCP and state leadership has stifled domestic labor unrest as well as feminist and environmental activism. It has pushed repressive policies against discontent or unrest in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, and it has strengthened its means of control and surveillance in the whole country to prevent organized protests and secure its rule.

Yet, many mainstream analyses and interpretations of the interwoven dynamics of China’s global capitalist expansion, increasing social unrest, and tightened state repression have remained largely inadequate. They tend to portray state-society relations in China and China’s role in the world from the perspective of a simplistic and politically dangerous “authoritarianism vs. liberalism” dichotomy. This angle has gained further traction during the Covid-19 pandemic and fed into the escalating global imperial rivalry between the regimes in China and the U.S.

In this discursive environment, class-based accounts on China from below remain rare. In fact, many left-wing commentators and organizations around the globe still have problems to “rethink” China and the CCP and expose its capitalist or imperialist policies. Referring to China’s “socialist” history and the role of the CCP regime vis-à-vis the imperialist regime in the U.S., they often ignore the important role of Chinese state and private capital for the dynamics of global capitalism and the repression of social unrest by the CCP and state leadership.

Against this background, this book brings together activists and researchers with a critical, left-wing perspective to analyze China’s current role in the world as well as the social conflicts and mobilizations in the country. The book is based on a webinar series held in 2020 and 2021 under the title “China and the Left—Critical Analysis and Grassroots Activism” and sponsored by gongchao.org, the Made in China Journal, positions politics, as well as Critical China Scholars. The contributions in this edited volume cover key issues necessary for “rethinking” China in the 21st century, including China’s feminist movement, tech worker organizing, environmental politics, state repression in Xinjiang, the Left in Taiwan, right-wing factions in Hong Kong, Chinese investments and labor struggles

in Indonesia, and a reevaluation of China's history since 1949 and the contested reform process.¹

The webinar series evolved from an initiative in Germany. A group of activists in Leipzig had prepared action days in order to protest against the EU-China Summit. That summit was planned for September 2020 but was then cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the cancellation, the action days took place in September 2020. Due to the pandemic, no one from China or Hong Kong could participate, though.

Subsequently, we decided to prepare the webinar series as an opportunity to both intervene in the polarized China discourse in Germany and elsewhere and to instigate direct exchange and solidarity at the grassroots level between initiatives outside China and social struggles and activists in China. In doing so, we also aimed to undermine the rising tide of anti-Chinese racism in countries of the Global North that governments and right-wing players stir up to promote economic and political nationalism.

The book contains eleven chapters based on the webinar presentations and discussions.² The chapters are organized in four sections. The *first section* on current contradictions is opened by Dong Yige's analysis of gender politics in China (*chapter 1*). In the last decade, the PRC has seen a growing number of social controversies, grassroots campaigns, and cultural phenomena related to gender and women's rights. While this new wave of "gender awakening" is a long process, the detention of the Feminist Five in 2015 marked a watershed moment in Chinese gender politics. Since then, on the one hand, the state has tightened its grip on political activism, and activists find it harder and harder, if not impossible, to use feminism as a label when organizing campaigns. On the other hand, we have seen the continuation of internet-based, decentralized, and spontaneous activism around women's rights and gender equality issues. Some of these issues were even "mainstreamed" and co-opted by government and corporate power.

In *chapter 2*, JS Tan discusses how we may understand rising class consciousness among Chinese tech workers and the conditions and forces in the industry that have given rise to it. For tech workers in China, the practice of 996—working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week—has long been in place. In 2019, after tech workers launched a campaign protesting the 996-schedule, the term rapidly went viral and ignited a nation-wide online conversation about the harsh

¹ The webinar series and the podcasts are documented on <https://www.gongchao.org/en/online-discussions>.

² The book PDF is available at <https://www.gongchao.org/en/china-from-below>.

working schedules of office workers in China. Since then, tech workers have adopted a new set a vocabulary: words like *manong* (coding peasant) and *dagongren* (worker) indicate a new class consciousness. *Neijuan* (involution) and *moyu* (touching fish) capture their feeling of diminishing returns and uselessness. Programmers, once regarded as a “professional class,” are now realigning their identity as part of the working class.

In *chapter 3*, Richard Smith, author of *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse* (Pluto Press, 2020), analyzes China’s environmental crisis and its roots from a Marxist perspective. China’s breakneck economic development has wreaked havoc on the environment, extracting and consuming an immense amount of resources and severely polluting land, air, and water. Whereas Europe and the United States have been historically responsible for the emission of greenhouse gasses, China has meanwhile overtaken the rest of the world to become the leading emitter as global production moved into China in recent decades.

In the *second section* of this book, we collected discussions on labor and racism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The last couple of years were characterized by the spatial and industrial restructuring of the Chinese economy. Workers’ bargaining power was, weakened. In *chapter 4*, Eli Friedman of Cornell University and two labor activists from Southern China discuss how labor organizers could continue their activity under the changing conditions, what organizing strategies could be used, and how activists outside of China could act in solidarity.

Chapter 5 addresses racial violence as well as right-wing and fascist politics that were fueled across the globe in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Gigi Mei, Kimiko Suda, Shan Windscrip, and JM Wong, scholars and activists from the Asian diaspora in the U.S., Australia, and Europe, discuss how the pandemic has also seen heightened organizing efforts by communities of color to counter racism and forge solidarity with struggles beyond the borders. They reflect on local struggles they have been involved in and discuss the possibility of transnational organizing.

The *third section* addresses the situation in China’s periphery. In *chapter 6*, Darren Byler considers economic and political factors that have produced protest and violence in Northwest China (Xinjiang), rather than drawing on frameworks of “human rights” or “ethnic conflicts.” Building on his in-depth research on the conditions for Uyghurs and other Muslim populations in Xinjiang, he describes how the Chinese state has used repressive institutions for the ethno-racialization of social relations and the establishment a “reeducation labor regime” at this

frontier of global capitalism. He argues that the material and digital enclosures of Uyghurs can be thought of as part of a process of “primitive accumulation.”

In *chapter 7*, Brian Hioe of New Bloom Magazine explores the progressive forces in Taiwan, their history, multiple currents, and tendencies, as well as the possibilities of progressive changes in Taiwan. In mainstream media around the globe, Taiwanese politics and society have often been primarily viewed through the lens of the relationship between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. That perspective obscures the complex political developments and vibrant social movements in Taiwan.

In *chapter 8*, Promise Li, member of the Lausan Collective, discusses the Hong Kong protest movement in 2019 and 2020 which has often been described as “non-ideological” and was supported by a big part of Hong Kong society. While right-wing ideas gained traction in the movement, left-wing and anti-capitalist formations were largely sidelined, despite the city showing a high degree of social inequality. Promise Li explores the factions in the localist movement that sympathized with U.S. president Donald Trump, reveals important truths about Hong Kong’s own colonial legacy, and discusses the contradictions that lie in the vision of democracy and self-determination in Hong Kong.

The *fourth section* brings together contributions on China in the world as well as on the experiences and legacies of historical socialism. *Chapter 9* focuses on Indonesia as a central partner of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. In recent years, more than 1,000 Chinese state-owned and private companies have invested in Indonesia. Their central aim is securing the supply of raw materials and primary products for China’s manufacturing sector. Against this background, Alfian Al-Ayubby discusses the situation in a Chinese-run mining and metal production facility on Sulawesi, and Y. Wasi Gede Puraka looks at the reactions and struggles of workers there. The subsequent discussion addresses Chinese investments in other parts of Indonesia and conflicts between Chinese and local capital factions.

In *chapter 10*, Isabella Weber, author of *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (Routledge, 2021), discusses the intense debates and conflicts over the Communist Party’s reform course since the 1980s. China’s reformers agreed that the country had to reform its economic system and move toward more marketization—but struggled over how to go about it. Should China destroy the core of the socialist system through shock therapy, or should it use the institutions of the planned economy as market creators?

In *chapter 11*, Ralf Ruckus takes a closer look at socialist legacies as well as today’s capitalist realities in the People’s Republic of China. The history of the country is often told as one of revolution or turmoil during the socialist period

followed by market reforms after 1978 that changed the course and caused the country's economic rise. Yet, despite this rupture in 1978, one constant remained: the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Ralf Ruckus elaborates on the main arguments of his book *The Communist Road to Capitalism. How Social Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)evolution since 1949* (PM Press, 2021) and discusses what we can learn from the PRC experience for a left-wing strategy that avoids past mistakes.

Inspired by the talks and debates collected in this volume, we compiled an *afterword* with a reflection on our support of movements and grassroots activism in China. Most of all, we share thoughts and experiences on solidarity: What do we understand as solidarity? What kind of practical solidarities have we been engaged in, and why? And what can we learn about cross-border solidarity from the texts collected in this volume?

Last not least, we want to thank our friends and comrades because without their help and support organizing the webinar series, transcribing the contributions and translating the content would not have been possible.

The Editors

Ralf Ruckus has long been involved in social struggles and left-wing initiatives in countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and East Asia. Since the 2000s, an important focus has been the struggle of workers, migrants, and women* in China. Ralf co-founded Gongchao Collective (<https://gongchao.org>) in 2008 and helped translate, edit, or publish a range of books written by Chinese workers, labor and feminist activists, or left-wing academics into other languages since. Translated books include, more recently, the German editions of Zhang Lu's *Inside China's Automobile Factories* (2018) and Wu Yiching's *The Cultural Revolution from the Margins* (2019). In 2018, Ralf collaborated on the publication of three volumes with texts on Italian workerism, class struggle, and feminism in Chinese (工人主义及其批判: *Operaismo and Its Critique*).¹ In 2021, Ralf's first book *The Communist Road to Capitalism. How Social Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)evolution since 1949* came out at PM Press,² and, in 2023, Pluto Press publishes Ralf's second book: *The Left in China. A Political Cartography*.³ For more detailed information on articles, books, and podcasts, please, see <https://nqch.org>.

Kevin Lin is the Managing Editor of Asian Labour Review. Kevin has been a labor activist and researcher on China labor issues for over a decade. He has researched and written about the development of labor movement, migrant worker organizing, labor NGOs, and civil society in China. He has published his research in academic journals such as Journal of Contemporary China, China Perspectives, New Labor Forum, East Asia Forum, and South Atlantic Quarterly. He has contributed chapters to edited volumes such as *China Story Yearbook 2021: Contradiction* (Australian University Press, 2022), *Proletarian China: A Century of Chinese Labour* (Verso 2022), *Afterlives of Chinese Communism* (2020), *Chinese Workers in Comparative Perspective* (Cornell University Press 2015), and *Globalization and Transnational Capitalism in Asia and Oceania* (Routledge 2015). His activist writings have appeared in Labor Notes, Jacobin, OpenDemocracy, Progress in Political Economy, and The Conversation. He is also an editor

¹ The three volumes can be downloaded at <https://www.gongchao.org/cn/gongrenzhuyi-ji-qi-pi-pan>.

² A German edition is planned for 2024. The Chinese edition can be downloaded as PDF at <https://www.gongchao.org/cn/tongxiang-zibenzhuyi-de-gongchanzhuyi-daolu>. Information on the French is available at <https://www.gongchao.org/fr/la-voie-communiste-vers-le-capitalisme>.

³ For the English edition see <https://www.gongchao.org/en/the-left-in-china>; For the German edition see <https://www.gongchao.org/de/die-linke-in-china>.

of the *Made in China Journal*, and he is an editor of *The China Question: Toward Left Perspectives* (Verso, 2022).

Jule Pfeffer studied Sinology and East Asian Studies in Leipzig, Taiwan, and Leiden. She wrote her master thesis on labor poetry, particularly on the anthology *女工记* (Female Workers: A Record) by Zheng Xiaoqiong. In this thesis she focused on Zheng's portrayal of female workers in their relationship to marriage. Other aspects are the destruction of the human body by the processes at the assembly line in factories and the dislocation of the individuals, who move from their hometowns to unknown cities. In 2020, she participated in organizing the EU-China critical action days in Leipzig. Jule was part of the group Left Echo, which disbanded in 2021.

Daniel Reineke is a researcher based in Berlin. His academic work focuses on industrial policy, labor relations, and migration, and he is the co-editor of several books on labor and class relations in China. He is a co-founder of the Gongchao Collective for which he has been involved in translating texts by Chinese researchers and activists into German since 2008.

I. Current Contradictions

1 | Gender Awakening, Care Crisis, and Made-in-China Feminism

Presentation: Dong Yige

Moderation: Jule Pfeffer and Ralf Ruckus¹

Jule Pfeffer (JP): Welcome to our talk today. Together with Dong Yige, we will discuss grassroots activism and cultural phenomena related to gender and women rights in China. Thereby we want to raise questions such as: What are the current issues faced by feminists and women in China? And given the context of increasing state repression and authoritarian rule as well as the concurrent mainstreaming and cooptation of certain gender-related issues by the state and corporate players, what kind of strategies and campaigns are used by feminists and women in confronting these issues? Moreover, we will also talk about what Yige and Angela Wu have called Made-in-China Feminism, that is, the outcry and actions of women who do not necessarily label themselves as feminists but still try to develop strategies in confronting patriarchal structures and politics.²

Let me introduce today's speaker, Dong Yige. She is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Global Gender & Sexuality Studies at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. She obtained her PhD in sociology from the Johns Hopkins University, and her research focuses on feminism, political economy, labor, gender relations, and contentious politics. Besides her academic writings, she also publishes essays and gives talks about labor and gender issues as well as Chinese feminism. Moreover, she is part of the editorial board of the Made in China Journal.

Dong Yige (DYG): Thank you so much for the introduction, Jule. It is always a pleasure to work with you, Ralf, and Daniel. Let me try to hammer home a few points that I want to make in the next ten minutes, and then we can dive into more detailed discussions.

In the last decade, the PRC has seen a growing number of gender and women's rights issues in the form of incidents, social controversies, and sensational stories that have been circulating in the media. I think for most observers in the international community, it was the detention of the Feminist Five in 2015

¹ This webinar took place on February 6, 2021. The English recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/02/23/podcast-made-in-china-feminism>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

² Wu, Angela Xiao, and Dong Yige, "What is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-socialist China." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2019), 471–492; Wu, Angela Xiao, and Dong Yige, "The Making of 'Made-in-China' Feminism." *Sixth Tone*, November 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/jf8vr56c>.

and the global campaign supporting them that marked a watershed moment in the gender politics of contemporary China.³ After 2015, on the one hand, the state has tightened its grip on political activism, and it has been getting harder or even unlikely to explicitly carry the label of feminist activists to try to organize public campaigns around sexual harassment, domestic violence, and so on—especially in the form of, for instance, taking to the street. On the other hand, we have seen the beginning of a decentralized movement on the internet, such as the #MeToo movement starting in early 2018.

More broadly speaking, we have seen that pan-gender and women's rights issues have been mainstreamed to some extent and even selectively co-opted by branches of the government and corporations. By mainstreamed, I mean that there has been a proliferation of what Angela Wu and I coined as Made-in-China Feminism, in other words, outcries and actions by women who do not necessarily label themselves as feminists, as a political force. Today you do not have to be a self-identified feminist in China to feel related to many topics discussed by feminists. In other words, caring about women's rights and interests is not something that just a radical branch of people in the society is doing. Common men and women, especially young women, are pretty much concerned with these issues.

Many scholars and observers, including Chinese feminists themselves, have already analyzed many of these ongoing issues and the related social transformation. The most dominant discourse, as far as I can see, is that Chinese women have become unprecedentedly aware of their own rights and freedom, and that some of the most heroic ones are willing to stand up against the powerful state. I want to add a particular perspective to this conversation, a perspective that tries to tie the political discourse and cultural formation to the political economy.

Over the past four decades, China's reintegration into global capitalism has brought forth an unprecedented accumulation of wealth, the spectacular rise of an urban middle class, and glaring class discrepancies. More particularly, I would like to highlight that the current regime of accumulation in China is prone to crises of social reproduction. Of course, I am not the one who has invented social reproduction theory. It has a long-standing Marxist feminist tradition, and it has recently been revived in many feminist circles—especially in the Global North, but I think it has been spreading around the entire globe.

From this very particular perspective of social reproduction, we can see on the one hand, that China's development model essentially depends on exploiting labor and denying workers protection and welfare provisions. That is the reason

³ Dong Yige, "Does China Have a Feminist Movement from the Left?" *Made in China Journal*, April 18, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mr23phe9>.

why China has been able to become the factory of the world in the last two or three decades. On the other hand, with this spectacular economic development, and with the massive scale of urbanization and industrialization, the cost of labor's social reproduction has been rising very quickly. Yet, the Chinese state has not provided adequate support in pension, health care, child care, housing, and so on, especially for rural migrant labor. Actually, many would argue that the state intentionally leaves rural migrants' social reproduction to their home villages, since from the perspective of the capitalist, this lowers the related costs.

Nationwide, social reproductive services that had been provided for urban workers through work units in the socialist period were fully dismantled between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, China is among the very few countries in the world that has zero government expenditures on care services for children under age three. Without public resources, a private market for social reproduction has emerged, and population policies and the reproductive culture have led to a skyrocketing price of social reproduction. For instance, if you look at the bride price in rural China, in order to marry a woman, you have to afford about 40,000 U.S.-dollars to purchase an apartment and an automobile. In urban areas, despite the lift of the One-Child Policy in late 2015, fertility rates have been declining as families find it really hard to afford the cost of rearing more than one child. The exact figure is a matter of controversy, but the currently estimated fertility rate in China is between 1.3 and 1.8. It is, in any case, below the replacement rate and among the lowest in the world.

How do the Chinese state and capital respond to this crisis? They have a very functional perspective: "Oh, we are ageing before we have become rich enough. We suddenly have a lack of relatively cheap and affordable labor." The state moved from a very stringent childbirth policy towards encouraging births and reforming its policies related to maternity benefits. Since Xi Jinping took power, there has been an increasing emphasis on family values and on women's essential role in taking care of the family. At the same time, private companies have been very smart. In several ways, they have started capitalizing on this crisis, on family's lack of support and parents' anxiety. For instance, there is a huge market on maternity care services, such as postpartum nannies and domestic workers. I have written an article about this.⁴ There has also been a tremendous growth of pre-school education and after-school services. This is a lucrative business now.

Who bears the brunt of this crisis of social reproduction? There is a huge unevenness among different social groups. Rural migrant women shoulder most

⁴ Dong Yige, "Spinners or Sitters? Regimes of Social Reproduction and Urban Chinese Workers' Employment Choices." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 2–3 (2020), 200–216.

of the crisis, in two ways: the service sector has already surpassed manufacturing in terms of employment in China, and rural women mostly find jobs in the informal care sector that is not yet regulated and does not offer any protection. Most of them have to leave their own children with the grandparents in the countryside. As a result, they have what I call “care as debt.”⁵ On the one hand, they have to work in the cities to make more money to provide for their families. On the other hand, they have this emotional debt to their own families, constantly feeling guilty because of the “left-behind” children. At the same time, both rural and urban women are being pushed to provide free reproductive labor within their families. This is encouraged by the state and the media discourse.

Any children whose families cannot afford to buy private services are at a disadvantage, because the less extracurricular or post-school services you can afford, the less likely you are to have a chance in the ever-competitive job market. That is why, today, many second-generation migrant workers in China just give up studying or having any hope of upward mobility. You might have seen the documentary 杀马特，我爱你 (*sha ma te, wo ai ni*) that portrays those second-generation migrant workers who lost their hope in upward mobility, do casual and precarious work, and build their own identity around something else.⁶

How do Chinese feminists and ordinary women react to all of this? I leave the historical review of different waves of Chinese feminism(s) for the Q&A and will talk about what Angela and I have called Made-in-China Feminism. To us, the biggest difference between today’s feminism and women’s awareness of their rights and interests compared to that of the previous generation is the following: We see a more organic reaction to a system that pushes women back to the social role of human producers and caregivers in a society marked by widening class inequalities. This has also been called 田园女权主义 (*tianyuan nüquan zhuyi*) or “country feminism,” precisely because it is not a movement led by small vanguard groups but instead gathering its momentum and followers in a very grassroots and organic way.

More and more women declare that they refuse to get married and that they refuse to bear children. Instead, they seek to develop their personal skills in order to succeed on the labor market. They prefer to rely on their own economic success to achieve upward class mobility. This encapsulates the essence of one strand of Made-in-China Feminism, the one that we call the “non-cooperative” strand. The other strand of Made-in-China Feminism is what we call the “entrepreneurial”

⁵ Dong Yige, *The Fabric of Care: Women’s Work and the Politics of Livelihood in Industrial China* (book-in-progress).

⁶ The English title of this documentary is “We Were Smart.” See <https://tinyurl.com/yncbw8dz>.

strand. At the surface, women who are following this strand are more cooperative, because they talk about how to get married, and how to marry up in order to make a better material life for themselves. But they are really cynical about this heteronormative marriage system. They marry not because they are looking for anything romantic. They marry because they figure out that—given the gender and class structure—the best way to pursue their personal interest actually is to play the system, to navigate the system, and to get upward mobility by marrying up without truly believing in romantic relationships.

Let me quickly comment on why I am framing the entire issue in this particular way—with an emphasis on the political economy. It has both an analytical and a strategic purpose. By analytical I mean that one cannot really understand the gender discontent as well as the backlash against women who stand out in the labor market by ignoring the class factor and the political economy. By strategic I mean that there is a lot of potential in organizing around the site of social reproduction. It is a global transnational movement, since many feminists across the globe are starting to organize on gender issues in relation to social reproduction. And it is very relevant for China, because China is an extreme case where capital accumulation cannot really sustain itself. On the one hand, it relies on social reproductive labor for the supply of a cheap workforce, while on the other hand, it constantly seeks to destroy the very foundations on which social reproductive labor is sustained. This contradiction is not particular to China, but I think that China provides one of its extreme cases. This is why I think that organizing around social reproduction offers a lot of potential and why I want to highlight the site of social reproduction as a site of struggle.

I want to propose several agenda items: The first one that we can think about is the still highly informal domestic labor market. As of 2016, China had about 21 million domestic workers, and ninety per cent of them were migrant workers. Because of the political structure, it is difficult for them to have any associational power. But they do have what Beverly Silver and others called “structural bargaining power.” There is a real demand for their care labor, because without them middle class families cannot sustain their daily reproduction. That explains why that market is still lucrative today. This structural bargaining power might be transformed into something that can enable those workers to seek protection and a minimal degree of regulation at least. Another avenue that I find interesting is the legal realm. Given the emergence of the #MeToo movement and some recent high-profile cases—including Xianzi (弦子) suing Zhu Jun (朱军), the most powerful TV anchor in China, because of his sexual harassment against her—I think that the legal arena can become something with which feminists can work as well.

JP: Thank you for your very interesting talk. You just mentioned Xianzi and the harassment case. Could you please talk about the experiences of sexist exclusion, discrimination, and sexualized violence in everyday life in China. How, for example, does Xianzi's case relate to experiences of other women in China?

DYG: In general, we have to think about the sexist culture and discrimination in relation to China's power hierarchy. Of course, misogyny, sexist culture, and sexism are not exclusive to China. But what is particular in China is that these phenomena are closely tied to its highly uneven power structure. If you are Zhu Jun, the most prominent TV anchor who works for the party-state, you are bulletproof. Even Xianzi herself said: "I know that I will probably not win the case whatsoever. But I want to use this channel to make my point heard and seen." It is not even just an uphill battle, but probably outright impossible to win the case against Zhu Jun. This also pertains to the powerful business sector. Here, another example is the case filed by Liu Jingyao (刘静尧) against Liu Qiangdong (刘强东), a business tycoon. I recently read an article about female cadres within the Communist Party which shows that the more power is concentrated and entrenched, the less likely women will have a chance to gain equal power with men.⁷ This is the bigger picture: It is hard to talk about sexist exclusion and discrimination without mentioning the general political and economic power hierarchies behind that.

JP: In what ways do women face the hierarchical and patriarchal structures in the legal arena? And how is it possible to deal with or fight back against these forms of discrimination and violence? For instance, where do you see the potentials and limitations of this form of activism in China's #MeToo movement?

DYG: I applaud their strategy, and I think for everyone participating in the #MeToo movement, their first and most immediate goal is to achieve justice in their individual cases. I also think they take the legal channel to show that they still have faith in the formal legal sphere. At the same time, people are smart enough to know that, under current political conditions, it is really hard to trust the legal system as the ultimate tool, as a tool to address all the unjust issues. Many of them are aware of that, and they are using these high-profile cases as a tool to advocate for long-term reform and a transformation of the gender culture in China. Again, going back to Xianzi's case, she mentioned that she will probably lose the case, but she sees the value of making this a high-profile case and using it to advocate change. I thus think the legal arena is very important. Beyond that, I would say that, after the detention of the Feminist Five in 2015, the general strategy of Chinese vanguard feminists has also been changing from demonstra-

⁷ Shen Lu, "Pretty Lady Cadres." *ChinaFile*, December 21, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/vn37xrwy>.

tions and protests to long-term work in the cultural realm. That is the most salient strategy I have seen so far.

JP: You have already mentioned the “structural bargaining power” of domestic workers. Someone in the audience asks whether there are spaces or institutions in which domestic workers gather or organize, for instance in sisterhoods, in order to help each other in finding new employers?

DYG: I think it is pretty challenging in terms of sisterhoods, for two reasons. First, horizontally speaking, how do we organize all the domestic workers in the informal sector? Here, we are confronted with an issue faced by domestic workers across the globe: They work in individual households, not on a factory shop floor where alliances can emerge more easily. These are cellular and isolated conditions, and this is also related to the recruitment practices: There are two ways in which domestic workers find their jobs. Some of them look for a client through a nanny agency. But an agency usually charges a twenty or thirty per cent commission fee. Therefore, many domestic workers, once they have built up their reputation, contact the potential clients directly to save those commission fees. This strategy, however, makes domestic workers even more isolated from each other. That is the first challenge.

Second, vertically speaking, you can definitely see much more conflicts with clients who happen to be women as well, either the wife or the grandmother in the family. There is more conflict than sisterhood or mutual understanding across the class line. They are in different positions, even though they are all women. I think this is an issue for feminists anywhere. Class distinction is preventing women from forming an alliance.

Is there any way we can solve this problem? I think the legacies from Chinese feminists of the earlier generation are very important. In particular, I want to mention their focus on migrant women’s rights and also on rural women who lost their land by marrying out. Such campaigns and awareness-raising movements are not new. This type of work has been organized by Chinese feminists at least since the early 1990s, for instance at the NGO *nongjia nü* (农家女; rural women) in Beijing. Feminists today are still doing this type of work, and that is where you can find the seeds and the foundations for the next steps in alliance-building. The question is whether they can gain further momentum, given the current level of suppression and repression. We thus need to acknowledge the huge obstacles and challenges that still exist.

JP: There is one question from the audience that relates to the concept of Made-in-China Feminism. What are the particular aspects of Made-in-China Feminism—traits that might derive from either the socialist legacy such as the *hukou* (户口), or from the state discourse on Confucian cultural patriarchy? And what are

the more universal aspects related to global capitalism? Could you talk about the symbiosis of these aspects in more detail?

DYG: I think the way I can reply to this is by trying to comb through several factors which I and Angela analyzed in our article. The short answer is: Yes, they all matter. The longer answer is: In conceptualizing this particular phenomenon as Made-in-China Feminism, we by no means want to essentialize Chinese culture or contemporary Chinese women's subjectivity as if there would be anything particularly "Chinese" about it. We actually want to unpack this huge black box. That is why we start with a historical analysis and by identifying how all those different factors matter in a particular, historically conditioned way.

With regards to the socialist legacy, of course, the biggest issue is that patriarchy was more or less reconfigured during the socialist period. We all know that one of the main goals of the communist revolution was women's liberation, but despite the rhetoric, it did not achieve that goal. However, there is still an ongoing debate whether women's liberation was not thorough enough because it was all just lip service or whether we should take the communist women's movement more seriously and assess its contradictions and built-in limitations.

I think, the most relevant legacy of socialism in contemporary China is the rhetoric around ideas such as "equal pay for equal work," that is, the idea that women have to be economically empowered before they can be truly liberated—however you define liberation. It is because of such discourses and corresponding institutional set-ups in the socialist period that most Chinese still believe today that women should work, that they should receive the same education as men and that they should compete with men in the labor market. If, one day, you leave the workforce and become a full-time homemaker, then you would have to justify why you do that. It is the opposite compared to countries in the Global North, where you initially had a homemaker-breadwinner model, and then gradually, since the 1970s, more women started entering the labor force. Even today, in many places around the world, you would not have to justify being a homemaker.

This is why I think that the most important socialist legacy is the idea that women's empowerment is tied to their economic independence. The discourse around this idea has been changing in China, but it is still very influential today. This helps to explain why, among the strands of Made-in-China Feminism, many women truly believe in the neoliberal idea that individual merit matters and that upward class mobility is the best way to achieve happiness.

With regards to Confucianism, on the one hand, it has always been present in China as a sort of cultural discourse. On the other hand, we need to ask who are the agents promoting the related rhetoric and values in different historical contexts. In modern Chinese history, there have been major historical moments

(the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution) when Confucianism was under fierce attack either by intellectuals or the state. In the early reform era, many male elites actively promoted gender essentialist values and ideologies by borrowing and coopting the Confucianist rhetoric. But for Chinese women, it is not the case that they have been inevitably influenced by or subjected to the Confucian doctrine. Thus, Confucianism has little power explaining Chinese feminism today.

Finally, on the matter of neoliberalism: I think China's capitalist turn has only exacerbated the fact that class mobility and competitiveness in the labor market are one's essential means to guarantee a certain socioeconomic status. That is why most women also see this as the viable route to go forward.

JP: You already talked about reproductive work and the idea that we should organize on a global scale. To some extent this is a point that Nancy Fraser has been making as well, and you also mention Fraser in your work. This makes me wonder about the influence of feminist writers and activists from outside China: Who has influenced your work on the topic?

DYG: I think these days among Chinese feminists, Nancy Fraser has become one of the go-to theorists, because of her powerful intervention in the ongoing social reproduction theory debate. Of course, she is neither the only one nor the first one who has written about that. But it happens to be the case that she, compared to other contemporaries, is more influential in China.

Another influential scholar is Chizuko Ueno (上野千鹤子), a Japanese feminist sociologist who wrote about misogyny, patriarchy, and capitalism. But their readers constitute a smaller section among Chinese women who care about women's issues and who read a lot. If you would ask a generically educated woman in China about who is the most famous feminist, I think the first name that would come up is Simone de Beauvoir.

I think there are some interesting hybrids of the second wave and the contemporary feminist movement. On the one hand, liberal feminists of the second wave are the ones who have been brought to China since the 1980s. On the other hand, faced with the increasing class injustice and the more recent "996" campaign, labor has become an issue not only for lower working-class people. Middle class or white-collar workers also have to deal with overtime work, abusive employment relationships, and financial hardships. In other words, economic issues have become more salient for everyone. That is why today, left-leaning feminist discourses also attract a lot of people.

I have to emphasize that it is not a one-directional thing. It is not the case that Chinese readers are just passively digesting what feminists outside China have to

say. In fact, you will find many grassroots, organic writings by Chinese women on various online platforms, including Douban (豆瓣), Zhihu (知乎), and so on. It is unfortunate, however, that the translation is one-directional. Publishers would only translate works written by foreigners to the Chinese audience. This has also to do with the fact that it is politically safer to translate an already published book endorsed by the academic establishment. It is riskier or even impossible to publish your own writing on those sensitive issues if you are living in China.

What I personally benefit from most are the online discussions, written and penned by contemporaries, women who are about the same age or even younger than me, women who may or may not have a degree in sociology or gender studies. They have a lot of highly original comments and writings. There are a few names that I think everybody should read and care about. I think Lü Pin (吕频) has been one of the most original thinkers and writers over the past years. So far, I think, she has not published in English, but I am looking forward to her work being translated. Another high-profile liberal feminist is Zhao Sile (赵思乐), or Alison Zhao. She has a book in Chinese titled *Tamen de zhengtu* (她们的征途), “Her Battles.”⁸ There are also grassroots feminist publications by collectives and media platforms such as “*Nüquan zhi sheng*” (女权之声) or “Feminist Voices” and “*Xin meiti nüxing*” (新媒体女性) or “Women Awakening.” They have published hundreds and thousands of essays and articles written by different participants in the movement. Unfortunately, they have not been translated into English yet. I do see mutual exchange of original thinking as a very crucial way to help cultivate transnational solidarity, and I am still waiting for it to happen.

JP: Thanks a lot for this. I will hand over to Ralf who will ask you further questions.

Ralf Ruckus (RR): We have got a lot of questions from the audience, and I am afraid Yige will not be able to answer them all. A few questions focus on class divides between women in China, and how the different feminist strands are addressing this issue. What role does the class background play in feminist debates? What are the particular positions of middle-class women in the movement? Do they address issues of women with other class backgrounds, for instance working class women? Is it possible to bridge the class divides?

DYG: I do think these are two questions. First, let me try to answer the question on the recognition, alliances, or connections between and within different groups of women. This is an ongoing process, and my observations are definitely temporary. A few years ago, I was still arguing with others that you should not accuse

⁸ See Cheng, Nathanael, “Zhao Sile and her Battles.” *New Bloom Magazine*, January 13, 2021, <https://newbloommag.net/2021/01/13/zhao-sile-profile>.

Chinese women's voices and actions of being too urban-biased and bourgeois. That was at a time when the Feminist Five were being accused of coming from an urban privileged position. I wrote an article to debunk that by arguing that two or three activists from the Feminist Five came from a rural background, and that they also fought for rural women's rights. But I think my position has changed a little bit since then when it comes to assessing women who talk about their own rights and interests. For instance, recently there has been a heated debate about surrogacy in China, which revealed a clear class bias. In those online debates, there has been very little discussion about female delivery workers or factory workers.

Nevertheless, the point that I and Angela make in *Made-in-China Feminism* still holds: We should not accuse the individuals who have such a bias, because the underlying problem does not start with them. You cannot educate individuals telling them "You are too narrowminded. You should really think for a higher cause, for the entire proletariat class." This is naïve and does not really work. Given today's tightening political control and the increasingly suffocating atmosphere, we are arguing that any voices that trying to destabilize the status quo—the rigid structure characterized by the entanglement of patriarchy with political and capitalist power—are actually helpful.

In terms of potential alliances, we sometimes still need to rely on some of the "vanguards" and original thinkers, who can articulate the issue differently. And again, I would like to emphasize a focus on the site of social reproduction: It has the potential to bring together women from different backgrounds, because we all have this shared position of being primarily seen as caregivers and human producers.

RR: Thank you! There are several questions on the role of the Women's Federation. What is the role of the Women's Federation today? And what role has the Women's Federation played in the socialist period?

DYG: First of all, I would recommend Wang Zheng's (王政) book.⁹ It is a must-read for anyone interested in Chinese feminism and the history of socialism in China. It is titled *Finding Women in the State*, and it offers a very historical understanding of the Women's Federation. Actually, I am working on an article on the question of how, in the period the Communist Party's formation in the 1920s, pioneer feminists such as Xiang Jingyu (向警予) and Yang Zhihua (杨之华) shaped the direction and the nature of feminist elements within the party. Wang Zheng's story starts in the late 1940s and follows the Women's Federation through to the

⁹ Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State. A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

1960s when it was this all-encompassing umbrella organization, a united front organization that tried to connect the party to the masses. It was the women within the party who did most of the job by pushing male leaders to care more about women's issues.

However, I think for the reasons that Wang Zheng points out in her book, since the late 1970s and the 1980s when China moved onto a capitalist trajectory, the Women's Federation has become more of a government branch, and it has become very bureaucratic. The women who have later joined the Federation have mostly been careerists, but not all of them of course. There have always been women within the Women's Federation, even today, who really care about women's issues and who are practicing "the politics of concealment." This term, coined by Wang Zheng, refers to the fact that when working within the party-state, in order to push forward their feminist agenda, Chinese state feminists oftentimes have to conceal their true purpose and toe the party line to avoid conflict and secure key figures' support. So, there is definitely an historical angle to it: You cannot use just one label to describe the nature of the Women's Federation, since it has experienced significant historical transformations.

However, even if we understand the Women's Federation today just as a branch of the government, then having that women's branch within the government still brings a lot of advantages. Look, for instance, at the domestic violence law that was passed in 2015: A generation of grassroots women feminists, NGO feminists, lawyers, and journalists participated and contributed to the campaign to pass that law. But at the end of the day, it was the Women's Federation who had the legal status and political position to propose the law to get passed. If you are a grassroots organization, you do not have that power. It was the collaboration between grassroots feminists and cadres within the Women's Federation between the late 2000s and early 2010s that enabled the passing of this law. That, I think, is the role of the Federation.

However, I am not optimistic with regards to the current situation. The trend is that state feminism is more and more suppressed. It has become much harder to collaborate across the boundary between those outside the Federation and those within. This is very unfortunate.

RR: Thank you. I would like to address a question about reproductive policies, especially the legacy of the One-Child Policy and the very low fertility rates today that you mentioned earlier. The state obviously wants to encourage women or force women in whatever way to have more children. How is this discussed in the feminist strands? And what is your position on this?

DYG: That is a very important question. Based on our observation, the non-cooperative strand is very clear and resolute about one thing, that is: "We refuse to

marry, and we refuse to give birth to children.” Because it is clear to them that the government has a very functionalist view about women’s body and women’s sexuality. The only thing that the state and the system care about is how much labor you can reproduce, and that is why the state is trying to restore women’s role as essential caregivers. Feminists from the non-cooperative strand say: “I decide not to fall into that trap. I do not want my uterus hijacked by the system. Instead, I will focus on studying hard, maybe going abroad. Or I will be just working hard so that I can secure my own apartment or my property. I rely on myself.”

Beyond that, I think it is outrageous that the debates and conversations related to population policy, family planning policy, and demography are dominated by men. The fact is that population issues are heatedly debated in China, but few women are asked to actually participate in the official debate. The women’s voices that we are hearing are from the internet or the grassroots community, but when it comes to official debates on reproductive policies, women’s voices are excluded. What I am trying to say is: Tensions will get even bigger between the functionalist view from the government and employers on the one hand, and individual women’s discontent and their impulse for maintaining their autonomy on the other hand. I think it is just a matter of time until China will switch to an even more pronatalist policy.

As long as individual rights or collective rights are protected, I do not see low fertility rates as a real problem, particularly from a feminist point of view. Instead, low fertility rates are a problem for a productivist state, for a productivist capitalist economy.

RR: The last time we talked to you, Wei Tingting (韦婷婷) also participated. We had a discussion on the feminist movement and the LGBT movement in China.¹⁰ How are these movements connected? And how do the two strands of feminism that you mentioned earlier as well as the not explicitly feminist online debates address the issue of non-binary gender identities and the people who do not want to stick to a binary gender concept?

DYG: Since I am not presenting a written paper on this question, I want to throw out some ideas that are not mature yet. It is hard to talk about LGBT or non-binary in a very monolithic way. My observations are mostly based on those who are being identified as women by others, and their positions are very different from, for instance, gay men who are looking for surrogacy opportunities. So, for me it is hard to see solidarity in that case yet. I see more potential in terms of solidarity between straight, heteronormative women and lesbian women, because

¹⁰ See <https://www.gongchao.org/2020/08/17/online-discussion-series-china-and-the-left>.

there is a shared position: no matter what your self-identification is, you are relegated by the system to the role of a caregiver and reproducer. For some people, there is huge pressure from the family, from the parents. Even if you tell them that you are not interested in the opposite sex, your parents would still try to persuade you to get married one day and have offspring.

So, I see a shared position by those individuals who are externally identified as women. I see less connections and sometimes even contradictions between people who have a uterus and those who do not or who want to reproduce by outsourcing that. Again, because there is a shared position among those who are able to reproduce. Thus, I am optimistic about alliances among certain types of LGBT communities and non-LGBT communities, but I see less opportunities for alliances among other types. That is my very honest and temporary assessment on that issue, and I just want to throw it out there.

JP: What forms of solidarity exist today between the feminist movement and other movements in China, such as the environmental movement or, since it also plays a big role in your writings, labor activism?

DYG: Let me point out several things here. I was also asked in the past how feminist movements build solidarity across the board and relate to other movements, and I appreciate those questions. But what I want to highlight is that environmental and labor movements should be aware of their own blind spots in terms of gender. So, how to make those movements more inclusive in the first place?

I have a lot of feminist friends, peers, and colleagues who are not only interested in gender and women's issues. If you are generally interested in and care about social justice, you naturally care about several issues. But oftentimes, when joining social movements that are not centered on feminist causes, many women are being excluded or feel the sense of exclusion. I have seen that in the labor movement. I have seen that a little bit in other types of movements too, and the history of the Communist Party itself showed the same thing, right? Women were actively participating in the early formation of the Communist Party movement. They sacrificed a lot and they were in charge of a lot of key positions. But gradually, they were sidelined and excluded. And I can still see this today. So, my answer is that if you talk about solidarity, it should be mutual. It is not just about how feminist movements try to relate to others, but also how other movements can be aware of their own blind spots. I think the best strategy forward is doing what we have been doing, that is, trying to be very focused and unapologetic.

In the past, many feminists were being accused of being separatists, which is a negative, derogative term within the Communist Party. But I think at this stage, this so-called separatist role is necessary to gather women. We need to bring

women together to make our voices louder and more widely heard. Only then can you really and fundamentally change the very misogynistic and sexist culture. And only then you can start talking about a truly inclusive social movement. I do not think that it is necessary to rush into others' movements, because your position can easily get washed down.

JP: Another big question relates to the conditions for solidarity across borders and between the global North and the global South. What are, in your view, the main problems but also opportunities regarding cross-border solidarity?

DYG: Since we have very little time left, I will keep my answer short and point to a particular silver-lining. What makes me very hopeful are developments in the diaspora communities, among first-generation overseas Chinese students and professionals. I am now living in the United States, and I can feel this strongly in my daily life. I think the number of overseas Chinese who are concerned about social justice is steadily increasing. Waves of social movements in the U.S. and Europe, such as the Occupy movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, have cultivated a new generation of Chinese diaspora. For example, Luo Xixi (罗茜茜), who initiated the Chinese #MeToo movement, is an employee in Silicon Valley. She was inspired by the #MeToo movement in the U.S. and then shared her story in Chinese communities.

Here you can really see how people are bridging communities and building solidarity. When we talk about solidarity between the Global South and the Global North, we should not understand it as a very vague, abstract term. It has to be built by real people in real life. And I see people capable of doing this in the Chinese diaspora communities. Censorship and misinformation campaigns are a real challenge, but when you are temporarily living overseas you enjoy a certain advantage in this regard, because you face less censorship and you have better access to reliable information. I therefore see a lot of vibrancy in those communities. I would like to recommend an article indirectly related to this by Zhao Mengyang that was published in *Critical Sociology*.¹¹ The article talks about Chinese overseas students' engagement in social movements and the obstacles they have been facing in the U.S.

A last point I want to make is that the exchange of language, of original knowledge and ideas, should be mutual and not just in one direction. Unfortunately, even for many people living in China, they have the impression that feminism is something that was "imported." This is not true. There were already feminist thinkers in China a hundred years ago, like He-Yin Zhen (何殷震).

¹¹ Zhao Mengyang, "Solidarity Stalled: When Chinese Activists Meet Social Movements in Democracies." *Critical Sociology*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2021), 281–297.

JP: We are at the end of our talk. Any last words you want to share with your audience?

DYG: Thanks to everyone. My very last point is that we should try to read texts originally written by Chinese feminists living either inside or outside China. There are also many awesome feminist podcasts out there in Chinese. It is really hard to just use thirty or forty minutes to tell you about feminism in China, because it is quickly growing and diversifying, and that is a good thing.

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2 | Tech Workers and Rising Class Consciousness in China

Presentation: JS Tan

Moderation: Kevin Lin¹

Kevin Lin (KL): Today we have JS Tan with us to talk about tech workers in China. JS is a former tech worker in the U.S. and has written widely about tech, labor, and China. With China's tech sector growing exponentially in recent years, tech workers are under immense pressure to work excessive hours. The practice known as 996—that is, working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week—is ubiquitous in the tech sector in China.

In 2019, Chinese tech workers launched an online campaign protesting the 996-schedule. The campaign generated a nation-wide conversation about the punishing working schedules of white-collar workers in China. In the last couple of years, China's tech workers have adopted a new set of vocabulary that captures their frustrations, which may indicate a new rising class consciousness.

Programmers, regarded as a professional class, may see themselves as part of the working class. As the tech sector races ahead, producing more billionaires than ever before in Chinese history, how can we understand these signs of recent class consciousness among Chinese tech workers? What forces in the industry have produced these conditions, and what does this say about the tech industry at large?

JS Tan (JS): The main thing I want to talk about is the rising class consciousness of tech workers in China. In particular, I want to frame this discussion around the question of labor and what transnational solidarity with tech workers in China might look like.

First, I want to share a quick note about myself. I am a member of a group called “Collective Action in Tech,” a media and research group that supports the tech labor movement. Among other things, one of our main goals is to work towards a tech labor movement that is global. Before that I was a software engineer at Microsoft, and I spent a lot of time on labor organizing within the company, particularly around climate justice and anti-militarism work. Anti-militarism was a big topic when it came to organizing within Microsoft because of the contracts that Microsoft had with the U.S. government. Today, I am primarily speaking

¹ This webinar took place on April 17, 2021. The original English recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/05/14/podcast-tech-workers-and-rising-class-consciousness-in-china>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

from the perspective of a tech worker, and as someone who has been involved with tech organizing in the U.S. for many years.

One of the things that got me thinking about Chinese tech work was the anti-996 campaign led by tech workers in 2019. 996 means to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week. This schedule is standard practice in most large tech firms in China. When the anti-996 campaign launched, it quickly catalyzed tens if not hundreds and thousands of tech workers across China to mobilize against the long working hours.

The whole campaign was run on GitHub, which is a platform for programmers to share code, bookmark projects, work collaboratively, and network with each other. If you are a programmer you almost certainly have a GitHub profile and use GitHub somewhat regularly. To give you a sense of how viral this anti-996 campaign became: within a few weeks, the anti-996 GitHub project shot up to become the second-most bookmarked GitHub project ever. It was bookmarked more times than any mainstream open-source project or famous library.

That was when it really occurred to me that we cannot think of the tech work movement holistically without thinking about how Chinese tech workers fit into the picture. As I was watching the campaign unfold, I wanted to see if there was any opportunity for U.S. tech workers to show solidarity and support the movement happening in China. Working with other organizers at Microsoft, I organized a separate GitHub project for U.S. tech workers to voice solidarity with the anti-996 campaign. Being one of the first times where tech workers were united across the U.S. and China, the small campaign of solidarity created a buzz. The solidarity statement was signed by hundreds of tech workers in the U.S. and around the world. Since the statement was also posted on GitHub, it was easy for Chinese tech workers to find it. They shared their gratitude knowing that they were getting support from across the world.

Since then, I have been following the working conditions of tech workers in China. One of the things that I observed was that with the exception of a few smaller companies, the 996 campaign basically failed. No major tech firm ended up revoking the 996-work regime. In fact, in the case of a few companies, work conditions became even more grueling. As an example, Pinduoduo, which admittedly was not as big two years ago, now requires some of its employees to work 380 hours a month, which is roughly the equivalent of twelve hours every day of the week. On top of that, there have been complaints by employees that the company was serving spoiled food. In some cases, they have also required workers to come in during national holidays. Over the past few months, one of their employees tragically committed suicide. Another died suddenly on her 1:30 a.m. commute home from work. There was also a case of a worker suddenly

passing out and getting hospitalized in the middle of the day. These incidents have been said to be connected to the tough working conditions within the company. The conditions at Pinduoduo were so bad that people have likened what has happened in this high-tech firm to the Foxconn suicides (in 2010).

Another company that has been the target of public anger is TikTok's competitor Kuaishou. It was leaked that the company had installed timers in the office toilet stalls to monitor how long employees were spending in them. Pinduoduo was also caught up in this controversy. Some floors of the Pinduoduo office in Shanghai were crammed with over a thousand employees but only had as few as eight bathroom stalls. Employees had to either wait in lines for hours or run over to the closest mall to use the public bathroom. The company also installed devices to block off the WiFi and cell phone connection in the bathroom stalls to discourage phone usage.

In response to these working conditions, tech workers have come up with a whole swathe of new words to capture what it is like to work in the industry. Some of these new terms are worth discussing because they indicate a shift in class consciousness among these workers. Terms that have become popular among programmers to call each other are *manong*, coding peasant, or *dagongren*, a term typically reserved for describing rural migrants who work in factories or lower-paid blue-collar jobs. Calling each other *dagongren*, even if only jokingly, shows that programmers are starting to see their work not only as incredibly grueling but as repetitive and even unskilled.

Another term that gets thrown around a lot is *moyu*, touching fish. The term means to pretend to work while actually slacking off on the job. This can look like taking unnecessary trips to the water cooler, playing games on your phone, or scrolling through social media. You can imagine how a word like *moyu* can become so popular in a culture where you are expected to work 996 hours. On online forums you will also find tech workers referring to their offices as *hulianwang dachang*, "big internet factories." Despite working in modern skyscrapers or office campuses, tech workers have started to liken their programming work to working on the factory floor.

The most popular term in the past year or so is involution or *neijuan*, which originated outside the tech industry, but has really resonated with tech workers. The term literally translates to "inward roll." So just from the word itself you get this feeling of spiraling inwards, a feeling of not being able to go anywhere, this sense of diminishing returns. For tech workers this has become a particularly accurate word for describing the brutal working hours in tech, the limited opportunities for career growth, and the cut-throat competition amongst tech workers.

I find *neijuan* to be a really compelling word, because it is also spot-on in describing the broader trend in the Chinese tech industry. At the more macro scale, the term captures the stagnation happening in the consumer tech ecosystem. For the past decades, the Chinese tech industry has enjoyed incredible growth. It has benefitted from the popularity of the smartphone, alongside China's massive population coming online. But obviously this growth cannot last forever.

We see this clearly in e-commerce. In the early days of the e-commerce boom in China, there were two substantial players: JD.com and Alibaba. Back then, these companies were not really competing against each other as much as they were racing to bring online shopping to as many people as they could in the country. However, these days e-commerce is no longer about getting new users on to the service, but rather it is about how to steal users from competing services. Pinduoduo is another good example of the competition in e-commerce. Instead of fighting against Alibaba and JD.com for consumers in large tier one or tier two cities, the company has figured out that the market in these cities is already saturated, and so they have focused on capturing new users in lower tier cities and rural towns.

Another example is this battle between the top two food delivery platforms in China: Ele.me and Meituan. Both are backed respectively by Alibaba and Tencent and locked in competition in this extremely low margin business for food delivery. These companies are similar to Uber and Lyft in that they have always struggled to make a profit. But with the big financial backers that they have, Ele.me and Meituan are basically able to sink large amounts of money into their operation making it ridiculously cheap to order food, barely enough to break even. All this is because they are essentially fighting with each other over a fixed market in food delivery. In other words, they are unable to charge customers more for their delivery because Ele.me and Meituan are trying to outdo each other on prices. As a result, these companies have to cut costs, or worse, pass the pressure on to their delivery drivers who unsurprisingly have been seeing their incomes drop year after year.

This is why individual workers are hustling so hard and are locked into this kind of cut-throat, zero-sum competition with each other. The metaphor that I like to use is that everyone is working super hard and fighting for just a marginally bigger slice of what is a shrinking pie. To me this is what is really at the core of *neijuan*. It is the idea that everyone is drowning in this culture of 996, but the minute you come up for a gasp of air you are suddenly outcompeted.

I want to return to the idea of tech workers organizing. As tech workers in China launched their anti-996 mobilization on GitHub, a similar pattern of rising class consciousness had also emerged in the U.S. tech sector. Over the past few

years, software engineers, data scientists, AI researchers, and others working in tech have started to acknowledge their interests first and foremost as workers. We saw this when workers at Kickstarter unionized, then later when Google workers launched the Alphabet Workers Union.

With rising class consciousness in tech sectors in both the U.S. and China, I cannot help but wonder how tech workers in these two countries can come together, especially in this moment when we are hearing politicians use phrases like the “AI-arms race,” or the “tech cold war.” The question of how the U.S. and Chinese tech sector can co-exist, at least from my perspective, cannot be left to politicians and the tech elites. So far, their leadership has only increased the bifurcation of the internet and increased militarization on both sides. The term “tech cold war” should itself be indicative of how dangerous this direction we are moving towards is. Instead, can we look towards tech workers to rethink how the U.S. and Chinese tech sectors can co-exist? If so, how can we build these connections?

KL: Thanks a lot for the really succinct presentation. I want to start with what appears as a very basic question. Could you give us a sense of what a tech worker in China looks like? If there is a typical tech worker in China, how would you describe their profile?

JS: I have not worked in the tech industry in China before, so I may not have the most representative answer. But even if we limit the definition of tech worker to those in white-collar jobs (engineers, programmers, program managers, etc.), I think it is important to remember that tech work is extremely diverse. Obviously, this applies to China just as much as the U.S.

Just to give you an example, a childhood friend of mine is now a tech worker in Shanghai. Contrary to this whole story about the grueling hours of 996, he mostly works forty to fifty hours a week. However, the company he works for is relatively small. Another example is a tech worker I interviewed at Alibaba. He is a low-level manager, works 996, but for him there is not much time to *moyu*, to slack off, which he said he was able to do a lot in his previous job. So even within a single company there is a lot of diversity. At Huawei, there is this program where they employ superstar engineers who make salaries of something like 100,000 yuan a month, which is comparable to some of the top salaries you see here in the U.S. tech sector. These workers are probably working 996 if not more, but unlike a lot of tech workers, they are probably researching and experimenting with the stuff they are interested in. They probably relish in 996.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are tech workers who are barely making 7,000 or 8,000 yuan a month. These are people who might have attended a boot-camp-like program and have developed some skills in front-end engineering, or data-base management, or something specific like that. A few years ago,

Echowall characterized this spread in tech as an “IT-pyramid.” I think the term is really useful to capture how within the industry, and even within a single company, there is a massive spread of incomes with some workers earning in the order of ten times that of their co-workers.

There is also a demographic dimension to this. In the tech sector, there has been a tendency to preference younger workers who do not have families. If you are young, fresh out of college, working 996 is much more doable. But as soon as you have a family, as soon as you have children, it becomes much harder. There is also a gender dimension to this. Women are expected to take on the bulk of domestic and childcare work. There is this joke you can find on many online forums about a 35-year age limit for tech workers. You start your career in your early twenties as a software engineer and then hopefully you get promoted over the years. By the time you are 34 you are a senior software engineer, or you have some title like that. But by the time you are 36 you are, all of a sudden, a delivery driver because you have been fired from the company.

KL: I want to pick up on this stratification, or the demographic diversity of workers. How does that intersect with 996 organizing and this sense of *neijuan*? Do you see the impact of this is uniformly felt, or do you think there is one segment that feels more intensely than others and is probably more likely to participate in the 996-campaign?

JS: I think that there are several factors here. Where you are on this IT-pyramid is one factor. If you are making in the order of 100,000 yuan a month, you might have the feeling that working 996 is fair, that you are simply reaping the benefits of your hard work. Whereas if you are on the lower end of that spectrum you might be working just as hard if not harder, and you might only be making just enough to get by. The latter group is more likely to be discontent with the long working hours. Another dimension is where in the industry a worker is located. For example, Baidu does not require workers to work 996, so relative to companies like Alibaba and Tencent, it is a much more relaxed workplace. There are also a lot of western firms with offices in China, like VMware or Microsoft. These companies also do not expect their engineers to work overtime. So, I think there are multiple ways to look at this question.

KL: I want to ask one more question about 996 before we move on to talk about class consciousness. In a way the campaign generated national conversation. People read about it and know about it, but the kind of organizing seemed very opaque. Almost all of the organizers remained anonymous. To the extent that you can share and to the extent that you know the behind-the-scenes organizing, how was that started, and how was it able to keep mobilizing even though the organizers are anonymous?

JS: I do not really know how it was organized. The first time I saw the campaign was when it was already live. Almost all the organizers behind this campaign were anonymous, because the 996-campaign was extremely critical of so many tech companies and their founders as well. Everyone was scared of retaliation. One of the communities that came out of this campaign was from Slack. And that really quickly became a vibrant community of tech workers in the campaign where a lot of new mobilization efforts came from.

KL: There are quite a few questions about the vocabularies and how they relate to class consciousness. One question is: “Does the way the workers call themselves *dagongren* necessarily contribute to their working-class identity? Are you suggesting that they would like to share a similar habitus and class identity with the working class in factories?”

JS: At this stage, I am hesitant to say that a tech worker in any significant way identifies with factory workers. But the way I see the word used is more in a joking or self-deprecating way. There is this shift in how tech workers are thinking about themselves. Even if only jokingly, calling themselves *dagongren* is indicative of this. However, I would be hesitant to say that we are going to see solidarity between tech workers and other blue-collar workers anytime soon.

KL: All through the last twenty years or so, users on the Chinese internet have been using self-deprecating terms to describe themselves or what they are doing as a way to complain or protest. Can you share a bit about the genealogy of the tech workers using those terms? Is that very recent, in the last two or three years, or did you see that before? And, why do you think they emerged at that particular moment?

JS: I have primarily observed what has happened since the anti-996 campaign. I cannot say with any real confidence what class consciousness in the tech sector was like before then. However, it is only after the anti-996 mobilization that tech workers started to develop these terms.

What were the conditions that led up to this moment? One of the things that created that moment of stagnating growth in the tech sector was a turn in the economy at the end of 2018 or early 2019. That was when you had companies like JD.com starting to fire employees en masse in order to cut costs. There was this economic moment where the tech industry was taking a turn and suddenly this promise that, if you work hard, you will make it, was broken. That is part of the reason behind the anti-996 campaign. Since then, we have seen a deterioration of the conditions of tech workers in China. My hypothesis is that the trade war between the U.S. and China also worsened the economic conditions and led to this crisis.

KL: We will talk more about the U.S.-China tech war and what it means in terms of solidarity. There is a good question from the audience about class consciousness. This vocabulary of *dagongren* and *neijuan*, to what extent does it signify neo-liberal individualism, and to what degree does it signify working-class collective experience? Do you see tension between this more individualized language and the more collective thinking? Which narrative is more dominant among tech workers in China?

JS: What illustrates that is the difference between the term “tech worker” used in the American sense and *neijuan*. The latter is hyper-individualistic. It is about turning inwards, competing with everyone else. “Tech worker” as popularized in the early years of the tech workers movement in the U.S. was envisioned as a broad category to include contract workers, content moderators, software engineers, and even the cafeteria workers serving food on tech campuses. So, it had this fundamentally collective aspect to it.

In the Chinese tech sector, the individualistic aspect is possibly more dominant. Compared to the U.S., there is an even stronger belief in meritocracy. There are also immense societal pressures. As a result, there is not much opportunity for broader solidarity among different types of tech workers.

KL: Do you see tech workers using or leveraging any state socialist language that they learned in school? Do you see that as playing a role or having any influence in shaping the discourse of tech workers?

JS: On social-media platforms like Zhihu where it is common for tech workers to post about 996 or their own conditions, I have seen the kind of examples you are talking about. Several years ago, people thought of Jack Ma as a superstar businessman. Now when people post or comment on articles about him, you will see comments like “proletariat unite.”

My sense is that it is a relatively small but vocal group. A lot of these comments are more an expression of discontent than a call for unity. As someone who has been organizing in the tech industry in the U.S., I really believe in having one-on-one conversations and meeting your co-workers face-to-face. So, this nod to socialist politics on online platforms is not a bad sign, but it is certainly not a clear indicator that the broader discourse of tech workers is undergoing meaningful change, nor is it indicative of the potential for more tech worker unity.

KL: There is a follow up question on the individual versus collective narrative. The question is about workers in Shenzhen, Beijing, and elsewhere who are hustling for apartments, competing for jobs, for places to live. There are also different types of workers or layers of workers at JD.com and Tencent. Do you think this boundary contributes to the relative predominance of the individualistic

narrative? And if so, do you think it is possible to build solidarity along different hierarchies of tech workers given all this fragmentation?

JS: I will answer this question by looking at what has been happening in the U.S. because it is a good case to compare with. Culturally, scholars have characterized the tech sector in the U.S., particularly during and before the dot-com era of the internet, with the term, the “Californian ideology.” The term points to a culture of individualism and the belief in free market capitalism. Many tech companies believed they could profit off free market capitalism while still maintaining progressive values. Yet over the past four or five years we have seen a remarkable shift in the culture of the tech industry. Tech workers who are making six-figure salaries are suddenly seeing themselves as workers. One really important aspect of this, especially early on when the tech worker movement began in the U.S., was the question of how we define a “tech worker.” Where do we draw the boundary?

In 2017, Facebook workers, office workers and software engineers, went out to support the union drive of the cafeteria workers on campus. Seeing solidarity between the well-paid office workers and cafeteria workers was inspiring to me because the former group were making the case that the latter group were in fact their co-workers. Since then, the Tech Workers Coalition has done a really good job at broadening the definition of a tech worker to be this much more inclusive category. As part of the Tech Workers Coalition, primarily an organization for office tech workers, we understood the struggles of Uber drivers and Amazon warehouse workers as part of our broader struggle. For me this was a remarkable moment in the U.S. tech sector where the word “tech worker” was used to unite all these fragmented pockets of the tech industry.

We have to remember that management benefits from a fragmented workplace. The platformization of work is one way this fragmentation happens. If you are a software engineer at a food delivery company like Meituan, it is extremely hard to think of delivery workers as your co-workers because you literally do not interact with them at all. That is why I think the key is to have this mechanism to organize in an inclusive way.

KL: This broad-based identity that you are describing has been emerging in the U.S. In comparison, how do you see this playing out in the Chinese context? We definitely see white-collar tech workers and delivery workers organizing. I am wondering how you see those dynamics playing out. Do you see the potential for broad-based mobilization or campaigning that cuts across not only tech workers from different companies, but also delivery workers and other workers who fall under the platform or tech economy in China? Do you see that emerging at all?

And does this discourse contribute to the mentioned vocabulary? Or does it militate against forming that broad-based identity?

JS: I personally have not seen an instance of solidarity between platform workers and your more conventional definition of a tech worker in the Chinese context. That said, the struggle of platform workers has increasingly received more attention in China which is promising. There is also the fact that some employees at Meituan or Ele.me have a clear material basis for solidarity with their delivery driver counterparts, especially among folks who are lower on the “IT-pyramid” and make salaries comparable to those of delivery workers. I am speaking speculatively, because I have not seen these moments of cross-employment type solidarity in the Chinese context yet. But we can look to the U.S. as an example to see how tech workers in the U.S. conceptualize Uber drivers or the Amazon warehouse workers as part of their common identity.

KL: What alternative organizing concepts and methods for collective action have been discussed among the Chinese tech workers after the 996-campaign? For example, are walk-outs, works councils, and unions being discussed? And that connects to another point I had in mind: we saw a great deal of online mobilization, but we did not really see much work-place based, offline action.

JS: The question of why we have not seen offline mobilization is an important one. The fact that the whole 996 movement was essentially run by tech workers who operated anonymously points to the fact that a lot of tech workers are worried about retaliation. In January this year, Wang Taixu, a programmer at Pinduoduo, was fired after anonymously sharing a video of a co-worker getting hospitalized, presumably from overwork. He shared the video anonymously on a LinkedIn-like service called MaiMai. Management at Pinduoduo was able to identify him and fire him. That is something we have to factor in when we ask why we have not seen more offline action.

After the anti-996 mobilization, some of the organizers made a mobile game about the working conditions of 996. It was a very simple game where you could play the role of a worker at one of these tech companies. You have to deal with management, you have to deal with working overtime. They released it a year and a half after the actual anti-996 campaign. Another thing that happened was an action where they sent a bunch of letters to Alibaba founder Jack Ma. For both these examples, pretty much everyone was working anonymously which makes it really hard to forge meaningful connections. I think we have to be critical of the efficacy of these types of actions.

KL: How does the state intersect the relations between tech workers and tech capital? In certain ways the state does discipline financial and tech capital, and when 996 happened the state media came out quite strongly condemning the

work culture. At the same time, you also see them harassing and warning organizers of this mobilization. How do you see the role of the state in this? Do you think this is a different dynamic compared to the manufacturing sector or other sectors? Do you think there is something unique about the state role and how the state sees tech capital?

JS: These anti-monopoly policies or financial regulations are good examples for understanding the logic of the state. I do not think the government is fundamentally opposed to companies like Alibaba or Meituan. They will intervene though when they start to see these businesses operate in a way that is unsustainable or in a way that could cause instability to the system which could ultimately undermine their own legitimacy.

In the case of delivery drivers, they have on the one hand praised the companies for poverty alleviation efforts, and on the other hand criticized these companies for their lack of safety measures. It is all about stability. The e-wallet payment platform, AliPay, is another good example. Because this platform has so much control over payments in the country, the government sees it as causing a lot of risks. That is why they blocked it from going public and pushed through a variety of financial regulations. Once again, their motivation is to stabilize and concretize the dynamic that tech companies have created.

KL: Let us dive into some of the U.S.-China questions. Can you give us a brief summary: what is the contour of the U.S.-China tech war, and what are the points of contention?

JS: The tech war, particularly when referred to by politicians or the tech elites, has these five fronts: semiconductors is a huge one, network infrastructure such as 5G, operating systems, platforms, and content. You will hear accusations like Chinese tech companies are stealing intellectual property or that Chinese firms are puppets of the state, or that China has implemented so and so protectionist policies. In the eyes of many U.S. politicians, the rise of the Chinese tech sector is a result of Chinese firms not playing by the rules of the international free market.

But I think the war as it is waged on the U.S. side is a much more strategic one. For the last three decades, U.S. firms have dominated internet services all over the world. If you look at what online services are used in most countries, you find that Facebook, Google, Uber, and other American consumer internet services are the norm. On the backend, large businesses run on services provided by IBM or Microsoft. So now, as the Chinese tech sector has come up, they are really challenging the hegemony that Silicon Valley has enjoyed over the past decades. The tech war is being supported both by the U.S. government and by the tech elite to keep the U.S. ahead.

KL: There are two related questions. How can workers in both the U.S. and China resist the use of AI for military applications? And on what material basis could tech workers in the U.S. and China come together to fight?

JS: First we have to remember that this rhetoric of a tech cold war is relatively new. It can seem like the U.S. and China have opposite interests, but we must not forget how integrated the global tech infrastructure really is. Connectedness forms the basis for one kind of solidarity, or a global wall-to-wall solidarity.

Ride hail is a good example. The venture capital firm SoftBank dominates the entire ride hail industry. They have a stake in Uber as well as Uber's Chinese counterpart Didi. Uber itself owns 19 percent of Didi. This means that the exploitation of ride hail drivers in China directly contributes to Uber's bottom-line.

We can also look at how integrated the tech supply chains are. Apple is the canonical example here. Apple relies deeply on factories in China as a central piece to their supply chains. This means that Apple engineers in California and factory workers in Shenzhen who are assembling iPhones are being exploited ultimately by the same boss. The one example that really punctures this myth is that the Chinese tech sector and the U.S. tech sector are completely at odds: semiconductors. Chinese firms spend a ton of money on U.S.-designed chips. From 2018 to 2020, China has consistently imported over 300 billion U.S.-dollars' worth of chips each year.

But not all tech capital is interconnected. Over the past decade, the Chinese consumer internet has emerged as a completely distinct concentration of tech capital, separate from the interest of the U.S. tech elite. After all, Huawei did get sanctioned, TikTok was nearly booted from the U.S., and China has essentially made it its national priority to rely less on the U.S. So, in light of this new cold war dynamic where tech companies in the U.S. and China are turning inwards and leveraging more nationalistic rhetoric, what can solidarity between tech workers in the U.S. and China look like? In this environment, what is the basis for solidarity?

To answer this question, we have to understand the way nationalism operates and how it is deployed in both contexts. Throughout history, nationalism has been used as a way to obscure the inherent class contradiction between workers and management. This means that workers are willing to put aside their class interests for national interests, making it easier for elites to get away with all sorts of things. The tech industry is no exception. In China we have already seen the tech elite use nationalist rhetoric to justify the 996 hours as a matter of national pride. For example, Ren Zhengfei, who runs Huawei, responded to U.S. sanctions by saying that the company must take this opportunity to prevent employees from slacking off.

In the U.S., tech companies use nationalism to justify all kinds of horrible behavior. Executives like Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg or Google’s Eric Schmidt, and of course Peter Thiel, have all done things like opposing anti-trust regulation or legitimizing violent military contracts in the name of staying ahead of China. Incidentally, these military contracts as well as the 996-working hours are the very things that U.S. and Chinese tech workers have organized against. It is really important to recognize that in both these cases nationalism has been used to undermine existing labor organizing efforts in the industry.

All that is to say that if tech workers are able to develop stronger relationships with their counterparts in China, they can possibly counter the nationalistic, jingoistic narrative that has been used to pit us against each other.

Recommended Resources

996.ICU: https://996.icu/#/zh_CN (Chinese); https://996.icu/#/zh_US (English); https://996.icu/#/zh_DE (German).

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Zhou, Viola, “The Dream is Over for China’s Tech Workers.” *Rest of World*, July 12, 2022, <https://restofworld.org/2022/china-tech-layoffs>.

3 | China's Engine of Environmental Collapse

Presentation: Richard Smith

Moderation: Kevin Lin¹

Kevin Lin (KL): China is at the heart of the global ecological crisis, which poses an existential threat to humanity. China's breakneck economic development has extracted and consumed unimaginable amounts of resources and severely polluted land, air, water, and of course people. On the climate change front, while Europe and the United States have been historically responsible for the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions, as global production has moved to China in the last few decades, China has overtaken everyone to become the leading emitter of CO₂.

So how should we understand China's environmental crisis and its roots from a left perspective? Is there anything specific to China's political and economic institutions that creates and perpetuates ecological catastrophe? Does China hold any solution to tackling the global ecological crisis? And what strategies and approaches should the international left develop to counter and mitigate the crisis?

Today, we will shed light on some of these questions with Richard Smith. Richard is the author of *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse* published by Pluto in 2020. He's also the author of *Green Capitalism: The God that Failed* published in 2016. Richard is a founding member of the group *System Change not Climate Change*, which is a U.S.-based eco-socialist organization. He is also a member of the DSA eco-socialist working group.

Richard Smith (RS): China presents a climate crisis paradox. It is the world's biggest manufacturer of solar and wind power plants and it has got the most installed capacity of both of those. Xi Jinping has promised to suppress China's emissions to zero by 2060 and says he wants to turn China into an ecological civilization. But his government is building coal-fired power plants faster than wind and solar. Moreover, China's CO₂ emissions have been relentlessly climbing since the 1990s, while those of the U.S., the EU, and Japan have been trending downward in the past decade, though certainly not fast enough to meet their own Paris commitments and certainly not enough to slow global warming.

¹ This webinar took place on April 3, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/05/03/podcast-chinas-engine-of-environmental-collapse>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

No doubt U.S. emissions are going to rise as the economy returns to growth this year, but they are unlikely to reverse their downward trajectory, let alone catch up with China. China's annual CO₂ emissions account for at least thirty percent of the global total at the moment, versus 15 percent for the U.S., 9 percent for the EU, 7 percent for India and 4 percent for Japan. In other words, China is by far the leading driver of global climate collapse. Indeed, the gap between China and the rest of the world widened last year and is likely to widen further this year if China's growth reaches 6 percent, which is its target. How do we explain these contradictions?

I want to explain why pollution, not just CO₂ emissions but water, soil, food, medicine, etc., is so extraordinary in China, so disproportionate in comparison with other large, industrial nations. And why is there so much overproduction and over-construction? Why do state industries produce steel and aluminum they cannot sell? Why is corruption so out of control? Most interestingly, why China's fiercely repressive authoritarian regime is not able to discipline its own bureaucrats, force them to curb emissions and obey China's anti-pollution regulations, and clean up corruption? It is often argued, "China's authoritarian system ought to be an advantage to get things done." So why does Xi not do it?

I argue that China's hybrid Stalinist-capitalist mode of production is unique. It contains its own systemic contradictions, drivers, tendencies, and built-in barriers to pollution-mitigation that are different in many respects from normal capitalism elsewhere. In this system, China's rulers are obliged to obey three nationalist-statist "maximals" that are at least as powerful and eco-suicidal, if not more so, than profit maximization under capitalism.

First, they have to maximize economic growth and self-sufficient industrialization. As a state-based communist ruling class in a world dominated by more advanced powers, Mao and his successors understood that they must catch-up and overtake the U.S. to ensure they will not be reconquered by imperialism. You read this all the time in the press these days: Gorbachev's loss of the economic and arms race doomed the Soviet communist party. Xi Jinping is keen to avoid that error. But to overtake the U.S., he must maximize hyper-growth of fossil-fuel based industries, even if this means forsaking his carbon neutral pledge, abandoning his dream of an ecological civilization, and leading the planet to climate collapse.

Only a third of China's CO₂ emissions come from coal-fired power plants. Most of the rest come from what are called the "hard-to-abate" industries like steel, aluminum, cement, aviation, shipping, chemicals, plastics, textiles, and electronics. They cannot be significantly abated either in the United States or in China with current or foreseeable technology, but are essential to Xi's mega-

infrastructure projects and his Made in China 2025 plan for global high-tech supremacy. So, either he gives up the race or he lets the polluters pollute.

Secondly, the Communist Party must maximize employment. They fear the workers and they need to maintain stability. Maximizing employment is a major driver of over-construction, overproduction, blind growth, blind demolition, and profligate waste of energy and resources across the economy.

Thirdly, they must maximize consumerism and consumption. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Chinese Communist Party's near-death experience in 1989, the party resolved in the early 1990s to create a mass consumer society and raise incomes in order to focus people's attention on consumption and take their minds off politics. The promotion of mindless consumerism for the sake of consumerism, based on the model of capitalism but with five times as many consumers as the United States, contributes mightily to China's and the world's waste and pollution crisis.

These are the main three drivers. There are others I discussed in my book, like corruption, which is a huge driver of pollution. Then there are the built-in barriers in this system. First, it is a police state, so there is no possibility for people to organize and fight pollution or out-of-control emissions. There are major protests all the time, thousands of protests every year against the building of power plants and chemical plants. But these are all individual and they are all relatively quickly suppressed. There is no room for any national organization, and you cannot protest against China's emissions in China.

Secondly, Xi Jinping cannot discipline his subordinates. They have their own interests. In the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping cut a deal with local officials and the state-owned industry bosses in which he gave them the right to sell excess production on the free market and to produce on the side new products for the market. There are huge incentives for local officials to maximize production, and especially because they understand that the state is not going to let state-owned industries go out of business. The government can run these zombies for decade after decade.

Xi cannot control his subordinates and their interest in maximizing production and pollution, because those subordinates are not really subordinates. They are not employees as in capitalism who can be fired, they are members of the Communist Party and of the same ruling class as Xi Jinping. There is a huge industrial complex in China that produces lots of coal but also maintains lots of jobs. These guys can carry on, largely even against Xi's will, because he does not control them. Xi is a *primus inter pares*, but he is not an absolute dictator.

And, thirdly, Xi does not and cannot try too hard to suppress CO₂ emissions, because his overriding priority is to catch up to the U.S. and become a superpower.

And to do that, he has no choice but to maximize the growth of all those hard-to-abate industries, steel, coal, cement, aviation, rail, and petrochemicals, for his *Made in China 2025*-program and his aspiration to become the number one superpower.

So, those are the main drivers of pollution that are different from capitalism and the main barriers to mitigating emission.

KL: I want to ask about your own background. How did you come to write a book about China's environmental crisis? What is your political or intellectual background that has shaped your analysis of China?

RS: I was a grad student in history at UCLA with the Marxist historian Robert Brenner and I studied with some Chinese historians there too. I was looking for a dissertation topic on modes of production, and there were lots of Marxist and other studies of European and Russian Stalinism. But there were no Marxist mode of production studies of China. In those days, Maoism was all the rage on campuses. I wrote some articles on Mao in the early 1980s, the nature of the revolution, and the contradictions of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution.

I decided to write my dissertation on market reforms in the 1980s, and I compared the intent of the reforms with the results in the decade 1979 to 1989. I showed that, instead of marketizing the state economy and making it more efficient through cutting waste and so forth, market-reform in the context of the old bureaucratic collectivist class and property relations tended to exacerbate most problems of the old Mao system: low productivity, inefficiency, lack of innovation, duplication, excessive waste, and so forth. To the extent that the market system worked in the 1980s, it did so separately, outside the state economy, in the private economy. The farm economy, which was to a great extent privatized, and in the coastal enclaves, the special economic zones, was where you had a real private economy.

Deng, instead of getting a market-reformed state economy, got two separate economies. He got the joint venture capitalist economy, the engines of growth in the special economic zones inside the bigger, mostly unreformed state industrial economy, which remains largely unreformed to this day even though it is more marketized now. That was my thesis, and my book on China's environmental problems extends this methodology to the environmental crisis.

KL: Do you still more or less maintain the analysis you did back then, or do you see the need for a revision of your original analysis for China today?

RS: My book is just a further development of the analysis in the dissertation. When it comes to analyzing any country, whether it is China or the United States, the mode of production approach is a very good theoretical construct for under-

standing the drivers and limits of reform within those systems. I think people need to do this kind of analysis of China to try and understand the trajectory of the system as well as the contradictions and the limitations of reform and development within it.

This analysis of the limits to CO₂ mitigation in China is a lot like the analysis I did in my *Green Capitalism* book for the U.S. and the West. I just said, profit maximization is an iron rule of capitalism, and no corporation can put the environment above the need to maximize profit. They can try, like oil companies these days which accept carbon taxes, because carbon taxes do not put a limit on growth. And they can pass the expense off to the customers. In capitalism, we know there are built-in limits to how far you can reform the system, politically or environmentally.

I am proposing that there are similar but different constraints on China. There are different drivers and different internal limits posed to CO₂ mitigation and all kinds of other pollution, and an inability to control the officials. And that explains why pollution is so out of control in China. It is different from capitalism largely because the drivers are different, but also the barriers are different.

KL: I would like to unpack some of the points you have brought up. The core of your analysis is rested on your concept of bureaucratic collectivism in China, which distinguishes the Chinese system in fundamental ways from the more advanced, capitalist countries. What do you say to someone who may argue that, of course, China is different, but the differences are not as significant as you make them out to be. And China's ecological destruction has more to do with the fact that production and manufacturing has been moving to China for the last few decades which has led to the disastrous environmental crisis that we are seeing now. How do you counter that argument?

RS: First of all, China is the most difficult economy to analyze in the world. It is the most complex economy. It has got every kind of capitalism. People say China is capitalist—well, yes, it is. It has got gangster capitalism, it has got state capitalism, it has got crony capitalism, it has got ordinary capitalism, it has got them all. But I argue it is a hybrid bureaucratic collectivist capitalist economy in two senses. First of all, the state controls about fifty percent of the non-agricultural economy, some specialists say even as much as two-thirds. And then about thirty percent of the economy is made up of joint capitalist-state enterprises in the special economic zones. That are mostly the coastal export bases like Shenzhen. The last twenty percent is the domestic private economy, and that is domestic capitalism, crony capitalism, and normal capitalism.

So, it is hybrid in that sense. But it is also hybrid in the sense that the state-owned sector produces both for the five-year plans and all the indices they are

required to meet, and these state-owned industries also produce for the market on the side. So, they are both producing for plan and market. The state system is hybrid in that sense too.

What about all this off-shoring of industry? Yes, China's pollution is to a very great extent the result of the fact that so many of the world's worst polluting industries, such as plastics, paints, petrochemicals, steel, metals, non-ferrous metals, aluminum, and so forth, were offshored from the United States and Europe to China. It is historically true they were off-shored there, and that is bad.

People often ask: "Is a big share of the pollution not due to the fact that goods are shipped back to the West from those polluting industries?" Yes, that is true, but only 18 percent of China's pollution is due to those exports. After all, China imports a lot of emissions, built into the Boeing airplanes it buys, the soybeans, or the coal it buys from Australia. The pollution is a consequence of both the export economy and of the domestic economy, and, in particular, their growth and drivers.

KL: Someone from the audience wants to know what you make of China's environmental collapse. Why would China not be able to stop the collapse?

RS: China has all kinds of pollution issues. The worst issues are water and farm soil, because you cannot just shut these off like when you close down a power plant. You can shut off fossil fuel emissions but you cannot shut off what you put in the ground and water, and China's rivers and lakes are massively polluted. An area the size of Belgium has officially been declared unfit to farm because it is too polluted, but much of the rest of the farmland is polluted too. That is a deeper, longer-lasting problem and it is cumulative.

But the emissions issue is the most urgent because if we do not solve the emissions problem the whole world is going to collapse. And the driver of the global ecological collapse is emissions. In China, these are growing like crazy. It is not just coal. China is the largest importer of natural gas, the largest importer of oil, and China is building up and maximizing its domestic ability to produce more oil and natural gas through fracking.

Of course, China is not the only driver. It accounts for about a third of that, and the rest of the world for two-thirds. The United States accounts for 15 percent, Europe for nine percent. It is not China's problem alone, but China is the leading driver. Because, in the West, we are able to organize protest and demand changes, people have managed to force governments to suppress emissions somewhat. Not enough yet, for sure, to prevent climate collapse but somewhat. They have been able to force them to level-off and drive down emissions in most leading big emitters in Europe, the U.S., and Japan. But there have been countertendencies

in both Germany and Japan after Fukushima because they phased out nuclear power plants, and to some extent they have replaced those with oil and even coal-fired power plants which has brought emissions up.

KL: I want to pick up on the movements from below. You mentioned environmental protests in China. We see the repression and the severe consequences for organizers. Nevertheless, you do also see protests which are pretty large-scale, but they are not often about climate change. They are about local chemical plants and incinerators, and most protests seem to be working. How do you see those environmental protests and their power to turn the course of the environmental crisis in China?

RS: It is true that the protests have a direct effect locally: they often stop the building of a chemical plant. But because the government is determined to build those plants anyway, what they typically do is just move them and install them someplace else where there is less resistance. There is nonetheless pressure in China, especially because of the smog, to move to renewable energy. I am not saying they cannot ever do this: they are the world's largest builder of solar and renewable power. But they are also building coal-fired power plants just as fast, if not faster. Possibly someday there will be pressure all over the world, not just in China, to cut back on coal. But I do not think they can eliminate coal by 2060. China does not have enough oil and does not have enough natural gas, and China does not want to be dependent on imports. I think, China is going to have to stay reliant on coal for a very long time.

KL: As China moves more of its manufacturing out to, for instance, Southeast Asia, do you think that will induce what you call a "spatial fix" without truly reducing emissions. At a global level, emissions simply get moved around the world. What does that mean for the environmental crisis? That may be good for China in the sense that, overall, there may be a reduction within its border, but it may export the emission to lower-income countries.

RS: That is clearly what is happening in Vietnam. We see a tremendous export of industry there. This is all thanks to the power of the Chinese workers who have fought back since 2010 to increase their wages. But they did so at the cost of pricing themselves out of the market at the lower end of production. So, those industries are moving out of China, and Chinese capitalists are moving their industries to Southeast Asia. There is no reduction of growth anywhere. And now to compound all that you have Joe Biden who wants to compete with the Chinese to make sure the Chinese do not take over the U.S.: national competition to consume resources and build ever more. So, we just drive the planet to collapse even faster. That is so crazy.

KL: Let us move to the question of strategy. What do you think should happen? You already mentioned that there are new energies being developed and implemented in China. Obviously, they are far from sufficient or adequate to address the scale of the environmental crisis. Should we put our faith in some technological fix to climate change? How do you see the solutions and the role of addressing and mitigating the climate change crisis?

RS: If we just use renewable energy to produce more plastic junk, more disposable iPhones, disposable automobiles, or disposable IKEA furniture, we would still be in the same fix eventually. We can suppress emissions a lot by suppressing fossil fuel emissions from power plants but that is not the whole economy. There are all of these other hard-to-abate industries: steel, cement, aluminum, electronics, and all in all dozens of industries. They are not so easy to abate. The only option in the long run is to suppress those industries.

I wrote an article on the U.S. economy which tried to lay out a plausible strategy for emissions production. It is called “An Eco-Socialist Path to Suppressing Emissions to 1.5 Degrees for the U.S.” and can be found on the System Change not Climate Change website. I proposed a four-point program which could begin within the framework of capitalism, taking off from AOC’s Green New Deal that she proposed a couple of years ago.²

The first of the four points for the U.S. (not China) is banning all new fossil fuel extraction, rationing gasoline, banning production of new fossil fuel vehicles, and nationalizing the whole fossil fuel industrial complex and all the downstream industries and downstream consumers of fossil fuels like pipelines and refineries, distribution networks, auto, aviation, airline, shipping, petrochemicals, some manufacturing, some tourism, and other businesses that are based on fossil fuels. I proposed that kind of wholesale nationalization program, and the cost for that was about 2.26 trillion. I suggested that could be paid for by simply rescinding Donald Trump’s 2.3 trillion U.S.-dollar tax give away to the rich. That would pay for that whole thing. We could actually buy-out the entire fossil fuel industrial complex and phase it out for less than 3 trillion dollars.

Secondly, I propose to create a federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs-type program to reemploy all of those fossil fuel workers and fossil fuel related industries at equivalent pay and benefits in low-emission work. Those workers in coal, oil, plastic, and toxic-chemicals deserve jobs, just not the jobs they have now. They need different jobs.

² AOC stands for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Party who has a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives (*editor’s note*).

Thirdly, I propose to launch an emergency state-directed program to phase in renewable electricity generation and replace all the fossil-fuel powered transportation and electric propulsion. The use of individually-owned vehicles should be discouraged, the use of public transportation, shared vehicles, bicycles, and other non-fossil fuel modes of transportation encouraged.

Fourthly and lastly, I propose to develop an emergency plan to phase-out wasteful, destructive and polluting industries—arms production, needless toxic chemicals, pharmaceuticals, disposables like single-use plastics designed to be obsolesced, iPhones, cars, and useless inventions. Emergency plans should be developed to shift from fossil-fuel dependent factory farms to fully organic agriculture and so on.

As for China, we need a crash program to suppress their emissions. That would require an emergency shutdown of coal production, a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels, and the retrenchment of electricity generation, steel, auto aviation, chemicals, and plastics. All that has got to be cut back dramatically. Unfortunately, China has the highest concentration of all these bad industries. We cannot survive if we let these industries go on. China needs help from the West to be able to phase-out these industries and replace them with industries that are sustainable for people and the planet. But it is not my place to think of those solutions. The starting point is to face up to the fact that neither China nor the U.S. can build an economy based on perpetual growth, that we need to close down and phase out industries, and that we need to restructure, reorganize, and reprioritize the world's industrial sector so that we can produce sustainably for future generations and leave resources aside for other lifeforms to share.

KL: I think part of what you are arguing relates to the question of state power. Given the scale of the challenge, it would definitely require a dramatic transformation, and many people would argue that means mobilizing state power to address that. In both the U.S. context and the Chinese context, you mentioned shutting down industries, and that probably requires a considerable use of state power. How do you see the use of state power? What is the prospect of putting enough pressure on the state to make those changes? And where do you think that pressure would come from?

RS: I think that we need states. We just do not need the states that we have. I am with Marx in that we need to destroy the capitalist state as it is and replace it with a workers' state. We cannot solve all these problems locally, so we need international governments to coordinate policies all over the world for emissions containment. We need to coordinate policies all over the world with respect to the oceans, to the forests, and to the deployment of resources. If people are going to be convinced not to tear down their forests you have to give them some other

way of making a living. That means, us in the Global North will have to help those in the Global South so they do not have to tear down their forests to grow cows for McDonald's hamburgers. There needs to be planning at local, national, and global-international levels, and for that you need states. But you cannot do that with capitalist states, or bureaucratic-collectivist states, you would need different states: workers' states, consumers' states, people's states, popular states, not class-based states.

KL: I cannot help but ask you about the possibilities or feasibilities of U.S.-China cooperation on climate change as they are the two largest emitters of CO₂. Obviously, both the trade war and the geopolitical competition and conflicts over the last two years, make it less likely today. Do you see the possibility and feasibility of things improving? And do you think they are able to cooperate?

RS: I think, discussions are beginning between the Biden administration and people in Beijing. I have no idea how far those will go. Despite all the rhetoric—all the anti-China and anti-US rhetoric and all the hyperbole at the political level—I think, people interested in climate change from both sides are talking. But who knows what it will amount to?

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II. Workers' Struggles and Racism Following the Covid-19 Pandemic

4 | Labor Struggles During and After the Pandemic

Presentations: Eli Friedman; Wen and Pan (two labor activists from China)

Moderation: Daniel Reineke¹

Daniel Reineke (DR): If we look at the past couple of years, especially since 2015, the Chinese state has turned towards a significant higher level of repression against labor organizers, grassroots labor groups, but also civil society more broadly. At the same time, the last couple of years were characterized by geographic and industrial restructuring of the Chinese economy, meaning that, on the one hand side, manufacturing workers' bargaining power seems to have decreased to some extent, while, on the other hand, we have seen a larger working class in the service and logistics sector. Against this background, we hope to cover a broad set of questions today to assess the current state of the Chinese labor movement. We aim to ask how labor organizers should continue to organize in China under the current conditions. What strategies can be used in China and in solidarity by activists outside of China? And how can the Chinese labor movement respond to the challenges of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic?

We are very happy that we have three speakers who will give a presentation for you. I will shortly introduce them. Our first speaker is Eli Friedman. He is Associate Professor in the Department of International and Comparative Labor at Cornell University. Eli has been researching and writing about the Chinese labor movement for many years, and in his presentation, he will give a broader overview of the current state of China's labor movement. Our second speaker is Wen. Wen is a labor activist from Southern China. They have written extensively about labor struggles in Guangdong. In their presentation, Wen will talk about workers' conditions during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in China. Our third speaker is Pan. Pan is also a labor activist in Southern China, and they have considerable experience in labor organizing on the ground. They will share their experience and observations of the situation labor activists are facing today, especially given the already mentioned increased level of repression against labor activists in China.

Eli Friedman (EF): Thank you very much, Daniel. I want to thank all the organizers. It is a lot of work to put this together. One of the great things about the last

¹ This webinar took place on September 26, 2020. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

several months is the possibility of building these transnational connections, and having speakers in North America, Europe, and Asia is really exciting.

What I am going to do here is provide a brief overview of the dynamics of labor protests in China over the past decade. I want to acknowledge at the beginning that China is a vast, complex country with lots of different social divisions, and it has a very large and differentiated economy. I will mostly be talking about migrant workers, and I am mostly going to be focusing on dynamics within the private sector. There was a big upsurge of labor unrest that came with the privatization of the state-owned sector beginning in the late 1990s, but that had mostly petered out by 2010. Which is not to say that those workers are no longer significant, but the focus of labor unrest has shifted to the private sector, and migrant workers are driving it.

The 2010s began with great optimism on the part of the Chinese labor movement. Just two years prior, in 2008, a series of laws had been passed, most importantly the Labor Contract Law that endowed workers with a set of new rights. There was a lot of discussion in public about the growing rights consciousness of workers, and these new laws themselves were seen as being a response to this growing worker insurgency that had emerged over the decade prior. China emerged from the economic crisis in 2008/2009 relatively quickly. There was immediately a lot of unemployment, but growth resumed quickly, and there were tight labor markets. So, from a structural standpoint, workers were in an advantageous position given those tight labor markets.

If we look at the official trade union structure in China, there is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which is formally controlled by the Communist Party. It is a very conservative and oftentimes even anti-worker kind of organization. But one of the signs of optimism is that they were responding to this bottom-up upsurge of worker activism, and I have studied the limits and possibilities of this phenomenon extensively.² There were new efforts to unionize, particularly in private and foreign companies. And there were new experiments with collective bargaining, which was seen as an effort on the part of the state to try to do something about this increasing labor conflict. Most importantly, of course, is that there was what at the time seemed like an ever-increasing wave of strikes. It really did seem as if the state, particularly at the central level, was genuinely afraid that this upsurge of labor unrest could threaten social stability, and that they were going to try to do something in response to ameliorate worker concerns. The state at the central level—the local level is a little bit more com-

² Friedman, Eli, *Insurgency Trap. Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

plex—was moving in a broadly pro-labor direction during this period in terms of passing new policies, allowing for the union to engage in some of these more liberal kinds of reforms.

I will say a few things about the general characteristics of this worker insurgency that emerges in the 2000s and really gains steam in the 2010s. It is largely situated in the industrial manufacturing heartlands of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province and the Yangtze River Delta surrounding Shanghai. The strikes are exclusively wildcat strikes. People oftentimes incorrectly believe that strikes are illegal in China, and the truth is that they are not illegal. The right to strike was removed from the constitution in 1982 by Deng Xiaoping, but the law does not weigh in one way or the other on strikes. That means that there is also no such thing as “illegal strikes.” But every time workers go on strike, it is without legal protection, and it is not being organized by the union. These strikes were generally confined to a single workplace. They were focused on pretty immediate workplace issues, they were not banding together across industries or across regions, and there is no capacity to form autonomous unions that are under the control of the workers. And so, even though the state was taking a somewhat more lenient attitude towards these strikes, there was no question that trying to establish a formal organization to represent workers was still considered extremely politically sensitive. There are debates about the political orientation of these strikes, and whether this kind of direct confrontation with capital in the workplace ought to be considered political action or not. Certainly, anti-boss sentiment has been widespread among Chinese migrant workers, and in the workerist tradition, this is kind of the crux of politics in some ways. I would say that there is a general sense of a common class position among migrant workers.

So those are all positive signs. Nonetheless, there are real constraints on the capacity of workers to build durable political organizations that can resist capital in the workplace or that can resist the state outside of the workplace. Strikes at the enterprise level during this period of time were oftentimes at least partially victorious. Many strikes were over legal violations, such as the non-payment of wages, overtime issues, or non-payment of social insurance. And there has been some improvement, albeit very uneven, in terms of legal implementation, which has historically been quite bad. It continues to be quite bad, actually. But one of the most interesting developments we saw coming out of the big strike wave in 2010 was that workers were making demands not just for legal enforcement, but they were actually making demands above and beyond the legal minimum.³ They

³ On the 2010 strike wave, see Butollo, Florian, and Tobias ten Brink, “Challenging the Atomization of Discontent: Patterns of Migrant-worker Protest in China during the Series of Strikes in 2010.” *Critical Asian Studies*, 44 (3) (2012), 419–440.

were demanding wage increases above the minimum wage, which historically the state had not been all that sympathetic to and which meant folks were more likely to encounter repression. In some cases, workers won big wage hikes, though. There were some emerging strikes over social insurance, which includes unemployment benefits and the pension system. This was marked most clearly with the 2014 strike at the Yue Yuen factory, a very large shoe maker in Dongguan, Guangdong province.⁴

So, there were all these signs of optimism, of workers being on the march. There was a general sense that things were going to improve in the future, albeit unevenly, that there was a relatively responsive central government, and that workers' political capacity was expanding. That optimism for most people has been largely extinguished over the past five years under the hard authoritarian turn of Xi Jinping. This political turn under Xi Jinping should be considered a right-ward turn. He is often talked about as being a Marxist or a socialist, and the language confuses people. But in just about every meaningful sense, we should consider this a hard turn to the right. This manifests with respect to labor politics in a strong anti-worker sentiment. There are also some economic factors at play that are militating against workers. The first is that this worker upsurge was centered in the export-oriented manufacturing sectors, and a lot of that production has relocated. It has been shut down, and it has been relocated either to the interior of China, which for workers involves various kinds of dislocations and uprooting of established communities, but it has also relocated to other places in Southeast Asia, South Asia, or further afield. So, increasingly, workers are fighting defensive battles against factory closures. We also see that automation plays some role in the reduction of laborers' role in production. In general, the labor markets are not as tight as they were in 2010 to 2012. The U.S. trade war with China has had a huge impact on those export markets, and Covid-19 has complicated this as well, with severe economic impacts starting in 2020.

But the political turn is the bigger story here. Xi Jinping does not accept any kind of dissent, and within the political structure there is no desire on the part of local officials to take any risks with the possibility of social instability. There has been a severe crackdown on NGOs, and we will hear more about this later. NGOs have played a supporting role in some of these strikes, particularly in Guangdong, they have been smashed, and prison sentences have been handed out. Unions ended the timid reforms that they had been engaged in ten years ago. They are not even discussing collective bargaining any longer, and there certainly is no discussion about the legalization of strikes or the legalization of independent

⁴ Schmalz, Stefan, Brandon Sommer, and Xu Hui, "The Yue Yuen Strike: Industrial Transformation and Labour Unrest in the Pearl River Delta." *Globalizations*, 14 (2) (2017), 285–297.

unions. And something that has been particularly important has been the severe crackdown on avowedly Marxist student activists associated with the Jasic case in 2018.⁵ Here we can see that it is not simply the government's concerns about so-called "foreign" or "Western" influence through the NGO sector. Even people who conceive of themselves as Marxists or Maoists and they try to engage in labor organizing can bear the brunt of fierce suppression.

That is all bad news. To try to end on a somewhat positive note, the good news is that the state has not solved the problem of wildcat strikes. It is hard to get a sense of how many there are and whether they have actually come down in number, because there is no official recording on this. But what we do know is that, as capital has relocated to new places within China and as capital has shifted out of the manufacturing sector and into the service sector and logistics, worker unrest has followed capital to these new places. The state does not have the political tools to establish a durable class compromise in the way that happened in the West in the post-World War II era, and so this issue of worker insurgency persists. I leave it at that. Thank you.

DR: Thank you very much, Eli. I would now like to invite Wen to talk about the situation of Chinese workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Wen (W): Hello, I am very happy to have this chance to share some information about the workers' situation in China during the pandemic from January until now [September 2020]. First, I would like to give you a general overview. As you know, in China the pandemic did not break out on a large scale outside of Hubei province. Therefore, most workers did not feel very threatened by the disease. Instead, wages have remained the principal concern of the class struggle between labor and capital throughout the pandemic and into the present. Data from the China Labour Bulletin shows that collective labor disputes from January to August 2020 centered on wages.⁶ This is different from many countries across Europe and America, where workers from multiple industries protested or went on strike in order to demand protecting measures in the face of a life-threatening situation on the job.

For the sake of making the narrative clearer, the analysis of the period from January until now [September 2020] can be split into five parts. The first part refers to the beginning of the pandemic, the period from late January to early February 2020. After Wuhan was put under lockdown, the whole country began

⁵ Au Loong-Yu, "The Jasic Mobilisation: A High Tide for the Chinese Labour Movement?" *Made in China Journal*, 3 (4) (2018), 12–16.

⁶ See China Labour Bulletin Strike Map, <https://tinyurl.com/4axjxy2p>.

to fight the epidemic. Numerous new online groups focusing on worker issues were formed at that time. These included:

- (a) face mask supply groups, focusing on the poor safety conditions in the sanitation industry and providing masks and equipment to sanitation workers;
- (b) groups calling for organizing and conducting online polls to pressure the government to extend the spring festival holidays;
- (c) groups that have been formed to protect worker rights when they returned to work;
- (d) and other groups for sharing information on the development trends of the pandemic, on protective measures against the virus, and on government policies.

The founders of these groups had some connections to student groups, to labor organizations, and to a few left-wing activists. The workers in these online groups were from different workplaces and locations in China. Since participants were not familiar with each other, and because this form of online organizing was repeatedly broken up by authorities, it has been hard for them to take any more meaningful action.

During the second phase between mid-February and early March 2020, people returned to their workplaces. Stringent control measures helped to stem a new outbreak of the pandemic. To restart work, companies had to comply with protecting measures and submit to a series of orders given by local governments. If new cases appeared in any workplace, they were to immediately stop operations and isolate the workplace or even the whole building. To resolve issues pertaining to the revival of production, workers could now more easily complain when factories violated regulations in contrast with the normal situation. There were no reports of large-scale incidents over issues of safety measures. In this period, the main conflicts were to be found in the necessity of simultaneously controlling the pandemic and restarting production.

During the third phase between mid-March and May 2020, more people returned to their workplaces. Most companies chose to pass their losses on to their workers, especially the small enterprises. As a result, dissatisfaction among workers generalized, also due to declining income. The labor bureau was already prepared for battle, ready to prevent and control such disputes between capital and labor. This strengthened the forces they had deployed to resolve such disputes or even broke new ground by setting up online platforms for mediation or having local level officials mediate directly in order to ease the tension between capital and labor. That was all particularly effective dissolving workers' shared grievances into an array of individual complaints, thereby reducing the potential for collective action. You can see the data from Shenzhen, a city in Guangdong

Province. Here, in the second quarter in 2020, the number of labor dispute cases filed at the local labor bureau increased sharply.⁷

During the same period, we saw lost work and halted production. In March, after the virus spread to Europe and to U.S., the automobile, clothing, and the electronics industries were greatly impacted. The effects were worst for companies engaged in export processing and foreign trade. Gradually, the common practice of working regular overtime became rare, hiring paused, and then production. For most workers who suddenly became unemployed or were asked to take compulsory time off, the normal response has been to find temporary work of some sort in order to supplement their income, or to return to rural hometowns in order to reduce their cost of living, all the while waiting for the situation to improve before they began looking for work again.

The fourth phase, which has persisted since the second quarter of 2020, brought economic recovery. Since February, the central government started to introduce a series of policies to stabilize the market, and in the second quarter, the economy has recovered from shutdowns and has started to grow again. Meanwhile, factories started to recruit workers again, and there has even been a labor shortage in some places. However, due to unstable orders, in order to reduce labor costs, most of the work is hourly or temporary without social security.

In sum, the impact of job losses, unstable employment, and declining real incomes on workers' lives is much greater than before. Each of these factors has increased the hesitancy and concern of workers to act and has repressed the beginning of a renewed period of struggle. However, the willingness of Chinese workers, particularly those in Guangdong who have fought directly against capitalists before, has not changed.

DR: Thank you very much, Wen, for this excellent overview. We continue with Pan's presentation. They will talk about the current situation for labor activists.

Pan (P): I am a labor organizer in the service sector in China. My presentation will focus on labor NGOs and on the future of organizing, that is, how labor NGOs can organize workers in the future in the context of authoritarian repression. We all know that there have been a lot of crackdowns on labor NGOs in the past years, and no doubt, from the state's point of view, labor NGOs and other human right organization are the enemy of the state. The devastating effects of the repression require us to self-reflect and to criticize the work of labor NGOs. So, in my presentation, I will try to reflect on the role of labor NGOs in order to discuss what needs to change and how new practices and new ideas to organize workers in such an authoritarian period could look like. In my presentation, I am

⁷ See http://hrss.sz.gov.cn/xxgk/tjsj/zxtj/content/post_8187870.html.

referring to NGOs as “outsiders.” By this I mean that, in the past, labor NGOs performed the role of an outside supporter to the labor movement, rather than the role of a comrade or organic intellectual of the working class.

Over the past ten years, labor NGOs faced two politically characteristic developments. The first is a shift from harassment to criminalization. Already during 2012 and 2013, many labor NGOs were facing harassment. They were evicted from their offices by their landlords, and their offices were shut down, but no one was arrested during that time. However, after 2015, there have been many cases that show that labor NGOs are being criminalized. The most famous cases were the ones in 2015 when dozens of labor activists were attacked in southern China,⁸ and the Jasic case in 2018 that Eli mentioned before. Also in 2019, many organizations were shut down, and many labor activists were arrested. We can thus see that the government has changed its strategies to control and crack down on labor NGOs’ activities.

The second development is a shift from invisibility to marginalization and strangling. What does that mean? As we know, labor issues have been largely made invisible in the public in China. Before 2015, they were less invisible, but after 2016 and 2017, two new laws were introduced to regulate civil society organizations. The first one is the Charity Law of 2016 which tries to regulate how local civil rights organizations and non-government organizations can raise money publicly. With this new law, you cannot raise money publicly without a certification from the government, and this created substantial difficulties for labor NGO to raise money domestically. The second one is the Overseas NGO Law of 2017 which tries to regulate financial support by overseas organizations to NGOs in China. This new law has been a crucial means to cut international funding for domestic NGOs.

In sum, with these two strategies, the government tried to control and limit the activities of labor NGOs and other human rights organizations. It tried to criminalize them politically and to limit their survival space financially. These two strategies, I argue, were very smart from the state’s perspective, and they continue to shape the existence of labor NGOs.

Previously, we always talked about three kinds of work that the labor NGOs were doing. One is service-oriented work, and another one is legal aid-oriented work. As a third type of work, some movement-oriented labor NGOs tried to collectively organize factory workers in order to launch strikes and to fight for compensation. However, because of the two new strategies of repression, the government has endangered the physical space of on-site worker centers, and it is

⁸ AP News, “China Detains Grassroots Labor Activists as Disputes Rise.” *AP News*, December 22, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/ymyhk3c9>.

very hard to operate a new worker center in a factory community right now. Moreover, the government forced many NGOs to adjust the focus of their daily labor-related activities or even to cut the labor rights-related aspects entirely. As a result, some labor organizations which had previously focused on migrant workers transferred their activities towards migrant children, an area that is less sensitive in China.

In addition, because of the Charity Law, all labor NGOs were being incorporated into a government-sponsored or government-recognized financial support system, which means that you need to build up a relationship with the government and report every detail of your activities and of your financial funding to the government. This makes it difficult to do any underground work, even if you have an official identity as a non-profit. So, over the past five years, this situation has left no space for NGOs to develop. They have focused on how to survive in this period, and only some NGOs that provide community services or legal aid still exist. Organizations that previously had been engaged in collective bargaining do not exist anymore.

Another challenge I would like to discuss is the aforementioned point that NGOs have worked as “outsiders” in the past. People criticized labor NGOs saying that they just provided services and suggestions for workers with legal issues, but that it is difficult to follow up on these cases, and that it is hard to see what kind of class consciousness service providers can possibly bring to workers. NGOs were busy dealing with crisis intervention, but they did not have much understanding about the workplace and long-term organizing. Some scholars even said that labor NGO were an anti-solidarity machine.⁹

I do not agree with that. But we have to accept the fact that NGOs at least partially and voluntarily incorporated themselves in the state-capitalist hegemonic structure. Some NGOs tried to encourage workers to ask the state and the union to be more accountable, and sometimes they would even bring workers to the side of the union. This can lead to a very precarious situation for workers, because the union does not stand with workers, it divides workers and destroys the potential for further collective action. Beyond that, many labor NGOs also considered themselves as the leaders of the movement, that is, they tried to lead the workers and did not let the workers take the lead on their own. In that sense, they were also kind of over-ambitious. Against the background of all these developments, we are currently facing big challenges.

⁹ Lee, Ching Kwan, and Shen Yuan, “The Anti-Solidarity Machine? Labor Nongovernmental Organizations in China,” in *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization. Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China* edited by Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary E. Gallagher (Ithaca/London: ILR Press, 2011), 157–172.

In this period, we need to rethink and redefine the role of “outsiders.” I argue that we need to move from a service model to an organizing model or empowerment model. I take my own practice in the past as an example. In the past few years, our organizing efforts focused on dealing with workers’ daily lives rather than with any particular crisis. We tried to put more focus on workers’ working conditions and conflicts at their workplaces. As organizers, we specifically educated workers on how to gain power at the workplace, and we supported them in developing an understanding of repressive management practices. We thereby tried to foster a culture of labor resistance. We were not exclusively focusing on larger collective actions, but giving more attention to various smaller issues, such as overtime payment and management abuses. We tried to raise more attention and promote “offensive” activism to mitigate these minor workplace issues that occur on a daily basis. We thereby intended to foster a new culture of subtle resistance. Most importantly, we tried to educate workers about the structural power imbalance at the workplace, publicly revealing the secrets of capitalist management. Because once workers understood how the management represses them economically and politically, they would generate strategies to challenge the power of managers. Workers thereby were able to overcome the fear from management and gain power from their own “offensive” activism.

One of our principles in the organizing model is that the law is not the workers’ weapon, since in China laws are not designed by and for workers, and law enforcement is terrible. We tried to educate workers about the legitimacy of labor resistance against the inhuman treatment by management. In other words, the question is not whether something is legal or illegal by law, but it is the unfair treatment that justifies and necessitates workers’ resistance. With this new organizing model and the way in which we practiced it, we highlighted that NGOs are just assistants and that we should try to support workers leading their own movement.

The question, however, is whether or to what extent this organizing model is still viable under the current conditions. Based on our experiences, I will conclude with some key points here. We focused on sector-specific organizing, and tried to transform legal education into education about power relations at the workplace. We also tried to encourage workers to offensively attack management in order to shift the balance of power at the workplace. Additionally, since we lost the physical space of worker centers, we tried to launch online mutual-aid communities and to encourage workers to help each other. This was partially a response to repression, because the government cannot just shut down the internet. This organizing model encouraged workers to act collectively. It inspired workers’ awareness that they have the power to counter management.

It is also worth mentioning that there have been some labor organizations and media, such as iLabour¹⁰ and Heart Sanitation,¹¹ that utilized online platforms to educate workers and to encourage them to challenge the oppressive culture. Some of these organizations and platforms still exist,¹² some have disappeared. It needs to be highlighted that when NGOs shift their organizing work from offline to partially online, this does not mean that they have given up organizing. Instead, they are managing to find new methods for organizing workers and to form a more solid foundation for that.

Of course, there still are some important, unaddressed challenges. We continue to face detentions and repression, and we do not have any solution for that. Even if we utilize the aforementioned online strategies, we can only buy some limited time for organizing. As soon as the government finds out about it, it will try to attack us. We also have a shortage of organizers, because it has become more and more dangerous for organizers to engage in labor-related work. So, even if more and more young students are turning towards the left in today's China, it is morally and politically difficult to encourage them to engage in the labor movement. I will stop here, thank you!

DR: Thank you very much, Pan, and thanks again to all the speakers. The first two questions from the audience that we collected are directed at Wen. Someone asked: "In the UK, the impact of being laid off from low paid temporary jobs under Covid-19 has hit women in particular. Can you say something about the gender impact of the pandemic in China, in general terms but also more specifically with regards to unemployment?" Someone else asked: "I just wonder if you could elaborate more on the issue of job loss or underemployment. So, when factories suspended production, were workers formerly made redundant? And do you have any observations regarding reemployment in the urban area? That is, when workers looked for temporary work or a different job, what kind of work did they end up doing?"

W: Yes, women workers in China have been hugely affected by the pandemic, especially in sectors and industries dominated by female workers, such as the domestic service industry, the dining and food industry, and some processing factories. So, on the one hand, many women could not continue to work, because these sectors were affected by the pandemic. On the other hand, because many schools were closed during the pandemic, many women had to stay at home to

¹⁰ See <https://gonghao51.github.io>.

¹¹ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20191223105322/http://hwg1026.com>.

¹² Unfortunately, by the time this interview was published, none of these organizations existed anymore.

care for their children. So, they were basically stuck at home, both because of job losses and due to school closures. Against this background, over the past few months, many media outlets and social organizations have paid attention to incidents of domestic violence, and reports about domestic violence have increased. By now, since the pandemic has been under control and schools have reopened, many women have gone back to work. However, there has been a visible decline in their income and salary, and their employment situation has become more unstable and precarious.

Regarding job losses it must be said that there have not been many incidents of factories being completely closed. Factory closures have mostly been temporary, and the duration has not been very long. Since June, you could already see many factories rehiring workers. And by now, in September 2020, you can see that factories would like to hire more people, but they cannot find enough workers. The labor market has become very tight again.

Workers tend to find temporary employment. In the Pearl River Delta, for example, many workers are finding jobs as construction or delivery service workers, or they take up temporary jobs in manufacturing. Because of the economic stimulus package issued by the government, the major sector right now is construction. There are currently many new construction projects that have a huge demand for temporary workers. The food and retail delivery sector has also seen a huge increase in labor demand because of the pandemic. Since employment in this sector tends to provide higher incomes, and because it is more flexible, many workers prefer this type of jobs.

And with regards to manufacturing, after May 2020, some factories started to receive increased orders from overseas. However, in order to lower labor costs, these factories prefer hiring day laborers. So, in general, in the Pearl River Delta, where export-oriented manufacturing dominates, the level of unemployment has declined. The job situation has been getting better for workers, and that has to do a lot with state policy as well. However, this sort of temporary mitigation might not be able to solve the problems related to job losses and unemployment in a more fundamental way.

DR: Thank you very much, Wen. The next question is addressed to Pan and focused on the challenges of labor activism. Pan, you mentioned that one way forward is to increase the efforts of educating workers on the issue of power imbalances at the workplace. How can organizers conduct this kind of educational work in practice? And, related to that, how can “outsiders,” as you called them, actually gain a comprehensive understanding of workers’ daily lives?

P: I start with the second question. When I say “outsiders” I am referring to the model of labor NGOs in the past, because we focused on all kinds of sectors and

behaved similar to doctors: You sit in a room, waiting for patients to ask a question, and then you provide them with a standardized suggestion. It has been like this with labor NGOs. We gave suggestions to all kinds of workers who came to us, no matter if they were coming from factories or from restaurants, and we never knew from which sector or workplace the next one would be coming. This was a total outsider position.

What we need to do is to redefine our role so as to not perform as outsiders anymore. The important task here is to focus on just one sector. Previously, we did not understand workers' lives, we considered them as patients, cured the diseases, and then the workers were gone again. However, if we focus on just one industry, we can learn about every development at the workplace. It allows us to understand the problems that workers are facing on a daily basis, because they share it with us. In this way, we are able to understand where repression is coming from, and why workers do not fight back. We always pose to ourselves the question of why workers do not fight back, but we cannot address this question unless we understand workers' worries and the difficulties that they are having. By digging into one sector, we can learn and understand.

With regards to the first question on our educational work, I would like to give a simple example. I work in the service sector, where workers are always being fined by the managers because they do something wrong or because they are seen as troublemakers. In our practice, we encourage workers to not accept such penalties. I told workers: "You need to talk to the managers, because even if you know that you cannot cancel the fine and get back the money, you still need to let them know what you are angry about. You have lost money, and you cannot just be silent about that. And even if you start yelling at the managers, even if you show that you are angry, they cannot double the fine." We also encourage them to share this experience with other co-workers and online. When everyone behaves this way, managers would stop fining people since workers' actions significantly delegitimize their authority. When managers understand that everyone will complain, they become scared, which in turn contributes to the weakening of the penalty system.

I can give another example. We always try to encourage workers to think about why they face high levels of exploitation and to help them realize that it is because of the manager. We then encourage them to go to the higher-level manager or to the government to complain about this manager. This way, we try to take the manager down. Once we bring this case to the higher-level manager or the government, the lower-level manager will become scared, he will call for a meeting with the workers and say: "Okay, I know that you are angry, and we will

address this issue.” Workers thereby learn how the power dynamic at the workplace can change through their own actions.

DR: Thanks a lot. I would like to continue with two questions addressed to Eli. In your overview, you talked about the increasing repression during the Xi Jinping era. The first question from the audience is: “What do you think are main reasons for this increased repression? Is it just a matter of securing social stability, or is it more about keeping current wage levels low?” And the second question is: “It looks like the state shows no intent to bolster workers’ bargaining power, but has the state done anything to strengthen the regulation of companies’ behavior instead?”

EF: Trying to get into Xi Jinping’s head is difficult, but there are a couple of things that we know for sure. One is that the increasing repression directed at workers is not unique. I mentioned briefly that there is this broad right-ward turn under Xi Jinping, and that repression has been targeted at, basically, any group in civil society that you can imagine.

Beginning in 2015, there was targeted repression against so-called rights defense lawyers.¹³ These lawyers are not radical by any means, they rather stood for a liberal effort to take the state at its word and work through the courts, but nevertheless they faced a lot of repression. Environmental activists faced repression. There has also been repression against feminists, and you may have heard about the Feminist Five,¹⁴ but the repression expands beyond that. Of course, there is also the terrifying camp system that has emerged in Xinjiang, and the system of repression has been directed against all sorts of minorities. This has been extended to Inner Mongolia as well, with the language issues that they are facing there. So, what we see across the board is this severe right turn that is an effort to enhance patriarchal forms of domination, Han supremacy, and the domination of capital.

When it comes to capital, things are a little more complicated, and this gets to the second question. The state is exerting a lot more control over capital. There is not more privatization, and they are trying to extend their control into private companies as well. There was just an announcement over the past couple weeks about Xi Jinping having this big meeting with lots of private entrepreneurs, and people were wondering what this is about. Well, the aim is to ensure that there is

¹³ Fu Hualing, “The July 9th (709) Crackdown on Human Rights Lawyers: Legal Advocacy in an Authoritarian State.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27 (112) (2018), 554–568.

¹⁴ Dong Yige, “Does China Have a Feminist Movement from the Left?” *Made in China Journal*, 4 (1) (2019), 58–63.

a party branch in all private companies and that private companies serve patriotic ends.

Some people on the left say: “Oh, this is good, you know, it is nationalization.” I have no optimism about that when viewed from the perspective of workers. So far, there is no indication that this increased government control, or more specifically party control, is being directed to serve the interest of workers by giving workers more control on the workplace, or even by giving them higher wages.

To come back to the first question on whether the repression is just political or whether it is about wage repression. It is political, first and foremost. There is a fundamental political-economic contradiction that the state faces and has been facing now for fifteen years. On the one hand, they want to increase domestic consumption, and they realized this with the economic crisis in 2008, when the United States and Europe became less reliable export markets. In order to increase domestic consumption, you have to increase wages, and you have to increase social insurance coverage, so that people do not have to worry about sending their kids to school, about retirement and health care, and all of the things Chinese migrant workers really worry about.

If you look historically how this kind of class compromise—basically, a sort of Fordist compromise—has been forged, then the independent power of labor has been absolutely essential. But that is the one thing that the Chinese state is unwilling to consider. And you can go back to 2003 and 2004 when Wen Jiabao was already talking about the need to increase domestic consumption, but domestic consumption has not increased. So, this is going to be an ongoing tension that the party has to deal with.

DR: Thanks a lot, Eli. I would like to move on to another issue. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the harsh working conditions of delivery platform workers have received increased attention and have become the subject of public debates also within China. Pan, do you see any possibility for delivery workers to get organized in China?

P: Many delivery workers are discussing to have their own organization. There are some leaders in different cities, and they are trying to organize and unionize themselves [and the other workers]. The ACFTU is also trying to unionize food delivery workers, but to establish an official union and to integrate it into the ACFTU is not the right way. We would not encourage that. The ACFTU is helping to unionize food delivery workers because of KPI [key performance indicators]. They want to include more informal workers in the official union in the future. Another reason for the ACFTU to act is that they are aware of the online activism among food delivery workers which has become vibrant over the past few years. This has caused a lot of tension among the authorities, and the ACFTU

aims to prevent workers' resistance. By now, many workers in this sector know how evil capitalist management is and how little they get paid. But they still lack the conditions for really unionizing themselves.

EF: Let me add something briefly. I have been doing research with a student on strikes among delivery workers.¹⁵ There are two main food delivery platforms in China, Meituan and Ele.me, and in our research we focused on Ele.me. With regards to the whole question about ACFTU organizing, I am also not at all optimistic about that. But just to reflect on a comment I made earlier about the way that worker insurgencies followed capital into these new sectors, it is certainly the case that this has happened among food delivery workers.

At Ele.me, there are two kinds of workers: There are the ones who work directly for the platform, but most delivery by Ele.me is actually filtered through subcontractors that are essentially like franchises directly employing the delivery workers. And what we found in the research is that there is actually quite a lot of resistance being organized at this micro scale. You see strikes where just ten or fifteen people work for one particular franchise within the city. The franchise gets to set a lot of the working conditions, and if, for instance, it lowers the delivery rate by half a yuan or one yuan, then fifteen workers are organizing, and they are doing it all online. One interesting thing is that the state has decided that it is not worth repressing or censoring these sorts of things. So, the workers are organizing online, and they will do a mini strike. For instance, at lunch hour, they will just walk out for two hours and force the boss to negotiate. We found lots of instances of these small-scale strikes happening, and that is a sign of optimism, albeit, of course, there are political limitations.

DR: Thanks a lot, Pan and Eli. On that specific topic, the podcast 打工谈 (*dagong tan*) also had an interesting episode recently, focusing on the issue of delivery workers.¹⁶

The next topic is the issue of transnational solidarity. Eli, you are based at a U.S. university, do you see any useful practices of solidarity that could come from scholars abroad in relation to the Chinese labor movement and student activists in China? Wen and Pan, what perspectives do you have on transnational solidarity? What kind of solidarity practices are possible and make sense in your opinion?

EF: That is a great question and a very difficult one. With regards to worker solidarity, we have an ideal image about how this is supposed to work, where you

¹⁵ Liu Chuxuan and Eli Friedman, "Resistance Under the Radar: Organization of Work and Collective Action in China's Food Delivery Industry." *The China Journal*, vol. 86 (2021), 68–89.

¹⁶ For the 打工谈 podcast, see <https://open.spotify.com/show/6kE1WvcbegErlJ4drKRhxX>.

have direct worker-to-worker solidarity coordinating around workplace issues or political issues. That, I should say, is extremely difficult to do right now, if not impossible, given the severe repression and also increasing nationalist sentiment. That may be more the case for people based in the U.S. than in Europe, but I think it is not all that different in Europe.

Whether we are based in a union or at the university, I think that the first thing to do is to acknowledge the growing anti-Chinese sentiment. This is a little bit more U.S. specific, and it has been very clear with the Trump regime. But it is important to identify the problem, which is the fact that the Chinese state and the United States, and the European Union for that matter, are complicit in a system of global capitalism that does not serve the needs of the people of each of those countries and regions. And we can do that in the absence of direct worker-to-worker contact or direct scholar-to-scholar contact.

Scholars do have a role to play in terms of structuring the debate, in terms of pushing back against anti-Chinese sentiment. This is not to say we should push back against criticism of the Chinese state. Obviously, we are all very critical of the Chinese state. But it is about pushing back against anti-Chinese sentiment and against the right-wing nationalism that is growing in scary ways in the United States, in Europe, and in other places.

In terms of thinking about specifically university-to-university contexts. At Cornell University, two years ago following the Jasic case, we suspended a relationship that we had with Renmin University, because Renmin University had been actively seeking to repress their students who had been involved in that labor movement.¹⁷ We suspended those ties and said explicitly that this was the reason why to make sure that it was not interpreted as being anti-Chinese, but that it was against the specific thing that the state and the university were doing to these student activists.

That is a unique example, but I do think that universities are complicit in a lot of nefarious things that the Chinese state is doing with respect to Chinese workers and certainly with respect to the camp system in Xinjiang. To the extent that we have partnerships in China, I am certainly not advocating a total decoupling. But I think that forms of engagement are possible under certain circumstances where you talk to your colleagues there and ask what is possible and what would be meaningful ways of expressing solidarity.

DR: Thank you. Wen and Pan what are possible and meaningful forms of transnational solidarity?

¹⁷ Weiss, Jessica Chen, "Cornell University Suspended Two Exchange Programs with China's Renmin University." *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/4smmvun2>.

W: The most important thing right now in terms of international solidarity is to exchange information, especially information regarding the working conditions and dynamics of worker struggles in different countries. One concrete initiative that has happened recently is that volunteers in China have been writing articles in Chinese to introduce Chinese workers to the ways workers from other countries have been protesting and staging struggles during the pandemic in order to fight for more rights and protection. There should be more such initiatives. And there should be more transnational seminars and discussions like this one. It is a very good platform to exchange information transnationally and to build solidarity.

P: That is a very difficult question, and I do not have a positive outlook, but I will try to provide two ideas. First, for the left it is key to understand China's regime from the perspective of Chinese workers and not just along the lines of "imperialist or not imperialist" or "Western vs. non-Western."

Second, we need to unite all the unions globally. If you look at the issue of human rights abuse, you will see that human rights organizations have formed a strong coalition. If a human rights activist is arrested, they would collectively write a statement, and support would be given not only via naming and shaming. After the release of the activist, human rights organizations would also try to support the family of the arrested person. Unions globally, however, have very different views about China, and unions in some countries even show support for the Chinese authorities. It is for this reason that I am arguing that they should develop an understanding of the Chinese regime and of Chinese official unions from a workers' perspective. They should unite and support us. For us activists, we do not expect a specific kind of support, whether it is financial support or not, that does not matter. What matters primarily is that you need to develop a real understanding of China. This is absolutely crucial and the starting point for supporting us. It is about getting an understanding of what we are doing and it is about trusting us grassroots activists rather than the official institutions such as the ACFTU.

DR: Thank you very much to all three of you!

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5 | Confronting Covid-19 Racism. Asian Diaspora Organizing and Transnational Solidarity

Presentation: Gigi Mei, Kimiko Suda, Shan Windscrip, and JM Wong
Moderation: Jule Pfeffer and Daniel Reineke¹

Jule Pfeffer (JP): Across the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified existing systems of racial violence while fueling the rise of right-wing and fascist politics. Racist attacks against people in the global Asian diaspora have increased. This ranges from openly violent and brutal attacks to verbal micro aggressions and structural discrimination. Discriminatory patterns of thought have also been fueled by an indistinct media coverage on Covid-19, which has often fallen into a cold war rhetoric as well as postcolonial narratives. Of course, discrimination and racism have existed prior the pandemic. They go much further, and they are often linked to gender and classism. Yet the pandemic has also seen heightened organizing efforts by communities of color that counter racism and forge solidarity with other struggles beyond borders.

With today's panelists, who are activists from the Asian diaspora in the U.S., Australia, and Europe, we want to talk about local struggles and discuss the possibilities of transnational organizing. Thereby we want to raise the following questions: What forms of anti-racists organizing are activists engaged in? Which organizing attempts have been successful and what challenges still remain? And how we can connect local movements to strengthen transnational solidarity among activists of color and their allies?

Daniel Reineke (DR): I am very happy to introduce our first panelist, Dr. Kimiko Suda. Kimiko is a sinologist and sociologist whose work focuses on sinophone/Asian-diasporic issues, queer feminist identities, as well as empowerment through migrants' grassroots organizations and cultural self-representation. Kimiko was a team member of Media Empowerment for German Asians (MEGA)—a project of Korientation—in 2020 and 2021, and she has also been co-directing the Berlin Asian Film Festival between 2011 and 2019.² She just

¹This webinar took place on March 6, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/04/01/podcast-confronting-covid-19-racism>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

²Korientation e.V. is a (post)migrant self-organization and a network for critical Asian-German perspectives on culture, media, and politics. For the MEGA project, see <https://www.korientation.de/mega/projekt-mega-2021>.

finished a postdoc research project on anti-Asian racism in the context of the corona pandemic in Germany.³

Kimiko Suda (KS): First of all, thank you for the kind introduction and thank you for the opportunity to speak here and also network. I will start with a few words about the characteristics of racism against people of Asian heritage in Germany. I agree with what Jule said, it did not start with Corona. You can say there are European racist narratives going back to the 13th century about Asia, Asian cultures, and Asian bodies which can be found in travel reports, novels and operas, and medical, biological, and anthropological scientific books.

With regards to the political framework, first of all German colonial politics in China has to be mentioned, the German involvement in the suppression of the Boxer Uprising around 1900, and the establishment of a colony in Jiaozhou in 1898 which lasted until 1914. Fast forwarding in time, I want to mention the repression of Chinese people during the German Nazi regime. In May 1944, during the so-called “Chinesenaktion” (Action against Chinese people) in Hamburg, 129 people were arrested, many of them tortured.⁴ About eighty of them were brought to the forced labor camp “Langer Morgen” in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg and others to the concentration camp Neuengamme, which is close to Hamburg.

Again, fast forwarding in time, after the wall came down, and Germany was reunited, there are two events which are strongly remembered in the collective memory of Asian German communities: the pogrom in Hoyerswerda in 1991,⁵ and the pogrom in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992.⁶ There were several other attacks and violent murders affecting Asian-diasporic communities during the post-

³ More information about the project: <https://tinyurl.com/37tbhvr7>; <https://tinyurl.com/4nda9czf>.

⁴ For a detailed description of the “Chinesenaktion” see the account by historian Lars Amenda: <https://www.lars-amenda.de/2021/05/13/chinesenaktion-13-mai-1944>.

⁵ The “Hoyerswerda pogrom” consisted of a series of racist attacks against migrant contract workers and asylum seekers, for instance, from Vietnam and Mozambique, which happened between September 17 and 23, 1991, in Hoyerswerda, a town in the north-east of Saxony, Germany. During the series of attacks, 32 people were hurt and 83 were arrested. After the incidents, the local government evacuated the affected asylum seekers and many contract workers left the town in fear of further racist violence. In 1991, the term “ausländerfrei” (free of foreigners) became a synonym for the pogrom in Hoyerswerda. See this website for a detailed documentation of the events: <https://www.hoyerswerda-1991.de>.

⁶ From August 22 to 24, 1992, extremely violent racist riots took place in Lichtenhagen, a district of Rostock, Germany. These were the worst mob attacks against migrants in post-war Germany. Stones and petrol bombs were thrown at an apartment block inhabited by asylum seekers and former migrant contract workers. At the height of the riots, several hundred militant right-wing extremists were involved, and about 3,000 onlookers from the neighborhood stood by, applauding them.

reunification-period, but due to the time restriction I could only mention these two so-called bigger events.

At the same time, we have a dynamic “model minority myth” here in Germany. I guess it is similar to the one in the U.S. context or in Australia. Asian people are depicted as quiet, as well integrated, or as good students in German media, movies, and so on. But at the same time, they are also depicted as criminals, sex workers, undocumented people, which provides arguments for racial profiling, for example in train stations or other public spaces.

If we try to bring this together with the topic of Corona, two aspects should be mentioned. As Jule said in the beginning, some German newspapers, magazines, and TV-stations used colonial images and narratives to culturalize and racialize the virus. And after that we could already see, in 2020, that the number of racial discrimination cases and verbal and physical attacks in public went up. Many people called us and wrote to us. Anti-Asian racism is mentioned in an anti-discrimination report by the federal government, and also other NGOs mentioned many cases to us.

Besides this information that we received as an NGO, I was also involved in conducting a study. It consisted of a survey with 700 people and a diary study of seventy participants, and it was conducted between October and December 2020. Fifty percent of the survey participants said they perceived increased discrimination in everyday life during the pandemic, eighty percent of these fifty percent mentioned micro aggressions such as verbal abuse, ten percent physical attacks such as spitting, pushing, and so on, and thirty percent institutional exclusion, meaning that they could not get an appointment in a clinic, for instance. As *Koriorientation* we think that this reflects a strong impact by media reports. At the same time, we think it made visible what was happening before, but it was not so much reported on then.

It also led Asian German people, especially those between twenty and thirty years old, to organize more through social media. People here in Germany also related to the hashtag #IAMNOTAVIRUS. In German, it is “Ich bin kein Virus.” We, as *Koriorientation*, also supported the online platform “ichbinkeinvirus,” initiated and run by Asian German activists, where people can record what happened to them anonymously or by full name if they like, and many cases were collected.⁷ It is not as big as “Stop AAPI Hate” in the U.S.,⁸ but for the German context it was something new, and also something pretty effective. And beyond

⁷ Here the link to the platform: <https://www.ichbinkeinvirus.org>. Unfortunately, the comment function had to be closed, since too many trolls kept posting racist comments.

⁸ See this website for more details about the project: <https://stopaapihate.org>.

this platform there is also a bigger network of social media activists who now meet regularly and use *KorIENTATION* as a platform for organizing. Having started with individual activism, they now come together for doing collective social media activism. We also got a lot of requests from government organizations, NGOs and so on, to make presentations or talk about the topic of anti-Asian racism in Germany. It is a complete novelty to us that we are seen as a community which is affected by racism. Of course, at the same time, we do not only want to see our own community represented in the discourse about racism. We want to be part of the cross-community anti-racist movement, especially after the shootings in Hanau. I do not know if you heard about that: one year ago, nine people were shot there by a right-wing person.⁹ The Black Lives Matter movement is also important here and had a big echo in Germany. As *KorIENTATION* we currently see the chance to talk about anti-Asian racism as a specific form of racism, and, at the same time, we always talk about cross-community solidarity.

DR: Thank you very much, Kimiko. We will come back and discuss questions regarding your input later and continue with our next panelist: JM Wong. JM is a queer community organizer, healthcare worker, policy adviser, and among other things a space nerd and writer living on Duwamish lands in Seattle. She will talk about Sinophobia and anti-communist anxieties in the U.S. political landscape.

JM Wong (JMW): Thank you for having me, Gongchao collective. It is really exciting to be having this conversation with folks across the world. I just have a few comments to make about the situation today. I am a diaspora Chinese person who has lived on Turtle Island, what is known as the United States, for about twenty years and most of my time on the lands of the Coast Salish people, also known as Seattle, Washington. I have been doing abolitionist organizing against policing, prisons, and detention centers, and I was also initially politicized through labor organizing as a health care worker.

I want to share some thoughts about this moment of Anti-Asian racism, transnational organizing, and how it manifests for me here in Seattle. I have four points. The first point I want to highlight is the context. A lot of people are talking about rising anti-Asian violence and things like that. How do we expand the view to think about what is happening nationally in the U.S. or globally in the world—that increased fragmentation we have been in, the decades long era of austerity?

⁹ For a description of the event in English see Ewing, Jack, and Melissa Eddy, “Far-Right Shooting Shatters an Already Fragile Sense of Security in Germany.” *New York Times*, February 20, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5y63px6e>.

We have what Ruth Gilmore Wilson has called “organized chaos,”¹⁰ and years and years of divestment from public health. And I think all of us collectively in the U.S. have experienced this major gaslighting of being told both that the Corona virus is scary, a deadly virus, while at the same time being told that we have to rush back, go back to work.

We have rising unemployment, rising chaos, the disenfranchisement of people who are getting kicked out of housing, we have a lot of unhoused folks in Seattle and in the U.S., and that is the context that we have to remember when we think about this moment right now. Covid is occurring in this moment within this backdrop. I am involved in a lot of mutual aid work, and I see mutual aid work as an attempt to make these connections again, to rebuild the fabric of society both on the individual basis, on the communal basis, but also politically. What do we need to push back, to be able to build the world that we need where people are cared for? And what are the forces, the institutional forces, that prevent the rebuilding of this fabric?

When we talk about transnational organizing, I want to highlight that over here in Seattle, one of the formations that we had early on when Covid hit the U.S., was the Covid-19 mutual aid formation. It brought together a lot of people in our networks and community. The precursor for that was that we were in deep contact with our homies in China, in Hong Kong, who were experiencing Covid, and we were having the conversations of how we can support folks in China. We were trying to solicit mask donations. The irony is that Covid would hit us less than a month later and that we would have this shortage in masks, but for a while it was this international, transnational care for our families and loved ones back home that enabled us over here to be more prepared when Covid eventually hit us. I want to think about the role of grassroots initiatives and responses in this context of fragmentation and austerity and how we need to resource and build power behind those efforts.

The second thing that has come up to me in terms of thinking about this anti-Asian moment is to push back against what I think is our invisibilization and also the self-infantilization. Those might be unpopular to say publicly, but I personally have experienced explicit anti-Asian rhetoric, people telling me to go home, and it has not been physical but it has been very charring and harmful and hurtful and traumatizing, and it impacts our sense of space. But I take issue with the rhetoric around Asian politicization when people are saying we will not be silent anymore around this recent anti-Asian violence. Because the news flash is that

¹⁰ Wilson, Ruth Gilmore, “Organized Abandonment and Organized Violence: Devolution and the Police.” Online talk, November 9, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/146450686>.

we have never been silent! This notion that Asian people have been passive, and now is the moment where we are going to rise up, is buying into this model minority myth that sees us as submissive and obedient. It erases the fact that a lot of Asian people in our communities have pushed back but have not been acknowledged by the powers that be, by the institutional non-profits, by these political actors. So how do we resist being Asian in America in this very curated way? This model minority deprives us of the politics and legacies that we come from.

Another question I want to ask when we think about this rising anti-Asian violence is, what are the different forms of violence that have existed against Asian people? Whose lives actually matter when we talk about the Asian community? I know a lot of people in this space have been doing work with South East Asian communities, with poor Chinese communities, and we know our communities have been hit with deportation. We know that in Seattle not too long ago there have been two cases of Asian folks who have been shot by the cops. But we do not see that same kind of reaction from the powers that be, that “Oh, this is anti-Asian violence!” It is only when unhoused folks, people with mental health crises, or people who are struggling in their lives, are doing this horizontal violence that suddenly there is so much awareness and suddenly the state and police are so interested in our safety. I think we have to be very careful in thinking about this notion of hate crime and how it has been individualized when we talk about violence against the community.

There have been generations of Black and Asian solidarity and grassroots formations that have pushed back against state violence, and that has been erased in this conversation right now in the way that people are framing the horizontal violence against Asian folks. I do not know if folks from other countries have seen this. It is always being presented as, “Oh, these Black folks are attacking these Asian elders!” That really erases the fact that actually in a lot of our abolitionist organizing, as Asian folks we have collaborated deeply with Black communities. Black communities have come up, have shown up, for our Asian folks when incarcerated, actually even more than our own Asian communities. By making all these critiques, I do not want to erase the fact that we all should have access to safety, but then the question is how can our communities think about safety, how can we see ourselves not as exceptions to the violence of this country? How can we even expect safety when people are getting shot by the cops for having mental health crises? How can we demand that we will be protected by a state that actually has been conducting genocidal violence against indigenous folks, class violence, and oppression against a lot of communities of color? So, while we all deserve safety, we have to imagine a different way to achieve it that is not appealing to the state, and also think about a strategy that really pushes

collective safety not just for us as an exception to the rest of the country. And then the thing is that we have to fight for safety. Safety is not granted to anyone.

The third thing I want to raise is just to highlight the more deeply rooted old school American liberal and progressive racism that is still manifesting today and has manifested for generations in the U.S. I shared the movie *American Factory* as a recommendation for folks to watch just to witness the nuances of old school American racism against Chinese people.¹¹ This movie is about a Chinese factory that opens in the Midwest and on this idea that Chinese workers are submissive, and American workers, in this case Black and White workers who had been unemployed and were then employed by this unscrupulous Chinese company, are coming together to unionize. I think it is deeply racist to just conflate the Chinese working class, to erase the fact that the Chinese working class has been organizing and has been mobilizing against the Chinese ruling class. This lack of nuance of seeing us as a whole community with no differences, with no complexities and dynamics. That is a very old-school way in which American racism plays out. I do wish for all these American capitalists and these union bureaucrats in the U.S. to actually experience the anger and the wrath of the Chinese working class. I do not know if they have seen the video clips that sometimes flow online about how Chinese workers strike back, and that is so different from the way that they depict Chinese people here in America. I just want them to see that we are not a submissive people. There are legacies of resistance and resilience.

My last thing is, thinking about this as the pandemic era, there will be more viruses to come in this moment of ecological destruction that has been extreme, taking place in many parts of Asia and many parts of the world. China's capitalist development and encroachment is extreme, though, and the displacement of people is extreme, too. These are the conditions that make it viable for animal to human transfers of the virus which is the origin of the Corona virus. So, who knows what kind of new viruses will pop up down the road, and we do have to mobilize, organize, and defend our loved ones and our communities.

It seems that if this trend keeps going on, that anti-Chinese sentiment is just going to go up. The questions I want to ask in this moment are: How then do we relate as various Asian people to Black liberation, to indigenous sovereignty? How do we reckon with our roles as settlers in this country and also as a racialized and exploited group of people? How do we hold up our own legacy of struggle and the politics unfolding in our home lands? How do we navigate a sense of home on lands that are not ours to own? How do we not buy into this amnesia,

¹¹ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9351980>.

the assimilation into this country to forget where we come from, and to see homeland politics as other and separate?

DR: Thank you so much, JM. Our next panelist is Gigi Mei who joins us from New York. Gigi received her MA in Peace and Human Rights Education from Columbia University, and she currently works with Chinese international students, 1.5-generation immigrants, and activists in engaging social justice organizing in the U.S. and beyond.

Gigi Mei (GM): Thank you, Daniel, for the introduction, and thanks you, JM, for providing context and laying out the landscape, because I am also talking about the issues in the United States. I think that was a great introduction to the whole dynamic environment that Asian populations, especially the diaspora, are experiencing. I want to zoom into specific sectors of Chinese international students, Chinese activists, and some 1.5-generation immigrants. I focus on the pandemic and on social issues that have been exposed throughout this pandemic in U.S. society, and on how the population deals with it and reacts to it with specific case study examples.

Chinese international students, typically speaking, are coming from relatively well-off family backgrounds and are less tuned into social justice issues in the U.S. They might experience micro-aggression types of racism in daily life, but often in a less overt and less intense way. Former U.S. president Trump framed Covid as the China virus, and as JM mentioned, during the initial stage, a lot of students and people within the Asian diaspora already started wearing masks before the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] told people to do so or before people in general had that permission to do so. During this initial stage, students and a lot of my friends were debating if they should wear it just for the sake of their own safety and because of what was happening back home in China or in Italy. But because of the dynamic here, once you wear masks you become that target of overt physical violence from all the people who are viewing you literally as the walking example of carrying the virus. A lot of international students for the first time overtly experienced what it means to be the target of racism in this country. Many of them might not have experienced this before on campus or working in different cities in the U.S. These incidents politicized a lot of international students and made them think about what racism is. This context really to understand why several groups initiated “Chinese for Black Lives” later on when the George Floyd incident triggered so much nationwide or even worldwide protest and movement.¹² The personal experiences of those racist attacks, physical or verbal, made them realize that it is not just happening to them.

¹² See <https://www.instagram.com/chineseforblacklives>.

Before that, it happened to Muslims who are wearing the hijab, it happened to so many people of color communities in the states, it happened to Black, Latino, and Indigenous people. I think that experience was vital to students who then identified and sympathized with other people of color in this country.

I would also like to talk about the #ChineseForBlackLives initiative. It was initiated by a group of Chinese feminists and diaspora activists in the U.S. Because of their activist nature, and because of being feminists and related to Chinese local issues, people naturally care about social issues in general. When people first saw the Black Lives Matter movement in the entire United States, they were realizing that there was just not much conversation going on about it in Chinese within the Chinese communities here. As people might know, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms is WeChat. There were different kinds of articles on WeChat, but it was more about the violence related to the Black Lives Matter movement, about the rioting, the looting. It was never about the positive effects or about why people are on the streets, why people were marching, why they were doing this. Because of that a lot of feminists started to chat about it in groups and said, “We should do something about it!” That was also because there was not much progressive liberal content or discussion about it. A group of feminist activists quickly mobilized and organized events, talking to the local communities, to Chinese vendors in Chinatown, and to other very Chinese or Asian heavy areas. They did that in order to talk about the issues related to the Black Lives Matter movement and at the same time to show our community ways to stand together in solidarity for racial justice. We made a lot of posters, a lot of signs that we distributed when talking to different Chinese store owners and vendors. We took pictures and posted them on social media. We created different solidarity signs, in simplified and traditional Chinese and in English, not only for the protests but also for individual vendors. That was really effective in a way that surprised us.

Personally, I was kind of late joining the #ChineseForBlackLives initiative, because I initially thought there would definitely be local Chinese American or Asian American organizations already doing that kind of work. But the fact that our group was one of the first groups doing this type of solidarity work within the community, also shows what large role international students can have working and collaborating with third generation or multi-generational Asian American organizations. Throughout our conversations, there were many more second generation and Asian American organizations reaching out to us, saying that they would love to have the content in Chinese, because not a lot of them speak Chinese or other Asian heritage languages anymore, since they primarily use English and do not know how to engage in such a conversation with their family or their grandparents. That was the emerging opportunity for international students who

know the vocabulary in English and Chinese to work together with each other. Not only Chinese internationals contributed in that way, we also got help from the local community. Chinatown is more heavily occupied by Cantonese speaking immigrants. They could not really read a lot of the posters that we made in simplified Chinese and we could not communicate. That is when our local Cantonese speaking friends came in. They helped us not only with rewriting our simplified Chinese into traditional Chinese versions, but they also helped us to reach out to the population that we were not necessarily that familiar with.

Related to that there is much more work to do. Racism puts up so many artificial barriers among groups. It makes you feel like, “Oh, we are international students, so technically that is the work of local Chinese American initiatives, not the work of us, because we are not American per se.” But racism does not discriminate you just because of your nationality. I was walking down the street and people looked at me, for example. I look Asian, I am a woman, right? I am not wearing a Chinese flag or an American flag. They do not discriminate you because you are or you are not American. So many South East Asian people also get called to go back to China when they are not even from China. So, in that way the pandemic helps people to understand. Regardless where they are from, they experience the same type of racism that is rooted in this country. They also might realize that our struggle, echoing JM, is the same thing. We are fighting against the same system and not against each other. The system pits us against each other, it makes us feel that we do not belong here or that this is not the type of work that we should do. This is how it gets in our mind, preventing us to form more cross-community solidarity. Exactly doing that, creating these channels, creating those opportunities, having those conversations, is a way to combat this. So, I am really glad to have this platform to talk to all kinds of organizers from across the world.

DR: Thank you so much, Gigi. Now I am happy to welcome Shan Windscrip. Shan is joining us from Melbourne. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, an activist, and a tertiary education unionist. She is currently finalizing her thesis on the history of diary writing in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. She will talk to us about racial nationalism in Australia and her experiences.

Shan Windscrip (SW): Thank you, Gongchao, and I also thank my co-panelists for their contributions. I learned a lot from your talks, and I am looking forward to making connections with you after this event too. Before everything, I want to acknowledge that I am speaking to you in a country founded on stolen aboriginal land. I am speaking to you in a place called Melbourne which belongs to Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin nation, and sovereignty in this country has never been ceded.

To be honest I should say that I have not been active since I entered the final completing stage of my PhD-thesis which is due very soon. So, I am going to talk about what I have done in 2020 and the year before when I was quite active. I want to give you a bit of a background information about the situation here in Australia. Like in many other places the Corona virus has been racialized in Australia when it first entered the media discourse back in January 2020. The pandemic soon triggered the shutdown of national borders to Chinese nationals specifically. At that time, we saw a spike of racial violence across the country towards people who simply looked Chinese, and sometimes towards South East Asian people, too. The Covid-19 situation has intensified pre-existing racial violence and also intensified the ongoing U.S.-China conflict and anti-China paranoia in Australia.¹³

I want to emphasize one particular form or effect of Covid-racism, and that is how citizenship and national borders excluded Australia's one million temporary migrants from social security. These included a large number of international students, backpackers, undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. What happened in March 2020 when Australia went into a nationwide lockdown? Businesses closed their doors and workers lost their jobs, especially workers in casual and precarious employment, and the government, in response to this, introduced a series of financial support packages to these people. But temporary visa holders and undocumented migrants were excluded from those financial relief packages. In early April, our Prime Minister Scott Morrison actually said—in response to criticism about this exclusion—that non-citizens, if they cannot afford to live in this country, should basically just go home, even though back then the borders were actually shut. So, despite the fact that migrant workers and students are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and despite the fact that it is mostly them who are putting their lives on the line and working as essential workers, they have been left in financial and housing limbo without any assistance in Australia.

Like Kimiko said earlier, none of this should sound surprising to us, because the racial violence unleashed by Covid-19 is not something new. It has been driven by deep-seated structural and ideological issues as well as by the dynamic of a shifting geopolitical context. Australia is a settler-colonial country founded on genocide and dispossession. Racism and white supremacy are constitutive of Australian nationalism. More recently, since 2016 and especially around 2019, we have seen a hegemonic discourse around “Chinese influence” developing alongside escalating geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S. Chinese

¹³ Ross, Kaz, “China and the Australian Far Right.” *The Interpreter*, January 29, 2021, <https://ti-nyurl.com/y8wd2c7w>.

international students in particular have been depicted in dehumanizing terms such as “CCP spies,” “cash cows,” or “patriotic students brainwashed from birth.” They have been criticized for their lack of English proficiency and blamed for lowering Australian higher education standards. So, when Covid-19 started, it tapped instantly into this long and rich discursive repertoire of racism and nationalism, and this morphed into a crisis of national security. The result is the normalization of Sinophobia, ethno-nationalism, and border ideology, and it also boosted far-right and fascist movements in this country.

I want to talk specifically about two avenues through which we have been organizing to push back against this racial nationalism in Australia. As I just said, my activism has been mostly within the university sector. Our organizing principle is basically building cross-boundary solidarity to encourage political contestation of power and political contestation of hegemonic discourse. We believe that solidarities forged based on shared precarity, shared oppression, and shared struggle can facilitate the dissolution of supposed divisions between groups and people.

The first thing I want to talk about is grassroots unionism. Unions are a powerful and effective avenue for contesting racism. This is very important, not only because racism erodes solidarity among workers, but also because trade unionism should be about generating social transformation for all. A strong and just union is built on a fight beyond the specific sectional interest of particular groups of workers. It is built on the principle of fighting against exploitation and injustice everywhere across the world. One of our key organizing principles was to challenge racism within the union while using the union as a mobilizing structure. For example, in 2019, the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] aired a documentary titled “Cash Cows.” The documentary basically pushed the racialized anti-immigrant and economic nationalistic discourse, saying that Australia’s higher education has been undermined by a growing reliance on foreign students and their fee payments. Foreign students, mostly from China and India, were portrayed as undesirable backdoor migrants. They were portrayed as incompetent, lacking English skills, and destructive to an Australian way of life and Australian values.

In response, we mobilized our casual academics and permanent staff members, the members of our union basically, to issue an open letter condemning this racist program. We argued that the problems in the higher education system were caused by Australia’s increasing corporatized and casualized neoliberal university system, not by foreign or international students. Within 48 hours of the show’s airing, our open letter gained about 160 signatures from academics across the country. Shortly after that, we held a rally on campus against university casu-

alization. More than seventy protestors stood in solidarity with international students against the show, and international students, in turn, spoke against university exploitation of workers. More recently during the corona virus lockdowns, casual and precarious academics at our university have pushed our union to demand financial support from the university for migrant workers and international students.

The second thing was the public engagement program that I have helped to organize in 2019. During the Hong Kong protest movement, Australian nationalists basically harnessed the Hong Kong movement for their own conservative and right-wing agendas. In the public discourse, you can see that they were trying to drive a wedge between different groups of people by their nationalities, basically defining them by supposedly innate ideological and ethno-cultural differences between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders. We believe that talks of international solidarity for Hong Kong cannot be separated from an active rejection of Australian nationalism and racism. And I know for a fact from teaching that many Mainlanders actually support the Hong Kong protests. So, in response we collaborated with Lausan, which was formed around that time, to organize a webinar titled “Uniting Beyond Borders.”¹⁴ We invited students, scholars, and activists from different parts of the world, from Australia, Canada, the United States, Mainland China, and so on. Our goal was basically to redraw the line. Instead of reinforcing the exclusionary logic of cultural differentiation between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders, we wanted to foster solidarity between workers and marginalized groups against the state and capital. We do not want to use the categories of ethnicity and so-called race to define people. The webinar was lively and transformative, and it enabled new transnational conversations and connections that has lasted to-date. We have been organizing reading group sessions with these people regularly. This year for example, we are also collaborating with Lausan to host international reading sessions with postgrads and activists from across the world. Those are the two ways of organizing I wanted to put out there. Thank you!

DR: Thank you very much, Shan. We have received a couple of questions that are directly related to the organizing efforts that Gigi mentioned. I would like to start with this one: “Hi, Gigi, thanks for sharing the valuable experience of #ChineseForBlackLives organizing. Are these efforts still ongoing? If not, are there any follow up actions or changes of strategy? I am asking because I think the energies were high last summer and fall, but it is subsiding. How do we continue to do anti-racist work when people seem to start to forget the dramatic moments?”

¹⁴ Windscrip, Shan, Promise Li, and Jimmy Yan, “Uniting Beyond Borders: A Lausan Webinar.” *Lausan*, December 4, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/39ty4bfa>.

GM: This really has to do with the nature of our organizing work and the difference between a network of volunteers versus the institutional type of organizing. The reason why we were able to react so fast and so effectively during last year was that students had their summer break, and that is why people had the time to volunteer and to show up in different communities. The reason for the momentum slowing down was that a lot of international students went back home at the end of the spring break for different reasons. Because of the geopolitics between the U.S. and China, but also because of the pandemic and school policies, a lot of people are currently in China taking classes online or remotely. According to U.S. customs data, the number of people arriving from China dropped by about ninety percent compared to 2019. New enrolments for 2020 dropped by about thirty to forty percent. So, comparing summer last year [2020] and now [2021], firstly, a lot of international students have left the country, and, secondly, the new semester has started and a lot of them just do not really have the time because they are busy with academic tasks or they are working.

But another reason is that we are so volunteer-focused and not necessarily an organization. We have very limited capacity and resources to follow up and to do long-term community engagement. The work that we did was more a reaction and also decentralized. We created an action tool-kit package, including posters, readings, and explanations. We saved it all in one Google folder. Whenever someone volunteered and reached out through social media writing, “Hey, I want to talk to the Chinese vendors in my city or in my community,” we shared the Google folder with them. It has everything they needed. It was super easy, and people could just ask another friend to go with them. They could just print out the posters and signs, and they did not have to be super-unified or organized. We do want to continue that anti-racist work, as we have now seen this rising wave of anti-Asian violence. We showed up last year for Black Lives Matter, and people want to continue this conversation. Organizers talk about strategies to continue the momentum, about how to continue this racial justice organizing.

DR: Thank you, Gigi. Kimiko, you mentioned the racist murders in Hanau that happened last year. Are there any efforts or are there any forms of cooperation with other communities affected by racist violence?

KS: I first would like to make a comment on JM’s presentation. I also watched the movie “American Factory” and had the same thoughts. I wanted to mention that besides working for Korientation for many years, I am also member of an organization called Forum Arbeitswelten [worlds of labor].¹⁵ Right now, it is difficult for the people of Forum Arbeitswelten to continue their previous work be-

¹⁵ For more information about the project see <https://www.forumarbeitswelten.de>.

cause of Corona and also for political reasons, but several years ago, this organization brought together workers from China and Germany working for the same corporation, so they could talk to each other and see each other's realities and share strategies for organizing beyond borders. I wanted to mention that attempts for this type of transnational grassroots workers organizing definitely exist.

In regard to Daniel's comment, yes, we work with other communities but not only if violent attacks are happening. For example, right now we are working with the Black German community, trying to establish a shared anti-racist memorial culture for the victims of Germany's colonial politics. In many aspects, the Black German community has been a pioneer in Germany, also in regard to developing decolonization strategies.¹⁶ We hope that in Berlin, in the former location of the Reichskolonialamt [the Imperial Colonial Office], a memorial site will be created. We are not sure how long this will take. Then we work together with representatives of other community organizations in a museum project called "Mauergeschichten revisited." That project focuses on the time after the reunification from a post-migrant perspective and also seeks to establish an anti-racist memory culture. In order to add this perspective to the current curriculum of the museum's guided tours, young people were invited to develop new content about the history of the Berlin Wall and get a first training as a museum guide. In this project there are also people from the Black German community, from the Romn*ja and Sinti*zze community, and from the Turkish German community involved. At least for Berlin, there are many fields in which we try to watch out for each other. If there is some bigger event where we get invited by the German government or by other institutions then we would ask, "How about these other communities? Why are they not at the table with us?" Of course, no cross-community projects are free of conflicts, like those about resources and visibility. Also here in our circle, it is always a question of personal efforts, of communication efforts, to not let tensions which are sometimes created not in the project but in discussions outside of it, enter the project you are working on.

DR: Thank you very much. I am directing the next question to JM, but anyone is invited to comment on it: "I would be interested in hearing the panelists dive deeper into the class difference between Chinese folks overseas. How can we build class consciousness among overseas Chinese of different generations as a tactic to move Chinese people to be in solidarity with the marginalized populations of their current home?"

JMW: Thank you for the question. I think this is a really important one. We have been having these conversations in PARISOL [Pacific Rim Solidarity Network],

¹⁶ See, for instance, the project "Dekoloniale": <https://www.dekoloniale.de>.

which is a group that I am part of based in Seattle.¹⁷ There is this American myth, the emigration myth that we all buy into all over the world. But when people come to the U.S., there are all these institutions of hegemony and the citizenship test, which is a big way in which people learn about this warped history of the U.S. As organizers this is something that we have been discussing for a long time. We need a different way to orient our people to Turtle Island. There is a different history that you do not know about, the history of Chinatowns, the history of South East Asian refugees, the history of indigenous resistance, the Black radical tradition, all these things. What are some of the ways in which we can replace the hegemonic institutions that the state has to familiarize people with this country?

I also think it is important to confront the class and gender differences within the community and the question of who gets to speak for the community. Why is it that Chinese restaurant workers in Chinatown are not the representative of the community? And some folks of Bellevue in the wealthier parts of the region are speaking for “the” Chinese community? As organizers it is our role to lift up the experiences of massage parlor workers, of Chinese undocumented folks, and of undocumented folks in the ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] detention centers who are Chinese but who are never talked about. How can we push back against the class hegemony within our Chinese communities too? That is where having the collaboration between international students who are well-versed in the language and second, third generation Chinese folks who are familiar with the context is a dynamic collaboration. That is something we should all be organized around, and we should share knowledge on how to do that kind of collaborative work.

GM: Another part of my work had to do with this rise of the small but very vocal group of Chinese right-wing and conservative people in the U.S., especially since Donald Trump got elected, those Chinese for Trump groups. As JM said, the diversity within the Chinese community in the U.S. is huge. You have these more well-educated, upper middle-class mainlanders coming here for work. Often some of them are pro-Trump, either for their individual benefit or because people come more from an anti-Communist sentiment. And there are huge populations of working-class people who come here undocumented, who are struggling and trying to make a living here. There is huge disparity between the two groups, and the vocal conservative group is not only hurting the community, they are also attracting a lot of working-class Chinese because they are so dominant on the

¹⁷ PARISOL is a grassroots anti-imperialist leftist Hong Konger, Taiwanese, and Chinese* diaspora group dedicated to local and international solidarity, community building, cultural & politicized learning, abolition, and anti-racist work. See <https://parisolnet.wordpress.com>.

WeChat landscape with the type of content and articles that they are generating. This misinformation and fake news just spread faster than other news.

DR: Thank you! I like to take up a question regarding the situation at universities. Shan, could you, please, say something about the following question. “Recently a visiting fellow of Asian descent from Stanford who gave a presentation hosted by the University of London said during his talk that there was nothing racist about using “to shanghai” as a verb or referring to Covid-19 as the “China virus.” The visiting fellow said that anyone who believes this is too sensitive. How can an Asian international student feel safe in a university institution where an Asian professor can make such marginalizing comments on an international forum?”

SW: I am sorry that this occurred at your university. There are similar incidents here in Australia as well. It is not okay to make such comments by whoever, whether you are an Asian or a non-Asian professor. And, of course, international students should not be feeling okay about these. The key again is to challenge this narrative and this racial discourse, not necessarily because it was made by an Asian professor. For example, at our university we have had tutors making discriminative and racial comments when marking their students’ essays, and these teachers are not all white. The point is that we should treat people’s political opinions without necessarily determining these opinions by their nationalities or wherever they came from. Of course, many Chinese people as well as many Hong Kong people are capable of reproducing nativist, nationalist, and racist discourses wherever they are. The point is to fight against this racialization directly without reproducing the same kind of categories. I do not feel like I should give you concrete suggestions, but that is the general kind of thought that is coming into my mind. And if there are local resources, such as the union, the student union, or the staff union, these cases should be reported to the university.

DR: Thank you very much, Shan. If it is ok for all of you then I would like to move on to the question of cross-border organizing and transnational networking. I would like to start with Kimiko again, but I ask everyone to add your comments, please. Kimiko, what concrete forms of cross-border organizing do you think are necessary and viable in the current situation among different communities?

KS: First of all, trying to think concretely, we could have, for example, a social media campaign together with several individuals. I mean trying to bring our networks together in a transnational way, maybe also sharing resources. It takes a lot of time, for example, to translate documents. And I can see that certain ideas we have about solidarity with different communities might be similar. I would be thankful if I can get a flyer in Chinese, in simplified and Hong Kong style characters, so that we could also share that in our communities in Germany, for example, since in our team we currently do not have anyone who can do this

translation work. If we do the film festival, then we would also love to show films you recommend or we could recommend some to you. I think this kind of resource sharing is something concrete we can do. Sometimes there might be language barriers, but I think that should not be a reason. I do not know if you share this approach, but we could also approach the UN or other transnational political organizations together if you think it is useful that they take a stance, for example, against violence against Asian communities. If our national governments are not taking any actions to fight anti-Asian racism, sometimes that helps. Those are some ideas I have right now, after I heard what you are doing, what you are working on.

SW: I think it is important for us to recognize that there are multiple levels of vulnerability and interconnected systems of violence, and we should group people together based on a recognition of these multiple levels of precarity. That is the general principle we have been using to bring people together from across the world whether you are international students or not and whichever class background you have been coming from. We have students in our group who do delivery work in Australia, and even though they could afford to migrate to Australia, even though they would be considered as students from middle class family backgrounds, they are also subject to racism in Australia, subject to vulnerable working conditions. They have been exploited by their bosses at restaurants. They are working for about three dollars per hour basically. This highlights the intricacies of interconnected systems of exploitation, and we should fight based on this principle and not think along the lines of the so-called “rich international students coming to study in Australia, why do we bother to help them?” We have worked with our local migrant worker centers in Melbourne to fight for their interests, and we have won wage theft backpays for people.

As to which kind of transnational organizing we could do moving forward, I want to invite people who are interested to attend our international reading session which is held once every month. We are collaborating with Lausan, bringing together postgrad scholars and activists from across the world to read something that is related to contemporary issues. Our first session, for example, is on complicating the concept of the Asian Diaspora.

GM: I can also share a couple of initiatives and projects that are still ongoing. For example, there is the Xinsheng Project,¹⁸ formerly called The WeChat Project. It was initiated by a couple of students at Yale during the Black Lives Matter movement. They drafted a letter to their Chinese parents explaining the whole long arc of anti-Black racism in the states and why they are supporting the Black

¹⁸ See <https://www.xinshengproject.org>.

Lives Matter movement. That made a huge hit and was read among the Chinese speaking community. They then felt like those types of content need to get more space and need to be read. But they primarily wrote in English, so they teamed up with a lot of international students who helped them to translate it to Chinese, and they published it on WeChat.

We also have another group on WeChat, a network working on anti-discrimination. These are scholars and activists in Mainland China. They are primarily focusing on the anti-Black racism in Mainland China. They often do webinars, invite African expats in Guangzhou or in Guangdong province who share their lived experiences in China and the discrimination that they experience every day.

There is also a group of folks calling out a lot of cross-borders issues. Some people are familiar with this long history of anti-Black racism and often study or have experiences in different types of Western academic institution. They are connected with friends and activists back home, co-authoring a lot of criticisms and opinion articles, for example, on the “black facing” during the “Chunjie Lianhuan Wanhui,” the Spring Festival Gala, which is one of the biggest national shows in Mainland China. So, with regards to putting up pressure and raising awareness, there are multiple groups doing cross-community work. There is also a group called “Chinese Against Racist Virus.”¹⁹ They are a UK based activist group that is doing a lot of work on anti-discrimination.

JMW: I am really hopeful and excited for some kind of transnational connection, especially with folks in Europe. Now, with the rise of China, there is this personification of international capital as Chinese, and then at the same time the personification of scab labor and surplus labor as Chinese, too. I think everywhere internationally we are dealing with these contradictions, and it is just going to accelerate. Those contradictions are going to be deepened, as the U.S.-China trade rivalry or China-EU relations start getting more intensified. The other thing is, the ruling class does transnational organizing. It is called the G8, it is called the WTO, all these institutions that we accept as norm in our society. So, what is our counter to that? That is the question. I really want to think of our transnational work also as grounded in what is actually happening in Asia and in some of the struggles in China as well, by the Chinese working class. I think pre-Covid, we had some connections and relationships, and then with the Xi Jinping regime and then also with Covid a lot of these relationships have gotten fragmented and fractured.

So, what does it mean to have a new iteration of that in this moment? Also, with regards to countering some of the Chinese presence in Africa, I feel like a

¹⁹ See <https://www.instagram.com/chineseagainstracistvirus>.

lot of these questions, wherever we are in the Chinese diaspora, we have to contend with. There is the material resource support people were referencing, such as sharing translation. And there is the arena of political alignment. What kind of politics do we believe in, and what are some of the obstacles that are local and specific in the U.S. or wherever we are? And then how do we track the movement of Chinese workers? When we talk to the massage parlor workers here in Chinatown, they come from the factories in Shenzhen, and then they come to a massage parlor in Los Angeles, and then they come up to Seattle. What is the movement of the working class and how can we support their movements, tracking where they go—whether it is in Europe, China, Africa, North America, or wherever? Routing these transnational connections in the movement of the class in a way that fortifies and supports the movement of the class, that is what I am hoping we could continue to do.

DR: Thank you very much to all of you! We hope that this sort of meeting was a tiny contribution to bringing activists together. It can only be a small stepping stone in continuing the exchange between people in different communities and different places in Europe, Australia, the U.S., and beyond.

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III.

China's Periphery

6 | Terror Capitalism: The Enclosure of Uyghurs in Northwest China

Presentation: Darren Byler

Moderation: Ralf Ruckus¹

Ralf Ruckus (RR): Welcome to this session of the online discussion series. The event today will be on Xinjiang. Before I turn over to Darren Byler, our guest speaker today, just a few comments on Xinjiang in general and why we want to talk about these events in Northwest China, or Xinjiang, and shed light on it from a left-wing perspective. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is the official term for this part of the People’s Republic of China, Uyghurs themselves call it East Turkestan. It is about the size of Iran and has a population of about 25 million people. Roughly half of them are Uyghurs or to a smaller extent Kazakhs or from other Turkic groups, about forty percent are Han-Chinese. The economy is, on one hand, dominated by agriculture. Cotton, fruit, and vegetables are produced there. On the other hand, there is oil and gas production. Both sectors are the result of more recent developments—state investments in infrastructure and development in the 1990s and since. At the same time, a new wave of Han migration into the region changed the composition of the population.

During the past few years, Xinjiang has also become important as a hub for the CCP regime’s Belt and Road Initiative because transport lines to the Middle East and to Europe run through the region. So, it has a strategic importance economically and also politically and militarily. Discontent because of colonialism and the oppression of Uyghurs has been an issue for a long time, not just in the last few years. But it took a different form since 2014, when the CCP regime, after a series of violent incidents and attacks by Uyghur separatists, declared the so-called “People’s War on Terror.” Subsequently, the Chinese state started to systematically criminalize any behavior that it saw as a sign of Islamism and Islamist terror on the side of the Uyghur, Kazakh, and other Turkic minority populations. Hundreds of thousands of them were detained, their mobility and migration were restrained, and the regime built a comprehensive surveillance system. That campaign was further intensified after 2017, with mass internment of

¹ This webinar took place on January 9, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/01/21/podcast-terror-capitalism-xinjiang>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

one million or more in reeducation camps and prisons, and the construction of what we can call the panoptical police state.

What interests us is that there has not been any larger left-wing response or campaign against this oppression of Uyghurs and the other Muslim populations in Xinjiang similar to, let us say, the campaigns in support of Palestinians. There has been a human rights discourse and recently some discussion about the usage of forced labor from the region for export production in factories and in agriculture in China. But there has not been a focused discussion on capitalist interests involved or the connection between these capitalist interests with the cultural genocide and forms of gendered and racialized oppression and violence in Xinjiang. We asked ourselves, why is that? To get a better understanding of these aspects and possible future left-wing discussions or actions and campaigns, we invited Darren Byler.

Darren is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and he researches the dispossession of ethno-racial Muslim minorities through forms of surveillance and digital capitalism in China and Southeast Asia. His first book will come out this year at Duke University Press. Its title is *Terror Capitalism. Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*. It examines emergent forms of ethno-racialization, capitalism and state power in the Uyghur Region in Xinjiang. Darren is also working on a second book titled *Technologies of Reeducation*, and that considers the social life of surveillance technology among ethno-racial minorities in China and around the world.

Darren, welcome! The stage is yours.

Darren Byler (DB): Thank you so much for the invitation and all of you for coming. It is a real honor to be here. In my ten minutes at the beginning, I would like to go over some of the key concepts, the key ideas that I work on. So, I will be thinking through the way that material and digital enclosures have transformed the Uyghur population in Northwest China and how we can think about that as a form of original or primitive accumulation. And, at the same time, we should think about it as connected to a contemporary form of colonialism and to the global discourse of terrorism.

In order to understand these concepts, we need to go back to the 1990s, which is when China began a process of opening up to the West, opening up to Europe and to North America and the United States. Becoming a manufacturer of the world, it was turning towards a capitalist economy. In order to drive that new economy, China needed resources, raw materials. It became quite strategic for Chinese authorities to think about where they could source oil and natural gas, for instance. And so, it was during this period that we first started to see the hard

infrastructure of pipelines and roads begin to be built in Northwest China. Xinjiang is the source of around twenty percent of Chinese oil and natural gas. So, in the 1990s, this hard infrastructure was put in place, and it brought with it millions of Han migrants to the region.² There had been a Han population in the region before. Already since the 1950s, Han folks have lived in Northern Xinjiang, on the other side of the mountains from the Uyghur majority areas. But, in the 1990s, it was the first time that a large-scale Han settlement began to emerge in the Uyghur majority areas, places where ninety to one hundred per cent of the population were Uyghurs.

Over time, along with the build-up of this infrastructure, a new service economy sprung up around it to support that infrastructure development and resource extraction. What we were seeing over time was an enclosure of the commons. This is an old story in capitalist expansion, the way in which fencing and roads began to push people off of land. Marx talks about it in relation to 18th and 19th century England and the enclosure movement there. What we were seeing in Xinjiang in the 1990s was something similar. It was an introduction of the Uyghurs to the market economy and the freedom of the market. As Marx talks about it, they became free to starve or free to find wage labor. Because the sort of subsistence farming that they had been doing in the past was no longer enough to sustain their livelihoods. And, in many cases, they were simply pushed off of their land. People were increasingly desperate as they were looking for ways into the new economy. They were being proletarianized in a certain way, although there was not even at that point any space for them to find wage jobs in factories because there were no factories available to them.

In general, what is happening in this context is what Marx would refer to as primitive or original accumulation, which is when material objects, material things that were previously not part of the economy or part of the market, were suddenly turned into a commodity form. We can think about that in relation to the natural resources, and eventually we can think about it in terms of Uyghur labor itself. The Uyghur case is showing us that original accumulation is not a point-in-time event. It is not just something that happened in the 18th or the 19th century in England. It is happening all the time, it is ongoing. This is what studies of racial capitalism show us. Marginalized populations are often targeted with the frontier expansion of capitalism into new domains. It is also important to understand that this is a kind of internal settler colony to China. Uyghurs speak a different language, they speak Uyghur. They are Muslim, and they are indigenous to the space that is being occupied. What is happening in this context is not just

² See Becquelin, Nicolas, "Staged Development in Xinjiang." *China Quarterly* 178 (2004), 358–378.

what David Harvey might refer to as accumulation through dispossession, which is more of a class-based antagonism where poor people are taken advantage of. In this context, it is something more than that. It is accumulation through a kind of epistemic and institutional elimination and replacement. So, there is a deeper form of symbolic, even cosmological violence happening in this context: the Uyghur life-world itself is being taken over and replaced with something else.

With the work of Ching Kwan Lee, who is doing research in contemporary Hong Kong, in mind, I have been thinking about how Hong Kong is now beginning to function as a kind of colony.³ What she points at in her work is that institutional capture is really where you begin to measure how a colony is progressing. When the education systems, the financial systems and the legal systems are taken over by the colonizer, that is what when you know that colonization is happening. For the Uyghurs this began to happen in the 2000s when that settler population began to take over the Uyghur institutions. That is when we started to see loan officers in the banks, who previously might have been Uyghurs, being replaced by settlers and Uyghurs being pushed into positions with less power in the banks. They became the bank tellers. Uyghur teachers in the schools were pushed into janitorial positions. Care givers for their children or the elderly in their homes are forced to become street sweepers. There was a fracture of the basic institutions of Uyghur society, the things that allowed Uyghurs to reproduce themselves. It went not just from those larger institutions, but also the very kind of core institutions of Uyghur society: the family itself eventually began to fracture.

In 2010, digital infrastructure arrived for the first time in the form of 3G networks. This seemed to promise Uyghurs a kind of way out. It promised them that there were opportunities in the city. They started to find ways of organizing themselves in communities there. A new app called WeChat allowed them to use social media for the first time because they could use the oral speech function and simply talk to each other in Uyghur. It showed them that they were connected to global Islam. That Islam itself, which was something that all of them shared, could be thought of as in relation to people in other places, particularly in places like Turkey. There was a real flourishing of religious learning and of cultural learning in Uyghur society.

People did not understand, at least initially, that smartphones were not simply devices for private-public speech and for exploring the world, but that they also became tracking devices. After 2017, smartphone activity began to result in first data harvesting from private tech firms in China, and, eventually, it was used as evidence for internment. Past activity on smartphones became a sign of whether

³ See Byler, Darren, "Infrastructural Power, Hong Kong, and Global China." *China Made Project*, Brief #6 (October 2020), <https://chinamadeproject.net/china-made-brief-6>.

this person was trustworthy or not. There is scholarship that has shown that data intensive industries that are built through private public partnerships, particularly partnerships with the police, are really essential to the growth of computer vision technology. Now some of these firms in China, private firms and also some state-owned, are leading the world in computer vision artificial intelligence, including face recognition and voice recognition. In that sense they are beginning to compete with American firms, and it is important to know that this is not unique to China: Amazon and IBM have also partnered with state authorities and are doing similar work to what these firms in China are doing. The systems in Xinjiang, though, go beyond what those systems do in the U.S. or Europe. The U.S. systems often push undocumented people or people who are on watch-lists into the gray zone of the economy.⁴ In the context of Xinjiang, the technologies and the carceral system begin to produce a new regime of forced labor.

Here I am thinking with some of the work of scholars that have studied migrant labor in Eastern China, people like Pun Ngai. She talks about a dormitory labor regime, which is the normative form of economic production in Eastern China where migrants are housed in the same place where they do production. In the Xinjiang context, it is a similar dynamic as in the dormitory labor regime, but it is something more than that because they are not ever permitted to leave the space. They cannot freely choose to be there, and so it is actually a kind of work-house environment. The Chinese state plans to move around one million textile jobs to the Xinjiang region as part of a poverty alleviation effort. That is how it is officially labeled. The Xinjiang region produces around 84 percent of Chinese cotton, so it makes a lot of sense to relocate manufacturing. It is not only people that have been in camps that are being sent into these factories, but also farmers who are deemed surplus laborers as their work as farmers is not valued as work as such.

Inside these factory spaces, there is monitored labor in terms of camera systems inside and also just normal factory surveillance. There is also monitoring of movement outside of the factories. There are checkpoints at the entrances to the factories, and then there are checkpoints beyond those checkpoints. There is a whole system of checkpoints.

What is holding people in place and making them productive in the factory space is the threat of the camp. People are told over and over again that, if they do not work well, they can be sent to the camp, particularly the people that have been in the camp before. This produces a kind of reeducation labor regime, which is how I think about it in my work. In 2018 and 2019, the authorities in Xinjiang

⁴ See for example Jefferson, Brian, *Digitize and Punish: Racial Criminalization in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

started to talk about the camp system as a carrier of the economy because the factories were becoming productive. So, it was now talked about as on the level of the oil and natural gas in Xinjiang because the camps are starting to drive the economy now.

All of this is happening under the sign of terrorism, which is something that entered China really after 2001. Prior to this, terrorism as a discourse did not exist in China. Now it is only associated with Muslim populations, every once in a while, with Tibetans, and now sometimes with people in Hong Kong. But it is minority folks that are seen as threatening national stability. The terrorism discourse everywhere in the world produces a racialized “other” that can be detainable or is made detainable through state power. In the Euro-American context this produces forms of banishment, pushing people into a kind of parallel economy on the margins of society.⁵ But what the Xinjiang case shows us is that in contemporary colonial contexts it does something more. It produces a transformation of the population and a kind of unfree proletariat. At least that is what is happening in Xinjiang.

So, just to put a button on my remarks, terror capitalism is a new frontier of global capitalism. It is a space where a population of people is made detainable under the sign of terrorism and therefore made productive as workers. I leave it at that, and I am happy to discuss any questions.

RR: Thank you very much! That was a very interesting introduction. There is one question from the audience that I want to put to you straight away. It is about Uyghur resistance or Uyghur separatism, or what the government calls terrorism. Is there actually a threat? Are these forms of repression that you described also a reaction to certain forms of resistance, or are they just paranoia racism?

DB: There certainly have been real forms of violence, and in some cases even violence that meets international standards of terrorism—for instance the incidents that happened in Kunming in April 2014. And even before that, there was an SUV that was driven into tourists by a family of Uyghurs in Tian’anmen Square. There were other incidents that have happened in Xinjiang itself that meet those international standards. These were carried out by a small number of individuals. It is not clear always what their intentions or motivations were. In some cases, it appears as though they were responding to forms of injustice in their own lives. But I am not here to justify their actions at all. Every state, every society deserves to live in peace, and violence should be addressed. In general,

⁵ See Roy, Ananya “Racial Banishment,” in *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, edited by Antipode Editorial Collective (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 227–230, and Chen, Chris, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Anti-racism.” *Endnotes 3* (2013): 202–223.

though, what often gets described as terrorism in Xinjiang is not those things.⁶ Most incidents described as terrorism are interactions between Uyghur individuals, mostly men, and police. Sometimes it is people protesting over land seizures, protesting police brutality, and then there is a crackdown from the police. The police are often the only ones that are armed in these encounters, and typically there is lethal violence that is used. And then, afterwards, it is labeled a terrorist event. It is not that this is the only kind of incident that has happened, but it frequently happened this way.⁷ As a lot of times the interaction is between individuals and the state, it also does not meet the standards of what we might refer to as terrorism, which is action that is carried out towards civilians.

In any case, the people that have carried out violent acts in Xinjiang are a very small minority, maybe several hundred, maybe a thousand people. That does not justify detaining a million and a half people and criminalizing an entire population. That is how we should think about this, as a strong overreaction that is built out of fear and Islamophobia. There is a lot of fear towards Uyghurs that they will carry out actions. Even if they are not religious and have no inclination toward political violence, that is how they are read. And that is motivating a lot of the harshness of the crackdown, that kind of fear. Then there is also the desire for the resources, there is the threat of people having been dispossessed wanting their possessions back. That is part of the dynamic here as well.

RR: Let us stay with the terror aspect. The Chinese regime declared a People's War on Terror in 2014. In your work you point out that there are actually lines or connections between the U.S.-American strategies used in Afghanistan and Iraq and the forms that the Chinese regime is using in Xinjiang. Could you explain that?

DB: Prior to September 11, violence carried out by Uyghurs, if it existed, was typically referred to as separatism. It was said that Uyghurs wanted to have their own ethno-state,⁸ and that was seen as the reason why there was violence. That was also not necessarily accurate as in many cases it was not the cause of the violence but rather a local dispute over things like land rights, job discrimination, or unjust arrests. Within one month of September 11, the state began to use the rhetoric of terrorism to describe Uyghurs. Very quickly they began to think about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which was based in Pakistan, as a terrorist

⁶ See Sean Roberts' recent book *The War on the Uyghurs. China's Campaign Against Xinjiang's Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020) for an in-depth discussion of this.

⁷ The index at the end of Gardner Bovingdon's book *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) catalogues years of state defined terrorism incidents to show this in minute detail.

⁸ See Bovingdon (2010).

group. Within one year, and with the support of the U.S. and a CIA investigation, they labeled that group a terrorist group. It was sort of a phantom group as it is hard to know exactly how it existed at that point in time. There were maybe half a dozen people in Pakistan who claimed to be part of this group. It mostly had an online presence. From the U.S. perspective, it seemed a strategic step to label this group a terrorist group and therefore get more support in the war in Iraq from China.⁹ Around twenty or so Uyghurs were also detained in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo Bay. Very quickly it became clear that these people were not a threat in any way, that they had really been turned over to the U.S. military for a bounty. They were not trained terrorists in any sense. They were all released eventually and are now living freely in other places in the world.

Over time the war on terror in Iraq came to be framed around counterinsurgency. A new military doctrine called the Petraeus Doctrine was written that talks about mapping an entire population in order to detect who is the insurgent population, who is the neutral population, and who is the counter-insurgent population, the people that are with us. Through that mapping you can detain the leaders of these groups and send them into detention. That is where the term “detainee” really comes from in its contemporary use. It is from the Iraq war when the U.S. detained lots of people. In addition to that, there is a third element of counterinsurgency theory, which is “winning the hearts and minds,” transforming the population through infrastructure building, through job creation, those sorts of things.

That is now standard military theory in the world. A lot of wars are now being fought using this kind of thinking, and it quickly entered the Chinese discourse as well. Back in the U.S., it also began to enter the policing discourse. So, military theory began to inform policing theory, and that is certainly the case in Xinjiang now. In addition to COIN—counterinsurgency theory—there is also a new theory for domestic wars on terror, which is “Countering Violent Extremism” or CVE, a sort of a preventative policing program. If you see something, you say something. So, you should get the teachers or the leaders in the mosque to inform on their populations. If you see someone who appears to be radicalizing or becoming religious, too pious in their practice, that should be read as a sign of potential violence or potential terrorism down the road. So, you should alert the authorities and they can intervene.

It is really a kind of profiling of Muslim people and also a misreading of pious practice as necessarily leading to violence. There is no strong evidence to support that as a general claim. But it has now become widespread in European and American contexts. It is something that has been adapted in China as well.

⁹ This is a point made by Roberts (2020).

Some key texts written by CVE and COIN theorists have been translated into Chinese and have now become standard for understanding what policing should look like.¹⁰ That has been adapted even further to Chinese characteristics, as they actually use that term and talk about “CVE with Chinese characteristics” or “preventative policing with Chinese characteristics.” It is now working within the socialist legacy forms of governance where there are neighborhood watch units or *shequ*—community organizations that are responsible for groups of houses or neighborhoods.¹¹ At a grassroots level, the neighborhood watch unit is now responsible for this kind of preventative policing. Over time, they also started to talk about transformation, that populations that are backward really need to be reeducated. They are building on a different legacy there, one that is coming out of the Cultural Revolution and other sources. A system of reeducation through hard labor is one of the things that they are thinking about, or the *laogai* system which is similar to the camp system. That has now been adapted to this new context where it is about retraining people based on their ideological and religious affiliation.

It is picking up on some of the logics of countering violent extremism, of countering terrorism, and then adapting them to this local context and taking them to their logical conclusion. When you have watched what countering terrorism is all about, you see a segmenting of the population. In Xinjiang, there is a greater political will to follow through on those watch-lists, to implement reeducation. In other contexts, civil protections might prevent that from happening.

RR: It is striking that you describe, on one hand, the capitalist reasoning behind this, the primitive accumulation and the transformation of the region, and also the kind of apartheid system of separating the population in order to create a colonized region that serves capitalist needs. And, on the other hand, you have talked about a sort of cultural genocide, the attempt to eradicate certain forms of culture, language, and identity. Where is the rationale? Why is the CCP regime trying to destroy the cultural identity of these people?

DB: The way they talk about it in the state literature is that they are trying to produce a kind of permanent stability. It is a long-term solution to what they refer to as the “Xinjiang problem” or the “Uyghur problem.” I think they feel like it is a necessary evil to accomplish this. Maybe they would not use those terms. But some of the Han people I interviewed, who had been sent to “visit” Uyghur families in order to spy on them, talked about it in this way. They understood that it

¹⁰ See Byler, Darren, “Preventative Policing as Community Detention in Northwest China.” *Made in China Journal*, October 25, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzy6uy9>.

¹¹ See Tynen, Sarah, “State Territorialization Through Shequ Community Centres: Bureaucratic Confusion in Xinjiang, China.” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8.1 (2020), 7–22.

would be really hard for Uyghurs to be separated from each other, to have to abandon their former way of life. But they said, in the long run, they will benefit from it. So, it is a kind of tough love.¹² They might think about it this way, something that is necessary. At the same time, though, there is a civilizational discourse that is part of this, a Han or Chinese cultural supremacy that is accompanying the system where Uyghurs and Uyghur culture are talked about as backward, as uncivilized. Uyghurs are talked about as lazy, that they do not have the training necessary to even be good workers in the factories. So, they need to be taught how be workers, those sorts of things. That is seen as a “gift” of development, a “gift” of civilization that is being given to the Uyghurs.¹³

There is also the discourse of Islam. It is talked about as something that is foreign to the Uyghurs and foreign to China. Islam is presented as a kind of virus that swept into Uyghur society in the last ten to twenty years, I guess, through the internet, as if they were not realizing that Uyghurs have been Muslim for centuries and centuries. It is not like that they are just discovering Islam—they have been Muslim all along. What is different is that they are starting to begin to align their Islamic practice with some practices in other places. The way that the state workers talked about this is that. “Uyghurs are ignorant. They do not understand how harmful Islam actually is, these new foreign forms of Islam, and so they need to be taught.” That the sort of normative forms of Islam are problematic for them. They are separating out the permitted forms of difference, the kind of cultural stuff that they like about Uyghurs from these other things that they think are threatening. Everyone loves Xinjiang food, everyone loves Xinjiang dancing and stuff like that, so that is okay. That is permitted, that should actually be accentuated in some ways, at least in certain spaces, especially for the purpose of tourism. But other aspects of Uyghur autonomy should be cut off, and they should be secular. There should be ethnic cultural stuff that happens in one place, but the rest should fit in with normative ideas of what Chinese identity should be.

RR: Here is one question on the gendered form of violence against Uyghur women. There have been reports that Uyghur women have been forced to marry Han men, and there are reports on forced forms of birth control and sterilizations. Is this part of a kind of genocide?

DB: Sure, I think that is probably where you see something that meets the definitions of genocide or sort of a eugenics campaign most closely, especially the

¹² This is an US-American expression used to describe beating children, punishing them since it is for their own good (*transcriber’s note*).

¹³ For a parallel example of “the gift of development” discourse see Yeh, Emily, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

birth control aspects of that.¹⁴ It is not clear how widespread the intermarriage issues are, though there are many signs that it is happening. It is almost always between Han men and Uyghur women. The way you find information about this is for the most part through local government posts about a couple that just married and that is a *minzu tuanjie* marriage, an “ethnic solidarity marriage” that is a model for all other villagers: “Look at this Han man and Uyghur woman who married.” And then there are pictures of it. There are also gifts that are given to them from the government, some economic incentives that are tied to this. It is not clear what the level of coercion is in this system. Based on the facts of the camp system and the disparity in power in general in the region, there is certainly pressure that is being placed on these women to agree to these marriages. And often it is not even the women that are making these decisions, it is the parents of the woman who have to be coerced to push the woman into doing it. Some of the interviews that I have done with people talked about how their *danwei*, the organization that they are part of as a worker, arranges parties for Uyghur women to meet Han men on the weekend. From their perspective, the purpose of that is matchmaking. It is not clear, though, how widespread those things are. We just know that there is a significant increase in reports of these kinds of intermarriages. There are also advertisements for Han men asking them to come to Xinjiang to meet Uyghur women where it will be arranged for them. You can see these on WeChat and places like that. But, to my knowledge, there has not been a systematic study of it, and it is very difficult to do that research.

When it comes to forced family planning, we can see clearly in reports from the camp detainees that many people were detained because of violations of family planning laws.¹⁵ They had more children than permitted. Typically, the men were detained in those cases rather than the women. We have also seen lots of reports of people having cervical exams, having IUDs implanted, having abortions as part of the reeducation campaign.¹⁶ And you can see in the government

¹⁴ Section 2E of the 1948 Genocide Convention states that genocide is constituted by the forcible transfer of children from one ethnicity to another, see Mundorff, Kurt, “Taking 2E Seriously,” <https://tinyurl.com/94rxh6zu>. This is the grounds on which many Indigenous peoples in North America have argued that the settler colonial residential school system which targeted them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constituted a form of genocide.

¹⁵ Here is the largest unredacted internal state document outlining reasons for detention that I am able to share publicly. It shows that many people were detained due to family planning related issues: https://shahit.biz/supp/list_008.pdf.

¹⁶ State documents show that, after the “zero illegal births” campaign was implemented across the region in 2018, women of childbearing age needed to submit to surgical sterilization, IUD implantation or other long-term birth control strategies, and regular quarterly inspections in order to be added to a list of “trustworthy” or “assured” citizens (see <https://archive.fo/7wyhZ>). Illegal pregnancies were to be “disposed of early.” State authorities began to give rewards of

statistics that there has been a dramatic decrease in the birth rate in the Uyghur population over the last three years. It is not clear how much of that is associated or should be thought of as directly reflected by the IUD insertion program and things like that, or if it is because of the widespread family separation. Many men are apart from their families, women are working in factories. So even the people that are not in the camp are often separated from each other. It is hard to reproduce right now because of the economic system and the carceral system. That is in addition to the actual family planning and public health initiatives that are being put in place. It does appear that the goal of the campaign is to reduce the autonomy of future Uyghur life. And here it is important to think in a parallel to at least North American contexts where eugenics programs were used on ethno- and racial minorities, Native Americans, and Black Americans as recently as the 1960s. These parallels should be drawn out as disfavored populations are targeted in that special sort of campaign. That is not to say that all people in China have not been targeted by family planning in the past, but this is a particular program that is directed only at Uyghurs at this period of time.

RR: Let us turn to the Uyghur organizations, Uyghur associations, and to forms of speaking out. What does exist in Xinjiang, what outside? What is the composition, and what are the political directions of the discourses these groups push?

DB: In Xinjiang itself it is very difficult now for people to organize in any direct way. That is not to say that everyone agrees with the system. Among both Uyghurs and Han people, many or some, are in disagreement. Among Uyghurs there is nearly universal disagreement, and among Han population at least some dissatisfaction. Uyghurs dislike it because they feel unsafe and it is destroying their way of life. Han people dislike it because it effects their economic prospects and takes up a lot of their time.¹⁷ When I was there in 2018, I talked to some people in non-obvious ways as I was shopping in book stores or traveling in taxis and in parks. I talked to them about what is happening to their family members, about the camps, and people would tell me that it is really happening, that this is what is happening to their family members. Outside, in Kazakhstan where I have been doing research more recently, people that have fled across the border talked about how they would meet outside of surveillance systems. Some of them would go to saunas where they would talk openly with each other. But people are so worried about surveillance even in their own homes that they try to not talk about

up to 5,000 yuan to anyone who reported others who attempted to violate family planning regulations (see <https://archive.is/C97TN>).

¹⁷ For more on Han perspectives and how it was viewed by a leftist international student from the region who returned home, please, see Darren Byler's short essay "'Uyghurs Are so Bad': Chinese Dinner Table Politics in Xinjiang." *SupChina*, June 3, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/4ny7x3cd>.

these things. Lots of people are keeping silence even as they are suffering to such a large extent. In the past, there was Han people that identify as from Xinjiang and identify with Uyghurs and wanted to take up kind of ally positions to help Uyghurs. I wrote a chapter about them in my book. That was written in 2015 and 2016, and it is not clear to me what has happened since then, if they are still able to actively support Uyghurs by helping to get them out of camps and things like that. There is some evidence from Uyghurs I have interviewed about Han neighbors letting them use their phone to call and to get information out. Some of the leaks that have come out have been coming from those allies that really want to see an end to this system.

Outside of China there is more organizing. Most of it is centered around the Uyghur ethno-state or East Turkestan, or it is focused on human rights issues. A lot of it is focused at lobbying efforts, not at the grassroots but more at the governmental level. I have been happy to see the Uyghur solidarity campaign in the UK emerge recently which was started by labor rights activists who take up this issue, think about the supply chain aspects, and go to large corporations and demand change.¹⁸

Thinking from a labor perspective and from an internationalist solidarity perspective, that is beginning to emerge. Most of the Uyghur and Kazakh leftists I know, some of them junior scholars or researchers or journalists, have to maintain a low profile when it comes to this kind of activism because their family members are still back in China. A lot of them are the guiding force behind decolonial and labor rights perspectives. A lot of the people I work with most directly are in that category, people that really want to see change and change from the left but cannot speak openly and organize openly. It is incumbent on people that have protection as non-Chinese citizens to stand in solidarity and amplify those voices of people that do not have that protection.

RR: There is a question on how Chinese leftists could support Uyghurs in their struggle against this oppression. And it is impressive when you describe the difference between the older Han migrants, people whose parents or grandparents migrated to Xinjiang some decades ago, and then the more recent Han migration and the different positions they have. The Chinese leftists and these two generations, how do they differ, and what forms of solidarity do they express?

DB: When I lived in Xinjiang in 2014 and 2015, I found that the people that were invested in LGBT* issues, Han folks that I met, were the most sympathetic to the

¹⁸ To follow the work of the Uyghur Solidarity Campaign, you can visit this site: <https://uyghursolidarityuk.org>. According to Darren Byler, the *Coalition to End Forced Labor* in the Uyghur Region is also doing good work: <https://enduyghurforcedlabour.org> (transcriber's note).

Uyghur position. They would, without any prompting from me, talk about how Uyghurs are discriminated against and how terrible it is and how the system needs to change. Then there is another group that you mention, too, the *bendiren*, the local or *lao xinjiang ren*. That is, local people who identify as being from Xinjiang, or who say Uyghur food is their food. They also had some solidarity with Uyghurs. What that is telling me is that people that have suffered in some way because of their ethnic, religious, sexual, or geographic self-identifications are able to empathize to a greater extent with the Uyghur position. I feel like if there is more information sharing, more solidarity building between these communities, there could be some forms of collective movement. But it is so difficult to organize in China because there is so much surveillance and so little information flow.

Another factor here is that Islamophobia has affected some human rights democracy advocates in China, too. They see the Trump administration's policy as anti-CCP and as promoting democracy and freedom. But, at the same time, they disagree with the U.S.'s official position on the Uyghurs, and they agree with the Chinese state's position because they think that Uyghurs really are a threat to Han safety. So, there is some work to be done in talking through the terror discourse and what that does to people who are targeted by it. That would be a next step for building more solidarity.

The labor rights folks in China could also be well positioned to understand the Uyghur position because what is happening in these camp factories is a kind of unfreedom that is at another level from the struggles that people have been invested in Eastern China. But they are related to them, and so there are ways for building solidarity there, too.

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7 | Taiwan's Left in the Era of Chinese-American Rivalry

Presentation: Brian Hioe

Moderation: Kevin Lin¹

Kevin Lin (KL): Today, we will have Brian Hioe, who will speak about Taiwan and the left. Brian is a very prolific writer and editor of the *New Bloom Magazine*.² He has been writing widely about Taiwanese politics, social movements, as well as on China and Hong Kong, among other topics. We hope this discussion will shed light not only on Taiwan's relations with China and the U.S., but also Taiwanese politics and social movements and struggles, which tend to be overlooked.

Brian Hioe (BH): Thank you, Kevin and all the other organizers, for inviting me to speak on this great series. I want to give a brief overview in terms of Taiwanese history without getting too lost in the details. Before democratization, Taiwan had a right-wing authoritarian regime that was backed by the U.S. in order to capture China. That was the KMT regime led by Chiang Kai-shek.³ After democratization, which took place after a people's struggle, a party was formed out of that movement, the Democratic Progressive Party.⁴ That is the party that is currently in power.

The fundamental split in Taiwanese politics is not always between left and right, but between independence and unification. This is the issue that has dominated Taiwan's politics effectively for the last seven years. In 2000, a non-KMT president had been elected for the first time in Taiwanese history, but we saw the KMT return to power under president Ma Ying-jeou in 2008. That led to concerns, for example, that the KMT was trying to put in policies that would push Taiwan closer to China, that it was trying to facilitate the economic integration of Taiwan and China in order to allow for closer political ties between Taiwan and China, and that it was hoping that this would eventually allow for some form of unifi-

¹ This webinar took place on January 23, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/02/08/podcast-taiwan-s-left>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

² *New Bloom Magazine* is an online magazine that features left-wing perspectives on Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific region. It was founded after the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan: <https://newbloommag.net>.

³ The KMT or Nationalist Party was defeated during the civil war by the CCP's Red Army in 1949 and subsequently fled to Taiwan.

⁴ Democratic Progressive Party, DPP.

cation. The KMT was accused of resorting to authoritarian means to do that. There were many cases of corruption, for example, at the local level, using local client networks that have been in existence since the authoritarian period to mobilize votes.

There were also concerns particularly regarding large and powerful media companies that wanted to enter the Chinese economy. Some had pro-China political views, so they took to self-censoring to ensure positive views of China in Taiwan. They would cover up things that took place in China or try to frame China purely in a positive way as though everything was getting better.

In 2014, the led to the Sunflower Movement. This movement oftentimes gets put alongside the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong because they took place in the same year and concerned themselves with similar issues. What was at stake was also the relationship with China. The Sunflower Movement was a movement in reaction to a free trade agreement with China that the KMT government wanted to push forward. It would have allowed for Chinese investment in Taiwan's service sector industry. This led to a backlash from a lot of student activists, from young people, and from regular people, and a month-long occupation of the legislature followed.

The publication *New Bloom Magazine* I founded with some friends came out of this movement. What we were trying to do at that point was inject a left-wing element into the movement, because that is what was getting lost in this discussion of the China issue. There were people that were, for example, critical of both China and the U.S., critical of free trade and so forth, and we had to make sure those voices were being heard.

Independence versus unification is still the most salient issue in public debates. This has affected the course of trying to chart out more possibilities for the Left or labor in Taiwanese politics. After the Sunflower Movement, for example, one saw a wave of third parties that have been trying to be more progressive than the DPP. The NPP was the biggest one.⁵ That is the one that won seats in the legislature. There was also a wave of labor protests. Riding off the wave of the Sunflower Movement, the Democratic Progressive Party was able to win the presidential elections in 2016, and it was able to win the legislature for the first time in Taiwanese history.

Once the Tsai Ing-wen administration of the DPP took office, it pushed forward the Labor Standards Act, a set of reforms to Taiwan's labor laws which undid around thirty years of reforms. This law got rid of some public holidays, and you had to work longer hours. There are not two set days per off per week

⁵ New Power Party, NPP.

but one set day off plus one flexible day off on which you could still be made to work.

A lot of young progressive activists started protesting who had been involved with the Sunflower Movement. It was not actually the traditional union groups that existed. These young activists engaged in, for example, labor NGOs, but were not actually part of the traditional unions themselves. This led to what was then the most intensive protest since the Sunflower Movement.

Also, you had a wave of union strikes. The most prominent and most reported was the China Airlines strike, which was the first strike in the history of the airline industry in Taiwan. This inspired a wave of other strikes or union actions. In the transportation industry and a lot of companies similar to China Airlines, there is a lot of state investment. The unions oftentimes adopted the strategy of trying to appeal to the state to intervene in this kind of labor struggle. This happened at Chunghwa Post, the railroad, street tolls, and another airline.

In 2018, the KMT won in a landslide victory in the local elections at the mayor and city council level. It did unexpectedly well. In the years since the Sunflower Movement in 2014, the KMT was thought to be on the retreat and that it was on the way out. When it unexpectedly did so well, this created a sense of panic regarding the independence versus unification issue.

There is the fear that in the 2020 presidential elections, this would lead to the defeat of the DPP. A lot of young progressive activists involved in the Sunflower Movement, who were critical of the DPP-Tsai administration's position on labor issues, ended up joining the DPP, running as candidates, and becoming part of the administration. That includes, for example, student leaders in the Sunflower Movement such as Lin Fei-fan, Lai Pin-yu, who is currently a legislator, and Aman Wu, who was one of the most militant activists regarding the labor reforms and who became the head of the DPP youth section.

The DPP was eventually able to triumph again in 2020. It retained the presidency and the control over the legislature, although the KMT did gain some ground. This points to one of the long-standing issues facing the left in Taiwanese politics: it is very hard to break apart from the independence-unification issue. In key moments, like elections, it flares up, and it makes it very hard to establish something independent from these parties.

During the Sunflower Movement, a lot of student activists were critical of both, the DPP and the KMT. The KMT is the former authoritarian party, and nobody wants that, but the DPP had also grown more corrupt in its years in office. It had formerly been a more progressive and more left-wing party, but it drifted away from the labor base. On the pro-unification side, one has also seen a similar

phenomenon in which you have had former left-wing activists siding with the KMT because of their desire to see Taiwan and China unify. So, you have a pro-unification left.

This is the issue facing the left in Taiwan. Both big parties swallow up leftists. The DDP has done this more recently, but it was also historically the case with the KMT. That also plays into the way Taiwan is caught between the U.S. and China. Today, the DPP is thought of as the party that is more pro-U.S. It is cautious of China. It is historically the party of independence, although it has moved away from that position to some extent. The KMT is the party for unification. It is the more pro-China party. It does act as China's proxy in Taiwan.

Taiwan is a country with a strong history of anti-communism. Among young people this has faded. Among young progressive activists, there is this interest in the left or in left-wing ideas. Even in the DPP, there are former radicals who are now in office. For example, the former mayor of Taichung and current minister of Transportation and Communication was once the head of a Marxist student group. Of course, once he was an elected politician, he backed away from radical views. But inside the party, space for more radical elements exist.

It is hard to criticize the U.S. once you are ensconced within this party apparatus, because of the fact that the DPP does bank on the U.S. as Taiwan's security guarantor from China, as a guarantee of preventing a Chinese invasion. That has unfortunately led to the idealization of Donald Trump among some quarters in Taiwan. One sees a similar phenomenon in Hong Kong, just because of the fact that the U.S. has taken a strong stance against China under Trump. Trump is idealized and seen as someone who will protect Taiwan, despite the fact that the U.S. just defends Taiwan for its own interest.

The paradox of that is that these younger, more progressive activists, who are pro-gay rights, pro-labor, and pro-immigration, have to deal with the fact that the person backing them is radically right-wing, and that one has seen this rightward shift in the U.S. This is a quandary shared in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Although in Taiwan, there is also this national security angle because of the fact that Taiwan fears a military invasion from China. This plays into the desire to strengthen ties with the U.S.

That is the historical issue facing the left in Taiwan. Now, as we enter the second term of the Tsai administration, these are the questions: Will young people within DPP break from the party? Will they continue within the party or just become absorbed into the party apparatus and the ideological mainstream? Or is there any way to create an independent path forward that is not caught up between the independence vs unification politics that has dominated Taiwan historically? I leave it at that, and I am looking forward to the discussion with everybody.

KL: Thank you, Brian, you covered quite some ground. Let us dive into some of the questions and start with this one on the left in Taiwan. What does it mean to be on the left in Taiwan today? What are some of the issues that leftists or progressives in Taiwan are taking up? And you refer to the division between pro-unification and independence. How has that divided up the left in Taiwan?

BH: The interesting thing is that, at a certain point in time, everyone from a certain generation after the Sunflower Movement referred to themselves as left, but everyone had a different view on what that meant. Everyone was generally pro-independence, but there were a few younger pro-unification leftists, for example. That has to do with the broader identity shift one has seen in the last seventy years in Taiwan. Everyone who is younger does identify with Taiwan and not China. They do not have the direct experience of China their grandparents had, or the nostalgia that their parents had for this imagined nation. That is true even for the “mainlanders,” the ten percent of the population who descended from those who came with the KMT to Taiwan.

The political spectrum divides between independence versus unification, but that overlaps in this strange way with left versus right. It is more like an x/y system with the parameters left and right on the x-axis and independence and unification on the y-axis. But left-wing and independence has this uneasy alignment, and unification and right-wing as well. The DPP is the party calling for change and for a shift in society. The KMT, meanwhile, is the party of the status quo that is calling for maintaining the structures lingering from authoritarianism and the past, and that overlaps onto this kind of pro-China ideology, which it has pushed as the party that ruled over Taiwan for so many decades.

Independence and unification, those are not inherently left/right issues. So, it is rather odd that way. Another thing is that Taiwanese politics is still dominated by these two electoral parties, the DPP and the KMT, but the DPP itself could actually be two parties. It has a left wing and a right wing which came together in a coalition, and the shared basis for that is opposition to the KMT. That has created an unusual dynamic, and that is the challenge we are dealing with.

KL: That is really interesting. You refer to the left-wing and the right-wing or the two directions within the DPP. Could you elaborate more on that? And what are other issues they are either aligned or sharply divided on within the DPP?

BH: Issues young or newer leftists claim to care about in Taiwan are, for example, LGBTQ issues, labor rights, and anti-xenophobia. Taiwan has seen much more immigration from Southeast Asia in the past twenty years, for example. But within the DPP, you do have voices that are not so on board with that. Their current Tsai administration is center-left, it is pretty technocratic, but it wants to

put on the veneer of being progressive just to appeal to this wave of new politicized young people after the Sunflower Movement.

Not everybody in the DPP is on board with that. For example, in the past few years one has seen rebellions by a group known as the Formosa Alliance. They are more conservative and very Christian. The DPP historically has a strong faction which is Christian, and they are opposed to gay marriage. They are composed of quite wealthy industrialists. One can see them as the domestic Taiwanese bourgeoisie that is pro-independence, because they are opposed to the cross-strait hopping bourgeoisie that jumps between Taiwan and China. They are also not as pro-labor because they are industrialists, and they have also made discriminatory statements against Southeast Asian immigrants. They are not in favor of immigration because they support Taiwanese nationalism of “native Taiwanese.” These are also called *benshengren* (本省人) and descended from earlier waves of migration before the KMT came over. They speak Taiwanese Hokkien, which is also known as Taiwanese.

That is one of the issues in which there are divides. It seems like a real fracture line in the DPP, particularly between 2018 and 2020, when it looked like Tsai was going to be challenged by other forces in the Party.

KL: Is this also generational, in the sense that the younger people in Taiwan are more likely to be pro-independence if they are on the left?

BH: Absolutely, it is generational. Few young people identify with being pro-unification. For example, the KMT has less than 4,000 members under 40. It is trying desperately to capture young people.

Young people are oftentimes more progressive than their predecessors or their parents. Around these kinds of issues, particularly gay marriage, one can see generational conflicts between younger and older people. It is the case around the world that young people are much more in favor of marriage equality. One can see a wave of young people rising up across the world against unfair economic conditions, but then oftentimes they are contesting their parents, the so-called boomers. That is also what happens in Taiwan.

KL: To what extent is the DPP able to attract this layer of young leftists? Even though they may vote against the KMT, they may still be feeling deeply disillusioned with the DPP as well, right?

BH: The key challenge facing the left is how to avoid being captured by the DPP, because the DPP has proven to be very good at co-opting and recruiting promising young people into the party. The DPP itself is a social movement party that originated out of Taiwan’s democracy movement. It was more radical in the past and has shifted rightwards, but it has retained strong ties with social movements.

Within the party, there is a department of social movements. It knows how to build ties with social movements, how to recruit, how to use this as a point for redirecting the massive energy of a social movement towards electoral politics. That is an issue. From 2014 to 2018, there was much more criticality of the DPP, from Sunflower Movement activists among others. When the DPP came to the legislature during the occupation, activists made it clear and said: “We are not going to allow you to co-opt this movement. This is our movement and you are not going to use this for your own purposes.”

But then, as time went on, the KMT seemed to be coming back, gaining ground, and appealing to these older, disenfranchised people who were looking at this wave of young people and thought: “They are going to make our society into something different than we recognize.” There was a fear that the DPP would actually lose, so, people joined the DPP. And now we are in a moment in which the DPP has consolidated power again, and the question is whether there is a way to push the party from left?

We always see new attempts to create third parties, or a new faction inside the DPP. While there have been different third parties that tried to be more left-wing and more pro-independence than the DPP, eventually, they have disintegrated under infighting, not necessarily ideological, just regarding tactical issues. The third parties seem to be a dead end after all these years of struggle. Now what do we do that everyone is in the DPP? That is a puzzle. The left in Taiwan has always emphasized that you do have to be independent from both parties.

KL: That is really interesting. I want to continue on this question of leftist space. You talked about third parties and how that has not worked out. Outside of the political party form, are there leftist spaces or formations that you think are promising or at least pointing in the right direction, even though they may not be able to capture power in electoral politics?

BH: There are left spaces that have existed for a long time, for instance, left-wing NGOs. But they do not seem to grow. In some sense they become generational. They train a new cohort of young people that are invested in social movements, invested in labor activism, and it becomes a way of passing down skills. I think this has been very effective, but it does not lead to an overall increase in the size of left.

The Mainland Club (大陸社) at NTU is a great example. It is a student group that was allowed to study Marxism under the KMT, just for the purposes of criticizing Marxism, and they all became Marxists as a result. That student group still exists today. But the question then is how to build a mass movement. That is the challenge because so much focus lies on young people and young people’s movements. They are not traditional workers. They are oftentimes working in

labor NGOs but not labor unions themselves. So, the labor union structure is not affected by these changes and still ossified, still caught in old dynamics.

KL: I have some interesting questions from participants. One question relates to the relationship between Taiwan and China, specifically, to the profound intertwining of politics with economics in relation to China and the role Taiwanese capital plays in PRC development. Do you see any possibilities for a class alliance among left progressive forces across the Taiwan Strait? What issues could prevent the formation of such a class alliance?

BH: That is a great question. It is very difficult. For example, Wu Jieh-min (a Taiwanese academic) has a famous book titled *The Third Imagination of China* (中國第三種想像). It was written about ten years ago. It is a utopic imagination of activists or the civil society aligning from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to resist their shared enemy of the CCP. You can just point to the fact that it is the bourgeoisie that is the shared enemy of the working class in all these different places.

What has become more difficult compared to ten years ago, is for exchanges to occur between individuals involved in social movements in different places. Back then, China was still relatively opened up and civil society was allowed to operate. It was possible for activists to travel back and forth between these places and conduct exchanges. That has changed in the past seven years since the Umbrella Movement. It is very difficult for Hong Kong activists to travel to China and vice versa. Oftentimes, exchanges need to go underground or find ways of happening otherwise. That is the difficulty.

In terms of actions by organized labor, a lot of these Chinese companies are owned by Chinese and Taiwanese capitalists, and there is no way to parse out the two sections of this shared entity. When you look at someone like Terry Gou, the owner of Foxconn, whose interests does he represent? Taiwan's or China's? Neither, he is just the bourgeoisie. In order to affect this kind of people, you need to have concerted action on both sides.

We have very few models of coordinating across borders, in terms of strikes, in terms of the whole world or even the Sinophone world these days. You do have union groups, for example, offering solidarity. They will take a photo, hold signs, and post that on Facebook. But beyond that, you do not actually see these kinds of attempts. There are pressure points where you can hit vast multinational corporations which have to have multiple locations in order to survive. You can hit them at more than one location according to the action, you can really hit them where it hurts. But I do not see enough thinking about that.

KL: Earlier you referred to the protests around the labor law, and you mentioned the flight attendants' strike. Could you give us a sense of what is the cutting edge of the labor struggles in Taiwan? Who are leading the struggles? We know there is a KMT aligned union federation, and there are also more autonomous unions and federations.

BH: Historically, unions have been weak in Taiwan. That is because of KMT authoritarianism, obviously. Unions are a threat to your power. You do not really want them to be strong. Also, the KMT would embed party cadres within labor unions. Sometimes KMT functionaries would take up positions in labor unions as a way to get money. It also served as a means of work control, and it served as a means of enforcing production quotas. Using a union system to enforce productivity you will see in other contexts in the world as well. With the DPP, one does see the attempts of creating independent labor unions from the KMT. That also encounters issues, particularly in the last twenty years, because labor unions can become corrupt, and they can become distant from workers struggles. And a lot of labor unions are not as much focused on larger mobilizations as they are deeply rooted in their workplace struggle. Oftentimes workers will join unions for the sake of just getting insurance. Sometimes they are not too active. And sometimes these unions are not all that militant.

In the past few years, one has seen a lot of militancy from Taoyuan-based labor unions, though. For example, the airline workers were involved in many struggles, and Taiwan's major international airport is there. In these struggles that involve different unions, in the transportation industry or in businesses that are heavily state-owned, oftentimes, you see the same people are active in all these struggles, the same leaders. That is maybe the issue, that you see the same people and the same cast of characters coming out continuously in the news. It is not expanding in terms of leadership. However, you do have young people or people in their 30s that are getting into labor struggles, and that is encouraging.

During the protests against the Labor Standards Act, I saw people who were college students in their 20s becoming politicized. That was encouraging to see in industries such as, for example, the sales clerks of department stores, but it is hard to see this to grow on a mass scale. What is appealing to young people is, when a social movement develops a visual language, an aesthetic language, or a protest culture of its own. The protests against the Labor Standards Act were getting there, like when these amazing artworks or protest performances came out of that. We had not seen anything like that since the Sunflower Movement. If not for the fact that there was exhaustion, I think it could have gone somewhere, and that was a missed moment maybe.

KL: Another part of labor is migrant labor from Southeast Asia, especially as domestic workers, factory workers, and fishermen. Could you talk about the conditions of migrant labor in Taiwan and also the organizing efforts?

BH: There are a number of migrant worker unions. The most famous is probably TIWA, the Taiwan International Migrant Workers Association. There are also some that are more specialized, like the Yilan Migrant Fishermen Union. Most migrant workers are in factories—about 400,000—but unionizing or organizing them is difficult. What gets a lot more attention is organizing among domestic workers or caregivers for the rising elderly population in Taiwan, because they are a visible population in urban centers. They also can gather in urban centers and their public places. Factory workers are often in the countryside, cut off from each other. It is hard for migrant worker NGOs to access them because they might not have cell phone signal. If there is some grievance, they have difficulty tracking them down even.

That is even more difficult with some migrant fishermen, because they are literally on the high seas. Oftentimes, they are not returning to shore for years at a time. They have no access to WiFi, and, oftentimes, not even a cell phone signal.⁶ They can only report things when they come back to port, but that happens so rarely. They are all on different vessels so they cannot unionize either.

Then, again, when it comes down to it, we have got politicians who are not listening because migrant workers cannot vote. There are often calls from these migrant worker unions to allow migrant workers the ability to vote for local elections in some places, even if they are not a citizen. But I do not see that gaining traction. A lot of politicians are tied to vested interests that benefit from migrant labor. There is not a lot of incentive for change. One has to push Taiwanese society to be more aware of this issue and less callous about it for something to happen.

KL: I want to turn to another subject. We have been skirting around the Sunflower Movement, and New Bloom comes out of that movement. Could you talk about the legacies or influences that come out of the Sunflower Movement? Do you see something like that could emerge again in Taiwan?

BH: That is very interesting because the Sunflower Movement is such an epoch changing event and has affected all protests after that. Every protest tried to mimic the Sunflower Movement in order to get demands heard. You see a lot of attempted occupations of the legislature, for example, in the belief that this would allow whatever cause that it was representing to get this much attention. The only

⁶ Meanwhile, the Taiwanese government has introduced regulations which encourage the owners of fishing vessels to install WiFi on board.

massive one that was as intense as the Sunflower Movement was the protest against the Labor Standards Act, but it was by no means as large.

Everyone has this model now to aspire towards. That has also led to some path dependency. There is this attempt to do the same things, using the same tactics. Protests in these central government buildings in Taipei always take place just to draw media attention. In the past ten or twenty years there is a history of such protests in that area. But is that all that can be done? I think more creative thinking is needed.

KL: You were in Hong Kong back in 2019 covering the protests there. Could you give us a sense of the linkages and connections? How do you compare these two movements?

BH: People often do not realize that, before the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella Movement happened, Taiwanese and Hong Kong activists and also Chinese activists knew each other casually, because there are only so many people working on these issues. Before you got famous, you could travel anywhere, so you could go to China and meet with people. Surveillance was also not as bad ten years ago, in Hong Kong as well. Often, people knew each other, and when these movements happened, your friends would be famous all of a sudden, friends that you knew already from working on similar issues.

These connections have developed over the last ten years, but it has been hard to meet physically, person to person. What is interesting is that Taiwan and Hong Kong obviously share an issue regarding China. That has led to a sense of solidarity or seeing commonality with each other, and some skill sharing or exchange of tactics. For example, after the Sunflower Movement, the occupation of the Legislature Council in August 2014, there was an attempt to storm the Hong Kong Legislative Council protesting development in the New Territories. Recently, in the anti-ELAB in early July 2019, there was the attempt to occupy the Legislative Council in Hong Kong, in which people wrote “Sunflower HK” in the building and drew comparisons in speeches.

Taiwan had also the largest solidarity rallies for Hong Kong. I remember one weekend with at least one solid rally per day, and they were all organized by different groups. It culminated in a solitary rally of tens of thousands of people. But the challenge of building transnational solidarity is that sometimes offering solidarity is just not enough. It is offering sympathy, and it allows for the support and for the feeling a sense of commonality or strength from outside. But what is the actual material benefit of that? It is hard to know. There were protest supplies being sent from Taiwan to Hong Kong during the 2019 protests—gas masks, safety helmets, and that sort of thing—but China eventually did come in and cut off those supply routes.

KL: Do you know if there are any alternative left strategies for Taiwanese independence? Or can you foresee any future for Taiwan that does not rely on the U.S. government or U.S. military intervention?

BH: In terms of not relying on U.S. imperialism, what would that look like? There is not a lot of discussion of models such as non-alignment or trying to resist falling in with the dual power world of China versus the U.S. and working with other countries along the chain. That is something that we have learned and are trying to push for, but it is still very new. The left has to tackle this head on and offer its own alternative. That is a way to build power, to show that you offer something different.

KL: Let us shift focus to the question of gender equality. In 2019, Taiwan was the first place in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. Could you talk about the struggle for gender equality in Taiwan? What are the challenges facing gender equality? Why do you think on this issue Taiwan is so progressive in Asia?

BH: There is no simple explanation as to why this happened in Taiwan. Paradoxically, Taiwan's exclusion from the world has oftentimes left it trying to adapt and develop new things or trying to be more progressive than other countries. Part of the interest in the left in Taiwan is the belief that this is the most advanced thing on offer right now. The way to build ties with people is to be better than everyone else. This was also another push in terms of legalizing gay marriage. One can bring up the critique of homo-nationalism here.⁷ The DPP was interested in legalizing gay marriage to have the credit of being the first in Asia to legalize gay marriage. So, you can distinguish yourself from China by saying you are the first to legalize gay marriage. That was an odd impetus for legalizing gay marriage that was allowing the DPP to force the conservative wing of the party to fall in line.

KL: This next question is about exposing links between the ruling classes in the West and China. One issue of solidarity with Hong Kong in the UK is that they are exploring and exposing the relationship of politicians and businesses with the ruling classes in China as well as those in the West. It goes back to some of your questions about the influence of people like Terry Gou, the Taiwanese businessman behind Foxconn, who has investment and political clout in mainland China. What is your thought on tracking down and exposing those linkages between ruling classes, based in Taiwan, in Hong Kong, in China, in the West? Could that be useful for building solidarity with radical forces elsewhere?

⁷ Homo-nationalism describes social forces which, in the name of claims by the LGBTIQ*-community, justify racism and nationalist exclusion.

BH: I think that is vitally necessary. Again, all these things are interlinked. Terry Gou and Foxconn, a Taiwanese company that operates factories in China, makes products for Apple, an American company which is basically everywhere. They can only operate in China with the cooperation of the CCP. There is this large network. I think just targeting one actor, one node of that network is not helpful. It will not be effective in the end, because if you take on Foxconn, another company will just step into the void or the production of iPhones by Apple would just be shifted to Southeast Asia. One has to build a network, because that is how the capitalist class works. They always go where it is most cost effective, where they can pay workers the least, or exploit workers without consequence. One has to see all of these issues as transnational. It is difficult to think of any company or any rich person that is just of one nationality. Thinking and trying to move beyond the nation state is the only way we can address the issue of capitalism.

Recommended Resources

Chiang Kuo-yu, “The Taiwanese Left Was Once Rooted in the Radical Labor Movement.” *Jacobin*, December 23, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bnuz9jx5>.

Dashorst, Bart, “Baodiao and the History of Postwar Taiwanese Leftist Thought.” *New Bloom Magazine*, August 26, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/438zv8c6>.

Hioe, Brian, “The Pro-independence Left Versus the Pro-unification Left in the Sinophone World.” *New Bloom Magazine*, May 19, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9xt84j>.

Hioe, Brian, “A Shared Logic Between the Pro-Unification Left and KMT Apologists?” *New Bloom Magazine*, October 1, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/28z6ckyf>.

Hioe, Brian, “Caught Between Two Superpowers: Taiwan’s Left in an Age of U.S.-China Tensions.” *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture*, no. 79 (2021), 24–36.

8 | Facing the Right in the Hong Kong Movement

Presentation: Promise Li

Moderation: Ralf Ruckus and Jule Pfeffer¹

Ralf Ruckus (RR): The Hong Kong protest movement in 2019 and 2020 has been understood as non-ideological. It was backed by a big and broad part of the Hong Kong society. But from the beginning, there was also support for right-wing ideas and figures. Such support was even more visible in the time leading up to the U.S. elections. Meanwhile, left-wing and anti-capitalist currents have largely remained side-lined.

I am happy to introduce Promise Li as our guest. Promise is from Hong Kong and Los Angeles. He is a member of Lausan Collective and active in U.S. socialist organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America and Solidarity. He has also been a tenant organizer in Los Angeles Chinatown. Promise has critically explored the pro-Trump and right-wing parts of the Hong Kong movement. He elaborated on this in a recent essay that we want to discuss today.² We also want to talk about the recent arrests of pro-democracy activists, journalists, and politicians and the implications of that repression. And we want to discuss how the struggle in Hong Kong can continue and move beyond its limitations and also why it remains important to support the Hong Kong movement. Promise will now give a short presentation. After that we will begin the discussion.

Promise Li (PL): Great, thank you for the introduction. A lot of the insights and impressions are preliminary formulations, and I look forward to a productive debate on this matter.

First off, I want to address a key criticism that I have received about my analysis of the right-wing in Hong Kong. Why are we even talking about such a marginal or small element, when we have state repression to deal with? Some people sympathetic to the movement question whether one can even meaningfully talk about the existence of a substantial right-wing in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the movement's critics question whether we can meaningfully speak of

¹ This webinar took place on February 20, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/03/06/podcast-facing-the-right-in-the-hong-kong-movement>. The transcript was edited and shortened for this publication.

² See Li, Promise, "It's Time for Hong Kong to Reckon with its Far-right." *Lausan*, November 29, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5n6mwtcw>; Li, Promise, and Matt Dagher-Margosian, "Facing Down Global 'Trumpism' and Hong Kong's Far-right." *Asia Art Tours*, January 9, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/54969jv3>.

anything *but* the right-wing in Hong Kong. And many in the city might not understand what the right-wing even means, from those who identify with it to those who do not.

This is all to say that the ideological confusion in Hong Kong, amplified by the movement's sacred adherence to unity across political lines against the CCP, does not prove the obsolescence of the left/right spectrum. It rather calls for us to understand why these categories became out of touch in Hong Kong. How did the failure to reckon with this limit our own movement for democracy? The right-wing is not monolithic and neither a bygone reality nor the guiding center of the movement. We must re-evaluate the objective conditions that gave rise to this complex conjuncture. I do not have an answer for how we can immediately transform these conditions for the better, especially in light of the unprecedented period of repression in the face of the National Security Law. I will focus on a few theses or observations that build on one another for us to discuss.

First, there are different kinds of right-wing forces that react against each other, irreducible to simply the authoritarian CCP or the intolerant pro-Trump and xenophobic factions in the protests. We must distinguish between the localists who identify as part of the right-wing, who know clearly what that means, and who are a loud but extreme minority; CCP officials who embody a right-wing ideology of state sovereignty coded in left-wing rhetoric; and lastly, those who have a minimal understanding of the political spectrum but support Trump simply because he is tough on China, like single-issue voters in the U.S.

These different right-wing forces feed on one another, especially on the point of nationalism. The militantly anti-Chinese and exclusionary right wing among the localist camp has given fuel to the CCP to rally their own mainland citizens around its own form of Han nationalism to further isolate the Hong Kong movement. And China's reinforcement of its own form of racially-charged nationalism borrows significantly from fascist theorists of racial nationalism and sovereignty, like Carl Schmitt. Scholars of contemporary Chinese political philosophy know that there has been a renaissance in such scholarship among some of the central ideologues of China's policymaking apparatus toward Hong Kong, like Jiang Shigong.³ For them, politics can be reduced to an existential conflict between those who are included in the Chinese imperial horizon and those who challenge it. Class and other issues are seen as merely secondary to the internal unity of national identity and sovereignty—the bread-and-butter principles of a far-right state.

³ See Ryan Martínez Mitchell (2020): "Chinese Receptions of Carl Schmitt Since 1929," *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 181–263.

Right-wing elements in the protest movement take on some of these characteristics, too, though importantly without state power. In some circles, spilling blood for the movement or the “Hong Kong people” has become a currency for recognition and impetus for action, rather than rigorously thinking through what a sustainable movement building can look like that can reach from locals to migrants.⁴ It is almost like a reverse image of Chinese nationalism. And these people are dangerous not because they are coherent and organized, but precisely because they are not. It all begins not with an ideologically coherent local tradition of right-wing thought, but from a messy, reactive, and populist dislike of what some see as the Chinese way of life and politics, which often confusingly conflates both the government and the people or the culture.

There is one key thesis in my essay that has been curiously misread or overlooked. I argue that this reaction also stems from Hong Kong’s own unresolved proximity to whiteness, not simply from misinformation. In other words, what are the material factors that make many Hong Kongers easily predisposed toward right-wing thought? For many Hong Kongers, the British colonial heritage has been conveniently reimagined as politically neutral or as a lesser evil. This is fueled by a long-standing tradition of critique from Hong Kong, Chinese, and Taiwanese intellectuals since the culture wars in the 1980s—from writers like Bo Yang and Sun Lung-kee to the more recent Joe Chung, who attacked Chineseness as somehow fundamentally alien to Western democratic values—a reaction to the CCP’s increasingly nationalistic channeling of the Han identity for its own political imaginary.⁵ In other words, the post-1997 generation in Hong Kong grew up in a discursive milieu in which a highly problematic kind of West-worshipping cultural critique dominated, providing fertile ground for ideologically right-wing sentiments, with no clear local and mainstream tradition of democratic movement building as a counterweight.

This brings me to my next point. Those attracted to right-wing ideas in Hong Kong often embody a central weakness of Hong Kong oppositional politics—political atomization. This explains why nearly all of the city’s mass uprisings since the handover have been characterized by powerful spontaneous energy but have been unable to be sustained or channeled into systemic critique. Hong Kong politics can be often reduced to various forms of custodial politics—small groups of activists compelled to substitute the kind of power capacity of mass move-

⁴ See Chen Yi (陳怡), “Confronting the New ‘Big Platform’—Part 1.” *Lausan*, April 21, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2bznhbya>.

⁵ See Promise Li, “From the ‘Chinese National Character’ Debates of Yesterday to the Anti-China Foreign Policy of Today,” *Made in China Journal*, March 8, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mtm4fx9r>.

ments, provocative street actions by a small core of activists, NGO culture and other kinds of professional activism, or politics merely in the Legislative Council. Both the CCP and the UK have been very effective in uprooting the political traditions that emphasize sustainable, democratic, and collective mass movement building. Of course, we can find many instances in which the masses spontaneously and valiantly developed more radical and democratic forms of thinking and action in 2019 to 2020—which we must learn from, remember, and uplift.

But the reality is that the movement's attack on hierarchies or big platforms often ends up spilling into disinterest in or even rejection of collective democratic mass organization and accountability as well as of developing a coherent political assessment of the relations of forces beyond toppling the CCP. In other words, the critique of leadership can be a source of strength, but the unclear or total lack of analysis of the system of oppression and the organizational forms that can best strike at its weak points is a limitation to democratic struggle. Thus, it is not a coincidence that today's right-wing in Hong Kong has been forged out of the atomizing culture of activism—from the loud street stages in Mongkok during the Umbrella Movement to the servers of LIHKG today.⁶

Any critic of Trump is smeared as a CCP supporter by a loud alliance of a minority of right-wing pundits but also politically confused Trump sympathizers. How can we account for the paradox that the bullying hegemony of pro-Trump voices in Hong Kong discourse grew in a movement that claims to not privilege various forms of ideology? By framing their concerns as non-ideological, some right-wing localists are able to position their discourse as merely tactical or pragmatic and as against the ineffectual moderates or other ideologues. At the same time, most people in the movement refuse to call out these forces in the name of unity, and also because the right-wing differs from a lot of the rest of the movement only to the degree in which people believe the myths of the democratic potential of Western individualist values.

Perhaps the greatest limitation and illusion of Hong Kong political discourse is the belief that we can transcend ideology, that somehow the left/right spectrum simply does not apply at all. Of course, anyone who knows Hong Kong can see that there are no organized or coherent left-wing or right-wing forces in what is left of the pro-democracy opposition today, but we must understand that not labelling certain actions as left or right does not mean that they do not have objective ideological consequences.

⁶ LIHKG is a messaging forum website in Hong Kong, roughly equivalent to Reddit, that became popularized by anonymous protestors as a site to exchange tactics and political dialogue. It eventually became an important breeding ground for some of the more right-wing, nativist elements of the movement.

Some actions open up space for democratic mass action, and others foreclose these possibilities or place brakes on them. The U.S. election has shown that our own movements' lack of clarity on this political compass, in fact, opens us up to destructive co-optation by established anti-democratic right-wing forces beyond Hong Kong. This is the kernel of why it is vastly important to understand the existence of right-wing ideas in the Hong Kong movement, no matter how various participants or other commentators may downplay it. Because bad ideology and organizing practices give space for agents of oppression and other opportunists to perpetuate our condition of bondage. A lack of clarity in these discourses means that we appropriate these anti-democratic paradigms among our ranks, quickening the collapse of an all too important mass struggle for democracy against one of the most powerful authoritarian regimes in the world.

The right has long condemned the left for dividing and limiting Hong Kong's movements. But where is the accountability for the right's failure? Whose ideas have gained traction but have clearly not worked—from banking our liberation on Trump to alienating our Mainland allies? Facing the right in Hong Kong means rethinking and rejecting that our vision of freedom could somehow include those who are comfortable in de-legitimizing the lives, freedom, and human rights of oppressed people.

Facing the right also means recognizing how the roots of the right-wing extend beyond support for Trump. And it entails a rethinking of how we, as Hong Kongers, have been accustomed to think of our own political and cultural identities. How can we build a sustainable movement together? And how have we failed to? Of course, violence from the CCP's repression and the part of the movement's rightward drift, are not comparable to each other in terms of scale. In this dark period of silencing by the CCP, we must honestly turn to what we can change among our own ranks, what we can self-reflect and improve on, to rebuild an even more effective movement in the future to come. Thank you!

RR: Thank you very much for this very interesting presentation! Since you mentioned that the left in Hong Kong is weak and divided: How do you think the left could break through the domination of a certain right-wing discourse?

PL: The left is weak and small in Hong Kong, but it is important to name that there are leftists in Hong Kong and that there are people who share left-wing ideas to varying degrees. Everyone applies them differently in their own respective milieu during the movement. There are organizers who are prominent in the Hong Kong Federation of Students, there are anarchists and other tendencies who

are less affiliated with Autonomous 8a,⁷ and there are those in the labor unions, and all of these people have been doing great work.

But the left has lacked platforms, coalitions, and campaigns of our own in recent years, such that we could move towards the practice of building independent power in a way that does not alienate ourselves from the movement. My whole presentation is framed around how the right-wing is a problem. At the same time, there is a real question for leftists to grapple with. How we can come from a position of humility and do our best to think about opportunities for intervention, to actually push for action, especially in this dark period, and to convince more people into what we think are the best paths to liberation based on our own analysis and participation in the movement?

It is important to not distance oneself from the movement, despite the kind of contradictory and diverse tendencies. Participation is a simple, basic first step. We need the humility to learn from the movement, but we should also not completely tail the movement or fail to have any critique or analysis at all. It is a fine balance, and it is easier said than done. But that is definitely the first step.

The second thing is going back to what I said about organization. I do not mean organization in the sense that we need to start a Leninist vanguardist party or something of that sort. It is necessary to think about what it means to have democratic procedures and processes, to cultivate an ethos of collective decision making and movement-building. We should not rein in or neutralize the revolutionary energies of the struggle but make the fight more democratic, representative, and sustainable. These are the things that are often neglected when we take in the ideas and traditions of left-wing thinkers and movements from the West, from the Global South, and from other parts of the world. The left is not just about ideas but also organizing practices. This is where I do not want my promotion of organization to necessarily be a criticism of various kinds of decentralized left-wing practices. The key to effective decentralized left-wing practices is an intentional view on how we can make decisions together collectively and democratically, rather than abstaining from thinking creatively about these procedural and organizational structures. How can we have an eye towards building power as the left without alienating the broader mass movement that does not share our critiques?

On this note, we can look to the Black Lives Matter movement or various Black feminist groups in the 1970s. Why did these people find a need to form their own kind of collectives in a way that emphasized coalition building and not total separatism from the rest of the larger movement? And this despite the fact

⁷ See <https://smrc8a.org>.

that some of the Black feminist groups in the U.S. in the 1970s saw so much marginalization and ostracization.⁸ They were thinking very critically about what it means to build a coalition, what it means to build power as the left together. Even though they were emphasizing principles of self-determination, they were trying to think about what their intervention is and how they can make interventions in a broader and more diverse mass milieu.

With regards to the new labor unions that are being attacked by the government,⁹ we need to ask: What does it mean for us to think about ways to support these unions, beyond simply the infrastructure of the HKCTU [Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions]? It can even be something as little as a group chat, or helping to turn out at the street stands that some of these new unions are trying to put together to get membership. How can we form a small core of people to help support these groups in action but, at the same time, keep our own space to think about the future of new unions? How can we embed ourselves—as workers and as everyday people in Hong Kong and in the diaspora—into these structures to assist them, while thinking critically about how to support without co-opting other parts of the struggles?

RR: In your recent article, you refer to Hong Kong’s colonial heritage and the way some people in Hong Kong reimagine the exploitative legacy of colonialism in Mainland China, while British colonialism is kind of de-linked and even mystified as the “better past.” What sort of groups in Hong Kong are pushing for this post-colonial myth? And what can be done in terms of demystifying?

PL: Like I said in the essay and alluded to earlier in the talk, especially my generation, this current generation of uprising or the younger generation, grew up in this discursive milieu in which there has been a rigorous tradition of local critique of Chineseness. Again, I am going to preface all this by saying, I am not trying to endorse Chinese nationalism nor suggesting that we have to reclaim the Chinese identity in some crude sense. But I think it is very important to explain why this allure to Western civilization and values is so strong.

Much of these sentiments can be traced back to the culturalist discourse of liberal intellectuals in the 1980s in China. For people like Liu Xiaobo, the possibility of democratic reform in China was framed as integrally tied to Westernization. This culturalist interpretation of politics determined the course and horizon of anti-CCP activism for generations to come. Instead of instinctively building links with grassroots and various civil society organizations that are pressu-

⁸ See the work by Barbara Smith, for instance: <https://barbarasmithaintgonna.com>.

⁹ For further readings on labor organizing and union solidarity in Hong Kong see <https://lauseancollective.com/2021/11-articles-workers-organizing-hk-china>.

ring against the Western establishment, Hong Kongers and other diaspora appeal directly to Western establishment organs. This is no accident but a product of longstanding traditions of discourse among liberal Sinophone circles that identify democratic movements as something inherent to Western civilization, rather than victories won by mass movements pressuring against Western institutions.

And thus, there exists huge erasure of the history of U.S. imperialism, compounded by the fact that many people in the movement symptomatically cannot recognize such abuses. Without proper organizing, proper political education, and proper motivating from activists, it is an uphill battle for the reasons I just cited. It is hard for people to take in the fact that the U.S. is not this glorious alternative to Chinese authoritarianism. There is something baked into how we think about politics. How we think of ourselves as Hong Kongers and how we think of democracy predisposes people to not recognize this fact. This is not to unconstructively slam the movement, but I am trying to identify what is a very real issue, and that is how have we related ourselves to Hong Kong's colonial legacy and how that has predetermined our horizon of struggle. Many Hong Kongers, beyond the openly-identifying right-wing, continue to look to the colonial past to recover and recreate an origin for this insurgent and inchoate Hong Kong identity.

The main problem is not that the movement was completely determined by organized British restorationists in Hong Kong. The main problem is what this general disposition towards "Western" values and institutions tells us about the kind of freedom that the movement wants, and what it tells us about the political future that the movement wants.

We should instead be pressing on the continuity and persistence of the colonial infrastructures in Hong Kong, on not to choose between China or the West but to emphasize the fact that the CCP's rule in Hong Kong has been built on the colonial legacy and infrastructure. From the point of policing, for instance, *Lausan* has articles about how the U.S. police force has trained the Hong Kong Police for many years.¹⁰ And, of course, the transition from the Royal Hong Kong Police Force to the Hong Kong Police Force under the CCP today is merely symbolic, a mere shift in sovereignty with minimal change in the actual structures of policing that have always governed Hong Kong in the colonial period. The upper echelons of the Hong Kong police are mostly British-trained, and Carrie Lam had routinely exercised colonial-era anti-riot legislation to clamp down on protesters.

¹⁰ See Matthew Tran, "From the Heartland to Hong Kong: The Case for Global Abolition." *Lausan*, January 4, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/b9se53tu>.

So, Chinese authoritarianism is not exceptional to the methods of Western colonialism but incorporates the latter to cultivate its power. By recognizing that Chinese and Western colonialisms borrow techniques from each other and sometimes work in continuity together, perhaps we can attune to new directions of struggle.

RR: One part, let us call it the ugly part of the movement, was or is the racism against both Mainland immigrants but also immigrants from other parts of the world, especially the many women* from the Philippines and Indonesia who work as domestic workers in the city. Why do you think these issues of immigration are so prominent, and why does especially this younger generation show this form of xenophobia, which I think is not just evident among the right-wing but more generally in the movement?

PL: Again, I completely agree. I think that there are significant overlaps between what I call the right-wing and even more liberal or center parts of the movement. I think there is a continuity in the ideological basis that folks have not recognized or unpacked in the same way. The legacy of colonialism has always been to divide. It is paradoxical, because people always think of Hong Kong as a very cosmopolitan city. But, in a sense, it is a very isolating city in terms of political discourse. There are not many readily available political paradigms for people to draw from, not many readily available lived experiences for people to look at and to sympathize with.

Southeast Asian migrant workers are so thoroughly embedded in Hong Kong society as almost ten percent or more of the Hong Kong working force. There are regular instances of racism and discrimination. In a sense, this regime of racialization reproduces the hierarchical class division of the British colonial government, only now under Chinese rule. The government maintains this unjust paradigm but it is also echoed and perpetuated by ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers themselves, too.

These things are not sufficiently unpacked. The process of decolonization in the city has not been fully advanced, especially since the handover. These contradictions exist not in an abstract sense in the city but in the very real way in which people appropriate these things and end up embodying a kind of “This is how society works.” There is a huge “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”-rhetoric that is prominent in Hong Kong society, and a lot of things are left unquestioned. This is very much the result of the colonial legacy.

RR: On the one hand, you have described how you think the left-wing discourse should be more organized, for instance, with regards to collective decision making. On the other hand, when I heard about and witnessed the lack of a common platform, the distrust of leadership, and also the distrust of any ideological stance,

I first felt that this was an opening. Because in the history of left-wing movements, the one important current that always comes up is paternalism where left-wing groups or parties try to dominate movements. I feel now that the medicine you are proposing might include the disease. So far it is hardly existing in Hong Kong because the left is so weak.

PL: I just want to emphasize, I am not against decentralization, I actually agree. There are many exciting opportunities that have been opened up by this autonomous, decentralized movement. I am not against decentralization per se but critical about how we end up throwing away other useful organizational practices along with centralization. Decentralization opens up the possibility of greater room for liberation. But, at the same time, what the Hong Kong movement showed in the last two years is that it also opens up the movement to certain types of weaknesses. This is not to condemn the movement but to show its contradictions. That is how mass movements work. There are contradictions, and as the left we stick close to it as much as possible and participate, and we try to out-organize the reactionary elements.¹¹

On that note, I want to turn to an article by Chinese diaspora leftist Zoe Zhao that has a lot of really helpful insights pointing exactly to what I am talking about.¹² Their essay illustrates how anonymity and decentralization do not necessarily result in a diversity of perspectives. Anonymity and decentralization within a social movement do not guarantee equal opportunities for participation. Anonymous organization can make it difficult to see where the movement's structural biases lie, much less to address them.

I am less skeptical of anonymous organization than Zoe is, but they make very important points. Decentralization and anonymity do not automatically entail that power relations are completely dismantled. I think you see this dynamic very clearly in LIHKG, where everyone is mostly anonymous or on the frontlines.¹³ There is another article coming out from Lausan, from the perspective of a participant, that calls for us to recognize the fact that, for example, a lot of the people in the movement could favor a non-violent rally at a certain point. Suddenly, you have a minority of radical activists who are provoking things on the frontlines much more than the rest of the people want. Then there is no mecha-

¹¹ According to the speaker, “out-organize” is a term used in organizer circles. The editors understand “out-organize” as “trying to keep reactionary elements out of the movement” (*editor's note*).

¹² See Zhao, Zoe, “Facing Down the Hong Kong Protests’ Right-wing Turn.” *Lausan*, March 28, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/778fvysx>.

¹³ “Frontlines” refers to those in the movement who were at the front of protests or demonstrations and involved in the clashes with the police (*editor's note*).

nism to collectively and democratically resolve disagreements en masse or even to talk through basic tactics on the streets, let alone for the broader movement. Is this truly what we want for a democratic movement?¹⁴

This is not to say we need a party's democratic centralist line, like one group decides on one thing and we all have to follow it. But the fact is that as much as decentralization had enabled more voices to come to the table, it also ends up limiting certain perspectives or ends up turning into a situation where people just end up doing their own thing. A mass of atomized people is not the same as a mass democratic movement. Democracy does not mean doing whatever you want on an individual capacity but transparently and collectively making decisions and building democratic organizations.

When you look at the frontlines on the streets, or even at the events that went on in the sieges of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Polytechnic University, you see, for example, student protesters arguing with outside protesters who were insisting on burning a car. How do you stop the guys from burning the car when a majority of people do not want to burn the car or set it on fire in front of the cops? What are the mechanisms to sort through these types of decisions? Is it acceptable that the general ethos of "no splitting" creates an atmosphere in which many of these hesitations cannot be voiced in fear of causing internal conflict? It ends up producing this vicious cycle where we do not voice our grievances because we want unity. Is that the best democratic practice when folks are afraid to critique Trump, to critique the movement, to talk about strategy together, or to talk about differences in an accountable manner?

That is what I am pointing to in terms of the limitations of this decentralization. There is an unhelpful conflation between a healthy skepticism of leadership and hierarchy with any democratic process and organization at all. I want to be very clear: I mean organization not just as something necessarily like the Labour Party in the UK or some orthodox Trotskyist party. I mean organization as in the ones Hong Kongers have already helped to organically build before, the many grassroots "concern groups," led by students and everyday people, that first sprouted to activate the masses against the extradition bill in early 2019; or the Civil Human Rights Front coalition that effectively mobilized millions to the streets and provided a space for various groups to come together and collectively decide on strategies.¹⁵ What if there was a way to keep building, sustaining, and

¹⁴ See Chen Yi (陳怡), "Confronting the New 'Big Platform'—Part 1." *Lausan*, April 21, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2bznhbya>.

¹⁵ See To Chi-kuen and Promise Li, "'We Just Had the Heart to Fight the Boss': A Hong Kong Leftist's Story." *Lausan*, October 17, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3hanaarm>.

reforming these organizations at various points in the movement, instead of devoting most of our resources to street combat with the police?

If we genuinely want liberation, there should be room for self-reflection. If we do not reckon with the things that went wrong, then how can we effectively rebuild our forces in the future to not reproduce the same issues? What initially was a positive ethos of decentralization can produce problematic elements, like the pro-Trump factions that we should out-organize in the future.¹⁶ I think it is long overdue to reflect on these contradictions.

Jule Pfeffer (JP): I would like to turn to a question related to the U.S. government. The Biden government in the U.S. is currently reconfiguring their official policies, which are meant to contain China as the main competitor in the global economy. What are the implications for Hong Kong and especially the protest movement? What do you think is being discussed in the movement about the Biden government and its potential course?

PL: Biden is not as outspoken as Trump while still attempting to consolidate a military presence in the Indo-Pacific even more so than his predecessor. The curious thing is that even though Biden is technically bolstering U.S. imperialism's force to "contain China" more coherently than Trump, the latter's far-right rhetoric proves to be more attractive to Hong Kongers. This is not me supporting Biden's policies, but what I am trying to get at is that the rhetoric and aesthetics of the far-right ends up roiling up more Hong Kongers, even though Trump has been wildly inconsistent in his 'support' for Hong Kong. Before he was president, he criticized Obama for supporting the Umbrella Movement, and, as president, he threatened to veto the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.

Many Hong Kongers' support for Trump—despite his inconsistencies in even executing the U.S. imperialistic agenda they wish for—points to what I see as the deeper problem with the right-wingers in Hong Kong. Why is it that one of the few times when the movement condoned a strong ideological stance is when it promoted the brute veneer of the U.S. as a strongman in the world stage under Trump?

JP: In mainland China, there are Trump supporters who, at the same time, disapprove of Hong Kong's independence, and, as you wrote in your article and just elaborated as well, in the Hong Kong movement there are a lot of people who support Trump as a person. How do you explain the shared trust in right-wing American politics? And why do you think people are so attracted to Trump and to right-wing politics when it comes to the Hong Kong movement?

¹⁶ On the term "out-organize" see footnote 11 (*editor's note*).

PL: Trump gave a perfect expression for some latent kinds of symptoms or tendencies in the Hong Kong movement. For one thing, and this is rather speculative, there is a connection between Trumpian rhetoric and the vocal leaders of pro-democracy Hong Kong political discourse. There is this culture of KOLs [key opinion leaders], who are often actually *the* face of the right-wing, more so than organized political groups. I am thinking of people like Lewis Loud and Chin Wan. Chin Wan has faded to obscurity now, but his ideas helped pave the way for people who are more popular now. I am also thinking of various pundits of Apple Daily or Chip Tsao. They have already been Trumpian in a way even before Trump became a thing appealing to “non-ideological” populism with polemical and anti-establishment rhetoric. I do not think it is a coincidence that these tendencies end up colliding. It is bombastic, it is controversial, and people think that must automatically mean they are speaking some sort of truth as opposed to the usual, bland positions of the moderates and pan-democrats who many have blamed for the failures of the Umbrella Movement years prior. It is interesting because one tendency of leftists first popularized this style of organizing in Hong Kong, people like Long Hair and his affiliated groups who have been performing highly provocative actions against the colonial power and the CCP for decades.¹⁷ Over the years, these leftists have made the decision to prioritize building allies in terms of tactical militancy rather than developing independent left formations. The history is rather complicated, but long story short, the right-wing has managed to co-opt this militancy of the anti-extradition bill movement.

So, there is already an easy connection with Hong Kong society on the point of rhetoric that opens people up to all these ideas. And the unconscious, hyper-capitalist mentality that has been latent in Hong Kong society even before the movement readily gives room to this right-wing distrust and attack on identity politics and other left-wing discourses. That already provides a ready connection to how these right-wing thinkers think and operate and talk in the U.S. And even beyond Trump, far-right senators and politicians have provided the most visible support. Josh Hawley was on the streets of Hong Kong, taking photos with Hong Kongers, supporting the actual protests, and things like that. Those are the loudest voices. Of course, it is not like the Democrats did not support them. But the right-wing globally have an ideological investment in what is going on Hong Kong. There is a mission and there is a history of how the far-right likes to co-opt and synthesize with local movements of resistance under Communist or post-Communist rule. While a number of factors made Hong Kongers easily predisposed

¹⁷ Leung Kwok-hung or “Long Hair” is a long-time socialist activist in Hong Kong. Coming originally from the Trotskyist movement since the 1970s, he became one of the city’s most visible and provocative activists in the 2000s and ended up winning a seat in the Legislative Council in 2004.

toward right-wing rhetoric in recent years, the global right-wing has also effectively organized to solidify these connections.

On the other hand, the left is busy dealing with pro-Beijing supporters in our own midst. If the loudest voices from the left are pro-Beijing pundits, like the opportunist reactionaries from The Grayzone, then why would we expect the movement to support the left? That is one concrete, practical reason for the right-wing's surge to prominence in the movement.

RR: This year, there have been dozens of arrests of people, politicians, and activists for which the government is using the National Security Law. Is that a new step towards a more authoritarian system in Hong Kong? Is there still space for resistance and what kind of space? Or are people so scared that they are not daring to come out anymore? And what role does the pandemic play in that?

PL: This definitely is the greatest level of oppression the city has seen since the handover. It is dismal, also in relation to the pandemic, and there are a lot of compounding factors, not to mention the burnout from a whole year or more of struggle. People are feeling disillusioned and live under a lot of repression. They are scared to do any political work together, even to speak anonymously online, because of the fear of surveillance. The effect of the National Security Law is not to prosecute everyone, the effect of it is to create an atmosphere of fear, to discourage people from organizing.

But I was going to point to some less well-known local campaigns and stuff that is going on. That is less directly related to this larger struggle for democracy, but there are grassroots struggles that are trying to point out social and political issues. For example, in Kowloon city, there is an anti-gentrification struggle trying to call for more democratic participation in city planning. Chinese University of Hong Kong students have been promoting dialogues for campus welfare and students' rights issues.¹⁸ Thus, so far, it seems like there is still some room when it does not threaten national security. Obviously, what that means is up to the decision of the Beijing-appointed judges. There is still some room to keep politicizing, to keep planting seeds and laying the groundwork for people on the ground, and to think about how to organize and how to do politics in a way where you might not immediately try to topple the whole system.

But, yes, it is a little bleak, it is definitely hard on the ground. The point I keep emphasizing is that there is a lot of work now for the diaspora. Many prominent figures in the movement have fled abroad, and there have been a lot of efforts by people abroad to rethink how to assist Hong Kong from afar. This is a

¹⁸ Moreover, delivery workers from Foodpanda have organized a brief strike and won some concessions in late 2021, see <https://tinyurl.com/5538rjjk>.

moment for the left to act, because if we do not posit a left-wing alternative for internationalism, then many of the diaspora activists are going to double down on the usual strategy of courting senators and giving more power to the right-wing in regions beyond Hong Kong.

The mass emigration out of Hong Kong, like in the pre-handover years, can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is a lot of potential to expose Hong Kongers to local left traditions and other forms of organizing. But at the same time, if we fail to act, the result is that this wave of diaspora exiles can strengthen the power of hawkish and right-wing forces worldwide, and especially in the U.S. We have seen that, for example, with the Cuban population in Florida or with the Vietnamese population in Orange County, California. The cost of not radicalizing Hong Kongers abroad to the left is the amplification of the right-wing worldwide. That is as important as supporting struggles locally in Hong Kong.

My basic assessment is that change is difficult in the short term locally. We have to think about the long term and political education, and we need to look back at what we did wrong in the aftermath of Umbrella Movement. How can we make use of a period of downturn to prepare for a potential future uprising? How can we do the next one differently, learning the lessons of this time? “No splitting” partly functioned as a compromise and response to the internecine conflicts within the pro-democracy movement in the wake of the Umbrella Movement. Now we have to think about how we can develop a middle point between destructive in-fighting and avoidance of dealing with internal contradictions and differences. This is precisely the time to think together collectively about such questions.

RR: One last question from my side. As I mentioned earlier, in some way, I sympathize with a movement when it questions certain traditional left-wing attitudes towards popular movements. You and I and others who are involved in the debate and connected to left-wing activism in Hong Kong, are able to address these issues in Hong Kong and to criticize politically what is going on there. But that also points to a problem. How do left-wing activists who are outsiders in a certain sense, who are critical of certain aspects, who may be organized and have a global perspective, who know a lot about different movements and maybe even have an academic background, how can they still get involved in a discussion with grassroots activists in Hong Kong who do not have this perspective because they had no chance to develop it?

PL: This goes back to something that ends up being lost as we as leftists get deeper into our ideological critiques and our various affiliations. For me, the kernel of being in the left is to empower people to be able to decide their own future and to decide their own material conditions without coercion and without oppres-

sion. That entails a certain amount of humility and learning from and with each other. At the end of the day, all these things we come up with—parties, organizations, campaigns, and strategies—should be in service of that fundamental ethos. How do we empower people, masses of people, to be able to democratically come to decisions and have a voice wherever they are situated?

I share a lot of the critiques of traditional left-wing formations. I personally do not come from orthodox democratic centralist organizations, nor do I trust them. But I think there are alternatives to that model—alternatives that do not require atomization or a complete chaos of different perspectives where there is no common ground for productive action. There are a lot of leftists on the ground who have been doing amazing work, even on the frontlines. There are also some leftists who are pretty isolated and do not do much. For me, the thing is not to keep criticizing the left for not being together, but it is more about the question of how can we meet the left where they are at. There is a reason why people choose not to band together as the left in Hong Kong. There is a history of infighting and external oppression. You have to sympathize and understand all those things. But, at the same time, going back to what I said about participation, we have to be in the movement in whatever way we find possible. By that I do not mean that you have to be on the streets and on the frontlines. I do not believe in this valorization of “the more frontline you are, the more you have the right to speak.” That is a problematic idea that lends weight to insurgent right-wing politics. “The more you spill blood for the movement, the more you have the right to speak.” This is the reverse image of how the CCP defends nationalism, in the sense of: “You have got to sacrifice for the movement, for the country and for the nation.” I do not mean valorizing the frontlines but trying to do what you can from where you are for the movement without just critiquing and not offering solutions. Of course, there is burnout, that is real. The key is to always find your way back to the movement and meet people where they are at.

Again, going back to what I recommended earlier, it is important to find rooms to raise campaigns, to power map, to organize together, to think about process and procedure together, and to build groups when you can and as securely as you can. We always need to try and find opportunities for that, find people that you think you can influence who might not have the same politics as you. You can start from one-on-one conversations and slowly move to “Let us form a group chat or reading group” or “Let the few of us turn out to support this one initiative,” whether it is small groups of workers organizing their workplace somewhere or student groups organizing to voice campus-related grievances. How can we support these campaigns to organize independently, like schools in bottom-up organizing for everyday Hong Kongers, without coercing people or use left-wing dogma to tell people from above? At the same time, we need to be clear in thinking about strategies, tactics, and how we can best organize to combat the forces

of oppression around us. We must always find the right balance in action, and for this I cannot provide the full blueprint. How can we have political clarity and, at the same time, have a will to action? Action here is not meant in the sense of doing what is most popular for the movement because that is not always the best for the movement as a whole.

RR: Thank you very much for sharing your insights and perspectives, Promise. This was very inspiring, and we will have to continue this debate both on how to face the right as well as on how to develop the left and create solidarity.

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IV.
**China in the World and the
History of Chinese Socialism**

9 | Chinese Investments and Labor Struggles in Indonesia

Presentation: Alfian Al-Ayubby and Y. Wasi Gede Puraka

Moderation: Alina Kornfeldt and Ralf Ruckus¹

Ralf Ruckus (RR): Welcome to this session of the online discussion series “China and the Left. Critical Analysis and Grassroots Activism.” Today we talk about Chinese investments and labor struggles in Indonesia. I welcome the two speakers in Indonesia, Alfian Al Ayubi and Wasi Gede Puraka, and I also welcome Alina Kornfeldt who will co-moderate today’s event.

I start with a short introduction before Alfian will speak about the workers composition and working conditions in Morowali, a big economic zone with Chinese investments on Sulawesi Island in Indonesia. Alina will ask him a few questions then. After that, Wasi Gede will speak about labor conflicts in Chinese invested projects in Morowali before I will ask him some questions. In the last part, Alina and me will talk to Alfian and Wasi Gede, and we will include questions from the audience.

Let us begin with the short introduction: With a population of 270 million, Indonesia is the world’s fourth biggest country and the most populous Muslim majority country. In the late 1990s, Indonesia saw a massive popular uprising that ended the previous so-called New Order regime under General Suharto. Since 1998 Indonesia has been a republic with a presidential system and multi-party parliament.

Economically, Indonesia is classified as a newly industrialized country, but agriculture and the extraction of natural resources still play a major role. The Indonesian economy was hit hard in the late 1990s by the Asian financial crisis, but since it has been growing. Currently, it is the world’s sixteenth largest economy, and some predict that it might become the seventh largest by 2030. But that would demand more investment, which the government under the current president Joko Widodo, first elected in 2014 and often called Jokowi, tries to secure also from abroad.

So, here is when China comes into play. The Indonesian government wants to expand infrastructure and upgrade Indonesian industries, also in peripheral

¹ This webinar took place on May 15, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/07/10/podcast-chinese-investments-and-labor-struggles-in-indonesia>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

regions like Sulawesi. The expansion of infrastructure is partly financed through foreign loans and investment. Meanwhile, the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping, in power since 2012, has expanded its economic engagement abroad with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which began in 2013. Several BRI-projects have been started in Indonesia since, and Chinese investments in Indonesia have grown, especially in the energy sector, the metal industry, in transport, and in real estate.

The relations between China and Indonesia were not always this good. During the early years of the authoritarian regime, which lasted from 1966 to 1998, communist China was mostly seen as a national threat. The Chinese diaspora in Indonesia was frequently targeted, for instance, during the anti-communist campaign in the mid-1960s. But the relation between the People's Republic of China and Indonesia changed in the 1980s.

After Suharto's fall at the end of the 1990s, the Indonesian ruling class saw the engagement of Chinese capital in Indonesia as a way to counterbalance Western influence and to bring in the needed investments for upgrading the Indonesian industrial sector. Since 2014, the Jokowi government has tightened the relations with the Chinese government and capital, and the Belt and Road initiative has facilitated increasing Chinese investment.

The flagship of these Belt and Road projects is the project we will talk about, the so-called Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park, or IMIP, on the island of Sulawesi, that has been built up since 2013. IMIP is run by a joint venture between Tsingshan, a Chinese state-owned enterprise and the world's largest stainless-steel producer, and Bintang Delapan, one of Indonesia's largest nickel mining companies.

Nickel is mostly used in steel production, that is in the production of stainless steel, but also for other applications. Indonesia holds one of largest nickel reserves globally, and the island of Sulawesi holds Indonesia's richest nickel reserves. IMIP includes various nickel related facilities like smelters and steel production, but also additional facilities including a coal-fired power plant, an airport, and more. The industrial park integrates upstream nickel mining with downstream nickel industry, which produces various types of nickel related products like, as I mentioned, stainless steel, nickel pig iron, and also nickel based battery components for electric vehicles.

We will now hear about the workers' composition, working conditions, and labor conflicts in IMIP companies as well as other Chinese investments in Indonesia from our two speakers, Alfian and Wasi Gede. First, I hand over to Alina.

Alina Kornfeldt (AK): Hello and welcome also from my side. Let me briefly introduce today's first speaker, Afian Al Ayubi, or shorter Al, as I will call you from now on if that is fine with you. Al is a member of the Sedane Labor Resource Center, or LIPS. This organization is based in Bogor, a city south of Jakarta. LIPS conducts research on various labor issues. Already since the 1990s, LIPS has documented strikes and other actions of the Indonesian labor movement. LIPS has also closely observed the development of Indonesia's labor regime. Al has done research and supported workers in various sectors and all over the archipelago: on the island of Sumatra, all across Java, which is the political and economic center of Indonesia, in Sulawesi, and in Bali. Al's presentation is based on a fieldwork that he did in 2018 and which was part of a study on the operation of Chinese capital in Indonesia. Al, the next ten minutes are yours.

Alfian Al-Ayuby (AA): Thank you for the nice introduction, Alina, and thank you for inviting me to share my research and experience. When I went to the Morowali regency to do research on IMIP in 2018, the number of workers reported by the media was around 25,000 in total including around 5,000 Chinese workers. But according to the statistical agency of the regency, at the time, the total number of workers in Morowali regency, not just in IMIP, was only around 8,000. In 2020, according to the media, the total number of workers at IMIP was around 40,000, including 7,000 to 10,000 Chinese workers. But, again, according to the data from the statistical agency for the year 2020, there were only around 8,000 workers in the whole regency of Morowali. So, the official data is not reliable and this reflects how the government deals with the massive concentration of workers just at one site.

We have to acknowledge that the Indonesian authorities handle this project with regard to manpower in a messy way. But it is not only that their data on the number of workers is unreliable, also in terms of workers' conditions the official data need to be questioned. For example, the data from the regional Labor Office lists no work accident in 2020. But the media reported that in May 2020, a Chinese worker died in a dormitory. In July 2020, another Chinese worker died in a canal where the remnants of the coal burning process go to. According to the Labor Office officials, the Chinese worker who died in the dormitory suffered from a heart attack, while they said that the other worker who died in the canal was having stress. There was neither a further investigation on why these workers died, nor on how many Chinese workers have died since IMIP started to operate.

At the time of my field research, there were only seven companies at IMIP. Now, there are about twice as many, and they have built four lithium battery factories there. IMIP is operating and still growing. More investment is coming in to build more factories there. In the whole Morowali regency, according to

official data, there are at least 120 metal factories, including nickel factories. From the 120 factories that stretch around Morowali, most are located at IMIP.

I recently asked some workers who still work at IMIP about the current working conditions. They say that, according to their contract, they should work eight hours a day. But their nominal wages are only slightly higher than the minimum wage and not sufficient to meet their basic needs because of inflation. That is why they have to work overtime. Many workers live in rented rooms in the surrounding communities. Some of the rented rooms are close to the sea. When the tide is high, they can get flooded. This area is still developing, and the spatial management is quite messy. So, people can say: “I have money, I can buy land to build a house and rent out rooms,” even if the house is located near the sea. Also, many workers have to rent rooms far away from the IMIP site. If these workers go to work in the morning, it feels like on a road in Jakarta, there is so much congestion. Thousands of workers go to work in the morning using motorcycles, and the road is not big enough for all these motorcycles.

To sum up, Chinese investment in Indonesia is still high, and the working conditions are not good. The situation in Chinese projects is worse than that in projects of investments from other countries. And I saw this not only in Morowali, but also in coal power plants in Sumatra that are Chinese investments.

AK: Thank you very much Al, for your short presentation and for your insights. Of course, you have a lot more to say, because you did research not only in Morowali but also in other places, and we can come back to that later. Could you tell us more where the Indonesian workers originate from, and could you tell us what kind of jobs they did before working at IMIP? How old are they on average, and what kind of education or training did they complete?

AA: Based on my interviews, the workers are on average around thirty years old. Most of them come from neighboring regions like South Sulawesi. And some of the workers I interviewed had worked in mining areas such as in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo Island, or Ternate, an island of the Moluccas. When they heard that IMIP was going to need workers, they left their other jobs and went to work at IMIP. Those who had worked for mining companies often became group leaders on the production line.

But there are many who do not have working experience in mining companies. For instance, I interviewed a worker who, before working at IMIP, had been a teacher for religion at an Islamic school. He has a bachelor degree. So, the backgrounds of the workers in Morowali are diverse. But, most of the Indonesian workers I interviewed work as blue-collar workers who do not need certain skills, for instance, in engineering. When IMIP started, there was a high demand for workers and they would hire anyone who was physically fit.

AK: Let us stick with the example of this teacher that you interviewed. What made him go to Morowali and work there?

AA: Firstly, he went because of the relatively high wage, and secondly, he had worked as a temporary contract teacher for a long time and never earned a permanent position. He said: “I could not build up a future if I kept teaching people, so I went to Morowali.”

AK: In your talk you mentioned the living conditions of Indonesian workers. You said they live in rooms rented out by the local community. What about the Chinese workers? Where do they live?

AA: Most of the Chinese workers live in separate dormitories inside IMIP. There are whole compounds that consist of dormitories, sport facilities, and grocery shops. At the time I never heard that any Chinese workers lived in the surrounding communities.

AK: Could you tell us more about the relation between Chinese and Indonesian workers?

AA: The interaction between Indonesian and Chinese workers, as I know, is very limited. Only when they work on site do they interact with each other. After work, there is no interaction, because the Chinese workers go back to their dormitories and the Indonesian workers go back to their rented rooms or their houses in the community. I heard that some tensions arise because of the language barrier. Some of the Indonesian workers I interviewed said: “When the Chinese workers give us instructions, they are very loud. It is as if they are angry with us.” Tensions arise because they say that the Chinese workers yell at them. In 2017 or 2018, there were also physical fights between Indonesian and Chinese workers.

Not many but some Indonesian workers want to get to know more Chinese workers and have good relations with them. But the problem is the language barrier. One of my colleagues who works for the Chinese news agency Xinhua had visited IMIP before our research. Access to the IMIP site is easier for him, and he speaks Chinese, but when he talked to Chinese workers, they did not answer him. He felt that the Chinese workers were afraid to speak to people whom they did not know.

AK: Let me ask one question before we go over to Wasi Gede’s presentation. Are any women* working at IMIP, and, if yes, what kinds of jobs do they do?

AA: Yes, there are women* working in Morowali. At the time of my interviews, most of the women* worked in administration. Only a few worked in the steel mill and checked how the iron is melting.

AK: Thank you, Al. Let me hand over to Ralf so he can introduce Wasi Gede.

RR: Wasi Gede is a researcher and the director of the Jakarta based Research Center for Crisis and Alternative Development Strategies, short INKRISPENA. INKRISPENA studies political and economic developments and their impacts on workers and communities in various regions in Indonesia. Examples are the expansion of the agricultural industry, the introduction of a new health insurance scheme, or the working conditions in Indonesia's free trade zones. The researchers of INKRISPENA closely collaborate with grassroots labor unions and community organizations. Wasi Gede's presentation on conflicts at IMIP builds on research he conducted in 2019 and 2020 on the industrial construction of IMIP, the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park, and that included research on strategies of labor control.

Y. Wasi Gede Puraka (WG): Thank you, Ralf. I start with the buildup of the Bahadopi mining business. Bahadopi is the subdistrict where IMIP is located. That buildup implied a number of conflicts between local residents and migrant workers from other regions and abroad, including between Indonesian and Chinese workers. First, there was unrest in the local community because they felt disadvantaged compared to the incoming workers. Their unrest was fueled by allegations that Chinese workers in the IMIP area were recruited illegally and performed work that does not require special skills. The import of Chinese labor is justified by skills that Chinese workers bring and that local workers do not possess. The district government of Morowali responded to the unrest by giving special treatment to a policy of placing local residents in the labor recruitment process.

Tensions also arise because of different treatment of Chinese and Indonesian workers at IMIP. For instance, the system of remuneration of the two nationalities is different and contains racial discrimination. The wages of Chinese workers are relatively higher than those of Indonesian workers. The base salary of Chinese workers is over five million rupiah per month, and their gross wages are two to four times as much as the wages of a local worker. So, to reach the basic wage of five million rupiah per month, which the Chinese workers earn, the Indonesian workers must work overtime. On average, their work hours are 12 to 14 hours a day. Every week they only have one day to rest. That is why on average, they work 28 days per month.

Even though the average nominal value of the gross wages of the local workers is high compared to the wages in the garment manufacturing sector in Java, their real wage value is low. Taking into account the high prices of basic necessities and other needs, the real value of wages is not sufficient to meet the workers' needs of life, especially when the workers have families. The workers' monthly expenditures include rental costs for housing, the highest expenditure of all Indo-

nesian workers in that area. Other expenditures are basic food stuff and drinking water because the source of water is contaminated and workers and local people have to buy drinking water. And further expenditures are school fees for children, motor bike credit installment fees, motor cycle fuel costs, and gas for the household.

We have to remember that in Indonesia, wages do not only cover the needs of the workers themselves, they also have to send money to their families in the village and they spend money on paying off debts. Basically, the minimum wage in Indonesia is only calculated for single workers. Therefore, when the workers have family, their wage is not sufficient and nothing is left for savings. This wage discrimination and the low real value of Indonesian workers' wages spark feelings of unfair treatment among local workers in the Morowali industrial area.

Also, the division of labor bears issues of discrimination. In almost all nickel mining product processing sites, there are workers of both nationalities. They work in the same space and do the same types of work. Important positions are dominated by Chinese workers, for example, the positions of department head, foreman, and shop-floor supervisor, whose position is below the foreman. But on the level of production, positions like supervisor, foreman, and operator are also filled by Indonesian workers. Regarding the daily operation of the production process, managers from China require that managers from Indonesia provide them with information on what they decide and what they are currently doing. However, it is not possible for managers from Indonesia to request the same information from managers from China. So even though at the production level, workers of both nationalities have the same position, there is discrimination regarding supervising positions. Foremen or supervisors from China can give work orders to foremen or supervisors from Indonesia, but it cannot be the other way round.

Job and occupation discrimination, work communication cultures, wage discrimination, use of working and rest periods, discrimination in the availability of clean water, differences in languages—all these are factors that contribute to the emergence of racism in the daily working life of workers of the two nationalities. Some Indonesian workers argue that communism as the ideology of the country where the investment comes from is the reason for their anti-Chinese attitude.²

Regarding job discrimination and work communication cultures, Indonesian workers think that Chinese workers and supervisors often delegate their work to

² See Mulyanto, Randy, "Why Fears of Communism, Anti-China Sentiment Are a Potent Mix in Indonesia." *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2u8pbt6w>; and Tarahita, Dikanaya, and Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, "Understanding Indonesians' Souring Sentiment Toward China." *The Diplomat*, June 6, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/3ez9a3nf>.

workers from Indonesia. IMIP employs translators to solve work communication problems. Most of these are ethnic Chinese originating from the Sumatran islands of Bantam and Belitung. But the ratio of translators and the differences between Mainland Chinese and Indonesian Chinese dialects and vocabulary make the translation process problematic. The Indonesian workers feel that even though there is a translator, the translator does not translate what has actually been said on either side.

Regarding the use of working time and rest time, Chinese foremen or supervisors often scold Indonesian workers if they are slow at work and when they take different breaks than the workers from China. Some Chinese foremen and supervisors are ignorant of the rights of Indonesian workers. The Friday prayers are one example of this: Because the Indonesian Muslim workers perform the five daily prayers in rotation, supervisors from China ask them to perform the Friday prayers alternately, too. But in fact, the Friday prayer must be performed together and simultaneously, it cannot be done individually.

Indonesian workers also face discrimination regarding the availability of infrastructures in their rental houses. Indonesian workers have to collect rain water for bathing and rinsing after defecating and cooking. Chinese workers can drink their water immediately and do not have to cook it first, and they can use it for showering at will.

The division of labor between Chinese workers and Indonesian can be characterized as a *primus inter pares* relation. This is demonstrated by the sanction mechanism that both groups of workers are subject to. Chinese workers are cut off their monthly work incentive when Chinese management at the nickel processing factory find that the Chinese workers failed at boosting production and their superiors consider they did not give “correct guidance” to the Indonesian workers. The pretext of job guidance is intended as an effort of Chinese workers to teach Indonesian workers how to work in order to increase productivity. However, instead of carrying out job guidance through methods adapted to the culture and wisdom of Indonesian workers’ work, Chinese workers give work orders, in the local language *menyuruh* [meaning something like “bossing around”], or they are loud when they give work orders. In that region, most of the companies in the IMIP area also have no clear job description and division of labor. So, the Chinese foremen like to give orders as they please with the Indonesian workers. Small mistakes can bring them scolding or even fierce anger. Often, they are dismissed for trivial reasons. All these problems of inequality have been driving forces for micro-level conflicts in the form of physical fights between workers of the two countries and sharpening racist sentiments between the two.

As AI mentioned, there are efforts from both parties to understand each other's position in the production chains in the factory. For example, Chinese workers know that Indonesian workers are underpaid and have supported them in the IMIP area when workers from Indonesia protested against management. Likewise, some local workers in the IMIP also supported workers from China who carried out a demonstration in the area to make demands to Chinese management. There is a strong awareness among some union activists to neutralize the racialist attitudes. Some labor union activists at IMIP think that the issue of Chinese labor is exaggerated and that the fundamental problems of the workers are left aside by capitalizing on the different origin of Chinese workers. These activists generally emphasize that regardless of ethnicity, religion, or national origin, Chinese workers have the same fate as Indonesian workers. They both face exploitation at the workplace.

Regarding unionization, prior to 2014, Indonesian workers did not know much about the importance of organizing and holding demonstrations in an organized manner. Following their dismissal in January 2014, some workers established communication with activists in the provincial capital. The communication resulted in a resolution to create a worker's union. One of the activists became a member of the labor union formed by the company and held the position of vice chairman. The aim was to radicalize the union. The radicalization was successful. For example, workers held a large demonstration in March 2014. The workers even stopped the operation of the power plant for three hours. If the power plant is shut down, processing factories in the area cannot operate. However, the companies' retaliation was to fire the vice chairman of the union.

RR: Thank you, Wasi Gede. Regarding this case of the strike and the blockade of the power plant, could you tell us more about how it was organized and what exactly happened?

WG: The workers held a series of discussions with activists on the provincial level. So, there was an interaction with, for example, environmental activists and other activists that had already been familiar with labor issues. The workers pushed their demands by conducting rallies and workers' strikes, and they closed the road access. In that case, they closed the trans-Sulawesi highway, this is a state-owned road, and they held demonstrations on the road in front of the main gate of the IMIP area.

RR: We heard from AI that there are different companies on the IMIP site. Were people from different companies coming out?

WG: Yes. Usually, people from different companies come out. IMIP is not only a company that manages the area, it also plays a role as a labor recruiter. So, after the workers are recruited by IMIP, they deliver them to the tenants inside the

industrial area. If they hold a strike, workers from different companies inside IMIP join in solidarity with workers from other companies. Typically, they experience the same problems, like those I mentioned before, problems related to wages and discrimination. These things happen in all factories.

RR: You gave an example from 2014. Could you give other examples of labor strikes at IMIP?

WG: I have many examples. One recent case took place in August 2020, during the pandemic. The workers were forcibly asked not to attend the workplace. They were forced to stay at home without any certainty when they would be called back to work. This was experienced by around 2,000 coal mining workers in the Morowali district. The company continued to pay the basic wage but did not pay the full labor benefits. By reducing their financial expenses, business entities maintained their level of profit.

On August 5, the workers went on strike to demand job security. The company rejected the demand of the workers and looked for an excuse to terminate workers' employment without having to pay severance pay. The legal excuse used to dismiss workers, especially union activists who protest, is often article 142 of the Law 13/2003 and the Decree of the Labor Ministry concerning the effects of illegal strikes. These require that workers and all unions wishing to carry out a legal strike are obliged to send out a notification no later than seven days before the strike is carried out. Although overshadowed by threats of dismissal, the tendency to strike in reaction to violation of laborers' rights did not decrease. But the company fired three union activists in order to counter their intention to conduct more strikes. On August 6, 7, and 8, the company published intimidation letters stating that workers who go on strike would be considered as being absent without leave. And, according to the regulations by the Labor Ministry, absence without leave means that you can be fired.

RR: Do you know how Chinese workers reacted to that? Were they also involved?

WG: No, as usual, Chinese workers did not join the strike, they only observed. But based on our interviews in 2019 with the local workers, Chinese workers supported the strike of the Indonesian workers.

RR: You mean that, when you asked them, they said, "We support the Indonesian workers," but they would not join or actively support the strike?

WG: They do not actively support actions of the Indonesian workers because they would face the threat of being deported by the IMIP management.

RR: How about the other way? Do you know of any labor actions by Chinese workers? Have they ever staged their own demonstration or other labor action at IMIP during the last few years?

WG: My friend in Morowali, a union activist, said that the Chinese workers often go on strike inside the industrial zones, but they strike in small numbers. When they do a strike, there are only twenty to thirty workers. They address their Chinese management office.

RR: Do you know about their demands?

WG: Usually, their demands are related to cuts of their work incentives. Because, as I mentioned before, the Chinese managers will think that the Chinese workers do not fulfill their duties if they do not push the Indonesian workers enough to work hard.

RR: A recent Washington Post article about Chinese workers in Sulawesi and other parts of Indonesia accused Chinese brokers and agencies of serious breaches of the labor law and talked about a kind of forced labor. When the Chinese workers arrived, their passports were taken away and they were not paid.³ This raises the point that many Chinese workers are illegally in Indonesia and have no work permit. Have you come across that during your research at IMIP?

WG: I often heard about that. I do not have clarified information about this in the IMIP area, but I have information that this happens in Banten Province, where I did research on power plants. At Lebak Banten Energy, a plant owned by Chinese investment, I heard that Chinese workers' passports were confiscated by management. So, when they leave the area of the factory or the area of the industrial zone, they have no documents to proof that they are legal workers, and they will be considered illegal workers. What AI mentioned earlier, that usually the Chinese workers do not leave the IMIP area, could be related to this.

RR: I have one more question on the nickel mining and smelter producing steels. This involves producing a lot of waste and environmental hazards in the region, which affects both workers who handle these materials and local communities. What did you hear about that from the local communities? Was there any resistance?

WG: The environmental damage in the area of Bahodopi where IMIP is located has already happened since 2010. For example, in July 2010, there were major flash floods in Morowali, and a month later, in August 2010 another flash flood occurred. From May to September is the season of heavy rain on the islands outside of Java, in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. When the area was cleared out for mining operations, there were no forests to hold the water. Flash foods frequently happen in every mining area in Sulawesi. In 2019, the locals told me that in the past they also experienced flash floods, but then, the water was clear.

³ Kuo, Lily, and Alicia Chen, "Chinese workers allege forced labor, abuses in Xi's 'Belt and Road' program." *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/xuar8a7j>.

Now, the water of flash floods is brown. The biggest flash flood occurred in 2019. Three main bridges on the national road were damaged.

There is resistance from the locals. For example, during the flash floods in 2013 or 2012, they held a massive demonstration in front of one of the investors of IMIP, PT Bintang Delapan Minerals. They burned their office, a dump truck, and other facilities. Before that, they cut off the bridge and blockaded the access to the area so the national police could not enter. After the demonstration, when the locals had gone back to their homes, the police could not arrest anyone.

AK: Al, you mentioned that you also did research on Chinese investments in coal-fired power plants in Bali and South Sumatra. Could you tell us how the conditions at these sites are different from those at IMIP?

AA: In Bali, the situation is not as bad as at IMIP and in Palembang, in South Sumatra. The situation in the coal power plants in Palembang is as bad as that in Morowali. These power plants are part of the Jokowi government's national project of mass electrification in the country. The government wants to achieve an electrification of 35,000 megawatts across Indonesia. Seventy percent of the targeted electricity will be produced in Sumatra and Java.

I can add some information to the question earlier on the Chinese workers' situation and working permits. In Palembang as well, the Chinese workers live in dormitories and have limited contact with the communities. I interviewed some of the members of the community and workers who come from the communities close to the power plant. They said that, in 2017, immigration officers raided a factory near the power plant to check the Chinese workers' working permits, and some of the Chinese workers ran away to a forest nearby. This reflects that at the time, some of the Chinese workers did not have a work permit.

You also mentioned the issue of forced labor. I do not know to what extent the Chinese workers performed forced labor, but they did not have a work permit. At the South Sumatra power plants, Chinese workers work for more than twelve hours.

AK: IMIP and the other projects you have worked on are part of a strategy of development and industrialization in Indonesia. Connected to this is the Omnibus Law of October 2020. This law is supposed to create more jobs. Could you tell us more about this law and how it affects workers and their protests in Indonesia?

WG: In general, the Omnibus Law is a project that pushes the flexibilization of labor to the extreme. For example, before the Omnibus Law was issued, labor regulations restricted the times a company could contract someone as a temporary worker. After three contracts the workers got a permanent position. The Omnibus Law has revoked this regulation, and there are no similar restrictions on contract

labor any more. Workers can be contracted as temporary workers for their whole life.

Another example concerns the wage determination formula. Before the issuance of the Omnibus Law, the wage determination formula was set by a tripartite institution and was negotiated between workers, companies, and the provincial governments. The wages were determined based on surveys on the basic necessities of a decent life. Before the Omnibus Law, the government carried out these surveys every year, but now, they are carried out only every five years. How can you guarantee that the inflation will be flat during five years? No one can guarantee that. At the same time, the wages stay flat because they are set based on the surveys carried out up to five years ago. The value of the wages may be lower because of inflation. Also, the wage determination formula erodes democratic processes of wage determination because now the governments are not specifically obliged to take into account the tripartite institutions.

RR: There was some resistance and mobilizations against the Omnibus Law. Could you tell us about that?

WG: The Omnibus Law was issued through a tricky process of legislation. Every section of society was tricked by the legislative process. For example, the legislators presented the draft of, say, May 15. When we criticized this draft, the legislative said, that was not the real draft. The real draft was issued on, for example, May 18. So, any criticism of the process of formulating the draft was played out. I think, this is a new strategy in the law-making process. Because of this tricky process, there were no massive demonstrations that contested the Omnibus Law in 2020.⁴ Many worker activists were surprised by the new tactics deployed by the oligarchs in the government. The law was ratified because the government was using buzzers. This is how we call cyber trolls in Indonesia doing propaganda on social media and disseminating fake news to distract and obfuscate through disinformation.

RR: We are at the end of the event. Thank you very much, Al and Wasi Gede, for sharing with us your information, insights, and perspectives. I want to give you both the chance to say a few more words on whether and where will you publish your work.

⁴ See BBC, "Indonesia: Thousands Protest Against 'Omnibus Law' on Jobs." *BBC News*, October 8, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5n8vt98j>; and Lane, Max, "Protests Against the Omnibus Law and the Evolution of Indonesia's Social Opposition." *ISEAS/Perspective*, November 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/mtk93f48>.

AA: We published our research about Chinese investment in those three areas, in Bali, at IMIP (in Sulawesi), and in North Sumatra.⁵ Let me share some comments on the limitation of our study which is that we did not interview the workers from China. We had planned to invite our Mandarin speaking friends from Hong Kong or Malaysia to come and do field research with us and reach the Chinese workers, but that was difficult. So, our task for the future is that if we want to get the real situation of Chinese workers at Chinese investment sites, we have to talk with them.

RR: Thank you, Al. This is a very good point, and it is a challenge for everyone to support you in this attempt to investigate the situation of Chinese and Indonesian workers at the same time. Wasi Gede, do you want to share any last words with us?

WG: In 2022, INKRISPENA will publish its research centered on the strategies and counter-strategies used by mining business entities to avoid being accountable for human right violations they have committed.⁶ We will be very happy if the results of this research can be further developed and if we can learn more about the Chinese workers. For example, we would like to learn what tactics and strategies the Chinese management uses to reduce the interaction between Indonesian and Chinese workers. Research from the perspective of Chinese workers could complement the research that we conducted and give the whole picture of the two sides.

RR: Thank you very much! Also, thank you, Alina, for co-moderating today. Do you want to have a last word as well?

AK: I would like to thank Al and Wasi Gede for being here. We appreciate that you have been here as Bogor-based and Jakarta-based researchers who have very close ties to social movements and independent labor unions. That you share these insights is very precious.

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10 | How China Escaped Shock Therapy. The Market Reform Debate

Presentation: Isabella Weber

Moderation: Ralf Ruckus und Daniel Reineke¹

Ralf Ruckus (RR): Welcome everyone to this session of the online discussion series “China and the Left. Critical Analysis and Grassroots Activism.” Today, we will learn about the contested reform of China’s planned economy in the 1980s, the fierce debates among economists and reform politicians regarding the right path to marketize and transform China’s economic system, and the economic, political, and social conflicts and outcomes the reforms engendered.

Daniel Reineke (DR): Welcome to everyone from my side as well. I would like to shortly introduce today’s speaker Isabella Weber, a dear colleague and friend. Isabella is a political economist working on China, global trade, and the history of economic thought. She is an Assistant Professor of Economics and the China research leader of the Asian Political Economy Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She holds a PhD in Development Studies from the University of Cambridge and a PhD in Economics from the New School of Social Research in New York. Isabella is an outstanding scholar who has published widely on the history of economic thought and China’s political economy. Today, we will talk about her first book, published in May 2021 with Routledge and entitled *How China Escaped Shock Therapy. The Market Reform Debate*.²

Although published just recently, the book has already received its first awards and much critical acclaim by economists and China specialists alike. I just finished reading it over the past week, and I would like to add to the praise since Isabella has done some truly groundbreaking research and delivered an extremely well-written book. It will become part, I am sure, of the key literature on China’s process of economic reform since the end of the 1970s. Based on extensive empirical research and building on interviews with Chinese and international economists as well as a wide array of written and unpublished documents, Isabella traces and analyzes the fiercely contested debates among Chinese economists and political leaders about the nature and direction of economic reforms in the 1980s. Along the way, she focuses on one central question: On what intel-

¹ This webinar took place on June 5, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/07/13/podcast-how-china-escaped-shock-therapy>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

² Weber, Isabella, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy. The Market Reform Debate* (London/New York: Routledge, 2021).

lectual grounds did China escape shock therapy in the 1980s? Shock therapy, that is, the quintessential neoliberal policy approach adopted most prominently in Russia and other former state socialist countries.

Answering this question, the book argues that “China’s gradual and state-guided marketization was anything but a foregone conclusion.”³ To the contrary, by uncovering the fierce debates around price reforms over the first decade of China’s reforms, she shows that at least twice, in 1986 and 1988, China narrowly escaped a shock therapy approach. Having this conversation with Isabella today, one day after the 32nd anniversary of the bloody suppression of China’s protest movement in 1989, it should be highlighted that her book also provides key insights into how this movement was related to the outcomes to the reform debates and measures analyzed in her book. Moreover, Isabella’s book also provides us with a fundamental historical contribution to understanding China’s course of reforms until today. Now, without further ado, Isabella, the floor is yours.

Isabella Weber (IW): Thank you so much, Daniel and Ralf. I am extremely humbled with this generous introduction. I tried to understand what happened in the 1980s from the perspective of an outsider, from someone who went there, tried to interview, tried to speak to the different sides, tried to pursue a question that I feel has been overlooked. That is the question of how marketization has gone about, since most of the debate was really kind of caught up in the binary of capitalism and communism.

This is of course incredibly important, and it is incredibly important to understand that the 1980s mark the transition from the ambition to establish something like communism towards capitalism. However, the “how” of this transition is important for the outcome and important for where we are today. When I started this project, I had no way of knowing that we would today be finding ourselves in a situation that is broadly considered a new cold war. In this situation, of course, the questions, “How did the last cold war end? And how did China come out so differently compared to the other former giant of socialism?”, are of a timeliness that is more than a bit overwhelming!

The book has two parts. The first part is the attempt to reflect on different modes of state market creation, that is, different ways in which the state has historically functioned as a market creator. I chose three main reference points that could be considered slightly unexpected. The first one is the attempt to situate China’s 1980s in the context of long-term state-craft traditions of state market creation and participation in the context of the granary systems. I am trying to reach back all the way to the ancient text of the *Guanzi* in order to avoid repro-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

ducing an image of China as a monolith. I want to instead highlight that, within China, there have been repeated and sharp debates over the question of how the state should be engaging with markets and specifically the question of how state market participation and creation can be organized.

The second reference point is the World War II economy in the United States and the postwar transition. The purpose of having this in the book is twofold. On the one hand, I came to this because people I interviewed in China repeatedly referred to the analogy with World War II in the European and American contexts. In particular, in the documents some referred to the writings of John Kenneth Galbraith. But the motivation is also to escape the idea of an essentialist approach, to show that these questions, how you create and recreate markets and how the state can function as a participant in the market and as a stabilizer of prices, are not unique to China but have been intensely debated and practiced in the 20th century in the European and American contexts, too. By juxtaposing the ancient Chinese thought and the statecraft tradition with the intense debates during World War II that involved some of the leading 20th century economists in the European, American, and UK contexts—such as Keynes, Mises, Hayek, and Galbraith—I tried to distill certain conceptual questions. Through this conceptual lens, I tried to transcend a mere confrontation of East versus West.

The third reference point that, to some extent, links to the first is a more immediate one, which is the reference to the 1940s Civil War economic warfare, where one of the key economic questions in the struggle for liberation was how to overcome hyperinflation. This was directly related to the question of price policy and market creation since part of the inflationary problem was that basic economic integration itself had broken down. In this context, key economic leaders on the Communist side, such as Xue Muqiao and Chen Yun, employed tools of economic warfare that involved trading agencies. These were really set up to reintegrate markets, and, by re-establishing supply for key commodities, to provide something for money to be exchanged for and, thereby, to provide not only a value reference point but an actual value for money. Through these practices of re-establishing an infrastructure for things for which money can be exchanged, they recreated markets, but at the same time they remonetized the economy and re-established the value of money. After the revolution in 1949, these same practices of using commercial agencies to out-speculate the speculators, to stabilize the prices of essential commodities first, and to thereby re-establish a certain degree of price stability, were employed *again*. They constituted an incredible breakthrough from an economic viewpoint because, had hyperinflation not been controlled, the whole basic economic project of reconstruction would have been substantially hindered.

Some of the people who were involved in the 1940s re-appeared as older generation political leaders or economic leaders and economists in the 1980s. This created a direct link to the practices of the 1940s, since, for these people, the reference point in terms of how to create, play, and regulate markets was that pre-revolutionary period, not exclusively but importantly so. There is a direct link between the long statecraft tradition that to some extent was mobilized in the revolutionary struggle and the debates and practices of the 1980s. On the other hand, some of the economists who started being invited to China from the West made references to the Western World War II economy and its later liberalization, including especially the so-called “Erhard miracle,” a term first introduced in the late 1970s by ordoliberals and later prominently evoked by Milton Friedman.⁴

In fact, the “Erhard miracle” is a metaphor for shock therapy that was not at all unique to China, but that was previously and subsequently also invoked in all sorts of other contexts, such as Chile, the UK, and, of course, West Germany, Poland, and even in some instances in Russia. The idea there is that starting from a war economy, which was very much a planned economy, you could recreate markets overnight by simply letting go of prices. You get all these quotes from Milton Friedman for example, saying that the “Erhard miracle” was a very simple thing. You just let go of price controls overnight, and boom, you have a functioning market economy. This idea that shock liberalization would be the way to go was already present, not necessarily prominent, but already present in the late 1970s. This brings me back to the actual context of my book, moving from part one to part two. But I find it important to clarify why am I engaging in this theoretical context discussion in part one.

By the late 1970s, there was a clear sense that Hua Guofeng’s attempt at another “big push,” this time an internationalized version that would involve the importation of foreign technology financed by the export of petroleum, had very much run out of steam. The late Maoist attempt of a continuous revolution and all that came with it had, of course, also ran out of steam by the late 1970s. So, there was a moment of clear openness.

The question of what comes next was structurally almost unavoidable. Which is not to say that there was no alternative, but which is to say that there was a very clear sense from the interviews I conducted that there was a need to overhaul the whole economic system. Added to this pressure was the recognition that China’s poverty was still rampant, that peasants in South China were fleeing to Hong Kong, and a great sense that basic industrialization had been achieved and

⁴ The so-called “Erhard miracle” refers to the economic boom in West-Germany that took place after 1949 when Ludwig Erhard was the country’s Secretary of Commerce (*editor’s note*).

great progress had been made in public health and so on. However, the basic materialist catch-up project that had been part of the revolutionary project in the beginning had not been achieved. In that context, Deng Xiaoping put economics into command, overhauling the idea of politics in command. But the problem was that economics at that point was dead. Economists had been sent to the countryside, and economics as an academic discipline of research had been canceled for quite a while. Economics reestablished itself quickly and vibrantly, but it was still just rekindling as an academic practice.

While this was happening, academic economists in China were starting to engage intensely with their Western counterparts. They were engaging in a catch-up game on what then was the Western economic mainstream, which at the time was turning towards a neoliberal type of economics. While this catch-up game was happening, and while the World Bank invited Eastern European émigrés for exchanges as some sort of ambassadors of neoclassical economics, the agricultural reforms in China began. These reforms created new realities that were in many ways detached from academic attempts of trying to answer the question of how China could create a new economic system. There, the logic was very much to start from the idea that you could design a target system from economic theory, and that you could then define, by theoretical means, steps that would take you to that target system. In that way, you would be implementing one big blueprint for economic reform that entails a whole package of specific measures. While this was going on, the agricultural reforms were taking off, creating a logic of reform that was a practiced logic of reform and was already becoming dominant.

On the academic side that I have just sketched, as part of this idea of designing a target system and then steps towards that target system, the idea of a “big bang” and price reform started to become prevalent. It was crudely starting from the neo-classical notion that getting the prices right is the most important thing to have a functioning market economy. Therefore, the most important step would be price reform. Once you have got the prices right, then everything else will more or less fall into place. The idea is that the crucial breakthrough towards a more market-based economy would be to implement some version of an overnight price liberalization. This overnight price liberalization and the whole reasoning on an intellectual level, in the sense of what kind of economics underpins this kind of reform proposal, is very much in parallel with what came to be called shock therapy in other contexts. Because shock therapy itself was based on the premise that the initial shock of the therapy would be a “big bang” in price liberalization for the very same reasons.

The “big bang” is the turning point that is or is not implemented. That is why the book entitled *How China Escaped Shock Therapy* is focused on these repeated

attempts at a “big bang.” This is, of course, a narrow conception of shock therapy, and we could be talking about other dimensions of shock therapy. I am using shock therapy here in a rather technical, economic sense. That is important to acknowledge, because depending on how we define shock therapy, we would come to different conclusions as to whether China has or has not escaped shock therapy.

On the other side, as a result of the agricultural reforms, a dynamic of marketization was released in the large agricultural economy, and that dynamic of marketization was transferred into the urban industrial economy. As the agricultural markets took off, there was also demand for industrial output, both for production goods for the township and village enterprises as well as for consumption goods. Because what is the point of having a sidelined production for the market if there is nothing you can buy with the money you earned? As a result of this, there was a dynamic of marketization along the lines of the dual track that was more or less endogenously transferred into the urban industrial economy.

In this context, the question becomes how to deal with agricultural reforms. Should you encourage these experiments that start to happen on the ground? Should you elevate them to national policy, or should you contain them? And once this dynamic has been transferred into the urban industrial economy, the same questions arise again: Should you encourage these dynamics? Should you turn them into national policy? Or should you contain and undermine them?

In this context, another group of economic researchers became important. This group grew out of a milieu of younger intellectuals who, having been sent to the countryside, returned to urban areas as Deng Xiaoping reopened the university exams in 1977. They returned to the cities and regathered. Some of them had high-level contacts. They formed this large group of young intellectuals that became engaged in the question of agricultural reform. They started to get support from people like Du Runsheng, Deng Liqun, and so on. That enabled them to go out and survey the experiments that had been happening and to systematize the results of the initial more or less spontaneous attempts at the household responsibility system.

Through their survey research, they helped and contributed to transferring these local experiments into national policy. Then, as this reform dynamic was initially transferred more or less endogenously into the urban industrial economy, the same groups of researchers started to engage with this debate and essentially helped to justify and systematize the idea of the dual-track price system in the urban context. So, these two reform paradigms—one coming out of the established economics discipline, the other coming out of the trajectory that begins from

agricultural reform—then became the two sides in the market reform debate that clashed again and again throughout the 1980s.

RR: Thank you very much, Isabella, for this interesting introduction. The questions we prepared are following the historical chronology. The first question concerns the period before the reforms started. You pointed out that getting the prices right was one of the central questions in the reform process, as it had been in the Civil War and in other situations. In the book, you explain very well how prices also played a role in the socialist period. I have two questions here. How were prices actually set? A common thought on this is that they had an idea and just set the prices somehow logically or looked at how much time was spent to produce something. And in what way did the price system play a role in squeezing the peasants to feed the workers or squeezing them to be able to start a huge industrialization program, which was basically the Stalinist program? What are your thoughts on these two questions?

IW: A naive way of thinking about prices under a planned economy would be to assume the planner could just set the prices as they wished. Another version of this would be that you could use optimal planning, that you could rationally set all prices based on some model of the economy as a whole, and that you could then create a system that functions like a designed optimizer. This is, of course, far from the truth. China in fact never re-set all prices from scratch. As prices were being stabilized in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the market was involved. At that point, the prices were in important ways a result of the struggle of re-stabilizing the economy rather than being set from some higher theoretical standpoint. Throughout the Maoist period, there was no moment when the whole price system was re-set to its initial point. In fact, during the Cultural Revolution, prices were more or less frozen. That is what economists I interviewed told me. I am sure that would be an interesting research project, how, on the ground, prices functioned during the Cultural Revolution.

So, how did relative prices work as a mechanism of redistribution in this context? If you think about the project of industrialization in a more or less closed economy, that is to say, an economy that cannot rely on substantial transfers from abroad to finance its industrialization project, then you need to have people who are working for industrialization, who are literally building coal plants, steel plants, and so on. As they are doing this, they are engaging in hard work, but they are not adding to the consumption fund. These people have to be fed, they have to be clothed, and so on, without themselves adding to the needs of those who are working. In this context, you need to have someone who is providing a surplus that is able to literally finance the industrialization attempt.

In the Chinese context, in a very poor country at the edge of subsistence, the financing of this industrialization in the context of a predominantly agricultural economy was coming first and foremost from the agricultural system. There was, of course, variation across the Maoist period, but as a basic principle this was being facilitated by setting the prices of agricultural goods consciously below any notion of cost and by setting the prices of at least some industrial goods and particularly industrial consumption goods somewhat above costs. By having one sector of which the prices are consciously devalued, and another sector of which the prices are consciously valued above any idea of costs, you get a redistribution from the agricultural to the urban industrial sector. I say urban here, because there was also some degree of industry in the countryside. This is the famous price scissors which is most directly expressed in terms of a relatively low price of grain, cotton, and other important agricultural staples.

In 1978, one of the initial changes was an adjustment of the price scissors, an upward adjustment of important prices, for grain, for cotton, and so on. The problem of reform in that sense was not only about introducing markets into an economy that previously was organized through a mixture of planning commands, local collective decision making, and the attempt to mobilize masses. It was also about the fact that prices had been set consciously in a way to facilitate redistribution within the system rather than to incentivize individual units of production to produce in ways that are somehow optimizing from the angle of the individual unit.

This problem does not only pertain to agricultural versus industrial goods. This also pertains to different industrial goods across different sectors. Basic industrial goods were in fact priced relatively low, since this was seen as a way to encourage further downstream industrialization. Whereas so-called luxury goods—radios, wristwatches, bicycles, and so on which were, at the time, considered luxury goods—were priced relatively high, not least because this was also a tool to redistribute between the industrial sectors. In addition, having consumption goods that were priced relatively highly was also a way of managing liquidity in the system, since you could extract a lot of liquidity from private households by offering so-called luxury goods at a relatively high price and thereby rebalance the liquidity within your system. All of this is to say that prices were planned in the sense that they were consciously alternated by price setting authorities. But the ways in which they were set was never based on some overall calculation method. It was based on principles of controlling the most essential goods most tightly and the less essential less tightly. Some sort of balancing act was meant to balance the economy as a whole in terms of liquidity while enabling the squeezing of the peasants or the transfer of funds for the industrialization project.

DR: I would like to move on to something that you have already talked about shortly: the early reforms in the Chinese countryside in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The household responsibility system that was eventually introduced was similar to reforms of collectivized agriculture in the 1960s. Why was agriculture the first item on the reform agenda? Could you elaborate on that a bit more? And while, in the book, you describe instances of local provincial leaders resisting the introduction of the household responsibility system and de-collectivization, we would also be interested to hear why the reformers did not push even further? Why was the privatization of land not considered, and, if it was considered, then in what sense? And, in the book, you highlight that overcoming rural poverty, “created a great urge for reform in the late 1970s.”⁵ Considering the historical urban bias of the development strategy in the Maoist period, I was wondering to what extent this agrarian question was related to the crisis in urban areas in the late 1970s that manifested itself in shortage of consumer goods, relatively high unemployment rates, and the urban protest movement. What was the relation of this decision to initiate reforms first in the countryside to the crisis in urban areas in the late 1970s?

IW: On an abstract level, this shift in the late 1970s towards an emphasis on agricultural reforms reflects a shift in the overall industrialization strategy from a logic of having to first concentrate all resources into the rapid built-up of urban industrial industries to a realization that, without improving the conditions in the countryside, there would not be enough economic leverage to achieve urban industrialization.

If you think about the Hua Guofeng type of development strategy, there is the idea that you could induce development in part with transfers from abroad. You would be transferring technology and financing this through certain exports. In some sense, you would be breaking out of this constrained development attempt that I have tried to sketch in my previous answer by engaging with the global economy. But this failed, and squeezing the peasants had really hit its limit, so they took a third approach that was, in fact, already mentioned by Mao in “On the Ten Major Relationships.” That is, to reverse the order and move towards an emphasis of first creating more prosperity in the countryside and, thereby, laying foundations—a kind of a shift in development strategy on a general level.

More concretely, my sense is that there are two elements that add to the urgency of reform in the countryside. One is that there was a realization on the part of the top leaders that overcoming rural poverty was the first step in a reorientation towards a primacy of economic development. Secondly, another element that

⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

should not be underestimated was that many elites had been sent to the countryside and returned to the cities. This involved not only this younger generation that emerged as an important intellectual and research resource in the 1980s, but also many of the top leaders and other elites who had spent years in the countryside. The question of the organization of the agrarian political economy was not some distant reality of the people in the villages; it was a question on the top of the minds of people who had been living the reality of rural poverty themselves. In some sense, it was the punishment that they were exposed to. In terms of the more sociological aspects, this is important to realize.

Finally, on a more ideological level, this whole idea of a primary stage of socialism is quite important to recognize, and it is something that was already introduced for the first time in the context of the reform period in the late 1970s. It only became official policy by 1987, but already in the late 1970s you had these discussions about the primary stage of socialism, which means that there was a sense of having overemphasized the attempt to revolutionize the social relations of production and that one had to emphasize the progress of the forces of production instead. So, there was a certain reorientation towards a more orthodox interpretation of historical materialism. If you are in a country that is still roughly eighty percent agrarian, then developing the forces of production must involve agriculture, of course. These are some of the aspects that contributed to agriculture being first on the agenda.

In terms of land privatization, I have not gone out into the field and studied these things on the ground, but I talked to people who were involved in these processes. There was no discussion of privatization of land at this stage. What was being discussed was a kind of rural “big bang.” After the dual-track system and the household responsibility system in the countryside had been unleashed, which—without making a causal claim here—coincided with a massive expansion in agricultural output, there was a sense in the early 1980s that, since the problem of grain provisioning and the provisioning of important inputs for light industry from agriculture was solved, then why should one not move on and get rid of the dual-track price system and liberalize grain prices?

They conducted experiments in this context and tried to see what happens if you simply impose a tax instead of having a quota price that was still below the market price at the time. Because if a rural household has to provide a certain amount of the output to the state at a price that is below the market price, then this appears to be the same as a tax. Some of the senior reform leaders in the agricultural sphere, in particular Wan Li, were opposed to this idea from the beginning on. They emphasized that the dual-track price system and the grain provisioning under the quota by the state did not simply serve a financial purpose of

extracting a tax but had a much more important role to play in maintaining food provisioning and price stability. Because having the state purchase a substantial amount of agricultural output at a state-set price meant during times of low harvest or of supply falling short of demand that market prices were higher than planned prices. But while these experiments were happening, the economy was shifting from a situation of shortage to a situation of local oversupply of some key commodities. If you suddenly have an oversupply of agricultural goods, then it can happen that the state-set price is above the market price. In that sense, the state-set price and the state provisioning of grain and basic agricultural goods was not simply a financial tool but had an important role of stabilizing the price and thereby also the demand for the agricultural economy. This very logic, in fact, links straight back to the logic of the granary system and the ways in which the granaries participated in the grain market for stabilization purposes.

DR: Could you give us a short introduction on how the dual-track price system that was eventually implemented as an official policy in 1984 actually worked?

IW: The basic logic of the dual-track system emerged, as I have mentioned, from the agricultural reforms where the grain quota and the state-set price initially stayed in place. That meant you had a dual-track price system where rural households were selling their output at a state-set price to the national granary system and at a market price to everybody else. So, there you already had this bifurcation of the price system. What that meant was that the link between the urban and the agricultural economy in terms of the provisioning of agricultural goods to the core of the planned urban economy was initially more or less unaltered. Prices were adjusted, but the basic mechanisms were left in place. The agricultural reform was radical and brutal from the perspective of how fast it served to dismantle communes in most places. It was gradual and experimentalist from the perspective of leaving this key link in place. In leaving this key link in place, there were, of course, areas in the relationship between the urban and the agricultural economy that were more important than others. If you are in a major grain producing region, then your grain output is important for the national economy as a whole, because it makes up a large part. If you are in a poor, remote, and mountainous setting where output is very low and transportation is extremely costly, then your output is unessential in relation to the working of the national system. It is not unessential to the subsistence of the people there, of course, but from the perspective of the national system it is unessential.

So, in the agricultural reform itself, the real battle in terms of introducing the dual-track system, was about whether or not to move to a household responsibility system and a dual-track system in the major corn chambers. It was not really

about whether some remote villages did something differently. These were the initial experiments, and they were important in establishing a practice and reviving certain practices, but the real breakthrough was moving to the core of agricultural production.

I am giving this lengthy answer on agriculture, because something in parallel happened in the urban industrial system. This was also heterogeneous across provinces but, initially, it was fairly straightforward to let factories that were producing unessential light industry goods experiment with the dual-track price system. A factory that produces plastic mirrors for children, for instance, was nice to have and not very widespread at the time. This would be a completely inessential production site. Giving up on planning this production completely or letting this factory sell some plastic mirrors on a street market, was something that already happened before. No one really cared to control this as tightly as steel production. This was just taking the logic of tightness of control in the previous system one step further and letting it happen.

The real battle was over whether or not to introduce a dual-track price system in core parts of the urban industrial system, that is, coal, steel, copper, and all the basic upstream industrial sectors that had to operate large-scale. So, each individual production unit had a lot of weight, and they were producing things that were inputs to pretty much all downstream industries. We can see this right now again very nicely, where we are in the middle of an explosion of commodity prices, and we have a discussion about whether we are at the verge of cost-push inflation. If steel prices go up, it is a problem for everything down the supply chain. The question was, would you introduce this same system into this core of the industrial production?

Ultimately the reasoning was, one could be contracting output shares from these core industries in a fashion that would initially keep the core planned relations running—not the planning of plastic mirrors but the planning of the production of machinery, things that have very high linkages, as we would say in economics. The dual-track system was already endogenously emerging in these industries of course, because you cannot start a township and village enterprise without some amount of coal, steel, and so on. Some of it could be sourced locally, but those things that previously would have come from the urban industrial system would still need to come from the urban industrial system. You could not recreate this in that short amount of time locally in the agricultural sphere.

This was the big question, and eventually it was decided that you could have a dual-track price system in these core industries. The Moganshan Youth Conference and a whole group of young researchers presented arguments in favor of this. But what happened was that luxury goods like wristwatches, bicycles, and

so on were initially priced above costs. If you introduced the dual-track price system in that context, profits would be very high, because prices are very high. Profits are by design much higher than in the system as a whole. There would be very strong incentives to expand production quickly, and in fact, that happened. And as production was expanding, you got a quick downward movement of prices. If you can compete and say, I still have a profit rate that is much higher than that in the economy as a whole but just a little bit less than in the other bicycle factory, then you can capture the market, right?

So, this logic of market competition drove down prices in the sectors where previously prices had been set very high. But in the sectors where prices had been consciously set below cost, the dual-track system meant that market prices shot through the roof. That was the point people who were arguing for a “big bang” were making. You got an extreme bifurcation where any little bit of, for instance, steel channeled out of the plan could be sold on the market by the person running the steel plant for maybe ten times the price. So, the incentive for corruption or for working into your own pocket was large. Corruption did happen, started to take hold, and became a problem towards the late 1980s. At the same time, the dual-track system meant that these upstream industries were contained as large production units on the scale on which they have to operate. They were reoriented from producing for the plan to become market-oriented enterprises while initially keeping the plan running. This was important for the ways in which China’s market transformation happened.

RR: In the book, you have a longer part on foreign influences and debates and, especially, on economists from Eastern Europe who were invited to China and also people such as Milton Friedman or economists from the World Bank. What were the foreign influences, and why would Chinese economists and Chinese politicians even listen to them?

IW: I have already illustrated how complicated it was to introduce market mechanism into the Chinese system in the late 1970s. In fact, as I was teaching this material, I asked my undergraduate students to think about solutions, and they had a hard time. This is a very difficult question. How do you introduce a different kind of price mechanism and create markets within that setting? In this context, in the late 1970s, not least unleashed by Hua Guofeng’s initiatives to send delegations around the world, the discourse to reengage with economics discussions around the world was burst open. In this context, several different sources and reference points became particularly important. The World Bank was engaged early on in a different way compared to the role taken by the IMF in Romania, for instance. China was not indebted at the time. It did apply for an IDA [International Development Association] loan, but these landings were relatively

small. That is important to take into account, because this set the stage for a different kind of interaction.

The Chinese leaders were primarily interested in the economic expertise of the World Bank and less interested in becoming indebted on a large scale. This meant that extensive exchanges were facilitated by the World Bank that involved bringing in famous economists from the West towards the later 1980s. In the early stages, it was primarily about bringing in Eastern European emigré economists who had been actively involved in the reform attempts in Poland, during the Prague Spring, and in Hungary. One of them was the last surviving person when I did my fieldwork, Péter Kende. When I met him in a coffee shop in Paris, he was wearing the exact same outfit that he had worn at the 1982 conference organized by the World Bank in China. He told me how he had preserved this outfit because he was in terror when he went to China. In his native Hungary, he would have been arrested at the border. He thought he could not entrust his life to the Chinese leaders, since China was part of the Socialist bloc. When he arrived back in Paris, he considered himself reborn and therefore preserved that outfit.

This is an important story to illustrate how bold it was on the part of the Chinese leaders to have the World Bank invite emigrés who had fled their countries. These were economists whose economic reform proposals were perceived as too radical. We have to recognize that these emigré economists were, according to the transcripts of informal conversations of World Bank people I have looked at, vastly disillusioned with socialism. They thought socialism had failed and that they had gone through decades of attempts of reforming socialism without any result but finding themselves exiled. This was a delegation of World Bank economists and disillusioned Eastern European emigrés trying to advise the Chinese counterparts in reforming socialism while they themselves had given up on the idea of socialism. So, they came into this with a skeptical view, and they suggested that gradualism would not work, that the dual-track price system would create a mess, and that what one would need to do is to recalculate all prices in a rational fashion employing the emerging computer capacity, reset all prices such that they would reflect an alleged equilibrium, and then liberalize.

This was their advice when they first came. When they toured China and saw what was happening with the agricultural reforms, some of them reconsidered. They saw that the agricultural reforms were bearing fruit. Some of them said that, in their context, reform had been a series of catastrophic failures, whereas the agricultural reforms [in China] seemed to be a significant success. That undermined their own perception of what reform was about and the prospects of gradualist reform. Ironically, a group of Chinese economists took on their advice and,

throughout the 1980s, argued for precisely the things that they had suggested. But they themselves became unsure about what exactly the right course of action would be. Of course, we have to realize that it was not only the World Bank. It was also the Ford Foundation and the American Economic Association. Kenneth Arrow and Joseph Stiglitz had already travelled to China in 1980 and 1981. So, there was an explosion of exchanges. In the book, my project was not to chronicle each and every famous American economist who ever entered China in that period but to work out a certain logic of reform and to highlight certain key players.

On the side of the “big bang,” there is also an interesting split in the West German engagement. People like Otmar Emminger, who worked under Ludwig Erhard in the post-war period and later was president of the Bundesbank, was advising along the same lines as Milton Friedman for a “big bang” and overnight price liberalization. Meanwhile, others who were just as ordoliberal pointed out that the West German conditions after World War II were drastically different from China’s conditions [in the 1980s]. Prominently, in 1987, there was a delegation from the System Reform Institute to West Germany trying to investigate what had happened in West Germany after the War because the side that was arguing for a “big bang” repeatedly suggested that China should have an “Erhard miracle.” So, they tried to find out what this “Erhard miracle” was and spoke to Herbert Giersch who was not only a famous ordoliberal but also a member of the Mont Pèlerin Society. There should be little doubt about Herbert Giersch being a neoliberal. He pointed out to the delegation of Chen Yizi, Wang Xiaoqiang, and others that in the post-war moment in Germany there were industrialists who had been integrated into the planned war economy during fascism. Nonetheless, as industrialists they knew how to run capitalist companies. They had been running capitalist companies before the war, they knew exactly whom to talk to, and so on. Of course, from a political standpoint, this is horrifying, but this is the kind of message that was presented. Liberalizing prices in that context would be very different from liberalizing prices in a context where the production sites are not big capitalist industrial conglomerates that had gone through a war but production sites that had been built up as socialist production units.

So, the message that they brought back was that, first of all, the “Erhard miracle” might not have been an “Erhard miracle,” because even under Erhard the key prices were not shock-liberalized. Secondly, the starting point in terms of market players was so different that one could not try to replicate the West German Erhard policies. One simplistic but still important difference between those who argued for the “big bang” and those who argued against it was that those who argued for the “big bang” came from fancy conferences such as the Bashan Lun “boat conference” that has figured prominently in recent debates on this period. You can see pictures of Nobel laureates like James Tobin and famous

Chinese economists like Wu Jinglian sitting on a boat next to a pool where the pool seems to be more important than the delegation. This is the world they were coming from: from catching-up on studying textbook economics and coming up with ideas of trying to create a textbook-style economy overnight that probably does not exist anywhere. On the other hand, there were the people who came out of the agricultural reforms and had this inductive, empiricist approach to economic research. They did not only go to West Germany to understand whether the “Erhard miracle” was really a thing and tried to research this on the ground instead of quoting Milton Friedman or Armin Gutowski or some of the German people who showed up in this context. They also went to Hungary and Yugoslavia to find out whether the portrayal of the visiting Eastern Europeans of this complete failure of reforms was really warranted and to study what had happened when Yugoslavia and Hungary tried to implement rapid price liberalizations in earlier reform periods. You got a division between the empirical, survey-oriented kind of research that was very much in the tradition of the socialist calculation debate and these longstanding debates in economics over the creation of an optimal economic system that are worlds apart in terms of the basic epistemology or the basic approach to research.

DR: In the book, you do a great job in uncovering and giving voice to the younger generation of reformers and intellectuals who were proponents of this inductive, experimental, and heterodox approach of doing survey-based economics. As you make clear in the book, these intellectuals argued for the dual-track price reform and against a “big bang.” Based on your book, by 1984, this argument against the “big bang” actually prevailed. However, you then move on and discuss the events in 1986 and in 1988. In both instances price liberalization as part of a “big bang” were being planned. So, the forces who were arguing for a “big bang” gained strength again and again. Could you explain why the regime actually planned to initiate a “big bang” in 1986 and in 1988 and why it cancelled it in the end?

IW: The situation in 1986 was very different from that in 1988. In 1986, Zhao Ziyang took the initiative, who by then had emerged as the most important political leader in charge of economic reform. He initially established his own political authority through the success of the agricultural reforms, and he was also involved in the early attempts at enterprise reform. The breakthrough of agricultural reform was the reason why Zhao Ziyang got that kind of weight. As a result of this, he had close ties with the relatively young economic researchers. I am consciously not calling them economists, because they were working on the economy but they were not necessarily trained as theoretical economists. These young researchers had risen not exclusively because of Zhao Ziyang; there were other important people involved. Among them was Deng Liqun, who is often portrayed as a conservative but was actually important in fostering that environ-

ment. There was an alliance between Zhao Ziyang and these heterodox people. Initially, some of them were not even party members when they started to advise the central government, which in this context was completely unorthodox.

Towards the mid-1980s, it became clear that the dual-track price system had been a powerful tool in the countryside, but also that the reforms in the countryside were no longer a simple miracle, as problems started to become apparent. Similarly, in the urban industrial economy, the problem of having very high market prices for essential goods and much lower planned prices also became apparent. The idea of having a reform approach that in one swoop of a knife cuts the Gordian knot became attractive. Of course, those who had been developing these proposals over almost a decade were continuously lobbying and engaging the political leadership. In 1986, Zhao Ziyang took the initiative to set up the so-called Programme Office. It was charged with developing a price, wage, and tax reform proposal with the aim of liberalizing some of the most important prices such as those for steel and coal. As I have tried to illustrate before, completely liberalizing the prices of peripheral goods was not the issue. The question was how to deal with the commanding heights of the economy. So, there was now the Programme Office set up to draw up a detailed step-by-step plan for the liberalization of the prices in the commanding heights.

The delegation I just mentioned went to Yugoslavia and Hungary for about six weeks with the ambition to understand what price liberalizations, not on the same scale but of a similar type in another context, would entail. And they sent back a telegram referring to János Kornai, who in this context has often been quoted as one of the intellectual fathers of the idea of a “big bang.” Kornai had in fact pointed out that if you liberalized the prices of goods priced below costs that were inputs to virtually everything in your economy, and if these prices universally shot up, then you would get cost-push inflation because market constraints of private property were not in place. This means that if one production unit faced higher inputs and was then free to set its own output prices, it would set its output prices just as high as the input prices had increased. As there was no labor market with its disciplining effect either, workers would then demand higher wages. So, as a result of this you would get a price-wage spiral that could quickly spiral out of control. Instead of having a rational price vector set by the most complicated models and most sophisticated computers of the time, you got a complete spiraling out of control of prices. Therefore, you got a substantial economic chaos which could unleash a political dynamic and undermine the reform project itself.

I do not think we can make a direct causal claim between these warnings and Zhao Ziyang’s turnaround. There were also SOE leaders involved who were cau-

tioning against this, since they were not sure whether they could hand down the price increases. From their individual perspective that was a very dangerous type of policy. So, there were more forces in the system than only the economists. In 1986, the voices and the reasoning of economists were important. In 1988, reform had in some sense ended up in some sort of deadlock, or the voices of those who thought that reforms were going too far were becoming louder and louder. At the same time, the voices of those who thought that the dual-track approach was creating a big mess were gaining more weight, because the mess was in fact increasing. And the initial period of reform where it looked like everybody was simply winning started to come to a close.

It became clear that rising prices for certain not essential but still important consumer prices did affect people's livelihood. The breaking-up of the iron rice bowl became an issue as the social brutality of marketization started to become apparent towards the late 1980s. In this context, Deng Xiaoping himself stepped up and tried to push through with reform, partially in order to rescue his own legacy, partially because he felt politically cornered after some key people had retired. My reading is that this was a deadlock that Deng Xiaoping tried to break out of. He then jumped on that same rhetoric of shock therapy by emphasizing that short-term pain was better than long-term pain. He invoked these metaphors of Lord Guan who passes through an impasse and cuts everybody who crosses his path into half, and he stated that sometimes it was important to take risks to crash through barriers and that China was ready to take risks if that is what it took.

This is a Chinese metaphor, but it is the same logic as the logic of the "big bang." In the summer of 1988, there was an announcement on state TV that comprehensive price reforms would be implemented in a context of already rising prices. It cannot be reduced to this price reform announcement, but in this broader context I have tried to sketch, this announcement triggered a panic. People started bank runs, tried to withdraw whatever savings they had accumulated over this first decade of reform, and bought whatever durable commodities they could get hold of. There is this story that people in Kunming, which is the proverbial city of spring, started buying up air conditioners which clearly indicates that, to hedge against these price rises, they just wanted to have some durable commodity instead of holding money. You even got local riots and uprisings. So, you got a big reaction to the point that the leadership decided to reverse course, which then was the beginning of the economic tightening in late 1988. This whole episode is an important context to what happened in 1989. It is not to say that we can reduce 1989 to the price reform episode in 1988, but it is important to see this clash, combined with this spiraling out of control and this massive panic reaction trig-

gered from the economic sphere, as part of the broader context for what happened in 1989.⁶

Since it is June 5 today, it is important to acknowledge that some of the people I have been interviewing for the book, who were very important in the 1980s, have lost out in the battle over interpreting the early stages of reform. Many of them were exiled, some of them were imprisoned, and some of them ended up in private business. The majority did not return into positions of influence and voice they had occupied in the 1980s. Meanwhile, those people who argued for “big bang” type policies in the 1980s and did not get their way, were quick in 1989 to turn around and blame Zhao Ziyang for messing up the reforms. Thereby, they never lost their positions of influence in the way the other group did. This is part of the reason why this fierce confrontation has not received the attention it should receive. This has to do with the sociology of who got to write books that were translated and published by MIT Press and who got to write books that were published in some small Hong Kong press without large circulation in Mainland China or in the West.

RR: You just explained how shock therapy was not carried out, and you listed some of the reasons why that was the case in 1988. There was, however, a price liberalization in 1992 and 1993, and there was a major reform of the state-owned enterprises starting in the mid-1990s which created huge unemployment. Could we say that there was some kind of “big bang” but one different from the one discussed in the 1980s?

IW: Not least as a result of the political constellation that I have just sketched, where the neoliberals and the so-called conservatives are the ones who emerged as the winners of 1989, we saw far-ranging neoliberal reforms in the 1990s. However, I think we did not see a “big bang” in the commanding heights of the economy. We saw brutal liberalizations and large-scale privatizations, but we did not see a shift to a mode of economic governance where the state regulates the commanding heights of the economy only as a policeman from the outside. Instead, we saw a situation where the state kept control over the core industries and the prices of the core industries. Only last week, we heard the news that maybe by 2030 China will be ready to liberalize the price of steel, right? This is another forty years counting from 1990. So, we did get rapid moves in the 1990s, but they did not involve the kind of “big bang” I tried to theorize it in the book. That is not to say that it was not brutal or that it was not neoliberal, but it was a different mode in terms of thinking about how to regulate the economy.

⁶ “1989” stands for the Tian’anmen Square Movement, a mass upheaval in Beijing and other urban centers between April and June 1989 (*editor’s note*).

By 1992, when Deng Xiaoping went on to the tour in the South and when Zhu Rongji, who at some point had been on a delegation to the World Bank in the 1980s, gained power, the collapse of the Soviet Union had already happened and the total economic meltdown in Russia was apparent. The human catastrophe of shock therapy in Russia is already apparent. We have to remember that the transition recession in Russia was deeper and more prolonged than the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States. Mortality shot through the sky, for instance. All of this was already happening. So even though intellectually they push towards completing reform and continued to push for shock therapy type of policies, the naive momentum of the 1980s where it was imaginable that this could work in some sense had passed. This is an important context. There was a lot of privatization, and the consequences for labor were horrifying, but the logic of grasping the big and letting go of the small [enterprises] is still an extension of the logic of what I have tried to describe for the 1980s. This is not to say that the battles of the 1990s do not matter, that there was not a huge loss of ground. These battles continue. But it is a continued battle over what counts as periphery and what counts as core of the system. This is continuing today. The fact that Goldman Sachs can engage now in the ways it engages in the Chinese financial market is another step in this precise battle. But the logic of the battle is not one of recreating this system overnight, of shocking the system from one initial state towards a target model, but it is a trench warfare type of situation.

RR: Thank you for sharing your insights and perspectives on this issue.

DR: Thank you, Isabella, for joining us. I encourage everyone to get a copy of her book and share it with colleagues and friends. It is really groundbreaking.

Reference

Weber, Isabella, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (London/New York: Routledge, 2021).

11 | The Communist Road to Capitalism in China

Presentation: Ralf Ruckus

Moderation: Kevin Lin¹

Kevin Lin (KL): Hello, and welcome to this final conversation in the Gongchao series “China and the Left. Critical Analysis and Grassroots Activism.” It is only appropriate that we have Ralf Ruckus with us in this final conversation. Ralf has done so much to make this series happen. Let me briefly introduce Ralf and his talk. Ralf has been active in social movements in Europe and Asia for decades, and he has published and translated texts on social struggles in China and elsewhere. I first met Ralf back in 2011. At the time, he had already been engaged with China and Chinese labor issues for years. He has a new book coming out in July 2021 with PM Press. The title is *The Communist Road to Capitalism. How Social Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China’s (R)evolution since 1949*. The book is very timely because we are in the year of the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which will be officially celebrated on July 1, about two weeks from now.

The book is a history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from the standpoint of the grassroots and of class struggle. For Ralf, despite the turmoil and ruptures in PRC history, one constant remained: the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The party has transformed itself repeatedly after taking power in 1949, during the socialist phase until the mid-1970s, the intermittent or transitional reform phase until the mid-1990s, and the capitalist phase since. In each phase, Ralf argues, the PRC’s development was pushed by a dynamic of social struggles from below followed by countermeasures of the CCP regime, a mix of repression, concession, cooptation, and reform. This argument is the reason why the book is so important. Ralf tells the story how capitalism emerged in the PRC not in spite of or against socialism, but because of this socialism. Without further ado, Ralf!

Ralf Ruckus (RR): Thank you, Kevin, for this kind introduction. I will take up three points you already hinted at in your short introduction. The first point is the periodization of PRC history that I use in this book; the second point is the pattern of struggles from below followed by countermeasures from above; and the third point I want to make regards the changes in the political, the economic, and the

¹ This webinar took place on June 12, 2021. The English webinar recording is available at <https://nqch.org/2021/10/16/the-communist-road-to-capitalism-in-china>. For this publication, the transcript was edited and shortened.

patriarchal system in the past seventy years. I will finish with a few remarks on conclusions and questions.

The book is meant as a political intervention into the debate on the history of the PRC—mostly the debate within the left which has intensified in the last few years. I call it a political intervention because the book is, on one hand, a historiography of social struggles, political developments, and economic crises, and, on the other hand, it is an evaluation of this revolutionary attempt of the forces behind the CCP to build a society without capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression.

How did I approach this project of understanding such a long historical phase? This is my first point, the specific periodization I use. When you look at the past seventy years of the existence of the PRC, you can see, on one hand, plenty of ruptures—crises, struggles, and campaigns. On the other hand, you can make out an important continuity: one party has been in charge throughout the whole period. This party is not just celebrating one hundred years of its existence but also its role of having been in power in this country for more than seventy years.

On the political left, we usually find three different positions how leftists characterize the essence of what the PRC was and is. According to the first position, the PRC has always been and still is socialist. This is, by the way, also the position of the current CCP leadership. The second position says that the PRC was never socialist but always capitalist. You find this in some older texts and forms of critique, for instance, by anarchists, but also in some newer texts that we can talk about later. The third position is that the PRC has been both socialist and capitalist: in the first half of its existence, it is considered as socialist, and in the second half, since the start of the reforms in the late 1970s, it then turned into capitalism.

I support a variation of the third position. There was rupture and transition, and I think it is important to acknowledge that we had two phases: a first transitional phase between the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and 1955/56 when the planned economy was actually constructed and working; and a second transitional phase from the start of the reforms in the late 1970s until the mid-1990s with the transition to capitalism. So, for me there are four phases or periods: transition, socialism, transition, capitalism. The book follows these periods, with one chapter on each, and each chapter is divided into several sub-chapters.

My second point is a central observation I made during the study and research for this book. During the three main periods, that is, socialism, transition to capitalism, and capitalism, we can see a similar pattern of struggles from below that took different forms followed by countermeasures from above by the CCP regime.

The pattern can be summarized in the following way. At the beginning of each period, we see a major social upheaval, a movement of workers, peasants, or students, and then the regime reacted to these upheavals with countermeasures. These countermeasures were a mix of repression, which was dominant in many ways, repeated concessions to the demands of the struggles, and also cooptation of people involved or of topics raised in the struggles. This was usually followed by larger reform efforts. These countermeasures and reforms then contributed to the development of a second large upheaval which was then followed by another mix of countermeasures and reforms. So, in every period—socialism, transition, and capitalism—I make out two cycles of struggles and countermeasures.

I will not go through all three periods now because that would take too long. I will just talk about the socialist period to make this point clearer. Right after the establishment of the planned economy we see a first wave of labor unrest and regime critique in the mid-1950s, before and during the so-called Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956 and 1957. The regime reacted with concessions at the beginning but then retaliated with harsh repression which was, at first, part of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957. In 1958, the regime started a large reform, the Great Leap Forward, which failed in many ways. This was followed by another reform and intensified leadership conflicts in the early 1960s.

The second wave of major struggles took place during the Cultural Revolution, in the form of labor unrest of particular groups—struggles the regime called “economist”—and resistance of the rebel movement. The regime, again, reacted with certain concessions at the time, and some of the rebel leaders were coopted and integrated into the party leadership. This was accompanied by the harsh repression of “economism” and of a large part of the rebel movement by the CCP leadership which also employed the army. This was followed by new reform efforts in the early 1970s, a kind of consolidation, and the attempt to carry out the so-called Four Modernizations. That failed, at first, but soon afterwards the socialist period ended with the death of two major leaders, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, in 1976, and with the coup against the so-called Gang of Four in the same year.

The next period, the transition, began like the previous socialist and the following capitalist period, with a wave of major struggles. In this case, it began with labor unrest and the so-called democracy movements starting in the mid-1970s and continuing in the late 1970s.

This was a short run through one of the three main periods. In the book, I obviously, discuss this in much more in detail and follow the chronology of events. In my view, the PRC’s historical trajectory was pushed by this dynamic of struggles from below followed by countermeasures from above. Obviously,

this dynamic does not explain all the developments in the PRC. That is why, in the book, I also trace other major factors, for instance, the changing position and role of the PRC in the global system of nation states and the PRC's relations to other socialist countries like the Soviet Union and later to the United States. I also look at the establishment and transformation of the new socialist ruling class as well as conflicts and faction-building within the CCP leadership in each period.

Now, I come to my third point. The pattern of struggles and countermeasures serves as a historical matrix for the book. I look at changes in the political, the economic, and the patriarchal system during the different periods. I will not go much deeper into this as we can discuss it later, so for now just this much: first, the political system was transformed after 1949, when the CCP established a so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat." State institutions and practices were introduced, developed, and later adapted over time. The CCP and the reconfigured authoritarian state survived all ruptures and changes.

Second, the economic system was changed profoundly in the early 1950s, with the land reform, and later collectivization, the nationalization of industries, and the implementation of the planned economy. However, new forms of inequality and class divisions were established with the consolidation of the socialist system. They formed the base not just for the repeated waves of struggles I described, but also for the marketization and the transition to capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Third, the patriarchal system was changed after liberation in 1949 when the legal position of women* in the PRC was strengthened and women* increasingly entered waged labor. However, soon it became clear that the improvements for women* were limited. For instance, women* were still systematically discriminated in rural collectives and urban work units, and they still had to do most reproductive labor—until today, actually. In the transitional and in the capitalist period, women* faced new attacks, such as the One-Child Policy and the sexist division of labor for migrant women* in urban factories or service industries. In each period, women* and feminist movements resisted the attacks on women*'s conditions, but they also faced serious backlashes several times—most recently in the form of reactionary gender policies promoted by the current CCP regime and in the form of its attacks on feminist activism.

Let me make just a few final remarks to wrap this up. The main part of the book provides a concise historical narrative of the developments in the PRC, especially of workers', peasants', migrants', and women*'s struggles under socialism as well as under capitalism. In the conclusions, I discuss several questions. I want to mention two of them here. The first question is: can we envision fundamental revolutionary change in the PRC? Many of us will probably laugh and

say, “No, of course, we cannot!” This makes sense, as the current situation of social movements and left-wing organizing in China is, indeed, difficult. However, in my view, the CCP regime is not as stable as it wants us to believe. In addition, the global crisis and instability in general offer more opportunities for movements from below compared to situations in which the capitalist world-system is rather stable. What is more, new cycles of social upheaval often occur when the political left does not expect them at all—as it was the case in the mid-1960s and the late 2000s.

A second question in the conclusions is: What shall we do while waiting for such a new cycle of struggles or a revolutionary situation? Obviously, we should analyze the situation and support social movements and left-wing organizing processes from below in China and elsewhere. That is what a lot of us already do. In my view, we should also use the time to learn from the experiences of earlier struggles and revolutionary attempts, like in the PRC, for the sake of refining a new left-wing strategy that avoids past mistakes. This strategy should take into account not just the limitations of these previous attempts—like class divisions, nationalism, gender discrimination, environmental destruction, all evident in the case of CCP rule in China. It should also consider the more recent experiences of social struggles elsewhere in the world that attacked some of these limitations—for instance, by trying to act globally, to establish forms of grassroots democracy in movements, and to take on capitalist exploitation, state repression, and all forms of discrimination at the same time.

I hope my book can contribute to these discussions on left-wing practices and strategies—strategies that can help facilitate a new cycle of struggles in the PRC and elsewhere. Such a cycle will hopefully be able to finish the revolutionary project that the CCP in very early stages of its existence might have anticipated but later abandoned.

KL: Thank you, Ralf, for giving a very concise overview of your argument and the book itself and for posing some very sharp political questions. As you said, this book is very much a political intervention. I remember you telling me a long time ago, that you purposely chose not to work in academia. Instead, you have been engaged intensively in political activities. So, I think it is appropriate to ask you, how your own political background and trajectory, your interest and concern, shaped and informed this book and your other writings.

RR: Since you ask, why I did not choose an academic career, let me first say that I attended university as a student in the 1980s. I came out of the radical social movements of the early 1980s, and, in my circles, it was, actually, not accepted at all to take an academic route. It also made no sense at the time, because we thought we would make revolution. Why would we go to university and teach

there if the main purpose of what we were doing was to take our political project right to the end? In some sense, I was lucky that I could experience this radical mobilization in my youth that shaped my life but also the lives of others around me. I cannot think of anyone from the days back then who ended up in academia, actually. Obviously, that changed later.

Several influences shaped my thinking and practice, starting with debates that came out of the 1960s and 1970s when revolutionary hope existed and was discussed broadly. This includes the critique of the state, that was also directed against the Marxist-Leninist currents at the time, and the critique of the capitalist political economy. To get into the latter was new to my early political circles. Many people were more interested in subcultural activity while some of us started reading Marx's *Capital* and critiques of that. Over the years, I was very much influenced by more global perspectives. That began a long time ago and intensified when I and others translated Beverly Silver's book *Forces of Labor* into German and discussed more what we could call the "workerist" part of the world-system approach.² Another strong influence came from the feminist debates since the 1980s.

I want to mention another thing. I grew up in West-Germany, but I had contacts to radical left-wing groups in East-Germany and later in Poland. All that had a strong influence on me, just like the experiences that I made or that I learned about in China—experiences of what actually existing socialism was like and what it meant for ordinary people, workers, women*, and also for left-wing activists or organizers.

KL: You said you lived in East-Germany and in Poland, and you are still engaged in solidarity work with the labor movement in Poland. How do you make the connections between the different parts of your activism in Germany, in Poland, and in China?

RR: Answering this question is rather difficult. What I do is rather an improvised way of integrating different activities. Before I started engaging in research and activism around China in the early 2000s, I had lived in half a dozen other countries. I learned from different left-wing groups, different views, concepts, and strategies for change. I tried to overcome a division many left-wing activists make between, on one hand, the job or work done for money, i.e., the stuff done to survive, and, on the other hand, political activity. I worked in construction, in call centers, factories, in different jobs, and, together with others in the political groups I was part of at the time, I intervened in these work places, connected to

² Silver, Beverly. *Forces of Labor. Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

other workers, tried to organized debates and resistance together with other workers while we learned from them. We discussed that as a practice that has its origins in the Italian *conricerca*, which is usually translated as “militant inquiry” in English.

In China, I could not do that, because as a white person and foreigner it is difficult to work in proletarian jobs. So, I had to change my strategy and focus on interviews and debates with workers and activists who did what I would have liked to do: work in factories, for instance, and start to engage with workers. I also concentrated on translating books, oral accounts, and other reports of workers, comrades, left-wing activists, and left-wing academics from China. This included books on the situation in Foxconn plants, on the situation of *dagongmei*, i.e., female migrant workers in world-market factories, and on similar issues.³

Apart from the activity around China, in the last few years, I have been involved in supporting the attempt of Amazon workers from Poland, Germany, France, and other countries to organize across borders and combine struggles.⁴

KL: Why did you write and publish the book right at this moment? And what is different about your book in comparison to, for instance, Maurice Meisner’s *Mao’s China and After* that has become a standard history of the PRC?

RR: There is a range of interesting books: Meisner’s book or Jackie Sheehan’s *Chinese Workers*. There are also more recent books I consider important, such as Joel Andreas’s *Disenfranchised*.⁵ I do not see my book in competition to these books. I see it as an intervention, as I said earlier, as a particular interpretation of PRC history that I would like to discuss with people from Greater China and elsewhere. Parts of the left are confused about what is going on in the PRC and about how to confront or act upon what the CCP regime is doing. What shall we think and do about the repression of feminists or of labor activists, for instance? The book gives a different view, a different perspective.

I did not write the book for China experts but for people who have little access to the material I use and the debate as a whole, people who want to learn what has happened in the PRC in the past seventy years from someone who has

³ The list of books Ralf Ruckus has translated and published can be found at the end of this transcript.

⁴ For an early report, please, see Ruckus, Ralf, “Confronting Amazon.” *Jacobin*, March 31, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/3d48t8zf>. More on the cross-border organizing attempt of Amazon workers can be found at <https://amworkers.wordpress.com>.

⁵ Meisner, Maurice, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic*. 3rd edition (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Sheehan, Jackie, *Chinese Workers: A New History* (London: Routledge, 1998); Andreas, Joel, *Disenfranchised. The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

been involved in this debate and has a particular left-wing perspective on this history.

KL: That flows nicely to the question about periodization. You look at four periods. Could you explain how you came up with those? And how far is the periodization you carved out unique to the history of the PRC? Can we find the recurrent pattern of struggles, countermeasures, and reform in other contexts or other countries?

RR: I started reading and writing about particular periods at first, without any idea of a strict periodization but rather with the aim to understand particular phases of struggles and reactions. The matrix in the book, the table that shows the periods and the dynamic of struggle and countermeasures, was something I sketched out after most of the chapters had already been written.

And on the second question: I have been thinking about whether we can see this pattern in other countries. Yes, I think we do, but I am not saying history is always working this way. In retrospect, history often sounds logic, and we make out such patterns, but that does not mean that China's development will continue in this way. It might, and it might not. Making out patterns just helps to understand what happened in the past—and maybe it helps us to be better prepared for the future.

KL: One aspect of this is that the periodization coincides with warfare capitalism, the period of WWII, and the neoliberal period in Western Europe and North America. To what extent do you see this pattern and the cycles of struggle and state responses in the PRC as part of a global history?

RR: Developments outside the PRC had a great impact on developments inside the PRC, for instance, developments in the socialist world, such as the support from the Soviet Union in the 1950s, or developments of global capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s. The anti-colonial debates and struggles were reflected in the PRC, both inside the Communist Party and among rebel groups during the Cultural Revolution. We can see connections and influences both ways, on movements in the PRC and on the anti-colonial movements that reflected on Maoism, for instance. It is interesting, though, that Arif Dirlik once said that the movement in 1968 that occurred in many countries was not that important for China. However, the Cultural Revolution in China was important for many movements elsewhere.⁶

Of course, the end of the socialist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the shock therapy we discussed last week during the event with Isabella

⁶ Dirlik, Arif, "The Third World," in *1968: The World Transformed*, edited by Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 293.

Weber, played a major role for the changes in the PRC.⁷ In addition, I think it is important to see that the transformation and the transition to capitalism was not the result of a big plan, in the way that the CCP leadership thought about it and then went ahead. It was a gradual change and slow development, and it only worked out as it did because global capitalism was at a point where capitalists in the Global North were looking for new sources of labor. In the 1970s and 1980s, they first went to the so-called Tiger States in East Asia and to Latin America. And then, in the 1990s, global capital tapped into the rural labor force the CCP regime willingly offered to them for exploitation. These were the migrant workers who became the largest working class and stood behind the “factory of the world” and, therefore, the “rise” of China. So, the development of the PRC and of global capitalism were closely connected.

KL: In the book, you write about the period from 1949 until the mid-1950s as the build-up of socialism and the period from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s as Chinese socialism. Then you lay out the different characterizations leftists make use of to describe the system. They called it socialism or state socialism or state capitalism or some other form of capitalism. Could you explain why you chose “socialism” to describe the period and not “state socialism” or some other term?

RR: The decision for using a certain term for the early period was rather pragmatic. Recently, Karl Gerth published a book focusing on the commodity markets and consumption in the early stages of the PRC. Gerth insists that it was capitalism.⁸ It is an interesting book, but I do not agree with the decision to simply call that period capitalist. In my view, it is important to mark the differences of the particular system that was developed in the PRC in the 1950s and existed for about twenty years before it was transformed decisively.

I want to encourage everyone to also not talk about *the* socialism or *the* capitalism but to use the plural: socialisms and capitalisms. For instance, Tobias ten Brink does the latter in his description of current PRC capitalism.⁹ In my view, from the 1950s to the 1970s, there was a particular form of actual existing socialism which was different in many aspects from capitalism. Still, I acknowledge there are aspects of that specific PRC socialism that also feature in capitalist economies. For this reason, it was fairly easy to gradually transform the PRC form of socialism into a system that I call capitalist.

⁷ See the transcript of the event with Isabella Weber in this volume.

⁸ Gerth, Karl, *Unending Capitalism. How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁹ ten Brink, Tobias, *Chinas Kapitalismus: Entstehung, Verlauf, Paradoxien* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013).

PRC capitalism as it developed in the 1990s and later is, to say that again, not the same capitalism that we see in the U.S., for instance. A long tradition exists of comparing the Soviet Union and Eastern European type socialism with the PRC model and of highlighting the differences. The same works for different types of capitalism, for instance, the specific German type of capitalism, the Polish type, or the U.S. type of capitalism. We should be careful not to use just one category and make sure we talk about differences as well.

Things get more complex when we talk about the role of the working class and the question how the working class viewed the transition. During the phase of socialism, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, there was not just one homogeneous working class but a working class that was in many ways divided. I like Joel Andreas's recent book *Disenfranchised*, but there is one thing I want to mention: Joel describes the changing situation mostly of workers in larger state-run enterprises. As the socialist working class and a minority, they were rather privileged. Eighty percent of people in the PRC were still living on the countryside, and even within the cities not all workers got the full welfare package. There was not *the* one urban working class but different working classes or a complex class composition.

We also have to see who was involved in those struggles in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s I describe in the book, and who had an interest in preserving the socialist structures and who did not. Certain workers who had privileges defended their conditions, their permanent jobs, and their welfare provisions. Other workers had never reached the status some workers in the larger state-run industries had. They were more inclined to welcome reforms and put hope in changes. Similar things can be said about some parts of the peasantry.

KL: During the transition to capitalism in the 1990s, there was militant state workers' resistance against privatization, lay-offs, and factory closures. I am wondering, how do you look at the way in which the working classes in the 1980s and 1990s responded to the transition. And how do people in the PRC remember that today?

RR: We have to consider that even people who are in their 30s now do not have the experience of what historical socialism or actually existing socialism was about. It is the same in Germany, Poland, or other eastern European countries. Everyone who is fifty or older remembers and has a particular position on the socialist period. That can be either nostalgia or anger and the feeling that socialism as it existed was also exploitative and authoritarian.

In the PRC in the 1990s and 2000s, we saw the rise of neo-Maoist tendencies and groups. Since then, some of them have developed a strong critique of the market reforms and see the CCP regime as capitalist or even as right-wing. Some

of them have to be more careful recently because the regime increased repression of left-wing groups. The fact that people rediscovered or newly emphasized Maoist thoughts on class struggle, a critique of capitalism, and also of certain forms of CCP rule under socialism, is important. Around 2010, there was a generational hand-over among them. Before, the Maoist debates were dominated by people who came out of Cultural Revolution rebel groups and had been part of other mobilizations in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of them had also been involved in the struggles of the late 1980s and in those in the state-run enterprises in the late 1990s.

Around 2010, a generation of young activists, influenced again by Maoism, took over. Their analyzes and practices focus on the rise of the new migrant working class. 2010 was the climax of migrant workers' struggles. Young activists started working in factories because they wanted to be involved in these struggles. I have had many debates on the way they see socialism. In my view, their perspective is often twisted. They idealize what Mao and the rebel factions during the Cultural Revolution were about and what the character of the socialist system was, but that is another story.

KL: Let us develop that point further, because the second part of the last question also relates to what the alternative is. The Maoist students have been very interested in reassessing or looking at the Mao era, the socialist era. Do you think that bears some fruit? Or is it a pretty marginal phenomenon, confined to small groups of Maoist students, activists, or intellectuals?

RR: It is very difficult in the PRC to organize such political debates and include a lot of people, also new people, because of the repression of this kind of political activity. So, this is hard to say. My experience is that when you talk to workers, young people, or students in the PRC, many of them are aware of the contemporary problems in Chinese capitalism. That ranges from economic problems to repression, and gender politics, for instance, the way the state tries to tell women* what to do and how to live. People are aware of these things. That does not mean they necessarily think that the CCP is responsible for all of this. A lot of people would rather criticize the boss of the company they work for or the local government.

Regarding left-wing activists, Maoism is the dominant left-wing tradition among them. There are other traditions, like anarchism, which was important one hundred years ago, Trotskyism, and influences that came out of the movements of the 1960s in other countries, but in terms of texts and sources and older comrades to refer to, Maoism is dominant.

For us who come from other political backgrounds and have a critique of what Maoism was about and how it shaped that particular form of socialism, it is

important to stay open to debates about it and to encourage people to do their own research and question the Maoist narratives themselves.

In the radical or not so radical left outside the PRC, some tendencies still consider the PRC socialist and support the CCP regime for different reasons. With these younger, grassroots Maoist circles in the PRC, I usually have no problem finding common grounds when criticizing the regime as capitalist. We might have difficulties and problems regarding nationalist tendencies or the importance of discussions on patriarchy and other issues. But in terms of agreeing on the class struggle of workers against capitalist exploitation we usually find common ground.

KL: Let us take the conversation to the latest period from the mid-1990s until now that you describe in the book as capitalist. What makes you use that term?

RR: The first book I translated from Chinese is one published by Pun Ngai (Pan Yi) and Li Wanwei in the early 2000s. It describes the fate of the *dagongmei* (young female factory workers) and uses their *koushu* or oral history telling. They interviewed dozens of female migrant workers on their experiences. A young migrant worker said: “In lower middle school we read some stuff on Marxist theory. When the teachers explained the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production in the capitalist society, they also talked about the inhumane exploitation of workers. At the time, we did not understand that. Then I came to Shenzhen in order to work here. From then on, I began to understand how capitalists suppress and exploit the workers.”¹⁰

The main aspect we should consider when we describe the current situation in the PRC is the experience of these workers, of women*, and of other groups, their daily lives and their social relations. Migrant workers have to work long hours. They face exploitation, a hierarchical labor system, and a gendered division of labor. This is what they describe when you ask them about their experience and what they write in their stories.

This was in the mid-2000s, and since then I never had any doubts that this is a capitalist system. Having said that, obviously, we have to acknowledge that the form of capitalism or the form the capitalist class took is different from the forms in other parts of the world. That concerns, for instance, the role of the state and the way it intervenes in the economy or controls a large part of the financial sector and the currency without fully opening up to global financial markets. That might happen in the future but it has not happened so far. The way the state controls

¹⁰ Pun Ngai and Li Wanwei, *dagongmei: Arbeiterinnen aus Chinas Weltmarktfabriken erzählen*. Translated and published by Ralf Ruckus (Berlin/Hamburg: Assoziation A, 2008), p. 149.

parts of the private capitalist class, as we have seen in recent years, is also important.

Still, that does not mean this is not capitalism. For me, state-ownership itself is not a sign of socialism and definitely not one of a socialism that promises to lead us into a society beyond exploitation and repression. And for me this is still the aim. Capitalism as a global system, as it is in Europe and in other parts of the world, as it is in China as well, needs to be overcome. It produces a lot of suffering and many problems for workers, for women*, and for other oppressed.

We need to organize and overcome it without going back to the model we saw in the Soviet Union and in the PRC. We need a different form that is actually in the hands of the people themselves. In my understanding, socialism in the PRC was never a workers' state or a workers' society, it was a society under the control of the CCP and the CCP leadership.

When discussing with left-wing activists from China, this is not something we argue about. I have not met anyone who wants to go back to exactly that type of regime. There has to be a form of grassroots democracy with grassroots control over all aspects of the society, including the economic, the social, and the political.

KL: You said that despite all these changes, turmoil, and ruptures, one thing that has remained is that the CCP is still in power. What transformations have been instrumental in maintaining the regime throughout the last seventy years and in maintaining the party for over one hundred years?

RR: First of all, the historical trajectory could have gone different ways. The CCP leadership faced its end several times, especially during the Cultural Revolution and during the movement in 1989. If people had taken different decisions, if the army had not been prepared to step in and rescue the rule of the CCP twice in the late 1960s and in the late 1980s, then things could have taken a different course. At times, forces within the party had different concepts and were fighting each other. Depending on whether a different faction or part of the leadership had prevailed, the CCP or the PRC could have gone into a different direction.

One thing you hint at and that I consider very important is that at certain times the CCP leadership did develop a way to reconfigure itself, to refine its strategies in an experimental way, and to "learn from practice." This way it could gradually transform the system as it was and make it more stable. The flexibility the CCP showed contradicts with all the corruption and nepotism. Still, the party found a way to react to challenges and use historical opportunities which were both created by developments of global capital I mentioned earlier, by the global crisis in 2008, and also by global instability today.

Whether the party leadership is still that flexible and will continue to be, I do not know. The tendency to even more authoritarian, centralized forms of governance in the last few years under Xi Jinping gives evidence that something has changed and that the party might lose capabilities. The factional strife within the party leadership was also a way to wage different strategies and be able to decide for the one that would be most appropriate to face certain challenges. After all, there are elements of crisis within China's economy, like bubbles, imbalances, and dependencies. And, last but not least, there is a lot of anger among different parts of the working classes because they expected further improvements and are still waiting to actually get them.

KL: There have been moments, as you also highlight in the book, where things could have gone different ways. But another thing has not changed, and that is the ideological insistence on some form of Marxism. Why do you think the CCP publicly insists on following Marxism even though, I guess, few people take this version of Marxism seriously.

RR: That is an amazing point: the party takes it seriously! We have to acknowledge that the political concepts developed in the 1950s and 1960s were based on an understanding of Marxism-Leninism as a concept of class struggle. In fact, the way the CCP used it at the time needs our critical reflection. The big change came in the 1980s, though, when CCP leaders gave up that part of their own political concepts and switched to an understanding of "social layers" as used by Max Weber, and of the integration of society. They kept certain aspects of Marxism, but the CCP leadership understands Marxism as some kind of science it can use for directing the economy and the society.

I heard a funny story from a comrade in Hong Kong. A leftist friend of his went to a conference on Marxism in the PRC where mainland scholars close to CCP positions debated Marxism. One of the CCP-type Marxist scholars turned to that friend and said something like: "I heard that in the West they still think that Marxism is a theory of class struggle. That is kind of backward, we are beyond that." So, we have to acknowledge that the CCP leaders use Marx and celebrate his birthday. However, their type of Marxism is different from what most people on the left, including leftists in the PRC, consider a revolutionary theory or practice based on what Marx wrote and did. But let us take it seriously! They use it for their own purpose and they use it for promoting their CCP model of how to govern a society and run an economy.

KL: In the European context, what kind of confusion have you encountered when people on the left think about China?

RR: Let us look at what changed in the past twenty years. When I started focusing on China in the early 2000s, my main problem was that outside China many

people did not recognize the social struggles there. Many thought Chinese workers were all obedient, and some shared that sexist image of “small Chinese women toiling away in the factories and not resisting at all.” My main task at that time was to underline that there were more strikes in the PRC than in any other place and that there is a long tradition of resistance, of uprisings, of undermining the rule of the dominant classes. That was an important discussion in the 2000s.

Today the conflict lies elsewhere. After all the changes in the world and the rise of China as a competitor of the U.S. dominated capitalist core countries, as a competitor for world hegemony even, you see a tendency within the left of people who criticize and attack U.S. imperialism, and rightly so, but who misinterpret the PRC as a kind of counterweight. That reminds me of debates in the 1980s and before, with similar arguments on the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Some people supported the Soviet Union because they saw it as a force against U.S.-imperialism while ignoring the struggles from below there—left-wing protests, struggles for liberation, against exploitation, and for improvements. The regime in the Soviet Union organized crackdowns against these struggles, just like today’s CCP.

For me, for you, and for others, this is alienating. What shall I tell comrades in China? Something like: “You will not get any support because it is more important to fight U.S. imperialism”? That makes no sense. I think it is important to stay focused and take a grassroots perspective on struggles of workers, women*, feminists, and of other social movements like that of environmentalists. It is important to support these struggles in a way that envisions crossing borders between countries, borders between people with different political backgrounds, and that also envisions global class struggle and revolutionary change.

KL: After having looked at PRC history from this grassroots and class struggle perspective, what are lessons for today, for activists who are watching social movements and grassroots activism in China and want to support them?

RR: The first lesson is to question the mainstream and dominant narratives on what happened in actually existing socialism and what happens today. That includes narratives among the left that focus on isolated human rights debates and ignore capitalist exploitation or patriarchal oppression.

Another thing is that, when looking more closely at the revolutionary attempt, we have to acknowledge that, in the early phase, the CCP and many people who supported the CCP had this vision of revolutionary change. So, what went wrong? Just to give an example: the CCP regime ran the work units, the enterprises, with the so-called “one-man regiment” copied from the Soviet or Stalinist model; then it introduced some kind of co-management of workers that did not really work and never led to the handing-over of the control over production to the workers.

Obviously, there is no point to come up with an idealized picture of what could have been or what could happen in the future. We need to stay focused on today's movements. At the moment, we live through a difficult time, not just in China but also in other regions. But, ten years ago, we had a cycle of struggles, and before the pandemic there was another beginning of a global cycle of struggles. Who knows what would have happened with that without the Covid-19 pandemic? Let us combine the historical analysis of socialism with an analysis of these more recent experiences, and let us bring in the Chinese comrades and their experiences as well. Then we can come up with some kind of global perspective for revolutionary change.

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Afterword: Reflections on Positionality, Representation, and Practical Solidarity

Ralf Ruckus, Kevin Lin, Jule Pfeffer, and Daniel Reineke

This afterword is an outcome of several roundtable discussions among the editorial collective that took place in 2021 and 2022. We reflected on our roles with regards to movements and grassroots activism in China, and we shared our thoughts and experiences on the issue of practical solidarity. What do we understand by this term? What kind of practices have we been engaged in and why? What can we learn about cross-border solidarity from the texts collected in this volume? What kind of challenges arise in relation to issues of positionality and representation? More often than not we did not have clear-cut answers but generated new questions which call for a continuation of the discussions gathered in this book.

I. On positionality, representation, and translation

Kevin Lin (KL): We all started to engage with grassroots activism in China at different points in time, probably not entirely for the same reasons and from different personal and political backgrounds. Given all this, let us begin our conversation with the following question. How do you see your role(s) in relating to what is happening in China, especially around the issues and movements you are interested in?

Daniel Reineke (DR): Beyond my work as an academic at the university, I have seen my role in writing and organizing discussions about social relations in China first and foremost as a translator. That is also where the past years' translation projects—such as the books on migrant labor and on Foxconn or the German translation of open letters by temporary auto workers at FAW-VW in China—and our webinars overlap.¹ They all try to create space for perspectives from within China and from other parts of the world that might be overlooked because of language barriers or because the dominant discourse does not give them space to be heard. For me, the practice of translation is very important to create that space.

¹ See <https://www.gongchao.org/de/aufbruch-buch>; <https://www.gongchao.org/de/slaves-buch>; <https://tinyurl.com/whpufr4a>.

Some of us here started to work on these issues about fifteen years ago in a very different discursive environment, prior to the current geopolitical escalation which tends to obfuscate class relations. At that time, there was arguably more space in the China-related public discourse for subaltern actors—migrant workers and feminist activists, for instance. However, they were mainly portrayed as victims of the authoritarian state, victims working in sweatshops and producing “Made in China”- products. A key motivation for me to engage in translation is to help present another perspective, a class-based perspective that puts the agency of those actors at the center, and that shows that this victim narrative is neither correct nor helpful to political understanding.

In order for us to not succumb to paternalist positions or the position of an outsider explaining what is going on in China, it is important that we keep, cultivate, and enlarge our connections with activists within China.

Jule Pfeffer (JP): I think, reflecting on one’s own position is critical when engaging with China. I am a white woman and I am privileged enough to be able to travel to other countries, stay there, and leave whenever I want to. Sometimes I hesitate when expressing my opinion on China. I do not intend to talk about or over people and, even worse, to enrich myself by calling myself a China expert or writing books where I reproduce stereotypes about “the Chinese” from an outsider position. Like Daniel, I want to stress the importance of translation, instead. Translation helps us to get in touch with people, with their experience.

I try to communicate the voices of other women who have more knowledge than I do. I try to spread their word so people can listen to them, especially people in German or European leftist audiences. In doing so, I try to deal with political structures around me as sensitively as possible.

Ralf Ruckus (RR): I got involved in left-wing politics in Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The 1970s were dominated by hierarchical communist groupings who tried to “educate” the working class. Some of us criticized that approach and advocated to do politics “in the first person” in the 1980s. That meant not having anyone representing you and not representing anyone else either. When you heard about a conflict or a struggle you would first go to the people involved and ask them what they think. You could tell them what you think, but it was up to them to decide what they wanted to do.

When I started visiting China in the mid-2000s, I did so as a left-wing activist and wage worker who wants to change the situation and abolish exploitation and discrimination. When I met workers from Foxconn electronics factories, for instance, who were mostly female rural migrants at the time, they did not see me as a journalist or academic who was just interested in writing an article or a paper. Still, these and other migrant workers and most left-wing activists from China

were only speaking or writing in Chinese and had difficulties travelling abroad, for various reasons: money, visa, family, jobs, and more.

So, for me, the question has been how people in other parts of the world can learn from workers' or women*'s struggles and experiences in China. There must be translation, not just in the sense of the translation of the language but also in the sense of including different positions, thoughts, or desires to debates in other parts of the world. That is why I have spent about a decade to translate or help to translate pamphlets, articles, and books written by workers, activists, or left-wing academics on social struggles in China from Chinese and English into several other languages. Most of that is available on gongchao.org.

DR: Kevin, how do you perceive your role in relation to grassroots activism in China? What relevance does the practice of translation have for you?

KL: One of the first things I did when I became interested in Chinese labor was also translation. I was studying outside of China at the time, and I volunteered for a project, the China Labor News Translation, which translated news and stories about Chinese labor from Chinese to English. We would collectively identify articles that shed light on labor conditions and resistance and then add the context and analysis to the translated text.

I should note that this was in the late 2000s when news and analysis about Chinese workers was rare in English, while global interest in Chinese workers was rising. Our goal was to bring these stories to a global audience, especially to those in the trade union movements but also labor researchers and students. Whenever we could, we translated texts written by Chinese workers and activists. We had a large mailing list and several dedicated volunteer translators. Some of them were themselves already seasoned activists or played important roles in supporting Chinese workers. As time went on, there were more writings and better news coverage in the international media, so our translation work became less necessary. Nevertheless, I have continued to translate materials in both directions, sometimes in collaboration with others.

Around 2010, when more labor struggles by migrant workers erupted in China, a new generation of students and researchers emerged who were from China, did research in China, and wrote about it in both Chinese and English. Prior to that, the writings on Chinese labor in English were written predominantly by researchers from Hong Kong, Australia, the U.S., and the UK. With the eruption of labor strikes around and after 2010, you began to see more people from mainland China taking a keen interest in labor issues. This brought about a Chinese perspective that is both richer due to more consistent engagement in the field but is also constrained in some respects by censorship.

Of course, none of us were workers, and we were not unaware of the distance between ourselves as students and the experience of workers. But looking back there was still too much treating workers as research subjects. I think what led to a fundamental change in this regard is that Chinese workers' own direct strike actions compelled all of us to center workers' perspectives and experiences as opposed to us speaking on their behalf. Over the years, people also tried to rectify the situation by inviting Chinese workers and activists to give talks in and outside of China. This has become much more difficult even prior to the pandemic.

II. Rethinking practical solidarity

DR: As several talks and discussions in this book demonstrate, the current moment in China is characterized by a significantly increased level of state repression. What impact does that have for practicing solidarity? What are potential risks of solidarity work? And what kind of solidarity actions were successful in the past and might still work today?

KL: I am really interested in these questions because I am often at a loss at what to do practically when there is a need or a direct call for international solidarity. We have a few default things that we do, such as petitions and statements, talks, and media outreaches. It is helpful to acknowledge that we do not always know to what extent these actions support the people we want to support. I used to ask people who are experienced in doing solidarity work, and their response is that it always helps. But when I pressed to ask exactly how it helps, I did not always get very responses. I used to get frustrated, but I now also understand how such solidarity work can help often in unexpected ways that we do not necessary anticipate and often do not directly see.

Over the years, I also recognized that there is an aspect of moral support that is important regardless of actual effect. Because it is intrinsically valuable for people to know they have not been forgotten and people are actively supporting them. It is important to acknowledge we are in a very weak position today. But that does not mean we cannot and should not engage in solidarity actions whenever we can. It can take on so many creative forms, too, as I learned from others. But without an honest reckoning about just how much it takes to build power, we will be doing actions out of habits or fall into despair when we do not see immediate results.

DR: Thank you, Kevin. It is difficult to say whether a certain solidarity action has been effective or not. I am thinking here mainly about instances of repression against particular activists or in response to strikes and public protests. For instance, in the case of the arrest of the Feminist Five in 2015, a number of inter-

national statements were written in reaction to it. We saw similar statements in the case of the repression against delivery riders in 2021. It is hard to gauge the effects of such statements and to understand what type of actions do have an effect and which ones do not.

Another challenge in relation to such cases is to create or maintain channels of communication. Key questions in cases of repression are: do the people affected actually a) want the case to be made public; b) do they like who made it public; and c) do they support the form of solidarity action taken. These questions are oftentimes not decided upon in direct exchange with those targeted by repression. You then need to rely on second-hand information, people “in-between” who are related to the person or maybe close friends who presumably try to convey information in both directions. I find that very difficult since there are also cases in which some of the people “in-between” would say, “yes, it should be made public,” while others disagree.

JP: I agree with Daniel. It is important to find the line of what people want to have communicated outside and what not. We had one incident in our political group in Germany when we worked together with another group. Our group included people with an East Asian background, and the other group wanted them to talk about anti-Asian racism in Germany. That is not our main topic, and we told them that we can recommend other groups who were more competent to talk about that issue. We had the impression that they wanted to have a person from East Asia as a token to comment on racism. It is important to communicate carefully and not simplify or use people for certain statements or issues.

It is not appropriate to put people on a stage for the sake of representation, without asking whether these people want to have this stage. At the same time, in the German left we do need to bring more people of color into debates or onto panels as well as more women and more FLINTA people who share their opinions and, if they want to, their experiences.² That is still not happening enough.

RR: Many years ago, I gave a talk in Delhi, India, on the situation of workers in China. I spoke to migrant workers from other regions in India who worked for a U.S. company in Delhi and had been on strike. We talked about solidarity and how people in other countries could support them. They said, if they are in a struggle or on strike then others in Europe or the U.S. could support them, as long as they were still in control. They are the ones who lead the struggle and the others would support them. But if they were not in a struggle and then others

² FLINTA is a term for people who do not identify as cis-men. It stands for female, lesbian, intersexual, nonbinary, trans, and agender.

started doing something to support them, the relation would change as the workers would not keep the initiative.

The point is, if we have or create direct links to workers who are exploited in jobs along the global supply chain, we can help to amplify and let their voices be heard. We can help them to speak out for themselves. We can help them to make their struggles visible. But if we do not have any connections or if we represent them without respect, without acknowledging their narrative, or without them being in control, then it is paternalism. The “good” people from Europe help the “poor” people over there.

That takes me to another point. I think, the term solidarity as such also needs to be thought through again. Most of what you just mentioned regards supporting prisoners or people who are accused of legal offenses, for instance. In the case of a strike, we might have to do different things than in the case of someone being attacked in the media or in case someone is in prison. Some things are trivial. For instance, people might need money or a lawyer or other forms of material support. I guess, we agree on that type of support. People who have access to all that should organize and provide it. It gets more complicated when we talk about political support, like in the case of the workers in Delhi who needed political pressure on the company in the U.S. Or if we talk about how to organize solidarity struggles, such as when some workers go on strike and then other workers go on strike in order to support the first strike.

I was lucky to witness such worker-to-worker support at Amazon in Poland. There was a strike in Amazon warehouses in Germany, and workers in an Amazon warehouse in Poland staged a solidarity wildcat. That is very rare, a struggle in support of a struggle. People risking their jobs to make the point that they also support workers of the same company in a warehouse in another country.³

Finally, I want to make another comment on the term solidarity. Solidarity seems to imply that you are doing something *for* other people. If we frame the support of a prisoner as “solidarity” that is fine with me. The person is in prison and we do something for them. Regarding labor struggles we should rather talk about “cooperation” or even a “collective struggle.” We could discuss that also for other situations, like struggles against racism or gender discrimination.

³ A short report on this solidarity strike can be found in Ruckus, Ralf, “Confronting Amazon.” *Jacobin*, March 31, 2016: <https://tinyurl.com/3d48t8zf>. Another report is available in German: Ruckus, Ralf, “‘Der amerikanische Traum für zwei Euro pro Stunde.’ Zum Arbeiterkampf bei Amazon in Polen.” *SozialGeschichte Online*, no. 18 (2016), <https://tinyurl.com/jchpc5yt>.

DR: What Jule said earlier on the issue of representation and on enhancing or creating visibility is very important. When it comes to practical solidarity focused on empowerment and visibility, then also simpler things such as translating interviews with feminists, workers, and others are important. Inviting people to talks and debates and providing the related infrastructure is crucial as well, and this kind of support should be continued. These forms of practical solidarity also help to establish trust that can be important for supporting future struggles. Building connections, creating visibility, and bringing people together is particularly important at times with a low intensity of strikes and movements since they create the foundation for engaging yourself and others in solidarity.

Beyond the aspect of supporting struggles, these practices are essential to counter a geopolitically motivated anti-China discourse that is usually not based on any dialogue with workers and activists on the ground. Building such connections can also help to intervene into the current debate by creating space for perspectives from below.

KL: I agree that an arrest and a strike will necessarily elicit different kinds of response and forms of solidarity, and sometimes both happen at the same time. I also like the idea of building long-term infrastructure of support and solidarity. This is particularly vital when labor struggles are at a low level so that we can be more prepared when the level of struggles rises again. We are at such a point right now as one cycle of workers' struggle in China came to an end. What is the task in such a moment? I think it needs to start with an understanding of this recent cycle, viewed with some distance and with a critical eye. What does it tell us about our own responses at the time? How can we do better at supporting the next cycle of struggle? These are moments for reflection, for collective self-assessment, and, most significantly, for patiently building and renewing connections and networks. This is the long-term project of solidarity-building.

CHINA FROM BELOW

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