

BRIEFS

Jan-Dec 2018

JAN/MAR 2018

Members of Student Reading Group Detained and Harassed

In November 2017, the police detained two recent graduates and four students who were attending a reading group at the Guangdong University of Technology in Guangzhou. The self-described Maoist reading group organised critical discussions of social and political issues. While most of the members were soon released, the organisers Zhang Yunfan—a recent graduate of Peking University—and Ye Jianke were detained for ‘gathering a crowd to disturb social order’. In December, more individuals affiliated with the reading groups were either interrogated or detained, but news of their detention was only made public in early January 2018. Starting with Zhang Yunfan, several members issued public statements explaining the personal and political reasons that led them to become involved with the group, disclosing their experience of harassment and torture under detention in order to mobilise public support. A statement signed by hundreds of academics, students, and public intellectuals—many affiliated with Peking University—called on the local authorities to review the case, release Zhang Yunfan from police custody, and protect his rights under residential surveillance. By the end of March, all detained members of the reading group had negotiated an end to their detention and regained their freedom. *KL*

(Sources: **Chuang**; **Hong Kong Free Press**; **Radio Free Asia**)

Constitutional Amendment Approved by the National People’s Congress

On 11 March, during the annual Two Sessions (*lianghui*), the National People’s Congress passed a number of historical constitutional amendments with 1,958 votes in favour, two against, and three abstentions. Among the 21 changes to the Constitution, the most controversial revision was the removal of term limits for the posts of President and Vice-President, which had been announced by Xinhua as early as 25 February. This amendment potentially paves the way for Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely. The legislature also amended the Preamble of the Constitution to include ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ and the sentence ‘the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics’—key tenets of what has officially become known as ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’—to promote the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party over the state. The amendments also pave the way for a major overhaul of the government, a move which will affect more than two dozens ministries and agencies with the aim of reinforcing Party control. Most importantly, the revision enshrines in the Constitution a powerful new watchdog, the National Supervision Commission. This new organ is equal in power to the State Council; it outranks all ministries as it reports directly to the Party centre. It will take charge of a national network of supervision commissions, linked with local anti-corruption offices. This will widen the scope of the Party’s authority over all civil servants, whether they are Party members or not, excluding the protections envisaged by Chinese civil law. *EN*

(Sources: **Financial Times**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **South China Morning Post 3**; **Xinhua**; **The New York Times 1**; **The New York Times 2**; **Xinhua 1**; **Xinhua 2**)

Unrelenting Repression of both Lawyers and Activists

The first quarter of 2018 saw continuous and unrelenting repression of both lawyers and activists in China. Four days into the new year, 32-year-old Tibetan activist Tashi Wangchuk went on trial for ‘inciting separatism’, a crime that carries a punishment of up to 15 years in jail. He was detained in January 2016, after appearing in a *New York Times* video that documented his efforts to preserve Tibetan culture and language. According to Wangchuk’s lawyer, the video—in which the activist criticises the education policies of the Chinese authorities—constituted the prosecution’s main piece of evidence. Also in January, prominent *weiquan* lawyer Yu Wensheng had his legal licence revoked, and was subsequently detained while walking his son to school. This was in retaliation for an open letter in which he criticised President Xi and called for political reform. In 2014, Yu had already been detained for 99 days, enduring interrogations lasting 17 hours, as well as physical abuse that resulted in a hernia. In February, it was reported that jailed *weiquan* lawyer Jiang Tianyong’s health had severely deteriorated. According to his sister, Jiang was suffering from memory loss, raising concerns that he was being force-fed psychoactive medication—a method commonly employed by Chinese authorities against political prisoners. Likewise, in March, former state prosecutor Shen Liangqing was briefly detained after speaking out against President Xi’s constitutional changes. In the same month, Fu Zhenghua, previously a deputy head of China’s Ministry of Public Security, who had led several high-profile investigations and crackdowns, was appointed Minister of Justice. *EN & TS*

(Sources: **Amnesty International 1; Amnesty International 2; BBC; Business Insider; China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; The Guardian; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; Radio Free Asia; Reuters 1; Reuters 2**)

Gui Minhai Seized in the Presence of Swedish Diplomats

On 20 January, Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai, who was abducted from Thailand in 2015 and was just granted limited freedom in October 2017, was again detained by the Chinese authorities while in the presence of Swedish diplomats. Gui was traveling from Shanghai to Beijing with two Swedish consular officials to seek medical attention. However, at Jinan station, Shandong province, plainclothes security agents forcibly took him away. He reappeared three weeks later in a forced confession filmed in front of a group of reporters from pro-Beijing news media, including the *South China Morning Post* (see Fiskesjö’s essay in this volume). In the forced statement, Gui was coerced into saying that his trip to Beijing was part of a Swedish plot to get him out of China. Chinese authorities subsequently stated that he was then being held in captivity for leaking state secrets. Gui, a Hong Kong resident and Swedish citizen, was originally abducted from his holiday home in Thailand in October 2015, and brought to China under the pretence of facing charges related to a traffic accident that had occurred more than a decade before. In October 2017 he was released under partial house arrest and allowed to communicate with his family using video chat. The Swedish foreign ministry and the European Union demanded that Beijing release Gui, with Sweden calling the most recent abduction a ‘brutal intervention’. The Chinese government responded by denouncing Sweden’s ‘irresponsible remarks’ and suggesting that continued protest could threaten bilateral relations. Gui’s case exemplifies the Chinese government’s intensifying crackdown on dissident voices, both in China and globally. China has repatriated thousands of suspected criminals and dissidents from 90 countries, including the US, despite the fact that extradition treaties only exist with 36 nations. The tactics range from abduction to threats aimed at inducing ‘voluntary’ repatriation. *NL*

(Sources: **China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Foreign Policy; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia; The Washington Post**)

Surveillance and Repression of Uyghurs Intensifies in Xinjiang and Globally

In the first quarter of 2018, the human rights situation in the restive northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region deteriorated rapidly. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, the Muslim ethnic minority that constitutes the majority of the local population, were sent to reeducation camps. Stories from the camps painted a stark picture, with detainees being held indefinitely as part of a newly normalised predictive policing regime. This followed a continuing crackdown targeting Uyghurs since 2014, which banned religious practices and dress, and was ostensibly aimed at stamping out religious extremism. With this anti-terror rationale, since then Xinjiang has become a testing ground for a state-of-the-art high-tech surveillance state. Authorities have been collecting biometric data at state-organised medical check ups, and Uyghurs are now required to install surveillance apps on their mobile phones. These actions have been accompanied by the rapid increase in the use of facial recognition software, iris scans at police checkpoints, and a range of other types of data collection that feed into an ‘Integrated Joint Operations Platform’ (*tihua lianhe zuozhan pingtai*) providing real-time analysis of ‘security threats’. Xinjiang residents are also being assigned ‘safety scores’, with those deemed ‘unsafe’ being sent to the reeducation camps (see Loubere and Brehm’s essay in this volume). The Chinese government has also increased pressure on Uyghurs outside of the country. Family members of Uyghur reporters for Radio Free Asia have gone missing in an apparent attempt at intimidation. Uyghurs in other countries, even those with foreign nationalities, have also been pressured to provide personal information—such as addresses, photos, and scans of foreign identity documents—to Chinese security forces. Those who refuse are compelled through threats to their families. *NL*

(Sources: **China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Foreign Policy; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia; The Washington Post**)

Foreign Companies Bow to Pressure from Beijing

In January, the Chinese authorities blocked the website and app of the Marriott hotel group for one week after the company listed Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as separate countries in an online customer survey. To make things worse, a Marriott employee used a corporate Twitter account to ‘like’ a tweet in which a pro-Tibet group expressed approval for the survey’s identification of Tibet as a country. In the midst of a public relations nightmare, Marriott profusely apologised and fired Roy Jones, 49, the hourly worker at a customer engagement centre in Omaha, Nebraska, who had liked the tweet. A similar incident involved Daimler, when its subsidiary Mercedes-Benz posted on Instagram a photo of a car along with an inspirational quote from the Dalai Lama. Delta Airlines, Qantas Airlines, clothing designer Zara, and medical instruments maker Medtronic were also involved in similar spats in late 2017 and early 2018. Far more consequential is the capitulation of Apple. On 28 February, the Cupertino-based company formally transferred its Chinese iCloud operations to Guizhou-Cloud Big Data, a local firm with close ties to the Chinese authorities. Apple also began hosting its iCloud encryption keys in China. Although Apple publicly declared that it would not transfer accounts over to the new data centre unless users first agree to the updated terms of service, the move caused widespread concerns regarding the privacy and data protection of users. Companies are not the only targets of pressure from Beijing. On 30 March, the organisers of the Man Booker International Prize admitted that, after receiving a complaint from the Chinese embassy in London, they had changed the nationality of Professor Wu Ming-yi, one of the writers included on the 2018 longlist, from ‘Taiwan’ to ‘Taiwan, China’. The organisers only backed down after a public uproar, announcing that in the future they would list the ‘country/territory’ of authors, rather than their nationalities. *IF*

(Sources: **ChinaFile; Quartz; Reuters; SupChina; The Guardian; The Telegraph; The Verge**)

APR/JUN 2018

Gender Issues in the Spotlight

The second quarter of 2018 brought renewed scrutiny of gender issues in China. Chinese women still face perilous conditions in society and the workplace, often falling victim to sexual harassment and discrimination of various kinds. The #MeToo campaign that swept Peking University (PKU) in April this year well exemplifies female vulnerability to sexual harassment on campus and in the workplace. This movement culminated in activists' demand for the university to disclose information on a rape-suicide case that occurred two decades ago, when Gao Yan, a student at PKU, committed suicide after being sexually assaulted by Shen Yang, at that time a professor at that institution (he would keep the position until 2011). Having failed to intimidate the activists, PKU pledged to reinvestigate the case and introduce regulations against sexual misconduct. Sexual harassment aside, Chinese and international media highlighted how women in China are discriminated against in job applications. Research conducted by Human Rights Watch found that almost 20 percent of civil service positions released in early 2018 either required job applicants to be male or expressed a preference for male candidates, whereas only one job post indicated a preference for females. It was also found that private companies—including tech giants Alibaba and Tencent—had opened up special positions to hire 'beautiful girls', so-called 'goddesses', to lure more male applicants. *N Liu*

(Sources: **Business Insider**; **Caixin**; **Human Rights Watch**; **The New York Times**; **Xinhua**)

Liu Xia Is Released, but Repression Continues Unabated

In the second quarter of 2018, repression of human rights practitioners continued unabated in China. In those months, foreign media widely reported on the situation of Liu Xia, the widow of late Chinese dissident and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo. Without having been formally accused of any offence, Liu was placed under house arrest in October 2010. While earlier reports claiming that Chinese officials were preparing to allow Liu to leave the country proved unfounded, diplomatic pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel led to the release of Liu Xia on 10 July, just days before the first anniversary of her husband's death. On that day, Liu left China on a flight that brought her to Berlin via Helsinki. During her visit to China on 24 May, Merkel also met the wives of two detained lawyers—Li Wenzu, wife of Wang Quanzhang, and Xu Yan, wife of Yu Wensheng. Earlier in April, Li attempted to walk over 100 kilometres from Beijing to Tianjin in search of answers regarding her husband's whereabouts, as he had been held incommunicado since July 2015. However, her planned 12-day protest march was cut short by Chinese authorities, who placed her under house arrest and later charged her with subversion. In the meantime, Yu fired his defence team, an action that contradicted a pre-recorded video in which he asserted he would never dismiss his lawyers under his own volition. This raised suspicions that he was acting under duress. There were also bad news for Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan activist who campaigned for Tibetan language education and who had been detained since 2016, after appearing in a *New York Times* video in which he discussed his campaign. At the end of May he was sentenced to five years in jail for 'inciting separatism'. *TS*

(Sources: **Amnesty International**; **China Change**; **The Guardian 1**; **The Guardian 2**; **Radio Free Asia 1**; **Radio Free Asia 2**; **Radio Free Asia 3**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **South China Morning Post 3**)

Labour NGOs Stigmatised on National Security Day

Since the passing of the National Security Law back in 2015, the Chinese government has declared 15 April as ‘National Security Education Day’, i.e. a day for raising public awareness of national security issues. In 2017, the authorities promised informants who reported on spies rewards ranging from 10,000 to 500,000 yuan. According to local media, in the following year the public had provided about 5,000 tipoffs, some of which were useful in catching alleged foreign spies. In 2018, the government disseminated among workers in defence-related industries a comic strip targetting labour NGOs. In it, we see a blonde, bespectacled foreign NGO staff member introducing himself to a plump, bald Chinese labour NGO leader. In the next panel, an NGO trainer is talking to an audience of workers about three key points—how to organise workers to protect their rights, how to establish a free trade union, and how to take to the street to raise demands—while the same foreigner is seen stuffing banknotes in the pocket of the Chinese activist. From this, the story progresses with the foreigner reporting on the success of his activities to his bosses abroad; the Chinese NGO leader holding another training session on ‘Western ideas of labour’ and ‘Western ideas of trade unions’ for workers; and the workers launching a demonstration to demand higher wages, shorter work hours, and ‘decent work’. However, the exchanges of money between Chinese and foreign NGO staff members catch the eye of one of the workers, who reports them. The story ends with the local NGO leader being interrogated by state security officials and admitting to his wrongdoings while the foreign NGO employee flees China in terror. This was just the latest and most explicit instance of state propaganda portraying labour NGOs as agents of ‘hostile foreign forces’. *IF*

(Sources: **China File**; **Global Times**; **People’s Public Security University of China**; **The New York Times**)

Strikes in Non-manufacturing Sectors Gain Traction

Between late March and June 2018, a number of strikes and protests in China’s non-manufacturing sectors gained international attention. In late March more than 2,000 sanitation workers in Shanghai went on a six-day strike to protest against waste management companies’ cuts to their income. After the local government had increased the minimum wage, these sanitation workers—who were barely paid the legal minimum—had their meal subsidies and morning and evening shift allowances cut. Later that month, up to 500 coal miners suffering from pneumoconiosis in Hunan province petitioned the local health authorities to protest the delay in providing them with medical examination records crucial to securing compensation. Then, for days leading up to International Workers’ Day on 1 May, crane operators on construction sites across a dozen provinces staged protests to demand a pay raise, citing relatively low pay for their high-risk work, the lack of paid overtime, and little annual leave. In April, teachers from kindergartens, and public and private schools organised at least 19 protests over pay, performance bonuses, and pensions. The following month, around 200 retired teachers in Anhui province protested to the local government twice within a single week to demand unpaid bonuses. Finally, in early June thousands of truck drivers in at least three cities used their trucks to block roads in protest against rising fuel costs and falling haulage rates that cut into their incomes. Strikes in non-manufacturing sectors such as education, retail, sanitation, and logistics have gained prominence in recent years. In particular, the nationally coordinated strikes by crane operators and truck drivers were significant, hinting at the potential for non-manufacturing workers to organise more networked and less atomised industrial actions. *KL*

(Sources: **China Change 1**; **China Change 2**; **China Digital Times**; **China Labour Bulletin 1**; **China Labour Bulletin 2**; **Radio Free Asia 1**; **Radio Free Asia 2**; **Wall Street Journal**)

New Statistical Report on Migrant Workers Released

In April, the National Bureau of Statistics released its latest annual report on Chinese migrant workers. According to this document, in 2017 China had a total of 286.52 million migrant workers, an increase of 4.81 million or 1.7 percent from the previous year. At the same time the migrant population was clearly aging: for the first time those born after 1980—the so-called ‘new generation of migrant workers’ (*xinshengdai nongmingong*)—made up more than half of all migrants. The Report also hinted at significant changes in the employment structure, with a gradual decline of occupation in the manufacturing (–0.6 percent) and construction sectors (–0.8 percent), and an increase (+1.3 percent) in the service sector. Average monthly wages grew by 6.4 percent to 3,485 yuan, but growth was 0.2 percent slower than the previous year, likely due to the minimum wage freeze in places like Guangdong since 2016. The 2018 Report added a new satisfaction indicator, with 56.1 percent of migrant workers declaring that they were very satisfied with their current living situation. The Report suggested that the Chinese government improve housing and education opportunities for migrants and their children in order to promote migrants’ social integration in the cities. The Report also revealed that migrants had become more likely to report labour to government bureaus and use legal mechanisms, and that they were slightly less likely to negotiate directly with their employers—a finding which might reflect either improved government responsiveness or a weakening of migrant workers’ bargaining power. Notably absent compared to previous reports was a section on rights protection, including statistics on overtime, labour contract coverage, and wage arrears. Labour contract coverage has been in decline for several years in a row—in 2016 it was down to only 35.1 percent from 43.9 percent in 2012. Also absent in this new report were data on unionisation and migrant workers’ awareness of unions. *KL*

(Sources: **National Bureau of Statistics**)

Revolutionary Martyrs ‘Slandered’

In May 2018, Rage Comic, a popular online cartoon and video platform, fell prey to China’s recently passed Law on the Protection of Heroes and Martyrs. Taking effect on 1 May 2018, the Law requires all of Chinese society to respect heroes and martyrs of the Communist Party, and subjects anyone who fails to do so to civil or even criminal charges. The turbulence surrounding Rage Comic resulted from a 58-second video it posted on 8 May 2018 on Toutiao, a Beijing-based news content platform. In this video, Rage Comic made fun of Dong Cunrui, a People’s Liberation Army soldier who is both famous and revered in China for his brave self-sacrifice in order to destroy a Kuomintang bunker during China’s War of Liberation. Playing on the rhyme between ‘bunker’ and ‘burger’ in Chinese, Rage Comic substituted the former with the latter and, thus, turned Hero Dong into a starving diner. This joke backfired, however. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism ordered the Cultural Department in Shaanxi province, where the company is based, to impose executive punishment on Rage Comic. CEO Ren Jia first apologised on Weibo on 17 May, stating that the company would reflect on its grave mistake and educate all its staff on pertinent laws and regulations. On 23 May, he brought his employees to the Cemetery of Martyr Dong Cunrui in Hebei Province, laying a wreath there and reading out an apology letter. Toutiao was also under official investigation for having failed to oversee its platform. Rage Comic and Toutiao aside, Sougou and Douyin, a popular Chinese search engine and video platform respectively, also received official punishments for publishing content that insulted ‘heroic deeds and spirits’ on their platforms. *N Liu*

(Sources: **China Daily; China Digital Times; Global Times; QQ News; Sohu; Wall Street Journal**)

JUL/SEPT 2018

Vaccine Scandal Rocks China

Consumer scandals continued to engulf China in the third quarter of 2018. News broke out in late July that Changsheng Bio-technology Co. and Wuhan Institute of Biological Products Co. had respectively manufactured more than 250,000 and 400,000 substandard infant vaccines, an unknown number of which may have been administered to Chinese toddlers. This revelation sparked outrage across Chinese society. Social media platforms were inundated with criticism of unscrupulous corporate conduct and lax government supervision. On 30 and 31 July, furious parents even staged a protest in Beijing outside the offices of the National Health Commission and National State Drug Administration. Such massive public backlash was not only due to the fact that defective vaccines would fail to protect infants from common diseases—such as diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus—but also due to the revelation that government officials had covered up for Changsheng Bio-technology Co. when it was discovered that the company had been falsifying its production data in October 2017. In response to the public outcry, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang vowed to conduct a thorough investigation. Fines were enforced on the two corporations involved, their executives detained, and more than 40 government officials punished. These efforts, however, did little to restore Chinese consumer confidence in domestic products, as this was just the latest in a series of repeated scandals since the milk powder incident in 2008. *N Liu*

(Sources: **Bloomberg; Caixin; CNN; Ershiyi Shiji Jingji Baodao; SCMP; Wall Street Journal**)

Xinjiang Garner Global Attention

Since October 2017, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been marked by intensified surveillance of Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic minority. According to scholar Rian Thum, an ‘entire culture is being criminalised’, as reports have emerged that up to one million Uyghurs have been detained in political re-education camps. Prominent Uyghur figures, such as Professor Rahile Dawut, football star Erfan Hezim, and musician Abdurehim Heyit are all believed to be currently held in such camps. For several months, this was met with silence from the international community. However, in August 2018 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released a report expressing concern, and called for the immediate release of all wrongfully and unlawfully detained individuals, as well as for the end of ethno-religious profiling. Likewise, in September, Human Rights Watch—an NGO based in the United States—released an extensive report detailing and providing evidence about the Chinese government’s mass internment camps; abuse and mistreatment of ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minorities; as well as the increasingly intrusive controls on everyday life in Xinjiang. Government leaders in Muslim countries—in particular Malaysia and Pakistan—also expressed concern. Meanwhile, the Chinese government continued to deny all allegations, and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to discredit the reports as ‘one-sided information’, claiming instead that the Autonomous Region was ‘enjoying overall social stability, sound economic development, and harmonious coexistence of different ethnic groups’. The Ministry further stated that the ‘policies and measures in Xinjiang are aimed at preserving stability, promoting development and unity, and improving livelihood.’ *TS*

(Sources: **CNN; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Reuters; SupChina; The Economist; The Independent; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2**)

#MeToo Lands in China

In the third quarter of 2018, in spite of almost immediate censorship from the Chinese government, China's nascent #MeToo movement refused to be stifled. During the summer of 2018, the movement—predominantly led by student activists—resonated across university campuses in China. Online, the #MeToo hashtag collected over 4.5 million hits on Weibo, with activists sidestepping online censors through the use of homophones, including #MiTu, which roughly translates to #RiceBunny. #MeToo in China led to accusations against multiple high-profile men in the realms of academia, media, and civil society, including activist Lei Chuang, environmentalist Feng Yongfeng, and journalists Zhang Wen and Xiong Peiyun. In August, accusations against two other well-known men emerged—Buddhist Master Xuecheng and billionaire Richard Qiangdong Liu, founder and CEO of JD.com. On 15 August, Xuecheng resigned from his tenure as head of China's government-run Buddhist Association after being accused of sexual assault and harassment. A 95-page dossier, compiled by two supervisory chancellors at Beijing's Longquan Temple, contained several reports of Xuecheng sending sexually aggressive texts to nuns and disciples, with one woman accusing him of rape. Liu was arrested on 31 August following allegations of rape from a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota. If found guilty, Liu faces up to 30 years in prison. Although the movement stopped short of attacking any powerful figure in the Party-state apparatus, the downfall of such high-profile and influential individuals was well-received as a victory for China's #MeToo movement. *TS*

(Sources: **Chublic Opinion**; **Reuters 1**; **Reuters 2**; **SBS**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **The Atlantic**; **The Wall Street Journal**; **The Washington Post 1**; **The Washington Post 2**)

One Step Forward, Ten Steps Back for Human Rights

The third quarter of 2018 saw continued repression of human rights in China. However, there was some welcome news on 9 July, when Liu Xia—widow of late Chinese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo—was released from effective house arrest and moved to Germany. Sadly, 9 July also marked the third anniversary of the '709' crackdown, which saw the arrest of over 300 human rights lawyers and activists. On the anniversary, the European Union urged the Chinese government to release almost 30 detained activists, including publisher Gui Minhai (a Swedish citizen) and lawyer Wang Quanzhang. At the same time, in Hong Kong a group of lawyers and activists held a silent protest outside the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal. In response, the Party-state stepped up repression. On 11 July, Qin Yongmin, a veteran pro-democracy campaigner, was sentenced to 13 years in prison on charges of 'subversion of a state power'. On the same day, Mongolian historian and author Lhamjab A. Borjigin was detained following charges of ethnic separatist activities. These charges are reportedly related to his book, documenting the life of ethnic Mongolians during the Cultural Revolution, wherein Borjigin claims that at least 27,900 Mongolians died, and 346,000 were imprisoned and tortured. A few days later independent liberal think tank Unirule Institute of Economics—which has often taken a critical stance toward government policies—was evicted from their Beijing office following an apparent tenancy dispute. Likewise, Jianjiao Bulao (roughly translated 'Pepper Tribe'), an online platform where female factory workers 'screamed' about workplace issues, was also shut down in July. *TS*

(Sources: **Hong Kong Free Press**; **Quartz**; **Radio Free Asia 1**; **Radio Free Asia 2**; **Reuters 1**; **Reuters 2**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **Voice of America News**)

OCT/DEC 2018

The Chinese Trade Union Holds Its National Congress

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

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

Fare Thee Well Private Economy?

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

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

China's Human Rights Record in Xinjiang under International Scrutiny

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

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

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

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

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

Hong Kong under Siege

In the final quarter of 2018, the political situation in Hong Kong was increasingly tense, as the former British colony's special status under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement appeared to be faltering. The inauguration of a high-speed railway connecting Hong Kong to Guangzhou on 23 September and a new bridge that links Hong Kong to Zhuhai and Macau on 23 October raised fears among Hong Kongers that closer linkages to the mainland would allow the Chinese government to exert more control over their society. These fears were mainly rooted in the decision to enforce mainland Chinese laws at the West Kowloon Terminus in Hong Kong, which critics argued would eventually undermine the independent judicial system of Hong Kong. The deterioration of Hong Kong's political situation was also apparent in a string of other incidents. In early October, Victor Mallet, Asia News Editor at the *Financial Times*, was first denied renewal of his work visa in Hong Kong and then, one month later, refused entry to the city, a de facto expulsion ostensibly related to his chairing a public meeting with a leader of an independentist party in the city. On 3 November, an exhibition by Badiucao, a Chinese-Australian political artist, was cancelled in Hong Kong over 'threats' from Chinese authorities. One week later, Ma Jian, a renowned Chinese writer residing in England, had two scheduled speeches at a literary festival in Hong Kong cancelled due to his criticisms of the Chinese government—the events were later rearranged as the hosts changed their mind at the last minute. Adding to these worrisome situations was the trial on 19 November of Chan Kin-man, co-founder of the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, and of his fellow campaigners. The controversies surrounding the proceedings, along with the other aforementioned contentious events, stained Hong Kong's image as a beacon of freedom in Asia. *NLiu*

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

Jasic Crackdown Widens

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

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

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