

On a Chinese Screen

Media, Power, and Voice in China

The previous decade saw widespread discussions about the role of the Internet in reshaping power relations in Chinese society. New media—it was widely believed—would give voice to the poor and downtrodden, allow citizens to better supervise government activity, and foster lively cultural exchanges. Workers would also benefit from this, as the Internet provided them with the tools needed to bring their grievances into the spotlight and enhance their ability to connect with their peers to establish new forms of solidarity. A decade later, what is left of that cyber-utopian discourse? As the Chinese Party-state steps up the censorship and manipulation of online information, and as new media is increasingly used as a means to reinforce control and surveillance over the population, a more sombre assessment of the role of the Internet seems to have gained traction in the court of public opinion. The scandals that in recent years have engulfed those social media companies that in the late 2000s and early 2010s gave rise to many of those thwarted expectations—Facebook in primis—have nothing but contributed to the disillusion.

This issue of *Made in China* offers a series of essays that assess the relevance of the cyber-utopian discourse against the background of the latest developments in Chinese politics and society. In the special section, **Sun Wanning** considers how the struggles of Chinese migrant workers have been constructed in public discourse and how media has come to play a role in their struggles. **Julie Chen** analyses the plight of Chinese platform workers. **Mimi Zou** shows how social media provides considerable scope for employers to monitor employees. **Marina Svensson** examines how Chinese

workers have been portrayed through the lens of photography. **David Bandurski** investigates an ‘independent’ Chinese documentary, revealing how foreign media can inadvertently become co-producers of state propaganda. Finally, **Zeng Jinyan** interviews writer **Wang Lixiong** about his latest novel, a damning portrayal of a cyber-dystopia.

The issue includes op-eds on the Jasic mobilisation by labour scholar and activist **Zhang Yueran**; the controversy surrounding Chinese scholar Hu Angang by his former colleague at Tsinghua University **Jane Hayward**; and the first anniversary of Liu Xiaobo’s death as experienced by his long-time friend **Jean-Philippe Béja**. The op-ed section also features a reflection on the situation of Chinese political studies by **William Hurst**. In the China Columns section, **Lynette Ong** examines how the Chinese state outsources violence and social control to private actors, while **Zhang Shuchi** describes the plight of Chinese workers in Papua New Guinea. The Window on Asia section offers two essays by **Sabina Lawreniuk** and **Hyejin Kim**, which respectively look into the latest elections in Cambodia and the recent Candlelight Movement in South Korea. In the cultural section, **Christian Sorace** delves into the work of movie director Geng Jun, and **Suzanne Scoggins** reviews Zhao Liang’s documentary *Crime and Punishment*.

We wrap up the issue with two conversations: the first with **Anna Lora-Wainwright** about *Resigned Activism*, her latest book on environmental activism in China, and the second with **Fang Kecheng** about the website CNPolitics. ■

The Editors