Unabated Repression

The second quarter of 2019 saw unabated repression of critical voices in China. On 4 April, Mongolian historian Lhamjab A. Borjigin was tried in secret for charges of ‘separatism’ and ‘sabotaging national unity’. Borjigin maintained his innocence throughout the proceedings and a verdict has yet to be announced. Another writer, publishing online under the penname Tianyi, was sentenced to a four-year prison sentence for publishing homoerotic works, while Liu Pengfei, the moderator of a news chat group on WeChat bringing verified news from overseas to a Chinese audience, was sentenced to two years in jail on unclear charges. Human rights lawyers are not faring any better. On 29 April, rights lawyer Chen Jiahong was detained by the police on suspicion of ‘incitement to subvert state power’. Meanwhile, prominent rights lawyer Liu Xiaoyuan was stripped of his practicing licence following an online photo where he is seen selling pesticides, an artistic form of protest he resorted to in order to denounce his inability to practice law due to official obstruction. On 28 June, Li Wenzu, the wife of lawyer Wang Quanzhang, was allowed to meet her husband for the first time since his arrest in July 2015. She found him a ‘totally changed man’, who spoke in a ‘robotic tone’. The situation in Xinjiang, where an estimated 1.5 million Uyghurs are believed to be held in internment camps, has shown no sign of improvement either. On 14 June, prominent Uyghur writer Nurmuhammad Tohti died while being held in an internment camp in Xinjiang. Amid the trade conflict between China and the United States, American universities are reevaluating their collaborations and partnerships with Chinese companies. Reports have emerged that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at least one other American university maintain partnerships with iFlytek, a Chinese artificial intelligence company whose voice recognition software has been used to securitise Xinjiang. TS

(Sources: ABC News; Global Times; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Voice of America)
Permanent Crackdown on Student and Worker Activist

The second quarter of 2019 once again saw heightened repression of Chinese student and worker activists—a further intensification of the crackdown that began in July 2018. As Xi Jinping hailed the nationalist legacy of the May Fourth Movement, calling on the Chinese youth to love their country and follow the leadership of the Communist Party, six more Marxist university students who were planning to celebrate the International Labour Day by working alongside workers disappeared just before May First. The crackdown also extended to members of social worker and community organisations engaging with labour and migration issues. Li Dajun, Liang Zicun, Li Changjiang, and Tong Feifei—staff members of various NGOs based in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—disappeared in May along with Wuqiong Wenqian, former editor-in-chief of the left wing media site Groundbreaking (破土) and volunteer at Tootopia (土逗公社). In spite of this unending repression, there has been some pushback. In April, one hundred Chinese workers suffering from silicosis signed a petition in which they demanded the release of three activists arrested in March who had assisted them in the past. Among the three arrested is Wei Zhili, whose wife Zheng Churan—herself a feminist activist who was detained for her advocacy work in 2015—has mounted a public campaign to secure the release of her husband by penning articles, speaking to the media, and inviting supporters to run ten thousand kilometres with her until Wei’s release. Few of the activists arrested since July 2018 have stood trial: most have either remained under detention or have been released under residential surveillance. KL

(Sources: CNN 1; CNN 2; Hong Kong Free Press; SCMP)

New Statistical Report on Migrant Workers Cuts Section on Rights

In April 2019, China’s National Bureau of Statistics released its latest annual report on migrant workers. It was probably the most underwhelming edition in many years, containing the usual sections on demographics, employment, migrant children education, and urban integration. However, this year differed in that there was no mention of labour rights issues. According to the document, the total migrant population in 2018 was 288 million people, an increase of 1.84 million (0.6 percent) over the previous year. While the number of migrants has continued to increase, the growth rate has slowed, as the migrant population showed clear signs of aging. In 2018, the average age of migrant workers was 40.2, a six-month increase from the previous year. Migrants born after 1980 were 51.5 percent of the total migrant population, an increase of more than 1 per cent from 2017, with 43.2 percent of this cohort born in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2018, migrant workers employed in the third sector represented 50.5 percent of the migrant population, an increase of 2.5 percent from 2017. The average monthly wage was 3,721 yuan, an increase of 236 yuan (6.8 percent). For the first time in years, the Report did not include a section on the situation of workers’ rights protection, which formerly provided statistics on overtime, labour contract coverage, and wage arrears. Other sections also did not provide any information about rights violations. The document only noted that the participation of migrant workers in activities organised by unspecified community organisations had increased by 0.9 percent, reaching 26.5 percent, and that 9.8 percent of migrant workers were members of unions. KL

(Source: National Bureau of Statistics)
**Sustainability of China’s State Pension Fund in Question**

The financial sustainability of China’s pension fund has recently come under the spotlight. According to a report released in April by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the reserve held by the urban worker pension fund—the cornerstone of China’s state pension system—will peak at 7 trillion yuan in 2027 and then start to drop steadily, reaching zero by 2035. The report also mentions that net outflows from the pension fund would already have begun this year had there not been fiscal subsidies for the pension fund, and that the gap between pension contributions and withdrawals will become as large as 11 trillion yuan by 2050. One important reason for the dire financial situation of China’s pension fund is the rapid ageing of China’s population and the concurrent decline in the available workforce. Other reasons include the relatively low age threshold for claiming pension benefits—60 for males and 55 for females—and the lax regulatory enforcement of pension contributions by both employers and employees. The looming pension crisis has caused fear in China, notably among younger generations. In response to these concerns, the Chinese authorities have pledged that they will ‘fully guarantee’ further pension payments and announced that they are pondering different solutions to make China’s pension fund more financially sustainable, including raising the retirement age while tightening the enforcement of pension contributions. To further address the adverse effects of demographic changes on China’s social security, the Chinese government has decided to completely lift the restrictions on migrants obtaining household registration (hukou) in second-tier cities, and is contemplating the removal of these restrictions in first-tier cities with populations of three to five million for particular social groups, such as university students and recent graduates. *NLiu*

(Sources: Bloomberg; Caixin; Reuters; Sina 1; Sina 2; South China Morning Post; Tencent)

**China Debates Labour Conditions of Migrant and White-collar Workers**

In the second quarter of 2019, China’s public opinion heatedly debated issues related to working conditions for both migrant and white-collar workers. On 11 April, Dou Yongyu, a construction worker, posted a video online in which he smashed a yellow safety helmet worn by front-line workers and a red helmet worn by site supervisors. While the yellow helmet was shattered into pieces after a single strike, the red helmet remained intact. The video quickly went viral, triggering a public backlash against the scarce regard of employers for the workplace safety of their migrant employees, as represented by the substandard helmets provided to Dou and his colleagues. Having initially maintained that his helmet was provided by a construction firm, Dou, nonetheless, backtracked afterwards, saying that he bought the helmet himself. The change in Dou’s account did not quell public outrage, with social media users arguing that the helmet was still of inferior quality, however he obtained it. Amid escalating public anger, China’s Emergency Management Department urged companies to ensure the quality of the equipment provided to their employers. Another debate raged over the work culture in the tech industry—in particular over the so-called ‘996 work schedule’, i.e. from 9am to 9pm and six days a week (see Li Xiaotian’s essay in the present issue). Starting from an anonymous post on GitHub in early April, the online campaign against the demanding work culture in China’s tech industry quickly gathered momentum. Chinese lawyers penned an open letter to urge the government to duly enforce labour laws, while Microsoft employees petitioned their company to decline any demands from the Chinese government to censor the debate. China’s Internet heavyweights, including Alibaba’s Ma Yun and Jingdong’s Liu Qiangdong, by contrast, vocally embraced the 996 work pattern, although their stances softened after the eruption of public outrage. *NLiu*

(Sources: Daily Mail; ifeng; Sina; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; tech.163)
**Hong Kong Rises against Proposed Extradition Law**

The second quarter of 2019 has seen growing tensions in Hong Kong. On 9 April, nine leaders of the Umbrella Movement, a mass pro-democracy protest that took place in the former British colony in 2014, were found guilty for their roles in mobilising protesters to block major roads in the centre of the city for 79 consecutive days. In a 268-page document, Judge Chan Jong-herng wrote that although Hong Kong courts recognise the notion of civil disobedience, it ‘is not a defence to a criminal charge’. A proposed extradition law further exacerbated the already-acute tensions in Hong Kong (see Werner’s op-ed in the present issue). The legislation was put forward by the Hong Kong government in February, with the stated aim of easing the transfer of criminal suspects between jurisdictions with which Hong Kong lacked formal extradition agreements, including mainland China. The legislation caused widespread public concern, as people worried that it would be abused by mainland China, whose legal system remains opaque. Still, in spite of the criticism, the bill was submitted to Hong Kong’s legislative council for approval in early April, which triggered the first round of protests. With the backing of the Chinese government, Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam determined to press ahead. On 12 June, around one million protestors took to the street, clashing with the police, who deployed tear gas and rubber bullets to contain the demonstration. Unexpectedly, three days later Carrie Lam announced the indefinite postponement of the bill. Short of total cancellation, however, the announcement did not prevent an even larger protest on 16 June, which involved as many as two million people. Amid mounting public pressure, Carrie Lam personally apologised but refused to resign. In the latest twist, on 1 July, the anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to the mainland, protesters broke into the Legislative Council building, breaking glass walls and spray-painting surfaces with political slogans. *NLiu*

(Sources: Bloomberg; CNN; People’s Daily; Reuters; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; The New York Times; Xinhua)

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**Murders in the Mines**

On 12 April, six men from poor villages in Shaanxi province were executed in northern China for faking premeditated murders as industrial accidents in order to pocket millions of yuan in compensation. Between 2007 and 2014, the six criminals, ranging in age from 22 to 47, murdered 11 mine workers in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, cheating a combined 3.1 million yuan in compensation out of the mine owners by disguising themselves as the victims’ families. The victims were all cash-strapped rural migrant workers who had been enticed into working in mines by the six criminals and agreed to use the identity cards of the criminals’ relatives to apply for jobs. Reminiscent of the plot of the award-winning Chinese movie *Blind Shaft*, such grisly crimes have repeatedly occurred in China over the last two decades. In December 2007, five miners in Hunan province were detained for murdering their coworkers and swindling hush money from the pit owners. In 2014, a court in Hebei province sentenced five criminals to death and 16 others to prison for similar charges. In 2016, 74 people were prosecuted in Inner Mongolia for the killing of 17 people whose corpses were used to forge mining accidents and extort compensation from the mine owners. In the same year, a court in Beijing handed down suspended death sentences to two felons who committed similar offences. Observers consider extreme poverty in remote villages in China as being the underlying reason for mine murders, while loopholes in regulations on safety in mines are regarded as a facilitating factor. *NLiu*

(Sources: Caixin Global; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The Atlantic; The New York Times)