Art must not be concentrated in dead shrines called museums. It must be spread everywhere—on the streets, in the trams, factories, workshops, and in the workers’ homes.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1918
Translated by Mikhail Anikst

The Work of Arts
Aesthetics and Subaltern Politics in China

With these words, the great Soviet poet addressed the key question of how to bring art to people and people to art in a new world in which old aristocracies, elites, and their aesthetic privileges were fading away. In the words of art theorist Boris Groys, ‘the world promised by the leaders of the October Revolution was not merely supposed to be a more just one or one that would provide greater economic security, but it was also and in perhaps in even greater measure meant to be beautiful.’ Walking in these steps, the Chinese Revolution was a project of further experimentation and creation in the realm of the relationship between art and the people. The world it created was at once utopian and disfigured, radiant and desolate. While today that world is no longer, the questions it raised about the relationship between the working class, artistic production, and aesthetic appreciation remain with us. This issue of the Made in China Journal offers a collection of essays that examine the ‘work of arts’, intended as the extension of art beyond the confines of the museum and into the spaces of ordinary life and production.

The special section is divided in two parts—‘Proletarian Images’ and ‘Proletarian Words’. In ‘Proletarian Images’, A. C. Baecker examines how amateur art practice during the socialist period in China changed the class and labour relations that had previously defined the fine arts. Tina Mai Chen tracks the image of Lenin across Chinese film history to reveal different understandings of socialist internationalism and their eventual eclipse. Wang Hui interprets the critically-acclaimed Phoenixes of Chinese artist Xu Bing as a gesture of refusal in a world in which the symbols of revolution and political art have become fashionable and lucrative commodities. Paola Voci delves into the case of Dafen village’s worker painters, the focus of many celebratory state-promoted narratives and, more critically, transnational media and academic attention. Cai Qing outlines a history of art performances both in China and the West characterised by violence done to the body. In ‘Proletarian Words’, Benjamin Kindler looks back to past literary debates to excavate a Maoist politics of ‘life’ as the grounds for a new, proletarian aesthetics and as a counterpoint to the biologisation of contemporary life. Federico Picerni digs into the literary production of Fan Yusu, a migrant worker who in 2017 became an overnight sensation in China after publishing her memoir.
online. **Christian Sorace** reads migrant worker poetry alongside Marx as a critique of labour exploitation and as a genre of mourning for a lost future. **Christopher Connery** reflects on his experiences with the experimental theatre group Grass Stage and on the role of the latter in providing a social space for interrogating contemporary society. Finally, **Jingyi Wang** profiles folk-rock singer Li Zhi, who achieved widespread popularity before being banned for unknown reasons in April 2019.

This issue also includes a forum on the ‘Enigmas of Chinese Capital’ in which a group of scholars engage with Ching Kwan Lee’s groundbreaking book *The Specter of Global China* from the perspective of their own research. Examining the case of the rubber industry in Laos, **Juliet Lu** extends Lee’s work by examining the history of the Chinese state’s commitment to securing access to resources it deems strategic, and how this structures firm-level approaches. **Aaron Halegua** draws from his work with Chinese construction workers in Saipan, a US territory in the Pacific, to consider the extent to which Lee’s research on construction workers in Zambia resonates with other contexts. **Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente** suggests that Chinese infrastructural investment in the Caribbean represents a distinct form of capital when compared with local and transnational construction companies in the region, particularly when considering the broader societal and institutional frameworks accompanying such investment. Finally, **Yu Zheng** and **Chris Smith** challenge the theoretical approach of Lee’s work through the lens of their research on Chinese multinational corporations in Europe.

The issue includes op-eds on the latest wave of anti-Asian racism in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak by **Gerald Roche** and on the latest trends in trade union reform in China by **Geoffrey Crothall**. In the China Columns section, **Bilal Zenab Ahmed** examines the ways in which Uyghur Islamic indigenous traditions have undergone ‘creative destruction’ through pressure from Beijing, and considers the potential for alternative traditions to form the basis for collective resistance. **Judith Audin** adopts an ethnographic approach to describe the social dimension of the restructuring of the coal mining industry in Datong, an important coal cluster in Shanxi province. **Hui Xu** explores how the policy of industrial upgrading based on the extensive robotisation of the manufacturing sector pursued by the Chinese authorities is impacting labour relations in Chinese factories. **Robert Walker** and **Jane Miller** draw on recently-published research by Chinese scholars to explore the status of women in contemporary China. **Adam Liebman** and **Goen G Lee** look into the implementation of a controversial new garbage sorting system in Shanghai starting from 2019. Finally, **Zeng Jinyan** engages in a conversation with **Liu Shao-hua** about the dynamics and shortcomings of epidemic control in China.

In the Window on Asia section, **Angela Tritto** analyses the dynamics of Belt and Road-related investment in Indonesia, and in the cultural section **Anita Chan** reviews the hit Netflix documentary *American Factory*. We wrap up the issue with conversations with **Joel Andreas**, **Mark Frazier**, and **Timothy Grose** about their recently-published books.

We are happy to announce that starting from this issue, the *Made in China Journal* will be published three times a year in collaboration with ANU Press. This partnership is grounded in our joint belief in open access publishing and the free circulation of ideas, and aims to further our goal of bridging the gap between the scholarly community and the general public.

The Editors