INTRODUCTION

Linda Jaivin

In early 2022, a vlogger passing through a village in Jiangsu province in the People's Republic of China (PRC) came across a woman chained by her neck to the wall in a freezing shed outside the home where her husband and children sat eating dinner. The video of 'Little Plum Blossom', a victim of trafficking and domestic violence, went viral, sparking widespread outrage. Before long, another kind of enchainment was dominating public discourse as city after city was shut in and shut down in service of the party-state's zero-COVID policy. As 2022 wore on, dramas erupted with supply chains and island chains and not-always-whispered critiques of Xi Jinping locking in a third term for himself as general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Censorship in the cultural sphere, meanwhile, intensified to the point that one observer remarked that China's film industry had entered 'an era of dancing in chains' 戴着镣铐跳舞的时代.[1] Even before the hanging of a protest banner on a bridge in Beijing and the deaths of ten people in a locked-down apartment block in Ürümqi sparked a nationwide chain reaction of protests, it was clear that 'chains and locks' 链锁 was the logical theme for the *China Story Yearbook 2022*.

According to the Chinese zodiac, 2022 was the Year of the Tiger. Tigers, which in China are both endemic and endangered, traditionally represent a range of things: power and predation, good luck, and protection. Countless Chinese stories, fables, and legends feature them, as Annie Luman Ren explains in 'The Year of the Tiger'. Among these are a parable from the ancient *Book of Rites* that tells of Confucius encountering a woman weeping bitterly by a grave. She tells his disciple that tigers have killed her father-in-law, husband, and son. 'Why do you not leave this place?' the disciple asks. She answers that while there are tigers there, at least there are no tyrants.

Locked Down, Breaking Out

The thirteen million people of Xi'an began 2022 in lockdown after testing revealed 127 cases of COVID-19 in that city. In February, the twenty-eight and a half million residents of Shanghai entered what for many would be more than two months of being locked in their homes. 'Big Whites'

大白 (public health workers/enforcers in white hazmat suits) and blue fences became common sights around the country. In August and September alone, more than 300 million people in over seventy cities went into lockdown. The other 1.1 billion were subjected to regimes of endless testing. The translation of a 'letter from lockdown' by a young Shanghai resident gives a taste of the many little stories unfolding behind the big ones of this extraordinary time.

When lockdowns were not in force, a universal 'traffic-light' COVID app determined citizens' individual mobility. Red indicated COVID-positive and yellow suspected contact with a positive case. Only those riding the 'green horse' *lüma* 绿马 (a homonym for 'code green' 绿码), as the slang went, could access public spaces or transport. Public security officials found the app useful for preventative policing — for example, turning protesters' app profiles to code red.

The wider uses of the COVID app reignited debates about data privacy and surveillance. Most of China's data privacy laws apply to private enterprise. Government agencies enjoy relatively free access to data on grounds of public or national security. Tsinghua University sociologist and data privacy campaigner Li Zhen 李振 maintains that the collection of data and surveillance associated with the fight against COVID-19 'has totally destroyed the past thirty or forty years of legal progress in China'.[2] In an online essay that was quickly censored, another Tsinghua academic, law professor Lao Dongyan 劳东燕, criticised general complacency about increasing levels of control and surveillance: '[M]any of those put in chains are not only not angry at losing their freedoms but are quite comfortable with it. They are like frogs being boiled in warm water.'[3]

By year's end, it became clear that complacency had limits. Reports and photographs of incidents in which the government's zero-COVID policy had led to tragedy continued to circulate, defying the censors. Among them was the story of a pregnant woman miscarrying outside a hospital that had denied her entry because she lacked an up-to-the-minute COVID test. Then there was footage of officials refusing to let residents out of a locked-down

building during an earthquake, and a road accident in which twenty-seven people died when the bus forcibly transporting them to a quarantine centre in Guizhou crashed. 'We are on the bus' became a (rapidly censored) hashtag.

On 13 October, a middle-aged tech worker named Peng Lifa 彭立发 hung a banner from the Sitong overpass in Beijing demanding 'Freedom, not lockdowns, elections, not rulers, dignity, not lies'. It also called for a general strike and demanded that Xi Jinping step down. Peng's words — though rapidly censored — spread like an electric current, graffitied on toilet walls, bounced in and out of the country via virtual private networks (VPNs) and Twitter, and affirmed by a simple (and quickly banned) hashtag saying, 'I saw it'. Nationwide demonstrations erupted demanding an end to zero-COVID. Some protesters held up sheets of blank paper to symbolise all they wanted to say but could not, inspiring the phrase 'A4 revolution'. A new vernacular phrase entered the language: 'To come out of the political closet' 政治出柜.

By December, the government unchained the country from 'dynamic zero-COVID', despite serious concerns that China's healthcare system would collapse under a massive rise in cases. It relaxed the rules on lockdowns, testing, quarantine, and mobility. Dynamic zero-COVID vanished from official rhetoric and the previously ubiquitous Big Whites began vacating the streets. (Later, some of them staged their own protests over not being properly paid.) The *People's Daily* claimed that the protests ('circumstances') had nothing to do with the sudden relaxation:

> It is absolutely necessary for people to appreciate that the present optimisation of our suite of coronavirus responses reflects a forward-leaning recalibration and is not a passive reaction to circumstances. The Ten New Regulations … in no way signal a relaxation of our COVID response … [nor do they] signify a complete opening up or so-called 'giving in and giving up'.[4]

Zealous officials swab fish caught for market, provoking disbelief and mockery
Source: Taihainet

It was also necessary for the party to demonstrate that it is what it has always claimed to be: 'great, glorious and infallible' 伟大光明正确. Jeffrey Wasserstrom and William Yang look at the balance between official celebration and mass protest in 'A Year of Protests, Ceremonies, and Surprises'.

Meanwhile, by year's end, there were reports of panic-buying of fever medicines at pharmacies, patients being treated outside overcrowded hospitals, and crematorium workers on double shifts. The government censors also worked overtime to suppress any suggestion that the sudden relaxation had precipitated a public health crisis, that its vaccination drive had been less than successful (or, by prioritising workers, had failed its most vulnerable), or even that there had been more than a few COVID-related deaths, which was manifestly untrue.

Chains of Command, Chains of Supply, and Links to a Greener Future

The big political story of 2022 was the Twentieth Party Congress in October. The delegates affirmed Xi Jinping's convention-breaking third term as general secretary of the CPC. The forced removal from the congress of his predecessor, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, after Hu became visibly agitated by something he read in the official papers on the desk in front of him, was

the only discordant note in an otherwise tightly orchestrated ceremony. The terse official explanation was that Hu was suffering from a health issue. Chinese-Canadian political scientist Wu Guoguang 吴国光 remarked on the *Bumingbai* 不明白 podcast that if Hu had truly suffered a health emergency, it says something about the humanity of the top leaders that they appeared less concerned about their colleague and elder than most people would have been for a stricken stranger.[5]

Neil Thomas, in 'A Matter of Perspective: Insider Accounts of Xi Jinping and the Twentieth Party Congress', and Ben Hillman, in 'Ghosts of Mao and Deng', contribute analyses of the congress from different angles. We have also provided a simple primer on the congress, explaining how delegates are chosen, noting major personnel changes, and listing key points from Xi's official report, which was notably less sanguine than others in recent years.

Although Xi cited 'major positive results' in 'economic and social development', the extensive and often chaotic lockdowns affected everything including production, shipping and transport, and consumption in 2022. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth sank to just more than 3 percent compared with 8.1 percent the previous year.

In mid-December, the annual Central Economic Work Conference set the economic policy directions for the coming year. It pledged to improve corporate governance of state-owned enterprises to make them more fit for the market. It committed the Chinese economy to 'a high level of openness to the outside world', including expanding access to the domestic market for foreign trade and investment. Industrial priorities would include 'new energy, artificial intelligence, bio-manufacturing, green low-carbon manufacturing, and quantum computing'.[6] The conference also affirmed the state's commitment to developing the private economy. This brought some comfort to the sector sometimes referred to as '56789' because it contributes about 50 percent of the state's tax revenue, 60 percent of GDP, and is responsible for 70 percent of innovation, 80 percent of urban employment, and 90 percent of new jobs.[7]

Stimulating domestic consumption is another focus. Yet, with youth unemployment hovering around 18 percent, at least some young Chinese, whose trend towards 'lying flat' led the world in 'quiet quitting', have begun to unchain themselves from consumerism. Not so long ago, young influencers staged photogenic 'accidental' spills of their designer bags (ideally the result of a fake tumble out of a Porsche or Lamborghini). In 2022, a new generation of young people were sharing tips for saving money. These included 'stooping', which is collecting other people's discarded but usable furniture and other items, and second-hand shopping — long anathema to status-conscious Chinese consumers.[8]

In her chapter, 'The Chinese Economy: Bursting Bubbles, Terminal Troubles?', Jane Golley surveys both the state of China's economy in 2022 and where reality differs from perception. She cautions against both what *Bloomberg* economist Thomas Orlik calls 'Sinophrenia' ('the simultaneous belief that China is about to collapse and about to take over the world') and its overly cheerful opposite, 'Sinophoria'.

In 'The Untold Story of Chinese Banking and Why It Matters', meanwhile, Adam Y. Liu delves into the background of the scandal that caused thousands of angry depositors to storm bank branches in Zhengzhou, Henan province, between April and July. It is a tale that exposes both the mechanics and the hazards of financial decentralisation. In a second forum on the economy, 'Coal Supply Chains: No Bright Outlook for Australia', Jorrit Gosens examines the outlook for Australian–Chinese coal supply chains and concludes that 'energy crisis or not', the outlook is not 'bright': the Chinese government is committed to increasing self-sufficiency in coal while dampening its overall demand for the fuel. Nonetheless, China remains the biggest user of coal in the world, climate change commitments notwithstanding.[9]

There were some significant advances in strategy and planning for a greener future in 2022, including the release in June of a National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy to make China climate-resilient by 2035. In September, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology revealed further details of strategies for achieving carbon zero and announced pilot programs in 'green finance' for the 'green transition'.[10]

Our environment section profiles two industry sectors that are crucial for the transition. In 'Supercharging China: Cars, Batteries, and Lithium', Barry van Wyk surveys the electric vehicle industry, while Hongzhang Xu looks at China's 'green steel' and its implications for Australian iron-ore exports in 'China's "Green Steel": Unchaining from Australia'.

Women: Power Down

No-one was surprised by the gender reveal of the Twentieth Politburo Standing Committee: seven men. No woman has ever sat on the CPC's most powerful body, but it was widely noted that not a single woman was nominated to take the place of retiring member Sun Chunlan 孙春兰 on the twenty-four-person Politburo. As China hardly lacks talented women, Cai Junyi asks in 'The Communist Party of China: Where Are the Women?' about the role of women in Chinese politics and what structural and other factors inhibit their rise to the top.

Xi Jinping, meanwhile, continues to promote policies that reinforce gender normativity and strengthen male dominance over Chinese society and the economy. They exhort boys to become more 'masculine' and urge young women to uphold 'traditional values', marry young, and ideally, have three children. In the interest of promoting the birthrate, however, unmarried mothers can access the same maternity leave as married ones. In late 2021, the State Council 'outline' on women's development for the period 2021–2030 laid out a policy to reduce the number of 'non–medically necessary' abortions.[11] The authorities have also made it harder to obtain divorce, even in situations of domestic abuse, which police often do not treat seriously as a crime.

Two particularly shocking cases of violence against women in 2022 drew attention to this problem. As Joel Wing-Lun writes in 'What Have We Learned from "the Woman in Chains"?', the 'outpouring of anger' that resulted from the sight of Little Plum Blossom chained in her freezing shed 'united liberals, feminists, and nationalists in outrage'. It remains to be seen how much, if anything, will change as a result.

Pan Wang picks up the narrative in 'Violence against Women: Can the Law Help?'. The furore around Little Plum Blossom's treatment had barely died down when another egregious incident of misogynistic violence put gendered violence under the spotlight once more. One evening at a restaurant in Tangshan, not far from Beijing, a middle-aged man approached a table of young women and put his hand on one of them. After she pushed his arm away and shouted at him to leave them alone, he slapped her hard in the face. In the melee that erupted as a result, and despite the presence of witnesses, the man and his companions beat the women savagely, leaving them with horrific facial and other injuries. Yet, little was done by local authorities to bring the men to justice until the security footage was leaked online, attracting more than 4.8 billion views. Official media generally presented the incident as a problem of local gangsterism, avoiding any suggestion that it reflected broader or deeper social problems.

At the end of October, the National People's Congress announced revisions to the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law — the first revisions in almost thirty years.[12] The product of long consultation, they addressed some of the hot issues of 2022, for the first time making it a crime to obstruct the rescue of trafficked individuals, as well as holding employers accountable for violations of women's labour and social security rights. The revised law strictly prohibits trafficking, kidnapping, and sexually harassing women by 'means such as spoken language, text, images, or physical conduct'. If a woman reports sexual harassment, the 'relevant state organ' is obliged to respond promptly and reply in writing; victims have the right to seek justice through both the criminal and the civil justice systems. Although schools and workplaces are tasked with preventing harassment, there does not appear to be any legal recourse available to victims should they fail to do so.[13] And while the law forbids employers from limiting certain roles to males or prioritising male applicants, there are exceptions 'as otherwise provided by the state'.

Feminism remains a 'sensitive' word and #MeToo a banned term, but women in China are not easily silenced. When protests broke out in late November and early December, it was widely noted how frequently young women took the lead — and the LGBTQI+ community was present as well.[14]

Erasure and Indelibility

In a report released minutes before her departure, outgoing UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet accused China of 'serious human rights violations' in Xinjiang, saying they could amount to 'crimes against humanity', and judged credible the numerous allegations of torture, sexual violence, and forced medical procedures. Beijing attempted to prevent the publication of the forty-five-page report, saying it consisted of smears, slanders, and 'disinformation … fabricated by anti-China forces' and interfered in Chinese internal affairs. James A. Milward discusses the attempted erasure of Uyghur culture and Xi Jinping's visit to Xinjiang in July in '(Identity) Politics in Command: Xi Jinping in Xinjiang'.

Hong Kong courts, meanwhile, cast aside 177 years of tradition in 2022 when the territory's justice minister decided that some people charged under the National Security Law would be tried in the absence of a jury of their peers. Among those affected is publisher Jimmy Lai 黎智英, founder of *Apple Daily*, the hugely popular, now defunct, newspaper that supported the 2019 protests.

Louisa Lim discusses often overlooked aspects of Hong Kong history, weighs up the resilience of the territory's unique local culture, and offers a personal and journalistic perspective on the city's five years of prodemocracy protests in 'Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong'.

China's LGBTQI+ community is another group that is in danger of erasure. In 'Double-Speak as LGBTQI+ Resistance', Ausma Bernot writes about the coded language that many in the queer community use to communicate on social media.

Troubled Waters, Pacific Ties

The economic disruptions caused by lockdowns and other COVID-related controls on movement in 2022 rattled global supply chains. When Shanghai's GE Healthcare factory, which manufactures the contrast media

used in medical scans, temporarily shut during the city's lockdown, for example, doctors in the United States and elsewhere had to postpone vital scans for cancer and cardiac patients.[15] The globalised economy is by nature vulnerable to such upsets; as Peter Hasenkamp of Tesla once said, 'It takes 2,500 parts to build a car, but only one not to.'[16]

Industries reliant on semiconductors include telecommunications, health care, computing, transportation, and clean energy. Taiwan produces 65 percent of all semiconductors and 90 percent of the most advanced chips. In 'Semiconductors, Supply Chains, and the Fate of Taiwan', Samuel George looks at how the location of the world's leading manufacturer of smart chips on the island affects the geostrategic calculus in both Beijing and Washington.

That calculus was tested in 2022. Like Deng Xiaoping and other leaders before him, Xi Jinping insists that Taiwan's 'reunification' with the motherland is a matter of when, not if. Yet, none of China's previous leaders has approached this task with as much urgency as Xi. The CPC is alarmed by an increasing tendency of younger Taiwanese to reject altogether the identity of 'Chinese'.[17] It is also closely monitoring the growing sentiment in Washington for abandoning its long-held policy of 'strategic ambiguity' on whether it would enter armed conflict on Taiwan's behalf in the event of a military attack by the PRC.[18]

In August, Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, became the highest-ranking US official to visit Taiwan in twenty-five years. Her visit prompted the 'Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis' (the first was in 1954–55, the second in 1958, and the third in 1995–96). Arthur Ding offers a Taiwanese perspective on the events of August in 'Buckle Up: Pelosi's Visit and the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis'. Lennon Chang, meanwhile, in 'Psyops and Cyberwar in Taiwan', looks at Beijing's intensifying grey-zone cyberwarfare against Taiwan, which includes hacking public information screens during Pelosi's visit, denial-of-service attacks on government websites, and the active spread of disinformation. Such actions are consistent with the People's Liberation Army's recent focus on developing an 'information-based combat system'.[19]

There are many hypothetical scenarios as to how the PRC might attempt to take Taiwan by force, but in all of them the navy plays a crucial role. Edward Sing Yue Chan's essay, 'Building a World-Class Navy: The Story of China's First Aircraft Carrier', tells the fascinating story of how China acquired its first such vessel, and describes China's increased naval assertiveness in 2022, including in the Pacific. There, Beijing's new security pact with Solomon Islands set off alarm bells in Canberra and Washington. In his chapter, 'The China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement: Clear and Present Danger', Sean Kelly examines the details and implications of the agreement. Denghua Zhang, meanwhile, describes how China 'recalibrated' its Pacific policies in 2022, partly in response to the reaction to that pact, in 'Beijing Reshapes Its Pacific Strategy'.

Foreign Ties

China historically has had a complicated relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union. Czarist Russia was among the imperialist powers that contributed to China's 'century of humiliation'. The newly formed Soviet Union, however, became the first of those powers to relinquish Moscow's imperialist holdings and claims. Mao Zedong greatly admired Joseph Stalin, but detested Nikita Khrushchev. Relations between the two socialist giants deteriorated in the 1960s to the point of border war and fears of nuclear attack. Later, relations warmed, though Mikhail Gorbachev's endorsement of *glasnost* ('transparency') and *perestroika* ('structural reform') alarmed the CPC leadership of the 1980s; when the Soviet Union collapsed at the start of the subsequent decade, the party took that as a lesson. When Gorbachev died in August at the age of ninety-one, the Chinese leadership's condolences were brief and restrained.

Vladimir Putin is a different story. Xi Jinping and Putin, who enjoy an ostentatious friendship, elevated their countries' increasingly amicable relationship to what they called 'a no limits partnership' at the start of the year. Shortly afterwards — although there is no evidence that Putin revealed his plans to Xi — Russia invaded Ukraine. Alexander Korolev's chapter, 'A "No

Limits" Partnership? China–Russia Strategic Cooperation', examines China–Russia strategic cooperation in the fraught circumstances of 2022, while Kecheng Fang discusses the reaction on Chinese social media to the war in Ukraine. The PRC has tried to navigate a neutral line on Ukraine, criticising Western sanctions against Russia while being careful not to violate them itself. In September, Putin indicated that he understood China's 'questions and concerns' about the conflict, though whatever they were, neither Xi nor other PRC officials said anything about them in public, and at the end of the year, the two countries held their customary joint naval exercises in the East China Sea in the interest of regional 'peace and stability'.

China's relations with Japan and Australia have not been quite as close. In 2022, China attempted something of a reset with the latter while celebrating fifty years of diplomatic relations with both.

Japan's military and imperialist aggression against China, which began with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and culminated in its invasion of China in the 1930s, is central to the narrative of the 'century of humiliation'. Anti-Japanese sentiment bubbles under the surface, spilling over in times of tension. In 2022, such sentiment played a role in the 'cancellation' of a popular actor.[20] After former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated in July, ardent Chinese nationalists freely rejoiced online.

During the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in August, five People's Liberation Army (PLA) missiles landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone — illustrating why Tokyo considers any attack on Taiwan to be a threat to Japan. In November, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida and President Xi held their first summit in three years. Yet, days later, Japan claimed that armed Chinese vessels had entered its territorial waters near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.[21] By the end of the year, Japan and Australia had strengthened bilateral collaboration on security.

In 'Taking Stock at Fifty', Yi Wang and I survey fifty years of Australia–China relations, through to the ice-breaking meetings between Australian ministers and their Chinese counterparts in 2022, including that between

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and President Xi. Geremie Barmé revisits the contentious idea that Australia could become a *zhengyou* 诤友 ('a friend who tells hard truths') to China.

This year, many stories were first commissioned for and published on thechinastory.org website, with the goal of providing timely expert analysis and background to current events, while highlighting important stories or aspects of stories that have been missed by the mainstream media. The authors of those chosen from the site for inclusion in this yearbook were given the opportunity to update them for publication. Other stories were commissioned specifically for the yearbook to cover emergent themes or major scheduled events, such as the Twentieth Party Congress. Limitations of space and resources mean that while we take a broad and multidisciplinary approach to the choice of topics, allowing both detailed reporting and broader analysis, we can never hope to cover everything that has occurred in the vast Sinosphere in any given year. The *China Story Yearbooks* together with thechinastory.org are intended to be a cumulative body of work that achieves balance and breadth over time and across platforms.

Vale

In November, the Chinese world farewelled Bao Tong, the influential Deng-era reformist who was the highest-ranking party official to be imprisoned after the protests of 1989. Bao, who had been a close associate of the purged party leader Zhao Ziyang, died at the age of ninety. Weeks later, Zhao's successor, Jiang Zemin, died at the age of ninety-six. The combination of the loss of two iconic figures of those times with the party's confirmation of Xi's third term — breaking a key convention set by the CPC under Deng — seemed to be confirmation that the first part of the Reform Era itself had passed. Hong Kong lost two of its sharpest and most iconic dissident voices as well with the passing of Li Yi 李怡 (1936–2022) and Ni Kuang 倪匡 (1935–2022).[22]

A Note from the Editors

The *China Story Yearbook* is a project initiated by the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) at The Australian National University. It has always been the approach of the *Yearbook* to view political and economic developments as part of a greater picture that encompasses society, personalities, and culture — a picture that is illuminated by considerations of language and history. Our ongoing reference to the China Story 中国的故事 reflects the principle set out by CIW founding director Emeritus Professor Geremie R. Barmé: China's story is not only the version portrayed by the CPC but also includes the diverse perspectives of a multitude of others, within and outside the People's Republic of China, who are dedicated to understanding the complexities of China through its language, history, culture, politics, economy, society, and most importantly, its people.

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