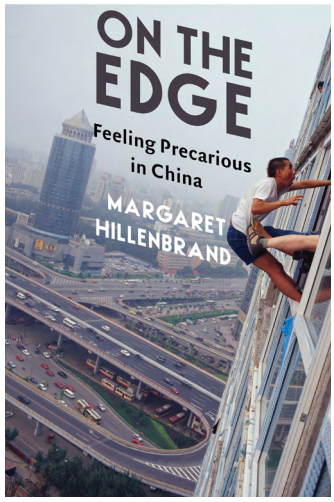

On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China (Columbia University Press, 2023)

On the Edge

A Conversation with Margaret Hillenbrand

Andrea E. PIA, Federico PICERNI, and Margaret HILLENBRAND

In *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), Margaret Hillenbrand probes precarity in contemporary China through the lens of the dark and angry cultural forms that chronic uncertainty has generated. She argues that a vast underclass of Chinese workers exist in a state of 'zombie citizenship'—a condition of dehumanising exile from the law and its safeguards. Many others also feel their lives are precarious, sensing that they live on the edge of a precipice, with the constant fear of falling into an abyss of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and dislocation. Examining the volatile aesthetic forms that embody stifled social tensions and surging anxiety over zombie citizenship, Hillenbrand traces how people use culture to vent taboo feelings of rage, resentment, distrust, and disdain in scenarios rife with cross-class antagonism.

Andrea E. Pia: In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978) famously proposes four figures of sexuality—the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, and the perverse adult—to explain the transition in the Western discourse of sovereign authority towards a form of disciplinary power that aims not at obedience but at the total normalisation (or *harmonisation*) of both private and collective life through the shaping of feelings, desires, and their expression in the ordinary conduct of individual bodies. In *On the Edge*, you seem to be after a similar analytical move—although à *rebours*—when looking at contemporary Chinese society through five figures of social and economic precarity: the delegators, the ragpickers, the ventriloquists, the cliffhangers, and the microcelebrities. You argue that these fractious figures enable the voicing of anger against the normalisation of social inequalities and allow members of the increasingly disenfranchised urban lower classes to stake claims to a richer form of citizenship. Can you tell us about the process that led you to centre your research on these figures, and what you think they accomplish for the study of contemporary China?

Margaret Hillenbrand: When I began working on this book, I planned to explore precarity in China through the lens of genre: poetry, performance art, short video, folk song, and so on. There's a vast quantity of cultural material out there that grapples with precarious experience and, in the early stages of the project, I thought genre or medium would be the most enlightening and efficient prism through which to survey it. But as I dug deeper, I realised that I was looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope. As I began working on this material, what struck me repeatedly was the high-voltage intersubjectivity, the electric current of personal antagonism, that seems to crackle across these cultural forms. There's always some kind of abrasive stand-off going on here: between avant-garde artists and the indigent people they

recruit for humiliating performance pieces; between unpaid construction workers threatening to jump from a rooftop and their wicked bosses on the street; between livestreamers who flout taboos and their so-called social betters who lecture them for being vulgar. This sense of the furious face-to-face was so strong it made me realise I needed to make a shift from *medium* as the organising principle of the book to *makers*, from genre to people. This is because it's in this space of bristling social tension that these cultural forms come into being. They're born in the crucible of anger, dread, and contempt.

Another reason I focused on these human figures stems from the core premise of *On the Edge*. In the book, I argue that the ranks of the immiserated in China—the largest underclass in human history—endure far more than inequality and insecure work. Their experiences are much better understood through the idiom of expulsion. They suffer this banishment on multiple fronts: from forced eviction to life-altering workplace injuries to the extraction of hard labour without pay. It seems to me that these experiences of expulsion have created an aberrant socio-legal condition. I call this 'zombie citizenship': a state of abject exile from the shelter of the law in which a substantial minority of Chinese workers—as many as 300 million people—currently languish, even though they theoretically enjoy full, even privileged, personhood under the law of the land in an example of what you've described elsewhere as a 'legal fiction' (Pia 2020).

The term 'zombie citizenship' seemed necessary because it captures the sense in which many working people in China are chained by toil yet simultaneously cut loose from the safeguards of the law. This is a paradox full of threat. It makes these workers real-world symbols of the unjustly wronged, whose mutiny is always around the corner. At the same time, civic zombiehood symbolises the fear—the fact—that no-one is safe from harm in a system where both the spirit and the letter of the law are applied inconsistently. But using the term zombie citizenship has to come with a crucial caveat—and this relates directly to my use of the five figures. Zombie is a provocative term. Zombies are sepulchral creatures, raised grotesquely from the grave: they have no power of speech, thought, or independent deed. So, I should say emphatically that I don't use this term in the book as an epithet for actual people. Instead, it's a coinage to describe the state of civic half-life into which some people are pitched in our current precarious moment. But the five figures I explore in *On the Edge*, and the cultural practices they create, offer vivid proof that people do not surrender to this fate tamely. Unlike the zombie, whose agency has been voodooed, the five figures show that citizenship—full life, in Giorgio Agamben's words—is worth going into heated battle for, even if that means taking the fight to those closest to hand. I'll say something a bit more about that in response to one of Federico's questions later.

But to get back to your question, I should make it clear that the five figures I explore in *On the Edge* do not—could never—constitute anything close to the full horizon of precarious experience in China. As case studies, I hope they're exemplary, even paradigmatic; but they're

also a long way from exhaustive. To treat this theme comprehensively (if that were even possible), I would also have needed to cover folk song, fashion, migrant worker museums, and much more. So, I had to make some choices. In part, that selection was directed by what was already out there in the field—for example, scholars such as Junxi Qian, Junwan'guo Guo, and Eric Florence have done fantastic work on migrant worker museums. But I also wanted to choose people-driven themes that would help to build a picture of precarity as a lifeworld. And with that in mind, I tried to match each figure with a keyword emblematic of life under siege, life without surety, as I scoped out the book. So, although the chapters crisscross densely in terms of theme, each is also shaped by a singular motif that has salience for that case study. Moving chronologically through the chapters, these emblems are 'exploitation', 'waste', 'grind', 'protest', and 'hustle'. Each emblem drives its own chapter, but they also cohere, alongside the five figures themselves, into a kind of affective assemblage for precarious experience both in China and elsewhere—a dark charter, as it were.

In terms of what these figures offer for the study of contemporary China, I hope above all that they can lend crucial humanist colouration to our understanding of precarious experience. As I argue in the book, precarity is a universal keyword for our times, but academic studies of the condition have mostly overlooked China until quite recently. What's more, the work that has investigated precarity in China tends to focus on contingent, casualised labour and does so from mostly social science perspectives (though there are, of course, some important exceptions, especially in the field of migrant worker poetry, where scholars like Federico, Maghiel van Crevel, Eleanor Goodman, Wanning Sun, Justyna Jaguścik, and others have done excellent work; there's also a superb special issue of *positions: asia cultures critique*, edited by Paola Iovene and entitled 'Cultures of Labor in Contemporary China', which came out earlier in 2023). In this sense, the five figures are a critical move intended to put flesh on the bones—personhood—of an approach to precarity that is grounded in the humanities and in cultural studies especially.

AEP: The central question of your book is, 'What might it mean to feel precarious in contemporary China?' To answer this, you conjure another powerful image, that of the *cliff edge*. It is at the cliff edge that marginal, surplus segments of contemporary Chinese society—rural migrants, factory workers, but also the educated unemployed, and the squeezed middle classes—come to reckon with their own progressive destitution. It is here that they experience at first hand the powerful counterforce of social gravity—gravity that by breaking with the post-socialist promises of upward mobility and generalised small affluence, drags the underclasses continuously down and forecloses the attainment of those status markers deemed by the Party-State a prerequisite for rightful citizenship and national belonging. You name this situation *zombie citizenship*. Yet, the cliff edge is for you also a conveyor belt of sorts, on which an increasingly larger portion of the Chinese populace is carried forth to experience social exclusion. And this experience ends up reinforcing the political principle that in contemporary China one should live according to the standards one might be able to achieve by one's own effort alone. After all, social gravity affects individuals and social groups differently, and an analysis of class composition would suggest that

within the Chinese precariat itself, there are certainly those who would be broken by a fall from the cliff edge, while others, better resourced, would manage to keep themselves 'suspended', to say it with Xiang Biao (2021), by frantically vibrating their wings to sustain themselves in the air.

I want to take issue with the *cliff edge* as a figuration of precarity and suggest an alternative image that, to me, appears more fitting of the brand of capitalist society in which Chinese citizens are made to dwell today. In *Economies of Abandonment*, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) draws on Ursula Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1975) to argue that the surplus populations produced by late capitalism are a little like the small child in Le Guin's short story, held forever captive in a broom closet and regularly abused by a group of strangers with the tacit consent of the entire population of Omelas. 'They all understand,' writes Le Guin (1975: 98), 'that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.' This image has the double merit of, first, individuating what you call the 'internal exile' of the growing ranks of the Chinese precariat (through the continuous denial of a stable home, a safe place to work, a steady means of subsistence). Second, it highlights the interclass complicities attending to the reproduction of economic and social inequality in China—complicities that are entertained in the effort of keeping the same inequality at bay for some. Therefore, to rephrase your own question: What might it mean to be rendered not precarious but 'abject' in contemporary China? What might it mean for the prospect of overt class antagonism in the country? Are you perhaps purposefully avoiding the more rigid language of class exploitation and, if so, why?

MH: I very much agree that Le Guin's allegory of the broom closet is in many ways horribly apposite for contemporary Chinese capitalism, not least because it conveys social abjection as a grubby but open secret. I'm not convinced, though, that the metaphor of the closet, which hinges after all on the idea of containment, is capacious enough to serve as a catch-all metaphor for precarious China. One of the points I make in the book is about the *failure* of containment—by which I mean the reality that abjection can't be confined to specific social cohorts in a world rife with precarity. And the attempt to box it in fails because chronic uncertainty doesn't simply unravel the social contract; it also starts to dissolve the lines of demarcation between social classes.

The analogy of the cliff edge captures this uncontainability: the precipice is by its nature narrow and squeezed, unlike the abyss that yawns below. So, its very topography exposes containability as a myth. The cliff edge also offers an answer to the question 'What might it mean to be rendered not precarious but "abject" in contemporary China?'. This is because the cliff edge is a two-part formation: it's composed of both the shelf and the drop, and the former induces vertigo only in proportion to the steepness of the latter. And in the same way, precarity is so gut-churning because it is only the smallest misstep away from abjection. Last, the cliff edge is perhaps a bit like the gladiatorial arena. It's a place where the hardy few survive if, and only if, they can dispatch their weaker others. It's a metaphorical site in which overt class antagonism is hardwired, where those who possess comparatively more social advantage can maintain their toehold only by leveraging that upper hand to shove others over the brink. Indeed, the fear of this short, sharp tumble from precarity to abjection is the propulsive

force behind many of the cultural forms at which I look in the book and the hostility that seethes within them. So, rather than avoiding the 'rigid language of class exploitation', the metaphor of the cliff edge addresses it head-on.

Ultimately, though, there's something bigger at work here. Over the past few years, memes and metaphors about corrosive unease and deadened opportunity in Chinese society have followed hot on each other's heels: 'lying flat' (躺平), 'involution' (内卷), 'Kong Yiji literature' (孔乙己文学), the 'youth of four nos' (四不青年), '*sang* culture' (丧文化). Each uses the language of analogy to gain some sort of purchase on what is both a pervasive and an elusive structure of feeling. This proliferation of descriptors makes it clear that this structure of feeling resists neat naming; it refuses containment, to use that word again. So, I offer the cliff edge as a heuristic tool very much in awareness of the fact that it's no more capable of nailing down this structure of feeling in its every shade of nuance than any other of the terms that have circulated in recent years. Probably the more tools we have at our disposal here, the better.

Federico Picerni: I very much agree with the book's core intent to show that class antagonisms continue to exist in contemporary China, and therefore to recentre the category of class. But what about the *underclasses*? The book considers 'laid-off workers dismissed from state-owned enterprises; landless peasants; those with disabilities and unable to work; unpensioned retirees; others who have fallen into homelessness or indigence, including recipients of the minimum livelihood allowance (*dibao* 低保); and, perhaps most important, the rural-to-urban migrants who work in factories, on construction sites, and in various branches of the service industry' (p. 7). Yet, some may argue your underclass is more a mix of different classes. For instance, if we adopted Lenin's criteria, we could divide classes based on the social division of labour. While I take your point that underclass works 'not because of empirical or theoretical accuracy' but thanks to its analytical value to capture 'the affective tenor' clustering together diverse disadvantaged groups (p. 11), this aspect is worth considering if we want to tackle the related issue of class consciousness. Do cultural practices reaffirm or dissolve the internal boundaries that exist between the social groups composing your underclass? What space is there for *intra*class solidarity among these groups?

MH: I very much take the point that China's underclass is heterogeneous, and I discuss this in some detail in the book's introduction. I note there that one key problem with the term 'underclass' is that it can perform 'a blanket homogenization of marginalized groups who are too disparate to group meaningfully together' (p. 9), and I cite examples such as the variegation between different groups of migrant workers and the divide between long-term urban denizens and newcomers to the city (as well as their second and even third-generation descendants). That said, I think it's worth saying again that I'm all too aware of the limits and liabilities of 'underclass' as a descriptive category. I'm sticking my head above the parapet with this term because it seems that if the necessary, normative, relatively neutral word 'class' is now off-limits—presumably because the socioeconomic differentials it

From Li Jikai 李继开: *The Waste Pickers* (Shihuangzhe 拾荒者, 2014).

denotes have become a runaway problem—then the term 'underclass' is almost certainly a blazing truth-teller about the state of things right now. So, using the term is worth the risks.

Moving on to class consciousness, I entirely agree that the question of *intra*class solidarity is a crucial one, and in many ways my book is written in direct dialogue with an important and inspiring body of work that explores this theme, as well as the equally vital question of *inter*class camaraderie in precarious times. Over the past few years, scholars working inside and outside China studies have shown not only that shared experiences of precarity can foster resilience and repair amid fragility, but also that culture—the making of culture—is often where that process happens. A lodestar for solidarity until its devastating recent closure was the Migrant Workers Home (工友之家), a multilateral nongovernmental organisation based in Picun urban village on the outskirts of Beijing. As a site of kinship, the home enabled both intraclass and interclass solidarity: it showed that cultural practices can serve as a salve for social friction. The Picun home proved that cultural practices can, as you put it, 'dissolve the internal boundaries' that divide members of China's diverse underclass, as people pushed to the limit find solace in writing, reading, and performing together. My book is indebted to the pioneering research that other scholars have done on this theme of solidarity. In fact, my expectation when I started the project was that I would build quite directly on their work.

But ultimately my findings took me in the opposite direction. What I found was that solidarity—transformational and visionary though it may be—is a quantity in diminishing supply as precarity bites, and in the book I refer to Picun as the 'charismatic exception that proves the rule'. As I explored a large corpus of cultural texts—poetry, migrant worker magazines, social media posts, short videos, performance art, documentary film, installations, interviews—what emerged was a picture in which culture is more often a space where bleak, fierce, tamped-down feelings run amok. Which is to say, I don't see these cultural forms as 'merely' representational; they don't offer an aestheticised refraction of social realities. I don't even think they exemplify Oscar Wilde's point that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life'. I ended up thinking of them not as artforms so much as lifeforms in their own right, sites through which repressed feeling is brought kicking and screaming into the world.

And the binding catalyst for this process is the strength and depth of fear and fury, not the balm of solidarity. We're conditioned to recoil from the rank irrationality of violent emotions, and rightly so for the most part. But the texts at which I looked in my book also display their own kind of hard logic: they show that antagonistic agency can work as a circuit board that conducts an essential electricity from person to person. I'm not disputing for a moment that camaraderie is a far healthier mode of intersubjectivity. But in times and places where solidarity cannot thrive—because people are atomised from one another, because political togetherness is taboo—antagonism can sometimes be another way of creating points of contact, of bringing about the face-to-face. I guess the key point is that vulnerability is a condition that people share in precarious times, even when they experience it along a wide continuum, and this state of commonality always harbours the potential for relationality.

The cultural practices I look at in the book are all about moments when people who are dislocated from others within their own class, or from people in other social groups, experience a hostile coming together. So, in answer to your question 'Do cultural practices reaffirm or dissolve the internal boundaries that exist between the social groups composing your underclass?', they can do both and, in addition, they may sometimes create a third state, one in which boundaries are neither reaffirmed nor dissolved, but in which people are thrust into tight, tense proximity across the divide—and that closeness can be transformative.

FP: Vital and productive experiences such as precarity, radicalism, and class struggle can be emptied of their content and turned into mere simulacra for the enjoyment of upper-class intellectuals, disconnected from real issues and movements. At the same time, having such an audience can help lower-class or counter-trend cultural creators acquire visibility. The recent demolition of the Museum of Workers' Culture and Arts (打工文化艺术博物馆) in Picun—which was part of the Migrant Workers Home you mentioned—should force us to rethink the pros and cons of interclass visibility in contemporary China. Let's take the exponents of *tuwei* culture (土味文化)—a term that you point out is untranslatable, which denotes a style of 'provocative' art based on the opposite of what is considered aesthetically, socially, or even hygienically accept-

able. Aren't they in fact consciously targeting upper-class viewers? And in so doing, couldn't they be seen as striving to demonstrate that they can conform to the dominant conception of the positive characteristics that the good citizen should possess to perform and fit into society—what usually goes by the name of *suzhi* (素质, usually translated as 'human quality')—rather than questioning the concept altogether? Contemporary worker-poets, by contrast, are sometimes engaged in the rekindling of the 'speak bitterness' (诉苦, *suku*) tradition. This practice originated in the revolutionary era and consisted of collectively venting one's rage and indignation at the abuses perpetrated by the oppressors and, by so doing, forcing ties of solidarity and political community. Worker-poets who do something similar today may be congratulated for escaping upper-class cooptation and reigniting older solidarities by voicing shared pains and pointing out the common (class) enemy. Could you elaborate on these shifting social geometries and the prospects for and limits of these cultural practices for radical politics in China?

MH: I entirely agree with you that any reading of these cultural practices has to remain open-ended. In the case of *suzhi* as a social protocol, many people enduring socioeconomic disadvantage in China do strive to 'better' themselves according to these assigned behavioural diktats. But on Kuaishou, the short video and livestreaming app that I explored in my discussion of *suzhi*, I found exactly the opposite. There, striving for high *suzhi* was a game for fools and following both the money and the fun meant being as performatively crass as possible. Similarly, the worker-poets who resuscitate the Maoist tradition of *suku* certainly open paths for lateral solidarity, and in ways that recall the class bonds of the socialist past. But there, too, my own case study—the poetry of Zheng Xiaoqiong—seemed to demonstrate the opposite momentum, as Zheng's later verse seems to want to 'level up', to tone down her earlier plaintive sounds of *suku* in favour of something a bit more socially emollient. In a way, these counterexamples simply corroborate the point you're making—namely, that interclass visibility has pros and cons and 'counter-trend cultural creators', to use your term, have to carry out a careful cost–benefit analysis if they want to pursue it.

Moving to the second part of your comment, these shifting social geometries do indeed tell us quite a lot about 'the prospects for and limits of these cultural practices for radical politics in China'. At first sight, the practitioners of *tuwei*, who revel in earthiness, seem at odds with the practitioners of *suku*, whose leitmotif is earnestness. They're counter-trend cultural creators who take ostensibly opposing stances on what it means to achieve interclass visibility. But on the structural plane, the two exist in a closely horizontal relationship with each other—and in a vertical one with those who are determined to set the cultural tone and thus shore up their own increasingly shaky position. On one level, these 'counter-trend cultural creators' can and do communicate richly and meaningfully within their class. The provocateurs of Kuaishou act in solidarity with one another as they heckle uptight *suzhi* protocols, while the poetic warriors on the factory floor are united in their mission to call out the injustices of the labor regime. But these are still practices mobilised 'from below', whose driving impetus is to remonstrate with a more powerful interlocutor.

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This cultural hierarchy, which is rooted in differential citizenship—in the *doxa* that some are more 'civic' or 'citizenly' than others—determines the 'prospects for and limits of these practices for radical politics'. In one sense, these cultural practices do show a shift towards 'class for itself' in Marxian terms, and that may harbour radical potential. But as part of that same process, this intraclass solidarity takes as its prime target more advantaged social others who are themselves just as fearful of the quicksand as those already deeper in the mire. In other words, a shared (if far from equal) state of precarity means that all class interests end up more antagonistically trained on each other than they are on attempting to rework the system *per se*. The core question for the future is whether or not these antagonistic encounters can also seed new ways of being together within a society where the state's grip on the system seems unassailable.

AEP and FP: Last, in exploring the figures of performance artists who appropriate the suffering and desperation of the underclasses by staging them in their haute-art interventions, the gentrification of working-class poetry in the hands of middle-class cultural brokers, or the microblogging celebrities who embrace and commodify their so-called social untouchability in exchange for online visibility, your book restages and dramatises the very familiar dynamic of neoliberal academia whereby subaltern lifeworlds and lifeways are reified and consumed, often by classed others, giving little back. Similar to Erin Huang's (2020: 193) analysis of Tsai Ming-liang's

movie *Stray Dogs*, your book invites us to question how we should feel about these characters and their torquing and bending of interclass responsibilities and self-exploitation into a novel ethical regime. It also invites us to consider our own ethical outlook as viewers and readers of such imponderable class-crossing acts. We would like to push you a bit further on this point. Writing about class voyeurism in the new Chinese social documentary tradition, Sun Wanning (2014: 129) has claimed that 'camera work can be a cruel means of storytelling, inviting people to reflect on their own miseries' without offering a way to change or improve their condition. What is at stake in such three-way encounters across class lines (the exploited, the exploiters, and the onlookers—that is, us)? Can we write books that are at once helpfully 'cruel' in exposing social exclusion but also potentially life-affirming and liberating for the subjects of exclusion?

MH: This is a vital question and I'm grateful to you for asking it because I didn't address it fully enough in the book and I should have. There are, of course, lots of ways of being a bystander. One can be lazily complicit; one can be craven; one can be gloating; one can be too far removed in time and space to intervene in the stand-off between aggressor and victim in any meaningful way. But one can also be the bystander whose own fate is foretold in that primary encounter between the exploited and the exploiter. This fact of premonition really guided my thinking as I worked on this book: the idea that the very ontology of the bystander—the notion that there are some people who have the luxury of looking on and standing back—is under terminal threat in our contemporary moment. My book is principally about precarity as an affective condition whose roots lie in the legal–economic–governmental nexus; but in a very real sense, this mode of precarity is also a messy dress rehearsal for the planetary precarity that is already lapping at our shores.

I allude to this point in the book's conclusion, which explores 'viral precarity' during Covid-19: the wild accelerant that the pandemic poured on already-chronic insecurity. But viral precarity should be understood as a contagion that is spreading not simply between people and social classes, but also between conditions of plight: from the legal–economic–governmental nexus to the still more fundamental matter of liveability in our world, a menaced state of being in which space for the so-called bystander is shrinking at speed. I don't delude myself that a book like this could ever bring anything 'life-affirming or liberating' to the subjects of exclusion. But I do think that reflecting on how people respond to precarity on a range of scales, and outside the soothing narrative of solidarity, is worth doing—and not simply in terms of alarmism or panic-mongering. Fury and fear, even when we direct those feelings at each other, may prove to be catalysts for new kinds of action at a time when simply standing by is becoming ever more impossible. ■

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