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I Source: AI King, Flickr

THE YEAR OF CRISIS

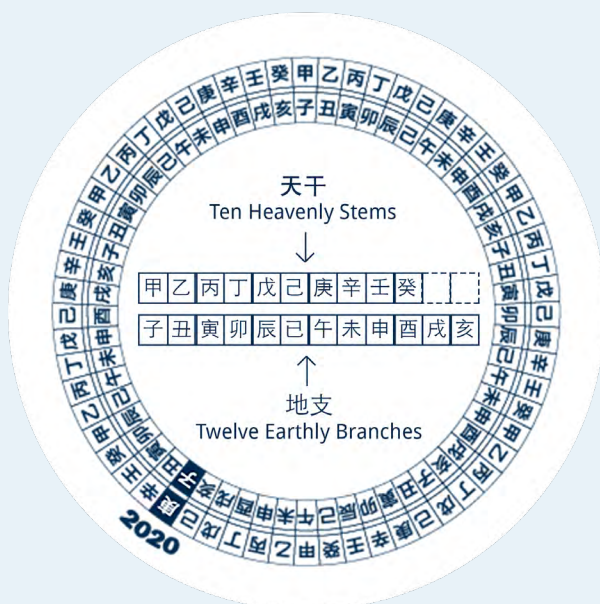
Linda Jaivin

Whenever the sixty-year cycle of the Chinese zodiac rolls around to the *gengzi* 庚子 year, one prepares for the worst.¹ Year thirty-seven, that of the Metal Rat, is traditionally associated with disaster and crisis. What an exemplary *gengzi* year 2020 turned out to be. It began with apocalyptic wildfires in Australia and a global pandemic that ended up sickening some 70 million people and killing close to 2 million, as well as triggering the deepest global economic recession since World War II. Tensions ran high in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, where the navy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) conducted live-fire exercises close to Taiwan, as well as along contested regions of the Sino-Indian border. In Hong Kong, the introduction of the draconian National Security Law sounded the death knell for the promise of One Country, Two Systems. Continued reports and evidence of the mass detention of Uyghurs, separation of Uyghur families, and other human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China further strained relations between the PRC and much of the rest of the world. And, an education reform in Inner Mongolia, which has ended the tradition of Mongolian-language schooling, has raised fears for the fate of the region's unique cultural heritage and questions as to whether state actions and policies in Tibet and Xinjiang might be replicated to some degree in Inner Mongolia as well.

Going Viral

The COVID-19 pandemic, which appears to have originated in Wuhan, was central to the sense of crisis in 2020 both in China and beyond. Towards the end of December, doctors in Wuhan observed with alarm that they had seen over 250 patients presenting with severe acute respiratory symptoms similar to those witnessed in the 2003 SARS outbreak. After Wuhan Central Hospital had a sample of a patient's lung fluid analysed, the lab informed them and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention that genomic sequencing indicated the presence of a new coronavirus

**Ten Heavenly Stems and
Twelve Earthly Branches
chart** 天干地支
Artwork: CRE8IVE, Canberra

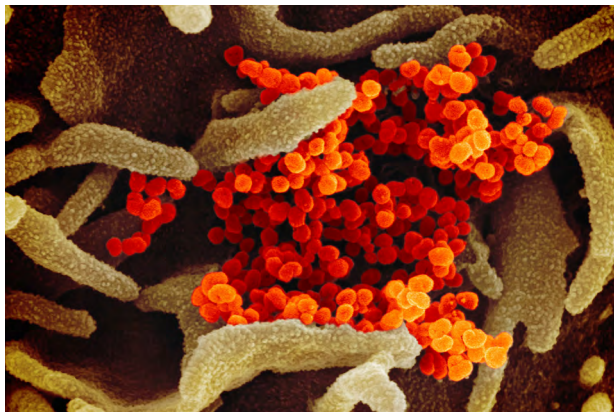


2020 — A *GENGZI* 庚子 YEAR, by Benjamin Penny

One of the ways that years are enumerated in China is to use a cycle of sixty based on the 'Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches' 天干地支. The twelve earthly branches are associated with the twelve-year cycle of animals that begins with the rat, before moving on to ox, tiger, and so on. The first of the ten heavenly stems, *jia* 甲, is paired with the first of these earthly branches, known as *zi* 子, the second, *yi* 乙, with the second, *chou* 丑, and so on until the first stem comes around again — only this time it is paired with the eleventh branch *xu* 戌. Thus year one is a *jiazi* year, year two is an *yichou* year, but year eleven is a *jiaxu* year. In one sense this is simply a way of identifying years. But it is also one element of the Chinese system of correlative cosmology by which different stems and branches (and their combinations) have symbolic or predictive meaning.

The year 2020 is a *gengzi* year, the thirty-seventh in the sexagenary cycle. As these things follow the lunar calendar, it runs from 25 January 2020 (Chinese New Year's Eve) to 11 February 2021. Each stem is either *yin* or *yang*. *Geng* is the seventh stem and is associated, in this scheme, with *yang*, and with metal — one of the five elemental phases or elements in Chinese cosmology, the others being wood, earth, fire, and water. *Zi* is the first branch and is associated with the rat. Thus *gengzi* years are the years of the *yang* metal rat.

The bad news is that *gengzi* years presage disaster. In the popular Chinese imagination these years are always calamitous. In 1840 — the first date usually mentioned — the First Opium War broke out, beginning China's 'Century of Humiliation'. The next one, 1900 brought the Boxer Uprising and foreign military intervention, along with the occupation and looting of Beijing. Sixty years later, 1960 saw the high point of the great famine, a result of disastrous government policy, that resulted in tens of millions of excess deaths.



An electron microscope image shows the Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (orange)
Source: NIAID, Flickr

(a type of virus with animal origins). It would eventually be named SARS-CoV-2 (to distinguish it from the 2003 SARS-CoV virus); the disease was eventually given the name COVID-19. Early on, the doctors understood that the new disease was transmissible, and highly so, through human-to-human contact.

On 30 December 2019, Li Wenliang 李文亮, a young Wuhan hospital ophthalmologist, warned his colleagues about the mystery disease, advising them to wear protective clothing and equipment as a precaution against infection. Days later, Li was hauled into the local Public Security Bureau (PSB), where police accused him of ‘making false comments’ that had ‘severely disturbed the social order’ and of ‘spreading rumours’. They warned him that if he did not stop, he would suffer the full effects of the law. ‘Do you understand?’ 你听明白了吗?, they asked him, and told him to write down his answer. ‘I understand’ 明白, he wrote. The state broadcaster, CCTV, amplified the PSB’s message, saying that cyberspace was ‘not beyond the law’ and such acts would not be tolerated. Just weeks later, Li Wenliang told his followers on Weibo — with whom he shared the letter he had been given by police — that he had himself fallen sick and was in hospital. He was one of what was then more than 6,000 people in China to have developed symptoms. With mass movements of people

across China in advance of the Chinese New Year holidays, and Wuhan a central travel hub, the disease quickly spread to Beijing, Shenzhen, and beyond.

On 23 January, on the eve of the holiday, the government placed Wuhan, a city of more than eleven million, into lockdown. Soon, travel restrictions were imposed on all of Hubei province's fifteen other cities, with over sixty million people forced to stay home and guarded barricades in front of apartment complexes or neighbourhoods a common sight. With a few exceptions, including the need to seek medical treatment, only one person per household was permitted to leave home, and only once every two days, for groceries and other provisions. This regime was replicated in a number of other cities around the country.

Many citizens cheered up themselves and others with WeChat video get-togethers, funny memes or by DJing online so that people in isolation could dance together. Many neighbours helped one another out as best they could with food and other supplies. There were heartwarming stories of camaraderie and mutual support.

Every night in Wuhan, at 7 p.m., people leaned out of their windows to clap for the frontline medical workers who were lauded as the nation's heroes. Yet as the US-based documentary filmmaker Nanfu Wang 王男栾, who made *In the Same Breath* about the crisis using footage sent to her by anonymous citizen journalists in the mainland, told *The New Yorker*:

When I talked to nurses, they talked about the seven o'clock clapping. On the one hand, they appreciated it. But, at the same time, they said, what is the use of clapping if people are not holding the government accountable? What does the clapping do?"²

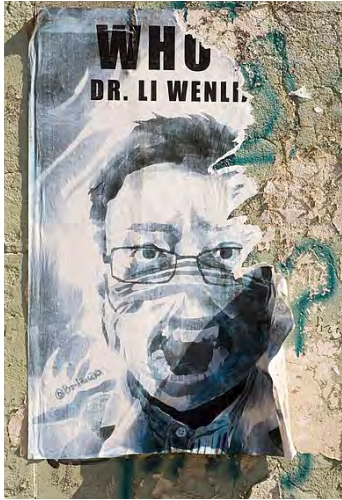
In Wuhan (and elsewhere), police patrolled with drones that shouted orders from the sky at people who were perceived to be lingering outside, or had removed their masks. Citizen journalists with smartphones, meanwhile, secretly recorded the ongoing chaos and fear in hospitals,

as well as instances of police brutality or overreach by citizen vigilantes in enforcing the lockdown. As would be the case elsewhere in the world, there were women and children literally locked into abusive relationships, and other vulnerable people forcibly separated from friends and family, contributing to psychological stress with occasionally tragic consequences. Stories leaked out such as that of the disabled boy who reportedly died from a lack of food and water after his father and brother were taken into quarantine.

The whistle-blower doctor Li Wenliang died of the disease at just thirty-three years old on 7 February. When the authorities, after some delay, publicly announced Li's death, the Chinese Internet — where the term 'whistle-blower' 吹哨人 had been trending — erupted with widespread expressions of grief, frustration, and rage, and the demand 'We want freedom of speech' 我要言论自由 before the censors stepped in. People in Wuhan shouted his name out their windows in anger and tribute. 'Do you understand?', 'I understand' and 'I don't understand' became memes — a silent reproach duplicated in cyberspace and on masks and T-shirts alike. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) quickly claimed Li for a martyr and shifted the blame for his persecution on to local authorities.

With hospitals in Wuhan swamped by cases and a rising death toll, the government ordered the construction of emergency dedicated field hospitals in Wuhan. The 1,000-bed Huoshenshan 火神山 Hospital took less than two weeks to construct, an extraordinary accomplishment, soon followed by a second, with 1,600 beds, and plans to convert several venues in the city, including an exhibition centre, into hospitals as well.

China publicly shared the genetic sequence of Coronavirus SARS CoV-2 on 12 January; the following day, Thai officials confirmed a case in Thailand, the first one recorded outside the PRC. By 30 January, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 82 out of nearly 8,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 had been reported across 18 other countries, but the



Damaged poster of Dr Li Wenliang
Source: PetrVod, Wikimedia

organisation did not officially declare COVID-19 a pandemic until 11 March.

Accused of overly harsh enforcement of the lockdown as well as covering up the outbreak by critics at home and abroad, the CCP clamped down on the remarkably detailed reporting being carried out by some Chinese media, including *Caixin* 财新 and *Caijing* 财经, and began detaining citizen journalists in an attempt to control the narrative. Controlling the narrative was easier done in China itself, where the project of universal surveillance and control that some have dubbed ‘big data totalitarianism’,

found an excuse in the pandemic to cast its net even wider. Censors diligently scrubbed from the Chinese Internet accounts that challenged the official version of events or lacked ‘positive energy’. The lockdowns were harsh, but effective. While people in the cities were confined to their homes through the erection of physical barriers to movement and human and technological surveillance, the lockdown was also effective in preventing the spread of the virus in rural areas, for reasons explained by Wuna Reilly in her chapter, ‘Beating the Virus in the Chinese Countryside’, pp.41–53.

Not everyone was getting the message, however — at least not at first. In his forum, ‘The Language of Trust’, pp.95–99, Gerald Roche looks at the public health consequences of a language policy that relies on an artificially constructed national language, Putonghua, for official and even urgent communications in a country where many people speak dialects and minority languages. Among the unsung heroes of the front

line at the height of the epidemic in areas including Mongolia and Tibet were cartoonists, social influencers, and even schoolchildren, all of whom helped to translate and communicate the government's notifications about social distancing, recognising symptoms, testing, and so on.

Among the more widely praised frontline exemplars was a group of female medical professionals from Xi'an who volunteered to serve in Wuhan at the height of the pandemic. A photograph of the group, who had shaved their heads, purportedly to make it easier to don personal protective equipment (PPE), evoked women warriors ranging from Mulan to the crop-haired Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. Yet, as Pan Wang writes in her chapter, 'Women's Bodies, Intimate Politics, and Feminist Consciousness Amid COVID-19', pp.75–89, when another group of women medical professionals, from Gansu, was shown tearing up as they too had their hair razored off, feminists questioned why, if women were expected to make such a sacrifice, their male colleagues were allowed to keep their hair?

The political, social, and economic implications of the COVID-19 medical crisis were not confined to China. A number of chapters and forum articles in the *Yearbook* examine these implications, from the pandemic's impact on international relations to how it affected the lives of Hong Kong's elderly working poor.

As the pandemic spread across the globe, an ugly side-effect was a wave of racist violence and hate crimes against ethnic Chinese and others of East Asian appearance in Australia, Germany, and the US, among other places. Chinese students studying overseas were among those who suffered from such abuse, although that was far from their only source of crisis in 2020, as Yu Tao writes in 'Chinese Students Abroad in the Time of Pandemic: An Australian View', pp.291–303. In May, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took racist rhetoric up a level with the repellent assertion that 'China has a history of infecting the world'. In 'The Future Repeats Itself: COVID-19 and its Historical Comorbidities', pp.167–177, Ari Heinrich looks at the historical association of China with disease in the Western imagination and its political, ideological, and racial dimensions.



Emptiness: The new normal around the world

Source: Dickson Phua, Flickr

Nowhere was this pathology on greater display than in the US, where the Trump administration reverted to using China as a scapegoat for its own failings in public health and the economy. In her chapter, 'US-China Relations: A Lingering Crisis', pp.191–203, on long-term tensions in US-China relations, Nadège Rolland observes that the pandemic affected great power relationships 'similarly to how the disease affects individuals: those with pre-existing conditions are the most vulnerable and the least likely to survive intact'.

The United States' long-standing and ambiguous relationship with Taiwan was one pre-existing condition of the US-China relationship that flared in 2020. In August, US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar became the highest-level US official to visit Taiwan since 1979. He was there ostensibly to learn about Taiwan's successful approach to managing the pandemic: the island, with a population of 23 million, had less than 800 confirmed cases and only seven deaths at the time. (Taiwan was also one of the few places in the world with positive economic growth in 2020.) Azar made a point of conveying President Trump's 'strong support and friendship' to President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文, who had earlier in the year led her anti-reunification Democratic Progressive Party to a landslide victory in the island's presidential elections against the more mainland-

friendly Kuomintang. Given that, and the fact that Azar clearly failed to implement any of what he had learned after returning to the US, where there were more than 17 million cases and over 310,000 deaths by the end of December, the visit appeared overwhelmingly political in purpose. The US approved US\$1.8 billion in arms sales to Taiwan in October alone, and President-Elect Joe Biden indicated that US support for the island will continue — ensuring an angry reaction from Beijing, which stepped up military exercises in the air and on the sea close to the island. When the Taiwanese Air Force challenged a People's Liberation Army Air Force pilot for crossing the Taiwan Strait's median line, the mainland pilot reportedly responded: 'There is no median line.' Wen-Ti Sung's Forum looks at how Taiwan's leaders are straddling the geopolitical median line that separates the two mutually antagonistic superpowers that are invested in the island's future.

Taiwan was also at the centre of an international controversy over its exclusion, at Beijing's insistence, from the World Health Assembly, especially as it was keen to share what it had learned about controlling COVID-19. In July, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the WHO by the following year, alleging misuse of funding and the organisation's supposed cosiness with Beijing. (President-Elect Biden reversed the decision soon after he took office.) In any case, the WHO remained the world's best hope for a thorough investigation with Chinese co-operation into the origins of the virus — an investigation it led in early 2021.

Xinjiang — Crisis Continued

Even Mulan, everyone's favourite Chinese woman warrior had a terrible 2020. Cinemagoers in mainland China were unimpressed with Disney's live-action remake of the popular animation, savaging the movie on the grounds of the wooden acting of its Chinese American star, Yifei Liu 刘亦菲, its clichéd martial arts scenes and many cultural howlers,



A painting of Mulan at the Walt Disney World Resort
Source: Steven Miller, Flickr

including turning the philosophical and medical notion of vital essence, *qi* 氣, into something like ‘the Force’ in *Star Wars*. In the US and elsewhere, the backlash was political. A #boycottmulan movement had begun the previous year after Liu voiced her support for the actions of the Hong Kong police during their brutal suppression of the 2019 protests in that city. The push to boycott grew after it was revealed that the filmmakers not only shot scenes in Xinjiang but also, in the credits, thanked the Public Security Bureau of Turpan and other organisations that have been implicated in widely documented human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities there.

In September 2020, Australian researchers for the Xinjiang Data Project, using satellite imagery and other sources, updated their estimate of the number of active detention camps in the region to over 380 and released a report claiming, among other things, that one in three mosques in Xinjiang have been demolished since 2017.³

Soon after the report of the Xinjiang Data Project was released, Xi Jinping 习近平 defended state actions in Xinjiang as ‘completely correct’. Claiming that happiness was on the rise in Xinjiang he summed up the

CCP's ongoing policy for the 'New Age' in the 'autonomous region' as 'reliance on law to govern Xinjiang, unity to stabilise Xinjiang, culture to assimilate Xinjiang, the people's prosperity to rejuvenate Xinjiang' 依法治疆团结稳疆文化润疆富民兴疆.⁴ The character translated (somewhat inadequately here) as 'assimilate' and pronounced *run*, can mean, when used as a verb, 'benefit', 'lubricate', 'moisten' or 'embellish' — and indicates a push by the CCP to limit Uyghur cultural and religious expression and promote 'ethnic unity' more broadly.

In June, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a Beijing-sponsored resolution by a vote of twenty-three to sixteen, with eight abstentions, that would fundamentally alter long-established conventions on human rights, removing the obligation of states to protect the rights of individuals, labelling rights as negotiable, and describing the expression of international concern about human rights abuses as interference in a country's internal affairs.⁵

All Hail

The personality cult of Xi Jinping continued to burgeon in 2020. In February, *QSTheory* 求是网 republished a breathless essay that exalted Xi, in a great number of ways and with many exclamation marks, for his 'superior political wisdom' in the face of the 'menacing coronavirus'. It praised his 'highly responsible attitude towards the safety of the people's lives and their physical health, and highly responsible attitude towards international society', speaking of how (in the same sentence), with 'broad feeling of love and concern for the people, and expert ability to get on top of complicated problems, cool-headedly respond to crisis, resolutely handle crisis, and scientifically prevent and control crisis', Xi had led the Chinese people to victory in the 'people's war' against COVID-19. It pronounced him the 'backbone' of the 1.4 billion Chinese people and the

‘pill of reassurance’ or ‘the one who sets the mind at ease’ 定心丸, both at home and abroad, helping the world overcome its terror of the pandemic.

While doing all that, He Who Sets the Mind at Ease further tightened political supervision and control over people’s lives in 2020. New regulations revealed in June demanded that party members — of whom there are currently some 91 million — not deviate from the party line even in private, off-hours conversation. Party members were also forbidden from reading or viewing any unauthorised books or videos or joining non-party-supervised WeChat groups including those formed by school alumni, hometown friends or fellow army veterans. Xi also launched a large-scale ‘rectification’ of members of China’s police and judiciary aimed at eliminating corruption and political ‘disloyalty’ — a campaign that will officially take off in 2021.

The new authoritarianism of the Xi era has shut down much of the civil society that had developed in the previous reform years and silenced many independent thinkers. In one of the highest-profile instances of dissent in 2020, Cai Xia 蔡霞, a long-term professor at the Central Party



Large billboard in Kashgar: ‘The hearts of General Secretary Xi Jinping and all Xinjiang ethnic groups beat as one’
Source: Wikimedia

School, which trains high-ranking party officials, accused Xi of having turned the CCP into a party of ‘political zombies’ and plunging China into ‘neo-Stalinist’ rule. She is now in exile in the US. Another prominent dissident, the irrepressibly sardonic and erudite former professor of constitutional law at Tsinghua University, Xu Zhangrun 许章润, was in 2020 banned from leaving Beijing, accepting media interviews, and receiving any kind of financial support including from friends, despite having his salary terminated. He was already banned from publication and teaching. Police also arrested Geng Xiaonan 耿潇男, a supporter of Xu’s and one of a fast-dwindling cohort of Xi critics still willing to speak out.

Throughout all this, as Delia Lin writes in ‘The Construction of Political Superiority’, pp.13–21, the CCP has promoted the view that only the superiority of the Chinese political system saved China from an all-out pandemic disaster. This triumphalist rhetoric resonated with many mainlanders who were proud of their country’s achievements in fighting the pandemic. Abroad, where so many places were experiencing tragic levels of mortality along with catastrophic failures of healthcare systems and political leadership, as well as severe economic hardship, it did not go down quite so well. After a restaurant owner placed a sign outside her restaurant in China’s north-east celebrating the spread of COVID-19 to the US and Japan, she was excoriated on Chinese social media and detained by the police. Abroad, news of the sign (and others like it) nonetheless fed suspicion of the CCP for its initial cover-up of the virus outbreak and the role that played in the pandemic’s global spread. Surveys of public attitudes towards the PRC showed precipitous drops in trust and approval in many parts of the world in 2020 compared with previous years. The CCP’s ruling Politburo, however, chose to frame 2020 in a positive light:

This year has been an extraordinary year in the history of the new China. Facing severe challenges and major difficulties, we have maintained our strategic determination, accurately judged the

situation, carefully planned and deployed, taken decisive actions, and put in hard work ... China became the only major economy in the world to achieve positive growth ... and the centripetal force and cohesion of the whole Party, the whole nation, and all the people have been further strengthened ...

This year is the closing year of the 13th Five-Year Plan. After five years of struggle, China's economic strength, scientific and technological strength, comprehensive national power and people's living standards have leapt to a new level. The task of poverty eradication in the new era has been completed as scheduled, achieving a moderately prosperous society is well in sight, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has taken a major new step forward.

Certainly, China's economy weathered the COVID-19 pandemic better than most, as Jane Golley and James Laurenceson discuss in 'The Chinese Economy: : Crisis, Control, Recovery, Refocus', pp.103–116. Two decades ago, the PRC contributed around 4 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP); today, that figure is around 18 percent. The boast about scientific and technological accomplishment was not an empty one either. Among other achievements in 2020, the PRC sent a mission to the Moon to collect rock samples — the first such mission since the Russian one of 1976 — and built a quantum computer called 'Jiuzhang' 九章 that claims to be 100 trillion times faster than current supercomputers! And President Xi Jinping did sound one of the grim year's genuinely hopeful notes when he pledged the PRC to carbon neutrality by 2060 and 'peak carbon' by 2030. In his chapter, 'China's Post-COVID-19 Stimulus: Dark Clouds, Green Lining', pp.139–153, Jorrit Gosens reveals some of the stumbling blocks that will have to be overcome, however, before China can get close to those green goals.

Friction Abroad

Even as Chinese workers in Yiwu laboured overtime stitching Trump 2020 flags and manufacturing MAGA hats, as Peter Hessler reported for *The New Yorker*, Trump and his administration officials continued to call for ‘containment’ and economic ‘decoupling’ from China.⁶ There was at the same time a move towards ‘detachment’ in Eastern Europe, with the Czech Republic, Romania, Poland, and Estonia looking like they would follow the US in barring Huawei from their 5G networks. The Council of the European Union stressed the ‘need to rebalance the economic relationship and achieve reciprocity’, while encouraging China to ‘assume greater responsibility in dealing with global challenges’. For numerous reasons, including Beijing’s expulsion of a number of foreign journalists (a response, in part, to Washington’s deportation of Chinese journalists and others), as well as the repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and continuing anger and suspicion over the initial cover-up of the pandemic, relations between China and much of the world grew strained in 2020. Even among countries whose governments remained relatively friendly with China, in Africa for example, there was popular outrage at reports of Chinese racism against Africans, from landlords expelling them from



The largest plane in the world arrived in Germany on 27 April 2020 from China bringing urgent medical supplies as part of efforts to help curb the spread of the coronavirus

Source: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Flickr

their homes in Guangzhou at the height of the pandemic to the ongoing appearance of blackface in entertainment programs.

Among Beijing's efforts to court international goodwill were the shipments of ventilators, masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to countries in need. The speedy retooling of factories to produce PPE also served to highlight the versatility of Chinese industry and reveal to many countries their own dangerous lack of domestic capacity and preparedness. In 'Mask Diplomacy: Shifting the COVID-19 Narrative?', pp.27–31, Verónica Fraile del Álamo and Darren J. Lim look at how the reception of 'mask diplomacy' intersected with Italian domestic politics. By the end of the year, the PRC's 'vaccine diplomacy' received its first strong endorsement when the United Arab Emirates pronounced the Sinopharm vaccine 86 percent effective.

The kind of Chinese diplomacy that attracted the most attention in 2020, however, was that branded 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy. Characterised by a pumped up and defensive nationalism and involving officials tweeting abuse at critics of the PRC's actions and inactions, it was tinged with triumphalism, xenophobia, and schadenfreude (evident, for example, in a tweet from a Chinese diplomat responding to racism-tinged remarks by a Venezuelan official: 'Put on a mask and shut up').

The CCP had previously declared its intention to speed up 'a profound adjustment in the international balance of power'; the wolf warriors were one indication of how that adjustment might work. Wolf-warrior diplomacy's poster child was Zhao Lijian 赵立坚, Deputy Director of the Information Department at China's Foreign Ministry. Zhao was the sender of the tweet towards the end of the year of a computer-generated image purporting to show an Australian soldier slitting the throat of an Afghan child after Australia released the results of a long investigation into war crimes committed by its special forces in Afghanistan.

Australia became a particular target of trade punishments in 2020 after the Morrison government made an early and unilateral call for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 that would have,

in Morrison's words, 'weapons inspector-like' powers. By the end of the year, as Victor Ferguson and Darren J. Lim discuss in their chapter, 'Economic Power and Vulnerability in Sino-Australian Relations', pp.259–274, the relationship had entered a dizzying downward spiral, with no end in sight. A Chinese diplomat listed fourteen grievances including Australia's ban of Huawei from 5G networks in 2018, 'unfriendly or antagonistic' reporting on China by independent media and criticism of China by Members of Parliament and think tanks, including with regard to human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Beijing considers that what happens in Hong Kong and Xinjiang is no-one's business but its own. Yet both remained a focus of not just Australian but also world attention and concern in 2020, especially following the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong on 30 June. Antony Dapiran analyses the law and its implementation in 'Hong Kong's National Security Law', pp.59–63. By the end of the year, in developments that would have been unthinkable just ten years ago, student leaders, independent media activists and others were in prison, Hong Kong people no longer enjoyed their customary exercise of free speech and association and pro-democracy legislators resigned en masse — all signs that the new law had ended the rule of law that was among the territory's greatest strengths and characteristics and the promise of One Country, Two Systems that had been the essential premise — and promise — of its Basic Law.

Humour, including black humour and satire, is one way in which human beings cope with crisis. But with restrictions tightening on all parts of the media in Hong Kong, the territory was forced to farewell much-loved Hong Kong comedic institution, *Headliner* 頭條新聞, that had long provided sharp satirical commentary on Hong Kong and Chinese politics. In the mainland, meanwhile, a young folk-singer with a whimsical sense of humour — and a serious message as well — whose videos, filmed in his grandmother's courtyard in Hubei province, provided one of the year's rare delights, as seen in 'Humour in Crisis', pp.123–127. Prayer is another form of release. Yu Sang reports on the response of Buddhist leaders and

organisations in the PRC and beyond to the challenges of the pandemic. Then there is the wisdom of the *I Ching* 易經, which tells us: ‘At peace, the gentleman does not forget times of danger, surviving, does not forget death, and in times of order, does not forget chaos; and so the safety of both the person and the country may be preserved’ 是故, 君子安而不忘危, 存而不忘亡, 治而不忘乱, 是以身安而国家可保也.

In addition to the chapters and forums mentioned above, Xu Cheng Chong looks at the fraught politics of 5G in Malaysia and Matthew Galway catches up with the Maoists-turned-mainstream politicians in Nepal. Beyongo Mukete Dynamic analyses the debt stresses related to Chinese loans in Africa, asking whether the loans are ‘choking’ the continent or ‘uplifting’ it. Annie Luman Ren highlights the relevance of Daoist tales and myth in official and popular responses to the devastating floods around the Three Gorges Dam, which took hundreds of lives and swept away millions of people’s homes and livelihoods in central and south-western China in the northern summer. Andrew Chubb, meanwhile, shows how the Indian nationalism that arose in the wake of the Sino-Indian border conflict that erupted mid-year turned China’s customary narrative of historical grievance and victimisation on its head.

Last Words

As always, we are interested in exploring the historical, cultural, and linguistic elements of the year’s theme. Benjamin Penny explains *gengzi* years, see p.xi. In ‘The Etymology of the Character of *Wei* 危’, pp.5–8, Jingjing Chen explores the rich etymology of the character *wei* 危, which appears in one of the most common contemporary Chinese expressions used to mean ‘crisis’, *weiji* 危机. The expression used on the cover, 多事之秋, is less common, but Yayun Zhu’s discussion of it on the following pages indicates why we have instead chosen this more poetic phrase, which refers to ‘an autumn in which much has occurred’. We hope that 2021 looks more like spring.

TROUBLED TIMES, by Yayun Zhu

In 1587, *A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*, Ray Huang wrote that nothing of great importance happened in 1587, the fifteenth year of the reign of the Ming emperor Wan Li 萬曆 (r. 1572–1620). Nevertheless, he contended, that year ‘must go down in history as a chronicle of failure’.⁷ Things that happened in 1587 portended a deluge of crises that in a few decades would devour the mighty Ming empire.

In contrast, 2020 was a year of great significance. Had Walter Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ flown by, he would have witnessed a chain of catastrophic events which ‘keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet’.⁸ It was a troubled time, the sort that is best characterised by the expression *duoshi zhi qiu* 多事之秋 — literally ‘an eventful autumn’ — that appears on the cover of the *Yearbook*.

The use of the character *qiu* 秋 (autumn, but can also indicate a year, or time) in literature has long been associated with tropes of ‘sadness’ and ‘desolation’. The Song-dynasty writer Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007–72), in his *Rhapsody on Autumn’s Sounds* 秋声赋, compared autumn, a season that kills the growth of spring and summer, to the Officer of Executions. In exile in his later years, the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) used autumnal imagery to describe displacement and alienation. Yet it is the modern revolutionary heroine Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (literally Autumn Jade, 1875–1907) who lent the literary tradition of *qiu* a sense of tragedy and sacrifice with the poem she wrote before she was beheaded by officers of the Qing, China’s last dynasty: ‘Autumn wind, autumn rain — my sorrow knows no bounds’ 秋風秋雨愁煞人. The character used here for sorrow, *chou* 愁, is composed of the character for autumn 秋 over the signifier for ‘heart’ 心.

While *qiu* evokes melancholic time, the phrase *duoshi* 多事 suggests a litany of precarious, unsettling events. From its early appearance in *Records of the Grand Historian* 史记 (finished



Eventful autumn, troubled times

Source: A_Peach, Flickr

Acknowledgements

The *China Story Yearbook* is a project initiated by the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) at The Australian National University (ANU). 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, and one 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, that China’s story not only is the version portrayed by the CCP, but also includes the diverse perspectives of a multitude of others,

around 94 BCE) — ‘the [Qin] empire was engulfed in many an affair, such that officials could not supervise them all’ 天下多事，吏弗能纪 — it indicates a realm in trouble.⁹

The first to put the two ideas together into what would become a set four-character expression was an earnest Confucian scholar-official born in Silla (modern-day Korea), Choe Chiwon 崔致遠. He came to the Tang capital Chang’an in 868 at the age of twelve to study and later rose to high office in the Tang. He coined the expression in response to what he saw as a series of bad decisions by the court that presaged disaster.

It later appeared in the writings of the tenth-century official and historian Sun Guangxian 孙光宪, who lived in the dangerous and uncertain era known as the Five Dynasties. Sun advised: ‘So in the eventful autumn [troubled times], hide your traces and lie low, do not be the one to lead an uprising.’ 所以多事之秋，灭迹匿端，无为绿林之嚆矢也。¹⁰

The term appears frequently in vernacular novels of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, including *Outlaws of the Marsh* 水浒传, *The Investiture of the Gods* 封神演义, and *The Travels of Lao Can* 老残游记. It typically accompanies the question of how people negotiate a time of crisis.

When Chairman Mao used the phrase to describe the troubled times of 1956, however, he was mainly referring to events outside China that were shaking the foundation of international communism — the anti-Soviet resistance of the Hungarian Uprising and the Polish October. Official media in the People’s Republic of China rarely use the term to describe the country’s internal vicissitudes; the rhetoric is mainly reserved for the misfortunes of foreign rivals, preferring more uplifting expressions for domestic woes such as ‘hardships strengthen a nation’ 多难兴邦.

In 2020, the Chinese Communist Party has used the phrase *duoshi zhi qiu* to describe calamities abroad while showcasing China’s successes. No sooner had the pandemic begun to abate in April than the *Global Times* used it to warn Taiwan against pursuing an active role on the world stage and to taunt Western democracies for their failures to contain the pandemic. The question remains: in an age of globalisation, in which China is tied to the rest of the world in so many ways, including economically, is it possible that the troubles of an autumn in one place can be kept from worrying another?

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.

The *China Story Yearbook* is truly a collaborative effort. Co-editors Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin, and Sharon Strange are enormously grateful to all our contributors and our designers, Michelle van Eerde and Laura Sibley at CRE8IVE, to Jan Borrie for copy-editing the book, to Sheehan Yang Xin for typesetting the book, to Melodie Chin-Jie Liu for her help with finalising the book ready for its publication, and to two anonymous referees for taking the time to read and comment on it prior to publication.

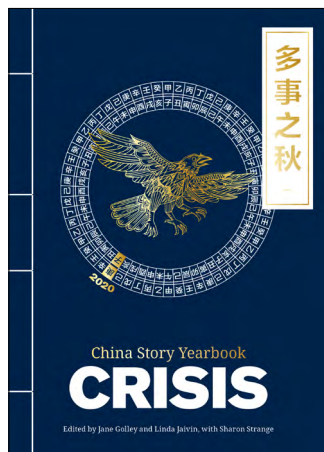
The Cover Image

The characters at the centre of this Yearbook's cover are 多事之秋. For more information on the etymology of this four-character phrase, see Information Box 'Troubled Times', pp.xxviii–xxix.

The basic design of the cover refers to a traditionally bound Chinese book with 'stitched binding' 線裝. Block-printed individual leaves of text were folded into a concertina shape then stitched together between dark blue paper covers. Four stitches, as on the cover of this book, was standard. These individual paper-bound volumes, known as fascicles, were then stacked together and encased in a protective covering called a *tao* 套 — a wrap-around, board-and-cloth case fastened using bone pegs and loops. This became the preferred printing format from the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) until the end of the imperial era in the nineteenth century when western bindings gradually took over.

The large double-circle in the centre of the cover is a depiction of part of a fengshui master's compass that makes use of the Chinese cycle of sixty that was used for counting hours, days, months, and years. This cycle is created from the Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches 天干地支. The twelve earthly branches are sometimes represented by animals, which has become a well-known way of referring to year of one's birth: 'the year of the pig,' 'the year of the dragon,' etc. For further explanation on the calendrical cycle, see Information Box '2020 — A *Gengzi* 庚子 Year', p.xi.

Two animals appear on this *Yearbook's* cover: a rat and a three-legged crow. The rat is the first of the twelve animals associated with the Earthly Branches. 2020 was the Year of the Rat and it was also aligned with 'metal' in the cycle of five elemental phases (the others are wood, earth, fire, and water). A metal rat year comes around once in every cycle of sixty and



Cover of the *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*
Artwork: CRE8IVE, Canberra

has become associated with disaster and crisis. Each time one of these years has occurred since the latter days of the Qing Dynasty, it has brought with it widespread death and destruction in China. In 1840, the Opium War broke out; 1900 brought the Boxer Uprising; and 1960 saw the high point of the great famine. Sixty years later, 2020 was no exception with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its global ramifications.

The three legged-crow, 三足鳥, in the sun is a motif found across East Asia in art and archaeology. The reason why a crow is depicted in the sun is disputed — one theory has it that it has something to do with sunspots — but we do know that the connexion goes as far back as the Neolithic. One later story — probably trying to account for this rather odd conjunction and suspiciously including a lesson in filial piety — alleges that the Chinese sun goddess Xihe 羲和 was the mother of ten ‘child-suns’ that took the form of three-legged crows. Each night, the child-suns slept in the lower branches of a mulberry tree and every morning Xihe bathed one of her children and let it rise into the sky and be the sun for a day. One day, however, all ten child-suns rose and scorched the earth. At the behest of the emperor, the child-suns’ father tried to persuade his children to only appear one at a time but they refused to listen. Thus, an archer was sent to shoot them down but one of the child-suns managed to escape the attack. It is said that this is the sun in the sky today.

The crow’s three legs are generally attributed to three being a *yang* number in *yin-yang* theory, and *yang* is associated with the sun, light, and heat.¹¹ Indeed, the Chinese characters that form the word *yin-yang* (in their simplified forms) include the glyphs for the moon 月, thus *yin* 阴, and the sun 日, thus *yang* 阳. The moon and the sun have always played a significant role in Chinese culture. A solar eclipse in imperial times presaged natural disasters, man-made misfortunes, and chaos caused by war, for example. The first solar eclipse of 2020 took place on 21 June, where its central path crossed southern China and Taiwan. A partial eclipse was visible in Wuhan — which appears to be the origin of the COVID-19 virus. The image of this partial eclipse, as seen in Wuhan, can be found on the cover flaps. Traditionally, a hare appears in the moon but for this image we have substituted the hare for a rat to reflect the Chinese zodiac sign for 2020.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin with Sharon Strange, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.00