CRISIS

多事之秋

EDITED BY
Jane Golley AND Linda Jaivin,
WITH Sharon Strange

CHINA STORY YEARBOOK: CRISIS

中心 全球研究中心
AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON CHINA IN THE WORLD

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本书概要

2020 庚子年危机四起。新年伊始的澳大利亚丛林大火映现全球气候危机的不详之征。习近平于9月宣布中华人民共和国将在2060年前实现碳中和，该承诺或有助于缓和气候危机，但中国必须首先解决自身煤炭依赖问题。无可置疑，是年最为惊心动魄的大事乃新冠状病毒引起的疫病大流行。时疫或起源于武汉市一海鲜市场，年末已夺走全球近200万人的生命，世界各地闭关锁国，经济举步维艰、陷入衰退。中国成功地在国内控制住疫情，并实现了全年经济增长，印证了中国共产党所宣传的『社会主义制度的优越性』。当然这并非万口一谈，中国共产党最初对病毒爆发的掩饰一直饱受质疑，政府透明度的缺乏如何助长了疫病早期的蔓延也备受争议。

《中国故事2020年鉴：多事之秋》纵览金鼠之年的重重风波，如年中洪灾泛滥引发的对三峡大坝溃堤的担忧。本书将目光投向疫情期间中国女性的命运：有家庭暴力的肆虐、官方塑造下的一线女性医护者的群像、也有某著名舞蹈家因无后嗣而招致的群嘲。本书还审视江河日下的中澳关系、中美之间艰难『共患』、香港『一国两制』的终结、中印激烈的边境冲突，以及疫情激发的反华种族主义的抬头。《年鉴》亦呈现诸如道士、佛教徒与幽默家等各色各样人士面临危机时的反应——因为在满目萧条万物失色之时，唯有哲思、祈祷与笑声能带来人间慰藉。

Translation by Yayun Zhu

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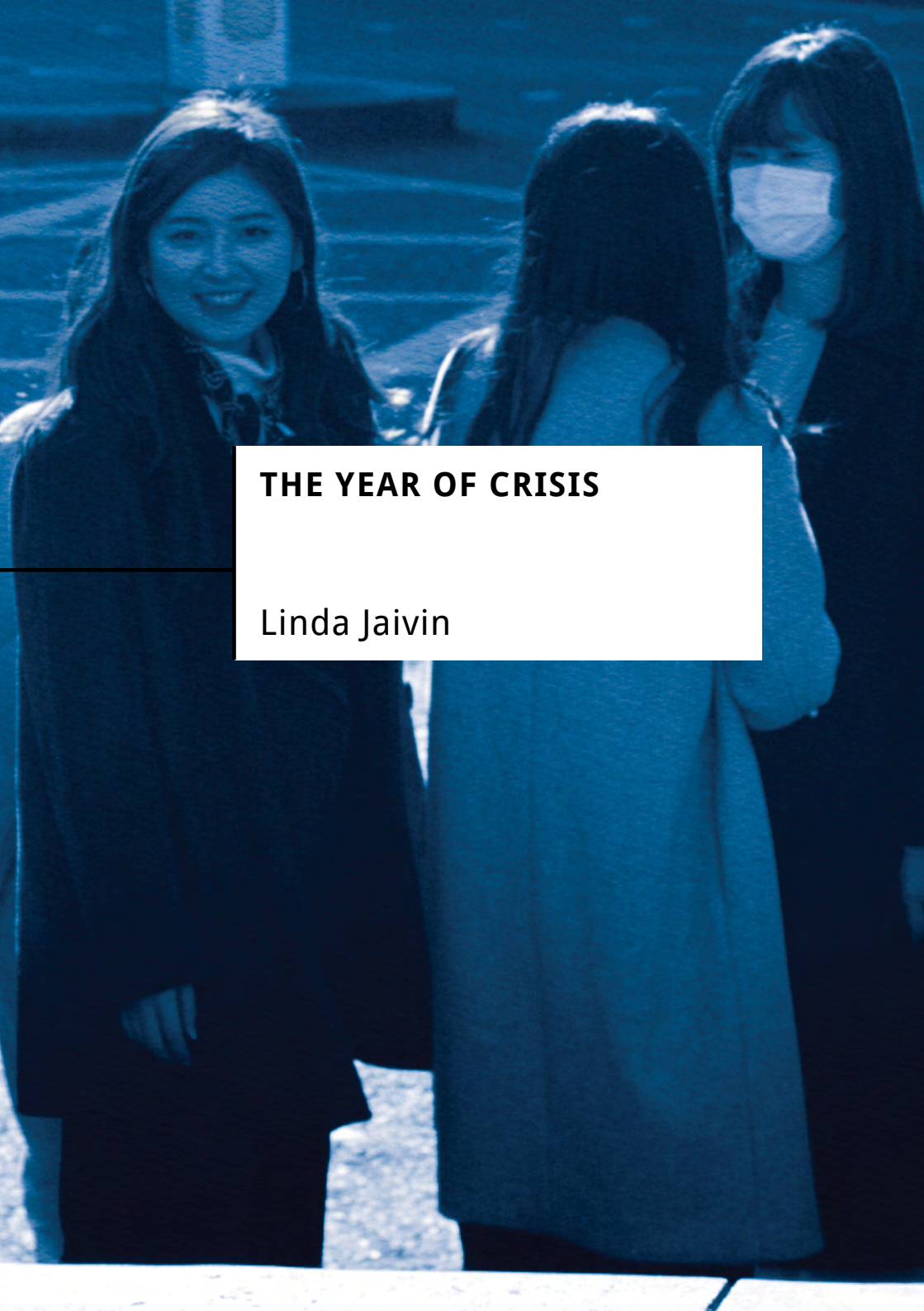
INTRODUCTION

Source: AI King, Flickr



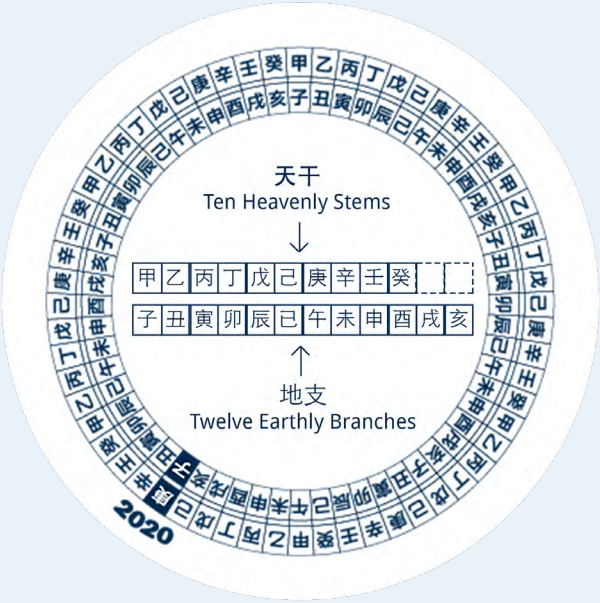
THE YEAR OF CRISIS

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



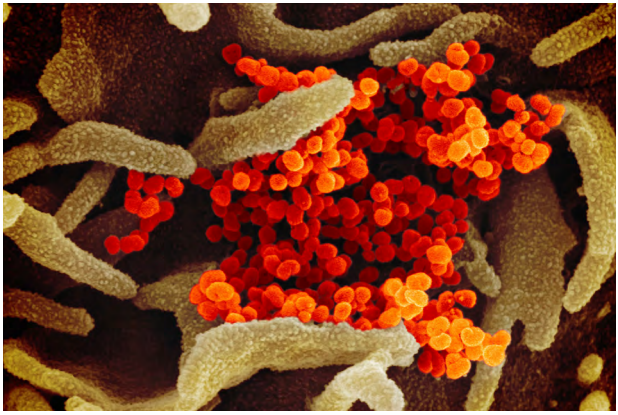
Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches chart 天干地支
Artwork: CRE8IVE, Canberra

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 王男栻, 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]

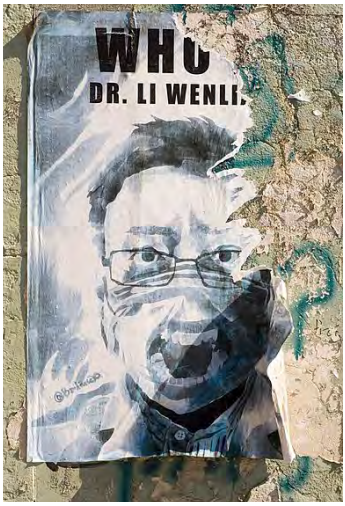
In Wuhan (and elsewhere), police patrolled with drones that shouted orders from the sky at people who were perceived to be lingering outside, or had removed their masks. Citizen journalists with smartphones, meanwhile, secretly recorded the ongoing chaos and fear in hospitals,

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

Eventful autumn, troubled times
Source: A_Peach, Flickr

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 signific 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

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 崔致远. 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 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.

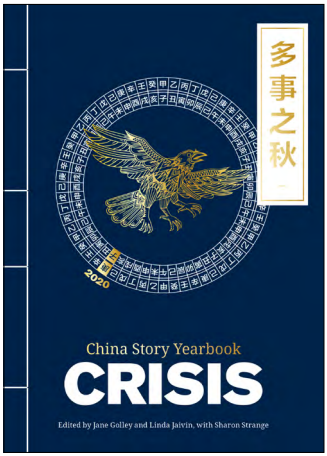
When Chairman Mao used the phrase to describe the troubled times of 1956, however, he was mainly referring to events outside China that were shaking the foundation of international communism — the anti-Soviet resistance of the Hungarian Uprising and the Polish October. Official media in the People's 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



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

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

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, 三足烏, 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.

论坛

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FORUM

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STANDING ON A PRECIPICE

The Etymology of the Character *Wei* 危

· JINGJING CHEN

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE CHARACTER *WEI* 危

Jingjing Chen

IN THE EARLIEST FORM of Chinese writing — oracle bone inscriptions from the second millennium BCE — we find the graph . It was used to denote an empty vessel that was easy to overturn and, by extension, connoted a lack of stability. In jade seals of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), this graph evolved into a clearer compound ideograph, . Scholars in the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) identified this as *xian* 㔾 'a man', *ren* 人 'on top of a mountain', and *shan* 山 'in imminent danger of falling'. The character *xian* 㔾 was also considered interchangeable with the character *xian* 仙, denoting a man climbing a mountain but which came to refer to an immortal being.

The meaning of the graph continued to develop; by the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), 㔾 had become the character for 'crisis', 危. Two radicals — semantic indicators of a Chinese character — helped transform the original graph. They were *jie* 𠂤, signifying possible dangers to people on the mountains, and *chang* 厂, indicating the height of the mountains and the objects on top of them. The graph of *jie* 𠂤, with etymological roots in the concept of kneeling, has two main meanings, both of which denote dangers related to military affairs. As a verb, *jie* 𠂤 signifies 'to moderate and to rule'; its secondary meaning is a noun, meaning 'military credentials'. Through the

introduction of the radical of *jie* 卩, the sense of 'danger', 'precipitousness', and 'crisis' for the basic meaning of *wei* was reinforced.

The component *chang* literally means 'rooftop'. With the introduction of *chang*, *wei* came to describe objects on high, including those on high mountains and in the sky.

As a corollary, *wei* also came to describe objects such as buildings on top of mountains, including Buddhist or Daoist temples and shrines. Under the roof, the radical 卩 also has the meaning of worship and praying on one's knees. Astrology developed in the late Warring States period and the Qin and Han dynasties, and, in a dictionary of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), we find that *wei* could also refer to the 'lunar lodge' or constellation known in Western tradition as Aquarius, which was believed to be the celestial complement of the earthly state of *Qi*.

During the reign of the first Qin emperor, a standardised system of written script was adopted throughout the empire and was continued over subsequent centuries. The character *wei* 危 became the standard. Its two basic meanings stabilised as well: being in danger and on high. Written in the style of writing known as small-seal script, *wei* 危 was often used interchangeably with the near-homophone *wei* 衛, meaning 'to defend' or 'to guard' or, as a noun, 'military guards'. Its meaning now encompassed notions of physical sickness, warfare and political challenges, including challenges to high-ranking officials engaged in military affairs with political opponents or rival states, while also describing those objects on high.

The great Tang dynasty poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762 CE) used *wei* to describe a Buddhist temple on the summit of a mountain where he once spent the night:

> *Here it is night: I stay at the Summit Temple.*
> *Here I can touch the starts with my hand.*
> *I dare not speak aloud in the silence.*
> *For fear of disturbing the dwellers of Heaven.*
> 危楼高百尺，手可摘星辰。
> 不敢高聲語，恐驚天上人。
> ——李白《夜宿山寺》

The Summit Temple serves as a bridge or place of mediation between the earthly and heavenly worlds; *wei* here serves to link humans and deities.

Wei appears in a number of political aphorisms, in which the word draws on the meanings of danger and height. In Confucius's warning to the ruler of Lu 魯, given during the turbulent spring and autumn, he contrasted *wei* with an 安, meaning stable, safe, and secure:

> [T]he land is not fruitful nor society prosperous, the people are hungry and cold, education and nurture neglected, social morals and customs disordered, and the people scattered. This is what we mean when we say *wei*.
> 地而不繁殖, 財物不蕃, 萬民複興寒, 教訓不行, 風俗淫褻, 人民流散, 曰危.

Referring to both basic meanings of the word, a Han text, meanwhile, advised rulers to

> be lofty but not arrogant, so as to dwell on high without danger [*wei*]. Be frugal and circumspect, to achieve fullness without overspill. Dwell on high without danger [*wei*], and nobility shall be long maintained.
> 在上不驕, 高而不危, 制節謹度, 滿而不溢, 高而不危, 所以長守貴也.

Similar messages were repeated or rephrased in many subsequent political texts on social norms, administration and ceremonial rites. During the Three Kingdoms period that followed the Han — a time of division and *wei* — the great strategist Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181–234 CE) famously described how his home state of Shu, in present-day Sichuan, had come under threat (see image on p.8). Zhuge combined *wei* with *ji* 急 'urgent' to refer to existential danger: Shu was at war with Wei 魏 (a different *wei*), which was militarily stronger. The ruler of Shu, Zhuge Liang's master, had just passed away. As Zhuge wrote:

> The late emperor was taken from us before he could finish his life's work, the restoration of the Han. The [old Han] empire is divided in three, Yizhou [modern Sichuan] is war-worn and under duress, and our life and very survival is under imminent threat [*weiji*].
> 帝創業未半而中道崩殂, 今天下三分, 益州疲敝, 誠危急存亡之秋也.

Zhuge's words resonated in the turbulence and division of the twentieth century. When

Stone carving of the *First Memorial on the Northern Expedition* 前出師表, written by Zhuge Liang, calligraphy by Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142 CE) at the Chengdu Wu Hou Shrine 成都武侯祠
Source: 蔣亦炯, Wikimedia

Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968), a revolutionary Chinese playwright and lyricist, composed the lyrics for 'March of the Volunteers' for the music of a film, the Japanese had invaded the People's Republic of China (PRC). The lyrics declared that 'China faces her greatest peril' 中華民族到了最危險的時候, using the phrase *weixian* 危險 ('crisis' plus 'peril'). The 'March of the Volunteers' later became the national anthem of China. In the Korean War of the early 1950s, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 framed China's decision to aid North Korea in these terms: 'With lips gone, teeth are exposed to cold. With the door smashed, the hall would be in danger [*wei*].' 唇亡齒寒, 戶破堂危.

These days, *wei* is used as a reminder not to forget the danger and difficulties of earlier times. In 2017, President Xi Jinping 习近平 told the Politburo that, even when there is political and economic stability, people should be prepared for danger, quoting the ancient *Book of Divination* or *I Ching* 易經:

> When resting in safety, do not overlook the possibility of danger [*wei*]; when all seems stable do not overlook that ruin may happen; when all is in a state of order, do not overlook that chaos may erupt. 安而不忘危, 存而不忘亡, 治而不忘亂.

Today, *wei* is commonly combined with *ji* 機 'opportunity' to refer to crisis 危機, or 危机 in simplified characters. Describing the global COVID-19 pandemic, *weiji* could be seen to express both crisis and hope.

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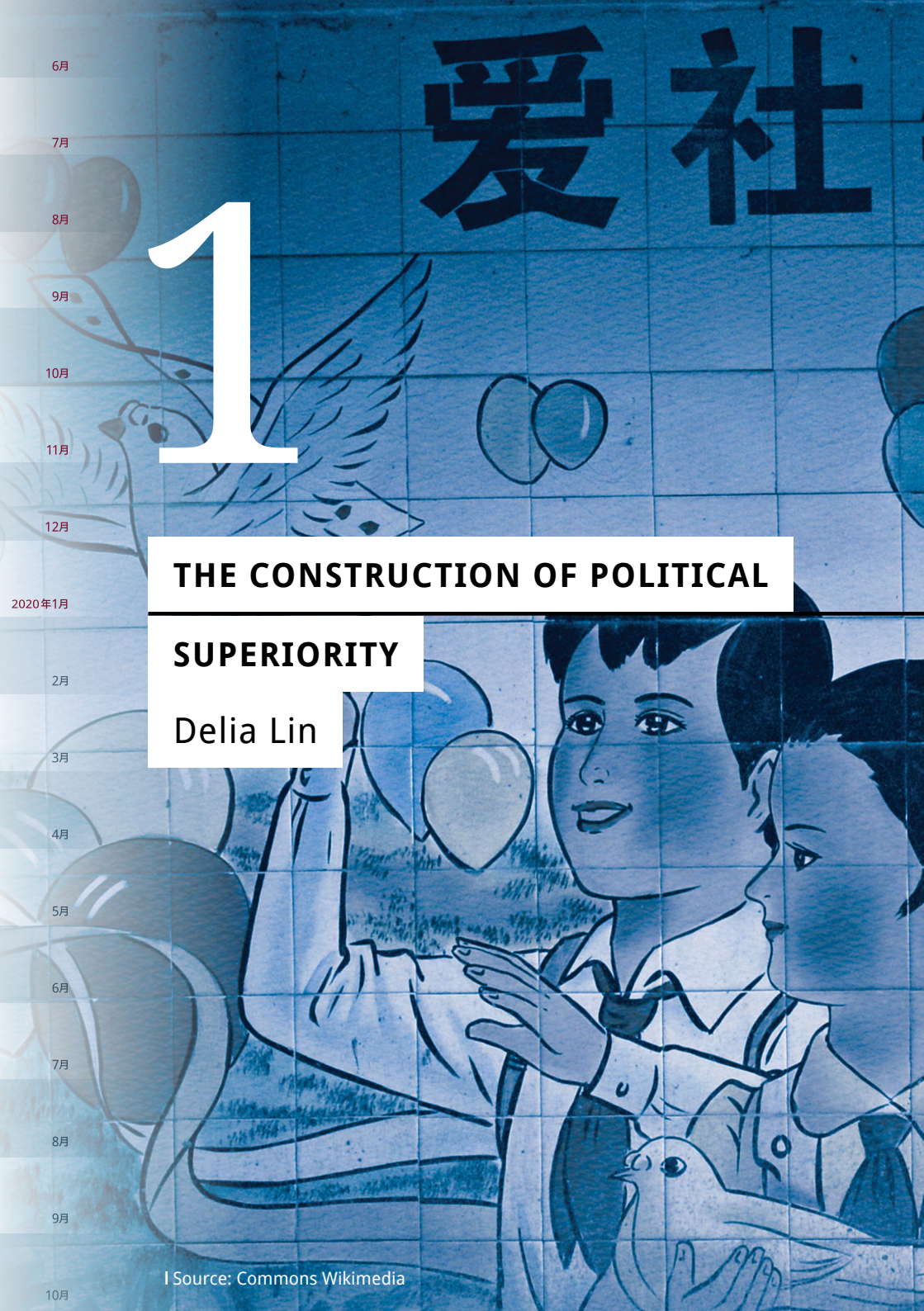
THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL SUPERIORITY

Delia Lin



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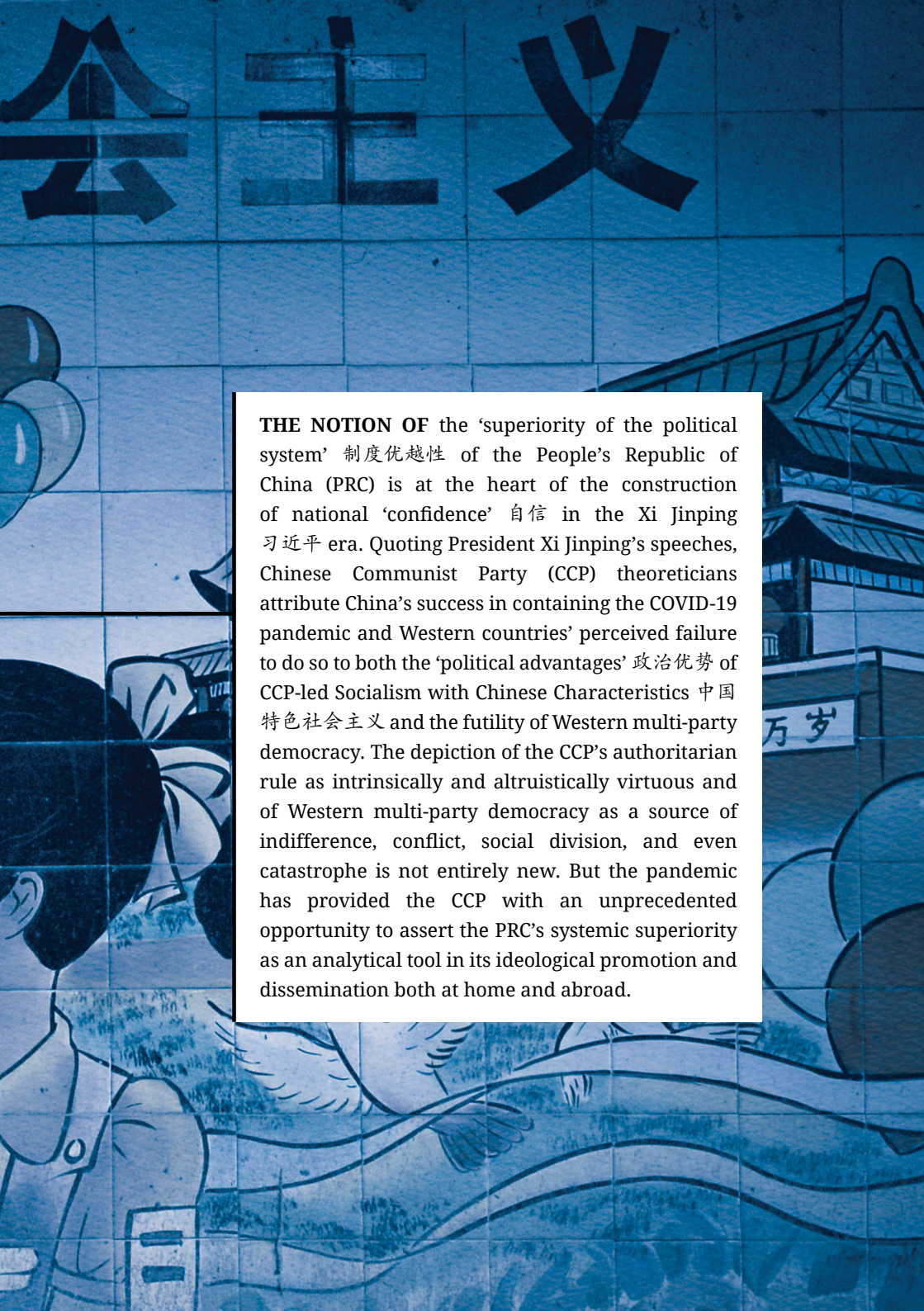

THE NOTION OF the 'superiority of the political system' 制度优越性 of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is at the heart of the construction of national 'confidence' 自信 in the Xi Jinping 习近平 era. Quoting President Xi Jinping's speeches, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) theoreticians attribute China's success in containing the COVID-19 pandemic and Western countries' perceived failure to do so to both the 'political advantages' 政治优势 of CCP-led Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 中国特色社会主义 and the futility of Western multi-party democracy. The depiction of the CCP's authoritarian rule as intrinsically and altruistically virtuous and of Western multi-party democracy as a source of indifference, conflict, social division, and even catastrophe is not entirely new. But the pandemic has provided the CCP with an unprecedented opportunity to assert the PRC's systemic superiority as an analytical tool in its ideological promotion and dissemination both at home and abroad.

Vice Premier of the Chinese State Council Wang Yang
Source: President of Russia, Kremlin website

Viewing the Pandemic Through the Lens of Political Superiority

Party leaders and academics have long claimed the superiority of China's particular form of socialism over capitalism, attributing China's accomplishments to its unique political system and the leadership of the CCP, including the rapid economic development of the post-Mao Reform Era.[1] Those outside observers who treat this as mere rhetoric are in danger of misunderstanding the advocates of economic reform as somehow automatically at odds with the socialist system. At the National People's Congress in 2013, newly appointed member of the CCP Politburo Wang Yang 汪洋, widely acclaimed in the West as an avid proponent of reform, told the delegates of his home province of Anhui that the West was anxious about the rise of China — not because of its growing economic, technological, and military strength, but because of the superiority of the Chinese political system over Western models.[2]

With China on its way to recovery from the pandemic while the US, the UK, and numerous European countries have struggled to get on top of the public health crisis, the CCP was quick to credit the Chinese experience

of controlling the virus as indisputable proof of this superiority. The central government white paper on the pandemic, issued on 7 June, portrayed the process as a grand battle — a 'people's war' 人民战争 under Xi Jinping's 'personal command' 亲自指挥 — that showcased the strength and advantages of the CCP-led Chinese political system.[3]

Soon after the publication of the white paper, the Central Party School's bi-monthly political theory journal *Qiushi* 求是 published an article titled 'Battling against the pandemic highlights the superiority of the political system of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'. The author was Qin Gang 秦刚, a research professor in the school's Centre for Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era.[4] It was soon widely republished in national, provincial and local print, and online media, including the *People's Daily* and Xinhuanet. The article places the Chinese political system and Western-style democracy side-by-side to make a comparative moral evaluation. It outlines five key 'institutional advantages' 制度优势 of the former over the latter: centralised, unified party leadership; the prioritisation of collective interests; adherence to 'the principal status of the people' 人民主体地位; powerful social mobilisation capabilities; and 'governing the country in accordance with the law' 依法治国. The article claims that, as it represents the 'people', the CCP has no self-interest: everything it does is to realise and maintain the common interests of the majority of the people while caring for different needs and concerns.

In contrast, political parties in the West, primarily represent interest groups. Fighting on their behalf, parties therefore attack and frustrate one another. Policy-making and legislation become acts of deal-making, which not only undermine the stability of policies and laws but also exacerbate social divisions. The article states that, during the pandemic, political parties in some Western countries focused on partisan bickering, shirking their broader responsibilities to society or spending too much time deliberating and consulting rather than making decisions — hence the catastrophic spread of the virus. By contrast, public ownership and

democratic centralism 民主集中制 (in which the people's congresses at the national and local levels may go through an election process but are subject to central leadership) enabled the CCP to mobilise its members and society at large and 'concentrate its strength to accomplish big goals and difficult tasks' 集中力量办大事办难事. Qin Gang also accused some 'so-called "human rights defenders"' in the West — presumably those critical of the Chinese state's actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong — of numb indifference to the lives of people in their own countries, including those damaged by the pandemic.

Similar to his comparative evaluation of political parties, Qin Gang offers a particular interpretation of the values and principles underpinning the Western capitalist system and the Chinese socialist system:

> The socialist system emphasises the supremacy of the general interest. This is completely different from the capitalist system. The capitalist system is a social institution with individualism as its core principle, placing individual interests above national and collective interests. Individualism was originally a weapon used by the bourgeoisie to fight feudal tyranny. When the bourgeoisie ascended to the ruling class, individualism became national ideology and the basis for the capitalist institutional structure as well as the foundation of national and social life. Individualism always firmly places individuals at the centre of society and personal relationships. This ego-centric individualism not only leads to alienation between individuals but also generates selfishness. During the devastating outbreak of the pandemic, individualism causes the social members to care only about their own so-called 'rights' and 'freedom' and be unwilling to accept any restrictions on their behaviour. They lack the concept of the collective and the awareness of the overall situation and many Western countries have paid a high price for it.[5]

Following this criticism of the selfish tendencies of individualism, Qin Gang praises the Chinese socialist system's insistence on placing the interests of the nation, the people, and the collective above individual interests. He postulates that this not only fundamentally resolves conflicts of interest among individuals, but also helps motivate and mobilise the entire society. It is the ethical and ideological foundation of the governance mechanism described as 'the whole nation playing a single game' 全国一盘棋. This explains why, according to the article, the majority of Chinese people had an 'awareness of the overall situation' 大局意识 and were thus able to restrain and even sacrifice themselves during the fight against the pandemic.

Numerous articles in print, online, and social media have repeated this crediting of China's achievements in pandemic control to the superiority of its political system, while blaming the deteriorating situation in the US and other Western countries on weak and flawed Western-style democracy with its poor moral foundations.

From Justification to Confidence-Building

The formulation of the Chinese phrase 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' has undergone three official revisions over two decades. When Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 initially coined the term during the opening ceremony of the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982, it was called 有中国特色的社会主义 (literally, socialism that has Chinese features).[6] Deng's use of 有, meaning 'has' or 'with', and the possessive particle 的 suggests he was calling for an adaptation of Maoist definitions of socialism to China's contemporary needs and characteristics. Indeed, Deng's speech emphasised that the CCP needed to integrate the 'universal truth of Marxism' with China's specific reality while borrowing useful ideas from foreign countries.[7] It is unknown whether Deng was referring to the then powerful socialist Soviet Union or Western democracies, but either way

the introduction of 'socialism with Chinese features' justified adhering to the ideology of socialism while introducing capitalist market mechanisms into the economy.

Ten years later, in 1992, Jiang Zemin's 江泽民 report to the Fourteenth Party Congress updated the term to 有中国特色社会主义 (literally, socialism having Chinese features).[8] The possessive particle 的 was omitted, suggesting a fusion in which the Chinese version of socialism is seen as a unique political system rather than a part of, or variation on, the greater socialist family.

Only in 2002, with Jiang's report to the Sixteenth Party Congress, did the term evolve into its current form, 中国特色社会主义, in which the first character, 有, was also removed, further linguistically cementing the idea of a self-standing sinicised socialism.[9] Fifteen years later, in 2017, during the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi Jinping added 'the new era' 新时代 to the term to frame it as a pathway to achieving the grand China Dream of national rejuvenation.[10] In October 2019, for the first time in the history of the CCP, a plenary session of the Central Committee was held especially to discuss the advantages of China's political system and governance, at the end of which it issued a 'decision paper'.[11]

During the Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, then general secretary Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 had introduced the confidence doctrine for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, calling for the Party to be confident in its chosen path 道路自信, guiding theories 理论自信, and political system 制度自信.[12] In his speech celebrating the ninety-fifth anniversary of the founding of the CCP in 2014, Xi Jinping added cultural confidence 文化自信.[13] The Four Confidences 四个自信 — in the path, theory, system, and culture of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics — were enshrined in the CCP Constitution following the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017.[14] Xi's addition of 'cultural confidence' added an element of cultural and traditional determinism to the

Xi's new era differs from Mao-style top-down condemnation of liberalism
Source: Françoise Gaujour, Flickr

political system. As Xi remarked to former Greek prime minister Antonis Samaras: 'Your democracy is ancient Greek and Roman democracy. That is your tradition. We have our own tradition.'[15]

In Xi's new era, rejection of a Western-style democratic political model is not exercised through a Mao-style top-down condemnation of liberalism. Rather, it is done through a party-endorsed reconstruction — by academics, writers, journalists, artists, and social media users — of a historical view of the contemporary Chinese and Western political systems and their underlying values and cultures. In this reconstruction, commentators conflate modern liberal democracy, capitalism, colonialism, and even racism. Liberal democracy and Western capitalism are seen as products of Europe's colonial expansion, while Chinese political ideas are portrayed as products of ancient, benign, and continuous civilisation (even if the term used for civilisation in modern Chinese, 文明, arrived in China in the late nineteenth century via a Japanese translation of a French philosophical text).

Calling for the central government to take decisive action against the Hong Kong protests in 2019, for example, columnist and documentary film director Yu Zhongning 于中宁 (who made the documentary *Openness and Co-operation: Operations Management in the Information Age* in 1995) writes that at the heart of decolonialisation is the subversion of the theory of Western superiority and the creation of China's own 'narrative logic' 叙事逻辑.[16] Yu asserts that some Chinese intellectuals lack a 'strategic vigilance' against the 'insidious, savagery, aggressive, predatory, and colonial nature of Western culture' deriving from the 'greedy and predatory nature of the white race'. Second, they wholly or partially accept that Western culture is superior. Third, while acknowledging that capitalism promotes professional ethics, the spirit of the rule of law and entrepreneurship, and although socialism itself is a great invention of Western culture, Yu contends that these valid elements are deviations from Western culture's fundamentally cruel colonial values.[17]

Journalist Zheng Ruolin 郑若麟, a fluent French speaker and author of *The Chinese Are People Like You and Me* (2014), as well as academics such as international relations specialist Zhang Weiwei 张维为, political scientist Jin Canrong 金灿荣 and physicist and economist Chen Ping 陈平, are among the most vocal theorists of the reconstructed articulation of Chinese and Western cultures and institutions. Among them, Zhang is particularly prominent as the author of *The China Wave: The Rise of a Civilizational State* and host of the educational series *China Now* 《这就是中国》, which has attracted hundreds of millions of viewers around the globe since Shanghai's Oriental TV began broadcasting it in January 2019. Through a combination of lectures, discussions, and questions and answers, Zhang analyses why the Chinese political model, based on a long-standing civilisation, is superior to what he portrays as decaying Western-style democracy based on a colonial history, looking at concepts such as democracy, rights, patriotism, universal values and freedom of speech.

The *People's Daily* praises the series for guiding 'young viewers to think of the "theoretical strength" behind China's seventy years of development' under CCP rule. [18]

This reconstructed 'narrative logic' is reinforced by Chinese official and social media reports on China and the West to create a new national self-image and new perceptions of China's 'enemies'. Western countries' criticism of racism and colonial legacies is weaponised to fit into a narrative of an immoral West that is despised by its own people. China's stories, on the other hand, are reported as the source of envy and admiration of the West and the world. This is creating an increasing divide in information and knowledge both within and outside China. A recent online survey of the Chinese public's views of China's image and popularity around the world indicates that an overwhelmingly high percentage of the respondents (87 percent) chose answers that overestimated China's image in North America and Western Europe, whereas the latest fourteen-country Pew Research Center survey reported to the contrary — that is, a record-high majority of these surveyed countries had, on average, an unfavourable opinion of China.[19]

Conclusion

The CCP's construction of the superiority of the PRC's political system has evolved from a reactive, top-down propaganda approach to a party-endorsed proactive, grassroots re-theorisation, and re-writing of the histories of China and the West. In this re-theorisation, Western-style democracy and its values are portrayed as being based on a colonial heritage, which means they are morally inferior and bound to deteriorate; the China model, led by the CCP, by contrast, holds the moral high ground as the heir to and guardian of a great civilisation. The way in which the pandemic has left so many Western liberal democracies, and especially the US, in tatters has been a gift to the proponents of the theory of the superiority of the Chinese socialist system.

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MASKS AND WOLVES

Mask Diplomacy: Shifting the COVID-19 Narrative?
· VERÓNICA FRAILE DEL ÁLAMO and DARREN LIM

The Rise and Fall of the Wolf Warriors
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MASK DIPLOMACY: SHIFTING THE COVID-19 NARRATIVE?

Verónica Fraile del Álamo

and Darren J. Lim

THE ORIGINS OF COVID-19 in Wuhan and early missteps by authorities in containing the outbreak caused many people around the world to blame the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the global pandemic.[1] As soon as the outbreak was stabilised at home, Beijing began a strategic effort to shift the global narrative and restore its image by sending shipments of medical equipment and personnel, combined with a vigorous public diplomacy campaign.[2] This campaign popularised the concept of 'mask diplomacy' — a term originally employed to describe shipments of masks sent by Japan to China in the earliest days of the outbreak.[3]

The strategic campaign enjoyed varied degrees of success, including within single countries over time. The case of Italy illustrates how domestic political factors played a key role in determining how well Beijing was able to rehabilitate its image.

From the outset of the Italian outbreak (Europe's first) in late February, it was evident the country was short of medical supplies. With Italy's European neighbours freezing exports of medical equipment to maintain their own emergency stocks, China seized the opportunity to ship masks and respirators, and even send doctors to Italy, along with children's drawings and messages of solidarity.[4]

These donations came from private companies, state-owned enterprises, and charitable entities like the Jack Ma 马云 and Alibaba foundations. Local governments in China with twin-city agreements also provided medical equipment to their Italian counterparts. Italian Chinese communities donated and distributed masks within their cities, offering their help to the local police.

Mask diplomacy also involved efforts to shape public discourse about China's pandemic efforts at home and abroad. Even before the virus arrived in Europe, the social media accounts of China's diplomatic missions were actively lauding the success of Chinese authorities in fighting COVID-19, and refuting rumours regarding its origin and accusations that China had failed to contain it.

Once the virus arrived in Italy, the message shifted to one of friendship, solidarity, and multilateral co-operation to fight the pandemic.[5] Beijing sought to promote its COVID-19 narrative in local Italian media. Many articles were published promoting the friendship and solidarity of the Chinese people with Italians.[6] China's ambassador also gave interviews to the country's most important newspapers.[7] On 5 April, he said: 'There is no geopolitics of masks, the aid from China to Italy is based on two considerations: the importance of a life, and our friendship.'[8]

In the early months of the pandemic, China's mask diplomacy enjoyed a major success in Italy. On 12 March, a Chinese Red Cross plane full of masks and medical equipment landed in Rome. Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Luigi di Maio livestreamed the flight's arrival, giving it the title: 'We are not alone.'[9] This act reflected strongly positive popular sentiment towards China within Italy from politicians, the media, and the public.[10]

The reasons were twofold. First, Rome was arguably the Western European capital with the closest ties to Beijing, being the first G7 country to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in March 2019.[11] In the pandemic's early weeks, di Maio attributed China's solidarity to the friendship strengthened through the BRI.[12] Second, in Italy, an increasingly Eurosceptic country, Beijing was able to play 'good cop' to the 'bad cop' of the European Union (EU), which had been missing in action at the very beginning of the pandemic's spread in Italy.

Tonnes of medical supplies were flown into Italy as part of China's efforts to help Italy contain the coronavirus outbreak
Source: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Flickr

Di Maio praised China's help while condemning the EU's lack of solidarity. This rhetoric may well have been an attempt to get more bargaining power at the European table, where a battle of 'north versus south' was taking place over the pandemic support mechanisms for member states, especially financial backing. While this strategy did not yield the desired Eurobonds, the head of the European Commission formally apologised to Italy in early April.[13]

China's positive image in Italy did not last, however. The tipping point came in mid-April, when Alessandro Di Battista, a former parliamentarian from the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), the largest party in the ruling coalition, wrote an article in the left-wing, populist newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* arguing that China would win World War III without firing a single shot. He stated that Rome should use the Sino-Italian relationship as leverage in negotiations with the EU.[14]

The effusiveness of the article created a political opportunity for the Italian opposition to pressure the coalition government, which was struggling to contain the outbreak. The leading opposition figure, Matteo Salvini of the right-wing Lega (League) party, sharply escalated his criticism of China and of the Italian Government's close ties with Beijing. Salvini and his party had long positioned themselves as China sceptics, including through their criticism of the BRI MoU.[15] But

in the early weeks of the pandemic they had been muted in the interests of national solidarity at such a challenging time. Di Battista's article created the opportunity for the Lega party to revive and strengthen its hawkish China policy, while simultaneously criticising the government's pandemic management.

From mid-April onwards, the bilateral relationship with China became highly politicised, distinctly partisan and inextricably linked to the pandemic. Even as the pandemic's first wave was brought under control, China-related issues — not just about COVID-19's origins but also about Hong Kong, human rights, and the security trade-offs of Italy's deepening ties with China — remained constantly in the news.[16] The politicisation of these issues put the government on the defensive, and the need to neutralise the opposition's critique was arguably a factor in subsequent policy positions less favourable to Beijing. These included di Maio himself saying that preserving Hong Kong's autonomy was indispensable (having previously refused to comment on the issue), a tougher stance on the involvement of Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in Italy's 5G network, and the Minister for European Affairs, Vincenzo Amendola, declaring that the BRI MoU with China was a mistake.[17]

While di Maio's complaints about the lack of EU solidarity and his praise of China were not excessively criticised in the beginning, a strongly positive discourse surrounding China became increasingly difficult to defend. In addition to the partisan critiques, domestic and international media reported on a pro-China disinformation campaign conducted through Twitter, alerting the public

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio
Source: Giffoni_ Experience, Flickr

to the more ominous aspects of closer ties with China. Moreover, the public became more aware of publishing channels created under bilateral agreements signed at the same time as the BRI MoU, which provided a vehicle for Chinese state media to publish on Italian platforms — a seemingly benign act at the time that appeared more problematic with the benefit of hindsight.[18]

Italy's closer relationship with China may have made it more amenable, at least at first, to China's mask diplomacy than most other EU states. However, this channel of influence came at a price, because a relationship that was prominent in the public mind was also exposed to the risk of politicisation.

The Italian case, therefore, offers an interesting insight into the dynamics of China's growing influence. Beijing's objective was to shift the public narrative around COVID-19. It leveraged an existing relationship to achieve this: mask diplomacy built on existing goodwill to shape Italian public opinion. Surveys conducted in June and July still showed Italians saw China in a comparatively more positive light than citizens of other European countries.[19]

However, the very prominence of the bilateral relationship with China, especially M5S's centrality to the MoU, also left it open to politicisation as a partisan issue. As 2020 progressed, domestic political dynamics, including internal pressure on M5S from within the ruling coalition and opposition criticism, as well as external pressure to express more solidarity with the EU as the collective pandemic response gathered momentum, saw the Italian Government create a little distance from Beijing. These political dynamics could remain a firm constraint on Beijing's future efforts to influence Italy. Mask diplomacy may represent a relatively novel form of humanitarian assistance, but Italy's experience suggests that it cannot simply smooth over all political frictions and is just as vulnerable as other forms of diplomacy to the vagaries of domestic politics.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WOLF WARRIORS

Yun Jiang

IN 2020, the usually polite and conservative diplomats from the People's Republic of China (PRC) attracted attention around the world for breaking form. 'Wolf warrior diplomacy' is a term used to describe the newly assertive and combative style of Chinese diplomats, in action as well as rhetoric. It is not the only diplomacy-related term that China became famous for this year; there was also 'mask diplomacy' (the shipment of medical goods to build goodwill) and 'hostage diplomacy' (the detention of foreign citizens in China to gain leverage over another country). Previous years brought us 'chequebook diplomacy' (aid and investment to gain diplomatic recognition *vis-à-vis* Taiwan) and 'panda diplomacy' (sending pandas to build goodwill).

Wolf Warrior 战狼 was a popular Chinese film released in 2015. It was followed by a sequel, *Wolf Warrior 2*, which became the highest-grossing film in Chinese box office history. They were both aggressively nationalistic films, comparable with Hollywood's *Rambo*, portraying the Chinese hero as someone who saves his compatriots and others from international 'bad guys', including American mercenaries. The tagline of both films

***Wolf Warrior 2* is the highest-grossing Chinese film ever released**
Source: DualAudio 300mb, Flickr

was 'Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far away' 犯我中华者, 虽远必诛. *Wolf Warrior 2* ends with this message on screen: 'Citizens of the People's Republic of China. When you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.'

Wolf warrior diplomacy conjures up images of diplomats as 'wolf warriors' — not afraid to pull punches. Chinese officials themselves reject this term, with the *Global Times* saying China, which makes 'a reasonable but powerful counter-attack only when being attacked' is more like *Kung Fu Panda*, while wolf warrior diplomacy is more of a 'US trait'.[1] However it is characterised, the way Chinese diplomats operate reflects the attitude to diplomacy and foreign affairs of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The discretionary power of even the top foreign policy bureaucrats and diplomats is relatively limited in the Chinese system.

Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 mantra for international relations was 'observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership'. Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (General Secretary of the CCP 1989–2002 and 2002–2012, respectively) mostly followed Deng's 'low-profile' strategy in the international sphere, focusing on economics and domestic affairs. Hu described his foreign affairs policy as 'peaceful development' 和平发展, emphasising that China 'never engages in aggression or expansion, never seeks hegemony, and remains a staunch force for upholding regional and world peace and stability'.

Under President Xi Jinping 习近平, Deng's strategy of 'hiding our capacities and biding our time' 韬光养晦 has given way to 'striving for achievements' 奋发有为 and 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' 中国特色大国外交. An increasingly powerful China, having risen in status and confidence, is ready to take centre stage in international affairs and proactively and firmly advocate for its interests, in the manner of a 'major country'.

From China's perspective, this implies that Chinese officials should be able to act like US ones, even taking cues from President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Chinese diplomats are no longer hesitant to be assertive with Western diplomats and audiences.

Their new-found combativeness is most evident on Twitter, a platform banned in China but used by many Chinese diplomats to communicate with people outside the 'Great Firewall' — a name given to China's multifaceted system of Internet censorship by Geremie R. Barmé and Sang Ye in an article they wrote for *Wired* magazine in 1997. Hua Chunying 华春莹, Director of the PRC's Foreign Ministry Information Department since July 2019, joined Twitter in February 2020. In July, she fired off:

> Is it Navarro or #RonVara who's claiming that #TikTok data goes right to Chinese military & the CPC? Any evidence? No? Just a new entry on his list of shameless lies. The #US boasts of its strong values, yet it fears a fun app popular with youngsters. When did it become so fragile?

If Hua's style fits the stereotype of 'wolf warrior', she was ahead of the curve; in 2015, as the department's deputy director, she batted away a US plea to release detained human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang 浦志强 by saying: 'Some people in the United States have hearts that are too big and hands that are too long; they always want to be the world's policeman or judge.'

Perhaps the most famous 'wolf warrior diplomat' on Twitter is another Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian 赵立坚. Back in July 2019, while he was a minister counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, he engaged in a heated online dispute with Susan Rice, former US national security advisor, saying to her:

> I am based in Islamabad. Truth hurts. I am simply telling the truth. I stayed in Washington DC 10 years ago. To label someone who speak[s] the truth that you don't want to hear a racist, is disgraceful & disgusting.

He was promoted to a deputy director position in the Foreign Ministry shortly after. In 2020, he shared a conspiracy theory from a known conspiracy website that COVID-19 had in fact originated in the US. He also shared a controversial image featuring an Australian soldier. The Australian Prime Minister reacted strongly to this tweet by holding an emergency press conference to condemn Zhao.

'Wolf warrior' rhetoric is popular inside China among the extreme nationalist voices often found online. These typically young voices have long called for Chinese officials to be less 'submissive' in the international arena, even joking that diplomats should be given calcium tablets so they can grow some backbone.

Unsurprisingly, the same rhetoric has not played well outside China, contributing to negative impressions of the PRC and weakening China's soft power appeal. An internal report by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, warned of anti-China hostility due to the coronavirus outbreak. A Pew survey conducted from June to August 2020 found that unfavourable views of China reached historic highs in 2020 in advanced economies such as Australia, some European countries, and Japan. In Australia, 81 percent

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian
Source: @MFA_China, Twitter

now ‘have an unfavourable opinion of China’, compared with 40 percent just a year earlier.

In a year of crisis, in which many Chinese people were shaken by government cover-ups and the persecution of whistle-blowers in the early stages of the pandemic, the Party may have purposefully sought to channel people’s anger towards external targets. Yet, by the second half of 2020, the ‘wolf warriors’ had largely retreated from the diplomatic sphere, perhaps heeding the advice of an older generation of diplomats who have indirectly if pointedly criticised these combative tactics. Fu Ying 傅莹, a former vice foreign minister and ambassador to Australia, wrote in April that diplomats ‘should adhere to the spirit of humility, inclusiveness, and learning from others’.[2] Shi Yinhong 时殷弘, an international relations professor in China, said of China’s diplomacy efforts this year, ‘they are being done too hastily, too soon and too loudly in tone’.[3] The Chinese Ambassador to the US also called the conspiracy theory promoted by Zhao ‘crazy’. But near the end of the year, ‘wolf warriors’ seemed to have enjoyed a resurgence, as demonstrated by Zhao’s tweet of the controversial image.

The antagonistic antics of the ‘wolf warriors’ do not accord with Xi’s rhetoric of ‘win-win co-operation’ and his much-promoted ‘community with a shared future for mankind’. Instead, they give us a taste of China’s rising ambitions on the international stage and perhaps also reveal the increasingly contradictory goals of foreign policy in Xi’s China.

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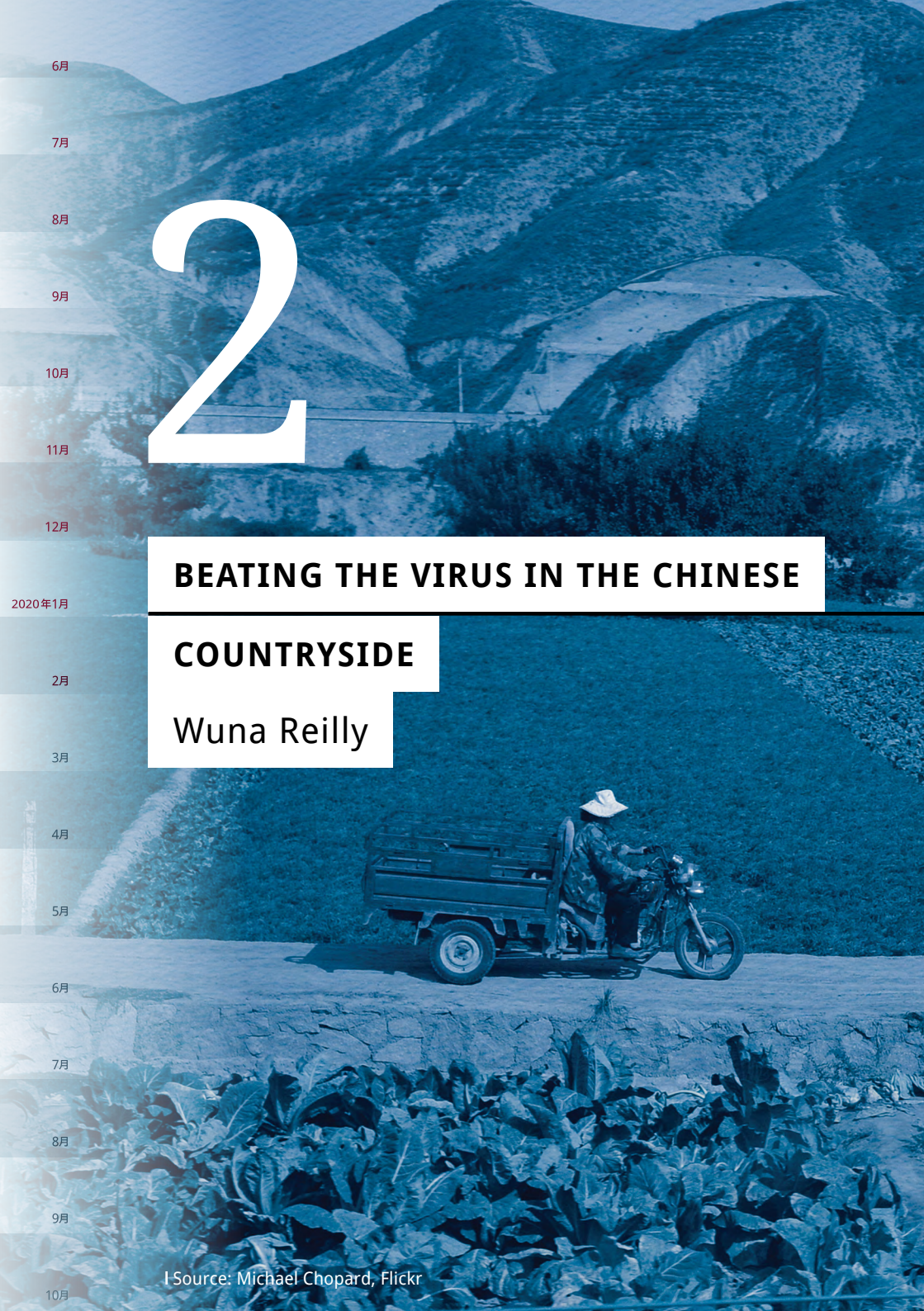
BEATING THE VIRUS IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE

Wuna Reilly



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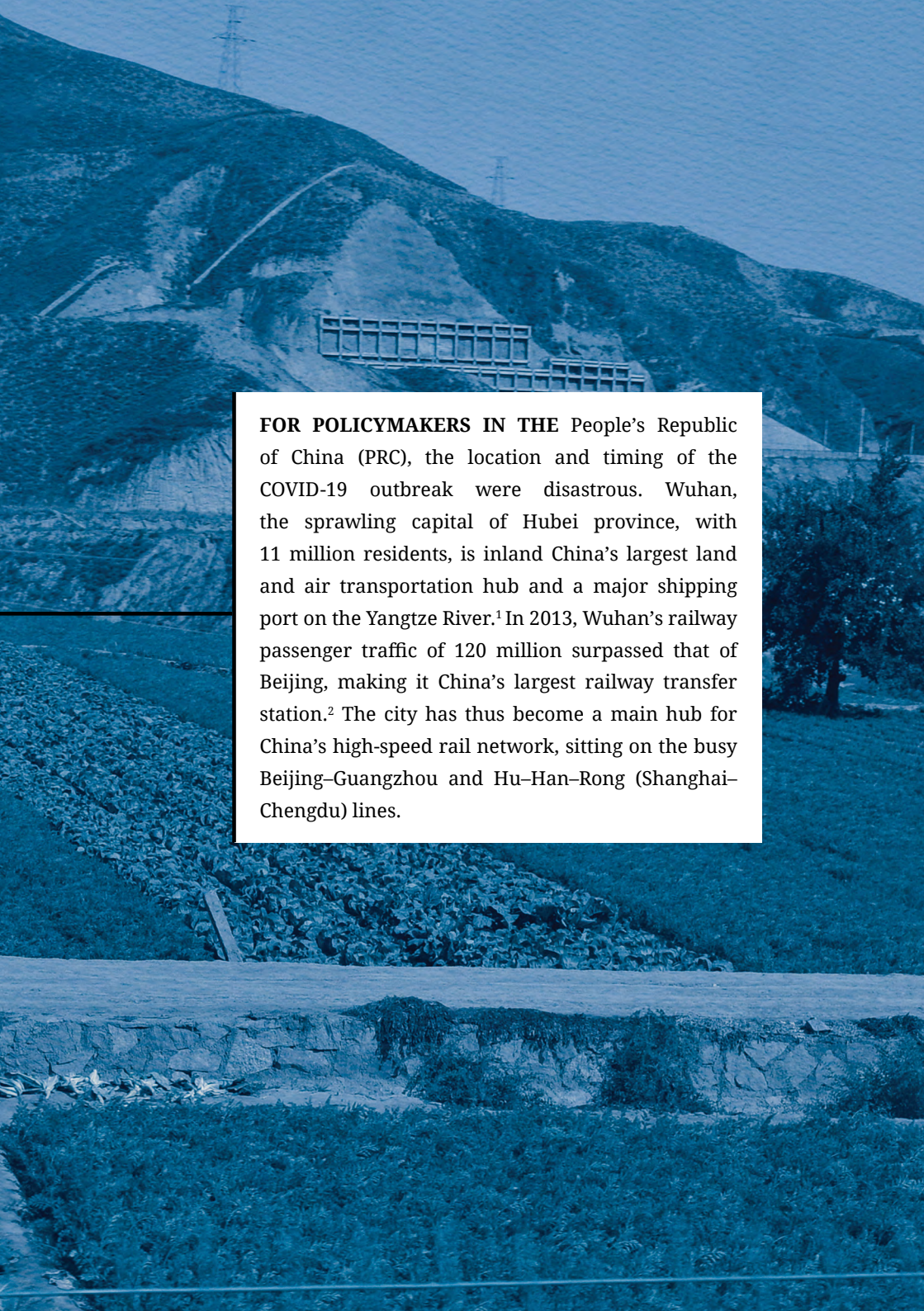
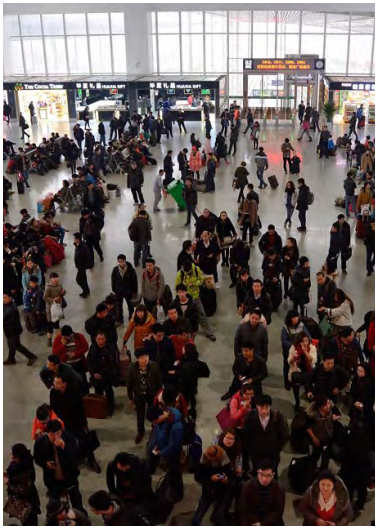


FOR POLICYMAKERS IN THE People's Republic of China (PRC), the location and timing of the COVID-19 outbreak were disastrous. Wuhan, the sprawling capital of Hubei province, with 11 million residents, is inland China's largest land and air transportation hub and a major shipping port on the Yangtze River.[1] In 2013, Wuhan's railway passenger traffic of 120 million surpassed that of Beijing, making it China's largest railway transfer station.[2] The city has thus become a main hub for China's high-speed rail network, sitting on the busy Beijing–Guangzhou and Hu–Han–Rong (Shanghai–Chengdu) lines.

Even worse than the location was the timing. The virus began to spread in Wuhan on the cusp of China's Lunar New Year holiday, when hundreds of millions of migrant workers leave cities like Wuhan and travel long distances on trains and buses to their rural homes for some well-deserved rest with their families.

On 23 January, the day before New Year's Eve, Wuhan was officially locked down — halting all travel in and out of the city. Yet this decisive move may have come too late. In the preceding weeks, some 5 million people left Wuhan for the New Year holiday, many of them migrant workers returning to their rural villages.[3] Travel was, as usual, intense: on 23 January alone, some 251 long-distance trains departed or passed through Wuhan between midnight and 10 am.[4]

Travellers departing Wuhan sat on trains and buses alongside many of China's 135 million migrants who work 'temporarily' in cities along China's crowded eastern seaboard during the year.[5] This year, from 9 to 24 January, China's railways carried 1.143 billion passengers, many of whom were migrant workers returning home for the holidays.[6] Millions of people thus passed through Wuhan or travelled alongside Wuhan residents before returning home, potentially spreading the virus throughout the country's populous agricultural regions.[7]



Crowded railway station during the Spring Festival travel rush
Source: 二泉印月, Flickr

Remarkably, the provinces surrounding Hubei did not experience a virus outbreak.[8] From the 23 January lockdown of Wuhan until its reopening on 8 April, China had a total of 81,865

COVID-19 infections. Of these cases, 67,803 (83 percent) were in Hubei, with Wuhan accounting for 50,008 cases, representing 61 percent of total cases across China.[9]

The low number of cases recorded in provinces adjacent to Hubei was particularly surprising. For instance, as of 8 April, Hunan had only 1,019 cases[10] in a total population of 69 million, 60 percent of whom live in rural areas.[11] Henan province is even larger — with 96 million residents, 67 percent of them rural — and yet it saw only 1,276 cases during the same period.[12]

In short, even though massive numbers of rural migrants flowed rapidly in and out of Wuhan during this critical period, the adjacent rural regions did not experience large-scale infections. What prevented this potential disaster?

State Control or Good Governance?

To date, most studies of China's control of the virus have focused on governance capacity or state control. Chinese scholars have generally credited China's effective containment to the state's capacity to make rapid policy decisions in the face of uncertainty, which proved impressive after the initial delays in Wuhan.[13] Others have praised China's 'responsibility system', which allocates authority to different functional and regional entities, for facilitating the rapid mobilisation of China's vast governance system.[14] After a 'chaotic' start, as Ciqi Mei 梅赐琪 explains, a 'policy mix of traditional measures' aligned with China's 'policy style' of 'a centralised leadership, bureaucratic mobilisation, and memories of the right policy mix of previous crises' proved effective.[15]

While acknowledging these governance tactics, Western analysts have instead tended to highlight political or state control, pointing to Beijing's willingness to employ coercive tactics, surveillance and propaganda.[16] But, coercion alone is an inadequate explanation.

Financing and organising the logistics around food and medical supplies, for instance, also required institutional capacity. Others have turned to cultural explanations, suggesting that factors common to East Asian societies such as a strong sense of civic responsibility and caution help explain China's success.[17]

In most of these studies, the focus has been on urban China. Yet unlike South Korea and Japan, which have small rural populations in percentage terms (Japan, 8 percent; South Korea, 19 percent),[18] more than 55 percent of China's population are rural residents,[19] many of whom travel annually between urban jobs and family farms. In one of the few studies addressing rural migrants, social anthropologist Xiang Biao 项飙 argues, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the mobility of China's migrant workers might have helped curtail the epidemic, as outmigration may have reduced urban infection rates and demands on urban medical resources.[20] Yet if their destination region had limited medical facilities, as is the case in most of rural China, a massive population movement into the countryside could have risked spreading the virus into areas with limited coping capacity.

A more useful way to understand the experience of rural China amid the COVID-19 crisis is to consider the role of established social and institutional structures in helping both the Chinese state and Chinese society control the spread of the virus while minimising the economic impact of public health measures.

One of the most valuable, though widely overlooked, institutional structures has been the system of collective landownership in rural China. Almost half of China's landmass is governed by a collectively owned land regime.[21] Neither fully private nor fully state owned, most rural land is still owned by members of rural collectives — namely, China's rural residents. By virtue of their membership within a collective — usually a village 'group' (VG) 村小组 — individuals who hold a 'rural collective residence permit' 农村集体户口 gain the right to use or rent out their allocated plot of farmland but cannot sell it off.

Chinese village near Jingzhou City, Hubei
Source: Paul Beavers, Flickr

During the crisis, two features of China's distinctive rural land regime proved particularly useful. In the first few months of the outbreak, the role of VG leaders was critical. VG leaders helped implement public health measures at the local level, while VG members policed the group's territorial boundaries, ensuring limited social movement while maintaining social distancing practices. The group-based territorial structures, encompassing family homes, farms, and collective spaces, enabled most rural residents to maintain a largely normal existence while still limiting their social interactions.

The second key factor was the nature of land rights for rural residents. Rural households maintained their access to housing and agricultural land with minimal expense requirements, enabling them to meet their family's basic needs without relying on government support. The central government could thus direct more of its financial resources towards controlling the virus, supporting urban residents, and restoring employment and economic growth. The rural land system thus played a crucial role in enabling China's virus response.

Rural groups are generally acquaintance communities which know their local territory very well
Source: Achim Höfling, Flickr

Groups, Territory, and Staying Home in Rural China

Two of the most important policy measures used to control the spread of the virus were social distancing and shelter-in-place orders. In rural China, with a highly dispersed population and limited resources provided by the state, implementing these measures was far more difficult than in the cities.

In provinces such as Hunan, rural township populations range from 5,000 to 40,000 people, with most around 20,000.[22] Yet only townships with a population of more than 20,000 are awarded their own police station, which are generally staffed with between five and fifteen officers, at most.[23] Below the township level, governance capacity is even lower. Villages, which tend to have at least several hundred residents, rely on a few local residents who serve on village committees 村委会 for local governance. As

widely noted in Chinese media at the time, these local officials had neither adequate training nor adequate resources to implement the governance measures required for effective virus control.[24]

Furthermore, due to the public ownership of rural land, the boundaries of Chinese farms are not clearly delineated. Years ago, when driving through the central United States, I remember being struck by the ubiquitous fences separating the endless fields of corn. In contrast, most Chinese villages and fields are not fenced off. Therefore, rural officials could not establish anything like the system of barriers used in Chinese cities to limit movement. Most Chinese urban residential developments 小区 have external walls and/or can easily construct fences or barriers, with guards at all entrances, to effectively enclose an entire neighbourhood. While local people could block a rural village's main roads, they would have been unable to build barriers enclosing the entire village, particularly if it was surrounded by fields or hills.

Given the limited governance capacity and difficulties of establishing territorial barriers in rural China, how did rural cadres manage to ensure rural residents stayed at home and maintained social distancing requirements for the crucial first two months after the Wuhan outbreak?

Again, VGs were a key factor. There are 2.385 million VGs in China.[25] For most of rural China, the VG is the entity that holds the collective rights to the group's allocated land. This land is then further subdivided among all of the VG members, providing each family's allocated land for farming and living. While these VGs do not have any formal administrative or economic functions within China's governance structure, three of their features were particularly salient for enforcing shelter-in-place orders and ensuring rural residents maintained social distancing requirements.

First, each VG is essentially an extended 'acquaintance community' — the phrase developed by the influential sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910–2005) to describe the dense interpersonal networks that characterise Chinese villages.[26] Close social linkages make it easy for

VG leaders to contact all members of their VG. A member of the village committee, for instance, could be responsible for contacting the leaders of all VGs to ask whether anyone in their group had been to Wuhan. The VG leaders are not only residents, but also have extended family members within the group. These leaders would likely be familiar with all families within their VG, and so could contact them quickly and easily, while requesting that they take (or avoid) certain actions and help monitor the implementation of key measures by all group members.

The diary of one village committee leader provides an insightful example of how VG-level epidemic control proved effective.[27] The village leader first contacted all VG leaders, asking each to tell the families in their group who had family members recently returned from a city to isolate themselves at home. Thermometers were distributed to each VG and then to households with members who had recently returned from a city. Each VG leader was asked to ensure that these households were doing daily temperature checks and providing these results to village officials. This proved effective and efficient. If village officials or doctors had to visit each home daily to conduct temperature checks, this not only would have been time and resource intensive, but also would have risked spreading the virus further.

Second, the territorial basis of VGs ensures that all group members are well aware of where their collective territory ends, even without any formal geographical markers. This meant that VG members could — and did — easily and collectively monitor any non-group members attempting to enter their territory. This explains why, during the lockdown period, simple boundary markers such as a red cloth, a pile of dirt or a handwritten sign were sufficient to indicate the dividing lines between different groups' territories.[28] Since each group has a common interest in maintaining the well-being of all its members, they co-operated in limiting entry by people from other groups while effectively supervising their own members' movements.

Finally, because each group's territory includes farming land, land for their homes, and shared zones for leisure, group members could carry on with their lives while still maintaining social distancing between households. Having this common territory meant that group members could continue to farm, spend time outside, engage in local trading activities and even play Chinese chess 象棋, while still maintaining the key policy measures of sheltering in place and social distancing from non-household members.

Access to Land, Fiscal Relief and the COVID-19 Crisis

China's collective rural land system also played a crucial buffering role during the lockdown period, enabling rural households to maintain their basic housing and food requirements without relying on financial support from the government. As a result, the central government did not have to expand its fiscal expenditure to support rural residents or unemployed migrant workers returning to the countryside. Instead, it was able to direct its scarce resources towards containing the epidemic in urban communities.

The income structure of most Chinese rural households features four main sources: wage income, operational income, income from property and income from government direct transfers. A large portion of wage income comes from informal economic activities, while operational income generally derives from cultivating farmland. For the average rural resident in 2019, wages provided about 41 percent of their total income, while income from land production provided 36 percent.[29] The mobility restrictions under shelter-in-place orders hit hardest for rural households that rely heavily on wage income earned by working in cities.[30] However, these measures had limited impact on rural households' farming income, due to four key attributes of China's collective rural land system.

First, households do not need to pay anything to maintain their access to land. Since rural land is not taxed and farmers cannot take out loans using their homes or farms as collateral, they are not in danger of losing these due to income loss. Second, since farmers' land is generally quite close to their residential land, mobility restrictions did not stop them farming. Third, although each family's plot may be modest in scale, it is generally adequate to ensure food security for all household members, including urban returnees. Finally, there are no taxes on the sale of grain products, so farmers can retain all the profits from selling their grain. Although the wage income of rural households declined sharply during the COVID-19 crisis, these features of the rural land system made it financially easier for farmers to remain safely at home for an extended period.

For many city-based migrant workers who lost their jobs or suffered reduced incomes during the crisis, they at least retained the option of returning to their family farms, where they could meet their basic needs. For many, this might have been their final or only resort. For instance, rural women migrants working in an urban beauty salon usually work during the day and at night sleep on the salon's beds to save on rent. When such businesses closed, their workers lost their housing as well as their jobs. Most migrant workers in small businesses were not covered by any urban welfare support during the crisis. Women who were fortunate enough to have kind parents or a good marriage were more likely to have retained

Shandong, China, August 2020: Migrants working in a street-side beauty salon. Source: Gauthier DELECROIX - 郭天, Flickr

their access to land.[31] These women could return to their family farms in the countryside, and so at least maintain secure shelter and sustenance throughout the crisis.

Migrant workers who were able to remain in the city during the crisis might still have chosen to return home for several reasons. First, rural living expenses are modest compared with those in the city. Second, while rural incomes are low, life on the farm is often less stressful and less demanding than in the city. If they were fortunate, some returned migrant workers might have been able to find employment nearby or earn income through local construction tasks.[32] This capacity for self-reliance was invaluable for the individuals involved and for the Chinese government as well.

For some wealthy countries, providing financial support helped businesses to keep their workers on the books while ensuring that recipients could and would abide by stay-at-home orders. But it has been very costly. Australia's 'JobKeeper' payments, for instance, were designed to help 6 million people retain their jobs over the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis but came with a hefty price tag: AU$130 billion.[33] If China had adopted a similar approach for just the most vulnerable migrant workers, the costs would also have been considerable. Based on an average per capita monthly income for migrant workers of 3,721 yuan, the 52 million migrant workers who returned home during the crisis would have suffered nearly 200 billion yuan (AU$41.3 billion) in lost income over just two months.[34]

For developed countries, the economic downturn has eroded fiscal revenue, while unemployment increases have driven up welfare expenditures. In Australia, the government faced massive additional expenditure in response to the crisis.[35] Even as the government's budget deficit has grown, it has faced pressure to maintain consistent levels of welfare provision.[36] Meanwhile, the dual pressures of shrinking revenues

and burgeoning expenses rendered the Australian government reluctant to fund some economic recovery measures that would have been socially desirable, such as building more public housing.[37]

The Chinese government faced the same fiscal problems of reduced revenue and increased expenditure during the crisis.[38] With so many migrant workers losing their urban jobs, the pressure to provide financial support to rural households would have been high.[39] If the Chinese government had provided 2,000 yuan per month (the minimum living requirements for a household of five people) over the two-month national shutdown for 600 million rural residents, this would have required at least 480 billion yuan (AU$99.2 billion). These non-payments represented a massive saving for China's federal budget.

Instead of providing financial support to unemployed migrant workers through their employers to help retain jobs or providing welfare payments to low-income rural households to cover their minimum living expenses, the Chinese central government focused its financial support on fighting the epidemic, providing tax relief for urban businesses and making payment transfers to local authorities. China's total funds for virus prevention and control reached 110.48 billion yuan by 4 March.[40] In the first half of 2020, the central government's transfer payments to local governments reached 6.28 trillion yuan, an increase of 1.26 trillion yuan over the same period the previous year. These funds were primarily used to protect the urban population: paying for staff wages at local public institutions, issuing social security payments for urban residents and helping meet the operational expenses of local governments.[41] At the same time, the central government's financial support to rural residents remained small and largely rhetorical. The government implemented a direct payment program for only 20,000 impoverished rural households. Instead, most official statements from the central government offered only vague pledges to 'guide', 'discover', 'promote', 'support', 'place', 'attract', and 'encourage' rural residents who faced considerable economic difficulties.[42]

By August, the situation in China was certainly looking better, with the virus largely under control, job growth turning positive and government budget revenue and tax revenue beginning to grow again.[43] However, the burden that rural communities took on during the crisis in support of the state's effort has tended to be taken for granted by the Chinese government and overlooked by many outside observers.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, effective governance rests on strong social and institutional foundations. Amid China's COVID-19 crisis, two features of the rural collectively owned land regime proved crucial. First, village group–based territorial structures and strong community ties motivated local residents to police their own territorial boundaries. Furthermore, having family homes, farms, and collective spaces within the group's territory helped rural families meet their housing and nutritional needs. As a result, the central government was able to direct its scarce resources towards urban communities and businesses while rural communities sustained key public health measures during the crisis.

The experiences in containing COVID-19 in rural China show that some of China's distinctive social and institutional factors were effectively utilised to support key public health measures. However, while the rural land system proved invaluable in this case, it remains inadequate as a long-term solution for meeting the complex and changing welfare needs of rural households and rural-to-urban migrant workers, especially women. To date, the Chinese government's fiscal policies have tended to favour urban residents and prioritise urban businesses and government agencies. With the Chinese economy now on the road to recovery, the government should expand its fiscal support for rural business, rural communities, and rural migrants working in cities.

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DOWN AND OUT IN HONG KONG

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HONG KONG'S NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

Antony Dapiran

THREE FUNDAMENTAL legal documents define today's Hong Kong. The first is the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The second is the Basic Law (1990), Hong Kong's post-1997 constitution. And, as of July 2020, there is the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 中華人民共和國香港特別行政區維護國家安全法 (National Security Law).

The National Security Law creates four new criminal offences: secession, subversion, terrorism, and colluding with foreign forces. Each of these offences is broadly defined and carries a sentence of up to life imprisonment. In addition, the law covers anyone inciting, aiding or abetting commission of the above offences.

Just like the first two documents, the National Security Law was drafted not by Hong Kong's own legislature but by an external body, the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and imposed on Hong Kong. The drafting was conducted in secret. The full text was only revealed to the Hong Kong people — including, by all accounts, Chief Executive Carrie Lam herself and other members of her government—at the moment it came into force, at eleven o'clock at night, one hour before the twenty-third anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China.

The law wrought a dramatic overnight change in Hong Kong. In the hours leading up to that moment, activists in the territory's pro-democracy protest movement raced to delete incriminating social media posts or to delete their accounts entirely. Protesters purged the contents of their chat groups and shut them down. Pro-democracy political parties (including the leading youth party Demosistō) and activist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (such as the political research group Network DIPLO) announced that they would dissolve. 'Yellow economic circle' (pro-democracy) cafés and restaurants raced to tear down their Lennon Walls — the protest artwork and colourful Post-It notes bearing pro-democracy and anti-government messages ripped away, leaving stark bare walls.

If some thought this was an overreaction, believing that — as the government had promised — the law would target only a 'very small minority' of extremists and fundamental freedoms would be maintained, the worst fears of others were quickly confirmed the next day. At a protest on the morning of 1 July, Hong Kong police unfurled a new warning banner:

> You are displaying flags or banners/chanting slogans/or conducting yourselves with an intent such as secession or subversion, which may constitute offences under the HKSAR National Security Law. You may be arrested and prosecuted.

The first arrests under the new law quickly followed — of a man found to be in possession of a flag bearing the slogan 'Hong Kong independence' and of two young women handing out stickers with various protest slogans. That same day, a young man flying a flag from the back of his motorcycle bearing the popular 2019 protest slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times' 光復香港, 時代革命, who appeared to have inadvertently crashed into a line of police officers blocking the road, was arrested and later charged with terrorism.

In the weeks and months that followed, the Hong Kong government cited the law as the basis for a variety of measures that made seismic changes to Hong Kong. Public libraries pulled 'suspect' books from their shelves; the protest slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times!' was banned; and primary elections

'Disregard and threats would never keep us silent' (left); 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times!' (right)
Source: Studio Incendo, Flickr

held by the pan-democrat camp were alleged to be illegal and amounted to subversion. Further arrests were made under the new law, including of teenagers accused of promoting secession on their Facebook pages. A number of Hong Kong dissidents, including former legislator and Demosistō founder Nathan Law 羅冠聰 and former Democratic Party legislator Ted Hui Chi-fung 許智峯, went into exile overseas. The mainland Coast Guard apprehended a dozen young Hong Kongers attempting to flee to Taiwan by boat and they disappeared into mainland custody. They were ultimately tried in a mainland court and given jail sentences of up to three years for illegal border crossing.

Close examination of the law's definitions makes it clear that it specifically targets dissent. It turns ordinary criminal acts (criminal damage, arson, assault) into terrorism if committed during a protest; civil disobedience (blocking roads or government buildings) into criminal subversion; political expression (including chanting slogans such as 'Free Hong Kong!' or publishing material that promotes self-determination) into acts inciting secession; and expressions of support for protesters (donating funds and equipment or transporting protesters to and from protests) into aiding and abetting terrorism.

An advert on a Hong Kong public light bus reads 'National Security Law: Preserve One Country, Two Systems, Restore Stability'
Source: Giryyf 233, Wikimedia

The law also has extraterritorial effect: it applies to any breach of its provisions by anyone, anywhere in the world. This has prompted concern among overseas activists and scholars critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worldwide that, not only is it no longer safe for them to set foot in Hong Kong, but also authorities may use the law to issue international warrants for their arrest. Hong Kong citizens overseas may worry that they risk a fate similar to that of the Causeway Bay Books booksellers, at least one of whom was kidnapped in 2015 and forcibly repatriated to mainland China to face trial. This motivated many Western nations, including Australia, to suspend their extradition agreements with Hong Kong.

But much more than just creating four new criminal offences, the National Security Law implements structural institutional change in Hong Kong that is both deep and fundamental. The law established a new Hong Kong government agency, the Committee for Safeguarding National Security 維護國家安全委員會, which comprises the chief executive, key ministers and representatives from the uniformed services (police, immigration, and customs and excise). This will be the single most powerful agency in the Hong Kong government,

with power to formulate policy and intervene in the work of all other arms of government, the education system and broader society.

The law empowers Beijing to appoint a national security advisor to the committee, marking the first time that a Beijing-appointed commissar is inserted directly into the ranks of a Hong Kong government agency. Luo Huining 駱惠寧, the director of Hong Kong's Central Government Liaison Office 中央人民政府駐香港特別行政區聯絡辦公室, which makes him Beijing's top representative in Hong Kong, was appointed the inaugural national security advisor, effectively making him the 'party secretary' for Hong Kong. The National Security Law thus effectively replicates in Hong Kong the same party-government structure that exists throughout the rest of China, integrating Hong Kong into the mainland's Party-State.

The law makes deep interventions into other branches of the Hong Kong government, including creating a new special prosecutor's office for national security offences in the Department of Justice and a department for national security in the Hong Kong Police Force. The National Security Law effectively sets up a parallel judiciary, requiring national security cases to be heard only by judges drawn from a panel hand-picked by the chief executive, an arrangement that punches a hole in Hong Kong's long tradition of judicial independence and the separation of powers, which are fundamental to the common law system — a legacy of the British colonial era.

Most alarmingly, the law empowers mainland government departments with responsibility for national security to establish a presence in Hong Kong through the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 中央人民政府駐香港特別行政區維護國家安全公署. This opens the door for PRC Ministry of State Security agents — China's secret police — to operate legally in Hong Kong, creating a parallel (and non-accountable) system alongside Hong Kong's police and courts for investigating and punishing national security–related offences.

Hong Kong's much-vaunted rule of law, which has always been an important part of its appeal to international business and finance, is seriously undermined by the National Security Law. The law even removes

the power of final adjudication from Hong Kong courts: certain serious national security cases will be tried on the mainland. Ironically, the protest movement the law is designed to crush began last year with opposition to an extradition law. The power to interpret the law is also taken out of the hands of Hong Kong courts and vested in the NPCSC; it cannot be challenged on constitutional or human rights grounds. Finally, the National Security Law is all-powerful: in the case of discrepancies between it and any Hong Kong law (the Bill of Rights Ordinance, for example), it overrules Hong Kong law.

Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, famously described Hong Kong's political system as one of 'liberty without democracy'. Hong Kong existed in a state of disequilibrium, enjoying a high level of rights and freedoms but suffering a low level of representative democracy. Hong Kong's various protest movements have sought to right this imbalance by increasing the level of democracy. They have always faced competing attempts by the government to address that disequilibrium by reducing their rights and freedoms. The National Security Law, it would seem, is the ultimate attempt to do just that.

There has long existed a particular idea of Hong Kong as a bastion of freedom in Asia or, in the common Chinese expression, a place to *bi Qin* 避秦 ('flee the Qin'), meaning to be safe from tyranny. Hong Kong had been a space where people could publish freely, make whatever artwork and screen whatever movies they desired, criticise governments near and far, and organise and fundraise for any cause. In Hong Kong, Chinese voices could speak freely and global voices could freely address Chinese audiences beyond the constraints present elsewhere in China. With the National Security Law, that unique space now seems lost. The loss will be felt not just by the Hong Kong people, but also by China and the world.

WASTE AND THE ELDERLY WORKING POOR IN HONG KONG

Trang X. Ta

SCENES OF THE elderly working poor breaking down cardboard, stacking it on trolleys and pushing it along densely packed streets to be sold at recycling centres are a common sight in Hong Kong. During the Lunar New Year celebrations, the cardboard accumulates in dishevelled piles in alleyways because the recycling centres are closed for the holiday; the unpaid labour contributing to the city's waste management infrastructure becomes obvious from the sheer amount of disarrayed cardboard and discarded waste that remains uncollected during this period.

Daily life for those engaged in cleaning the streets of refuse, bundling empty cardboard boxes discarded by many businesses and salvaging abandoned materials for reuse and resale in informal street markets is a visible struggle in a place where vast disparities in wealth persist. The annual *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2018*,[1] published by the government in December 2019, noted that the number of elderly poor aged sixty-five and over rose to 516,600 persons, with the poverty rate remaining steady from the previous year at 44.4 percent (within the range of 43.5 percent to 45.1 percent since 2009). Among poor households in Hong Kong overall, 39.4 percent are elderly households; and among the general elderly population, 53.1 percent are women. Thus, the activity of collecting cardboard is commonly undertaken by elderly women.

The government provides a wide range of social security services for the elderly with various eligibility requirements. Direct cash assistance includes the Comprehensive Social Security Scheme and Old Age Living Allowance, and non-cash assistance includes subsidised public housing, healthcare vouchers, discounted public transportation, district and neighbourhood elderly community centres, and residential care homes. There are also local charities that run social outreach programs and provide additional free services. Some restaurants provide free or discounted meals for the elderly poor. The report found that, among the elderly poor counted in the survey, 86.2 percent or 445,300 persons were receiving some social security benefits from the government. The Old Age Living Allowance of HK$1,435 (AU$250) per month is, however, popularly referred to as 'fruit money' because such a minimal amount will only purchase some fruit or snacks. The poverty line in Hong Kong is HK$4,000 per month (AU$695) for a one-person household and HK$10,000 per month (AU$1,735) for a two-person household. The elderly poor seek out charities and community centres that provide free meals and groceries to supplement their food requirements due to the inadequacy of government cash assistance to cover all their needs.

The socially marginalised and economically vulnerable have always struggled to survive in densely populated Hong Kong, with its chronic housing shortages and prohibitive cost of living. According to the Hong Kong Housing Authority, as of 2020, the current waiting time for subsidised public housing is 5.6 years for general applicants and 3.3 years for single elderly applicants. The elderly working poor must be resourceful and adaptive to make a living, and healthy enough to deal with the physical challenges of work. The creation of informal street markets where they sell second-hand, discarded and outdated goods is an example of how marginalised communities find a means to redistribute resources.

In one of Hong Kong's poorest districts, Sham Shui Po in Kowloon, regular and itinerant hawkers set up each evening to sell second-hand goods to locals in the area, most of whom are also working poor, homeless or refugees awaiting approval of their asylum claims. On the weekends, migrant workers from the Philippines

Hong Kong's 'street stall grannies'
Source: igapp, Flickr

and Indonesia come to the area on their day off to shop for both new and used goods. Before the COVID-19 pandemic restricted international travel, African merchants who came to this district for the wholesale clothing suppliers would also be seen at the informal markets buying second-hand goods for resale back in Africa. However, hawking on the streets is not without risk and is an unreliable source of income. Hawkers can be fined by officers of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department who regularly patrol the streets of this neighbourhood in the evenings to enforce public hygiene codes and obstruction and nuisance ordinances. In these cases, the goods are confiscated and disposed of.

Waste took on new visibility and purpose during the protests of 2019–2020. Global and local media attention focused on what became, throughout much of 2019, daily clashes between protesters and the police across Hong Kong. The dramatic and historic protests also generated an epic amount of rubbish. Accumulated debris included pieces of broken pavement, disposable facemasks, ripped gloves, empty water bottles, contorted umbrellas, shattered glass, uprooted signposts, plastic food packaging, burnt rubbish, and discharged tear-gas canisters. Protesters, meanwhile, appropriated bright orange drums used as garbage bins from the sidewalks, multicoloured neighbourhood recycling receptacles, and large green wheeled dumpsters to build blockades and barriers, and even burnt them as a deterrent. The dumpsters had the added benefit of easy mobility and could be used as moving shields against projectiles such as tear-gas canisters and rubber bullets. When these bins and dumpsters became fewer in number due to their destruction and removal as the months of protests continued, businesses put out their rubbish in black garbage bags tied to signposts

Metal pushcarts collecting cardboard are a common sight in Hong Kong
Source: Pxhere.com

along the street or in piles on the sidewalks and in back alleys. Protesters often shifted these bags on to the road and burned them to serve as blockades when dumpsters were not available.

The waste generated by a city of 7.5 million residents was thus used as a resource in the protests. In turn, the amount of waste generated by the tactical measures of both police and protesters, and simply by crowds of people, added to this rubbish and took on new political significance. Its prolific visibility was an undeniable representation of political, economic, and social crisis in a city where the sight of the elderly poor collecting and neatly sorting cardboard had become so commonplace as to render waste 'invisible' in public space. The international media that reported on the protests sometimes mentioned how careful the protesters were to clean up the streets but were generally uninterested in reporting the details of the tedious clean-up process that followed each clash with police. Each morning, bands of contracted street sweepers and local residents cleaned up the litter-filled landscape, joined by demonstrators eager to show solidarity with people in the community. In some instances, the elderly poor also participated by salvaging what they could find in the aftermath, but most of what was left behind had little or no value.

The new National Security Law may have put a stop to the protests, but the problem of waste — and poverty — remains. According to the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department, as of 2020, the government has already closed thirteen landfill sites, which collectively occupy 300 hectares, due

to lack of capacity; only three in the New Territories are in active use, despite also operating at capacity.

Waste management has always been a challenge for Hong Kong, which covers 1,106 square kilometres, even before the protests of 2019 and COVID-19 in 2020 disrupted tourism. The Hong Kong service industry is dependent on tourism and, according to the government Tourism Commission, total visitor numbers reached a high of 65.15 million in 2018. In 2020 the city faced multiple related crises: an environmental catastrophe due to mounting levels of rubbish, the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertainty over its future under the new National Security Law. (See Forum, 'Hong Kong's National Security Law', pp.59–64).

The convergence of crises has exacerbated existing social inequities. The downturn in tourism has severely affected the working poor, who are heavily concentrated in the restaurant, catering and accommodation sectors. The elderly working poor continue to struggle to eke out a livelihood in a time of social and economic disruption, and amid a public health emergency that has presented them with the additional challenges of maintaining social distance in crowded quarters, ensuring adequate sanitisation measures and accessing cleaning products and facemasks. The increasingly financialised global economy, with its attendant wealth inequalities, has compounded labour precarity for the working classes in Hong Kong as elsewhere.

Asian societies are facing a 'silver tsunami', with Hong Kong seniors having the longest life expectancy in the world. These elderly people sorting through society's waste are survivors of some of the most dramatic events of the twentieth century, including war, revolution, and the end of British colonisation. Managing waste has long been a livelihood for the poor, whether they are employed to carry it away from public view or they sift through it to reclaim whatever value remains in its use or exchange. The elderly working poor have learned to be resilient in the midst of crises and have found a means for survival among society's discards. But that is not a solution to poverty alleviation and waste reduction.

甲乙丙丁戊己庚辛壬癸
子丑寅卯辰巳午未申酉戌亥

3

WOMEN'S BODIES, INTIMATE POLITICS, AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AMID COVID-19

Pan Wang

I Source: Gauthier Delecroix - 郭天, Flickr

IN SOCIAL AND GENDER RELATIONS, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a kaleidoscope revealing light and darkness, strength and vulnerability, as well as beauty and ugliness, in China as elsewhere. The crisis has brought attention to pre-existing inequalities and prompted a rise in feminist consciousness in China — even if 'feminism' 女权 itself is deemed a 'sensitive word' by the censors.

'My Body, Whose Choice?'

In April 2020, conservative protesters in the United States borrowed the feminist slogan 'My body, my choice' to urge their states (including Texas and Virginia) to lift their coronavirus restrictions and to encourage people to refuse to wear face masks.[1] The rhetorical weapon was originally created to advocate for women's abortion rights, yet, ironically, it was adapted to oppose government-mandated stay-at-home orders. At the same time, 'anti-vaxxers' held signs claiming vaccines 'violate bodily autonomy'. A number of women in the People's Republic of China (PRC), meanwhile, were making — or being motivated to make — rather different choices.

In early February, China's state-run Xinhua News Agency posted a video on Twitter featuring a group of female medical professionals from Xi'an who voluntarily had their heads shaved before heading to the coronavirus frontline in Wuhan, which was then the epicentre of the pandemic.[2] In the video, these women — dressed in navy-blue uniform jackets — raise their fists and give the thumbs up after their haircuts; even face masks cannot hide their smiles. They look happy, calm, and strongly determined, showing not the slightest hesitation. This calls to mind the legendary woman warrior Hua Mulan, who cut her hair short and disguised herself as a man to fight in the army of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE). These images also call to mind the 'little red guards' 小红卫兵 who cut their hair short to fight during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Also in February, China Central Television (CCTV) produced a documentary featuring the nurse Zhao Yu 赵瑜 working in the emergency ward at a military hospital in Wuhan while nine months pregnant. Overruling the objections of her family and peers, Zhao said, 'I believe all the difficulties can be conquered when my child accompanies me fighting in this battle.'[3] CCTV described her as a 'great mother and respectable angel in a white gown' 她是伟大的母亲，更是让人敬佩的白衣天使.[4] The media also reported stories of other pregnant women who insisted on working to fight the coronavirus. Some of the women were medical staff taking

A scene from the *Red Detachment of Women* (1972 production)
Source: Byron Schumaker, Wikimedia

the temperature of commuters on public roads; some were working at local clinics; and some were administrators in charge of sourcing medical supplies. One nurse returned to work in a Wuhan hospital just ten days after surgery following a miscarriage. These women continued to work despite fainting spells and internal bleeding.[5]

Wuhan was home to another story of female sacrifice on the COVID-19 frontline. According to the *Changjiang Daily*, seven nurses from the Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital who were new mothers breastfeeding their babies — with the youngest baby aged four months — voluntarily decided to stop breastfeeding and return to work when their hospital began admitting patients infected with coronavirus.[6] Some mothers had to pump their breast milk by hand to alleviate the pain caused by engorgement while at work. Moreover, they were only able to watch their babies remotely via smartphones because they needed to stay on duty at the hospital. Many had not seen their babies for more than ten days at the time of the report. The media hailed them as 'the most beautiful mothers' 最美的妈妈.

The crown of 'most beautiful' was also awarded to nurses whose skin had been damaged by the continuous wearing of surgical masks, goggles, and other personal protective equipment, as well as exposure to disinfectant. The damage included deep lines on their faces, blisters,

Nurses were hailed as the 'most beautiful mothers' by Chinese media
Source: Pxhere

and patches of bleached skin. A poster made by the Chinese Communist Party organ the *People's Daily* called these marks the 'most beautiful "epidemic battle makeup" of counter-marchers' 逆行者最美的'战疫妆'.[7] It was also reported in praiseworthy terms that many medical workers wore adult diapers during their shifts as there was no time to go to the toilet. Shortages in menstrual hygiene products made this a particular challenge for women — something the propaganda did not mention.[8]

The women who shaved their heads understood that this would 'de-feminise' them in a society otherwise obsessed with narrowly defined ideas of feminine beauty and youthfulness (for example, the 'A4 waist challenge' that has prompted thousands of Chinese women to share photos on social media revealing how skinny they are by holding a piece of A4 paper vertically in front of them);[9] they were also aware of the consequences of stopping breastfeeding or working during pregnancy and were conscious of the damage to their skin. However, they had chosen, in the words of the Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily*, to 'sail against the current' 逆流而上. In her 2016 book *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, Louise Edwards describes the actions of such 'women warriors' and 'self-sacrificing daughters' of the nation as giving lie to the notion of women as inherently 'vulnerable' or weak.[10] In official media accounts, their 'derring-do' is testament to their heroism, altruism, sense of unity, resilience, and patriotism; just like men, they are capable of 'sacrificing the "small family"

for the "big family"' 舍小家, 顾大家. These 'women worriers', whose heroic choices are written into their bodies, have been held up as role models to boost public morale and help China through the health crisis.

Despite these heroic efforts, women are disadvantaged in China's health and medical industry. According to a report released by China's online recruitment website Zhipin.com in March, the gender pay gap between men and women was 38.4 percent in medical care in 2019 — among the top four gender wage gaps across fifteen sectors — meaning women healthcare workers earned only 60 percent of their male counterparts' wages.[11] This gap has persisted despite the government's wage increase for frontline health workers during the coronavirus crisis.[12]

Fighting for Justice and Closing the Gender Gap

At the same time, there was a public, if sporadic and fragmented, backlash to these stories of heroines. This is evidence of a rising 'feminist consciousness' that extends beyond activist circles to a growing awareness of gender inequality and a trend towards resistance and pushing for recognition of women's contribution, rights, and interests. This echoes the calls made by people around the world for gender equality and efforts to improve the situation of women during the pandemic. For example, hundreds of women in Asian countries including India and the Philippines made sacrifices to help their local communities prevent the spread of the virus; many were involved in programs that aimed to empower women during the pandemic; and female political leaders such as New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 adopted inclusive approaches to handling the crisis and received widespread praise.[13]

Riding on this wave, in China, many people expressed their gratitude to these 'woman warriors' while questioning the way their sacrifices have been politicised to promote Positive Energy 正能量. (This is one of

President Xi Jinping's 习近平 favourite slogans, meaning to 'give people confidence and hope, encourage people to love their country, society and life, as well as to pursue nice things',[14] which is essential to the state's strategy of control.)[15] One netizen commented: 'The sacrifice and contribution of these women nurses and doctors is plain for all to see. Do not attempt to use their bodies as heavy-handed "propaganda", they shouldn't be morally kidnapped like this.'[16]

Other netizens questioned whether the nurses had genuinely chosen to shave off their hair; a video released by Gansudaily.com on Weibo showed women from Gansu province shedding tears during and after their haircut. Some commentators pointed out that men serving on the coronavirus frontline did not have to shave their heads; why couldn't women simply have short hair like their male counterparts? These debates led to the removal of some of the 'propaganda' from the Internet, such as the video clip of the pregnant nurse by CCTV and the one by *Gansu Daily*.

One of the heroines of the crisis was undoubtedly Ai Fen 艾芬, a Chinese doctor and director of the emergency department at Wuhan Central Hospital. She was known as the 'whistle-giver'[17] 发哨子的人 of the novel coronavirus. Ai was among the first healthcare workers to encounter the outbreak of the virus and alerted her colleagues. However, she was reprimanded by her hospital for 'spreading rumours' and 'harming stability'.[18] Her interview with *People* magazine posted on social media was also deleted within three hours of its publication on 10 March. In her words: 'If I had known what was to happen, I would not have cared about the reprimand. I would have fucking talked about it to whoever, wherever I could.'[19] To evade censors, Internet users have posted in foreign languages and used other means such as emojis, Pinyin, Morse code, Klingon, and oracle bone scripts to repost the article. Unlike the model 'sacrificing daughters' in official accounts, Ai is a 'hidden' hero who dares to tell the truth by 'sailing against the current' of the bureaucracy.

The 'Shadow Pandemic' and 'Coronavirus Divorce'

With the escalation of the coronavirus outbreak around the globe, many countries have imposed lockdowns of cities and other social restrictions to contain the virus. This, however, has led to the emergence of a 'shadow pandemic': a rising number of women have reported falling victim to domestic violence, with a significant surge from the pre-crisis period, including in Argentina, Australia, Cyprus, France, and Singapore.[20] In Hong Kong, many women were reportedly overwhelmed by their 'natural duty' of household chores and this sometimes led to 'pushes and shoves'.[21] In mainland China, national-level statistics on domestic violence during COVID-19 are not available, however, media reports similarly suggest that domestic violence has increased sharply during this period.

Meanwhile, divorce proceedings have in many countries throughout the year. For example, in Italy, lawyers reported a 30 percent rise in the number of couples inquiring about and initiating divorce proceedings from the beginning of that country's lockdown in early March through to May.[22] In Australia, the national information and mediation group, The Separation Guide, reported that the number of couples considering separation had increased 314 percent compared with the pre-lockdown period.[23] In Japan, 'coronavirus divorce' has become a trending term during the pandemic and divorce rates have reportedly increased, with 35 percent of marriages ending in separation (at the time of reporting).[24] In Saudi Arabia during the lockdown, the divorce rate had increased by 30 percent in February from the same period last year.[25] In China, national divorce statistics are not yet available as official data are released yearly. However, various media reports suggest that inquiries about separation and divorce rates have been climbing, especially since the lockdown period.

In one case, a woman from Lingshi county, in northern China's Shanxi province, committed suicide on 9 March after writing on Weibo a few hours earlier: 'I always felt domestic violence was far away from me, however, today is a nightmare, I'm suffocated by fear and helplessness. My

spirit is completely broken.'[26] This incident suggests that the pressures of lockdown and isolation have resulted in an increase in domestic violence, which has extended to women who may not have experienced it in the past.

According to Wan Fei 万飞, a retired police officer and founder of the Under the Blue Sky Association for the Protection of Women's and Children's Rights 蓝天下妇女儿童维权协会, an anti–domestic violence organisation from Jingzhou in Hubei province, 90 percent of domestic violence incidents reported in January and February 2020 were related to the COVID-19 epidemic.[27] He said the domestic violence calls received by the local police bureau in Jingzhou's Jianli county 监利县 doubled in January and had more than tripled from 47 to 162 cases in February compared with the same period last year. Men were the perpetrators in 97.4 percent of the cases and women were the victims in 94.7 percent.[28] The cause of the increase in violence can be attributed to people's fear and anxiety about the extended quarantine, financial stress on households, as well as weakened support systems for survivors of domestic violence.[29]

The divorce rate in Wuhan reportedly doubled after the lockdown was lifted.[30] There were also record highs in divorce filings in other places, including Xi'an, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Dazhou in Sichuan province and Miluo in Hunan province.[31] Some of this was due to couples who had intended to file for divorce before COVID-19 hit, but put it off because of the lockdown.[32] Other factors reportedly included disagreements over the

Lockdown in Chongqing
Source: Gauthier DELECROIX - 郭天, Flickr

sharing of responsibility for childcare and housework, disagreements about mask wearing or simply having to spend so much time in each other's company.

One could easily blame COVID-19 for both the 'shadow pandemic' and the increasing divorce rates. I believe, however, that the pandemic has simply drawn public attention to pre-existing — but now magnified — domestic violence, while also magnifying existing problems within marriages.

Statistics released by All China Women's Federation in 2015 showed that 30 percent of married women in China's 270 million households had experienced domestic violence (in comparison, on average, one in six women has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in Australia and one in four of that in the United States);[33] while 70 percent of male perpetrators abused both their wives and their children physically.[34] Of the 157,000 women who committed suicide each year, on average, 60 percent had experienced domestic violence.[35] The statistics also showed that one Chinese woman suffers domestic violence every 7.4 seconds. On average, a woman will suffer thirty-five incidents of domestic violence before reporting it to the police.[36]

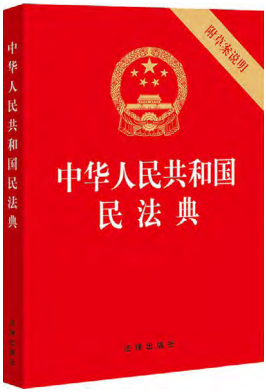
The statistics suggest three things. First, many women do not enjoy equal status with men within their household, despite the Chinese government's efforts to promote gender equality through legislative reforms and various social policies and measures. Such inequality is enhanced by the growing incidence of 'mistress keeping' 包二奶 by Chinese men, along with the growth of private investigation services specialising in tackling this issue.[37] Second, in the absence of clear and widespread government and media messaging to the contrary, many women see domestic violence as normal marital behaviour, believing doctrines such as 'Do not wash your dirty linen in public' 家丑不可外扬 and 'Couples fight at the head of the bed and compromise at the end of it' 夫妻床头打架床尾和. Many also see domestic violence as punishment for something they lack or did wrong, rather than a social problem. Third, China's

anti–domestic violence law, enacted in March 2016, has been compromised by prevalent judicial mediation aimed at 'saving the marital relationship' and 'maintaining social harmony'.[38]

Data released by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) reveal that, in 1978, 285,000 couples registered for a divorce; in 2012, the figure was more than 3.1 million, and it was 4.15 million in 2019.[39] According to Zhou Qiang, 周强, president of the Supreme People's Court, in seven cases out of ten, it is the woman who initiates a divorce.[40]

The National People's Congress passed the long-awaited Civil Code 民法典 on 28 May 2020.[41] Among other provisions concerning property rights, inheritance, contracts, and so on, the new law, to take effect on 1 January 2021, introduced a thirty-day 'cooling-off period for divorce' 离婚冷静期 to encourage couples to reconsider — reinforcing its mediation-oriented approach to conjugal disputes. This clause stirred an open discussion online about the state's interference in private relationships and raised concerns about the protection of women's rights. Fortunately, the 'cooling-off period' does not apply where there has been a history of domestic violence or extramarital affairs. However, as one needs to provide evidence to file for divorce on the grounds of domestic violence, this makes it very difficult for women to win their divorce case. This was evident in the case of 'Liu' (full name not provided), a woman from Henan province whose divorce request was denied by the local court despite her presenting medical documents to prove her injuries, which included her being paralysed when trying to jump from a second-storey window to escape her abusive husband. Liu was told by local police that her paralysis was a result of her 'attempted suicide' rather than domestic violence.[42]

A policy enacted by the local government of Jinan, Shandong province, in response to the coronavirus outbreak sparked a similar controversy. On 8 February, after schools were closed during lockdown, education officials in Jinan suggested that in families with small children where both parents were employed, women should take the initiative to apply for leave to care for the children.[43] Many people called the policy sexist and accused



Civil Code of the People's Republic of China
Source: winxuan.com

the government of reinforcing existing patriarchal norms and gender inequities in the job market — that is, in employment opportunities, recruitment processes, and the unequal payment between men and women. One netizen commented on Weibo: 'Is it your business who takes care of the kids at home? Why does it have to be women? Every family can make their own arrangements.' Another noted: 'We're not refusing to look after the children at home because we're feminists. We just need the government and society to treat men and women equally, and not to use this kind of gender-biased language.'[44] Others pointed out that the policy was also biased against men who preferred to be the one to look after the children.

The call for a traditional division of domestic labour is consistent with gender education campaigns in recent years under President Xi. These campaigns reinforce the idea of 'traditional family values' as being crucial for familial harmony and social stability and thus achieving the China Dream itself.[45] They are behind training programs aimed at cultivating feminine virtues and fostering masculinity, such as the New Era Women's School 镇江新时代女子学堂 run by a college in Zhenjiang, in southern China. The school teaches female students how to behave 'like a woman' through studying Chinese history and cultural etiquette such as the correct way of pouring tea, using 'the right amount of make-up' and sitting 'with [their] bellies held in and legs together'.[46] At the same time, boys are encouraged to join boot camps teaching them how to act like 'a real man': confident, diligent and equipped to 'pick up the steel gun' to safeguard the nation.[47] Military-style programs are designed to tackle the supposed 'masculinity crisis' that first emerged in the 1980s in which young men have become 'feminised', lack confidence and are without ambition; and continued

in the new millennium that saw more and more boys model their looks and behaviour on the popular teenage bands made up of 'little fresh meat' 小鲜肉 — young, good-looking males who are well-groomed and with feminine facial features.

Seeing Female Workers, Respecting Women's Choices, and Empowering Women

From the end of February, the hashtag #SeeingFemaleWorkers 看见女性劳动者 went viral on Weibo (with 630 million reads and 901,000 users joining the discussion until 22 July), calling for the recognition of women's contribution during the pandemic.[48] One netizen who used the hashtag commented: 'Women really have held up this fight against the epidemic.' Another wrote: 'I didn't have a sense of it before, but I'm starting to admire female comrades more and more!'[49] The hashtag led to a wider call for recognition of women's contribution to society, including that of women teachers, police, drivers, and other professionals.

The struggle for women's rights was reignited on another front in 2020 by a comment on Douyin (the Chinese TikTok) about the 'child-free lifestyle' of revered dancer Yang Liping 杨丽萍 (who is known as the 'Peacock Princess' after one of her most famous dances).[50] A female netizen accused the 61-year-old artist of having 'failed as a woman' because she had never had children. The Douyin video had received more than 11,000 likes by 8 June. On Weibo, where it also circulated, the majority opinion was in support of Yang. One person wrote: 'A sow has the happiness of a sow, a peacock has the happiness of a peacock. The problem of the sow is that it very stupidly insists that its [kind of] happiness suits the peacock as well.' Another asserted that reproductive choices were 'an individual right'.[51] Chinese celebrities including actress Li Ruotong 李若彤, singer and actress Qi Wei 戚薇, and actress Chen Shu 陈数 weighed in, urging people not to define or judge women based on their reproductive choices. Following the attack on Yang, 41-year-old Chinese actress Qin Lan 秦岚

was asked about her marriage plans in an interview; she responded: 'Some people even say that it's women's obligation to bear children. To them I want to say, it's none of your business if I use my uterus or not.'[52] This stirred another wave of debate on the Internet.

Chinese male group competition show: *Idol Producer*
Source: Wikimedia

The conversation about women's choices around marriage and childbearing will likely continue as more and more women in China choose to postpone marriage and not have children. Statistics from the MCA show the country's marriage rates have been in decline for five consecutive years, from 9.9 per 1,000 persons in 2013 to 7.3 per 1,000 persons in 2018. People are also marrying later, with the highest number of marriage registrations before 2012 among those aged between twenty and twenty-four years, while in 2018 those aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine made up the majority.[53] Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that China's birth rate has been in decline as well, dropping year on year to reach 0.48 per 100 people in 2019 — the lowest since 1949.[54]

China's video-streaming show *Sisters Who Make Waves* 乘风破浪的姐姐 debuted in June on Mango TV, sparking discussion about women and ageing. The show features thirty 'middle-aged' female celebrities (with an average age of thirty-five-plus), such as fifty-two-year-old singer Yi Nengjing 伊能静, forty-eight-year-old actress Ning Jing 宁静, and thirty-seven-year-old actress Huang Shengyi 黄圣依, showcasing their talent on stage and competing for limited spots to form an idol group. While some viewers believe this show has empowered 'old girls' and broken the link between women's value/beauty and being 'young, slim and sweet', others have argued that the show fails to address the real issues faced

by women and tells women that they must be 'young and beautiful to make a new start'.[55] Whether the show empowers or stereotypes women remains controversial.

Another noteworthy action centred on Chinese women was the #'Rice Bunny' 米兔 campaign,[56] which was part of the global #MeToo movement that started in 2018. Although censored by the government, the movement has raised awareness of the protection of women's rights and inspired many Chinese women to speak out against sexual assault. This movement has had some success in China — marked by the country's first successful prosecution for sexual harassment in July 2020. This resulted in a Chinese court's decision to order Liu, the sexual offender and director-general of a non-profit organisation in Sichuan province, to apologise to 'Xiao Li' (a pseudonym), who is a prosecutor and a social worker[57] — a success for collective efforts in advancing Chinese women's rights.

Overall, between the domestic crisis engendered by the pandemic, the divorce provisions of the new civil law and the debate around having children, 2020 was a year that exposed both ongoing struggles and new challenges for Chinese women. These include unequal social and gender relations that have been institutionalised in a nation in which no woman has ever taken the top position in the Party or state, few have served in the Politburo and none in the powerful Politburo Standing Committee. There are also fewer employment opportunities (especially good jobs)

Chinese reality television show: *Sisters Who Make Waves*
Source: Mango Tv

for women and the gender pay gap between men and women continues in the job market.[58] And yet, under President Xi, overt feminist activism has never been tolerated, and terms such as ‘feminism’ and ‘me too’ are considered ‘sensitive’ and subject to censorship. Rising consciousness is one thing, but women have a hard struggle ahead to achieve true equality.

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CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The Language of Trust

· GERALD ROCHE

THE LANGUAGE OF TRUST

Gerald Roche

BY MID-FEBRUARY 2020, Yulha's family was running low on perishable food.[1] Her village, in the mountainous Tibetan region of Rnga ba prefecture, western Sichuan province, had already been in lockdown for a month. Every morning, her family woke the young woman to check social media and tell them the latest statistics: How many infected? How many dead?

We are all now familiar with some variant of this anxious routine, but what made Yulha's experience special was the reason her family relied on her for the news. They are among the approximately 10,000 Tibetans who speak the Khroskyabs language and there was almost no information about the epidemic in their language. And so Yulha, whose Chinese was the best in the family, had to translate for them.

News of the epidemic and crucial public health information, spread through Tibet via a network of informal, community-based translators like Yulha, in person and on social media.[2] There were no official translations of even vital public health information available in minority languages like Khroskyabs. Policymakers and administrators recognise only a single Tibetan language, based on the written standard.[3]

In fact, most of the languages of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are invisible to, or considered irrelevant by, its policymakers.[4] Although the constitution guarantees everyone the freedom to use their native language,

Propaganda on a wall in a kindergarten in Shanghai promotes speaking Standard Modern Chinese (Putonghua): 'Let's all speak Putonghua and standardise speech and spelling'
Source: Wikimedia

in practice, the government relies on an informal policy of recognising only one language for each of China's 'nationalities' (including the Han majority and the country's fifty-five 'minority nationalities'); in contrast, linguists identify between 129 and 293 languages in total.[5] So, beyond the fifty-six formally recognised languages, most languages in China are demoted to the status of dialects.

Linguists in China were once actively discouraged from identifying languages beyond those officially recognised by the state.[6] This started to change in the 1990s, with the launch of a publication series titled New Found Minority Languages in China, edited by Sun Hongkai 孙宏开, one of China's leading linguists.[7] However, policy has not kept pace with the expansion of linguistic knowledge. Instead of monitoring the number of languages that people in China actually speak, the Party-State keeps meticulous records on the number of people who speak the national language, Putonghua, and sets targets to drive this number up.

This national language did not exist at the start of the twentieth century. Linguist David Moser has described Putonghua as 'an artificially constructed hybrid form, a linguistic patchwork of compromises based upon expediency, history, and politics'.[8] Although based in part on the Mandarin of north-eastern China, Putonghua had a total of zero speakers at the start of the previous century. It only came to be spoken by

a majority of the Chinese population (53 percent) as recently as 2007.[9] By 2015, this number had been raised to 70 percent, and a target was set to reach 80 percent by 2020.[10]

This increase in numbers has been supported by the special place given to Putonghua in China's laws: it is the only language that is specifically named in national-level law and the only language that anyone in China is legally obliged to use or learn.[11] In contrast, the use of minority languages is 'desirable rather than mandatory',[12] and languages such as Khroskyabs, which are considered dialects, are mostly excluded from the rights and obligations of China's language laws.

The Party sees the promotion of Putonghua as the solution to a wide variety of ills in China. For example, it was a key element in the drive to eliminate poverty by 2020. In 2018, the Ministry of Education, the Poverty Relief Office of the State Council and the State Language Commission jointly released a three-year 'action plan' to increase Putonghua proficiency among China's poorest citizens.[13] This was because Putonghua is seen as the key to participation in both education and the economy, with integration and prosperity supposedly going hand-in-hand.

The promotion of Putonghua has also been a central focus in the 're-education' camps of Xinjiang, where up to a million people, mostly Uyghurs, have been detained. A Uyghur woman who taught in one of the re-education camps described these 'educational' facilities to researcher Ruth Ingram in 2020: 'students' chained hand and foot, 'classrooms' with closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and meals of watery gruel.[14] The promotion of Putonghua inside the camps occurs in tandem with the suppression of mother-tongue education outside — two aspects of a broader program of political repression.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed crucial shortcomings in the Party's approach of promoting Putonghua as a magic bullet, whether for poverty alleviation or national unity. In Hubei province, for example, officials realised that unless they used local dialects, they could not ensure clear and effective communication on important public health issues. They mobilised linguists and public health experts to

Tibetan alphabet
Source: Sina

ensure that information was available and comprehensible to everyone in languages they understood.[15]

Such efforts were constrained, however, by the state's refusal to recognise the majority of languages spoken in the country. Most of the public health translation work carried out during the pandemic was done unofficially, at the grassroots level by people like Yulha. Meanwhile, on social media, a range of 'influencers', including 'cartoonists, poets, singers, calligraphers, [and] writers', made public health information available to their audiences in the language they understood best. In Inner Mongolia, some influencers were so effective in spreading the message about the pandemic that state media co-opted and reused their content.[16]

In a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, there are serious implications of the state's failure to adequately recognise linguistic diversity and provide public health information in the languages that people know and use. These include people being misinformed about what is happening and unclear about instructions to protect their health, thereby putting themselves and their communities at risk.

Even more important than the clarity and accuracy of information is the issue of trust. People tend to trust information they receive from a source they consider reliable, which often requires it to be in a language that is most familiar.[17] That sense of trust in turn influences how any individual acts on information they receive. In a pandemic, that, too, can have significant consequences not only for the individual's own health, but also for that of the broader population.

In Tibet, the experience of the SARS epidemic suggests that Tibetans did not trust information they received in the language of the state. Anthropologist Beth Meriam describes how Tibetans in Qinghai province responded with a mixture of distrust and cynicism to the state's efforts to control the disease and spread public health information. Instead, they reached out for what was familiar and comforting: their faith, their language, and their community.[18] When rumours spread that the Dalai Lama was conducting an empowerment ritual to protect Tibetans from the disease, locals waited at the designated time with doors and windows open to receive his blessings. In the end, the epidemic served to further drive a wedge between local Tibetans and the state, undermining rather than building trust.

Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tibetans — like people all across China — reached for languages they understood, which comforted them and that they trusted. Because Putonghua is the language of state and party propaganda, and is used in places like Tibet and Xinjiang as a tool of repression, it fails to be the language of trust.

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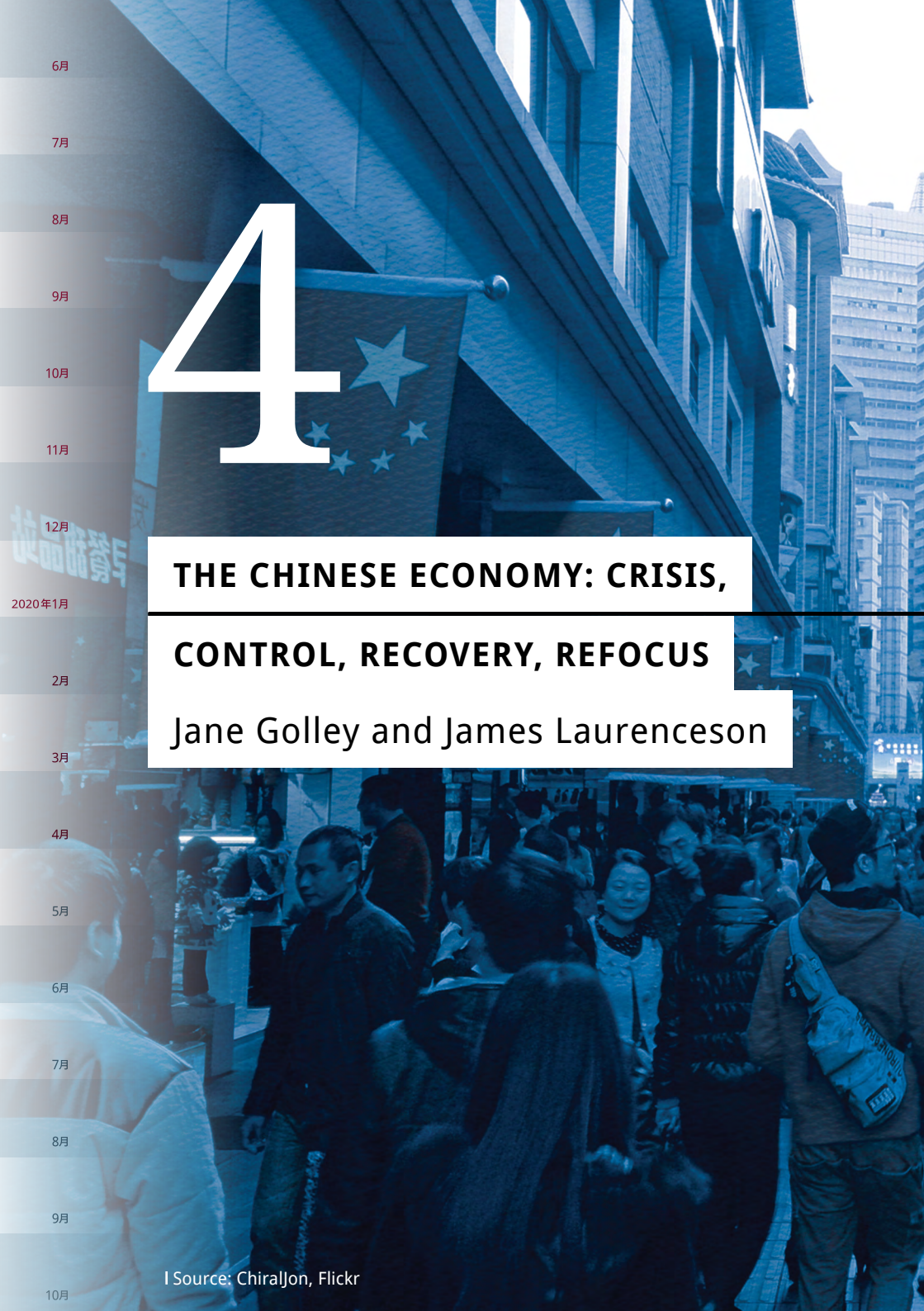
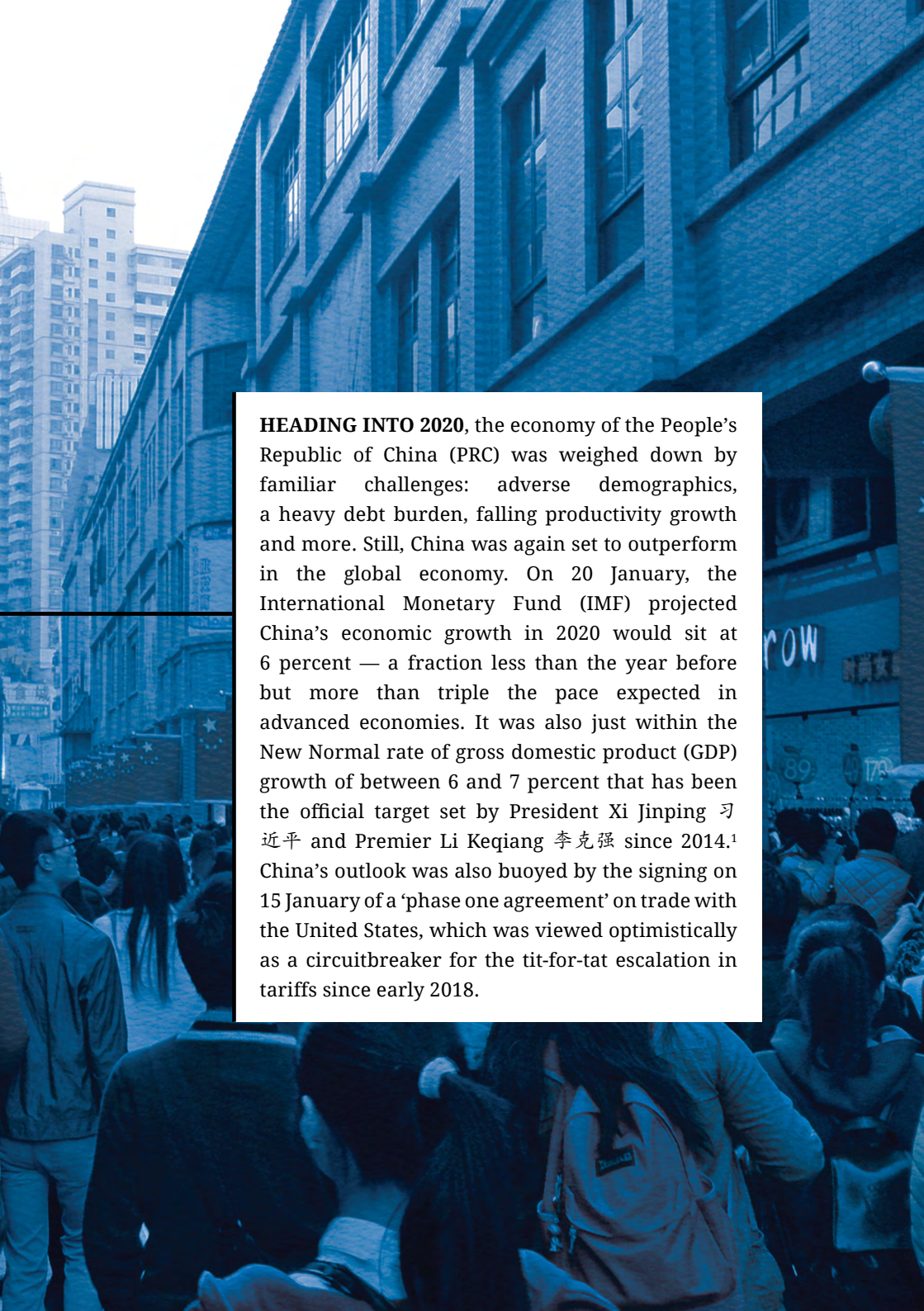
THE CHINESE ECONOMY: CRISIS, CONTROL, RECOVERY, REFOCUS

Jane Golley and James Laurenceson



I Source: ChiralJon, Flickr



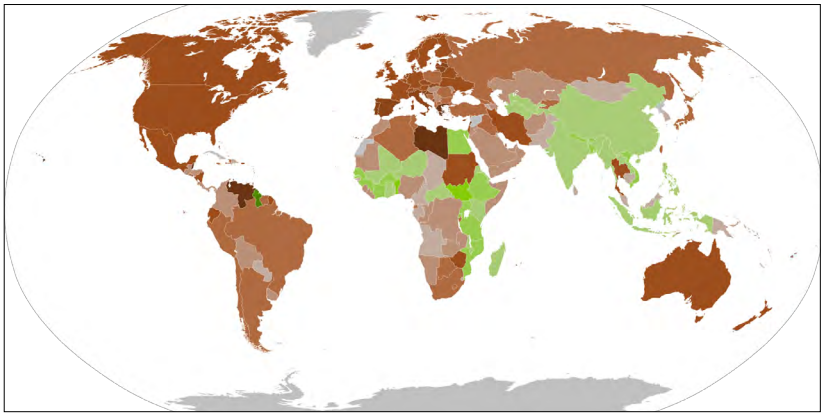
HEADING INTO 2020, the economy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was weighed down by familiar challenges: adverse demographics, a heavy debt burden, falling productivity growth and more. Still, China was again set to outperform in the global economy. On 20 January, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected China's economic growth in 2020 would sit at 6 percent — a fraction less than the year before but more than triple the pace expected in advanced economies. It was also just within the New Normal rate of gross domestic product (GDP) growth of between 6 and 7 percent that has been the official target set by President Xi Jinping 习近平 and Premier Li Keqiang 李克强 since 2014.[1] China's outlook was also buoyed by the signing on 15 January of a 'phase one agreement' on trade with the United States, which was viewed optimistically as a circuitbreaker for the tit-for-tat escalation in tariffs since early 2018.

Yet by mid January, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was well under way in Wuhan. It was 23 January when the metropolis of 11 million residents was locked down, with *The New York Times* observing that day that the virus had 'cast a pall over growth prospects for the world's second largest economy'.[2] A 'new abnormal' era — albeit with some familiar echoes from the past — had begun.

Domestic Developments: Crash, Rebound

Early assessments of the damage inflicted on China's economy by the pandemic were complicated by the fact that production had already begun shutting down for the annual Spring Festival break, originally scheduled for 24–30 January, but extended to 2 February 'to strengthen the prevention and control of the novel coronavirus outbreak'.[3] By the time work at offices and factories was officially allowed to restart, many restrictions on travel remained in place throughout the country — reportedly affecting around 500 million people.[4] Real-time indicators of economic activity such as road congestion and electricity consumption, remained at a fraction of normal levels.[5] On 29 February, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published its manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) — a measure of factory activity. With 50.0 being the dividing line between month-on-month expansion and contraction, and also the value that was recorded in January, February's reading of 35.7 showed the fastest rate of collapse on record. The official index covering the services sector was even worse, falling from 54.1 to 29.6.[6]

As the central authorities became increasingly impatient to get the economy moving again, local media reported that lower-level officials were meeting 'back-to-work targets' by instructing firms to power up idle equipment and turn on factory lights at night in an attempt to game performance measures by boosting electricity consumption.[7] In the middle of March, the NBS announced that the official unemployment



Map of the projected real GDP growth rate in 2020 of countries in the International Monetary Fund's *World Economic Outlook* (April 2020). Green colour indicates improvements and red indicates deteriorations; the darker the colour, the greater the degree
Source: Wikimedia

rate had jumped to 6.2 percent — the highest on record.[8] But even this did not capture the millions of migrant workers who had not returned to the cities following the Spring Festival break, so the real unemployment rate was undoubtedly much higher.

On 20 April, the NBS issued grim confirmation that the economy had shrunk by 9.8 percent in the first quarter compared with the last quarter of 2019, or 6.8 percent in year-on-year terms.[9] In the first quarter of 2009, in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, the PRC's year-on-year growth rate slumped, but to a still-positive 6.4 percent, down from 9.5 percent six months earlier. The effects of COVID-19 seemed to have taken the meaning of economic crisis to a new level.

From April, however, the economy picked up. By the time the IMF released its *World Economic Outlook* report in October, its forecast for China's 2020 GDP growth had increased to 1.9 percent (compared with a June forecast of 0.8 percent). By contrast, the forecast for India had been downgraded to a contraction of –10.3 percent (more than double the already devastating –4.5 percent predicted in June); and the projection

for the US was –4.4 percent. Indeed, by October, China was the world's only major economy projected to record positive growth in the year.[10] This feat was confirmed — according to official data at least — with the NBS reporting in January 2021 that China's economy had expanded by 2.3 percent in 2020.

How did China manage to perform so well while the global economy was crumbling? Emergency government interventions played a big role initially. The most prominent of these was the RMB 3.6 trillion (US$500 billion) fiscal stimulus announced in May — the equivalent of 4.5 percent of Chinese GDP — taking the country's budget deficit to 3.6 percent of GDP, above the longstanding ceiling of 3 percent.[11] The stimulus followed the familiar playbook of primarily targeting investment in infrastructure (as discussed in Chapter 5, 'China's Post-COVID-19 Stimulus: Dark Clouds, Green Lining', pp.139–153) and property development, while Chinese households by and large received no direct support. This was evident in China's second quarter GDP growth rate of 3.2 percent (year-on-year), to which investment added 5 percent while consumption subtracted 2.3 percent.[12]

Premier Li's declared that street vendors represented the 'livelihood of China'
Source: Azchael, Flickr

Supporting a more organic economic recovery from April was the fact that China managed to get the public health crisis under control, allowing restaurants and retail outlets to join factories in reopening their doors. But a stalled agenda for economic reform undermined the sustainability of China's continued growth. The Asia Society's *China Dashboard*, which tracks the progress of economic reforms across ten domains, revealed that, during the first six months of 2020, only two of these domains (land and state-owned enterprises) showed minor improvements, with downgraded assessments for competition, the financial system, innovation and labour, and stagnation for the remaining four: cross-border investment, the environment, fiscal affairs, and trade.[13]

Labour was hit the hardest, with evidence that all labour indicators — including unemployment rates, migrant wages, and job creation — 'deteriorated and are now in unchartered territory as policies failed to support workers during the pandemic'. One of the only vaguely positive signs in the mix was Premier Li's declaration in June that street vendors represented the 'livelihood of China', and he encouraged them to 'come alive, survive, and develop'. Shortly thereafter, at least twenty-seven cities, including Shanghai (but not Beijing), began to bring back street vending, contrasting starkly with past crackdowns on street stalls in the name of 'urban beautification'.[14]

All this was despite the fact that, in April and May, Beijing announced two sets of guidelines, on 'making market mechanisms more important' and 'speeding up the improvement of the socialist market economic system in a new era'.[15] These guidelines implicitly recognised that the ambitious reform agenda to which the Third Plenum of the Central Committee back in 2013 had committed (see the *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, Chapter 1, 'Great Expectations', pp.21–37) had not been fully implemented by 2020.

The Party Leads All

The Nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017 endorsed the writing into the Chinese Constitution of President Xi's Four Confidences — in the path, theory, system, and culture of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (see Chapter 1, 'The Construction of Political Superiority', pp.13–21). He reiterated this formula in various speeches throughout 2020, as well as emphasising the centrality of the power of the Party, which was encapsulated in his now well-worn phrase: 'Party, government, army, society, and education — east and west, south, north and centre, the party leads all.'

This expression was first used by Mao Zedong in 1962, during a conference that 'saw a broad pushback against Mao and his radical leftist policies' following the Great Chinese Famine (1959–1961) that left tens of millions of people dead.[16] Xi, like Mao, reportedly facing internal criticism, strengthened both his control over the Party and the Party's control over most aspects of Chinese politics, economics, and society throughout 2020. In September, the Party ordered the United Front Work Department to work more closely with business to strengthen the government's leadership role in the private sector, by 'strengthening ideological guidance' and 'creating a core group of private sector leaders who can be relied on in critical times'.[17] Neil Thomas from the Paulson Institute reminds us that, in Xi's China, while ideology is framed as supporting 'comprehensively deepening reform', this reform is not always market-oriented. Rather, it can also be directed at enhanced 'governance' with the ultimate goal being for the PRC 'to escape the middle-income trap and achieve comprehensive national power'.[18]

While some entrepreneurs may have found Xi's commitment to doing 'better in promoting the healthy development of the private economy' reassuring, especially after previous, less encouraging signals, it is unlikely they were comforted by his intention to 'unify members of the private sector around the Party'.[19] (See the *China Story Yearbook: China*

Dreams, Forum, 'Xi Jinping's War on "Black and Evil"', pp.37–41.) A case in point is China's richest man, Jack Ma 马云, who was worth US$61.1 billion in mid-November 2020 according to *Forbes*'s 'real-time billionaire' list.[20] Ma, a longstanding member of the Communist Party, co-founder and former executive chairman of Alibaba and owner of its affiliate Ant Group, the world's highest-valued fintech company, was also ranked by *Forbes* as the twenty-first most powerful person in the world in 2018 (only two PRC citizens outranked him: President Xi at number one and Premier Li at number fifteen).[21] In late October, Ant Group was poised for what was expected to be the world's largest-ever initial public offering (IPO): a hotly anticipated dual listing in Hong Kong and Shanghai valued at US$30 billion. But then reports broke that Xi had personally halted the IPO. The immediate cause appeared to be a speech given by Ma in October in which he criticised global financial regulations. There was also speculation that Ma had pushed the limits of his personal power too far in recent times; Xi was ready to rein him in.

China's richest man, Jack Ma
Photo: Paul Kagame, Flickr

In times of crisis, the mechanisms the Chinese government has at hand for stimulating economic growth may be superior to those of liberal democracies, where there is no omnipotent central power that can make decisions without consultation. It is certainly easy to imagine that the events of 2020 confirmed for the CCP one of their basic tenets of faith, the 'superiority of the socialist system'. Yet by clutching too tightly to the notion of a state-controlled economic system while clamping down on wealthy entrepreneurs and failing to provide for

the country's least privileged workers (numbering in the hundreds of millions), they may be sacrificing the sustained economic growth and social stability that Xi and his party crave in the longer term.

The Global Economy: Conflict and Co-operation

The Sino-American 'phase one agreement' on trade may have paused the escalation of tariffs, but the relationship between the world's two superpowers deteriorated in 2020 (as discussed in Chapter 7 of this volume). In April, Orville Schell wrote in a *Foreign Policy* article titled 'The ugly end of Chimerica': 'The best hope is that the US and China remain in the foothills of a Cold War, and don't ascend to its heights.'[22] While not everyone accepts that a new Cold War has begun, in 2020, both the US and China increasingly pursued their conflicting geopolitical objectives by using economic tools to punish or reward: the US focusing its efforts on China; China focusing its own 'geoeconomic' proclivities elsewhere.

Chinese companies and individuals continued to suffer under trade restrictions, with President Trump seeming to pick his targets at random, from WeChat and TikTok to the possible delisting of Alibaba. He introduced new restrictions on Chinese researchers and students in the US and imposed sanctions on fourteen PRC officials for their connection to the suppression of democracy in Hong Kong. Perhaps no company felt the heat more keenly than Huawei, when in August, the US government announced that any foreign companies using US technology to supply Huawei with the semiconductor chips required for its smartphones and 5G equipment would have to apply for a special licence. *Fortune* magazine observed that, should these licences be denied, it would amount to a 'death sentence' for the tech giant.[23]

Overwhelmingly, however, Trump's tariffs on Chinese goods were being paid by American consumers, adding between several hundred and one thousand dollars to average annual household expenses.[24]

TikTok would face a complete ban if it did not sell to a US company by 14 November
Source: Solen Feyissa, Flickr

Retaliation by Beijing also saw the average tariff rate on US imports climb to 25.9 percent by the beginning of 2020, up from 8.0 percent two years earlier; at the same time, China was cutting tariffs on imports from other countries.[25]

The 'phase one agreement' struggled to deliver the volume of additional US exports Trump promised it would. In October, Chad Bown from the Peterson Institute for International Economics found that, through the first three quarters of 2020, China had reached only 53 percent of its target purchases of US exports for the full year; Chinese imports of US goods were 'lower than they were before Trump started his trade war' in 2018.[26] That same month, *Reuters* reported that some 3,500 US companies, including Tesla, Ford, Target, and Home Depot, were suing the Trump administration over the US$300 billion tariffs imposed on Chinese imports — a revealing sign of the internal damage Trump inflicted via his 'punishments' of China.[27]

Geopolitical tensions and the economic damage caused by the pandemic had a more mixed impact on capital flows. In the first half of 2020, direct and venture capital investment between the US and China fell to its lowest point since 2011.[28] Yet by October, the *Financial Times* was reporting that Beijing and Wall Street were 'deepening ties despite geopolitical rivalry', with US portfolio investment capital

pouring into Chinese government bonds, which paid much higher yields than American ones: 3.18 percent compared with 0.8 percent. As Cornell University's Eswar Prasad explained: 'Economic imperatives are certainly overriding political concerns. Ultimately, private capital and private financial institutions are going to respond more to economic incentives irrespective of what political masters say.'[29]

Australia, meanwhile, was bracing itself from February for the knock-on economic effects of the pandemic on its most significant trading partner. On 27 February, *Bloomberg* published a feature with the headline 'The world's most China-reliant economy reels from virus shock waves', adding that developments had 'fuelled questions over whether the nation is too reliant on the Asian behemoth'.[30] Some security and strategic analysts were quick to answer in the affirmative.[31] Economists, on the other hand, pointed to data suggesting that Australia's trade exposure to China might turn out to be a strength rather than a weakness[32] — or even a 'blessing in disguise'.[33]

The political relationship between Australia and China took a battering in 2020, with Australia targeted by Beijing for a series of 'geoeconomic punishments'[34] (see Chapter 9, 'Economic Power and Vulnerability in Sino-Australian Relations', pp.259–274). Yet Australian trade with China showed resilience in aggregate. China accounted for 38.2 percent of Australia's goods exports in 2019.[35] By the end of 2020, this share had risen to 40.0 percent, while the total value was

Australian beef sold in a Chinese supermarket
Source: myzaker.com

down by only 2.1 percent on the same period a year earlier, which had represented a record high. Goods exports to all other countries were down by 9.9 percent.[36]

This paints a slightly different picture than that commonly presented by media reports. These understandably focused on the ever-growing list of Australian export sectors and companies that were coming under pressure from China, with Beijing's 'plausible denial' that the restrictions were not imposed for political reasons becoming increasing implausible. By year's end, Australian wine, lobster, sugar, coal, timber, wool, barley, and copper ore were in the firing line, and the export value at risk was projected at AU$20 billion. While the macroeconomic consequences of a shock of this scale were limited — hence feeding into a picture of resilience in aggregate — there is no doubt these individual sectors suffered significantly and some individual firms suffered enormously.

Beijing's actions towards Australia sat uncomfortably alongside Xi's claims that China would be a responsible, inclusive and co-operative global power in the face of the 'indisputable reality' of economic globalisation or, as he put it in his statement to the UN General Assembly in September 2020:

> We should see each other as members of the same big family, pursue win-win co-operation, rise above ideological disputes, and not fall into the trap of 'clash of civilizations' … . We should pursue open and inclusive development, remain committed to building an open world economy, and uphold the multilateral trading regime with the World Trade Organization as the cornerstone.[37]

Nonetheless, in some areas, Xi lived up to his word. In November, fifteen countries in the Asia-Pacific — including China, Japan, Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and Australia — signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a major trade agreement covering some 30 percent of global GDP. This was widely interpreted as

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)
Photo: Wikimedia

a geopolitical (or geoeconomic) victory for China, signalling its capacity to step into the void left by Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership back in 2017. A Peterson Institute for International Economics working paper concluded that lower trade costs, especially among China, Japan, and Korea, would 'accelerate the decoupling of the East Asian and US economies'.[38]

China further courted parts of the world that may have felt abandoned by Trump's 'America first' policies both before and during the pandemic. It did this through the provision of foreign aid including donations of critical medical equipment. Critics have noted that there were problems with substandard equipment and the aid tended to flow

to ‘friendly’ countries like Italy and Serbia, while neglecting supporters of Taiwan such as Haiti, Honduras, and Paraguay.[39] Yet its relief efforts across the globe were undeniably substantial, including

> A $20 million donation to the World Health Organization (WHO), sending doctors to Iran and Italy, building a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) laboratory in Iraq to increase the country’s coronavirus testing capacity, donating test kits to the Philippines and sending protective equipment to Pakistan and France.[40]

Beijing also agreed to participate in the G20’s Debt Service Suspension Initiative, delaying loan repayments to 77 low-income countries, alongside promising to build hospitals and send medical experts to countries across Africa — although the picture there was complicated. (See Forum, ‘Chinese Loans to Africa: Trap or Treasure?’, pp.243–246.)

Xi’s Solutions: Self-Reliance and Dual Circulation

With the global economy collapsing around them and tensions with the US continuing to run hot, Chinese leaders became increasingly vocal about a pair of solutions with strong echoes of the past: ‘self-reliance’ 自力更生 and ‘dual circulation’ 双循环. Both concepts explicitly recognise new limits to the global interdependence that has propelled China to its current position as a global economic power — and to ‘Chimerica’ in particular.

‘Self-reliance’ is a term familiar from the Maoist era of command economic planning and is set to become so in the Xi era as well. As Xi stated during his tour of southern China in October, ‘we need to take the road of self-reliance on a higher level’.[41] During this tour, and in speeches throughout the year, Xi emphasised the need for a greater reliance on domestic demand and for technological self-sufficiency to underpin ‘high-quality’ development of the domestic economy at a time of ‘major changes’.

These are two of the key prongs of Xi's Dual Circulation Strategy, which came into focus in May, when he declared that China would 'fully develop the advantages of [the country's] super-large market and the potential for domestic demand to establish a new development pattern featuring domestic and international dual circulations [双循环] that complement each other'.[42] The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), due for release in early 2021, should provide more detail. Dual circulation does not signal a fundamental shift in China's development strategy. Rather, it builds on the 'rebalancing' strategy first introduced by then president Hu Jintao back in 2007, which (largely unsuccessfully) sought to reduce China's reliance on export-led growth and to boost domestic consumption.[43]

The stakes are arguably far higher than they were previously, with Sino-American strategic rivalry unlikely to diminish under a Joe Biden presidency. Even past vocal advocates for greater economic engagement with the world, such as Yao Yang 姚洋 of Peking University, recognise that increasing 'internal circulation' is a necessary, if costly, response to the US administration's determination to 'punish China's high-tech companies and other entities'.[44] While acknowledging that 'US moves to isolate China from the global technology supply chains have dealt a blow to the Chinese economy', Yao insists, 'this will not stop China's rise'.

The COVID-19 crisis may finally be easing but the debates it brought into sharper focus — about the role of state control versus market forces and individual freedom, international decoupling versus interdependence, and the best path to sustained economic growth — will continue for decades to come.

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COPING THROUGH LAUGHTER AND PRAYER

Humour in Crisis
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The Power of Compassion: The Buddhist Approach to COVID-19
· YU SANG

HUMOUR IN CRISIS

Linda Jaivin

IN FEBRUARY, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in the People's Republic of China (PRC), a young folk singer from Gansu province, Zhang Gasong 张尕怂, made a video that went viral. Singing and strumming his snakeskin-covered *sanxian* 三弦 (three-stringed lute) with his bank card, an irrepressible, impish smile on his face, he sings in local dialect of all the things he would have done had he known his village would be put under lockdown, like stocking up on alcohol and fooling around with his girlfriend more. He would not have given his mah-jong set to a friend or spent 500 yuan getting his hair permed. The video ends with his grandmother approaching off screen and him breaking off the song to ask, with a sheepish grin, whether she liked it. The gentle humour and (apparently unscripted) surprise ending of 'If I'd Known How Long I'd Be Stuck at Home' 早知道在家呆这么久, filmed in Zhang's rustic courtyard, was a humorous antidote to the nation's anxieties. In June, the *Beijing Daily* 北京日报 interviewed Zhang about his music and sense of humour and the joy he had brought to so many people in lockdown with the song (as well as about the time he dislocated his jaw from laughing too hard).[1]

Much of the humour that circulated on social media during the initial stages of the pandemic was, like the song, politically harmless,

China's great satirist, Lu Xun
Source: ryanhicks49, Flickr

acting as a circuit-breaker for tension, anger, and grief. People in lockdown in Wuhan posted videos of themselves fishing in their goldfish tanks, turning over boxed chocolates with cotton buds as though grilling snacks at a night market and showing hand puppets pretending to catch and eat passing cars.[2] Jokes circulated in the form of memes, such as one purporting to explain social distancing and asymptomatic transmission: 'If A has the coronavirus, and gives it to B, and B gives it to another B …' — an elaborate setup for the punchline 'Don't be the 2B', which is rude northern slang loosely translatable as 'moron'.

The *Beijing Daily* interview did not mention another video by Zhang that also went viral before the censors got to it. 'The Wuhan New Coronavirus Song' 武汉新冠状病毒肺炎之歌, sung in the same courtyard with the same cheeky smile, offered a darker take on the crisis, noting that it was not funny that old people unable to buy masks were using orange peel instead, castigating the Red Cross for skimming off donations and keeping reporters away, and suggesting: 'First wash your brain, then your hands and face' 洗完脑子勤洗手再洗把脸.[3]

China's long tradition of political satire stretches back to the *Book of Odes* 詩經 (compiled between 1000 and 600 BCE), which contains verses such as one mocking the nobility for exploiting the labour of others: 'You neither sow nor reap, so how do you fill so many bins with grain?'

The Republican-era writer and translator Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), who was the first to transliterate the English word 'humour' as *youmo* 幽默 in the 1920s, once said that the goal of a journal to which both he and the great satirist Lu Xun 魯迅 were contributors, *Threads of Discourse* 語絲, was to 'smash the "face" of "scholarly dignity"' and foster 'healthy belligerence'.[4] In 'Funny, But Not Vulgar' (1944), George Orwell wrote: 'A thing is funny when — in some way that is not actually offensive or

frightening — it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.' Humour, he wrote, was 'dignity sitting on a tin-tack'; whatever 'destroys dignity … is funny'.[5]

President Xi Jinping 习近平 and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally take their dignity very seriously. After netizens light-heartedly compared a 2013 photograph of Xi walking with then US president Barack Obama with an illustration of a plump Winnie the Pooh strolling with lanky Tigger, China's censors scrubbed the Internet of all references to the fictional bear. After the American TV cartoon *South Park* satirised the ban, censors cleansed the Internet of any mention of *South Park* as well. The CCP's war on humour extended to an official directive in 2014 banning the use of puns and character play (both venerable forms of Chinese humour) in broadcasting and other media. In 2018, officials shuttered a jokes app called Neihan duanzi 内涵段子 that had hundreds of millions of mainly working-class male followers, accusing it of 'vulgarity'.

Hu Yong 胡泳, a professor at Peking University's School of Journalism and Communication and commentator on new media, has called humour 'a natural form of encryption'.[6] In March, as central authorities continued to shift responsibility for the outbreak of COVID-19 on to local officials, Li Jiabao 李佳宝, the visionary, Shenyang-born artist and 'technologist', filmed herself performing a sassy 'Toss Pan Dance' 甩锅舞 — a play on the Chinese slang 'toss the pan (or wok)', which means blame shifting or buck passing. Posting it on YouTube at the end of March, noting that it was a perfect form of exercise for quarantine, Li invited viewers to 'inform, criticise, and warn' others about problems of evaded responsibility while creating their own interpretations. The video was reposted on Chinese social media but a search on Weibo in August for Li Jiabao and 'Toss Pan Dance' (in Chinese) turned up nothing.

On the 101st anniversary of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Bilibili, a popular streaming platform, released a rather different sort of video. Titled 'Next Wave', it was narrated by the fifty-two-year-old television actor He Bing 何冰, who lectures in earnest, pontifical tones to his elders that, in essence, the kids are all right. Over a pacey montage of young people travelling the world, skydiving, and generally enjoying all that money

can buy, he tells Chinese youth that they are fortunate to have the 'right to choose' from life's smorgasbord. He credits them with the fact that 'the world likes Chinese people even more than ever'.

The video landed on a nation still struggling with the effects of the pandemic on society and the economy, and in a world that demonstrably was 'liking' China less and less (see Chapter 6, 'The Future Repeats Itself: COVID-19 and Its Historical Comorbidities', pp.167–177). Although He Bing's narration proclaimed satire a 'tool of the weak', the video brought satirists out in force. A video titled 'Waves of Garlic Chives' 韭浪 parodied Bilibili itself for turning every kind of human experience into capital, via influencers and online marketeers. 'You may honestly believe that you're lucky to be living in the present age,' goes the narration, 'but Capital knows that it is far more fortunate to make your acquaintance.'[7]

In Hong Kong, political satire and humour grounded in the Cantonese dialect have long been a part of local culture — and one traditionally given free range. Humour enlivened the slogans and signs of the protest movement of 2019 and informed the response to the security law of 2020 by protesters, who, forbidden to express anything 'subversive', held up pieces of blank paper.

The public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) furloughed the political comedy skit show *Headliner* 頭條新聞 ahead of the law's implementation. In annual surveys conducted by the University of Hong Kong, *Headliner* typically ranked among the top twenty most popular programs in Hong Kong. Writer-performer Tsang Chi-ho 曾志豪 has called it a 'pressure valve for Hong Kongers disillusioned with the political system'.[8] But in March, after the show satirised police as having more personal protective equipment than medical staff, Police Commissioner Chris Tang alleged that continuing to broadcast the show would 'lead to a loss of confidence in the force' (a statement, considering the record of police brutality in 2019, itself ripe for satire). That appeared to be the last straw for a broadcaster increasingly under pressure to toe the official line.

Hong Kong journalist Lee Yee 李怡, writing about the end of *Headliner*, noted that those who wield power 'fail to appreciate that satire is an outlet, a kind of social release

'Surge Forth, Waves of Garlic Chives!"
Source: STF臭豆腐弹,Bilibili

valve that gives people a way of coping with their frustrations'.[9] After the introduction of the security law prompted 'yellow' (pro-democracy) restaurants and other businesses in Hong Kong to take down now illegal images and slogans supporting the protests, some began putting up copies of Mao-era propaganda posters with slogans like 'Revolution is no crime! To rebel is justified!'. As Lee Yee also observed, while the authorities are able to 'ban a TV show or forbid satirical sketches, they can't shut down the way the people of our city are really thinking and feeling'.[10] Or, to borrow lyrics from another Zhang Gasong song: 'People must all tell the truth. If you lie and deceive, wait for a brick to come your way'.[11]

THE POWER OF COMPASSION: THE BUDDHIST APPROACH TO COVID-19

Yu Sang

AS THE CORONAVIRUS spread around the world in 2020, countries with significant Buddhist populations including Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar recorded not only very low infection rates, but also very few deaths. One reason seems to have been the fact that so much of the population is dispersed through the countryside rather than concentrated in big cities, making transmission less likely. However, some Buddhists have credited it to a faith that strongly inclines people towards caring for others and social co-operation for the common good. Working collectively for mutual benefit, many people in these communities united to cope with the crisis, strictly obeying rules such as mask wearing and social distancing. Transmission was also likely to be reduced by traditional Buddhist greetings like the Thai wai — pressing one's palms together in front of the chest — which are more hygienic than handshakes.[1]

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), although Buddhist temples were closed to the public as part of the society-wide lockdown, their clerics were active online, with the state's blessing or at least the approval of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC),

A slogan on the door of a temple in China: 'The pandemic is an order, and to prevent and control it is a responsibility'
Source: Chinese National Religious Affairs Administration website

a multilevel organisation under the State Administration of Religious Affairs. The BAC issued a number of directives on how Buddhist leaders should deal with the pandemic, including donating funds to organisations such as the Chinese Red Cross and offering prayers, but also guiding believers to steer clear of superstition.[2] Many local Buddhist associations (such as the Buddhist Association of Shanghai and the Buddhist Association of Tianjin) and temples (including Tianning Temple 天宁禅寺 in Changzhou, Jiangsu province, and Lingyin Temple 灵隐寺 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province), as well as individuals (such as Master Baohan 宝菡法师 from the Temple of Great Compassion 大悲禅院 in Tianjin), have been recognised for making significant contributions to the cause. By mid-February, the BAC and the Buddhist temples in Beijing directly under it had raised more than 5 million yuan. With the help of other Buddhist organisations like the Lingshan Charity Foundation 灵山慈善基金会, which looked after buying and distributing the goods, these funds were used to purchase masks, protective suits, ventilators, and other items needed in Hubei province, the epicentre of the epidemic in China at the time.[3]

On 8 August, the independent Hong Kong Buddhist Association — the territory's largest Buddhist organisation, whose charity work includes running nursing homes

— asked all its members to pray in unison, for the pandemic in Hong Kong and elsewhere to be brought under control.[4] It had also donated 50,000 masks to grassroots employees in Hong Kong, including those in schools and nursing homes, at the beginning of 2020.[5]

Outside China, many Buddhist societies and individuals, such as Foo Hai Ch'an Monastery 福海禪寺 in Singapore, the International Buddhist Temple 國際佛教觀音寺 in Canada and the Chicago Chapter of Dharma Drum Mountain 法鼓山 — an international Buddhist organisation with its headquarters in Taiwan — as well as Master Chuanyin 傳印法師 from the Seng Guan Temple 信願寺 in the Philippines, offered their support in various ways, including raising funds for medical and other charities. The power of meditation to promote health and calm anxiety emerged as a central focus of many Buddhist groups, with many temples and meditation centres providing resources such as virtual *saṅgha* (Buddhist communities of monks, nuns, and laypeople)[6] and special guided online meditations for resilience and well-being.[7]

Two Taiwan-based Buddhist organisations were particularly active. One was the Tzu Chi 慈濟 Foundation, whose activities include international fundraising and the provision of medical aid. Not long after a bushfire relief event organised in the wake of Australia's own catastrophic start to 2020,[8] the Tzu Chi Foundation's Australian branch established COVID-19 Emergency Relief Assistance to help people who needed financial support but were not eligible for government assistance.[9] The other was the international Fo Guang Shan 佛光山, whose activities include medical clinics and child welfare services. At the beginning of the year, the organisation's founder, Master Hsing Yun 星雲大師, offered a prayer for relief of suffering from COVID-19 and called on believers to recite the Heart Sutra 心經 together in an attempt to stop the epidemic.[10] The Nan Tien Temple 南天寺 — one of Fo Guang Shan's branch temples, in Wollongong, Australia — held a prayer meeting on 1 February focused on bringing the pandemic to an early end.[11]

Buddhist theology emphasises the idea of 'compassion' 慈悲 or 悲 (*karuṇā* in Sanskrit). This is expressed

in the Buddhist saying 'great kindness without discrimination; great compassion based on sameness in essence' 無緣大慈，同體大悲. It is also fundamental to the spirit of a *bodhisattva* — a being who is motivated by 'great compassion' to achieve enlightenment and who postpones his or her enlightenment to save all other beings from suffering.[12] Buddhist activities to confront the coronavirus typically cited this idea. As the pandemic spread, the Buddhist Association of Hunan Province asked all Buddhist monks in the province to cultivate a *bodhisattva*'s spirit of compassion, feeling the pain of those who had suffered 'as if it had happened to themselves'. Buddhists across Hunan province donated money and supplies totalling 500,000 yuan in response to this call.[13]

In an article published on 14 April, as the global number of COVID-19 cases climbed to nearly 2 million, the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual leader, said: 'This crisis shows us that we are not separate from one another — even when we are living apart. Therefore, we all have a responsibility to exercise compassion and help.'[14] He and other Tibetans living in exile in Dharamshala contributed money, protective equipment and food to pandemic relief efforts in India. Coinciding with this statement was a report that the Chinese state had used the coronavirus pandemic as a cover to further interfere in the private and devotional lives of Tibetans. While the Dalai Lama's words received global coverage, in Tibet, people were reportedly detained simply for sending prayers on social media.[15] Across China, it is highly unlikely that the Dalai Lama's message made it through the online censors' 'Great Firewall'. Yet compassion was central to believers' approach to the crisis, in Tibet or elsewhere.

What do Buddhists expect to achieve with compassion in the context of a pandemic? As well as feeling sympathy for others in need and wanting to help them — core elements in the lay interpretation of compassion — Buddhist compassion evinces universal and unconditional kindness and pity, based on the idea that all living beings are the same in essence and share the same suffering. This can be traced to the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: *catvāri ārya-satyāni*), the Buddha's first and most basic teaching.[16] In Buddhist philosophy, all

The Leshan Giant Buddha
Source: linwujin, Flickr

things in the phenomenal world are interconnected and interdependent. All sentient beings are equal and all suffer. Mental and physical suffering is due to ignorance of this and attachment to the view that things are permanent. Suffering can be eradicated by reaching enlightenment, which in turn entails compassion: the desire to free others from suffering.[17] It works the other way around as well: by saving others from suffering, believers help themselves to attain enlightenment.

Two important Mahāyāna texts translated into Chinese — the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* 大智度論 (the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*) and the *Treatise on the Scripture of Adorning the Great Vehicle* 大乘莊嚴經論 (the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra*) — explain the meaning of 'great kindness and great compassion' 大慈大悲 as bringing happiness to all sentient beings, and liberating all sentient beings from suffering or sharing the suffering of others 大慈與一切眾生樂, 大悲拔一切眾生苦.[18]

Miguel Ángel Moratinos, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, declared that the world should 'draw inspiration from Buddha's teachings' to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. We should 'show kindness and compassion to the

Nan Tien Temple, Wollongong
Source: Henry Ang, Flickr

most vulnerable and truly leave no one behind as we face these turbulent and difficult times together'.[19]

Buddhist activities such as prayer and meditation have not ended the pandemic, but the charitable and compassionate contributions made by Buddhists the world over have been significant. They have also provided people with ways to alleviate their anxieties in confronting the COVID-19 crisis, which has been accompanied by a worrying rise in mental health problems worldwide.[20]

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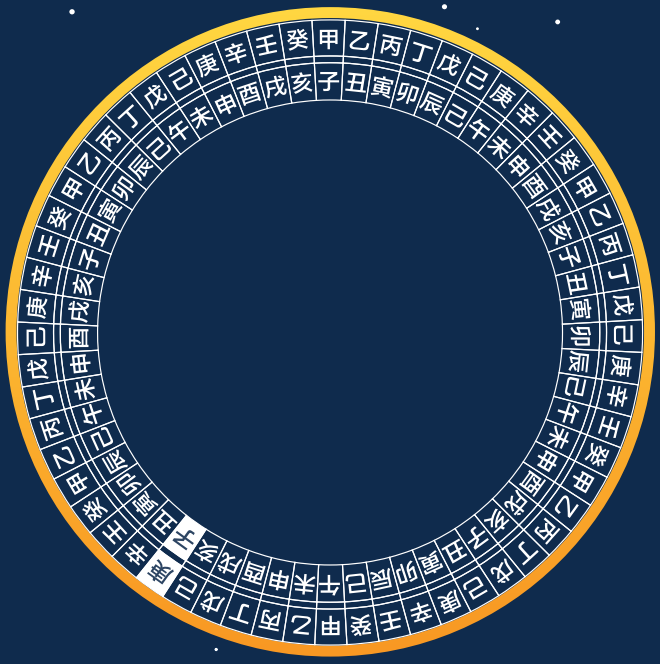
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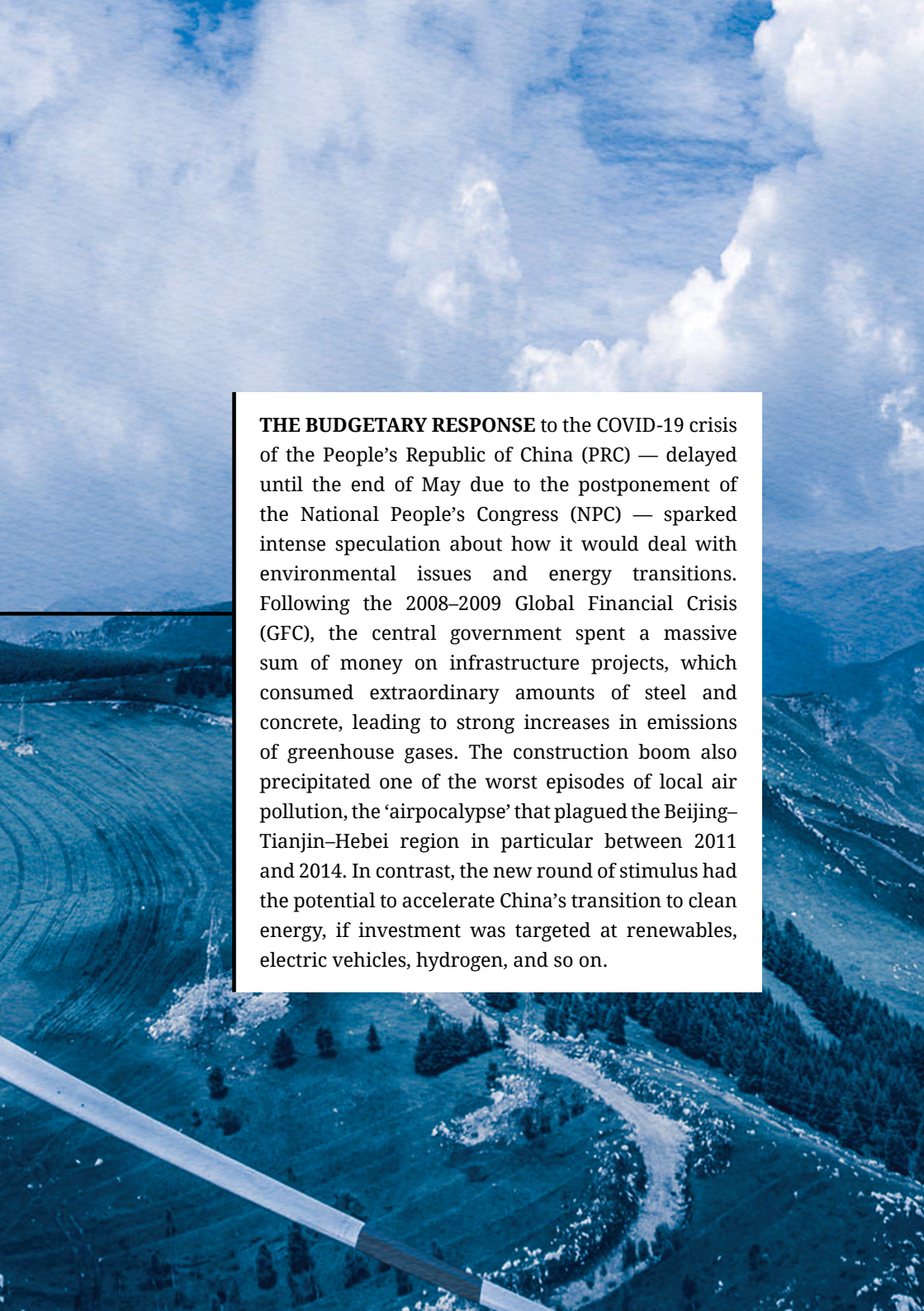
CHINA'S POST-COVID-19 STIMULUS: DARK CLOUDS, GREEN LINING[1]

Jorrit Gosens

Source: Hahaheditor12667, Wikimedia



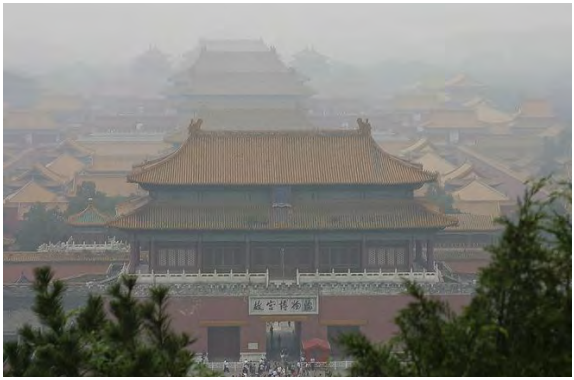
THE BUDGETARY RESPONSE to the COVID-19 crisis of the People's Republic of China (PRC) — delayed until the end of May due to the postponement of the National People's Congress (NPC) — sparked intense speculation about how it would deal with environmental issues and energy transitions. Following the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the central government spent a massive sum of money on infrastructure projects, which consumed extraordinary amounts of steel and concrete, leading to strong increases in emissions of greenhouse gases. The construction boom also precipitated one of the worst episodes of local air pollution, the 'airpocalypse' that plagued the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region in particular between 2011 and 2014. In contrast, the new round of stimulus had the potential to accelerate China's transition to clean energy, if investment was targeted at renewables, electric vehicles, hydrogen, and so on.

As it turned out, the 2020 stimulus package did not provide support for a massive new construction program, but neither did it provide support for clean energy industries. In recent years, there has been a slowing of China's push for renewables. Investment in coal-fired power plants has continued on a large scale, and further accelerated in 2020.

On 22 September, months after the worst of the COVID-crisis had passed in China, President Xi Jinping 习近平 announced to the UN General Assembly that China would aim to have carbon emissions peak before 2030, and reduced to zero by 2060.[2] This ambitious plan makes keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees a much more realistic proposition. The suggested trajectory to get to zero by 2060, however, appears to put most of the hard work on hold until after 2030.

The Initial Crisis Response: Priorities in a Time of Uncertainty

The NPC's annual *Government Work Report* — roughly analogous to the State of the Union in the United States — was presented in 2020, as usual, at the opening of the Two Meetings: the NPC and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC). For the first time since 1990, when an economic growth target was first announced, the latest *Government*



Smog over Beijing's Forbidden City
Source: Brian Jeffery Beggerly, Flickr

Work Report did not set a target for gross domestic product (GDP). This means the politically weightier 6.5 percent annual average growth target from the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan period, which ended in 2020, was also abandoned.

Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang
Source: President of Russia, Kremlin website

Premier Li Keqiang 李克强, who delivered the report, explained that there was too much uncertainty about the pandemic's effect on global economic activity and trade, making it all but impossible to set a reasonable growth target.[3] But in China, growth targets are not so much forecasts as directives. The central government might therefore have worried that setting a target — for example, for 6 percent growth — would have pushed provincial officials to aim for that target with little regard for long-term financial viability or the environmental consequences.

Li described the immediate priority as stabilising employment and protecting people's livelihoods. He announced additional expenditure of 1 trillion RMB (about AU$200 billion), made available by raising the central government's budget deficit from 2.8 percent to 3.6 percent of GDP (see Table 1). Another trillion RMB would be raised through issuance of specific pandemic bonds. Local governments were instructed to use these 2 trillion RMB to support households and small businesses through employment protection and tax relief measures.[4]

The budget reserved 600 billion RMB for construction projects — unchanged from 2019. The central government did increase its contribution to the national railway construction fund by 100 billion

yuan, to a total of 900 billion RMB. This limited increase in railway construction will not result in great increases to emissions, and investment in high-speed rail will reduce emissions over the lifetime of the project by providing a low-carbon alternative to short-haul flights.

Support for households and small businesses cannot be said to have either positive or negative effects on the environment. Combined with spending on low-carbon transport, such support should help repair some of the economic damage caused by the pandemic without putting environmental goals at risk. So far, so good, but other elements of the recovery plan indicated that the central government prioritised the economy over the environment in the immediate crisis response.

The *Government Work Report* normally sets a national target for energy consumption, but that target was also omitted this year. The central government had previously committed to reducing energy intensity — the amount of energy used per unit of economic output — by 15 percent between 2015 and 2020. By the end of 2019, energy intensity had fallen by 13.2 percent.[5] By causing a contraction in services and other sectors with low energy intensity, however, the pandemic will make it hard to achieve the 15 percent target. The *Government Work*

China's COVID-19 stimulus measures			
Item	2019	2020	Additional spending on stimulus
Central government budget deficit	2.8%	3.5%	1 trillion
Pandemic bonds	--	1 trillion	1 trillion
Construction project investment fund	600 billion	600 billion	None
Railway construction fund	800 billion	900 billion	100 billion
Quota for 'special bonds' issued by local governments	2.15 trillion	3.75 trillion	1.6 trillion
Bank lending, status for the first six months	9.7 trillion	12.1 trillion	2.4 trillion

Table 1: China's COVID-19 stimulus measures[6]
Note: All values in RMB; 1 RMB was equivalent to AU$0.20 at the time of writing

High-speed rail
Source: PxHere

Report also neglected to set numeric targets for emissions of sulphur and nitrous oxides and other pollutants, asking only that they be reduced, whereas in 2019, for example, it called for them to fall by 3 percent.

Although the stimulus budget does not earmark central government funds for large-scale construction, it gives lower-level governments more scope to spend, and there are indications that provincial governments may do so with little regard for the environmental consequences. Local governments in 2020 were permitted to issue an additional 1.6 trillion RMB in 'special bonds' 地方政府专项债券 compared with 2019 (see Table 1). These bonds must be repaid from the projects they finance, rather than general government budgets. They primarily fund infrastructure projects such as roads and railways, water conservation projects, and industrial parks, where tolls or other usage fees can go towards repayment.[7] The central government has also eased the conditions for lending by financial institutions, generating a 2.4 trillion RMB boost to loans in the first six months of the year.[8] Following the GFC, about half of such loans were used to finance infrastructure projects.[9] Assuming the same share of increases in loans this year will be used similarly, combined with the money raised by the special bonds, this would mean that 2.8 trillion RMB will be invested in infrastructure projects. Though substantial, this is only slightly more than half the amount of investment in construction resulting from the GFC stimulus.[10]

The State Council has, however, made it clear that it does not wish the stimulus to go towards 'traditional' infrastructure such as highways, bridges, and airports — projects that use large amounts of steel and concrete and support high-carbon modes of transport. In a meeting on 4 March, the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest leadership body of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), stated that 'new infrastructure construction' 新型基础设施建设 was the preferred way of promoting economic growth following the pandemic.[11] The very brief statement 'to accelerate the construction of new infrastructure such as 5G networks and data centres' immediately buoyed the stocks of relevant companies.[12]

The New Infrastructure concept also covers other technologies for digital transformation, such as artificial intelligence and the Industrial Internet of Things. Such investment would result in economic growth, but with far fewer emissions for every RMB spent than from traditional stimulus spending on bridges and highways. The concept further covers low-carbon energy technologies such as high-speed rail and light rail transit, charging infrastructure for electric vehicles, and ultra-high-voltage (UHV) transmission lines to transfer renewable energy to China's coastal provinces, which would reduce emissions with every RMB spent.[13]

Yet the central government did not specify that provincial and local governments had to spend their stimulus funds on these sorts of projects, unlike in the post-2008 stimulus budget, which clearly divided the funds into categories of projects for funding. One explanation may be that the central government is contributing proportionately far less this time. The post-2008 package was drawn roughly half and half from central and provincial budgets.[14] The current package is nearly entirely funded by provincial and local governments (Table 1), which are likely to expect a greater say in how it's spent.

A Chinese Green New Deal?

In other parts of the world, governments are using their recovery spending to accelerate transitions to clean energy and digital transformation. The European Union's 'Next Generation EU' recovery package allocates hundreds of billions of Euros to renewables, clean hydrogen, and sustainable transport.[15] Germany plans to spend more than one-third of its €130 billion stimulus package on 'future technologies', such as renewable energy, hydrogen, electric cars, and artificial intelligence.[16] The Chinese central government, which wants to make the PRC competitive in these sectors, could have chosen to direct spending towards these industries.

The state has extended purchase tax exemptions by two years for 'new energy vehicles' 新能源汽车 (electric vehicles and fuel-cell vehicles), but only as part of a measure seeking to prop up vehicle demand more generally.[17] There are clear national-level roadmaps for expanding the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles,[18] with 90 billion RMB budgeted towards charging piles from 2020 to 2025.[19] The stimulus measures did not add to these investments, however, nor did the government decide to spend the six-year investment budget over the next two years, for example, in order to help with short-term economic recovery.

The European Union, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and several other countries have recently published national hydrogen strategies. In China, there is interest in this, but policymakers remain undecided, mostly about the best financial support measures for such a strategy. Until now, it has mostly been local governments that have promoted the use of hydrogen, with a limited number of small pilot projects. Local governments and industry are unlikely to invest more in manufacturing fuel cells, fuel-cell vehicles, and hydrogen generation and distribution infrastructure when the central government appears

to be dragging its feet on a national and long-term support scheme. During the design phase of the pandemic recovery package, the national hydrogen strategy remained in the stage of discussion drafts only.[20]

Renewable energy options such as photovoltaics (PV) and wind power, meanwhile, did not rate a mention in the central government's stimulus package. In 2009, the government introduced a feed-in tariff — a fee paid for each kilowatt hour of electricity that goes back into the grid — for producers of wind power and, in 2011, for producers of solar power (Figure 1). These were quite generous subsidies, especially after the cost of wind turbines and PV panels started to fall rapidly. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has since reduced the feed-in tariff rates, at increasingly regular intervals (Figure 1). As elsewhere, the goal is 'grid parity', meaning that wind and solar would be as cheap as, or cheaper than, coal-fired power generation.

The rapid reduction in subsidies has put financial pressure on developers of wind and PV farms, resulting in reduced growth in new wind-power plants and a rapid decline in new solar-power plants (Figure 2). Despite the disruption to construction of new solar farms because of the COVID-19 crisis and appeals from developers, the NDRC

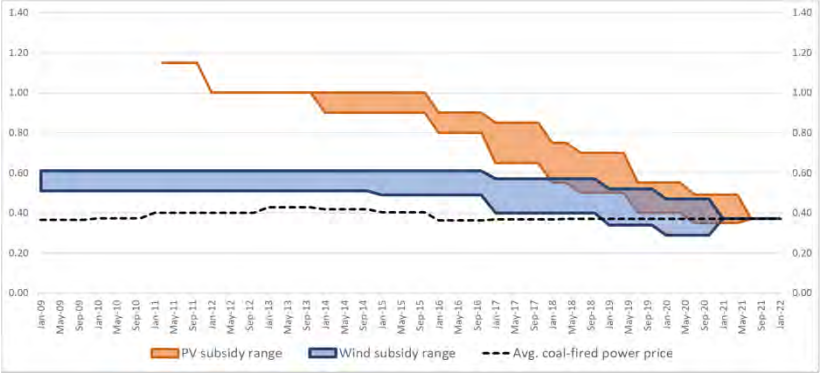


Figure 1: Chinese feed-in tariffs (RMB/kWh) for wind and solar PV, and the tariff for coal-fired power
Note: The coal-fired power tariff is the weighted average of provincial-level tariffs. The tariffs for wind and PV vary because China provides more generous subsidies for areas with poorer wind or solar resources.[22]

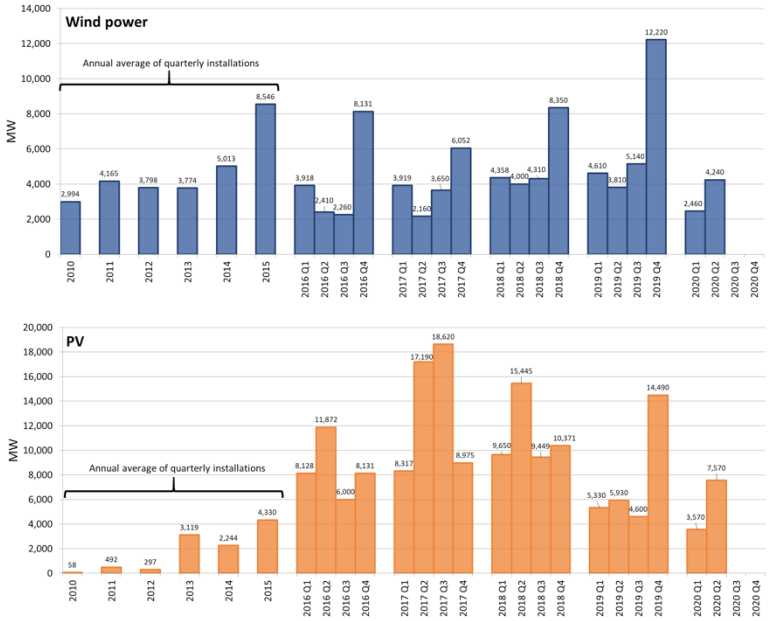


Figure 2: Quarterly installations (MW) of wind (top); and PV power generation capacity in China (bottom)[23]

followed through with its planned annual tariff reductions at the end of May, even slashing subsidies for household-scale PV by more than half.[21] Many provincial governments have put additional wind-power construction on ice, as wind projects connected to the grid after the end of this year will not receive national-level subsidies, even if they had previously been approved to receive them.[24]

The haste with which the government has reduced subsidies for wind and solar power reflects not just falling technology costs. Subsidies are paid through the Renewable Energy Development Fund 可再生能源发展基金, which is financed by a surcharge on each kilowatt hour of electricity sold. After subsidy payments exceeded the fund's earnings from surcharges, the central government was forced to make up the shortfall. By the end of 2019, the renewable energy fund was heavily

overdrawn — by some estimates, to the tune of a hefty 200–300 billion RMB.[25] The new rules effectively put the financial onus on the owners of renewable energy projects, with subsidy payouts intended to make up the shortfall.[26] Nervous investors are scrambling to sell renewable energy assets, fearing that subsidy payments will be delayed or never paid at all.[27]

Coal-Fired Power Gathering Steam

In late 2014, the central government decided it would hand the power to make decisions about the development of coal-fired power to provincial governments. This caused an immediate spike in new coal-fired power plants in 2015 (Figure 3). The NDRC introduced a 'traffic light' system shortly thereafter, with provinces given a red, yellow or green rating, telling them to stop, slow or continue as planned with construction of new coal-fired power plants. The central government wants to limit construction in provinces where new power plants are considered to be superfluous.

Worker holding up a piece of coal in front of a coal firing power plant in the Netherlands
Source: Adrem68, Wikimedia

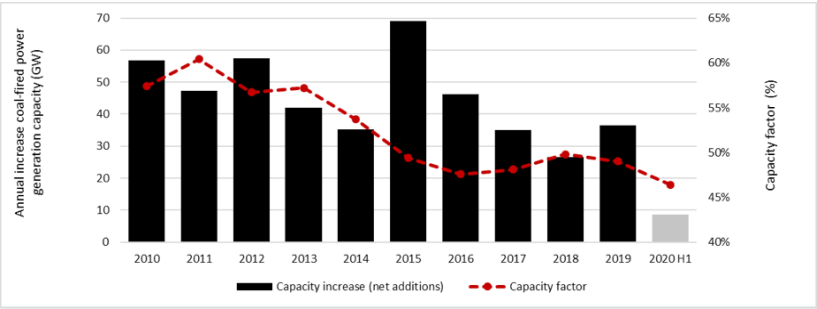


Figure 3: Chinese newly installed capacity and average capacity factor of coal-fired power
Note: Annual additions of coal-fired power (GW) except for 2020, where increases for the first six months are presented. The capacity factor is the percentage of the maximum output a plant can deliver.

The restrictions are primarily targeted at areas where existing capacity can already satisfy electricity demand, and where any new power plants will simply lead to lower levels of utilisation and therefore profitability.[28] The worry is that, once new plants are built, they will have to be kept running at levels high enough to recoup the investment in them. The 'traffic light' system therefore aimed to prevent unnecessary emissions and the construction of new plants that would have to be closed only a few years after opening.

The COVID-19 crisis appears to have made both the central and the provincial-level governments rethink this sensible policy. Large coal-fired power projects provide a quick boost in investment and job creation, and may help counter the economic slowdown, even if they have poor long-term financial prospects and put environmental targets at risk. After the NDRC relaxed restrictions on investment in coal-fired power projects in February, local authorities approved the construction of forty-eight gigawatts of coal-fired power plants by the end of May.[29] In comparison, only ten gigawatts were approved in 2019. China now has a total of ninety-eight gigawatts of coal-fired power plants under construction — similar to the entire operational capacity of those in Germany and Japan combined.[30]

The Path Towards Zero Carbon by 2060

China's central government did not opt to make its 2020 stimulus package about high-carbon-emission construction projects, as it did in 2009. While that has averted a potentially massive increase in emissions, China's stimulus investment did not amount to a Chinese Green New Deal either.

When Xi Jinping's announced a net-zero by 2060 target at the UN General Assembly on 22 September, this came as a surprise to most observers, who had seen deteriorating policy support for renewable energy in China in recent years. The announcement included a further pledge to have carbon emissions peak before 2030. Earlier pledges, including China's 'Nationally Determined Contribution' (NDC) under the Paris agreement, were to have emissions peak 'around 2030'.

It is difficult to overstate the relevance of China joining the club of countries with such net-zero pledges. The country consumes half the world's coal, and emits 28 per cent of global carbon emissions. Chinese energy transitions therefore strongly determine global energy transitions. Although the accumulated global net-zero pledges still

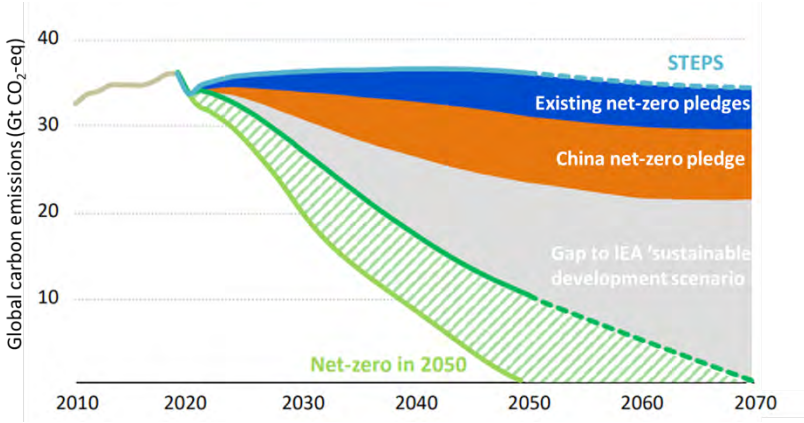


Figure 4: Historic and projected global carbon emissions
Note: Existing net-zero pledges (by all other countries) and the Chinese net-zero pledge put the world closer to net-zero by 2050, a requirement to keep global warming 'well below 2 degrees'. Source: IEA World Energy outlook 2020

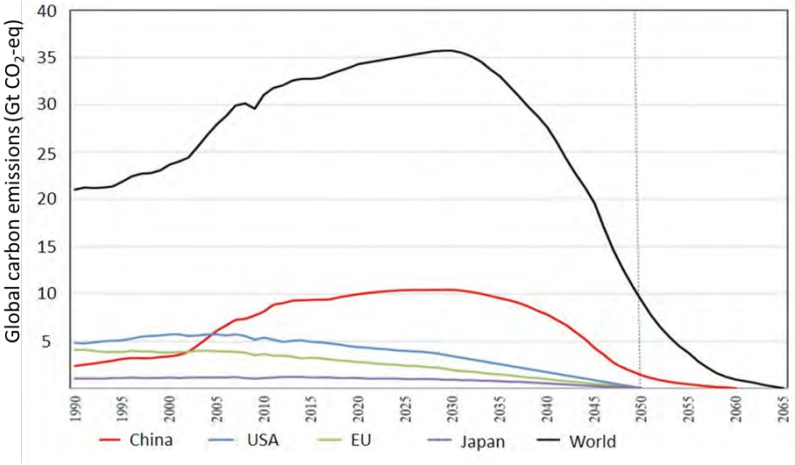


Figure 5: Historic and projected carbon emissions for key countries
Note: China's emission path is a suggested trajectory to net-zero by 2060 from a consortium of influential research groups led by Tsinghua university.[31]

fall short of an emissions trajectory compatible with limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, China's pledge puts the world much closer to such an outcome (Figure 4).

There are, however, many different trajectories to get to net-zero by 2060. A large consortium of Chinese research institutes presented possible scenarios in October, concluding that the goal would require renewable energy production to grow about 4.5 fold by 2050, compared to today. Simultaneously, this scenario leaves most of that growth to occur after 2030, with renewables growing at a pace comparable to what has been seen in the last few years until then.

Carbon emissions, too, could keep growing slightly until just before 2030, after which they would have to come down more rapidly (Figure 5). This trajectory, and the pledge to have emissions peak before 2030, are in fact not that drastically different from business-as-usual. Chinese GDP growth is forecast to weaken, and combined with historical reductions in emission intensity of GDP, this would lead to emissions plateauing at levels only slightly above current emissions. Bringing them down from that level requires enhanced policy support.

Beijing will use the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan period to get a head-start on its future net-zero ambitions
Source: Wikimedia

The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan will guide economic and energy sector development through to 2025. This plan, which will be formally announced in early 2021, needs to lock in sustainable lower emissions development pathways if China and the world are to achieve necessary climate change goals. What Beijing sets out to do over the next five years will have far greater ramifications for climate change than its immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The plan will also make clear whether Beijing will use the next five years to get a head-start on its future net-zero ambitions, or whether it will leave most of the hard work until after 2030. It is clear that the central government has committed itself to this long-term target. Now they will have to ensure that lower-level governments and state-owned enterprises follow suit. Beijing's signalling of the new level of ambition may not be enough to prevent much of the current spending planned in fossil fuel infrastructure.

A Fourteenth Five-Year Plan with strong renewable energy ambitions will do more to turn this trend. That could include a strong cap on coal-fire power installations, a nationwide roll-out of the carbon emission trading system which is currently in trial phases, power

market reform to further promote the competitiveness of renewables, and strong research and development programs for less mature renewable technologies, such as concentrated solar power, energy storage, and using hydrogen in industrial processes for making steel or fertiliser. Any carbon emissions prevented now will do more to mitigate global warming than the same amount of emission reductions in ten years from now.

The world is a step closer to limiting global warming with China's pledge to reduce emissions to net-zero by 2060. In order to truly contribute to climate change mitigation, these long-term targets should be backed up with measures to reduce emissions now.

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BROKEN RIVER SHATTERED MOUNTAIN

The Three Gorges Dam: A Deluge of Doubts

· ANNIE LUMAN REN

THE THREE GORGES DAM: A DELUGE OF DOUBTS

Annie Luman Ren

IN THE NORTHERN SUMMER of 2020, weeks of torrential rain caused a series of devastating floods across central and south-western China, killing hundreds of people and destroying the homes and livelihoods of millions. In August, during a tour of Anhui, one of the provinces ravaged by flood, President Xi Jinping 习近平 made a speech, mouthing the usual platitudes:

> Between 'the Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains' [愚公移山] and 'Yu the Great Who Harnessed the Flood' [大禹治水], the Chinese nation has fought natural disasters for thousands of years, gaining precious experience. We will go on fighting.[1]

Both the 'Foolish Old Man' and 'Yu the Great' 大禹 are mythological figures frequently cited by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 during his mass mobilisation campaigns and monumental nature-taming projects. The Foolish Old Man refers to the story of a ninety-year-old man who was vexed by two giant mountains in front of his house and decided to level them, bucket by bucket. Told he would never succeed, he replied that his descendants would continue until they did. Yu the Great (c. 2200–2101 BCE) is said to have

'controlled' 治 the waters of China and went on to establish the oldest dynasty, the Xia (2200–1750 BCE).[2] Both figures reflect a vision in which people must struggle against and conquer nature — a vision that Chinese environmentalists and engineers have been questioning since the 1980s. The natural disasters of 2020 — a record twenty-one floods by September, with 833 rivers rising above 'warning levels', and 267 of those reaching over official safety levels — have revived this debate and brought the monumental Three Gorges Dam under fresh scrutiny.

'East of Yichang! Run!'

The Three Gorges Dam, located in the city of Yichang, 300 kilometres west of Wuhan, is the world's largest hydroelectric facility. It was designed for a maximum water level of 175 metres. On 18 July, its water level reached 163.5 metres — the highest level recorded since the dam began operation in 2003.[3]

Rumours of the dam's imminent collapse filled the internet. One WeChat post warned: 'East of Yichang! Run!' 宜昌以下快跑. Another post, playing on the literal meaning of Shanghai ('on the sea'), read: 'On the Sea Becomes Under the Sea' 上海已变海上.

State media assured the public that the dam was safe and had prevented the flooding of cities including Wuhan and Shanghai.[4] But many were sceptical. Fan Xiao 范晓, a Chinese geologist and long-term critic of the dam, told the Hong Kong-based *Asia Times* that, although 'the dam was designed with "once-every-

A riverside pavilion on the bank of the Yangtze in Wuhan is submerged
Photo: Xiaoyijiu, xinhuanet

two-century worst-case flooding" in mind', it was failing in the face of a deluge 'far less severe than its worst-case design parameters'.[5]

The Dream of Becoming Yu the Great

Since Yu the Great, the ability to harness rivers for flood control, irrigation and navigation has been upheld as an essential task for every ruler of China. In 1919, Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925), father of the modern Chinese nation, envisioned a new and industrialised China powered by a great dam on the Yangtze River. In the 1940s, Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石, invited the American engineer John L. Savage — designer of the Hoover Dam — to survey the region and conduct a feasibility study. In 1956, Mao Zedong characteristically announced his vision of the dam in a poem, rhapsodising about 'walls of stone standing upstream' and 'a smooth lake rising in the deep gorges'.[6]

Many believed Mao gave up his dream because of the economic failures of the Great Leap Forward and the social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. The truth is, according to Mao's former secretary Li Rui 李锐 (1917–2019), Mao only abandoned his plan on account of rising tensions with the Soviet Union, which he feared might try to bomb the dam.[7] Mao's second in command, premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来, remained supportive of the dam, pushing engineers to break ground on the Gezhouba Dam 葛洲坝, thirty-eight kilometres downstream from the current Three Gorges Dam, in time for Mao's seventy-seventh birthday in 1970. The project proved expensive, inefficient, and polluting, endangering both river whitefin dolphins and the rare Yangtze River sturgeon.[8]

In the post-1978 Reform Era, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 also pushed to build the Three Gorges Dam, believing in its abilities to curb floods and generate energy. However, Deng faced strong opposition from some of the Chinese Communist Party's most senior members, all of whom were scientists and engineers by training. Their concerns appeared in a book of essays titled *Yangtze! Yangtze!* published in February 1989. This book, edited by journalist and environmentalist Dai Qing 戴晴, was seen at the time as 'a watershed event … the first use of large-scale public lobbying by

intellectuals and public figures to influence the governmental decision-making process'.[9]

In the aftermath of the military crackdown on student protesters on 4 June 1989, Dai Qing was imprisoned without trial and her associates purged. Public debate on the Three Gorges Dam was effectively silenced. Three years later, in 1992, the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC) passed the proposal to construct the Three Gorges Dam by the smallest margin of any vote in the history of the NPC: 1,767 voted in favour, 177 against, and 664 abstained.[10]

Many believed that the final push to build the dam came from Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Li Peng 李鹏, who trotted out the project for their own political and economic gain. Ascending to power after 4 June 1989, Jiang's first ever visit as the new Party general secretary and president was to inspect the proposed site for the Three Gorges Dam. In the words of Li Rui's daughter Li Nanyang 李南央: 'Jiang had just become the Emperor, he needed something to make his mark, so he turned to Yu the Great and sought to harness the water.'[11]

Meanwhile, Jiang's ally Li Peng (premier from 1987 to 1998) has been accused of reaping all the economic profits.[12] Despite the fact that every electricity user in China since 1992 has paid levies to finance the dam, the Yangtze Power Corporation, headed by Li Peng's son Li Xiaopeng 李小鹏, currently controls all thirty-two turbines at the Three Gorges Dam and the power they generate.[13]

The True Spirit of the Foolish Old Man

'Man must conquer nature', Jiang Zemin proclaimed at the official ceremony marking the completion of the Three Gorges cofferdam in 1997: 'This is a victory for the spirit of the Foolish Old Man who moved the mountains.'[14]

By the time of its completion in 2006, the Three Gorges Dam had displaced 2 million people from their homes in 13 cities, 140 towns and 1,350 villages — all of which were submerged, along with 100,000 hectares of arable land and innumerable cultural and archaeological sites. Despite ongoing criticism, it was not until 2011 that China's State Council finally issued a vague statement acknowledging the environmental, social and geological

A still from Jia Zhangke's 賈樟柯 film *Still Life* 三峽好人 (2006), an elegiac tale about the destruction and despair caused by the displacement of millions to make way for the Three Gorges Dam. Here, the protagonist gazes over Fengjie 奉節, a 2,000-year-old town, now under water
Source: YouTube

concerns surrounding the Three Gorges Dam.[15] But the damage, including to the river's ecosystem, is irreversible.

Many Chinese today are unimpressed by the idea of the Foolish Old Man. The question 'Should the Foolish Old Man just move houses instead of mountains?' has become a favourite topic for debating societies in some of China's high schools.[16] Students are encouraged to re-evaluate Maoist ideals, as well as the unrestrained pursuit of development and profit in the post-Mao era.

The story of the Foolish Old Man originated from a collection of Daoist tales attributed to Lie Yukou 列禦寇 (c. 400 BCE). Like many Daoist anecdotes, the story is in fact a commentary on the relativity of human perception. Compared with the two giant mountains, the efforts of the Foolish Old Man are insignificant indeed, but what are the mountains when they are faced with time's weathering power? Big and small are thus relative. Depending on how one sees it, heaven and earth may be treated as a tiny grain; oceans and mountains merely the tip of a hair.[17]

If anything, the true spirit of the Foolish Old Man reprimands the short-sightedness of human ambition and greed. As demonstrated by this other story from *The Book of Master Lie*:

> Once there was a man from the old country of Qi who wanted gold. So he went to a shop and snatched some. The local magistrate caught him and asked, 'Why did you take someone else's gold in front of so many people?' The man replied: 'At the time when I took it, I did not see the people, I only saw the gold.'[18]

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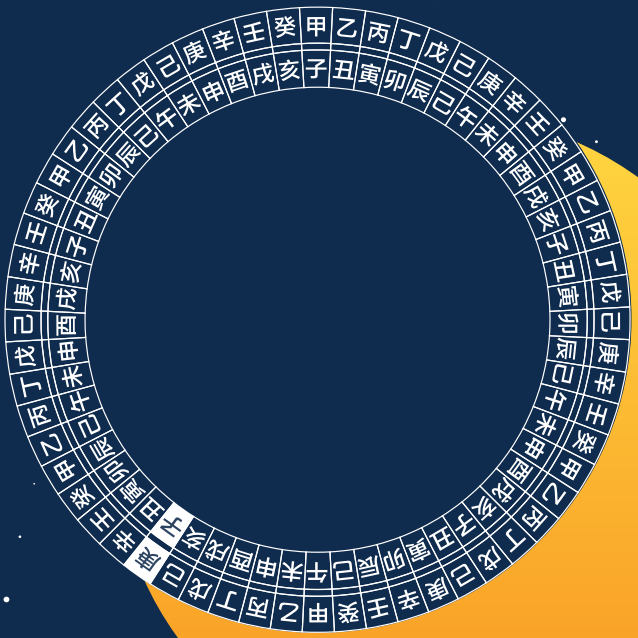
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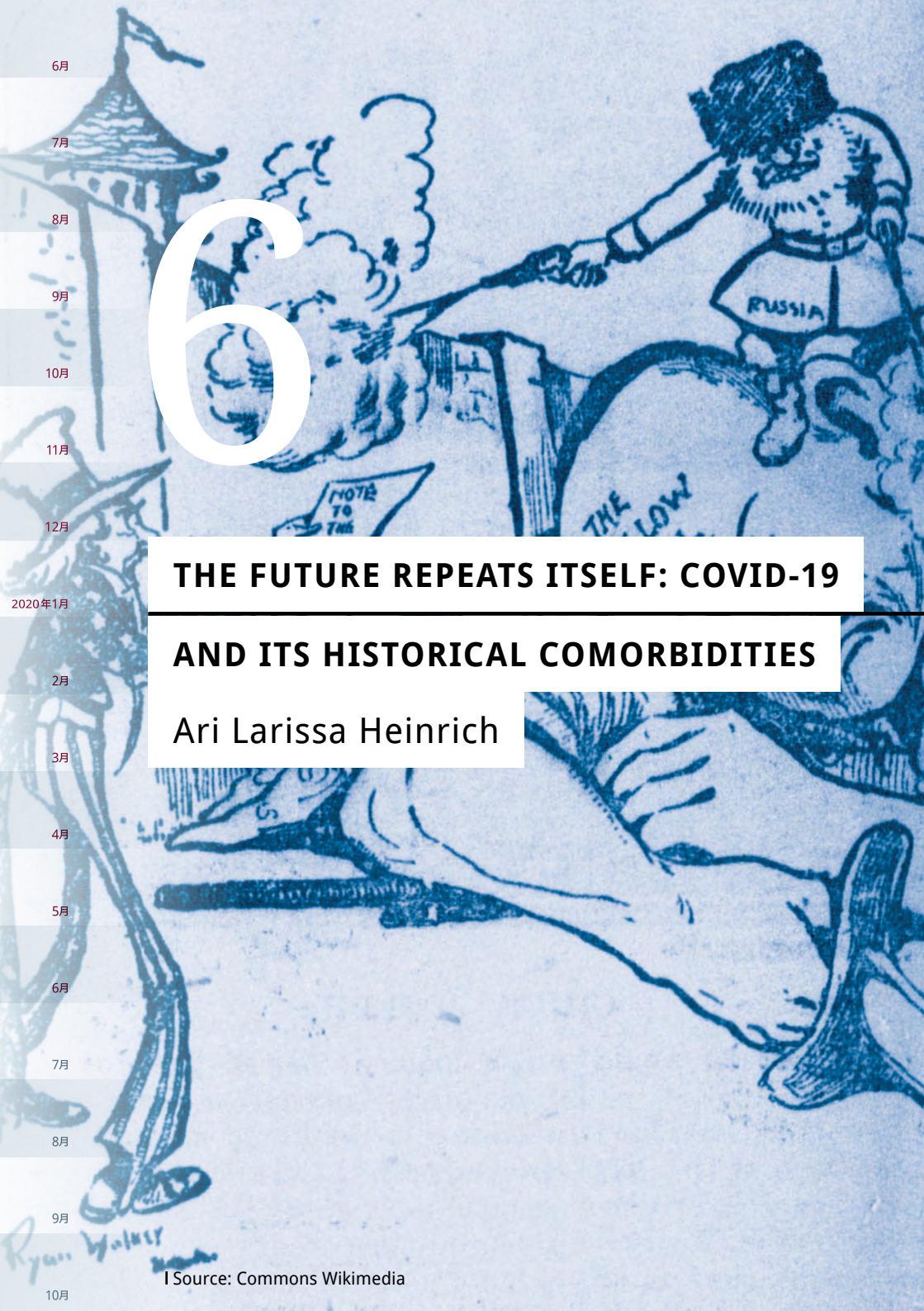
THE FUTURE REPEATS ITSELF: COVID-19 AND ITS HISTORICAL COMORBIDITIES

Ari Larissa Heinrich



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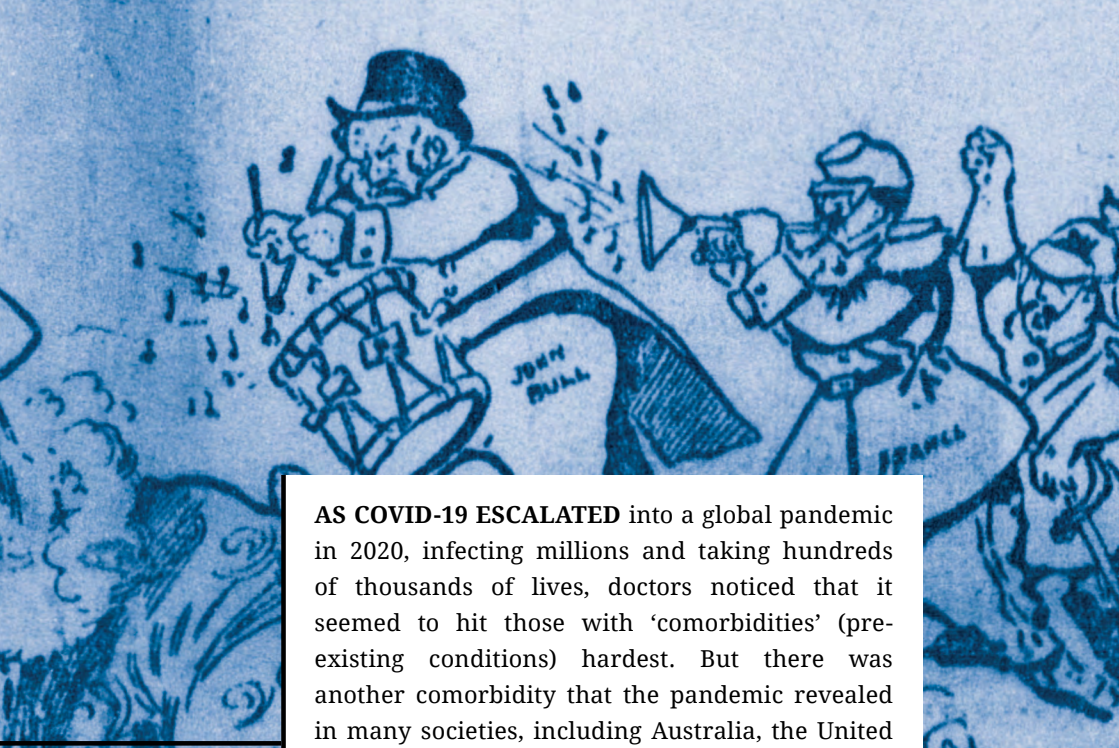

AS COVID-19 ESCALATED into a global pandemic in 2020, infecting millions and taking hundreds of thousands of lives, doctors noticed that it seemed to hit those with 'comorbidities' (pre-existing conditions) hardest. But there was another comorbidity that the pandemic revealed in many societies, including Australia, the United States, and Europe: that of endemic and historical racism. People of Chinese ethnicity — along with anyone mistaken for Chinese — were subjected to incidents of violence and verbal abuse, including spitting, name calling, and even physical assault.[1] US President Donald Trump consciously stirred the pot by referring to COVID-19 as 'the Chinese virus', 'the China virus' or 'the Wuhan virus' — even after he was told of the consequences, including to American citizens of Asian descent. Attempts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to control the narrative through 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' (see Forum, 'The Rise and Fall of the Wolf Warriors, pp.33–37), censoring scientific research linking the origins of COVID-19 to a wet market in Wuhan and some early triumphal comments by President Xi Jinping about how the number of cases abroad had surpassed those in China poured fuel on the fire.[2]

With Trump announcing that the US, which provides 15 percent of the funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), was withdrawing from the organisation because of perceived pro-China bias, he extended the pain to all those countries and people who rely on the WHO to help them combat such diseases as polio and malaria.

The intensity of this eruption of popular anti-Asian racism in the US, Europe, and Australia draws on deeply entrenched stereotypes that date back more than 200 years. These unfairly characterise Chinese people as uniquely vulnerable to certain kinds of illness and as having dietary customs and a lack of hygiene that create a cultural predisposition towards disease.[3] They can be traced with remarkable precision to politically charged exchanges as far back as the late eighteenth century. Understanding their evolution and circulation can help defuse some of the vitriol of racist attacks against Chinese and other Asian people today and free us to focus instead on the real common enemy in the fight against COVID-19: the unequal distribution of wealth and power that results in the disproportionate impact of the disease on communities disenfranchised across categories of race, class, gender, location, and the like.

Responses to the surge in anti-Chinese (and anti-Asian) racism rarely refer to such structural issues. Rather, they tend to include pleas for self-reflection and civility from governments, compensatory generosity, and statements by Asian-Americans, Asian-Australians, and others, and expressions of solidarity from other people of colour or minorities. As early as mid-January, scholars from around the world began gathering and circulating articles, bibliographies, and curriculums for educators who wish to contextualise the eruption of pandemic-related racism in light of persistent anti-Asian myths of the 'yellow peril'.[4] Even before COVID-19, other scholars had been working to address the plight of Chinese international students in Australia, for instance, who face everyday racism, on top of other challenges including loneliness, alienation, and cross-cultural misunderstanding.[5] (See Chapter 10, 'Chinese Students Abroad in the Time of Pandemic: An Australian View', pp.291–303.)

***Peoples of Europe, Defend Your Holiest Possessions,* lithography by Hermann Knackfuss (1848–1915)**
Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Visualizing Culture

While the recent outbreak of anti-Asian racism may appear to be specific to the situation of a pandemic with apparent origins in a live animal market in China, this anti-Asian sentiment and violence (like other racism and anti-Semitism) bubble just below the surface of economic instability. The COVID-19 pandemic has not *caused* racist violence; rather, it has *tapped into* long-established streams of anti-Asian aggression.[6] What, then, are some of the specific historical tributaries that feed into these streams? From where do the perceptions of Chinese propensity towards pathology actually come?

Nineteenth-Century Fake News

> Ancient falsehoods and modern truths relate to each other like the two revolutions of a single spiral.
>
> — Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*[7]

Many of the roots of current anti-Asian racism lie in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century misinformation about Chinese cultural practices that were communicated down the years in a game of transhistorical telephone. An archetypal and stubbornly persistent characterisation of

Chinese people specifically and, later, Asians more generally has them posing a collective existential threat of 'yellow peril' to the West.[8] The idea has its roots in the Chinese resistance to Western imperialism that came to a head with the Boxer Uprising at the turn of the twentieth century, when thousands of fighters stormed missionary outposts and eventually laid siege to Beijing's Legation Quarter. While disease sometimes fits under the larger umbrella of 'yellow peril' in Western characterisations of 'Asian' threats, epidemics often generate their own individual stereotypes.

Take smallpox as an example — the disease that everyone loves to blame on someone else. Like cholera or the bubonic plague, smallpox has been laid variously at the door of India, Turkey, the Middle East, and China. From the early 1800s, many Europeans and Americans believed that China was the 'cradle of smallpox' — an idea circulated by numerous missionary journals, travelogues, bulletins, and official reports from that time onwards. For example, as travel writer Charles Toogood Downing stated in 1838:

> This dreadful malady is supposed to have originated among the Chinese, and to have spread westward in a gradual manner among the natives of Western Asia, until it became as prevalent with the people of Europe, as among those of the Centre Kingdom. The disease then ran its frightful course, unchecked by the ingenuity and resources of man; spreading dismay and horror wherever it appeared, and blighting the loveliness and beauty of the fairest works of the creation.[9]

Downing claimed that the Chinese had invented the practice of inoculation. He continued:

> As if in some measure to compensate the nations of the west for the dreadful gift which they had bestowed, the Chinese discovered, towards the close of the tenth century, the mitigating effects of inoculation. This practice, by which it was vainly hoped that the original disease might

> be entirely eradicated, followed the same course, and soon became common as far as the shores of the Atlantic.[10]

Downing got this information from a single — and singularly unreliable — source: an eighteenth-century essay by the French Jesuit missionary Father Pierre Martial Cibot called '*De la petite vérole*' ('On Smallpox'). Cibot composed the essay in Beijing in the late 1760s, but it did not reach Paris until 1772. It begins with a punchy proclamation that smallpox had existed in China for 3,000 years and claims to summarise 'many very knowledgeable and very boring [Chinese] essays on the origin and the cause of smallpox'. Cibot dismissed unambiguously what he viewed as the 'pathetic stupidity' of Chinese medicine, described its 'lunacy and inconsistency' and declared the history of Chinese medicine to have been obscured by 'clouds of idiocy'. An earlier (1726) report on smallpox by another French Jesuit in China, Father François Xavier D'Entrecolles,[11] had adopted a more neutral tone. Where D'Entrecolles had investigated Chinese inoculation practices with an eye towards finding something useful for Europe, Cibot reserved his most acidic critique for the practice.

The management of smallpox and the practice of inoculation were actually quite advanced in China, especially compared with France during the same period. As early as 1622, the Manchus — a people from

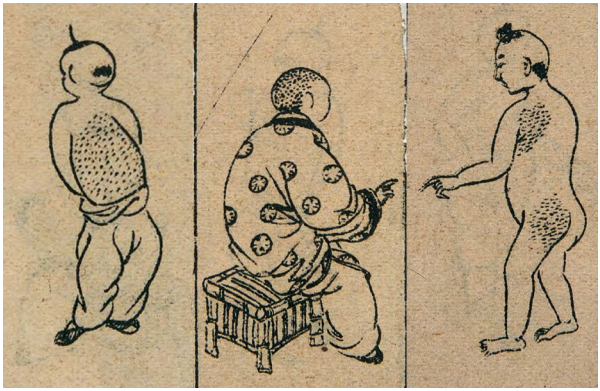

Illustration of smallpox from mid-twentieth century Chinese medical texts
Source: Wellcome Collection

Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor in Court Dress (1791), painter unknown
Source: Royal Academy of Arts, Wikimedia

north of the Great Walls who would soon conquer the Ming and establish the Qing dynasty — had already implemented smallpox reporting systems within the context of the 'banners' that were the basis of social, political, and military organisation. The system required squad leaders to report anyone showing symptoms so they could be quarantined. Clear guidelines also ensured safe interactions with non-Chinese and Mongolian dignitaries, protected the emperor during audiences and applied to funeral rites and the stationing of military personnel (for example, sending officers who had acquired immunity to smallpox to regions where the disease was active). The Manchus also set up strictly maintained *bidousuo* 避痘所 ('smallpox avoidance centres') — quarantine centres to which the emperor might retreat during the seasons in which smallpox ran rampant.

Both the Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) emperors were inoculated against the disease, as were other members of the imperial retinue. In 1739, Qianlong even sponsored the compilation of an imperial medical anthology that contained a special section devoted to smallpox diagnosis and inoculation — the very text upon which Cibot later claimed to base much of '*De la petite vérole*'. This imperially subsidised reference work not only included detailed illustrations to aid specific diagnoses, but also summarised existing treatises on smallpox and provided precise descriptions of how to prepare smallpox matter for inoculation, instructions for creating the optimal conditions under which to perform inoculation, descriptions of adverse reactions to inoculation, and suggestions for post-procedure care.

Given this advanced institutional and pragmatic response to smallpox and the practice of inoculation in China, why would Cibot choose to represent the Chinese situation so pessimistically? It came down to politics. When Cibot left France for Beijing in 1758, inoculation was becoming the subject of heated controversy between the Church and Enlightenment thinkers. This was because inoculation (to be distinguished from the later practice of vaccination) used material from the disease itself to stimulate an immune response. Although it sometimes caused full-blown smallpox, more often, it successfully immunised the recipient against the disease. At the time, the Church considered disease to be a divine plague or scourge. Voltaire was among the French intellectuals who favoured inoculation, but the Church believed it interfered with divine will and, by 1763, banned the practice. The controversy ended abruptly in 1774, when Louis XVI, having witnessed Louis XV's gruesome and untimely death from smallpox, was himself inoculated.

Based on his knowledge of the political situation in France at the time of his departure for China, Cibot realised that if he represented Chinese responses to the disease in too positive a light, he risked giving ammunition to Enlightenment thinkers who were arguing against the stance of the Church. He chose to invert the narrative by critiquing Chinese medical practice in general and using China's success in establishing institutionalised preventive measures around smallpox as 'evidence' of Chinese vulnerability to the disease. As the meticulous medical archivist and plague specialist Wu Lien-teh noted in the 1930s, Cibot's essay — particularly his claim that smallpox had existed in China for three millennia — was subsequently 'often repeated', including 'in some quite modern compilations', such that 'China was even considered as the cradle of smallpox'.[12] A reference to Cibot's eighteenth-century essay made it unchallenged as the source of a footnote on China in Donald Hopkins's (otherwise) definitive 2002 world history, *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History*.

Pathological Racism

The narrative of smallpox in China contributed to the evolution of an even broader and more insidious stereotype linking Chinese identity to pathology: the notion that China was the 'sick man of Asia'. According to this idea, China and Chinese people are uniquely susceptible to ailments, be they corporeal, cultural or symbolic (for example, ailments of the body politic). Coinciding with the development of influential pseudoscience about 'race' in the late nineteenth century, these notions gained momentum. By the early twentieth century, China became known not only as the 'cradle of smallpox' and the 'sick man of Asia', but also as 'the original home of the plague', a source of cholera ('the pestilence of the East') and a place where men were constitutionally weak.[13] Imperialist powers perceived themselves to have a 'civilising' mission. It helped to justify occupation and exploitation if the occupied and exploited were painted as inferior but capable of improvement through the paternalistic intervention of the occupier and exploiter.

In Cibot's time, China still occupied a dominant position in the European psyche in relation to trade and culture. Many Europeans viewed China not just as a desirable trading partner, with its magnificent porcelain wares, teas, spices, and other goods that were highly sought after — even if China was not interested in anything the West had to offer. It was also seen by some, including Voltaire, as a potential source of medical knowledge and positive models of government. China's status plunged after Britain and France defeated it in the Opium Wars — so-called because they were waged so that opium could be exported to China — in the middle of the nineteenth century. As European and American imperial powers made advancements in medical, martial, industrial, and agricultural technologies, they also formalised colonial labour practices, exploiting the global slave trade and trans-Pacific commerce of 'coolie' workers for such projects as railway building in the US and gold digging in Australia.[14] The accumulation of wealth became

***Dr Peter Parker* (c.1840s) by Lan Qua (1801–1860)**
Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Visualizing Cultures

even more explicitly enmeshed with the expansion of religious dogma and colonial enterprise, which in turn had consequences for perceptions of the origins of various pathologies. This coincidence of technological, economic, and political expansion created a perfect storm of conditions for the typecasting of Chinese and other non-Western groups. China emerged from this period not as a source of cures, but as a source of pathologies.

A particularly vivid example concerns the American medical missionary Peter Parker (1804–1888), who, in 1835, opened a hospital in Guangzhou. Like other missionary doctors at this time, Parker sought to use Western medicine to win converts. He found that relatively simple procedures, such as cataract removal, could yield results with biblical resonance — bringing sight to the blind, for example. To illustrate some of his more spectacular cases, Parker hired the respected Cantonese painter Lam Qua 關喬昌 (1801–1860) to create a series of full-colour portraits of more than eighty of his patients, including several 'before and after' images showing the dramatic effects of surgical intervention.[15] The artist's work was stunning. Compared with the limited images that could be produced by photography, which was still in its infancy, Lam Qua's detailed, full-size portraits in oil of Parker's patients were vibrant and lifelike. These portraits were as much sensitive portrayals of individual Chinese people as they were portrayals of unique medical conditions.

Some of Lam Qua's paintings were hung in the receiving room of the missionary-run hospital for prospective patients and their families to view; however, the majority accompanied Parker on a visit back to the US and Europe in 1840–1841, where he used them to petition ecclesiastical organisations and government bodies for funding to support his work. Parker pleaded his cause to influential people, from the American presidents William Henry Harrison and Martin Van Buren to the king and queen of France. He also exhibited Lam Qua's paintings in Boston, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, Salem, and Guy's Hospital in London. Removed from their original context (and in the absence of equally compelling portraits of everyday healthy Chinese people), the striking paintings of gross pathology not only provided potential funders with compelling evidence of China's need for medical intervention, but also conveyed a sense that Chinese people were disproportionately vulnerable to frightening illnesses and all the more in need of spiritual salvation.

There were other, later chapters in this story, in which 'yellow peril' rhetoric blended with that of imagining Chinese people as carriers of disease, including during the Cold War, when communism was portrayed as a contagious and potentially fatal disease of the spirit.

In the age of COVID-19, such examples make the current rise of demagoguery, the politicisation of vaccination and the challenge of sorting through misinformation about the origins of the pandemic feel uncannily familiar. What can we learn about the economic motivations behind the proliferation of fake news about political opponents in a time of intensified trade wars? The old French adage that 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' seems to be more apt today than ever. It can take years or even centuries for the truth about a given circumstance to emerge. Before rushing to translate our anxiety about the latest 'dreadful malady' into aggression against those we perceive to be responsible, we should first ask who stands to benefit

from this racialised discourse. History suggests that such rhetoric has serious consequences.

When a president of the US refers to COVID-19 as ‘the China virus’, he draws directly on a longstanding stereotype of Chinese pathology that has roots not in medical evidence but in old political, commercial, and religious rivalries. The history behind this stereotype — including its connection to the emergence of the ‘sick man of Asia’ stereotype — also helps explain why China is so deeply invested in ‘controlling the narrative’ of COVID-19. However, in spite of President Trump’s escalation of dangerous myths about Chinese pathology, at least we can be grateful to him for shining the spotlight on what is really behind this particular outbreak of anti-Asian animosity — that is, the enduring (and all too contagious) virus: greed.

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PLAN FOR DIFFICULTY

The Dao of Crisis

· ESTHER SUNKYUNG KLEIN

THE DAO OF CRISIS

Esther Sunkyung Klein

TAIWAN'S DIGITAL Minister Audrey Tang 唐鳳, in a 23 July 2020 interview with *WIRED*, quoted the *Dao De Jing* 道德經 extensively to illustrate her self-described 'Daoist approach to political and social action'.[1] The fourth-century BCE Daoist classic, widely translated abroad and often taken as a spiritual guide, has a separate tradition of being read as a guide to governing, albeit a highly ambiguous one.[2] Tang had brought together the Taiwan government's pandemic response team and 'civic tech hackers' to create a rational system of facemask distribution and availability mapping. To describe her role, she quoted from chapter eleven of the *Dao De Jing*: '"Hollowed out, clay makes a pot. Where the pot isn't is where it's useful." All I did,' she added, 'was hollow out the clay to make a pot.'[3]

The hollow pot is one of several well-known metaphors for the Daoist theory of governance, which emphasises the passivity, 'inaction' 无為 and even invisibility of political leaders. The *Dao De Jing*'s most famous and paradoxical line has it that the true adept, like the Dao itself, 'does not make anything happen, yet there is nothing that does not get done' 无為而无不為.[4] Some philosophers argue that Daoism is fundamentally

Audrey Tang by Camille McOuat
Source: Audrey Tang, Flickr

anarchistic, while others argue the extreme opposite — that it is a form of paternalistic authoritarianism. This is a long-running debate in the field of Chinese political philosophy.[5] The answer may depend on whether one focuses on the empty space inside the pot or on the clay that shapes that space. Tang implicitly weighed in on this debate; in a later interview, with the global tech journal *Rest of World*, she described herself as a 'conservative-anarchist' seeking to build a 'radically transparent digital democracy'. While she did not define what she meant by 'conservative', she described her anarchism as a rejection of all 'top-down coercion'.[6] It is a value she shares with g0v ('gov zero'), a collective of civic hackers of which she is a member; it also accords with at least some interpretations of the *Dao De Jing*.

Taiwan's success in containing the COVID-19 pandemic relied on an approach expressed in another precept of the *Dao De Jing*: '[P]lan for difficulty while it's still easy; accomplish big things while they are small' 圖難於其易, 為大於其細.[7] If you stop a pandemic at the airport, you deal with a few dozen cases rather than millions. If you have a solid pandemic plan that is deployed without hesitation at the first sign of trouble, you set yourself up for success. For Taiwan, the pandemic was neither unforeseen nor unprecedented: a 2017 article in the *Journal of Microbiology, Immunology and Infection* described how Taiwan's

'collaborative' and 'whole of society' model of pandemic preparedness was developed in response to successive threats from SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), and others, and suggested that the island offered a valuable model of collaborative governance in the area of public health.[8]

Less fortunate countries have endured alternating waves of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and drastically changed lifestyles. Yet the 2020 lockdown experience in many places ironically approaches another *Dao De Jing* ideal, the small, stable community that takes shape under the guidance of a sage ruler:

> Make the people fear death and
> go not far abroad …
> They'll savour their food, and
> beautify their clothing;
> they'll feel secure in their own
> dwellings, and delight in their
> own customs.
> Though neighbouring states be
> within sight of each other —
> so close they can hear each
> other's dogs and chickens —
> the people live out their old age
> without visiting back and forth.

> 使民重死而不遠徙 … 甘其食, 美其服, 安其居, 樂其俗. 鄰國相望, 雞犬之聲相聞, 民至老死, 不相往來.[9]

In rural areas of the People's Republic of China (PRC), many villagers voluntarily, and in some cases even illegally, built blockades, posted guards, and barred outsiders from their communities as early as January. Even before government-mandated lockdowns, they imposed quarantines on their own returning residents. Some even destroyed the roads into their villages to prevent the infected from getting in. When asked by journalists whether they were worried about running out of food, they retorted that they grew their own.[10] As the *Dao De Jing* counsels: 'Block the roads, shut the door, and you'll never get worn out. Open the roads, meddle in affairs, and you'll end up incurable' 塞其兌, 閉其門, 終身不勤. 開其兌, 濟其事, 終身不救.[11]

The PRC government's response, when it did come, was muscular and swift, including draconian lockdowns, boosted funding for medical research and the production of needed equipment. These measures, together with fine-grained tracing techniques such as the Alipay Health code system,[12] seem to have effectively controlled the

The *Dao De Jing*
Source: Wikimedia

pandemic (global scepticism about official statistics notwithstanding), while advancing the government's massive technology-assisted project for the consolidation of authoritarian control. It brings out the darker strand of *Dao De Jing* paternalism, expressed in a line that refers to 'straw dogs' 芻狗 — objects of no intrinsic value, temporarily elevated for ceremonial use and unsentimentally discarded thereafter:[13] 'Heaven and earth are not humane; they treat the myriad things as straw dogs. Sages are not humane; they treat the common people as straw dogs' 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗.[14] Some rulers employ co-optation: they 'empty the hearts [of the people], fill their bellies, weaken their will, and strengthen their bones' 虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨.[15] One way to effect non-coercive rule is to make resistance unthinkable.

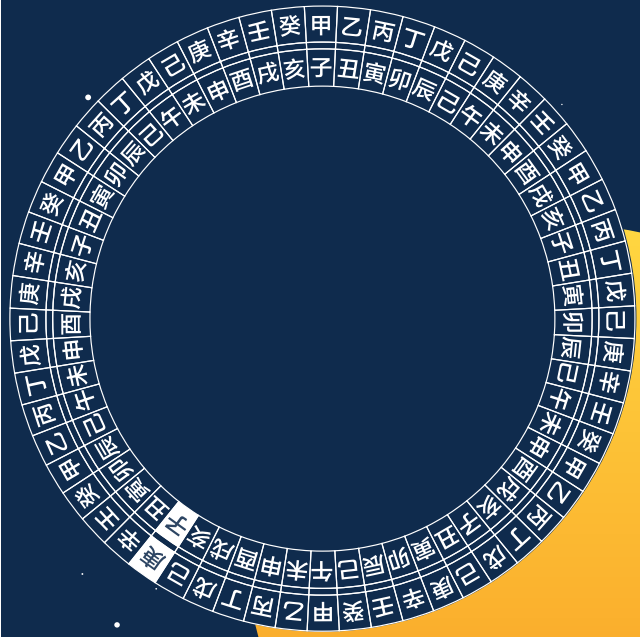
The failures of most democratic societies, including the United States and much of the European Union, in response to the pandemic crisis undermine their critique of authoritarianism. Although China seems to be the exception here, with Brazil and Russia, for example, badly mishandling the pandemic. In this fraught ideological moment, Taiwan's strategy of crisis management offers an example of robust success without paternalistic authoritarianism.

Globally, female leaders have performed exceptionally well in the COVID-19 crisis.[16] Again, the *Dao De Jing* anticipates this development. Sarah Flavel and Brad Hall have proposed that the ancient classic's political theory should be described as 'maternalism'.[17] They refer to the text's pointed disapproval of coercive rule and its claim that the role of the ruler is to nourish the people without demanding recognition for so doing. The *Dao De Jing* frequently refers to the Dao as a mother: '[T]he mother of the state' 國母, 'mother of the world' 天下母 or even 'a nursing mother' 食母. The successful ruler deals with the people as the Dao does with the world's myriad things: 'It brings them up and rears them, completes them and matures them, nourishes them and protects them' 長之育之; 成之熟之; 養之覆之.[18]

Flavel and Hall are careful to dissociate this maternalism from 'gender essentialism'; and maternalist techniques employed by both male and female leaders have enjoyed success — for example, by using state resources to 'nourish' sick workers so they can afford to quarantine themselves.

Audrey Tang's vision brings out its softer maternalistic side, a vision of a state that nourishes its people and cultivates not only their trust, but also their trustworthiness: 'I trust the trustworthy. I also trust the untrustworthy. In this way I can get trust' 信者, 吾信之; 不信者, 吾亦信之; 得信.[19] Or, as Tang told *WIRED*: 'To give no trust is to get no trust' 信不足, 有不信.[20] As is seen most starkly in the United States, where COVID-19 denialism and resistance to government efforts to control the pandemic have been rampant, with no trust, there is no access to the nurturing power of the Dao; there is only crisis.

七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US–CHINA RELATIONS: A LINGERING CRISIS

Nadège Rolland

I Source: Trump White House Archive

LOOKING AT RELATIONS BETWEEN Washington and Beijing in 2020, it would be tempting to conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic affects great powers' 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 relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has long been ailing. The pandemic, rather than acting as the primary cause of the overall deterioration of the relationship, has served as an aggravating factor, dramatically accelerating the ongoing US–China rivalry.

Throughout 2020, US–China relations spiralled downward. Hopes that the 'Phase One' trade deal signed by US President Donald Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He 刘鹤 on 15 January would help ease tensions after nearly two years of trade war soon receded under a surge of virulent rhetoric and an exchange of retaliatory measures between the two countries, triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak. The vicious verbal tit-for-tat, centred on the origins of COVID-19, lasted several months. In mid-March, as the disease started to spread in the United States, President Trump and other high-ranking US officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, started a spiteful routine of publicly calling the virus the 'Chinese virus', the 'Wuhan virus' and 'Kung Flu' in a thinly veiled effort to deflect responsibility for rising US infection and death numbers on to China.[1] Chinese officials countered with the public promotion of conspiracy theories. On 12 March, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian 赵立坚 posted on Twitter that COVID-19 might have been brought to China by US military athletes who attended the seventh Military World Games in Wuhan in October 2019.[2] In early May, Chinese official media outlets ramped up their verbal attacks, specifically targeting Pompeo and calling him 'evil', a 'liar', and the 'common enemy of mankind' after he blamed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a televised interview for mishandling the outbreak.[3]

Meanwhile, the tit-for-tat reached media organisations. On 18 February, the Trump Administration designated five Chinese media outlets operating in the US (Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio International, the *People's Daily* and *China Daily*) as 'foreign missions of the PRC', thereby considering them as extensions of the Chinese Government. The next day, Beijing revoked the press credentials of three *Wall Street Journal* reporters, ostensibly in reaction to an op-ed with the headline 'The sick man of Asia'. On 2 March, the White House put a cap on the number of Chinese nationals allowed to work for official media outlets in the US. On 18 March, China's Foreign Ministry ordered thirteen reporters from *The New York Times*, *The*

Zhao Lijian suggested that COVID-19 might have been brought to China by US military athletes who attended the seventh Military World Games in Wuhan in October 2019
Source: Dutch Ministry of Defense

Washington Post, and *The Wall Street Journal* to return their media passes, effectively expelling them from China.

The spat also extended to diplomatic ties. On 27 July, China's Foreign Ministry ordered the closure of the US Consulate in Chengdu in response to the US's closing of the Chinese Consulate in Houston, Texas, a week earlier, over allegations that it had become a hub for spying and intellectual property theft. From there, it was just a short step to talk of both countries drifting towards a complete breakdown of relations and a 'new Cold War'.[4] Having apparently reached a point of no return, the bilateral relationship was widely seen as being in crisis.

Crises to Spare

Since the US and China normalised relations in 1979, the bilateral relationship has faced at least three severe crises: in 1996, 1999, and 2001. In each case, after an initial sharp deterioration and then hitting rock bottom, the relationship eventually returned to an amicable *status quo ante*.

The first event, in March 1996, is what is now called the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.[5] At the time, Taiwan was getting ready to hold its first democratic presidential elections. Beijing suspected Lee Teng-hui 李登輝, the candidate from the ruling Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT, Nationalist Party), of harbouring a pro-independence agenda and wanted to send a clear signal that a formal declaration of independence would result in war.[6] The signal came in the form of People's Liberation Army (PLA) military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, simulating an amphibious assault and the firing of M-9 ballistic missiles that landed in the shipping lanes near the southern seaport of Kaohsiung and in the vicinity of the Port of Keelung, passing almost directly over the capital, Taipei, before landing thirty kilometres off the coast. For two weeks, the level of tension between the US and China reached extraordinary levels, with undercurrents of nuclear threats: high-ranking PLA officials reportedly raised questions with their American counterparts about whether the US was willing to trade 'Los Angeles for Taipei'. The crisis was eventually defused following a show of military resolve by the United States, and several rounds of skilful diplomacy.

During a special dinner hosted at the State Department on 7 March 1996, defence secretary William J. Perry notified Beijing's vice-foreign minister Liu Huaqiu 刘华秋, who was on a visit to the Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC, that there would be 'grave consequences' should Chinese weapons strike Taiwan. In an effort to send an explicit warning against Chinese escalation, secretary of state Warren Christopher, national security adviser Anthony Lake and United Nations ambassador Madeleine Albright all repeated the same phrase on national TV news programs over the following weekend.[7] Words were backed by the deployment of two US carrier battle groups to waters off Taiwan, led by the USS *Independence* (already on station in the East China Sea, 322 kilometres north-east of Taiwan) and the USS *Nimitz* (stationed in the Persian Gulf and ordered into the area on 9 March by then president Bill Clinton). The two battle groups

eventually converged to form the largest gathering of US naval firepower in East Asia since 1958.

On 8 March, the US National Security Advisor spent the entire day with the Chinese envoy — accompanied by National Security Council aide Robert Suettinger and State Department officials Winston Lord and Jeff Bader — in the living room of the Middleburg, Virginia, country estate of Pamela Harriman, the US ambassador to France. Next to a lit fireplace, Lake and Liu engaged in tough talk, speaking at length about their respective national interests and red lines, while attempting to find a commonly acceptable middle ground. According to David Rothkopf, deputy under-secretary of commerce at the time, the meeting led both sides to sit down and say: 'Wait a minute. This is no way to run one of the pivotal relationships on the planet Earth.'[8]

The relationship was soon back on track. President Jiang Zemin's 江泽民 visit to the United States the following year — the first by a Chinese head of state since that of president Li Xiannian 李先念 in 1985 — was a success. It was crowned by Jiang's commitment to purchase fifty Boeing civilian airliners valued at 3 billion dollars, the establishment of a direct 'hotline' between Washington and Beijing and China's pledge to cease its nuclear co-operation with Iran, opening the door for the signing of a US–China nuclear co-operation agreement ahead of Clinton's visit to Beijing the following year.[9] A formal joint statement by Jiang and Clinton released on 29 October 1997 stressed that the proper handling of the Taiwan question 'holds the key to sound and stable growth of China–US relations', and announced that the two sides would work towards a 'constructive strategic partnership'.[10]

Tensions flared up again in 1999 when, on 7 May, US warplanes, acting in support of operations by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Yugoslavia, accidentally dropped bombs on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Three Chinese journalists died and twenty-seven staff members were wounded. The US Government's official apologies and explanations, pointing to a targeting mistake based on outdated maps, were not reported

The Chinese Embassy in Belgrade ten years after aerial bombing by US military aircraft
Source: Wikimedia

until several days later by Chinese state media, which continued to portray the bombing as a deliberate act of aggression. Jiang Zemin did not accept Clinton's attempts to discuss the incident by phone until 14 May.[11] In the meantime, tens of thousands of Chinese protestors demonstrated outside the US and other NATO countries' embassies in Beijing, throwing rocks, splattering paint, and inflicting other damage on buildings. The US Consul General's residence in Chengdu was set ablaze and protesters attempted to burn the US Consulate in Guangzhou. US diplomatic personnel, including the ambassador, were trapped for several days in their embassy. In the week after the bombing, the Chinese Government suspended three formal bilateral dialogues (on military relations, non-proliferation, and human rights), and demanded formal apologies, an investigation of the bombing, severe punishment for those found responsible, and compensation for the damage done to the Chinese Embassy and loss of life and injuries in Belgrade.[12]

With negotiations over China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) at a critical point, however, neither side wanted to risk a major deterioration in relations. Washington urged a focus on the 'compelling mutual interests' of the two nations in advancing security and economic well-being in Asia.[13] After several rounds of diplomatic exchanges conducted in both Washington and Beijing, the two sides finally

agreed on mutual compensation to cover the property damage both to the Belgrade embassy (US$28 million) and to the US diplomatic buildings in China (US$2.87 million). The US further agreed on 30 July 1999 to make an additional 'voluntary humanitarian payment' of US$4.5 million to the families of the three Chinese killed and the twenty-seven injured. The payment was issued to the Chinese Government on 25 August 1999.[14] The bilateral relationship returned to normal in just a couple of months. Although military to military contacts were frozen for a while longer, other activities carried on as usual, with the Chinese authorities making special efforts to emphasise to American businesspeople, journalists, teachers, and students that their presence in China was still welcome.[15]

Diplomacy prevailed again during the third crisis. On 1 April 2001, a US Navy EP-3 ARIES reconnaissance plane and a PLA Navy F-8 fighter collided over the South China Sea. The Chinese fighter crashed into the sea and its pilot was lost. The US aircraft made an emergency landing on Hainan Island, where its twenty-four crew members were detained for eleven days by the Chinese authorities. Washington and Beijing engaged in a tense round of negotiations over the release of both the crew and the plane. The Chinese Government demanded an official apology, but the White House refused, maintaining that the Chinese pilot's repeated dangerous manoeuvres in close proximity to the US Navy plane, which ended up hitting one of its propellers , had 'put at risk the lives of twenty-four Americans'.[16] The solution eventually came in a series of US statements that expressed 'regret' and included the words 'very sorry', which the Chinese side translated as an apology.[17] Face was saved, the US crew members were eventually released safe and sound,[18] and the disassembled EP-3 plane was transported back to the US in early July,[19] leaving ample time for the PLA to access the classified material that the crew had not had the chance to destroy before the Chinese side took control of the aircraft.[20]

As with the previous two crises, it appears neither side believed it stood to gain by allowing tensions to escalate. Jiang Zemin presumably did

not want to disrupt China's impending accession to the WTO in December 2001 or Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, with the winner scheduled to be announced in July 2001. Jiang's uncompromising public stance during the crisis was understood by the Americans to be primarily motivated by domestic politics: he had to appear strong because he needed the support of the Chinese military to retain his position as the chairman of the Central Military Commission after the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002, and needed to satisfy popular nationalistic sentiment.[21] Ultimately, in the assessment of a former national security adviser to president Clinton, the Chinese leadership was also keen on preserving good relations with the United States, which was deemed 'critical to its future development', to let the domestic nationalists and hardliners overrule the CCP's 'internationalist' group.[22] For its part, despite tough campaign rhetoric labelling China a 'strategic competitor', the newly elected Bush Administration proved eager to keep relations on an even keel.

These three crises have much in common. In each case, an unexpected event created a sharp spike in tensions that suddenly brought the two countries into direct confrontation. But each time, the relationship quickly got back on track because both sides had a strong overriding interest in preserving the status quo. Successive US administrations believed that a robust engagement policy and China's integration within the international system would lead to positive changes: China would become a 'responsible stakeholder' in the existing international system, it would progressively liberalise economically and eventually undertake political reforms.[23] The CCP, on the other hand, believed that China's immediate interests were best served by preserving engagement, expanding trade and investment, and building up all the elements of the country's national power while at the same time maintaining their unchallenged domestic authority. In sum, both parties believed that time was on their side, and neither expected an imminent downturn in relations.

Along Came COVID-19

The latest crisis was sparked by an outbreak of disease that became a pandemic — a natural event that was external to the bilateral relationship rather than triggered by a direct clash between the two countries. China's initial handling of the pandemic led to increased friction, yet, in contrast to previous crises, the incentives for getting things back on track seemed to have evaporated. Instead of seeking compromise and de-escalation, both sides have played an aggressive and bitter blame game, with no end in sight. The general backdrop is also different. After a protracted deterioration in relations over the past decade, both countries are pessimistic about the overall direction of their relationship. The pandemic poured petrol on a smouldering fire, exposing the precariousness of what until recently seemed a reasonably stable equilibrium.

There are underlying forces at play. Deep-seated geopolitical dynamics drive relationships between established and rising powers. Rather predictably, like other rising powers historically, as China's material power and capabilities have grown, its leaders have started to define the nation's interests more expansively and to seek a greater degree of influence on the global stage.[24] Especially since the Global

US aircraft carrier transiting the South China Sea
Source: US Pacific Fleet

Financial Crisis, China has been displaying increased self-confidence in the resilience of its model and the upward trajectory of its wealth and power relative to that of the United States. Beijing's desire to revise the regional *status quo* started to become apparent around 2009–2010. Through the use of 'grey zone' operations below the threshold of armed conflict, Beijing sought to secure gains in the East and South China seas,[25] renewing claims over contested islands and territories, building and then fortifying artificial islands, presenting the so-called Nine-Dash Line as the legitimate delineation of its maritime territory (and later on rejecting the 2016 Hague tribunal ruling that challenged some of its claims). The scope of its 'core interests' — traditionally defined as national security, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity (specifically including Taiwan since the early 2000s and Tibet and Xinjiang since 2006) — broadened in 2010 as Chinese officials privately told US officials that the South China Sea was now included.[26]

Beijing has also taken steps to ensure access to markets, natural resources, and infrastructure, including ports and telecommunication networks, beyond its immediate borders. Xi Jinping's 习近平 launch, in late 2013, of what is now called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), clearly set out China's aspiration for greater influence across Eurasia and beyond. Xi's 2017 affirmation that China should 'guide' the international community to 'shape a more just and reasonable new international order' reflects the Chinese leadership's desire not only to have what they consider to be their rightful say in international affairs, but also to reshape the existing order in ways that better serve China's interests and to alter the interpretation of existing norms.[27]

As the power gap between China and the United States has narrowed, the competitive elements of the relationship have become more prominent. Economic competition and disputes over trade practices, intellectual property, state subsidies, and rules violations have marked the relationship for more than two decades. The current tensions are not simply the result of the Trump Administration's eagerness to slap tariffs on Chinese goods,

Roundtable meeting of leaders at a Belt and Road international forum
Source: President of Russia, Kremlin website

but also the manifestation of growing frustration in the United States and other market economies (including in the European Union and Australia) with China's state-led, market-distorting trade and industrial policies, and lack of reciprocal market access.

Sino-American military competition, which used to be largely confined to East Asia, has begun to expand to the entire Indo-Pacific theatre thanks to the establishment of a permanent PLA Navy base in Djibouti in 2017, the development of Chinese major surface platforms equipped with advanced combat management systems and extended-range surface-to-air missiles,[28] and a modernised stealthy subsurface fleet that can be deployed further from China's coastline for longer periods. Technological competition has accelerated, too, with China making strides in cutting-edge and emerging technologies in which it aims to be the global leader by 2035.[29] These include, among others, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, unmanned and fully automated systems and robotics, biotech, as well as next-generation information and telecommunication technologies.

In the competition for global influence and standing, the United States has suffered what may prove to be a temporary setback under the

Trump Administration. Meanwhile, under Xi Jinping, China's wolf warrior diplomacy and bullying behaviour have resulted in a dramatic and unprecedented decline in how it is perceived by the public of advanced economies across the world.[30] This is despite (or perhaps because of) China's increasingly open attempts to influence the perceptions and policies of other nations through the stepped-up use of its United Front networks and co-optation tactics in Western democracies. (For an overview of the United Front, see the *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, Forum, 'The United Front in an Age of Shared Destiny', pp.128–132.) China's human rights record and the CCP's repression of dissident voices and religious and ethnic minorities have always been a cause of friction in US–China relations. But the scale, scope, and inhumane nature of the Uyghur repression, and the merciless subjugation of freedoms in Hong Kong in the name of security (see Forum, 'Hong Kong's National Security Law', pp.59–64), have sparked outrage not only in the United States, but also in other Western liberal democracies.

The US–China rivalry has always been multidimensional. What has changed most in the past several years are the expectations of the two sides. Many in the United States and elsewhere have concluded that the policy of engagement has failed. Accumulating evidence that Beijing does not intend to liberalise has crushed the hope that China will eventually support and adhere to the existing international system, its institutions and the values and norms underpinning them.

Over the course of the past four years, the Chinese leadership seems to have concluded that the American decline has accelerated, clearing the way for its own rise to predominance.[31] Xi Jinping and other top-ranking officials evidently have these trends in mind when they refer to the 'profound changes unseen in a century' 百年未有之大变局 that are taking place.[32] For its own purposes, the Chinese leadership may want to continue to point to the chaotic democratic process surrounding the US presidential elections as an illustration of the supposed failings of democracy. On the other hand, reflecting the new bipartisan consensus on the challenge

posed by China, there is every reason to expect that, even if it adopts a less combative tone than its predecessor, the Biden Administration will maintain a strong competitive stance and will attempt to work more closely with its allies to defend their shared interests and common values.

In contrast to previous crises, neither side seems to have any interest in compromise or dialling down the tensions. There is no going back to the 1990s. This does not mean, however, that either side wants to escalate the crisis further or risk an all-out conflict. What is to be expected for the foreseeable future, then, is an across-the-board intensification of geopolitical, economic, and ideological competition. Increasingly tense US–China relations are not a crisis. They are the new normal.

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TAIWAN'S SEARCH FOR A GRAND STRATEGY

Wen-Ti Sung

ON 10 OCTOBER 2020, simmering political tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) erupted in the form of a physical fight between their diplomats in Fiji. Two Chinese embassy officials had allegedly gate-crashed a National Day reception hosted by the Taiwan trade office — Taiwan's *de facto* embassy. The Taiwanese side claimed the Chinese officials were conducting intelligence-gathering activities about the function and its guests and assaulted a Taiwanese diplomat who asked them to leave; the Chinese Embassy blamed the Taiwanese diplomat for acting 'provocatively' and causing 'injuries and damage to one Chinese diplomat'.[1] In any case, it was a Taiwanese official who ended up in hospital with a head injury.

This episode illustrates Taiwan's increasing diplomatic isolation at the hands of China and the breakdown of mutual trust in recent years. Beijing has little incentive to change course, given the luxury of its economic and military strength, as well as its increasingly nationalistic ideology. This leaves Taipei searching for a new strategy for coping with China's 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' and escalating rivalry with the United States.

Beginning in the late 2000s, administrations of different political stripes in both Washington and Taipei pursued policies of political and economic engagement with China. The hope of some was that

this would promote economic liberalisation in the PRC, which would lead also to political liberalisation, if not outright democratisation. The '(inter)democratic peace theory' in international relations, which has its roots in Immanuel Kant's 1795 idea that people would never vote to go to war, holds that democracies do not fight democracies. By that logic, engagement with a liberalising China should also have 'pacified' it as a security concern to liberal democracies around the world.

This scenario allowed China to, as Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 put it, 'hide its strength and bide its time' in international affairs, creating a path for a peaceful rise to quasi-superpower status. What's more, to take actions they believed would strengthen the moderates and 'liberals' in Zhongnanhai, both Washington and Taipei accommodated elements of Chinese foreign policy that were out of sync with the norms of the liberal international order. While looking after the 'big picture' of US–China relations, meanwhile, policymakers and pundits in Washington often practised benign neglect of the third vertex of the triangle, Taiwan.

Taiwan, for its part, was largely content with this until 2019. Indeed, the population remained undecided about the price it was willing to pay for Taiwan's political future. Opinion poll after opinion poll showed a majority of the population preferred to maintain the cross-strait status quo — either in perpetuity or at least for the moment.[2] They were pragmatic: 60.8 percent of Taiwanese were still willing to work in China or do business there as of 2018. The heightened cross-strait tensions during 2016–2018, rather than sparking Taiwan's nationalist pushback, actually resulted in a mild dip in Taiwanese national self-identification in *Commonwealth Magazine*'s annual polls.[3] For example, between 2017 and 2018, when pollsters asked whether respondents self-identified as 'Taiwanese', 'Chinese' or 'both Taiwanese and Chinese', the percentage who self-identified as 'Taiwanese' decreased by 4 percent and 7.8 percent, respectively, for those aged 20–29 and 30–39 years.

For their part, Taiwan's political elites had adopted what I describe as the strategic posture of 'dual alignment' or, as expressed by its most famous advocate, former president Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九, 'stay close to America

US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar met Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei in August 2020, the most senior US official to visit the island in decades
Source: Wang Yu Ching / Office of the President, Flickr

and on good terms with China' 親美和中. Yet while the US has been Taipei's primary security guarantor since the onset of the Korean War in 1950, the guarantee of protection has always been ill-defined. There is no current formal treaty codifying a security commitment, with the closest thing being America's *Taiwan Relations Act*, which is only domestic legislation. It describes Chinese military action against Taiwan as a 'grave concern' to the United States, without obligating the US to make a proportional military response to defend the island. Implicitly, US support has also been conditional on Taipei boosting its own defence and not on unduly 'provoking' Beijing, even if the line for what counts as provocation is constantly shifting. A natural extension of that logic has been that, for Taipei to maintain good relations with its superpower patron, it has also needed to maintain cordial relations with Beijing. 'Dual alignment' has pushed Taipei to seek friendly relations or partnership with *both* the US and China.[4]

A series of recent crises have undermined that harmonious three-way arrangement. In Washington, the ever-escalating US–China trade war, Cold War–style rhetoric and sociocultural-academic decoupling under outgoing president Donald Trump have undermined and sidelined advocates for engagement. As for Taiwan, in the words of the American

international relations scholar Charles L. Glaser, it remains 'a secondary, albeit not insignificant, US interest'.[5]

Chinese President Xi Jinping's 习近平 2019 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan', which called for greater cross-strait integration, became a divisive issue in Taiwan's 2020 presidential and legislative elections. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is relatively assertive towards China, won the elections with 57 percent of the vote. The PRC greeted that development with military drills in the Taiwan Strait and renewed efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically. This pressure became the subject of intense international discussion and media coverage when Beijing insisted that Taiwan be excluded from the 2020 meeting of the World Health Assembly to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic. Many found this demand highly problematic given that Taiwan had proved a successful model in containing the disease without imposing a major lockdown or significantly damaging its economy.

The US State Department sent more senior officials to visit Taiwan in 2020 than it had in the previous four decades, including undersecretary of state Keith Krach and health secretary Alex Azar. Since 2019, Washington has also sent US naval warships to sail through the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait on a number of routine 'freedom of navigation operations'. These are intended to boost Washington's perceived security commitment towards Taiwan and 'a free and open Indo-Pacific', according to a statement issued by the US Seventh Fleet.[6]

Taipei is keenly aware that, with President Xi in power (apparently for the long term), and China hawks increasingly ascendant in Washington, the age of 'dual alignment' is over. By late 2018, Taiwan had to choose sides. It chose the US, which has no territorial ambitions towards the island and poses no existential threat. But in so doing, and by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen's 蔡英文 own admission, Taiwan is now *the* 'frontline state'[7] in the emerging bipolar rivalry — if not a new Cold War — between the US and China. Should that strategic rivalry escalate into military conflict, Taipei would be vulnerable to attack by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Dual alignment — the comfort blanket that freed Taipei from having to make tough strategic choices in the past — seems no longer sustainable.

Yet Taiwan is struggling to find a viable alternative. It is facing a crisis of grand strategy.

On the one hand, Taiwan's main opposition party, the relatively China-friendly Kuomintang (KMT), still largely clings to the idea of dual alignment. This is despite the fact that the strategy's underlying foundation on a US–China entente no longer exists. The electorate, well aware of this fact, has punished the KMT accordingly. On the other hand, while the ruling DPP enjoys great popularity for now, without the capacity to communicate with Beijing, it is struggling to regain agency in the US–China–Taiwan relationship, leaving dependency on the US as the only viable option. Yet with dependency comes the constant fear of abandonment. Each piece of news about progress on the US–China trade front renews paranoia in Taipei about whether Washington will one day trade away Taiwanese security interests in exchange for Chinese concessions and abandon it to China.

This constant fear of abandonment may push Taipei into two unintentionally self-defeating measures. First, Taiwan may elect to demonstrate greater commitment towards the US in the hope of eliciting greater US support. For example, Taipei may make expensive purchases of US defence material in the hope that 'America helps those who help themselves'; in late 2020, the Trump administration approved a potential US$1.8 billion weapons sale to Taiwan. Even if this strengthens Taiwan's ability to deter Chinese military aggression, it will mean less spending on domestic needs and will thus erode the government's domestic electoral support.

Second, it may enter into defence and intelligence-sharing arrangements with the US in the name of improving joint interoperability and strengthening deterrence against Chinese aggression. Yet, the decision about whether and when to enter a conflict has always been the prerogative of Washington, which would not look favourably on any attempt by Taipei to entrap or undermine American strategic autonomy in its own interest.

Taiwan's conundrum may be unavoidable given its unique situation. Whether Taiwan can identify a viable alternative to dual alignment will determine its ability to survive and thrive as the Sinophone world's foremost liberal democratic society.

MALAYSIA: TAKING NO SIDE BUT ITS OWN

Xu Cheng Chong

MIDWAY THROUGH MAY 2020, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's government quietly, and forgoing the promised public tender process, granted 5G frequency bands to five Malaysian telecommunications providers. These included four of the country's biggest — Maxis, Celcom, Digi, and Telekom Malaysia (TM) — as well as the obscure Altel.[1] Behind Altel is Syed Mokhtar Albukhary, a Malaysian billionaire who has been the subject of much public criticism due to his fistful of government-licensed monopolies, including rice distribution, motor vehicle inspection, postal services, the running of media companies and ports.[2] A public uproar in early June caused the government to quickly reverse its decision by revoking the allocations of all providers. Previous promises of a third-quarter rollout of 5G have been delayed until late 2022 or early 2023, buying the Muhyiddin Administration more time to formulate an allocation process that will avoid a public backlash. Instead, it has decided to focus on optimising 4G speed and

The Muhyiddin Administration granted 5G frequency bands to five Malaysian telecommunications providers
Source: Atiqah Nazir, Flickr

Huawei, the Chinese 5G network provider
Source: Kārlis Dambrāns, Flickr

coverage under the new Jalinan Digital Negara Plan (JENDELA).

The initial plan announced by the Mahathir Administration's MCMC National 5G Task Force was to offer the pioneer spectrum bands of 700MHz and 3.5GHz to a consortium of firms. This was justified on grounds of efficiency and cost, as forcing providers to work together prevents the duplication of infrastructure and lowers capital expenditure. After Mahathir was ousted, his successor, Muhyiddin, bypassed the previously announced process and allocated the 700MHz spectrum to five providers.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) appears to be the big winner in Malaysia's 5G rollout, and would have been so regardless of which plan was followed. In Malaysia since 2001, Huawei's deep penetration of its telecommunications equipment market has led to its dominance of Malaysia's 4G infrastructure. This accords Huawei another advantage as it offers further cost savings when upgrading its 4G equipment to 5G. Maxis announced Huawei as its official 5G equipment provider, while Celcom and TM signed provisional agreements to use Huawei's hardware. Digi was exploring co-operation with ZTE, another Chinese equipment provider. All four major Malaysian providers essentially confirmed that they were obtaining 5G equipment from Chinese sources. Against the backdrop of a US–China technology war over 5G leadership, this might be construed as Malaysia choosing sides.

In 2018, Dr Mahathir Mohamad returned to politics for his second term as prime minister at the helm of the centrist political coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH), which ended the centre-right Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's six-decades-long reign over Malaysia. His new parliament and cabinet saw a higher proportion of non-Malays than past administrations — a stunning deviation from his long-standing endorsement of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay pre-eminence as entrenched in the Constitution). He replaced prime minister Najib Razak, who by mid-2018 was facing a twelve-year prison sentence for corruption. Najib's shift towards China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — the 'China factor' — was seen as vital to BN's first ever electoral loss. Under Najib, Malaysia had signed on to several BRI projects, the most prominent being the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL). Mahathir's campaign wove a narrative that tied Najib's dealings with China to his problems with corruption and debt. Mahathir accused Najib of having placed self-interest before Malaysia's national interests in signing on to these expensive infrastructural projects. By focusing his criticism on Najib, Mahathir avoided accusations of being anti-China and thus left open the option of further bilateral economic co-operation. However, this election left behind two indelible political legacies: future governments had to avoid being perceived as ceding any sovereignty to China and had to face higher standards of public accountability.

The latter manifested in May, leading to the hasty retraction of 5G allocations by Muhyiddin's governing Perikatan Nasional alliance, which was elected in March with just a two-seat majority, unseating Mahathir's PH. The non-transparent allocation process for 5G might not have attracted so much criticism had it not been for the mysterious grant to Syed's Altel. Altel had also been awarded 4G bands in 2012, which it promptly leased to other providers. This allowed Altel to profit without making any expensive infrastructural investment itself — a classic case of rent-seeking behaviour. While the backlash against Altel is not about China, the persistence of anti-corruption sentiment signals that government decisions surrounding future investment need to consider the larger picture. If economic policies are seen to disproportionately benefit the

kleptocratic elite, they might invite a repeat of Najib's downfall.

The future of Malaysia's 5G plans remains in flux. Mahathir had promised commercial 5G by the third quarter of 2020, with a simultaneous upgrade of 4G capabilities. Muhyiddin's new timeline, announced in September, proposes a staged termination of 3G services and a concurrent upgrade of 4G until 2021, after which there will be a transition to 5G.[3] This delay could be attributed to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, with Malaysia's economy expected to shrink by 3.1 percent in 2020 according to World Bank estimates. Malaysia's second wave of COVID-19 ended on 8 July after a total of 3,375 infections, but a third wave was sparked in September by a surge in domestic travel to Sabah for that state's elections.

Muhyiddin's government is also inclined to stand firm against China without taking a directly confrontational stance. With its razor-thin parliamentary majority and ongoing leadership challenges, including from Mahathir, it does not want to be seen as selling out to China on any level.

In April, Chinese research, coast guard, and maritime militia vessels tailed a Panamanian-flagged drillship hired by Petronas, Malaysia's state gas and oil company, in the South China Sea. The drillship was conducting activities on the outer edge of Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) — an area contested by China's Nine-Dash Line territorial claims. This was regarded as part of Beijing's intimidation tactics, meant to coerce South-East Asian littoral states into pursuing joint exploration of resources in their EEZs with China.[4] (One of the Chinese ships had been involved in similar alleged harassment of a Vietnamese drilling ship the previous year.) The standoff lasted into May, drawing US and Australian ships to the vicinity, where they conducted presence operations. In October, the detention of six Chinese fishing boats and sixty Chinese nationals, whom Malaysian officials accused of trespassing in Malaysian waters was another signal to China of the seriousness with which Malaysia regards its sovereign territory in the South China Sea. Despite Malaysia's resolve, China continued to apply pressure as it engaged the South-East Asian state in another standoff along the coast of Sarawak in late November.

Muhyiddin is willing to confront Beijing on issues like the protection of Uyghurs on its soil
Source: Studio Incendo, Flickr

A month earlier, in September, the Malaysian Government drew another line when it announced that it would not entertain extradition requests from China for ethnic Uyghur refugees. Under Mahathir's government in 2018, Malaysia had allowed eleven Uyghurs wanted for extradition by China to instead leave for Turkey, but the decision in September marked its first clear position on Uyghur extraditions. This helped Muhyiddin's government satisfy two political objectives: to demonstrate that Malaysian sovereignty over domestic issues is absolute, and to appease the growing number of Uyghur advocates in the constitutionally secular state, where Islam is the official religion of the federation.[5]

The Malaysian Government clearly sought to decouple its economic and foreign policies; its choice of Huawei for 5G cannot be regarded as choosing China's side in the face of intensifying great power competition more generally. To reduce it to a simple matter of choosing sides would be to disregard the relevance of Huawei's two decades worth of investment in Malaysia, as well as domestic exigencies like cost savings from upgrading existing 4G Huawei infrastructure. Malaysia has a clear incentive to deepen economic ties with China, yet under Muhyiddin, it is also willing to confront Beijing on issues like the South China Sea and the protection of Uyghurs on its soil.

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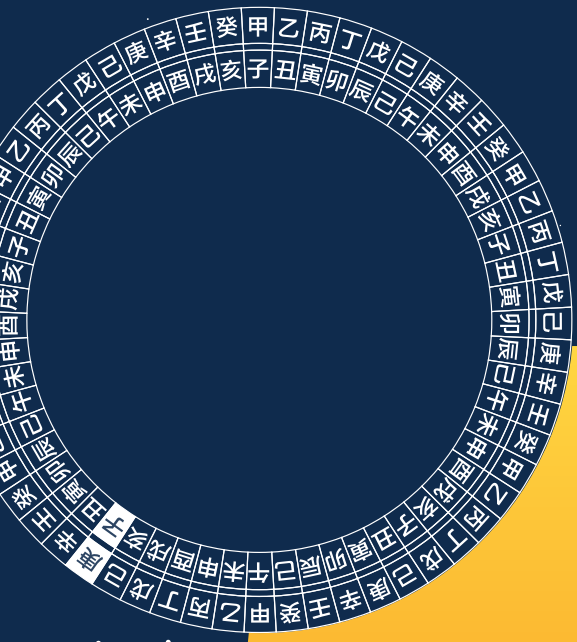
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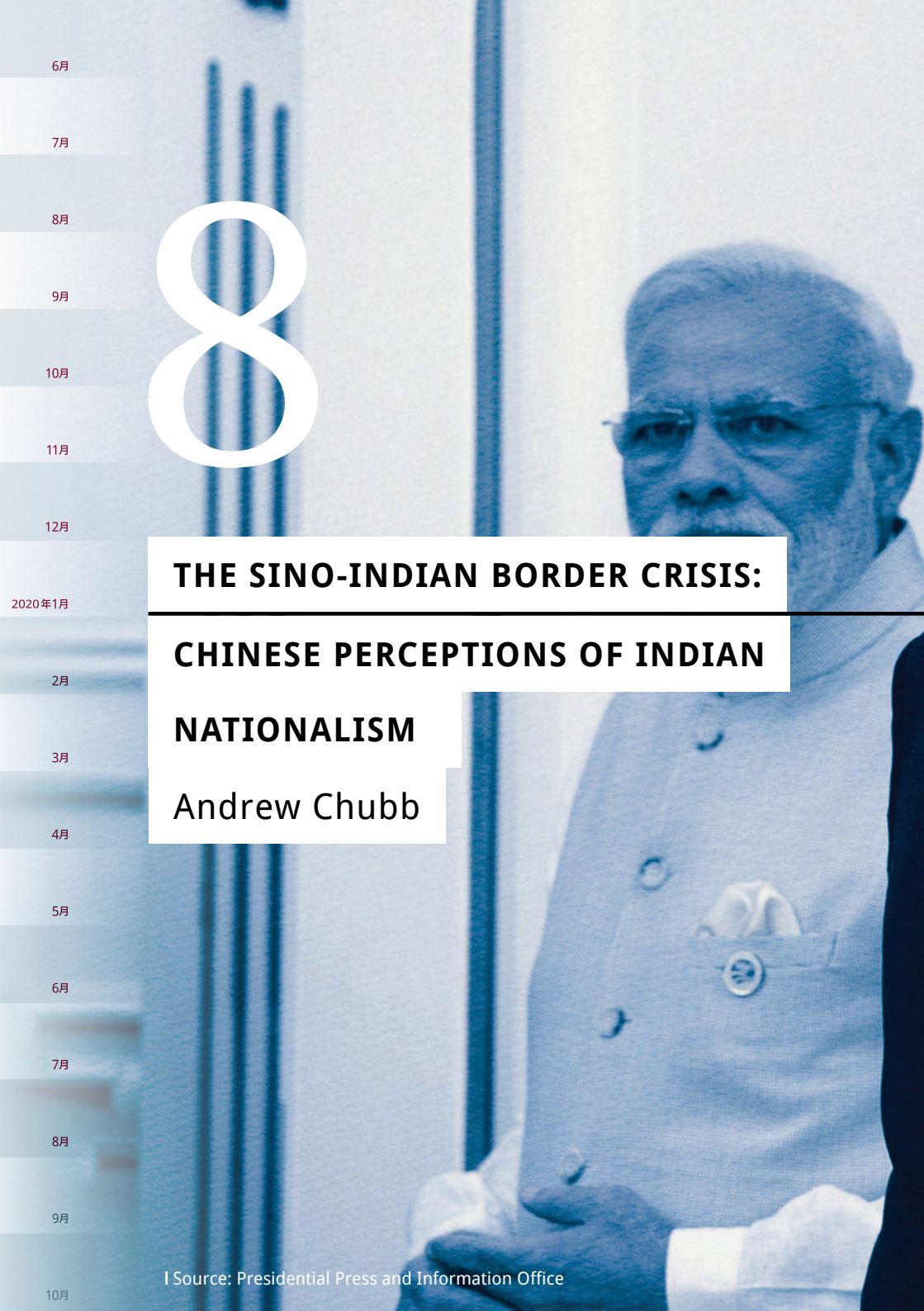
THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER CRISIS: CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

Andrew Chubb



Source: Presidential Press and Information Office

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 15 JUNE 2020, several dozen Chinese and Indian soldiers stared each other down on a desolate Himalayan mountainside, more than 4,000 metres above sea level. Over the past four decades, such standoffs have been common along the 'Line of Actual Control' in the disputed Sino-Indian borderlands, particularly during spring and early summer. This is when both sides resume patrolling and consolidating their positions after the winter freeze. Sometimes standoffs have resulted in fistfights or stone throwing, but no personnel of either side had died on the border since 1975, when four Indian soldiers were shot and killed on a patrol at Tulung La, a pass in Arunachal Pradesh at the far eastern end of the disputed border. What happened next on that day in June remains shrouded in mystery and recrimination.

Not surprisingly, the two sides' official versions of events diverged sharply. According to Foreign Ministry spokesperson for the People's Republic of China (PRC) Zhao Lijian 赵立坚, Indian troops 'violently attacked Chinese officers and soldiers who were there for negotiation'. India's External Affairs Ministry spokesperson called it a 'premeditated and planned action' by the Chinese side. What is not in dispute is that an enormous brawl erupted that night, in which hundreds of soldiers wielded an array of crude weapons against each other, including rocks, clubs studded with nails and batons wrapped in barbed wire. By morning, twenty Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers had died, and war between Asia's two rising superpowers was more likely than it had been since the 1970s.

The disputed area is so remote and unpopulated that the two governments have previously been able to defuse tensions there quietly. The mêlée of 15 June changed all that, making the Sino-Indian border crisis a matter of intense and ongoing public focus in both countries and beyond. Yet in contrast to China's territorial disputes in the East and South China seas, where Beijing has positioned itself as the aggrieved historical victim, here India carried the emotional burden — and wielded the power — of national humiliation.

This incident sparked one of China's most dangerous foreign policy crises in 2020. What happened in the Himalayas? How did the confrontation begin, and why did it escalate? And what role has Indian nationalist outrage played in its handling?

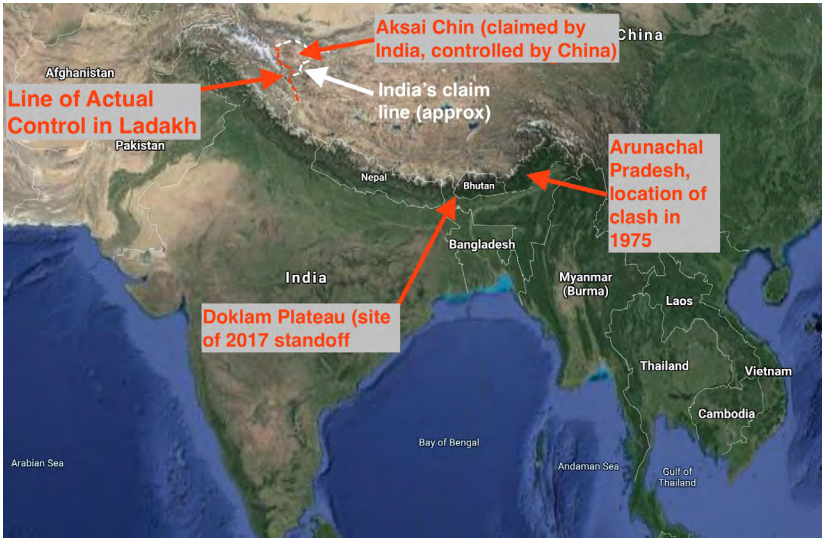
Control and Crisis

The remote mountain-desert geography in which the crisis unfolded has virtually no civilian settlements. In the areas between the two sides' military encampments, territorial control is exercised not by occupation

but by administrative behaviours such as patrolling and surveillance. It is in these grey areas of overlapping presence, where perceptions differ as to where the 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC) lies, that the crisis unfolded.

The stage was set for the crisis in May, when thousands of PRC soldiers, together with trucks, tanks, and artillery, moved into territory at several points along the LAC that India believed it controlled, mostly in Ladakh, at the western end of the disputed border. According to defence journalist and retired Indian Army colonel Ajai Shukla, the Indian Army had observed a build-up of People's Liberation Army (PLA) units throughout April, but its analysts interpreted this as preparations for routine drills held in the area each spring.[1]

The PLA advanced several kilometres down the Galwan Valley, setting up a new encampment and blocking an Indian road under construction. Almost simultaneously, about 100 kilometres to the south, Chinese soldiers seized an eight-kilometre-wide stretch of territory along the northern shore



Overview of the China–India border. Crisis erupted in 2020 along the 'Line of Actual Control,' at the western end of the disputed border
Source: Andrew Chubb

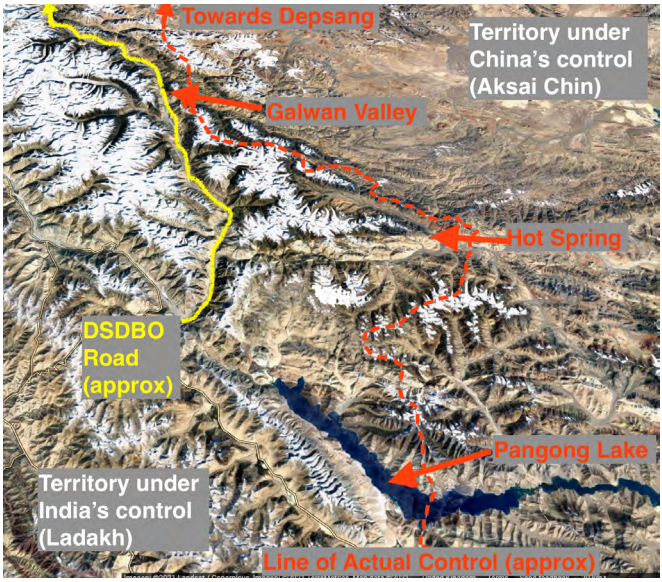
of Pangong Lake. This denied India access to an area it had previously patrolled, leading to minor scuffles when the PLA refused access to Indian troops. The PLA also occupied territory previously subject to overlapping control at several other points along the LAC, including Hot Springs and Depsang Plains, as well as North Sikkim, several hundred kilometres away.

PLA occupation of the Galwan Valley would have not just blocked India's road construction, but also afforded the PLA sweeping views over a strategic Indian highway in undisputed Indian territory, the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldi Road. Known as the DSDBO Road, this recently upgraded artery links the Indian military's furthest-flung border outposts, enabling the movement of weaponry, equipment, and supplies to the frontier. The prospect of PLA emplacements overlooking this lifeline was not a comfortable one for the Indian Army. According to China's Foreign Ministry, on 15 June, Indian troops 'demolished the tents built by the Chinese side' and then violently attacked 'Chinese army officers and soldiers [who] came to negotiate'.[2]

The brutality of the weapons used in the brawl at Galwan paradoxically reflected the two sides' adherence to a mutual agreement to refrain from gunfire along the border. Two months later, that norm too fell by the wayside. On 7 September, warning shots were fired — each side said it was by the other — as Chinese soldiers approached an Indian position on the south bank of Pangong Lake. The Indian Army had recently occupied several mountain peaks in the area to survey the PLA's new positions on the northern shore of the lake. This was the first time shots had been fired on the border since the 1975 incident in Arunachal Pradesh.

Explanations for Escalation

In the past, at least some Sino-Indian border incidents have probably been the consequence of decisions made by local commanders. The seventy-two-day standoff at Doklam in 2017, for example, may have been triggered



Key flashpoints along the Line of Actual Control (dotted orange line) in 2020. Arrows indicate approximate direction of PLA troop movements
Source: Andrew Chubb

by a local PLA unit's ill-considered idea of building a road on territory overlooking India's vulnerable Siliguri Corridor.[3] Since India was not previously a claimant to the area, which was contested by the PRC and Bhutan, it is possible India's tough response took the PLA by surprise. The crisis in 2020 was different. The scale and co-ordination of the PLA's movements implied approval from the Central Military Commission headed by President Xi Jinping 习近平 himself.

Observers have proposed three main explanations for China's actions. One is opportunism: seeking to take advantage of the distractions of the COVID-19 pandemic to make territorial gains at India's expense. A second line of argument is geo-strategic signalling: demonstrating to India the potential costs of its warming security ties with the United States. A third explanation is insecurity: a pre-emptive show of strength at a time of economic slowdown and deteriorating relations with the United States.

Without access to the black box of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decision-making, it is difficult to prove motivation, and all three factors could simultaneously be at play. History offers some support for the third explanation. It is not the first time the PRC has behaved aggressively on the Sino-Indian border during domestic troubles. Allen Whiting's classic study *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence* shows how, in 1962, facing severe economic, social, and political stresses in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, PRC leaders perceived a '180-degree' arc of threat in which enemies from Taiwan to the US, and from India to the Soviet Union, were conspiring to take advantage of China's internal turmoil.[4] A traditional Chinese political idiom holds that internal chaos often brings external trouble 内乱外患.

Yet the PRC was facing relatively few external security threats in 2020 compared with 1962. Its relations with Russia are blooming, and the ruling party on Taiwan could not be less interested in retaking the Mainland. The CCP had effectively quashed the threat of COVID-19 through social mobilisation and public health measures backed by a massive propaganda campaign — and the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists and others who dared tell a different story about it. While the PRC also faced its first quarterly economic contraction since 1978, even its economic worries were noticeably easing by the time troops began moving on the Indian border in May. It is difficult, moreover, to identify any Indian moves along the border in early 2020 that could be construed as threatening. A more convincing explanation is that the PRC was responding to two actions India had taken the previous year.

One was the completion of the strategic DSDBO Road in 2019, which greatly enhanced communications and logistics for India's outposts along the LAC. The PLA's move down the Galwan Valley appears to have been aimed at establishing an overlook on to this road. The second was India's dissolution of the state of Jammu and Kashmir on 31 October 2019. This administrative act proclaimed Ladakh, together with the Chinese-held territory of Aksai Chin, as a new Union Territory directly administered

by the government in New Delhi. At the time, the PRC denounced this as placing Chinese territory under Indian administration, accused India of challenging China's sovereign rights and interests, and described the act as illegal, null, and void. China's moves along the LAC the following year may have been what the University of Macau's You Ji 由冀 has called 'one-plus retaliation', meaning that China responds to perceived provocations by advancing its own position one step further than its adversary has.[5]

Due to its peculiar geography, activity in the disputed areas is seasonal: these high-altitude deserts are largely inaccessible until spring. In many areas, soldiers can only be deployed in large numbers and progress made on infrastructural projects after the winter ice has melted. The timing of China's military build-up in April and its movements in early May was in line with this seasonal cycle.

This is significant because it means Beijing's decision to advance might have been taken many months earlier, though it could only be implemented with the arrival of spring. This supports the two key developments discussed above as the main motivations for the PRC's move.

Nationalism and 1962

Chinese popular nationalism has featured prominently in the unfolding of international crises in recent years. Commentators, including within China itself, have expressed concern about the potential for an agitated Chinese public to constrain the state from seeking diplomatic solutions to sensitive problems, or for rampant nationalism to drive the escalation of crises involving Taiwan, the South China Sea or China–Japan disputes. In this case, however, Indian nationalists are the ones who are claiming the higher moral ground as historical victims.

From India's perspective, China has unlawfully occupied some 40,000 square kilometres of its land in Ladakh since the 1950s. It was then that the PRC occupied Tibet (or, according to Beijing, 'peacefully

liberated Tibet') and solidified control of its western expanses by building a highway linking Tibet with Xinjiang via Aksai Chin, the PRC-administered portion of the disputed territory. In those pre-satellite days, New Delhi only realised this when construction was already complete. The ensuing cycle of escalation culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian border war in which Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 troops overran almost the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector before unilaterally withdrawing, as if to underline the insult; most of the war's several thousand casualties were Indian.

The PLA's decisive victories in the 1962 war not only humiliated the Indian Army, they also entrenched a status quo in Ladakh that was highly unfavourable for India, in which China controls almost all of the disputed territory. A nationalistic press and commentariat have kept 1962 vivid in India's popular consciousness. The democratic political system, meanwhile, rewards tough posturing on border issues.

The Galwan Valley violence of 15 June immediately triggered impassioned anti-Chinese street protests across India.[6] Crowds smashed their Chinese products, torched the PRC's national flag, burned effigies and portraits of Xi Jinping, and demanded boycotts of Chinese

Rifle-toting Indian soldiers on patrol during the brief, bloody 1962 Sino-Indian border war
Source: Photographer unknown, 1 January 1962

companies. The media provided wall-to-wall coverage of the incident and aftermath, and opinion leaders lined up to demand retribution for the deaths of the twenty Indian soldiers.

Until 15 June, and the popular reaction that followed, the Indian Government had downplayed the seriousness of the confrontations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and government-friendly media had repeatedly asserted that there had been no Chinese incursions into India's claimed territory. This questionable claim got little traction in traditional and online media, with the liberal-leaning Congress Party opposition lambasting the denials. The pressure mounted for Modi to at least appear to be doing something.

The main catchcry of this outpouring of nationalism — 'Boycott China!' — reflects widespread scepticism in India about the benefits of trade with China. In the Pew Research Center's most recent global poll, conducted in 2019, India was the only Asian country in which a majority of respondents considered China's economic growth to be a bad thing for their country.[7] In this context, it was not surprising that India chose to retaliate economically. By the start of July, New Delhi had announced a raft of symbolic yet costly economic sanctions on the PRC, from bans on fifty-nine popular apps like TikTok through to the re-tendering of railway and highway projects involving Chinese companies. Indian Railways cancelled an US$129 million contract for signalling and telecommunications work, and the Ministry of Highway and Road Transport scrapped winning bids from PRC firms for two stretches of the 1,300 kilometre, US$150 million Delhi–Mumbai expressway.[8] India's road transport minister declared: '[W]e won't entertain any Chinese player directly or indirectly' in future highway projects.[9]

The Indian Government's language was at times strikingly familiar to that frequently employed by Beijing in diplomatic altercations. In a speech to a national meeting of India's political parties on 19 June, Prime Minister Modi declared: '[T]he entire country is hurt and angry

at the steps taken by China at the LAC', according to a government summary posted on the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) website. 'No one can even dare look towards an inch of our land.'[10] In diplomatic exchanges, Indian foreign policy officials also tried to impress on their Chinese counterparts the 'sensitivities' of the issue.[11] In November, after Twitter showed a map depicting Ladakh as part of China, the national spokesperson for Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party announced that the company had 'apologised for hurting Indian sentiments and have sworn to correct the error'.[12]

Modi's allusion to the hurt and anger of the 'entire country' acknowledged the genuine prevailing outrage in India. But the publication of the remark on the MEA website also suggests an intention to communicate to Beijing the popular pressure on the government to escalate the conflict in the hope that it might lead China's leaders to take steps to cool the situation. But did that work, or did the nationalist protests and the rhetoric from New Delhi simply convince the Chinese leadership to prepare even more thoroughly for confrontation?

PRC Perceptions of Indian Public Opinion

The waves of nationalism in India attracted significant attention in China, where they were addressed in statements by leaders of the Party-State, on state media and through scholarly analyses. In a 6 July telephone conversation with India's National Security Adviser, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 called on India to

> move in the same direction as the Chinese side, correctly guide public opinion and the people's sentiments, safeguard and advance the two sides' normal contact and co-operation, and avoid taking measures that enlarge or complicate the dispute, jointly safeguarding the overall situation of Sino-Indian relations.

In an 11 July speech, the PRC's ambassador in Delhi similarly noted with concern 'emerging opinions in recent days which repudiate the essence of China–India friendship'.[13]

PRC leaders and media had used near-identical language following outbursts of anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam in 2011 and 2014. As a call for the other side to placate or control anti-China public opinion, it implies that Beijing understands nationalist sentiments to be stronger in India than in China. It is, in effect, an admission that the other country possesses what strategists call 'escalation dominance' — the ability to maintain overwhelming advantages in a given domain at any level of conflict — in the field of public opinion. The PRC's call for India to 'correctly guide public opinion and the people's sentiments' was a sign of Beijing's recognition of the danger and political significance of the rising domestic nationalist sentiments in India regarding the crisis.

In the immediate aftermath of the deadly 15 June clash, *Global Times* chief editor Hu Xijin 胡锡进, a key opinion leader in PRC popular discourse on foreign affairs, argued that withholding the number of PLA casualties from the Galwan Valley brawl was an act of 'goodwill' by Beijing. In an English-language Twitter post, he wrote: 'My understanding is the Chinese side doesn't want the people of the two countries to compare the casualties number so to avoid stoking public mood.'[14] In other crises, including the 2017 standoff at the Doklam Plateau (see the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Forum, 'Peripheral Trouble: The Sino-Indian Standoff', pp.99–103), Hu's state-run tabloid led the way in 'stoking the public mood' within China.

Editorials and commentaries in the *Global Times*, Hu's state-run, semi-commercial newspaper and web portal that voices state-approved popular nationalist sentiment on international affairs, put forward an array of interpretations of Indian public opinion during the crisis. In late May, even before the outbreak of hostilities, Hu had already begun warning about the Indian media's 'fanning' of nationalist sentiments,

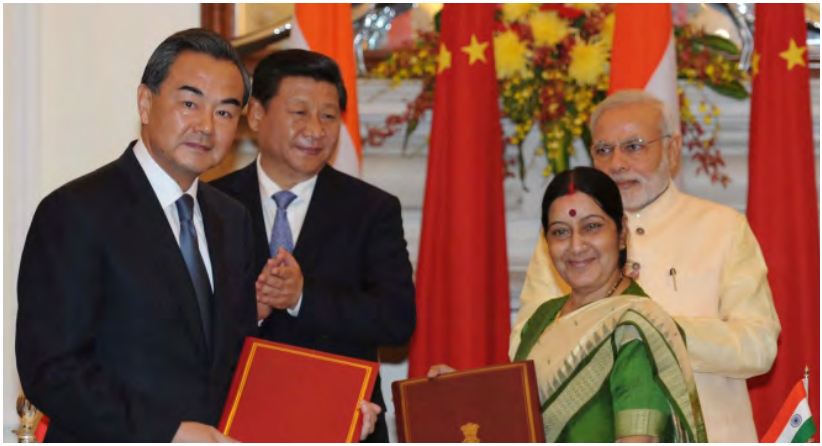
which he contrasted with the Chinese side's restraint.[15] This was followed with a commentary cautioning against 'extreme anti-China sentiment' promoted by 'radical media outlets and organizations in India'.[16]

Following the wave of nationalist mobilisation in India in mid-June, the newspaper directly addressed Indian citizens with the message that boycotting China would harm India's own interests.[17] Other state publications hammered home the message about Indian public opinion as a dangerous escalatory force that the Indian Government needed to control. A 1 July article from the State Council–affiliated *China News Service*, for example, reported that 'half a month after [the incident,] the Himalayan border conflict is still stimulating irrational outpourings of Indian domestic nationalist sentiments'.[18]

Following Prime Minister Modi's conspicuous 3 July visit to rally troops in Ladakh, and India's ban on fifty-nine PRC apps announced four days earlier, CCTV-4 devoted its *Today in Focus* 今日关注 program to the spiralling tensions. It did not take long for Indian public opinion to feature in the discussion. Ministry of Foreign Affairs–affiliated academic Ruan Zongze 阮宗泽 argued that Modi's military posturing was a response to sentiments whipped up by the Indian media and opposition. Ruan's colleague Su Xiaohui 苏晓晖 warned that banning Chinese apps would 'agitate' Indian nationalism, creating additional barriers to de-escalation.[19]

Other PRC observers recognised Modi as a nationalist leader under pressure to live up to his reputation. A 17 July article on *Guancha.cn*, an international affairs site popular with intellectuals co-founded by venture capitalist Eric X. Li 李世默, observed:

> Since the Sino-Indian confrontation, Indian domestic nationalist sentiments have risen rapidly. From some Indian people boycotting 'Made in China' to India's government ban on WeChat and other Chinese apps, the great nationalist flagbearer Modi is facing increasingly massive domestic pressures.[20]



Wang Yi, Xi Jinping, Sushama Swaraj, and Narendra Modi at an MoU signing in 2014
Source: Wikimedia

In one of the first scholarly analyses of the crisis, published on 19 August, one of China's leading India experts, Yang Siling 杨思灵 of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, argued that Indian popular nationalism had contributed to an 'increased risk of large-scale confrontation or even war'. Yang wrote:

> Indian officials, media, and scholars' discussion of China's 'invasion' and distorted reports and propaganda inevitably results in a surge of domestic anti-China sentiments, which in turn force the Indian government and military to maintain a hard-line stance and even take things to the brink … anti-Chinese sentiments provoked by these kinds of words could force the Indian Government into a dead end of military confrontation with China.[21]

Besides pinning the blame on India, such an assessment also carries an important, though unstated, policy implication for China: Beijing needs to act cautiously if it wishes to avoid an accidental war with India.

As the Indian economic sanctions piled up in late August, the *Global Times*'s editorials blamed them on a combination of domestic pressure and strategic avarice. 'Indian domestic anti-China public opinion has been clamorous', an editorial observed in late August, leading India to 'overestimate its strength, imposing economic sanctions on China and increasing its links with America in an attempt to pressure China into backing down'.[22]

The same editorial also characterised India's management of the crisis as a diversionary ploy:

> India is presently beset by domestic problems, especially the seriously out of control coronavirus pandemic … By provoking Sino-Indian border tensions New Delhi intends to divert domestic attention. It's international hooliganism, and a domestic political fraud.

Indian public opinion, in this view, was pressuring the country's leaders into hard-line anti-Chinese actions, while those same leaders were benefiting politically from driving attention towards the issue.

As the crisis escalated again in late August, the PRC's propaganda organs began to emphasise that nationalist sentiments were now growing among the Chinese public. On 31 August, the *Global Times* reported that a poll of just under 2,000 PRC citizens had found 89 percent support for China to make an 'armed self-defence counter-attack' 武力自卫反击 should further clashes occur on the Sino-Indian border. The report also said that nearly 70 percent of respondents had agreed that India's anti-China sentiments were 'excessive'.

With the news of warning shots fired on 7 September, the real-world dangers increased further. The *Global Times*'s editorial that day called for an end to this vicious cycle, but offered no suggestion as to how it might be done, besides exhorting India to take control of public opinion:

> Indian public opinion's participation in the border issues is too deep and too broad, the Indian Army is clearly captive to domestic nationalism, and their ostentatious displays in the border area, it must be said, are influenced by the intense interactions of the military and the media. Thus, besides China and India jointly controlling the border disputes, India domestically should control the above-mentioned interactions of public opinion and the military nationalism, the beneficial choice for itself and its people.[23]

Nowhere did the *Global Times* admit any possibility that Beijing's actions might have contributed to the situation.

For the time being, surging Indian nationalist sentiments and actions are making Beijing uncomfortable, but also cautious. As chair of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping is the PLA's commander-in-chief. If he were to conclude that Indian nationalist sentiments are so strong that sooner or later a clash on the border will escalate into a war, he might be inclined to strike first. If such a scenario should come to pass, Indian nationalism would have flipped overnight from a fragile deterrent to a driver of conflict.

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OF MAO AND MONEY

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CHINESE LOANS TO AFRICA: TRAP OR TREASURE?

Beyongo Mukete Dynamic

BETWEEN 2000 AND 2018, Chinese financial institutions provided more than US$152 billion in credit, loans, and grants to Africa, funding projects including railway lines, ports, stadiums, hospitals, presidential palaces, and digital migration programs.[1] In recent years, there has been growing concern about debt distress in nations across the continent, including Zambia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. Loan repayments are draining badly needed public revenue from African nations, which in 2020 also faced the need for increased investment in public health due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the devastating health and economic crises instigated by COVID-19, there were growing calls from the Bretton Woods institutions alongside African heads of state, such as Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to forgive the debt owed by some African countries.[2] In 2020, Beijing decided to walk a fine line between selectively cancelling some debts and postponing others, while resisting calls for blanket debt forgiveness.[3]

Chinese lending to Africa began in 1960, with a loan to Guinea to finance trade and economic projects, including a cigarette and match factory, followed

by one in 1963 to Algeria to buy arms and medical equipment and to train soldiers for its anti-imperial fight against France.[4] In 1969, Chinese leader Mao Zedong agreed to finance one of Africa's largest infrastructure projects, the Tanzam railway line, linking Zambia's Copperbelt and the Port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.[5] To Chinese officials, this aid and support had strong anti-colonial significance — in the case of the Tanzam railway, for example, breaking the stranglehold of Rhodesia and South Africa on landlocked Zambia's access to ports. These loans were also meant to shore up international support against threats from Taiwan, the Soviet Union, and the United States.[6]

Fast-forwarding to the 1990s, investment and aid from Western countries to Africa began to slow, precipitated by slowing domestic economies and the Asian Financial Crisis (which improved the competitiveness of Asian economies vis-à-vis their African counterparts),[7] and China emerged as a relatively friendly financier, offering flexible, rapid, and often large loans with promises of 'no strings attached' (in contrast with the stringent structural adjustment programs that often were imposed in tandem with Western investments).[8] To some African states with limited capital and high levels of unemployment, Beijing's finance was timely. As former Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi observed in 2002 during an official visit to China, Chinese finance provided firm economic support to African countries.[9]

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced in 2013, has further increased China's investments across the African continent, with a focus on infrastructure including roads, ports, bridges, and airports. At the Forum on China–Africa Co-operation in 2018, President Xi Jinping announced that, as part of the BRI, China would provide an additional US$60 billion over three years as concessional loans, grants, and trade and development finance to Africa.[10] By May 2020, researchers at the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) reported that China had disbursed about US$38.7 billion of this amount.[11]

By then, however, debt levels were already becoming unsustainable. In 2018, 19 percent of external debt repayment by African governments went to China.[12] Average debt repayment as a percentage of government revenue across the continent rose from 5 percent to 11 percent between 2015 and 2018.[13]

The Chinese-built Ethiopia–Djibouti standard gauge railway
Source: Skilla1st, Wikimedia

More specific to the debt distress problem relating to Chinese loans, researchers at CARI have shown that Chinese loans account for more than one-quarter of external loans for African countries facing high debt distress.[14] These countries include Kenya (27 percent), Zimbabwe (25 percent), Zambia (26 percent), Cameroon (32 percent), and Ethiopia (32 percent), with the worst performers being the Republic of Congo (45 percent) and Djibouti (57 percent).[15]

US government officials and some civil society organisations in Africa argue that African countries risk surrendering strategic assets and eventually their sovereignty to China in the event of debt default. Former US national security advisor John R. Bolton has accused the PRC of the 'strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands'.[16] Beijing, of course, denies this.[17] Indeed, Beijing acknowledged in 2020 that Africa needs 'the international community, especially developed countries and multilateral financial institutions, [to] act more forcefully on debt relief and suspension' to help the region combat COVID-19.[18]

The high levels of debt owed by African countries to China could not only undermine Africa's own development but also hurt Sino-African relations and co-operation in other spheres. According to Chris Alden, these high debt levels have 'the potential to produce the most profound change in relations since China became a major economic player on the continent' and

'African governments and society are increasingly asking China to come up with answers to this problem'.[19]

The Bretton Woods institutions have acknowledged the burden of debt repayment on developing countries, calling for debt forgiveness to help these nations respond to the financial distress caused by the economic fallout from COVID-19. In April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank proposed the Debt Suspension Initiative (DSI), which was endorsed by G20 finance ministers. The DSI suspends loans, but it does not forgive them. While officials from both the IMF and the World Bank asked China to forgive most of the debts owed by African states, Beijing has resisted the idea of any blanket or large-scale debt forgiveness, instead proposing to work within the DSI framework and look at each country's debt on a case-by-case basis.[20]

On 17 June, via video link to the Extraordinary China–Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19, President Xi Jinping 习近平 spoke of fighting 'shoulder to shoulder' with African nations against the virus, including offering medical teams and supplies from China.[21] He also stated that China would forgive all the interest-free government loans due to mature by the end of 2020 and affirmed that China would work through multilateral agencies to provide broader solutions to Africa's debt crisis, including by further extending the period of debt suspension.[22]

While China was once applauded for providing African countries with a firm basis for economic growth and development through funding infrastructure, trade and industry, a growing controversy has emerged over the implications of Chinese loans for African economies. The decision to work within the multilateral debt servicing initiative and look at African debts on a case-by-case basis leaves room for Beijing to protect is diplomatic and economic interests, but also provides critics with fodder to question China's 'true intentions in Africa'. For Africans, it is unlikely that COVID-19 will put a brake on the region's quest for Chinese finance. The pandemic, however, may create new opportunities for African leaders to adopt more sustainable debt agreements in the future.

OFF THE PRACHANDA PATH: NEPALI COMMUNISTS' CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

Matthew Galway

ON THE SOUTHERN SLOPES of the Himalayas, in the shadow of Mount Everest, lies Nepal, a country that is remarkable for its rugged terrain and turbulent politics. A Hindu kingdom until 2008, the landlocked country is officially the world's only secular federal parliamentary republic governed by a duly elected communist party, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP). In his second stint in office, which began in January 2018 (the first was in 2015–2016), Prime Minister Khadga Prasad 'K.P.' Sharma Oli forged an alliance with Nepali Maoists to guide the NCP to victory in the 23 January 2020 national assembly elections. Now he serves as co-chairman of the Party with Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, whose *nom de guerre* is Prachanda (meaning 'fierce'). They are presiding over the NCP at a time when it commands an absolute majority at federal, provincial, and local government levels.[1]

However, the NCP faced numerous crises in 2020 that could complicate its ability to govern effectively during this term and may compromise its comfortable majority in the 2022 elections. There is widespread popular criticism of the authoritarian, illiberal and hard-liner turn it took because of the alliance with the Maoists. It also

Nepal Communist Party Chairmen Pushpa Kamal Dahal (left) and K.P. Sharma Oli (right)
Source: Pradip Timsina-Think Tank, Wikimedia

faces accusations of discrimination against the Madheshi (lowland Terai peoples of Indian origin) and Dalit (so-called untouchable) people. Geopolitical tensions with India over contested territories and the need to balance relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (its principal source of foreign direct investment) and India (one of its major sources of remittances) have added to its woes, as have Oli's bungled handling of the COVID-19 virus in Nepal.[2] Opposition critics in the social-democratic Nepali Congress party and Hindu nationalist National Democratic Party have grabbed on to every failure.

Even within the NCP, there are grumblings. Prachanda has already warned that the Party has grown distanced from the people and its 'communist principles', becoming 'individualistic and power-centred'. In 2019 he argued that communism could fail in Nepal as it did in the former Soviet Union.[3] The NCP, in short, faces a crisis of legitimacy. Although many of its leaders identify as Maoists, they are almost exclusively upper-caste, ethnic-majority men, and they seem to have discarded the ideology that drove them during the 'people's war' of 1996–2006.[4]

Before the 2018 merger, the Maoist Centre, or CPN-M, was the more prominent of the two communist

parties. It subscribed to Mao Zedong Thought 毛泽东思想, with its focus on applying Marxist-Leninist theory to concrete realities, guerrilla warfare, agrarian revolution, and anti-imperialism. Its charismatic leader, Prachanda, had twice served as prime minister, from 2008 to 2009 and again in 2016–2017, before the merger led to him sharing NCP leadership with Oli.[5] The 'Prachanda Path' he developed during the war promoted 'continuous revolution' and opposed what he described as 'right capitulationism and sectarian dogmatism', which in the Nepali context indicated coexistence between capitalism and socialism, and the pervasiveness of conservative Hindu traditions — a compromise with which the NCP under Oli is more comfortable.[6]

The CPN-M is not the only Maoist group outside China to have gained state power: the Communist Party of Kampuchea, or Khmer Rouge, which ruled Cambodia under Pol Pot from 1975 to 1979, also seized power using Maoist methods. In Nepal, as in Cambodia, Maoism took hold during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders encouraged anti-imperial revolutions globally through the mass translation and dissemination of Mao's works.[7] The CCP tasked its Foreign Languages Press with translating Mao's works for a global readership, which were distributed to more than 100 countries by Chinese embassy personnel and 'progressive bookstores' at virtually no cost.[8]

In Nepal, such books as the *Quotations of Mao Zedong*, *Song of Youth*, and *Bright Red Star* were soon, as Nepali translator Khagendra Sangroula (b. 1946) said in an interview, 'everywhere in Kathmandu: wide and loud' — and outside the capital, too. As a child, one Nepali Maoist recalled visiting a library in his hometown of Bhaktapur:

> [I] told the librarian that I was interested in tales of bravery. They gave me a small book entitled *The Life of Mao*, through which I learned about Mao's love of serving the people, his patriotism, the way he brought China forward.[9]

A curious readership soon developed into radical critics of, then active agents fighting against, the kingdom's status quo. The 1951 Nepalese revolution, initiated by anti-monarchist political organisations in exile, had felled the

autocratic, iron-fisted Rana dynasty (1846–1951 CE) and installed a brief constitutional democracy. But in 1960, the Royal House of Gorkha launched a coup that suspended parliament and banned all political parties. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN, 1949–1962) fractured into factions, including one that was pro-China and another that was pro-Soviet.

The Nepali Maoists posited themselves as the 'voice of Nepal's poor and marginalised, the indigenous ethnic peoples, the lower castes, peasants, workers, students, and women'.[10] In 1994, they formed the underground CPN-M, which aimed to topple the monarchy through 'people's war' and to establish a 'people's republic'. They sent 'political-cultural teams' into the villages to mobilise the poor against oppressors such as landlords and police, and carried out land reform based on the violent Maoist model.[11] The 'people's war' began in earnest on 13 February 1996 after Nepali Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (b. 1946) dismissed the Maoists' list of forty demands, which included improving workers' wages, narrowing the gap between rich and poor and eliminating the exploitation of and discrimination against women and ethnic minorities.[12] The people's war itself began in the mid-western districts of Rolpa, Rukum, and Jajarkot, where the Maoists had already established strongholds.[13] It targeted, in the words of Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati, 'the most obvious signs of inequality in the form of local politicians, police posts, the judiciary, rural banks, and land revenue offices'.[14] The CPN-M went from controlling three of the country's seventy-five districts in 1996 to controlling forty-five in 2003, establishing 'people's governments' in twenty-one of them.[15]

Although many villagers regarded the Maoists' tactics as 'positive' forces for change,[16] their experience of Maoism was mixed. The Maoists coerced villagers into joining their movement through conscription and threats of or actual violence, and even abducted children to serve as guerrilla fighters,[17] reportedly luring impoverished Dalit children into their People's Liberation Army with offers of food.[18]

More than 17,000 deaths later (nearly half of them Maoist), the conflict overthrew the royal autocracy and the CPN-M emerged as a major national political party of considerable influence.[19] After party leaders signed

Arming our minds with Mao Zedong Thought to become heroic warriors of the working class
Source: Zhou Guangjie, chineseposters, Flickr

the Comprehensive Peace Accord with the Government of Nepal in November 2006, Nepal became a federal republic.[20] After leading three governments, the party merged with the NCP, which won government in 2018.

Before the merger, in September 2015, the CPN-M had drafted Nepal's seventh constitution. Critics claimed that by failing, among other things, to outlaw gender discrimination and other forms of prejudice, the constitution failed to deliver on the Maoists' promises of equality and higher standards of living.[21] Women and ethnic minorities had been among the Maoists' most fervent supporters. Some estimates suggest as many as four out of every ten of its fighters and civilian supporters were women. Yet the Party's rise to power did not result in women receiving promotions to leadership positions in the Party or in government; following the 2020 elections, only one of the twenty-two NCP ministers was a woman.[22] As long ago as 2003, Maoist activist Aruna Uprety accused the CPN-M of 'behaving no differently than our "men-stream" political parties'.[23] Women made up one-third of the Constituent Assembly in 2008, but in 2020, Uprety's criticism remains a valid one — despite the significant achievement of the country electing its first female president, Bidya Devi Bhandari.

Similarly, the new constitution failed to codify protections for ethnic minorities and oppressed castes, including the sixty non-Hindu Tibeto-Burman–speaking peoples and lowland Madheshis the Maoists had once courted.[24] An ethnic Magar interviewee told a researcher in 2004 that he had joined the Nepali People's Liberation Army partly because of 'economic repression' but also because, as an indigenous person,

Maoist supporters at a rally in Kathmandu
Source: Wikimedia

he had not been allowed to speak his language and suffered under other repressive policies of the Hindu government.[25] In 2020, anti-Madheshi discrimination persisted and caste-based discrimination remained a major problem.[26]

Although Nepali politics were more stable than they had been for decades, these problems, and serious socio-economic inequality in general, remained unaddressed. As part of the ruling coalition, Maoists have abandoned more radical visions in favour of moderate approaches. This might help them stay in power, but in 2020, it seems increasingly unlikely that they will maintain legitimacy as the defenders of the poor and downtrodden.

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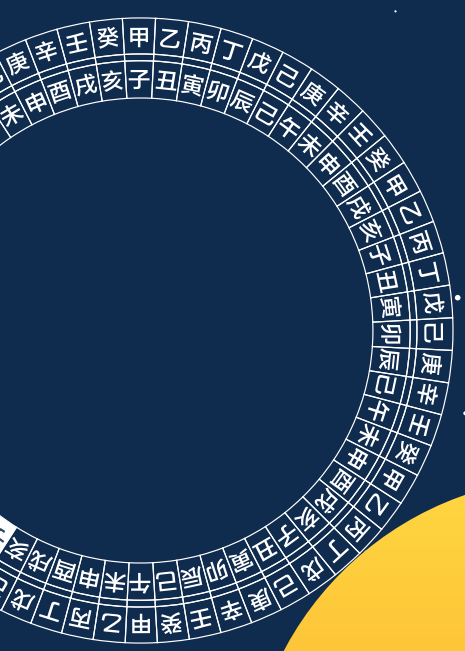

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ECONOMIC POWER AND VULNERABILITY IN SINO-AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS

Victor Ferguson and Darren J. Lim

Source: Jamie C2009, Flickr

FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, Australia's leaders have expressed the expectation, or perhaps the hope, that the country's mutually beneficial trading relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) would flourish regardless of occasional political disagreements between Canberra and Beijing. Despite different political systems, divergent values, and Australia's steadfast commitment to the US alliance, many inside the Australian government insisted that 'cold politics' would not extinguish 'hot economics'.

Such public optimism was maintained by Canberra over the past decade, despite growing evidence of China's willingness to use its geoeconomic power by leveraging trade relationships to resolve political disputes. In 2010, Norwegian salmon exports were suspended following the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident. In 2012, bananas from the Philippines rotted in Chinese ports following a maritime confrontation in the South China Sea. And in 2017, Chinese group tours to South Korea were banned during a dispute over a missile defence system. Other alleged cases of Chinese economic coercion have featured targets as diverse as Mongolia, Japan, and Canada.

Cheng Jingye, China's Ambassador to Australia, described Australia's push as 'dangerous' and 'irresponsible'
Source: Sophie Paris, CTBTO Photo

Until 2020, however, Australia had mostly managed to avoid such an experience.[1] Despite a recent downward spiral in political relations — strained by, among other things, Australia's 2017 foreign interference legislation, the 2018 exclusion of Huawei from the 5G network and criticism of Chinese actions in the South China Sea — bilateral trade had not experienced much, if any, obviously politically motivated disruption.[2] Then, on 19 April, the Morrison government called for an independent inquiry into the origins and spread of COVID-19.

The Chinese government swiftly denounced Canberra's proposal as a political attack. In a now infamous interview with the *Australian Financial Review*, Cheng Jingye 成竞业, China's Ambassador to Australia, described Australia's push as 'dangerous' and 'irresponsible', before speculating on how China might respond:

> The tourists may have second thoughts. Maybe the parents of the students would also think whether this place, which they find is not so friendly, even hostile, is the best place to send their kids to … And also, maybe the ordinary people will think why they should drink Australian wine or eat Australian beef?[3]

The comments stirred controversy and prompted Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne to publicly denounce attempts at 'economic coercion'.[4] They also proved to be prescient: over the coming months, each of the industries the ambassador identified experienced some form of disruption in their trade with China.

Power and Sino-Australian Economic Interdependence

Successful economic coercion relies on an asymmetry in the costs of forgoing a trade relationship: the lost trade must be relatively less costly for the party doing the coercing. For most of the past twenty years, Australia's resource-heavy export mix underpinned a belief that, should China have any reason to coerce Australia, it would be constrained in so doing. Australian commodities such as iron ore and coal have been vital inputs into China's manufacturing and construction industries and are not easy to replace with alternatives. Australia's supposed invulnerability derived from the assumption that any benefits for China from disrupting this trade for coercive purposes would be outweighed by political problems arising from the damage to the Chinese economy.

By 2020, there were three significant challenges to the status quo. First, the rise of trade in services — particularly education and tourism — meant resources were no longer the only story in Australia's exports to China. In the 2018–2019 financial year, education ranked as Australia's fourth-largest export, while tourism ranked sixth.[5] China remained the

most important market for both sectors and major disruption to them could cause significant damage to the Australian economy, as the COVID-19 border closures illustrated.

Meanwhile, a maturing Chinese economy was changing the Chinese government's economic calculus. With export-led growth slowing, concerns about other interests, such as pollution, resource security, and the self-sufficiency of Chinese producers, served to lower the demand for various categories of foreign imports. The less essential an import category was to the domestic Chinese economy, the easier it was to justify disrupting it for coercive purposes.

The third and perhaps most important factor was the shift in Beijing's global political interests. The PRC is now a confident and assertive major power with an expanded set of interests that are increasingly coming into conflict with those of other countries, including Australia. Meanwhile, the authoritarian Chinese Community Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping 习近平 has faced growing criticism both at home and abroad. As a result, it has become increasingly focused on defending against threats to its political legitimacy.[6] Such threats can be perceived in international reproach of events and policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, or suggestions that Beijing is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. The stronger the CCP's political interests in an issue, the greater economic costs it will endure to protect them.

In the 2018–2019 financial year, tourism ranked as Australia's sixth-largest export
Source: Rambo2100, Flickr

These three gradual changes cumulatively created the conditions in which Australian vulnerability to economic coercion was greater than it had been in the past.

Barley

The first apparent instance of retaliation was China's imposition of anti-dumping and anti-subsidy tariffs on Australian barley. On 10 May, China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) announced a determination that Australian barley growers had received illegal subsidies and 'dumped' their produce in China at predatory prices, undermining local competitors. Tariffs of 80.5 percent were imposed on 18 May, to remain in place until 2025.

Some Australian commentators argued the tariffs were coercive sanctions.[7] MOFCOM denied this, calling them 'a normal trade remedy'. The Australian government distanced itself from arguments that the tariffs were political, though Trade Minister Simon Birmingham said he could 'understand why people draw those links'.

There is reason not to jump to conclusions. The Chinese investigation that led to the tariffs was launched in 2018, long before COVID-19. At that time, it appeared to be retaliation for Australia's own anti-dumping measures on Chinese products — an issue of trade, not politics.[8]

It just so happened that the eighteen-month investigation time limit coincided with the bilateral political row, and in the middle of the season for planting winter crops. Perhaps the tariffs would have been imposed regardless. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Beijing failed to understand that they would be perceived as coercive, especially after the ambassador's comments and the expression of similar hypotheticals in Chinese state media editorials.[9]

The tariffs effectively cut off the barley industry's most important market. Since 2014–2015, China had purchased approximately 50 percent of Australia's barley exports for an average of AU$1.2 billion annually.

China's tariff on Australian barley sent shockwaves through grain industry
Source: Mark Seton, Flickr

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics estimates that losing the China market will cost barley growers about AU$330 million a year, although some farmers claim that losses could amount to up to AU$1 billion a year.[10] Growers can offset some costs by shifting to alternative crops and diverting exports (albeit for lower prices). However, the tariffs are still a significant blow to the Australian agricultural sector. Subsequent reports of an 'informal ban' on Australian barley and the suspension of imports from two of Australia's largest grain exporters, CBH and Emerald Grain, suggest the market may remain inaccessible for some time regardless of the tariffs.[11]

Why was barley vulnerable? First, Australian barley is relatively substitutable, partly because barley can be sourced elsewhere (although not necessarily at the same price or volumes), and also because, as a livestock feed, it can be replaced with other grains. While there are some costs for Chinese importers, they are not so great as to disrupt the wider economy.[12] By contrast, it is harder for Australian growers to find alternative export markets. Second, by framing the tariffs as a remedy for Australian violations of international trade rules, China has 'plausible deniability': it can plausibly claim that they are not coercive sanctions.[13] Although China's legal arguments may not stand

up, the process of challenging them may take years and a finding in Australia's favour will not undo the interim economic damage. Finally, as University of Queensland agricultural economist Scott Waldron persuasively argues, ending imports of Australian barley may suit China's domestic agricultural policy objectives relating to food security and import diversification.[14]

Beef

On 12 May, between announcing and imposing the barley tariffs, China suspended imports from four Australian abattoirs, citing 'serious' and 'repeated' violations of Chinese customs and quarantine requirements. Once again, China denied the suspensions were coercive and the Australian Government downplayed the political angle, describing the measures as related to 'highly technical', isolated issues concerning labelling and health certificates.[15]

Nevertheless, the suspensions raised eyebrows. This was partly due to the timing and partly because of China's track record of using similar regulatory quibbles to disrupt trade during disputes with other countries. The suspensions, Perth USAsia Centre research director Jeffrey Wilson concluded, were 'unquestionably political retribution'.[16]

A fifth abattoir was delisted in August after Chinese customs allegedly detected residues of a banned antibiotic in a consignment of beef. That announcement came one day after Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced new legislation enabling the federal government to terminate agreements made between Australian states and foreign governments that are deemed by the Foreign Minister to be inconsistent with national foreign policy; Victoria's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) deal with Beijing could be subject to such a review. While Australian Agriculture Minister

David Littleproud stated that China's concerns about the beef were 'quite legitimate', industry insiders noted that the antibiotic in question had not been detected in Australian beef for a decade.[17]

The affected abattoirs together supply approximately one-third of Australia's AU$1 billion annual beef exports to China. Exports for the first three quarters of 2020 were down 22 percent compared with the same period in 2019, and China slipped from Australia's first to fourth-largest export market for beef in July.[18] Yet other contributing factors to the fall included decreasing demand in China, Chinese regulations requiring COVID-19 testing of imported meat products, and the application of safeguard tariffs to Australian beef in early July.[19] By expanding the list of approved suppliers from other countries, Beijing has also encouraged importers to shift to alternative markets. This may create future issues for Australian exporters. As one Chinese market analyst noted: 'It will be hard for Australian beef suppliers to regain the market share once Chinese consumers get used to the beef from other countries.'[20]

If the motivations were political, the logic of targeting beef is that it is relatively easy for China to substitute Australian imports and — like other agricultural goods — trade can be easily disrupted by opaque applications of technical regulatory rules. However, it is impossible to be certain. That some of the abattoirs had previously been suspended for label violations and that one of the implicated factories is wholly Chinese-owned support the case that there was a genuine issue. Alternatively, these same facts offer the cover of plausible deniability for a coercive measure undertaken at a time of high tension.

Tourism and Education

In June, citing media reports about increased attacks and discrimination targeted towards 'Chinese and Asian people' in Australia, the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism alerted citizens against travel to

Australia. The following week, China's Ministry of Education cited the same 'discriminatory events', warning Chinese students to be 'cautious' about choosing Australia as a study destination. In July, in what appeared to be direct retaliation for Australian government warnings about the risk of 'arbitrary detention' in mainland China, the Chinese government upgraded its travel advice to warn that 'Australian law-enforcement institutions arbitrarily search Chinese citizens and seize their assets'.[21]

Were these warnings given out of genuine care about the welfare of Chinese travellers or were they a message to Canberra? The case for the latter turns on the timing, the fact that ambassador Cheng had publicly singled out the sectors and China's history of using travel warnings and other policy instruments to deter Chinese citizens from travelling to specific countries during political disputes.[22]

In 2019, China was Australia's top source of short-term visitors — about 15 percent of the total. Chinese travellers were also the highest spenders, contributing about 27 percent of the AU$45 billion spent by foreign tourists.[23] This is partly due to the large number of Chinese nationals studying in Australia, who continue to make up the largest cohort of international students at Australian universities (approximately 38 percent),[24] and were responsible for AU$12.1 billion of the total AU$37.6 billion international education exports in 2018–2019.

It is difficult to measure the impact of the warnings given that Chinese citizens were unable to travel to Australia due to the pandemic. Study visa lodgements by prospective Chinese students decreased by 20 percent in the 2019–2020 financial year. Due to the general uncertainty stemming from COVID-19 and border closures, however, visa applications from other countries were also down — some by greater percentages, including India at 47 percent and Nepal at 61 percent.[25] While there is some evidence that Chinese students and tourists take travel warnings seriously, with borders still closed, it is too early to identify the impact on travel or enrolment numbers.[26]

What is the logic of disrupting travel to a country that had already closed its borders? Reports of increased racist behaviour in Australia gave Beijing scope to plausibly deny that the warnings were sanctions in disguise.[27] They caused Beijing no pain to issue, either. While their practical impact may have been limited, the warnings signalled Chinese displeasure, put pressure on the Australian government and stirred debate about the vulnerability of the tourism and education sectors to coercion.

Wine

In August, MOFCOM announced new investigations into allegations that Australian wine exporters had been receiving illegal subsidies and 'dumping' their wares in the Chinese market at predatory prices. A spokesperson from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the investigations as 'normal' and advised Australians not to draw 'unnecessary associations'. Within twenty-four hours of the first investigation being launched, however, the Australian government declared the allegations 'baseless', while winemakers and analysts derided the probe as a politically motivated sanction.

Again, there are reasons to believe China has plausible legal complaints.[28] However, the timing of the probes — coming amid unprecedented tensions in the bilateral relationship — suggests they are political. Chinese state media had been hinting for months that wine could be targeted, especially after Australia joined the US in denouncing China's legal claim to most of the South China Sea in July.[29] Wine also featured in ambassador Cheng's April comments.

Investigations do not directly disrupt trade, but they flag the possibility of future restrictions. Such signalling can impose costs on a target country's markets. The share price of Australia's largest winemaker, Treasury Wine Estates, collapsed more than 28 percent over the week following Ministry of Commerce's announcement. Concerns were also raised that Chinese

Chinese students decreased by 20 percent in the 2019–2020 financial year
Source: ANU Image Library, Flickr

importers might pre-emptively shift to alternative suppliers to hedge against the risk of a proposed 202 percent tariff should investigations conclude there had been trade violations. Australian winemakers could see their largest export market, worth AU$1.2 billion in 2019, shrink regardless of whether tariffs are ultimately imposed. Meanwhile, there is little the Australian government can do beyond consult with the industry, file formal responses, and prepare for a possible World Trade Organization (WTO) challenge.

The impacts on Australian wine suppliers illustrate how investigations can be used as coercive sanctions while guaranteeing China plausible deniability.[30] They are a relatively low-cost tool for China to ratchet pressure on Australia up or down: if political relations improve, they might opt to withdraw the investigations; if relations continue to deteriorate, they can escalate by imposing tariffs.

Wine is highly substitutable, with ready alternatives to Australian wines, including from France, Chile, and South Africa. The possibility of tariffs might upset enthusiasts of Penfolds Grange and adversely affect

those Chinese citizens who have invested millions in Australian wine businesses,[31] but it will hardly disrupt the Chinese economy or lead to civil unrest.

Lessons on Economic Power and Vulnerability

In the final months of 2020, after this chapter had been written, Australia's export industries experienced a new series of disruptions. In mid-October reports emerged that Beijing had issued verbal instructions for traders to cease importing Australian cotton and coal.[32] Two weeks later, as exporters of those products began to see orders cancelled, the disruption spread. Chinese customs officers seized tonnes of Australian lobster for testing, citing concerns about metal content levels, and halted imports of Australian timber after allegedly discovering pests.[33] At the same time, the *South China Morning Post* reported that traders had received new informal instructions about a forthcoming import ban on seven Australian products: timber, lobster, copper ore and concentrate, sugar, wheat, barley, and red wine.[34] The full consequences of these new measures remain

Australian wine sold in a liquor store
Source: Maxim75, Wikimedia

unclear, however, they and the cases described above lend themselves to several conclusions about the nature of power and vulnerability in the Sino-Australian economic relationship.

The first regards the changing composition of Sino-Australian trade. As Australian exports continue to diversify away from natural resources into services and consumer products, they will inevitably become more substitutable and thus more vulnerable to coercion. This will not render Australia helpless — among other things, less dispensable resource commodities will continue to make up a large share of exports to China — but it does underscore the need for broader recognition that we no longer live in an era when the inherent qualities of Australian exports insulate them from any disruption.

Second, while the range of vulnerable industries may be broadening, those that are actually targeted are not random. One signpost is Chinese domestic policy goals, which often guide the selection of targets. Barley is a good example of this. Chinese agricultural policy promotes food security through import diversification and increased domestic production — a goal at odds with high levels of Australian barley imports.[35] A similar logic also appeared to underpin the disruption experienced by South Korean electric vehicle battery makers in 2017–2018, whose competitiveness in the Chinese market was at odds with Beijing's efforts to support domestic firms like Contemporary Amperex Technology (CATL).[36] It might also be relevant to the two 'unofficial' bans on Australian coal and cotton exports that were reported in October. Beijing's apparent instructions to steel mills and energy providers to cease importing Australian thermal and coking coal are consistent with new Chinese plans to significantly slash coal consumption and carbon emissions. Likewise, China may be concerned about protecting domestic cotton producers confronted with low demand for textiles and a glut of foreign supply in 2020.[37]

Third, even where Beijing does wish to disrupt trade, it is constrained by its unwillingness to acknowledge formally that disruption is related to politics. This helps avoid legal liability and provides flexibility to wind

down the disruption without admitting 'defeat' once the other issues are resolved or tensions decrease. To maintain plausible deniability, Beijing requires both an alternative explanation — such as alleged breaches of customs requirements (as for beef) or international trade rules (as for barley and wine) — and regulatory tools such as the anti-dumping framework or discreet mechanisms such as travel warnings. Yet the plausible deniability constraint may be fading; the breadth of the bans apparently instituted towards the end of 2020, combined with the 'fourteen points' document released to the Australian media in late November apparently listing Beijing's political demands, make continued denial of economic retaliation extraordinarily difficult to sustain.[38] This might suggest Beijing's approach to the dispute has moved into a new phase, where it values the benefits of plausible deniability less than the scope to disrupt a broader range of Australian trade. Time will tell.

Finally, economic coercion is unlikely to involve China fundamentally upending the bilateral trading relationship in the short to medium term. Beijing's approach to geoeconomics has not involved applying 'maximum pressure' on a target economy in the style of the United States' comprehensive sanctions on Iran or North Korea. Instead, Chinese sanctions are more selective, designed to strike a careful balance between signalling displeasure and creating meaningful political pressure on their target while being (mostly) deniable, minimising the cost to China and facilitating domestic policy objectives. Nevertheless, the fog created by Chinese denials and the fact that booming iron ore exports saw overall trade actually increase in 2020 should not cloud the ongoing risk faced by Australian exporters. Moreover, longer-term Chinese planning, such as the "dual circulation" concept sitting at the heart of Beijing's latest five-year plan, suggest that Beijing's own efforts to diversify its import sources and achieve greater self-sufficiency may affect its trading relationships regardless of bilateral tensions.[39] (See Chapter 4, 'The Chinese Economy: Crisis, Control, Recovery, Refocus', pp.103–116.)

Head office of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, Australia
Photo: Adam Carr, Wikimedia

There is a clear need to deepen understanding of the nature of political risk in the economic relationship with China. Consideration of the kinds of factors discussed here, including relative substitutability and the relationship between disruption and domestic policy goals, could assist the government in identifying vulnerable industries and even individual companies in advance. Advance consultation with exporters could allow them to anticipate potential forms of disruption and take steps to minimise their exposure to political risk in the Chinese market.

The reality is that some industries will remain vulnerable even with flawless customs paperwork or impeccable sanitation standards. Reports that both Australia's domestic intelligence agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are actively engaging with the private sector to ensure they are mindful of these risks are reassuring.[40] Some industry actors also appear to have a growing understanding of how economic coercion works — in

'Squeeze a piglet, make it squeal and the big sow will come running … [T]he industry is getting better at not responding because that's what China wants'
Source: laughingmonk, Flickr

particular, that it often relies on economic disruption prompting firms to lobby their governments to change policies to accommodate the concerns of the coercing state. In the words of the chief executive of the Western Australian Farmers Federation: 'Squeeze a piglet, make it squeal and the big sow will come running … [T]he industry is getting better at not responding because that's what China wants.'[41]

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PLAYING THE GAME?

China and the Multilateral Trading System: Misunderstandings, Criticisms, and Options

· WEIHUAN ZHOU

CHINA AND THE MULTILATERAL TRADING SYSTEM: MISUNDERSTANDINGS, CRITICISMS, AND OPTIONS

Weihuan Zhou

CHINA'S ROLE in the multilateral trading system established under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been much debated and remains highly controversial. More often than not, however, the labelling of China as a 'bad player' in the system results from significant misunderstandings of both the WTO's functions and China's behaviour.

Amid the rising tensions between the United States and China since 2017, the Trump Administration frequently and aggressively repeated the claim that the US, under the Clinton/Bush Administration in 2001, mistakenly supported China's accession to the WTO.[1] It accused China of failing to adhere to WTO rules and failing to transform into a fully fledged market economy. It also accused China of refusing to implement the rulings of the WTO's dispute-settlement system when it lost a case. The Trump Administration's argument also blamed the WTO for failing to come up with ways to tackle China-specific problems such as these.[2] The European Union (EU) and Japan have shared some of these concerns.[3] However, these claims are untenable and misleading.

As a global institution, the WTO does not mandate any particular type of economic and political structure or model of development. Its members are at various stages of economic

development, with different economic structures, policy priorities and regulatory regimes. Nor does the WTO require members to change the structure of their markets or patterns of ownership. While China may not have a free market economy,[4] it is not unique: state-owned enterprises (SOEs) play a significant role in many economies and regulatory intervention in markets is widespread.[5] The WTO and its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947–1994), have admitted many other transitional economies, including Poland, Romania, and Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s, and Russia and Vietnam more recently. When negotiating to join, China insisted on its own development model of a 'socialist market economy system'.[6] It is both unreasonable and unrealistic to expect or demand that China adopt a Western model of market capitalism. While its accession commitments involved massive market-oriented reforms, nothing in those commitments required China to change its economic model.

To join the WTO, China made unparalleled commitments. Then US Trade Representative (USTR) Charlene Barshefsky observed that the concessions it made 'far exceeded what anyone would have expected'.[7] To date, China's obligations remain the most extensive and onerous among all WTO members, and many go far beyond those demanded of the most developed nations.[8] To implement these obligations, China made tremendous efforts, including amending numerous laws and regulations, significantly reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, opening up a range of service sectors

Signing ceremony for China's Accession to the WTO
Source: World Trade Organization

and achieving outstanding and well-documented successes along the way.[9] The USTR report on China's WTO compliance in 2007, the year immediately after China was required to complete implementation of most of its WTO concessions, acknowledged that 'China has taken many impressive steps to reform its economy, making progress in implementing a set of sweeping commitments'. It also noted that China's WTO membership had delivered 'substantial ongoing benefits to the United States'.[10] Thus the claim that China failed to observe its WTO commitments is misleading.

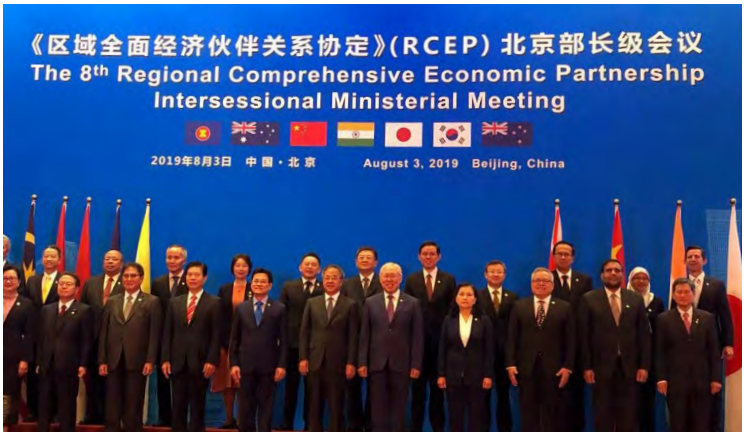
This is not to say that China has never breached WTO rules. However, whether a member has breached a rule must be assessed through the WTO's dispute-settlement mechanism (DSM), based on evidence and detailed legal examination rather than through unsubstantiated allegations.

Having been involved in many WTO disputes both as a complainant and as a respondent, China has become an experienced and sophisticated player in the DSM.[11] When it was less experienced in the early years of its membership, China settled most of the disputes in which it was a respondent by amending or removing the challenged policies, laws and practices without going through the adjudication process. In the past decade, China has changed its approach to vigorously pursuing or defending selected cases.[12] In almost all of the cases it has lost, China has implemented the findings and recommendations of WTO tribunals. It has done so in a way that delivers the minimum level of compliance required while maintaining its own interests, showing full comprehension of the limits of the rulings. Overall, China's record of compliance compares favourably with those of the other key players in the system, and particularly the US. China has never been subject to any demand for retaliation (the final and most serious consequence that a member can face in the DSM). Yet the US has been a major target of retaliation, the most recent being a WTO-authorised retaliation worth US$4 billion by the EU due to its failure to remove subsidies to Boeing that are illegal under WTO rules — a dispute that has lasted for sixteen years.[13]

This is not to suggest that China poses no challenges to the multilateral trading system. Industrial policies and subsidies, the role of SOEs in the economy, the growing influence of the

government on private enterprises and insufficient protections for intellectual property rights are prominent and long-standing issues. Although similar situations persist in other member states, China has been at the centre of academic and policy debate given the scale and impact of its policies and practices. In this regard, the global community has been overwhelmed by allegations that WTO rules are inadequate to cope with China. However, to determine whether the rules are in fact insufficient, one would have to undertake a meticulous study of the Chinese laws and practices in dispute and all the applicable rules including those specifically tailored to China. Contrary to the allegations of the Trump Administration, one such study has found that 'the WTO's existing rules on subsidies, coupled with the China-specific obligations, provide sufficient defence against the encroachment of Chinese SOEs beyond their own shores'.[14] Therefore, the issue is perhaps not the *lack* of rules but the lack of *utilisation* of the rules.

WTO rules rely, of course, on enforcement. The DSM has managed nearly 600 trade disputes since commencing operations in 1995.[15] It has been largely effective in enforcing compliance and influencing domestic policy-making,[16] including in China, where its decisions have prompted gradual and systematic adjustments to the country's complex regulatory regime. However, the ongoing crisis in the DSM — the result of the US under President Trump blocking the appointment of judges to the WTO's Appellate Body (its appellate court) — has weakened the effectiveness of the system as a whole. In the absence of a functional Appellate Body, a losing party may abuse the right of appeal to avoid adverse decisions of WTO panels (the WTO's lower court) and implementing their decisions,[17] as several members have done in recent cases. As the most frequent abuser to date, the US, in two recent cases, 'appealed into the void' a panel ruling against the trade war tariffs it imposed on China,[18] and another panel ruling against its anti-subsidy tariffs on softwood lumber originated in Canada — both in breach of WTO rules.[19] Such abuse of the right of appeal will only further damage the DSM and encourage similar actions, furthering the crisis and generating more tensions and uncertainties in international trade.



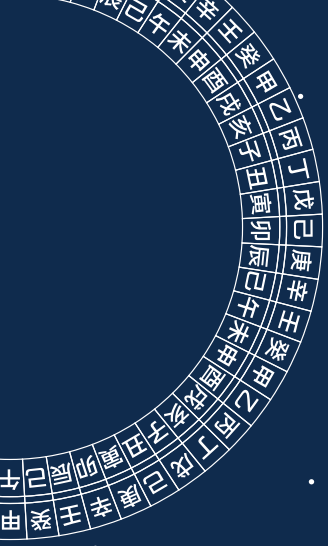
The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)
Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Flickr

The unilateral and confrontational approach of the US has in any case proven to be counterproductive in dealing with China. As China's economic power and influence grow, its foreign policy is becoming more assertive, as is evident in its (relatively moderate) response to the US's trade war tariffs and its ongoing trade sanctions against Australia.[20] With China asserting that it is a staunch defender of the multilateral trading system,[21] a co-operative approach would be more effective. But this would need to entail adopting an objective and country-neutral stance on China.

As flagged above, the so-called China problems of industrial policies, subsidies and SOEs are also issues in many other member nations of the WTO. The COVID-19 outbreak has led many governments to resort to such policies as export restrictions, stimulus packages and subsidies to maintain domestic economic resilience and stimulate recovery.[22] Global problems require global solutions based on collective efforts and actions that target the problems themselves. The WTO provides a unique forum for multilateral solutions: when a government suspects that China has not played by the rules, it should resort to the DSM to push China to change its

behaviour. This approach has worked very well in the past, though it may not be as effective today given the impasse over the Appellate Body caused by Washington. If the WTO is to function properly, with regard to China or any other member state, it needs a functioning Appellate Body and rules that are based on multilateral negotiations and that reflect the shared interests of all nations involved.

The recent completion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free-trade agreement to date, embracing 30 percent of global output,[23] has shown the strong political will for international co-operation of the fifteen member countries, including China, even in times of crisis, populism, and anti-globalism. While the US's trade policy agenda remains to be uncovered, there are some positive signs of moves towards a more co-operative approach to China and the WTO under the incoming Biden Administration.[24] This approach will offer greater hope for working with China on the challenges faced by all nations and the multilateral trading system.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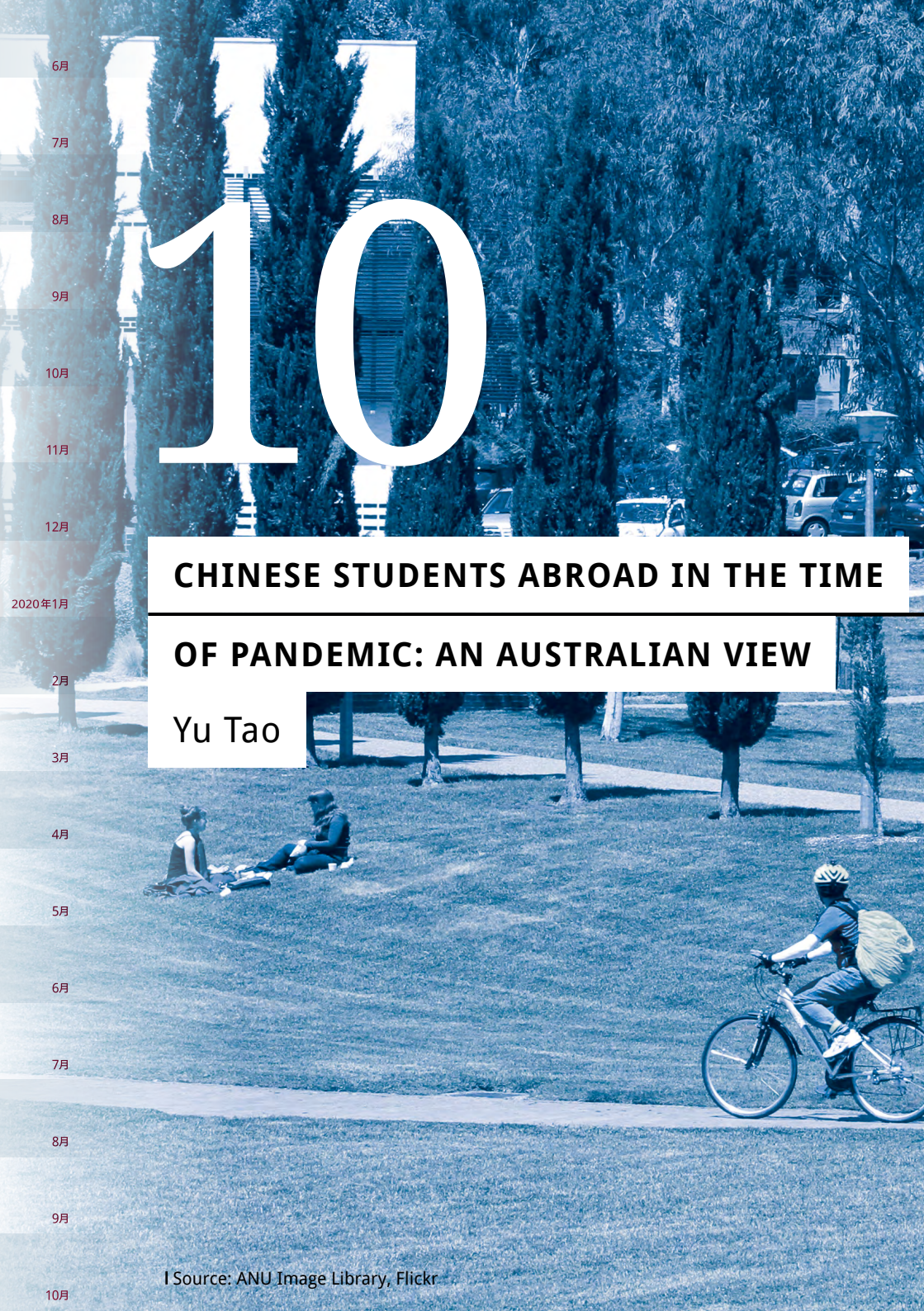
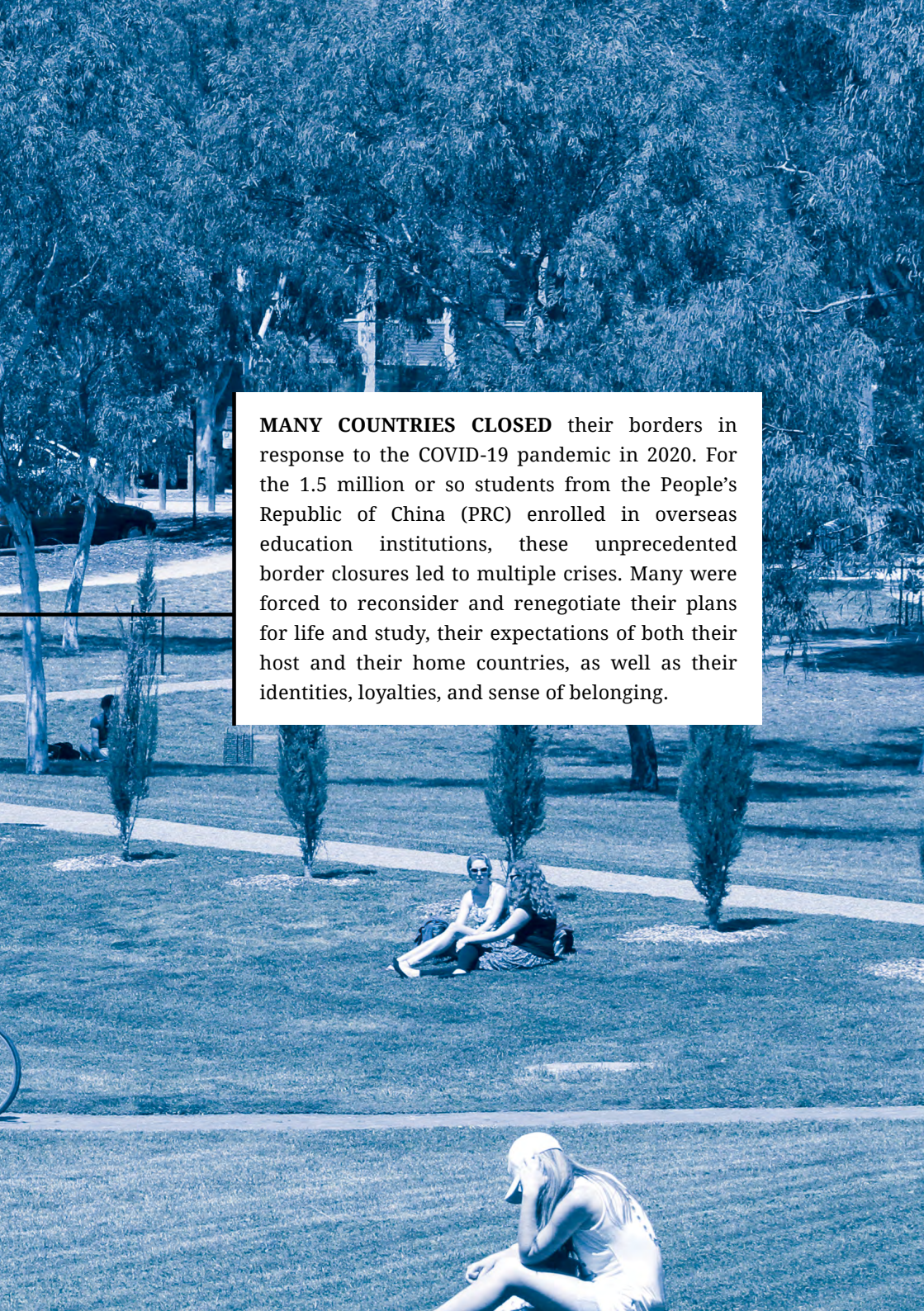
CHINESE STUDENTS ABROAD IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: AN AUSTRALIAN VIEW

Yu Tao



I Source: ANU Image Library, Flickr



MANY COUNTRIES CLOSED their borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For the 1.5 million or so students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) enrolled in overseas education institutions, these unprecedented border closures led to multiple crises. Many were forced to reconsider and renegotiate their plans for life and study, their expectations of both their host and their home countries, as well as their identities, loyalties, and sense of belonging.

Australia provides an ideal case study for an examination of the behaviour and decision-making of Chinese students overseas during a period of global crisis. International education was Australia's fourth-largest export in the 2019–2020 financial year. According to data from the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, the number of international students in Australia increased from 153,372 in 2000 to 876,399 in 2019.[1] That year, Australian universities earned more than AU$10 billion in international student tuition fees — a record 27 percent of their revenue.[2] As Professor Andrew Norton from The Australian National University summarised, international students 'filled the gap' during the previous two decades, as Commonwealth funding for higher education continuously dropped.[3] In the 2019 calendar year alone, international education contributed over $40 billion to the Australian economy.[4] During their study in Australia, many international students are also consumers and tourists.[5] They also make valuable intangible contributions, by increasing ethnic, social, and cultural diversity within and beyond Australian university campuses.

Chinese students make up more than one-quarter of the country's international student population. According to Department of Education, Skills and Employment data, there were 653,539 international students

Students on the ANU campus
Source: ANU Photos, PhotoShelter

enrolled in Australian education institutions between January and July 2020. Among these, 176,397 students, or approximately 27 percent, came from mainland China.[6] Before the pandemic, Chinese international students contributed about $10 billion to Australia's economy annually through tuition fees and spending. These vast numbers have shaped Australian campuses in ways that have become controversial in recent years (see *China Story Yearbook: China Dreams*, Chapter 9, 'Campus Conundrums: Clashes and Collaborations', pp.255–267). However, they have also brought benefits, including strengthening people-to-people links between the two countries, which are maintained by various means including through China-based alumni associations.[7]

Prior to the pandemic, Australia was closely linked with China through strong economic ties and extensive flows of people in both directions. China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner in goods and services, accounting for more than one-quarter of Australia's trade with the world; before the pandemic, China was Australia's largest inbound market in terms of visitor arrivals and total visitor spend.[8] However, Australia's close political and military relationship with the United States and growing political frictions with China have complicated the social circumstances of Chinese students in the country. On top of the challenges posed by substantial differences in language, culture, values, governance, and politics, these students have also suffered from a regrettable rise in racist abuse in Australia. After the pandemic, for many of these students the situation become even worse.

Before the Pandemic

Despite the rapid development of the Internet and other technologies for distance learning, the experience of studying abroad means much more than just education to many international students; it allows

them to observe, understand, and reflect on different values, opinions, and lifestyles first-hand. For students from China, studying in Western countries like Australia, it also means they can obtain free access to information and resources unavailable or censored in their home country. To some students, these opportunities to access new perspectives help them broaden their horizon and enrich their understanding of the world and themselves. As China has become more prosperous, foreign universities have courted fee-paying Chinese students, while the Chinese government has simplified procedures for its citizens to study abroad. In 1999, there were already more Chinese students studying abroad than from any other country. In 2013 alone, China sent 712,157 students to study overseas — almost four times as many as India, the world's second-biggest source country for international students in that year.[9] The growth in the number of Chinese international students has been decelerating since 2013, along with the slowdown of the Chinese economy, although China remains the world's biggest source country for international students by a significant margin. In 2018, 662,100 students left China to study abroad — 8.8 percent more than in 2017.[10] As of 2018, in Australia, almost two of every five international students enrolled in an institution of higher education were from China.[11]

Although there are criticisms of various aspects of quality control in Australia's international education,[12] empirical studies reveal the experience of studying in Australia has long-term benefits for Chinese international students. For example, according to a 2016 study focusing on a leading Australian university, the majority of highly skilled returned graduates from the English-speaking environment 'retain an advantage in China's crowded graduate labour market' even if the situation has grown significantly more competitive than it was in former times, when graduates of well-regarded foreign universities could quickly gain access to prestigious positions.[13] Intercultural competence and the diversification of social networks are of value back in China

more generally.[14] For many, studying abroad is also a means of pursuing what Vanessa Fong describes as 'social, cultural, and sometimes legal citizenship in the developed world'.[15]

The Re-Bordered World

In an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, on 1 February, Australia introduced strict travel bans prohibiting the arrival of non-citizens and non-residents travelling from anywhere in China. This expanded a previous ban on travel from Hubei province, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak at that time. Approximately two-thirds of Australia's Chinese students were now 'stuck at home'.[16] In early March, I surveyed approximately 150 Chinese international students who were enrolled in a unit that I was teaching. Sixty-three students reported that they were physically in Australia, while fifteen students were on their way to Australia via a third country; before the 20 March closure, it was legal for them to enter if they stayed fourteen or more days in a third country. Most of the remaining students were still in mainland China.[17] Australia's travel ban was extended to other countries, including Iran, South Korea, and Italy, and then, on 20 March, to all non-citizens and non-residents regardless of their place of departure. In October, the Australian government indicated that the border closures might remain in place through to the end of 2021.[18]

Graduates from English-speaking countries 'retain an advantage in China's crowded graduate labour market'
Source: ANU Image Library, Flickr

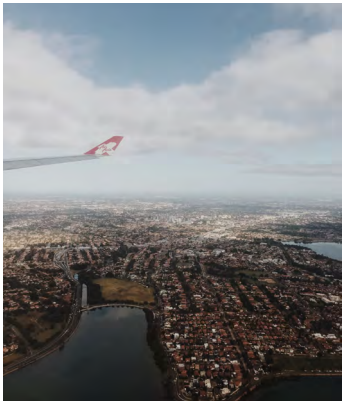
On 24 August, 27 percent of the 307,038 student visa–holders enrolled in Australian higher education institutions remained

outside Australia.[19] As of 1 November, just over half of the 85,612 Chinese international students enrolled in Australian universities and schools remained offshore.[20] Although many of these students continued their study through remote learning, they lost access to many of the opportunities associated with studying abroad, which, under normal circumstances, would have been indispensable components of their international education. The indefinite nature of the travel bans imposed extensive uncertainty on them as well. It added mental, physical, and financial pressures on those Chinese (and other international) students caught outside the country, as well as those trapped in Australia, who suffered reduced opportunities for part-time employment and were separated from their families. Many Chinese international students experienced three crises simultaneously.

Crises of Study, Life, and Direction

Beginning in late February, the world that was once closely connected by transnational and transcontinental flights fragmented into fortified national islands. Travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, and the grounding of most commercial passenger flights meant that most people were stuck where they were when the new rules were put in place. After Australia closed its borders, many Chinese international students had to make a painful choice between flying back to Australia via a third country or staying in China until further notice. Entering via a third country, such as Malaysia or Thailand, made the journey expensive and stressful. Some of my students who eventually made it back to Australia under those circumstances felt that having to layover in another country put them at significantly higher risk of catching COVID-19 in these third countries than if they had been allowed to fly directly to Australia from areas in China that were mostly free of COVID-19. Indeed, in early March 2020, a Chinese

international student at the University of Queensland tested positive for the virus shortly after arriving in Brisbane following a two-week stay in Dubai.[21]



Many Chinese international students made the choice of flying back to Australia via a third country, such as Malaysia or Thailand. Source: Izzie Renne, Unsplash

The stress and fear were such that many of these students geared up with personal protective equipment including masks and, in some cases, full hazmat suits on both legs of their journey. One student told me that he and many other Chinese international students on the same plane refused any drink or food, despite the flight lasting for ten hours. In addition, these students could not be sure that Australia's border control measures would not change while they were in a third country, where they typically had no contacts or social support. Some of my students learned the Australian government had shut the border entirely on 20 March from reading the news online in their Malaysian hotel rooms. One told me over the phone: 'It's a shame; I totally lost with this gamble.'

After the border closure, the Australian higher education sector successfully lobbied China to relax its Internet restrictions to allow the 100,000-odd students stranded at home to study online more smoothly.[22] Australian universities also provided online support for their students and allowed those in China to suspend their degree courses until the border reopened. Despite these efforts, many students who were not able to make it back to Australia experienced considerable pressure and anxiety due to the lack of familiarity with teaching methods such as 'Zoom classes' and the uncertainty around the policy development regarding border restrictions.[23] Learning purely online was a novel experience for Chinese international students; many felt the loss of community keenly and complained that the quality of teaching

To many Chinese international students, online classes did not feel like value for money
Source: Chris Montgomery, Unsplash

and learning was not the same.[24] Some offshore students could not keep their cameras on during classes due to insufficient bandwidth and hence had limited chances to participate in class discussion. Academics and their professional associations in Western countries have also raised concerns over the security issues of teaching certain China-related topics online, fearing that data generated from Zoom and other online teaching software may be vulnerable to surveillance by the Chinese state.[25] For many of them, online classes did not feel like value for money, given the much more expensive tuition fees they have to pay in comparison with domestic students.[26]

Take the tuition fee for an undergraduate course in social sciences at the University of Melbourne, for example. In 2020, a domestic student typically paid AU$6,684 for a full-time academic year,[27] whereas an international student had to pay AU$33,824 for the same educational opportunities.[28] Nor could online teaching provide students the kind of cultural competencies that come from ordinary experiences like visiting weekend markets or making friends with Australian students — experiences that Zhichen Ye, a master's student at the University of Melbourne, noted in her study of student experiences during the pandemic.[29] One student interviewed by Ye remarked that the Internet 'always fails to reflect a more intangible and diverse side of Australian life'.[30] Her friend, who attended classes via Zoom from China, felt a sense

of loss due to the 'lack of personal experiences' in Australian society.[31] Some of Australia's most prominent educators have also acknowledged that, although remote learning can keep some international students enrolled, it is 'a stopgap, not a solution', as it is unable to give students 'the full experience'.[32]

For the many Chinese international students stuck at home, the future was full of uncertainty. Without knowing when it would be possible to return to Australia, they found it challenging to make meaningful plans for their study or life more generally.[33]

A Crisis of Expectation

Even for those students who managed to enter Australia before the border closure on 20 March, life was not easy. Far from home and amid new challenges, many reported feeling anxious, depressed, and lonely. Some struggled to understand the ever-evolving official advice and regulations related to the pandemic and lacked the information or linguistic confidence to access counselling services.[34] Worse, neither their host nor their home countries considered them a priority for financial help or other support.

Although international students in Australia are often perceived as wealthy, many have to rely on part-time jobs to subsidise their living expenses.[35] Far from their support networks and relatively unfamiliar with the Australian legal system, international students have long been vulnerable to underpayment, sexual harassment, and other types of employer exploitation.[36] The pandemic significantly exacerbated existing and chronic problems.[37] What's more, according to the results of a comprehensive survey of 6,000 international students and other temporary visa-holders in Australia conducted in mid-2020, 70 percent of respondents, most of whom worked in heavily casualised industries such as hospitality, lost their job or saw most of their hours cut during the year.[38]

As temporary visa-holders, international students in Australia were denied access to federal government support packages such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper. Prime Minister Scott Morrison explicitly told international students who were facing economic hardship during the pandemic to 'return to their home countries', even though this was not always a realistic or feasible option.[39] The lack of support from the Australian government left many international students feeling abandoned.[40] As a result of their experience, almost three of every five participants in the comprehensive survey cited above reported they were less likely than before to recommend Australia as a study destination.[41]

Many Chinese students were determined to continue living and studying in Australia despite the pandemic because they had already made substantial non-refundable investments in the experience. Even those who wanted to return home had limited options. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) implemented strict regulations on the frequency of international flights departing from and arriving in China. Beginning on 29 March, each Chinese airline could maintain only one route to any specific country with no more than one flight per week. Foreign airlines were similarly limited to one route to China with no more than one weekly flight. In the case of Australia and also beginning in late March, the CAAC allowed only three direct routes to operate all departing from Sydney.[42] Chinese students in Australia who wanted to return home faced costly airfares, and limited seats meant many could not get a ticket at all.[43] Some students and their parents, influenced by popular Chinese films like *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* that focused on the Chinese government's extraction of citizens from crises abroad, firmly expected their government would bring them home — especially given that flying students home would be considerably less challenging than plucking kidnapped citizens from the clutches of terrorists in the middle of a war zone.[44] On 16 March, the parents of 166 Chinese international students enrolled in British primary and secondary schools collectively petitioned the PRC Embassy in London

Chinese films like *Wolf Warrior 2* focused on the Chinese government's extraction of citizens from crises abroad
Source: Celinahoran, Wikimedia

to arrange chartered flights to bring their kids home.[45] Two weeks later, the parents of 200 students in the New York area wrote an open letter to the Chinese Ambassador to the United States with a similar request.[46] The Chinese government did arrange chartered flights to repatriate some 180 secondary school students from the UK who were not living with their parents;[47] however, many other students felt abandoned by the 'motherland' when the Chinese government failed to meet their expectations. This reportedly came as a particular shock to those who had fervently and vocally supported the Chinese Communist Party in the face of public criticism while overseas.[48]

A Crisis of Belonging

Many Chinese international students, regardless of their individual political views, were put in awkward situations created by increasing diplomatic tensions between China and a range of countries, including the US and Australia, in 2020. These tensions existed before the pandemic but escalated during the year (see Chapter 7, 'US–China Relations: A Lingering

Crisis', pp.191–203; and Chapter 8, 'The Sino-Indian Border Crisis: Chinese Perceptions of Indian Nationalism', pp.223–237). The Chinese government accused Australia of 'hurting the feelings of the Chinese people' by calling unilaterally for a 'weapons inspection–style' investigation into the origins of the virus.[49] The Chinese Ministry of Education issued to Chinese students who were considering studying or continuing their studies in Australia an official alert about COVID-19-related health risks and racism.[50] As tensions escalated, Beijing increasingly accused Canberra of anti-China sentiment and actions.[51]

Coinciding with the diplomatic tit-for-tat was a 'growing public polarisation about the presence of international students in local communities' in popular host countries.[52] According to a survey conducted by Universities UK, almost one in every five people in the UK wished universities had fewer international students. A survey conducted by The Australian National University showed that 46 percent of the public felt that 'universities should be educating fewer foreign students and more domestic students'.[53] Australia's initial travel ban, which was China-specific, also contributed to a sense that its response to the pandemic was tinged with racism.[54] Like many Chinese Australians and others of East Asian appearance, more than half of the Chinese students who stayed in Australia during the pandemic reported experiencing direct and explicit racial discrimination, including verbal and physical abuse.[55] (See Chapter 6, 'The Future Repeats Itself: COVID-19 and Its Historical Comorbidities', pp.167–177, for a historical overview of pandemics and anti-Chinese racism.) Although some Chinese international students defended Australia as a safe destination for education,[56] many became disillusioned because of the racism, the lack of government support and a sense of exploitation, with one respondent in the survey saying she felt Australia had treated her like a 'cash cow'.[57]

Yet many Chinese students who managed to return home also found themselves unwelcome there. On Chinese social media, some commentators accused them of being unpatriotic for paying taxes to

other countries and not making contributions to China's development.[58] Others viewed them as threats to China's success in controlling the spread of COVID-19, despite the strict quarantine regime.[59] Influential media, such as *China Youth Daily*, criticised these unfair comments while highlighting the efforts that Chinese embassies and consulates had made to support Chinese students in host countries.[60] However, according to Zhaoyin Feng, writing for the BBC about the 360,000 Chinese students in the US, many Chinese international students felt they were 'unwanted' at home and were 'getting the short end of the stick' from both their host country and China.[61]

Conclusion

Prior to 2020, Chinese international students in Western countries such as Australia were at the core of international education mobility. Their experience shows how Chinese citizens overseas are under increasing pressure to pick a side between their home and host countries, as diplomatic clashes and economic conflicts between China and the West become more frequent and fierce. By treating these students better — integrating them into virtual communities, helping with cross-border travel and embracing inclusivity and multiculturalism — Australia should be able to attract and retain large numbers of Chinese international students in a post-COVID world.[60] However, the uncertainty and negative experiences of overseas Chinese citizens during a year of crisis, combined with political tensions, may destroy not only the capability but also the aspiration for international education mobility — and mobility more generally — among citizens of the PRC.

CHRONOLOGY

The following outline chronology covers some of the key events discussed in this book.

2019

30 December: Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang 李文亮 alerts colleagues about a new disease with apparent similarities to the SARS coronavirus; days later, the police warn him to stop 'spreading rumours'.

2020

11 January: Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文, leader of the Democratic Progressive Party and an opponent of unification with the mainland, re-elected by a landslide.

15 January: US and China sign 'Phase One' trade deal.

23 January: Wuhan goes into lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19.

30 January: The World Health Organization (WHO) declares COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

7 **February**: Whistleblower Li Wenliang dies of COVID-19.

11 March: WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic.

13 March: A Chinese Red Cross plane delivers PPE and medical equipment to Rome in the first major expression of China's 'Mask Diplomacy'.

2 April: COVID-19 cases surpass 1 million worldwide.

8 April: Wuhan lockdown ends.

19 April: The Australian Government calls for China to co-operate in a global investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

21 April: Beijing takes the first of a number of seemingly punitive actions against imports of Australian barley, beef, wine, and coal.

14 May: The US Senate passes the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, angering Beijing.

20 May: The CCP warns its members not to deviate from the party line even in private conversation.

23 May: The People's Republic of China (PRC) announces it has no new cases of COVID-19 for first time since the beginning of the pandemic.

15 June: Deadly skirmish on the Sino-Indian border sparks continuing, low-level hostilities.

19 June: Hong Kong's popular political satire show *Headliner*, apparently cancelled under political pressure from Beijing, airs its final episode.

26 June: Human Rights Watch and 300 other groups call on the UN to monitor the human rights situation in China.

30 June: The National Security Law for Hong Kong, which criminalises 'secession', 'subversion', 'terrorism', and 'foreign interference', comes into effect.

8 July: The CCP Central Committee launches a new 'political rectification movement' for political-legal institutions including the police and judiciary to eliminate corruption and enforce political loyalty.

18 July: Water levels at the Three Gorges Dam reach historic highs. Catastrophic floods across twenty-six provinces result in hundreds of deaths, displace millions, and cause hundreds of billions of yuan worth of economic damage.

22 July: The US closes the PRC's Houston consulate; the PRC retaliates by closing the US Chengdu consulate.

23 July: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says engagement with China has failed and calls on 'freedom-loving nations' to make their mission 'changing the CCP's behaviour'.

5 August: US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar travels to Taiwan, the highest-level US official to visit the island in forty years, infuriating Beijing.

22 September: Xi Jinping 习近平 announces to the UN that China will reach 'peak carbon' by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.

6 October: A survey by Pew Research Center reveals unfavourable views of China at historic highs around the globe, with Beijing's lack of

transparency around the coronavirus outbreak a major factor.

10 October: Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen invites the PRC to engage in 'peaceful dialogue'; Beijing announces live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait.

13 Ocober: The PRC is re-elected to the Human Rights Council of the UN, amid controversy over ongoing repression in Xinjiang and arrests of human rights activists.

14 October: Shenzhen celebrates the fortieth anniversary of its establishment as a Special Economic Zone.

12 November: Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmakers resign en masse after government disqualifies four of them. There have already been multiple arrests under the National Security Law.

15 November: China, Australia, and thirteen other Asia-Pacific countries sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, the world's largest free-trade bloc.

18 November: China reveals fourteen grievances with Australia, warning: 'If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy.'

19 November: The foreign ministers of the 'Five Eyes' alliance Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the secretary of state of the US call on the PRC to 'stop undermining rights' in Hong Kong.

2 December: Hong Kong democracy advocates Joshua Wong Chi-fung 黃之鋒, Agnes Chow Ting 周庭, and Ivan Lam 林朗彥 jailed for their role in the 2019 protests.

2 December: Landmark sexual harassment case against the TV host Zhu Jun 朱军 by Zhou Xiaoxuan 周晓璇, aka Xianzi 弦子, an advocate for women's, LGBTQ, and trans rights, begins court hearings in Beijing.

3 December: Xi Jinping declares victory in China's fight against poverty.

17 December: UNESCO names Tai Chi part of the world's 'intangible cultural heritage'.

26 December: The UK's Centre for Economics and Business Research predicts the Chinese economy will become the world's largest in 2033.

31 December: According to John Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center, confirmed global COVID-19 cases reach 83,146,810 million, with more than 1,812,645 million deaths. The US has the world's highest number of cases (19,852,041) and deaths (344,030).

NOTES

INTRODUCTION — The Year of Crisis

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CHAPTER 5 — China's Post–COVID-19 Stimulus: Dark Cloud, Green Lining

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The Three Gorges Dam: A Deluge of Doubts

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CHAPTER 6 — The Future Repeats Itself: COVID-19 and Its Historical Comorbidities

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FORUM — Plan for Difficulty

The Dao of Crisis

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CHAPTER 9 — Economic Power and Vulnerability in Sino-Australian Relations

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FORUM — Playing the Game?

China and the Multilateral Trading System: Misunderstandings, Criticisms, and Options

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CHAPTER 10 — Chinese Students Abroad in the Time of Pandemic: An Australian View

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CONTRIBUTORS

Beyongo Mukete Dynamic is an associate editor for the *National Times News*, an online newspaper based in Cameroon. Beyongo's research interests include international political economy, BRICS, Africa's political economy, geoeconomics, Australia's foreign policy, and political philosophy.

Andrew Chubb is a British Academy Post-doctoral Fellow at Lancaster University. His current research examines the role of domestic public opinion in crisis diplomacy, with a focus on China's maritime and territorial disputes.

Jingjing Chen is a PhD candidate at the School of Culture, History and Language at the ANU. Her doctoral research focuses on Tang dynasty religious and geographical history.

Xu Cheng Chong is a Master of Strategic Studies student at the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Research Officer at the ANU Geoeconomics Working Group, and Research Assistant at the Little Red Podcast. His work covers a wide range of topics related to China, from modern Chinese history to the domestic fan economy, though his most in-depth research has been conducted in the field of China's economic statecraft and its effect on Chinese relations with the sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific.

Antony Dapiran is a Hong Kong-based writer and lawyer, and the author of two books on Hong Kong including his latest, *City on Fire: The Fight for Hong Kong* (Scribe), which was long-listed for the Walkley Book Awards in 2020.

Victor Ferguson is a PhD Candidate in the ANU School of Politics and International Relations. His research focuses on the intersection of economic statecraft, international trade and investment law, and international security.

Matthew Galway is a Lecturer of Chinese History at the Australian National University. His research focuses on the globalisation of Maoism and the rise of Maoist movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America. His book, *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China and the Communist Movement in Cambodia, 1949–1979*, is forthcoming with Cornell University Press in 2022.

Verónica Fraile del Álamo is studying a Double Masters in Asian and International Affairs at King's College London and Renmin University of China. Her interests include international political economy, geoeconomics, and EU-China relations.

Jane Golley is the Director of the Australian Centre on China in the World, ANU, and Managing Editor of The China Story Project, encompassing the *Yearbook* series and The China Story Blog. As an economist, her research has covered a wide range of Chinese development issues, from rural-urban, gender and regional inequalities to China's role in the emerging geoeconomic world order.

Jorrit Gosens received his PhD from RCEES, an institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy at ANU. He researches renewable energy transitions and innovation globally, including in China.

Ari Larissa Heinrich is the author of *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Duke, 2008) and *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body* (Duke, 2018). He is Professor of Chinese Literature and Media at the School of Culture, History and Language, ANU.

Linda Jaivin is an author, essayist, cultural commentator, translator, co-editor with Geremie R. Barmé of the anthology of translation *New Ghosts Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, and editorial consultant at the Australian Centre on China in the World, ANU. Her books include the China memoir

The Monkey and the Dragon. Her newest book, *The Shortest History of China*, will be published in May 2021 with Black Inc.

Yun Jiang is a Managing Editor of The China Story Blog at The Australian National University and a producer of China Neican. Her interests include Australia-China relations, economic statecraft, China's political economy, and foreign interference.

Esther Sunkyung Klein is a Lecturer in pre-modern Chinese studies at ANU, focusing on Chinese philosophy and historiography. Her book, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song* (2019), traces pre-modern Chinese attitudes toward authorship and the representation of historical events

James Laurenceson is the Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney. His research focuses on the Chinese economy and the Australia-China bilateral relationship.

Darren J. Lim is a Senior Lecturer in the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences and host of the 'Australia in the World' podcast. He researches in the fields of international political economy and international security, with a focus on geoeconomics.

Delia Lin is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies in the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on discourse, ideology and patterns of governance in a changing China, with a special interest in the role imperial Confucian-Legalist statecraft plays in Chinese governance today. Her monograph *Civilising Citizens in Post-Mao China: Understanding the Rhetoric of Suzhi* (Routledge, 2017) examines how the discourse of human quality and shame are entrenched into current Chinese politics.

Benjamin Penny is an historian of religions in China at the School of Culture, History and Language, ANU. He is the editor of *East Asian History*.

Wuna Reilly is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World at the ANU. Her research focuses on rural society, sustainable development, and social welfare. She is currently preparing a book manuscript based upon her doctoral thesis: *Sharing the Land: Explaining the Endurance of China's Collective Owned Land Regime*.

Annie Luman Ren is a PhD Candidate at The Australian National University, writing on the eighteenth-century Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone* 紅樓夢. She is also the translator of Leo Ou-fan Lee and Esther Yuk-ying Lee's memoir *Ordinary Days*.

Gerald Roche is an anthropologist and Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Politics, Media, and Philosophy at La Trobe University. His research focuses on the intersections of language, race, and colonialism. He edited the *Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*, and his articles have appeared in *American Anthropologist*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, and *China Quarterly*, among others. You can find him on Twitter: @GJosephRoche.

Nadège Rolland is a Senior Fellow at the Seattle-based National Bureau of Asian Research and a Non-resident Fellow at the Lowy Institute. Her research focuses on Chinese politics, foreign and defence policy, and grand strategy.

Yu Sang is a Post-doctoral Researcher in the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, and a Visiting Fellow in the Australian Centre on China in the World at The Australian National University. Her research focuses on Chinese philosophy, in particular Buddhism and New Confucianism, and the intellectual history of modern China.

Wen-Ti Sung is a political scientist who teaches in the Taiwan Studies Program at The Australian National University. In 2021, he will be a MOFA Taiwan Fellowship visiting scholar at the National Taiwan University. His research covers the US-China-Taiwan trilateral relationship, focusing particularly on U.S. foreign policy think-tanks, Chinese political norms, and Taiwanese elections. His latest work is a book chapter, 'Taiwan-China Relations: Asymmetric Trust and Innenpolitik' (2019).

Trang X. Ta is a cultural and medical anthropologist with research and teaching interests in healing regimes; the cultural politics of food and nutrition; culinary medicine; ageing and the elderly; death and dying; science and technology studies; waste and discard studies; and theories of labour. Her current projects examine public narratives of medical tragedy and moral economies of charity in contemporary China and informal

street economies of recycling and salvaging waste among the elderly working poor in Hong Kong.

Yu Tao is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Western Australia, where he teaches contemporary Chinese society and language and co-ordinates the Chinese Studies major. His research primarily focuses on the interaction between religious groups, civic organisations, and local state agencies in contemporary China and overseas Chinese communities.

Pan Wang is Senior Lecturer in Chinese and Asian Studies, University of New South Wales. She completed her PhD in International Studies from the University of Technology Sydney. She is author of *Love and Marriage in Globalizing China* (2015 & 2018 Abingdon: Routledge). Her research areas include love, marriage, and gender in China and Chinese media and communication.

Weihuan Zhou is Associate Professor, Director of Research, and an inaugural member of the Herbert Smith Freehills China International Business and Economic Law (CIBEL) Centre, Faculty of Law and Justice, University of New South Wales, Sydney. His research explores the most current and controversial issues in the field of international economic law, particularly the nexus between international trade law and China.

Yayun Zhu is a PhD Candidate at the School of Culture, History and Language at the ANU. His doctoral research focuses on the city of Nanjing during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition.

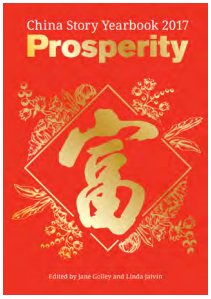
PREVIOUS *CHINA STORY YEARBOOKS*

2019: *China Dreams*

The year 2019 marked a number of significant anniversaries for the People's Republic of China (PRC), each representing different 'Chinese dreams'. There was the centennial of the May Fourth Movement — a dream of patriotism and cultural renewal. The PRC celebrated its seventieth anniversary — a dream of revolution and national strength. It was also thirty years since the student-led Protest Movement of 1989 — dreams of democracy and free expression crushed by government dreams of unity and stability. Many of these 'dreams' recurred in new guises in 2019. President Xi Jinping tightened his grip on power at home while calling for all citizens to 'defend China's honour abroad'. Escalating violence in Hong Kong, the ongoing suppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and deteriorating Sino-US relations dominated the headlines. Alongside stories about China's advances in artificial intelligence and genetically modified babies, and its ambitions in the Antarctic and outer space, these issues fuelled discussion about what Xi's own 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation means for Chinese citizens and the rest of the world.

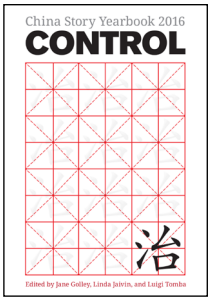
2018: *Power*

In 2018, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, by most measures, more powerful than at any other time in its history and had become one of the most powerful countries in the world. Its economy faced serious challenges, including from the ongoing 'trade war' with the US, but still ranked as the world's second largest. Its Belt and Road Initiative, meanwhile, continued to carve paths of influence and economic integration across several continents. A deft combination of policy, investment, and entrepreneurship has also turned the PRC into a global 'techno-power'. It aims, with a good chance of success, at becoming a global science and technology leader by 2049 — one hundred years from the founding of the PRC.



2017: *Prosperity*

A 'moderately prosperous society' with no Chinese individual left behind — that's the vision for China set out by Chinese President Xi Jinping in a number of important speeches in 2017. 'Moderate' prosperity may seem like a modest goal for a country with more billionaires (609 at last count) than the US. But the 'China Story' is a complex one. The *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity* surveys the important events, pronouncements, and personalities that defined 2017. It also presents a range of perspectives, from the global to the individual, the official to the unofficial, from mainland China to Hong Kong and Taiwan. Together, the stories present a richly textured portrait of a nation that in just forty years has lifted itself from universal poverty to (unequally distributed) wealth, changing itself and the world in the process.



2016: *Control*

'More cosmopolitan, more lively, more global' is how the *China Daily* summed up the year 2016 in China.

It was also a year of more control. The Chinese Communist Party laid down strict new rules of conduct for its members, continued to assert its dominance over everything from the Internet to the South China Sea and announced a new Five-Year Plan that Greenpeace called 'quite possibly the most important document in the world in setting the pace of acting on climate change'.

2015: *Pollution*

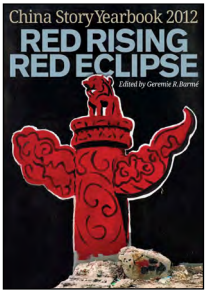
This *Yearbook* explores the broader ramifications of pollution in the People's Republic for culture, society law and social activism, as well as the Internet, language, thought, and approaches to history. It looks at how it affects economic and political developments, urban change, and China's regional and global posture. The Chinese Communist Party, led by 'Chairman of Everything' Xi Jinping, meanwhile, has subjected mainland society to increasingly repressive control in its new determination to rid the country of Western 'spiritual pollutants' while achieving cultural purification through 'propaganda and ideological work'.

2014: *Shared Destiny*

The People's Republic of China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping, has declared that it shares in the destiny of the countries of the Asia and Pacific region, as well as of nations that are part of an intertwined national self-interest. The *China Story Yearbook 2014* takes the theme of Shared Destiny 共同命运 and considers it in the context of China's current and future potential.

2013: *Civilising China*

As China becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, it also expects to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and as a formidable civilisation. Through a survey and analysis of China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, mores, the Internet, history, and thought — in which the concept of 'civilising' plays a prominent role — *China Story Yearbook 2013* offers insights into the country today and its dreams for the future.



2012: *Red Rising, Red Eclipse*

The authors of *Red Rising, Red Eclipse* survey China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, human rights and economics, the Internet, history, and thought. This inaugural *China Story Yearbook* offers an informed perspective on recent developments in China and provides a context for understanding ongoing issues that will resonate far beyond the Dragon Year of 2012–2013.