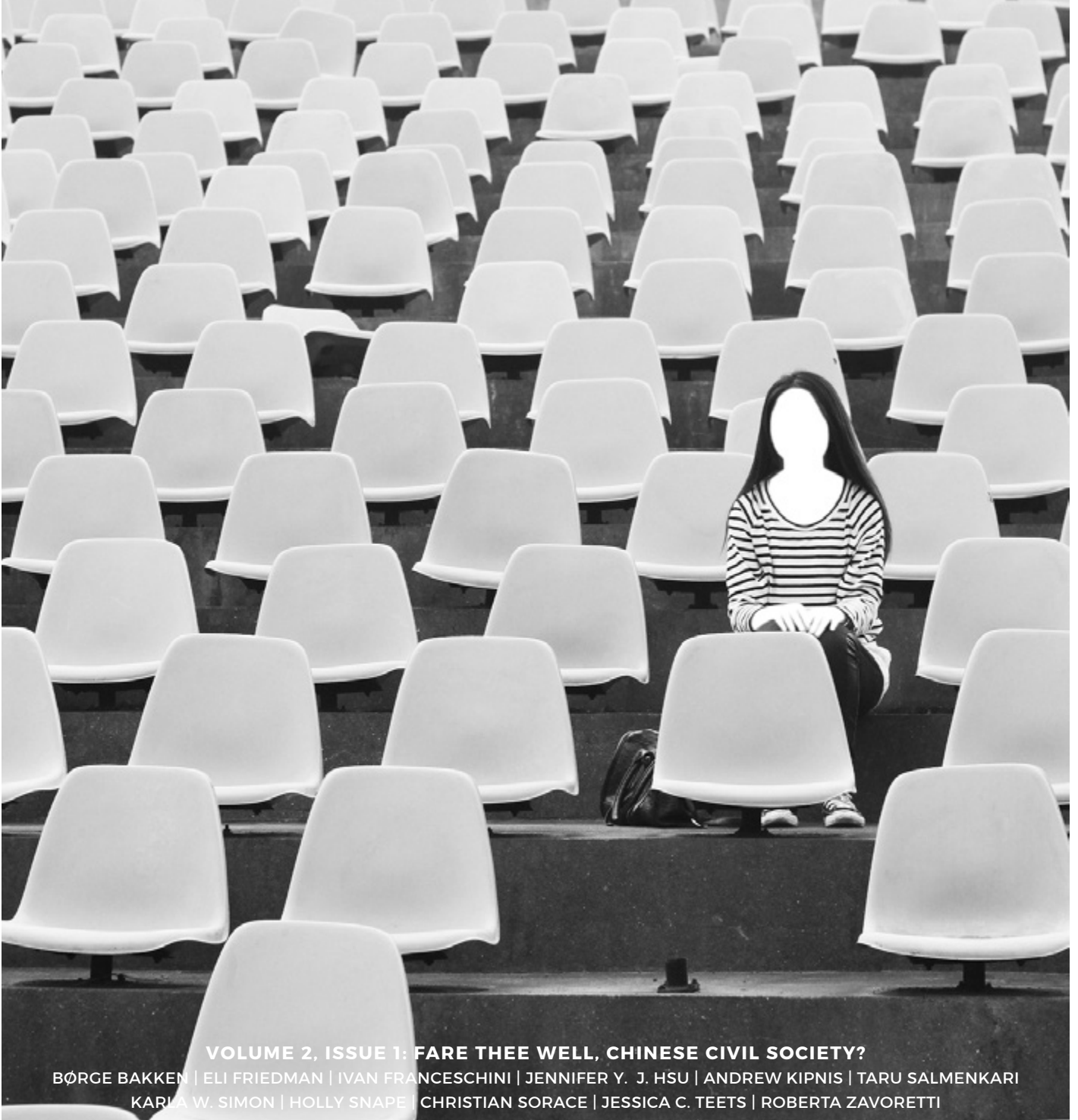


# MADE IN CHINA



*A Quarterly on Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights*



**VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1: FARE THEE WELL, CHINESE CIVIL SOCIETY?**

BØRGE BAKKEN | ELI FRIEDMAN | IVAN FRANCESCHINI | JENNIFER Y. J. HSU | ANDREW KIPNIS | TARU SALMENKARI  
KARLA W. SIMON | HOLLY SNAPE | CHRISTIAN SORACE | JESSICA C. TEETS | ROBERTA ZAVORETTI





Made in China is a quarterly on Chinese labour, civil society, and rights. This project has been produced with the financial assistance of the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), the Australian National University, and the European Union Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No 654852. The views expressed are those of the individual authors and do not represent the views of the European Union, CIW, or the institutions to which the authors are affiliated.





VOLUME 2, ISSUE #1  
JANUARY-MARCH 2017  
ISSN 2206-9119

CHIEF EDITORS

Ivan Franceschini  
Nicholas Loubere

EDITORIAL BOARD

Kevin Lin  
Elisa Nesossi  
Andrea Enrico Pia  
Christian Sorace

COPY-EDITING

Sharon Strange

ART DIRECTION

Tommaso Facchin

ISSUE CONTRIBUTORS

Anita Chan  
Børge Bakken  
Eli Friedman  
Jennifer Y. J. Hsu  
Andrew Kipnis  
Jamie Liu  
Taru Salmenkari  
Karla W. Simon  
Holly Snape  
Christian Sorace  
Jessica C. Teets  
Roberta Zavoretti

PHOTO CREDITS

Mollie Chen (cover), [Flickr](#)  
Jonathan K. Read (PP. 9-10), [Flickr](#)  
Eddy Milfort (PP. 42-43), [Flickr](#)  
Gu Tao (PP. 48-49)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EDITORIAL (P. 5)**

FARE THEE WELL, CHINESE  
CIVIL SOCIETY?

---

**BRIEFS (P. 6)**

---

**CHINA COLUMNS (P. 10)**

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING  
IN CHINA IS DEAD: THE  
SITUATION IS EXCELLENT  
(P. 12)  
Eli Friedman

MAKING CLASS AND PLACE  
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA  
(P. 16)  
Roberta Zavoretti

---

**FOCUS (P. 20)**

CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION IN  
THE RESEARCH ON CHINESE  
CIVIL SOCIETY (P. 22)  
Taru Salmenkari

CHINA'S SOCIAL  
ORGANISATIONS AFTER  
THE CHARITY LAW (P. 26)  
Karla W. Simon  
Holly Snape

THE RISE OF  
FOUNDATIONS (P. 30)  
Jessica C. Teets

MEET THE STATE SECURITY  
(P. 34)  
Ivan Franceschini

SNAPSHOTS OF CHINA'S  
'UNCIVIL SOCIETY' (P. 38)  
Børge Bakken

---

**WINDOW ON ASIA (P. 42)**

BURMESE CIVIL  
SOCIETY CHALLENGES  
CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT  
ASSISTANCE IN MYANMAR  
(P. 44)  
Jennifer Y.J. Hsu

---

**WORK OF ARTS (P. 48)**

LOSING THE WORLD (P.50)  
Christian Sorace

---

**ACADEMIC WATCH (P. 54)**

ANDREW KIPNIS ON  
'FROM VILLAGE TO CITY'  
(P. 54)

## Fare Thee Well, Chinese Civil Society?

---

For many years now, Chinese civil society has been the focus of considerable expectations for scholars, journalists, and politicians all over the world. There has been great eagerness to salute every small victory by Chinese NGOs and activists over the powerful party-state as evidence that the authoritarian tide was finally receding in China, and that grassroots forces were stepping up to take a new role in Chinese politics and society. In light of these high hopes, it is not surprising that the recent troubling news coming from China has been acutely disappointing and has dampened people's enthusiasm. With the arrest of yet another activist, the airing of yet another public confession, the closure of yet another NGO working for the weak and disenfranchised, and the passing of yet another repressive law, the world has come to view Chinese civil society as if it were on its deathbed. For sure, an *idea* of Chinese civil society is ailing. But, if we consider the swiftness with which the party-state has tamed these forces (at least for the time being), was this civil society ever there in first place? Or were we simply projecting our hopes onto a handful of Chinese grassroots organisations and activists?

While we mourn the death of an ideal, it is imperative that we overcome our sorrow to look at the momentous changes that are currently taking place in the realm of Chinese civil society. In this issue of *Made in China*, we offer a series of perspectives on these developments. In **Conceptual Confusion in the Research on Chinese Civil Society**, Taru Salmenkari highlights the biases and lack of clarity that undermines much of the discussion of Chinese civil society. In **Chinese Grassroots Organisations after the Charity Law**, Karla Simon and Holly Snape

consider how the new legislation is likely to break down the old order and establish a new system of governance. In **The Rise of Foundations**, Jessica Teets examines the role of Chinese foundations in providing financial assistance to local NGOs now that foreign sources of funding are drying up. In **Meet the State Security**, Ivan Franceschini looks at the ambivalent relationship between labour activists and their controllers from the security apparatus. Finally, in **Snapshots of China's 'Uncivil Society'**, Børge Bakken describes how the attempt by the party-state to prevent a civil society from organising itself has led to the emergence of a rather uncivil type of society.

In this issue you will also find other provocative essays. In **Collective Bargaining Is Dead: The Situation Is Excellent**, Eli Friedman argues that the recent decline in discussions about collective bargaining in China is not necessarily bad news, as it paves the way for public debate about other meaningful policies, such as universal basic income. In **Making Class and Place in Contemporary China**, Roberta Zavoretti contends that in today's China, the state-sponsored discursive production of migrant labourers as a homogeneous social group sustains the promotion of the hegemonic social model of an ideally emerging 'middle class'. In our Window on Asia section, Jennifer Hsu shifts the focus from China to Myanmar, analysing how Burmese civil society has reacted to the challenges posed by Chinese aid and investment in the country. In **Losing the World**, Christian Sorace reviews Gu Tao's documentary 'The last Moose of Aoluguya', about the forced relocation of the Evenki people in Northern China. The issue concludes with an interview with Andrew Kipnis about his latest monograph, *From Village to City*.

The Editors

**JAN/MAR  
2017**

## **Grisly Murder Brings Back Haunting Memories**

In December 2016, a court in Beijing handed a suspended death sentence to two migrant workers from a village in Sichuan province, while three others were given jail terms ranging from fifteen years to life imprisonment for the premeditated murder of a colleague in August 2014. They had killed him on a construction site in Shunyi district, Beijing, and then had used his corpse to stage a fake accident in order to claim compensation from the construction company by posing as relatives of the victim. Such grisly deeds are not unheard of in China. In May 2016, prosecutors in Inner Mongolia announced the indictment of seventy-four people for the killing of seventeen mine workers in order to blackmail mine owners running unlicensed operations into paying reparations. In 2009, the police discovered that several residents of a village in Leibo county, Sichuan province, were involved in buying or kidnapping people with severe mental problems to sell them as slaves or to kill them in mines to get compensation by posing as relatives. A similar situation was famously portrayed in Li Yang's haunting movie *Blind Shaft*, shot in 2003. *IF*

(Sources: **Caixin English; The New York Times**)

## **Foreign NGOs Law Enforced**

On 1 January, the controversial Law on the Management of Foreign NGOs' Activities within Mainland China came into force. To clarify matters in the midst of legal and procedural uncertainty—the list of agencies allowed to supervise foreign organisations and the areas in which these organisations can work was released only at the end of December—in early January the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) set up a **webpage** with an online manual on how to register foreign NGOs. Unfortunately, the page remains only in Chinese. Roughly at the same time, thirty-six Chinese lawyers formed a legal service group to advise foreign NGOs and their local partners on matters related to the new legislation. Considerable worries remain, however, as in early March only three dozen organisations, which had registered under other labels before the law had come into effect, were able to complete the registration process. These included the World Economic Forum, Save the Children, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and several chambers of commerce. Many foreign NGOs have simply adopted an attitude of wait and see, suspending their activities in China until they can observe how other organisations will fare in the registration process. According to some observers, though, this difficult start does not warrant excessive pessimism. In the words of civil society scholar Shawn Shieh: 'My experience working with Chinese and foreign NGOs in China is that both are quite creative and persistent and as long as there are pressing social needs for their work, they will find ways to work through or around the NGO Law.' *IF*

(Sources: **China Development Brief; China Law Translate; The Diplomat; NGOs in China; South China Morning Post**)

## The Struggle of Walmart Workers Enters a Phase of Litigation

---

In July 2016, the protest of Walmart workers against the company's introduction of a new flexible working hour system culminated in a series of strikes (see **Anita Chan's chapter** in the *Made in China Yearbook 2016*). In the following months, the company started undertaking retaliatory actions aimed at the labour activists, and coerced workers to sign a form stating that they agreed to the new working hour system. Those who refused met with fierce harassment. Having found fault with these workers, Walmart could then fire them without having to pay compensation or entitlement. At the time of writing, the dismissals are still continuing. Some activists have started arbitration and litigation procedures against Walmart but thus far only a dozen workers have been able to take this legal option because of the expensive nature of litigation. The Walmart Chinese Workers Association (WCWA), the main social media platform on which Walmart workers communicate, was able to raise fifty thousand yuan through crowd-sourced donations at the end of last year to fund some of the cases. The prospect of workers winning is not high, but the activists have vowed to persist in the attempt to set a precedent. One worker-activist in Shenzhen, who went after Walmart through legal channels for owing her money, had the case jettisoned by the arbitration committee. Instead of giving up, she filed a second case and in a WeChat conversation told us: 'I'll insist on using the law to protect my rights. This time I'll charge Walmart for retaliation. No matter what the outcome will be, I just can't let them bully me this way.' As for the two WCWA founders, Zhang Jun and Zhang Liya, they are not going to give up either. To *Made in China*, one of them declared: 'This experience teaches workers a good lesson about the importance of forming their own trade union. In the beginning they appealed to the official union for help, and now they realise they need their own union.' AC

## Fourteen Million People Get Household Registration

---

On 24 March, the Ministry of Public Security disclosed that over the past four years nearly fourteen million unregistered citizens had been provided with household registration documents. The beneficiaries of this move—which had been called for in an official opinion of the State Council released in December 2016—included not only homeless people and those who had lost their documents, but also orphans and children born illegally during the period of strict implementation of the one-child policy (known as 'black children'), when families often had no other choice than hiding their offspring in order to avoid hefty fines or other punishments. To this day, a household registration document remains necessary to access most public services in China. IF

(Sources: Quartz; State Council; Xinhua)

## Supreme People's Court Boasts about Arrests of Lawyers

---

During the 'Two Sessions', the President of the Supreme People's Court Zhou Qiang presented his annual report about developments in the work of the courts during the past year and plans for the year to come. As in past reports, the protection of human rights features among the work carried out by the Chinese judiciary. According to this latest report, human rights are guaranteed by the correct implementation of criminal justice policies, the appropriate use of the death penalty, the respect of the right to a presumption of innocence, and the right to appeal decisions by the courts. Interestingly, however, in the very first section of this year's speech—entitled 'ensuring state security, punishing crime, and protecting human rights'—Zhou Qiang singles out the sentencing 'according to the law' of *weiquan* lawyer Zhou Shifeng to seven years in jail as one of the key achievements for the protection of state security in 2016. EN

(Sources: Minnan Network; South China Morning Post; Xinhua)



## Further Job Cuts in the Coal and Steel Industry Announced

---

China's annual economic growth in 2016 reached the expected target of 6.7 percent, with the creation of more than thirteen million new jobs in cities and towns. Still, the employment prospects for the year ahead remain worrying, as China continues to rein in its overcapacity in heavy industries such as steel and coal. In a press conference held on 1 March, Yin Weimin, the Chinese Minister of Human Resources and Social Security, explained that arrangements were made in 2016 for 726,000 workers who had lost their jobs in the steel and coal industry. Moreover, he announced that an extra 500,000 workers will need similar arrangements this year. To facilitate this process, the authorities have proposed four approaches: workers whose skills are applicable to other positions within their factories will be reassigned internally; workers with skills incompatible to other roles in the same factory will be relocated to other places, with the government providing them with job training and guidance if necessary; workers within five years of retirement will be encouraged to retire early; finally, a special effort will be made to ensure the livelihoods of disadvantaged and older workers who do not belong to the first three categories. While acknowledging all the difficulties posed by such massive job cuts (see also **Kevin Lin's chapter** in the *Made in China Yearbook 2016*), the Minister believes that the whole process will be smooth. *JL*

(Sources: **Caixin 1**; **Caixin 2**; **Renminwang**; **Washington Post**)

## Claims of Physical Violence against Lawyer Raise a Storm

---

During the first few months of 2017, the issue of torture of Chinese lawyers caught up in the '709 incident'—the crackdown against the 'rights protection' (*weiquan*) community that took place in July 2015—generated significant attention both within and outside China. In January, the legal team of human rights lawyer Xie Yang, who was detained in Hongjiang, Hunan, on 11 July 2015, released the transcript of a conversation they had with their client to protest the decision of the authorities not to release their client. In it, Xie describes the details of the physical and mental abuse he has been subjected to while in detention. The transcript has resonated widely, particularly after 12 January when human rights lawyer Li Chunfu emerged from nearly seventeen months in police custody in a shattered state, suffering from violent bouts of paranoia and with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. On 27 February, eleven diplomatic missions in Beijing wrote a letter to Guo Shenkun—the Minister of Public Security—expressing their 'growing concern over recent claims of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in cases concerning detained human rights lawyers and other human rights defenders.' As a response, in an unprecedented move, on 1 March, China's official media responded to Xie's allegations, and indirectly to the letter, claiming that his torture was a story fabricated in order to attract international attention. State media accused disbarred lawyer Jiang Tianyong—himself detained since November 2016—of making up 'fake news' and featured interviews with him admitting to fabricating Xie's claims of torture. Chinese media reported that an 'independent' investigation by the Hunan Procuratorate found that Xie has not been tortured. *EN*

(Sources: **China Change**, **Global Times**, **Guanchazhe**; **The Guardian**; **The Independent**; **The New York Times**; **Xinhua**)



## Talks about Migrant Workers at the Two Sessions

---

At the beginning of March, the annual ‘Two Sessions’ of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC) convened in Beijing. On 5 March, Prime Minister Li Keqiang addressed the NPC. In his speech he reiterated once again the determination of the government to tackle the issue of wage arrears besetting migrant workers. The beleaguered situation of migrant workers also drew much attention from representatives. Some delegates contended that inadequate legislation on wage payment, lenient punishment for companies violating laws, and weak law enforcement are some of the main reasons for the persistence of wage arrears in China; they thus suggested that the government should reinforce its supervision of the labour market—for instance by creating a blacklist of law-violating companies and imposing stiff penalties on them. Wage arrears aside, a special personal income tax scheme was proposed, which would take into consideration the seasonal fluctuations in migrant workers’ wages and therefore help increase their disposable income. Moreover, it was recommended that the government, in cooperation with firms, provide more vocational training to migrant workers to help them survive in the era of automation. *JL*

(Sources: **Gongren Ribao**; **Xinhua 1**; **Xinhua 2**; **Zhonggongwang**)

## Chinese-Born Australian Scholar Prevented from Leaving China

---

Over the weekend of 25 March, Feng Chongyi, a Chinese-born professor who has been teaching for over a decade at the University of Technology Sydney, was stopped at immigration checkpoints in Guangzhou while he was attempting to take flights back to Australia. For a week, he was prevented from leaving China and remained in a hotel room, subject to interrogation by state security agents because of his alleged involvement in a threat to national security. He was allowed to leave the country on 1 April. Professor Feng, who is known for having repeatedly expressed critical views about the Chinese government and its political dealings in Australia, was in China to conduct research on *weiquan* lawyers during one of the worst crackdowns in years. The ‘incident’ happened while Prime Minister Li Keqiang was on an official visit in Australia to negotiate several trade deals, and when the Australian Parliament was on the verge of ratifying an extradition treaty long in the making with China. On 28 March, facing rising public concerns about China’s record of the abuse of national security charges to quash political dissent, Australian Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull called off the vote on the extradition treaty. The detention of Feng Chongyi followed the disappearance of Lee Ming-cheh, a Taiwanese human rights advocate, the week before. According to friends and relatives, on 19 March Lee had boarded a flight from Taipei to Macau but he never emerged from the arrivals gate. Only ten days later, the Chinese authorities confirmed that Lee was detained on vague national security charges. At the moment of writing, he remains in detention. *IF*

(Sources: **The Guardian**; **Reuters**; **The New York Times 1**; **The New York Times 2**; **The New York Times 3**)



# CHINA COLUMNS







Construction workers in Changsha.  
Photo: Citizenoftheworld (Flickr)

## Collective Bargaining in China is Dead: The Situation is Excellent

Eli Friedman

*As the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has turned in a markedly anti-worker direction, attempts to establish a genuine collective bargaining system in China have been smothered. If collective bargaining is dead, what might Chinese workers and their allies advocate? The time might be ripe to shift our focus to a demand for a rapid expansion of universal social services, not least for a universal basic income.*

For many years reform-oriented labour activists and scholars working in China have seen collective bargaining as the cure for the country's severe labour problems. The logic underlying this was often unstated, but straightforward: collective bargaining was crucial for twentieth century labour movements in capitalist countries in giving workers a voice and creating a more equitable social distribution of wealth. With growing levels of labour unrest in China over the past twenty years, collective bargaining seemed like a logical next step. Hopeful reformers—both within the official unions as well as labour NGO activists and academics—envisioned rationalised, legalised bargaining between labour and capital as a central pillar in the construction of a more just workplace and society.

The challenges to institutionalising a robust collective bargaining system in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have always been profound. Fundamental to labour relations theory is that collective bargaining rights must be accompanied by the right to strike and freedom of association—capital has no reason to take workers seriously without labour possessing some coercive power. But independent unions have long been an anathema to the Communist Party. From the **Lai Ruoyu debacle of the 1950s** to the crushing of the **Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation** in 1989, the Party has made it clear time and again that independent worker organisations are forbidden. Although workers have never enjoyed the right to strike in practice, the right was formally included in the Chinese constitutions of 1975 and 1978. It was Deng Xiaoping who removed it from the constitution just as private capital began pouring into China in the early 1980s.

### Working Within the System

Nonetheless, with no signs of articulated worker movements since 1989, many well-

intentioned people thought it was worth trying to advance worker rights within the system. Especially from the mid 2000s on, academics (myself included) launched research projects, NGOs held training sessions, and foreign unions engaged with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Many assumed that the state would eventually decide that worker insurgency was exacting too high a cost, and that serious labour reforms were therefore necessary. And indeed, beginning in the late 2000s the ACFTU made collective negotiations (*xieshang*)—rather than the more antagonistic sounding ‘bargaining’ (*tanpan*)—a high priority, investing time and resources into expanding the coverage of collective contracts.

At its best, collective bargaining in China has been woefully inadequate. The state and the ACFTU have been very cautious about controlling workers’ aspirations, and have insisted on the fundamental harmony of interests between labour and capital. Experiments with bargaining have been almost exclusively restricted to single enterprises, thereby preventing workers from constituting cross-workplace ties. The overwhelming majority of collective contracts are formulaic: actual bargaining rarely occurs, and enforcement is largely non-existent. The few shining examples where employers have made real compromises during collective bargaining have followed autonomously organised wildcat strikes. The best-known case is the 2010 strike from a Honda transmission plant in Guangdong province, which resulted in major wage gains as well as an (ultimately unsuccessful) effort to reform the enterprise union. It is not coincidental that substantive worker-led bargaining is much more likely in Japanese or American firms, where the state must be cautious not to inflame patriotic sentiments. State-sanctioned economic nationalism is a shaky foundation for a robust collective bargaining system.

## The Death of Collective Bargaining under Xi

Even these timid efforts have been smothered in recent years, as the central government has turned in a markedly anti-worker direction under Xi Jinping. There was a brief moment in 2010 when discussion about the right to strike emerged from hushed whispers into the public discourse. But this opening was ephemeral, and union reformers in Guangdong who had pushed gentle reforms in the mid-late 2000s were replaced with typical Party apparatchiks. The country’s pre-eminent centre for labour studies at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou **was shuttered**. The academic study of employment has now been left almost entirely to business schools, as the government has stymied further expansion of labour relations programs. Labour NGOs in Guangzhou were subjected to a brutal crackdown in December 2015, with the government specifically targeting those groups that had been helping workers to engage in collective negotiations to resolve strikes. And the ACFTU has seemingly given up on advancing collective negotiations altogether. The Chairman of the ACFTU Li Jianguo does not even mention the term in his speeches anymore. Under the ‘work developments’ section of the ACFTU’s website, a **lonely single report** on collective contracts for the entirety of 2016 is a stark indication that the union has almost totally forsaken this agenda.

Collective bargaining is not dead in the sense that it will disappear from China’s labour-capital relations. It is almost certain that official unions will continue to pursue bargaining in its current vacuous, bureaucratic, and worker-exclusionary form. Collective contracts will continue to be signed, tabulated, and then hidden from view from workers. Somewhat less pessimistically, workers will continue to force management to bargain with the collective via wildcat

strikes. This latter form will still be an important means by which workers can attempt to ensure their most basic rights, and these efforts are absolutely worth supporting. But collective bargaining is dead as a *political* aim. It is not going to be the cornerstone of twentieth century-style class compromise in China, it is not generative of worker power, and it certainly does not herald broader social transformation. To the extent that legal bargaining does develop, it will be as a mechanism for the state to deprive workers of autonomous power.

What then might Chinese workers and allied intellectuals and activists aim for? At the risk of stating the obvious, the working class needs more power. The question is, how to foster proletarian power in the face of a highly competent authoritarian state that views organised workers as an existential threat? In the absence of independent organisations, the only option is an intensification of already widespread worker insurgency. The more wildcat strikes, mass direct action, and worker riots, the more the state and capital will be forced to take worker grievances seriously. Of course such forms of collective action come at great risk for workers, and many have already paid a high price. In any particular case, the risks may certainly outweigh the benefits. But in the aggregate, expansive unrest is just what the working class needs. With the institutions firmly oriented towards advancing the inter-related goals of state domination and exploitation by capital, disruption on a large scale is the only chance workers have of forcing change. Ungovernability will be the necessary prelude to any institutional reform worthy of the name.

## The Quest for Universal Basic Income

Let's now imagine a scenario—a fantastic one, admittedly, but one for which we

should be prepared: worker unrest hits some inflection point, and the state comes begging for compromise. If collective bargaining is dead on arrival, what might Chinese workers and their allies advocate? The time has come to shift our focus to a demand for a rapid expansion of universal social services, not least of which should be universal basic income (UBI).

UBI has been hotly debated in North America and Europe in recent years. There are numerous **excellent accounts** of various ways of structuring UBI, which I cannot rehash in detail here. But the fundamental idea is that all members within some given political jurisdiction receive a certain income by virtue of their citizenship—there are no means tests, and everyone receives the same amount regardless of employment status or existing wealth.

Perhaps the most frequently cited reason for implementing UBI is that technological development is increasing productivity while undermining the stability of jobs. A somewhat more expansive version of this argument recognises the diverse ways that people contribute to capital accumulation outside of wage labour—if the traditional wage is an increasingly unreliable measure of value production, perhaps it should be abandoned altogether. Another important point is that UBI would have the advantage of **freeing up time** for more socially constructive activities. Liberated from the daily struggle for survival, people will have the space to do what they will—including engaging in politics. In this sense, UBI is not merely an end in itself but also a means for developing the political energies of the dominated.

UBI is by no means a panacea, and at worst it could be a **Trojan horse for austerity**. Many conservatives have come to embrace UBI, as they see it as an efficient replacement for all other social programs. An additional concern is that it is unlikely that elites will endow society with the right kind of UBI in the absence of vigorous, organised demands

from below. A technocratic approach will likely serve the interests of elites, or will be unenforceable.

A few exceptions notwithstanding, UBI has aroused little discussion within China. There are a variety of reasons for this, not least of which has been thirty years of nearly unbroken economic development and job growth. Industries such as manufacturing and construction have absorbed huge volumes of labour, and automation has only just begun chipping away at this growth in employment. Ideologically, UBI has resonances with the state socialist ‘iron rice bowl’, and runs counter to dominant meritocratic discourses that valorise hard work. Advocates of UBI would likely encounter repression, as the state is constitutionally opposed to any politics that could articulate the aspirations of a broad constituency. Given all of this, UBI has not yet gained widespread currency in China, and workers have not put it forward as a demand.

Nonetheless, the moment seems ripe to raise the topic for debate. Economic growth is slowing, **automation is accelerating**, and greater numbers of people are dependent on highly informal, contingent, and irregular forms of work to survive. Minimum wages increased significantly from 2010 until last year, but have more recently been frozen in many provinces. The growing informal workforce does not enjoy minimum wage rights, and even formal workers with a labour contract often have to protest just to have basic laws enforced. Furthermore, the minimum wage has never been a liveable wage, particularly for migrant workers excluded from state-subsidised health care, education, and housing. The contradiction between China’s highly uneven economic geography and localised system of social welfare provision on the one side, and its unified national labour market on the other, is only likely to intensify. UBI cannot be realised without widespread working class support and mobilisation—now is the time to

plant the seed.

## Crucial Questions

There are important details that would need to be worked out for UBI to be effectively implemented, especially in a place as large and complex as China. Crucial questions about how to fund such a program, how much citizens would receive, and the administrative arrangements could determine success or failure. But even in advance of having a perfectly worked out plan, the demand serves an important political purpose: it proposes that all humans have a right to subsist, irrespective of their utility to capital. Particularly given China’s highly fractured welfare regime, the demand could serve to unify people across region, ethnicity, and *hukou* status. If linked to demands for universalising other forms of social protection such as healthcare, education, and housing, it could lay the foundation for meaningful human autonomy from the dictates of the market.

Is the demand for UBI in China utopian? Perhaps. But based on the past two decades of experience, we know for a fact that collective bargaining is a chimera. As China’s wealth and social inequalities yawn ever wider, factories relocate to cheaper locales, automation expunges workers from the labour process, and the old state socialist institutions continue to rot in irrelevance, it is time to change tack. The death of collective bargaining may yet be a gift to China’s workers.

### Eli Friedman

Eli Friedman is an Assistant Professor of International and Comparative Labour at Cornell University and the author of *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* (Cornell University Press, 2014).



## Making Class and Place in Contemporary China

Roberta Zavoretti

*Rural-to-urban migrants in China are often depicted as being poor, uncivilised, and having a lower level of 'human quality' than those with urban household registration. Policy-makers carefully strategise in order to produce rural-to-urban migrants as a homogeneous category. However, the use of this term obscures more than it illuminates, as it homogenises complex social realities.*

In the People's Republic of China the media, official state policies, and propaganda, as well as the policies of market organisations, define rural-to-urban migrants (*nongmingong*) as essentially lacking 'human quality' (*suzhi*). They are depicted as being poor, uncivilised, backwards, and hopelessly bound to their rural roots. In China, the *nongmingong* paradigm also evokes the spectre of Maoist egalitarianism. This implicitly reminds Chinese people that post-Mao inequality should be recognised as the motor of 'development', and that it has allowed people to get rich or, to paraphrase Deng Xiaoping, it has allowed some to 'get rich first'. Western media and academia have largely drawn on the paradigm of the rustic, plain, and hopelessly marginalised *nongmingong*, identifying them with a specifically Chinese 'underclass'. As **Michael Stewart** has observed in his study of the plight of Romany people of Eastern Europe, the use of this term, however, may obscure more than it illuminates in terms of social exclusion, as it homogenises complex social realities.



Migrant workers in Guangdong.  
Photo: CNY Hélène (Flickr)

## Displacements of Class Meanings

Since the 1990s, ethnographers have devoted much attention to the predicament of migrant factory workers in South China. **Pun Ngai**, for example, argues that this group constitutes a new working class whose subordinate position is determined by the interplay of ethnicity, gender, and residence status. These sensitive and influential ethnographies, however, portray the specific experiences of life and labour in Guangdong-based factories, rather than providing a general picture of migrant labour in China. General depictions of China's *nongmingong* as a socially homogeneous group are constantly confronted with the ever-growing heterogeneity and presence of migrants in the labour force. The phenomenon of labour migration in China involves **people who differ** by local origin, employment sector, income, educational level, gender, and age, to mention just a few factors.

In present-day China, the state-sponsored discursive production of migrant labourers as a 'real' and homogeneous social group sustains the promotion of the **hegemonic social model** of an ideally emerging 'middle class'. This trope implies high disposable income and home ownership, as well as publicly recognised professional status, top-level education and the highly valued quality of taste. In other words, it embodies the ability to compete and to choose as a high-quality consumer. Yet the discursive opposition between the *nongmingong* paradigm and the trope of middle classness must be produced without mentioning 'class' (*jieji*), a term that China-based policy, media, and academic production routinely avoid, and replace with the less conflictive term 'social stratum' (*jieceng*). To quote Sherry Ortner, the use of the policy category of *nongmingong* contributes to the continuous '**displacement of class meanings**' into other discursive fields,

such as gender, geographical background, ethnicity, and sexuality, in order to produce a class-based order without mentioning class.

## Household Registration Today

The household registration (*hukou*) system has long allowed administrative institutions to identify rural-born city dwellers as a group. However, following the social and economic changes of the last forty years, as well as the various reforms of *hukou* at the local level, a **debate** has emerged about the link between residence status and the reproduction of social inequality. Following the radical Reform-led changes in urban-based employment and social security provision, the *hukou* system is no longer used to stop rural residents from moving into the cities. Urban residence status is increasingly being **commoditised** through policies linked to the opening up of the housing and employment markets. Four decades of market-oriented policies have brought about a profound redefinition of social relations and a rapid process of **social segmentation** in the countryside as well as in the city.

Some scholars have associated urban *hukou* status with the **idea of 'citizenship'**, thus echoing a larger debate on migration, citizenship, and globalisation. This debate illuminates the dynamics of state-market relations at a global level, while being relevant to China as well. **Saskia Sassen's analysis** of migrant service sector workers in 'global cities' distinguishes between a top end of high-flying 'global managers' and a bottom end of low-status service workers whose existence is the bedrock of the current global economic system. This latter group is denied full citizen rights and is therefore, by definition, vulnerable to exploitation and to specific forms of state policing. Notably, the state's policing role survived the rolling back of nation-states prescribed by the current



Migrant workers in Shanghai.  
Photo: Leniners (Flickr)

neoliberal policy trend. The **neoliberal state** is thus not antagonistic to, but rather complicit with global market forces and transnational institutions. This synergy between state and market in neoliberal times implies an altered idea of the citizen as a self-regulating, self-promoting competitor and consumer, and thereby a noticeable redefinition of the value of citizenship. In this view, Sassen ultimately suggests that citizenship may gradually lose importance in the lives of migrants due to the neoliberal restructuring of state-market relations.

## Governing Inequalities

In post-Mao China the restructuring of state-market relations—and accordingly of the relationships of both state and market with citizens—brought about a **specific form of governance** that reconciles the state's promotion of neoliberal subjectivities with the perpetuation of socialist discursive practices and political structures. The persistence of

the household registration system allows state policy to cast *hukou* status—rather than class, for example—as a proxy for social positionality. While residence status still plays an important role in the definition of social positionality, however, urban residence is gradually ceasing to represent a guarantee of economic and social rights, as Solinger anticipated in **her study** of the work unit in the early 1990s.

Following the gradual dismantlement of the work unit, the state has increasingly made access to resources and services not a matter of residence, but of individual responsibility towards the family. According to this model of governance, each individual should compete to secure jobs and invest sensibly in his/her family's long-term security, and also by participating in market-mediated insurance schemes. In this context, identifying 'urban residence status' with citizenship-based full civil, social and economic rights obscures the role that **equally important variables** play in the formation of social inequality, such as class, connections, gender, education, etc.

These assets may be far better guarantees in terms of securing social and economic rights, including the right to be recognised as an ‘urban citizen’.

## ***Nongmingong* as a Strategic Discourse**

The development of China’s state-led capitalism and the dramatic increase of inequality witnessed in Chinese society has led to the emergence of unprecedented forms of social exclusion—even among the once protected urban residents. During the Maoist era, urban residence status guaranteed the provision of a large array of services, including employment and housing. The main channel for rural to urban mobility was supposed to be higher education. Rural youngsters, however, faced enormous challenges to get a formal education in their villages, and only few determined and lucky ones were able to access universities. Four decades of economic reforms fundamentally changed the nature of social inequality and the role that residence status plays in it. During the pre-reform era, holding urban residence enabled citizens to claim housing (although often of poor quality) from the state; nowadays it is the ability to purchase property on the housing market that allows many, if not all, to access urban residence. Purchasing housing is also a strategy to situate oneself in a highly unequal and segmented society.

Local authorities throughout the country have been gradually **reforming hukou-related provisions**, leading to a de facto commoditisation of residence. However, the *nongmingong* remain a central category in state policy and media discourse. Local policy-makers carefully strategise in order to produce and maintain the social order. Policies that produce rural-to-urban migrants as a homogeneous category remind urban residents that these ‘outsiders’ may constitute a social problem; they also prompt

both rural and urban residents to see each other as competitors rather than as possible allies on the basis of overlapping socio-economic positions. In addition, grouping citizens according to the rural/urban binary allows the state to deflect attention from the increasing complexity and deepening of inequality in the city as in the village.

### **Roberta Zavoretti**

Roberta Zavoretti is the author of *Rural Origins, City Lives. Class and Place in Contemporary China* (University of Washington Press, 2016). Her present research deals with the entanglements of gender and class formation in contemporary urban China.

# FOCUS

**Fare Thee Well,  
Chinese Civil Society?**









funding. Others include NPOs, philanthropic organisations, charities, aid organisations, foundations, cooperatives, social enterprises, and self-help groups. ‘NPO’, in particular, is a legal category employed in relation to specific tax regulations reserved for voluntary associations. The official Chinese category—‘citizen-initiated non-enterprise units’ (*minban feiqiye danwei*)—conveys the same meaning. Because many civil society organisations are actually registered within this category, Chinese scholars, correctly, use ‘NPO’ at least as often as ‘NGO’. In addition to NGOs and NPOs, civil societies are populated by other types of organisations such as interest groups, professional associations, sports clubs, support groups, academic societies, syndicates, cooperatives, and many others.

Furthermore, civil society includes more fluid and less organised forms of associating. Civil societies contain social movements, campaign networks, community assemblies, voluntary projects, and temporary gatherings and forums inspired by public issues. These less formal platforms and networks are even closer to civil society ideals than formal associations are. Besides, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring demonstrated that these non-organised or loosely organised forms of public activity have more potential than registered associations for mobilising social pressure for democratisation.

## Conceptual Mistakes

China studies would benefit from using more specific terms for different types of organisations because different organisations do dissimilar things and fulfil particular attributes of civil society in distinct ways. The use of the term ‘NGO’ for many analytically diverse types of organisations in society suggests that NGOs can do it all just by the virtue of their non-governmentality.

‘NGOs’ are expected to defend interests,

channel developmental aid, give voice to society, produce social services for the needy, protect rights, empower the marginalised, self-regulate industries, offer opportunities for popular participation, advocate liberal causes, and, eventually, demand a democratic political system. This list should make it evident that an individual NGO can hardly do everything and that some kind of division of labour is needed to fulfil these promises of civil society. This division of labour should be recognised and highlighted conceptually.

Conflating too many aspects together blurs analytical clarity and results in misinterpretations. Because terminology makes no distinctions between causes and roles in civil society, conclusions based on one specific type of civil society organisation have been expanded to cover them all. Conceptual confusion has contributed to consensus that Chinese NGOs are mainly service providers. Had service-providing organisations been classified as NPOs, attention could have been focused on political NGO activities as such. In fact, China is no exception. Nowhere in the world do advocacy NGOs make up the majority of civil society organisations.

Currently, analytical approaches that suit one type of civil society organisation are expected to suit them all. It makes complete sense to analyse as an epistemic community a global advocacy network that produces and spreads new knowledge and vocabulary in order to make violence against women a political issue. **Chinese feminist NGOs** campaigning against domestic violence are part of this epistemic community. However, **non-profit service providers** hardly form such an epistemic community.

Orally, I have heard my colleagues suggest even wilder ideas, such as using the One Foundation, a private philanthropic foundation, to discuss NGO advocacy, while still opining that there is no connection between charity and civil society. Using the term ‘NGO’ for all privately established associations makes it non-transparent when

they are philanthropic and when they engage in more political activities, such as policy advocacy and interest promotion.

This type of conceptual confusion has caused a major theoretical confusion in China studies. Only China studies uses the **theory of corporatism** about interest groups for analysing NGOs, as if all associations automatically equal intermediary organisations and interest groups. Those who introduced the term ‘corporatism’ to Chinese studies used it correctly to **analyse labour union activities and business associations**. Corporatism is a form of interest representation delegating regulatory functions to interest groups in civil society. Hence, it has been described as a **mixed mode** of policy-making, private interest government, and self-regulation.

However, NGOs are not the kinds of organisations that could participate in corporatism. They do not represent any sector and cannot make agreements on behalf of a sector. Many NGOs have only a few members. Thus, they are not intermediary organisations able to talk to the state or other interest groups in the name of a coherent social group. Furthermore, corporatism does not contain a comprehensive vision about the regulation of civil society as a whole. Corporatist compacts regulate only the relevant parties, such as relations between the labour and the employers, usually under the auspices of the state. Apart from these interest groups, all corporatist countries have voluntary associations not connected to this system.

## Consequences on the Macro Level

Different types of organisations fulfil the promise of civil society in different ways. NPOs by definition emphasise voluntariness; advocacy NGOs monitor the government and demand a more inclusive political system;

the philanthropic sector solicits non-state resources for causes determined as being important by society; interest groups engage in social mediation of interests. All of these attributes and functions are characteristics or forms of self-organising in society.

Using different terms for various organisations in civil society, and even for diverse visions of civil society, is advisable because these differentiated terms imply different relations to the state. Liberals see that advocacy NGOs offer policy alternatives in the public sphere. In more leftist interpretations, NGOs and social movements epitomise anti-hegemonic organising to demand inclusion and voice for the marginalised. Special-interest groups, which derive from the theory of pluralism rather than of civil society, lobby the government. In corporatism, certain intermediary groups participate in social mediation of interests in civil society, nowadays often through tripartite arrangements involving the state. Non-profit service production is present in most societies, but is theoretically emphasised in the neoliberal strategy for the state to reduce its social service burden by outsourcing services to civil society. Communitarianism wants to reclaim face-to-face social life and cultivate social capital in everyday life. For acquiring social capital, any form of association that brings people together is fine, recreational associations and self-help groups included. In the communitarian vision, associational life is a school for citizenship and political participation. Theoretically speaking, none of these relationships equal categorical separation from the state.

Civil society itself is a vast container of associative activities and ‘**occasional**’ and ‘**episodic publics**’, which together constitute public life. As a whole, it seldom promotes any particular political opinion, supports any particular form of activity, or holds any united stance in regards to the government. In civil society, hegemonic groups associate alongside with anti-hegemonic forces.

Due to different contributions to civil society by different types of associations, just to show that civil society is there tells us little about what is happening within civil society or the political consequences of what is occurring. The developments are neither linear nor similar to associations of all types. For example, after the crushing of the massive protests in Beijing in 1989, the first independent aid organisations rocketed to fame, according to their own understanding because the state media needed positive news in gloomy times. Developments in different fields and between different types of civil society organisations can be contradictory. For example, some Chinese advocacy NGOs I have interviewed find that the opportunities emerging with the growth of the third sector contradict activists' own ideals about NGO work.

## Using Correct Terminology

Conceptual confusion in naming organisations leads to a poor understanding of civil society itself. The use of more accurate terms is not only beneficial for semantic clarity, but makes visible the unevenness of forces and growth trends within civil society.

Hence, it may be advisable to use more confined terms which focus on some aspects of civil society only. 'Associational society' suffices if the purpose is to research formal associational activity without complex networks and causes that make these associations, ideally, contribute to national-level publics and to a community of citizens. Other terms used far too little in China studies are 'third sector', or its equivalents, 'non-profit sector' and 'voluntary sector'. This omission is particularly surprising considering the fast development of this sector in China. Not only would analytical nuance be gained if third sector service production was distinguished from political aspects of civil society, but using these terms

would treat China more equally than current civil society research does. Although Chinese associations are not always fully 'autonomous' (whatever that means), the existence of three separate sectors is evident. China observably has a public sector, a private sector, and a third sector.

Conceptual clarity is needed to understand what happens in Chinese civil society. Consequences are hardly the same if the number of political advocacy groups or the number of third sector service providers grows. These types of organisations answer to very different social needs, have different relations to the government, and contribute differently to politics and democratisation. One part of civil society can be growing even if others are not or even if its growth happens at the expense of another part.

For gaining a more comprehensive, nuanced and meaningful understanding about Chinese civil society, researchers should do what social sciences have always taught them to do: use accurate and exact terminology to specify what is being referred to and what is expected of the research objects.

## Taru Salmenkari

Taru Salmenkari is an Associate Professor at Tallinn University, Estonia. Her research interests focus on civil society and other social spaces in East Asia, specifically in China and Taiwan.

## China's Social Organisations after the Charity Law

Karla W. Simon and Holly Snape

*The passage of the Charity Law in May 2016 has made the legal environment for charities in China more complex. The new Law does represent an initial breakthrough in the transformation of the regulatory system for social organising and, on a deeper level, in the relations between society, government, Party, and market. However, it does not equalise the rules for all Chinese non-profit organisations and, crucially, it does not provide a basic social organisation law applicable to all types of non-profit entities. Why does this matter?*

Many commentators have sought to simplify the legal environment in China after the passage of the **Charity Law** in May 2016. But in our view that Law has made the legal environment more complex. The new Law does represent an initial breakthrough in the transformation of the regulatory system for social organising, and on a deeper level in the relations between society, government, Party, and market. However, it does not equalise the rules for all Chinese non-profit organisations (NPOs), and crucially it does not provide a basic social organisation law applicable to all types of non-profit entities. But why does this matter?

### What is a Social Organisation?

To understand the need for a basic law for social organisations, first we need to get straight what social organisations are, and what charitable organisations are not. ‘Social organisation’ (*shehui zuzhi*) (hereafter SO) can be understood as a kind of blanket term used in official policy for all kinds of non-governmental NPOs. It covers the three legal forms that Chinese citizens are obliged to choose from to establish such an organisation:



*Cishan Fa*, the new Charity Law passed in May 2016.  
Photo: Canyu.org

foundations (*jijinhui*), social groups (*shehui tuanti*), and social service organisations (*shehui fuwu jigou*). At present, it also covers citizen-initiated non-enterprise units (widely known by their abbreviated Chinese name ‘*minfei*’) (*minban feiqiye danwei*). The latter continues to be a legal form even though the Charity Law and the newly modified **General Provisions of Civil Law** (GPCL), passed by the NPC on 15 March 2017, replace it with ‘social service organisations’. There are currently over **three hundred and twenty thousand** *minfei* already with legal status that have been placed in limbo since the passing of the Charity Law. This is partly because the relevant administrative regulations are currently being revised—the **latest draft** of the new *minfei* regulations was released publically in May-June 2016 to solicit comments, but revisions have been ongoing for years and there is uncertainty as to when and what revisions will be made.

The term ‘SO’ also covers a new category—‘charitable organisation’ (*cishan zuzhi*)—created by the Charity Law. While the new GPCL makes the watershed adjustment of dividing legal persons into ‘non-profit’ and ‘for-profit’, charitable organisations are not among the four categories of organisations referred to as NPOs. ‘Charitable organisation’ does not represent a legal category in its own right. Instead it can be thought of as being a hallmark of an SO’s ability to adhere to legal requirements related to accounting, transparency, and so on. To become a charitable organisation, a group must register as one of the legal forms of non-profit SOs, then apply for charitable accreditation. In other words, if we tier the new system (‘new’ after the GPCL), the GPCL is the threshold system, a basic law on SOs would be the second tier (this does not yet exist), and the Charity Law would be the third tier.

The GPCL treats public service institutions (*shiye danwei*), foundations, social groups, and social service organisations as NPOs. The first of these, public service institutions,

differ significantly from the others. They are not SOs, although it is intended that some will morph into them. Born of the socialist system built after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, public service institutions formed the public service arm of the government structure that all but subsumed society. With their deep links to government and their ability to monopolise resources and opportunities, their reform is essential to creating a competitive non-profit market in which diverse and genuinely non-governmental organisations can thrive.

China’s SOs work in education, healthcare, culture, science and technology, and sports and fitness, which are among the many fields covered explicitly in the broad definition of charity used in the Charity Law. But they also work in a vast range of other areas, on labour issues, in advocacy, legal services, and so on, none of which are covered by the Charity Law. While legislators and scholars involved in the legislative process for the Charity Law underlined the ‘big’ definition of charity as a legislative success and an important fundamental feature of the Law, many SOs cannot be squeezed into the definition of charitable organisations, no matter how ‘big’ that definition may be.

In implementation, while the Charity Law offers the opportunity to gain charitable status through accreditation to SOs that do fit its definition, there is already **anecdotal evidence** of SO leaders being reluctant to seek this charitable status for their organisations. Thus, for myriad SOs, there is a gaping legislative hole.

## Breaking Down the Old System of SO Regulation

There is no doubt that the Charity Law is a landmark step toward breaking down the old system for regulating social organising. That system was characterised by a lack of clear boundaries between society, state, and the



market, and the use of administrative powers to meddle in and control SOs combined with a failure to regulate effectively. At the Eighteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, it was **announced** that China was to build ‘an SO system in which government and SOs are separate, powers and obligations are clear, and autonomy is practiced in accordance with law.’ This is a powerful statement of intent, which has often been quoted in **the Chinese literature** to suggest that SOs will gain greater autonomy and be freed from government intervention. The Charity Law, if implemented fully, is a significant move in this direction, to a certain extent delineating boundaries and replacing administrative control with law-based regulation. In this sense, it is an important step in building a new model of governance.

The Charity Law moves toward direct registration for some SOs in a step that is basically a nationwide adoption of rules that had already been put into practice in a large number of provinces. It moves away from ex ante regulation to a system of ex post oversight connected to report filing, transparency, and accountability—placing new demands on organisations in these regards. These responsibilities do not come accompanied automatically with new rights. The Charity Law and its ancillary regulations make the right to fundraise from the public a possibility for SOs that gain charitable organisation status, albeit only through a further process of accreditation. This is a major step in levelling the playing field for some genuinely non-governmental organisations to compete in the non-profit market.

The new Law begins to swap opaque administrative management for a greater reliance on public oversight, and new ways of making this possible, such as with analysis of big data. There continue, however, to be exceptions and strong traces of the old way of thinking about how to achieve regulation. This is apparent for example in the

Provisional Regulations on the Work of SO Registration and Management Bodies Related to Administrative Law Enforcement Using Talks (yuetan) released days after the passage of the Charity Law. Also, interestingly, some of the ancillary regulations that followed the passage of the Charity Law are actually related to all SOs and not just those with charitable organisation status, such as the Provisional Measures on SO Registration and Management Bodies’ Receipt and Handling of Complaints and Accusations passed in August 2016, and the Guiding Opinion on Strengthening and Improving the Management of Pay in SOs issued in July of the same year. This shows the need to regulate all SOs and not just charitable organisations.

## Building a New System of Governance

---

The Charity Law goes further toward enabling SOs to provide public services to the Chinese people in lieu of government. This means that government must delegate and **outsource service provision** through instruments set up at the local level. Some provinces and municipalities will find it more comfortable to do this by **contracts or grants**, while others may wish to use vouchers, and other methods.

Allowing SOs to provide almost everything but the most basic of public services forms one part of the transformation of China’s system of governance. Back in 2013, the **Resolution** of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP announced that the ‘overall aim of comprehensively deepening reform is to push ahead with the modernisation of China’s governance system and capacity for governance.’ But using law as a means to do this will only go so far unless the law itself goes further. A basic law for charities is not enough.

Two areas of reform given attention in Premier Li Keqiang’s 2017 **Government**

**Work Report** illustrate this well. The first is the ‘profound reform of government’ as government steps up efforts to transform its own functions and delegate roles and powers to others. SOs, not just charitable organisations, are a key group to ‘receive’ these new roles and powers. A crucial top level **policy document** issued jointly in 2016 by the general offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council—an unprecedentedly high level document for the non-profit sector—links the government’s transformation of functions directly to SO development. The ‘Two-Office Opinion’ (*liangban yijian*) as this document is known in Chinese, tells us that government will give priority to SOs in purchasing services related to safeguarding people’s welfare, social governance, and industry regulation, and states the need for SOs to make innovations in social governance.

The second, directly related to the first, is the continued reform of public service institutions, the so-called *shiye danwei*. This reform goes back many years, but was underlined early in Xi Jinping’s first term in office as an important task in transforming the functions of government. Looking back at the Resolution of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee, the stated intention was to ‘push publically run public service institutions to clear up their relationships with their managing bodies and de-governmentalise (*qu xingzhenghua*)’ and ‘push those public service institutions in the position to do so to transform into enterprises or SOs.’

What kind of SOs are these public service institutions supposed to transform into? Surely they cannot all be transformed into charities? And yet there is no basic law for SOs. This is not an easy issue as these institutions have complicated relationships with the state, involving a tangled web of different interests. Perhaps an even more knotty issue is that of the mass organisations (*renmin tuanti*), such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions

and the All-China Women’s Federation. But, these are critical reforms. In the market, state-owned enterprise reform is needed to level the playing field for businesses. In the third sector, public service institution reform is needed to allow the fair competition necessary to develop healthy SOs able to take on the roles and responsibilities of a transforming and downsizing government.

Our perspectives on this issue will be expanded on in other papers we intend to publish, the first of which will be in the Nonprofit Policy Forum this summer. Trying to get to grips with this vast area entails time and attention. And there is much that is new, such as the GPCL, which goes into effect on 1 October 2017.

## Holly Snape

Holly Snape is a Foreign Expert at the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s Central Compilation and Translation Bureau.

## Karla W. Simon

Karla W. Simon is a Professor of Law and Affiliated Scholar at the US-Asia Law Institute, New York University School of Law.



## The Rise of Foundations: Hope for Grassroots Civil Society in China?

Jessica C. Teets

*Over the past decade, the not-for-profit foundation sector has grown rapidly in China. This expansion has occurred as international foundations and organisations were withdrawing funding from Chinese grassroots NGOs, causing many civil society leaders to put their hopes into domestic foundations as a way to close their deficit of funding. But can the rise of foundations in China really replace the evaporating foreign grants for domestic NGOs?*

After the new **Regulations on Administration of Foundations** were promulgated in 2004, foundations (*jijinhui*)—that is not-for-profit organisations that promote public benefit undertakings through grants and donations—experienced rapid growth in China. In light of this, **some observers** considered private foundations to be the hope of China’s third sector. The rapid expansion of the foundation sector indeed occurred as international foundations and organisations were withdrawing funding from Chinese grassroots NGOs, and many civil society leaders hoped that foundations would replace the international funding deficit. According to a **report** by the China Development Brief, ‘NGOs cannot rely solely on international foundations. In the future, international foundations will move on to other countries. Even now you see international foundations will not use the majority of their funding on a country like China that is developing so fast.’ In fact, the Global Fund withdrew funding from China in 2013, the Ford Foundation changed its **funding profile** so that less than one third of its funding went to grassroots NGOs, and the new **Foreign NGOs Management Law** passed in 2016 restricts foreign funding of domestic social organisations. In this essay, I explore whether the rise of foundations in China



(Left) Jet Li, movie star and President of the One Foundation; (Right) Supporters of the One Foundation during a charity event. Photo: Wikimedia Commons; One Foundation

could serve as a potential funding source to replace foreign grants for domestic NGOs.

Despite the promise of the rise of Chinese foundations, I find that they function differently from their counterparts in the United States, in that very few foundations make grants to other non-profit organisations. This might be a result of differences in the identity (or missions) of Chinese foundations, or simply due to their relatively early stage of development. Regardless of the reason, since foundations mostly finance their own projects rather than funding other organisations, they often compete with, rather than support, NGOs. If this trend continues after the implementation of the Foreign NGOs Management Law further restricts foreign funding, grassroots NGOs will depend entirely on private donations and government-awarded service contracts for funding. Government contracts do not help grassroots NGOs build capacity in the same way that grants often do, in that most contracts prohibit the use of funding for salaries or restrict other administrative costs to ten percent of the total value of the contract. In order to promote a more diverse and active civil society sector, foundations in China should partner more with grassroots NGOs to build civil-society capacity and replace lost international funding. For example, the Narada Foundation provided ten million yuan to NGOs for **over sixty-two projects** related to disaster relief and to aid reconstruction after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. This undoubtedly had a large impact on the groups receiving funding, and arguably helped them build capacity.

## The Rise of the Foundations Sector in China

Although the first foundations were established in 1981, the rapid expansion of this sector did not occur until after the 2004

Regulations were passed, reducing capital barriers to two million yuan. The earliest were public foundations, mostly funded and managed by the government, and the 2004 Regulations distinguish between ‘public fundraising foundations’ (*gongmu jijinhui*) which are allowed to raise funds publicly, and non-public fundraising foundations (*feigongmu jijinhui*), which are not allowed to raise funds publicly. Before 2004, over eighty percent of all foundations were government-initiated public foundations; but after 2004, private foundations **increased to forty percent**. Although private citizens started some of these private foundations, many are established by companies, especially those in real estate. In 2010, the number of private foundations overtook public ones, and by 2013 the **total number of foundations** reached 3,082—1,753 private and 1,329 public. At the latest count, **5,209 foundations** were registered in China. Education is their most common focus, with fifty-three percent of all foundations focusing on education as a key area. By 2013, there were 422 education foundations, with net assets, income and charitable spending accounting for nearly **half of the total spending** of private foundations.

Why is the emergence of a foundation sector so important? According to **Joel Fleishman**, in the United States, foundations represent ‘the operational secret of America’s civic sector’ by playing ‘the priming role ... in starting new civic-sector organisations, they nurture them into self-sustainability, and provide a continuous supply of social venture capital to the civic sector.’ While almost eighty percent of the foundations in the United States are grant-making, private Chinese foundations mostly operate their own projects; **one study** found that only 1.6 percent of all public foundations and 13.2 percent of all private foundations could be categorised as grant-making. Thus, despite the promise of private foundations becoming ‘the hope of China’s third sector’, very few foundations currently make grants to other



(Left) Xu Yongguang, President of the Narada Foundation and Emeritus Chairman of the China Foundation Center. (Right) Members of the Narada Foundation during a meeting.  
Photos: Narada Foundation

non-profit organisations: 43.5 percent provide some grants to grassroots organisations, but only nine percent are **solely grant-making foundations**. As **Xu Yongguang**, the President of the Narada Foundation and Emeritus Chairman of the China Foundation Center, notes, private foundations that fund NGOs are still in the minority. This results in insufficient support for grassroots NGOs—a situation that will take time to change.

Despite its growing number of wealthy citizens, China has also been criticised for having little charitable giving. For example, the 2015 ‘World Giving Index’ ranked China 144 out of 145. Furthermore, while many foundations have been established, indicating the potential for an expanded charity sector, the China Foundation Ranking—a survey of grassroots Chinese NGOs that looks at their experiences with funders—criticised these organisations for not engaging in promoting the development of the sector or supporting the work of local NGOs. In the words of **Chen Yimei**, the Executive Director of the China Development Brief, ‘[the China Foundation Ranking] helps to make foundations realize that they should treat NGOs with more equality in their partnerships, rather than just assume a top-down relationship.... It’s a critical moment, a time when foundations

are thinking about their operating model and the philanthropy sector is contemplating whether we should have more grant-making foundations.’

## Sources of Change?

The lack of NGO support on the part of Chinese foundations might be due to a number of reasons, including legal impediments, habits of donors and foundations, or just an early stage of development. For example, over **eighty-five percent of foundations** have been registered with low levels of initial capital, under eight million yuan. As regulations and habits change, will we see that more Chinese foundations assume a grant-making role, similar to the foundations in the United States? Or, as these foundations continue to develop, will we see persistence along a unique path of development, i.e. ‘foundations with Chinese characteristics’?

Regarding legal impediments, there is a great deal of change in the regulations governing this sector. The 2004 Regulations promoted the expansion of the foundation sector due to changes in tax laws, as well as the formation of private foundations. More recently, the 2016 Foreign NGOs Law restricts

the ability of international foundations to fund grassroots NGOs in China. This means that Chinese NGOs will need to depend more on domestic sources of funding. In addition to increasing services contracted by local governments, the **2016 Charity Law** allows any registered charity to apply for permission to seek public donations (see also the article by Simon and Snape in the present issue of *Made in China*). This major change might provide more funding sources for NGOs, in addition to funding from foundations which, **Shawn Shieh** notes, is slowly increasing through mechanisms like ‘special funds’ and ‘joint fundraising’. The regulations governing registration and management of the three types of ‘social organisations’ (*shehui zuzhi*) are currently under revision, and **amendments are expected** to be issued related to the Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Associations (1998); the Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Civil Non-Enterprise Institutions (1998); and the Regulations on the Management of Foundations (2004).

In addition to legal changes that seem to encourage philanthropic giving and the expansion of the foundation sector, there is also a shift in habits of both donors and foundations regarding willingness to fund NGOs. This began in 2008 after the Sichuan earthquake. In 2016 the **top one hundred Chinese philanthropists** donated 37.9 billion yuan, up nearly twenty-five percent from the record 30.4 billion yuan given in 2014, underscoring the philanthropic potential in China. Since, as **Xu Yongguang** notes, public foundations control most of the public donations in China, it may be more important to convince these types of foundations to support NGOs, as when the Chinese Red Cross offered **funding to grassroots NGOs** for the first time in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Xu and other foundation leaders are also creating initiatives like the China Private Foundation Forum and the China Foundation Center to encourage greater

cooperation between foundations and NGOs.

These changes in the laws supporting foundations and philanthropy, shifting norms around charitable giving, coupled with the continued development of the foundation sector in China, might encourage foundations to take on more of a grant-making role similar to foundations in the United States. However, becoming a grant-maker is not inevitable, and is instead a decision that the founder must make. In this way, the unique path of development for Chinese foundations might influence whether foundations choose a grant-making mission over a project-based one. As **Shawn Shieh** contends, ‘In our interviews, a surprising number of foundations who did commit to grant-making did so either because their founders had participated in or were in some way influenced by international philanthropic approaches.’ If the American model of grant-making influences the development of Chinese foundations, this would provide an invaluable source of funding for Chinese NGOs, especially as these grants might allow for a stronger focus on capacity building, unlike government service contracts. Although there remain many obstacles, the collaboration between an increasingly vigorous foundation sector and Chinese NGOs would thus end up reinforcing the continued development of each.

## Jessica C. Teets

Jessica C. Teets is an Associate Professor in the Political Science Department at Middlebury College, and Associate Editor of the *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. Her research focuses on governance and policy experimentation in authoritarian regimes, especially the role of civil society.



Photo: Grafoto 123RF

## Meet the State Security:

### Chinese Labour Activists and Their Controllers

Ivan Franceschini

*Chinese labour NGOs have to deal with several state bodies. Still, given their reliance on foreign funding and the political sensitivity of labour issues in China, the agency they have the most dealings with is probably State Security, a secretive branch of the public security apparatus charged with protecting the country from domestic political threats. How do labour activists manage to navigate this challenging terrain?*

A slightly different version of this essay will appear in Jane Golley and Luigi Tomba (eds.), *China Story Yearbook 2016: Control*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2017 (forthcoming).

*O'Brien was a person who could be talked to. Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood. O'Brien had tortured him to the edge of lunacy, and in a little while, it was certain, he would send him to his death. It made no difference. In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates: somewhere or other, although the actual words might never be spoken, there was a place where they could meet and talk.*

George Orwell, 1984

Chinese labour NGOs have to deal with several state bodies. When they are properly registered as social organisations, they fall under the supervision of the departments of civil affairs; in carrying out activities among workers they often find themselves face to face with the police; in addressing workers' grievances they communicate with labour offices. Still, given their reliance on foreign funding and the political sensitivity of labour issues in China, the agency they have the most dealings with is probably the State Security (*guobao*), a secretive branch of the public



security apparatus charged with protecting the country from domestic political threats.

I still remember my first meeting with an agent of the State Security. It was back in December 2010 and I had gone to the office of a relatively little-known labour NGO in the suburbs of Shenzhen to interview some activist there. When I arrived, I found a plump, bespectacled man of around forty waiting for me. Nobody thought about introducing him and he definitely did not make an effort to make himself familiar: for me, he was only ‘Mister Wang’. Sitting in silence in a corner, he wrote down everything I was saying in a notebook. He was a very destabilising presence. Not only did I not know what I should say and what I should avoid, but I was also worried about the potential problems that I was causing for my hosts.

My second brush with the State Security came some time later, and it was much more worrying. While I was back in Italy for a few weeks, some *guobao* officials tracked down one of my former collaborators and interrogated him at length about my activities and whereabouts. I heard much later that they were particularly interested in how I spent money: did I often rent expensive cars? Did I throw money around? He protested that I was so stingy that I always insisted on taking a bus even when doing interviews in some faraway suburb—which was true—and the matter seemed to rest there. In fact, being a foreigner, I had little reason to fear the consequences of these encounters: at worst, they would deny me a visa, or expel me from the country. But that encounter made me wonder about those Chinese labour activists who have to deal with the security forces of the Chinese state on a regular basis. How do they navigate this challenging terrain and manage their affairs?

## Sticks...

---

As with other civil society activists,

invitations to ‘have a cup of tea’ (*he cha*) with State Security officials are one of the most common occurrences in the life of a Chinese labour activist. These encounters generally do not entail physical violence, as they serve a twofold purpose. On the one hand, officials seek information about the activities of labour NGOs—such as recent contacts with foreigners and any new sources of funding. On the other, they use the meetings to warn, inform or remind activists about boundaries that they must not cross if they want to avoid severe repercussions. From this point of view, these gatherings can be considered mutually beneficial: the Chinese party-state gets to remind labour activists that they are under surveillance, while activists benefit from a direct line to the authorities and are able to avoid unnecessary risks. For instance, a labour activist in East China told me that when he set up his organisation ‘[the people from the State Security] came to me several times. First, they established a base line (*dixian*) and a framework (*kuangjia*), warning me to stay within these boundaries. They said that if I did that, all would be good, that I would even be helping the government and the country. If, on the contrary, I crossed that line, for instance by telling foreigners some things that I shouldn’t say about our country or our government... that would have meant real trouble.’

Still, promises are occasionally broken and these encounters do not always go so smoothly. The highest echelons of the party-state tend to consider labour NGOs to be covert agents of ‘hostile foreign forces’ eager to wreak havoc in China, a narrative that has gained much more currency under Xi Jinping. Agents of the State Security may also resort to psychological intimidation and other tactics to persuade labour activists to cease their work. In the past few years, *guobao* officials have repeatedly pressured landlords to evict NGOs from their premises. They have also liaised with other branches of the party-state—such as those in charge of family

planning, tax or social security bureaus, as well as universities, etc.—to harass the activists and their families. They have even intervened behind the scenes to freeze bank accounts or prevent people from leaving the country. As an activist in southern China told me in November 2014: ‘In the past, they didn’t provoke us, nor did we provoke them. Basically, what we had back then could not even be called repression. Usually, they just knew about the existence of our organisation and there were often people from the government who came to talk with us.... But these last few years have been quite different, they have started to harass us directly.’

While life for Chinese labour activists has never been easy, 2016 has been a horrible year for Chinese labour NGOs. As regular readers of *Made in China* will surely know, the latest wave of repression started in December 2015, when the Chinese authorities rounded up dozens of labour activists in Guangdong and then charged five of them for ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt public order’ and ‘embezzlement’. This coincided with a particularly difficult time for Chinese civil society, with the closure of many NGOs working on social issues and the arrest or outright disappearance of several public interest lawyers. On that occasion, the party-state singled out Zeng Feiyang, leader of a pioneering labour NGO in Guangzhou, targeting him in an unprecedented campaign to smear his reputation in the national media. A series of **devastating reports** accused Zeng of embezzling funding illegally obtained from foreigners and of acting out of personal greed, without any regard for the actual interests of the workers. To further destroy his credibility, he was also accused of several instances of sexual misconduct.

Zeng pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years of imprisonment—suspended for four years—for ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt public order’, while two of his colleagues received prison sentences of eighteen months—suspended for two years—for the same crime. Meng Han, another activist in the

same organisation, refused to cooperate. Only after the repeated harassment of his parents, did he finally capitulate and plead guilty, and was sentenced to twenty-one months in jail. Zeng’s admission of guilt at the trial was quoted in full by the **Chinese media**: ‘I apologise for the losses that my criminal actions have caused to companies, society, and workers, and I express deep sorrow for the enormous wounds that I have inflicted on my family. I hope that everybody will take me as a warning and that they will not be fooled by any foreign organisation, [keeping in mind] that they must resort to legal means and channels to protect their rights and interests.’

## ...and Carrots

---

The relationship between labour activists and their controllers is not always so thorny. I still remember my surprise when, about five years ago, an activist I used to know quite well told me that while he was recovering from surgery, the State Security official in charge of his surveillance had visited him in the hospital. Wishing him a speedy recovery, the *guobao* had brought flowers and they had engaged in amicable conversation. The activist explained that, since this official had been his ‘supervisor’ for quite some time, they had almost become friends, regularly exchanging greetings and wishes on all major Chinese festivals.

Such ambiguous feelings are not so surprising considering that some activists are supervised by the same officials for years. These relationships may also offer some perks. As one activist in southern China recently told me: ‘We can say that they are old acquaintances... On the surface they are friendly, but in fact we don’t really know what they think about us, we just tell them what we have to... Sometimes they also offer us some gifts [like shopping coupons], which obviously we don’t accept... But it seems that in recent years they have become poorer, they



don't have as much money as before.'

In some cases, less scrupulous activists have exploited their connections to the State Security as leverage in their relationship with foreign donors. In 2009 and 2010, I was working as a manager on a project in partnership with a local labour NGO that turned out to be quite notorious for its record of fake activities and inflated invoices. When I refused to reimburse an obviously dodgy expenditure, the leader of the NGO hinted that he would say something rather unpleasant about me in his next meeting with the authorities. On another occasion, someone who had been fired from the same organisation decided to seek compensation directly from the foreign donor, threatening to talk with his 'friends' in the security apparatus if he did not get what he wanted.



Peter Dahlin, a Swedish citizen, confessing to inciting opposition to the government on the Chinese national television.

## What next?

Control over NGOs is increasing, and so is repression, and this extends to foreigners who are involved with them. In the past couple of years, a few expats in China with ties to foreign and local NGOs have been detained, with one of them—**Peter Dahlin**, a Swedish citizen—even being paraded on national television in early 2016 to confess to

inciting 'opposition to the government'. But it is Chinese activists who bear the brunt of the ire of the party-state. Labour activists, as well as human rights lawyers, are among those most at risk in the current political climate. Even more worrying than brutal repression is the recent adoption of a whole series of new laws and regulations aimed at bringing civil society under control. Most notably among these is the new Foreign NGOs Law, effective from 1 January 2017, which basically cuts off any access to financial support from abroad for NGOs active in sensitive fields.

Almost all the labour activists that I have encountered in the past few months say that they are willing to keep up the fight, undeterred. At the same time, however, they cannot help but wonder how they will be able to survive as their sources of financial support quickly dry up, and even finding enough money to pay their staff or the rent has become problematic. A few months ago, for the first time in many years of regular encounters with labour activists, I was asked by the leader of a once-prominent NGO now in serious financial troubles to help by sending some funding—'really, any amount counts'—to an account opened under the name of one of his friends. If this is going to be the 'new normal' under Xi Jinping's tenure, then activists might start reminiscing about the golden age when the most that State Security did was to invite you for a cup of tea.

## Ivan Franceschini

Ivan Franceschini is a Marie Curie Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and at the Australian Centre on China in the World working on a project on Chinese labour in a global perspective.



Criminal poster wall in Guangzhou.  
Photo: Børge Bakken.

## Snapshots of China's 'Uncivil Society'

**Børge Bakken**

*Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party has reinvigorated attempts to eradicate detrimental 'Western ideas', resulting in the assertion that civil society is nothing more than a concept, if not a trap set by the West. In practice, however, these attempts by the Chinese government to prevent a civil society from organising itself has led to the emergence of a very different—uncivil—type of society.*

It has now been thirty years since former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gave voice to her famous and equally senseless idea that: 'There is no such thing as society.' In the Chinese Communist Party's quest to eradicate 'Western ideas' from the realm of discourse in China through the 'seven prohibitions' (*qi bu jiang*), Xi Jinping is likewise denying the existence of a society, by arguing that a civil society is nothing but a mere concept, and even a trap set by the West. Thatcher and Xi's ideas are equally senseless and equally ideological in their quest to deny the obvious. While the denial of the very existence of a civil society is not new in China, and Xi Jinping is not the first to have devised this type of propaganda (it was already referred to as a 'trap' by the former Hu Jintao administration), the 'trap theory' today is closely linked to the propaganda surrounding the 'Chinese Dream' (*zhongguo meng*).

## Dreams of Exclusion

In the myth of the American Dream, it was once said that: 'What is good for General Motors is good for America and good for you.' In February 2013, *The People's Daily* made a direct reference to the American Dream when stating that the Chinese Dream promotes the concept that 'what is good for the country will be good for individuals.' While holding to the assumption that the Chinese Dream diverges from its American counterpart, the party-state basically promoted the same myth about the dream's alleged benefits for 'the people'.

Ideological references to 'individualism' and 'collectivism' aside, the respective 'Dreams' are, of course, the dreams of the rich and the beautiful. Like in America, many Chinese fall outside the dream with no chance to 'get rich first', as was the original slogan put forward by Deng Xiaoping. The present propaganda texts emphasise that the

Chinese Dream is the dream of all Chinese, in particular the ‘Dream of the *laobaixing*’—the ‘old one hundred surnames’, or the people themselves. Of course it is all basically an emperor’s dream, and very much as is the case in America, the people who fall outside the grand dream tend to organise themselves in ways outside the legal rules and accepted norms in an attempt to reach the overarching cultural norm of prosperity that ultimately underpins the dream in the first place. In many such cases we are not even speaking of getting rich, but merely of getting by.

The sociologist **Robert Merton** wrote about those excluded by the American Dream as far back as the late 1930s. One of his main findings was precisely that people who could not achieve the dream of personal prosperity by the restricted avenues of legal means and norms would simply try to achieve that aim by illegal means. And why shouldn’t this be the case in a China that has moved from one of the most equal to one of the most unequal societies in the world in just a few decades? According to recent **World Bank statistics**, China has seen the GINI coefficient—the statistical estimate of relative equality and inequality—moving up from an equal 0.21 in 1978 to an estimated highly unequal 0.61. The Chinese people and their ways of organising themselves in the face of this reality is tangible and no imagined theoretical ‘trap’.

## Underworld Countryside

The paradox of trying to prevent a civil society from organising itself from the grassroots in any legal manner has seen the unintended consequence of a rather uncivil type of society emerging from the bottom of contemporary Chinese society. The examples of such phenomena are too many to describe here, but let me take just a couple of examples from my new book *Crime and the Chinese Dream* (forthcoming in February 2018 with Hong Kong University Press).

In the countryside, we see the emergence of a virtual criminal economy among the excluded. Earning money by illegal means has become common as the only way to ‘get rich’ or even just get by, and many parts of the countryside have come to be described as an ‘underworld countryside’. So-called ‘criminal villages’ (*fanzui cun*) and **criminal towns** have emerged as people on the margins are struggling to fulfil the dream of relative prosperity in the only way available to them. In Fang Village in the south-east, so-called ‘cake-uncles’ (*bingshu*) are running grand scams by carrying out sales with falsified account books—extending their fraudulent activities across China and making the village prosperous. The new mansions in the village are all built and owned by the fraudsters. The village girls all want to marry a ‘cake-uncle’ instead of a toiling peasant. The story is one where the village struggled with all kinds of legal means to gain prosperity before they found their criminal and profitable trade. Fang Village is not alone.

A map of criminal villages in China shows a diversity of criminal activities from fraud, organised large-scale shoplifting, car theft, and burglary. In one much publicised example, a robbery village in Guangxi specialised in hand-cutting as a means of creating chaos and then utilised that chaos to rob people in the panic after their blood-letting attacks. The village robbers typically attacked crowded places like train stations or other locations where many people had gathered. The culprits then robbed and fled in the mayhem created by the incident. Other examples we can read about include drug-producing villages where the whole local economy is based on drug production and transportation, typically in poor provinces like Yunnan and Guangxi in the south-western drug belt areas. There are also weapon-making villages trading in illegal firearms. The list of criminal entrepreneurialism is diverse and wide ranging.

I have recently been involved in a project

that looks at child kidnapping. The project has identified villages that base their local economy on the kidnapping of children for profit. We found that the children are typically under three years of age, and that there is a clear ‘division of labour’ among traffickers. The last link in the on-the-spot act of kidnapping is often an old woman who may look like the grandmother of the screaming kidnapped child, not creating any suspicion about the crime being committed. After the kidnapping, other perpetrators stand for the storage, transport, and final sale of the kids. The entire process is extremely well organised, with the police involved occupied looking in other directions. In this example it is worth noting that impunity is the rule for the kidnapers, and that the civil society occupied with organising and petitioning activities among parents is cracked down upon far more readily and effectively than the ‘uncivil’ organisations and networks in the criminal villages. The few solved child-kidnapping cases are shown on a special national TV show as ‘proof’ of the effectiveness of the police. Parents, however, are not able to have the TV station run any unsolved cases, as the show only allows happy stories to be aired.

## Criminal Advertisement

A snapshot from the ‘uncivil’ reality of the cities can be illustrated by a short stroll over a narrow footbridge in Guangzhou. I counted no less than two hundred and fifty illegal posters and stickers offering everything from false documents and stolen goods, to sexual scams and job ads for prostitutes. This is typical for many public spaces in the city—in the outlying rural areas, the suburbs, and the central business districts. All posters, stickers and painted messages come with a mobile phone number that is impossible to trace by the police, and the high-ranking policemen I spoke with said they do nothing about this

unless there is a genuine complaint from the public, and even then is there is not much that can be done. The regular police even blame the urban management teams (*chengguan*) for being responsible for the criminal posters problem. The *chengguan* on their side believe that it is the duty of the police to take down the posters, so they simply let it pass and refuse to do anything about the problem. The uncivil society, thus, has free advertisement walls all over the city and with a nearly one hundred percent chance of impunity.

If the Cultural Revolution had its ‘big character posters’ (*dazibao*), and the late 1970s and early 1980s had their ‘democracy walls’ (*minzhu qiang*), the Chinese Dream era has its own criminal poster walls (as well as bridges and all kinds of public spaces) with free ads for criminal activity. Such posters more or less dominate many cities in China today, and this kind of ‘uncivil society’ is allowed to spread. The walls are typically plastered with private commercial posters, job ads, and all kinds of announcements, legal and illegal alike. On many walls, recruitment posters for the army and the brothels stand side by side. The picture that accompanies this article shows several typical criminal posters, like the frequently displayed big red poster ads for recruiting male money boys and female prostitutes (concealed with inventive ‘job descriptions’ such as ‘secretary’, ‘PR-consultant’, ‘service worker’, ‘housemaid’ etc.). The job categories are easily recognised by the people in question as describing different forms of prostitution with promised earnings of up to sixty thousand yuan per month.

Another poster at the bottom left of the photo pictures a beautiful twenty-nine-year-old woman accompanied by a scam story of an unhappy marriage and a rich husband’s accident leading to the couple not being able to have a child. Half a million yuan (!) is promised to the person who can make her pregnant (after paying a ‘small fee’ of one thousand and two hundred yuan to the

couple's alleged lawyer). My colleague who speaks Cantonese with a northern accent phoned the number, met a woman on the line, and set up an appointment to meet her alleged lawyer at a hotel lobby the next day. He never went, but the scam became clear to us. The 'lawyer' would disappear as soon as the fee was paid. I asked a policeman if people really buy this scam, and he confirmed that many do, and that they never receive any complaints because the betrayed 'inseminator' never dares come to the police with his foolish mistake. This type of scam has almost no chance of being targeted by the police, and this is well known among the perpetrators.

## Uncivil Society Out of Control

Capitalism has come to China in the grand package of a Chinese Dream, and the crimes that follow are covered up by massively falsified crime statistics. According to **data gathered** a couple of years ago, in Guangzhou alone the real numbers of crime known to the police are falsified down to 2.5 percent in the official statistics, while 97.5 percent is concealed to the public. The falsification of numbers concerns petty crime as well as serious violent crime. The government is no longer fully in control of crime and 'uncivil' entrepreneurialism, but they care more about controlling the alleged 'trap' of civil society. In short, petitioning is more important to control than kidnapping.

This situation recalls what Marx and Engels wrote in their *Communist Manifesto* about bourgeois society—that it is 'like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'. Both economies and norms change in this spiral of capitalist economic development (with Chinese characteristics), giving rise to 'uncivil' forms of entrepreneurialism. In such a whirlwind, the 'nether world' in Marx and Engels' account may well translate into

the 'uncivil society' shown in the criminal villages in the countryside and the criminal posters on the city walls.

### Børge Bakken

Børge Bakken has worked at Oslo University, Copenhagen University, Harvard, Ludwig Maximilian Munich University, Hong Kong University, and the Australian National University. He has written extensively on sociological and criminological issues in China. Among his books are *The Exemplary Society* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Crime and the Chinese Dream* (Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming in 2017).





# WINDOW ON ASIA

—  
Myanmar





Protest against the Myitsone Dam in Myanmar.  
Photo: AK Rockefeller (Flickr)

## Burmese Civil Society Challenges China's Development Assistance in Myanmar

Jennifer Y. J. Hsu

*China and Myanmar have been economic partners and allies for a long time. But this partnership is now being challenged by Myanmar's democratisation process. Although nascent, Burmese civil society has shown it is ready to actively contest the legitimacy of China's various development and commercial interests in this new democracy.*

The development landscape is shifting. China's emergence as a non-traditional development donor is challenging traditional donor countries that are part of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Development Cooperation (OECD), such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. After many years of ambivalence, Beijing is renewing its engagement with its Southeast Asian neighbours in trade and development cooperation, a shift predicated not only upon the need for **China to secure its energy supplies** as the Chinese economy continues to expand, but also on the potential economic growth of these neighbouring countries, with their cheap labour and growing middle classes. Southeast Asia represents a market of six hundred million people for Chinese goods and services—a potentially significant boon for the slowing Chinese economy. Among these countries, since its transition to a civil government, Myanmar has had one of the highest growth rates in the region, exceeding seven percent per annum, a development that has been heavily driven by foreign direct investment.

From a developmental perspective, Chinese aid and development assistance are nothing new, but over the years these instruments have shifted from being driven by ideology, as during the Maoist era, to a much more flexible and pragmatic approach. According to a **recent report** by the Asia Foundation, Chinese development assistance currently focuses on non-interference, mutual benefit, infrastructure-led growth, and demand-driven cooperation. In Southeast Asia, China has provided a full range of assistance, including soft loans, debt cancellation, and the extension of lines of traditional credit. Moreover, the Chinese state has actively assisted and invested in the infrastructure of Southeast Asian nations. In the case of Myanmar, China has been a long-term economic partner and ally, but this partnership is now being challenged by **Myanmar's**



**democratisation process.** Based on fieldwork observations conducted in Myanmar in the summer of 2016, in this article I first examine the role of Chinese development assistance and investments in the country's transition, I then move on to consider how this role is perceived and challenged by an emerging but active Burmese civil society. While nascent, Burmese civil society has indeed shown that it is ready to actively contest the legitimacy of China's various development and commercial interests in this new democracy.

## China and Myanmar: A Strained Relationship

---

China is Myanmar's most significant and largest investor to date. China's relationship with Myanmar is primarily driven by Beijing's need to secure resources for its own development, as the country offers China a wealth of natural resources and is strategically located. Gas and oil routed through the Indian Ocean into Myanmar and on to China reduce Chinese dependence on the Middle East and on the unsafe passage through the Malacca Strait. While the expansion of the Chinese economy has slowed considerably, the desire to sustain growth demands that China secure not only resources, but also a market for its goods. The Burmese economy is forecast to grow at **8.6 percent in 2016**, with similar projections for 2017, presenting a significant opportunity for Chinese manufacturers.

For this reason, much of China's development assistance remains framed as economic cooperation, a situation that has failed to win the support of Burmese society. Large-scale projects such as the Myitstone Dam, the Letpadaung Copper Mine, and the Kyaukphyu Gas Pipeline have drawn the attention and opposition of civil society representatives. Chinese companies, such as the China Power Investment (CPI) have been accused of not providing enough safeguards against environmental damage,

nor appropriate compensation to affected communities. The Irrawaddy River, where the dam was to be located, is seen as the birthplace of the nation. Given the Irrawaddy's cultural and historical significance, the lack of consultation prior to the initiation of the dam project further strengthened the claims against CPI. In addition, **accusations** of land grabs and contracts that favour the Chinese have increased **anti-Chinese sentiments** in Myanmar.

The Chinese are seeking to make amends. The Chinese Embassy in Yangon has instructed all state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating in Myanmar to undertake corporate social responsibility training. The China National Petroleum Corporation, the SOE responsible for the Kyaukphyu pipeline, has established a Pipeline Friendship Association in Myanmar to address local grievances that pertain to the pipeline. These types of actions have proved insufficient to address continuing concerns and the demands of Burmese civil society. For instance, a 2016 delegation from CPI that was accompanied by the Chinese Ambassador Hong Liang to Myitkyina township, Kachin state, to meet with local officials and residents **attracted protests**; while the restarting of the Letpadaung mine elicited outcry and further **protests in May 2016**. The inability of the Chinese to win over Burmese support is an indication of not only a failure to address the asymmetry in its engagement with Myanmar, but also its failure to recognise the importance of the country's increasingly active civil society.

## The Resistance of Local Actors

---

As a long-standing partner of Myanmar during its years of international isolation, China's engagement with the country has reached a critical juncture. Now more than ever, Beijing needs to re-frame its partnership to incorporate a new development component,

one that seeks to address the existing asymmetry and provides opportunities for all stakeholders to be part of the development, notably civil society groups and communities that are affected by Chinese economic interests. Indeed, Chinese involvement in Myanmar must be seen in the context of the country's political transition, which is providing new space and opportunities for local civil society.

Burmese civil society stakeholders have pushed their country's new democratic government for accountability and transparency in its deals with the Chinese, particularly considering that the Chinese authorities have in the past supported the military dictatorship. Moreover, while the Chinese government, NGOs, and investors have the capacity to deliver sustainable development and to be effective development partners with the Burmese, the asymmetrical nature of the Sino-Burmese partnership—firmly tilted in favour of China's economic, political, and strategic interests—is starting to change. In re-engaging with the world and re-establishing its international connections, Myanmar is diversifying its sources of economic, social, and political support, thereby reducing its dependency on China. In addition, China's own democratic deficits are significant impediments to its overseas development assistance policies, especially considering the fact that the Chinese authorities prefer government-to-government development cooperation. This form of partnership often illuminates China's democratic deficiencies rather than hiding them and is, therefore, hardly acceptable to local Burmese civil society.

As mentioned above, the activism of Myanmar's emerging civil society has already had an impact on Chinese economic interests in the country. The Thein Sein government's decision to shelve the **China-backed Myitsone Dam** on the Irrawaddy River in late 2011 is generally attributed to opposition from **Burmese civil society**, based on worries

about irreversible environmental damage and displacement of communities. Fieldwork interviews in 2016 with Burmese civil society representatives engaged across a number of fields—from corporate social responsibility (CSR) to political transition—suggest that there is a tendency to look towards the West, in particular the United States, for development assistance. This is principally out of concern for China's top-down approach to economic development cooperation. Interviews with people working in the Burmese NGO sector suggest that the Chinese state—in its various guises—is perceived as lacking the know-how and skills to effectively engage with Burmese civil society, a perception that is also jeopardising China's legitimacy and its status as an economic and development partner. According to an NGO representative working in Myanmar's CSR sector, campaigns to improve the Chinese image and attempts to engage with Burmese civil society in the wake of large-scale protests against a number of Chinese-backed projects have, thus far, proved weak and ineffectual. For example, despite providing **public access** to its Environment Management Plan for the Letpadaung Copper Mine, Wanbao, the Chinese mining company that owns the site, was not able to quell protests from local villagers claiming environmental damage and inadequate compensation.

Finally, another factor that should not be discounted in the relationship between the two countries is that Chinese economic interests in Myanmar are threatened by the ethnic conflicts taking place across the Yunnan border. For example, the conflict between the ethnic Kachin and the Burmese army threatens not only Chinese internal security—with some **sixty thousand displaced people** entering Yunnan since conflict intensified in early 2015—but also China's strategic oil and gas supply pipelines.



## Looking Forward

China's political culture has always shaped the manner in which Beijing has engaged with other nations. This has entailed a strong preference for state-to-state relationships. Myanmar's reforms have opened up new space for local civil society actors and the media, all of which have become roadblocks for furthering Chinese interests in the country. China was slow to recognise the influence of civil society on domestic politics and Burmese development, and Burmese civil society representatives have grown increasingly sceptical regarding Chinese claims of mutual benefit and South-South cooperation. Still, although it has little to offer in terms of values associated with development, such as good governance and accountability, China does have a significant development experience to share, having lifted over seven hundred million people out of poverty in just two decades. And yet, in spite of this, both domestic and international civil society activists working in Myanmar question the extent to which the Chinese state and its various stakeholders will be of assistance to their country. Extrapolating further, we can also speculate that, if and when Chinese civil society stakeholders begin to play a bigger role in delivering development assistance to Myanmar, questions will surely abound as to the **autonomy of Chinese civil society organisations** from the party-state. All of this is likely to continue to restrain Chinese economic and development cooperation in Myanmar.

Nevertheless, China has started to acknowledge the importance of engaging civil society actors to deepen cooperation with its neighbours. As a mechanism for building trust and cooperation at the regional level, China and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations established a high-level, people-to-people dialogue, involving civil society representatives from across the

region. The **first meeting** was held in 2013 in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and was organised by the China NGO Network for International Exchange (CNIE), an umbrella organisation for China's leading non-profit social organisations. The **second meeting**, held in 2015 in Nusa Dua, Bali, paved the way for the establishment of an NGO network responsible for organising future rotating dialogues. Moreover, the **China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation**, one of China's largest NGOs, opened its second international office in Yangon in August 2016. Such measures suggest that a possible re-framing of Chinese development efforts is underway. This, in the future, may open up greater space for both Chinese and Burmese NGOs to cooperate on development projects and, thus, build trust and goodwill between the two countries.

### Jennifer Y. J. Hsu

Jennifer Hsu is a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include state-society and state-NGO relations, the growth of civil society in China, and the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. She is the author of *State of Exchange: Migrant NGOs and the Chinese Government* (University of British Columbia Press, 2017).



# WORK OF ARTS

---

## Losing the World

After the Moose Have Gone Away





## Losing the World

### After the Moose Have Gone Away

#### Christian Sorace

*Sometimes the plans to improve people's lives end up destroying them. When the Chinese government moved the nomadic Evenki people from the forests into urban settlements and confiscated their hunting rifles, they took away their livelihood. Gu Tao's film *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* documents how people survive, or slowly destroy themselves, after the catastrophe of losing their world.*

*Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world*

Jean-Paul Sartre

Gu Tao's documentary *The Last Moose of Aoluguya (an da han)* (2013) follows the life of Weijia, an Evenki hunter, artist, and alcoholic who **Gu Tao described** as 'the most lonely person in the forest'. Traditionally, the Evenki, also known as *Tungus* in Russia, are a culture of nomadic hunters that span the trans-Baikal region, Siberian taiga, Mongolia, and the forests of northern China. Although mainly concentrated in Russia, in the People's Republic of China there were 30,875 Evenkis as of the 2010 population census. In the forests of China's Great Xing'an ling Mountains (*daxing anling*), the lives of the Evenki have revolved around moose hunting and reindeer herding.

In 2003, the Chinese government relocated the Evenki from the forest into new settlements in nearby townships as part of a broader campaign of 'ecological migration' (*shengtai wenming*). The relocation policy hoped to accomplish the interrelated goals of protecting nature, while providing

indigenous people with new apartments and urban amenities, folded into a larger plan of accelerating regional economic development. As part of the urbanisation process, the government confiscated the Evenkis' hunting rifles and banned hunting. For this reason, Weijia asserts that the Evenki hunter lifestyle is guilty before the law that confiscated their guns and evicted them from their land: 'I heard about four young hunters who got arrested for hunting. That was the end of our culture. They put us on trial. Guilty! Just drink myself to death. We'll just have to get used to it.' Weijia's life occupies the ambivalent no man's land between dying and adaptation.

Not only are the Evenkis prohibited from hunting, there are no longer any moose to hunt. The local moose population has either been killed by illegal poachers (Weijia insinuates that the poachers are mainly Han Chinese) or migrated elsewhere due to deforestation. In the movie, Weijia and his friend Mao Xia search the forest in vain for signs of moose. All they find are sun bleached moose bones and rusted poacher traps, but no trace of living presence.



Drawing by Gu Tao, charcoal pencil on bark, 2015

The disappearance of the moose means extinction for the Evenki. Uprooted from the forest, the Evenki culture is preserved only in the form of cultural representations and museum artefacts. In the movie, we see



Weijia watching propaganda performances and television documentaries celebrating the vitality and economic development of the Evenki culture under Communist Party leadership.

## Blood Relatives

We can learn about the Evenki's contemporary predicament by looking across the ocean at the history of genocide and sedenterisation of Native American nations in the United States. Despite a prevalent impulse among China watchers to blame China for all of the world's human rights violations, the destruction of indigenous culture is not particularly Chinese, Maoist, or authoritarian. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tyranny of progress is only one variant of settler colonialism. In the United States, the genocide of the Native Americans was arguably more extensive, violent, and merciless than the complex and uneven histories of the CCP's policies and treatment of its minority populations, which were at least formulated under the banner of socialist equality.

The eradication of indigenous cultures also belongs to the histories of the moose in the forests of Hulunbuir and bison in the Dakota plains. In her book *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten*, historian Kate Brown argues: 'The story of Custer and his defeat by Crazy Horse at the battle of Little Big Horn is well known. So, too, are his infamous trips through the plains shooting bison and leaving the stench of rotting flesh . . . Custer was one of a number of Americans who felt that the extermination of the buffalo would inspire the Indians to settle down.' For pastoral nations like the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Crow, the end of the buffalo meant the end of their way of life. In the haunting words of Plenty Coup, the leader of the Crow Nation at the end of nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries: 'But when the

buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.'

In his book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, philosopher Jonathan Lear interprets Plenty Coup's statement to mean that life for the Crow went on after the buffalo died, but there was no longer a world in which actions could be ascribed familiar meanings. As Lear explains, the same action that meant one thing in the past (display of martial valour and courage) meant an entirely different thing on the reservation (an illegal and barbaric practice). The only bridge between these two worlds is one of memory and loss. Similarly, life for the Evenki continues in the settlements, and Weijia's life continued when he moved to Hainan to pursue a marriage based on an advertisement his mother placed in the newspaper, but it is life without a world.

The end of the world does not mean the end of state violence because new and counter-worlds will always be born from the memories of the past. As I write this essay in February 2017, the United States federal government, US Army Corps of Engineers, in tandem with oil corporations are preparing to build an oil pipeline (Dakota Access Pipeline or DAPL) through the **Standing Rock Sioux Reservation's sacred burial grounds** despite massive and ongoing protests and environmental concerns. At an earlier stage in the conflict in November 2016, militarised police deployed tear gas, rubber bullets, concussion grenades, and water cannons on peaceful protestors and encampments of 'water protectors' composed of over two hundred indigenous nations. In China, **Inner Mongolian grasslands are being devastated in part due to extensive coal mining operations**. Increasingly frequent protests by ethnic Mongolians over the loss of traditional grazing lands are inevitably greeted by riot police.



## Alcoholism

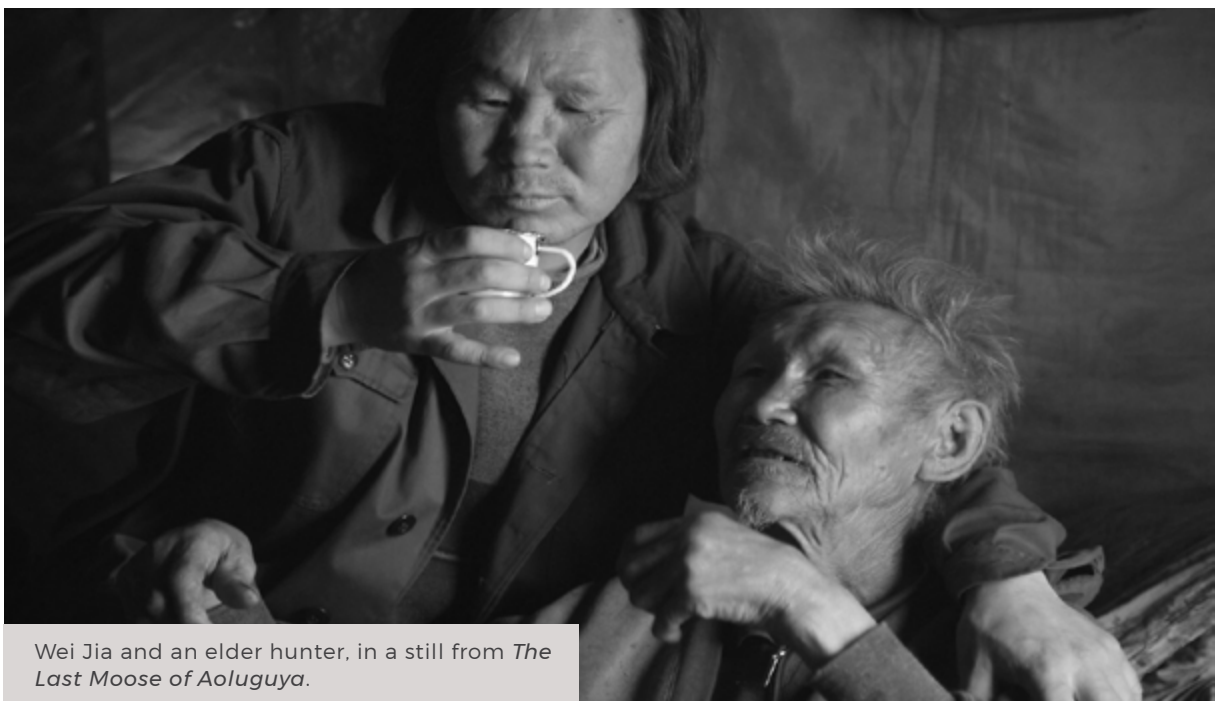
The possibility of rebuilding a new world requires political resistance, organisation, and hope, without which there is despair. Unable to maintain their traditional livelihoods, marooned in townships with bleak economic prospects, many Evenkis became alcoholics. **In an interview**, Gu Tao stated that drinking was ‘everywhere in the forest. Everybody was drinking, so much that alcohol seemed to permeate the air. I wanted to capture this aspect of their lives, and the accompanying loss of their traditional way of life. This loss caused suffering which is the reason they turned to alcohol.’

Weijia is an alcoholic because his world is over. In the film, he is clearly, and in his own words, ‘drinking himself to death’. Aware that he is destroying himself, he embraces the decision as the only one available to him in lieu of a world and out of fidelity to the past. ‘The guns were gone after we moved, we had nothing to do, so we started drinking. Drinking heavily. People started dying. Already eight of us have died. Eight of us have fucking died

from drink. We’re lost. Our culture, our guns are gone. So we drink.’

Drinking in this context is not a response to boredom. Weijia is indeed busy throughout the film. He tends to reindeer, gets married, writes poetry, half-heartedly attends an English lesson. Although being busy keeps him alive, it does not relieve him from the knowledge, which is a permanent ache and void, that his world no longer exists. It is also clear from the film that drinking does not numb the pain but in fact heightens it. Weijia confesses that if he does not drink, he is unable to speak—which is to say, drinking immerses him in reverie about the past, where speech is meaningful.

Weijia is not drinking to forget; he is drinking to remember. His drunkenness prevents him from being reconciled to the world being thrust upon him. He is frequently kicked out of the settlement for drinking; he is unable to sustain his marriage; because of drinking, his new projects are doomed to failure. In this light, alcoholism becomes a self-conscious mode of sabotage and refusal of a world in which he is a stranger. ‘To be fucking honest, it’s like those Japanese samurai [author’s



Wei Jia and an elder hunter, in a still from *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*.

note: he makes a cutting sound to mimic the practice of seppuku] ... Let me just say it straight, to lose your culture, it's like losing everything and so we begin to wither away. Drink! Just drink yourself to death.' These are not incoherent ramblings but clear-sighted insights into the choices available to him (perhaps it is when we believe we are sober that we can trick ourselves more effectively into accepting the unacceptable). For Weijia, to stop drinking would betray the past.

Weijia's alcoholism is neither romantic nor pathological. As he puts it, 'I'm not afraid of being poisoned, that's what drinking is. If you don't get poisoned, then what's the point?' Following Lear's argument about the Crow, I suggest that Weijia's self-destructiveness is not psychological, but an objective assessment of his (non)place in the world: 'We live in a modern society now, it's swallowed us up. Our hunting culture is disappearing. The society is becoming industrialised, and turning the world into a miserable place. If the police of a civilised world, shot at me, then I'd say, "Go ahead, shoot!"' The wish to die is not a rejection of himself but of the world on offer. It seems that Weijia is not only mourning the loss of his traditional lifestyle but is also cognizant of the violence of the world promised to replace it. What kind of world is he being asked to join?

## On Extinction and Being Human

Why is the fate of nomadic, reindeer people in the remote regions of Inner Mongolia so haunting? When we watch Weijia's self-destruction on the screen, we see people that we know, including our own future possibilities. Gu Tao rejects the label of being an 'anthropological filmmaker', I suspect in part because Weijia's situation of living amidst cultural collapse belongs to the human condition. Undoubtedly, the world is full of cultural plurality, textures and contexts,

meanings and misunderstandings, norms and transgressions, all of which require detailed attention to, and knowledge of, the local. But details are not discrete fortresses impervious to collapse—they are fragile dwellings built on the edge of a void.

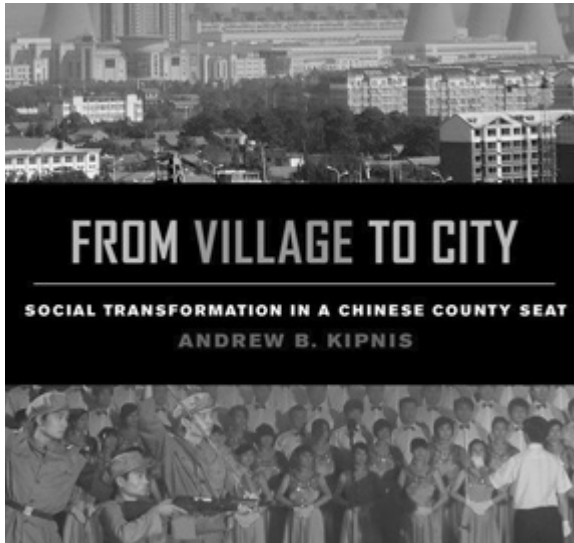
No one expects that their world will disappear. The possibility that the world can collapse is probably the kind of knowledge that Nietzsche suggested we must forget to remain alive. The cultural extinction of the Evenki is an extreme example, but collapses of different scales and intensities are happening all the time. When a factory shuttered in a remote town due to capital flight and takes people's prospects at a better life along with it, is this not also a form of world collapse? When residents must permanently evacuate their villages in Alaska because of climate change, do their worlds remain intact apart from the place that held them together? When Weijia is living in China's southern island of Hainan, he remarks, 'I'm not interested in the sites here. The big hotels... that has nothing to do with me. I'm just interested in local villages' and their customs and ways of life. Perhaps his motivation to research other villages was driven by a sensibility of camaraderie through the shared experience of loss and precarity. Perhaps he wanted to find other possibilities for coping with extinction.

## Christian Sorace

Christian Sorace is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World, the Australian National University. He is the author of *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, scheduled for publication with Cornell University Press in Spring 2017. He is currently conducting research on the urbanisation of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia, China, and ger districts in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

# ACADEMIC WATCH

## Andrew Kipnis on From Village to City



Andrew Kipnis' new book, *From Village to City: Social Transformation in Chinese County Seat* (University of California Press, 2016), paints an extraordinary portrait of Zouping, a county in Shandong province, challenging our current understandings of modernity and putting forward a new theory of urbanisation. For our Academic Watch, we spoke with the author.

### *Why did you choose to study Zouping?*

ANDREW KIPNIS: I originally went to Zouping county in 1988 when I was a PhD student, before I had even decided exactly what project I would complete for my PhD degree. I had just finished my preliminary exams and was studying Chinese at Nanjing University, when one of my PhD supervisors was given an opportunity to do a project in a village in Zouping county and invited me to tag along as research assistant. At that time, Zouping had been selected by Chinese officials as a county where American social

scientists could do research, so I did not really choose the place, it was my only option. But since I started doing research there, I established relationships with many people and found the research environment good. My discussions with researchers working in other parts of the country led me to conclude that, though Zouping was a place that had been approved by the Chinese government for researchers, it was not terribly different from many other parts of the country. Over the years, as I have read about and visited many other parts of China, I gained a firm grasp on the ways in which Zouping differs from and resembles other places. After my dissertation research, I continued to return to Zouping as often as I could. From 1999 onwards, most of my time was spent in the county seat. I observed the rapid urbanisation that took place there and thought that I should write a book about it.

### *How do places like Zouping challenge our current understandings of modernity?*

AK: The term modernity means different things to different theorists. In the book, I summarise theories of modernity by grouping them into three types. The first is classical theories, which portray modernity as an all-encompassing historical rupture that occurs when predominantly agricultural societies urbanise and industrialise. Next comes second-wave theories, which observe shifts that occur after industrialisation and urbanisation in Europe, and posit ever newer 'modernities' to go with these changes. Third are cyclical theories of modernity, which postulate that any place in the world where capital is accumulating will feel modern, that features of modernity, like a belief in progress and planning, move from place to place as capital shifts around the world. In the discipline of anthropology, most theorists abandoned the concept of modernity because debates over the term had become too convoluted and criticisms of the expression too numerous. But in observing Zouping's relatively simultaneous industrialisation, urbanisation, demographic

transition, consumer revolution, and increases in educational and bureaucratic structures, I felt drawn by the term's comparative strengths. While I agreed with many of the criticisms, I felt that classic modernisation theory especially raised important questions for understanding Zouping's social transformations. So I strived to develop a theory of modernisation that addressed some of the criticisms without abandoning the term altogether. Within anthropology, many theorists simply did not discuss places like Zouping, which were undergoing many of the social transformations associated with a classic modernisation. In the field of China studies, most of the literature on urbanisation focuses on the Pearl River Delta, Shanghai, and Beijing. But Shanghai and Beijing, like the other major cities in China, are de-industrialising, and the Pearl River Delta urbanised and industrialised in a relatively peculiar manner—it relied primarily on foreign capital and workers from other provinces while the local rural population became a privileged rentier class. In Zouping, there was the combination of industrialisation, primarily local capital, and a local rural population that became a proletariat. This type of urbanisation has not received the attention that it deserves.

***In the introduction, you quote from Marcel Proust's Recherche. What does Proust have to tell us about a Chinese rural county today?***

AK: Quoting Proust is one of the ways in which I bring the literature on classic modernisation into the discussion. Proust wrote about a time when the social transformations associated with industrialisation and urbanisation in France were proceeding rapidly. He focused on the topic of memory in relation to these transformations. I wanted to raise the topic of memory because it is an important aspect of social transformation. What are the social and psychological functions of memory in a place undergoing rapid technological, social, and economic change? In the particular passage I quote, Proust links memory to both the psychological construction of one's ego and the

place of concrete technologies from the past in the process of constructing the ego. In the book, I raise questions about the place of nostalgia for bygone technologies and modes of life among Zouping's residents.

***One of the central concepts that you introduce in the book is that of 'recombinant' urbanisation. What do you mean by that?***

AK: My use of the word recombinant is a way of emphasising a central fact about all forms of transformation—that transformation includes the recycling and recombination of existing parts of a given entity, along with the integration of new items. Too often, classic theories of modernity wrote about social transformations as if they were acts of replacement instead of transformation. Instead of saying that industrial/urban society was built out of bits and pieces of rural/agricultural society, they tended to rely on tropes of complete contrast which implied that industrial/urban society was completely different to the past societies out of which it developed. Just think of the children's toy—the Transformers. You can transform them from a human-like robot into a car, truck or airplane by twisting the individual bits. A proper transformation requires the coordinated shifting of all of the original pieces. But no part is simply replaced by something else and many of the properties of the transformed entity are still marked by their original form. Now the analogy of the toy has its limit. With the toy there are no new pieces incorporated from the outside and the entire process is consciously guided by the person playing with the toy. But still, this is a better understanding of social transformation than one that implies the simple replacement of one thing by another. My interest in memory—individual, social, and political—relates to my interest in processes of social transformation. Memory is one of the ways in which slices of the past are recombined to construct the present.

# MADE IN CHINA



*A Quarterly on Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights*

中(美)全球研究中心

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON  
CHINA IN THE WORLD



CHIN*O*IRESI*E*

mismatched shards of China



