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# Journal OF THE Royal Asiatic Society China

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DEPUTY EDITOR  
Kate Munro

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## CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor of the Journal invites submission of original unpublished scholarly articles, essays and book reviews on the religion and philosophy, art and architecture, archaeology, anthropology, environment, and current affairs of China and Greater Asia. Books sent for review will be donated to the Royal Asiatic Society China Library. Contributors will receive copies of the Journal.

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

WHAT A JOY it is to bring you this year's eclectic selection of essays, articles and book reviews, in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China (JRAS China).

This year will be forever remembered as the second Covid year. The death toll from the disease continued to mount steadily around the world, despite the introduction of a range of vaccines, and millions have had to learn how to live in these interrupted times. A pandemic of misinformation has caused its own global wave of misery, but we are very glad to be part of the antidote: the RAS journal is full of beautifully written, carefully researched articles that contribute to the growth of knowledge and understanding – at least in our region.

There is fun and adventure to be had too. Geoff Raby takes us on a trek into the high reaches of Ladakh in search of snow leopards, where he learns that he is not quite as fit as he was in his hippy days, while Paul French carries us along on a different journey, on a 'China Steamer', slipping out of the fog of Shanghai in the early 1950s. He traces the footsteps of a pulp fiction writer whose characters inhabited a disappearing world, providing a rare glimpse of this little recorded period.

An interesting study of the Anglo-Irish in India by Robert Brown examines the similarity between the unrest in Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century and the growing turmoil in India at the same time. Nerves were stretched to breaking point following the anguish of the Great War, resulting in hysterical attempts at control on the part of the British agents of Empire. The work of earlier, gentler men were overshadowed in the tumult, and their good intentions overlooked.

Japan has proven to be a popular subject for study, perhaps because this year it hosted the 2020 Olympics (a year late because of the pandemic). John Van Fleet uses the famous line: 'History never repeats itself, but it rhymes' as a springboard for his playful yet penetrating essay comparing the assessments of "the chattering classes" when Tokyo and Beijing hosted earlier Olympic competitions. Is it true that 'You meet the nicest people on a Honda'? You'll have to read the essay to find out.

Su Pengfei also uses this rhyming, or chiming, leitmotif in his scholarly article about how the Wei controlled food prices in the

Warring States Period – surprisingly, the same techniques were used by Yoshimine during the Tokugawa Shogunate. It seems that an appreciation for Confucianism underlay government policies in both cases, leading to promotion based on merits and fairer distribution of wealth in times of abundance.

Our young scholar, Raag Pathak writes about the Japanese too, in his excellent essay about the zaibatsu and their considerable influence on national policy in the 1930s.

We are fortunate to have a couple of essays looking at some interesting, and very different aspects of current youth culture in China. Chang Che's charming essay *China Looks to the Classics* investigates the growing interest in Classical Studies among young people in China, while Michael Tundermann takes a critical look at the apparent rise of Marxism among students as a backlash to pressures of the market economy, such as the "996" culture. He asks, 'Can one touch the devil without being burned?'

In our book review section, you can find lists of lovely books compiled by our book club convenors, Cordy (Non-fiction) and Rachel (Fiction). If you are able to join their monthly meetings in person, I'm sure you would enjoy lively discussions about these books. For those of us who can't make it to these meetings, usually held at the legendary Garden Books on Changle Road, there's the option of reading these great books quietly alone, at home or...anywhere. There's always room for a book!

In addition, we have some in-depth reviews from Duncan Hewitt, Shuyu (Cindy) Guo and Peter Hagan. Duncan's review of Ruth's Record, a book written by a woman interned with her family in a Shanghai internment camp, evokes a period soon after Shanghai's Golden Age, chiming perhaps, with Paul French's article. Another Golden Age is the subject of the book Peter reviews – the Golden Age of Central Asia. As we reflect on the end of the 20 year war in Afghanistan, this book provides a useful perspective. Cindy's book review covers a very different subject: Necrocitizenry. Her introduction to a study on this strange topic is illuminating.

All editions of the Royal Asiatic Society Journal are available on the RAS website, and our library holds not only the journals from the last ten years, but also the NCBRAS journals going back to 1857.

Finally, I'm grateful for the hard work and patience of our editorial committee, Dr Kate Munro, and Ted Willard who have painstakingly

checked every word and provided a sounding board for discussion of ideas. As always, our sincere thanks to Earnshaw Books – this journal would not be possible without the calm guidance of our publisher, Graham Earnshaw and his meticulous designers.

We hope you will enjoy these essays and articles as much as we did. If you have any feedback, including suggestions, requests, comments, please drop us a line at [editor@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn](mailto:editor@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn). We would welcome contributions for future issues of JRAS China, from scholars, writers, biographers and anyone with a story to tell. Our editorial committee would be pleased to work with you to help bring your stories to life.

*Tracey Willard*  
*Editor*



# **RAS CHINA COUNCIL 2020-2021**

## **Honorary President**

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Robert Martin (Stories of Things)

James Miller (Asian Philosophies and Religions)

Parul Rewal (RAS Beyond City Series)

Katherine Song (Film Club)

Rachel Tan (Book Club – Fiction)

## RAS CHINA ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

THIS HAS BEEN an invigorating year of growth and renewal for RAS China in Shanghai, packed with events in all spectra of our interest-based focus groups. Overall, we have averaged more monthly events than ever before, membership has grown and our financial position is more secure with a healthier reserve than in the last three years.

**Events:** We continued a healthy mix of live events side by side with online events for the benefit of our overseas members. This also allowed us to tap into remotely located speakers. Art Focus returned to a museum based theme with guided tours of museum collections led by convenor Julie Chun who has been heading the focus group now for eight consecutive years. History Focus held an array of exciting events including a feature on John Rabe, the German businessman who became the Schindler of China during the Nanjing massacre in 1937, offset by gentler topics such as exploring Japanese and Chinese tea arts. In RAS Beyond City, our architecture and urbanism talk series, we continued to explore topics pertinent to cities in China and Asia, including urban governance, the relationship of food to the city, understanding China's rural revitalisation and poverty alleviation program, the future of heritage conservation in Shanghai and the ups and downs of urban transformation. The Film Club grew its fan following with the screening of classics such as *Red Sorghum*, comedy dramas like Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*, and *East Palace West Palace* – China's first film dealing directly with gay themes. The RAS general lecture series explored vibrant and diverse themes, including China's early encounters with first wave feminism as well as exploring gay literature in China and its transition into the digital age. The Fiction and Non-fiction Book Clubs both gained new convenors this year and we look forward to seeing growing gatherings as they gather momentum. Stories of Things continued to regale RAS members with personalised stories around intriguing or even ordinary objects embedded with a wealth of cultural information; among other things a tiffin box, a marriage certificate, a Qing dynasty fan, a bottle of plum wine from a monastery, and an art deco hair oil bottle – these objects shared their far-ranging stories through their owners at these intimate gatherings. The end of the year brought an exciting development with the materialisation of our brand new focus group on Eastern

Philosophy and Religions, headed by Dr James Miller, who chose to redirect attention away from mainstream Confucian philosophy that dominates philosophical conversations in Chinese society, beginning instead with a series of conversations around Zhuangzi, Mozi and Zen Buddhism. This new focus series has caused quite a stir, evoking widespread interest amongst our membership base.

**Membership:** Overall our membership and donor friends base has grown by more than 30% from last year. The society gained three Life Members this year, whose generous patronage we are thankful for, as the lump sum, one time, life membership fee goes a long way to support the society's functioning. Our Institutional Membership program has also found patrons amongst academic institutes, foreign universities and consulates.

**Finances:** The financial position of RAS China continues to be healthy and strong. As a non-profit organisation, our financial goal is to generate enough revenue to provide our community with stimulating experiences and information through our focus group events, library and journal, as well as to maintain a healthy reserve for contingencies (such as the need to relocate the library, which may include warehouse storage and installation of shelving. The library has moved six times since the re-establishment of RAS China).

Our major sources of revenue are membership fees, donations, and event revenue. Membership in 2021 has surpassed the previous years, and event revenue is expected to be approximately double that of last year. Our major ongoing expenses are events costs, publication of the annual RAS journal, our administration manager's salary, maintaining our digital platform, hosting of the summer social, which was held in June this year, and the AGM in November. The estimated year end cash reserve is approximately RMB 260,000, an increase of approximately RMB 67,000 over 2020 year end, a very healthy increase as a result of higher revenues and good cost management. We expect to use a portion of our cash reserves to invest in new upgraded content, equipment and facilities in the coming year. We also have ongoing plans to institute an annual scholar's grant to support research in interesting content related to China that will be published in the journal each year. Thus, we continue the primary mission of the society – to further a greater understanding of China and Asia.

**Library and Reading Room:** As always, we are grateful to our library volunteers who manage the library during its opening hours



each week. Their enthusiasm and energy keeps the library shelves in order, the facilities open to members as well as important tasks such as the cataloguing of new books acquired or donated to the library. The new reading room, though not yet open to public, has served as a useful work space this year where the cataloguing of new library acquisitions takes place and the council meets for its monthly meetings.

*New RAS Merchandise* was ordered this year, the black tote bags with Tug the Lion being much preferred over the beige ones produced the previous year, and our brand new enamel mugs bearing the imprint of the Chinese stamp from the old library offer slick retro appeal.

We had an intensive strategy meeting at the beginning of the year, brainstorming about how we could further increase value for our members, which was followed by an online survey sent to RAS members asking for feedback and suggestions. We were pleased to find when collating the responses that 97% of the respondents reported that they regarded RAS membership as providing medium to high value.

As this annual term comes to a close, we can look back with satisfaction at a year filled with activity, which delivered good quality content to our members and attendees. We are busy making plans for next year. We thank our members and patrons for their loyal support and look forward to a great year ahead as we hope to continue growing stronger and stronger.

*Parul Rewal*  
*Vice President RAS China*

## **RAS China Membership 2020-2021**

### **Honorary Memberships**

Honorary Members	7
(FRAS) Fellow of RAS China	2
Complimentary Institutional memberships	4

### **Paid Memberships**

- Individual Members	115	65%
- Joint/Family Members	37	21%
- Student Members	3	1.7%
- Young Professional/Pensioner	7	4%
- Overseas–Individual Members	9	5%
- Overseas–Household	2	1%
- Lifetime Members	3	1.7%

**GRAND TOTAL** 176

**RAS Donor Friends** 59

**Paid Institutional Memberships** 2

### **RAS China Events, 1 Dec 2020 – 30 Nov 2021**

- Art Focus	10
- History Club	8
- Beyond City Series	6
- Non Fiction Book Club	12
- Film Club	10
- General Program	8
- Story of Things	4
- Asian Philosophies and Religions	2
- Additional RASBJ online lectures shared with members	16
- Joint lectures with Crossroads	6
- Special Events (Summer Social, AGM)	2

**TOTAL** 82

## RAS BEIJING REPORT FOR 2020-2021

RASBJ HAS enjoyed an exceptional year. By mid-2021, pandemic-related challenges had been overcome and RASBJ membership has continued to surge, tripling pre-Covid numbers. The frequency of activities also exceeded expectation. Events of an extremely high calibre – about half online and half in-person – averaged nearly one per week.

RASBJ maintained its ability to recruit top-drawer speakers. Highlights included the online book launch of *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives* and an in-person discussion with the directors of *The Six* a highly acclaimed documentary film about Chinese survivors of the ill-fated *Titanic's* voyage, just before the film's opening night. Authors Paul French and Amy Sommers, as well as prominent academics Valerie Hansen and David Abulafia, discussed their publications. The head of the EU Chamber of Commerce Joerg Wuttke and Ogilvy's Scott Kronick analysed the history and future of doing business in China.

Along with these successes came new responsibilities. The growth in scale and intensity of RASBJ activities placed greater demands on the all-volunteer RASBJ Council. In order to ensure quality control and sustain its fast-growing membership, in 2021 the RASBJ established a corporate platform for its operations, a structure ratified by the 2021 EGM. This removed regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles to admitting PRC nationals as full-fledged members, hiring personnel and professionalising operations.

The RASBJ's aim is to help bring China and Asia and the rest of the world closer together through cultural exchange. Founded in 2013 by Alan Babington-Smith and Melinda Liu as a chapter of the Royal Asiatic Society China, the RASBJ five years later became an independent branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (which was founded in 1823 and received its Royal Charter in 1824). This historical legacy continues to inspire RASBJ. In early 2020 RASBJ opened its (virtual) doors to welcome members of the Royal Asiatic Societies based in London, Shanghai, Seoul and Hong Kong to attend its online events for free, a popular collaboration that has boosted interaction between chapters and members of the global RAS community. Thanks to our RAS partners for reciprocating by inviting

our members to join online talks for free as well! We anticipate that such liaison and cooperative projects will expand and thrive.

Before the Covid-pandemic, RASBJ activities were entirely in-person, and the pool of speakers was by nature geographically limited. When the pandemic drove many events online in 2020 and 2021, the popular online talks program unearthed a mother lode of new potential speakers – which helped RASBJ weather the Covid-19 storm. However the grim experiences of at the beginning of 2020 teach us that even the best-laid plans can be disrupted. RASBJ has worked hard in 2021 to adapt to new realities and stay nimble, while catering to its intellectually curious members, both expatriate and Chinese.

China's capital is a natural hub for this sort of engagement, a dynamic crossroads for multiple personalities – for official policy-makers and diplomats but also for academics, CEO's, cultural heritage experts, artists, historians, musicians, architects, filmmakers, conservationists – and a growing corps of climate change wonks. This year's speakers even featured two paleontologists. Steve Brusatte is consultant to the hugely popular "Jurassic World" film franchise and American expert Thomas Stidham led RASBJ members around the Peking Man archaeological dig in person – and revealed Beijing was once home to ancient giant pandas. RASBJ is constantly searching for unusual topics, fresh formats and cutting-edge technologies – for those who are open to something new.

*Melinda Liu*  
*Vice President RAS Beijing*

## OFFICERS

The 2021 Royal Asiatic Society Beijing Advisory Group includes William Rosoff, Victor Lang and Joerg Wuttke.

The following are 2021 Council Members:

- |                              |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| (1) President                | Alan Babington-Smith |
| (2) Vice-President           | Melinda Liu          |
| (3) Treasurer                | Peter Hogg           |
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| (8) Council Member-At-Large  | Susie Hunt           |
| (9) Council Member-At-Large  | Jeremiah Jenne       |
| (10) Council Member-At-Large | James Nobles         |
| (11) Council Member-At-Large | John Olbrich         |
| (12) Council Member-At-Large | Eileen Vickery       |
| (13) Interim Website Manager | Danny Parrott        |



# **Section 1: Essays and Articles**

**‘Written in a Page - Turning Style’**





# AN APPRECIATION OF DON SMITH'S 1952 *CHINA COASTER* AND THE PERIOD OF “INTERREGNUM SHANGHAI” IT PORTRAYS

BY PAUL FRENCH

## ABSTRACT

*During the heyday of American pulp fiction, from the 1920s through to the late 1950s, Shanghai was regularly used as an exotic location. Pulp stories were invariably serialised in the numerous pulp fiction magazines and then, if length and popularity determined, reissued as novels. Shanghai-located pulps range from Yellow Peril “Penny Dreadfuls” of the first two decades of the twentieth century through to the spy stories of the 1930s that often detailed the deteriorating relationship between America and China on the one hand and Japan on the other. Authors included those as well known as JP Marquand (the creator of the Mr Moto series), as well as Louis L’Amour and L Ron Hubbard (who both set a number of their early pulp stories in Shanghai, though later became better known for their Westerns and science fiction respectively). Among the Shanghai-set post-war “pulp”, Canadian author Don Smith’s *China Coaster* (1952) was one of the most widely read and reviewed. Though typical of the genre in the 1950s – violent, action-packed and accentuating sex appeal – it can be argued that *China Coaster* is also a rare glimpse of post-1949 interregnum Shanghai, before the final communist consolidation of the mid-1950s, written by an author who knew the city well.*

## INTRODUCTION

Though it sold well and was widely reviewed when it was first published, Don Smith’s 1953 novel (first serialised the previous year) *China Coaster* is barely remembered these days.<sup>1</sup> There are no reprints after the mid-1950s. When it occasionally is referenced, it is largely dismissed as a lowbrow pulp fiction novel typical of the once prolific genre of books assumed to be run-of-the-mill and low-quality, though entertaining in a time before television.

However, while written in a page-turning style to appeal to the mass market, a deeper reading of the novel reveals that it does quite accurately describe a Shanghai shortly after the communist revolution. In that brief period between 1949 and the mid-1950s, the initial chaos

in the wake of the civil war allowed for the old pre-1949 Shanghai of gangsters, stateless Russian émigrés, opium dealers and China Coast adventurers to uneasily co-exist with the fledgling new socialist state. The Communist Party was yet to consolidate its position and take complete control. This fascinating period of partial interregnum between the defeated Nationalist government and the new communist regime remains under-researched and under-written about. Smith's novelised descriptions of this interregnum are perhaps useful.

Among other descriptions of contemporary events in Shanghai, *China Coaster* notes how worker grievances against foreign companies were regularly upheld by Communist courts, forcing them to pay large court-imposed fines or hand over their businesses. Additionally, descriptions of the ridiculously high "taxes" imposed by the new communist administration on foreign firms are provided. These tactics forced the eventual transfer of assets and abandonment of their corporate infrastructure, forcing the company owners to leave China. Smith also describes the last remnants of the stateless Russian émigré community, known after the end of the war as Displaced Persons (DPs) – many of who did not manage to leave until the mid-1950s and many of whom were forced into 'repatriations' to the Soviet Union.

Much of the action of *China Coaster* takes place on Wayside (Huoshan Lu) and Broadway (Daming Lu) in Hongkew (Hongkou), an area that did stubbornly remain home to a number of foreigners and various DPs well into the 1950s as well as still-visiting merchant seamen. It was, as it had largely always been, an area of poor, indigent lodging houses – 'shabby old foreign-built houses [...] with rickety Hongkew furniture.'<sup>2</sup> Tramp steamers still docked at Shanghai occasionally and so sailors came ashore for the bars, dens and nightclubs that managed to remain in business. Wayside had been a bar strip for several decades moving between largely Russian and Jewish proprietors before the war, to Japanese owners during the occupation. However, with the Bamboo Curtain starting to descend and the last DPs being either granted passports for other countries or forcibly repatriated to the USSR, *China Coaster* reflects the last gasp of Wayside and Broadway as sites of treaty port cosmopolitanism.

#### **DON SMITH**

Don Smith was a prolific author of Cold War thrillers in the 1950s through to his death in the late 1970s. His "Secret Mission" series,

written in the 1960s and 1970s, starring a businessman-turned-spy Phil Sherman was especially popular and numbers over twenty books. Smith occasionally returned to China and Asia in his Secret Mission books – *Secret Mission: Peking* (1968), *Secret Mission: Tibet* (1969), *Secret Mission: North Korea* (also 1969), and *The Peking Connection* (1975). But none feel as personal or specific as *China Coaster*.

*China Coaster* could conceivably have been written without visiting Shanghai, but the locations and some minor details suggest a familiarity with the International Settlement. And indeed, it seems that Smith did know Shanghai well.

Donald Taylor “Don” Smith was a Canadian, born in Port Colbourne on the shores of Lake Erie in August 1909. After school he was employed as a clerk with the electricity company Northern Electric in Toronto. Between 1934 and 1936 he was the Peking correspondent for the *Toronto Star* newspaper. It seems he spent just a couple of years as a full-time correspondent for the *Star* in northern China (which obviously later inspired his two books set specifically in Beijing) and then relocated to Shanghai. It appears he split his job between continuing to act as a stringer for the *Star* while also working with the Associated Publishing House Shanghai (though what exactly he did for this Chinese-owned publisher is not clear).

When war broke out in Europe Smith left China and travelled to London. In England he briefly worked as a representative of Stone & Cox, Canada’s leading insurance publisher and lived in the rather plush Athenaeum Court, a grand 1930s apartment block overlooking Green Park. He then joined the Royal Air Force, as an Aircraftman, trained as a pilot, qualified, and flew fighter planes with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve/Royal Canadian Air Force. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his part in the Dieppe Raid of 1942. The British Air Ministry Bulletin published the following citation to accompany



Figure 1: Don Smith

the announcement of Smith being awarded the DFC:

‘This officer was the pilot of an aircraft detailed to lay a smoke screen along an area at Dieppe [...] In the face of intense opposition from the ground defences, Flying Officer Smith began his release run. When halfway over the target a shell shattered the windscreen, wounding him in the face and a piece of Perspex became imbedded in his right eye. Despite this he bravely pressed on and completed his task successfully. On the return flight Flying Officer Smith’s left eye also became affected by powdered Perspex causing him great discomfort but he eventually flew his aircraft back [...] and made a safe landing. Throughout, this officer displayed the highest qualities of courage and resolution.’<sup>3</sup>

Smith was discharged at the end of the war with the rank of Lieutenant.

After the war Smith lived for a time in Morocco working as a yachtsman, and then in Majorca as a businessman. He only really started writing seriously in his fifties while living in Morocco. Smith’s debut novel, *Out of the Sea* (1952) was largely ignored. *China Coaster* was his second novel, also published by Henry Holt in the USA, after being first serialised in the November 1952 edition of *Bluebook Pulp – Adventures in Fact & Fiction*, a strongly selling pulp fiction magazine that arguably published more literary pulp writing (sometimes referred to as “slick” writing) than its main competitors such as *Argosy*, *Adventure* or *Short Stories*.

#### ‘NOTHING BUT A POT-BOILER’<sup>4</sup>

The basic plot of *China Coaster* concerns six-foot three-inch Captain Michael O’Connor who is stuck in the Far East and keen to get back to his native America. He boards a ship for Hong Kong that, due to Russian machinations, ends up in Tsingtao (Qingdao). O’Connor realising that the Chinese will not help him in this new era of Sino-Russian collaboration, swims for shore and jumps a train to Shanghai. Though O’Connor knows Shanghai well and of old, it is a port he does not want to be in, and indeed is considered persona-non-grata within its boundaries, as he has recently been engaged in smuggling. He

had helped anti-communist Chinese sneak out of the country, under the noses of the communists who had been seizing remittances sent from their families already stuck safely in America. Now stuck in Shanghai he moves from an opium den into the arms of a stateless Russian beauty, Anya Chekov, who is subsequently killed. O'Connor swears revenge and that he will catch the murderer – a process that involves forging a pact with an old time Shanghai gang boss (reminiscent of Du Yuesheng) and a long chase

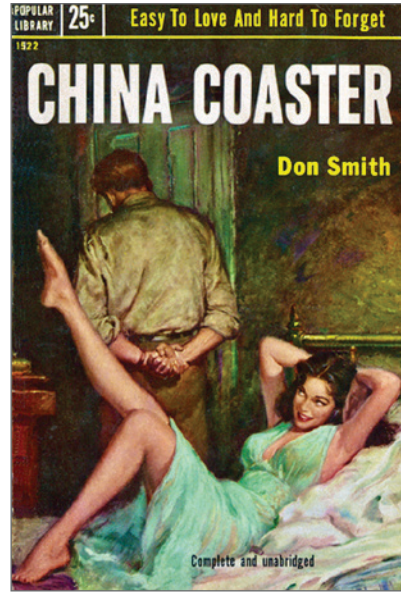


Figure 2: China Coaster

that takes O'Connor down to Guangdong and Hong Kong and then up to Chongqing with repeated returns to Shanghai. The *Tampa Bay Times's Crime Corner* review section had perhaps the pithiest of reviews: 'American mariner battles way out of Red Orient; meets plenty women. Toughie, with salt air.'<sup>5</sup>

The reviewer for the *Dayton Daily News* basically got it right when he said the novel was redolent of the much more popular and bestselling Mickey Spillane. Their reviewer did note the large body count and also that O'Connor 'unscrutables the inscrutable Chinese.'<sup>6</sup> This refers to O'Connor's second major female interest in the novel, the mixed-race Eurasian Pao Chu.

Marj Heyduck, the witty book reviewer for the Dayton, Ohio *Journal Herald* for many years, also pretty much got *China Coaster* right: 'If you're going to turn pale at the thought of a hand-to-hand fight on a roof four stories above the city, an explosion in an opium den, a gun-battle in a hilltop sanctuary, or description of exquisitely detailed Russian torture methods then go read Elsie Dinsdale. This is a red meat mystery, not suitable for mush and milk readers.'<sup>7</sup>

But reviews were mixed. The reviewer for the *Arizona Daily Star* was more dismissive, 'Those who like a grain of believability in their fiction might as well skip it.'<sup>8</sup> The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reviewer,

Eugene A Hacker, listed the book's pulp credentials: 'a sexy, hard drinking, profane hero, a tough hombra with a heart of gold and fists that pack a mighty wallop in defence of all that is good and beautiful. Women are smitten with him at sight.'<sup>9</sup> Despite these qualities, or perhaps because of them, Hacker considered *China Coaster* too generic. By way of contrast though *The Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina thought *China Coaster* would make a good movie, a vehicle for Alan Ladd' perhaps and added that once you'd started the book you wouldn't be able to put it down.<sup>10</sup>

These mixed reviews were not helped by the publication in the same month of the novel *Gentleman of China* by Robert Standish. Though now a rather dated tale – a Chinese master detective Kung solves crimes 'in time honoured Chinese fashion' – Standish, the pen name of English author Digby George Gerahty, was (at least in the United States) considered far more respectable and literary than Smith at the time. Many chose to jointly review the two novels and invariably Smith was positioned as the weaker choice of the two.

As to the authenticity of *China Coaster*, only the *Montreal Gazette* reviewer, BW Kapp, noted that Smith gave, 'a good factual background to a rousing rowdy story,'<sup>11</sup> while James Scott in the *Times Colonist* of British Columbia noted that, 'Mr Smith writes of the people and places he has seen. Real red-blooded stuff.'<sup>12</sup>

#### SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN OF SHANGHAI FROM *CHINA COASTER*?

Smith's Shanghai in *China Coaster* is one that is definitely down on its uppers – rampant inflation, shortages of everything from decent booze to razor blades, the black market is running riot, random police searches and identification checks make daily life a hassle. Foreigners are no longer welcome and actively encouraged to leave China. Displaced Person Anya Chekov lives in a rundown lodging house on Wayside and works as a taxi dancer at the Venus nightclub, which was in fact a long running and legendary cabaret up on the North Szechuen Road (Sichuan North Road).<sup>13</sup> Anya is eager to leave Shanghai, but unable to secure a passport. This was also the case for the real-life owner of the Venus, Shalom 'Sam' Levy, an Iraqi Jew who (probably due to his nightlife and underworld connections) had trouble securing a foreign passport and later left for Palestine,

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\* Smith describes O'Connor as 6'3" while Ladd was 5'5," though Hollywood has invariably found ways around these discrepancies

eventually becoming a citizen of Israel.

Smith clearly knows the Hongkou area. The descriptions of Wayside and Broadway are accurate as is the detail of the pawnshops on Tiendong Road (Tiantong Road) that did exist as well as the notorious drug dens (formerly opium dens and by the early 1950s more notorious as heroin “shooting galleries”) on Nanxing Road (Nanxu Road).

Smith includes any number of references to pre-war Shanghai and the city he knew, though now noting how run down they are – the Palace Hotel on the Bund (now the Swatch Art Peace Hotel), the Great Eastern Hotel (part of the Wing On Building on Nanjing East Road), as well as closed down establishments Smith (and by extension his character O’Connor) knew before the war such as the Shanghai Club (No.2 Bund).

After a diversion in the plot that takes O’Connor south to Guangdong province and the old pirate haunt of Bias Bay (Daya Bay), which did actually remain a centre of smuggling well into the 1960s, and to Hong Kong, he returns to Shanghai, staying in the Chinese-run boarding houses along the Bubbling Well Road (Nanjing West Road). These were close to the (as O’Connor notes) now closed former Shanghai racetrack and club (today’s People’s Park). Eventually, after a search for the Russian killer of Anya – Soviet agent Boris Sakalov – O’Connor flies to Chongqing (courtesy of China National Aviation Corporation<sup>†</sup>), deals with Sakalov, makes his peace with the Chinese underworld leaders and escapes China. He heads to the safety of the British colony of Hong Kong with his new lover Pao Chu for a happily ever after ending.

#### EASY TO LOVE AND HARD TO FORGET<sup>14</sup>

Of course *China Coaster* is ultimately fiction and, at times, a definite stretch. Furthermore, it could be argued, Smith relies too much on his, by 1952, outdated knowledge of Shanghai. For instance, most road names had been changed in the years since Smith had left China. Some were changed by Wang Jing-wei’s puppet government during the Japanese occupation, then more by the Nationalists after liberation in August 1945, and then pretty much all road names after the communist takeover of the city in 1949 and into the early 1950s. However, it is also

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† China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC), the former Nationalist Chinese airline founded in 1930, did remain in business until May 1952

the case that the old foreign Shanghailanders continued to use the old pre-war largely western road names (which also appeared in advertisements and often still on street signs well into the 1950s) in everyday conversation.

Ultimately *China Coaster* is not the best novel of old Shanghai by a long way. But nor is it the worst work of pulp fiction to have used Shanghai for a location. At times the plot meanders and seems to lose its way. The male characters are from pulp fiction central casting and the females don't do much but be attractive and sexy. Still, it is one of the few at least semi-accurate fictional recreations we have of the crucial and fascinating period between the fall of Shanghai in 1949 and the final consolidation of communist power in the mid-1950s. For that reason alone it is perhaps worth a couple of hours reading time.

*Paul French* was born in London, educated there and in Glasgow, and lived and worked in Shanghai for many years. His book *Midnight in Peking* was a *New York Times* Bestseller, a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week, a Mystery Writers' of America Edgar award winner for Best Fact Crime and a Crime Writers' Association (UK) Dagger award for non-fiction. His most recent book *City of Devils: A Shanghai Noir* has received much praise, with *The Economist* writing, '[...] in Mr French the city has its champion storyteller.' Both *Midnight in Peking* and *City of Devils* are currently being developed for television.



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# SENSING THEIR PRESENCE: SEARCHING FOR SNOW LEOPARDS IN THE WORLD'S HIGHEST DESERT

BY GEOFF RABY

## PREPARATIONS IN LEH

The flight from Delhi to Leh, the capital of Ladakh was predictably spectacular. Nearly two hours crossing immense snow-swept ranges of wind-sharpened, steely, razor-backed peaks. Leh is settled deep in the remote Trans-Himalaya range, cut off by the Great Himalaya Range to the south west and the Karakoram Range to the north east. As the crow flies, Tibet is not more than 80 kilometres due east.

Descent into Leh through narrow twisting valleys with wing tips perilously close to craggy ridges is every bit as thrilling as landing at Paro in Bhutan, one of the most hair-raising landings in the world. The pilot cheerily advised it was minus 19 degrees on a brilliant sunny morning. Everyone was scrambling to rug up. The locals knew well that almost the entire plane would be slowly squeezed, person by person, into an unheated ancient bus to be carted off to the makeshift terminal building, protected from the icy blasts by only pieces of thick felt hung at the entrances. Eventually, the bags dribbled in.

Leaving the plane, we were simultaneously whacked by cold and altitude. Both were to dominate every aspect of our lives for the next two weeks.

We were to acclimatise at Leh, already a giddy 3,500m, before heading higher, mostly on foot. Our best chances of seeing a snow leopard would be around 4,000m, where their prey wintered. At that height, even the slightest physical exertion is crushing. Putting on or taking off boots leaves you gasping for air. Headaches and nausea are common. Uninterrupted sleep is impossible.

Margaret had persuaded me to come on this trip and tick the box of one of my must-see destinations from my misspent hippie youth. Her invitation was a case of put up or shut up. At 65, and an Australian Ambassador for the International Snow Leopard Conservancy, she had long wanted to make this trip. I had not much interest in snow leopards, and zero expectation that we would see one of the world's most elusive big cats.

We were met by our guide, Norbu Tsering, who glided effortlessly through the chaos outside the terminal to our van, demonstrating his thirty-five years of experience meeting disoriented foreign tourists. In these harsh areas, guiding is more than leading a group and making sure the cars turn up on time. The guide becomes an indispensable link to the visitor's survival. They plan, instruct, counsel, comfort, deal with anxieties, motivate and sometimes inspire the tourist to go beyond themselves, to do more than they thought themselves capable of doing. From our first meeting, it felt as if Norbu was watching us closely. Evaluating our responses, trying to understand our willingness to take instruction and counsel, our physical capacity and mental equanimity.

I had resisted Margaret's efforts to have me take tablets to assist with the thin air and its effects on the body. For weeks she had been behaving like a rapacious representative from big pharma, pushing a high-altitude drug on me that was supposed to deal with all the symptoms. Perhaps she felt some responsibility for taking me on this potentially reckless adventure at our advancing ages.

As a younger man, I had managed the effects of altitude in many places in the high Himalaya. AMS (acute mountain sickness) seems to be random, respecting neither age nor physical condition. I had wanted to experience again the effects of high altitude. I hadn't realised when we arrived in Leh that our last night in Delhi would be the last time I would sleep longer than 90 minutes at a stretch for the next two weeks.

At 3,500 metres, the mainly Tibetan town of Leh is a pleasant place for acclimatising to thin air before going on to higher parts for wilderness trekking and searching for the elusive snow leopard in the highest desert in the world. Leh is surrounded by breathtaking scenery. The Zaskar Range to the south looms over the Upper Indus River as it pounds its way from Mt Kailash in Tibet on through Baltistan before turning south at the Hunza Valley on its way to the Arabian Sea. Even these freezing temperatures are not enough to arrest its flow, though it is interrupted along its course through Ladakh by thick ice.

Travellers, overland traders and adventurers have spent time at this key junction resting, re-stocking provisions and buying animals for hundreds of years. Leh was once one of the most important cities on the Silk Road and a thriving junction for camel caravanserais connecting Lahore and Delhi with Kashgar and Hotan on the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, and then to points further north west via central

Asia, or southwest to the great mercantile ports of Gujarat, and later Bombay. In the nineteenth century and at the start of the twentieth, it was a major staging post for the improbable cast of spies, soldiers, adventurers, and mad men who made up the Great Game, defending British India from an imaginary Russian threat.

Descendants of the Silk Road traders are found in Shia villages around Ladakh, while Sunnis mainly live in towns. Just outside Leh, before the significant Shey Tibetan Buddhist monastery, with a recently built wing dedicated to the current Dalai Lama, is the village of Choshod. Here, female descendants of Silk Road traders dress in black chador.

Norbu insists that the Muslim minority coexist harmoniously with the majority Buddhists. Wistfully he notes, however, that inter-marriage ended about twenty years ago. He emphasised the continuing closeness of the communities; it was still common for Buddhists to attend the Muslim holy festival of Eid marking the end of Ramadan. In Choshod, the Buddhist houses are distinguished from the Muslim dwellings by prayer flags hanging from the guttering.

In summer, Leh hosts hordes of Indian tourists coming to the high altitudes to escape the suffocating heat of the plains. Some 80 per cent of the houses tucked into the sides of Leh's neat, steeply rising valleys are various types of hotels, lodges, homestays and redoubts. In winter,



**Figure 1:** Stok Kangri (6153m), from our hotel room

Leh is freezing cold, dry, dusty, and deserted. Most of the lodgings and many shops and cafes are firmly shuttered against the bitter emptiness. The multitude of little rivulets, that in warmer weather run down the steep streets and fields like veins under the skin providing water for drinking and irrigation, are frozen hard.

The only other foreigners we saw were a solitary German businessman, a small group of Japanese Buddhist tourists visiting sacred sites, and a Canadian ice-hockey team, in Leh to compete in an international competition on the highest ice-hockey field in the world.

The Grand Dragon Hotel is one of the few to keep its doors open, looking after its guests with excellent Tibetan and Indian meals. The silver service and white starched table linen seemed something of an anachronism. Rooms are over heated and wood panelled in the style of a Swiss chalet. It has spectacular views over the Upper Indus Valley to the south and Mt Kangri at 6,130m. It has been in the same Muslim family for two generations. Its policy of not serving alcohol helped secure my 12-days of total abstinence which, at such altitudes, was wise.

The Ladakhi Government has banned the big-name hotels, including the likes of Aman and the Banyan Tree, which would be ideal for attracting high-end, eco-friendly tourists, in order to favour local owners. This is a more protectionist approach than that of Bhutan, which has opened to international luxury, eco-friendly, brands but has restricted the bulk tourists and backpackers which have so harmed Nepal. Consequently, in high season, Ladakh attracts backpackers and Indian group tours, but is missing out on the high-value end of the market.

Ladakh is predominately Tibetan Buddhist and the people are devout followers of the yellow hat sect. In its architecture, religion, most



**Figure 2:** Woman in traditional Ladakhi dress with author

of the people and their customs, it is Tibetan. It looks and feels like Tibet itself, minus the Chinese presence.

An hour along a narrow, jagged road out of town are some of Tibetan Buddhism's significant holy places. Past the outer limits of Leh, the road passes through the Royal Family's "Field of Stupas". As its name implies, it is a broad flat area with some 700 stupas of all sizes. It sprawls out just before the ruins of the Shey Fortress containing a revered statue of Buddha. Since 1981, the Dalai Lama has often visited the region to celebrate his birthday on 6 July. Prayers are held on a large sports field along the riverbanks. Tens of thousands of pilgrims attend. An hour further along the Upper Indus Valley is the remote, massive, Thiksey Gompa, the biggest monastery in Ladakh, with a sizeable population of monks and the huge Future Buddha (Maitreya) statue.

Thiksey Gompa is deeply redolent of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Beyond lies Hemis Gompa, attached to the near-vertical sides of the valley wall like a massive wasps' nest, concealed until almost upon it. Just after Hemis begins the restricted frontier zone of the Indian-China border. A line of significant geo-political interest.

Leh is the administrative capital of Ladakh, which still has a hereditary ceremonial monarch. Until recently, it has been administered by the semi-autonomous, Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. In August 2019, Prime Minister Modi abolished the special status that established Jammu and Kashmir as an autonomous administrative region, within which Ladakh had been



Figure 3: Hemis Monastery



**Figure 4:** Protest in Leh Against US Military Actions

included. Ladakh will now be administered directly from New Delhi, rather than Srinagar.

Norbu said all people in Ladakh welcomed this as they envisaged greater attention and financial support from the central government than they had received from the Kashmir Government with its substantial Muslim majority. He hoped it would also boost tourism to Ladakh, as visitors would no longer be put off by concerns over terrorism arising from India and Pakistan's ongoing dispute over Kashmir. He said he was not concerned that removing the special status of Kashmir-Jammu was indicative of rising Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Modi. He was confident that the three main religious groups in Ladakh – the majority Buddhist, and minority Muslim and Hindu – would continue to live harmoniously together.

In the fading light, as we leave the central square in the old Leh market for the warmth of our hotel, a demonstration was being organised outside the central mosque. The protestors were attacking the US for the assassination two days earlier of the Iranian strong-man leader, Qasem Soleimani. Indian security forces were out in numbers, with their trademark long bamboo sticks for crowd control. Militancy is present even in this most remote isolated corner of the world, but it is to be hoped that Norbu's confidence and optimism will be confirmed.

South east from Leh is Pangong Lake, which forms part of the border between China and India, with two-thirds of the saline, brilliant

blue lake situated in Tibet. It was a major theatre of action in the brief 1962 Sino-Indian War. India and China's last military skirmish was also at Pangong Lake in 2016. It remains one of the regions military flash-points, although China and India have managed to avoid any major conflicts for nearly 60 years.

The area around Leh is heavily militarised. Just outside the town is the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Indo-Tibetan Regiment, which is the central command for the border area along Pangong Lake. It is the front-line force to defend against potential Chinese incursion in the area. "Tibetan Regiment" is something of an anachronism as Tibet was formally integrated into in China in 1959 and India recognises Tibet as part of China. Its name may be an historical relic, or more likely a deliberate Indian provocation.

Across the busy road outside the Regiment's barracks we witnessed a cricket match played on the highest pitch in the world. Admittedly, in Leh, just about everything from sporting events to petrol stations are claimed to be the highest in the world. Orange and lime green high-viz vests faced each other on an icy pitch in minus 15 degrees, making it not only the highest pitch in the world but one where games are played at the lowest temperatures. From where we stood freezing in the anaemic, mid-afternoon sun, it wasn't obvious whether this was an intra or inter-regimental match. The intensity of the play could best be attributed to the cracking cold.

During the three days when we were acclimatising in Leh, wandering the back lanes and alley ways, idling in Kashmiri shops



**Figure 5:** The world's highest cricket match



and teahouses, and exploring the temples and numerous stupas of the Upper Indus Valley, I often felt Norbu keenly observing my fitness and breathing as he marched us up and down steep streets and stairs in ancient monasteries and forts.

In response, I would return his curiosity with my own explicit questions about how far and how high would be the march up the Rumbak Valley. He was evasive, which made me anxious. I would point out my lack of fitness and that I was seriously overweight, as if either needed to be said. He would reply, 'No hurry, no worry!' This became something of a leitmotif of our time together in the high Himalaya.

### **SNOW LEOPARDS**

Margaret Gee has published many of Australia's internationally recognised and acclaimed travel writers, adventurers, climbers and naturalists of the Himalaya. She has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the places, individuals, plants and animals. She assured me this was the most likely time and place to see snow leopards. She had also engaged a leading guide from the international Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust to accompany us.

Setting off early in light snow, we entered the Hemis national park after an hour and a half of driving from Leh – reputedly one of the world's best locations for sightings. We were heading to the upper reaches of the Rumbak Valley, with a long walk ahead before reaching our rustic homestay. Other than that, we knew little. The march was said to be from 2-5 hours, depending on who we asked. Easy to difficult, depending again on whose opinion we sought. Above or below 4,000 meters, it was the same. Always a range intended to either encourage us or to prepare ourselves mentally, depending on a judgment about our fitness for purpose.

Information about such things is selective, especially when travelling with highly experienced local guides. They could just about jog up any ascending track through ever-thinning air. But they also have a commercial interest in concluding treks without their customers expiring with heart failure or brain haemorrhaging on the way up.

Norbu's times varied from two and half hours to four hours. We had heard from an experienced Australian traveller in these areas, Gary Weare, that it was more like five hours. Norbu had said horses would be available to us, then these began to dissolve with more fudging, only to materialise as tiny but sturdy donkeys to carry luggage. He was also

cagey about the altitude of our ultimate destination. Four thousand metres emerged as a key threshold between us. We were wanting to know if we would go over 4000 metres and Norbu was resisting us saying only three thousand something but not over four thousand. Having been a long-standing public servant, these conversations began to take on a familiar, bizarre, “Yes Minister” feel.

Norbu reassured that the ascent would be gentle, and we could recover on the flat sections. But whatever the steepness, it would fine for me, “no hurry, no worry”. He shared his observation that on hard treks older, less fit, walkers did better than younger ones, because they did not hurry. Against my better judgement, I felt reassured that we could do this leisurely and all would be well. It seemed the wheel of fate would favour the tortoise over the hare.

Eventually we left the cars and began what became a tough four and a half hour forced march from 3,400m to 4,050m. In all, 6.5 kilometres of agony. The tortoise did not calmly prevail, every step was accompanied by grimaces, panting and wheezing, but there was no option at all other than not to hurry and continue ascending. Even at minus 18 degrees, I was soon wet through to my undergarments with sweat. It was uphill the entire way along a narrowing valley between deep frozen rivers and



**Figure 6:** A frozen stream in the Rumbak Valley

overhanging waterfalls, suspended in space, so thick and heavy it felt as if they should snap off at any moment and come crashing down on us, twenty metres below.

At sea level this hike would be tiring, but at height, excruciating. As the altitude increased, the pressure on breathing felt as if it were increasing exponentially. My chest was on fire. I had visions of it splitting down the centre and opening like doors of an oven to a raging, blazing fire within.

For someone who was on the snow leopard leg of the trip mainly to keep my friend company, this forced march seemed something of a supreme sacrifice, especially as I never believed we would even see one of these fabled solitary cats.

Our other guide, Jigmet Dadul was a local with years of experience studying snow leopards . He is director of the Ladakh Snow Leopard Conservancy and Ladakh's most famous snow leopard guide. At least we would be in good hands, but this hardly increased my confidence in a sighting.

As we pushed higher, Jigmet became increasingly active. Stopping frequently, and in doing so affording much welcome rest breaks, setting up his powerful German telescope on its tripod to scan the boulder strewn rocky ravines. Norbu, also an experienced scanner, joined in with a second Leica telescope. It was like watching a ballet as they fluidly leaned into their lenses to peer into the vastness, adjusting field of vision with slow wrist movements, stepping back, scanning unaided, and then gracefully returning to the lens.

It was as if Jigmet could sense their presence. Soon he was pointing out snow leopard tracks high up the snow-covered, narrow valley sides. Naturally, our expectations rose. Excitement surged through us. All our senses were on edge. The effort of walking was a little more bearable.

To give myself time for longer rests, I kept moving ahead and came to a bridge, where I stopped about halfway across the solid-iced river and looked back. The others stopped before the bridge and waved me to return. Jigmet had found snow leopard tracks in the snow on either



**Figure 7:** Snow leopard pug marks

side of the trail at the start of the bridge. The pug marks were fresh and had just started to soften. I had panted past these, oblivious.

The leopard that had made these not so long ago was a big cat, according to Jigmet. It had spent some time in this area as it had left tracks below the bridge and further upstream along the snowy bank. We quickened our march, with Jigmet stopping more frequently to scan the craggy walls. He had seemed to have acquired a feline quality, as if his fur was standing on edge and his back arched in anticipation of sighting our quarry. He was light, swift and graceful as he moved between telescopes.

After some time, he stopped abruptly and looked under an overhanging rock next to the track. There he found the oily marks of a leopard, which had rubbed its fur against the rock, leaving its scent to stake a territorial claim, as well as scratch marks in the rock and a spray with its heart-like shape. This was the start of mating season for the snow leopard. Our cat was looking for a partner and we were not too far behind.

Further on as the valley, all too briefly, flattened and opened onto a narrow plain, Jigmet saw a small flock of Himalayan blue sheep (bharal) on the opposite bank. They are neither blue nor sheep, but



**Figure 8:** Himalayan blue sheep (bharal) seen through a scanner

more like a tawny goat with wide flat ears. These are the snow leopard's prey. The leopards stalk the bharal down from high altitudes as they seek forage in winter. By now Jigmet was certain that on our first day out we would find a leopard. I remained sceptical but with a heightened sense of anticipation that could not be suppressed.

Observed by a curious Himalayan Golden Eagle (berkut), we quickly ate a brief snack of cold, crumbling, damp, hotel

sandwiches. Jigmet was keen to move to higher altitudes. A gruelling two-hour, continuous climb followed, to our homestay at the top of Rumbak Valley. I was broken on arrival, badly straining a calf muscle on the very last step on to flat ground at our refuge. I simply could no longer put one foot in front of another.

As soon as we arrived Jigmet and Norbu set off with their telescopes, promising to call us if they saw a leopard. As they left, I was privately wishing them no success. I lay prone and immobile in front of the compact, cow dung-fuelled, slow combustion stove on rugs on the floor, which stood in for chairs, or benches, or any other furniture whatsoever, gulping sweet milky tea. Cow dung burns at low temperature, providing little warmth but a lot of smoke. It was a miserable end to a rugged day, despite the tease of the leopard.

But it was not over yet. Within forty minutes and with still enough light, Norboo burst through the door, saying Jigmet had one in his telescope. Margaret leapt to her feet and was outside in a flash, initially heading in the wrong direction. Norboo turned her around and helped me with my boots, as I had neither the strength nor the oxygen to put them on unassisted. Jigmet was set up on a ledge looking back down over the valley from where we had come. Across the valley on a high, sharp broken ridge a solitary leopard was moving around the edge of the bare rock and snow-covered steep slope. We each had a look through the telescopes. At over 500 metres away it requires a good eye to spot, unless the leopard is on the snow and moving.

I saw it briefly sitting on its hindquarters with its long, thick heavy tail close in on its right side. Then I lost sight of it. Its camouflage against the rock is excellent. Jigmet had it fixed. Margaret took his telescope just as the leopard moved rapidly off the rocks, kicking up an arch of dust before racing down across the snow with its tail flailing.

Possibly no more than eight seconds, but for Margaret it was a dream of forty years realised in the most spectacular way. Overcome with joy she burst into tears, hugging us all and crying. Her emotion made all the effort seem just right. Pain and exhaustion were forgotten for the moment. I felt myself wondering, was that how these things happen? Some people have come to these areas in search of snow leopards many times and still haven't seen one. Certainly, our odds had been increased by having Jigmet with us. He has seen some 300 of them over a twenty five-year career and about 50 up close without a telescope. He probably has seen more than most people on earth,



Figure 9: Jigmet Dadul

but it is not a great strike rate. Our sighting then, albeit fleetingly, was extraordinarily lucky.

Peter Matthiessen, in the 1970s, travelled to the most promising area for seeing snow leopards at that time – the Nepalese Inner Dolpo region, east of Mt Kailash – about as far east as we were to the west of it. After a gruelling trek of many months, he still did not see one. Instead, in his book *The Snow Leopard* (1978) he interprets his failure to see one as a mystical experience arising from the beast's elusiveness, and a lesson in the Tibetan Buddhist belief of the impossibility of possessing another being.

One of Margaret's authors has been travelling in and around this region for some 40 years and has never seen a snow leopard. We had a quiet, if brief, moment of reflection on his misfortune and our good fortune. Our guides were jubilant. We all looked forward to seeing more leopards over the next eight days. We were hot.

It was dark by the time we returned to our homestay, located in a traditional mountain hamlet with a dozen farmers' stone houses and attached animal pens. The Ladakh Department of Wildlife and Conservation has established a network of homestays to provide villages with alternative sources of income, which work as a type of compensation scheme for villagers not to kill snow leopards, which have been known to attack livestock.

Homestays are in the typical Himalayan style of building with



**Figure 10:** Our hosts in the living room of the homestay

several stories, a barn on the ground floor and living and cooking quarters above. The family room and kitchen are one, with cooking and eating taking place sitting on local carpets on the floor.

It was not like romantic lodges in the Alps in Europe but a rough hard place to stay. No hot water or running water, a long drop bog, and basic food. Dishes including the local thukpa or skyu, both of which were vegetable stews with different sorts of noodles, lentils and chickpeas, eggs, flat bread, and tea were the only things on offer. Our hosts and their extended family were kind and looked after us as best they could.

To stay warm at night in an unheated room under a heavy weight of quilts which gave no apparent warmth, it was necessary to wear two sets of thermal long johns, thick cashmere socks, jumpers, gloves, scarves and a beanie.

On the first evening at Tarchok Homestay, the runs set in around midnight. Resistance was useless: the reality of having to go outside in minus 20 degrees and negotiate slippery twisting frozen uneven steps was grudgingly accepted. The obstacle course safely was negotiated without a foot dropping into the pit, but back in my room, I found that my substantial water bottle was frozen rock hard. It was a long night extracting myself four times from the dank bed before the Lomotil tablets did their blessed job.

Jigmet and Norbu were up early scanning. Having seen a leopard



**Figure 11:** So near and yet so far: the outhouse next to the Tarchok home the evening before, our hopes were high that we would soon have a successful sighting in the frigid early morning air as the pale sun rose over neighbouring frozen peaks. The cold was everywhere. It took you captive and wouldn't let you go. It worked its way into your bones. And there it stayed.

For the next three days we woke early, which was not hard to do



**Figure 12:** The author in bed, writing in the frozen room

as we were hardly sleeping, and went out in minus 20 degrees to stand for as long as we could bear it until the sun rose, peering into the telescopes and scanning the ridges, caves, ledges and big boulders looking for our prey. We repeated the same routine in the evening, until the sunset and we were so cold that our feet ached. No more sightings were had.

We bailed out after only three nights and returned to the comforts of the Grand Dragon in Leh. For three days



we relished the relief from the altitude, cleaned our things, washed clothes, marvelled at flushing toilets and a wide variety of food. We hardly left the hotel and the time passed far too quickly. The Canadian ice hockey team provided some change of conversation in the dining room.

Our guides were confident that the Ulley Valley would give us at least as good, if not better, chance of seeing another leopard. Besides, we were advised that the Snow Leopard Lodge, owned by the most renowned leopard spotter, Norboo Tchemang, was more comfortable than in Rumbak despite being nearly two hundred metres higher.

Ulley is a three-hour drive slightly to the north and west of Leh. The road went through Basgo past the old Royal Summer Palace where a flock of Ladakhi urial (a type of long-horned sheep) were grazing. To the east, the highest mountain is Mt Ajanglung at 6,020m. On the way there, the road skirts the spectacular confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers, viewed from a pass at 4,050m. The long, slow twisting climb up through the valley was mainly through deep snow. At least we could get to our destination by jeep with chains, rather than having to walk it.

Ulley is more regularly visited by snow leopard tours and our hamlet hosted several more substantial homestays, in addition to our lodge, than in Rumbak. Again, however, we were the only visitors.

The hamlet sits on a broad ledge with the ice-covered valley continuing to sweep upwards behind it and a wide vista down the snow covered valley. Encircling the lot is a gigantic amphitheatre of



Figure 13: Scanning the mountainside

massive peaks. It is not just the altitude – standing on a ledge scanning for leopards in this immense space takes your breath away. The sense of desolation, isolation and human insignificance is palpable.

Our comparatively comfortable lodge was heated by slow combustion stoves using wood, which give off more heat than cow dung, and there was electricity in the bedrooms. Still we had no running hot water or flushing toilets, but at least there was a toilet and more importantly, in the freezing conditions, it was inside.

Each morning just before sunrise the graceful ballet with telescopes resumed as our guides scanned rocky spaces and snowy ravines looking for the elusive beast, until the cold could be tolerated no more and thoughts turned to the late breakfast that was waiting for us in the lodge. During the day we lolled around keeping warm or doing short walks until the sun began to turn golden and the imposing shadows of the surrounding ranges lengthened. We would return to the icy platform in search of a leopard until darkness and the aching cold sent us back inside the lodge.

For three days like pilgrims performing some ancient ritual, swathed in high-tech clothing, we would manipulate telescopes peering into the vast spaces. These were anything but empty. Over these days we saw plenty of ibex, which are also prey of the leopard, the giant woolly hare, wild yak, red foxes, Himalayan magpies, rose finches, the red-flanked bush robin, partridge and many more, as well fresh wolf tracks. With the naked eye, our guides could spot just about anything that moved. It would be only a matter of time before we would have the second sighting of a snow leopard.

To improve our chances on the second last day, we hiked above the hamlet to over 4,200 metres. Taking a couple of hours, it was less steep than the Rumbak march. “No hurry, no worry” was the order of the day and the hike, though taxing on breathing, was pleasant enough. We had also thoroughly, or so it seemed, acclimatised. We saw a host of wildlife, including the carcass of a woolly hare, recently ripped apart by a pair of red foxes we had observed busily trotting along the trail far below us, but no snow leopard.

That afternoon, after a late lunch of omelette and naan bread, I was alone in the lounge room when suddenly I became aware that I could not remember anyone’s name. Neither Margaret’s nor the guides’, nor anyone else’s, nor the name of where I was. Nothing would come to me. I tried for a while various associations, such as Margaret’s

husband, but I couldn't remember his name either.

It was obviously a reaction to the altitude, but one not expected after nearly two weeks at these heights. Admittedly, the day's walk had been the highest we had been, but only by about 150 metres. Not panicking, I recalled that I had Margaret's email messages on my mobile phone. Although the phone could not be used for calls in such a remote place, I had it with me for photographs. Opening it I flicked through messages received. When one from Margaret came up, her name came back to me, and one by one so did the others. Later, speaking with a former jet fighter pilot, he said that I had suffered hypoxia from the altitude, something for which jet pilots commonly prepare. This time I had reached my limit.

Next morning, we were at the telescopes scanning again. The last chance for a sighting. Remaining hopeful, we stood staring at the most likely locations for the leopard to be, but the hours went by and cold tightened its grip. It was time to go and leave Ulley like most visitors do, without having seen a leopard. At least, we had seen one in Rumbak, so there was no sense of disappointment.

Still, it is more about the chase. The daily routine of early starts and brilliant sunsets in the crushing cold. Waiting for hours, our scanning guides never stopping. Admiring their fluid movements as their eyes read the landscape, anticipating where the leopard might be. The excitement of seeing wildlife everywhere, with sightings of ibex and bharal raising expectations that their hunter would be nearby. Knowing that we had been observed by a leopard, even if we have not seen it.

Ultimately, it is the sense of extreme isolation in the wilderness, its scale and your own insignificance that gives meaning to such adventures.

During descent, a great sense of elation occurs as the oxygen to the brain increases and every banal action becomes easier. Next stop was the bar in the historic Imperial Hotel, New Delhi. After 12 days on the wagon, the first gin and tonic would be special.



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# SETTLER, SCHOLAR, SOLDIER, SCRIBE: ANGLO-IRISH AGENTS OF BRITAIN'S EMPIRE EAST OF SUEZ

BY ROBERT BROWN

## ABSTRACT

*Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, members of the Irish diaspora were both agents for, and insurgents against, the expansion of England's (later Britain's) colonial empire. In the heart of empire, and on the far-flung reaches of the colonial periphery, Irish administrators and soldiers often wielded great amounts of power and exercised a form of Anglo-Irish hegemony over their subordinates. Some notable examples include Sir Alexander John Arbuthnot, East India Company administrator and later educationalist, and Micheal O'Dwyer, the Governor presiding over the Punjab region when the fateful massacre of Sikh peaceful protestors took place in 1919. The General responsible for the massacre was Reginald Dyer, also of Irish descent. This article argues that the complexity of Anglo-Irish society and their relationships with wider metropolitan and imperial institutional power structures complicate British and colonial histories: the levels of lightness or brutality, affection or contempt displayed by the Anglo-Irish in South Asia during the colonial period may illustrate how such agents of empire identified with their Irish roots, the Anglo-Imperial establishment, and the subjects over whom they exacted control.*

## AGENTS HIGH AND LOW – TINKLER, DALHOUSIE AND THE WELLESLEYS

The agents of empire east of the Suez Canal were a diverse group. They came from every class, every background, and often a diverse range of ethnicities.

One unlikely example was working-class Englishman Richard Maurice Tinkler, a veteran of the horrors of the First World War who in 1919 became a police constable with the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP)<sup>1</sup>. Protecting the interests of the British dominated International Settlement was Tinkler's primary function.

Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s was a raucous patchwork of vice, glitz, hedonism and modernity, a thriving transnational metropolis marked by peaks of fortune and gaping chasms of inequality<sup>2</sup>. Westerners, Communists, Nationalists, and the Japanese

all intermingled on the streets of the city, along with local warlords and gangsters, vying to expand their economic and political influence. Tinkler's "beat" covered the "Shanghailanders", the Western expatriate community who represented a beachhead for Britain's informal empire in China, a complex maze of jurisdictions and business interests that gave Europeans a semi-colonial privileged status.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Bickers's study of 'Maurice' Tinkler, in *Empire Made Me* gives us a rather different perspective of British influenced Shanghai than the millionaire and movie star studded accounts of Paul French in *Destination Shanghai* (2019). Patient archival research, using photo albums and Tinkler's letters to his sister Edith, allowed Bickers to create a 'biography of nobody'.<sup>4</sup> SMP constables were not officers of high status. They were 'marginal men', ordinary European policemen operating at the blurry extremes of European power. They were expected to serve their community faithfully, though many Shanghailanders treated them with a snobbery transplanted from the hierarchies of the British domestic class system. Resentment and disappointment at his low status punctuate Tinkler's writings, and he often assuaged his anger by displaying physical roughness and cruelty towards the Chinese Shanghainese unfortunate enough to cross his path. Tinkler's is the tale of a desperate man who escaped poverty and inertia at home only to die a miserable death in 1939 at the hands of the Japanese Empire, as the British Empire's power in the city rapidly ebbed away. It was only with his murder, reported internationally as Britain and Japan moved to the brink of war, that Tinkler's name achieved any kind of fame outside the Shanghai Municipal Police or his hometown.

Bickers takes us away from a view that British Imperialism in China was exclusively the domain of fat cat bankers and monocled megalomaniacs commanding fleets and smuggling opium. By giving us a very personal story of one individual, Bickers shows how ordinary servants of empire helped to keep it functioning, and how this role changed over time.

India also absorbed these marginal men, many of them from Ireland. By 1817 approximately twenty percent of the European population of the subcontinent were Irish, making them one of the most numerous diasporas. Many of them served in the army of the East India Company (EIC), which until the 1857 Indian Mutiny effectively ruled the South Asian subcontinent. The EIC army between

1813 and 1857 recruited around fifty percent of its soldiers directly from Ireland; by 1857 around forty percent of the British Regular Army that supplemented Company forces was also of Irish heritage. Without this Irish manpower as a backbone, ‘the rampant growth of Britain’s Empire at this stage would scarcely have been possible’.<sup>5</sup>

Although there are few personal accounts of the rank and file in India during this period, there are many more traditional accounts of *grandees* and commanders, and their interactions with the peoples of Greater Asia. These histories have never fallen out of popularity, and continue to dominate public understanding of what modern empires were and how they operated in places like China and South Asia.

The story of the Anglo-Irish Wellesley dynasty is an illuminating example. Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington and victor at the battle of Waterloo (1815) is such a monolith in British history as to have completely overshadowed his siblings, but several of them were notable in their own right as imperial agents. Aspects of Arthur Wellesley can be understood in the context of his Anglo-Irish family through their correspondence. His oldest brother, Richard Wellesley, became Governor General of India in 1798. He arranged an army commission for Arthur that allowed him to build his career in India as a Lieutenant Colonel, and together the brothers helped shift the balance of power in favour of the British. Arthur’s decisive victory over the Maratha Empire, the most powerful major rival remaining on the subcontinent at the battle of Assaye in September 1803, can be seen as a family effort. It cemented not only British domination in Southern Asia, but also the fortunes of Arthur, Richard and their many siblings, as elements of an influential imperial network.<sup>6</sup>

The life of a later British agent, James Andrew Broun-Ramsay, first Marquess of Dalhousie (1812 – 1860), illustrates the growing complexity of the cross-cultural relationships in the British Empire. He was a Scottish colonial administrator who served as Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856. Enthusiastic about education reform and the education of women, his reforming instincts chimed with the young Sir Alexander Arbuthnot’s, who would serve under Dalhousie’s governor-generalship. Despite his high intentions, Dalhousie’s controversial Doctrine of Lapse (the policy of taking control over “lapsed” states), his overbearing paternalism towards subject populations, and failure to spot signs of unrest within East India Company territories on the eve of the catastrophic 1857

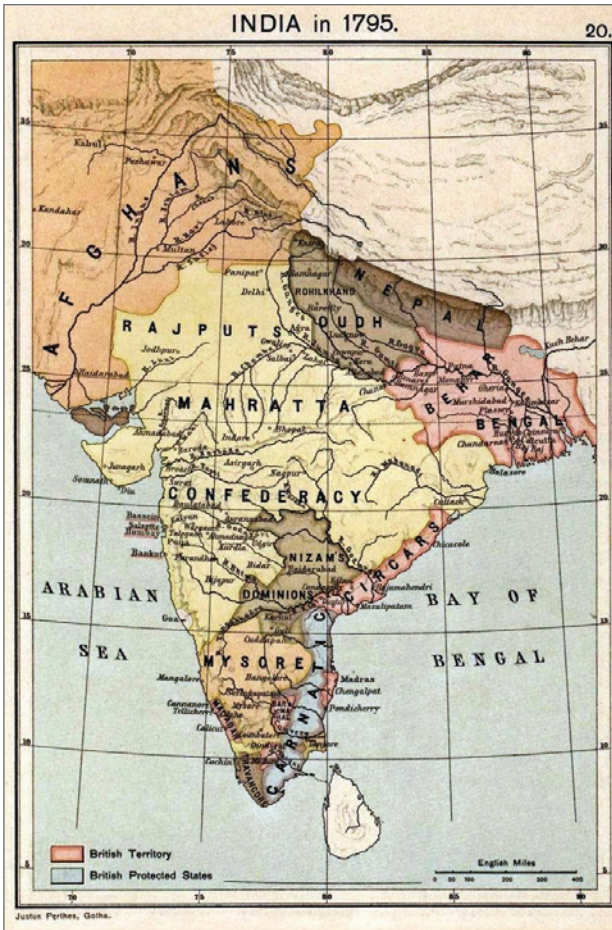


Figure 1: The Marathi Empire prior to the Battle of Assaye<sup>7</sup>

Indian uprising deeply tarnished his legacy. Overambitious and megalomaniacal, Dalhousie perhaps characterised the growing anxiety and repression by the imperial state that would become common in the decades after his tenure.<sup>8</sup>

### EMPIRE'S SCHOOL DAYS

From Sir Alexander Arbuthnot (11 October 1822 – 10 June 1907), we get a very different portrait of the British official colonial mind, one that is far more optimistic. In *Memories of Rugby and India*, a memoir published in 1910, Arbuthnot explains that protestant values of education and paternalism were the agents of consolidation in India,



and were more suited to the Indian situation than the paranoia and iron fisted oppression of a police state<sup>9</sup>. In this memoir his second wife Lady Constance Arbuthnot, who is credited as co-author, describes her husband as the 'strong man of Madras', looking back with reverence and affection on the life of a man who had given decades of his service, and perhaps even a portion of his soul, to the Madras Presidency under the East India Company and later the British Raj after 1859.<sup>10</sup>

Sir Alexander John Arbuthnot, 'Alick' to his close friends, was born in County Mayo, Ireland on 11 October, 1822. His father, also called Alexander Arbuthnot, was a Reverend who was elevated to an episcopal position as the Bishop of Killaloe and Kilfenora in 1823. He was a member of the Church of Ireland, which was an autonomous offshoot of the Anglican Communion or Anglican Church, the State Church of England. Their protestant denominational links to England would have undoubtedly helped the family achieve a favourable position within the complex religious-political hierarchies of nineteenth century colonial Ireland. Alick's mother was Margaret Phoebe ne Bingham, daughter of General George Bingham. They married at St Peter's Church, Dublin, on 5 May, 1819 and the marriage produced a daughter, Susan, born in 1821, and two sons, Alexander in 1822 and Charles in 1824.<sup>11</sup> Alexander Arbuthnot senior's extended family could be described as a military family, and several of his siblings were notable soldiers serving in outposts of the British Empire. His brother was Lt-General Sir Charles George Arbuthnot and his half-brother was Major-General George Bingham Arbuthnot.

The Reverend Alexander Arbuthnot died suddenly and unexpectedly towards the end of 1828 with no pension, leaving his widow in straitened circumstances. Margaret wrote many desperate letters, eventually securing an annual payment from her brother-in-law. Attempting to provide an 'inexpensive yet efficient' education for her sons, lady Arbuthnot was able to get a foundation scholarship for Rugby School. In return for Alexander's place at Rugby, she had to buy a house within ten miles of the school itself.<sup>12</sup> As John Tosh and other historians have demonstrated, institutions and public schools such as Rugby evolved into finishing schools for empire, playing a powerful role in shaping the practical, political and cultural values of the boys that passed within its walls. Many of the alumni were then dispatched to take up imperial careers at the outposts of the British world system.<sup>13</sup>

The work of the School Master Dr Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) in reshaping the religious and moral values of the school created an epicentre for an Anglican Imperial revolution that spread out across the mid-nineteenth century empire. Arbuthnot became a firm and persistent disciple. Admitted in 1832, as a classmate of Thomas Arnold's eldest son, Matthew Arnold, Alick was to spend eight years under the gentle guidance of the famous schoolmaster. A spontaneous testimonial from the great educator was to have a profound effect on young Alexander's later life. Arbuthnot became immersed in the culture of both the school and the area, and despite admitting to not being a hard worker, rose rapidly to the sixth form. By the time he was 15 in 1837, Dr. Arnold and George Edward Lynch Cotton, the model for 'the young master' of Tom Brown's School Days, were transforming the school. He became friends with Dr. Arnold, other masters and other pupils with whom he would later be acquainted professionally, as soldiers or civil servants.

He described Dr. Arnold at 'the most-high minded man I had ever met' and a man who shaped his love of languages and writing, and admired his fervent Christianity. James Prince Lee, a Master at Rugby who later became Bishop of Manchester, was also close friends with the young Alexander, and gave him a book of Asiatic poetry by Sir William Jones. He rubbed shoulders with a number of figures who went on to be soldiers, administrators and clergy in the empire. He would meet a number of them later on in his career, and we can see that he was becoming aware and fond of the fraternal, cultural, professional networks of imperial governance that were building up around Rugby School in the 1830s and 1840s, especially as Dr. Arnold sought to reorganise and increase the prestige of the school. He knew well Willie Arnold, Dr Arnold's fourth son, who went on to become Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab.

In 1840, British India was still under the control and administration of the East India Company, a corporate-political superstate that would eventually see its collapse after the 1857-59 Indian uprisings.<sup>14</sup> At this time, connections and patronage were still the necessary trappings for those seeking careers in the East India Company. Such was the case with the young Alick Arbuthnot, who was recommended by the master of Rugby School, Sir Thomas Arnold, in 1840.

On the strength of Dr Arnold's recommendation, Alick was nominated for the job of 'writer', effectively a clerk, in the Honourable

East India Company (HEIC). Accordingly, Arbuthnot was enrolled at the East India Company College at Haileybury, Hertfordshire, on 23 January, 1840. The institution, established in 1805 by Charles Grant, Chairman of the British East India Company and Member of Parliament, was used as a training centre for ‘writers’, as the junior level of administrators of HEIC were called.

The college provided necessary vocational and general training of 16 to 18-year-old male aspirants nominated by Company’s Directors for Civil Service appointments overseas. During this time, the young Alexander had come under the tutelage of Francis Johnson, designated teacher for Sanskrit, Bengali, and Telugu, and developed a keen interest in South Asian languages. Arbuthnot left the College around Christmas time of 1841, with distinctions in the Classics and in Telugu. Indeed, in *The Classics and Colonial India*, Phiroze Vasunia mentions an incident when AJ Arbuthnot, writing under a Greek pseudonym, had written a description of a cricket match in Homeric Greek for the College magazine.

In May 1842 he began his voyage to Madras from Portsmouth on the ship Northumberland to take up his position in the Madras Presidency, going via Madeira and Port Louis in Mauritius, arriving in Madras on 21 September, 1842.<sup>15</sup> At the time, control of South Asia was in theory divided into three British run Presidencies: Madras, Bombay and Bengal, each with a Governor who in turn reported to an overall Governor General of the subcontinent. Despite the image of India as a railway ‘Mecca’ under British rule, there were few or no railways in India in 1842 when Arbuthnot arrived, and he describes how he was conveyed around by a palanquin which had eight bearers, a hollow box that passengers lay down in, or a buggy like a London cabriolet. Dining with the outgoing Governor Elphinstone when he arrived, at the Governor’s country house at Guindy, he was quickly inducted into the tight knit world of the notables and heroes of empire, where men like Elphinstone rubbed shoulders and built relationships.<sup>16</sup> One of Arbuthnot’s pastimes at Rugby, fox hunting, was even catered for at Madras with Indian foxes.

In June 1843, the “Company Bahadur”, as the HEIC was referred to in India, was pleased to grant Arbuthnot an honorary award of a thousand pagodas (a pagoda being a gold or half-gold coin used in British colonial India, and worth about 350 rupees at the time) for his exemplary proficiency in Telugu and Hindustani. Aside from what

we might be inclined to see as the prestige of being an East India Company official, junior administrators were often compelled to supplement their income with freelance work. To this end Arbuthnot continued studying Telugu and added study of Hindustani when he got to Madras, and later learned Malayalam. In 1849 he was able to get additional work as a translator in order to pay for his wife's passage back to England for medical treatment, as the climate of India refused to agree with her.<sup>17</sup>

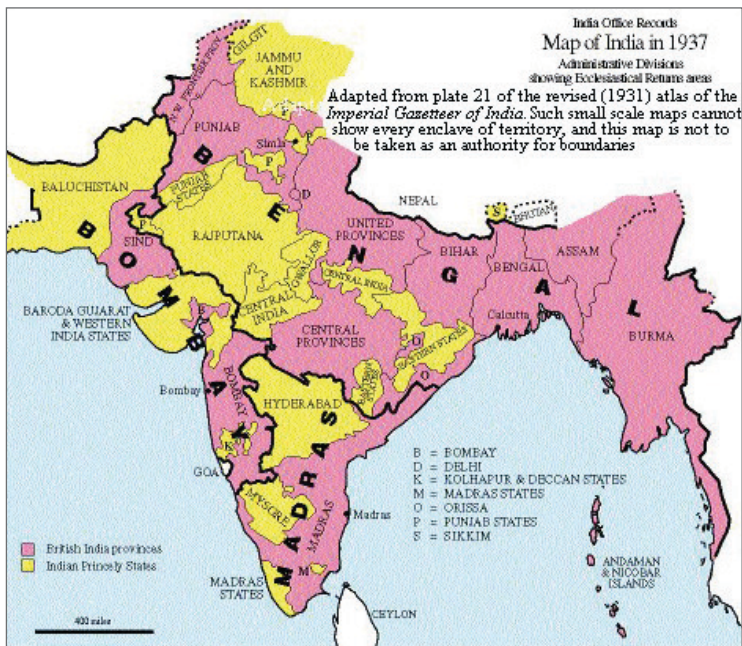
Arbuthnot had married Frederica Eliza Fearon, daughter of General Robert Bryce Fearon, in February 1844. His career accelerated from there. In 1846 he got himself appointed by Lord Tweeddale to the position of Head-Assistant to Registrar of the Court of Sadr and Foujdari Adalat, which later became the High Court, and he moved to Nungumbaukum in Madras. In 1846 he became one of the founders of the Madras cricket club, and also played some football there.

A man of diverse talents, Arbuthnot set about compiling a history of selected criminal cases examined by the Sadr Court from 1826 to 1850, a treatise that was to have a historical importance in later years. At the same time, he penned a report of the state of Public Education in Madras Province, going back to 1822, a report that was to have a decisive effect on his later career.

His career continued to blossom. On the basis of his report on Public Education in Madras, Arbuthnot was appointed Director of Public Instruction for Madras in March 1855, at the age of only 33, the first incumbent to the august post. In this capacity, he worked out many schemes that proved to be very beneficial to the Public Instruction department, including one that led to the incorporation of Madras University in 1857. Arbuthnot became one of the pioneering Fellows, and later Vice-Chancellor of the University from 1871-72. He was to later occupy the post of Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University from 1878 to 1880.

He also took roles in civil administration as chief secretary to the Madras Government between 1862 and 1867, and a member of the Legislative Council (1867-72); Serving on the Viceroy's Executive Council (1875-80); he was even the acting Governor of Madras for three months between 19 February 1872 to 15 May 1872 due to the assassination of Lord Mayo in February 1872, and held the government together.

He later served as a member of the Council of the Secretary of



**Figure 2:** India divided into presidencies. British territory is represented in pink, while the Indian Princely States are yellow.<sup>18</sup>

State for India from 1888 to 1893. Arbuthnot was honoured by the Crown with the titles of Knight Commander of The Most Exalted Order of the Star of India (1873) and Companion of The Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire (CIE). It is documented that the Engineering College founded under the auspices of Madras University had been established according to his detailed recommendations in 1855. By now an educationist of renown in British India, he became a champion for the inclusion of worthy Indian personnel in positions of responsibility and trust in Public Service, defending very strongly their rights to parity of emoluments.

The 'Indian Mutiny' gets very limited mention in Arbuthnot's memoir.<sup>19</sup> Arbuthnot claims, 'we heard but little of the Mutiny in Madras as the disaffection did not reach our presidency.'<sup>20</sup> If the mutiny spread to Hyderabad, he thought it would spread to Madras. However, he argues that Sir Salar Jung, Minister at Hyderabad, stopped this happening. Jung apparently realised the 'power of England' and its 'benefits', and stayed loyal. Despite his ambivalence, Arbuthnot would have known other British agents who had been killed. His compatriot at Haileybury East India College, Hillersden, whom he met in Madras

in 1857, was brutally slain in the mutiny, as described in Kaye's famous history of the Uprising.<sup>21</sup>

In 1872 Arbuthnot left India for England to take two years leave. Upon reaching the end of his leave, he resigned from the Indian Civil Service. In 1874 he wrote the article 'Poor Whites of India' for the *Contemporary Review*, a very popular and prestigious periodical in Britain at the time, in which he claimed that the problem of unemployed and destitute Europeans in the Madras Presidency had been greatly exaggerated.<sup>22</sup> Finally, after an invitation from Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State, Arbuthnot went back to India in 1874, joining the Governor-General's council as a member from May 6, 1874. He was to enjoy an extended and fruitful diplomatic career in India till his final farewell to Indian shores in 1880, 38 years from the time he had set foot in Madras as a new 'writer' in 1842.

#### EMPIRE AND THE ATLANTIC ARCHIPELAGO

When examining the records of servants of empire, it can be seen that many posted to positions of power in Asia were born not in England, the heart of the Empire, but in the far less populous countries of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The "four nations" theory of empire may help to elucidate our understanding of imperial agents, and how they became "insiders" or "outsiders" in the empire project.<sup>23</sup>

The development of the British and Hibernian Isles, forming the Atlantic Archipelago, can be considered as an interaction between the four constituent ethnicities of those islands (Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English), although these nations comprise further ethnicities within themselves. As in the contemporary world, significant tensions existed between these different ethnicities and political identities, but what held the Atlantic Archipelago together, according to some historians, was the British Empire project, which acted as both a 'solvent' of differences, and a wider transnational space into which different groups from the British Isles could exercise colonial power and agency under a collective imperial umbrella.<sup>24</sup>

In this process, the narrative goes, aspects of autonomy and identity of the four nations had to be destroyed for this to happen. However John Mackenzie, in *Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Worlds? A Four Nation Approach to the History of the British Empire* argues that the unified façade of an imperial Britain 'obscured many more complex phenomena', even going as far as suggesting that separate

Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Empires were all operating at the same time. Each ethnicity within the four nations interacted with the indigenous peoples they encountered in a variety of often contradictory ways. A simple colony-metropole<sup>\*</sup> analysis is insufficient; aspects of each of the four nations, must be examined, to draw out in more detail the ‘expansion, settlement, and patterns of dominance of the imperial connection and also the pressures towards decolonisation’.<sup>25</sup>

Ireland, in particular, throws up a plethora of contradictions. Historians of Ireland have labelled Ireland as ‘both the first and last colony of the British Empire’.<sup>26</sup> Whether Ireland was a partner in the Empire Project, or an oppressed colony ruled in a manner reminiscent of what could be seen in the British Raj in the aftermath of the Indian Uprising (1857-59) is a complex question. England, its powerful neighbour, evolved over time, as did the “British World System”, which grew from the expansion of that power to unprecedented size and scope. The decline and decolonisation of this system also massively affected Ireland. As Kenny has argued in *Ireland and the British Empire*, as well as being subjects and victims of Britain’s empire, ‘Irish people helped conquer, populate, and govern the colonies overseas’. This creates an uncomfortable contradiction.

Far from empathising with indigenous peoples overseas [...] the Irish, whatever their experience at home, were as brutal as any other white colonisers. Not surprisingly, this paradoxical involvement in British imperialism has yielded an ambivalent heritage.<sup>27</sup>

The family tree of the Irish journalist Fergal Keane provides a poignant example of this. While his great-grandfather served as a sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary, the loyalist police force, his grandfather joined the Irish Republican Army, the paramilitary organisation fighting against the British Empire, and for an independent Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

In 1920, the tensions between the pro- and anti-imperialism in both Ireland and India threatened to cripple the British World system. As Susan Kingsley Kent has suggested in *Aftershocks*, in the paranoid post 1918 atmosphere there was a conservative turn and a groundswell

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\* Metropole (from the Greek metropolis for “mother city”) can be defined as the homeland or central territory of a colonial empire.



Figure 3: Ireland prior to 1922<sup>31</sup>

the ‘Bloody Sunday’ massacre at Croke Park, Dublin, on 21 November, 1920. British loyalist units known as the ‘Black and Tans’ drove an armoured car into a stadium and machine-gunned a football crowd, in reprisal for Irish Republican Army killings on the same day. Twelve people were killed and dozens injured. Outcry in response to this brutal act helped create the conditions for the Anglo-Irish Treaty, eventually signed on 6 December, 1921. The treaty proclaimed an Irish Free State in 1922 in most of Ireland, while the six Unionist, pro-British counties in the North of Ireland remained part of Britain, in line with the Government of Ireland Act 1920. While some Irish nationalists rejoiced, the dissenting unionist voices raised during the 1920s give us a fascinating glimpse into the lives and careers of a class of British Empire loyalists from the Irish diaspora who had just seen a great chunk of their identity and *raison d’être* dismembered.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE SHADOW OF THE SEPOY WAR

Prominent among them was Longford-born Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, who lamented in March 1921: ‘If we lose Ireland we have lost the Empire.’<sup>33</sup> Wilson was also reacting to an event in 1919 involving Irish imperialists that had seriously jeopardised the integrity of British control in India, at a time when the nerves of empire, exhausted by the First World War, were severely strained.

On the 13 April, 1919, a crowd of 20,000 had coalesced at the

of support in Britain, Ireland, and the imperial elite in India for tough action against anti-empire separatists in southern Ireland, Egypt and India who were nearing open rebellion.<sup>29</sup>

Danger signs in India had already surfaced in June when the Connaught Rangers, heroes of the Napoleonic wars, mutinied in protest at the ongoing Irish War of Independence.<sup>30</sup>

Tensions continued to

escalate in Ireland, resulting in

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eventually signed on 6 December, 1921. The treaty proclaimed an

Irish Free State in 1922 in most of Ireland, while the six Unionist,

pro-British counties in the North of Ireland remained part of Britain,

in line with the Government of Ireland Act 1920. While some Irish

nationalists rejoiced, the dissenting unionist voices raised during the

1920s give us a fascinating glimpse into the lives and careers of a class

of British Empire loyalists from the Irish diaspora who had just seen a

great chunk of their identity and *raison d’être* dismembered.<sup>32</sup>



Jallianwalla Bagh, a large public space in Amritsar, Punjab, to protest the imprisonment of Indian Nationalist figures by the British. Mohandas K. Gandhi himself had been one of those arrested during early April 1919, while trying to enter the Punjab to join the nationalist protests.<sup>34</sup> The situation was tense in Amritsar, following several days of rioting and a ban on public assembly, and it was into this fraught scenario that Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer strode. Dyer led his fifty Gurkha riflemen into the Bagh, a public ground enclosed by stone walls. Without any communication toward the crowd, he directed his men to fire. After a sustained bullet barrage, 379 civilians were killed according to official estimates, although others claim this was as high as 600 or even 1,500. Over 1,200 were injured.

Although born in Punjab, North West India, Dyer was of Irish descent.<sup>35</sup> He was sent to Ireland at the age of eleven to be educated at Midleton College in County Cork, and later entered the Royal Military College in Sandhurst. Dyer assisted with riot control in the Belfast riots in 1886, and served in the Third Burmese War and other Subcontinent conflicts prior to the First World War. He served in the British Indian Army for most of his career and achieved the rank of Colonel in 1915.

The Hunter Committee, led by the Scotsman Lord William Hunter, was assembled to investigate Dyer's misconduct. The committee condemned his recklessness, and invited Dyer to resign his commission, but allowed him to retire on half pay with no further punishment. Principal among Dyer's fellow Irish defenders was Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab County, Micheal O'Dwyer, a Tipperary native and the man who had given Dyer the autonomy to conduct brutally repressive tactics. He had proclaimed martial law in the Punjab on 15 April, 1919. In 1920 O'Dwyer, along with other supporters including Rudyard Kipling, mounted a newspaper campaign, the 'Appeal to Patriots', to drum up public support claiming that Dyer's actions had saved the British Raj. The scandal also provoked an informal referendum on the state of Ireland, which at that point, much like India, was in open rebellion against Britain. With O'Dwyer's encouragement, the pro-British Ulster Unionist Party leader Edward Carson roused his supporters to vote against the government censure and in favour of Dyer.<sup>36</sup>

O'Dwyer was also relieved of his office. Despite being pushed to leave his position in the Punjab and coming under criticism, O'Dwyer remained defiant. In his widely read 1925 memoir, *India As I Knew*

*It*, a self congratulatory whitewashing of his role in the Amritsar massacre, was a tacit endorsement of a coercive police state, rather than liberal model of control, for both India and Ireland. Democracy had no place East of the Suez Canal, he claimed, because reformers held the 'false premise that the Indian masses have the desire and capacity for representative institutions which British people have'. By his logic the cultural cross-pollination of British liberalism, 'pouring the new heady wine of the West into the ancient wine-skins of the East', would lead to chaotic consequences. Force and order was the language that the Indian understood.<sup>37</sup> Was he by extension implying that certain sections of the Irish population, in theory his own people, were uncivilized and un-British?

Who was O'Dwyer, this stalwart and divisive loyalist to a British Empire and a British Ireland? Born in 1864 in County Tipperary, he was one of fourteen children. His family were sizeable landowners by the standards of the Irish bourgeoisie. They were also Irish Catholic. With the state religion of England being Anglican Protestant, and systemic anti-catholic antipathy in the British Isles typified by flash points such as the Gordon Riots in 1780, it should surely have stood to reason that Catholics would have struggled to implant themselves into imperial elites. But this was not entirely the case. The majority of Irish who served the empire were of catholic background, usually as bureaucrats or as soldiers, joining the British and EIC armies and navies out of necessity rather than patriotism. However, the Indian Civil Service, with its opportunities for advancement into the global Anglo-Irish elite, served as the preferred path for the younger sons of Irish Catholic gentlemen.<sup>38</sup>

Until 1855, entry to the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was controlled by a system of patronage and networking favoured by the East India Company. This was the case in Arbuthnot's time: those young men who had impressed patrons with connections were sent to the East India Company College at Haileybury, Hertfordshire. Prior to 1855, the majority of those chosen to train for ICS were English or had gone to a prominent English school or university.

In an attempt to develop a more meritocratic system, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Charles Wood, helped to institute competitive examinations for entrance into the Indian Civil Service in 1855. This changed the pattern of recruitment to an extent. Irish universities capitalised most quickly on the new situation, producing legions of

new recruits. While Trinity College Dublin established chairs in Arabic and Sanskrit, key languages needed for operating in South Asia, the Queen's Colleges in Galway, Cork and Belfast also moved quickly to offer South Asian languages. While only 5 percent of Haileybury appointees from 1809 to 1850 were Irish, at least 24 percent of recruits between 1855 and 1863 came from Irish universities. Between 1886 and 1914, eighty percent of Irish recruits came from the Catholic middle class in Ireland, a massive swing away from protestant dominance of coveted imperial appointments. The Anglo-Irish were influential also at the apex of the Indian colonial state: Lord Landsdowne and Lord DuVerin occupied the position of Viceroy, highest office in the post-mutiny Raj, and by the end of the 1890s, seven of the eight provinces of India had an Irish-born Governor.<sup>39</sup>

O'Dwyer himself, a very talented student, passed the examination for the ICS in 1882 at a London crammer school and entered the considerably more prestigious Balliol College, Oxford as a Probationer. At a critical point in his life in 1882, as he was finishing his training at Oxford, the assassination of the Chief Secretary of Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, by separatists, hardened the attitude of O'Dwyer against anti-British dissent, and led him to gravitate further toward the Anglo aspects of his identity. His family home and lands became the target of intimidation. This made O'Dwyer feel 'ashamed of being an Irishman', conditioning his tendency for 'tyrannical rule' in the Punjab and paranoia about the survival of the British State.<sup>40</sup>

He landed at Karachi in 1885, and took up his first post in Lahore. Despite his powerful intellect, his interaction with, and appreciation of the local people of Lahore was very limited. Instead he kept closely to the European expatriate community wherever he went, and held to the paternalistic belief that only the British were fit to judge the innocence or guilt of Indians.<sup>41</sup> Enormously fond of his Anglo-Irish upbringing and tastes, he ignored Indian cuisine entirely in favour of simple familiar food, even refusing to eat a dish prepared for him personally by a powerful Maharajah as a token of respect and fealty.<sup>42</sup>

In 1912, not long after he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab region, a bombing almost killed the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge. This event intensified what Choudhury and Bayly have termed the periodic 'information panics' that bedevilled the British colonial state. Believing that a second Indian mutiny was imminent, compounded by the immensely difficult task of processing a deluge

of intelligence regarding multitudes of Indian nationalists and anti-British agents in the Raj arriving via the telegraph service, British agents attempted to fill information gaps and choose appropriate courses of action.<sup>43</sup> There had been several British information panics prior to this – in 1907, on the fiftieth anniversary of the mutiny, and in 1894 when the *Spectator* magazine ran a story claiming that Indian villagers were daubing secret signs on trees in preparation for an organised rebellion.<sup>44</sup> O'Dwyer in particular was steeped in this neurotic and aggressive atmosphere, and vowed to intervene with all necessary force to punish resistance to his rule in the Punjab. He distrusted all the ethnic groups in his province, particularly Hindu Brahmin whom he regarded as 'avaricious and treacherous', and the Sikhs, who had to be dealt with 'firmly'.<sup>45</sup> Even before the First World War, his resentment regarding the gradual power-sharing concessions made to Indians by Westminster, such as the 1909 Act of Parliament, was evident. He opposed the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, with their moves towards limited self government, which were embodied in the Government of India Act of 1919. All of these pre-conditions made O'Dwyer something of a ticking time bomb ready to explode against a local population he despised.

Following his dismissal from his Punjab post, O'Dwyer remained in India until 1925, writing his memoir, then returned to England. Eventually, however, the ghosts of Amritsar caught up with him. On 13 March, 1940, when O'Dwyer was giving a guest lecture at a meeting of the East India Association in London, an Indian revolutionary called Udham Singh fired his revolver at the speaker. The Sikh, who had been wounded as a youth at the Amritsar massacre, blamed the former governor for the death of his friends and family at the Jallianwala Bagh. Singh had spent much of his life planning his revenge. Moving to England in 1932, he took his chance at the Caxton Hall lecture and fired twice at O'Dwyer, killing him almost instantly.

## CONCLUSION

In Arbuthnot and O'Dwyer we see the strains of a shared history, yet these men chose wildly different approaches to the opportunities and experiences that were presented to them as Irish agents of a British Empire.

A sense of 'imperial belonging' and an affinity for Anglo values and worldviews clearly shaped O'Dwyer and Arbuthnot's careers and

their places in Irish and Indian history.

In Arbuthnot's case, colonial governance with Anglo protestant values and public service led to rapid and peaceful advancement. By O'Dwyer's time, exacerbated by the legacy of the Indian Mutiny and the immense strain of the First World War on the British Empire, this pathway had become obscured by nervous anxiety as the empire, in both Ireland and India, was showing signs of reaching breaking point. This sense of paranoia clearly weighed upon O'Dwyer and other Anglo-Irish colonial scions, and perhaps explains why he was willing to exercise brutal repression that stood out of step with the kind of liberal post-war image that was being refashioned for colonialism, by more moderate, and modern thinkers, such as Montagu and Chelmsford.

The legacy of the colonisation and decolonisation of Ireland is a well-worn historical trope, but it still holds practical significance in shaping dealings between the United Kingdom and the European Union, in governing the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That the Irish diaspora fought and died in great numbers for the Empire is well documented. However the background of Irish lives, whether elite, bourgeoisie or working class, and how their upbringings, educational experiences and institutional values inculcated when young and impressionable infused the 'texture' of imperialists and imperial rule in South Asia, is an avenue ripe for more nuanced exploration.

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# CHINA LOOKS TO THE CLASSICS

BY CHANG CHE

## ABSTRACT

*The essay below is based on interviews with Professor Leopold Leeb, Literature Professor at Renmin University, and his students during class visits in July 2021. While Classical Studies are suffering a diminishment at prestigious Western universities in recent years, the study and appreciation of Classics appears to be flourishing in China. In the following pages, Professor Leeb and other scholars in China and the US discuss possible reasons for these trends.*

A BLOCK EAST of Tiananmen Square, in a classroom in late July 2021, Chinese school children were singing the nursery rhyme “Old McDonald Had a Farm” in Latin: ‘Donatus est agricola, Eia, Eia, Oh!’ The students, aged eleven to seventeen, were taking an introductory Latin class with Leopold Leeb, a professor of literature at the prestigious Renmin University.

Every weekday during the summer vacation, from nine a.m. to noon, Leeb holds a public class in a marble white church just a stone’s throw away from Beijing’s central government, in which, just three weeks prior, the Communist Party had celebrated its centennial. On the day I attended, Leeb had given each student a Roman name. There was a Gaius, a Flavius, a Monica, and two sisters Amata and Augusta. The sisters came from Changping, a two hour and a half train ride away. They sat in the front row and took naps during the 10-minute breaks.

In the halls of China’s elite universities, Leopold Leeb is sometimes known as “the legendary Austrian.” His friends affectionately call him “Leizi” – “Lei” from his Chinese name *Lei Libo* and “zi” (子), an ancient honorific reserved for the most esteemed Chinese intellectuals, like *Kongzi* (孔子, Confucius), *Mengzi* (孟子, Mencius), and *Laozi* (老子, Lao Tzu). For Leeb, a pioneer of Classics education (the study of Greco-Roman antiquity) in China, the honorific seems apt: Leeb’s textbooks and dictionaries form a rite of passage for nearly all Chinese who wish to embark on Western Classical study. He has written over a dozen monographs on Greek and Roman history, thirteen Classics

dictionaries, nine textbooks, and over two dozen comparative works, giving Chinese readers access to Western ideas and texts. At fifty-four with no family and no hobbies, he displays an almost religious devotion to his work. ‘Obviously,’ one colleague wrote of him recently, Leeb is ‘more concerned about China’s yesterday, today, and tomorrow than many Chinese.’<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, the future of Classics education is on shaky ground. In 2019, a panel conference, held by the Society of Classical Studies in San Diego titled ‘The Future of Classics,’ asked panellists to speak about ‘the diminution of our future role’. One panellist, Dan-el Padilla Peralta of Princeton, embraced that future, calling for the Classics to die ‘as swiftly as possible.’<sup>2</sup> Peralta, who is Black, has become known in Classics circles as a searing critic of his own discipline, lambasting its lacklustre representation of non-whites and its role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes. He once argued that ‘the production of whiteness’ resided in ‘the very marrows of classics.’<sup>3</sup> In May 2021, the Classics department at Princeton decided to remove the Latin and Greek requirement for its majors in a bid to welcome ‘new perspectives in the field.’<sup>4</sup> Josh Billings, the department head, said that the decisions – which follow from Princeton’s initiatives to address systemic racism on campus<sup>5</sup> – were given ‘new urgency’<sup>6</sup> by the events following the death of George Floyd in May 2020.

At first glance, China looks like an improbable place to find “new perspectives” in the Classics. But in the past few decades, its universities have grown into bastions for the West and its traditions. The irony is palpable. Across China, patriotic fervour is growing, and nationalists are becoming more confident, and increasingly dismissive of Western critics. But enter a humanities classroom in China and one is now just as likely to find students reciting speeches by Cicero as reading lines of Marx.

China’s Classics revival has its origins in the cultural renaissance of the reform era. In 1977, a year after Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping reinstated the *gaokao*, the entrance exam for higher education. The decision restored a sense of esteem to the pursuit of knowledge, an activity which, taken as an end in itself, was punishable by death during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976). Having spent five of his formative years in France participating in the Diligent Work-Frugal Study Movement, Deng knew the value of learning from the West. His educational reforms included increased training for foreign languages.

In addition, students were encouraged and offered resources to go abroad after studying at Chinese universities.<sup>7</sup>

Reforms took hold gradually, then suddenly. In the 1980s and 1990s, the most gifted students still studied practical things; physics, chemistry, engineering, all the knowledge that would secure a well-paying job. But by the early 2000s, parents were becoming more accepting of non-STEM curriculums, teachers were better qualified, and the book market had exploded. In 2015, China's book market was valued at \$8 billion, the second largest after the United States.<sup>8</sup> Chinese publishers released 444,000 titles in 2013, a 35% increase from 2010. 'The Chinese appetite for Western books is really impressive', said Niko Pfund, president of Oxford University Press, to *The New York Times* in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

'It's a generational shift', said T.H. Jiang, a philosophy lecturer in an elite US university and a former humanities student at Peking University, in a July 2021 conversation with me. 'Now, Chinese students are studying medieval theology, the ancient Middle East, and ancient Near Eastern studies – all this useless knowledge'. Jiang meant it facetiously, given his own abstruse and ostensibly "useless" discipline. He said that a sliver of pride was also behind the budding curiosity: '[Chinese students] started to think "Oh, those other cultures are accessible to us. And because China is also a great civilisation, why don't we study other civilisations too?"'

The rebirth of Classics study is an outgrowth of this cultural efflorescence. In the early years of reform, when it came to funding for the Classics, the Ministry of Education was as spendthrift as a Renaissance noble. It sponsored projects on Catullus, reprinted translations of Classical poets, and erected institutes dedicated to serious scholarship of Western civilisations. Bilingual editions of Greek and Roman texts began appearing in bookstores: translations of the complete works of Aristotle were made available in 1997.<sup>10</sup> Strong Classics faculties began to proliferate throughout the country's universities. The *Chinese Journal of Classical Studies*, established in 2010, produces scholarly work on ancient Rome and Greece. Since then, more than two hundred and fifty Greek and Latin texts have been translated by scholars. Conferences for Classical Studies are being held every year, and job postings for Latin teachers can be found in Nankai University in Tianjin, Fudan University in Shanghai, Southwest Normal University in Chongqing, Huazhong Normal

University in Wuhan, among others. The Center for Western Classical Studies was established in 2011 at the prestigious Peking University, and, in 2017, Leeb's Renmin University established its own Classics institute. 'I could only ascribe it to magic', observed a Chinese Latin professor, 'that all of a sudden we came to have our own organization and the attention of the whole nation.'<sup>11</sup>

After Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012, the world began to see many changes in China. But what is equally striking is the continuities: Classics in China is still burgeoning. The leading classicist Gan Yang remarked in an essay that the term "classical studies" (*gudianxue*) had become such a buzzword of late that even "Confucian classics," or *jingxue* has been resuscitated from its century-long exile among intellectuals.<sup>12</sup>

The study of the Classics, of course, is not immune to political exploitation. After all, one does not need to venture far into them before bumping up against discussions of democracy, critiques of tyranny, and theories of mixed government. But the field is allowed to breathe, Leeb notes, because there is no such thing as a definitive interpretation of Classical texts. 'It's an element that protects the Classics', he said. 'They're not so obviously anti-Marxist or anti-somebody.' Leeb also pointed out the problem of accessibility. 'Classical Greek may never be popular in China because it's simply quite difficult to learn. That kind of protects these studies too.'

In Chinese universities, Classical Studies do not yet warrant their own department. Leeb, for his part, is affiliated with Renmin University's School of Liberal Arts. But recently, prominent Classics scholars have tried to change this. Gan Yang described the absence as a 'profound problem', advocating for a unified department that offers courses in both Western and Chinese Classics. 'I have said many times that modern Chinese universities lack civilizational roots', he said in an interview last year. 'A university without its own roots cannot be a great university, it can only be subordinate to others.'<sup>13</sup>

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Leeb's skill as a cultural mediator between East and West, along with his Catholic faith, calls to mind China's first Christian "zi": the Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci. In 1583, Ricci arrived in China with a dream of building a Sino-Christian Mission. In a few years, he had become

so immersed in the culture that he confessed, in a letter to his college friend, ‘I have become a Chinaman.’<sup>14</sup> His knowledge of Chinese language and culture reached a level that ‘no Westerner had ever come near to attaining’, observes Jonathan Spence, a Yale sinologist.<sup>15</sup> He left behind scores of translated Western texts, including a Chinese translation of Euclid’s *Elements*, as well as the first Latin translation of Confucius. For his extraordinary deeds, the literati gave him the honorable title of “zi.” They called him “Lizi” – “Li” from his Chinese name *Li Madou*.<sup>16</sup>

Leeb is a man of unassuming stature. Bald, moustachioed, with a capacious forehead and seraphic smile, he has the benevolent aura of the Catholic missionary he once was. Like Ricci, his Chinese is the stuff of legends, but passed through his hardened German palate, it suggests the accent of a foreigner. However, after twenty-six years living in China, longer than most of his native students, Leeb is fully at home. ‘When I’m in Austria, I’m a foreigner now, I have nothing in common with the people, whereas in China,’ he said, gesturing outside the dumpling house we had stopped in for lunch, ‘I have so much in common with the people.’

When Leeb arrived in China in 1995, China’s Classics appetite had just been whetted. Latin classes were available, but they were mostly offered as supplementary courses for zoologists, botanists, and doctors. After completing his post-doctoral work in 2004, Leeb was told that the best way to secure a job was to teach German, his mother tongue. Philosophy departments were growing, and German was necessary for Chinese scholars who studied Hegel or Edmund Husserl. But Leeb didn’t want to help specialists specialise, so he took a leap of faith. He applied to three Beijing universities as a Latin teacher. Two got back to him with only part-time offers, not enough to secure a visa. Then he received an email from Renmin University’s literature department. ‘Yes, you can teach Latin,’ it read, ‘but you have to teach ancient Greek too.’ He accepted.

In teaching a generation of Chinese to read and write Latin and ancient Greek, Leeb has something in common with Princeton’s Classics educators – trying to pry open the gates of a field that has long been exclusive and rather narrow. ‘A student who has not studied Latin or Greek but is proficient in, say, Danish literature would, I think, both pose interesting questions to classical texts and be able to do interesting research on the ways that classical texts have been read

and discussed in Denmark,' said Princeton department head Billings to *The Atlantic*.<sup>17</sup> Had he replaced Denmark with China, he would have sounded just like Leeb. In its quest for reinvention, Princeton's Classics department looked at the standards of entry and lowered it. Leeb is training a generation of Chinese who can unequivocally pass it.

Leeb's current and former students, now more than 2,000 strong, are part of a generation of Classics scholars studying and teaching in Chinese universities. Many of them, who studied overseas, are helping to shape China's universities in their bicultural image. 'The chair of my department told me I'm the only Chinese graduate student in Classics since the founding of the university 160 years ago,' said Luo Xiaoran, one of Leeb's former students, who completed his Ph.D. in Classics at the University of Washington in the spring of 2021.<sup>18</sup> Luo now plans to teach at the Chinese Academy of Arts in Hangzhou University. 'I'm going to be the first Classics major to teach there.'

Luo is bone thin with wide, dazzled eyes. When I met him for coffee near his university, he wore circular metal-rimmed glasses and a mandarin-collared shirt, the consummate style of a twentieth-century Chinese scholar. In many ways, Luo is Billings' example *par excellence*: a non-white Classics scholar from a non-Western part of the world. Ironically, though, when I asked Luo about his thoughts on the diversity efforts in the Princeton Classics department, Luo was dismissive. 'It's absurd,' he said. 'If you want to get well-trained, educated classicists, you should have the requirement for Classical language.'

Moreover, despite the West's efforts to retain such talents, Luo is returning to China to teach. When I asked why, Luo told me that American students were simply less interested in Classics than Chinese. 'There just aren't as many curious students studying Classics in the US,' he said. 'I taught at the University of Washington for over six years. I tried all kinds of stuff to keep it engaging – they just didn't care.' Last year, by contrast, he gave a lecture in Hangzhou to a crowd of Chinese on the character of the Cyclops in Greek mythology. 'I could see sparks.'

China's Classics enthusiasm fits oddly with the West's Classics malaise, but both have their roots in the post-Cold War environment. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Communism was on the defensive and liberal democracy was declaimed by Francis Fukuyama

as ‘the final form of human government’<sup>19</sup>. Western scholars were reared in that triumphalism, a value system predicated on universal agreement, the end of partisanship, capitalist prosperity, and the absence of viable alternatives. In the ensuing decades, revisions of the tradition of Classical scholarship increased as progressive movements began to challenge that system of thought.

For China, the 1990s was an era of deep soul searching, as other nation states with similar ideologies collapsed under their own weight. Students in the ensuing decades had to go back to the drawing board. They looked to all kinds of new theories for meaning and direction. That divergence in philosophical outlook persists in academies today: While American students were immersed in a process of deconstruction, Chinese were embarking on a project of reconstruction.

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By and large, China’s attention to the West has always had this pragmatic spirit. In 1898, three centuries after Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries, a wave of Western translations erupted, beginning with the work of Yan Fu and his interpretations of such thinkers as John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith. At the time, China had just lost the first Sino-Japanese war, and Western ideas acted as a fertiliser for the subsequent nationalist protests. The first translations of Marx came in 1920, and the Communist Party of China was founded a year later, devoted to the idea that social revolution would save China from foreign powers. After Mao’s death in 1976, a new wave of translations began, eclipsing the prior ones in magnitude. The influx of new ideas, this time around, coincided with the exigencies of reform era China, and its nascent experiments with state capitalism. By the 2000s, there were formal Chinese study groups on Michel Foucault, John Rawls, Jacques Derrida, Fredrick Hayek and others.

The most influential thinker in the reform era has been the German classicist Leo Strauss. In 2008, Evan Osnos, writing in the *The New Yorker*, described a ‘new vein of conservatism’ emerging among China’s youth inspired by what some called “Strauss Fever.”

<sup>20</sup> By the 2010s, Strauss – along with another German legal theorist Carl Schmitt<sup>21</sup> – had become mainstream in China’s academic circles. ‘No one will take you seriously if you have nothing to say about these

two men and their ideas’, a Chinese journalist told Mark Lilla in *The New Republic* in 2010.<sup>22</sup> The works of both men were translated into Chinese by Liu Xiaofeng, a bespectacled Christian philosopher and a colleague of Leeb’s. He teaches an advanced classics course at Renmin University and is one of the most high-profile figures in China’s intellectual circles.

The Strauss obsession offers another window into China’s Classics revival. China, like America, was facing a crisis born out of increased economic integration: disintegrating borders between levels of society, a fraying social fabric, and a splintering of national identity. Strauss, who had dedicated his career to the study of the ancients, promised China a way to remain rooted in tradition while integrating with the world. ‘Under the guidance of [Strauss] philosophy’, Liu wrote in 2016, ‘young scholars’ intellectual passion can be seasoned through immersion in the Classics.’<sup>23</sup>

Rather than reading Plato without any preparation, however, Chinese students can access the Classics through Strauss in a purified form. The German thinker, who was a trenchant critic of the Enlightenment, thought that modernity had distorted the Socratic conception of philosophy as contemplation; students instead should heed the ‘teachings of the ancients.’ Liu, channeling Strauss, included Western progressive politics – its penchant toward agenda-driven, action-guiding theories – in Strauss’s sweeping denunciation of Enlightenment thinking. ‘The main reason for introducing Strauss to China’, Liu wrote, was ‘to avoid the century-long fanaticism toward all kinds of modern Western discourses.’<sup>24</sup> Debates on race and gender identity were side-lined in favour of close readings of Plato. Feminism, critical race theory, intersectionality; these were not for Liu the signposts of moral progress, they were road spikes to be avoided on China’s own path to modernity. For China to embark on its own development path, Liu believes, it is necessary to heed Western wisdom. But how could it be absorbed without the toxins that Liu saw as inseparable to the West’s decline? For Liu, Strauss was the solution: a dose of Western wisdom – without its post-modern demons. ‘The Straussians in China almost unanimously view “political correctness” in the West as a “second Cultural Revolution”’ Jiang told me.

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In his book *The Classical Tradition*, the Renaissance scholar Anthony Grafton remarks on the impossibility of accounting for the Classics' impact on the current world: 'An exhaustive exposition of the ways in which the world has defined itself with regard to Greco-Roman antiquity would be nothing less than a comprehensive history of the world.'<sup>25</sup> Though Leeb and Liu had different reasons for introducing the Classics to China, they have held onto that same premise: that the Western tradition is as much an inheritance to China as it was of the contemporary West.

'Everyday life in China is now based on all these contracts like marriage', Leeb told me. 'That was created by the ancient Romans. Most Chinese people are not aware of that.' Even some Chinese words, he explained, like the word for milk *lao* had likely come from the Latin *lac*. Luo impressed on me a similar view when he argued just how Westernised China continues to be. 'The political climate now is more anti-Western', Luo admitted. 'But culturally that isn't the case. Culturally, we still love the West. Look at these cars! Look at these people, look at these outfits, and this place!' He pointed to the fancy cafe with a leafy interior we had chosen to sit in and went on: 'This is the place we selected, and this is not Chinese.'

One day, in 1996, Leeb sat down for tea at the house of his doctoral advisor, the renowned Confucian scholar Tang Yijie. 'You know', Tang told him, 'the views of people from the East and West can enlighten each other.' He described it using four Chinese characters: *huxiang faming* or "mutual illumination." Leeb never forgot it. 'It's stayed in my mind throughout the years', he told me. 'That is why I teach Latin.'

Indeed, for Leeb, teaching Classics to Chinese is itself a process of self-discovery. 'To have a profound response to the value of Chinese culture and tradition', Leeb told me, 'you have to put it into perspective with what there is in the West. This so-called Western superiority or Chinese superiority, what does it mean?' Leeb's words also spoke to the present political moment. In an era of geopolitical competition, comparisons with the West have soared. Leeb hopes that the Classics can help China make sure that future comparisons occur on firmer empirical ground.

During my last interviews with Leeb's students, I asked Qu Xinchang, a sophomore philosophy major, what was the most important lesson he had learned from all those classes with Leeb. To my surprise, his answer had nothing to do with history or geopolitics.

‘Modesty’, he replied. I asked if he meant that the Classics was too difficult. ‘That’s part of it. But the other is that Classical knowledge, at its essence, is a lesson in humility’, he said. ‘Perhaps it was after the Enlightenment that our pride kicked in.’

The reference – the particularities of which escaped his notice – captured perfectly the fruits of Leeb’s work.

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# RESISTING CAPITALISM IN CHINA'S NEW ERA

## A MARXIST CRITIQUE ON CHINESE YOUTH SUBJECTIVITY

BY MICHAEL C. TUNDERMANN

### ABSTRACT

*Over the past year and more, observers of China's ongoing modernisation project have noted a growing leftist reaction amongst China's post-90s and post-00s generations toward market pressures, such as the "996" work culture. These observers have further offered youth resistance as evidence of a mature resonance between their politics and the works of Karl Marx. In response to these phenomena, this paper argues that the conception of a Marxist-socialist politics arising out of China's rapid modernisation encounters several problems from a critical perspective. Firstly, by accounting for the discursive forces that have operated in China since Deng, this article illustrates that the assimilation of capital in the New Era has mapped capitalist forms of logic onto people's subjectivity, thus reifying Chineseness. While contradictions have emerged between collective and individual agencies, such contradictions have recently found resolution through the Chinese Dream, which has clandestinely normalised commodification. Considering the compelling dynamic of China's immersion in capitalism, one recalls the maxim, 'can one touch the devil without getting burned?' By re-examining this question in the visible fluctuations of China's New Era, this paper considers whether the Chinese Dream represents an authentic Marxist resistance for Chinese youth.*

Having reached the centenary of the Communist Party of China, a bevy of concerns, old and new, concerning China's modernity project are surfacing once more. The 'Report on the Work of the Government', delivered by Premier Li Keqiang last March, has recently put some of them into focus, but perhaps foremost is the concern about the role of the market. Listing key policy areas that the CPC had been vigilant of in 2020, Li specially highlighted three – 'job security, basic living needs, and the operations of market entities'.<sup>1</sup> Chinese youth especially will be the centre of this consideration, as confirmed by recent scholarly attention to the attitudes of this cohort, notably a three-part *Sixth*

*Tone* series by Wang Rui, that promulgates the notion of the Chinese economic trends re-inspiring, or even provoking, Marxist-socialist orientations. However, examining Wang's contributions, as well as other *Sixth Tone* pieces, can lead one to an alternate view, that any such orientation is still encapsulated by non-authentic, commodified forms – namely, a reified, capitalist subjectivity.

The aforementioned maxim of 'being burned'<sup>22</sup> refers in China's case to the tricky task of using capitalism to satisfy economic imperatives while preventing it from harming subjectivity. The latter, from the postmodernist (late capitalist) perspective, can elicit potentially troubling reactions in a politico-economic system that demands a collectivity tethered to the party-state. The phrase further elicits the more abstract dilemma of trying to map traditional "Chineseness" in a non-indigenous marketised economy. For instance, defining the market in a Chinese context requires recognition of the robust macroeconomic controls the Party has employed and, as the Li report affirmed, will continue to use. Ignore the tease for now: what is crucial to our purpose is sketching out how state-society relations are currently conceived and the subjective perspectives that are emerging.

As this essay will explore, determining a correct principle in the New Era is ineluctably tied to the politics of the modern Chinese citizen, particularly Chinese millennials, broadly referred to as the post-90s (*90hou*) and post-00s (*00hou*) generations. Such a development has been well chronicled already. That marketisation and consumerism, for example, have been integrated into China's nation-building project is something that has been acknowledged and criticised on both sides of the political spectrum. But more salient for our purposes here is the extent at which Chinese society in general and Chinese youth in particular are exhibiting a consciousness signifying resistance to China's market economy and its manifestations, while at the same time conforming to the fragmented disposition of a reified capitalist subject.

A centuries-old issue of Chinese identity re-emerges here, one that recollects historical discourses from Mao to today's party leadership. Re-evaluating this dilemma in the wake of the CPC centennial, the reader may gain some sense of the urgency that the party-state has to formulate a politics for Chinese youth. Are the boundaries of a Chinese identity now more set by non-indigenous elements? Has China already been irreversibly burned?

## NEW ERA, OLD DILEMMA:

### MARXISM AND CHINESENESS IN THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY

Although ‘Chineseness’ as a concept enjoys historical continuity, as expressed for example in the oft-used reference to its ‘5000 years of cultural history’, it is being recast by the acts, choices, and positions of the country’s millennials. These are the first cohorts to be born, raised, and acculturated within China’s so-called ‘post-socialist’ period, a term that is problematic yet can satisfy us inasmuch as providing a connotation of market normalisation. Commentators have at times affixed the word ‘revolution’ to describe China’s generation gap<sup>3</sup> and, more recently, the apparent recalcitrance exhibited by youth toward marriage conventions, gender roles and other socio-cultural norms.<sup>4</sup> These have often been positioned by scholars within two main trends: a tendency toward individual agency (or, to use the exact philosophic term, *cogito*-being), and escapism.<sup>5</sup> Such trends have evoked pejoratives to characterise Chinese millennials, with terms like ‘exquisite egoists’ and ‘*zhong er bing*’ entering the lexicon.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the preferred word, it is clear that the Chinese youth phenomenon has been firmly bracketed as a subject of interest.

Although China’s generation gap is rightfully a fixture in such literature, this topic has shifted in the past year, with many now finding a stronger orientation amongst Chinese youth toward Marxism. With China facing substantial changes in the job market, particularly with increased demands by employers, harsher competition from swelling numbers of college graduates, and continued withering away of social welfare, youth have been placed in a state of precariousness that, as Guy Standing<sup>7</sup> argues, marks a new ‘class’ of the modern world. The so-called “996” work schedule – working 9 am to 9 PM, six days a week, a timetable that industry leaders like Jack Ma have encouraged young workers to adapt – has recently stood out as a prominent example, as will be discussed further below.

Such changes to China’s work culture have seemingly impelled a Marxist-inspired refusal to acquiesce which has been increasingly recognised by both domestic and international media. *The Economist*, for example, has written on how ‘Marxist rhetoric is gaining currency among young, overworked netizens.’<sup>8</sup> Others have noted Chinese youth approval for the Chinese government’s efforts to rein in large private companies (like Ma’s Alibaba Group)<sup>9</sup>, though of course other reasons and intrigues may be driving such efforts.

Such observations can be forgiven for exhibiting surprise when covering these developments, given the other common trope that media clings to when covering China: that while its political reform remains (by the liberal democratic standard) limited, economic reform through marketisation has been incredible.

Unsurprisingly for the Marxist observer, however, the starting point for this youth phenomenon is not some specific event such as Jack Ma's (in)famous promotion of "996" work culture, but capital itself. The precise time when capital's introduction to China reached an epochal moment is a notion that lends itself to various judgments. I set the point of departure at the 15th Party Congress in 1997, notable for effectively encoding Deng's 'white cat, black cat' pragmatism. The years that followed saw notable symptoms of societal fragmentation brought on by the growing impetus of capital and its impact on socio-economic strata, including the closure of state-owned firms, increased unemployment, reduced incomes, and more. Such trends get colloquially referred to as the 'pains' of releasing productive forces and were certainly noted in the works of Wang Hui, who, writing in the years following the 15th Party Congress, promulgated the worrying concept of capitalism as the sole form of modernity<sup>10</sup>. As his works lay bare, Chineseness born under and acculturated by capitalism cannot be neatly demarcated from the outside world, but rather becomes an idea subsumed under the broader, global neoliberal discourse. The rise of a Chinese precariat (workers who have precarious and uncertain employment) could also be interpreted as supporting Wang's thesis.

It is easy to infer from these developments dramatic possibilities concerning the near- and long-term future of state-society relations in China. Indeed, state media like the Global Times have implied anxieties amongst officials over the values held by the younger Chinese cohorts. As one article notably mentions, 'the post-00s [...] are more critical of authority and mainstream ideas as they grew up being encouraged to think independently.'<sup>11</sup> Inexorably tied to such anxieties is the other, well-worn concern over ideology and legitimacy. Some wonder whether China, as it carries out its 'post-socialist' stage, is concomitantly entering a 'post-ideology' phase as well. In fact these notions can be given a conceptual form that scholars on Chinese thought would likely adduce as the latest incarnations of Chinese dialectics. This emphasis on dialectics keeps track of what Tian Chenshan<sup>12</sup> and Zhang Dainian<sup>13</sup> astutely cover in their expositions

on Chinese philosophy and political thought.

It therefore might be tempting to label China's generation gap and the aforementioned anxieties regarding Chinese millennials in general as 'dramatic', 'revolutionary', or the like. However such characterisations could be considered already passé on account of the basic dynamics of Chinese institutions, norms, and practices, which can be observed through careful readings of ancient Chinese texts, Maoism, and contemporary concepts such as 'one country, two systems'. As Yang<sup>14</sup> and others point out, highlighting Chinese youth as 'dejected' and 'alienated' invites misreading. China, in other words, is in a state of contradiction and flux, conditions derived from philosophical principles that have prefigured China to embrace change and dynamisms. In fact, as the scholarship of Zhang Dainian as well as Hall and Ames<sup>15</sup> make clear, such conditions can be inferred as laying the grounds for many of the clichés like 'cultural differences' and the 'Thucydides Trap', as well as their manifested opprobriums.

Nevertheless, in the New Era the pressures of capital and their corollary effects have impelled a notable backlash amongst Chinese youth, that for multiple observers signpost a renewed interest in studying (and practising?) Marxist tenets. This of course is a 'dramatic' potentiality that once again invites a renewed critique as to why and how Chinese subjectivity is changing. Writing from a Marxist perspective, what may be more dramatic still is the extent to which young Chinese leftists are able to authentically determine this subjectivity and whether China is approaching what Michel Foucault famously terms an 'epistemic rupture'. Is China approaching another historical threshold in which not only things like institutions, sexual practice, and power centres are changing, but with them concepts of the self as well?

Two points of clarification should be discussed. First, the term 'epistemic rupture' possibly loses some of its vexing properties since one could argue that by virtue of its dialectical tradition, China's history naturally encounters ruptures anyway. Mao is illustrative here. Secondly, Marxist readers might be uncomfortable with me invoking Foucault, who ultimately abandoned Marxism. To these concerns, I would respond firstly that representations, Marxist or otherwise, in a *Chinese* context can never be reduced to a univocal form. Secondly, such use of representations as Foucault's, imperfectly aligned though they may be with Marxism, still sustain value for



standing in contradistinction to the hegemonic, Aristotelian-Kantian ‘rational’ Western modality that, as Freud, Lacan and other thinkers in psychoanalytical Marxism point out, has centralised thinking within the realm of science, with other thinking basically subsumed and made reductive. One may interpret China’s prioritising of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects amongst secondary and higher education students as being linked to this paradigm. This, as Bai Tongdong argues, reveals an ontologically (I would add ‘tautologically’) driven preference for a value-fact binary – something he characterises as being ‘laden with values.’<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we must not efface other properties that are *philosophical*. Thus, my project here, as a China-centred critique, attempts to use a *Chinese* modality of thought that dialectically contributes to an ‘image cluster’ (as Foucault helps us accomplish), as well as calling attention to the dominant Western, Kantian model, thereby faithfully adhering to a fundamental Marxist goal of immanent historicisation.

With the possibility of a new episteme emerging in China, we certainly find indications through both Western and Chinese interpretations of current young leftists that, if not a ‘rupture’, then a state of unresolved epistemic production exists. In the section that follows, I offer analysis of the relations between the discourses in China and the possibility of a genuine Marxist agitation amongst youth, with critical attention paid to the overarching philosophical question of how Chinese subjectivity has been (and is being) developed and narrativised.

#### THE INDIGENISATION OF THE MODERN CHINESE SUBJECT

To say that Chinese millennials evoke a gamut of concerns is now passé. Such are the (modern) times, as both the layman and expert would argue. Concerns span from the psychoanalytical (Chinese youth are becoming individualistic, ‘lonely-hero’ egoists engaged in escapist fantasies) to the political, with the problems of maintaining or strengthening ties between the *90hou/00hou* and the Party-state. As China’s modernity project has developed in the past decades, with all of the vacillations that come with such a fast-paced project, so too has the manner by which the CPC-led state has tied the body politic to its governance or maintained legitimacy. Nonetheless, before discussing the Party methods of the New Era and their applicability to emerging young Chinese leftists, we are justified in historicising this Marxist tide by seeing how modernisation has impelled various discourses.

Over the past thirty-plus years, I would argue, there have been three main discursive forces operating across different ‘mini-epochs’. The first, state-led nationalism, is one that operates today, but took on greater resonance in the immediate post-Cold War period. Such nationalism compensated for global communism’s decline and acted as an agent of Chinese resistance toward post-’89 foreign pressures, as articulated in works such as 中国能说不 (*China Can Say No*) and through policies such as the 1994 Outline for Conducting Patriotic Education. This force was most prodigious until the late 90s/early 2000s, when the effects of Deng’s Southern Tour (南巡) and particularly Jiang Zemin’s Three Represents (三个代表) instigated an ‘accommodative framework’ that coincided with the normalisation of capital and the market economy. As various social preferences and classes subsequently began emerging, nationalism under this framework stressed Chinese traditional values<sup>17</sup>, ostensibly as a check on emergent interest groups, growing pluralisms, and unscrupulous impulses impelled by capitalism’s ‘official’ approbation by the Party.

This second force operated for most of the 2000s (elements such as state-led capitalism, are very much apparent today) as the CPC grappled with the task of achieving various economy performance indicators linked to the country’s ongoing transformation.

Finally, with material means continuing to increase in the market economy, China has by some accounts begun adjusting to a ‘post-materialist’ framework. This force is so named so as to signify a growing indifference for the material life – which, as the argument goes, the people had become accustomed to in the decades of China’s economic miracle – and by a higher regard for other issues such as the environment, education reform, and health care. Such a framework arguably gained its rhetorical power with Xi Jinping’s promulgation of a Chinese Dream (中国梦), as expounded in his two most famous published works *The Governance of China* (2014) and *The Governance of China II* (2017). For example, in the latter text, Xi notably writes:

In almost four decades since the start of reform and opening up, China’s productive forces have markedly improved, *fostering higher expectations* for a better life and diversified needs for development. The people aspire to better education, more stable jobs, higher incomes, reliable social security [...] and *richer intellectual pursuits* and cultural entertainment [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup>

Although ongoing issues of uneven development and regional variations are effaced here to a degree, the above factors can be viewed as an adjustment to China's changing socio-political landscape. Some studies suggest that under this post-materialist setting the middle class has gained unprecedented levels of influence.<sup>19</sup> Such authors and Xi himself in essence have connoted a modern Chinese subject – that with the New Era has become a 'new citizen'. The term stylises earlier modern thinkers like Liang Qichao, who struggled to make sense of what Chinese modernisation would entail and how to develop an authentic Chinese identity. But where Liang was confronting the dilemma of how to diagnose and cure Chinese as the perceived 'sick man of Asia', Xi and the Party have been preparing for a Chinese subject more fully acculturated by modern trends such as pluralism, individualism, and of course decentralised consumer impulses. Here, we must be careful with terms. 'Chineseness' in the New Era is irreducible to an understanding that solely blames rapid marketisation. Sources such as the May Fourth Movement, Marxist dialectics, the revolution, Maoism, the New Enlightenment movement of the 1980s, as well as the aforementioned Southern Tour and Three Represents, have all mapped themselves to some degree onto the Chinese consciousness. Added to these are the influences of the New Leftists such as Wang Hui and others who have critiqued the pains of China's modernisation, particularly perceived inequalities and other forms of social fragmentation mentioned earlier. And yet, the market pressures brought to bear on China in the 21st century have impelled a noticeable ontological shift evidenced by various forms of commodity culture.

The examples and forms of this culture are vast, and I shall only highlight a few. China's so called 'beauty economy', as explored in detail by Fan<sup>20</sup> and Yang<sup>21</sup>, stands as a prominent example of Chinese essentially seeking agency through market logic, much to the delight of companies such as Chanel, Meitu, and Sephora, which Yang describes as 'the increasing commodification of all aspects of corporeality in China.'<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, Wang<sup>23</sup> and Zhang<sup>24</sup> in their respective works discuss phenomena such as the '二奶' (second-wife) practice and the rise of 'visual culture' as signposts of the subject experiencing market-based transformations. Zhang notably refers to such developments as 'capital hedonism'.

Perhaps ironically, contemporary Confucians such as Daniel Bell

and Wang Pei have found refuge in commodity culture such as ‘culture of cuteness’ – epitomised by things like emojis and ‘ridiculously cute cats and dogs’<sup>25</sup> – as vessels for understanding the merits of political hierarchy. The authors may understand the problems associated with such hierarchy, especially those raised by Marxists<sup>26</sup>, yet would do well to examine the definition of ‘hierarchy’ itself, the grounds upon which hierarchy is founded, and the near- and long-term implications of the competitiveness it fosters.

Such developments should not surprise Marxist readers, particularly those of the postmodernist school, as they serve as products of what Frederic Jameson, calls the ‘late’ (or ‘third’) stage of capitalism. Although the examples cited above and various others – the annual record-breaking sales during China’s 双十一 (“double-eleven”) shopping holiday, for example – make me reject the notion of China being in a ‘post-materialist’ paradigm, they nevertheless create the ideological components of a discourse. To call this discourse ‘postmodern’ may be too broad. However, insofar as state-society relations are concerned, we can infer in line with Marxist/postmodernist theories the linkage between hyper-consumption (nurtured by the state in support of the market) and the depoliticised, ‘non-critical’ realm. The origins of such dynamics are detailed insightfully by Bruce Dickson, whose monograph *Red Capitalists* helps us understand how China has cultivated a modern ‘totalizing’ environment that consigns civic consciousness to the realms of commodities or, more precisely, commodity fetishism.

What is famously called ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ has led to the indulgence of the consumer (versus, say, ‘citizen’), with longstanding effects, a reality evidenced prominently last year by the hit show ‘Sisters Who Makes Waves’ (乘风破浪的姐姐). Running under the promotion line of ‘thirty dark horses return to youth’, the program was touted for re-empowering female agency, especially for actresses and singers ‘past their prime’; and it was marketed as redefining femininity, or a fresher approach to ‘women’s self-awareness’ that displaces dominant gender stereotypes and breaks ‘rigid, superficial standards.’<sup>27</sup> As these commentators and others point out, the show has foreshadowed a capitulation to market forces that renders its ‘fresh approach’ an empty signifier: ‘while the show ostensibly emphasises a diversity of female values and female beauty, its stars are still primarily appraised, consumed, and favored for their attractive appearances,

svelte figures, dewy skin, unrealistic pep, and extreme self-discipline.<sup>28</sup> This paraphrasing also marks China's changing demographics. For instance, there are more men than women over 35. And many of these men are single, something that puts the 'Sisters' promotional photos of 'standard-breaking' female artists posing voluptuously in sexy attire into a more critical context.

The point here is that capital's penetration into the Chinese economy has, as in the West, continually fostered a non-critical realm. One performance in 'Sisters' that had illustrated this point well was a sanitised version of Taiwan-born Jolin Tsai's 'Womxnly', a piece famous for its political tenor and foray into issues of gender identity, roles, and nonconformity. As one cutting critic argued: 'To a mainland audience [...] distracted by dazzling choreography designed to showcase the performers' curvy bodies, youthful looks, and willpower, all that remained of the song's original meaning was the flattened rhetoric of "resilience".'<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, whereas some commentators have argued that the show cannot be trusted as a standard-bearer of feminism, others have criticised the show for dispossessing viewers of authentic representations.

Such practices are not uncommon and have been discussed extensively in both Marxist and Chinese studies, including issues of alienation and authentic being. Aggregated together, these practices generate a mix of diverse ontological factors that carry through to the consciousness of young and old Chinese both. This development can further be given conceptual form by using, as Marx and later thinkers such as George Lukács gave us, the idea of reification. This idea would later provoke concerns of subjectivity, hence elucidation of the 'capitalist unconscious', as Freud, Lacan, Samo Tomšič and the various Marxist psychoanalysts have written. The normalisation of fetishist scenarios, as embodied in productions like 'Sisters', subtly destabilises the unconscious and puts it in a structural non-relation that in the final analysis leaves the self ventriloquized by commodities.<sup>30</sup> Thus we become 'good capitalists' acting as avatars of a reified consciousness tied to social links that are built on fetishisation – relations between people displaced by relations between things.<sup>31</sup>

With this problem in mind, we turn back to the main question: with the rise of a flourishing consumer culture and signifiers of commodification, what referents do Chinese youth have to critically examine their place in the capitalist world? If their discursive

environment has instilled a market consciousness in them, accentuated by beauty products, smart technology, social media, and shows like ‘Sisters’, and they have begun drifting to a ‘false consciousness’ – one that displaces an authentic, traditional Chinese one – if we are correct in diagnosing these components of modern Chinese subjectivity, then we are required to ask how millennials (re)discovering Marxism can avoid the debilitating features that reside both in their subjectivity and in the world of commodities. Will they be able to operate from an position independent of their material condition, or, as Marx’s judgment of classical political economy holds, are their forms of thinking predicated on a consciousness that has already been consigned to commodified logic?

#### RESISTANCE, OR RETICENCE? LOCATING A THEORY OF THE SUBJECT FOR CHINESE YOUTH IN THE NEW ERA

Whatever its influences, what we can term as ‘Chineseness’ may not satisfy the reader seeking a concrete definition, yet this project may still offer value insofar as exhibiting the discursive powers at work and their effects. Having shown the broader problems associated with China’s history of vacillating discourses in general and the resonances of the late capitalist/postmodern in particular, I now focus more closely on how Marxism is resonating amongst Chinese youth and to how authentic this new leftist upsurge is.

First, a word of caution is due here. Any theory of subject, as I attempt here, risks becoming an over-determination if we loosely ascribe such theory to categorical values. Taxonomy is not the goal here. Historicisation is. As we saw in the above section, China has experienced many influences, which, aggregated, cloud our understanding of what a Chinese Subject is born from. Accordingly, it should be clear that the contemporary usage of “Chinese” has been and remains a fluid concept.

With this disclaimer, it is still of considerable interest that at a time when China’s New Era has been substantially realised through marketisation, nascent Marxism, though never absent from official Party-state lexicon, would sustain the awkwardness of negotiating the contours of abstract and universal aspirations with the more mundane realities of the material life. The negotiation between that material life and the means required to get it, remains a dilemma that Wang Rui’s December 2020 *Sixth Tone* series on youth attitudes highlights.

Like others, he attributes a leftist upsurge as a reaction against the 996 work culture, or more broadly to the fact that ‘young Chinese have lived and suffered under capitalism.’<sup>32</sup> Manifestations of this reality have been revealed amongst the netizenry in Zhihu (China’s equivalent to Wikipedia) and viral themes, combined which articulate a notable angst with terms like ‘involution’ (内卷 – inward curling, where population growth does not result in increased innovation or productivity) and ‘Versailles literature’ (凡尔赛 ostensibly modest, but in fact boastful). Whereas the former signifies the precariat and has generally referred to those caught in China’s capitalist ‘rat maze’ (like delivery drivers and programmers), the latter signifies a cynicism toward middle- or upper-class Chinese who ‘humblebrag’ their wealth<sup>33</sup>, thus exhibiting disingenuous attempts to elide class boundaries. Within these contexts, Wang’s general thesis is that a process of ‘political maturation’<sup>34</sup> is occurring, one that is comparable to other cited works that have observed the 90hou/00hou rejection of working conditions and the ‘revolution’ that such resistance seemingly embodies. Furthermore, these tendencies, he asserts, convey a consciousness capable of reinterpreting Chinese and world history. ‘Chinese youth reject the neoliberal consensus that there is no alternative to Western development strategies.’<sup>35</sup> With these ideas in hand, one can locate an interesting, if concerning turning point in what now constitutes Chinese agency. Put more provocatively, do these attitudes reveal an approaching epistemic rupture?

Beckoning us here is the issue as to what teleology is guiding this movement. Accordingly, it is necessary to also unpack how the general concept of a grand vision in contemporary China has been formulated. I have already mentioned Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. Under Hu Jintao, governance was centred under a ‘people first’ vision of harmony that sought to ‘take the path of prosperity for all and promote their all-around development.’<sup>36</sup> Hu spoke of balance: that between urban/rural development and between economic and social development. The latter strikingly invokes leftist anxieties over the waters China had been wading into. While crossing the river, it seems, the Party-state had perhaps too hastily felt its way along the pebbles toward modernity. Yet the ‘deal with the Devil’ nonetheless had to be made: the Party, Hu later proclaimed, must also ‘unleash the potential of individual consumption’<sup>37</sup> – an imperative that maintains legitimate economic goals (like fixing an unsustainable import-export

model of growth), yet, as Wu Guoguang persuasively argued, dovetails into unresolved contradictions whereby faster economic growth is built on amplifying social controls, social tensions, and social misery.<sup>38</sup>

Should the post-Deng discourses – Jiang’s ‘Three Represents’, Hu’s ‘social harmony’ campaign – signify a ‘crisis’ of determining a *telos* for modern China, then one might be transported with uneasy anticipation by the knowledge that this crisis merely reaffirmed the urgency of constituting Chineseness in a global context. Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream is a possible resolution. The Chinese Dream notably attempts to solidify Chineseness in the fragmentary, pluralistic landscape that the global market economy has created. Like his predecessors, Xi has recognised the problematic contradictions of this landscape, but he has also more distinctively asserted individualism. That is, individual desires can (and should) be given more agency:

Young people must have the courage and determination to start up new businesses and do pioneering work, try to blaze new trails and start new endeavours in reform and opening up, and constantly create new prospects for their career development.<sup>39</sup>

However, this admonishment is followed by another that calls on the people to ‘[associate] the fruits of success with the evergreen tree of patriotism’<sup>40</sup>, a point that clearly aims to limit *unfettered* individualism, as youth are to

integrate correct moral cognition [...] consciously establish and practice the core socialist values [...] take the initiative to carry forward patriotism, collectivism and socialism, and actively advocate social and professional ethics, and family virtues.<sup>41</sup>

Although Xi describes the Chinese Dream as harmonising contradictory elements, its intended praxis perhaps loses, if not effaces, the individual-based egotisms that would arise as they are being woven into a national, collective discourse. This latter dimension has been emboldened in the ubiquitous banner slogan of ‘中国梦，我的梦’ – the Chinese Dream, *my* dream – and constitutes an epistemology whereby the ‘interests, values, and aims of the collective bleed into



and “disappear” in personal narratives.<sup>42</sup> By more deeply engaging in private interests and consumerism, in other words, we are still engaging in ‘socialism’.

Collective concerns are still at play here. It is in this individual narrative-building that we may be approaching a *post-Marxist* moment. On the one hand, we have a maturing market economy that creates a narrowing concept of what it means to be a legitimate subject, even though by appearances we have a multiplicity of subject forms. On the other hand, we are still confined in the practice of the market and therefore are incapable of forming an actual site of resistance. Through its function as a framing discourse, then, we can see the Chinese Dream drawing dangerously close to a system that is fundamentally alien and rife with fragmentary elements – hence the risk of being ‘burned’. From a Marxist perspective, such an approach merits reflection on how one becomes a subject of cognition, thereby invoking concerns for how subjectivity is already reified under hegemonic relations of power.

I suggest that the possibility of an authentic Marxist movement amongst youth in China is largely foreclosed due to the fundamentally unreliable logic that these power centres create. Admirable though their program of resistance is, for China’s youth to have a critical perspective, they first need to critique their ontological position. While they are agitating to theorise China’s historiography and national development in the context of capitalist society pains<sup>43</sup>, their perspective is also implicitly taking its systems (cultural, political, and so on) as the means for agitation, and as a result normalises that system, pains and all. An idealistic red herring emerges, one that effaces underlying logics and the practical transformations that originally built these systems. For example, if youth are nostalgic for the past, as Mahoney explains, such nostalgia risks becoming acts of culture and nationalism that maintain the logic of capitalism.<sup>44</sup> Lost within such an anti-capitalist project is the counter-possibility that one’s subject-constitution is not only determined by what is narrativised, but also from what *cannot* be said.

In this contextualisation, as Wang Rui suggests, Chinese history books need to be rewritten so as to avoid ‘simplistic, if satisfying renderings of the country’s history.’<sup>45</sup> When we arrive at the question of what subjects may construct this history, the notion of dialectically conceiving of one’s nature as a product of material and historical

conditions becomes important. The most obvious implication is well known: when the dialectic is absent, such conditions are allowed to exist on the basis of suppression, a fundamental principal that is sketched out by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. Hence we get Marx's famous 'inversion' of Hegel. We must start with the material world and use the dialectic as a critical perspective from which to build our immanent critique.

At the centre, however, is the issue of commodity fetishism, or taking a reality principle and unconsciously transferring it to insatiable, self-valorising needs, with the result that truth-speaking is adulterated by commodity language and becomes alienated from knowledge. To incorporate more of the *postmodernist* Marxian perspective, fetishisation arrests the dialectic and in turn does subjective violence, with the result that capitalism thrives and we get the 'end of history'. On this level, it is useful to recall what Tomšič refers to as the Symptom<sup>46</sup>, a term that confers upon a discourse a palliative dimension that both renders truth reducible to knowledge and, as Spivak further develops for us, enables the state to *re-present* (a play on words she uses in juxtaposition to the political denotation of 'representation') individualism within a dominant system.<sup>47</sup>

Where might this Symptom come from today? The Chinese Dream offers us the clearest example of a Symptom, a schematised governmentality aimed at constituting the Chinese Subject. Taking its place in the gap between economic imperatives and problematic social transformations brought on by capital-induced inequalities, the Chinese Dream has embodied the aforementioned palliative by giving 'voice' to market-oriented individualism to Chinese who in a relatively short period of time were thrust into a world of commodities. But again, is this voice critical? The question infers part of a greater symptom, one that historians, Marxists and philosophers could all claim has come part and parcel out of China's relatively fast turn from feudalism to late capitalism. This is a provocative topic in its own right and deserves further discussion than what this paper can provide. Nevertheless, on the general level on which theoreticians infer 'power' from a discourse, one encounters at least part of an answer in the following understanding: a discourse simultaneously constitutes and removes ideological elements from the space that its narrative manifestations enter, a statement that is framed well by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's theorisation on the 'silencing' effects of discourses<sup>48</sup>

and foreshadows a topography through which the Chinese Dream becomes a process of historical production. Recalling that theory and discourse also operate as practice, we may see the opposition between narrativising on one end and the displacement of potentially counter-hegemonic positions – what cannot be said – on the other.

Thrust into this opposition is the individual, for which the Chinese Dream renders the subject capable of '[seeing] their own reflection' in a collective narrative.<sup>49</sup> In this reflection, however, what practices are both emboldened and muted? Again, I hesitate to offer unitary notions in a Chinese context of 'collective' (or even 'China'). However, we would do well to consider what sluice gates have been opened by an individualism constructed and activated, for example, by means of private, entrepreneurial pursuits. Here, the problematic issue of engendering a critical realm remains apt, but with the understanding that, accelerated by the Chinese Dream discourse, the critical realm has been subsumed by the realm of consumption. In this space, the Chinese Dream provides a constellation that essentially says 'consume to rejuvenate the state'. Such thematisation in turn reveals the discourse as fitted to a Chinese subjectivity that is not maturing politically, as Wang Rui would argue, but maturing *economically*.

Accordingly, the Chinese Dream and its entry in the New Era has been the antithesis in some ways to the aforementioned post-materialist paradigm many see now occurring in China. To say it another way, and with intended provocation: materialist goals are state goals. It is through such *re*-presentation of mass ideology that we have seen reified cultural products like 'Sisters' that simultaneously sanitise collective agency and clandestinely normalise commodification, e.g. of the body (the '二奶' (second wife) culture and beauty economy).

It is within this current paradigm, that leftist youth reactions in China must be scrutinised. The requirement of critiquing capitalism using a logic not predicated on that of the system itself has become deeply problematic in the country's current discursive environment. This point demanded better treatment in Wang's articles, and it would have if, in his research on Chinese leftists, he started with what Marx began *Capital* with: the commodity. Had he done so, we would be able to better understand the transactional manner in which these leftists are using Marxism, a point that can drawn from his observation that Chinese are using Marx's work to 'vent frustrations' against the pressures of the market economy. That word – transactional – is

paramount. Truth-speaking therefore becomes the valorisation of self-interest. By pointing to this, one sees Marxist texts also being ventriloquized by what Tomšič refers to as ‘commodity language’; and accordingly, we have an act that elides capitalism’s proxies and agents of power – the same forces that construct realities like ‘996’.

Lacking such understanding, what is described as ‘maturation’ signifies more a genuflection to the past than a mature, authentic movement. If this genuflection further rests on the intention of affirming Chinese history, then these millennial attitudes, that emerge initially as a resistance, become themselves assimilated by the market. Following such analysis and its implications for the younger Chinese generational cohorts, the advent of a Chinese leftist youth resistance appears to signal that their Marxism has become instead another site of alienated being.

## CONCLUSION

In so fraught a field as Chinese politics, it should not come as a surprise that Marxist orientations in a globalised setting, and China’s effort to identify its own modernity in that setting, should lead to unwieldy constructs. A point worth repeating is that China, as Mao posits in *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*, is indelibly subject to historical incongruities. In more modern parlance, we can take this lesson and apply it along post-New Enlightenment terms that hold ‘tradition’ as connoting ‘one China, many paths’ (a subject that is expounded in Wang Chaohua’s 2005 edited volume of the same name).<sup>50</sup> As one with sympathies for Marxism and Chinese dialectics, I find it useful if not also comforting that the historical canvas China has constructed for itself in the ‘modern’ age lends itself to no clear-cut categorisation, but rather lays out a topography that allows for non-universal forms of consciousness. Within this topography is a method of discursive production that similarly bears the marks of multiple forms, which reveal, as Osnos observes, no ‘central melody’ but an element of adaptability for the historical moment being entered.<sup>51</sup> In this way, we can infer that it is only “natural” for a Marxist discourse in China to (potentially) emerge again.

At the same time, participation in such a discourse does not hold back the assumption of authentic consciousness. It follows that young Chinese leftists cannot or may not speak of their material condition, let alone ‘Chineseness’ in the New Era, if their choices and subjectivity

have already been disciplined, an observation that raises Foucauldian concerns that 'care for the self' is impossible if discourses are narrowed to the confines of a capitalist system.

This is not to say that the Chinese Dream is a capitalist dream (though interestingly, President Xi has compared the Chinese Dream to the American Dream).<sup>52</sup> However, we are compelled to critique the Chinese Dream's individualist narrativising as intended to align people's bodies with economic imperatives (or more specifically, the imperatives of the market), a point that dovetails into broader concerns on the totalisation of capital. To invoke Foucault once more here, as he explains in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, one can have their discourse, but only if you get yourself to work, accept your wages, and buy stuff – or in the case of Chinese millennials today, start a business, then sell and buy stuff (usually with corporate entities like WeChat acting as midwife). In a tragic twist of paradox, the same individuals proclaiming affinity with Marxism thus risk rendering it as another site of commodification. (The banner photograph in part two of Wang Rui's series showing two young women taking selfies in front of a bust of Karl Marx fuels a certain irony.) Accordingly, if this paper is correct, then not only are current Marxist reactions still consigned to the totality of the market, but the Marxist identity becomes cheapened, things don't change, and everyone remains a worker.

From the position of anti-capitalist reified subjects, the obvious implication is that enunciating a post-materialist philosophy cannot simply exhort audacity to working conditions. This statement recalls the oft-heard criticism of American progressives that the left merely complains but does not actually form a program of resistance. To be fair, Chinese youth are still undergoing formative parts of their lives and should not be expected to proficiently comprehend texts like the massive three-volume *Capital*; nor have they been given many opportunities to contribute *per se* to literature. Clearly the positions of the *90hou* and *00hou* need to be re-examined in future empirical and philosophical research as their members more fully enter into professional and academic environments.

However, as a contemporary phenomenon, efforts by Chinese youth to invoke Marxism recall the same contradictions the New Left and others have observed along various intellectual genealogies and critiques. Addressing problems in China is to also encounter

worldwide phenomena that intersect with political, social, cultural, and economic contours. For example, China, in anticipating economic slowdowns in which subsequent job losses will occur, has promoted an older, more traditional concept of women, the logic being that if jobs are to be lost, it's best that women lose those jobs. Such logic is based on the conveyance that women will naturally tend to be a more benign behavioural problem and accept a return to the traditional role of the housewife. This, taken with Marx' and Engels' concerns, highlights the problems of relationships: for example, relationships between prostitution and commodified marital relations; between urban dwellers and migrants; and between the authors of ideological works and the subjects such works target as practitioners.

How will China's youth interpret and determine being in these relationships? While it is impossible to form a fully realised critique, from a critical Marxist perspective I have attempted to weave together the most pertinent narratives in order to at least provide hermeneutical insights into how a politics of youth is forming, and offer several concluding observations.

Firstly, the distant future of socialism (or Marxism) in China is an issue that will require constant unpacking. Today it is well known that socialism both experiences internecine and outside pressures. The New Left camp is hardly monolithic and promulgates various definitions of socialism. And there are those outside this camp who claim China is not capitalist enough. Relatedly, the project of narrativising itself is problematic in the context of heterogeneous power centres within the Party-State, as studies of elite Chinese politics in their various ways elucidate. Accordingly, mapping a politics for Chinese youth runs the risk of serious error.

Secondly, incongruities that arise may further give recourse to the concept that Marxism in China has historically always been applied from teleological perspectives. We may find continuities; elsewhere, ruptures. They are not necessarily bifurcated, a point that complicates scholarly interpretations seeking to differentiate epochs in China (like Mao to Deng, or Mao to Xi). In this sense, we too must be careful using the *90hou/00hou* attitudes as signposts of some new epistemological orientation.

Unfortunately for Marxists perhaps, when we account comprehensively for narrative forces that are operating both within and independent of discourses like the Chinese Dream, the power of

these forces provide recourse to the argument that the young wing of the leftist movement in China may be promulgating a vision of Marxism that denigrates some of its basic principles. The additional irony here is that some of those principles are shared in the Chinese traditional mode of thinking, to wit the dialectic, begging the question in turn as to whether or not dialectical thinking has had, in its ancient Confucian/Daoist roots, a class-based demarcation. Here again is another provocative notion in need of future study.

I return to the analogy of the ‘deal with the devil’: in this critique, we are reminded that while a system has a utility value and that the ends justify the means, the means are always something we should be insecure about. Such insecurity, if present amongst current youth, does not rise to the level of a ‘rupture’ nor convey a drastically new episteme. But perhaps it does serve a reminder that there exists in the human subject a qualified determinism. History has a momentum that people can be swept along by. However, as Marx informs us, we can sustain agency, and the more we realise that agency, the more empowered we are to alter history or change its momentum.

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# OLYMPIAN MISAPPREHENSIONS

BY JOHN D VAN FLEET

HAD MARK TWAIN lived from 1935 to 2010, instead of a century earlier, he might have uttered his apocryphal axiom, ‘History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme’, about Beijing’s Summer Olympics in 2008, following Tokyo’s in 1964. In this year of Tokyo’s second Olympics, nominally 2020 but in fact a year later, a good look at the assonance between the two countries in their respective first Olympic years, and at the misapprehension of the countries’ potential by leaders and the chattering classes in the developed economies at that time and later, may help us avoid similar mistakes now, and in the years to come.

## ESCAPING FROM THE PAST

Tokyo hosted the 1964 Olympics 19 years after nearly a million residents of Japan had died in US fire-bombings of more than 60 of its cities, followed by the nuclear devastation wrought by the Fat Man and Little Boy bombs. The cities were smouldering wrecks, the economy ravaged. To say that 1945 was a low point in Japan’s relationship with the world would be to compete in the understatement Olympics. Yet by 1964, Japan had become number five in global rankings of gross domestic product (GDP)<sup>1</sup>, on a purchasing power parity\* (PPP) basis.

Despite Japan’s rapid rise from the ashes, 1960s consumers in the “West” considered “Made in Japan” a pejorative – a synonym for cheap, shoddy, knock off products. Large swathes of the business community in the Anglophone world saw nothing in their Japanese counterparts but inscrutable, untrustworthy intellectual property thieves – certainly not innovators, worthy business partners or competitors.

The Beijing 2008 Olympics were held 19 years after the ‘incident’ of 1989, not nearly as low a point in international relations as Japan had suffered (also an own goal) in 1945, but a trough perhaps last matched only by the time of the Boxer uprising. In 1989, China’s GDP was on par with that of Brazil, a fraction of Japan’s and the United States’ figures. Yet by 2008, China’s GDP (PPP basis) had risen, far surpassing Japan’s (formerly number two) and was approaching that of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

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\* PPP is the measurement of prices in different countries using prices of specific goods to compare the absolute purchasing power of the countries currencies.

In the decade of the Beijing Summer Olympics, China had already become famous as the “factory for the world”, yet Chinese business, and business people, often suffered opprobrium similar to that suffered by their Japanese neighbours 40 years previously. As late as 2014, the Harvard Business Review ran a feature with the (now infamous) headline: ‘Why China Can’t Innovate’.<sup>3</sup>

#### INTO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

One of Mao’s famous dictums was, ‘No investigation, no right to speak (没有调查没有发言权)’. Those willing to investigate their way past facile assumptions, past the view from boardrooms and conference centres, think tanks and editorial desks overseas, saw the innovation potential of Japanese enterprises in the 1960s. (and of China’s in the 2000s, but we’ll get to that shortly) In *The Greatest Year in the History of Japan*, Roy Tomizawa writes,

While known for its cheap and shoddy toys and electronics in the 1950s, Westerners woke up to the fact that Japan’s cameras, radios, and watches were actually pretty good value for money. Thanks to the hundreds of inspection groups and thousands of Japanese who visited American companies between 1956 and 1966, and the generosity of the American firms to grant patent licenses to the Japanese (thinking that the Japanese companies would never grow strong enough to become competitors), Japanese corporations began to find their footing [...]<sup>4</sup>

The price of the Sony TR-610 transistor radio, launched several years before the Tokyo Games in 1964, may have led one to assume that the TR-610 was just another cheap Japanese knock-off. But Sony had combined low-cost manufacturing with operational excellence to create a lower priced, shirt-pocket sized product (Japan’s prowess at developing compact products was soon to be legendary) that also featured world-standard quality. The TR-610 and its Sony brethren came to dominate the transistor radio sector, and by the next decade, Japanese companies would come to dominate consumer electronics overall.

Toyota combined manufacturing expertise with design innovation to develop the 40 Series Land Cruiser in 1960. Their ad slogan, ‘We’ll know how long it lasts when the first one wears out’, came to symbolise



Figure 1: The Sony TR-610<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: An early 1960s advertisement for an American magazine, featuring the TR610<sup>6</sup>

Toyota's now legendary dedication to their motto: quality, durability and reliability. The Land Cruiser became the benchmark for the enormous subsequent success of the global SUV sector, and the Toyota Production System would soon become the quality benchmark for global manufacturers.

The Honda Super Cub, a lightweight (50cc) motorcycle launched in the United States a few years before Tokyo 1964, became perhaps the most remarkable innovation of all. The Super Cub transformed the motorcycle sector, capturing nearly half of the US market by the Olympic year and eventually becoming the largest selling wheeled vehicle in human history. Decades on, business school and strategy consultant communities still love to revisit the Super Cub's development. "The Honda Effect" is a common catchphrase used in those communities.<sup>8</sup>

#### LARGER CANVAS, SIMILAR IMAGERY

As the 2008 Beijing Olympics approached, something remarkably similar was happening in Chinese enterprises, as was the world's attitude

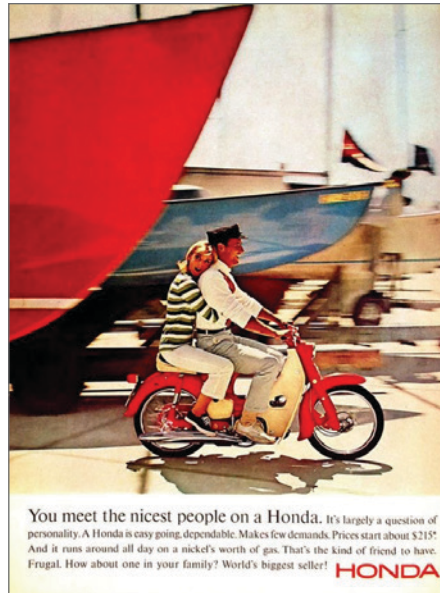


Figure 3: A 1960s Toyota 40 Series Land Cruiser<sup>7</sup>

toward these companies. Some aspects of Chinese enterprises' innovation and development had been quite visible to the world – China's explosive development of manufacturing for export began in the 1990s, and some Chinese companies had developed global brands accordingly, from the ubiquitous Haier in white goods (at first), to Pearl River Piano, both of which had become category killers by the time of the Beijing Olympics. But some of the most important innovations in the China of that era were less visible to business communities in the developed economies.

Several Chinese enterprises focused their innovation resolutely on the domestic Chinese economy, and hence were less visible to those outside. Jack Ma launched Taobao in 2003, to compete with eBay, which had entered China a year before, via an acquisition of EachNet<sup>10</sup>. Taobao's China-appropriate user interface, market savvy and home court advantage, and especially the development of an effective payment/escrow system (Alipay), helped Taobao to drive eBay out of China by 2007. With later innovations from the likes of JD.com, Pinduoduo and Meituan, China is now the undisputed world leader in e-commerce, while Alipay and rival WeChat Pay are the world's top mobile payment providers. This development has been overwhelmingly a domestically driven phenomenon, and was largely under-appreciated in the West for years.

Other Chinese enterprises expanded into locations far from the economically advanced nations, and innovated accordingly, thus becoming less visible to prognosticators in London or New York. Mao famously turned orthodox Marxism on its head by asserting that, in



**Figure 4:** The Super Cub's early 1960s *You Meet the Nicest People* ad campaign remains iconic among marketers.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 5:** Chery's global presence in 2008 (from Chery's website at that time; image long since taken down)

China, the peasantry, rather than the urban proletariat, would drive the revolution. He captured this strategy with another dictum, 'Surrounding the cities from the countryside (农村包围城市)'. While "Brand China" was a perceived net negative in much of the developed world in the previous decades, myriad Chinese companies adopted this Maoist dictum for their globalisation strategies, expanding their brands into the "countrysides" of Latin America, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, etc., while (often) becoming contract manufacturers for developed-country brands in their "city" markets.

At the time of Beijing's Olympic year, Chery Automobile and other Chinese vehicle manufactures were unable meet US and EU safety standards. This, however, left a lot of room in other world markets for strategic development. Chery's 2008 website showed that the only places where Chery wasn't doing business were the Anglophone countries, Western Europe, Japan and South Korea, and sub-Saharan Africa.

At an auto-sector conference in Shanghai in 2010, an executive from a US auto giant sniffed that, 'You won't see a Chinese-branded car on the streets of London or New York in this decade'.<sup>11</sup> He meant that the Chinese automakers wouldn't have a branded presence in these countries, with fully legal imports, distribution and service centres. He felt confident that Chinese manufacturers would not be able to meet G-7 level safety standards or overcome the negative image of Brand China in the foreseeable future.

He was wrong even as he spoke – China's SAIC had already acquired MG and restarted British assembly of the bankrupt brand by that year, making MG a Chinese brand and thus becoming an example of another



globalisation strategy used by Chinese enterprises in the decade of the Beijing Summer Olympics: acquisition.

Acquisition strategy, the “domestic only” and “developing economy” strategies were rather less attractive to Japanese companies in the mid-1960s, when the United States accounted for 50% of global GDP, and Japan for about a tenth of that. Moreover, the acquisition strategy was not readily available to Japanese enterprises in the 1960s: the targets were fewer and the financing was harder to obtain. But such strategies were more attractive to Chinese enterprises by 2008, when the US share of global GDP was down to 25%, and the developing economies were doing just that, and rapidly. By that time China’s GDP had risen to the level mentioned above.

The list of such Chinese-acquired brands isn’t short. Some well-known brands include:

- In the auto sector, Volvo and MG and Pirelli;
- In home products, GE Appliances, vacuum makers Hoover, Vax and Dirt Devil, plus baby accessory brand Tommee Tippee, and food giants Smithfield and Weetabix;
- In the retail sector, AMC Theatres in the US, and Britain’s Harvey Nichols and Superdrug, Hamleys and Pizza Express (since re-sold);
- In the sports sector, the Italian giant Inter Milan, and formerly the UK football club Aston Villa and the owner of the Ironman triathlon, World Triathlon Partners;
- In fashion, Miss Sixty, Cerutti, Bally and Lanvin;
- In luxury/leisure, the Sunseeker yacht brand (007’s favourite), the Waldorf Astoria and Club Med.

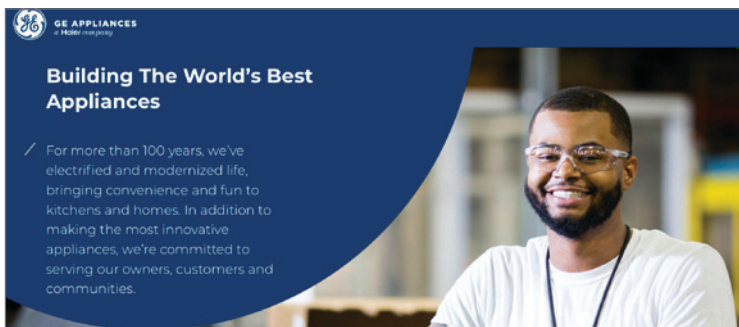


Figure 6: GE Appliance corporate site – note the fine print under the logo.<sup>13</sup>

Haier bought GE's appliance unit in 2016, a year that saw Chinese firms' overseas merger and acquisitions value approach that of US companies.<sup>12</sup> GE Appliances still boast on their consumer website that they are 'America's #1 appliance brand', with no indication of the owner of the brand; a visit to their corporate site shows 'A Haier company' under their logo in smaller print. GE Appliance has joined scores of other similar famous first world brands that Chinese enterprises have bought, opting to keep the acquired brand name and reputation value intact.

For Chinese enterprises however, presence in developed-economy markets has become incrementally less important. At the time of the Beijing Olympics, China's passenger vehicle sales had already reached rough parity with those in the US; from that time, China took over the No. 1 spot and has widened the lead in recent years.<sup>14</sup>

#### FIRST (FALSE) PRIDE, THEN PANIC, THEN COMPLACENCY ONCE MORE

By 1980, no one was turning dismissive noses up at Japan anymore. The Nissan 240Z had become the highest selling sports car in history, Sony had launched the Walkman and was head to head with Matsushita for dominance in home video recorders, while Japanese brands had come to dominate not only consumer electronics overall, but the auto, steel, shipbuilding and industrial tool sectors.

Few in the United States were feeling merely congratulatory toward their erstwhile wartime enemy. Published in 1979, Ezra Vogel's *Japan as No. 1* well represents the spirit of the reactions to the coming *tsunami*, by turns fawning and alarmist. Chalmers Johnson's *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982) granted deific status to Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry of the era.

On the other end of the hyperventilation spectrum, tropes like 'the Japanning of America' and 'economic Pearl Harbor' became common in the early 1980s press.<sup>15</sup> Director Ridley Scott set his 1982 film *Blade Runner* in a Los Angeles of the future, dominated by Japan. The movies *Back to the Future II* (1989) and *RoboCop 3* (1990) featured nefarious Japanese overlords. Sony famously bought Columbia Pictures in September 1989. A few weeks later, *Newsweek* featured a controversial cover with

[...] the logo of Columbia Pictures, Miss Columbia, holding a torch and dressed in a kimono. Many in the US saw this

picture instead as the Statue of Liberty, a fundamental symbol of the US, and more generally as symbolic of the Japanese threat to America itself.<sup>16</sup>

In a tragic incident occurring in 1982, as the US auto brands were being crushed by consumer preference for Honda and Nissan and Toyota, a Chinese American, Vincent Chin, was mistaken for a Japanese in a bar in Detroit and beaten to death.<sup>18</sup>

Readers were treated to *Shadows of the Rising Sun: A Critical View of the Japanese Miracle*<sup>19</sup> (1983), *Yen! Japan's New Financial Empire and its Threat to America*<sup>20</sup> (1988) and *The Coming War with Japan*<sup>21</sup> (1991). But 1989's *More Like Us: Making America Great Again*<sup>22</sup>, by long-time Japan resident James Fallows, delivered a welcome contrarian view, suggesting that the 'us' (nice pun on US) would do well to stop obsessing about others and pay attention to the US's own peculiar strengths and weaknesses. In the same year, *The Sun Also Sets: the Limits to Japan's Economic Power*<sup>23</sup>, by long-time Japan resident and Economist correspondent Bill Emmott, also bucked the trend, suggesting all the ways that Japan Inc was on the verge of collapsing under its own weight. His work turned out to be the more prescient, as 1989 witnessed the peak of and the pinprick to, what the Japanese call the *baburu jidai*, the bubble economy era.

The 1990s ushered in yet another round of offshore pontification about Japan, at the time of the Tokyo Olympics generally under-informed and dismissive, with the Chicken Little clamouring of the 1980s. The 1990s narrative was "The Lost Decade", when Japan's GDP contracted in nominal terms, and asset prices plunged.

This narrative too proved false in its assumptions, and again reminds us of Mao's 'No investigation, no right to speak'. Attempting to assess quality of life by country, the United Nation's Human Development Index measures life expectancy, level of education and GDP *per capita*.



Figure 7: Newsweek's controversial cover, 9 October 1989<sup>17</sup>

Japan's ranking over the past 30 years has been better than that of the United States and the U.K., and better than all the rest of the G-7 in the past two decades.<sup>24</sup> In a 2012 New York Times op-ed titled *The Myth of Japan's Failure*, Eamonn Fingleton [quoting CNN analyst David Gergen] writes that,

“It's now a very demoralized country and it has really been set back.”

But [Gergen's] presentation of Japan is a myth. By many measures, the Japanese economy has done very well during the so-called lost decades, which started with a stock market crash in January 1990. By some of the most important measures, it has done a lot better than the United States.

Japan has succeeded in delivering an increasingly affluent lifestyle to its people despite the financial crash.<sup>25</sup>

Fingleton is no armchair pundit looking on from afar. He lived in Tokyo for more than two decades, serving as editor for *Forbes* and the *Financial Times*. Another journalist with years on the ground in Japan, David Piling, published *Bending Adversity* in 2014, his reflections on the country following the Tohoku earthquake. In it, as part of his dismemberment of the Lost Decade narrative, he writes,

[...] though I arrived in what was said to be the midst of a deep recession, many Japanese appeared to have a lot of money. A visiting MP from northern England, on seeing the bright lights of Tokyo and throngs of people waiting outside overflowing restaurants and bars, remarked, ‘If this is a recession, I want one.’<sup>26</sup>

#### **A MASHUP OF DISMISSAL, DEIFICATION AND DIRE WARNINGS**

Everything in China seems to happen faster – even all at once. A 2013 McKinsey paper, titled *A New Era for Manufacturing in China*, leads with,

China's emergence as a manufacturing powerhouse has been astonishing. In seventh place, trailing Italy, as recently as 1980, China not only overtook the United States in 2011 to become the world's largest producer of manufactured goods

but also used its huge manufacturing engine to boost living standards by doubling the country's GDP per capita over the last decade. That achievement took the industrializing United Kingdom 150 years.<sup>27</sup>

It took about 15 years following the Tokyo Olympics for that era's punditocracy to launch a schizophrenic love-hate relationship with Japan. But perhaps because of the compression McKinsey suggests, stoking fear of China was already a promising path to book sales by the time of the Beijing Olympics. Like the list of Chinese acquisitions of foreign brands, the list of books proclaiming an existential threat from China isn't short. The pre-Olympics list includes *The Coming Conflict with China*<sup>28</sup> (1997), and *America's Coming War with China*<sup>29</sup> (2006). Post-Olympics, we were graced with *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*<sup>30</sup> (2015) and *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*<sup>31</sup> (2019). The FBI has an entire page on their website with the title, The China Threat.<sup>32</sup>

Pride of place on the hubris side goes to 2001's *The Coming Collapse of China*.<sup>33</sup> Author Gordon Chang has predicted the collapse as imminent in most of the succeeding years. We are still waiting.

The hagiography Olympics occurred a few years before the real ones began in Beijing, with Robert Kuhn's *The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin*<sup>34</sup> (2005). John Naisbitt's *China's Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society*<sup>35</sup> appeared a year after the Olympics. These works heralded the rise in popularity of 'The China Model' meme. Daniel Bell's 2015 book, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*<sup>36</sup> put a nice bow on this empty package of "Japan as No 1" imitators. These works were indeed competitions – for the financial favouritism the authors stood to gain from the PRC government. In 2011, David Bandurski's China Media Project published a handy review of the concepts that underpin the risible China Model narrative, referring to the 'laudatory canon of China Model slush'.<sup>37</sup>

Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World*,<sup>38</sup> published in 2009, plays both sides of the prognostication spectrum. Echoing Vogel's and Johnson's tomes from thirty years before, Jacques' fear-tainted enthusiasm may be understood in light of his decades-long leadership role in the Communist Party of Great Britain.

## THE HONDA EFFECT AND ITS VALUE FOR CHINA WATCHERS

The creator of the concept The Honda Effect, Richard Pascale, was motivated to write his seminal paper, first published as Perspectives on Strategy: The Real Story behind Honda's Success, in the *California Management Review* edition of spring 1984.<sup>39</sup> Pascale had encountered a Boston Consulting Group (BCG) report, commissioned by the U.K. government in 1975 to help Britain regain some of its precipitous loss of share in the US motorcycle market from 1959 to 1973 (much of it to Honda).

Reading the 120-page report, and sensing a problem akin to Mao's lack of real investigation, Pascale went to Tokyo in September 1982 to conduct his own examination. There he convened a meeting with six of the Honda executives who were leaders in the development of the US market, 'to describe in fine-grained detail the sequence of events that had led to Honda's ultimate position of dominance' He went on to relate the story that unfolded, while highlighting miscalculation, serendipity, and organisational learning as 'counterpoints to the streamlined "strategy" [related in the BCG report].' Pascale summarises his observations with

The juxtaposed perspectives reveal what I shall call the Honda Effect. Western consultants, academics and executives express a preference for oversimplifications of reality and cognitively linear explanations of events. To be sure, they have always acknowledged that the 'human factor' must be taken into account, but extensive reading of strategy cases of business schools, consultants reports, strategic planning documents, as well as the coverage of the popular press reveals a widespread tendency to overlook the process through which organizations experiment, adapt and learn.

The Anglophone punditocracy, management gurus and such failed to recognise the importance of the ascent of Japanese enterprises in the 1960s. In the following decades, they misread that rise as being part of some coherent, scheming or super-human national strategy. Finally, they used macro statistics and observations from afar to conclude that post-1990 Japan was in much worse shape than it actually was.

We've more recently seen a highly similar progression in the China-focused Anglophone publishing world – dismissal, deification and dire warnings. Now, as then, we have antidotes to hand. *The Journal*

of *Contemporary China* published a research paper in 2012, titled 'The China Threat' through the Lens of US Print Media: 1992–2006. In it, authors Edward Yang and Xinsheng Liu suggest (not surprisingly) that, 'the initial emergence of "China threat" arguments in the US print media corresponded with the sharp upward turn in China's economic growth rates in the early 1990s'.<sup>40</sup>

In 2015's *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China*, Stanford's Gordon H. Chang (the Gordon Chang, worth our attention) describes how an endless shifting between love and hate, fascination and fear, has characterised the US view of China and the Chinese since the 19th century, with one particular manifestation post 1945, when China 'went red'.

At precisely the time that the Harvard Business Review was asserting that China couldn't innovate, Edward Tse was writing *China's Disruptors: How Alibaba, Xiaomi, Tencent and Other Companies are Changing the Rules of Business*<sup>41</sup>. Tse demonstrates that innovation lives and thrives in China's tech sector in particular, and that these companies are not only changing the rules of business, but changing the world. And to be fair, Harvard's pundits have seen the empirical light. The May-June 2021 issue of the Harvard Business Review features an article with the title, China's New Innovation Advantage.<sup>42</sup>

Tom Orlik, long-time Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg journalist for China and Asia, and currently chief economist for Bloomberg, has just published *China: The Bubble that Never Pops*, which demonstrates why books like *The Coming Collapse of China*, and those he calls 'the Cassandras of collapse', miss the mark so widely.<sup>43</sup> The Cassandras usually cite debt as a primary risk factor for an imminent economic implosion; Orlik counters that a combination of an exceptionally high savings rate, plus confidence in and empowerment of government technocrats – in their ability to intervene and guide effectively – has led to a steady amelioration of the debt challenge.

Again picking up from Fallows and Emmott, a June 2021 op-ed in the Guardian, by former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, closes the loop between the malignant Olympian misapprehension in the US and elsewhere about Japan from the 1960s on, and the collective China-specific mistaken beliefs that seem so prevalent in the Anglosphere now:

The greatest danger we face today is not coming from China. It is our drift toward proto-fascism. We must be careful not to

demonize China so much that we encourage a new paranoia that further distorts our priorities, encourages nativism and xenophobia, and leads to larger military outlays rather than public investments in education, infrastructure, and basic research on which America's future prosperity and security critically depend.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed and there's another lesson from the world's experience with Japan that we are, regrettably, likely to see repeated. In a disturbing echo of Japan at the end of the 1980s, China has high debt to GDP ratio, GDP itself that's out of balance (too much fixed asset investment and too little consumption), and a bubbly property sector. If an economic downturn transpires in China, will we then see a round of dismissal of China's future, similar to the Lost Decade meme about Japan that proved so popular yet so wrong? Will the overseas punditocracy engage in yet another Olympian level of misapprehension, assuming that 1.3 billion Chinese, and the world's largest economy by some measures, will just slink into the background? It's happened before, on a bit more of a *bonsai* scale.

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# FOOD MARKET PRICE STABILISING MECHANISMS IN PROTO-BUREAUCRATIC STATES: COMPARING CERTAIN REFORM POLICIES OF JAPAN'S KYOHO ERA AND WEI STATE OF CHINA'S EARLY WARRING STATES PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

*Comparisons of China and Japan at various simultaneous historical periods reveal profound differences between the two countries. This paper, however, compares two different historical periods which lead to the discovery of many resemblances: both Kyoho Reform (1716-1745 AD) under the rule of Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune and the Chinese vassal state of Wei during the late fifth century BC implemented similar reform policies in building a proto-bureaucratic state. This paper discusses the following very similar policies that both governments implemented. They both promoted meritocracy in senior official nominations and abolished hereditary offices; boosted cultivation of new farmlands; increased tax revenues by levying additional grain output from farmlands, and implemented food price stabilisation mechanisms by transacting in the grain/rice market. Both states were experiencing transition from a hereditary feudal aristocracy to a proto-bureaucratic state. This paper takes note of the following phenomena that lacked counterparts in Wei State: first, Yoshimune implemented some economic policies through trade guilds; and, second, implementation of Yoshimune's food price stabilisation mechanism involved a nascent commodity futures trading market. Such differences denote that the reform history of Wei State was not repeated but did subtly chime with mid-Tokugawa Japan. Although some policies of Wei State seemed to re-emerge in the era of Yoshimune, the associated differences indicated that a more complex social system was being formed in Tokugawa Japan and thus it stood more ready for subsequent upgrading.*

## INTRODUCTION

Comparisons of ancient China and Japan in simultaneous historical periods often lead to the discovery of profound differences between

the social institutions of the two countries. For many centuries, ancient Japanese society made conscious efforts to adopt from China institutional and cultural products that appeared to be more advanced. Such learning by Japan was oftentimes piecemeal and cautious, and influenced only selected strata and sectors of the ancient Japanese society, which always featured major differences from contemporary China.<sup>1</sup> The *ritsuryo*-based land distribution system adopted from China was in full operation in Japan for only a century.<sup>2</sup> The bureaucratic, landholding and tax institutions borrowed from China seemed to be overly sophisticated and even anachronistic for Heian-period Japan, which made substantial revisions to such borrowed institutions.<sup>3</sup> For example, in imitation of Tang Chinese practice the Japanese state minted bronze coins, but their circulations soon declined in a relatively backward country whose chief accounting unit was rice and principal mode of exchange was barter.<sup>4</sup> Chinese-style Heian institutions managed to survive for several centuries only because they had been heavily attuned to local conditions in Japan.<sup>5</sup> The classical Chinese-style refined culture maintained by Japanese noble circles during the Heian period became hardly comprehensible to latter-day Japanese, while domestic feudal cultural values that emerged after the twelfth century remained easily understandable to the Japanese public.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, institutional evolutions that frequently occurred in ancient China were seldom echoed in contemporary Japan, and vice versa. It seemed that not much similarity could be discovered by comparing historical events that unfolded in ancient China and Japan contemporaneously.

However, if we step back from this microscopic-style observation of the two countries' contemporaneous events and look at their historical trajectories from afar as though through the lens of a binocular *telescope*, a quite different picture emerges. While we will still see that contemporaneous China and Japan were not evolving in the same historical stages, occasionally we will be able to find similarities between the two countries in respect of events that were many centuries apart from each other.

The aim of this article is to discuss one example of the uncanny similarities that can be discovered through such a telescopic perspective. It intends to reveal some resemblances between the following two periods: the Kyoho Reform (享保改革) (1716 AD-1745 AD) under the rule of the eighth Tokugawa Shogun Yoshimune (徳川吉宗) and

the Chinese vassal state of Wei (魏) (“Wei State”) during the late fifth century BC (circa 445 BC-396 BC). Both regimes implemented a series of reform policies as part of their initial steps towards the building of a proto-bureaucratic state. Upon close examination, we can spot numerous similarities existing between these two sets of policies. Even though the policies of Wei State are nearly 25 centuries from the present time and hence have left scant records of how they were implemented in detail, we can find various aspects of its policies that are comparable to Yoshimune’s program.

During the late fifth century BC (i.e. the early Warring States period), Wei State had just partitioned from the larger, vassal state of Jin (晋) to form an independent state. In establishing its own institutions, Wei State broke away from the more archaic hereditary feudal system and tried to build a streamlined efficient administrative state staffed by non-hereditary officials accountable to the monarch. The new state made great efforts to increase its agricultural output through various measures. Success in such policy gave rise to an unexpected new problem, i.e. occasionally there was an overabundance of grain in the food market, causing the grain price to dip to unreasonably low levels, and hurting the interests of the farmers and the state in general. To cope with such a problem, Wei State implemented a set of mechanisms that could not only adeptly stabilise the grain price in the market but also safeguard the welfare of average farmer households.

Similarly, when coming into power in 1716 AD, Yoshimune took over a system that was highly feudal, hereditary and fragmented,<sup>7</sup> and he adopted numerous measures to build a more streamlined efficient administrative system inside the territorial domains directly governed by his central government (the shogunate). Such policies included appointing and promoting officials on a nonhereditary basis, cultivating more agricultural farmlands, and raising the amount of tax revenues levied from farmlands. As with Wei State, the success in implementing these policies also gave rise to the problem of overabundance in the food market. Once again prices, in this case rice prices, would dip to unreasonably low levels and governmental interests in maintaining rice prices would be hurt. To cope with this problem, Yoshimune implemented various measures that effectively stabilised the rice price in the market.

While Yoshimune’s policies bore a striking resemblance to those of the Wei State, upon closer examination we find that certain elements

in the implementation of Yoshimune's price-stabilisation policies were absent from Wei State's program. These were the use of trade guilds (*kabunakama*株仲間) and official approval of a futures trading market based on rice-bills. These two new phenomena showed that Yoshimune's policies were not a mechanical repetition of Wei State's policies, but embodied some burgeoning new mechanisms that would continue to play a role in the next stage of economic development.

This article will discuss the two regimes' similar policies for promoting meritocracy and non-hereditary offices, their similar policies in cultivating new lands and raising output or tax revenues from farmlands, and their similar policies for stabilising the grain/rice price in the market. It will describe two new elements that played interesting roles in implementing Yoshimune's price-stabilisation mechanism: trade guilds, and the rice-bill-based futures commodity market in Osaka, before exploring some deeper implications that are embodied in the above similarities and differences between the two sets of policy programs.

#### **PROMOTING MERITOCRACY AND NON-HEREDITARY OFFICES**

Wei State first emerged around 453 BC when the feudal state of Jin was partitioned by three major aristocratic lineages, Wei魏, Zhao赵 and Han韩, after defeating their common foe. The ruler of Wei State of this era, Wei Wen Hou (r. 445 BC-396 BC), who was a marquis in title and a king in reality, was the most aggressive among contemporary Sinic states in abolishing pre-existing feudal privileges and building an absolutist proto-bureaucratic state. A key feature of the new state's bureaucracy was that its numerous offices were non-hereditary, which was in a sharp contrast to the common practice of the previous Spring and Autumn period, when governmental powers were distributed amongst hereditary nobility houses. Under the new system, officials would be compensated not by granting of hereditary fiefs but by payment of salaries in grain or precious metals, their appointments came not from hereditary succession but from the monarch's nomination, and the officials could be evaluated and removed by the monarch on grounds that were supposed to be objective, sometimes based upon numerical accounting.<sup>8</sup>

Li Kui李悝, a prominent prime minister of Wei State during this period, made it a priority to abolish hereditariness of government positions. He told the king that governmental policies could fail

because there were in the kingdom too many “slackers”, whom he described as: “*after the father earned a governmental position for his achievements, the son became entitled to it without his own merit [...] The son lived a highly pompous and extravagant lifestyle [...], while feeling contented with the enjoyment of his own children and disturbing the governance of local townships*”. His stated policy was to deprive the entitlements of such hereditary “slackers” and use the proceeds to attract and reward more capable personnel recruited from all over the country.<sup>9</sup> Such policy was mirrored by Wei State’s actual administrative practices during this period.

In abolishing the pre-existing oligarchical method of government appointments and opening up senior positions to candidates from the society at large on meritorious standards, a monarch of the Warring States period resorted to a series of channels that were exemplified by the ruler of Wei State. Firstly, accepting commoner-scholars who had presented persuasive policy proposals or oral arguments: second, accepting recommendations from high officials for candidates that had distinguished themselves with capabilities or civic virtue and, third, promoting lower officials or commoners who had distinguished themselves by outstanding military services.<sup>10</sup>

In particular, Wei Wen Hou associated himself socially with a number of senior advisors who had no aristocratic origin. For example, Wei Wen Hou’s closest mentor during his early years was Zi Xia 子夏, who had come from a family of modest means and made his mark as an outstanding disciple of Confucius. Zi Xia was known to have compiled multiple Confucian classical works, and Wei Wen Hou was the only monarch during this period who had diligently studied Confucian theory.

During Wei Wen Hou’s academic experience, he took note of the capabilities of Tian Zifang 田子方, a disciple of Zi Xia, and then frequently sought Tian’s counsel on public affairs. A nobleman in the royal court once challenged the king’s close association with Tian on the ground that Tian was not an estate-possessing aristocrat, and the king defended his position by emphasising that as a man of “benevolence, wisdom and broad knowledge”, Tian deserved respect as a treasure for the king, as Tian would help to prevent disputes among the ministers, defeat threats from neighbouring polities and win respect for the king.<sup>12</sup>

Duan Ganmu 段干木, another disciple of Zi Xia, was commoner



with a great reputation for virtue. When the king paid a visit to his shabby residence for the purpose of inviting him to serve as a minister in the court, Duan declined the offer. Despite such a rebuff, when he later passed near Duan's residence, Wei Wen Hou would salute in his carriage to show his tribute to an outstanding commoner who possessed neither noble title nor official position.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Wei Wen Hou promoted a different group of officials who came from humble origins and were highly capable in fulfilling the king's political or military goals. They included Wu Qi 吴起 and Yue Yangzi 乐羊子. Neither came from prestigious noble lineages, but they systematically improved the quality and efficiency of Wei State's military machine and won numerous battles against neighbouring states in warfare. Later, Wu Qi left Wei State to serve as the prime minister of the southern state of Chu, where he implemented aggressive policies aimed at abolishing hereditary offices. He deprived the royal clan's distant branches of their aristocratic status and the proceeds collected from such deprivation were allocated for military purposes. Under his policy, a feudal lord's entitlement to a fief from the state could not be inherited by his male descendants indefinitely, and his fief, including the title and stipend attached thereto, would be forfeited when his grandson passed away.<sup>14</sup> This was an intensification of the nonhereditary policy that had been implemented in Wei State.

There existed some tensions in Wei's royal court against the king's meritocratic practices, but the king's attitude was clear: the new state would promote meritocracy at any rate at the cost of the old-fashioned hereditary aristocracy. On various occasions he preached the significance of such a policy to his close circle, and regarded it as a vital tool for strengthening the power of his state.

Similarly, before Yoshimune implemented his meritocratic policies in Japan, most of the high-ranking offices in the Tokugawa government were hereditary and there was a serious lack of upward social mobility in the ruling class.<sup>15</sup> If a middle-rank official inherited from his father a position that entitled him to receive from the government an annual stipend of 2,000 *koku* of rice (rice amounts were mainly measured in the unit of "*koku*" during this period in Japan, and one *koku* equaled approximately five bushels.): it was impossible for him to aspire to rise to a position that was entitled to an annual rice stipend of 10,000 *koku*. This was due to two reasons. First, such a higher position was hereditary and was reserved for a much smaller circle of nobles that had inherited

their rankings from their male ancestors. Besides, the holder of such a high position had to employ and pay a big team of assistants, and it was financially impossible for a lower-ranking official with a much lower stipend to employ such an entourage. In contrast, a senior lord (*daimyo*) who had inherited a handsome annual entitlement of 10,000 *koku* or more in rice stipends could easily shoulder the fiscal burden of running a significant office.

This situation constituted a major deviation from Confucian principles which stressed promotion on the basis of merit. Just as Wei Wen Hou was a keen student of Confucianism, Yoshimune also took a great interest in classical Chinese political traditions and invited scholars to his castle to lecture on the subject.<sup>16</sup> Yoshimune's key tutor in Chinese classics was Muro Kyūsō 室鳩巢 (1658-1734), who was a prominent Confucian scholar.

Yoshimune was determined to bring meritocratic practices to his administration's personnel appointments. After consulting with Muro, he put forward the *tashidaka* 足高 system, which allowed him to promote low-ranking samurais (i.e. members of the ruling warrior class) to senior positions without restrictions of hereditary class. Under this system, a capable lower-ranking samurai could rise to an important senior position and earn a higher stipend commensurate with such position, but he was only entitled to such an additional stipend during his own lifetime. This marked a major break with the government's prior practice. For example, when, on some rare occasions, the shogunate did promote a low-ranking samurai with a rice stipend entitlement of 1,000 *koku* to a senior position of 5,000 *koku*, the government used to maintain his subsequent stipend, and the stipends for his descendants who succeeded to his office, at the same level of 5,000 *koku*: in effect the rankings and stipend entitlements of his heirs would be permanently elevated by his service at a higher office. In contrast, the *tashidaka* system introduced by Yoshimune abolished the hereditary nature of a normal promotion and endowed the promoted officials with higher stipend entitlements only during their lifetime. This policy was comparable with, but more thorough than, Wu Qi's reform in China more than two millennia earlier, under which feudal lords were entitled to fief grants for only three generations.

The most famous beneficiary of the *tashidaka* system was Ōoka Tadasuke 大岡忠相, who rose from relatively middling origins to

serve as the mayor of Edo (present-day Tokyo), where he excelled as an efficient city manager and an insightful judge. Another significant beneficiary was Tanaka Kyūgū 田中丘隅, a commoner who, in his early life, worked as a peasant, a silk tradesman and a petty clerk. When Tanaka authored a book on rural administration matters, Yoshimune became aware of his expertise and appointed him to positions supervising irrigation and flood control projects. After Tanaka proved his competence in such posts, Yoshimune eventually promoted him to the important post of a provincial governor with an annual stipend of 30,000 *koku*. This was a truly impressive achievement for a commoner who had remained obscure until 59 years of age. His stellar career path was totally antithetical to the pre-existing hereditary practices and would be unimaginable without Yoshimune's meritocratic policy, which mirrored the reforms implemented by Wei State over two millennia earlier.

#### CULTIVATING NEW FARMLANDS AND INCREASING AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT

Under the guidance of efficient administrators the government of Wei aggressively built irrigation projects within its territories, which enabled vast areas of new farmland to be opened up for cultivation. For example, Wei official Ximen Bao 西门豹 led the building of 12 canals that introduced the River Zhang 漳 into Ye 邺 region, providing much water for irrigation and vastly increasing the area of arable lands in the region. While an average farmer in the region used to be allocated an area of 100 *mu* for cultivation, after Ximen Bao's irrigation projects were built, they would each be allocated 200 *mu*, i.e. a doubling of arable land. It was estimated that such irrigation projects enhanced the per unit grain yield in the region by approximately 8 times.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Yoshimune launched a major campaign for cultivating new farmland (“*shinden kaihatsu*” 新田開墾). He promulgated various incentive policies to advance reclamation efforts; local officials who organised land reclamation projects would be entitled to receive a portion of the newly-cultivated land as a reward. Due to this campaign, huge tracts of wasteland were reclaimed as paddy fields in Japan's Kanto plains and northeastern regions. As part of this campaign, the irrigation projects led by Tanaka Kyūgū in the Tamagawa 多摩川 and Sakawagawa 酒匂川 river valleys between 1726 and 1729 helped to boost the land reclamation efforts in such regions and were comparable to the significance of Ximen Bao's irrigation projects.

For both regimes, opening up new agricultural land was only a precursor to more ambitious programs for increasing agricultural output and revenues. While serving as the prime minister of Wei State, Li Kui's slogan on agriculture was that his administration would "*instruct on how to exhaust farmlands' potentials*". According to Li Kui's calculations, if farmers cultivated the fields diligently, from each *mu* of field there would be an increase of grain output in the volume of 0.6 litres, which meant for every unit region of about 1200 square kilometres of farmland, a total of approximately 24 thousand tons of grain output could be either increased or lost, depending upon how carefully the farmers cultivated their fields.<sup>18</sup> His officials would rank the fertility level of each agricultural land-lot, reward the farmers who had produced high amounts of output on barren land, and punish those who had produced poor harvests on fertile land.

In trying to maximise agricultural output, Li Kui used more than the "carrot and stick" policy of rewards and punishments. He knew very well about the economic aspects of an average farming household's life conditions in his state, and he understood the necessary costs that farmers had to pay and the hardships they were faced with. By placing agricultural officials at the grassroots level, he prudently advised or even coerced farmers into making best efficient use of natural resources and their own physical power, on the understanding that sustainable tax revenue growth should come from enhanced agricultural productivity rather than excessive levies. Through lower-ranking officials, Li Kui conveyed prudent advice to the farmers on how to maximise efficiencies in production: first, farmers should plant and grow at least five types of cereal crops, as such diversification of crop varieties could hedge against natural disasters that might befall a single type of plant; second, farmers should plow and weed diligently, and should punctually harvest their crops without delay as if their ripe crops were under the imminent threat of looting by bandits and third, in addition to cereals, farmers should make full use of all idle fields to plant cash crops, such as vegetables, fruits, melons and mulberry trees, whose leaves were needed for rearing silkworms.<sup>19</sup> Under his guidance, Wei State's agricultural output experienced a remarkable increase, which laid the economic foundation for the state's rise to hegemonic status in north China.

Yoshimune's attitude towards agriculture was similar to Li Kui's philosophy and was best reflected in the remarks of one of his officials

who compared farmers to sesame seeds, “*the harder you squeeze them, the more you can extract from them*”.<sup>20</sup> Yoshimune’s basic goal in agriculture was to increase rice tax revenue collections from farmers to the greatest extent possible. The pre-existing tax collection method during the Tokugawa period was based upon annual inspection (“*kemi*” 検見) of fields by local officials, which meant an official had the discretion to levy a higher tax rate on a parcel of land when its crop harvest was good and to levy a lower rate when its annual harvest was poor. Such a method was associated with three potential shortcomings: first, great administration costs were incurred each year from such on-the-spot annual inspections of each land parcel; second, as the method granted substantial latitude to local officials in setting tax rates for each parcel of land, its application was prone to subtle manipulation from cronyistic connections between landowners and officials; next, as local officials tended to levy a higher rate on a parcel of land when its crop harvest in a given year seemed to be good, the farmers lacked strong incentives to put in additional farming efforts on that parcel, knowing that any extra harvests were likely to be levied off as tax after a higher rate was set.

The above issues were effectively addressed by a new tax rule (“*jomen*” 定免) formulated by Yoshimune. Under this rule, a village’s tax rate would be increased to a higher rate and remained fixed thereafter for a number of years, sometimes ten years, unless very disastrous crop failure occurred. While the average tax rate under the old system hovered around 40%, under the new rule the prevalent tax rates were increased to 50 – 60%. The new method reduced the administrative costs associated with governmental surveys of numerous land parcels each year and eliminated the possibility of cronyism that might arise in connection with annual inspections and tax-rate setting. More importantly, by bringing stability and predictability to the tax rate applicable to each parcel of land, farmers became incentivised to till their land harder, knowing that their extra harvests earned from harder work would not be levied off, since the tax rates would remain the same no matter how strong the harvest turned out to be. The new tax regime seemed to work well for Yoshimune’s government. After it was implemented, his government’s annual tax rice revenues, which had previously been around 1.4 million *koku*, increased immediately to 1.5 million *koku*, and in 1744 reached a record high of 1.8 million *koku*.<sup>21</sup>

While this new tax policy was intended to increase tax revenues

from the territorial domains ruled by the central government (shogunate), Yoshimune also implemented another policy (*agemai no sei* 上米の制) that was for the purpose of increasing tax revenues from the domains of the autonomous feudal lords (“*daimyo*”). Under this latter policy, the central government gained the power to levy a tax of 1% on the rice revenues collected by each *daimyo*, in exchange for which a *daimyo*’s period of mandatory stay in Tokyo during every two-year period would be reduced from one year to half a year. That is, in the past during a period of every two years, a *daimyo* used to have a legal obligation to spend one year in Tokyo, but now he would only be required to stay in Tokyo for half a year. Therefore, a local ruling lord whose domain was valued at 50,000 *koku* of rice revenue would be required to give to the central government 500 *koku* of rice revenue each year, while the lord himself could reduce by half the time during which he was officially required to stay in Tokyo. This policy immediately resulted in a 13% increase in the central government’s revenue, an amount sufficient to cover half of the amount of salaries the central government paid its retainers.<sup>22</sup>

#### MECHANISMS IN FOOD PRICE STABILISATION

Wei State’s success in implementing its agricultural policies gave rise, however, to an unintended consequence. When an excessive amount of grain came into the food market, the grain price would fall to unreasonably low levels, hurting the livelihoods of farmers. Li Kui worried about such a scenario, as a substantial portion of farmers’ income came from their sale of residual grain in the free market, and when the grain price was too low, the farmers’ income would be greatly curtailed, leaving them unable to disburse numerous miscellaneous expenditures for clothing, medical care, funerals, religious services and governmental surcharges etc.

In light of the above problem, Li Kui formulated a system aimed at stabilising the grain price in the market. First, he categorised the harvests of different years into a “top bumper harvest”, a “medium bumper harvest”, a “bottom bumper harvest”, a “small failure”, a “medium failure” and a “top failure”. On the basis of such categorisation, he formulated the following measures in respect of the government’s purchase and distribution of grain:

- In a year of top bumper harvest, a farmer’s household

would harvest about 600 *dan* (about 8,100 kilograms) of grain. It was expected that, after the household's annual consumption, about 400 *dan* (about 5,400 kilograms) would be left as residuals; in such a case the government would purchase 300 *dan* (about 4,050 kilograms) of grain from the household, i.e.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the residual harvest

- In a year of medium bumper harvest, a farmer's household would harvest about 450 *dan*, and it was expected that, after the household's annual consumption, about 300 *dan* would be left as residuals; in such a case the government would purchase 200 *dan* of grain from the household, i.e.  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the residual harvest
- In a year of bottom bumper harvest, a farmer's household would harvest about 300 *dan*. After the household's annual consumption, about 100 *dan* would be left as residuals; in such a case the government would purchase 50 *dan* of grain from the household, i.e.  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the residual harvest
- In a year of small crop failure, a farmer's household would harvest about 100 *dan* only, and the government would distribute into the food market the grain that it had procured during a year of bottom bumper harvest, in the amount that would stabilise the food price;
- In a year of medium crop failure, a farmer's household would harvest about 70 *dan* only. Again, the government would distribute into the food market the grain that it had procured during a year of medium bumper harvest, so that the food price would be stabilised; and
- In a year of top crop failure, a farmer's household would harvest about 30 *dan*. Once again, the government would intervene, using the grain that it had procured during a year of top bumper harvest to stabilise the food price.<sup>23</sup>

After the above principles were applied, extra grain output in a year of good harvest would not result in any drop in grain price in the market, because the extra supply would be purchased by the government for a strategic stockpile and would not exert any downward pressure on the market price. On the other hand, even when there had been a natural disaster or inclement weather, crop failure would not give rise to any

grain price surge (let alone famine), because the government would put into the market the huge amount of grain that had been accumulated in years of good harvests. In either event, the general population would benefit from such stabilisation of grain price and would not encounter hardship related to price fluctuations.

Similarly, the success of Yoshimune's policy in reclaiming agricultural lands and prompting rice production also caused a social problem, when an overabundant supply of rice flow into the market led to a substantial decrease in the rice price. As fiscal powers of the central government and feudal lords in Tokugawa Japan were typically evaluated in rice volumes and their samurai officials' salaries were paid in rice, a drop in the rice price meant a decline in the actual purchasing powers of government entities and their salaried officials. Therefore, Yoshimune embarked upon a constant campaign of stabilising the market price of rice. For such a purpose, he often gathered information on the latest rice prices in the Tokyo market and closely monitored their fluctuations, sometimes on a daily basis. Anecdote had it that in a private chamber he kept a small box which contained piles of thin strips of paper covered with fine handwriting, which were detailed lists he kept of the daily fluctuations in rice prices at the market in Tokyo.<sup>24</sup>

His nickname "*Rice Shogun*" reflected his very close involvement in the rice price during his reign and he implemented a series of meticulous measures aimed at stabilising rice prices. For example, he ordered that his government and the local feudal lords should purchase large quantities of rice from the market for the purpose of raising the rice price and that merchants in Osaka and Tokyo should also purchase large quantities of rice from the market. He ordered that his government should consciously store surplus rice in granaries so that it could be dispensed in times of crop failures. He restricted the flow of rice supply into such big cities as Osaka and Tokyo, where there existed major markets of rice, and lifted the pre-existing ban on alcohol-production so that more rice would be processed into alcohol rather than channeled into the rice market.

All these measures combined to effectively stabilise the rice price in the market, and they mirrored the grain control measures adopted in Wei State more than two millennia before. Both governments purchased substantial amounts of cereals when the harvests were good, placed them into a strategic stockpile, and distributed them to



the market when it was short of cereal supply due to poor harvests. Both governments followed the same economic logic in stabilising cereal prices in their domestic markets.

#### YOSHIMUNE'S NOVEL MECHANISMS FOR PRICE-STABILISATION

After examining the various similarities discussed above, a curious student of comparative institutional history might want to inquire whether Yoshimune's measures were largely an early modern Japanese duplicate of the relevant policy programs of the early Sinic world, *mutatis mutandis*. The answer is in the negative. There did exist some differences between the two sets of policies, first in the use of trade guilds to enforce economic regulations and second in the emergence of a nascent rice futures market. Both are discussed below.

#### USING TRADE GUILDS TO ENFORCE ECONOMIC REGULATIONS

On the surface, Li Kui's price stabilisation program was implemented solely through open, governmental operations in the grain market without any involvement of private merchants, while Yoshimune's program included instructing merchants to follow the government in engaging in the same open market operations. Bai Gui 白圭, a big merchant of Wei State and contemporary of Li Kui, frequently engaged in market operations in a fashion similar to Li Kui. Bai would purchase huge quantities of grain from the market in periods when harvests were good, and then sell them in the market when harvests were poor. While Bai's operations had the same effect of stabilising grain prices, he was not following any instructions from Li Kui. Bai's market operations seemed to have instead been driven by economic consideration: he observed the existence of a 12-year business cycle that arose from periodic variations in climate and he consciously used such a cycle in his advance planning for market transactions in such bulk commodities as staple foods, textile and paint.<sup>25</sup> So in terms of physical conduct, Bai's trading firm could sometimes be engaging in the same type of market operations in grains as Li Kui's officials, but Bai was largely transacting on his own.

However, the difference between the two policy programs went deeper than mere use or non-use of big merchants in market operations. Yoshimune's policies required not only that the merchants should comply, but also that the merchants should comply *in concert*. That is to say, in implementing his economic policies, he made use

of his control of trade guilds (*kabunakama*), while Wei State did not attempt to use trade guilds.

A *kabunakama* of the Tokugawa period had a variety of functions, and they could make internal regulations governing the actions of member firms and fix transaction prices for member firms on relevant products. In light of this, Yoshimune's government utilised the trade guilds as a conduit for distributing governmental regulatory messages to the huge number of merchants in the market, especially in respect of its control of rice prices. For example, the government granted to certain trade guilds monopolies of the rice distribution business, in return for which the guild members pledged that they would include in their bylaws provisions requiring compliance with governmental rules on price controls; the guilds would self-police member merchants who violated governmental regulations on rice distribution, and would revoke the business licenses of those member merchants who had failed to comply with such governmental regulations.

Furthermore, the government required the trade guilds to submit periodical reports regarding their member firms' prices, fees and business activities. In connection with its receipt and review of such periodic reports, the government imposed, through each guild as an intermediary, rules that member merchants should follow in respect of rice prices.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, there isn't any historical record of similar trade guild organisations existing in Wei State. The kingdom did produce some big merchants or entrepreneurs operating in various industries, e.g. salt production, iron-making, and wholesale agricultural products, but these firms largely operated on their own without forming a guild with other firms in related businesses.

#### **EMERGENCE OF A NASCENT RICE FUTURES TRADING MARKET**

While many people have the impression that a futures trading market was first invented in the West after the industrial revolution, it was actually first formalised in Japan in connection with the implementation of Yoshimune's food price stabilisation mechanism.

Rice was the principal measure of wealth in Tokugawa society, creating the need for central markets where huge quantities of tax rice could be exchanged and funds could be secured for purchasing other commodities. Much of such rice trading took place in Osaka.<sup>27</sup> Since the 1620's, a novel system of rice trading had grown among

merchants in Osaka. Under this system, merchants purchased and sold rice bills which represented formal agreements for selling and delivering a certain amount of rice in bulk at a certain future time and at a price which was determined on the day the contract was made, although the seller might not necessarily own the subject rice at that time. Over time, such rice bills became standardised, each bill typically represented 10 *koku* of rice, and there emerged an active trading market for such rice bills. Pre-Yoshimune governments deemed such activities as “empty” speculation and issued orders to prohibit various aspects of such trading. However, Yoshimune saw in such a trading system a useful tool for stabilising the oftentimes volatile rice market. In 1730, Yoshimune issued a decree officially acknowledging the Osaka rice-bill market, and at the same time laid down a series of rules that must be followed by the traders. While Yoshimune’s primary motive in accepting the rice-bill market was to increase rice prices, his policy allowed the establishment and optimisation of a complex ecosystem processing futures trading of rice bills, which included numerous officially-licensed rice merchants, rice traders, rice brokers, clearing houses, credit houses, warehouses, and, above all, a rice-trading futures exchange.<sup>28</sup>

Within this officially-accepted trading system, the exchange traded standardised rice bills as futures, i.e. all the rice bills represented certain brands of standard rice, and their obligations would mature in prescribed periods; on the maturity day all trading positions had to be cleared, either in cash or by physical delivery, and a central clearing place, which was made up of a number of clearing houses, assumed contract obligations when any default occurred.<sup>29</sup> Despite the existence of various technical differences, the basic mechanism of the Osaka rice futures trading market, which crystallised during Yoshimune’s reign, were comparable to the futures exchange markets that were to emerge in Western countries in the nineteenth century.

In contrast, sophisticated derivative trading was never a part of the implementation of Wei State’s grain price stabilisation program. Although Wei State did leave some records of commercial prosperity arising from bulk trade of commodities, an institutionalised form of commodity exchange never emerged in the kingdom, and it did not seem feasible for a set of futures trading mechanism to be supported by the kingdom’s commercial rules or market mechanism in the fifth century BC.

## CONCLUSION

The resemblance between the policy programs of Wei State during the early Warring States period and of Yoshimune in the early eighteenth century seems striking. They resemble each other in their abolition of hereditary offices, promotion of meritocracy in appointments, efforts at increasing agricultural output, and meticulous implementation of food price stabilisation mechanisms in the market. The similarities between the reform policies of the two regimes actually went further than the above. For example, Li Kui formulated for Wei State a comprehensive legal code which became one of the most influential codes in early Chinese history, while in 1742 Yoshimune organised the codification of the government's laws into *kujikata osadamegaki hyakkajo* 公事方御定書百箇条, which became the most important legal code in Japan prior to the Meiji Restoration. Discussion of such further similarities, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

The basic reason for such similarities was that the two states were both experiencing the early stage of a similar transitional process: the metamorphosis from a hereditary feudal aristocracy into a proto-bureaucratic state, and both governments would naturally adopt similar policies when faced with similar aspirations and pressures. In terms of their relative positions in their social evolution trajectories, their reform programs both occurred on the eve of a bigger paradigm shift. They both foreshadowed some fundamental changes that would come in due time: the initial emergence of a unitary modern state in Meiji Japan and the emergence of the early unitary classic empires in China, both of which would be based upon the dismantling of traditional feudal privileges and boundaries, promotion of meritocratic principles, and governmental intervention in the domestic market. The very early years of the Meiji Restoration actually witnessed some traces of institutional Sinicisation, when the new Japanese government pursued certain institutional changes that mirrored changes that had taken place during the early periods of the Chinese empire.\*

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\* A net effect of the early stage of Meiji Restoration was partial restoration of a centralised government resembling the Heian period's *ritsuryo*-based state, which was modelled upon the institutions of imperial China. Precedent policies from the early Chinese empire could be found for certain reforms implemented by the early Meiji government, including: (i) "return of domain registers" 版籍奉還 and abolition of the feudal domains, through which the central government took away local lords' administrative powers over feudal domains and gained the power to directly rule all such territories, which were reorganised into prefectures, (ii) relocating families of feudal lords to the capital city, (iii) abolishing samurais' privilege to bear swords, and (iv) abolishing custom tariffs on flow of goods between different domestic regions.

The policy programs of Yoshimune and Wei State could both be regarded as a cautious step towards that fundamental change, but they were unable to follow up with stronger measures. They sowed the policy seeds that would be reaped by subsequent regimes which would intensify such policies to a degree inconceivable for the predecessors. For example, Japan's policies during the early Meiji era in promoting meritocracy and equalising social ranking could be regarded as a dramatic extension of Yoshimune's small first steps in weakening the hereditary ranking system, while the concept of Li Kui's price stabilisation mechanism was adopted and applied on a national basis in China in the late second century BC by an imperial finance minister who held a dirigisme standpoint.

On the other hand, despite the numerous similarities between the reform policies formulated by Yoshimune and Wei State's ruling elites, the former was far from a repetition of the latter. Rather Yoshimune's policies were implemented in a socio-economic environment that was more sophisticated than the Wei State of the fifth century BC. Late Tokugawa period was on the eve of an industrial revolution, and certain aspects of the Japanese social institutions of this period had been pre-adapted to suit the needs of a future industrial takeoff.<sup>30</sup> Guild organisations and financial markets were part and parcel of the social fabric of that industrialising society. In contrast, Wei State of the late fifth century BC was more than two millennia away from an industrial revolution; its administrative system had been pre-adapted for, and stood poised to embrace, an absolutist agricultural empire that was to emerge in China in about two centuries. A unitary agricultural empire had no use for self-regulating trade guilds or risk-hedging derivative markets, but it could be keen on conducting governmental open market operations *à la* Li Kui.

*'History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes'*, or so the saying goes. From the discussions in this article, we find that the reform policies of early China's Wei State were not repeated, but did rhyme in mid-Tokugawa Japan in a very subtle manner. It would be desirable for us to not regard these similarities as mere coincidences, but to consider them as part of a larger pattern of history's meandering path. Yoshimune's policy program was anything but a mechanical repetition of Wei State's reform, and Yoshimune's policies were implemented in a social environment that looked comparable with Wei State in rough contour but was different in the fine details of the social fabric. The

novel phenomena in the implementation of Yoshimune's policies indicate that in mid-Tokugawa Japan a more complex social system was coming into formation and was standing ready for upgrading. This echoes Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, who once said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man".

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**Section 2:  
YOUNG SCHOLAR'S ESSAY**

**'EXCEPTIONALLY LARGE  
AND VASTLY DIVERSIFIED  
MONOPOLIES'**



# THE ZAIBATSU AND FOREIGN POLICY: AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW BUSINESS AND POLITICS INTERTWINED IN 1930S JAPAN

BY RAAG PATHAK

## ABSTRACT

*Contrary to the usual trope that the Imperial Japanese Army held absolute command over foreign policy in 1930s Japan, this paper draws attention to the role of business influence in the rise of the expansionist regime, which left a bloodstained mark in the books of history. The zaibatsu, a collection of high-powered monopolies, drew upon their considerable influence to align national policy with their business interests, consequently leading Japan into internal strife, authoritarianism and ultimately war. Through the examination of various primary sources and historical writing, this article attempts to reassess the responsibility attributed to the zaibatsu for the origin and course of Japanese expansionism, as well as the Sino-Japanese hostility that resulted. With the steady expansion of private influence in modern-day policymaking, this historical investigation into the zaibatsu exposes the damaging nature of the business-politics relationship that is seen throughout the world today.*

## INTRODUCTION

From lobbying in the U.S. to the bribery of top officials in Brazil, the involvement of private corporations in policy decisions is, alas, a rampant practice across many modern democracies.<sup>1</sup> As the entanglement between business and politics grows by the day, few observers acknowledge the history of this relationship, remaining unexposed to perhaps the most powerful and consequential firms to have existed: the zaibatsu.<sup>2</sup>

As the Japanese economy first began to modernise in 1868,<sup>3</sup> the few business families which operated in the nation developed into the leaders of exceptionally large and vastly diversified monopolies, collectively known as the zaibatsu.<sup>4</sup> After years of continuous growth, they were able to extend their authority to Japan's immature political system, seeking to align the country's domestic and foreign policies with their business interests.<sup>5</sup> By the 1930s, the zaibatsu held a

majority in nearly all state ministries and legislative assemblies,<sup>6</sup> were heavily financing the predominant political parties,<sup>7</sup> and controlled the bulk of foreign trade and industry:<sup>8</sup> The scale and breadth of their power was unimaginable. At the same time, however, the Imperial Army grew increasingly independent of the zaibatsu-infiltrated Tokyo government, casting doubt on how far the zaibatsu truly influenced foreign policy during this time.<sup>9</sup>

With the invasion of Manchuria in 1931,<sup>10</sup> Japan's foreign policy underwent a radical change, instigating further territorial expansion into China and ultimately leading to the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937,<sup>11</sup> a conflict whose unanticipated length and difficulty prompted Japan to launch an offensive in the Pacific.<sup>12</sup> As such, the question of the zaibatsu's significance in shaping Japanese foreign policy during 1931–1937 must be examined to not only understand how far the zaibatsu were responsible for the interventionist foreign policy mounted during this period, but also to unravel their role in the route to Pearl Harbour and the ensuing outbreak of World War II in the Pacific. Further, given that many modern corporations similarly attempt to influence government policy, investigating the issue could provide a historical outlook from which the consequences of the business-politics relationship that prevails in today's world can be understood.<sup>13</sup>

The question shall be addressed by comparing the significance of the zaibatsu and the Imperial Army, the two leading groups involved in the shaping of foreign policy during the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, primary accounts by zaibatsu and Imperial Army leaders shall be examined to uncover both parties' roles. Secondary sources such as books, doctoral theses and journal articles shall also be considered in order to retrieve historical perspectives for evaluation and to obtain a broader factual understanding than that conveyed by primary documentation. It should be acknowledged, however, that there is limited source material relating to the zaibatsu's efforts to shape foreign policy as they largely did so behind closed doors; therefore, this paper shall attempt to draw inferences from existing sources to 'fill in the gaps' where they arise.<sup>15</sup>

This question addresses an area of history which has a number of competing perspectives and interpretations. Prominent East Asian historian, T.A. Bisson, argues that foreign policy was devised under zaibatsu hegemony and that, although the Imperial Army's role intensified in the 1930s, the notion that they presided over state

affairs is greatly exaggerated.<sup>16</sup> U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, at the culmination of his posting in occupied Japan, similarly stated that the '[zaibatsu] influence upon government policies [was] inordinate and set the course which ultimately led to war and destruction'.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, historian Arthur E. Tiedemann contends that the zaibatsu's ubiquitous attachment to politics was insignificant in shaping foreign policy whilst their destruction of national stability in previous years was much more notable.<sup>18</sup> Finally, illustrious Japanese political scientist, Sadako N. Ogata, is of the widely accepted view that from the outset of the Manchurian Crisis in 1931 to Japan's surrender in 1945, foreign policy was devised exclusively by the Imperial Army as it "*reformed*" Japan's leadership.<sup>19</sup>

This paper challenges the orthodox argument that the Imperial Army held absolute command over foreign policy. Although Japan's territorial expansion from 1931–1937 was an endeavour physically undertaken by the Imperial Army, this paper argues that the zaibatsu were highly significant in shaping both the origin and course of this endeavour. Even as the zaibatsu's predominance in the Japanese political system became virtually futile as the 1930s progressed, it is evident that their vast economic control played an inherent role in driving Japan closer towards war.

### **1931–1932: THE MANCHURIAN CRISIS**

On 18 September, 1931, a section of Japanese-administered railway near the city of Mukden was detonated, thus triggering the Manchurian Crisis,<sup>20</sup> a crucial turning point in Japanese foreign policy during which the Chinese region of Manchuria endured a series of territorial offensives and was ultimately seized by Japan a year later.<sup>21</sup> Evidence indicates that whilst the invasion of Manchuria was both planned and carried out by the Kwantung Army (a branch of the Imperial Army), the zaibatsu laid the groundwork for the invasion and crucially altered its outcome.

Nevertheless, the orthodox viewpoint asserting that the Manchurian Crisis was entirely an endeavour of the Kwantung Army, and that the zaibatsu were largely inconsequential must be considered, since it is one adopted by many scholars, particularly Sadako N. Ogata who had access to an array of previously confidential Japanese sources on the Manchurian Crisis.<sup>22</sup> The evidence contained within the Lytton Report, a primary inquiry into the events in Manchuria, also concurs

with this argument.<sup>23</sup> For instance, though the report fails to blame any particular group for the Mukden Incident, it declares that the damage to the railway ‘did not in fact prevent the punctual arrival of [Japanese trains]’ and that the Japanese seizure of nearby cities following the incident was carried out with ‘swiftness and precision’ as if it was planned, strongly suggesting that the Kwantung Army executed the Mukden Incident in an attempt to initiate an invasion of Manchuria.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the report states that Shigeru Honjō, commander-in-chief of the Kwantung Army, was first made aware of the incident the day after it occurred.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the leader of the Kwantung Army was entirely unaware of the ploy makes the possibility of it being planned by military authorities or the zaibatsu-infiltrated Tokyo government highly improbable, as a group of junior Kwantung Army officers autonomously drafted and subsequently executed the Mukden Incident. The staged attack on the railway created the grounds for further Japanese expansion into the region of Manchuria.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the Kwantung Army initially seems to have independently created the conditions out of which the Manchurian Crisis transpired, perhaps signifying that non-military groups such as the zaibatsu played a minimal role in shaping the foreign policy executed in Manchuria.

Although the Lytton Report examined various eyewitness accounts of the Mukden Incident, which enabled it to provide a valuable first-hand narrative of the event, its purpose was to determine whether the Japanese expansion into Manchuria was justified. This is too narrow a scope to adequately investigate the shaping of Japanese foreign policy from 1931–1932.<sup>27</sup> The Kwantung Army may well have been the sole planners and executors of the invasion of Manchuria, as suggested by the report, however, a broader examination of evidence demonstrates that the zaibatsu also held tremendous significance in shaping this invasion, in turn refuting the orthodox viewpoint. Colonel Kanji Ishihara, the member of the Kwantung Army considered to have masterminded the Mukden Incident, stated that ‘natural resources in Manchuria [...] will be sufficient to save [Japan] from the imminent crisis [the economic and social plight of the Japanese population]’, suggesting that the motivating force behind the invasion of Manchuria was the economic and social problems plaguing Japan, problems which were by and large created by the self-interest of the zaibatsu.<sup>28</sup>

To illustrate, there was a remarkably large harvest of rice in 1930 meaning that the ruling Minseitō Cabinet should have stored a large quantity to keep its price at a stable level\* under the previously established “Rice Act”.<sup>29</sup> However, the magazine *Chūō Kōron* reported that Minseitō heavily adhered to the interests of the Mitsubishi zaibatsu.<sup>30</sup> Mitsubishi had a monopoly in rice transportation and on that account would lose a great deal of potential revenue if a large quantity



of rice was stored instead of being exported or transported within Japan.<sup>31</sup> With regard to empirical evidence, the price of rice collapsed in late 1930,<sup>32</sup> suggesting that Minseitō indeed misused the “Rice Act” owing to their entanglement with Mitsubishi and that Japanese farmers, who constituted around 47% of the population, consequently lost their only source of income after the Great Depression had vastly shrunk the demand for Japanese silk.<sup>33</sup> Considering the widespread protest that ensued, publicly demonstrating that a large proportion of the Japanese population suffered economic distress, it can be seen that the zaibatsu caused and promulgated the public hardship that led Ishihara to plot the invasion of Manchuria.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, contrary to the orthodox argument, the zaibatsu were highly significant in shaping the Manchurian Crisis as they created the deep economic and social instability which the invasion of Manchuria was launched to resolve.

But factors such as the Great Depression similarly caused domestic instability in early 1930s Japan, and as such, the degree to which the zaibatsu truly prompted the Kwantung Army to invade Manchuria could still be considered an area of contention. For instance, a major effect of the Great Depression was the collapse in the demand for Japanese silk which resulted in a steep fall in its price and a loss of income for Japan’s large rural population.<sup>35</sup> Even after this setback, however, the cultivation of rice remained a stable source of income, suggesting that farmers’ living standards were only uprooted after the zaibatsu’s self-interest resulted in the collapse of rice prices and

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\* Editor’s note: see Mr. Su’s illuminating article on page 116 for more information on this topic.

that the zaibatsu were indeed chief in prompting the invasion of Manchuria.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, although the Great Depression certainly caused economic problems such as the suppression of Japanese economic growth,<sup>37</sup> this merely provided a basis for the zaibatsu's destruction of domestic stability as they were able to use their vast cash reserves to acquire competing firms at a low price.<sup>38</sup> These firms were subsequently dissolved and their employees laid-off, as suggested by the relatively stable value of the zaibatsu's assets during this period,<sup>39</sup> despite the price level decline.<sup>40</sup> Given that such acquisitions were not of a limited scale – for instance, around 600 of the 1,300 Japanese banking institutions were purchased by the zaibatsu – it is evident that they limited the bulk of competition, created vast unemployment and extensively raised prices in the various nationwide industries in which they operated,<sup>41</sup> including real estate, utilities, foodstuffs, textiles, ceramics, banking and insurance.<sup>42</sup> Hence, one can confidently argue that a significant proportion of the 5.3% rise in the Japanese price level from 1930–1931,<sup>43</sup> in addition to the rising unemployment in Japan,<sup>44</sup> was created by the zaibatsu. This suggests that they were central to the collapse of living standards throughout Japan and consequently led the Kwantung Army to invade Manchuria so as to improve the nation's economic and social situation, thus validating the view of Arthur E. Tiedemann that the zaibatsu's destruction of national stability was significant in shaping Japan's 1930s foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst it is evident that the zaibatsu were highly significant in causing the Mukden Incident, the event merely constituted the earliest stage of the Manchurian Crisis. Orthodox historians argue that after the Mukden Incident, the Kwantung Army acted independently of all non-military groups such as the zaibatsu, progressively advancing into Manchuria on their own terms.<sup>46</sup> It is certainly true that the continuous dispatch of troop reinforcements by the War Ministry in Tokyo allowed the Kwantung Army to ignore the government's condemnation of a continued expansion into Manchuria. However, that is not to say that the zaibatsu were completely excluded from shaping the course of the Manchurian Crisis during its later stages.<sup>47</sup> Tadashi Katakura, a general in the Imperial Army, declares in his diary that the Kwantung Army's original aim was to annex the region but that this was prevented by the Tokyo government, which had a predominant zaibatsu presence.<sup>48</sup> Although it is difficult to appreciate the full effect of the zaibatsu's political influence given that much of their dealings took place



behind closed doors, evidence strongly suggests that the ruling that blocked Manchuria's annexation originated from the zaibatsu.<sup>49</sup> In *A Businessman's View of the Lytton Report* by Chokiuro Kadono, the vice-president of the Ōkura zaibatsu, an especially prevalent theme is his support for the independent state of Manchukuo and deep concern about the international response to the Japanese advancement into Manchuria,<sup>50</sup> presenting a clear motive to prevent Manchuria from being directly annexed by Japan. However, this source is limited in that it offers the outlook of a single zaibatsu executive, and as such, it may not be indicative of all zaibatsu.

Nonetheless, every zaibatsu significantly engaged in foreign trade<sup>51</sup> and because Article 16 of the League of Nations Covenant indicated that 'all trade [...] relations' must be severed with 'covenant-breaking States'.<sup>52</sup> Thus, a formal annexation could have dissolved a primary source of their revenue which suggests that it was in every zaibatsu's interest to block Manchuria's annexation. Given that the Meiji Constitution stated that 'Privy Councillors shall [...] deliberate upon important matters of [the] State' and that "Ministers of State shall [...] be responsible for [...] Imperial Ordinances', the source of a ruling that averted the formal annexation of Manchuria as stated in Katakura's diary was likely the Privy Council or Cabinet ministers.<sup>53</sup> At the time of the Manchurian Crisis, the zaibatsu were closely related to Prince Saionji, the only surviving Genrō (principal elder) who alone constituted the Privy Council.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, zaibatsu officials constituted a majority in the Foreign Ministry and the ruling Minseitō Cabinet heavily entertained the Mitsubishi zaibatsu's interests.<sup>55</sup>

Since the zaibatsu historically used their political contacts without reservation in order to protect their profits, as Mitsubishi had done in 1930, there can be no doubt that they were connected to the ruling that blocked the Kwantung Army from annexing Manchuria. On the whole, it seems very clear that the zaibatsu were highly significant in shaping both the origin and outcome of Japanese foreign policy from 1931–1932.



Figure 2: Prince Saionji

### 1932–1937: THE CONTINUED EXPANSION INTO CHINA

Following the Manchurian Crisis, the Japanese expansion into China never truly ceased. From 1932–1937, the Imperial Army moved aggressively forward into the provinces of Jehol, Hebei and Chahar,<sup>56</sup> establishing the puppet states of Mengjiang and the East Hebei Autonomous Council whilst laying the groundwork for the Second Sino-Japanese War.<sup>57</sup> It is once again evident that whilst the Imperial Army physically executed the continued expansionist campaign into China, the zaibatsu significantly shaped foreign policy, in this instance by equipping the Imperial Army with the means to undertake such a campaign.

Yet, the orthodox perspective contending that the zaibatsu's role in shaping foreign policy was inconsequential, which seems stronger than ever, should be recognised. After Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was murdered in an attempted coup d'état on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1932, the Cabinet suffered a blow to its power over state affairs and succeeding prime ministers increasingly leaned towards the Imperial Army.<sup>58</sup>

As the Cabinet was a major constituent of the zaibatsu's political arsenal, this suggests that their policy-influencing abilities were hampered.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, during the period of 1932–1937, the Imperial Army pursued a foreign policy which they had drafted, potentially signifying that they were at the helm of the continued expansion into China. For example, following the Japanese advancement into Jehol province in 1933, which itself began after a few Imperial Army soldiers



Figure 3: Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi

fired blank cartridges near Japanese barracks, the Imperial Army was given the order not to progress beyond the Great Wall of China.<sup>60</sup> In 1935, however, the Imperial Army submitted plans to expand beyond the Great Wall into Chahar and North Shanxi which although immediately rejected, did not prevent their troops from venturing beyond the Great Wall in subsequent months.<sup>61</sup> The Imperial Army's independent acts of territorial invasion in China suggest that, at

least on the surface, they almost exclusively shaped the foreign policy of 1932–1937 at a time when the role of the zaibatsu was marginal.

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the political authority of the zaibatsu waned as the 1930s progressed, their significance in shaping foreign policy during this time most certainly did not falter. As T.A. Bisson notes, ‘[the] parties [...] represented only one weapon in the *zaibatsu* [...] armoury.’<sup>62</sup> In actuality, the zaibatsu were an essential element of the continued expansion into China. In 1932, the Imperial Army drastically needed to expand its inflow of matériel if it were to carry out further interventionist acts;<sup>63</sup> only the zaibatsu were able to supply the increased matériel necessary for continued territorial advances. Large quantities of matériel could most definitely not be obtained from abroad – there was a 23.76% tariff levied on imports, and even then, most global economies directed matériel production inwards owing to the Great Depression.<sup>64</sup> The zaibatsu’s sheer size and productive abilities presented the only solution to the Imperial Army’s problem. The nine largest zaibatsu conglomerates collectively occupied 35.5% of the mining industry, 27.2% of the machinery industry and 20.6% of the petroleum industry in Japan, meaning that they possessed such significant infrastructure in matériel industries that a continuous and easily-expandable yield of matériel could be supplied to the Imperial Army.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the zaibatsu possessed vast reserves of funds which could be used to invest in enlarged scales of production in addition to a long history of industrial manufacturing, endowing them with significant productive know-how.<sup>66</sup> It is thus apparent that the extensive growth of matériel production from 1931–1936 and the resulting ability of the Imperial Army to continue their expansion into China could not have occurred without the zaibatsu,<sup>67</sup> demonstrating their significance in shaping Japanese foreign policy as well as the invalidity of the orthodox viewpoint. Furthermore, because the zaibatsu enabled the Imperial Army to develop their military forces, Chinese troops were consequently overpowered which resulted in the signing of treaties such as the Tanggu Truce and the He-Umezu Agreement through which Japan gained immediate control over the provinces of Jehol, Hebei and Chahar.<sup>68</sup> The zaibatsu directly facilitated Japan’s territorial gain, further suggesting that they were immensely significant in constructing foreign policy from 1932–1937.

Historian T.A. Bisson argues that the ‘monopolists [exercised] decisive power’,<sup>69</sup> much like General Douglas MacArthur who

claims that the ‘[zaibatsu] influence upon government policies [was] inordinate’.<sup>70</sup> Whilst both perspectives are certainly worthy of consideration, since both Bisson and MacArthur experienced Japanese foreign policy first-hand, they do not appear to correspond with existing evidence. The zaibatsu could not have been in “decisive” control of foreign policy because, whilst they were obviously open to the short-term revenues involved in the growth of Japanese industry, the foreign policy mounted in China was certainly not their foreign policy of choice. Mitsui executive Seihin Ikeda wrote in his book *Business Circle Retrospective* that in 1937 he sought solutions to the Second Sino-Japanese War and how to control the Imperial Army, demonstrating that he was not in favour of the war and the foreign policy which had brought Japan into it.<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting that Ikeda was writing in 1949 so his opinion could have been influenced by his access to hindsight and his knowledge that the continual conquests in China up to 1937 paved the path for the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Nonetheless, this source is extremely valuable because Ikeda was a top executive of one of the largest zaibatsu conglomerates and undeniably presents an opinion of foreign policy representative of most, if not all zaibatsu.<sup>72</sup> Thus, whilst the zaibatsu most definitely facilitated territorial gain and enabled the Imperial Army to continue their expansion into China, by no means should their role in shaping foreign policy be considered as overarching.

### **1937: THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR**

At first glance, the Imperial Army seems to be wholly responsible for the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Imperial Army troops, directly disobeying government orders, had advanced to such an extent within China that on 7 July, 1937, they were positioned at the Marco Polo Bridge where they clashed with Chinese troops in an incident often identified as the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War.<sup>73</sup> But war was not inevitable following the skirmish – on 11 July, a truce was agreed upon by both Chinese and Imperial Army troops at the bridge.<sup>74</sup> War was only triggered when Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe breached the agreed-upon ceasefire by ordering the mobilisation of Japanese troops, an act that was most certainly the result of Imperial Army influence.<sup>75</sup>

For one, Konoe spent much of his early tenure attempting to pardon the ultranationalist military officers who had executed a

failed coup d'état, demonstrating clear allegiance to the far-right faction of the Imperial Army, the same faction that overtly objected to the truce.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, after the war's outbreak, Konoe blamed the aggressive elements of the Imperial Army for the provocation of conflict, further suggesting that they were the driving force behind the decision to mobilise troops and thus initiate war.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 4: Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe

However, the zaibatsu were not detached from the outbreak of the war. The advance towards the Marco Polo Bridge was inherently an endeavour of the Imperial Army.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the zaibatsu had fundamentally enabled such an expansion which suggests a strong connection to the preparatory stages of the war. Further, the primary reason that the ultranationalist faction of the Imperial Army objected to the initial truce and yearned for the mobilisation of troops was that they believed that victory over China could be achieved within a few months.<sup>79</sup> A factor principally contributing to this optimism was undoubtedly the ramped-up matériel production by the zaibatsu<sup>80</sup> which allowed the Imperial Army to expand and modernise beyond its 1932 level, as shown by the significant increases in military expenditure since 1932.<sup>81</sup> By contributing to the mobilisation Imperial Army troops, the zaibatsu significantly influenced the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

## CONCLUSION

Despite much of the drafting and execution of Japan's foreign policy from 1931–1937 being undertaken by the Imperial Army, the zaibatsu were highly significant in not only prompting the Japanese invasion of China, but in directly shaping the course of this invasion. The zaibatsu were responsible for creating domestic crises in Japan, and in turn, inciting expansionism amongst Imperial Army Troops. Moreover, they directly facilitated a continued territorial campaign in China by significantly ramping-up the Imperial Army's inflow of war matériel,

fuelling optimism about Japan's odds of victory in a war with China.

Let the zaibatsu's role in driving Japan towards war serve as a reminder: if allowed an inordinate share over an economy or to entangle itself in a deep web of political connections, big business can be the root of global catastrophe.

*Raag Pathak is aged 18 and has been living in China for the last five years, graduating from Dulwich College Shanghai this year. Following his parents' expat trail, he has grown up in India, South Africa, Singapore, and Hong Kong. This contribution to the young scholar's section of JRAS was part of his extended research as a component of the International Baccalaureate Diploma. He is now moving to the U.K. to pursue a BSc degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Warwick, where he will continue exploring his passion for academic research, foreign affairs, and competitive rugby and cricket.*

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# **Section 3**

## **Book Reviews**



## RAS NON-FICTION BOOK CLUB

BY CORDELIA CROCKETT

The RAS Non-Fiction Book Club met about once a month throughout 2021. Early in the year, meetings were held both on-line and in person; from the summer meetings were held in-person only. Book club meetings are an opportunity for people to discuss a pre-selected English book about some aspect of Asia. The group welcomes participants from all backgrounds and nationalities – in fact, it is the variety of our participants that makes discussions so enriching.

One of the highlights of the year was the discussion in April about *Victorious Blood* by Hussin Alkheder. RAS was fortunate to have the author present for the discussion. This book describes the violent conflict between the grandson of the prophet of Islam and the Umayyad state. The book club will return to the Middle East in December with the book *Islamic Empires: The Cities that Shaped Civilization from Mecca to Dubai* by Justin Marozzi.

Another highlight of the year was the discussion about *A Thousand Cranes for India: Reclaiming Plurality Amid Hatred*, as editor and journalist Pallavi Ayer was able to join the discussion on-line. This book is a compilation of essays and poems related in one way or another to modern India and the shared motif of an origami crane.

China unsurprisingly gets the most attention in the non-fiction book club. Several books about events in Imperial China were included in the 2021 roster, including *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* by Philip A. Kuhn and *1587: A Year of No Significance* by Ray Huang. Each of these books brought to light fascinating social, economic, and political tensions manifesting at certain moments in history.

The book club also read several books about modern China, including *Superpower, Interrupted* by Michael Schuman, *India's China Challenge* by Ananth Krishnan, *China's Good War: How Memory of World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism* by Rana Mitter, and *Big Sister, Little Sister, Red Sister: Three Women at the Heart of Twentieth-Century China* by Jung Chang. These books bring to life the personalities of modern China, while also describing how aspects of this country's recent and ancient history are used by today's leaders to

justify China's domestic and international policies.

Every good book club includes a book about food, and this year it was *The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography* by Brian Dott. Through the study of this vegetable, the reader learns about Chinese traditional medicine, domestic and international trade during the Age of Exploration, class, literature, and much more.

As 2021 was an Olympic Games year (due to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics being postponed), the 2021 reading list included *1964 – The Greatest Year in the History of Japan: How the Tokyo Olympics Symbolized Japan's Miraculous Rise from the Ashes* by Roy Tomizawa. This book is a series of vignettes about the athletes and organisers of those Olympic Games and how their stories were affected by the cultural and political currents of that year.

We are very grateful to Garden Books for hosting our monthly discussions. Garden Books is centrally located, with good public transport access, and provides plenty of books to peruse for any participants who arrive early to the meeting or want to linger among the bookshelves before heading home.

# RAS FICTION BOOK CLUB

BY RACHEL TAN

RAS is delighted to restart the Fiction Book Club, after a hiatus caused by Covid-19 related issues. The RAS book Clubs, both fiction and non-fiction constitute a core component of the Royal Asiatic Society China in Shanghai. For the second half of 2021 and continuing into 2022, our selection of new fiction and vintage fiction, all with an Asian perspective has been chosen to stimulate and delight.

The selection of the titles depends on what our members wish to read and regard as important for their understanding of China and Asia, and this year our novels range from studies of gritty reality to the heights of heroic fantasy. In addition, our members explore these worlds of fiction through biographies, reviews, movie adaptations and many other forms.

We are presently meeting once a month at Garden books, where our lively discussions help to tease out deeper meanings, and increase our enjoyment of the books. We are unfortunately not able at this time to incorporate online members at this stage, but hope, if you are in Shanghai, you will be tempted to join us. Information about the bookclub is posted regularly on RAS platforms, including Wechat, our website and in email notices.

## NOVELS FOR 2021-2022

*Strings of Life (China Stories)* by SHI TIE SHENG (命若琴弦)

Some of Shi Tie Sheng's work is gathered in this collection, including the novella *Strings of Life* and the prose essay *In the Temple of Earth*. *Strings of Life* elucidates a profound life philosophy, discussing human survival and self-redemption. *In the Temple of Earth* tells the story of a desperate man seeking hope, while the remembrance of his mother provides an evocative description of motherly love.

*Under the Midnight Sun: A Novel* by Keigo Higashino (白夜行)

The writer of the international bestseller *The Devotion of Suspect X* gives us a sweeping novel in the tradition of *Les Miserables* and *Crime and Punishment*. We follow the compelling story of two teenagers whose lives remain deeply linked during the twenty-year search for

the truth behind a shocking crime.

*Moment in Peking* by LIN YUTANG (京华烟云)

The story of several rich Chinese families who live through ‘interesting times’. From Lin Yutang, a major interpreter of Chinese culture in the 20th century.

*The Ordinary World* by LU YAO (平凡的世界)

This novel documents the historical changes in the rural areas of Northwest China, through the lens of an ordinary family. The protagonist’s indomitable spirit in the face of difficulties still inspires college students today, and has for many years. The author has portrayed the realistic lives of many people from all walks of life, engaged in complex social contradictions and entanglements in contemporary Chinese urban and rural society. There are three books in this volume, blending together to show the sometimes difficult and tortuous road ordinary people have travelled in a historical great age.

*A Hero Born: The Definitive Edition (Legends of the Condor Heroes Book 1)* by JIN YONG (射雕英雄传)

Set in ancient China, where kingdoms vie for power. In this world, kung fu is magic, and the battle among characters, fighting to become the ultimate kung fu master, forms the background of this lively tale. In the first book in the epic *Legends of the Condor Heroes* an unlikely hero is born [...] by the critically acclaimed master of the genre, Jin Yong.

*Half a Lifelong Romance* by EILEEN CHANG (半生缘)

Manzhen works in a Shanghai factory, where she meets Shijun, the son of wealthy merchants. Despite family complications, they fall in love and begin to dream of a life together – until circumstances intervene. This affectionate novel tells the tender story of a lasting love affair, and offers a fascinating glimpse into Chinese life in the first half of the twentieth century.



# URBAN LOOPHOLES: CREATIVE ALLIANCES OF SPATIAL PRODUCTION IN SHANGHAI'S CITY CENTER

BY YING ZHOU

BIRKHÄUSER, BASEL, 2017

REVIEWED BY DUNCAN HEWITT

This book's slightly unwieldy title is a reminder of its genesis as a PhD, and of the author's background as an architect and academic specialist on urbanism. Yet, despite a smattering of academic jargon, Ying Zhou, currently assistant professor in the Architecture Department at Hong Kong University, has produced an accessible, richly-illustrated work which is one of the first in-depth English-language studies of the development of Shanghai's downtown areas, and the city's urban planning, over recent decades. She focuses in particular on the redevelopment or repurposing of old neighbourhoods, and the evolution of attitudes to heritage architecture, with a number of detailed case studies – ranging from what she calls the “heritageisation” of Wukang Lu in Shanghai's former French Concession, to the rise and fall of small ‘cultural businesses’ in the downtown Jing'an Villas compound, the demolition of other lane compounds such as the nearby Dazhong Li, and the development of a growing number of art zones and ‘creative clusters’ in repurposed industrial buildings.

Zhou's background makes her an ideal guide: Shanghai-born, raised partly in the US, and educated at Princeton, Harvard and ETH Zurich in Switzerland (where she also worked with architects Herzog & De Meuron), she combines local knowledge and insight with the dispassionate eye of an outside observer. Her work blends interviews (and photographs) from her PhD fieldwork in Shanghai between 2011 and 2013 with a wealth of Chinese language sources, including media reports and academic research; she is particularly good at teasing out the interplay between the various forces and processes – governmental, economic, social and cultural – that have contributed to Shanghai's breakneck transformation.

The ‘urban loopholes’ of the book's title refer to Zhou's argument that, despite the top-down nature of governance in China, some aspects of Shanghai's recent development are the result of various

players taking advantage of gaps in evolving urban planning regulations to pursue their own aims. These range from local officials applying creative thinking to repurpose areas such as Tianzifang (a densely populated old lane neighbourhood which attracted artists and creative studios in the early 2000s, before becoming home to cafes and boutiques), to the rezoning of government-allocated industrial land in old factory compounds to create several hundred ‘creative clusters’ (including the M50 art zone; Bridge 8, where design studios are housed in former workshops of Shanghai’s state car manufacturer; and ‘Anken Green’, a converted warehouse in a run-down neighbourhood near the Suzhou Creek).

Zhou also highlights cases of entrepreneurs and officials capitalising on China’s ‘dual market’ in real estate – where some buildings sell for millions of dollars, while others remain state owned and are leased out for low rents – to repurpose old buildings owned by state-run companies in downtown Shanghai relatively cheaply. One example was the renovation of shop fronts on Yongkang Road – a narrow former market street close to the upscale malls of Huaihai Road – as galleries and later as cafes and bars. Other examples of such ‘loopholes’ include small-scale cultural entrepreneurs seeing the chance to open creative businesses in residential neighbourhoods such as Jing’an Villas (ahead of a rumoured relocation of its residents); and the fact that state ownership of old houses in the more upmarket western end of the former French Concession around Wukang Lu has led to what Zhou calls ‘preservation via inhabitation’ – since it has become expensive for the state to relocate long-term residents, who still pay tiny rents to live in these often sub-divided old houses and apartments.

However, Zhou notes that while some of these loopholes are ‘bottom-up’, allowing entrepreneurs to take advantage of a transitional phase in the economy, many are ‘top-down’, and dependent on the state’s “discretionary authority” to implement and sometimes adjust regulations; and she says this “adaptive governance” also gives the authorities ‘the power to close [these] urban loopholes at will’ This was demonstrated both by the sudden ban on commercial activity in Jing’an Villas in 2013, and by the abrupt shutdowns of many businesses around Wukang Lu and on Yongkang Lu in 2016.

These latter crackdowns were driven partly by campaigns against unlicensed businesses and irregular commercial activity by state enterprises. Yet as Zhou notes, they also ‘claim[ed] heritage

as justification', with officials insisting that one of their aims was to restore the original "appearance" or ambiance of these areas, by removing elements of modern consumerism. It was an argument that would have been hard to imagine a decade or two earlier, and the evolution (often meandering, and frequently contradictory) of official attitudes to Shanghai's pre-1949 architectural heritage is one of the underlying themes of Zhou's book. She notes that in the early post-Cultural Reform era, Shanghai's late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture was not considered to have any 'historic' value: Shanghai was not included in the Chinese government's first batch of 'Renowned national historic cultural cities' announced in 1982, while early 1980s' Chinese tourist maps of Shanghai highlighted the Yuyuan Garden, the city's parks and its zoo, but made 'no mention of the Bund or the residential architecture of the former Concessions'. When Shanghai was eventually listed as a 'historic cultural city' in 1986, the emphasis was very much on its political history of uprisings against foreign control, and on the founding of the Communist Party in the city in 1921.

It was only in 1991 that Shanghai introduced measures to 'conserve and manage' its 'outstanding modern era architecture', followed in 1997 by publication of the 'Conservation Plan for Renowned Historic Cultural City Shanghai' – and not until 2003 (and much demolition later) that the city set up a conservation committee and zoned 12 areas of 'historical and cultural appearance', with new rules clarifying that 'modern era buildings are part of China's repertoire of historic architecture, [and] needed to be valued and conserved'. Zhou highlights the part played by local academics, notably those from Tongji University (home to the city's leading architecture department, with its links to Shanghai's modernist architects of the 1930s and 40s) in influencing this change in approach – in particular Wu Jiang, who left Tongji to serve as deputy head of the municipal planning bureau from 2003-8, before returning to the university as vice-president, and Ruan Yisan, whose National Research Center for Historic Cultural Sites has made many proposals for the preservation of specific areas. One key moment, Zhou argues, was the campaign to save the merchant Chen Guichun's large traditional courtyard house (now a museum in the Lujiazui Park) from demolition in the early 1990s, during the wholesale clearance of old buildings for construction of Shanghai's new financial district: local TV news showed Professor Wu and others

‘confronting an advancing bulldozer’ to prevent the demolition, which had already begun, from going any further.

But Zhou also traces the evolution of China’s real estate market, starting with the gradual privatisation of housing during the 1990s, and the decision to allow foreign capital to enter the nation’s domestic housing market in 1994. This, along with plans to regenerate Shanghai as the “dragon’s head” of China’s economic reforms in the 1990s, contributed to huge ‘developmentalist pressures’ in the city, she argues. Such pressures were highlighted by Shanghai’s 1992 ‘365 Plan’, which called for the demolition of 365 hectares of ‘inadequate and congested housing’, mainly in old downtown neighbourhoods, by the end of the decade. Thus, as Zhou puts it, ‘the same municipality overseeing the rolling out of the 1997 Conservation Plan was simultaneously incentivizing demolition and redevelopment projects en masse’ – with district governments prioritizing the sale of ‘land leases for large scale real estate development as a means to secure fiscal autonomy’.

The result, she says, is that when westerners began moving back to Shanghai in the 1990s to work in finance and commerce, ‘expecting to encounter a unique and authentic atmosphere [...] what most locals tried to offer was the opposite. In the first decade of development, the new, the modern and the technological were what the locals aspired to, not the existing, the old, the small and the backwards [...] China wanted so badly to catch up.’

Zhou illustrates these contradictory forces in Shanghai’s attitude to old neighbourhoods with chapters on two of the city’s central districts, Jing’an and Xuhui. She argues that Jing’an, which encompasses much of Shanghai’s former International Settlement, including West Nanjing Road (Nanjing Xilu), was determined to build its status as a local economic and financial powerhouse, in the face of the rise of Pudong and its Lujiazui financial district (mandated by the central government as part of China’s post-1992 economic reforms.) Being short of land, Jing’an’s push to create an alternative ‘Central Business District’ and attract investment and businesses from around the world led to the large-scale redevelopment of Nanjing Xilu and much of the surrounding area; Zhou identifies a relative ‘lack of interest’ in heritage in the district at the time, with conservation seen as ‘an afterthought in planning.’ Thus the demolition of the large lane community at Dazhong Li, close to the West Nanjing Road Metro station, was approved in late 2002, while the famous, winding old

'food street' on Wujiang Lu (formerly known as Love Lane) was also subsequently demolished.

Yet an increased focus on heritage-based 'cultural capital' did emerge during the 2000s, Zhou says, inspired not only by campaigning Tongji academics (who also played a part in listing Shanghai's 'outstanding historic buildings'), but also by popular authors like Chen Danyan, Wang Anyi and Cheng Naishan, whose work highlighted the stories of historic downtown neighbourhoods. Zhou also notes the impact of returnees from abroad, like the artist Chen Yifei and entrepreneur Wu Meisen, and others with rich roots in Shanghai's cultural tradition, like the photographer Deke Erh (Er Dongqiang), all of whom were involved in the development of the Tianzifang area, where Chen and Erh opened studios in the early 2000s.

She argues that the approach of the World Expo, held in Shanghai in 2010 under the slogan "Better City, Better Life", along with the success of the redevelopment of the Xintiandi area in the early 2000s, also encouraged a more positive approach to repurposing old neighbourhoods. In Jing'an, an old colonial era police station was converted into the Design Commune creative and leisure complex, while some attempts were made to renovate and highlight the history of the nearby Zhangyuan compound, built in the 1920s on the site of a famous pleasure garden which had hosted significant political events, including speeches by Sun Yat-sen and debates on foot-binding (though residents of the Zhangyuan have more recently been moved out, as the area undergoes another, far more commercial makeover.)

Even the removal of the bookshop-café, teahouses and small design studios – which had been tolerated by the local authorities for some years – from the large and famous Jing'an Villas residential compound in 2013 was, as noted above, officially portrayed as not only beneficial to the elderly residents who lived upstairs in these buildings, but also as restoring the area to its original use and appearance. (In fact, Zhou says, some of the lane's cosmopolitan older residents had welcomed these relatively undistruptive, 'cultural' businesses, which she says could have become a model for a new type of less extreme commercial development of old neighbourhoods; and she notes that, as far back as the 1930s, the lane had housed businesses, while young people sent down to the countryside in the 1970s had been encouraged to open small shops and eateries there when they returned to the city in the early 1980s, to reduce unemployment.)

In Wukang Lu, in the upscale and less densely populated reaches of the western end of the Former French concession, on the other hand, the emphasis on ‘appearance conservation’ [*fengmao baohu*] took root earlier, helped by the presence of many retired officials and academics in the area’s old buildings (mainly more spacious garden houses and apartment blocks). Zhou notes that among the growing body of research on heritage-related issues by students at Tongji University (which began offering a master’s degree in heritage conservation in 2003) there was renewed interest in a plan drawn up by the French Concession authorities in 1938, zoning this area for high-end development.

An early project in this district saw the repurposing of two houses as an upmarket yoga studio, boutique and café compound known as Le Passage Fuxing, by a French investor who had been invited to China by the government in the early 2000s. Interest in the area also grew when key scenes from Ang Lee’s 1940s’-set movie *Lust, Caution* were filmed here in 2007; and in the run-up to the 2010 World Expo, the district authorities, with backing from Tongji academics, launched a research project into Wukang Lu, a quiet, leafy side-street lined with elegant buildings. This resulted in bespoke makeovers for old buildings, the refacing of uglier modern structures, and (apparently against the advice of academics) the installation of fashionable cafes, restaurants and small stores in the ground floor of a number of houses. An information centre on the area’s history was also opened, and signs put up on some 80 buildings, emphasising the neighbourhood’s heritage – and in 2011 it was designated an official ‘renowned historic and cultural street’.

The ‘cultural street’ model has since been replicated in other areas of Shanghai, in an attempt to attract more visitors and, as Zhou puts it, ‘unearth the economic value embedded in the remaining historic architecture.’ However Zhou, who herself grew up in a 1930s’ apartment building on Wukang Lu, suggests that this approach is often superficial, amounting to ‘merely polish[ing] the patina of history’ with a surface renovation. And she notes that the signs erected often overlook the ‘ambiguities and complexities’ of that history. She recalls, for example, the punishments meted out to the two daughters of one Wukang Lu resident, a pre-1949 paper-making tycoon, during the Cultural Revolution: in 1967, the young women were accused of bourgeois tendencies because of their interest in fashion, and

were paraded, shaven-headed, on the street. Yet Zhou notes that the heritage plaques affixed to their former home, and that of another entrepreneur nearby, make no mention of these former residents.

Zhou also highlights the case of Lane 1754 (now renumbered as 1768) Huaihai Road, originally a spacious compound of Spanish-style lane houses backing onto Wukang Lu, where the American writer Emily Hahn once lived with her lover, the poet and publisher Zou Xinmay (Shao Xunmei) in the 1940s. In the early 2000s it was assigned to a local real estate company, which promised to upgrade the buildings while preserving their original appearance. In fact, she says, the developer took advantage of “loopholes” in heritage protection to level and rebuild the houses, and expand their dimensions; the firm insisted it had kept the original facades intact, but one local academic accused it of ‘hanging up a sheep’s head but selling dog meat’.

However, Zhou argues that while academics from Tongji and other universities have been able to exert some influence on the planning process over the years, their role as consultants to many official projects has ultimately resulted in what she calls a ‘pragmatic complicity’, which has ‘inhibited [their earlier] criticality’.

Zhou herself remains admirably objective throughout, and in the book’s final section she gives a particularly clear and sober account of the rise of the Shanghai art scene from the 1990s on, along with the development of the broader Chinese art market in its economic and political context. She reminds us of what now seem like long-distant episodes, including the establishment of the original artists’ studios in the ‘red houses’ beside the Suzhou Creek in the late 1990s, and the time when local officials invited the artist Ai Weiwei to open a studio in Shanghai’s northern Jiading district in 2008 – only for it to be demolished two years later. But Zhou also notes the marked shift in official attitudes after artists moved from the original ‘red houses’ into the former textile factory compound on nearby Moganshan Lu in the early 2000s; after initial resistance, local officials embraced the rise of this art zone, and Professor Ruan Yisan’s ‘historic cultural sites’ centre drew up an alternative masterplan for the area, preserving the factory compound, which had previously been slated for demolition, and renaming it M50. The Shanghai Creative Industries Center, which was established in 2005 and has encouraged the repurposing of empty former state factory buildings, designated the compound an official ‘creative industry cluster’, and an official college for Communist Party

officials even set up a branch there.

Of course real estate values remained an important consideration – Zhou recalls the rapid rise and fall in the 2000s of the artists' compound at 696 Weihai Lu, an old technology factory in Jing'an district, whose central location ultimately made it too attractive not to be redeveloped. Yet by the time of the opening of the Power Station of Art – a 'Tate Modern look-alike' former electric facility intended to be a 'new pivot for development' on the former World Expo site – Zhou says that Shanghai officials increasingly saw such 'cultural districts' as engines of economic growth. This was emphasized by Xuhui District's backing for the development of the 'West Bund' art zone on the banks of the Huangpu river, on the site of former coal docks and the old Longhua Aerodrome. The district not only planned the area as a 'cultural cluster', Zhou writes, but also financed construction or renovation of key art museums and spaces: these included the building leased to private art collectors Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei for their Long Museum, and the old aircraft hangar which is now home to Indonesian collector Budi Tek's YUZ Museum. 'Rent free leases' were also offered to attract established galleries and artists to move here, Zhou says, in order to raise the area's cultural status and thus 'catalyze' surrounding real estate development. And she notes that including elements of art and culture can now help developers win permission for construction projects in the city – and that Shanghai's reuse of old industrial sites as creative zones has become a model for other Chinese cities.

It's just one of many insightful sections in a book which encourages us to look again at the recent past. *Urban Loopholes* is enlivened by well-observed character sketches (the founder of the Yongfoo Elite club, and the 'avocado lady' of Ulumuqi Lu both get a mention), and contains much fascinating detail: Zhou describes the 'concrete slab' buildings quickly erected on Huihai Road to impress President Nixon when his motorcade drove down the street from Hongqiao Airport, en route to normalise Sino-US relations in 1972; she recalls queuing for ice cream as a child at the old dairy factory on the site of the current Shanghai Library; and she notes that, in the 1930s, the French Concession authorities introduced a ban on grey brick lane houses being visible from the street in upmarket areas, since 'grey bricked buildings were [considered to be] Chinese' at the time, while 'red-bricked ones were western, which were preferred.'



The book's academic price tag may be sizeable, but *Urban Loopholes* is a valuable resource for anyone interested in how the most industrialised Asian city of the 1930s emerged from decades of stagnation and metamorphosed into the gleaming regional finance and commerce centre of today – and in how some pockets of old buildings have, so far, managed to survive amidst the high rises. How long will they last? Zhou notes that some 'loopholes' that encouraged impromptu, creative uses of old buildings are now being closed, as rules become stricter. But she argues that pragmatism and an awareness of the value (whether historical or economic) of old areas means that some will endure, particularly as China pledges a more balanced approach to growth – though she acknowledges that, as urbanisation continues, "uncertainty" is never far away.

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# GOVERNING THE DEAD: MARTYRS, MEMORIALS, AND NECROCITIZENSHIP IN MODERN CHINA.

BY LINH D. VU

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021

REVIEWED BY SHUYU GUO

Linh D. Vu's new book *Governing the Dead: Martyrs, Memorials, and Necrocitizenship in Modern China* examines how the Chinese Nationalist state (1925-1949) used instances of martyrdom to reconstruct the relationship between the civilian and military communities in the first half of the twentieth century. By implementing localised policies to mourn the dead, including public military cemeteries, collective mourning and celebrations, the Nationalist government created an intimate state-family relation based on a negotiation of performative virtue. Martyrs' families were compensated to reward the dead and to promote their values. The people who mourned and celebrated the war dead showed their loyalty to the country. These practices thus mobilised the population for war.

Vu studies these practices carefully and describes how 'The bureaucracy, created to govern the dead and the bereaved, became the institutional foundation that fortified China's centralized authority, even after the end of Nationalist rule'. The significance of the dead partly lies in their role as 'intimate bonds between the new political regime and the old familial lineage'. In this way, the living could ascribe meaning to civilian casualties as well as to the act of remembering. By looking at the legal regulations of martyrdom, the conflicts experienced at both communal and personal levels, and the memorialisation of violence, Vu investigates how the state invested in its dead, particularly in terms of how they would be remembered.

The martyr Chen Gengxin (1889-1911) became a symbol of the revolution, appealing to those who valued equality and liberty. After his tragic death, the commentaries that were endorsed by the Nationalist Party described how 'the nobility of Chen Gengxin's ideals emanates from his final act of resistance, turning both enemies and bystanders into allies'. Behind this comment lies a narrative about civilian martyrdom, which, as Vu suggests, came out of the Yellow Flower Hill

uprising'. In the chapter, 'Manufacturing Republican Martyrdom', Vu examines how the state constructed and promoted accounts of war participants and dead like Chen, and in doing so, achieved their political goals. Vu observes that 'the post-imperial governments saw the revamped celebration of martyrdom as a powerful instrument to exert political and moral superiority, restore social order, and unify communities of survivors'. When the dead were memorialised and regarded as martyrs, the state hoped to promote similar desires of self-sacrifice among the populace. This concept stems from Confucianism, encouraging feelings toward family members and, by extension, the community and the nation. Vu thinks that such elaborate sacrifices and the image of the idealised male citizen were fundamental in creating the hierarchy in the Chinese nation-state, and were 'inseparable from the new discourse of militancy and violence'.

In the early twentieth century, we can observe a trend that assimilates traditional practices of remembering the dead while taking the dead as national ancestors. From Vu's point of view, such religiosity was crucial to the integration and reparation of conflict-stricken communities in Republican China. In addition, the sense of communal belonging was strengthened among the living. To construct a new 'state-family dynamism' and civilian community, the Nationalist government transformed filial piety and patriarchal concepts into patriotism and the much-promoted value of self-sacrifice. Vu goes on to explore the concept of "Necrocitizenry" describing how the dead were considered as national ancestors and distinguished members of the state. The Nationalist government was particularly attracted to the construction of monuments to preserve the most esteemed revolutionary dead. Local county governments also set up memorial shrines. Those who had lost their lives in martial conflicts were called "national martyrs" (*guoshang*).

The relationship between the state and bereaved families was also important. Compensation laws allow the family—the bereaved proxy citizenship—to make claims to the state on behalf of the dead. A complex system of compensation laws was created, allowing both unmarried daughters and sons to be considered as beneficiaries. In practice, however, daughters were rarely able to claim such compensation, reinforcing the gender inequality prevalent at the time.

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\* A failed uprising that occurred in 1911 in Guangzhou, also known as The Second Guangzhou Uprising. Most of the revolutionaries were killed, leading to the creation of the "72 Martyrs".

Chapter three “Consoling the Bereaved” and chapter four “Gendering the Republic” discuss how the republic’s narratives treated males and females differently. For instance, female martyrdom was still heavily associated with domesticity. The women who became martyrs were considered virtuous and chaste. This was mostly consistent with the Qing state’s policy, which enshrined and memorialised chaste women. Female petitioners identified with this patriarchal ideology, valuing the morality element in regulations and ‘presented themselves according to the ideals of virtuous women and female citizenship’. Overall, the new compensation standards institutionalised performative feminine virtues such as chastity, vulnerability, and dependence. Furthermore, the state not only considered the contribution of the martyrs but also the conduct of bereaved families. Widows who met the criteria of female chastity were favoured.

Changes began to appear when the War of Resistance started. From the late 1920s to the late 1930s, widows of revolutionaries who had died in anti-imperial uprisings gained status as petitioners and became beneficiaries of death stipends. This was curtailed, however, in 1937 when the Nationalist government modified the rules and placed parents before spouses and children as recipients of death benefits. The new policy also required the widow to share the stipend with other eligible family members; she and any children had to remain in the household run by the patriarch. Such a requirement reconfirmed the utmost importance of filial piety.

The democratisation of martyrdom in the Republican era was crucial to the twin aims of civilising war and the militarising of civilian life in twentieth-century China. As he probes the origins of militarisation and how it evolved in Chinese society and culture, Vu examines how the process of civilising war arose in late Qing times. He observes that the Qing administrations enshrined both military and civilian martyrs, blurring the boundary between these two groups. In the Republican period, the state’s demand for local commemoration intensified, as the government attempted to bureaucratise death at a time when the number of deaths had massively increased. For instance, the process of collecting biographical information about civilian deaths was institutionalised, allowing civilians from modest backgrounds to be recognised as well as those of high status.

Vu suggests that the bureaucratic desire to classify the dead is driven by the modern state’s need to render reality into standardised

concepts, and write history in a way that benefits the state. Apart from justifying violence as necessary, these institutionalised martyrdom processes help to reconstruct the hierarchy between the state, the military and civilian corps. Such strategies were successful in bringing together the state and local communities.

This fresh and ground-breaking book sheds light on how the Nationalist government used compensation regulations and war commemoration to consolidate the Chinese nation-state in the early twentieth century, and used “necrobureacracy” to foster a sense of civilian community. Vu’s analysis shows how deeply Confucianism and traditional Chinese cultures underscored the development of the modern Chinese state. *Governing the Dead: Martyrs, Memorials, and Necrocitizenship in Modern China* carefully and delicately unpacks the policies that evolved in late imperial China and illumines the problem of bereaved families and widows, who remained rather invisible compared to male martyrs. While their underrepresentation was primarily due to influential Confucianism and patriarchy, Vu’s work leads us to consider whether feminine virtues gained new meanings through the state’s compensation regulations. Were they an acceptance, or rejection, of the *new* feminine virtues? In the early twentieth century intellectuals wanted to abandon Confucian approaches: How did the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement shape the Nationalist government’s policy? By examining how the impacts of these events mingle with the traces of the previous administrations in late imperial China, Vu highlights how gender inequality was reinforced or muted, depending on the needs of the state. Vu’s work allows a new and nuanced examination of communal and personal experience of conflict, and the effect of the memorialisation of violence as martyrdom.

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# RUTH'S RECORD: A FIVE YEAR SHANGHAI DIARY, 1941-45

BY RUTH HILL BARR

EARNSHAW BOOKS, HONG KONG, 2017

REVIEWED BY DUNCAN HEWITT

The name may sound unassuming, but *Ruth's Record* is in fact a remarkable document, depicting life for a foreign family in Shanghai from 1941-45, as the city came under Japanese control and westerners from allied nations lost their privileged status, culminating in their eventual internment in Japanese-run camps. The majority of the book's content comes from the 'Five Year Diary' which Ruth Hill Barr, an American teacher married to a Scottish missionary, began, with some prescience, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1941. Edited with an introduction and notes by her daughter Betty, it brings an extraordinary era dramatically to life in a way that formal histories rarely can.

Ruth Barr had apparently never kept a journal before, but with war already raging in Europe, and Japan in control of almost all of eastern China – apart from Shanghai's foreign concessions – she began taking daily notes, presumably in part to make sense of it all for herself, but also inspired by Samuel Johnson's maxim, which she quotes, that 'There is nothing [...] too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery, and as much happiness, as possible.' The details she recorded, some prosaic, some historic, combine to create both a vivid record of how western power in Shanghai, a city dominated by foreigners since the 1840s, ebbed away within just a couple of years – and also an absorbing document of how an ordinary family sought to cope in such uncertain and difficult circumstances.

Her daily entries are just a few lines each, and some of them, particularly in the early part of the diary, are dominated by the minutiae of everyday life – visits to the doctor's or the hairdresser's, work issues, school plays and swimming for the children, tea and movies with friends. Yet together they provide a rare three-dimensional portrait of life in Shanghai for a foreign family who, unusually for the era, not only had many international friends, but many Chinese friends too. Ruth Hill Barr had studied Chinese history

at Columbia University, and learnt Mandarin in Beijing when she was first posted to the country, by the YWCA, at the turn of the 1930s. She later taught at the University of Shanghai, a Christian college for Chinese students, and also at Medhurst College, a British-established missionary institution where her husband John worked. She writes of watching Chinese films and ‘modern Chinese play[s]’, of frequent teas and dinners with Chinese colleagues, former students and friends from church, of attending Chinese cooking lessons at the YWCA and the wedding of Chinese friends at a ‘Mohammedan restaurant’.

Yet as 1941 progressed, this cosmopolitan way of life was to be quickly overturned for Barr, her husband John, (step-)son Dick and daughter Betty. A year which began reassuringly with a dinner of ‘turkey, roses, mints’ at a friend’s apartment, and a New Year reception at Shanghai’s Community Church with Chinese and international friends, would end with the family having to leave their comfortable flat and move in with friends, after the Japanese took over the whole of Shanghai following Pearl Harbor. Ruth’s employers were no longer able to pay her, and she struggled to deal with inflation and food shortages: ‘Every bit of food and material substance assumes a new importance in the light of the times – no ships to bring more, no money to buy more’, she wrote in December. ‘I’ll never again take for granted such blessings as hot water and bus service.’

It is often the juxtaposition of the detail of everyday life and the dramatic forces playing out in the background that most tellingly captures the mood of the time: at the end of a description of a day studying literature, working on the American Women’s Club calendar and attending a “knitting bee”, Barr notes bluntly that ‘Ivanov, head of White Russians, [was] assassinated.’ On July 11<sup>th</sup> 1941 she records: ‘A cloudy, leisurely day at home. Phil and Maynard came after dinner to play bridge. R.Y. Loh has been kidnapped by Wu & is held at “76.” [a reference to the notorious secret police of Wang Jingwei’s Japanese-backed puppet government].’

Throughout 1942, with the threat of violence, sickness and possible internment looming over them, the family do their best to get on with life: Barr takes on other teaching, her husband keeps working (though his college has to move), the children carry on attending the Shanghai Municipal Council school. But some of their friends leave the city, and life becomes increasingly dominated by tightening restrictions, with “enemy nationals” soon required to wear red armbands and banned

from entertainment venues. Shanghai becomes a 'Town full of rumors, Money situation very tense,' Barr notes. Chief among the rumours are the possibility that the family and other foreigners will be repatriated to the US; such hopes are repeatedly raised, only to be dashed again.

Barr's tone is generally remarkably calm: she seems unflappable not just in the face of war and chaos, but also in dealing with children aged 9 and 12, who often 'ask questions a mile a minute'. She does her best to keep them busy with dance classes, play dates and sport, yet by the end of the year she admits that 'it's so hard to relax – always some upsetting angle turns up.' And by early 1943, it becomes increasingly clear that all enemy nationals in China will soon be interned. 'Not easy, but we can take it,' Barr writes when this is confirmed in late January. Again there are dashed hopes, this time of arranging to go into a camp with Barr's American friends at Ta Hsia [now East China Normal] University. When this is delayed because the Japanese don't have enough space for new internees, Barr writes exasperatedly, 'Enough uncertainties. Oh to get it settled'. Yet a few weeks later, when it's confirmed that they will be joining mainly British citizens in Lunghwa Camp, she admits: 'It's rather hard'.

After a week of farewells with Chinese, western and also Japanese Christian friends, the Barrs (and their 16 pieces of luggage) are taken in a procession of buses from the assembly point at the Columbia Country Club to the Lunghwa Civilian Assembly Center, on the grounds of what had been (– and is again today) the Shanghai High School. The four of them move into one room, which will remain their home for the next two and a half years. Ruth Barr's subsequent diary entries, while slightly less regular, provide a vivid, factual picture of life in the camp made famous by fellow internee J.G. Ballard in his novel *Empire of the Sun*. (The young Ballard, who lived in the same block in the camp, attended birthday parties for the Barrs' son Dick, while Ruth discussed economic and philosophical issues with his father, of whom she notes: 'He stimulates and also aggravates'.)

The mood of the internees (some two thousand in total) is initially relatively positive, helped by continuing 'excellent' news of the progress of the allies in the war in Europe and North Africa. They quickly organise their own camp general council, as well as schools for the children and a kitchen detail to cook for the internees. Ruth Barr is eventually elected to the council, while her husband is made manager of the kitchen, as he is considered trustworthy at a time when



food thefts are common. (Their daughter Betty, in one of the useful notes she provides for each year of the diary, adds that her father's kitchen role 'was, however, a family joke, because he could not boil an egg.')

The internees organise regular classical concerts on the rooftops (though Dvorak's New World Symphony makes Barr feel homesick), Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, school sports-days, and learned lectures on everything from Chinese education and the life of Alexander the Great to "Printing Fabrics" (Mr Ballard's contribution) and "Molluscs – From Cuttlefish to Snail."

The camp commandant, Mr Hayashi, who had served as a diplomat in the UK, is portrayed as a relatively humane official who sends the sick to hospital in his chauffeur-driven car, and becomes friendly with some of the internees (as do some of the young guards, who are mainly Korean conscripts). Yet Hayashi is eventually sent away for military training and later transferred to another camp. And as the months pass, conditions worsen, with declining supplies of electricity, water and food (from three meals a day in April 1943 to just one by June 1945), typhoon damage to buildings, and illness in the face of poor diet and Shanghai's extreme climate (the internees had no heating in the exceptionally cold winter of 1944-5). Betty and John both catch malaria, while Dick spends seven weeks in the camp hospital with malnutrition and a septic finger. Ruth Barr summarises: 'In this place – good health – can do. With someone in the family sick – it's awful!'

And after a series of escapes in 1944, the internees are denied access to a part of the camp where they grow vegetables and where the school is housed. When the camp council subsequently calls on internees not to attempt any further escapes, as this could lead to punishment for all, Barr notes that 'About 95% agreed not to escape, but quite a few wouldn't agree to try to influence others' on the issue.

Barr is also blunt about other problems – from lack of sanitary towels to the inevitable rivalries and disputes of camp life. While the family has many good friends in the camp, she bemoans the 'pettiness of some people', and notes that a women's meeting to arrange block duties resulted in 'a disgusting brawl of personalities'. Contrasting the atmosphere to YWCA camps she has previously attended, she says the main difference is that 'here we are neither like-minded, like-hearted nor like-spoken.' And, as time goes by, she complains that 'moral standards [are now] very low'.

The end of the war (which arrives not long after her daughter Betty ‘started her summer job – herding goats’) comes without the atomic flash in the sky depicted in *Empire of the Sun*, but amid ‘much dive bombing’. ‘Beautiful sight – those groups of 8 shining American planes,’ Barr writes. ‘If only they didn’t have to drop bombs.’ When news that the ‘fighting had stopped’ finally reaches them, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Barr says the internees are initially ‘incredulous’ – and then ‘greatly depressed’ to hear that the Japanese will remain in control of the camp until allied troops arrive. It’s only a few days later, when Swiss diplomats take over the camp, that there is ‘great jubilation’, followed by a thanksgiving service and ‘very moving scenes of reunion as guests arrived by the hundred.’ Yet with Shanghai in a state of chaos, many internees remained in the camp for their own safety – Barr’s first trip into Shanghai came ten days later, when she attended the Community Church for a service which, she reports, included ‘Y.C. Tu speaking about “Love your enemies”’.

The Barrs’ time in the camp ended with Ruth and Betty boarding an American ship bound for San Francisco (via Guam, where ‘more than 200 service men on stretchers’ were brought on board), followed by reunions not just with family but also with many old friends from Shanghai. Yet within a year they would return to Shanghai to continue their work and studies – their love of the city typified by Betty, who, after leaving in 1949, moved back to Shanghai to teach English in the early 1970s, and returned again in the 1990s to marry George Wang (making her the only foreign resident of 1930s’ Shanghai currently living in the city.)

Ruth Barr’s account of the final days of war typifies the style and impact of her diary – carefully documented facts, some wry commentary, nothing dramatized; but the cumulative effect is compelling. As a record of the war years in Shanghai, *Ruth’s Record* achieves a rare immersive quality, a testament to Barr’s talent for observation. (Only Rena Krasno’s *Strangers Always*, the memoir of a stateless Russian Jewish family in occupied Shanghai, comes close in its detailed depiction of this era; significantly, that book too was based on journals and scrapbooks kept by the author at the time.)

There is much detail here that will be of interest to historians. Barr records the ‘great excitement caused’ by the shooting of Jardines’ *taipan* Tony Keswick by a Japanese community leader at a ratepayers’ meeting in early 1941; she describes the bristling security in the lane

where the family lived off Yuyuen Road (Yuyuan Lu), after a senior member of the puppet government's secret police moved into the neighbourhood in 1941; and she gives her immediate response to news of the segregation of Jews in the Hongkou "Ghetto" by the Japanese in early 1943: 'Fiendish! After Pearl Harbor (on which Betty Barr has added extra notes made by her mother in a separate notebook) she joins the queues trying to withdraw money from the banks on the Bund, witnesses the Japanese military taking over the offices of foreign companies, and records the requirement for private car owners 'to push their cars to the Ford Hire station to turn them over'. (She also notes that the Japanese 'came to the RAS with 150 crates & took away all files of periodicals. Gave no receipt to librarian as they "deal with Navy people only"')

Yet above all, *Ruth's Record* is a testament both to the strength of the human spirit in adversity, and to Ruth Barr's own remarkable stoicism and sense of purpose. (Her daughter Betty notes that, long after her retirement in Scotland, her mother continued raising funds for the United Nations Association; she also became a committed supporter of voluntary euthanasia – and in 1990, at the age of 87, 'she acted on her principles.'). It is also a reminder that, like journalism, diaries can be the first draft of history.

*Duncan Hewitt's biography appears elsewhere in this volume, below his book review for Urban Loopholes.*

# LOST ENLIGHTENMENT: CENTRAL ASIA'S GOLDEN AGE FROM THE ARAB CONQUEST TO TAMERLANE

By S. FREDERICK STARR

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REVIEWED BY PETER HAGEN

Traveling southeast from the Aralkum Desert – which used to be the Aral Sea – and upriver along the Amu Darya, which forms the border between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, one enters a valley between the Alai, Pamir, and Hindu Kush Mountain Ranges; a fertile area that has been home to civilisations since recorded history. Fifty miles south of the Amu Darya, in modern-day Afghanistan and now a suburb of the provincial capital Mazar-e Sharif, sits the small town of Balkh, once the site of a sprawling city that was so enormous that '[its] urban walls enclosed roughly a thousand acres, while the outermost walls that protected its suburban region and gardens were more than seventy-five miles in length'.

It was while travelling through this region, known in earlier times as Khorasan, that Professor S. Frederick Starr asked, 'What did these people achieve? Why did it happen *here* – and what happened to them?' He looked for a "guidebook" about the region's history and couldn't find one, so had to write it himself: 'because I myself wanted to read such a book'.

Prof. Starr is not a casual Central Asian tourist. His expertise on Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia has led to his being engaged as advisor to three US presidents. He has written over 200 articles on Russian and Eurasian affairs, 20 books and is the founder and chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.

In his seminal work *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, Starr weaves four thousand years of history into a cogent, accessible tome, concentrating on the span of years between approximately 750 CE and 1200 CE – the "Golden Age" of the region. The book gathers the threads of the lives of Central Asia's great poets, philosophers, mathematicians, engineers, astronomers, astrologers, geographers, musicians, scientists, and doctors that flourished during this period. He includes a handy timeline and a

“dramatis personae” at the front, and there are plenty of photographic plates to enliven the pages.

What gave rise to this golden age in Central Asia? Starr explains that the reasons for an emergence of intellectualism are numerous. Central Asian cities, like Balkh, Merv, Nishapur, and Samarkand were advantageously situated between other great civilisations: China, India and the Middle East. The cities benefited from the global exchange of goods and ideas and there was a general appreciation for innovation. The citizenry were able to assimilate new ideas and technology while maintaining their own rich heritage, and were affluent enough to support the arts. The environment was fertile, and ideas flourished for hundreds of years.

These Central Asian cities did not solely exist as stops on the Silk Road: they developed their own far-reaching industries, including sericulture. Artisans of Merv, in what is now Turkmenistan, had become such experts in cultivating silk that they developed their own “institutes” for studying silkworms and their cultivation. Starr describes pottery sherds identical to Roman and Indian ware found at the Balkh archaeological site, dating to 100 – 400 CE, and discusses evidence found at the site that points to a sophisticated and highly lucrative economy ‘based on wheat, rice, and citrus fruits; the manufacture of metal tools and ceramic housewares, turquoise gemstones, and fine leather goods’. Central Asian cities were not just prosperous, they were enormous, ‘[Merv’s outermost ramparts] ran 155 miles, three times the length of Hadrian’s Wall, [and] would have taken 10 days to traverse by camelback’, while at Balkh, ‘the citadel alone called Bala Hisar, was twice the size of the entire lower city at Priene, a typical Hellenistic city on the Turkish coastline, and ten times the total area of ancient Troy. And the citadel comprises less than a tenth of Balkh’s total area’.

Naturally, these urban centres cities attracted talent – where there is a city, there is work, and where there is work there are skilled workers. In order to maintain the agricultural sector and the complex irrigation systems, cities required large workforces and brilliant engineers and mathematicians. At Balkh, says Starr,

[...] dams were fitted with huge gates or valves that could be opened and closed to assure a steady flow of water through the [city] at all seasons [...] The dams in turn

fed the half dozen or so open trunk channels that were dug to and through the city and surrounding agricultural lands. At Balkh, there were twenty such channels [...] In an effort to minimize evaporation, Central Asians came to dig these channels deeper and deeper and thus reduce the area exposed to the sun. They are also lined to prevent loss through seepage – both of these techniques that modern Soviet engineers ignored, with disastrous consequences [...] These channels often ran for many miles, reached three hundred or more feet in depth, and passed directly under whole cities.

While Merv in the tenth century C.E. ‘had a staff of twelve thousand to maintain the hydraulic system, among them three hundred divers’, demonstrating the sheer scale and specialisation needed to maintain life on the edge of the Karakum Desert. Indeed, not only did this challenging environment require a lot of human labour to maintain, it also drove practical mathematical and engineering development. High-level engineers were needed to calculate water volumes, fall-rates, and solve a myriad of physical challenges, which meant that dam and diversion channel construction attracted the attention of young, talented polymaths, such as the famous mathematician and astronomer al-Khwarizmi (Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, c.780-c.850), who gave his name to the word “algorithm”, and dedicated his life to practical applications of mathematics, such as hydraulics. Starr believes his familiarity with this field of applied mathematics is likely because al-Khwarizmi was born in Khwarazm, which had perhaps the most sophisticated irrigation system in the world at that time.

Other mathematicians such as Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), who also was a poet, philosopher, geographer, and musician, started his career at twenty-two in Samarkand, where he wrote the *Treatise on Demonstration of Problems of Algebra*. Khayyam also spent time in Balkh and Nishapur, where he contributed to astronomical research to develop a new solar calendar, which was used in Iran until 1925. Of Khayyam’s system, Starr quotes English historian Edward Gibbon who said it ‘surpasses the Julian [calendar], and approaches the accuracy of the Gregorian [calendar],’ calculating the length of the solar year ‘to the eleventh decimal point’.

Central Asia was not just a locus of trade but also of religion. Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion through much of antiquity, but Buddhism from India, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity from the West intermingled for centuries.

Sustaining this intellectual inflorescence was a societal appreciation for open-mindedness and general acceptance of strange ideas and outlandish solutions, Starr believes. His meticulous research suggests that this way of thinking originated in Central Asia and was expressed by craftspeople inventing strange and useful devices such as screws, lutes, crank shafts, and force pumps, that they would come to export globally. This creativity continued as Arab armies conquered the region and brought Central Asian polymaths into the Caliphate, which meant that many of their treatises were to be written in Arabic. Prior to the Islamisation of the area, the practice of sharing learning via books had been well established in Central Asia: as early as the third century CE Central Asian cities were producing a high-quality cotton paper instead of using Chinese mulberry paper. From that time on, Starr insists, 'Samarkand, not China, set the world standard for paper'. Urban centres like Merv continued to have an insatiable appetite for books even into the 13<sup>th</sup> Century: 'No city in the Muslim East boasted so many libraries as Seljuk Merv [...] [Merv had] twelve libraries, just one of which [...] contained twelve thousand volumes'.

A crucial component to this potent mixture was antiquarian and medieval patronage, though this was inconsistent. Starr states that patronage of the arts and sciences in Merv, Balkh, Nishapur, and Samarkand was, at its best, an obligation of kingship, and at its worst a type of exhibitionism; patrons ranged from the generous to the tyrannical. Without patronage, Khayyam likely would have not been able to publish his treatise on algebra. He also was under the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk, a champion of another contemporary Central Asian intellectual named Ghazali (1058-1111), who published *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, criticising rationalism generally and thinkers like Farabi (780-950), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1037), author of the classic texts the *Canon of Medicine*, *Book of Healing*, and *Book of Deliverance* – and Khayyam, specifically.

The arrival of Islam and its internecine conflicts were woven into this fertile intellectual tapestry. Evidence that Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity were all practised in Central Asia is widespread, but in time many Central Asian philosophers

and scientists were converted to Islam. The intellectually sophisticated population seems to have supported much of the diverse philosophy of the period and even allowed tolerance of religious sceptics and atheists. Religion stands as an interesting example of how Central Asians adapted new ideas rather than adopting them indiscriminately – for example, Starr describes how the Buddha was most often portrayed without much clothing in India, while Central Asian artists, having been exposed to the Greek aesthetic, draped the Buddha in Grecian robes, a depiction that would later be adopted by East Asian cultures.

The arrival of Islam in the region carefully explored by Starr. By 660 C.E., Arab armies had reached the “borders” of Khorasan, attacking various cities, where they met with fierce resistance. This, in combination with internal divisions that would soon lead to the Sunni-Shia split, meant that the first invasion would amount to little more than plundering expeditions. Over the following century and a half, Arab armies failed to gain a foothold in the region, resulting in a pattern of attack followed by withdrawal and then negotiation with the local kings and their rich aristocrat traders. This was to change in 705, when an Arab general named Qutayba, embarked on a conquest to ‘wipe out all infidels’ by exploiting local divisions and employing local soldiers. His tactics were brutal and effective; eventually his armies conquered the major economic centres in the region. While Qutayba himself did not live past 714 C.E. (having been killed by his own troops as he grasped for greater power), tens of thousands of Arab troops were now stationed throughout the region. Cunning new taxes encouraged people to convert to Islam (at one point Arab rulers declared that devout Muslims would be exempt from taxation), which immediately embroiled them in conflicts over the Umayyad Caliphate’s killing of a relative of Muhammad. The war that would ensue had terrible consequences for the region but ultimately, Central Asians found themselves in a comfortable relationship with Arab leaders.

Starr’s painstaking research shows that by the 760s, Central Asian scholars were active participants and contributors to the new Abbasid Dynasty. By the ninth century, Baghdad had been established as the jewel of the Muslim world and by 813, Caliph Mamun, supported by the Central Asian states, established himself as the leader, taking up residence in Merv, and ‘[...] for some years thereafter, Baghdad



lay in ruins [...] Merv, not Baghdad, was the capital of the caliphate and hence nearly all of the Muslim world, a status it enjoyed down to the moment Mamun decamped for the Tigris in 819'. Mamun was a sincere patron of science and art, establishing Baghdad's House of Wisdom, but also embroiled himself in internecine philosophical debates about the limits of human reason. He undertook a campaign against intellectuals that he believed stood against him and created an inquisition, jailing, flogging, and sometimes executing dissidents. Despite such persecutions, over the next four hundred years, a golden age of reason flourished in Central Asia, through the Samanid and Seljuk Empires.

But that is not to say that the seeds of change were not evident throughout this period. Ghazali the cynic, for example, touched a cultural nerve when he became the rector of the Nizamiyya at Baghdad (named for Nizam al-Mulk), where he spoke and trained scholars to argue against the philosophies of reason expounded by people like ibn Sina. Ghazali alone did not cause the withering of scientific rationality, however Starr believes that he most definitely articulated the change in sentiment in the Islamic world at that time, and Ghazali 'granted reason some modest role in practical affairs but considered it irrelevant to the great questions of existence'.

By the time the Mongol invasion swept the Eurasian continent, the enlightenment outlined by Starr was in steep decline. While the Mongols indeed disrupted the order of the day, the great Central Asian civilisations did not end solely because of their invasion. Once theological and state control were established during the Seljuk period, those who moved outside and beyond that boundary were subjected to censorship. Rationalism and logic changed and intellectuals focused on supporting the state. Once the *ulama* (guardians and interpreters of Islamic religious knowledge) were in control of the state, they were also in control of the reading and interpreting of texts and the establishment of the relevance of texts. When all "right action" is traced to authority and selected texts, the definition of "right" becomes difficult to change.

The tragedy is that so little of the places described in *Lost Enlightenment* remain today – Merv and Balkh were all but destroyed during the 1218 Mongol invasions. So complete was their destruction that a Daoist monk passing Balkh a year later, commented that not a soul remained. As these cities were built of mud brick, the passage of

time and weather has taken away almost all vestiges left untouched by the Mongol hordes.

Starr's book brings to life a region that lies just beyond the horizon line of History as told by Western historians, imbuing the now dusty landscape with the stories of its most brilliant sons. His style is intimate and yet full of exact detail, the result of much research. He is anxious to stress that the book rests on 'the scores of dedicated scholars in many countries', and while lamenting that 'Central Asia as yet has no chronicler comparable to Joseph Needham', he hopes his work might inspire 'some future Needham from the region or from among scholars abroad.' It is sure to be the catalyst for a new understanding of Central Asia and its role in the coming centuries.

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