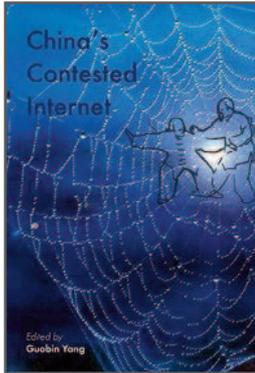


Book reviews



Guobin Yang (ed.),
China's Contested Internet,
Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2015, 310 pp.

SÉVERINE ARSÈNE

China's *Contested Internet* is a collective book composed of 10 chapters, seven of which were previously published in a special issue of *China Information* in July 2014. With case studies ranging from around 2006 to 2013, this collection of papers covers some of the most salient phenomena that have characterised the Chinese Internet over the last decade: e-government initiatives such as public consultation on the health system reform project (Steven J. Balla), and municipal microblogs (Jesper Schlaeger and Min Jiang); the rise of online culture and subcultures, for example in literature (Thomas Chen), and amongst Internet developers (Silvia Lindtner), the backpacking upper middle class (Ning Zhang), and self-labelled "losers" (*diaosi* 屌丝) (Marcella Szablewicz); moral controversies about Chineseness and race (Robeson Taj Frazier and Lin Zhang); the rise of "Big V" opinion leaders (Marina Svensson); and the censorship of a *Southern Weekly* editorial in 2013 (Sally Xiaojin Chen).

Guobin Yang chose to group the chapters into "pre-*weibo*" and "post-*weibo*" contributions, but the main value of the book does not lie in a discussion of *weibo* as a potential game-changer in the Chinese Internet landscape. True, the period between 2009 and 2013 – when *weibo* was at its height – could be considered a turning point in the history of the Chinese Internet. But there is more than the rise of *weibo* behind it, and it was more gradual than a change of platforms would suggest. With hundreds of millions of Internet users (now about 50% of the population), the Chinese online population has become increasingly pluralistic, hence "disorderly" and contentious. Even more significantly, this period coincides with a specific moment in Chinese Internet politics. In 2010, a *White paper on the Internet in China* kicked off a period of more assertive cyberpolicy and public opinion censorship, more sophisticated influence and propaganda techniques, as well as several waves of repression against prominent opinion leaders.

Against this background, this group of papers samples an exciting new generation of research on the Internet in China that focuses less on critical content and mobilisation repertoires and instead digs deeper (as highlighted by Yang) into the fabric of the Internet and Internet uses, with original methods and fieldwork.

First, it nuances the idea that the Internet has empowered the underprivileged by documenting digital divides, with attention to social status and

gender. For example, Balla notes that 80% of those posting comments on the government-sponsored consultation platform concerning health system reform in 2008 were male; that 3/4 were in cities; and that they were older and more educated than the average Internet user. He also notes that female commentators tended to post more substantial and more positive comments. Looking at various surveys and through several fieldwork studies with NGOs and migrant workers, Svensson also provides an important insight into the ability of different categories of Internet users to "have a voice" on Sina Weibo. She notes that Sina Weibo users are mostly from coastal regions, with rural and migrant users being largely underrepresented and tending to favour other platforms such as QQ or Tencent Weibo. Although women users seem to catch up with men, they are still a minority of the Big Vs on Weibo. These factors clearly affect the communication strategies of NGOs, which can use Weibo for advocacy or information dissemination, but clearly not to reach out to underprivileged communities on the ground.

Secondly, this group of chapters highlights how online features are the results of complex interactions between a variety of actors with diverse, sometimes conflicting motivations and agendas. This is highlighted by Sally Chen's interviews of Southern Media Group staff and participants in the street protest. In their study of the microblog of a municipal government, Schlaeger and Jiang show that the local propaganda department, the local police department, agencies in charge of public policies, and political decision-makers all pursue different goals when they convey a message via microblogging. Conceptualised as "beta institutions" because of their experimental nature, municipal microblogs differ greatly from one municipality and from one service to the other, precisely because the teams are working without precise objectives and have had to develop their own guidelines, contradicting the stereotype of a highly centralised, top-down propaganda machinery.

This underlines yet another important takeout of this collection: it sheds light on the labour performed behind online platforms and even behind censorship. Thomas Chen, looking at the various online and offline versions of the novel *Such is this World@sars.come* (*Ruyan @sars.come* 如焉@sars.come), shows the painstaking work of Internet users who compared different versions of the novel to detect traces of censorship. In a kind of *mise en abyme*, the novel itself relates how labour-intensive online censorship is, as puns and pictures make sensitive speech difficult to detect automatically. Lindtner's long-term embeddedness in the Shanghai "maker" community also reflects on the "making" of the Chinese Internet from the angle of startups and developers. She looks into the origins and ethics of this particular group, whose ambition is to "create in China" by taking advantage of foreign venture capital, of the CCP's political agenda to create a "better quality" workforce, and of a relatively flexible intellectual property environment in China. One might wonder, then, what kind of industrial model, and therefore what kind of labour will be engendered by these ventures as they grow in size.

The role played by developers is all the more important as the state itself is relying on commercial platforms to communicate and provide public services. Schlaeger and Jiang highlight that the municipality they study has no

access or control on the data generated by its official microblog account, which effectively prevents them from devising a better, more predictive e-government strategy. This asymmetry of power over data in favour of corporations could, of course, be curbed by regulation.

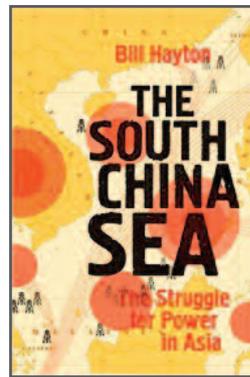
The book also shows the variety and evolution of imaginaries and cybercultures across communities and time. There is a stark contrast between the optimism of the upper middle-class backpackers of 2006 described by Zhang, some of whom had taken to promoting long-term, gradual social change, and the disillusioned “losers” studied in 2012 by Szablewicz. The latter’s ambivalent attitudes towards social norms and promises – rejecting and endorsing them at the same time – clearly show that they don’t believe in the promises of modernisation anymore, nor do they believe in their capacity to change things, and instead turn to humour and self-mockery. This kind of fatalism answers, also, to Balla’s conclusions that subjective motivations are better predictors of online participation than socio-economic factors, and more particularly by a perception that comments can actually bear fruit. The *diaspora* phenomenon described here may highlight the link between subjective motivations for (non)participation and socio-economic positions.

Finally, as underlined by Yang, the book helps grasp the “subtleties of state power” (p. 4) and the “manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political” (p. 14). Lindtner draws on G. Barmé’s concept of a “parasitic”⁽¹⁾ relationship to show how her respondents take advantage of the system, depend on it, and in many ways transform it. Thomas Chen proposes the term “alter-production” to show how literary production works around censorship constraints and generates many original literary forms. Szablewicz relies on R. Williams’ “structures of feelings,”⁽²⁾ and on the literature on desire (V. Fong,⁽³⁾ L. Hoffman,⁽⁴⁾ A. Kipnis⁽⁵⁾), to explain the ambivalences and limited radical potential of the *diaspora* meme. This makes the title of the book, “China’s contested Internet,” a little misaligned with the content. Indeed, the term “contested” resonates with the title of the very famous book *Access Contested*,⁽⁶⁾ which in fact points at very different kinds of contention on the Internet, such as the emergence of concern over Internet governance.

Nevertheless, the chapters in this book are in general very well researched and well connected to theoretical literature in political science, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies among others. They skilfully articulate online and offline contexts, with sources collected through a variety of methods ranging from participant observation to in-depth interviews, to surveys and qualitative and quantitative content analysis. They constitute an excellent introduction to the Chinese Internet itself, as well as to research methods and theories on the Chinese Internet, and may be of great interest in a teaching context.

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1. Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. xiv.
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132.
3. Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China’s One-Child Policy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 98.
4. Lisa M. Hoffman, *Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2010.
5. Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.
6. Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain (eds), *Access Contested: Security, Identity and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2012.



Bill Hayton,
The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia,
New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2014, 298 pp.

SÉBASTIEN COLIN

Published in 2014, Bill Hayton’s work on the South China Sea stands out from much of the recent literature on this maritime space, on at least two counts. The first is that this is a single-author monograph, which deserves credit for providing a historical overview of the South China Sea from prehistoric times to the early 2010s and for analysing the territorial disputes and power rivalries to which it has given rise. In doing so, the work calls upon a considerable body of academic literature, as well as interviews the author conducted with various actors, newspaper articles, and a number of reports and working papers. The book thus offers a broad synthesis that sets it apart from the numerous, albeit very interesting, collective works that have been published in recent years, many of which are the proceedings of conferences organised on a regular basis throughout the region.⁽¹⁾ Whilst scholars working on the South China Sea will find in Hayton’s book some worthwhile information and some useful and even highly valuable references, they will find little that is surprising in its overall approach. This is not a fundamental problem, however, as in my view this book is one of the first essential works for anyone (student, journalist, or diplomat) who wishes to gain insight, here quite comprehensive, into the hot spot that is the South China Sea today.

The second particular feature of *The South China Sea* lies in its largely journalistic style of writing. This is only natural, given that Hayton has been working for several years as a reporter for *BBC News*. His style takes the form of long digressions on certain actors or personalities directly or indirectly involved in the dispute, or by descriptions of key episodes in what has been a troubled history, to say the least, of this maritime space. The various narrative devices employed by the author contribute to constructing a detailed history of actions undertaken by the different players: for example, the completion of China’s annexation of the Paracel Islands in January 1974, something directly experienced by Gerald Kosh, an American soldier who was on a South-Vietnamese ship at the time (pp. 72-78), or the way in which the small American oil company Crestone managed to obtain an oil concession from China in waters claimed by Vietnam (pp. 123-127), or Cambodia’s opposition to any mention of the question of the South China Sea in the joint communiqué issued at the meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Phnom Penh in 2012 (pp. 192-200). As a researcher with a careful eye for historical detail, I think these accounts have their own importance, although some descriptions, such as those concerning Wu Shicun, president of the China National Institute for South China Sea Studies (p. 248), do not

1. See, for example, Tran Truong Thuy and Le Thuy Trang (eds), *Power, Law, and Maritime Order in the South China Sea*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015, 378 pp.

seem particularly useful. It is also regrettable that much of the information provided by the work is not systematically referenced, in spite of calling on an array of sources. Furthermore, the nine chapters would have doubtless benefited from the inclusion of subsections with inter-titles to enable a better exposition of the analysis. Lastly, whilst the geographer in me welcomes the four maps at the beginning of the work – a rare occurrence in English-language publishing, where cartography is often of poor quality if it exists at all – it is a pity that Hayton does not really refer to them, particularly Map 4, which in spite of its interest is not commented upon in the body of the work. A map of the oil concessions cited in Chapter 5 would have been particularly welcome.

The South China Sea is composed of an introduction, nine chapters, an epilogue and, following the endnotes, a few pages entitled "Acknowledgements and Further Reading," which underline the important number of people the author met or interviewed, as well as the reference works used or deemed useful for a greater understanding of the complex geo-history and geopolitics of the South China Sea.

The Introduction opens with an imagined standoff between China and the Philippines over the ownership of the Scarborough Shoal that degenerates into a situation of heightened military tension between China and the US. Through this ploy, Hayton reminds us at the outset that "the South China Sea is the first place where Chinese ambition has come face to face with American strategic resolve" (p. xvi), thus giving point to the work's subtitle, *The Struggle for Power in Asia*.

In the first three chapters Hayton goes over the long history of the South China Sea: "Wrecks and Wrongs: Prehistory to 1500" (pp. 1-28); "Maps and Lines: 1500 to 1948" (pp. 29-60); and "Danger and Mischief: 1946 to 1995" (pp. 61-89). His account is inevitably at odds with the official historiographies put forward by the various states to justify their sovereignty claims over the islands. In the process, the writer reminds us that these islands (which are actually various insular formations mostly composed of reefs, sand banks, and low-tide elevations) did not generate an enormous amount of interest before the European powers and Japan began to eye them for economic and strategic reasons from the late nineteenth century onward. Prior to the introduction of the Western colonial juggernauts, the South China Sea was a "Mediterranean" structured by trade and migration flows and circumscribed by state and territorial systems within which questions of sovereignty and borders – particularly in Southeast Asia, dominated by the territorial system of the *mandala* – were posed differently.

The assertion by the Western powers and Japan putting their stamp on the South China Sea provoked a reaction in China in the final years of the Qing dynasty and then during the Republican period as shown by the organisation of naval expeditions, the production of geographical accounts, the creation of a Chinese toponymy for the islands, and lastly the drawing of maps, including that of the famous "U-shaped line," which would gradually lead to an official and national claim by China over the archipelagos of the South China Sea. The years 1946-47 were especially the time of French-Chinese rivalry before decolonisation, and the difficult construction of nation-states in the Philippines and Vietnam threw new players into the fray. There then followed unilateral appropriations in the Spratly archipelago, also motivated by a desire to exploit offshore hydrocarbon resources under a nascent United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In short, there was a veritable "occupation race," which China was to join with some delay but not without force.

The following five chapters tackle in turn legal, economic, political (nationalisms), diplomatic, and military questions, while Chapter 9 ("Cooperation and its Opposites: Resolving the Disputes," pp. 239-265) considers the state of cooperation (or rather its absence) and the question of joint development, actively proposed by China in the zones subject to territorial claims by the other states, but in which none of the latter are interested insofar as that would amount to tacit recognition of China's right to these areas.

Chapter 4 ("Rocks and Other Hard Places: The South China Sea and International Law," pp. 90-120) is noteworthy in that it presents the impossibility, as Hayton sees it, of settling sovereignty questions by reference to international law, and despite a number of reclamation and construction projects (some of which are described by the author) by the states concerned dating back to the early 1970s. Chapter 5 ("Something and Nothing: Oil and Gas in the South China Sea," pp. 121-150) confirms the myth of one archipelago, the Spratlys, overflowing with gas and oil reserves and clearly shows that the delimitation of oil exploration concessions is above all part of a political game aimed at affirming the sovereignty of one state at the expense of another. Chapter 6 ("Drums and Symbols: Nationalism," pp. 151-180) examines the place of nationalism in the disputes while also highlighting the complexity of relations between China and Vietnam and the respective place of China and the United States in the minds of Filipinos. Chapter 7 ("Ants and Elephants: Diplomacy," pp. 181-208) shows how the lack of interest by the United States in Southeast Asia (owing to the priority given to the war on terror by the Bush administration) gradually evolved, beginning in 2007-2008, into a new policy of the so-called "Pivot to Asia," the principal objective of which is to rebalance power relations with China, which had until then derived considerable benefit from American passivity. In this context, Southeast Asia has become a subject of competition between the two powers, making it very difficult to find a consensus within ASEAN on the question of the South China Sea. Chapter 8 ("Shaping the Battlefield: Military Matters," pp. 209-238) begins with the USNS Impeccable incident in 2009, which contributed to the increase in American concern over the question of access to the South China Sea, in spite of a continued significant imbalance in terms of military might.

Lastly, in the Epilogue (pp. 266-269), the work ends with the author's personal hope of one day seeing a delineated South China Sea, the main obstacle to which, according to Hayton, is China maintaining its "maximalist" (p. 267) claims through actors such as the People's Liberation Army, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and certain coastal provinces, and the permanence of the U-shaped line, which has become a "secular religion from primary school to the politburo" (p. 267). Without directly denying these points, I feel these final pages place too much emphasis on China's responsibility, and would have no doubt profited from a little more nuance given that the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the United States, and before them France, Britain, and Japan, have also played a part in intensifying the complexity of an issue that entangles legal disputes over territorial sovereignty, great power rivalries, and the defence of economic interests.

■ Translated by Peter Brown.

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Arianne Gaetano,
Out to Work: Migration, Gender
and the Changing Lives of Rural
Women in Contemporary China,
 Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press,
 2015, 232 pp.

ERIC FLORENCE

In this volume, by looking at domestic labour and service work in offices and hotels the author sets out to study what kinds of cultural, social, and political impact mobility brings to bear on the identity and agency of rural migrant women and how mobility shapes gender roles and relations. The book aims to shed light on whether and how migrant women's migration improves gender equality in post-Mao China. In her endeavour, Arianne Gaetano draws on multifaceted and longitudinal methods that enable her to explore the complex and changing interplay of structure and agency by considering rather long periods over the course of her informants' lives and by documenting how these people reflect differently at these various stages on their experience of migration. The ethnographic study was conducted through fieldwork carried out in Beijing and in each of the 11 key informants' hometowns from 1998 to 2000 and in 2002, and annual trips in 2006-2010 and 2012, combined with frequent contact through email, cell-phones, airmail correspondence, and instant messages. Gaetano anchors her work upon a solid body of scientific literature in the field of migration and gender studies, as well as in social theory (structure/agency). This enables her to produce a fine-grained ethnography of the life trajectories of rural migrant women. She manages to simultaneously take into account the structuring role of three sets of forces: at the macro level, the historical transformations of gender norms and roles, the role of the Party-state in shaping gender relations in contemporary China, the ideological and institutional construction of rural-urban differences, etc.; at the meso level, forces such as the patrilineal-patrilocal family system or the gender-based division of labour; and micro forces such as the aspirations and goals embodied by migrant women themselves. Providing ample space for the unfolding of the narrative of migrant women's experiences, she shows vividly how the measure through which migrant women are empowered is "situational, contextual, and also temporal" (p. 9).

Chapter One (pp. 14-27) provides a broad and useful historical overview of the political-institutional as well as discursive structures that have both produced and legitimised the service sector and more particularly the domestic worker labour market in post-Mao China. The author highlights the excessive concentration of migrant women workers within the informal and unregulated sector of domestic services. Gaetano also points to the core role of the state-sponsored provision of a "cheap and flexible female rural migrant labour force" in guaranteeing economic growth: by "maintaining the urban labour force, particularly urban working mothers," female rural migrants have contributed to maintaining high levels of urban consumption in the midst of state retreat from social welfare provisions (p. 25). While post-Mao economic reform and opening have provided rural migrant

women with myriad possibilities "for self-determination and wage work," she points out, the Party-state, neoliberal forces, and the rural patriarchal system have joined to strongly constrain the conditions for realisation of self-determination (p. 27).

Through a migrant-centred ethnography, Chapter Two (pp. 28-45) explores rural migrant women's complex mixture of aspirations for pursuing a more independent and self-determined life outside the village and their willingness to conform to their gender duties within the family. Gaetano argues that the combination of urban-rural and gendered differences in post-Mao China provides room for the empowerment of rural migrant women while also producing "particular gendered patterns of migration that reflect and also perpetuate such difference and inequality" (p. 29). This chapter also documents the process of devaluation of rural life and agricultural work, which is anchored within historical representations of modern China and also strengthened within the broad ideological and institutional patterns of post-Mao political economy. The author could have further stressed and documented in this section how much this devaluation and rejection of the rural and over-evaluation of urban lifestyles and standards of consumption are also strongly reinforced as the migration process unfolds and becomes increasingly institutionalised over time, impacting social norms and gender roles in the village and in the places of destination and turning migration into the only desirable venue for social recognition and emancipation.

The next chapter (pp. 46-58) looks at the role of network (*guanxi*) building in both facilitating and constraining rural migrant women's migration, identity, and agency, while Chapter Four (pp. 59-69) explores the manifold impacts of rural migrant women's closer proximity to urban culture and lifestyles on the shaping of their identity and on their social status.

Chapter Five (pp. 59-80) then proceeds to examine how rural migrant women fared in the informal and rather depreciated urban domestic sector, looking at the everyday experiences and everyday forms of resistance and engagement with authority in the domestic services sector on the one hand and in the office cleaning and hotel service sector on the other hand. Within the domestic services sector, while the blurring of living space and working space strongly limits migrant women's freedom, Gaetano neatly describes the everyday tactics migrant women deploy to evade such constraints and negotiate alternative spaces in order to avoid the isolation that comes with domestic service labour. In the office cleaning service sector and hotel service sector, a paternalistic attitude of employers extending their supervision outside the labour space to the private space of migrant women has enacted a mixture of solicitude and normative pressure on migrant women and enabled reassuring "parents of their daughters' physical and moral well-being" (p. 73). In the following chapter, the author documents how in the face of stigmatising stereotyping that stresses their otherness and supposedly embodied sense of inadequacy to urban lifestyles and civility, migrant women actively engage in attempts to enhance their personal quality. But this chapter also shows how migrant women managed to invest the public sphere so as to escape the exploitative and oppressive conditions of their work. The changes in traditional patterns of courtship, marriage, and family relationships as a result of migration is the focus of the next chapter (pp. 99-130), which is followed by a brief concluding chapter (pp. 131-136).

A truly important insight of this very clearly written volume is to provide readers with some sense of proximity with the lives of migrant women in post-Mao China. It provides a complex, dialectic, historical, cumulative, and multi-layered understanding of female migrants' agency where individual agency is conceived as being shaped by socio-spatial differences and gender

norms, but also by those same people's biographies and trajectories (p. 43). It shows that the human experience of migration may never be fully shaped by or reduced to a simple mono-causal narrative.

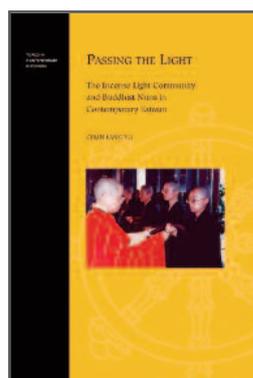
A note of criticism and a suggestion regarding an otherwise very accomplished and fine-grained ethnographic study: while the author does not fail to underline the role of post-Mao era ideologies, and particularly the discourse on the putatively low level of "quality" (*suzhi*) of rural people, as a "tool of domination" (p. 98), one would have expected further engagement with existing scholarship that stresses the role of the labour-market and state institutions in shaping rural migrant women's subjectivities,⁽¹⁾ or with studies that highlight the role of Party-state sponsored institutions in shaping or formatting migrant workers' narratives of their migration and work experience. Tamara Jacka, for instance, has highlighted the fact that the specific goals pursued by these institutions – the Migrant Women's Club where Gaetano has carried out fieldwork is one of these – and their understanding of class and gender differences strongly shaped the kinds of narratives and representations produced by migrant women via the mediation of these institutions.⁽²⁾ There is a need to more closely relate the role of institutions to the shaping of narratives and of subjectivities, even though these institutions are never either entirely saturating subjectivities or the sole forces to be taken into account in these processes. Similarly, Gaetano notes the ubiquity of catchphrases such as "self-development," "improving quality," or "challenging oneself" in rural migrant women's rationales for migration. The interest here may lie in investigating further in which respect such narratives are linked intertextually to various forms of public narratives or if they may be related to patterned institutional practices aimed at specific publics. Moreover, what do these narrative tropes of self-transformation mean for the people who draw on them, and how are these actually related to their specific biographical trajectories? These questions are left untouched. Also, the political nature of people's choices related to migration decisions is on the whole left undiscussed, as is the inevitability of migration decisions linked to the devaluation of the countryside and to the production of a politics of desire related to urban consumption and lifestyles. These "choices" are political precisely because they appear so inevitable and are expressed in such ubiquitous forms, for as Lisa Rofel has argued, in post-Mao China power "operates precisely in those realms it has made liberatory" (the labour market and employment choices, for instance).⁽³⁾

Secondly, while Gaetano does highlight the indignities as well as the economic uncertainties migrant women face, on the whole the migrant women she has interviewed hold a positive view of migration, and in her conclusion, Gaetano argues that "over the long term, migration especially empowers some rural women and advances gender equality by enabling greater autonomy in courtship and marriage" (p. 134). One would have hoped for some space to also be devoted to the tales of rather unsuccessful, disillusioned, or resentful migrant women. Similarly, it would have been worth discussing the overall rather positive outlook on migration and life outside the village obtained through the author's ethnographic work in the domestic services, office-cleaning, and hotel service sectors and confront these insights with recent scholarship on the manufacturing and construction sectors, which provide a far more bleak and precarious picture regarding workers' conditions and expectations for the future. This would have enabled a discussion of the specific features of work sectors as well as the degree to which the overall optimistic outlook provided within this volume may or may not be related to the biographic trajectories of the author's key informants.⁽⁴⁾

That being said, this volume will be highly appealing to scholars interested in migration and gender studies. It will also be very useful as a textbook or assigned reading for students of contemporary China and of migration.

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1. See for instance Yan Hairong, "Neo-liberal Governmentality and Neo-humanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labour Recruitment Networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2003, pp. 493-523. For a critical appraisal of the association of "suzhi" discourse with neoliberal governmentality, see Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the PRC," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 383-400.
2. Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*, Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 2006, 329 pp.
3. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 29-33.
4. See for instance, Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformations*, Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2016, 204 pp.



Chün-fang Yü,
Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan,
Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press,
2013, 264 pp.

AMANDINE PÉRONNET

This is an essential publication for anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of female monasticism in Buddhism. It offers the reader an immersive look into Incense Light (*Xiangguang*), a community of nuns formed in Taiwan in 1974, where the author carried out a lengthy period of fieldwork. A historian by training, in her previous works Chün-fang Yü had mostly focused on the transformation and development of Buddhism in the pre-modern era. With its contemporary setting, *Passing the Light* constitutes a break from this tradition. It is, in addition, the author's first study of the nuns and their approach to modernity.

While many twenty-first century works have examined the phenomenon of the growing number of women among the monastic orders of Taiwan, few have touched on the ways in which one of these communities can be transformed by globalisation. This is what Chün-fang Yü has set out to do by studying the missions that these nuns are undertaking in education and in their practice. She points out – and this is the book's connecting thread – that the nuns have fashioned their own approach to Buddhism due to a lack of pre-existing traditions upon their arrival. Their community is therefore a very real example of the reinvention of contemporary Buddhism. Drawing upon a variety of sources, the book seeks to resolve a paradox: how the members of the community are preserving tradition while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. The book's appeal lies in the fact that the author is able to link her vast knowledge of the history of mutations in Buddhism to an in-depth study of a contemporary phenomenon.

In a first, introductory chapter, the author looks at collections of hagiographic works: *Lives of the Nuns (Biqiuni zhuan)*, written in AD 516, and *Lives of the Nuns: Continued (Xu biqiuni zhuan)*, written in the twentieth century by a disciple of Taixu. Examining these collections gives the author an opportunity to outline the status and perceptions of nuns throughout China's history, even though the nuns in question are not indicative of the norm. Following on from this, she explores changing perceptions of nuns in various forms of writing. These perceptions are often condescending: the women are seen as objects of pity because they don't enter into religion by choice. Furthermore, they represent everything that Confucian society rejects: their way of life goes against filial piety and they make no contribution to the economy. Only when the 1980s begin does the author note a change: the women begin to stand up for their choices. According to Chün-fang Yü, this coincides with the arrival of the first generation to benefit from the law stipulating nine years of mandatory education in Taiwan, announced in 1968. Another contributing factor is the development of "Humanistic Buddhism" in Taiwan at the beginning of the twentieth century: certain leaders advocate a spirituality that is independent of gender. This movement, which had a powerful influence on the administration of Xiangguang, stresses the importance of social reconstruction and education. According to the author, it is the latter that sets the nuns in Taiwan apart. Many of them are educated to university level and bring their expertise to the monastery. This may explain in part the innovations that have taken place in the way Xiangguang is run, and in the methods of teaching on offer.

The second and third chapters are dedicated to chronicling the history of the community and its current abbess, Wuyin, who has held the position since 1980. After the first nuns moved there in 1974, a number of non-Buddhist features were removed in the many renovation projects that were carried out on the original temple. The author demonstrates that efforts such as these show a clear desire among the first residents to break with the traditional model and create a new religious identity. Three nuns had a significant influence on the direction this new search for identity took, thanks to their progressive ideas: Xinzhi, Wuyin and Mingjia. In the author's view, these three figures are significant because they were responsible for laying the foundations that made the reinvention of contemporary Buddhism possible. For example, they established the Incense Light Buddhist Seminary for Nuns in 1980, followed by Buddhist classes for adults in 1984. The author paints a portrait of Wuyin, the progressive abbess, through the eyes of the members of her community. The interviews with her provide firm proof that she is not a feminist, but simply wishes to question male-female inequality and traditional representations: for instance, that nuns must be taught by nuns, and should only eliminate their feminine characteristics in order to sidestep any question of gender in the face of spiritual accomplishment.

In the fourth chapter, the author explains the workings of college Buddhist studies societies. These are often the first point of contact that young educated women will have with Buddhism, and play a major role in their decision to join the orders. The primary aim of these study societies is to revive a secular Buddhist way of life, which in turn will help to change society's outlook. This concept was developed by secular Buddhists who believed that a Buddhist resurgence could only be brought about by educated individuals. In Taiwan, two secular Buddhists in particular allowed societies like these to set up on campus: Zhou Xuande and Li Bingnan, whose life and efforts the book describes in detail.

The fifth and sixth chapters provide an exhaustive description of two programmes set up by the members of the Xiangguang community: the

Buddhist seminary for nuns and the Buddhist adult classes. The inclusion of sources such as course books and students' homework allows the reader to fully comprehend the system of teaching practiced by the community. It transpires that contemporary topics are chosen for examinations and homework in order to retain a close connection with the lives of non-religious people, and that teaching focuses on pre-sectarian Buddhism, rather than any specific school, in order to reach the widest audience possible. These measures are designed to appeal to the non-religious, who then become patrons who can help fulfil the needs of the community.

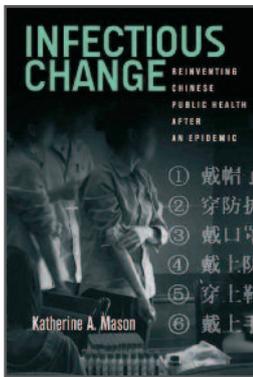
The seventh and final chapter is dedicated to depicting the nuns who have been part of the Xiangguang community. The author shows how much these nuns have contributed to the development of Xiangguang by drawing up a number of proposals aimed at modernising the way the community is run. One proposal involves modifying the rota system for daily tasks, while another suggests creating an educational resource centre to update teachings and practices. They also thought that a body of rules should be created for the *sangha* of the community, or that experts should be invited from outside to give classes. Apart from outlining the nuns' many contributions, these personal portraits aim to examine the factors affecting religious vocation.

In a short conclusion, the author discusses the community's future, which she claims is linked to changes in Taiwanese society. Currently, the challenge for Xiangguang is to improve attendance numbers at the adult classes. In fact, these classes are integral to the community's economic security, which is threatened by competition from similar developing programmes. Another challenge is finding an alternative to the nuns' teaching missions, because these are becoming so time-consuming that they are struggling to find the time for religious practice. In the end, the author is led to wonder whether the idiosyncratic nature of Xiangguang's unique religious identity might also end up jeopardising its reputation among lay people. In fact, if this reinvention of Buddhism is taken too far, could it run the risk of losing touch with the reference points agreed upon by secular and religious people alike?

All told, *Passing the Light* is indispensable for those wishing to understand what it means "to be a nun" in Taiwan, but it's also essential for anyone who is studying the role of nuns and the changes Buddhism has undergone in contemporary society. That said, while the author's observations are highly relevant, the emphasis she places on the originality of the object of study is debatable. For example, she mentions that the members of Xiangguang conceal their femininity, not in order to look like a man, but to transcend the idea of gender. On the other hand, they see this same femininity as an essence that is, according to Wuyin, very similar to the essence of Buddhism, which could explain why Buddhism holds such an appeal for them. However, this contradiction, which the author presents as unique to this community, has also been found in other communities. Furthermore, Chün-fang Yü notes that the community's programme of study and religious identity prioritises pre-sectarian Buddhism over the Chinese traditions. One might ask if this doesn't conceal an underlying desire to make a distinction from the traditions of the mainland and forge a Buddhist identity unique to Taiwan. The book does not touch on this issue, and it is a gap that might be filled, for example, by comparative studies on the role of Chinese and Taiwanese nuns in their respective societies.

■ Translated by David Buchanan.

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**Katherine A. Mason,
Infectious Change: Reinventing
Chinese Public Health after an
Epidemic,**

Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press,
2016, 252 pp.

JUSTINE ROCHOT

The 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic marked a turning point in recent Chinese history. In the years that followed the epidemic, a number of texts were published that analysed the effects of the event on Chinese society,⁽¹⁾ contributing to the growing body of work on the anthropology of health in China.

In her first book, published 13 years after the epidemic, Katherine Mason, an anthropologist at Brown University, casts a fresh eye over the evolution of local public health policies in China. *Infectious Change* is the product of 13 months of ethnographic research, conducted between 2008 and 2010 at a Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, or *jibing yufang kongzhi zhongxin*) in a city in Guangdong, as well as among public health actors in China and further afield. The city where the research was carried out has been given the pseudonym of “Tianmai,” but the description of a large, cosmopolitan city developed during the early reform period and sharing a border with Hong Kong leaves little doubt as to its true identity.

The author’s goal is to show the impact that SARS may have had on the way in which Chinese public health policies are put into practice today. She explains “how the first global health crisis of the twenty-first century transformed a Chinese public health apparatus – once famous for its grassroots, low-technology approach to improving health – into a professionalized, biomedicalized, and globalized technological machine that frequently failed to serve the Chinese people” (p. 3). In her view, the professionalisation of public health since the early 2000s has led to a side-lining of health’s ethical issues, and to the governance of “dangerous” fringe elements of the population, in the name of an idealised world of modernity and science, or what she terms the *common*. In addition, Chinese health policies are seen to have turned “toward the protection of global, rather than local, interests and toward the protection of a cosmopolitan middle-class dream rather than toward the betterment of the poor” (p. 3), leading to a process of bifurcation between the common that they are supposed to serve and the populations they are supposed to govern.

The structure of the book reflects the pluralist hierarchies that shape Chinese public health practices: each chapter shifts in scale from the local toward the global, presenting an aspect of the hierarchies that are being established among the members of the CDC in question, with the populations they hope to govern, or with the institutions for health and international research with whom they collaborate.

The introductory chapter contextualises the research within the evolution

of Chinese public health policy, from the great Mao-era health campaigns at a local level, via the opening-up of the economy, to the institutional consequences of SARS. While the 1980s saw a massive reduction of state investment in health, and a resurgence of infectious and chronic diseases, the author also highlights the way in which, during the 1990s, the Chinese state copied the American model and transformed local Mao-era Anti-Epidemic Stations (*fangyizhan*) into CDCs. This reform took place following the first outbreak of avian flu in Hong Kong in 1997, but it was SARS that really allowed the CDCs to take a central role, and to benefit from the significant funding and political support that were again mobilised following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the 2009 epidemic of swine flu (H1N1). In fact, the CDCs embody the emergence of a new variety of actors and views on public health in China, based on the management of groups (*qunti*) and crowds (*renqun*) rather than individuals.

The first chapter, “City of Immigrants,” examines the image that the CDC employees in Tianmai have of the individuals they help on a regular basis. The author explains that “in their attempts to serve a *civilized immigrant common* emblematic of the Tianmai dream (...), Tianmai public health professionals built and maintained precarious (...) boundaries between themselves and the 12 million-strong floating population” (p. 38). In their eyes, the migrant population is dirty and backward, and its terrifying mobility and lack of education is probably the reason for the increased propagation of disease: in this sense, the migrant population – far from being portrayed as a beneficiary of the state’s public health policies in the name of social justice – is considered a threatening group that has to sacrifice itself in the name of the “common good” of the urban middle classes.

The second chapter, “Relationships, Trust, and Truths,” covers the ways in which CDC employees work together and collaborate with different institutions. The author highlights a strong tension between two opposing conceptions of work within the CDC. On one side, the older members of the Centre respond to orders from their superiors by using *guanxi* and banquets to achieve “satisfactory” results, and are less concerned with scientific precision than they are with meeting the necessary targets and ensuring stable, trusting relationships. On the other side, the younger employees who arrived during the time of SARS are often better educated, and may have trained abroad. They insist on the need to move beyond *guanxi* in order to act in the name of modern science and abstract professional ethics, and in doing so pave the way for the creation of data that corresponds to biomedical truth.

The “Scientific Imaginaries” chapter offers a detailed examination of the statements of principle made by the young CDC employees and their concrete scientific practices, now that research is becoming increasingly central to the work of the CDCs. Using an approach similar to that of Bruno Latour, which seeks to understand the materiality of scientific production, in this chapter the author provides valuable accounts of the ways in which the CDC’s young researchers collect their data. We learn, for example, how some of them manage to fill out questionnaires without obtaining the subjects’ consent; this method helps them sidestep the issue of refusal, which in their eyes guarantees the “scientificity” of the results. Packed with examples of big data harvesting in the name of the common good (*gongyi*), the chapter reminds us that the use of such ethically questionable practices to attain “scientific truth” is not unique to China: not only do these researchers see themselves as working in accordance with internationally standardised methods for producing truth, but their international partners also often turn a blind eye to the ways in which their Chinese colleagues gather their data.

1. Arthur Kleinman and James L. Watson (eds), *SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic?*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2006; see also Deborah Davis and Helen F. Siu (eds), *SARS: Reception and Interpretation in Three Chinese Cities*, London, Routledge, 2007.

This case therefore attests neither to an anomaly of Chinese research nor to an attempt to mimic Western science: on the contrary, “the story of public health research in Tianmai [also] offers a window (...) into the deeply conflicted ethics of the international scientific common as a whole” (p. 112).

The position of Chinese health policies in an international context is examined in the final chapter, “Pandemic Betrayals,” which returns specifically to the treatment of H1N1 in 2009 and the various tensions that were brought to light by the epidemic. The author shows how H1N1 was first seen by the CDC operators as an opportunity to set up “what they thought would be a globally laudable, professional response to H1N1 that would prove their worthiness both as members of the civilized, modern world – a ‘global common’ – as well as members of the world of public health officials devoted to controlling border-crossing diseases – a ‘global health common’” (p. 145). But in the wake of the CDC’s initial enthusiasm when faced with such a noble task, there followed a series of disappointments. The well-structured system of quarantine and movement control (especially for foreigners), of which the CDC members were so proud, was condemned as a breach of human rights, and China was accused of xenophobia. Betrayed by the global common they had hoped to join, the CDC members retorted that their authoritarian behaviour was entirely rational. Similarly, suspicions of withholding information (since no one dared take responsibility for declaring the first case of flu in Tianmai) meant that overall, for the members of the Centre, H1N1 seemed to “degenerate into a crudely political game” (p. 172) between the leaders and the international community, thus destroying the employees’ ideal of scientific professionalism.

In her conclusion, the author reminds us that the issues tackled in this book are every bit as crucial in other cultural and national contexts. Reflecting on the ways that a local public health policy might genuinely serve the individuals it represents, she cites the example of the only CDC programme that is actually founded on a meaningful relationship: the Department of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control. She shows how practices of *guanxi* and engendering human feelings (*renqing*) have helped to create an authentic community that transcends the opposition between professionals and the group that is governed. In this regard, the quality of the descriptions provided in the extracts from field journals and the emphasis Katherine Mason places on the meanings that individuals give to their actions and choice of words provide a valuable model for the construction of an ethics of public health; one that goes beyond the distant governance of abstract populations. Moreover, as well as adding to the existing knowledge of contemporary China, this book makes a stimulating contribution to the anthropologies of science, health, and public policy.

■ Translated by David Buchanan.

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