

Introduction

Gerda Wielander and Séagh Kehoe

Welcome to *Cultural China 2021*. A year on from our inaugural volume, Covid-19 is still dominating everyday life for many people across the world, none more so than in the People's Republic of China (PRC) which continues to enforce a zero-Covid policy with increasing difficulty and against a backdrop of mounting criticism from the general population to public health advisers. If Covid-19 seems elsewhere to have slipped into the background, it is only because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which has implications for China, Taiwan, and the international world order.

It is in this wider context that we write this introduction to *Cultural China 2021*, our unique annual publication for up-to-date, informed, and accessible commentary about Chinese and Sinophone languages, cultural practice and production, and its critical analysis. Looking back on the year 2021, the following events stand out in memory: the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) centenary celebrations; the Hong Kong police banning the annual vigil commemorating the Tiananmen Massacre; the Chinese state's denouncements of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's National Day speech after she vowed that her government would not bow to pressure from the PRC; the deadly rainstorms in central China that left dozens dead and thousands trapped without electricity; the announcement of the three-child policy; and the disappearance and carefully orchestrated reappearance of Peng Shuai after she accused retired Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault. The year 2021 also marked the 50th

How to cite this book chapter:

Wielander, G. and Kehoe, S. 2022. Introduction. In: Kehoe, S. and Wielander, G. (eds.) *Cultural China 2021: The Contemporary China Centre Review*. Pp. 1–8. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book69.a>.
License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

anniversary of 'Ping-Pong Diplomacy', with various friendship matches, exhibitions, and other events held across Beijing to commemorate the occasion. At the Tokyo Olympics, China came close to topping the gold medal tables, while at the Paralympic Games, the country finished atop the gold and overall medal tally for the fifth time in a row. Meanwhile, on social media, 'lying flat', denoting a desire to disengage from the intense social competition and work pressures of China's 996 culture, claimed the title of slang word of the year.

The different chapters of this year's review are organised around the themes of health and medicine, environment, food cultures, children, film, red culture, and activism, showcasing the best examples of our now well-established blog.

The first three chapters are intrinsically linked: the distinction between food and medicine is blurred in the context of Chinese culture more widely and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) more narrowly, and the 'medicinal' properties of foodstuffs is a recurring topic in everyday Chinese conversations. The impact of the environment on food production and food safety is a big topic for middle classes across the world, whose main concern has shifted from having enough to eat to eating the right thing. Food is also a core element in feelings of belonging and being part of a community. All these themes are addressed in the twelve pieces that make up the first three chapters of the review. In terms of conceptual approaches, the pieces share a concern for the boundaries that are created between 'inside' and 'outside', the urban and the rural, the separation of bodies and substances from others, and anxieties over authenticity, change, and security. Some of the pieces also invite reflection on the role of the researcher when it comes to romanticising indigenous or authentic practices.

In the initial stages of Covid-19, when China's handling of the coronavirus appeared exemplary to the rest of the world, the PRC sent care packages to students abroad and the CCP hailed a new era of public health in China, as Emily Baum points out. This was a major reputational victory: no longer was China the 'sick man' of Asia, but its management of Covid-19 was hailed as evidence that a clear strategy coupled with swift and uncompromising decision-making – possibly facilitated by its non-democratic processes – were conducive to controlling the pandemic. In her chapter, Baum deals with the link between Chinese medicine as a unique approach to the treatment of diseases and nationalist sentiments in modern Chinese history. Baum invokes acupuncture anaesthesia as a unique example of Chinese medicine practice played in US–China rapprochement and China's soft power image more widely. Even though its efficacy could not be verified in clinical trials, acupuncture anaesthesia contributed to feelings of nationalist pride as it appeared to prove that China was able to develop its own solutions independent from established Western medical science. TCM continues to play an important role in China's soft power toolkit; it is also invoked as shared heritage when reaching out to an imagined Chinese cultural community, as Baum reminds us.

The role of TCM was first promoted during the Mao period which led to an expansion of the use of medicinal animals, as we learn from Liz P.Y. Chee's

piece. This ‘faunal medicalisation’ has its roots in the strong Sino-Soviet relations of the 1950s, as well as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. While originally only certain parts of animals were considered to have medicinal powers, over time the logic of production (i.e. the breeding of the animals and the need to avoid waste) meant that medicinal powers became ascribed to larger parts or even the entire animal, rather than specific parts of it. Chee sounds a cautionary note against romanticising indigenous medicines and calls for a ‘de-sanctification’ of so-called traditional practices. As she points out, indigenous medicines have evolved and today have strong ties to states and the pharma industry, and are tied into transnational trade networks, not all of them legal. She also points out the role of ‘faunal medicalisation’ in zoonoses, that is, the transmission of diseases from animals to humans.

Sophie Xiaofei Guo, on the other hand, engages with the work of ‘virophil’ artist Pei-Ying Lin whose work centres on the relationship between humans and infectious agents. By staging ‘virus dinner performances,’ Lin wants to promote a positive attitude to our relationship with viruses. Via the medium of food, participants in Lin’s dinner performances gain a sensory experience of viruses entering the body. As Guo explains, Lin’s work can be understood as part of the ‘microbial’ turn that has occurred in the biological sciences at the turn of the 21st century which sees infection as the result of ecological disturbances rather than an attack of a pathogen that needs to be eliminated. Guo puts Lin’s work into the context of biomedically engaged arts practice which emerged in Taiwan in 2009 and has gained momentum since 2017. Lin’s work also provides an interesting extension of the concept of ‘faunal medicalisation’ and the inherent medicinal qualities of all that we ingest.

Lin’s friendly embrace of the virus (any virus) stands in stark contrast to the zero-Covid-19 approach pursued in the People’s Republic, where imported frozen goods were tested for Covid-19 (The Economist, 2022), and faceless people in hazmat suits are both feared and revered. Returning to the context of the pandemic, Dino Ge Zhang’s piece on WeChat group chats as epidemiological space discusses how, in the early stages of the pandemic in locked-down Wuhan, WeChat groups, initially created for grocery shopping and information sharing, became field-sites of social-viral-technical epidemiology, as Zhang puts it. Zhang illustrates how these spaces, intended to provide practical support, became sites of intense affect, creating a parallel ‘affective plague’ to the virus-induced pandemic in the city. Rather than providing practical and emotional support, doom-scrolling social media accounts often had a negative effect on individuals. The state was quick to label this negative affect a corrosive force with the potential to undermine social unity as well as individuals’ immune systems. At the time of writing this Introduction, several major Chinese cities have been under severe lockdown for weeks, no doubt providing rich new data on the role of social media whose perusal, as Zhang points out, is not a life-choice, but essential in order to be able to organise the most basic necessities of life.

Caroline Yiqian Wang's piece on eating videos engages with another aspect of social media use criticised by the Chinese government. Originally an import from Korea, eating videos or *chibo* 吃播 were a big thing on social media platforms between 2015 and 2021. The concept is simple: film yourself eating a range of dishes and post it on social media or, as the audience, watch other people eat. The practice started to be criticised from 2021 with an ensuing 'crack-down' on such posts, ostensibly because they promoted a culture of waste and indulged an escapist mentality. However, as Wang points out, this disregards the positive effects these social media posts had and the positive affect they created. As most were accompanied by a live chat function, they provided a much-needed sociality for single people whose isolation was exacerbated during lockdown. And as many such posts were effectively amateur cooking shows, they also imparted much-needed basic skills training in a relatable manner to a young generation of urbanites who had never cooked for themselves.

A fear (rather than an embrace) of toxins also lies at the heart of two female poets whose work Justyna Jagusik analyses. Zhai Yongming's and Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry deals with the topic of food anxiety not as a result of scarcity or famine but as a result of food production scandals which have heightened fears over food safety in China. While these anxieties are real (as were the scandals of poisoned food that gave rise to them), the proposed solution is interesting and warrants critical examination. According to Jagusik, fostering villagers' emotional connection with the countryside may be a first step towards creating a healthier living environment seemingly laying the responsibility at the door of the rural population whose practices potentially endanger the urban. The importance of an emotional connection to the land also lies at the heart of the community garden project in Lancheng (Taiwan) discussed in Shaw-wu Jung's piece. Here, the elderly population of a small community with a stagnant economy received a boost through the project of creating an organic community vegetable garden. Through the process of creating this garden, residents started to re-engage with their agricultural roots and awakened traditional farming methods, Jung contends.

Accompanying food anxieties among the urban middle classes is a desire for 'authentic' or simple foods like the potato, which is the focus of Jacob Klein's alliterative article. A recent Western intruder into the Chinese larder, the humble potato is a case study of the way state intervention taps into cultural values around food, in particular the centrality of grain in governance, family ties, and ancestor worship. In 2015, a state project was launched to turn the potato – introduced to China in the 17th century, widely disliked, and its consumption associated with being poor – into a new superfood with medicinal qualities in an effort to transform the potato into a staple food for the Chinese nation by raising its status to the same heights as that of grains like rice and maize. While the campaign bore all the hallmarks of state intervention (apparently, it was a citizen's duty to eat potatoes, as Klein points out), potato promoters also tapped

into the emerging market for so-called authentic or ‘pure’ foods of impoverished inland areas, now rebranded as ‘heritage’.

What is branded ‘authentic’ or ‘pure’ often has been derided as *luohou* 落后 or backward, as is the case with *shaoguo* 烧锅, a type of cooking using a biomass stove with significant air quality implications. Shaoguo is mainly used to cook extremely simple staples like *mantou* 馒头 (a type of steamed bread) or soup made of boiled water and flour. Erin Thomas relates how returning migrants have developed a nostalgia for what is not necessarily considered tasty but familiar food which has, in turn, contributed to a continuation of this cooking tradition with biomass stoves even installed in new housing blocks. Thomas considers this a positive ‘creation of a consciousness about rural conditions’ whose upholding seems to be the sole responsibility of older women.

This same appetite for simple foods by an urban population also drives the migrant workers in Sam Berlin’s study to learn how to make local delicacies, allegedly part of their own heritage, to sell in eastern cities of China. Many of these small-scale entrepreneurs are newly unemployed former factory workers and find themselves jobless as the result of rapid development but stalling social mobility: the so-called middle-income trap. Berlin adopts an optimistic perspective about the chances of these less than affluent *getihu* 个体户 (small-scale entrepreneurs) returning to the factory floor in the future who, for now, are content in the knowledge that development will come. That this knowledge is no longer certain is set out with sobering clarity in Rozelle and Hell’s *Invisible China* (2020) which identifies the segregation of the rural and the urban in crucial areas like health care, education, and parental education as key reasons why the aspirations of Berlin’s interlocutors may well not be fulfilled, as they may be unable to upskill to meet the requirements of China’s future labour force.

Laying the responsibility for safe food production at the door of the rural (often ageing) population is another example of this crucial binary that lies at the heart of the Chinese society and economy, that is, the clear separation of the urban and the rural which was enshrined during the Mao period and which continues today. Focusing on the other end of the ecosystem, Adam Lieberman’s piece on waste separation based on field work in Kunming, south-west China, identifies clear continuities in the way waste collection and separation is built on the separation of people into different categories, where peasants who entered the urban areas for waste collection were considered dirty, unhygienic, and unsightly – despite being classified as the most revolutionary class in the 1960s – and barred from entering the urban areas at certain times of the day. In the early days of reform and opening up, garbage units within *danwei* structures were converted into other, more lucrative spaces, leading to waste expunged into the streets, while in the 2010s locked ‘smart’ garbage bins have closed off a crucial sector of the economy for the poorest, so vividly and sympathetically evoked in Jia Pingwa’s novel *Happy Dreams* (2017, translated by Nicky Harman; the original was published as *Gaoxing* 高兴 in 2007). Jessica

Imbach reminds us that ‘smart’ technology is not a concept of the new millennium. ‘Smart villages’ were already fantasised about during the Mao period and were a recurring trope in socialist science fiction from the 1950s and 1960s. Just like ‘smart’ cities today, they imagined a reliance on technology to achieve a Maoist green utopia which resonates with current articulations of state environmentalism, as Imbach points out. Then and now, the taming and controlling of nature by humans lies at the heart of the project.

Turning to film in 2021, many will recall US-based director Chloé Zhao’s historic win at the 2021 Oscars, where she became the first woman of colour to win Best Director. While Zhao’s win was initially met with praise and celebration by many in China, including Chinese state media, it was swiftly censored after an interview from 2003 surfaced where Zhao referred to China as ‘a place where there are lies everywhere’ (Davidson 2021). The 2021 Oscars themselves, meanwhile, were not broadcast at all in Hong Kong for the first time in 50 years. While Hong Kong’s leading broadcaster explained the move as based on ‘commercial reasons’, others cited *Do Not Split*, a nominated documentary about the Hong Kong protests and the increasing control of Beijing as a likely reason for the broadcast ban. The various and complex entanglements of Hong Kong film and the Chinese state are clear to be seen in the case of the *Storm* film series, as Alvin Hoi-Chun Hung discusses in this volume. The series, which is produced by filmmakers from Hong Kong but primarily directed at the Chinese market, moves away from Hong Kong’s crime film tradition to using film to transform people’s legal consciousness and educate them about the dangers of corruption. In this sense, they chime in neatly with Xi’s ‘anti-corruption’ drive and serve broader attempts to strengthen CCP legitimacy. Yet, as we see in Alvin K. Wong’s piece, Hong Kong film nonetheless continues to occupy a unique place in Sinophone cultural production, one that is ‘not always in sync with the dominant logics of nationalism, global capitalism, and Sinocentrism.’ Wong focuses on Jun Li’s *Drifting* (2021), a film about homelessness and economic precarity in a post-2019 Hong Kong that is still wrestling with the aftermath of social upheavals, political uncertainty, and the global pandemic. The film, as Wong argues, in its manifold visualisations of homelessness and the brutal processes of neoliberal dehumanisation in Hong Kong, offers a trenchant cinematic diagnosis of dispossession and Sinophone resistance. The third piece in this chapter, written by Jie Li, shifts attention from production and representation to questions of cinematic dissemination and amplification. Turning to the role of film in the making of Mao’s personality cult, Li shows us the range and complexity of audience responses to Maoist cinema, noting that while many young people were inspired to mobility as revolutionary pilgrims to meet Mao in person, others were less enchanted and harboured critical, even subversive, thoughts.

Discussion of the Mao era and its various legacies continues in the next chapter where scholars consider new approaches to the study of ‘red culture’. Marc Matten’s piece, for instance, focuses on the often underappreciated role

of Mao-era books, or more specifically book covers, in disseminating political ideas, as well the production and modernising process of the materials themselves. Jon Howlett's piece, too, shows how *Menus and Resources for Western Cuisine*, a recipe book for train staff published in 1978 by the passenger department of the Guangzhou Railway Bureau, provides an entry for exploring the history of the short-lived Hua Guofeng era (1976–1978) on its own terms. Both pieces speak to the ways in which artefacts provide valuable insights into the Mao and early years of the post-Mao period. But so, too, have the many after-lives of the 'red culture' become a topic of much discussion in recent scholarship (Leng and Chen 2021; Li and Zhang 2016; Williams 2022). We see this in Steven F. Jackson's piece, which revisits key themes across propaganda posters in our very own University of Westminster's China Visual Arts Project and considers their pedagogical value in contemporary classrooms, particularly in the way posters might be used to reflect on the discourses about ethnicity and nation in China today. Focusing on the place of Mao-era 'red culture' in contemporary China, Ruichen Zhang's piece considers the repackaging of Chinese propaganda posters as Covid-19 memes on social media. Here, we see the enduring, playful, and multifaceted reworkings of 'red culture' as a means of constructing new kinds of public discourse and online participatory media.

The final theme in this volume reflects on issues of social (in)justice and calls to action. The first two pieces focus on racism(s) in the UK. Freya Aitken-Turff, for instance, explores the impact of both longstanding and Covid-19-compounded Sinophobia in London's Chinatown within a broader context of widespread problems of under-resourced support services, gentrification, and invisibilised local histories. Tan's piece examines the various formations of racisms that exist across timelines, geographies, and generational divides, charting their various connections and disconnections across 'model minority myth', 'new Yellow Peril', xenophobia confluences, Islamophobia, the Atlanta spa shootings, Black Lives Matter, and white supremacy. Both pieces call attention to the necessity of naming and interrogating structural power. How to do this is very much the issue at the heart of the third piece in this chapter, which looks at the gender politics of NGO volunteering in contemporary China. Here, Jing Y. and Derek Hird illuminate the ways in which state and market discourses of self-reliance, psychological self-care, and various forms of 'emotion management' work to obscure broader questions of structural change. Focusing on discourses of 'female wisdom' in one Guangzhou-based NGO, they argue that such practices have the effect of both entrenching gender norms while also complicating attempts to expose state patriarchy.

Cultural China 2021 therefore provides another rich menu of insightful pieces about the less attention-grabbing yet no less pertinent and important social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics that inform life in cultural China today. Whether you are an academic, activist, practitioner, or politician, we hope that *Cultural China 2021* helps you situate current events in and

relating to cultural China in a wider context and may inform your engagements and policymaking practices. Enjoy!

References

- Davidson, H. 2021. Nomadland references censored in China over critical comments by Chloé Zhao from 2013. *The Guardian*, 8 March. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/08/nomadland-references-censored-in-china-over-critical-comments-by-chloe-zhao-from-2013>
- Jia, P. and Harman, N. (trans.) 2007/2017. *Happy dreams*. Seattle: Amazon Crossing.
- Leng, T. K. and Chen, R.Y. 2021. The red culture and political economy of museums in Shanghai. *China Review* 21(3): 247–270.
- Li, J. and Zhang, E.H. 2016. *Red legacies in China: Cultural afterlives of the Communist Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rozelle, S. and Hell, N. 2020. *Invisible China. How the urban-rural divide threatens China's rise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- The Economist. 2022. China says imports are causing outbreaks of Covid-19. 21 April. <https://www.economist.com/china/2022/04/21/china-says-imports-are-causing-outbreaks-of-covid-19>
- Williams, E. R. 2022. *Collecting the revolution: British engagements with Chinese Cultural Revolution material culture*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.