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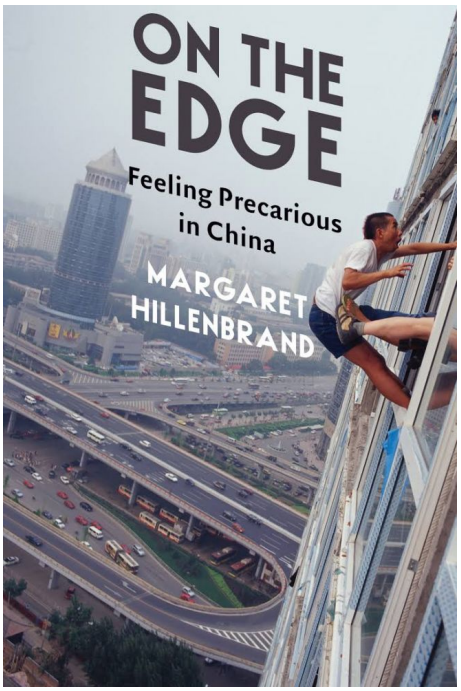
A conversation with Margaret Hillenbrand around her latest book On the Edge. Feeling Precarious in China (2023) devoted to representations of precarious life of "the underclass" in contemporary China.

Margaret Hillenbrand - Margaret Hillenbrand is Professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Visual Culture at the University of Oxford. Her research focusses on literary and visual studies in twentieth-century China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, especially cultures of secrecy and protest. Her books include Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China (Duke University Press, 2020), and On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China (Columbia University Press, 2023). She is now working on a new project about the cultural politics of the face in Chinese visual culture during the era of biometric surveillance.

Magda Szcześniak - Born 1985. Assistant Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw, leader of the MA program in visual culture. Author of books Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji [Norms of Visibility. Identity in Times of Transition, 2016] and Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce [Feeling Moved. Upward Mobility and Emotions in Socialist Poland, 2023], co-author of the two-volume Kultura wizualna w Polsce [Visual Culture in Poland, 2017]. Recipient of the Fulbright Foundation Junior Advanced Research Grant (2010/11, University of Rochester, Graduate Program for Visual and Cultural Studies) and the Fulbright Foundation Senior Award (2019/20, Duke University, Institute for Critical Theory). She has also received stipends and grants from the National Science Center (Preludium grant, 2013-2015; Sonata grant, 2018-2023) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science (stipend for outstanding young scholars, 2017-2020). In 2017, she won the prestigious award for young

scholars granted by the "Polityka" weekly (Nagroda Naukowa Polityki). She has published articles in numerous academic journals, including New Literary History, Oxford Art Journal, Journal of Visual Culture, Teksty Drugie, Dialog, Konteksty, Kultura i Społeczeństwo. She is currently leading a research project titled Representations of the popular classes in contemporary Polish visual culture.

The Hostile Proximity of Classes: Margaret Hillenbrand in Conversation with Magda Szcześniak



Magda Szcześniak: Your newest book, *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (2023), is a riveting account of contemporary class strife and the cultural forms through which conflicts are performed, in a country which, as you note in the introduction, has eliminated the language of class from the public sphere and promotes a vision of harmonious coexistence. Class is always tied to representation, and the categories a given society uses to describe these hierarchically positioned groups matters hugely, as it influences both self-identification and class consciousness. What happens when the word "class" can't be used and simultaneously hundreds of millions of people form a group on the verge of subsistence and millions of others are anxious about joining them?

Margaret Hillenbrand: Class is a charged topic everywhere and anytime, isn't it? But class seems especially fraught in contemporary China for a cluster of factors. Crucial here is the legacy of revolution – a past which is supposedly buried, but actually remains far from forgotten. Not so long ago, inflammatory class talk was being broadcast from loudspeakers on every street corner. It was the theme of the day; it was mandatory Maoist speak. You couldn't *not* talk about class,

and class talk was violent and febrile. And this is a really arresting irony. Maoist China was actually a place of remarkable social equality, where many of the standard differentials between people had been ironed out. So the paradox you refer to – the simultaneous existence of class strife and the lack of a concrete class discourse to describe it – is, in a way, an uncanny inversion of the past. Back then, there was far less actual cause for class struggle, but rabble-rousing class language was everywhere. Nowadays, China has a skyrocketing Gini coefficient, and the differentials between people gape like a chasm, but class language has been muzzled. Anyone in China who remembers the socialist period – a shrinking demographic, but still a significant minority of the world's second most populous nation – can't fail to be aware, whether subliminally or otherwise, of this paradox. The word "class" – *jieji* – is now effectively banned, and the term "stratum" – *jieceng* – is being used instead to underscore the diktat that class turbulence has now evaporated. Against the real-time threat of downward mobility for many, this kind of semantic move can only create a state of jittery cognitive dissonance.

MS: What does this move from "class" to "stratum" entail, and what other categories have come into the public sphere to capture class difference and conflict?

MH: Obviously, it's unsustainable to pretend that class tension has vanished like dawn mist just because the lexicon has changed and certain words are now off-limits; rather than making strife disappear, the shift from one term to a blandly disingenuous alternative simply opens up a vacuum in language which new coinages have filled. This point became clear around 2017, when the municipal authorities in Beijing began using the term "low-end population" to describe the poorly paid migrant workers who live on the city perimeters. Officials were using that term with the specific intention of evicting those people from the capital:

the term was applied precisely because it served as a rationale for social cleansing and gentrification. "Low-end population" is, of course, an outrageously discriminatory term under any circumstances. But what I found extraordinary is that the term quickly spread to state news media despite the *de facto* ban on class talk. The circulation of this term in a society that has apparently replaced class struggle with social harmony, and "class" with "stratum," is a measure of what we might call discursive stress, of what happens when you get ugly truths being papered over with glossy rhetoric. Before long, hairline cracks start appearing on the surface of public discourse, as the pressure of brute facts inexorably pushes through. So, it was with the term "low-end population" in mind, with that sense of discursive volatility, that I started thinking about underclass experiences in China, and how to describe those experiences in a more transparent idiom. That's where the term "zombie citizenship" comes from.

MS: In the introduction, you point to the fact that both categories – the "underclass," which has a long history within class analysis, and "zombie citizenship," which you propose in the book – are not innocent terms. The first has been accused of devaluing the working classes, robbing them of the potential of political agency; the second could be taken for a descriptive term, one which compares precarious migrant workers to stupefied, numb monsters. Obviously, these are not the intended definitions, but how did you work through the discursive risks?

MH: Using the term "underclass" is already potentially problematic for the reason you mention, but I think the risks are redoubled in the case of China because of the sheer heterogeneity of the groups the term encompasses. This heterogeneity is such that plenty of gravely disenfranchised people in China don't claim much, if any, kinship with one another. But I decided on the term, despite these risks, because I don't

think there's another word that captures the grim contours of expulsion, the sense in which certain peoplecan be "of" society without being "in" society, as I put it in the book. In fact, I think we may need to rehabilitate the term "underclass" if we're to do discursive justice to spiraling social harm.

I was also very aware of the risks of developing "zombie citizenship" as a conceptual tool. As a descriptor it's potentially quite incendiary: I mean, to describe China's underclass as zombies is to add grievous insult to grave injury. This is why I use the term "zombie citizenship" instead to describe the state of civic abjection into which certain people are thrust in our current epoch. Again, I wanted to take that risk, the risk of using a provocative term, because there's so much obfuscation, so much strategic ambiguity around class issues in China.
The Chinese underclass is the largest in human history – well over 300 million strong – and many of these people languish in a quite deviant socio-legal condition, in what is effectively a state of dismal exile from the shelter of the law. Article One of the Chinese constitution states that the People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship, led by the working class and based on the alliance of peasants and workers. That's a bold statement of solidarity and support for working people, but it's one that's not typically honored in practice. The legal code may pledge rights over pay, over occupational health and safety, over social welfare, and so on, but China's underclass is routinely excluded from those boons. Zombie citizenship thus seemed like a necessary countermeasure to state-speak, because it communicates the blunt reality – the fact that many working people in China are chained by toil and yet simultaneously cut loose from the safeguards of the law, despite what that law says in black and white.

And as such, zombie citizenship becomes a codeword for precarious experience in China. Precarity is, of course,

a master term for the global present, and commentators typically describe it in terms of disposability, casualization, inequality, workfare instead of welfare, and so on. But China's underclass has endured much worse than this under an entrenched system of social segregation which keeps some people within the charmed circle of the law and others out. So the premise of the book is that pathway between precarity and banishment – the notion that the endpoint of fragile rights is actually expulsion.

MS: Your book is a forceful and highly needed return to the idea of the relationality of classes, often silenced in public discourse at so many historical moments. This is exactly what happens when we move from the category of "class" to the category of "stratum." From my own research on socialist Poland, I can add that the same discursive move occurred in sociological language in the mid-1960s, fifteen years after the introduction of socialism. At that point, it was clear enough to everyone that a classless society is not arriving anytime soon, and that Polish society, although having undergone a revolution in the mid-1940s, retained some pre-war hierarchies and produced its own. The mid-1960s are also precisely the moment when the upward mobility of the working classes slows, which is why we can view the move from the language of class to the language of strata as a safe way of silencing any calls for the return of forcefully egalitarian politics.

MH: How fascinating that there's exactly the same linguistic maneuver going on!

MS: Right, because the idea behind the category of strata is one of a society grouped hierarchically, but the differences between specific strata are not viewed as extreme, and, perhaps more importantly, are not produced as a result of class antagonisms over differing interests. Your analysis reminds us

that class is in fact always relational, and that class interests are oppositional. Let's move to the relations between the underclass and the middle class in contemporary China. You show that precarity as a structure of feeling permeates the entire class structure: there is a fear of precarity, which migrates upward from the lives of migrant workers to the urban milieus. As you convincingly demonstrate, this common structure of feeling does not – as theoreticians of precarity were hoping for – provoke solidarity, but rather fuels conflict. How do these conflicts materialize in the public sphere?

MH: This is the core issue I look at in the book. China's underclass doesn't simply experience precarity *en masse* – they also make that experience graphically visible to more advantaged social others, and they do so within urban spaces where access to social and material goods is competitively squeezed. I don't mention David Neilson's work on this topic in the book, but it has been on my mind subsequently. Neilson talks about how our first order of response to what he calls a lack of "ontological security" is denial.[1] This denial is about the pretense that "nothing has changed" – that life can carry on as before so long as we keep our eyes tightly shut. But the searing optics of Chinese cities, by which I mean the constant visibility of a large, disenfranchised underclass, makes that strategy completely unworkable for China's middle classes and their self-perception as a sheltered cohort. This process is then amplified by the fact that precarity is on the march from the social margins toward the previously more comfortable classes. This loss of surety is experienced by graduates from elite Chinese universities who can't find jobs, for example, or by IT employees stuck in China's demanding "996" working culture, which requires them to work from 9 am to 9 pm, 6 days a week, and so on. In other words, the fear of tumbling into zombie citizenship menaces not only the underclass, but also those who at first sight seem far more

secure. In fact, the second conceptual tool that I work with in the book is what I call "the cliff edge" – the terror of the precipice, the fear of falling from a solid perch into a life without rights and protection. The core case studies in my book show that the fear or fact of downward mobility has brewed social strife during the first couple of decades of this century up to the pandemic – because when denial fails, what follows is a backlash against people who are often already socially stigmatized and who then lash back in turn. Which is to say that precarity amplifies class hostilities at the same time as it causes actual class borders to break down. These structures of feeling are thus both intimate and inimical. It's that hostile proximity that I try to explore in the book – and what my case studies show is that culture is often the public space where that antagonism breaks cover.

MS: You write that it's impossible not to see the underclass in China, but I think the middle classes of the Global North might soon find it difficult to maintain the practice of denial as well. For example, the phrase "hostile proximity" seems like a useful category to describe the intense emotions erupting around the so-called "homelessness crisis" in big American cities.

But I'd like to move on to the role played by aesthetic forms in these conflicts. You describe *On the Edge* as a cultural studies project – what does that mean to you?

MH: *On the Edge* is certainly a cultural studies project, and in two senses. First, my approach draws on the interdisciplinarity, maybe even the anti-disciplinarity, which is germane to cultural studies and which seems to me crucial for the study of authoritarian states like China. The reason for this is obvious: powerholders who seek absolutism will insinuate politics into every possible social space and call on every possible societal resource to push that mission of absolutism. In practice, this means that a siloed approach to contemporary China will

only get you so far. But I also think that precarity mandates a mixed-methods approach, too, since precarious experience, like authoritarianism, ends up infiltrating everything: it's a condition which is at once economic, political, social, and affective. The second reason I gravitated toward cultural studies as a methodology for this project is its avowed commitment to the study of culture as grassroots, culture as always more than statically representational, and culture as a forcefield in which class contestation plays out.

MS: Your readings of cultural forms are comprehensive and complex. You go beyond straightforward readings of texts and images as representing certain class identities, toward an analysis of formal characteristics of aesthetic phenomena, to show how class relations are coded or negotiated through specific formal choices or tools. You write that "aesthetic practices serve as actual zones of encounter between different social actors who are menaced by zombie citizenship as a looming threat or existing reality" (p. 46). These "fractious forms," as you call them, include delegated performances, contemporary waste art, migrant worker poetry, faux-first-person popular narratives, suicide shows distributed on streaming platforms, and brazen livestreaming performances on social media. The forms are often themselves fractured, scalable in the context of exposing or muffling class strife. Could you say more about the affective power of these tense class encounters?

MH: I was interested in locating moments of flare-up – those moments when social strife is really set ablaze. A striking example of this are so-called "delegated performances," a term I borrow from Claire Bishop, who has written illuminatingly on this particular practice. In these pieces, Chinese avant-garde artists hire members of the underclass to perform in site-specific installations. The term "perform" here is a perhaps bit of a misnomer, since the role played by the hired hands

is stripped of agency. It's also demeaning, sometimes brutally so. To give you an example, for a video work titled *Wrestling: One and One Hundred*, the artist He Yunchang paid one hundred men, mostly migrant workers, a small fee to engage in successive wrestling bouts with him over a period of 66 minutes. The staging here is all about *Ubermensch* and *Untermensch*: the artist as aesthetic maestro versus the massified lumpen proletariat. This is a performance which explicitly enacts class conflict, and it does so in an openly violent way. He Yunchang even incentivized the migrant workers to fight more aggressively, by offering them extra cash if they won their individual bouts against him. On one level, it's pretty hard to recuperate much sense of political promise from a performance like this, other than to say that at least it's honest in its rejection of the political slogan that China is a "harmonious society" despite its epic inequalities. In another sense, though, there's an intense intimacy in wrestling which makes it an intriguing analogy for what class conflict feels like in a densely packed and frenetically competitive society. Wrestling is all about closeness, physical and mental, as opponents grapple and spar, one to one. And if we want to probe the boundaries between those who have full civic life and those who are consigned to zombie citizenship, then the friction that arises between different class actors as they jostle with one another for security, status, money, and rank really calls for attention – even when that friction is horribly uncomfortable to witness. Distasteful as it is, He Yunchang's performance really does that. The artist shows that hostile proximity forces the self to acknowledge the other face to face, even if that recognition happens in moments of dirty conflict. And as people come together like this, right down in the dirt, they also intuit their sameness and come to realize the artificiality of the boundaries that separate them. In a sense, battles like the ones He Yunchang

stages show that citizenship is actually worth fighting for, and that maybe it needs that kind of hard struggle to stay relevant.

MS: Many of these distasteful and contentious performances have so far been ignored by scholars of contemporary Chinese art and culture, who tend to gravitate toward works generating positive affects. You deliberately chose to avoid the more reassuring works and practices, for example instances of solidarity across class lines. Why do you think that studying ugly feelings and dark emotions connected to class relations is politically important?

MH: That's a really good question. As you've alluded to, scholars of precarity in both the Global North and Global South have taken solidarity as their rallying call. Chronic instability is seen as a shared state, and at a time when certainties are unraveling, the sense that people are comrades can help stitch a sense of security back together. That commitment to solidarity was what I expected to find when I started the project. I thought that camaraderie would be the dominant leitmotif. But as I started assembling what soon turned into a very large archive of Chinese materials about precarious experience – social media posts, poetry, documentaries, performance art, interviews – I discovered a very different kind of mood. Its emotional keynotes were bleak: anger, dread, resentment, contempt. And what was even more interesting was that these dark feelings were directed not at political powerholders, the actual architects of social harm, but rather at the equally vulnerable people closest to hand. Initially, I found that perplexing. I mean, we're socialized from childhood to tamp down these sorts of feelings; and we're politically conditioned – in many circles, at least – to reach reflexively for empathy as our first response to the condition of shared plight. But over time, I began to think about the possibility that there may be circumstances in which empathy short-circuits because it's not structurally permitted to

do its work of social repair. The contemporary Chinese state denies its citizens the passionate experiences of protest, mass activism, public assembly. These are the embodied experiences through which empathetic solidarity is acted out and made real in the theater of the everyday. And without them, I think it's very easy for social atomization and apathy to take hold. We see a powerful manifestation of this in the quitting culture which has gripped China in the last couple of years, such as the "lying flat" movement which has been reported on widely in global media. By contrast, the dark emotions I look at in my book are conduits for counterintuitive modes of togetherness. This kind of togetherness is not about warm solidarity – it's about white-hot antagonism between hostile class actors. But precisely because of that heat and light, it can also be a catalyzing moment in which vivid agency flares up and new bonds can perhaps be forged.

MS: Throughout the book, you grapple with the theme of agency in relation to cultural production. You examine many cases of ventriloquy, in which middle-class – although also precarious – artists appropriate underclass bodies, experiences, and causes for their own creative practices. On the other hand, many of the forms in the book short-circuit the system of cultural production, but even there you show that members of the underclass struggle to find their own voice and message. It is difficult to separate pure "underclass" voices from their middle-class benefactors and intermediaries, like literary experts, who help migrant worker poets rise to fame. It might also be difficult to separate underclass identity from norms of middle-classness, to which many workers aspire.

MH: This is another key question that I tried to address. I do focus quite a bit on cultural forms produced by representatives of the underclass, and while these practices are all very different from each other, they share a pressing commonality. This is the provocation that they pose to the gatekeepers of cultural

production in China. I don't just mean official turf protectors, but also self-appointed pundits, often operating online, who try to police who's allowed to make culture in China and what kind of culture they're allowed to make. In an example of the former, it's very commonplace to hear established literary critics describe the work of migrant worker poets as abrasive, discordant, crude, unpoetic, and so on. Again, this is a matter of language and its limits: poetry from the sweatshop floor uses a lexicon dominated by the assembly line, ID cards, fluorescent lights, deafening machines, and amputated fingers. That poetic diction sounds jarring to some ears. This discordance, though, is also its special power – without those harsh sounds, factory poetry would never have become publicly audible in the first place. But if migrant worker poets want to get anywhere, they've often found themselves having to modulate at least some of that harshness. The poet Zheng Xiaoqiong is a fascinating example of this: she's risen stratospherically through the ranks, from migrant worker to prize-winning poet to literary editor. And as she's traveled that path, she's planed down the rougher edges of her poetry. It's become smoother, more melodious. And maybe this is the ticket price of entry into the literary establishment.

Another example are the suicide shows you mentioned a moment ago, in which workers in China's vast construction industry who've been denied their wages scale high-rise buildings and threaten to jump off unless they get paid. Watching these videos is excruciating: the wind howls on the soundtrack, and the bodies of the protestors quiver as they swing from scaffolding. The vertigo they experience is both staged and not staged: it's physiological, it's unfolding in real time, but it's also a rehearsed move within a protest repertoire that workers have been refining over years of practice. Because of this, some critics in the Chinese media have called such workers showmen or charlatans. But I've also had people question me about the appropriateness of calling their work a mode of performance

when I've given talks about this topic. These are polar opposite reactions: either suicide shows are too showy, or they're not showy enough – they shouldn't be seen as performative at all. This divided response is very revealing, and I think it brings things back to your point about how "members of the underclass struggle to find their own voice and message." A reflex of discomfort seems to be triggered when members of the underclass mobilize culture – weaponize their bodies, even – to change their status.

Thinking about this with a little hindsight, it seems to me that precarious conditions among China's underclass seethe and boil to the point that some kind of new vibrant cultural form suddenly bursts forth into the public sphere. But then the cultural orthodoxy immediately sets to work smoothing the cultural surface flat again. That means, as you said, co-opting, managing, downplaying, appropriating, and making things appropriate.

MS: In many ways, this is the trajectory of upward mobility and its narratives. The upwardly mobile subject needs to leave her language behind in order to assimilate into a new language. But this doesn't necessarily make critique impossible. The Kuaishou app moves from crass and extreme performances of bad taste – you call them "shit shows," and it's not a metaphor – to what is also a fascinating, although more subtle, tactic of class critique, in which users perform skits appropriating middle-classness to ridicule its absurd standards.

Were there any genres or forms which you initially included in your archive, but ultimately left out of the book as either too positive or too negative representations of underclass life and precarity?

MH: Yes, definitely there are genres which I ended up leaving out because they seemed overly or even falsely positive. A good example of this is content by China's new rural influencers. In the mid-2010s, some extraordinary livestreaming and short video

apps were launched in China – including Kuaishou, as you mention. Kuaishou consciously targeted low-income people living in the countryside, and it totally pulverized the protocols of appropriate content creation. Rural creatives on the app produced some real gross-out content: video skits of people eating excrement, setting off firecrackers on their genitalia, and so on. But in 2018, the state "purified" Kuaishou, and ruled that content on the app from that point on could be earthy, but only in wholesome, nourishing ways – so, no more lewd or grubby videos. In the wake of that, a new breed of rural influencer emerged, and its poster child was a vlogger called Li Ziqi. Her videos are gently pastoral and bucolic: they're about birdsong, handicrafts, with comforting sounds of food production on the soundtrack. Technically speaking, these are representations of precarious rural life, and so I did consider including them in the book. But arguably they're better understood as examples of what the Chinese state calls "main melody" productions: forms of culture which tune themselves to the Party's policies and muffle less obedient noises. So even though Li Ziqi is a big deal in China, and in some ways a leading exponent of subaltern cultural production, I veered away from discussing online creativity of this kind.

MS: Despite all the dark feelings and class strife present in the public sphere, the classical upward mobility story – structured around the myth of individual talent and resilience as a path to a better life – is incredibly stable. You trace its motifs not only in main melody genres, but also in much more ambiguous cultural forms. What makes this narrative so bulletproof?

MH: A core context here is the doctrine of human quality – *suzhi* – which currently holds sway in China, and which segregates people according to their "value" in pernicious, prejudicial terms. Someone with high *suzhi* has the right education, the right attire, the right accent, the right deportment when entering a room.

This narrative of *suzhi* operates as an economy of social "rightness," and it's gained a traction through pedagogy and propaganda that's very hard to unsettle. There's something mesmerizing about the idea that if you hone your human quality you can glide up the escalator of different strata to the grail of the so-called "good life." But ramming hard against that fairy tale is the reality of China's household registration system – *hukou*. This decrees that only people born in a particular place can access fundamental rights in that place – education, healthcare, public services, and so on. The exclusionary logic of these rules means that rural-to-urban migrants are excluded from city schools and hospitals, however hard they toil to raise their human quality. These two political drives – human quality and household registration – squeeze the life chances of China's migrant workers in a tight and treacherous pincer movement. The *suzhi* doctrine promises that if you try hard enough you will belong, but the *hukou* regime traduces that pledge by ring-fencing core benefits according to birthright. So it's a case of bait-and-switch, exacerbated by the fact that the state has vowed repeatedly to ease *hukou* restrictions, but so far has only tinkered superficially with the system. If the narrative is bulletproof, that may be because of the destructive process of hope dangled and hope denied, which works to keep precarious people in a place of stasis.

MS: I'm thinking about the context of upward mobility narratives in early post-war European socialist countries, and about the ways in which the process was structured and represented as a collective and mass one. Of course, people crossed class lines – say from the peasantry to the intelligentsia – but they did so with the help of the state and for the good of the collective, for example to become engineers in state-owned factories which hired other upwardly mobile subjects.

Individualism was deeply distrusted. Where are the roots of the *suzhi* discourse – are they socialist or post-socialist?

MH: I found your work on this subject really compelling, especially the point you make in a new paper about how socialist narratives of upward mobility from post-war Poland emphasize the collective character of the journey, unlike the relentless individualism of neoliberal tales, which rely on the skill and toil of the singular subject.[2] China's *suzhi* discourse has deep roots, which can be traced back to early 20th-century treatises on eugenics and the race for racial superiority. But it's in the post-socialist period that the discourse really takes off as a comprehensive mode of people management – and it has no time at all for the mass process you mention. Over the last 25 years, it's hardened into doxa, into the ultimate neoliberal mantra, and although some researchers are now arguing that its grip is loosening, it's hard to see the state readily relinquishing a narrative that releases it so neatly from duties of care to its people.

MS: What are the discursive remnants of the socialist period in the public sphere? There are, after all, still people who remember the socialist revolution...

MH: So much language from the socialist era is now back in the Chinese public sphere, from the Party's recent claim that it is still "the vanguard of the working class" to Xi Jinping's revival of the Maoist-era quest for "common prosperity." Another example is Xi's intensifying use of the word "struggle." He often uses this term to talk about contemporary foreign relations, but of course it's also a word which remains indissociable from the vicious class warfare of the past. This return of the repressed, these resurgent afterlives of Maoist watchwords about class, struggle, equality – they really matter, because the words are back but the reality they describe,

the reality they pretend to refer to, has blatantly morphed beyond recognition. So reasserting these socialist credentials within the context of rampant authoritarian neoliberalism is a flex; it showcases the Party's power to flout reality. But just as importantly, it also telegraphs the warning that now the ideological will for true egalitarianism is fading, it is the brute power of the Party over all classes that remains.

MS: One last question I have about the book and its portrayal of class strife relates to gender. There are traces of gender analysis in your book, but as I understand, you decided against foregrounding it as one of the main axes. Is zombie citizenship gendered? What would the differences in underclass and middle-class precarity be if we applied a gender lens? I'm thinking, for example, of one of the cultural producers whose work you examine – Foodie Fengjie – a middle-aged woman embodying underclass crassness and uncoolness. Her main act is extreme and inappropriate eating, during which she breaks both the norms of middle-classness and of femininity.

MH: That's a very good question. I had to make some hard choices about what to include and exclude in the book in terms of case studies, and also about which thematic prisms to use. In the case of gender, the choice was made easier by the fact that there is a lot of superb work being done in that field, even though the remit for gender-based activism in China has been severely constrained in recent years. What I felt was really missing was cultural studies work on class – that struck me as a core and telling gap in the scholarship. But that's not to deny, of course, that there are highly gendered dimensions to zombie citizenship. Suicide shows, for example, are a highly masculinized practice, in part because the construction industry tends to employ male workers. But these performances about labor, risk, physicality, stoicism, and power are also heavily inflected by the status of the performers as men who see themselves as providers

(they often refer to this point in the videos), but who have had that core relation of trust and care for their families violated by the withholding of wages. By contrast, the example you mention – livestreamer Foodie Fengjie – belongs within a media ecology dominated by women: most successful livestreamers in China are female. But the femininity which they embody is one dictated by very rigid notions of erotic capital – and Foodie Fengjie in her uncool crassness offers an audacious riposte to this. There's a lot more work to be done on precarious experience in China, and a more sharply gendered lens would certainly uncover or spotlight things that my book misses – perhaps especially in those cultural practices where gender difference is so pronounced. But in other cultural forms – for example, migrant workers' magazines and poetry from the factory floor – I found that the experience of precarity seemed to hammer people in quite cognate ways, irrespective of their gender.

MS: Does your newest book project continue along the lines of inquiry from *On the Edge*, or have you moved on to entirely new questions?

MH: My new project explores a new line of inquiry: it's about the cultural politics of the face in 21st-century China. Obviously, there's a long tradition in anthropological and sociological work which reads the face as a codeword for status, respectability, and pride. In my project, I try to move away from this figurative take to explore the face as something fleshly, as actual skin and bone. In particular, I'm interested in the face as a vessel through which biopower flows in China today. I look at three facescapes which have shaped governance in China since the millennium: the biometric face, the aesthetically modified face, and the masked face. It seems to me that the face is a zone in which power happens, and that spaces of visual culture are both reflecting and making real that process. It's intriguing that the face remains so oddly overlooked in social

theory, outside the parameters of the face-as-status that I just mentioned. Sure, there's seminal work by Levinas, by Deleuze and Guattari, and by a few more recent geographers and anthropologists, but for the most part, the face still hides in the long shadow cast by the body right across the humanities. Embodiment is everywhere, on every curriculum and at every big conference, while the face remains by and large uncharted terrain. This is especially true of China, where the focus on face as social protocol has combined with an ongoing obsession with the particular countenance of Mao Zedong. The face really needs its moment now, in our current era of pandemic and protest, surveillance and surgery. So, my next project tries to get to grips with that, via a range of visual, textual, and digital sources.

1 David Neilson, "Class, Precarity, and Anxiety under Neoliberal Global Capitalism: From Denial to Resistance," *Theory & Psychology* vol. 25, no. 2 (2015), 184–201.

2 Magda Szcześniak, "Feeling Moved. Upward Mobility Stories in Socialism," *New Literary History* vol. 55, no. 1 (2024).