



Beyond The Pale: *Critical Reflections on Society, Politics and Aesthetics Within and at The Borders of China*

Throughout much of the latter half of 2019 lawmakers and police in Hong Kong have been cast in a persistently negative light by the Euro-American media for their handling of public protests against what is seen as the growing influence of mainland China on politics and governance in the special administrative region. Faced by increasingly confrontational/violent street protests Hong Kong's government under the leadership of its Chief Executive Carrie Lam has continued to uphold the region's existing Beijing-sanctioned rule of law – based (notionally) since the handover from Britain in 1997 on the principle of 'one country two systems' – while refusing calls for the establishment of a Western-style liberal democracy separate from mainland China. Police have defended the Hong Kong government's position by seeking to suppress the actions of protestors through sometimes excessively violent means – including the use of live gunfire and summary beatings – thereby extending an established reputation for brutality earned during the time of British colonial rule.¹ All of which has been presented internationally, even within mainland China, as part of twenty-four hour rolling news.

This negative coverage of government and police authority in Hong Kong has been accompanied in the Euro-American media by continuing vilification of Beijing's treatment of Uighur Muslims in the autonomous region of Xinjiang. As a response to repeated and sometimes violent resistance to majority Han Chinese rule, alongside signs of local Islamic fundamentalism linked to acts of terrorism in Xinjiang and elsewhere in the PRC,² Beijing has shut down mosques and established so-called "vocational re-education" centres in Xinjiang aimed at "assimilating" Uighurs "safely" into mainstream Chinese society. The similarity of the layout of those centres to concentration camps as well as leaked directives from Beijing making clear its desire to impose severe and uncompromising discipline on recalcitrant Uighurs³ has resonated chillingly within the Euro-American media-sphere where remembrance of the Holocaust is firmly established and critical coverage of the detention of Muslims at Guantánamo Bay also persists.⁴ Perhaps in part due to international pressure Beijing has stated recently that Xinjiang's "re-education centres" have now been closed having fulfilled their purpose. The truthfulness of that statement remains to be confirmed.⁵

Negative coverage of governmental actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang by the Euro-American media is, of course, entirely predictable. Suppressive violence recently enacted by the Hong Kong government and Beijing in response to dissent is automatically concerning from the point of view of liberal-democratic societies. That concern is magnified by the PRC's long-standing image as an authoritarian one-party communist state which remains firmly lodged in the popular imagination of Euro-American societies in spite of nearly forty years of social and economic modernisation since the acceptance of Deng Xiaoping's so-called policy of 'Reform and Opening-up' in 1979.⁶ Moreover, that image has itself been exacerbated by the PRC's growing and perceivably threatening political, military and cultural presence on the international stage in recent years—including the building of military bases in the contested area of the South China Sea—and the counterposing rise of Trumpian exceptionalism in the USA—the latter presenting itself as an antidote to neo-liberalism's projection of a new international post-Cold War capitalist world order deconstructive of spent ideological oppositions. While the Cold War may have ended symbolically in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, its traces have undeniably persisted in circumstantially refracted form. From the point of view of the Euro-American media mainland China and all its works remain resolutely 'beyond the pale'.

This resurfacing of stark ideological opposition may provide a reassuring sense of rationalist certainty for some in response to the deconstructive social and economic uncertainties and precarities uncaged by neo-liberal globalisation. However, it also serves, as it did during the Cold War, to gloss over the rather more complex character of ostensibly opposed political discourses lived in relation to the variable and permeable particularities of localised social conditions and cultural identities on the ground. As the espionage novels of John Le Carré indicate, political differences between the capitalist West and communist East during the Cold War were in many respects a façade to mutually sustaining deferrals and intersections played out spectacularly as ideological struggle.⁷

That deferring-intersectional condition has, if anything, come into even plainer sight since 1989, with the PRC having officially embraced capitalist modes of production pragmatically in the context of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', and Euro-America, an institutionalised Third Space postmodernist critique of established capitalism and its associations with colonialism-imperialism. All of which contributes to the condition now widely referred to as 'contemporaneity', as a displacement of once dominant Western(ised) post-Enlightenment discourses by the conspicuous paradox of a seemingly intractable though closely interconnected global factionalism,⁸ dubbed by philosopher Peter Osborne as a present global "unity in difference."⁹

It is, however, possible to go beyond the current reprising of a simplistic Cold War dialecticism by shedding light on the PRC's culturally specific vision of itself and its approach to governance. That vision is one bound up with aestheticisations and non-rationalisms which may seem akin to those of Nazism viewed through the interpretative lens of Walter Benjamin—in which auratic authority is seen as buttressed by non-rationalist appeals to the supposed certainties of tradition—but are within China historically durable and for many therefore both natural and reassuring. Although by no means intended as an apology for the undeniable and eminently questionable authoritarianism of Beijing—or indeed by association that clearly wished for by Donald Trump on his home turf—available to us is a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese politics and its relationship to tradition. Such an understanding is arguably crucial to any critical-productive engagement with the increasing and inescapable impact of a revived China on the contemporary world-stage. The alternative is a potentially bellicose confrontation between siloed, mutually uncomprehending political, socio-economic and cultural domains.

This essay focuses on two indicative contexts: that of political resistance to Beijing's authority in Hong Kong since 1997; and initiatives taken by the PRC's ruling Communist Party (CCP) in Fujian –historically one of China's remotest regions–intended as ways of managing and lessening the social and economic disparities brought about by the country's industrialisation and urbanisation of the last four decades. In both of those contexts appeals to social cohesion can be seen as based on the persistence of traditionally shared Confucian values of harmony and reciprocity. Values that are nevertheless subject to differing ideological perspectives—being viewed by many in Hong Kong opposed to Beijing's authority as a basis for mainland Chinese imperialism.

In August 2019 I took part in an international conference organised by the China Academy of Art (CAA) Hangzhou at its newly established Practice Base of Social Aesthetic Education near Ningde in Fujian. The conference, *Sharing and Participating—the 'Commons': Art Social Aesthetic Education Summit 2019*, was intended as a forum for the sharing and discussion of differing outlooks on the idea of aestheticised social engagement set against the background of current, governmentally supported efforts to redevelop rural areas within mainland China as a means of reducing inequalities between cities and the countryside.¹⁰ One of the consequences of the PRC's prodigious modernisation since the late 1970s has been the opening up of significant socio-cultural differences between urban and rural areas, with the latter having remained closer to the conditions of materially impoverished Maoist collectivism, while the former has become the cradle of a burgeoning version of bourgeois capitalism, albeit one inflected by Chinese 'socialist characteristics'.

Fujian was until recently an extremely isolated mountainous province, only accessible by often crudely built and maintained roadways or tracks. As such, the province has been a historical place of flight from conflict as well as exile or retreat for those resistant to prevailing authority¹¹ –for example, supporters and acolytes of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) after transition to the Qing (1644-1912). Fujian is now penetrated by an increasingly extensive modern highway and high-speed railway network and as a result the site of fast-growing towns and cities with modern amenities, such as supermarkets, shopping malls and international four-star hotels. The province nevertheless retains much of its rugged bucolic character and is still the site of numerous small towns and villages with buildings whose fabric dates back to the Ming Dynasty and beyond.

International delegates to the conference arrived in Fujian by high-speed train from Shanghai after a journey of four hours that would have taken at least twice as long much less than a decade ago. From there they travelled for a further two hours to CAA's practice base by coach, journeying through mountainous countryside punctuated frequently by urban construction. On arrival the international delegates were greeted eagerly by the base's resident staff and students. They were also treated to a series of predictably declamatory speeches extolling the virtues of the conference's organisers as well as those of the PRC's President Xi Jinping and the CCP. At the conclusion of the speeches and heralded by fireworks, doors of the building behind the speakers' podium swung open to reveal a carefully curated exhibition of the work of the centre, comprising photographic records and assemblages of traditional artefacts alongside 'relational' artworks and documentary films representative of Fujian's historic and contemporary rurality.

The conference took place over the best part of a week and was divided into presentations before lunch and group visits to sites of rural redevelopment in the afternoon. The presentations were characterised by sometimes pronounced differences in cultural and socio-political outlook. Although our hosts spoke passionately, intelligently and admirably about the need for rural redevelopment as a way of countering social inequalities –including one speaker, through the appropriation-translation

of Joseph Beuys's ideas of artistic democracy,¹² their outlook was one frustratingly but understandably constrained by an inability/unwillingness to directly criticise domestic political authority. Such direct criticism in open forum is vanishingly rare in mainland China where confrontational public dissent from CCP orthodoxy remains anathema (critical discussion is enshrined in Chinese law but only among experts and in closed session and is therefore both troublesome and risky to stage).

The approach of local mainland Chinese delegates to the conference was also discernibly inflected by China's long-standing syncretic Confucian traditions that uphold the aesthetic as a realm of nuanced feeling commensurate with ethical social governance. Following Immanuel Kant's development of a tripartite philosophy dividing practical reason from pure reason and judgement at the end of the eighteenth century, dominant discourses in Euro-America and related Westernised spaces have tended to uphold the aesthetic as an autonomous, or relatively autonomous locus of transformational resistance to established authority. China has historically by contrast upheld a sense of close reciprocity between the aesthetic and authority as a basis for ethically informed social governance. This non-rationalist sense of reciprocity is fundamental to Daoist/Buddhist-inflected neo-Confucian ideas dominant for over a millennium during China's dynastic-imperial period from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) to the Qing Dynasty, China's last. It is also embodied historically by imperial China's scholar-gentry administrative class, known in Anglophone contexts as the Literati and in Mandarin as the *Shi*, whose ability as painters, poets and musicians was taken as an index of their fitness to oversee the workings of state.

Crucially the Literati/*Shi* were morally obligated to uphold the continuity and development of the Chinese dynastic-imperial state, including though an understandably oblique/symbolic rather than oppositional resistance in that context to overweening authority—as exemplified historically by the group known as the Seven Intellectuals of the Bamboo Grove: Daoist inclined Literati who during the third century CE dissented from the authority of the Jin Dynasty (265-420). A close relationship between ethically informed governance and the aesthetic thus persisted as a fundamental underpinning to Chinese dynastic-imperial rule.

Although echoes of rationalising Euro-American post-Enlightenment critical distancing have informed the development of modernity in China since the nineteenth century—not least in relation to communist party co-options of the idea of socialist realism—they have continued to intersect with a durable civilisation-specific Confucianism, an intersection brought to the fore by recent CCP appeals to neo-Confucian ideas of unifying social harmony/reciprocity, in response to the social and cultural upheavals brought about by Reform and Opening-up, alongside perceptions of a persistent and threatening Euro-American colonialism-imperialism. Where critical distancing remains a staple of progressive Euro-American modernity, in China proximate critical obliqueness has been taken as a sustained underpinning to socio-cultural continuity and development. The *yimin*, “leftover subject” or scholar, who withdraws into nature, remains a familiar figure within Chinese culture to this day. Critically inclined contemporary artists in and from mainland China can in most cases be seen to have adopted similarly proximate-oblique approaches. As the detention and effective exile of Ai Weiwei makes clear, open oppositional dissent from governmental authority within the PRC is easily commuted by the state. Complicity with and resistance to prevailing authority are thus typically hard to distinguish. Each can nevertheless be seen to manifest itself in indeterminate reciprocal relation to the other. ‘Worrying’ about the perfectability of the state along ethically/aesthetically informed Confucian lines has remained a constant within China¹³ and as such can be understood to have pervaded the CAA Fujian conference's support to CCP strategy.



Protests in Hong Kong during the second half of 2019 were initiated by a mass demonstration on 12 June against the Hong Kong administration's stated intention to pass a law allowing extradition of indicted individuals to mainland China.¹⁴ The protests continued through an array of public actions, including peaceful assemblies for and against Hong Kong's established Beijing-backed administration, almost daily running street battles between the Hong Kong police, 'black shirt' anti-Beijing protesters and 'white shirt' pro-Beijing groups, repeated occupations and blockades of Hong Kong's international airport and a violent occupation of the Hong Kong legislature on 1 July – as part of which British flags and historical Hong Kong flags incorporating the former were unfurled as symbols of democratic freedom, somewhat ironically given the UK's colonialist-imperialist legacy.¹⁵ During the protests savage beatings have been meted out by protesters and police alike. Police and their families have been denounced in public and on social media. Protesters have been arrested and subjected to summary detention.

Despite an announcement from Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam on 4 September that the extradition bill had been terminally withdrawn and the subsequent holding of a series of 'town hall' consultations aimed at establishing public dialogue, protests continued to escalate as part of a more general resistance to its perceived complicity with Beijing and amid demands from protesters for a public enquiry into police violence, the unconditional release of protesters detained by police and the establishment of democratic processes in Hong Kong free from mainland Chinese interference. In advance of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the PRC, on 1 October 2019 battles between protesters and police became increasingly ugly with extreme violence on all

sides.¹⁶ Black shirt protesters added to the repeated building of street barricades, disruption to public transport and damage to public property with the throwing of Molotov cocktails, including at police stations. Police repeatedly deployed riot sticks, water cannon, tear gas, pepper spray, baton rounds, snatch squads, and on occasion live ammunition against street protesters.

On 1 October a black shirt protester was for a time critically wounded by a policeman firing at point-blank range. This shooting was followed on 13 November by further violent incidents: another shooting of a protester by police, the driving of a motorcycle into a crowd of protesters and bystanders by a policeman, and the setting on fire of a pro-Beijing resident by protesters. In November protesters moved to occupy university campuses strategically placed in relation to Hong Kong's transport infrastructure. Police sieges ensued resulting in the eventual dispersal of those occupations despite protestors erecting substantial fortifications and deploying a range of potentially lethal weaponry including bows and arrows. District council elections in Hong Kong on 24 November saw the returning of democracy candidates to all but one of the contested administrative roles¹⁷—a significant signal to Beijing of the wider public mood in Hong Kong. Much to the displeasure of Beijing, a bill was passed by the US senate on the 19 November giving tacit support to democracy protesters by establishing twice-yearly monitoring of Hong Kong's special status separate from mainland China under US law as well as a presidential process for the handing down of sanctions against anyone contravening human rights within the region.¹⁸

In recent years there have been major socio-economic upheavals within Hong Kong, including spiralling land and property prices and markedly increased migration/commuting from mainland China that have impacted significantly upon the region. Many Hong Kong residents and particularly the young are now excluded from property ownership and subject to escalating competition for jobs and access to resources. Added to which are local perceptions of the dilution of Hong Kong's specific cultural identity by growing numbers of migrants and commuters from mainland China. Continuing protests against the influence of mainland China over Hong Kong are no longer fuelled simply by a desire to uphold democratic and legal rights conferred on the region by the establishment of the 'one country, two systems' policy supposedly vouchsafed by Beijing until 2047 under the joint Sino-British agreement as part of the transition from British rule. They also reflect matters of socio-economic and cultural protectionism in the face of what might be seen as creeping *de facto* mainland Chinese colonialism-imperialism contrasting and eclipsing the *de jure* existence of a politically and legally autonomous Hong Kong.

Preceding the 2019 Hong Kong protests were Taiwan's so-called 'Sunflower Movement'—involving public protests against increased cross-straits collaboration with mainland China—which took place during March and April 2014 and the Occupy Central Movement, otherwise known as the Umbrella Movement—involving public protests against perceived anti-democratic reforms allowing pre-screening and selection of electoral candidates in favour of Beijing—which took place in Hong Kong during September and December 2014. The Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement protests extended long-standing public resistance to Beijing influence over Hong Kong after its handover—including a massive and successful demonstration on 1 July 2003 against implementation of Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law calling for the local enactment of laws prohibiting "treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government."¹⁹ The Taiwan and Hong Kong protests of 2014 not only saw public resistance to Beijing's political influence but in addition contributions to that resistance through visual and other forms of cultural-artistic representation/performance. The Sunflower Movement derives its name from the upholding

of actual sunflowers by protesters as a heliotropic symbol of hope, a somewhat ironic usage in the context of Taiwan given metaphorical references to Mao Zedong as the sun and the mass of the people as sunflowers during the PRC's revolutionary period. Umbrellas were widely used by protesters in Hong Kong during 2014 to protect against the deployment of pepper spray and tear gas by police. Umbrellas thus became a highly visible symbol of public protest as well as a practical means of resistance to police violence. The 2014 Hong Kong protests also saw the self-conscious making of situated public artworks and the staging of street performances, some involving the use of umbrellas as symbolic objects. The Sunflower and Occupy Central/Umbrella movements share in similar co-options of artistic production and aestheticised experience that have accompanied anti-capitalist and other public protests internationally, as part of a widespread 'Social Turn' in the arts characterised by what might be described as a post-postmodernist return to oppositional resistance, which has gained significant traction after the global downturn of 2008.²⁰

Amidst the prevalence of mobile street battles rather than static occupations, the situated use of visual art and performance as part of the 2019 Hong Kong protests has been far less pronounced than in 2014. More widely used have been contingent/impromptu forms of visual signification, such as posters, stickers, graffiti and the dissemination of memes on social media whose perfunctory execution and often straightforward conveying of messages can only be loosely allied to the established conventions of a sophisticated Western(ised) contemporary high-art practice and its characteristic use of various forms of defamiliarisation (carried over from postmodernism). There would appear under those changed circumstances from occupation towards mobile conflict to be a practical acknowledgement of the limits of studied aesthetic resistance and its subordination to the exigencies of direct physical struggle. The use of umbrellas by protestors as both a practical means of defence against tear gas and water cannon and as readily interpretable signifiers of oppositional political intent nevertheless persists in the popular imagination world-wide. There is, moreover, what might be seen as a distinctive visual-cultural aesthetic of protest signified by the motley though recognisably shared sub-cultural garb of black shirt protestors as well as their use of posters, graffiti and on-line postings, all of which plays out semiotically in dyadic contrast to visual signifiers of identity associated with white shirt protestors and the police.

Photographic documents, as well as physical and virtual relics of the 2014 and 2019 Hong Kong protests, are nevertheless being upheld and therefore institutionally decided within the purview of the international art world's currently fashionable social turn as indexes of radical socially-engaged artistic expression.²¹ Such a view maintains the expanded field accorded to the aesthetic as part of postmodernist-lite discourses, whereby all modes of expression have the potential to be considered as art. The sustainability of that romantically expansive upholding is however eminently questionable. In light of the more intellectually rigorous interventions of poststructuralist postmodernism it is arguably no longer possible to sustain the very ideas of a categorical aesthetic and critical distancing upon which Western(ised) post-Enlightenment artistic criticality is based. Moreover, an autonomous or relatively autonomous critical aesthetic is arguably something that has long-since been recuperated by a pervasive capitalist spectacle.²² To which one might also add artist and critic Grant Kester's observation that claims of the impact on society of oppositional socially-engaged art are largely unproven by systematic scholarship.²³ This is not to deny outright the possible critical impact of the aesthetic as an uncertainly drawn category on an equally indeterminately structured society, but to suspend any simple rationalising understanding of what that impact might be and how it might take place. The sanctification of aestheticised protest in Hong Kong by the international artworld

emphatically as 'art' is therefore arguably misleading in its desire to keep faith with the integrity of an aesthetic domain whose assumed status in relation to post-Enlightenment discourses has been placed inescapably under erasure. It is also arguably as a consequence more of a gestural sop to rationalising oppositional ideology than a reflection of the demonstrably more complex relationship of the aesthetic to society.

Media coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong protests inside and outside mainland China has inevitably been subject to the effects of ideological parallax: while international news media providers such as the BBC and Sky committed to Western conceptions of liberal democracy have tended to paint the actions of the Hong Kong government and Beijing implicitly or explicitly as politically repressive,²⁴ within mainland China, where discourses supportive of central CCP-led socialism and cognate neo-Confucian notions of social harmony hold sway, the actions of protesters are presented as unnecessarily divisive, unpatriotic and detrimental to the rule of law, as well as the economic development and general well-being of Hong Kong.²⁵ Following the pattern of abiding Cold War ideological divisions, escalating violence among black shirt protesters has been reported by Chinese media as tantamount to terrorism²⁶ and tacitly by supposedly impartial Western media as part of a justified struggle for freedom.²⁷ While Chinese state media coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong protests has been subject in the UK to an OfCom investigation into its impartiality,²⁸ it is also illuminating to recall responses in the public sphere to widespread riots in the UK during 2011: an ideologically inchoate proletarian uprising against government and police authority that was almost universally condemned by local journalists and politicians as being against the interests of "ordinary" people.²⁹ When it comes to mainstream interpretation of public resistances to authority dominant discourses play a definitive role in dividing opinion.

As I write, Beijing has refrained from stepping in directly to quell the protests in Hong Kong by deploying mainland security forces openly on the region's streets, no doubt partly in light of the international opprobrium heaped on the PRC following the Tiananmen killings of 1989. By the time this essay is published, circumstances may have altered. The prospects of democratic revolution, the violent imposition of mainland government authority or unresolved relatively low-level conflict in Hong Kong remain poised. Events might conceivably fall in any of those directions; although the latter two seem more likely given strong public support for Beijing within mainland China³⁰ at present and the overwhelming might of the PRC's repressive state apparatus.

None of the above would have transpired in the ways that it has without the historical drawing of a border between Hong Kong and mainland China as a means of demarcating the limits of British colonialist-imperialist authority. Britain's acquisition first of Hong Kong Island after the First Opium War with China in 1842, Kowloon after the Second Opium War in 1860, and then the neighbouring New Territories on a ninety-nine-year lease in 1898, establishes the fundamental geopolitical division in relation to which present-day conflicts between mainland China and Hong Kong's citizens have emerged. While Britain did little if anything to foster democracy during the time of its colonial rule, it did seek to secure certain legal and democratic rights for Hong Kong citizens after 1997 as part of the Sino-British Joint Declaration underpinning Hong Kong's transition to a Special Administrative Region of the PRC—including the continuation of Hong Kong's local British influenced jury-based legal system, limited elections for local public office with the continuing assent of Beijing and the establishment in 1987 of the British National (Overseas) Passport for permanent Hong Kong residents before 1 July 1997, which confers the pale shelter of British nationality on its holders while withholding automatic rights of residency in the UK. It is precisely





the situating of Hong Kong as an indeterminate borderland fringing mainland China that has set the scene for localised conflict. As a cartographic inscription on the geo-political body politic, the border between Hong Kong and mainland China has taken on lasting and unforeseen meaning.

The drawing of firm geographical boundaries, which became established from the early Modern period onwards, is a principally European and then Euro-American invention tied to divisions of national and regional sovereignty, allocation of resources and projections of colonialist-imperialist power. Geographical and geopolitical borders historically outside that invention were more nebulous, usually constituting the notional limits of agglomerative empires or the aggregated lands of city states and other sovereign spaces across which tribal/nomadic societies would otherwise spread or traverse. The division of the world into modern nation-states intersects with and is often interrupted by that second configuration. There are, in short, persistent intersections between the staking out of hard geographical boundaries and other more fluid performative states of social being/identity. The legacy of those intersections—as events in the Middle East and proximate parts of Asia since the end of WWI make abundantly clear—have resulted in continuing conflicts over sovereignty and self-determination.

Prior to the early third century BCE, what is now thought of as China comprised an array of competing states. The coalescing of China as an empire began with the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), China's first. From the Qin Dynasty until the ending of the Qing Dynasty (the last), China was a dynastic imperial state within graduated limits of authority but without absolute geographical boundaries. Underpinning Chinese dynastic authority were the related concepts of the Mandate of Heaven—a desired state of harmonious reciprocity between heavenly and temporal realms vouchsafed by the ultimate authority of the former—and *Tianxia* (everything under heaven)—a perceived state of indeterminately circumscribed authority reaching out concentrically from the central power of China's emperor through the provinces of Chinese imperial state and tributary states to 'barbarians' beyond the immediate reach of imperial rule. These and other related ideas associated

with a syncretic Daoist-Buddhist inflected Confucianism constitute the discursive foundations of what is perceived within China as a durable civilisation-specific identity. As such, they allow for assertions of China's centrality to the world while drawing short of the necessity for any totalising colonisation of spaces beyond the immediate sphere of Chinese authority.

The durability of *Tianxia* as a discursive prescription for governmental authority is evidenced by recent calls by intellectuals within the PRC for its application globally as part of a new post-West world order.³¹ While the emphasis in these calls is on the desirability of states of mutual reciprocity upheld by Daoist-inflected Confucianism (as symbolised by Daoism's non-rationalist cosmological pairing of *yin-yang*) – in ways arguably resonant with counter-cultural new ageism in Euro-American contexts – it is also possible to view present-day assertions of the relevance of *Tianxia* as a continuation of historical Chinese imperialism. With regard to which one might look towards the outcry within the PRC in the news media, and on social media, against support voiced by the general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team for democracy protestors in Hong Kong. In the face of that outcry and suspension of lucrative showcase US National Basketball Association fixtures within the PRC, the NBA was forced to distance itself from support for the Hong Kong protests.³² Although China's impact on the international stage remained weak throughout much of the Modern era, its growing economic and military strength has resulted in a return to much greater international reach and influence, not least in the spheres of media and culture.

The uncertain limitations of Chinese power signified by *Tianxia* are manifested by fortifications erected historically along China's immediate imperial territorial borders, including the so-called Great Wall of China (*Wanli Changcheng*) and the Miaojiang Great Wall. The Great Wall, which is in actuality a series of related fortifications stretching along China's northern limits, was initiated during the seventh century BCE and successively added to, from the Qin Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty. These fortifications were used as a means of defence preventing incursions into Chinese territory by nomadic groups from the north. Their discontinuous and overlapping structure was also intended to protect and facilitate trade along the Silk Route, restricting movement in and out of China along prescribed and regulated channels. A similar state of controlled porosity pertains to the Miaojiang Great Wall, which was constructed during the sixteenth century both for defence against outsiders and regulation of trade along China's southern border. China's historical border defences – which could be opened and closed according to need – can be understood to reflect the indefinitely circumscribed reach of its imperial power as well as the discursive non-rationalism underpinning Confucian ideas of social order. The permeability of imperial China's historical border defences is underscored by the incursion of conquering Mongol forces from the north during the thirteenth century, who simply adopted the expedient of circumventing the Great Wall, resulting in the establishment of the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

When addressing recent events in Hong Kong and Xinjian from an Euro-American interpretive perspective there is a reflexive tendency to position cultural differences/diversity in opposition to overweening authority – albeit somewhat paradoxically in the case of the former with regard to local appeals for American intervention, and the latter the West's own fears of Islamic insurgency. Within the context of Chinese society cultural opposition of that sort is simply incompatible with durable and widely upheld Confucian principles of orderly and ethical governance encompassing social differences under majority Han rule. It is unnecessary for the CCP to impose its will simply in an Orwellian manner. Although integration of surveillance and spectacularism is now pervasive as a mode of social control within mainland China – as given shape by the idea of

the Han-opticon linking good social behaviour to social and financial credit³³—also efficacious are high-context CCP appeals to Confucianism as a durable discursive framework for harmonious social cohesion.

That framework remains deeply ingrained as part of the Chinese cultural habitus and will not be perfunctorily given up, in spite of its obduration of democratic suffrage and an associated freedom of speech (which have been traded historically for social stability). As Beijing's influence on the world-stage grows and as the ascendancy of Western-style democracy falters in the face of growing populisms, as well as the wider factionalism of contemporaneity, it is also one that the rest of the world will perforce increasingly have to come to terms with. Those committed to the persistence of criticality as a necessary adjunct to the relationship between aesthetics and social development will perhaps take at least some comfort from syncretic Confucianism's codification of the aesthetic as a means of proximate-oblique critical intervention, albeit one whose indeterminacy presents itself almost automatically as weak from a rationalising post-Enlightenment perspective.

Notes

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³ Anonymous, 'Data leak reveals how China 'brainwashes' Uighurs in prison camps', *BBC News*; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-50511063>; accessed 11 December 2019

⁴ Peter Beaumont and Rod Austin, 'Guantánamo Bay branded a 'symbol of Islamophobia of Trump presidency', *The Guardian*; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/11/guantanamo-bay-branded-a-stain-on-us-human-rights-record>; accessed 11 December 2019

⁵ Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, 'China Said It Closed Moslem Detention Camps. There's Reason to Doubt That', *The New York Times*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/world/asia/china-xinjiang-muslim-detention.html>; accessed 11 December 2019

⁶ Anonymous, 'Chronicle of Reform and Opening-up in China', *China People's Daily*; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/peoples-daily-online/business/chronicle-reform-opening-up-china/>; accessed 3 December 2019

⁷ See, for example, John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974

⁸ See Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008

⁹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013, p. 2

¹⁰ Anonymous, 'Art Helps Rural Rejuvenation-2019 International Forum on Social Aesthetic Education and Practitioner Conference Opens', *China People's Daily*; <https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/rmh6795230/rmh6795230?from=timeline&isappinstalled=0>; accessed 10 December 2019

¹¹ Anonymous, 'Fujian', *Wikipedia*; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fujian#Song_dynasty; accessed 8 December 2019

¹² See anonymous, 'Joseph Beuys. Every Man is an Artist 1978' (sic), *Tate*; <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beauys-joseph-beuys-every-man-is-an-artist-ar00704>; accessed 9 December 2019

¹³ Glora Davies, *Worrying about China*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007

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