Biography

Margaret Hillenbrand is Associate Professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture at the University of Oxford. Her new book, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What not to Know in Contemporary China*, will appear with Duke University Press in 2020.

The Cliffhangers: Suicide Shows and the Aesthetics of Protest in China

Over the last couple of decades, workers in China's vast and poorly regulated construction industry have increasingly turned to suicidal performance as a radical means of securing wage arrears. These so-called "suicide shows" have drawn attention as expressions of escalating labor unrest in China, and thus have mostly been read through a political science prism. But these displays, precisely in their dramatic dimension, also open themselves up to a culturalist, even aesthetic analysis: they braid together mixed threads, from the Chinese tradition of suicide as righteous remonstrance to present-day forms of creatively embodied protest in the era of Occupy. At the same time, though, these workers have also fashioned an aesthetic intervention which is very much of their own devising. This paper draws on an empirical base of two dozen suicide shows posted on video-sharing sites to argue that these performances force a visual rupture in the narcotically identikit Chinese cityscape, as the nation's new poor, so often invisible to their social others on the street, climb to the highest urban summits and command extreme attention. Once there, they turn the rooftop into a site of performance which acts out the excruciating distinction between those who belong within the *polis* and the dispossessed: those who are cast out from the circle of humanity and are thus excluded from all avenues to legal and economic redress when they are wronged. As such, "cliffhanging" in China exemplifies what I call the fractious form, in which a tense encounter between different class actors under the regime of precarity becomes the genesis for a volatile cultural practice.

Keywords

Protest
Suicide
Aesthetics
Precarity
China

The Cliffhangers: Suicide Shows and the Aesthetics of Protest in China

Ten construction workers cling by their fingers from the ledge of an industrial water tower 34 meters high. They are roped together from a centerpoint at the top of the tower: if one falls, they all do. A low-flying drone captures footage of their strained faces as they hug the smooth sides of the building (figure 1). On the top of the tower lounges the enigmatic figure of a man: the ropemaster in whose hands rest the fates of those who dangle from the edge. Overhead, the drone swoops and circles, panning round the circular tower from man to man before sweeping back to shoot the city in panorama, while a bleak soundtrack plays. Down below, traffic on the adjacent highway flows on, while pedestrians and a lone cyclist pass directly beneath the tower without looking up. The only watchers are two women, one of whom films the scene on her phone. Entitled *Bu sha zhi en* 不杀之恩 (*The Mercy of Not Killing*, 2017), the clip is part of is a site-specific installation video by the Chinese conceptual artist Chen Chenchen 陈陈陈.[1] Chen Chenchen's website, where the clip can be found, also displays several photographs of the performance, including a jubilant final shot in which the men, who've clambered safely to the top of the tower, raise their hands in smiling salute – presumably savoring the mercy of having not been killed. The critical consensus on the performance is that it enjoins on spectators a deep kind of ethical contemplation, that it "raises questions about common humanism and universal connection, voluntary compassion and the suspension of brutality in everyday life" (Miller 2018).[2]

Yet the performance is also a striking example of delegated performance art from China which steps calculatingly into inhumane territory to generate its effects. This point is made clear in a "making-of" documentary about the performance which is also available on Chen's website. It makes no bones about the artist's borderline ruthlessness towards the hired construction crew as he strives for the visual look he wants. It opens with vertigo-inducing

shots of the water tower, in which the camera tilts queasily upwards. The scene then cuts to a tense exchange between Chen and the intermediaries who are managing his relationship with the construction crew – a counter-intuitive set-up given that the stated purpose of the work is to stage and probe "interpersonal relations." Chen and the intermediaries are arguing about how to suspend the men from the tower. "That hook won't hold … our insurance won't cover that," says one middleman. "But in the movies you never see any ropes … we've all seen how cliffhanger shots (*xuanya jingtou* 悬崖镜头) work in the movies," counters Chen. The other intermediary steps in, saying, "I've just talked (to one of the guys). Seems he has experience of doing maintenance work at high altitude. So I think they may have their own way of keeping themselves safe. They may not go along with your new method." Twice she tells Chen that he may need to find a different crew to work with, but he persists with the arrangement. Judging from the final result, in which the ropes are barely visible, he gets what he wants. Towards the end of the film, Chen finally gets around to interacting with the hired hands himself. "Do as many facial experiences as you can in those four minutes," he instructs them; "Flatten your waist against the wall." These brief directorial interventions aside, though, the documentary focusses on Chen's philosophical exposition of the work: his argument that choreographing the jeopardy of others allows for an intimation of our humanity. As he puts it, "the situation of the cliffhanger is a highly abstract and artistic one: a kind of focused ritual takes place on top of that beacon."[3]

In what follows, I take Chen's installation as the oblique departure point for a discussion of what he calls the "cliffhanger" in contemporary Chinese cultural politics. Cliffhanging, I argue here, constitutes a significant performative practice in China today, in which opposing class actors encounter each other across a real-time physical abyss. My focus is the recently emerged ritual of the so-called suicide show, or *tiaolou xiu* 跳楼秀, in which

aggrieved precarious workers, mostly employed in the construction industry, threaten to jump from a high-rise building – sometimes one they have built themselves – if their wage arrears are not paid by the building site foreman or a higher-level boss. The suicide show is often carefully choreographed. Many are also filmed, and subsequently find their way onto mainstream news and social media platforms. To date, suicide shows have mostly drawn attention as expressions of escalating labor unrest in China, and have thus been read through a political science prism. This disciplinary take is summarized in the work of Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin (2010: 145), who describe "a variety of violent actions taken by construction workers which were no doubt caused by the political economy of the construction industry".[4] But these displays, precisely in their dramatic dimension – in their status as "shows" (*xiu* 秀) – also open themselves up to a more culturalist, even aesthetic analysis. To an extent, they are what Charles Tilly (2008: 5) calls "contentious performances," politico-cultural recitals in which disadvantaged actors work from a scripted repertoire of public actions that "make claims bearing on someone else's interests". More than this, though, cliffhanging is a pre-eminent instance of what I call the fractious form, in which a tense standoff between different class actors under the regime of precarity becomes the genesis for a volatile cultural practice.

I begin by sketching the backdrop to the suicide show, a practice born in the crucible of precarious labor, whose threats gain clout against a recent history of actual self-slaughter in China's factory regime. I then read these shows as a fractious form which braids together mixed cultural threads, from the Chinese tradition of suicide as righteous remonstrance to present-day forms of creatively embodied protest in the era of Occupy. In the main body of the essay, though, I draw on an empirical base of two dozen videos to argue that these workers have fashioned an aesthetic intervention which is also very much of their own devising. This creative practice plays in part – no doubt inadvertently – on the two etymological meanings of the term "precarious": to be in danger of falling, and to be a

supplicant who seeks to obtain rights or goods by entreaty. At the same time, these shows also force a visual rupture in the narcotically identikit Chinese cityscape, as the nation's new poor, so often invisible to their social others on the street, climb to the highest urban summits and command extreme media attention. Once there, they turn the rooftop into a site of performance which acts out the excruciating distinction between those who belong within the *polis* and the dispossessed: those who have been cast out from the circle of humanity and are denied legal and economic redress when they are wronged. In suicide shows, that place of exile is metaphorized as the looming freefall on the brink of which the protestor teeters in full view of impromptu audiences on the street below. The suicide show wrests this situation away the domain of conceptual art, and charges it instead with the raw language of the gesture: the silent man, poised at the edge of annihilation, whose strung-out, shaking body compels a reckoning between those whom the state considers human and those it has banished beyond the pale. That looming space between the two, between the rooftop and the street, connotes social space without a safety net; it is a visualization writ large of Agamben's "state of exception" (2005). This is the zone of the outcast: the refugee, the immigrant, the disappeared. But it is also the state of existing without rights and protection to which not just the few but the many fear they might be consigned in China's at once closely patrolled but tensely precarious society.

Wage rage

We are all now more than familiar with the shift to precarious labor. This is labor that is contingent, casualized, piecemeal; labor without sureties, benefits, or prospects; labor that takes and gives little back. In China, this shift has been felt all the more acutely because, once upon a time in the Maoist era, labor was glorious, blessed by the state, and lauded for its national significance. Called *laogong* 劳工, it was a sacrosanct calling, and workers themselves, as they built the "new China," enjoyed dignity and a degree of rights that accrued

to them precisely because they labored. Since the reform era, labor has acquired a new name: *dagong* 打工, or working for the boss. That term carries strong connotations of degrading dispensability; it is exploitative, often with the state's tacit blessing; it comes with no iron rice bowl even though migrant workers have built the new postsocialist China with their blood and sweat. Workers in China's vast construction industry eke out lives at the sharp end of this shift,[5] and have suffered a particularly precipitous decline in status and conditions.[6] They work intense, irregular hours in unsafe conditions; they mostly lack union representation or other routes to compensation in the event of injury; they have been denied urban household registration (*hukou*), which provides access to benefits, welfare, services, and education; they endure a low or no-wage regime, typically based not on contractual arrangements but on verbal agreements with labor subcontractors which can be shirked or disowned, often because the necessary funds are not yet forthcoming from the top-tier property kingpins (Pun and Xu 2011: 11–12). This nexus of factors – the punishing work in a state of physical jeopardy, the exclusion from the circle of rights, the withheld pay and consequent need for hapless entreaty – enforces on China's construction workers a lived experience of precarity, of the body, of the cortex, which gives that term a set of meanings which, as I suggested earlier, go right back to its etymological roots.

Workers have certainly tried to get hold of their wages via legal means, and continue to do so. But these efforts frequently end up "stuck in an inefficient bureaucracy with few alternative channels of redress" (Fu 2018: 107). Indeed, despite repeated mantras from municipal and state authorities about the unimpeachability of the law in labor disputes, migrant construction workers have come to understand that these grievance mechanisms do not really work for them – principally because few have contracts while their unregistered status means that they struggle to mount legal challenges against employers in court (Swider 2015: 45). It is in this context of frustrated justice that workers have turned, since the late

1990s, to the politics of radical performance. As Wanning Sun puts it, "Intuitively, and without much theoretical knowledge of the power of the media, migrant workers … realize they may need to escalate their action to the next level of publicity in order to gain voice, recognition and compensation" (2014: 58). Or as one protestor puts it, "We have to get hold of you guys (the media). Without you there's no way forward" (n.a. 2015). As a consequence, these performances are multiply, strategically mediated. The immediate performance dynamic occurs on-site between the workers, bystanders, emergency services, and site foremen or subcontractors. In most cases, the central dramatic tension plays out between the jumper and the subcontractor, as the latter tries to persuade the former down from the rooftop by brandishing wads of banknotes, sometimes even enlisting an intermediary to climb up to the protestor's perch, cash in hand. This on-site performance is recorded, by news media organizations or increasingly by citizen journalists, and then posted online. Video-sharing sites both inside and outside China contain footage of such suicide shows, ranging from slick TV broadcasts to muddy amateur recordings. Further mediation occurs "below the line," as online commentators post impassioned responses to the videos.

Only one of the suicide shows I have found shows a protestor actually jumping. The rest belong within the limbo space of the cliffhanger, a term that becomes visceral as the bodies of the protestors take up positions that test gravity in agonizing ways. Some commentators on these performances argue that their status as eye-catching shows, rather than actual jumps, has dulled their edge, as spectators no longer need to look on with their hearts in their mouths (Sun 2014: 66). But audiences in China also know well enough that the nation's most precarious people are sometimes prepared to trade their lives in order to stake moral claims that will not be heard any other way. The most egregious case is the wave of suicides at the Foxconn industrial park in Shenzhen, which peaked in 2010 when 18 employees killed themselves by jumping from buildings in protest at "labor camp" conditions

at the complex, forcing the company to install safety nets around the site.[7] Then in 2015, 30 cabdrivers tried to take their own lives by swallowing poison in Beijing after their petition against new regulations for renewing vehicle licenses had failed (Hong 2015). 35 cases of self-immolation occurred in Tibet in 2012 alone, as protestors stripped of other political options carried out extreme embodied remonstrance against the repressions of the Chinese state (McGranahan and Litzinger 2012). Within this context of suicide-as-protest, the cliffhangers of China's construction industry are not merely showmen, purveyors of a spectacle whose credibility depreciates through over-exposure. They are the makers of a charged political ritual which draws its power from a rich repertoire of historic and contemporary resources. It demands attention both as a complex iteration of suicide-as-protest – in which suicidal ideation can be as threatening as the act of jumping itself – and also as an exemplar of the fractious forms born of strident class clash under China's regime of precarity.

Not the why but the who

As anthropologist Margery Wolf (1975: 112) once noted, "In the West we ask of a suicide, 'Why?' In China the question is more commonly 'Who? Who drove her to this? Who is responsible?". Although Wolf's work on suicide concerned itself predominantly with the methods used by persecuted rural women to protest unjust social relations, her argument about the "who" rather than the "why" ricochets both backwards and forwards in Chinese historical time. Every year in early summer when Chinese people race dragon boats and eat sticky rice dumplings at the Duanwu festival, they are in part commemorating the ancient statesman Qu Yuan, who was banished by the emperor and drowned himself in the river Miluo in protest while villagers threw rice into the water to distract the hungry fishes from his corpse. It is common enough to see Qu Yuan's death described as a parable of loyalty, as an assertion of the identity of the Chinese scholar-official and his venerable duty to

remonstrate against the depredations of imperial despotism (Schneider 1980: 48–86). But it may be truer to say that Qu Yuan's story specifically authorizes suicide as a form of protest in the elite political repertoire at the same time as it provides an annual rite in which that method can be reaffirmed in ways that are insistently vernacular. Indeed, this socially distributed ritual of remembering may help explain why the handbook of psychiatric classifications that was published in China up until 2001 states that "suicide may be motivated by hopelessness, *protest against injustice*, fear of punishment, superstition and mental disorders … Most people who commit suicide do not suffer from mental disorders" (quoted in Lee and Kleinman 2000: 312).

Lee and Kleinman (301) also observe that Chinese people "celebrate, remember and reaffirm resistance as a part of their cultural identity". Yet more than a tie that binds, protest suicide is a mode of dissensus in which the ultimate gift is proffered up to a reluctant recipient in order to acquire socio-political capital for the donor – and which thus lends itself readily to class-on-class strife. This is Lucien Blanco's (1978: 280) point when he notes of pre-Communist China that "one of the most popular ways to take revenge upon a pitiless creditor is to commit suicide before his door" – a practice that has been updated for the post-reform era by peasants who protest unjust taxation by depositing a corpse in front of the local cadre's home (Bernstein and Lü 2003: 122). In other words, suicide-as-protest is a civilizationally sanctioned means via which exploited people can pressurize the bureaucracy, using the remonstrance of the most virtuous of all Chinese public servants – Qu Yuan – as precedent. As Diana Fu (2017: 111) observes, performance threats pose the blunt question: "What kind of state would drive its citizens to the brink of suicide in order to claim their basic legal rights?". But more than merely condemnation, the resort to the rooftop is also a means of self-ennoblement, as the protestors directly contest not just the illegality of wage

arrears but their own status as "illegals" – people not deserving of the law and its protection – by arrogating to themselves a mode of petition whose origins lie in high statecraft.

Blood on the streets, shit on the walls

Suicide shows, whether consciously or otherwise, also stake their claims within global genealogies of extreme embodied protest. In a reductionist sense, protest is always an expression of corporeality, of ourselves as flesh-and-blood entities. As Basil Rogger (2018: 42) puts it, "protest arises from the human body. This body is the primary means of expression of and the utmost commitment to the cause that is attested to in a protest". And precisely for this reason, those who find themselves *in extremis* will often instrumentalize the body from the inside out to make metaphors of resistance, using all matter available. Thus blood often becomes the stuff of protest, from the writings that Cultural Revolution dissident Lin Zhao penned on her prison bedsheets after piercing her veins with a hair clip (Xi 2018: 4), to the "Red Shirts" protestors in Bangkok who drew quantities of plasma from their bodies and used it to anoint the streets as they clamored against governmental policy in 2010 (Viernes 2015: 118–140). Political detainees at the Maze Prison outside Belfast went further during the "Dirty Protest" of 1978, when they daubed the walls of their cells with excrement to protest their status as common prisoners and the violent treatment to which they were subjected by prison officers when they used the lavatories and showers (Coogan 2002). Embodied protests of this kind are core context for China's suicide shows, not simply because they exemplify Karin Andriolo's point that "words do not grip unless one gives them hands to do so, unless one embodies them" (Andriolo 2006: 102), but more fully because they connect with her argument about self-sacrifice as the protest gift that keeps on giving. As she puts it (105), "the meaning of the pain endured is one's own to bestow, is inalienable, and fuels the capacity to endure more".

These examples of corporeal protest which use the body's effluvia to speak truth to power belong within the same spectrum of experience that makes a construction worker dangle himself from an urban precipice. All show that embodied protest is a highroad to desperation, in which injustice takes an ever more visible toll on the integrity of the body. The endpoint of this journey is, of course, writ large by the fatal hunger strikes that the Maze prisoners later pursued, and by the man in the video mentioned earlier who finally jumped from the building's edge. In this context, the body that leaches blood and shit, the body that suspends itself recklessly from a rooftop, is auguring its own end in eschatological terms at the same time as it reclaims that imminent decay from the ignominy of political incarceration or a life lived beyond the protection of the law. Maze prisoners, surrounded by their own waste in conditions so appalling that a visiting archbishop was "unable to speak for fear of vomiting" (quoted in Coogan 2002: 265), were on one level simply acting out the status to which the state had consigned them as convicted terrorists, even though the confessions of many had been extracted under duress. They were performing their abject identities, just as the cliffhanger stages his utter dispensability as he swings from the scaffolding in high winds. But at the same time, protests such as these are like baptismal fire, since by allowing their bodies to own and show, as deadly metaphor, the process whereby they are cast beyond the pale, the protestors project that degradation back to its origins in governmental injustice. This is Allen Feldmen's (1991: 236) point when he notes that "The act of hunger striking purified and decriminalized the striker, but the queue of corpses emerging from behind prison walls would shake the moral legitimacy of the British state".

Contentious performances, or, the essential creativity of protest

Yet perhaps what these examples reveal above all else is a central truth of protest: that to agitate in this way is to engage power and the polity creatively, and often in overtly aestheticized ways. In his pioneering work on black insurgency in the 1950s and 1960s, Doug

McAdam (1983: 735) noted that "Lacking institutionalized power, challengers must devise protest techniques that offset their powerlessness". He called this process "tactical innovation," thus explicitly situating it in the domain of warfare. Unquestionably, much protest does play out in the gladiatorial arena of David and Goliath, in which small sleights of hand can sometimes shake the mighty. But the devising and choreographing of "tactical innovation" is also a necessarily creative process, which is why many protestors often make a point of vocalizing their artistry. After splattering Bangkok with blood, for example, one of the Red Shirt leaders shouted "We have our own art" (quoted in Viernes 2015: 119). On one level, this creativity is about inventiveness, about the capacity to coin an arresting idiom for struggle – whether this is black bloc, *gilets jaunes*, or painting the city red. Protestors, for this reason, are often masters of the meme, possessors of high visual literacy, generators of new cultural scripts which make the lexicon of contemporary life richer. But beyond the level of the gimmick, the slogan, or the hashtag that goes viral, protest is akin to and indeed deeply part of art because, as James Jasper (1997: 13) argues, protestors "much like artists … are at the cutting edge of society's understandings of itself as it changes … they sometimes generate new ways of understanding the complexities of the human condition". Protestors, then, are practitioners of the avant-garde, divided from their brethren at the vanguard of the art world by only a paper-thin margin.

> In coining the term avant-garde, Henri de Saint-Simon wrote in 1825 that
>
> … the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas … and in that way above all we exert an electric … influence (cited in Egbert 1967: 343).

His manifesto extrapolates itself smoothly to China's cliffhanging vanguard, who take the streets as their canvas and the high-rise as their marble, and who electrify those below and online with their message about spent hopes for justice. But to liken their protests to art, to

aestheticize the act of suicidal ideation – even when it is performed deliberately in front of spectators, and with every intention of connecting with bigger audiences online – might seem a depoliticizing move. Suicide shows in China are about wages, not art; so to suggest otherwise is surely to trivialize radical struggle of this kind. Jasper, though, is right to point out that culture is all too often the missing link in scholarship on protest, which prefers to scope out this kind of civic dissent through a political science prism that is ultimately skewed and partial. As Jasper (1997: 16) puts it, "Most scholars, by concentrating on citizenship movements and by slighting culture (especially its moral and emotional dimensions), have inadequately understood the causes, unfolding, and effects of modern protest". Protest becomes meaningful, like art, precisely at the moment in which it permits new ways of seeing. In plain terms, China's suicide shows are art forms because they push at the limits of the politically visible. Like avant-garde aesthetics – *as* avant-garde aesthetics – they commandeer new domains of possibility, in which months of unpaid toil can suddenly morph into stacks of 100-yuan bills when the ultimate risk is brokered.

These new domains of possibility are, though, hard-won. Belittling media discourse on suicide shows in China, the tone of which has switched "from one of compassion to one of mockery" in recent years, often castigates the protestors as manipulative sensationalists (Sun 2014: 67). In one video, for example, part of a state media news broadcast in Zhejiang province, the newscaster declares that

> Late payment of wages is totally impermissible, but if our migrant worker friends who find themselves facing this situation climb onto a rooftop and threaten to jump off, this is tantamount to choosing the wrong route towards obtaining labor rights (n.a. 2018).

According to this rhetoric, cliffhanging is legally needless and morally culpable, and so those who climb to the rooftop are showmen in the most derogatory sense.[8] Or as another

commentator puts it, “This behavior has been given a strange name: the ‘jumping show’. The subtext here suggests that the jumper doesn’t really plan on dying, it’s just about putting on a show. Putting on a show is fake and so deserves no sympathy” (Shi 2014). Wanning Sun argues that the use of the word “show” in such accounts registers a shift from tragedy to comedy in the perception of these protests, a disparagement that compromises their status as crusades for social justice.[9] Yet the ideological slight actually runs deeper, and relates to the right to perform at all. Performance, after all, can only ever be about simulation. Staging, impersonation, playacting, dramatization: all specifically denote the wearing of a guise, the emoting of fixed lines. Thus to criticize a suicide show for being performative – whether in tragic or comic – is a perverse denial of its exact social purpose: rather like hiring a construction worker for his labor and refusing to pay him for it, in fact. Worse still, to rebuke a would-be jumper for being “fake” has its own semantic subtext: namely, the assumption that actually plummeting to one’s death is the only way to vouchsafe the authenticity of the protest.

In this sense, it becomes clear that suicide shows are dismissed not simply because their initial tragic edge has become attenuated, but because the very act of performing carries a cultural value that construction workers are not societally “allowed” to access. At stake here is not merely the right to protest, but the right to use cultural means to do so. As such, the attempted denial of performative rights has the effect of eliding the precise political aesthetic of the suicide show, which manifests a highly evolved sense of the allegorical reach that these embodied performances can attain. In his work on “contentious performances,” Tilly (2008: xiii) argued that protestors in 19th-century France “drew their claim-making performances from standardized, limited repertoires … but only changed them bit by bit”. From this core finding, Tilly elaborated the dual concepts of performance and repertoire, in which protest is a stage on which the players put on a stock set of shows, and these shift their

content only gradually through time. China's suicide shows certainly follow fixed rules about suicide as the most politically punitive of gifts; but they also depart from Tilly's notion of rigid repertoire by smashing pre-existing protest paradigms to create a new vocabulary for dissent. This vocabulary, I will argue next, strives to create a visual lexicon for precarious experience in contemporary China, and it draws its creative spark from the explicit staging of class conflict.

Life on a ledge

Limbs dangle from the edge of a high-rise; a protestor is bent double, incapacitated by vertigo atop a tower crane; a small cluster of men balances, like birds perched on a telegraph wire, on the ledge of a skyscraper; others hang silently from scaffolding as if they were acrobats, but with stricken, tearful faces; a man, persuaded down from the roof of a department store, can barely stand and has to be supported by firefighters as his legs give way; protestors scale towers that are visibly still under construction, as the sound of wind howling on the rooftop muddies the audio; huge yellow inflatable mattresses are blown up and positioned on the street in readiness for the jump (n.a 2013; n.a. 2016; n.a. 2017a; 2017b). All these are moments from suicide shows posted on video-sharing sites such as YouTube, Bilibili, iQiyi, Pear Video, and Tencent Video over the last five years. What's more, several of these scenes recur repeatedly across the many videos of suicide shows available online, which follow a relatively fixed choreography and order of play. They constitute, as such, the basic visual language of this protest form, and it is a language which allegorizes the queasy jeopardy of life on a ledge, the precarious state in which tens of millions of workers in contemporary China now subsist. Precarity, it should be made clear, is seldom crudely co-terminous with fragility. It is a condition in which brittleness co-exists with resilience, and the visual language of the suicide show captures this dialectic via the courage and tenacity of the protestors. Yet this is not the perky kind of resilience

immortalized in the Great Depression-era photograph "Lunch atop a Skyscraper," in which eleven construction workers ate sandwiches and shared smokes on an iron girder, while swinging their legs hundreds of meters above the New York streets. The image, staged in 1932 to promote the new Rockefeller Building, acquired its iconicity in large part because of the men's insouciance, and the way that mood became a cipher for American fortitude and optimism in the face of extreme economic shock. Integral to the photograph is the connection between labor and aspiration, and the implicit conviction that resilience will bring its own rewards.

Several suicide shows by Chinese construction workers instantly recall that fabled image for those viewers who know it. But the rooftop, and its interplay of risk and hardiness, is parlayed into different meanings here. Precariousness, as mentioned earlier, suggests both hanging in the balance and being suspended there at someone else's mercy, only a plea away from falling. Suicide shows create a metaphoric structure in which the violent dynamics of that state are inscribed onto urban space. Waiting for wages that never come is, indeed, to be poised at the edge of an abyss: a black hole in which, as the video testimonies make clear, lie not just hardship, eviction, and hunger, but also divorce, the loss of children, and estrangement from home and family since there is no money to make the journey back at Chinese New Year. Like balancing on a precipice, the difference between wages and arrears is a gut-churning knife-edge. Rather than the brio of the New York workers, China's cliffhangers show their hardiness via the physical toll that high altitude takes on them – the vertigo, the wobbly legs – whilst still persevering with the performance script. This visual vocabulary is backed up by the lexicon of despair that can be heard on the soundtrack of these shows. Viewers hear terms such as "forced into a hopeless position" 被逼无奈 (*beibi wunai*); "hounded to death" (*bisi* 逼死); "extreme measures" 极端的方式 (*jiduan de*

fangshi); “to take a desperate path” 走投无路 (*zoutou wulu*); “to make an unwise move out of utter helplessness” 无奈出此下策 (*wunai chuci xiace*); and to fight for “money earned in blood and sweat” 血汗钱 (*xuehanqian*).

Meanwhile, all that holds back the jumper back from the finality of the sheer drop is the chimera of payment: the outside chance that the rule of law will, after all, apply to him if – paradoxically – he takes that law into his own hands. This is why a core section of many suicide shows focusses on the chaotic process in which the emergency services call the boss; the boss shows up, all of a sudden flush with cash to pay wages when before there was none; and these bright red banknotes are perilously conveyed to the rooftop. This sequence, a stock staple of the suicide show genre, allegorizes the strategic caprice of the law in China. The money is always there, it’s just that gaining legal purchase on it is as slippery as gripping hold of a rope on a cliff face in high winds. This same notion of the law as an utterly contingent thing surfaces in different form via the inflatable mattresses that the emergency services place at the bottom of the building to cushion the jumper’s fall. On the figurative plane, they are an ironic stand-in for the social safety net that is never furnished for so many of China’s floating population, who cannot access *hukou*-based rights. Social safety nets, by definition, are wraparound and fixed in place, so their mutation into a portable mattress, wheeled out, blown up, and placed at a guestimated spot on the street becomes further visual code for what it means to belong to China’s precariat.

Skyline, eyeline

As in all good parables, there is both a stark simplicity to the narrative lines here and a treacherous depth of meaning below. On one level, it is entirely logical for construction workers seeking unpaid wages to climb to the top of the very same high-rises that they themselves have built, the same scaffolding that they have constructed, the same tower cranes

that they operate, and stage a public grievance there. What other meaningful sites of protest are available to them, after legally normative petitioning has failed? But as Andriolo (2006: 102) notes, suicide-as-protest is also rooted in a more symbolic logic of mimicry: "The body becomes the site on which self-destructive mimesis denounces the wrongs that humans have wrought"; or, I make manifest in my self-ruination what you have done to me in order to show the world your injustice. In this context, to use the very architectural structures via which labor has been injuriously extracted as the site of extreme protest doubles down on the symbolism. Both the body and the building it made become part of a ritual performance, as the back-to-back exploitation of hard grind for no pay is made real. And to the extent that these skyscrapers metaphorize China's own giddy rise, suicide shows find figurative form of their own for the fact that that this success is built on the ruined lives of those whose labor made it happen.

Even more than this, though, to take a stand on such a perch is to make a radical statement about the politics of visibility. China's most precarious people often hover just beyond the gaze of those who have a greater entitlement to the city and its citizenship. Migrant workers may build the skyscrapers, clean the streets, and sort the garbage, but they struggle to enter into the seeable state of civic identity. Suicide shows violently disrupt this condition of invisibility, mostly because they turn the distant skyline into an ideologically disobedient eyeline. The contemporary Chinese cityscape, as many commentators note, has acquired a lookalike anonymity in recent years. In a manifesto of 2015, the architect Ma Yansong 马岩松 calls China's conurbations "stock cities," "copies of one another," full of "standardized architecture … that could be put into use in any locale, for any project." He writes (2014: 49): "My impressions of them are so muddled that I can't even be sure which ones I've visited before". Within this terrain of numb uniformity, skyscrapers and architectural mega-projects act as necessary peaks and summits which project power into the

built environment and tell urban denizens that the space they inhabit is both ultra-modern and created by the state; through this panorama political elites attempt to "orchestrate social control, manufacture consent and promote consumption" (Broudehoux 2013: 52–3). Even high-rises without pretensions to starchitectural monumentality in China's second- or third-tier cities belong within this rhetoric, which decrees that the metropolis should have a skywards orientation that leverages age-old associations between the steeple and the power of the state.

Suicide shows blight this discourse in politically intolerable ways. Figures 2 and 3, for example, show the huge signage for the Bailian Anqing shopping mall in Anqing city, Anhui province, the site for a suicide show just before Chinese New Year in 2017 (n.a. 2017a). In the first image, a protestor is perched on one of the giant shiny characters spelling out the name of the mall, while other protestors swing between adjacent lettering. Already, the men are an affront to the glossy mall and its injunctions to consume. In the second image, though, the videomaker – whose identity is unclear – has climbed to the rooftop and now films from behind the signage, thus revealing the complex system of struts that holds it in place. It is via this metal framework, invisible from the street, that the protestors have managed to climb onto the lettering. As such, the front and back shots of the video satirize both the high-spec China dream, with its fantasies of untrammeled consumption, and the invisible labor that builds this utopia whilst being denied entry into it. This language of dissensus is also arresting in shows which are staged on the apparatus of construction: scaffolding, birdcages, tower cranes. Even more than unfinished buildings, these protest sites metaphorize the strain and danger of toil in this industry; but in their radical play of incongruity they also defamiliarize the banality of the high-rise Chinese cityscape.

Neil Leach (1999: 33–54) argues that contemporary architecture narcotizes the denizens of the city, operating as an anesthetic for dissent. This critique echoes what Rem

Koolhaas (1995: 1250–1) calls “sprawl, sameness … a city without history created on a … surface”, a “fractal” which repeats its form from laptops up to skyscrapers and dulls political will. Figures 4 and 5 interrupt this seduction into apathy. The protestors who balance on scaffolding, or who teeter from the extended limb of a tower crane, insert a volatile subjectivity into the cement and concrete of the city, with its its huge bulk of hard matter, its overwhelming metaphysics of material. These protestors are matter out of place, not simply because they are migrants in the city, but specifically as precarians who demand visibility by appearing in the most ideologically inopportune of places. This misalignment is conveyed in the many videos which use post-production software tools to draw a red ring round the protestors as they occupy their uncanny lookouts: viewers need visual help locating these people in places they are not supposed to be. These suicide shows – as they unsettle the slick architectural order with irruptions of the small, the personal, the unpredictable, the insurgent – present a self-endangering *détournement*, a situationism in which the spectacle-driven ambitions of the Chinese city are flipped around via the figure of the man who turns the skyscraper, an agent of apathy in the built world, into something suddenly political by risking his own life. The very horizon which stifles debate is reactivated into a zone of contention.

More than this, and in a qualitative difference from the Maze hungerstrikers – whose protests were shielded from public view – China’s cliffhangers contest their social invisibility by deploying the mediated image of the body-as-weapon. As suggested earlier, the performativity of suicide shows begins with the local and the immediate, but its real threat and leverage are exercised on the infinite publicness of video-sharing sites. Indeed, the specific aesthetic of the suicide show exploits this ambiguous space between the extreme amateurishness of cellphone footage – often captured by citizens now that official media are less inclined to report on these conflicts (Sun 2014: 65) – and the coalescence of the shows, with their set script, into something close to a recognized media genre in recent years,

established enough to have spawned its own satirical cartoons, for example. Viewers both know what to expect and don't, since the dynamics of cliffhanging always remain, by their very definition, prone to sudden sensory jolt. From this derives the power of the show's deployment of the mediatized body-as-weapon: the tension between script and shock, contingency and planning, shoddy production values and a savvy media awareness that the precarious body at high altitude has a rawness that can never quite be attenuated by familiarity.

Cliffhangers, rooftoppers, thrill-seekers

Perhaps it is for these reasons that cliff-edging has now crystallized as an aesthetic theme in China. The ledge or rooftop emerges and re-emerges in visual culture, not just as stereotypical liminal space, but as a vent in the oppressive urban fabric: a breathing space or breakout zone in which the human figure asserts a right to adventure or rebellion. An example is Xing Danwen's 邢丹文 series *Dushi yanyi* 都市演绎 (*Urban Fiction*, 2004-), in which the artist takes the small shiny scale models that have been so instrumental in the construction of China's deadringer cities, and populates them with tiny, transgressive humans. As Yomi Braester (2013: 66–7) has argued, the maquette is a vigorously ideological tool in Chinese state-driven urban planning. It mandates the law of duplication at the same time as creating projects ready for instant implementation, with an overbearingly utopian cast (64). Jeroen de Kloet (2016: 38) notes of *Urban Fictions* that it is often in the "liminal spaces of the city … like rooftops and balconies, where human drama occurs". The rooftop can be a murder scene; a venue for outdoor coupling; or, as in figures 6 and 7, a stage for an imminent white-collar suicide. In each case, the rooftop becomes a place of discarded strictures and inhibitions, which the homogeneity of the surrounding Plexiglas cityscape attempts to hold in place. Similar effects are visible in the photography of the Gao Brothers 高氏兄弟, whose

series Yong bu wangong de dasha 永不完工的大厦 (*Forever Unfinished Building*, 2002-) uses rooftops, ledges, risky apertures, and sheer drops to create a dialectic between civic obedience, as enforced by architectural design, and the impulse to waywardness, exhibitionism, violence, and suicide which breaking out of the building comes to symbolize.

The most extreme form of this process is the practice of rooftopping, a thrill-seeking subculture that has offshoots globally, but which assumes a sharper edge within the "narcotically" neutralizing cityscapes of China. Commentary on rooftopping in the international frame usually presents it as urban adventurism, a mode of pleasurable self-endangerment in which outlaws make unsecured ascents to architectural high altitude, partly for the adrenaline and partly for the fame they get from posting death-defying selfies on social media. Developing Stephen Lyng's notion of "edgework," or the voluntary pursuit of peril, some sociologists argue that rooftopping is an inevitable response to the tamed, grid-like cities of today – a point amplified in places where the cityscape is in thrall to state power and fashioned in its image (Garrett 2015). In China, though, rooftopping should also be understood as a practice which is only a hairbreadth away from the protest activities that I call cliffhanging. Obviously, both corporealize risk. But both are also legally precarious: only those with "guile and personal connections" can gain access to commercial skyscrapers in China as the police clamp down on rooftopping (Zhuang 2017); and more troublingly, wage protestors are now frequently detained by the authorities after making their descent. Most tellingly, rooftopping has taken on an activist tinge, particularly in Hong Kong, as thrill-seeking veers into the political domain and becomes a means through which causes can gain extreme photogenic visibility. Ultimately, cliffhanging has filtered its way into more overtly aesthetic spaces because of its power as political art, as a cultural practice born of challenge and contestation (Braester 2019: 8).[10]

Thus it is probably inevitable that cliffhanging is now subject to the kind of recuperative moves that dominant social forces so often perform on practices which possess destabilizing potential. This is shown in a recent mainstream romance film, *Di san zhong aiqing* 第三种爱情 (*The Third Way of Love*; dir. John H. Lee, 2015). Partway through comes a highly melodramatized rendering of a suicide show. Mr Wang, a worker left for dead by his employers after an industrial accident, has taken up position on the rooftop of a half-finished skyscraper swathed in complicated scaffolding, with a rickety-looking construction elevator on its side. His wife is having a panic attack at street level, while a huge crowd films the scene on smartphones. The male lead steps in to demand that the corrupt construction company pays the worker's hospital bill. This won't work, say the police: "He doesn't believe the construction contractors. He's demanding that his attorney gives him the cash in person or he'll jump." Enter Mr Wang's beautiful pro bono attorney, who publicly rebukes the predatory construction company before putting on a hard-hat and making the juddery ascent to the rooftop. The camera flic-flaks between her nauseous expression and her patent black stilettos as she quakes her way up a precipitous wooden ladder. The worker, meanwhile, gets scant screen time as he balances atop flimsy scaffolding shortly after having suffered a severe industrial injury. Despite all the appropriation, though, it might still be arguable that this scene retains some political value, since it stages the experience of cliffhanging, and the precarity which that incarnates, for the white-collar class. It seems to metaphorize the motto that "we are all precarious now."

"Our use of death is simply to testify that we were ever alive at all"

But the scene is better understood as a more problematic kind of recuperation. This is because it seeks to smooth over the inter-class strife in which all suicide shows are rooted. The pale-skinned, white-collared savior who delivers a suitcase full of cash to Mr Wang, risking her own safety in the process, acts as a fake social unguent in this scene of extreme

class friction, for the simple reason that her pro bono benevolence elides the core political truth about suicide shows. These contentious performances protest a caste system which is not primarily about the difference between white-collar and blue-collar work, or even between the "haves" and the "have-nots," but rather the much deeper ontological question of who is, and is not, accorded proper being in contemporary China. The protestor who threatens to jump off a rooftop because of unpaid wages is a person whose rights have been suspended, who must be willing to tender his life in order to gain the essentials necessary to live, who is denied legal redress when wronged but then will feel the full force of the law when he dares to transgress it. Consigned to what Agamben (1998: 170) calls the "zone of indistinction", the protestor who performs suicidal ideation is simply acting out the truth of his existence, which is a state poised precariously between full life and bare life, in Agamben's terms.

As he does so, this protestor acquires a visibility that is certainly boosted by the points I made earlier about the shock value of physical precarity at high altitude and the rupture this creates in a blandly seamless cityscape. But his eruption into visibility also exceeds those points. Bare life is life outside the *polis* – a fact made topographically real by the migrant encampments that encircle major Chinese cities – but it is also, and paradoxically, an intensely political identity. It is, in a core sense, the place where politics happens, the place where the decision about life and non-life – the ultimate power exercised by the sovereign state – is made incarnate. Precisely in the moment that he is denied legal rights, the outcast whom Agamben calls the *homo sacer* embodies the limits of the law: he shows where it ends, which is in himself. As such, the *homo sacer* can only be politically voiceless, since his appeals for justice fall on deaf ears. But his body can still "speak," and this is why the politics of the gesture are so crucial to the suicide show. Occasionally, the protestors do shout out from the rooftop; but their voices are swallowed by the wind and make no intelligible sound.

As these words fail to travel, drowned in the space between life and non-life, they turn the protestor who voices his grievance into someone who can only gesticulate, to whom the power of audible speech is not vouchsafed; or into someone whose cries have only a guttural, animalistic sound. More often, though, the construction workers remain wordless and impassive throughout their protest. Their bodies, in a state of strung-out jeopardy, do all the talking. This point is vivid in figure 8, which shows a protestor, naked from the waist up, his face pixelated, whose legs dangle from the roof edge. This is bare life, literally and at the limit, and the man's silent body, which quivers in stress, engages with those who watch not verbally but precisely as a body, in its tribulations. This point is made even more forcefully in the videos of suicide shows which feature the authoritative voiceover of a newscaster who, in the very act of commandeering the right to speak about the show, makes the body language of the protestors more politically poignant.

This power of the gesture as a language that speaks across the divide is even more intensely actualized in figures 9 and 10, which come from a video of a suicide show which took place in Lingbi County, Anhui Province, again just before Chinese New Year in 2017 (n.a. 2017c). The video opens with blurred images of four members of the emergency services, shot from behind, who are staring into a dazzling white space. They are remonstrating with a fifth person, who remains invisible until the minute-and-a-half mark. A trick of the light means that the figure of this man, who once again is protesting unpaid wages, gradually hoves into view as the video progresses. By the end of the clip, the viewer can see clearly that he is clinging to a metal window frame; but for most of the video, his body is a spectral presence, outlined darkly against an intense white backdrop, like a photographic negative emerging slowly from its chemical bath. More than this, the lighting set-up actually makes him appear suspended in mid-air, since the window frame remains invisible for most of the video. Poised improbably over the void, his body enacts – as gesture

– the precarious state of subsisting somewhere in the no-man's land between full life and bare life. The video ends after police officers and firefighters drag the man violently from the window ledge and into detention, thus making him hostage to the very legal system which his protest was attempting to access.

Fractious forms

In literal ways, this video also exemplifies the suicide show as a fractious form in precarious China. This term refers to a cultural practice which emerges from the status of precarity as a transversal phenomenon from which few are confidently and comfortably exempt. China, as is well known, is a society in which a large minority of the population lives in a zone close enough to a state of exception. That minority – the floating population, the *nongmingong* 农民工 – is so vast as to constitute a nation within the nation, and so ubiquitous as to be unmissable, even as many of their social "others" try hard not to see them. Their existence turns precarity into an atmospheric condition, which seeps into the thoughts and fears of the imminently precarious, the partially precarious, the formerly precarious, the might one-day-be-precarious, the never-want-to-be-precarious. Indeed, despite the mechanisms of social segregation which are so prevalent in China today, the dividing lines between precarians and their supposed social others are in practice blurred and all too crossable. This permeable condition epitomizes the state of exception: Agamben's central and evolving argument that dispossession should be understood, not as the exceptional plight of the few, but as an increasingly exemplary state which either describes or augurs the fate of the many.

Within this context, it makes little sense to categorize a politico-cultural form such as the suicide show as an exclusively subaltern practice. Rather, these performances play out precisely at the tense interface between different social groups and are more socially "distributed" than previous scholarship has allowed: as precarious practices, practices about

precarity, they are born not of isolatable class interests but emerge, as forms, from the generative clash between those interests. In one sense, then, these shows dramatize the violence of inter-class strife: they render "harmonious society" as farce. They are reports from the trenches of what Pun and Lu (2010: 144–145) call the "culture of violence" among China's aggrieved construction workers, whose lives are "deeply affected by quarrels, individual and collective fighting, attempts to damage buildings, bodily abuse and even suicidal behaviors".[11] Yet in their intensified staging of social friction – and real-time violence – suicide shows also go further than this. Ultimately, these contentious performances reveal how charged encounters between different class actors have the potential to give all present an apprehension of the imminent state of exception within a society that has tried to eliminate class as a category of political analysis whilst simultaneously enforcing caste as a core mode of governance. As they stage a violently intimate face-to-face across the divide – between protestors and police, between protestors and their real-time or online audiences – suicide shows deploy gesture to perform the meaning of bare life in the theatre of the everyday. These intense moments of intersubjectivity are the crucible for suicide shows as a fractious form that finds its birth not in commonality as consensus, but in the gathering awareness that what people share is their imminent vulnerability to outcast status, to the "necessary violence of development" in which some must be sacrificed in order to "improve the life chances of the rest" (Anagnost 2008: 514).

In large part, this happens because the suicidal protestor changes his class status – if only briefly – when he climbs to the rooftop. Quite paradoxically, the precariousness of his stance there, its sheer photogenic visibility, transforms him from a disenfranchised subaltern into a somebody who commands attention: from film crews, newscasters, passersby, online audiences, his own miscreant employers. As one construction site manager puts it: "You may not have heard this: migrant workers are the God now; you've got to keep them happy".

(quoted in Sun 2014: 70–71). This comment is flippant; but it nonetheless recognizes that the act of protest is also an assertion of social mobility and a rejection of assigned class status. And as it pushes and pulls at the rigidity of rank, the suicide show simultaneously draws its observers into a state of cognizance about how potentially close at hand the protestor on the rooftop without rights is to the person watching online or down below. The suicide show suggests, in short, that if class lines can be crossed in one direction then they are highly permeable the other way too: the rooftop and the street – the metaphoric zones of precarity and social shelteredness, respectively – can be traversed in an instant. This brings things back round to Chen Chenchen and his almost inexplicably cruel installation. While Chen argues that "the situation of the cliffhanger is a highly abstract and artistic one," it is tempting, in light of frequent suicide shows, to put a different interpretive gloss on his statement. Chen's installation, in which construction workers are choreographed into extreme jeopardy by an avant-garde artist, essentially reinstates the kind of sealed and bordered social world that the suicide show strives to undo. It makes precarity other people's problem precisely at a time when wage protestors in China are creating an aesthetics of protest that reveals, quite to the contrary, that social vertigo – a sense of being suspended just above the void – is the coming state, not for the few, but the many.

References

n.a. 2013. "Wei taoxin mingong shouchi 40 wan baitiao hanlei jiti tiaolou 为讨薪民工手持40 万白条含泪集体跳楼" (Tearful Migrant Workers Seeking Wages Stage a Group Suicide Show while Holding IOUs Worth 40,000 *Yuan*). *YouTube.com*, June 18. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5l01S7yPPs.

n.a. 2015. "Jinan: wei taoyao gongzi mingong jiti shangyan tiaolouxiu 济南：为讨要工资

民工集体上演跳楼秀” (In Jinan, Migrant Workers Seeking Wages Stage a Group Suicide Show). *iqiyi.com*, November 26. https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rrkbntzc.html

n.a. 2016. “Beijing shipai Zhongguancun wu mingong yu tiaolou wei taoxin chuci xiace 北京实拍中关村五民工欲跳楼为讨薪出此下策” (Footage from Zhongguancun in Beijing of Five Migrant Workers Seeking Wages who Rashly Threaten to Jump from a Rooftop). *YouTube.com*, June 1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2NXnxugCso.

n.a. 2017a. “Nianguan jiangzhi gongren taoxin wuguo xiang jiti tiaolou qingsheng 年关将至工人讨薪无果想集体跳楼轻生” (As Year End Approaches, a Group of Workers Unsuccessful in Securing Unpaid Wages Threaten to Jump from a Rooftop) *Tencent Video*, January 25. https://v.qq.com/x/cover/t436r94h83whux9/z0369flfvtr.html

n.a. 2017b. “Baogongtou wuding taoxin, gongdifang qu 30 wan laiquan 包工头屋顶讨薪，工地方取 30 万来劝” (Labour Contractor Climbs onto a Roof to Protest Unpaid Wages, Site Management Side Produces 30,000 *Yuan* to Persuade Him to Come Down)
Pearvideo.com, September 5. https://www.pearvideo.com/video_1149055.

n.a. 2017c. “Lingbi yiwei taoxinzhe yu tiaolou, jingcha xiaofang chenggong jiuren! 灵璧一位讨薪者欲跳楼，警察消防成功救人!” (In Lingbi a Person Seeking Wages Threatens to Jump from a Rooftop and is Successfully Rescued by Police and

Emergency Services). *Tencent Video*, January 25. https://v.qq.com/x/page/p0369lrsdwd.html.

n.a. 2018. "Zhejiang Wenzhou Ruian. Si ming gongren wei taoxin tiaolou qingsheng. Zuihou bei chu 6 ri juliu 浙江温州瑞安 四名工人为讨薪跳楼轻生 最后被处 6 日拘留" (In Ruian near Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, Four Workers Threaten to Jump from a Rooftop in Protest at Unpaid Wages and are Eventually Detained for 6 Days) bilibili.com, July 26. https://www.bilibili.com/video/av27819497/.

Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Anagnost, Ann. 2008. "From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-era China." *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3: 497–519.

Andriolo, Karin. "The Twice-Killed: Imagining Protest Suicide." *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1: 100–13.

Bernstein, Thomas P. and Xiaobo Lü. 2003. *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bianco, Lucien. 1978. "Peasant Movements." In *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 13, edited by John King Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker, 270–328. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Braester, Yomi. 2013. "The Architecture of Utopia: From Rem Koolhaas' Scale Models to RMB City." In *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Popular Culture and Art*, edited by Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, 61–75. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

_____. 2019. "Panorama as Method." *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 16, no. 2, forthcoming.

Broudehoux, Anne-Marie. 2010. "Images of Power: Architectures of the Integrated Spectacle

at the Beijing Olympics." *Journal of Architectural Education* 63, no. 2: 52–62.

Chan, Jenny and Ngai Pun. 2010. "Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 8, no. 37: 1–33.

Coogan, Tim Pat. 2002. *On the Blanket: The Inside Story of the IRA Prisoners "Dirty Protest"*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

de Kloet, Jeroen. 2016. "Rescuing History from the City." In *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space*, edited by Shirley Jordan and Christoph Lindner, 31–48. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Egbert, Donald D. 1967. "The Idea of 'Avant-garde' in Art and Politics." *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2: 339–66.

Feldman, Allen. 1991. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Feng Lei. 2003. "Mingong 'tiaolou xiu' bei jingxiang xiaofang Shenzhen jingfang cheng jiang duibi yancheng 民工'跳楼秀'被竞相效仿 深圳警方称将对此严惩 (Migrant Worker "Suicide Shows" Engage in Competitive Copycat. Shenzhen Police will Issue Severe Sanctions). *sohu.com*, January 7. http://news.sohu.com/46/79/news205557946.shtml

Fu, Diana. 2017. *Mobilizing without the Masses: Control and Contention in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Garrett, Bradley. 2015. "Meet the Rooftoppers: The Urban Outlaws who Risk Everything to Summit our Cities." *The Guardian*, February 17. https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/feb/17/rooftoppers-urban-explorers-risk-photographs-skyscrapers-bradley-garrett.

Hong Ning. 2015. "30 yu fangmin Beijing zisha weiguo 6 ren zao jing jiankong 30 余访民北

京自杀未果 6 人遭警检控" (More than 30 Petitioners Make Failed Suicide Attempts in Beijing; 6 are Prosecuted). *Epoch Times*, April 28. http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/15/4/28/n4422309.htm

Jasper, James M. 1997. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Koolhaas, Rem and Bruce Mau. 2002. *S, M, L, XL*. New York: Monacelli Press.

Leach, Neil. 1999. *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lee, John H., dir. 2015. *Di san zhong aiqing* 第三种爱情 (*The Third Way of Love*).

Lee, Sing and Arthur Kleinman. 2000. "Suicide as Resistance in Chinese Society." In *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, 221–40. New York: Routledge.

McAdam, Doug. 1983. "Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency." *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6: 735–54.

McGranahan, Carole and Ralph Litzinger. 2012. "Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet." *Cultural Anthropology*, April 9. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet.

McKenzie, Abby. 2017. "China's Artistic Stance against the Rising Tide of Anti-Global Sentiment." *Widewalls*, May 17. https://www.widewalls.ch/the-new-normal-ucca-beijing/.

Ma Yansong. 2014. *Shanshui chengshi* (*Shanshui City*). Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe.

Miller, Megan. 2018. "'The Mercy of Not Killing': Chenchenchen on 'Poor Sci-fi' and

Humanitarian Glamour in Berlin." *Art Radar*, July 11. http://artradarjournal.com/2018/07/11/the-mercy-of-not-killing-chenchenchen-on-poor-sci-fi-and-humanitarian-glamour-in-berlin/.

Mouna, Thomas. 2017. "The New Normal." *ArtAsiaPacific* 104: 100.

Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin. 2010. "A Culture of Violence: The Labor Subcontracting System and Collective Action by Construction Workers in Post-Socialist China." *The China Journal* 64: 143–58.

Pun Ngai and Xu Yu. 2011. "Legal Activism or Class Action? The Political Economy of the 'No Boss' and 'No Labor Relationship' in China's Construction Industry." *China Perspectives* 2: 9–17.

Rogger, Basil. 2018. "Protest: The Aesthetics of Resistance." In *Protest: The Aesthetics of Resistance*, edited by Basil Rogger, Jonas Voegeli, Ruedi Widmer, and Zurich University of the Arts, 32–45. Zurich: Lars Müller Publications.

Schneider, Laurence. 1980. *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shi Xin. 2014. "Cong 'Liu Liang an' fansi 'tiaolou xiu'" 从"刘亮案"反思"楼秀 (Rethinking "Suicide Shows" on the Basis of the "Liu Liang Case"). *Zhongguo gongchangdang xinwen*, November 17. http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/1117/c390722-26041310.html

Sun, Wanning. 2014. *Subaltern China. Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield.

Swider, Sarah. 2015. "Building China: Precarious Employment among Migrant Construction Workers." *Work, Employment and Society* 29, no. 1: 41–59.

Tilly, Charles. 2008. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Viernes, Noah. 2015. "The Aesthetics of Protest: Street Politics and Urban Physiology in

Bangkok." *New Political Science* 37, no. 1: 118–40.

Wen Haixiao, Chen Zhongqun, Wang Feng, and Li Xiaohui. 2008. "Nangong 'tiaolou xiu' shuapo 5 xiaoshi 男工 "跳楼秀"耍泼 5 小时 (Male Migrant Worker's "Suicide Show" Makes a Scene for 5 Hours). *Sina.com*, September 10. http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2008-09-10/120214430185s.shtml

Wolf, Margery. 1975. "Women and Suicide in China." In *Women in Chinese Society*, edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, 111–41. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Xi, Lian. 2018. *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China*. New York: Basic Books.

Zhuang Pinghui. 2017. "Friends in High Places: Why China's Extreme Rooftoppers are Reaching for New Heights." *South China Morning Post*, December 16. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2124597/friends-high-places-why-chinas-merry-band-extreme-rooftoppers-are

---

[1] The installation can be viewed at Chen Chenchen's website: https://www.chenchenchen.net/the-mercy-of-not-killing-2-0.

[2] Other assessments consistently echo this point, arguing that the work draws "on a shared humanity that Chen believes is in all of us" (Mouna 2017: 100), that it "laments the power relations between the spectator and the spectated" (McKenzie 2017). For a more nuanced treatment that explores Chen's work from the perspective of urban panoramic vision, see Braester 2019, forthcoming.

[3] See https://www.chenchenchen.net/the-mercy-of-not-killing-2-0.

[4] See also Fu 2017: 117 and Sun 2014: 62–71 for analyses which interpret suicide shows through a principally political lens.

[5] Sarah Swider notes that approximately one third of China's migrant labor force works in the construction industry (2015: 41).

[6] During the Maoist period, as Pun and Lu note, "their food was provided and they enjoyed modest but regular payments and reasonable working hours … construction jobs were viewed as skilled and respected work, and construction workers were often propagandized as 'model workers' contributing to the rebuilding of the socialist country" (2010: 146).

[7] For a detailed study, see Chan and Pun 2010.

[8] For other media stories that report harshly on suicide shows, see Feng 2003 and Wang *et al*. 2008.

[9] As she puts it, "Adding the word 'show' to the description of workers' struggles facilitates a rhetorical shift, from the poetic (tragedy) to the prosaic (comedy), and from the sublime to the ridiculous. For this reason, it is not simply the addition of a word; it represents a profound

revamping of what Hall et al. (1978) call the 'primary definition' of the situation … these actors are no longer perceived as fighters for justice. Instead they are portrayed as amateur performers in reality shows whose claim to authenticity and recognition is connected less to real life than to the logic of the media" (2014: 66).

[10] Braester argues that "the image of the rooftopper against the backdrop of the built environment …identifies her as a hero who conquers the city. She is an entrepreneur of viral images, vying with the master builders for defining the contemporary skyline. The rooftopper claims the position of an urban subject, taking advantage of — if not outright celebrating — the city's vertical growth and the development of corporate architecture" (2019: 8). The cliffhanger also vies with the "master builders" for control of the skyline, but does so from a posture of lamentation rather than triumph and privilege.

[11] This culture of violence is exacerbated by what Swider calls the "socially distant" character of relationships between contractors and workers, and by the dynamics of social organization on the jobsite. As she puts it, "Place-based social networks separate workers into different workgroups, dorms and into different social spaces. In this context, social networks reinforce hometown and place-based solidarities while fostering divisions across these groups" (2015: 55).