

## On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China

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Hui Faye Xiao

University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

Email: [hxiao@ku.edu](mailto:hxiao@ku.edu)

With a global pandemic and climate crisis, expanding wealth gaps, capital-driven advancements of automation and AI technologies that threaten to render much human labour superfluous, as well as the rise of regional conflicts, ultra-nationalism and xenophobic sentiments, our unsettling age has been characterized globally by unprecedented changes, social segmentation, ideological polarizations, and profound anxiety, uncertainty and hopelessness. A growing number of scholars have paid close attention to the prevalent condition of precarity all over the world. Engaging in a critical conversation with this body of scholarship, Margaret Hillenbrand's *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* makes an urgent contribution to the field. Through a systematic and in-depth analysis of a precarious lifeworld, cultural landscape and affective topography shaped by the specificity and complexity of sociopolitical circumstances in post-socialist China, this book seeks to situate Chinese experience in a global context to remedy the largely Euro-centric discourse of precarity.

This solid volume consists of a long, eloquent introduction, five main chapters and a conclusion. The introductory chapter revolves around a central theoretical thread connecting precarity and the logic of expulsion and exile. Hillenbrand focusses on the vast army of migrant workers who constitute a disenfranchised underclass. Being deprived of access to citizens' core rights and public services enjoyed by urban residents, these labourers are plunged into the state of precarity by an "internal exile" (xiii). The term "zombie citizenship" is coined to describe their "civic nonpersonhood" and liminal existential conditions (xiv). Moreover, instead of reading the "zombie citizenship" in a strictly sociopolitical sense, Hillenbrand investigates its distinctive cultural manifestations and affective ramifications. Through engaging with a diverse body of cultural forms and practices "in which the affective dynamics of the cliff edge are made concrete" (p. 5), her highly innovative and interdisciplinary study shows how the prevailing condition of precarity creates the fear, rivalry, revulsion, estrangement and contempt that catalyze individual alienation, social divisiveness and class fractions. To help readers grasp the complicated nature of precarity that a rights-centred approach fails to fully explain, more discussions on the political economy of precarity predicated on neoliberal capitalism could be useful. After all, the creation of a massive underclass of "zombie citizens" exiled from the centre of corporate capital through outsourcing and subcontracting is the very precondition of the neoliberal globalization that is predicated on deploying the flexible and fragmented labour of a more mobile, fluid and easily exploitable workforce scattered around the world to maximize productivity and competitiveness.

The five main chapters then present a series of gripping case studies of cultural products and practices. Chapter one, "The delegators," analyses a set of delegated performance works, a highly controversial yet understudied form of participatory art in which avant-garde artists hire migrant workers at an abhorrently low price to "stage-manage [them] into tensely contrived situations of servitude, jeopardy, exposure, bodily shame, and alienated labor" (p. 58). The production of such delegation artworks often "zombifies" migrant workers instead of empowering them by inviting them to participate collaboratively in creating the form and meaning of the work. While vividly visualizing and embodying the sensibility of precarity in contemporary China, many of these delegated performances, serve, ironically, as the best illustrations of the inter-class strife and exploitation



discussed in the introductory chapter. I wonder if these avant-garde artists were eyeing an international art market when creating these performance works. In this case, the separation of capital and labour as well as of labour and market, the core logic of a neoliberal globalization, seems to duplicate itself in the economic operations and power relations in the production of such avant-garde commodities. Chapter two, “The ragpickers,” continues to highlight such an interclass strife and differentiation, but with its focus on those who live and work with waste. Hillenbrand problematizes Chinese visual artists’ “thingly turn” (p. 97), i.e. negligence of waste pickers in their artistic representations about garbage, wasted objects and precarity. Against this backdrop, Wang Jiuliang’s documentary *Plastic China* (2016) stands out as one of the rare works that makes visible the creative labour and active agency of a young ragpicker who recycles waste to produce unique artworks.

Chapter three, “The vocalists and the ventriloquists,” examines two drastically different genres that, ironically, have often been lumped together under the indiscriminate label of migrant workers’ literature (*dagong wenxue*). The first consists of creative writings by migrant workers, and the second often includes commissioned writings published under the umbrella term of *jishi wenxue*, roughly literature derived from real-life stories. Hillenbrand pins down the mechanism of repetition in both types of works through her parallel close reading of Zheng Xiaoqiong’s poems and a set of *jishi wenxue*-type narratives that are often claimed to be “authentic” life stories told in migrant workers’ own voices. While the steady rhythm of “repeated lexical units” in Zheng’s poems effectively punctuates and amplifies the power of “a dissensual poetic voice” (p. 132), the repeated pattern of all the rags-to-riches success stories published in *Migrant Workers’ Bosom Friend*, however, reiterates the neoliberal “main melody” of individual self-realization and thus undermines the disruptive potential of the poetic dissensual voice from the floor of the factory.

Chapter four, “The cliffhangers,” studies suicide performances that are inspired by migrant workers’ desperate acts of resistance, i.e. threatening to jump off from a high-rise building to protest wage arrears. Suicide performances, staged or real, can be seen as embodied acts of protest that bring migrant workers’ dark abysmal everyday condition of precarity into the public vision. However, some works that are produced as a form of delegated art also run the risk of Othering and zombifying the hired performers, mostly migrant workers, and further complicate the power dynamics underlying the artistic and political dramatization of “the violence of cross-class strife” (p. 199). The last chapter, “The microcelebrities,” continues with a theoretical exploration on the class politics of seeing and making seen. It studies a group of *wanghong*, or “microcelebrities” as Hillenbrand calls them, who enjoy a large following of fans through livestreaming or posting short videos on popular video-sharing apps. In contrast to the political correctness and grandiose aesthetics endorsed by state media, *tuwei* (lowbrow, rustic, vulgar) is the signature trademark of these short videos. Frequently censored by the state and despised by middle-class urban professionals, these apps, however, provide much entertainment to the vast rural population. Playfully exhibiting disdained low-*suzhi* (human quality) behaviour, acts and embodied identities, these carnivalesque *tuwei* videos poke fun at the state-sanctioned *suzhi* discourse that justifies the hard logic of exclusion through attaching differential human values to the bodies of different social groups.

Standing at the intersection of cultural studies, art criticism and political philosophy, Hillenbrand’s heavyweight volume offers the most up-to-date and systematic study of precarity in post-socialist China, breaking new ground in both Chinese studies and global precarity studies. If one could ask more of this already exceptionally sophisticated and rich book, another trend about which readers might be curious is the precarization of social institutions and intimate relationships, including family and marriage, and this epochal shift’s disproportionate impact on younger generations’, particularly women’s, risk management and future envisioning.