Daria Berg and Qian Cui

16 The Art of Anti-Utopia: Visual Narratives of the Chinese Dream and the Covid-19 Nightmare

Introduction: The Chinese Dream and China's Nightmares

On 29 November 2012, Xi Jinping launched the concept of the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢)—in analogy to the iconic American Dream—as the motto of his new government.[1] The American analogy, however, only holds on the surface. Surrounded by all members of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Politburo Standing Committee, he used the occasion of his visit to the exhibition "The Road to Revival" at the National Museum in Beijing to define the ambiguous concept as the "revival of the Chinese nation" after the perceived long century of "national humiliation" from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945).[2] The venue on Tiananmen Square also gave symbolic weight to his speech as a directive emanating from the traditional epicentre of political power in China.

In China, such reign mottos reverberate with traditional impact and ideological weight. According to political scientist Yongnian Zheng, China's modern-day party-state functions like an "organisational emperor."[3] As Chinese emperors chose titles for their reign periods in imperial times, Communist leaders have also chosen a motto to define their governments, from Deng Xiaoping's (r. 1978–1997) "Four Modernizations" (*sige xiandaihua* 四個現代化), "Reform and Opening-up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革開放) and achieving "*xiaokang* society" (*xiaokang*

1 Xinhua 2012. Callahan (2013) and Tsang (2015) translate *Zhongguo meng* as "China Dream". Other scholars (e.g. Wang 2013) have used "Chinese Dream" or followed Callahan. The present study follows the Chinese government's use of the official English keyword "Chinese Dream", the grammatically correct version that also echoes the "American Dream"; see The State Council Information Office, (July 13, 2022).

2 Wang 2013; Tsang 2015.

3 Zheng 2010.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank the University of St.Gallen, Switzerland, for research support.

Open Access. © 2025 the author(s), published by De Gruyter. BY-NC-ND This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111450858-016

shehui 小康社會),[4] Jiang Zemin's 江澤民 (*r.* 1992–2002) "Three Represents" (*sange daibiao* 三個代表),[5] and Hu Jintao's 胡錦濤 (*r.* 2002–2012) "Harmonious Society" (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會),[6] to Xi Jinping's (2012–present) "Chinese Dream." Xi Jinping's launching the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI *yidai yilu* 一帶一路) in 2013 demonstrated that his motto implied the announcement of a geopolitical shift from the "American century" of US political, economic and cultural dominance in the twentieth century to the "Chinese century" characterized by China's push for economic and geopolitical dominance and a new world order in the twenty-first.[7]

The notion of the American Dream stems from James Truslow Adams' popular history *The Epic of America* (1931): The "American Dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement."[8] This Dream proceeds on the premise of the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and its notion that "all men are created equal" and their "unalienable rights" include "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."[9]

The concept of the Chinese Dream implies the discourse on utopia.[10] Thomas More's (1478–1535) concept of utopia, as depicted in his satirical fiction *Utopia* (1516), implies that the good place (*eu topos*) exists nowhere (*ou topos*).[11] China's indigenous tradition of utopian thought stems from the ancient depictions of the ideal world in the Confucian utopia of the Great Unity (*datong* 大同) from the *Liji* 禮記 (*Records on Rites*) and the Daoist realm of Supreme Harmony (*taiping* 太平) from the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*The Springs and Autumns of Lü Buwei*) and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 ([*The Book of*] *Zhuangzi*). Anti-utopia is its inversion, and anti-utopian or dystopian literary or visual narratives explore society as if under the satirical magnifying glass.[12]

If official definitions of the Chinese Dream remain vague and ambiguous,[13] Xi Jinping, too, weaves the notion of the people's happiness into his grand narrative of the Chinese Dream which, he claims, aims to achieve a "rich and powerful country, the revival of the nation, and the people's happiness."[14] His Chinese Dream constructs the utopia of a powerful, strong, and happy nation to pervade

4 Cf. Wang 2013: 7.
5 First discussed in 2000; cf. Wong 2021.
6 First discussed in 2005; cf. Zheng/Tok 2007.
7 See, for example, Luce 1999; Pieke 2014.
8 Adams 2017: 695; cf. Callahan 2017: 259
9 Merrill 1970: 90.
10 Berg 2002: 33–57.
11 Berg 2002: 7–8.
12 Berg 2002: 39.
13 Wang, 2013: 2; Barr in Kerr 2015: 194; Tsang 2015.
14 Xi 2013: 3 and 5; cf. Callahan 2015: 221.

the metanarrative (*grand récit*) on national history and identity circulating in the official mediasphere at the expense of alternative and localized micronarratives (*petits récits*).[15] Yet the official discourse presents the Chinese Dream as a challenge to, rather than a continuation of, the American Dream.[16]

In June 2013, prior to Xi's visit to the US and Barack Obama, the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* pointed out "The Seven Major Characteristics that Differentiate the Chinese Dream and the American Dream" (*Zhongguo meng qubie yu Meiguo mengde qi da tezheng* 中國夢區別於美國夢的七大特徵) that China was in pursuit of a "collective dream of national wealth and power" as opposed to the American variant of "personal freedom and happiness."[17] A month later, Liu Qibao 劉奇葆, the head of the CCP's Publicity Department, emphasized the significance of the Chinese Dream as the "mission statement" of the government and the "political manifesto" of the party.[18]

The Chinese Dream featured prominently in Xi Jinping's official discourse even before his rule. As the chairman of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, Xi chose the motto "One World, One Dream" (*tong yige shijie, tong yige mengxiang* 同一個世界, 同一個夢想) for the Olympic Games, foreshadowing the Chinese Dream of his presidency.[19] The official discourse firmly situates the Chinese Dream within the framework of consultative Leninism, China's official ideology, as political scientist Steve Tsang has shown, noting that the Chinese Dream "is built solidly on the basis of the consultative Leninist political system already in place."[20] Its first and most important tenet holds that the CCP is to stay in power to maintain stability. Tsang points out that consultative Leninism is predicated on the success of the party's rule in times of crisis, but it may not need to last longer than a decade until Xi retires.[21] Since Xi has meanwhile lifted such limits on his rule while exceeding a decade in power, it is important to test the concept of the Chinese Dream against the backdrop of national crisis and nightmares. This study investigates the Covid-19 pandemic as one such major national nightmare.

The following research questions will guide this investigation: Is the government's Chinese Dream also the people's dream? Are there other competing dreams in China's cultural discourse? How do ordinary citizens dream, and how do urban dwellers dream? What are their dreams and nightmares, their percep-

15 Lyotard 1984: 60. On the mediasphere, see Debray 1990; Berg 2011.
16 Callahan 2017: 257.
17 Callahan 2017: 275.
18 Liu 2013; Wang 2013: 1.
19 Xu 2006.
20 Tsang 2015: 27.
21 Tsang 2015: 30.

tions of the world, and their hopes, fears and aspirations? Recent scholarship has discussed "China's many dreams" from socio-political and economic perspectives.[22] This study seeks to answer such questions by probing into China's visual art and vernacular culture.

While the official media propagate Xi's Chinese Dream, multiple and divergent dreams circulate in China's vernacular cultures as opposed to the officially sanctioned culture of the party-state.[23] This study presents one way of exploring such competing dreams by analyzing online visual narratives. If the following decade of Xi Jinping's rule appeared to cement his dream of unlimited power when he changed China's Constitution at the 15th Party Congress in 2017 to make him ruler for life,[24] it also brought a series of nightmares to overshadow his Chinese Dream: protests in Hong Kong;[25] the Covid-19 pandemic; large-scale city lockdowns entailing an economic downturn;[26] the CCP's propaganda showcase of the Beijing Winter Olympics hampered by Covid-19 control measures;[27] the Ukrainian leg of Xi's Belt and Road Initiative in ruins;[28] and prolonged Covid-related lockdowns leading to calls for Xi's resignation.[29]

Despite intense scholarly and media scrutiny of the official Chinese Dream, striving to make sense of what it means for China and its future,[30] few studies have analyzed grassroots perceptions of Chinese nightmares in visual art and vernacular culture. The Covid-19 pandemic has received much attention from economic, political and psychological perspectives, too, but such scholarship is also disproportionate to research on its cultural and artistic impact. This study seeks to redress such shortfalls by focusing on vernacular expressions of Chinese dreams, dystopias and nightmares during the Covid-19 lockdowns from the artistic perspective. It examines bottom-up responses to top-down control measures through the artistic lens, focusing on online visual narratives by Chinese artists and bloggers within China and abroad.

This study is divided into two main parts. The first part will look at government censorship of the cultural discourse around Covid-19, outlining two case studies of top-down control measures in visual culture: first, propaganda posters; and second, street banners communicating Covid-19-control government policies

22 Kerr 2015.
23 Cf. Kerr 2015.
24 Lam 2024: 189.
25 Purbrick 2019.
26 Wu et al. 2023.
27 Liu 2022.
28 Mendez et al 2022.
29 Lam 2024.
30 See, for example, Callahan 2013, 2015, 2017; Keane/Chen 2015; Taylor 2015; Gow 2017.

to the masses. The second part will analyse bottom-up responses, focusing on two case studies of visual narratives produced during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns by two Chinese artists: female artist Cao Fei in involuntary exile in Singapore imposed by the Covid-19 lockdown; and famous artist-cum-activist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 in self-imposed exile in Europe.

Spiraling out of Control: Covid-19 as China's Nightmare

The focus on the cultural discourse around the Covid-19 pandemic is timely and responds to the urgent need to understand grassroots reactions in visual arts and Internet culture to state control, censorship and lockdowns. On 1 December 2019, the first case of Covid-19 appears to have been detected, although later research found the possibility that the virus had started to spread even earlier.[31] On 31 December, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan.[32] On 4 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported on Twitter that China had clusters of pneumonia cases with no deaths.[33] One day later, Dr Zhang Yongzhen 張永振 (b. 1965) and his team unraveled the genetic sequence of the virus.[34] On 11 January, he leaked the information online to Dr Edward Holmes, University of Sydney, against the will of the Chinese government.[35] The following day, China's government publicly shared the genetic sequence and forced Dr Zhang's lab to close for "rectification."[36] The Chinese government still believed it could deal with the outbreak by media censorship, but the diseases rapidly spread beyond China's borders.

On 13 January, the first cases outside of China were confirmed.[37] On 23 January, Wuhan went into the first lockdown until April.[38] On 11 March, the WHO referred to Covid-19 as a pandemic.[39] In 2020 and 2021, China implemented a zero-Covid strategy and reopened most cities while the rest of the world struggled to

31 Roberts et al. 2021.
32 WHO 2020b.
33 @WHO 2020c.
34 Dang 2024.
35 McCarthy/Xiong 2024.
36 McCarthy/Xiong 2024.
37 WHO January 14, 2020a.
38 Yang 2020.
39 Cucinotta/Vanelli 2020.

cope with the virus.[40] Among major Chinese cities, lockdowns closed Urumqi in July and August 2020, and Shijiazhuang in January 2021.

In 2021 the world was preparing to open up again while the coronavirus transmuted into the more contagious but less severe Omicron variant, leading to a series of city lockdowns: Xi'an in December 2021 to January 2022, Anyang in January to March 2022, Shenzhen in March 2022, Shanghai in April and May 2022 and Chengdu in September 2022.[41] During the Shanghai lockdown, 25 million citizens suffered "inadequate food supply, lack of medical attention and psychological distress,"[42] while Europe, the US and the rest of the world gradually emerged from the crisis with the development of the new mRNA vaccines which China did not subscribe to.[43] Dissent started to spread on social media while the lockdowns crippled the economy.[44] By October 2022, the ill-managed lockdowns of that year led to the first displays of dissatisfaction in China and calls for public protests.[45] The White Paper protests followed, with protesters holding up blank sheets of paper over their heads to express dissent while drawing attention to the regime's censorship.[46] When protesters called openly for Xi Jinping to step down, the government reacted by lifting its zero-Covid policy on 8 December 2022, leading to a surge in Covid-19 cases and an estimated 1.5 million deaths, probably largely in the elderly and poorly vaccinated populations.[47]

The implementation of health policies corresponds with heightened control of China's mediasphere, including the Internet. From 1 January 2020, the app WeChat censored keywords about the coronavirus outbreak.[48] Whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang 李文亮 (1986–2020), an ophthalmologist working in a hospital, used WeChat to warn colleagues of a new SARS-like illness in Wuhan.[49] On 3 January, the police forced Li to sign a confession that he had been spreading "false statements that disturbed the public order."[50] On 7 February, Li, aged 33, succumbed to the Covid-19 virus after having contracted it from a patient.[51] His death sparked an

40 Johnson 2024.
41 Buchholz 2022.
42 Buchholz 2022.
43 Johnson 2024.
44 Restrepo 2022.
45 Restrepo 2022.
46 Lam 2024: 73.
47 Johnson 2024.
48 BBC 2020.
49 Green 2020.
50 Green 2020.
51 Green 2020.

outcry and outpouring of emotions on Chinese social media, forcing the government to reverse their verdict and reinstate Li as a national martyr.[52]

The 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing pose another prominent example of the implementation of the Chinese Dream, zero-Covid strategy and top-down control. While the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics declared their motto as "One World, One Dream," the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics only announced "One World," leaving out any reference to the Chinese Dream—or rather the pandemic nightmare—while proclaiming its official slogan "Together for a Shared Future" (*yiqi xiang weilai* 一起向未來),[53] a statement that acquired a certain irony at a time of social distancing and both enforced and voluntary isolation during the pandemic. The "motto represents the power of the Games to overcome global challenges as a community, with a shared future for humankind," declared the International Olympics Committee, adding an explicit reference to the pandemic: "the necessity for the world to work together towards a better tomorrow, especially given the difficulties faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic."[54]

The official interpretation links the Olympics logo, inspired by the Chinese character *dong* 冬 (winter) resembling a skater on top and a skier at the bottom, together with symbolic references to Chinese "dreams" and the national flag: "The use of blue in the emblem represents dreams, the future and the purity of ice and snow, while red and yellow—the colors of China's national flag—symbolize passion, youth and vitality."[55]

Xi Jinping declared the Beijing Winter Games "an efficient and safe" event.[56] Attendance was by invitation only to the ruling CCP elite, selected members of the CCP, and staff from state-owned enterprises.[57] Athletes, Games personnel and government officials formed a controlled "close loop" where they got tested daily.[58] From 23 Jan 2022 to the opening on 4 February 2022, China declared 287 positive tests among Games-related-personnel from a total of 610,000 tests.[59] The success of its control measures boosted the CCP's reputation in China and abroad and served for nationalist propaganda.[60] In the following, we shall look at the visual culture of top-down control, using propaganda posters and banners.

52 Zhang 2022.
53 IOC 2021.
54 IOC 2022.
55 IOC 2022.
56 Brant 2022.
57 Brant 2022.
58 Bloomberg News 2022.
59 News Wires 2022.
60 Liu 2022.

Top-Down Control—Part I: Covid-19-Campaign Propaganda Posters

Propaganda posters have a long history in Communist China, dating to the Mao era.[61] Propaganda posters warning of an epidemic already appeared in 1952 when Mao used them in a patriotic health campaign to warn the masses of germ warfare.[62] One such poster shows a female health worker in a white medical suit with a white facemask, using a spray to disinfect the ground in front, with the oversized outline of a soldier in combat as a backdrop. Its slogan at the bottom reads: "To do a good job in epidemic prevention and hygiene work is concrete patriotic behavior in the battle to smash American imperialist germ warfare!"[63]

In the digital age, the Chinese government still resorts to broadcasting its messages to the masses through traditional propaganda posters posted in public urban and rural spaces, as well as online, as the campaign about the Chinese Dream has shown.

One poster from the 2020 Covid-19 campaign shows a grey bat on a dark brown background, its wings on fire, hovering above the slogan "Refuse game, start with me!" and a subtitle: "Stay strong, China! Stay strong, Wuhan!" (*Zhongguo jiayou! Wuhan jiayou!* 中國加油! 武漢加油!).[64] This appears among the most frequently used slogans on such posters.

Where once propaganda posters depicted Mao in the center of the sun, another poster circulating on Internet and social media platforms including sohu.com, sina.com and WeChat in February 2020 shows the back of a Chinese health worker facing the sun against the silhouette of a cityscape of skyscrapers, next to the slogan "Salute the heroes, dawn is imminent!" (*zhijing yingxiong, liming zaiji* 致敬英雄, 黎明在即).[65] At the bottom it features again the slogan "Stay strong, Wuhan! Stay strong, China!" (*Wuhan jiayou! Zhongguo jiayou!* 武漢加油! 中國加油!) A QR code leads the spectator to a WeChat site.

War metaphors abound, repeating the orders to fight, resist and wage a war against the virus. For example, one poster created by Wang Yiyu 王義宇, a student at the School of Urban Arts, Tianjin Chengjian University, forms part of the City University Youth Online Art Exhibition entitled "Uniting Youth Power, I'm Here in the Fight Against the Epidemic"

61 Landsberger 1995.
62 IISH "Patriotic Health Campaign (1952)".
63 IISH, PC-1952-004.
64 Art RUC 2020.
65 Sohu.com 2020; Yang 2020.

circulating on sohu.com in February 2020. The poster entitled "White-Clad Warriors—Stay Strong, Wuhan" (*baiyu zhanshi—Wuhan jiayou* 白衣戰士—武漢加油) depicts a male health worker in full hazmat suit (hazardous materials suit) standing in the limelight against a wall onto which his shadow is projected, revealing the silhouette of a soldier carrying a gun. The slogan (both in Chinese characters and in pinyin) on the left-hand side of the picture beneath the shadow of his gun reads: "Stay strong, Wuhan!"[66]

The artist explains:

> The artwork features the 'angels in white'—medical personnel—as its main subject. Using the technique of shadows, it conveys the theme that medical personnel are the vanguard warriors fighting the virus. The silhouette of Wuhan city is used as a backdrop to express the emotional support for Wuhan.[67]

Wang Yiyu also outlines his creative concept:

> The recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan resembles a tough battle for the entire nation. Our medical personnel don protective clothing as armor, wear masks as helmets, and wield their professional medical skills like sharp blades and guns to fight the virus on behalf of the people. They battle death to save lives. We should learn from their bravery, fearlessness, and spirit of dedication. Let's salute all the medical personnel fighting on the front lines![68]

At the moment of crisis, art practice thus turns into national propaganda, with the sole aim—as Mao demanded in 1942—to serve the people.[69] The posters depict crisis and urgency in military terms as warfare.

The end of February 2020 saw the eighth wave of @Design Week's "Global Poster Design Campaign" entitled "We are together 2020 Fighting against the New Coronavirus" releasing another set of propaganda posters focusing on the theme "Your love is like a mask."[70] One such poster by an artist only known as @freeman depicts two health workers in hazmat suits, against the backdrop of a painted version of a massive green coronavirus, looking down—as if onto a patient's bed—at the slogan "At the forefront of the battle" (*zhan qian xian* 站前线).[71] In the previous seven waves of the campaign, the *People's Daily* newspaper

66 XXR 2020.
67 XXR 2020.
68 XXR 2020.
69 McDougall 1980: 16; Pan 2014: 331.
70 Sheji zhou 2020.
71 Sheji zhou 2020.

group had pushed 7,725 images onto mobile phone lock screens free of charge for people to use freely for public welfare, garnering 1.7 billion views.[72]

One cartoon entitled by "Fighting Pneumonia" (*kangji feiyan* 抗击肺炎) by Gazi Chen 嘎子陈 depicts ten long human arms rising into the sky above a Chinese city signposted as "Wuhan" complete with a TV tower, modern skyscrapers and a traditional pagoda, and descending towards a bunch of coronaviruses on the ground, pointing their finger as if the hands were bombs and the arms their trajectories. The slogan above the painting reads "Wuhan must win! China must win!"[73]

Another poster shows a group of skydivers in full hazmat suits descending on parachutes from a red plane with the symbol of the yellow hammer and sickle, symbolizing the CCP, carrying in their arms oversized injections, pills and medicine bottles. The picture's title at the bottom reads "Divine troops descend from heaven" (*shenbing tianjiang* 神兵天降) and it is signed with the artist's name Li Ya 李亚.[74]

Similar pictures also featured on the frontpages of magazine covers in 2020, as Florian Schneider has shown (2021) using the example of *Xinmin Weekly* magazine (*Xinmin zhoukan* 新民周刊), a publication from Shanghai.[75] Some images also, in time-honored Cultural Revolution style, resort to using famous traditional Western paintings such as Delacroix's "Liberty leading the people" (1830) as inspiration for motifs of Covid-19 fighters and the fight for Hong Kong.[76] The poster campaign caused mixed reactions among the public in China's cities.[77]

Top-Down Control—Part II: Covid-19-Campaign Propaganda Banners

In addition to the propaganda posters, the government also used Mao-era and Cultural Revolution-style large red propaganda banners with white writing (*biaoyu* 标语) on social media and in urban and rural spaces to convey their messages of Covid-19 control.[78] Covering the period of the initial government cam-

72 Sheji zhou 2020.
73 Du/Lu 2020; cf. Schneider 2021: 307.
74 Schneider 2021: 307.
75 Schneider 2021: 317.
76 Schneider 2021: 317.
77 Han 2021.
78 Dong et al. 2020.

paign from mid-January to late February 2020, a linguistic study of "early Covid-19" banners by Dong et al. warns: "If the Coronavirus Doesn't Scare You, the Banners Will." It shows how such banners feature instructions and prompting in four styles: official, gentle, humorous, and "hardcore" confrontational.[79] Chinese social media carrying such messages included WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu, Kuaishou, Douyin, Sohu, Baidu, Douban, Toutiao, and Netease News.[80]

Dong et al. point out that an online discussion ensued on social media, predominantly supportive of the banners.[81] Weibo user Tian commented on 26 January 2020: "I think this kind of hard-core propaganda slogans are needed. Some places are more traditional. Adults and old people don't listen to it, and don't listen to young generation's suggestions at all." This comment achieved a modest 900 reads and 13 likes.[82]

The official newspaper *The People's Daily* posted a WeChat commentary on 29 January 2020 entitled "Read these banners and you will understand why we need to rely on our people."[83] It further explained: "These 'provincial' banners are as rough as landslides, but very 'hardcore', they achieve the purpose of Early COVID-19."[84] On kuaishou.com, a video-sharing mobile app with 200 million active daily users, one comment agreed: "The banners in the countryside hit the nail on the head."[85] This comment received 1.7 million reads and 71,000 likes.[86]

Jenny Feng postulates that many propaganda banners are "hilariously aggressive," prompting laughter in online communities.[87] Banners seen on walls, fences and roadsides in urban and rural areas carry messages such as:

> 'A surgical mask or a breathing tube—It's your call.'
> 'A bite of wild animals today—See you in hell tomorrow.'
> 'Anyone you encounter on the streets at this juncture is a wild ghost seeking to take your life.'
> 'Even Chinese gods have to wear masks—The epidemic is no joke.'
> 'If you hang out in public today, grass will grow on your grave next year.'[88]

79 Dong et al. 2020.
80 Dong et al. 2020: 4.
81 Dong et al. 2020: 13.
82 Dong et al. 2020: 13.
83 Dong et al. 2020: 14.
84 Dong et al. 2020: 14.
85 Dong et al. 2020: 14.
86 Dong et al. 2020: 14.
87 Feng 2020.
88 Feng 2020.

Such official visual narratives of top-down control have elicited bottom-up responses from Chinese artists both within China and abroad. In the following we shall examine the inversion of theme of Xi Jinping's Dream of a superpower utopia in two artistic narratives of dystopia from the early Covid-19 period in 2020.

Bottom-up Responses: Superpower Utopia vs. Dystopia of Isolation and Instability

This section focuses on a Chinese woman artist whom the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily locked out of China and will conclude with a comparison to another Chinese dissident artist living in self-imposed long-term exile abroad. Both their visual narratives question the utopia of the Chinese Dream and the superpower nation by conjuring up dystopian visions of China during Covid-19.

An Island Nation of Isolation and Instability

On a trip to Singapore to install the kinetic show *Fu cha* 浮槎 (*The Raft*, 2020) at the National Gallery, Cao Fei 曹斐 (b. 1978) found herself stranded in a Singapore flat for nine months during Covid-lockdown with her Singaporean husband and two children.[89] The daughter of Cao Chong'en 曹崇恩 (b. 1933), official sculptor to China's leadership and Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts professor, Cao Fei was born in Guangzhou in 1978, the year Deng Xiaoping took power in China.[90] She graduated from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 2001 and lives in Beijing; her artistic practice includes photography, film making, video art, script writing, performing, installation, and sculpture. Introduced to the international audiences by the Swiss art collector Uli Sigg, she won the Sigg Foundation's "Contemporary Chinese Art Award" for "Best Young Artist Prize" in 2006, and the "Best Artist Prize" in 2016.[91] In 2017, Cao Fei aged 39 created the BMW Art Car #18, entitled *Unmanned*, gaining fame as the youngest ever artist to follow in Andy Warhol's footsteps as a BMW Art Car designer.[92]

The art foundation Audemars Piguet Contemporary commissioned Cao Fei in 2019 to produce a new artwork in their Swiss factories, but when lockdown forced

89 Lloyd-Smith 2022; Peh 2020.
90 Fok 2011: 500.
91 Cao N.d. "About."
92 BMW Group 2017.

Cao Fei to stay in Singapore they agreed to a different project "to reflect the current state of the world."[93] A series of drawings, sculptures, and home videos resulted in Cao Fei's video installation entitled *Isle of Instability* (2020) which premiered at the Audemars Piguet space at the West Bund Art & Design Fair in Shanghai in November 2020.[94] Filmed over the period of two months, the work is based on a documentary study Cao Fei conducted during quarantine, exploring "the limitations and emotions felt in isolation and the psychological and physical implications on herself as well as her family," as her website announces.[95] The flat became her studio; the living room her stage; her children her actors and collaborators; and everyday life the subject of her practice.

Reminiscent of Cao Fei's early low-tech DYI art works, the artist said she only used "simple materials" without lighting or production support, but she sees the advantage in such production going "back to nature."[96] Her website announces:

> *Isle of Instability* was imagined and produced in Singapore, away from the artist's home, studio and day-to-day habits in Beijing, with her daughter serving as an assistant and actor. This artwork (. . .) also offers solace to the public and the opportunity to converse about shared experiences and the ways in which humanity deals with uncertainty.[97]

One part of this multimedia artwork, the video entitled *Outlying Island* (1m 7s), shows a performance starring Cao Fei's daughter Qing 晴, armed with yellow cleaning gloves, a bucket, cleaning utensils and Dettol disinfectant, sitting in a living room in front of a potted palm tree and a TV screen showing rolling waves at a beachfront. On the left side of the split screen, Qing can be seen cleaning first the plants, then the TV screen; the right-hand side shows the implied artist's view from the balcony looking across onto the Singapore skyline beneath a rainbow and peering down onto the streets, partly in video-game animation, partly as a realistic scenery. The view then cuts to a scene down below on the street showing the artist's two children running away from the camera, before reverting to the view back up in the flat looking down from the balcony. Art critic Hans Ulrich Obrist calls the work developed out of constraints a "fiction about being the last human."[98] This dystopian world sanitizes its dreams of luxury and displacement; the utopian idyll of a holiday island turns into a dystopian prison without escape.

93 Audemars Piguet 2020.
94 Cao 2020a.
95 Cao 2020b; Audemars Piguet 2020.
96 Cao/Obrist 2020.
97 Cao 2020b; Audemars Piguet 2020.
98 Cao/Obrist 2020.

Neither the artist nor any other adults appear in the artwork. Cao Fei explains her role in the video: "I'm in, but I'm also out. [. . .] I'm both participant and observer, and it's difficult to separate my roles."[99] The atmosphere of island isolation echoes the dystopia of Daniel Defoe's (c. 1660–1731) *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) while the attempts at disinfecting the world anchor Cao Fei's story in the lived experience of Covid-19-lockdown. She notes: "Being away from home for so long, the foreign culture became familiar, the exotic cuisine became my go-to delicacy, the labyrinth of alleys became my daily routine, the strangers next door became my friendly neighbors, and I, once a guest of this country, became a resident." She hints at the emotions captured in the work—a mixture of "fear, love, hope, sadness, hopelessness."[100]

The dystopia of fear and isolation in *Isle of Instability* ends with Qing banging a pot as night falls over the city—an unwitting antecedent to the night-time Shanghai music party in the April 2022 lockdown when residents banged their pots and pans to demand food in protest at Xi Jinping's regime and his Zero-Covid -strategy.[101] The split screen reflects a split world. As Cao Fei notes:

> Our world has been divided into places that have the virus and places that don't. If it is said that places that are pandemic-free are an 'island', then the virus-rampaging lands are the emptiness outside of this island. [. . .] Just like *Robinson Crusoe* is both realistic and symbolic, the notion of island is related to both the experience and the adventure, and is both about self-exile and self-construction, it is both a place of paradise and a place of imprisonment.[102]

Cao Fei insists on a positive message: "I believe that art has the capacity to heal, sooth and promote optimism in times of difficulty."[103] She depicts the contrasts and contradictions of the Covid-19 era: "During lockdown, I wandered between familiarity and strangeness, between homesickness and dispersal, between wonderland and desperation. I wanted to confront these contrasting emotions and respond to the urgency of our living conditions in this project, but also to give hope to people who need it."[104] The rainbow at the outset of the video belies this message. In traditional Chinese culture, a rainbow symbolizes negative emotions, heralding the crisis of adultery. Here Cao Fei's visual narrative hints at critiquing the "instability" of a country in lockdown.

99 A&M 2020.
100 A&M 2020.
101 On 28 April 2022; O'Donnell 2022.
102 Lloyd-Smith 2022.
103 A&M 2020.
104 A&M 2020.

The Fall of a Nation

Another dissident response to the Covid-19 pandemic takes a harsher line, explicitly inverting the Chinese Dream of superpower status. On 20 August 2020 multimedia artist Ai Weiwei released the Mandarin Chinese documentary with the English title *CoroNation* (1h 53m), a pun on coronavirus, the Covid-19-embattled nation, and the coronation of a king and his dream of being crowned as the head of a superpower. Produced by AWW Company in Germany, and directed by Ai Weiwei remotely from Europe, the film displays a montage of original footage filmed secretly by volunteers and paid crews on the ground in Wuhan and within six Wuhan hospitals.[105] In this section, the documentary is discussed in relation to Ai Weiwei's media politics as expressed in his earlier Chinese microblog @Fanfou from 2009 and, after his account was axed, his tweets on Twitter @aiww from 2010.[106]

The son of eminent poet Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996), Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957.[107] When Ai Qing was persecuted in Mao's Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the family was first exiled from Beijing to Northeastern China, and later to Xinjiang province; they returned to Beijing after nineteen years in exile.[108] Ai Weiwei studied, worked and lived in the US from 1981 to 1993. After 81 days in secret detention in Beijing in 2011, he spent four years in Beijing under government surveillance, subsequently self-exiling abroad—to Germany, the UK and Portugal—to avoid further persecution. He has gained international celebrity status an artist and activist advocating freedom of expression and human rights; his practice encompasses sculptural installation, architecture, photography, ceramics, painting, writing, social media and filmmaking. Ai Weiwei, together with his brother Ai Dan, made a documentary *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry* (Ai Weiwei Studio, China, 2003) about the first coronavirus SARS-epidemic in 2002.[109]

Seemingly without a plot or storyline, *CoroNation* shows China's official responses to the Covid-19 crisis while inverting its claims to deal with the Covid-19 nightmare efficiently by revealing the dark sides that remain obscure in the official mediasphere. In Ai Weiwei's version of China, the locked-down nation turns into a prison and panopticon. Ai Weiwei stated that he and his team edited the film from 500 hours of film footage.[110]

105 Ai Weiwei Films 2020.
106 On Ai Weiwei's medis politics, see Strafella/Berg 2015; Callahan 2014.
107 Cf. Strafella/Berg 2015; Strafella/Berg 2017.
108 Ai 2021.
109 Mendes/Ai 2022.
110 Johnson 2020.

The fly-on-the-wall quality of the film creates the illusion of staging a reality show or an unedited documentary, rendering Ai Weiwei's dystopia even more chilling: the viewer gets to see the visual evidence of a national nightmare, not just a feature film about it. The slow-moving film documents the every-day lives of patients and their families while following several individuals on their journeys through the Covid-19 lockdown, including a couple trying to return to their home in Wuhan, a courier delivering essentials to residents under lockdown, an emergency construction worker, a former party cadre and her son, and son looking to retrieve his deceased father's ashes.[111]

The bird eye's shot of abandoned train tracks in a monochrome world without human beings forms an apocalyptic vision of a post-Anthropocene world—contrasting with the sounds of sirens and the riot of colors reflected in the emergency lights of ambulances, the florescent lighting of hospitals and the search lights beaming across the sky from Wuhan skyscrapers.[112] These search lights also symbolize the government's surveillance campaign, turning the whole nation into a prison and panopticon.

Ai Weiwei situates dystopia in a totalitarian world, a prison of surveillance without freedom of expressions and human rights: "When we talk about freedom of expression, we all know that we will live in much worse conditions than previously. Everywhere. In China, people are under intense control and surveillance, like in a science fiction movie, except that it is very real."[113]

For Ai Weiwei, revealing everyday routines and a non-staged, non-scripted storyline expresses dissent—at the government's staged version of "reality". Simultaneously, the artist's documentary subverts the government's obsession with control and citizen surveillance by offering his version of surveillance of the current situation through the documentary's "candid" camera. The artist expresses his opinion about the "true" origin of the pandemic:

> I made a film in 2003 about SARS, my first documentary film, which is where my understanding of these Chinese institutions comes from, and how it works. And it's obvious the disease is not from an animal. It's not a natural disease, it's something that's leaked out, after years of research.[114]

Ai Weiwei's message is political: "The communist regime is very powerful and strong and keeping this secret in on top of their agenda."[115] This message is con-

111 Ai Weiwei Films 2020.
112 Bramesco 2020.
113 Chade 2021.
114 Harvey 2022.
115 Chade 2021.

sistent with the artist's decade-long battle for freedom of speech and human rights. "'Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.' Without the freedom of others, you will never be at peace," Ai Weiwei wrote on his @Fanfou 飯否 microblog in July 2009.[116] When even the word 'freedom' (*ziyou* 自由) faced censorship on China's Internet, he quipped: "I'll get impatient with anyone who brings up free*** of speech again. Free-damn-dom."[117] He rants against the government:

> Here's the objective truth I haven't mentioned yet: My blog's been axed, blocked and blacklisted, and my words have been censored thousands of times; my freedom of information requests have been rejected dozens of times; my questions have remained unanswered thousands of times; our volunteers have been arrested and interrogated dozens of times, and frequently subjected to physical violence – and that's just the beginning.[118]

In his view, the nation is far from superpower status:

> No votes for 60 years, no universal education, no universal health care, no free press, no freedom of speech, no freedom of information, no freedom of movement or residence, no judicial independence, no public watchdogs, no independent trade unions, no national army, no constitutional safeguards. The only thing left is to let the Grass Mud Horse next door fuck your mother's pussy.[119]

The Grass Mud Horse (*caonima* 草泥馬) is a mythical animal used as an Internet meme whose name puns on 'fuck your mother' (*caonima* 肏你媽).[120] The use of vulgar language symbolizes the artist's fight for free speech. Ai Weiwei's tweet from April 2010 points to the persistent problem of government censorship:

> With regard to press freedom and independent reporting, China's state-run media have not changed in decades, whether we're talking about the Wenchuan earthquake or the SARS era.[121]

The documentation of events from the grassroots' perspective offers in Ai Weiwei's view an alternative vision, but he admits: "The world will probably never know what really happened in Wuhan just over a year ago."[122]

The fight for freedom of expression and personal freedom as a human right appear paramount in Ai Weiwei's media politics, as both his documentaries and

116 @Fanfou 6 July 2009.
117 @Fanfou August 2, 2009, 00:06:52.
118 @Fanfou November 27, 2009, 15:32:31.
119 @Fanfou June 14, 2009, 09:10:39.
120 Bingham 2013: 15.
121 Twitter @aiww April 7, 2010, 13:15:56.
122 Chade 2021.

microblogs show. To the question by @windcloudor: "@zuzhou @aiww I think so too. Life shouldn't be immersed in politics; there are still many beautiful things to enjoy," the artist responds on Twitter: "A life without fighting for freedom is not worth living. A life not immersed in politics is only an incomplete version of life."[123]

Ai Weiwei considers the battle for freedom worth fighting. In reply to the question by @a081314, "@aiww How do we fight to the end?," he tweets:

> Don't believe the government's nonsense. Actively and consciously defend freedom and human rights, strive to help the weak and the damaged, participate in social investigations and discussions, reveal and spread the truth, continue to question and challenge authority, and express your voice passionately.[124]

Ai Weiwei describes the political value of *CoroNation* in the international discourse about China: "This is probably the most important film about the pandemic and about China. What I wanted to show is how China performs in the political world. And how the world understands China."[125] The film is available online for rent on vimeo.com,[126] but even abroad only Geneva dared to screen it in a movie theater.[127]

For Ai Weiwei, the fight for freedom is a long and steady process. In response to the question by @RealHector, "@aiww Teacher Ai, I get the feeling that although you actively participate in some public events, you haven't really figured out how to use these efforts to achieve the great goal of bringing democracy and freedom to China as soon as possible, is that right?," the artist responds: "True freedom comes little by little."[128]

True to Ai Weiwei's media politics and his concept of art as activism, *CoroNation* offers a dystopian vision of a world moving from the riot of sounds and colors characterizing the national catastrophe of Covid-19 to the bleak and silent vista of the post-Anthropocene. It points the finger at the party-state's secrecy, surveillance, and obsession with information control as the root of dystopia.

123 Twitter @aiww December 12, 2010, 22:52:07.
124 Twitter @aiww June 12, 2010, 11:22:10
125 Chade 2021.
126 Ai Weiwei Films 2020.
127 Chade 2021.
128 Twitter @aiww 20 November 2010, 21:10:48.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, this study has traced the dynamics of visual culture during the early Covid-19 era of 2020—from the top-down control measures of propaganda posters and government campaign banners to the bottom-up responses of Chinese artists who grew up and lived in China for most of their lives, even if they spent the Covid-era abroad—Cao Fei in involuntary exile due to the Covid-19-lockdown in Singapore, Ai Weiwei in self-imposed exile in Europe as one of the most important voices of dissent. The themes of Covid-19 responses from vernacular culture reveal experiments in the mediasphere with different strategies of direct and indirect styles of critique and comment on the war against the virus. The utopian visions deconstruct the Chinese Dream into a series of nightmares that engulf the nation, revealing insights into perceptions of the official Covid-19 responses from unofficial or "grassroots" perspectives.

Cao Fei's installation *Isle of Instability* depicts the dystopia of an island nation in isolation where instability reigns supreme and disinfection turns into a nightmarish obsession, hinting at the derailment of a regime and the ruling ideology as an implied possibility. Ai Weiwei's documentary *CoroNation* dismantles the utopia of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream and the "coronation" of a superpower nation, revealing instead a "corona-nation" in which a deadly disease threatens to eliminate humanity in a dystopian nightmare.

If their voices are exemplary, they are neither unique nor alone—other artists have joined in the network of social negotiations and exchanges around visual narratives about the Covid-19 lockdowns and the issues of freedom of expression and the spread of information vs. disinformation and propaganda. Such artistic practice occurred during the early and late Covid-19 lockdowns across China from Beijing to Shanghai and Hong Kong from 2020 to 2022. For example, Beijing-based artist Ye Funa's 叶甫纳 (b. 1986, Kunming) online work *Ke daifu zaixian* 柯大夫在線 (*Dr Corona Online*, 2020) offers a critique of the citizens' craving for information versus the vortex of disinformation around Covid-19 by playing on the format of the agony aunt column and the use of AI and the digital media in spreading both information and disinformation.[129] Hong Kong-based artist, designer and scholar Michael Leung 梁志剛 (b. 1981, London, UK) has created an online archive of media information about the Covid-19 crisis as a counterpoint to the lack of trustworthy information from official Chinese channels.[130]

129 Ye Funa's work is no longer available online as of May 2024. On Ye Funa, see Furmanik-Kowalska 2022.

130 Michael Leung's work is no longer available online as of May 2024. On Michael Leung, see StudioLeung.

Shanghai artist Hu Jieming胡介鳴 (b. 1957) produced an online diary entitled *Shisi tian: waijiao gongyu riji* 十四天外交公寓日記 (2020) with the English subtitle *Fourteen Days: The Diary of DRC No.12*, including poetry and photographic works on the themes of isolation, surveillance, self-surveillance and the early Covid-19 lockdown in Shanghai.

Such trends continued throughout the Covid-19 years until the late lockdowns in 2022. When Beijing-based artist Sun Xun 孫遜 (b. 1980), originally from Fuxin 阜新, Liaoning province, found himself stuck in a hotel room in Shanghai for fifty days during the city lockdown in the spring of 2022, he produced works of poetry and photography in protest.[131] In future research, we shall explore their voices and visual narratives and place them into context with the cultural discourse analyzed in this study. This study has shed light on two examples of visual narratives as early Covid-19 responses in vernacular culture to the official responses of lockdown, surveillance and censorship. Their dystopian themes reveal different styles of direct and indirect critiques of a superpower in crisis.

References

A&M (November 12, 2020): "Cao Fei's 'Isle of Instability'." *A&M (Art and Market)*, https://artandmarket.net/news/2020/11/12/cao-fei-isle-of-instability (05/27/2024).

Adams, James Truslow (1931, repr. 2017): *The Epic of America*. With a new introduction by Howard Schneiderman, London & New York: Routledge.

Ai Weiwei (2009): @Fanfou 饭否.

Ai Weiwei (2010): @aiww. Twitter.

Ai Weiwei (2020): *CoroNation*. Documentary.

Ai Weiwei Films (August 20, 2020): *CoroNation*. Documentary. Vimeo.com. https://vimeo.com/ondemand/coronation (05/31/2024).

Ai, Weiwei (2021): *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir*. Translated by Allan H. Barr. New York: The Crown Publishing Group.

Art RUC (Renmin University of China School of Arts) (February 26, 2020): "Yiqi zhanyi, fangyi zujizhan, yishu you Liliang (Xuesheng zuopin xuansong)" 艺起战疫 | 防疫阻击战, 艺术有力量 (学生作品选送) (Art Joins the Fight Against the Pandemic, in the Battle for Prevention and Control, Art Has Power (Student Works Submission)). http://art.ruc.edu.cn/info/1019/4958.htm (05/31/2024).

Audemars Piguet (November 11, 2020): "Cao Fei: *Isle of Instability."* https://www.audemarspiguet.com/com/en/news/art/cao-fei-isle-of-instablity.html (05/27/2024).

Barr, Michael (2015): "Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: Old Wine in New Bottles?" In *China's Many Dreams: Comparative Perspectives on China's Search for National Rejuvenation*. Edited by David Kerr. Houndmills & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 180–200.

131 Gaskin 2022. On Sun Xun, see Guest 2018.

BBC (March 4, 2020): "Coronavirus: Chinese app WeChat censored virus content since 1 Jan." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51732042 (05/10/2024).
Berg, Daria (2002). *Carnival in China: a reading of the Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*. Leiden: Brill.
Berg, Daria (2011): "A New Spectacle in China's Mediasphere: A Cultural Reading of a Web-based Reality Show from Shanghai." *The China Quarterly* 205: 133–151.
Bingham, Juliet (Ed.) (2013): *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*. London: Tate Enterprises Ltd.
Bloomberg News (February 16, 2022): "Virus Cases in China's Olympic Bubble Fall Amid Covid Zero Curbs." Bloomberg. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/china-s-winter-olympics-near-zero-covid-cases-in-victory-for-xi (05/01/2024).
BMW Group (May 31, 2017): "BMW Art Car reloaded: Chinese multimedia artist Cao Fei takes the series into the 21st Century by going digital." https://www.press.bmwgroup.com/global/article/detail/T0271401EN/bmw-art-car-reloaded:-chinese-multimedia-artist-cao-fei-takes-the-series-into-the-21st-century-by-going-digital?language=en (05/27/2024).
Bramesco, Charles (August 21, 2020): "Coronation review—Ai Weiwei's harrowing coronavirus documentary." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/aug/21/coronation-review-ai-weiwei-harrowing-coronavirus-documentary (05/22/2024).
Brant, R. (February 4, 2022): *Beijing Olympics: Winter Games start amid Covid and boycotts*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-60242083.
Buchholz, Katharina (September 5, 2022): "Covid-19 in China: Lockdowns of Major Cities Continue." *Statista*. URL: https://www.statista.com/chart/27043/coronavirus-cases-lockdowns-in-china/#:~:text=Covid%20in%20China&text=After%20the%20controversial%2C%20two%Dmonths,on%20Thursday%20was%20prolonged%20Monday (05/20/2024).
Callahan, William A. (2013): *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Callahan, William A. (2014): "Citizen Ai: Warrior, Jester and Middleman." *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 212: 1–19.
Callahan, William A. (2015): "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream." *Politics*, 35.3–4: 216–229.
Callahan, William A. (2017): "Dreaming as a critical discourse of national belonging: China Dream, American Dream and world dream." *Nations and Nationalism* 23.2: 248–270.
Cao Fei (2020a): "Works: Isle of Instability." Personal Website. http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?year=2020&wtid=3 (05/27/2024).
Cao Fei (2020b): "Exhibitions: Isle of Instability." Personal Website. http://www.caofei.com/exhibitions.aspx?year=2020 (05/27/2024).
Cao Fei / Obrist, Hans Ulrich (October 15, 2020): "Conversations: Cao Fei and Hans Ulrich Obrist," *Art Basel*, https://www.artbasel.com/stories/cao-fei-and-hans-ulrich-obrist?lang=en (05/27/2024).
Cao, Fei (N.d.): "About." Personal Website. http://www.caofei.com/exhibitions.aspx?year=2020 (05/27/2024).
Chade, Jamil (March 12, 2021): "Geneva shows the film China wants no one to see." Swissinfo.ch. https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/geneva-shows-the-film-that-china-doesn-t-want-anyone-to-see/46440028 (05/22/2024).
Cucinotta Domenico / Vanelli, Maurizio (2020): "WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic." *Acta Biomedica* 91.1: 157–160.
Dang Yuanyue (2024): "Chinese scientist who first shared Covid-19 genome data sparks sympathy after lab closure battle." *South China Morning Post*, May 3. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3261238/chinese-scientist-who-first-shared-covid-19-genome-data-sparks-sympathy-after-lab-closure-battle (05/31/2024).
Debray, Régis (1991): *Cours de Médiologie Générale*. Paris: Gallimard.

Dong, Hongjie et al. (2020): “If the Coronavirus Doesn’t Scare You, the Banners Will—A Case Study of Early COVID-19 Banners.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2020, 17.24.9595: 1–19.

Du, Jiani 杜佳妮 / Lu, Jing 鲁婧 (February 3, 2020): “Renmin zhan ‘yi’ wenyi zuopin / huabi zuoqian, kangji feiyan (manhua edition) ” 人民战‘疫’文艺作品|画笔作枪 抗击疫情 (漫画篇) (The People’s War Against the Pandemic: Literary and Artistic Works | Using the Paintbrush as a Weapon to Fight the Pandemic (Comics Edition)). http://art.people.com.cn/gb/n1/2020/0203/c41426-31568578.html (05/31/2024).

Feng, Jenny (2020): *All the hilariously aggressive coronavirus propaganda banners found in China*. The China Project. URL: https://thechinaproject.com/2020/02/11/all-the-hilariously-aggressive-coronavirus-banners-found-in-china/ (05/01/2024).

Fok, Silvia (2011): “Micro-narratives in Contemporary Chinese Art: A Case Study of Cao Fei’s *Pearl River Delta Anti-heroes*.” *Asian Studies Review 35*.4: 499–520.

Furmanik-Kowalska, Magdalena (2022): “Battlegrounds. Net Art and Virtual Worlds in the Work of Chinese Artists.” *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*, 22.A11: 11–16.

Gaskin, Sam (2022): “Artists in China Endure Harsh Covid-19 Lockdown.” *Ocula*. May 16, https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/artists-in-china-endure-harsh-covid-19-lockdown/ (05/31/2024).

Green, Andrew (2020): “Li Wenliang: Obituary.” *The Lancet* 395 (February 25): 682, https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2820%2930382-2 (05/27/2024).

Guest, Luise (2018): “Allegories of the Anthropocene: Animated dystopias in the Work of Geng Xue, Qiu Anxiong and Sun Xun.” *Art Monthly Australasia*, 307: 52–63.

Han, Yanmei (2021): “Situated impoliteness revisited: Blunt anti-epidemic slogans and conflicting comments during the coronavirus outbreak in China.” *Journal of Pragmatics*, 178: 31–42.

Harvey, Chris (2022): “Ai Weiwei: ‘It’s obvious Covid is not a natural disease, it’s something that leaked out.’” The Telegraph, January 29. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/artists/ai-weiwei-obvious-covid-not-natural-disease-something-leaked/ (05/31/2024).

IISH Collection. The Stefan R. Landsberger Collection or the Private Collection. Edited by Stefan Landsberger. chineseposters.net (05/27/2024).

IISH. “Patriotic Health Campaign (1952).” https://chineseposters.net/themes/patriotic-health-campaign (05/27/2024).

IOC International Olympics Committee (2021): “Beijing 2022 reveals official motto: ‘Together for a Shared Future.’” https://olympics.com/ioc/news/beijing-2022-reveals-official-motto-together-for-a-shared-future-x3061 (05/27/2024).

IOC International Olympics Committee (2022): “Olympics Winter Games Beijing 2022, ‘The Brand.’” https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/beijing-2022/logo-design (05/20/2024).

Johnson, Ian (2020): “From Ai Weiwei, a Portrait of Wuhan’s Draconian Covid Lockdown.” *The New York Times*, August 21. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/movies/ai-weiwei-coronation-coronavirus.html (05/22/2024).

Johnson, Ian (January 25, 2024): “The Shadow of China’s Lockdown Remains.” *Think Global Health*. https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/shadow-chinas-lockdown-remains (05/26/2024).

Kerr, David (ed.) (2015). *China’s Many Dreams: Comparative Perspectives on China’s Search for National Rejuvenation*. Edited by Houndmills & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lam, Willy (2024): Xi Jinping: The Hidden Agendas of China’s Ruler for Life. London: Routledge.

Landsberger, Stefan (1995): *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Landsberger, Stefan (2018): “China Dreaming – Representing the Perfect Present, Anticipating the Rosy Future.” In: *Urbanized Interface – Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in*

Contemporary China. Edited by Minna Valjakka & Meiqin Wang. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 147–177.
Leung, Michael. Studio Leung website. https://www.studioleung.com/ (05/31/2024).
Liu Qibao 刘奇葆 (2013): "Guanyu Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi lilun tixi de jidian renshi" 关于中国特色社会主义理论体系的几点认识 (Some thoughts on the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics). *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, 8 July. Renmin wang. URL: http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0708/c40531-22110474.html (26/05/2024).
Liu Qibao (2013): "Some points of understanding concerning the theoretical structure of socialism with Chinese characteristics" [关于中国特色社会主义理论体系的几点认识], People's Daily, 2013 http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0708/c1003-22109528.html (05/10/2024).
Liu, Ziyang (2022): "Exploring the Role of the Olympic Games in Political Narrative——A Case Study of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics." *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 6: 38–44.
Lloyd-Smith, Harriet (2022): "Cao Fei on collective confinement and the significance of home." Wallpaper, 30 June 2022, https://www.wallpaper.com/art/cao-fei-audemars-piguet-west-bund-art-design-fair (05/24/2024).
Luce, Henry R. "The American Century." *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 159–71.
Lyotard, Jean-François (1984): *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
McCarthy, Simone / Xiong, Yong (April 30, 2024): "This Chinese virologist shared crucial Covid-19 data. Then his research hit hurdles." CNN. https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/30/china/zhang-yongzhen-china-scientist-protest-intl-hnk-scn/index.html (05/31/2024).
McDougall, Bonnie S. (2020): *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A translation of the 1943 text with commentary*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
Mendes, Ana Cristina / Ai, Weiwei (2022): "The world as a readymade: a conversation with Ai Weiwei." *Transnational Screens*, 13.2: 157–175.
Mendez, A. / Forcadell, F.J. / Horiachko, K. (2022): "Russia–Ukraine crisis: China's Belt Road Initiative at the crossroads." *Asian Business & Management* 21: 488–496.
Mirra, Federica (2020): "The art of billboards in urbanized China." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7.2–3: 275–300.
News Wires (2022): "New cases among Winter Olympics staff put China's zero-Covid strategy to the test." *France 24*. February 3. https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220203-beijing-winter-olympic-games-sees-its-highest-daily-tally-of-new-covid-19-cases (05/22/2024).
O'Donnell, Mary Ann (2022): "Shanghai Music Party, 28 April 2022." *Shenzhen Noted*. https://shenzhennoted.com/2022/04/29/shanghai-music-party-28-april-2022/ (05/22/2024).
Pan, Yaochang (2014): "The Posters of the Mao Era: A Perspective of Art and Society." *Artibus et Historiae*, 69: 289–304, 331.
Peh, Clara Che Wei (August 17, 2020): "Review of Cao Fei's 'Fu cha.'" https://artandmarket.net/reviews/2020/8/17/review-of-cao-fei-fu-cha (05/24/2024).
Peterson, Merrill (1970): *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Pieke, Frank N. (2014): "Anthropology, China, and the Chinese Century." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 123–138.
Princeton University Library (2020): *Zhongguo xin guan yi qing zheng ce xuan chuan hai bao* 中国新冠疫情政策宣传海报 (Chinese COVID-19 political propaganda poster collection). N.p. https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/9912047521350642l#view (26/05/2024).
Purbrick, Martin (2019): "A Report of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests." *Asian Affairs* 50.4: 465–487.

Restrepo, Manuela López (December 8, 2022): "How protesters in China bypass online censorship to express dissent." NPR. https://www.npr.org/people/1004889801/manuela-lopez-restrepo (05/31/2024).

Roberts, David L / Rossman, Jeremy S / Jarić, Ivan (2021): "Dating first cases of COVID-19." PLoS Pathogens 17.6: e1009620, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.ppat.1009620 (05/31/2024).

Schneider, Florian (2021): "COVID-19 nationalism and the visual construction of sovereignty during China's coronavirus crisis." *China Information* 35.3: 301–324.

Sheji zhou @She ji zhou @设计周 (@Design Week) (2020): "Nide ai xiang kou zhao / Women zai yiqi 2020 kangji 'xinguan feiyan' quanqiu zhaotie sheji zhengji huodong zuopin tuijie dibabo" 你的爱像口罩丨"我们在一起"2020抗击"新冠肺炎"全球招贴设计征集活动作品推介第八波 (Your Love Is Like a Mask / "We Are Together" 2020 Global Poster Design Campaign Against COVID-19, Recommendation of Works, Eighth Wave). Sohu.com, February 27, https://www.sohu.com/a/376348708_744403?_trans_=000019_wzwza#google_vignette (05/31/2024).

Sohu.com. (2020): "Taizhou bentu yinyue renyuan chuang zuopin: women de yingxiong" 台州本土音乐人原创作品:《我们的英雄》(An Original Piece by a Local Taizhou Artist: "Our Hero"), February 5, https://www.sohu.com/a/370841451_181765 (05/31/2024).

Strafella, Giorgio / Berg, Daria (2015): "Twitter Bodhisattva: Ai Weiwei's Media Politics." *Asian Studies Review* 39.1: 138–157.

Strafella, Giorgio / Berg, Daria (2017): "Ai Weiwei's #Refugees: A Transcultural and Transmedia Journey." *Made in China* 2.3: 72–77.

The State Council Information Office, The People's Republic of China (2022): "China Keywords: The Chinese Dream.", July 13. http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/featured/chinakeywords/2022-07/13/content_78321910.htm (05/31/2024).

Tsang, Steve (2009): "Consultative Leninism: China's new political framework." *Journal of Contemporary China* 18.62: 865–880.

Tsang, Steve (2015): "Contextualizing the China Dream: A Reinforced Consultative Leninist Approach to Government." In *China's Many Dreams: Comparative Perspectives on China's Search for National Rejuvenation*. Edited by David Kerr. Houndmills & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 10–34.

Wang, Zheng (2013): "The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19:1–13.

Wong, Y. C. (2021): *Assessing the Era of Jiang Zemin*. In *Chinese Ideology*. Edited by Shiping Hua. London: Routledge, 183–202.

World Health Organization (WHO) (January 14, 2020a): "Novel Coronavirus – Thailand (ex-China)." https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2020-DON234#:~:text=On%2013%20January%202020%2C%20the,Wuhan%2C%20Hubei%20Province%2C%20China (05/31/2024).

World Health Organization (WHO) (January 5, 2020b): "Pneumonia of unknown cause — China." https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unkown-cause-china/en/). (05/31/2024).

World Health Organization (WHO) @WHO. Twitter (Now: X). (January 5, 2020c). https://x.com/WHO/status/1213523866703814656 (05/31/2024).

Wu, Jianxin et al. (2023): "The Economic Impacts of COVID-19 and City Lockdown: Early Evidence from China." *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics* 65: 151–165.

Xinhua (2012): "Xi Pledges 'Great renewal of Chinese nation.'" *Xinhua*, 30 November. http://en.people.cn/90785/8040389.html.

Xu, Xin (2006): "Modernizing China in the Olympic Spotlight: China's National Identity and the 2008 Beijing Olympiad." *The Sociological Review* 54:2: 90–107.

XXR (2020): “Ningqing juli, zhan ‘yi’ you wo” Chengda qingnian ‘tanshang’ zuopinzhan (yi) “凝青聚力, 战‘疫’有我”|城大青年“云上”作品展 (一) (Uniting Youth Power, I Stand in the Fight Against the Pandemic, City University Youth Online Exhibition (Part 1)), February 11. https://www.sohu.com/a/372260742_652055 (05/31/2024).

Yang Chengpai 羊城派 (2020): “Zhenqing huikui: Huaxia hangkong zhijing kangyi yingxiong” 真情回馈|华夏航空致敬抗疫英雄 (Heartfelt Gratitude | China Express Airlines Pays Tribute to the Heroes fighting against Pandemic). Sina.com, April 26. https://k.sina.com.cn/article_5787187353_158f178990200106vn.html?cre=tianyi&mod=pcpager_fin&loc=34&r=9&rfunc=82&tj=none&tr=9 (05/31/2024).

Yang, Xiaoxuan (2020): “Does city lockdown prevent the spread of COVID-19? New evidence from the synthetic control method.” *Global Health Research and Policy* 6.20. https://ghrp.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s41256-021-00204-4 (05/31/2024).

Zhang, Chenchen (2022): “Contested disaster nationalism in the digital age: Emotional registers and geopolitical imaginaries in COVID-19 narratives on Chinese social media.” *Review of International Studies*, 6: 1–24.

Zheng, Yongnian (2010): *The Chinese Communist Party as Organisational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction, and Transformation*. London: Routledge.

Zheng, Yongnian,/ Tok, S. K. (2007): “Harmonious society and harmonious world: China’s policy discourse under Hu Jintao.” *The University of Nottingham China Policy Institute Briefing Series*, 26: 1–12.