University of Groningen

Book review: Caring in Times of Precarity

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Published in:
China Information

DOI:
[10.1177/0920203X19878364a](https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X19878364a)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lin, J. (2019). Book review: Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai. *China Information*, 3, 373-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X19878364a>

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everyday forms of containment. Apart from avoiding political controversies, pastors are cautious when there is any change in the policy of religious toleration. Reflecting on the impacts of religious containment on regime survival, Chapter 5 explains how this top-down strategy is bound to collapse when the state refuses to keep up its side of the bargain, and when some religious actors decide to fight for greater autonomy.

Chapter 6 tests the concept of authoritarian containment through comparisons of China and the Middle East. Reny looks at influential Muslim groups with broad-based agendas (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood) and low-profile networks (e.g. quietist Salafis) and asserts that in these autocracies, institutional choices made by political elites and religious leaders are contingent upon many variables. Jordan's leaders appreciate the anti-Shi'a rhetoric of the quietist Salafis because of their fear of Shi'a neighbours such as Iran and Syria. This shared agenda has ensured support for the regime from quietist Salafis. In Egypt, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a new force, promising religious purity for marginalized people, contributed to state-building, even though it has intensified clashes between faith communities. As with the Chinese communists, autocrats in Jordan and Egypt have distinguished Islamic extremists, bent on seeking power in the name of Allah, from Muslim activists inspired by their faith to serve the public, and these autocrats have partnered with the latter to ensure regime stability. The conclusion and afterword bring the story into the conversation about a campaign launched in 2013–14 by Xia Baolong, the then provincial party secretary, to demolish Protestant churches and crosses in Zhejiang and with Chinese president Xi Jinping's latest ideological attempt to restrict public religion.

Two lessons can be gained from this excellent investigation. The first lesson is a methodological one. Reny avoids falling into the trap of earlier quasi-totalitarian characterizations that viewed China's church and state as monolithic and oppositional entities. The church–state encounters span a wide spectrum, ranging from extremely conflictual to remarkably cooperative. The picture that emerges is one of such variation, which makes it difficult to generalize China's church–state relationship. The second lesson concerns the relative decline of state power in the religious sphere. The Chinese state's ability to put religious institutions in the service of the country goes hand in hand with the need to maintain control. The state has yet to resolve the tensions and conflicts of modernization. An unprecedented level of inequality remains intact and the cultural divide between cities and the hinterlands is unbridgeable. Lacking shared values to hold the diverse populations together, the only option for the state is to draw on its legalistic tradition of autocratic rule to contain, co-opt, and coerce its religious communities.

In short, *Authoritarian Containment* is theoretically sophisticated and well written, and its findings should appeal to Chinese historians, political scientists, and religious scholars.

Chow Yiu Fai, *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; xii + 345 pp. with notes, appendix, bibliography, and index: 9783319768977, US\$89.99 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Jian Lin, *University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

Chow Yiu Fai's book *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* offers an interesting study of a special group of individuals in contemporary China: single women creative workers in Shanghai. It bridges two fields of research – studies on gender and women with creative labour and work studies – through grounded empirical analysis in the Chinese context. The book challenges the existing assumptions about precarity inherent in female singlehood and creative work (Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, *In the social factory?: Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work*, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(7–8), 2008: 1–30; and Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, London and New York: Verso, 2015). Chow focuses on the question of 'care': 'how can one take care of oneself in times of precarity?' (p. 3). If creative work and singlehood induce increased work and precarity, it can also bring delight, hope and possibilities of caring to single women creative workers in their everyday experience of doing creative work.

The major contribution of this book lies in its intersectional and affirmative analysis of single women doing creative work. Viewing from a contextualized Chinese perspective, this non-Western approach stems from the concern that the existing literature and theorization on precarity is 'predominantly conceived of and necessitated by scenarios unfolded and conceptualized in Western contexts, say, the Global North' (p. 13). This book refuses to view Chinese single women as 'a coherent, identical group' victimized and repressed in a Third World society 'without class, ethnic, or racial distinctions' (p. 15). For the same reason, the author argues for a 'politics of care' which is not simply 'informed by the politics argued elsewhere in Western democracies' but situated in the local context and connected to the actual experiences of individual subjects.

Rigid state control and rampant capitalism in China dilute possibilities for effective activism or revolution. While individual resistance to ongoing politics continues to take place, such dynamics is trivialized and internalized in everyday work and life. Instead of viewing single women as marginalized and stigmatized, this book affirms the active recognition and defiant spirit of single women as well as the caring that they do as creative workers in Shanghai. First and foremost, these single women recognize themselves as individuals (not victimized singles) and they refuse to follow 'the advice by the state and by [their] parents to get married before it is too late', and turn down 'the prospect of earning more money with jobs that are more lucrative than the creative ones' (p. 18). Their commitment to creative work relates to their attachments, goals, and ambitions; in this sense it is an affirmation of their capacity to resist outside pressure and to care for themselves.

The seven empirical chapters of this book explicate this politics of care in the everyday experiences of single female creative workers in Shanghai. Chapters 2 and 3 delineate the specificities of Chinese single womanhood through a discursive analysis of representations of single women in Chinese popular culture and its specific conjunction with the discourse on generation. Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the actual work and life experiences of single female creative workers in Shanghai. Departing from the existing critical scholarship on the exploitation of creative labour, the book focuses on the subjective experiences of single women and their strategies in response to the prevailing precarity of and pressure from work (job market) and pressure to marry (from parents and a patriarchal authoritarian society). Chapters 6 and 7 continue this investigation of the

everyday experiences of single women by examining their interaction with each other (community) and with the urban city (space). Their shared love of *kunqu* (a form of Chinese opera) serves to bind the research participants and form an informal community for socializing and sharing not only their hobby but also their work and life. Their collective life aside, these single women also actively relate to the urban space as mapped out in Chapter 7 – their everyday mobility and interaction with the city and how these mobile relations in return also affect individual subjectivity. Finally, in Chapter 8, Chow provides an interesting supplement often neglected in similar studies: creative works made by these single women professionals. The visual analysis of these self-representational materials best echoes this book's theme that affirms the individual subjective experiences of single womanhood and creative work.

The intersectional approach to gender and creative work adopted, innovative and multiple methodology used, and non-Western ethnographic perspective make *Caring in Times of Precarity* a highly valuable contribution to current theorizations about creative labour. This book, as it promises, gives voice to marginalized and stigmatized single women in the creative economy: their struggles and frustrations as well as pleasures and hopes. The emphasis on actual experiences rightly challenges contemporary Western-centric understandings of precarity and politics obsessed with truth and justice while neglecting issues such as relevance, connection, and passion. The question Chow raises in the epilogue, 'How dare I speak on their behalf?', should concern every researcher. The politics of care, therefore, is not another therapeutic programme in the name of progressive politics, but an affirmation of life, difference, and agency which does justice to creativity and cultural value (Mark Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017) from the perspective of agentic individuals.

Peter Nolan, *China and the West: Crossroads of Civilisation*. Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2019; x + 268 pp. with tables, notes, references, and index: 9781138321281, US\$170.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Prasenjit Duara, *Duke University, USA*

Peter Nolan seeks to correct the current misperceptions in the West about Chinese society as well as to create the basis for cooperation between China and Western powers to collectively address the financial and environmental crisis that is affecting the world. In addition, he wants the world to avoid another Peloponnesian War arising from the famous Thucydides trap of a rising challenger (i.e. China). I am in full agreement with this goal.

At the same time, I personally know of no other scholar writing in English who serves more as an apologist for the Chinese Communist Party, representing, to the letter, its view of the world, its history, and its destiny. In Chapter 2, Nolan deliberately adopts the perspective of a senior party cadre to represent this view, which may be fair enough. But one will note that there is no significant difference in the book between this view and Nolan's own. As a historian, I find the view of history presented to be entirely blinkered.