

Today's China in Seven Life Stories

As China shapes the world, who are the people shaping China? This brief discusses seven prominent people in China whose lives reflect a diverse and fast-evolving society.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary western media, China is often portrayed as an inscrutable behemoth, a country whose culture and people defy attempts at understanding. In reality, of course, China is no such thing—no country can be reduced to a single stereotype, let alone one as complex and multifaceted as China. Nor is it complete mystery; rather, it has a history and culture that can be surprisingly easy to grasp, with links to the outside in sometimes unexpected ways.

From its long eastern coastline to its western borders with India and the Central Asian republics that once marked the southern extent of the USSR, from its sweltering tropical regions to the rolling steppes that mark its northern border with Mongolia, China encompasses nearly 10 million square km. It is home to some 1.4 billion people, or 17% of the world's population. In many senses, there is no singular "China"—a country as vast as this is home to multiple cultures and ways of life.

But ultimately, as with any country, knowing China requires knowing its people. China's leaders—especially its president, Xi Jinping—have been the subject of endless analysis and reportage in the west. But beyond those in the highest echelons of power, the lives of the many millions of people—extraordinary and ordinary—who form the bulk of Chinese society, receive little coverage for a general western audience.

This piece aims to offer some remedy by highlighting seven Chinese citizens whose lives reflect the complexity of contemporary Chinese society. These individuals' stories illustrate how the

lives of China's people are shaped by both the country's internal dynamism and its increasingly vital connections to the wider world.

马云 JACK MA: THE TECH MOGUL WHO FLEW TOO CLOSE TO THE SUN

Imagine if Amazon and PayPal had been founded by the same person—and that person also sat on the board of Warner Brothers. In China, such a person exists, and his name is Jack Ma.

Ma was born in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou in 1964. He trained as an English teacher, and his first business venture was a translation service, which he founded in 1992. In 1995, he used nearly all his savings to finance a visit to the US west coast, where he landed smack bang in the middle of the first “dot com” boom. Ma recognized the business potential of the internet, and on returning to his hometown—with a laptop in tow, a rare novelty in China those days—he founded one of China's first internet companies, which had since faded into obscurity in the great churn of China's commercial world.¹

While he was a pioneer of Chinese online business in general, Ma's key insight was recognising the potential of the internet for connecting millions of middle-class Chinese households with China's burgeoning manufacturing sector. His first venture in this area was Alibaba, set up in 1999 as one of China's first business-to-business Internet platforms. It was followed in 2003 by Taobao (Chinese for “treasure hunting”), an online auction site founded as a rival to eBay, which had recently launched in China. Taobao's combination of free listings, instant messaging and an Internet payment tool (Alipay) proved a hit with Chinese consumers, and within three years eBay had withdrawn from mainland China. But Ma's business also benefited from foreign

¹ 澎湃新闻 (2025) ‘商界大佬们的高考往事：李彦宏是状元，马云连考 3 次’，https://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=1249539&from=wifiKey; 蔡洁晶 (2014) ‘帝国 1995：马云第一次触网是什么样子’，澎湃新闻 https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1267760; 新浪财经 (2007) ‘马云当初的创业经历’，<https://finance.sina.cn/sa/2007-06-26/detail-ikkntiam1470354.d.html>.

connections too: Yahoo and SoftBank were both major shareholders of Alibaba Group by the mid-2000s.²

Taobao expanded in 2008 to include a business-to-consumer branch, and in 2014 Alipay was spun off into a separate financial service provider, named Ant Group in a nod to Ma's humble origins. These services made it increasingly convenient for Chinese households to access the fruits of their labour. Ma himself, meanwhile, continued to diversify his interests—most notably in 2008 when he became a deputy chair on the board of the Huayi Brothers, a major Chinese entertainment production company.³ Today, Alipay and its rival, WeChat Pay (operated by Tencent), dominate the digital payment scene in China, where credit cards and cash are rarely used in daily transactions, while Alibaba has broken into foreign markets, connecting consumers across the world with Chinese factories and workhouses.



Jack Ma spotted by a fan cycling in Hangzhou, July 2025.

Source: 财经真相 on x.com (2025)

<https://x.com/Rumoreconomy/status/1945865955336126845>

However, Ma's story also demonstrates that, however powerful or prominent a businessman is in China, crossing the government remains ill-advised. Ma learned this the hard way in late 2020 when, in the run-up to Ant Group's planned public listing, he made some unusually conspicuous criticism of China's financial regulators. Perhaps he was too confident that, in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns where e-commerce platforms helped keep the economy going, he could translate his corporate power into gravity-defying political influence. The Shanghai stock exchange called off the listing, and the regulating agencies forced Ma to divest

² 新华网(2012) '阿里巴巴 71 亿美元回购雅虎所持 20%股权', <https://finance.sina.cn/sa/2012-05-21/detail-ikftpnx8042317.d.html?from=wap>; Feng (2024) 'Japan's SoftBank concludes run as Alibaba's biggest shareholder, drawing to a close one of the most successful internet deals in China', *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/article/3249933/japans-softbank-concludes-run-alibabas-biggest-shareholder-drawing-close-one-most-successful>.

³ 刘冉 (2013) '马云减持华谊兄弟 套现 2.6 亿', *财新*, <https://finance.caixin.com/2013-10-29/100596982.html>; 吴波 (2011) '神秘的财富圈', *人民文摘*, https://paper.people.com.cn/rmwz/html/2011-05/01/content_899486.htm?div=-1.

from Ant Group, which was then broken up,⁴ and for the next two years, Ma virtually disappeared from public view.

He resurfaced in early 2023, when he began making public appearances in China again, at which he mostly remained silent.⁵ In February 2025, Ma was given a front-row seat at a meeting between Xi Jinping and heads of China's most prominent private corporations. This was interpreted widely as a gesture from the Chinese government intended to inject confidence into the private sector, rather than a full rehabilitation for Ma himself,⁶ and quite where China's internet Icarus goes from here remains to be seen.

陶华碧 TAO HUABI: THE BILLIONAIRE WHO REPORTEDLY LOVES PAYING TAXES

If you shop in the “imported food” section of Australia's major supermarkets, you've probably bought Lao Gan Ma products—most likely their chili sauce, which comes in a small glass jar with a red label adorned with a woman's face. If you've ever wondered who the unsmiling middle-aged lady in the white apron staring back at you from the middle shelf is, then wonder no longer: she's Tao Huabi, the founder of Lao Gan Ma (meaning “old godmother”).⁷

Tao was born in the southwest Chinese province of Guizhou in 1947. This mountainous inland province is one of the poorest in China, and like many others from the region, Tao made her own preserved chili sauce to spice up work lunches that were otherwise rice- or pastry-heavy.

In part, Tao was saving money on food for her husband's medical treatment; he nevertheless died from illness when she was just 26. She was left with two young children and hardly any savings, and for the next 15 years, she worked as a manual labourer to support her family. By 1989, she had finally saved enough to open a small eatery. It served one thing and one thing only: noodles with Tao's home-made chili sauce. Word soon got around, and the quality of Tao's sauce—along with her hands-on, unpretentious style and her reputation for a dogged

⁴ Fang (2021) ‘被赶下神坛的马云——阿里巴巴遭反垄断调查始末’, ABC 中文, <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2021-01-08/jack-ma-ant-finance-and-alibaba/13039486>.

⁵ Yong (2023) ‘Jack Ma: Alibaba founder seen in China after long absence’, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-65084344>.

⁶ Zhang (2025) ‘Look who's back: Alibaba's Jack Ma shakes Xi's hand at meeting of China's business titans’, *The Strait Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/look-whos-back-alibabas-jack-ma-shakes-xis-hand-at-meeting-of-chinas-business-titans>.

⁷ Kuang (2022) ‘从文盲寡妇到辣椒女王:“老干妈”陶华碧的传奇能延续多久?’, ABC 中文 <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2022-12-29/tao-huabi-laogama-chilli-sauce-empire/101809266>.



Benjamin Law 羅旭能
@mrbenjaminlaw



Whenever I wonder whether I'd have the courage to put myself in harm's way for a stranger, I remember I would die for this woman



8:13 PM · Oct 3, 2022

Australian broadcaster Benjamin Law unofficially but enthusiastically endorsing the condiment brand Lao Gan Ma

Source: Benjamin Law on x.com (2022)

<https://x.com/mrbenjaminlaw/status/1576862962542780417>

commitment to quality and honesty—meant that she was soon having trouble keeping up with demand. Urban development further expanded her customer base.

In the mid-1990s, Tao set up a factory that employed 40 people to hand-make her chili sauce. She worked alongside her employees, the strenuous labour reportedly leaving her with lasting health issues,⁸ and it's hard to imagine she could have foreseen the global reach that her humble business would come to possess. The 2000s saw the meteoric rise of China's household income and thus consumer goods

corporations, including Lao Gan Ma. By 2014, the company was producing over 2 million jars of chili sauce per day.⁹

Today, Tao is a billionaire, and one notable aspect of her portrayal in the Chinese media is the extent to which she has made paying tax, which she describes as a key responsibility to the state and society,¹⁰ central to her personal brand. Unlike Jack Ma, Tao has also managed to avoid falling foul of the state—in fact, she was given the honour of a seat in the National People's Congress (China's peak legislative body with nearly 3,000 members) between 2008

⁸ 艺非凡 (2022) '26 岁丧夫, 50 岁身价过亿, 一生只识三个字', 澎湃新闻, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16973069.

⁹ 新黄河(2022) '营收一年缩减 12 亿元, 老干妈不香了?', republished on 金羊网, https://news.ycwb.com/2022-11/07/content_41152966.htm.

¹⁰ Tao (2021) interview with 新浪财经, https://finance.sina.com.cn/chanjing/dygc/2021-12-29/doc-ikyarmz1956666.shtml?finpagefr=p_115.

and 2018.¹¹ Though perhaps expressed in an unusually ostentatious way with Tao, this connection to the party-state—a term reflecting the Communist Party’s command of the state’s functioning—is a fact of life in China, as the party has been encouraging closer affiliation with private businesspeople, including by incorporating them into its 100-million-strong membership.¹²

乔杰 QIAO JIE: THE WOMAN WHO CAN DO IT ALL

In a country where most senior leadership are still occupied by men, Qiao Jie has not only smashed through the glass ceiling and became a vice-chancellor of one of China’s best universities; she has become one of the world’s most accomplished and respected voices on matters of public health.

Qiao’s background is in obstetrics and gynaecology, in which she holds both a master’s degree and a doctorate. In 2014, Qiao began to gain public prominence when she gave a seven-minute briefing to Xi Jinping during a televised visit to her research laboratory at Peking University.¹³ In an interview that followed, Qiao spoke eloquently about how China should improve its socialised health service. In doing so, she joined the ranks of senior Chinese academics whose public commentary advances, but also influences, the Chinese government’s policy agenda.

She also exemplifies a trend in Chinese academia that began in the 1980s, when the country began to move away from isolationism; in scientific and medical fields, there was a boom in collaboration with experts from beyond Mainland China. This has allowed Qiao to take a visiting scholarship at Hong Kong University between 1997 and 2002, to conduct further research at Stanford University until 2003, and to benefit from access to an international academic network.

This collegiate atmosphere was challenged by the emergence of COVID-19, and especially by the rhetoric from Western politicians keen to portray the virus as being somehow China’s fault. As the disease tore through Wuhan in early 2020, Qiao—now president of the prestigious Peking University Third Hospital—joined over 40,000 health professionals across China in a scramble to control the pandemic. The efforts of Qiao and her team became part of official

¹¹ 中国新闻网 (2017) ‘老干妈陶华碧将缺席今年两会 据说她就住在厂子里’, http://www.ce.cn/cysc/sp/info/201703/02/t20170302_20646996.shtml.

¹² 杭州统一战线 (2024) ‘钱塘 “后浪” 潮头涌 ——杭州市新生代企业家成长启示录’, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26528670; 人民网 (2018) ‘民营企业和民营企业家是我们自己人’, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1102/c1001-30377203.html>.

¹³ 吴宁 (2014) ‘对话北医三院院长乔杰：三种视角，一个梦想’, *健康界*, <https://www.cn-healthcare.com/article/20140508/content-457163.html>.



Prof. Jie Qiao (second from right) on a visit to Helsinki for an international conference, October 2024

Source: Peking University official website

<https://news.pku.edu.cn/xwzh/8b08257ef67943e4aa43f509a37fdf80.htm>

director of the university's medical school.¹⁶ While she is the first woman in either of these roles, neither Qiao herself nor reportage about her seem to place much emphasis on her gender, as feminist politics in China remains muted and usually expressed through policies of material impacts.

She has, however, made use of her position to express alarm about China's declining fertility rate, an issue that will only become more important if China's long-running downward trend in birthrates continues. In a 2023 interview, she recommended that new fathers be given paternity leave so that they learn to share child-care responsibilities,¹⁷ and she has also opined that giving birth could bring physiological benefits to the mother.¹⁸

narratives about China's response to the crisis centred around government competence and national unity.¹⁴ Notably, in April 2020, Qiao was given membership of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,¹⁵ the oldest honorary society in the US—a rare exception to the heightened tensions between China and the USA during the pandemic.

In 2021, Qiao was appointed as one of two Executive Vice-Chancellors of Peking University, as well as the

¹⁴ 姚常房 and 仰东萍 (2020) '战疫院长访谈录|中国工程院院士、北京大学第三医院院长乔杰', *健康报*, https://www.most.gov.cn/ztzl/kxydfyyq/mtbd/202003/t20200313_152401.html.

¹⁵ PKU News (2020) 'Peking University Qiao Jie elected new member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences', https://newsen.pku.edu.cn/news_events/news/focus/9724.html.

¹⁶ 澎湃新闻 (2021) '北大首位女性医学部主任乔杰已出任北大常务副校长', https://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=12693233.

¹⁷ 王兆昱 (2023) '北大医学部乔杰院士: 如何看待不婚不育保平安?', *中国科学报*, <https://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2023/11/512060.shtm>.

¹⁸ *中国新闻周刊* (2023) '中国工程院院士、北京大学医学部主任乔杰: 今年出生人口或低于 900 万', <https://finance.sina.com.cn/jjxw/2023-08-08/doc-imzfnns0938186.shtml>; 王兆昱 (2023) '北大医学部乔杰

王宏志 WANG HONGZHI: THE ENERGY TSAR WHO KNOWS HIS STUFF

Wang Hongzhi is the man in charge of China's National Energy Administration—a 240-person organ with the formidable task of overseeing energy policy and regulation in a country that uses nearly twice as much energy as the United States.¹⁹ As China

pivots from the world's largest fossil fuel consumer to a renewable energy superpower, Wang's work plays a consequential role in global climate action.

In 1992, at about 23-years-old, Wang graduated with a master's degree from Tsinghua University, one of China's top tertiary institutions. After getting a job at the state-run electricity sector in the populous province of Henan, a string of promotions saw him rise to become manager of the province's electricity distributor and retailer, which is a subsidiary of the State Owned Enterprise (SOE) in charge of most of the nation's electricity grid.²⁰ In 2018, Wang was made the general manager of another SOE, the China Southern Power Grid, which supplied electricity to over 250 million people. By 2023 he was in charge of the central government organ that oversees state-owned economic assets.²¹

When he was appointed the director of the National Energy Administration in late 2024, Wang became the first head of the agency to have had extensive experience in electricity, reflecting



Wang Hongzhi (right) with UK Energy Secretary Ed Miliband at the 2025 China-UK Energy Dialogue

Source: UK Government (2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-china-restart-meaningful-climate-change-dialogue>

院士：如何看待不婚不育保平安？', *中国科学报*, <https://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2023/11/512060.shtm>.

¹⁹ (China) National Energy Administration (n.d.) 国家能源局简介, <https://www.nea.gov.cn/gjnyj/>; Gross and Sall (2025) 'How do China and America think about the energy transition?', *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-do-china-and-america-think-about-the-energy-transition/>.

²⁰ 韩舒淋 (2024) '王宏志任国家能源局党组书记，为首任电力背景主政者', *财经*, https://news.caijingmobile.com/article/detail/535590?source_id=40.

²¹ 韩舒淋 (2024) '王宏志任国家能源局党组书记，为首任电力背景主政者', *财经*, https://news.caijingmobile.com/article/detail/535590?source_id=40.

the Chinese government's heightened emphasis on energy transition. Previous directors had little prior experience in energy sectors,²² or—in the case of Wang's immediate predecessor—come from the state-owned oil industry.²³ In contrast, as the general manager of the China Southern Power Grid, Wang had overseen a large-scale rollout of clean energy production into a grid which powered the manufacturing hubs in Guangdong Province.²⁴ To that end, in 2024 alone, the China Southern Grid planned to invest approximately \$365 billion (¥1730 billion) in grid expansion and energy storage.²⁵

The symbolism of this changing of the guard in 2024 was apt: China's oil consumption likely peaked that year.²⁶ It was also a milestone year for China's renewable energy sector: in 2024, it installed more solar and wind electricity generation capacity than the rest of the world combined.²⁷ The logic behind this “miracle” is simple: clear political commitment, proactive investment in infrastructure (such as power transmission) and generous spending in research and development by private firms, all enabled by the government's ambitious industrial policy.²⁸

With his solid technocratic expertise and managerial experience in the electricity sector, Wang is well qualified to preside over the continued acceleration of renewable energy development that Beijing intends. This appointment could mark a successful culmination of Wang's career—a five-year tenure would bring him to China's current minimal retirement age of 60. It would also bring him to a deadline that China has set for itself: the country would reach “peak carbon emission” by 2030 and begin to reduce emissions thereafter.²⁹ This presents Wang and his colleagues a twin challenge: the still rapid growth in electricity demand and the influx of renewable generation capacity—which comes with significant intermittency—into a singular grid.

²² 贺梨萍 (2014) ‘吴新雄卸任国家能源局局长：任期 22 个月，未提颠覆性改革’，*澎湃新闻* http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1290303; 新华网 (2019) ‘张国宝同志逝世’，http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-10/22/c_1125137688.htm.

²³ National Energy Administration (2018) 章建华同志简历，https://www.nea.gov.cn/2018-12/05/c_137652815.htm.

²⁴ China Southern Power Grid (2022) ‘深入推进能源节约与生态环境保护支撑“双碳”目标实现’，<http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n4470048/n22624391/n24988398/n24988408/c25012259/content.html>.

²⁵ 新华网 (2024) ‘南方电网 2024 年安排固定资产投资 1730 亿元’，<http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/20240620/c4f0e0ddc5d74073b7a9e77975a9bcd9/c.html>.

²⁶ Healy, McKimm, and Walinga (2025), ‘Oil demand for fuels in China has reached a plateau’, *International Energy Agency*, <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/oil-demand-for-fuels-in-china-has-reached-a-plateau>.

²⁷ Graham, Fulghum, and Altieri (2025) ‘Global Electricity Review 2025’, *Ember*, <https://ember-energy.org/latest-insights/global-electricity-review-2025/major-countries-and-regions/#china>.

²⁸ Stylianou, Tauschinski, and White (2025) ‘How Xi sparked China's electricity revolution’, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/f86782fa-9f2e-448a-b710-29e787dc9831>.

²⁹ Liu et al. (2023) ‘The Carbon Brief Profile: China’, *Carbon Brief*, <https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-profile-china/index.html>.

Wang is one of many in the Chinese system who excel at their work but otherwise seemingly unremarkable, though someone with his career trajectory has probably had a fulfilling life. What they preside over, however, is a truly impressive human creation.

王沪宁 WANG HUNING: THE PARTY'S TOP THEORETICIAN

Just as the west seeks to understand China, so does China seek to understand the west. Perhaps the most important piece of scholarship in the latter category was written in 1988 by Wang Huning, then a 33-year-old academic who had just spent six months as a visiting scholar to the United States. Decades later, Wang would become a central figure in Beijing's foreign and security policy, overseeing projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

Wang's book, entitled *America Against America*, is a fascinating examination of the logic of American political economy and culture. The book's nuances defy the simple binary of "pro/anti-America" or "pro/anti-westernisation",³⁰ and include hints of reflections on how a modern society could one day be sustained and governed in China.

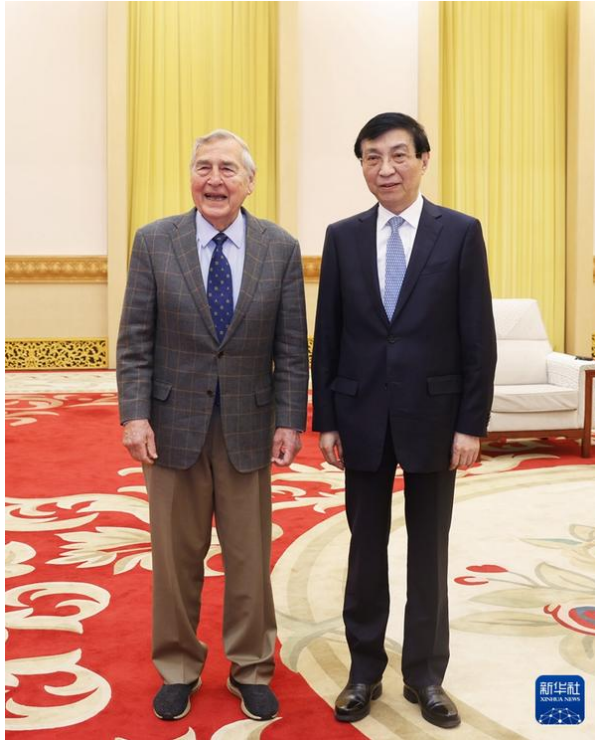
While Wang was not the first senior Communist Party figure to spend time in a Western country during their younger years—indeed, Xi Jinping himself stayed in rural Iowa in 1985—he remains the only one to translate his experiences into a monograph. The book was but part of a body of work that established him as a scholar in political science, an unusual achievement as Wang began his university education in the mid-1970s, when China's tertiary education system was still ravaged by the Cultural Revolution whirlwinds.³¹

In 1995, he was recruited to the central organs of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Beijing. He spent the next decade working in senior policy research positions, and likely played a crucial role in formulating the political doctrines of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao leadership groups (in power in 1989 to 2002, and 2002 to 2012 respectively).³² These highly abstract political theories pertained to how the CPC saw its own role in Chinese society, and helped shape its governing agenda. It was a testament to Wang's political instincts and adroitness that he not only survived a power transition between leaders from different factions, but continued his rise in the heart of the CPC. When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Wang was only given more political

³⁰ 王沪宁 (1991) *美国反对美国*, 上海文艺出版社 [Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House].

³¹ 薛华子 (2017) '从明星学者到三朝帝师, 晋级中共权力巅峰的王沪宁是谁?', *Initium Media*, <https://theinitium.com/zh-hans/article/20171025-mainland-wanghuning>.

³² Bo (2004) 'Hu Jintao and the CCP's Ideology: A Historical Perspective', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*.



Wang Huning with the visiting US scholar Graham Allison, December 2024

Source: (China) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025)
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202412/t20241225_11518124.html

oversight responsibility, including on the Belt and Road Initiative by which China invests in infrastructure construction across Eurasia.

This career trajectory makes Wang Huning unique: plucked from the academia, he has served as a key theoretician for three generations of Chinese leadership and entered the innermost sanctum of political power. Today, he is a member of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee, the party's highest decision-making body, which counts just seven members.

Wang most likely remains a key influence on Chinese foreign policy, especially when it comes to America, as evidenced by his meeting with Graham Allison, a prominent Harvard University scholar on China-US relations known for his warning that the two countries must avoid the “Thucydides trap”—the situation where the rivalry between a rising great power and an incumbent culminates in a war ruinous

for both.³³ As the head of China's political consulting mechanism between the CPC and minor parties (similar in status to the national legislature but functioning in parallel), Wang is also a regular host for visiting heads of government from mostly non-Western countries.³⁴

Meanwhile, the views articulated in *America against America* continue to inform the Chinese leadership's appreciation America's strength, and provide lessons on how to harness the dynamism of a modern society through increasingly sophisticated, often indirect ways. In 1988, Wang observed how the US, with its massive population, individualistic ethos, and powerful interest groups, was governed and partly self-regulated through market mechanism and technology in addition to its imperfect political system.

That vision is largely realised in contemporary China: digital technology both enables extensive surveillance and brings treats for the middle-class consumer; an ultra-competitive private sector annually absorbs millions of university graduates—the demographic that has historically

³³ *Xinhua* (2024) ‘Wang Huning meets with Harvard professor’, http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/2024-12/20/c_1057729.htm.

³⁴ See *Xinhua* (n.d.) 王沪宁报道专集, <http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/wanghuning/jjhj.htm>.

been at the forefront of political foment. It might be a world unrecognisable by Wang Huning the young scholar, but perhaps one not entirely alien to those living in the “free world” today.

胡锡进 HU XIJIN: THE FIRST WOLF WARRIOR

Journalist Hu Xijin’s name might not be well known in Australia, but his words are another matter. In 2020, during a diplomatic spat between Beijing and Canberra over the Morrison Government’s call for an international inquiry into the origin of COVID-19 in China, Hu went in with both feet: in a series of posts on his Chinese social media account, he dismissed Australia as “a chewed gum stuck on China’s boot”.³⁵ Later in the year, the *Global Times* made conspicuous comments on Australian troops’ war crimes in Afghanistan.³⁶

Predictably, Hu became, for a time, public enemy number one with Australia. So who is the man whose way with an insult could make Paul Keating blush?



Hu has a complicated trajectory. He was born in 1960 in the central Chinese province of Hunan to parents who remained life-long Christians,³⁷ though Hu hardly ever discussed how this influenced his work or outlook. He studied Russian in a military academy, and like many Chinese university students of the era, found himself dazzled by newly accessible Western

Hu Xijin on his personal vlog in December 2020: “If Australia continues to its hostile policy against China, there will be costs to itself”.

Source: Hu Xijin official YouTube channel (2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCmsz6KZIng>

³⁵ 胡锡进 (2020) ‘澳大利亚总折腾，像粘在中国鞋底上的口香糖’，环球网，republished on 新浪新闻，<https://news.sina.cn/gn/2020-04-28/detail-iirczymi8761478.d.html>.

³⁶ Xiao (2020) ‘Chinese artist behind doctored image of Australian soldier says he’s ready to make more’，ABC News，<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-01/doctored-image-of-australian-soldier-tweeted-by-chinese-diplomat/12938244>.

³⁷ 联合早报 (2018) ‘指抵制圣诞节是虚假报道 胡锡进：我父母都是基督徒’，<https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20181225-918587>.

literature. Hu recalled his reading planted the seeds of what he described as a deep-seated humanism.³⁸ After obtaining a master's degree in 1989, Hu began working in the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CPC. This was the year of Tiananmen Square; three decades later Hu recalled to the *New York Times* that he participated in the protests which ended in bloodshed.³⁹

As the years passed, Hu's liberal streak increasingly gave way to hard-edged patriotism after two formative experiences as a foreign correspondent. In the 1990s, Hu reported from the disintegrating former Yugoslavia; in 2003, he witnessed up-close the invasion of Iraq and the collapse of its justification—Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction. These experiences instilled in him a deep scepticism of the West and of its benign intentions.⁴⁰

In 2005, Hu was appointed as editor-in-chief of the Communist Party's international-focused masthead, *Global Times*. During his tenure, the paper was characterised by Hu's own combative style, serving as a foil for the relatively respectable and cautious *People's Daily* from which it spun off. While some of his views are more nuanced than one might expect—he has often emphasised that the world is complicated⁴¹—Hu's outspoken nature has attracted criticism at home as well as from abroad. So too have some of his more outlandish opinions: a 2013 op-ed that suggested China's air pollution might offer defensive advantages by blinding incoming missiles, for instance, drew anger and mockery from domestic audiences.⁴²

Hu's intervention in the acrimony between Canberra and Beijing around COVID was understood by some Australian national security experts as the Communist Party's threats against Australia—exemplified by a May 2021 column, in which he recommended that China prepare for “long-range strikes on the military facilities and relevant key facilities on Australian soil if it

³⁸ 纪体 (2022) ‘分裂的胡锡进与主流意识形态困境’, 激流网, <https://www.szhgh.com/Article/opinion/zatan/2022-04-01/297165.html>; 胡锡进 (2011) interview with 南方人物周刊, republished on 观察家, https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2011_06_28_58256.shtml.

³⁹ 赫海威 (2019) ‘胡锡进, 中美对抗时代的民族主义传声筒’, *New York Times*, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20190801/hu-xijin-global-times-us-china-tensions/>.

⁴⁰ 胡锡进 (2023) ‘二十年之后, 靠撒谎开战毁了伊拉克的小布什应下跪忏悔’, <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=958070>.

⁴¹ 南方人物周刊 (2011) ‘胡锡进: 我是一个“复杂中国”的报道者’, republished on 观察家, https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2011_06_28_58256.shtml.

⁴² 赫海威 (2019) ‘胡锡进, 中美对抗时代的民族主义传声筒’, *New York Times*, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20131210/c10pollution/>; 章节 (2013) ‘雾霾对武器影响多大: 侦察看不清导弹打不准’, *Global Times*, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJDtAO>; 华世柳 (2021) ‘胡锡进 “持中守正”, 这种观点要不得’, Sohu, https://www.sohu.com/a/512417263_120991196; 雪中风车 (2024) ‘胡锡进, 你的基督徒父母没教育你怎么做人吗?’, NetEase, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/J68BTMO90523C0OR.html>.

really sends its troops to China's offshore areas [i.e. Taiwan]”.⁴³ Hu had faced similar accusations in the past, dismissing them in a 2016 interview by arguing that his paper had been pushing the envelope of press freedom in China—freedom to harshly criticise foreign actors.⁴⁴

In December 2021, Hu retired abruptly from the editorship of *Global Times*, though retaining a position as the paper’s contributor.⁴⁵ Some foreign observers speculated that the “wolf warrior” had been stranded on the beachhead as China suddenly retreated into a more conciliatory diplomatic stance.⁴⁶ This speculation increased when, in July 2024, his social media accounts suddenly went silent. But that November, his voice was restored, and from January 2025 he resumed posting on X (formerly Twitter).

And while Hu is now enjoying his retirement, the growing power and confidence of China ensures that he will not be the last Chinese media figure to make waves abroad.

邓紫棋 GLORIA TANG SZE-WING: A POP STAR WHO STANDS ALONE

Unlike many of China’s other industries, which are either directly linked to China’s official establishment or operate in its proximity, today China’s vibrant entertainment industry is able to largely operate autonomously. Within the demarcated political boundaries, creativity and commercial logic take over. So, while Western cultural products have long been popular on Mainland China, today it is increasingly homegrown but cosmopolitan artists who entertain the public.

However, the inherently expressive nature of art give rise to the need to walk a delicate political tightrope—as exemplified by the story of singer Gloria Tang Tsz Kei, aka GEM. Tang is something of an oddity in China: a Hong Kong-raised singer who, having spent part of her childhood on the Mainland, sings in Cantonese, Mandarin and English; a devout Christian in a country where many of her faith prefer to worship in secret, a Chinese artist who has a large

⁴³ Dibb (2021) ‘China threatens Australia with missile attack’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-threatens-australia-with-missile-attack/>; Hu (2021) ‘China needs to make a plan to deter extreme forces of Australia’, *Global Times*, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1222899.shtml>.

⁴⁴ 上海观察 (2016) ‘胡锡进：我也不知道 我是罪大恶极还是穷凶极恶’, https://www.guancha.cn/Media/2016_07_04_366323_1.shtml.

⁴⁵ 券商中国 (2021) ‘“老胡”退休了！’, *Sohu*, https://www.sohu.com/a/508800477_177992.

⁴⁶ Powers-Riggs and Jaramillo (2022) ‘Is China Putting “Wolf Warriors” on a Leash?’, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/is-china-putting-wolf-warriors-on-a-leash/>.

following in North America. Perhaps if Taylor Swift could sing in another language or two, she could be called America's Gloria Tang.

It was perhaps inevitable that, as a Hong Kong-based artist with a large following both in that territory and on the mainland, Tang would sooner or later find herself in this delicate situation, despite being an apolitical person by all accounts. In 2013—five years and three albums into an already prolific career—she appeared to express sympathy with the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive of Hong Kong in the face of growing public discontent, provoking accusations that she had aligned herself with the regime on China's Mainland.⁴⁷

However, when mass protests broke out in Hong Kong in September 2014 against Beijing's tightening political control, Tang's stance seemed to have reversed, and her social media posts were widely interpreted as expressing thinly veiled support for the protestors.⁴⁸ A month later, Tang tried to mollify both sides with a relatively anodyne statement, expressing her hope that young people in Hong Kong would be allowed to think for themselves and avoid being manipulated.⁴⁹

By this stage, she was looking beyond China's borders—her world tour, which began in 2013 and lasted two years, saw her play in England, Australia and North America as well as China. A



Tang with her debut novel in Chinese, *The Path of Revelation*, advertised as “a story of reconciliation between science and theology”.

Source: Gloria Tang on Xiaohongshu (2025)
<http://xhslink.com/o/3AiKiEWjys8>

⁴⁷ *Apple Daily* (2013) ‘G.E.M.開腔力撐梁振英捱轟’, archived at *Wayback Machine*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170811104304/http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/news/20130904/51699712>.

⁴⁸ 甄树基 (2014) ‘大陆爆红香港歌手邓紫棋只因“为香港痛哭”而被“严控”’, *法国国际广播电台*, <https://www.rfi.fr/cn/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/20141110-%E5%A4%A7%E9%99%86%E7%88%86%E7%BA%A2%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E6%AD%8C%E6%89%8B%E9%82%93%E7%B4%AB%E6%A3%8B%E5%8F%AA%E5%9B%A0%E2%80%9C%E4%B8%BA%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E7%97%9B%E5%93%AD%E2%80%9D%E8%80%8C%E8%A2%AB%E2%80%9C%E4%B8%A5%E6%8E%A7%E2%80%9D>.

⁴⁹ *Ming Pao* (2014) ‘内地唱《一无所有》 傳遞自由信息’, https://www.mingpaocanada.com/TOR/htm/NEWS/20141030/HK-gba2_r.htm.

decade later, she remains a highly prolific and successful artist, composing and performing alternately in Mandarin and Cantonese with English elements. She regularly tours China and overseas, and her works are carried on Chinese media and Internet platforms not available in China, drawing large audiences in both worlds. Though she never seemed interested to position herself as such, Tang is part of China's growing soft power. Indeed, her very independence from China's establishment allows her work to find acceptance and following as part of the ambience in global pop culture.

Tang's Christian faith is part of her public image in China, and she openly discusses it in interviews or her Chinese social media accounts.⁵⁰ While China is estimated to have 20-40 million Christians, public expression of the religion is heavily regulated, and a large number of Christians there may prefer to keep their faith secret.⁵¹ The levity afforded to Tang is likely due to her status as resident of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region—which still retains significant legal and administrative autonomy from the Mainland—as well as her popularity with China's youth, who expect their government to have a healthy degree of respect for individuals' private beliefs and life choices.

Undoubtedly, Tang has had to carefully navigate around political sensitivities to thrive in China, a universal experience for those who were not wholly supportive of the government's crackdown in 2014 but nonetheless remain in Hong Kong today. Life is still colourful in both Hong Kong and the Mainland thanks not least to people like Gloria Tang, who embody the collisions of languages, cultural influences, and public and private lives.

⁵⁰ E.g. 万小刀 (2021) “铁肺小公主”邓紫棋的情史, NetEase blog, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GHGQUPSA0537MK0O.html>; Tang (2024) RedNote, <http://xhslink.com/a/qub9wnBt56agb>.

⁵¹ Hackett (2023) 'China's Christian population appears to have stopped growing after rising rapidly in the 1980s and '90s By Conrad Hackett', *Pew Research Centre*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/12/chinas-christian-population-appears-to-have-stopped-growing-after-rising-rapidly-in-the-1980s-and-90s/>.