

Slide 1: Title

My sincere thanks to the hosts Signor Caccia on behalf of City of Venice, Marco Baravalle and the SaLE Works Collective for organizing this debate on Chinese Paradoxes as part of a broader conversation about the Global Commons.

Slide 2: Outline

I. 21st Century China – slide 3 (Olympics)

China is a big story especially in western media. Not a day goes by these days without hearing reports about the vast China market and the bureaucracy that spawned its reach into the global economy. Specific images come to mind when we consider this story. New China was on grand display during the 2008 Beijing summer Olympics. The enormity of this event follows other epic state projects such as the controversial Three Gorges Dam (**slide 4**), the emerging aerospace program (**slides 5 & 6: rockets, taikonauts**), and, less well known, the biotechnology industry (**slide 7: biotech expo**).

The 21st century was proclaimed decades ago by media and policy makers as the Chinese century. China is the material embodiment of old and new. Ancient remnants and histories often become part of national stories of origin and constructions of belonging that are forged to shape the present. China is also home to young, diverse populations that are transforming local landscapes and global industries. (**slide: China Youth**)

II: Technologies of Life (slide: title w/rice)

As domestic policy makers and international corporations continue to shape Asian markets, the social worlds and experiences of desire that accompany these formations are key ethnographic

sites. I focus on three arenas for this discussion: medicine, food, and biotechnology.

A. Transformation of citizens to Consumers

From 1990-2008, the new middle class in China grew by 800 million, ten times the British middle class (80 million) (**slide :street pharmacy**). New forms of materiality and intensive commodification infuse everyday life (**slide: bus**). This transformation of patients and citizens into consumers commenced during the 1990s when Big Pharma began to infuse the market and transformed daily life. The search for wellbeing and use of medical technologies animate much of daily life and consumption in this region. New meanings of the good life were promoted through consumption of medicinal products and beauty aids. Though the association of the good life with material goods and well being is not a new concept in late socialist China, with the expansion of materialism there are more elaborate systems of classification. Epidemics of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and avian flu also shape this landscape (**slide: pills on table**).

B. Fearful consumption as everyday life

In the past decade, consumers in China have expressed much concern for the safety of their food, drugs, and drinks (**slide: milk formula**). Knowledge about the real or fake can be a matter of life or death. Chinese consumers are on the frontlines of this new global assembly line. The concern of citizens in China are shared worldwide as product recalls have identified goods such as children's toys with lead paint (**slide: toys**) or pet food with melamine that pose hazardous use or consumption. Calls for more careful oversight of production lines have led to an overhaul of the food and drug administration and its safety program in recent years. Stiff penalties for individuals or institutions engaged in producing shoddy goods have been introduced including the execution of a few officials at the provincial and state level.

C. Chinese Biotechnology

In this context of endangerment and vulnerability, biotechnology is situated as a matter of life over death, where the biosciences and scientific knowledge enable a very different formulation of governance (**slide: Honest Scientific**). Age old concerns for food security has evolved in this decade to encompass biotechnology as part of a national platform for biosecurity. Within the next three decades, the estimated population will increase to 1.6 billion and food production must increase by at least 60 percent to match this growth. Widespread starvation in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward and other famines remain deeply etched in personal and institutional memories. Such a story locates biotechnology as a savior rather than a problem (**slide: natural products**). Biotechnology has been touted as the best solution for meeting the needs of the world's largest population ranging from food shortages to health care. The aggressive promotion of this new science is deemed crucial not only for material resources but also for the wellbeing of the nation. The intensity of knowledge making as well as development of biotech products in China (**slide: Double Helix Water**) offer insight to key questions of property and how a nation engages biosovereignty to promote a vision of the public good in entrepreneurial fashion. Research and development in the biosciences are celebrated and deemed significant to national progress and senses of modernity. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crises of the 1990's, such assemblages offer timely and significant investment in the economic and social landscape through the life sciences. New consumers are raised in an environment of the market and biotech as conjoined. (**slide: eco ring/consumers**)

The expansion of biotechnology industries across Asia in the twenty first century has been described by media and scientific journals as a biotech bloom. The ascent of this region goes beyond being a genomic assembly line for sequencing, lab research, or drug trials. Rather,

the production of knowledge in this setting reflects the formation of an increasingly global technoscientific culture in which researchers, private firms, and state investors forge a distinctive biotech industry. The story of rice genome sequencing offers insights into the complexities of public-private intertwinings of knowledge making and ownership in biotechnology. **(slide: rice genome)** China's genomic center in Beijing surprised the international science community with its quick sequencing of the rice genome, indica species, in 2001. **(explain rice genome race)** Bioprospecting in the 21st century, **(slide: GM Testing)** whether of plants or animal/human genetic material, reflects ongoing compromises between the ideal of open source information and private capital that funds highly collaborative work on a global scale.

III. Rethinking Global Commons Through Crisis - (slide: title w/bldg)

This seminar focuses on Chinese paradoxes with the broader concern of the Global Commons. In a moment of deepening environmental concerns and financial market volatility, perhaps the directions taken by China foreground the difficult choices that nation states elsewhere also face. Longstanding categories of health, wealth, and prosperity are being infused with extensive differential access with the consequence of bare life for the majority of people in this world. Paradox is used often to frame the dramatic extremes of bare life and cosmopolitan transformation that have been wrought by market expansion in this region. While juxtapositions of ancient/modern; central planning/neoliberal markets; freedom/containment are endless, it may be useful to situate the different meanings of the Commons. There have been particular moments when notions of the Commons emerge (shared resources, property, and most significant meanings). **(slide comparing 3 categories/context)**

A. Brief Background on notions of the Commons

- Garrett Hardin "Tragedy of the Commons" *Science* article 1968

Thesis of individual overuse ignores costs on others leading to tragic overuse -

Inevitable destruction of resource that collective depend upon (food, water, oil, etc.)

Conclusion: "...either socialism or privatization of free enterprise" – critiqued for oversimplification of problems

Huge impact, nonetheless, led to focus on sustainability and focus on management during 1970s

- Creative Commons

Lawrence Lessig, Stanford Law

Late 1990s-early part of this century

Community oriented sharing

Social movement in response to global flows of info and intellectual property rights

TRIPS: trade related intellectual Property

Culture of free sharing and collaborative authorship (some rights reserved) to counter dominant copyright regime (all rights reserved)

Binchun Meng, LSE 2009: CC China

China has

- Global Commons

Realignment to address global needs for conservation

Shift from notions of property to notions of governance of key resources (food, water, oil)

It is this last category of the commons which has been ironically, or paradoxically, controversial. The global commons is ultimately about shared meanings and strategies.

However population growth, economic change, capital and labor mobility, and technological shifts push environmental change even before we know it. Resources such as food, water, oil, biodiversity are increasingly linked to climate change. This has always been the site of historical contestations as well as those of the present and future.

IV. Conclusion (last slide – water conservation poster)

There is deep ambivalence in the embrace of neoliberal models of achievement and governance. Disasters and crises necessitate envisioning and creating alternate futures. The work of ethnography is also about the invisible and intangible – i.e. what holds things and people ('what binds us') together. In being attentive to culture and collective meanings, anthropologists by necessity strive to go beyond the surfaces of capitalism and neoliberal frameworks. Our task

is not simply to be historians of the present to witness and document new forms of consumption or socialization. Rather engaged ethnography can be an opportunity to frame the contemporary world as part of the search for alternate futures that exist in recent pasts and those in the making.