



MY YEAR AT WIKO  
XUN ZHOU

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Dr Xun Zhou, Reader in History at the University of Essex, is one of a growing number of historians pioneering the history of the PRC using new oral and archival evidence. In 2007–11, she worked on a project of key importance to the history of the 20th century – the Great Leap Forward famine (1958–62) in China. Based on thousands of archival documents and hundreds of interviews, *The Great Famine in China: A Documentary History* (2012) and *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine: An Oral History* (2014) powerfully reshape our understanding of modern Chinese history. *The People's Health: Health Intervention and Delivery in Mao's China* (2020) is the first systematic study of healthcare and medicine in the PRC. Xun turns from official statistics to the records of local institutions and personal memories. Her book illustrates the dynamics between politics and health and between individual lives and the political system. She co-authored the book *"I Know Who Caused COVID-19": Pandemics and Xenophobia* (2021). At Wiko, Xun worked on a monograph "Coping mechanism and everyday survival tactics: The Great Leap Forward famine, a case study," exploring how rural villagers in China understood the famine and state propaganda, and their mechanisms to cope with hunger, illness, and loss on such a massive scale and in the context of older traditions and belief systems. – Address: History Department, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Essex, CO4 3SQ, United Kingdom. E-mail: xzhoug@essex.ac.uk.

My ten months at Wiko went by much too quickly. During those ten months, a great many things kept on happening in the world. Some bad, some good. I arrived at Wiko in the midst of the Covid pandemic; when I left, Russia's war in Ukraine had entered its

fifth month, and there was little sign of it ending soon. In the meantime, the pandemic has been largely forgotten, at least in the West and despite a large number of daily infections. While travelling in Europe became a breeze: “nary a face mask” and “smiles everywhere,” restaurants and shops too enjoyed brisk business; sports and cultural events and public transport were jam-packed, China and its SAR Hong Kong stood out again, being the last region on this planet to insist on *zero*-Covid policy. Commentators in the West quickly condemned this as “cruel” and another crime of autocracy against humanity. My lawyer in Hong Kong, who immigrated to Hong Kong during British colonial rule, however, compared the SAR and the Motherland to “The Land That Time Forgot,” while calling the territory’s pandemic policies “prehistoric.” Indeed, for Hong Kong, the quarantine rule that has been implemented is another legacy of British imperialism, and the Handover in 1997 did nothing to change that – even though anti-imperialism has been an ideological pillar of the PRC ever since the communist revolution. Ironically, during the SARS pandemic in 2003, mask wearing was popularised in Hong Kong by a group of pro-democracy lawyers to protest the “prehistoric,” “colonial,” and “inhuman” quarantine rules imposed by the Hong Kong authority.

As I watched the world going topsy-turvy, life at Wiko provided a much-needed respite. At times, the Grunewald felt almost like the “Peach Blossom Spring” imagined by the 4th- and 5th-century Chinese poet and politician Tao Qian (365–427). Living in a time of great turmoil, Tao fantasised an idyllic community of Chinese who centuries ago had settled in the “Peach Blossom Spring” – a wilderness of natural beauty – after having fled their war-torn homeland. Oblivious to the chaos in the world beyond, they lived in perfect harmony, peace, and simplicity. They were also hospitable to strangers. A kind of Confucian secular utopia, but also inspired by the Daoist notion of a grotto heaven. The Wiko community was, however, much more engaging than Tao Qian’s imagined ideal community, and life at Wiko was never short of fun and exhilaration. At Wiko, we enjoyed material pleasures, and Thursday night’s excessive drinking led to some enlightening and engaging conversations, unlike boring haiku contests. I also remember fondly many passionate, and sometimes even heated, lunchtime discussions on a wide range of topics, from the pressing issue of climate change to whether cherry blossoms have six or five petals and the latter’s social and cultural meanings.

One of the many memorable moments of my Wiko year was, in anticipation of the coming of the Year of Tiger, working with a world-class literary scholar (Eva), scientists (Mark, Sean, and Szabolcs), an anthropologist (Chris), a demographer (Teresa), a lawyer

(Weitseng), and the talented Sandra to transform the Wiko kitchen into a pop-up dumpling lab. I bet the beastly Tigress was impressed!

Wiko was not just boozing, dining, and having fun. At Wiko, unburdened by my usual, or I would say, overwhelmingly heavy teaching and administrative duties, I was finally able to breathe, read, think, and write – in other words, have time for serious scholarship. For the first few months, in addition to giving a number of online talks across the world on the topics of the two new books I had just published before coming to Wiko, I revised my chapter examining the unintended consequences of political planning and social engineering in Maoist China for *The Yearbook for the History of Global Development* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, January 2023, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783111015583/html>). During this time, I was also commissioned by the Bloomsbury Food Library to write a lesson plan titled “A History of Food and Health in China.” It was subsequently published by Bloomsbury Publishing’s Digital Resources (doi:10.5040/9781350930322.018).

In addition to having the time to complete the above writing, the intellectual freedom we enjoyed at Wiko, which has become increasingly rare hence more precious these days, and the simple fact that we were encouraged to “think outside the box” and to go beyond our usual “comfort zone,” allowed me to focus on two very different topics, using two different types of non-textual sources. Being surrounded by first-class textual scholars and award-winning authors, as well as Fellows who are unfamiliar with China, made me listen to views that were very different and much broader than those in my own discipline. I was able to sharpen the perspective and trajectory I needed to take for my projects, including their new directions. I began to challenge myself to ask the *hard* questions: What is the value of oral and visual sources for the historian? What more can we learn from oral sources about the Mao era on top of what we already knew from the abundance of memoirs by dissident intellectuals from the PRC and survivors of such political repression as the Great Proletarian Revolution, memoirs published in the West since the death of Mao – many of these have been greeted in the West as the “authentic voice” of the “silenced” “victim” and have won prestigious prizes. (I must say I was surprised and disappointed to learn that the relatively new oral history archive “Archive of Refuge” in Berlin – an admirable initiative – has so far followed the same vein to include only voices of dissident Chinese intellectuals, rather than making the effort to give voice to ordinary Chinese refugees/emigrants who don’t normally have a voice.) How can I, as a historian of modern China who deploys the techniques of oral history, help to fill the missing gap by exploring the private lives of ordinary PRC citizens living under Mao’s leadership (frequently

compared to Stalin's terror), e.g. how did individuals and families react to the pressures of the socialist regime? How did they preserve their traditions and beliefs when their private values were in conflict with the public goals and the morals of the Maoist socialist system? What were their survival strategies, from moral compromises to the arbitrary and brutal choices individuals and families made in their unceasing struggle to survive threats to their physical existence and private life? How did the experiences of rural villagers differ from those living in cities? How does the legacy of Maoist rule impact the life of ordinary Chinese and Chinese society compared with that of the Stalinist regime? To this last question, I am indebted to Ilya and Elena Kalinin for the conversations we had and for their valuable recommendations and suggestions.

As I try to return to and explore new directions of working with visual sources (beyond using them as mere illustrations), it was a real blessing to have Guy the photographer and Nuno the multidisciplinary artist around as Fellows. Their works and the many conversations we had have been inspiring and thought-provoking. Daniel, too, took time to read my grant proposal for a new project "Imaging Asia: John Thomson and a Visual History of Southeast Asia and Greater China." He has given me some insightful and valuable suggestions. Daniel also helped with meeting Joachim K. Bautze, a German art historian who specialises in encounters between European visual arts and indigenous visual art traditions in India and Southeast Asia and is the author of *Unseen Siam: Early Photography 1860–1910*. My meeting with Dr Bautze began what I call a snowball effect. His publisher Mom Rajawongse turned out to be the great-granddaughter of the Siamese King Rama V the Great. King Rama V was photographed by Thomson as a young boy, and during his long reign was a farsighted monarch open to new ideas and a keen photographer himself. Her Excellence Mom Rajawongse introduced me to the work of Nakrob Moonmanas, a Thai visual artist and a laureate of Cité internationale des arts Paris for 2020–21. For his 2021 exhibition *PhotoAlchemy*, Nakrob took old photographs from archives, most of these by Western photographers, and collaged them in a computer graphic program: "I see [this] as a progressive and advanced by-product of photography, and there is this current, contemporaneous dimension to it. I printed them out and sent them over to a photographer who specializes in the collodion wet-plate process and created the final results. It's a reversed process that allows me to revisit the past. But with this process, the past becomes this mixture of times, intertwined and almost inseparable," he says. He also talks about how Siamese people viewed photography as a form of alchemy, "which was neither entirely scientific while not fully natural nor supernatural" and how "photography allowed

Siamese people to explore and present their visual appearances to the outside world for the first time, even though it was through the eyes of western photographers using a camera.” This was eye-opening, as I have been exploring the ways that this new project would move away from the plain East-meets-West trope or a simple contrast between the cultural representations and symbols of Western visual arts and “traditional” Asian arts, and Nakrob’s work reminded me how images in the past can be reworked and deployed by “dusting things up, collaging things together and re-presenting them to the world.” With the help of Her Excellence Mom Rajawongse, our proposed project has secured a partnership with the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre, which will involve Nakrob creating contemporary artwork using Thomson’s 19th-century photos of Siam that tell the visual history of modern Thailand and reflect the challenges of the present world.

There was also the Wiko library with its amazing staff. They not only helped locate all the English-language books I requested, they even managed to find some Chinese-language primary sources for me. The other bonus of being in Berlin was that, through the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science library, I could use the CrossAsia portal set up by the Berlin State Library, which allowed me to access digitised Chinese primary sources held in libraries across China, Japan, Taiwan, the USA, and Europe.

Wiko was more. “Wiko is like a family,” as the wonderful Teresa so precisely put it. At the beginning, when I was confronted with the daunting obstacle of finding a school for my son Alexander, Vera Pfeffer stepped in and took care of it. Vera was incredible! She not only managed to secure a school place for my son, she also drove us to the school and made sure my son settled down. On her return from leave, Andrea and Eva von Kügelgen worked together to come up with a “secure plan,” generously funded by Wiko, to help my son improve his German proficiency. Alexander is now fluent in the German language, and he loved the ten months he spent in Berlin and at the Charles Dickens Grundschule and the Villa Walther. We are forever grateful to Wiko for this amazing experience.