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The Chinese Geography of Ordinary Security

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	<i>Questioning the Spaces of School, Hospital and Grave in China</i>	2
	<i>Questioning Securities and Insecurities: A Critical Perspective</i>	4
	<i>Organisation of the Book</i>	6
	<i>References</i>	8
2	The Indistinction of Security: A Brief Look at Chinese Perspectives	11
	<i>Beyond (in)securities: Dao and Tai Chi</i>	13
	<i>Harmony and Chaos</i>	14
	<i>Mao's On Contradiction</i>	15
	<i>Xi Jinping's Comprehensive National Security Concept</i>	17
	<i>Conclusion</i>	18
	<i>References</i>	20
3	Navigating Safety and Security: The Complex Landscape of Chinese Schools	21
	<i>Introduction</i>	22
	<i>An Epistemological Transformation of School Space</i>	24
	<i>Violence in School and School in Violence</i>	25
	<i>School Violence in China: An Overview</i>	27
	<i>Nexus Between School and Violence in China</i>	29
	<i>Securitization Landscape</i>	30
	<i>Violence Continuum</i>	33

	<i>Unpredictability of Violence and the Role of Social Support Networks: The Handan Student Murder Case</i>	35
	<i>Conclusion</i>	38
	<i>References</i>	39
4	Hospital Radicalization: The Rise of Yi Nao	47
	<i>Introduction</i>	48
	<i>Defining Yi Nao</i>	49
	<i>The Causes of Yi Nao</i>	50
	<i>Yi Nao as Radicalization</i>	54
	<i>Intersection One: Socialization</i>	54
	<i>Intersection Two: Fear, Insecurities and the Securitized Space of Hospital</i>	57
	<i>Intersection Three: Yi Nao as Political Protest and Its Performativity</i>	58
	<i>A Staircase Model of Radicalization: A Deep Dive into Yi Nao</i>	60
	<i>Ground Floor: The Psychological Interpretation of Structural Transformation</i>	61
	<i>First Floor: Perceived injustice and options to fight</i>	63
	<i>Second Floor: All-around Government and the Expectation Dissonance</i>	63
	<i>Third Floor: Securitizing Subjectivity</i>	65
	<i>Fourth Floor: Yi Nao as a Performative Outlet</i>	68
	<i>Response of Health Professionals</i>	69
	<i>Conclusion</i>	71
	<i>References</i>	73
5	Graveyard Politics: Feng Shui and Rural Chinese Cemeteries	77
	<i>Introduction</i>	78
	<i>How is Security Felt in Rural China?</i>	80
	<i>The Tradition of Feng Shui</i>	81
	<i>Feng Shui and Space</i>	83
	<i>Feng Shui, Place-making, and Lineage-based Security in Cemetery Spatial Orderings</i>	87
	<i>Collective Cemeteries and Ethically Oriented Security</i>	87
	<i>Public Cemeteries and State- and Capital-Driven Securities</i>	91

<i>Scattered Cemeteries and Negotiated Securities</i>	93
<i>Feng Shui and Imaginative Geographies of Death</i>	97
<i>Conclusion</i>	101
<i>References</i>	102
Conclusion	105



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Anwei xiang yi, fuhuo xiang sheng (安危相易, 祸福相生)¹
—“Zeyang” in *Zhuangzi*

What does security signify, how does it resonate emotionally, and what conditions, narratives, or relationships foster both security and insecurity within the fabric of everyday life in China? In our attempt to find the answer for these localised security perceptions, we have found the fundamental relationship between security and insecurity, between hope and fear, and between peace and unrest confused, indistinct and, at some points, reversed. In this book, we explore how perceptions of security, fear, and anxiety among ordinary people in China emerge in three key spaces: schools, hospitals, and cemeteries. While these places are traditionally viewed as sanctuaries of safety and solace, our research reveals evolving perceptions where schools may feel more guarded, hospitals face challenges in patient care, and even graves become sites of local dispute. This

¹ The dialectical idea of security originated from the texts of the *Zhuangzi*. In English: Safety and danger appear alternately; catastrophe and fortune are derived from each other. It points out that security and insecurity exist in the form of interdependence.

book chronicles these unsettling transformations, exploring how alienation and insecurity become intertwined in the daily lives of ordinary Chinese. It's a narrative of Chinese heterotopias.

QUESTIONING THE SPACES OF SCHOOL, HOSPITAL AND GRAVE IN CHINA

For more than a decade, we have studied the everyday securities, violence, and conflict in China, yet we never considered dedicating a monograph to the topic. On our way home from work in Wuhan, we usually pass by the university's elite-affiliated kindergarten. A few years ago, on an ordinary afternoon, something unexpected caught our attention as we walked by—the entrance of the kindergarten had been fortified with a thick, imposing anti-collision wall. We had seen such robust security measures at embassies, military headquarters, or government offices—places associated with exceptional security. Seeing similar measures at the kindergarten caught our attention and made us reflect on the evolving approach to safety in everyday spaces. The idea of writing a book about this contradiction suddenly came to mind.

The contradiction between space, meaning, and emotion extends beyond schools, affecting hospitals as well. During the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, the government transformed venues like gymnasiums and exhibition centers into temporary field hospitals (*fangcang*) to manage bed shortages, resource strain, and health inequality. These *fangcang* hospitals, isolated from society, created a minimalist and egalitarian environment where patients received free care, contrasting with the usual tensions in Chinese hospitals. Remarkably, activities like square dancing, suspended nationwide, resumed in these hospitals. Patients and medical staff participated in dances, comedy routines, and opera, transforming a space for disease control into one of play. This shift was notable not only during the crisis but also in the broader context of China's hospital culture, where occasional tensions between patients and doctors can arise.

A doctor friend told me, one of the authors of this book, "I didn't want to go back after that." Seeing my confusion, he explained: "Why go back? In *fangcang*, it felt like an escape from daily challenges and tension between doctor and patient." Though exaggerated, this raised an important question: How have hospitals, traditionally symbols of care, become sites where tensions can sometimes surface?

Both schools and hospitals are spaces for the living. It wasn't until this stark contrast extended into spaces for the dead that we truly decided to write this book about the paradox of security. The story about the spaces of the dead began during a conversation with a friend from Hubei. His home is in a rural area of a small town in southern Hubei. He told one of the authors that in his hometown, "when people died, they were buried in the farm fields, so you can see some tombs scattered among the fields. At night, if you walk outside or are alone in the fields, you will see fireflies flying around the tombs, and sometimes people see ghost figures". We were fascinated. He went on to say, "this is all good *feng shui*". We asked him if he also believed in *feng shui*?

He didn't respond directly but changed the subject to a recent news story in his village. The grave of an old man who had just been buried in the village had been dug up and the coffin exposed. The village's "*feng shui* Master" (风水先生) was summoned by the police for investigation. Our Hubei colleague explained that after the old man passed away, according to local tradition his family had found a "*feng shui* master" for burial site selection. The "master" pointed out a location for the grave in the family's own plot. However, just before the burial, they encountered strong opposition from the neighbour, who had brought their own "*feng shui* master" to confront them. Their reason was that the old man's burial location was less than 50 meters behind their house, which would affect their family's *feng shui*. The two sides went to the village committee over the matter, but after mediation by the village committee, old man's family still buried him at the original site. The neighbour and the "master" who opposed the deceased being buried there felt that they had been humiliated. They dug up the tomb with a shovel the next day and opened the coffin to vent their dissatisfaction. We were stunned. How did the cemetery—presumed to be the most peaceful and restorative place in human society—turn into a battlefield? How can our final resting place be filled with so much noise?

These stories, laden with contradictions, highlight the evolution of everyday spaces in China, be they always (school), often (hospital) or rarely (grave) present in our life. Within these spaces, contrasting feelings and perceptions coexist. These shifts in the landscape of daily security reveal a geography where traditional meanings of belonging, safety, and solace are reinterpreted and sometimes challenged. This book explores the evolving dynamics of schools, hospitals, and graves—spaces that are

increasingly shaped by a complex interplay of security, anxiety, and societal change.

QUESTIONING SECURITIES AND INSECURITIES: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

This book is an effort to integrate human geography, critical security studies, and Chinese sociology. The integration of space-oriented perspectives has enriched critical security studies, yet very few critical examinations of Chinese society have harnessed the potential of these tools. A reflexive, post-modern interpretation of the spatiality and materiality through which security is constructed contends with an intricate ontology that acknowledges the intersection of human and non-human entities. This view recognizes that physical entities—whether they are man-made structures or not—mediate safety and care between individuals separated by time and space (Scarry 1985; Mitchell 2014, p. 10).

Such emergent ontological frameworks have paved the way for diverse approaches, such as new materialism, posthumanism and complexity theory. For instance, new materialism posits that “a new basis of political communities can be found in ‘human-nonhuman’ collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm” (Bennett 2010, p. xix; Mitchell 2014, p. 12). The notion that “human-nonhuman collectives” can form an alternative conception of community inspired a wave of new literature on the themes of urbicide (deliberate annihilation of urban and public spaces), domicide (the deliberate destruction of home in global-scale), and memocide (the deliberate destruction of cultural artifacts that enable group of people to maintain their integrity and way of life) and mudicide (the destruction of worlds and of the conditions of worldliness) (Bevan 2006; Mitchell 2014, p. 11, 16). These emerging approaches in critical Chinese studies help us produce a more coherent and integrative analytical framework, addressing both tangible/spatial and symbolic ramifications of civic conflicts, such as school violence, hospital disruptions or buried site disputes.

A school is both a securitized space and a space of securitization, where security practices and concerns are embedded in its daily operations and physical environment. Securitization involves mobilizing practices like policy tools, images, and emotions to prompt an audience to perceive a threat, requiring immediate action (Waever 1989; Balzacq 2010). In the context of schools, these practices translate into physical and emotional