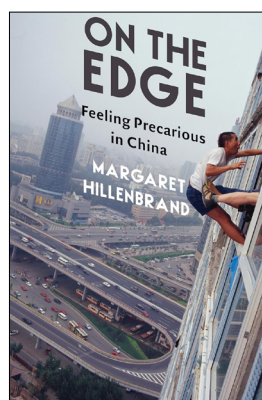


it otherwise would be. The book will be of interest to scholars and a general audience who share an interest in clothing, the Mao period, and Chinese society in general.

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**HILLENBRAND, Margaret.
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***On the Edge: Feeling Precarious
in China.***

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During my 2024 summer fieldwork in a rural Chinese village, I heard a harrowing story about two local truck drivers who tragically died in separate accidents after being forced to drive nearly nonstop for 36 hours. Long-distance trucking, a common profession for undereducated rural men since the 1990s, has become defined by brutal competition and inhumane demands. These deaths underscored the relentless pressure in the industry, where refusing a job only leads to someone more desperate taking the role. The story was a grim reflection of the ruthless exploitation of China's underclass labour. Precarity, however, is not limited to the working class. In 2023, I learned of a wealthy couple in Wuhan who employed more than six private tutors for their sixth-grade son to ensure his academic success and guarantee his ascent into an elite middle school. This starkly different scenario nonetheless reveals the same underlying anxiety: the pervasive fear of losing one's social or economic position in an intensely competitive society.

These two stories, though class-distinctive, embody the pervasive sense of precariousness that Margaret Hillenbrand explores in her recent book, *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China*. Hillenbrand's work probes deeply into the sociocultural landscapes of precarity in contemporary China, offering an interdisciplinary examination of the aesthetic expressions born from these conditions. Her study encompasses avant-garde artists, migrant workers, microcelebrities, and marginalised individuals who grapple with existential threats while using culture to express and confront their realities. Hillenbrand's analysis moves across cultural forms, blending art history, digital media, literature, and performance studies to articulate the various ways precarity is felt and represented in contemporary Chinese society.

Hillenbrand frames "zombie citizenship" as a central concept in her analysis, describing the dehumanised and legally excluded state in which vast numbers of Chinese workers exist. These individuals inhabit a liminal space, denied the rights and protections typically afforded by citizenship. Yet, precariousness extends far beyond

this underclass. Hillenbrand argues that a broad swath of the population, regardless of their economic position, lives with the constant fear of falling into the abyss of dispossession and disenfranchisement. This precarious existence contributes to the birth of a societal phenomenon known as “involution” (*neijuan* 内卷), a vicious cycle of social competition that has enshrouded every aspect of life in China. The book’s introduction lays the groundwork for this exploration, vividly portraying the simmering social tensions that often remain suppressed but occasionally erupt into cultural and aesthetic expressions of instability and defiance.

In Chapter One, “The Delegators,” Hillenbrand critiques how avant-garde artists enlist migrant workers for site-specific performances that blur the line between exploitation and empowerment. Often, these collaborations occur with little compensation or recognition, revealing the ethical complexities of using the suffering of the underclass as material for artistic creation. Hillenbrand’s sharp analysis raises critical questions about the complicity of art in perpetuating, rather than alleviating, inequality. Chapter Two, “The Ragpickers,” continues this theme by examining artists who make waste their subject matter. While they bring attention to the detritus of modern life, they often omit the real ragpickers who sift through garbage daily, erasing the labour of those who endure the harshest realities of contemporary Chinese society. This artistic erasure is emblematic of broader societal practices that marginalise and make invisible the working poor.

In “The Vocalists and the Ventriloquists,” Chapter Three, Hillenbrand highlights the poetic expressions of migrant workers and contrasts these with a state-endorsed magazine aimed at the working class. She emphasises the raw, unfiltered emotions expressed in the poetry of factory workers, which reveals their deep frustrations with a system that keeps them trapped in cycles of exploitation. Yet, the magazine appropriates these voices, sanitising and professionalising them in ways that obscure their original subversive power. This duality between authentic self-expression and state co-optation mirrors the larger struggle between grassroots resistance and official narratives in China’s precarious social order.

Chapter Four, “The Cliffhangers,” examines suicidal performances by migrant construction workers who resort to desperate acts to demand payment for their labour. These public performances, often captured on video, blur the boundaries between protest, spectacle, and self-destruction. Hillenbrand argues that these acts of defiance are not only attempts to redress personal grievances but also serve as potent symbols of the extreme precarity faced by those at the margins of Chinese society. These performances, which take place at the intersection of labour unrest and personal desperation, underscore the cultural significance of precariousness as a site of both vulnerability and resistance.

In “The Microcelebrities,” Chapter Five, Hillenbrand shifts her focus to digital platforms such as Kuaishou 快手, where individuals from marginalised communities create content that ranges from abject to outrageous in pursuit of fleeting fame. These self-made microcelebrities often produce videos or livestream performances that shock and unsettle mainstream audiences, challenging state-sanctioned narratives of social harmony. Hillenbrand delves into how these online performances reflect broader tensions within Chinese society, where underclass voices, though temporarily

amplified through digital means, remain subject to state suppression and middle-class disdain. These microcelebrity performances, while seemingly self-destructive, encapsulate deeper struggles for visibility and agency in a society that systematically marginalises the poor.

The book’s conclusion, “Viral Precarity,” considers how cultural expressions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic further illuminate the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Chinese society. Hillenbrand emphasises that the pandemic heightened existing tensions, making visible the stark inequalities that had long simmered beneath the surface. Yet, she leaves readers with a note of cautious optimism, suggesting that the cultural practices explored throughout the book – though fraught with fragility and hostility – hold potential as sites of resistance and reimagined citizenship.

While *On the Edge* offers a rich and compelling analysis of cultural forms in contemporary China, it is not without its limitations. Hillenbrand’s focus on extreme or sensational cultural practices may skew the reader’s perception of Chinese society as dominated by instability and chaos. This emphasis on the most provocative forms of expression risks overlooking more subtle, everyday acts of resistance and resilience that also play a crucial role in articulating precariousness. Moreover, while the book provides a valuable critique of the sociopolitical conditions that give rise to these cultural forms, it could benefit from deeper engagement with how such expressions might translate into tangible political or social change. Hillenbrand hints at the transformative potential of these cultural practices but stops short of fully exploring how they might influence policy or lead to broader societal improvements.

Despite these shortcomings, *On the Edge* is a seminal work that offers a multifaceted understanding of precarity in contemporary China. Hillenbrand’s interdisciplinary approach and her ability to connect disparate cultural forms provide a fresh perspective on how insecurity and instability shape both individual and collective experiences in China. By centring the voices and creative expressions of those living on the margins, Hillenbrand contributes to a global conversation about the ways precarity erodes the social contract and undermines the value of citizenship and belonging, leaving no parts of our interconnected world untouched.