

Xiaowei Wang

episode 10

The Culture & Technology Podcast

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Episode 10: Commerce & Culture

Xiaowei Wang

INTRODUCTION

How do we relate to a global market that is increasingly impersonal?

Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside is the most recent book from artist and technologist Xiaowei Wang. We sat down with Xiaowei to discuss innovations in China's countryside, agency in the tech community and how reading tarot gave them a sense of connection during a disconnected pandemic.

GUESTS

Xiaowei Wang is a technologist, a filmmaker, an artist and a writer. As creative director at Logic magazine their work encompasses community-based and public art projects, data visualization, technology, ecology, and education.

HOST

Severin Matusek is an editor, producer and strategist who has spent the last decade researching how technology transforms culture, communities and society.

IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- **Tarot** is a tool for processing all that we encounter. Xiaowei Wang is a certified tarot reader through the Golden Dome School's Tarot Initiatives Program and offers sessions through her website. <https://www.xiaoweiwang.com/tarot>
- **Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside** is the most recent book from Xiaowei Wang. It examines the human stories behind the distant corners of global capitalism. <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374538668>
- **Logic Magazine** is a magazine devoted to deepening the discourse around technology. They publish three times per year in print and digital formats. <https://logicmag.io/>
- **Logic School** is an online, experimental school for tech workers produced by Logic Magazine. Their curriculum draws from the worlds of activism, design, and software engineering. <https://school.logicmag.io/>
- **The Rise of Made-In-China Diplomacy** is an article in the New Yorker by writer Peter Hessler. It examines America's increasing reliance on Chinese manufacturers. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/15/the-rise-of-made-in-china-diplomacy>

CREDITS

The Vienna Business Agency supports businesses, the economy and the city in developing the Austrian capital's creative industries and shaping its future trajectory.

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Theme Music by Zanshin.

TRANSCRIPT

Severin Matusek

Welcome Xiaowei.

Xiaowei Wang

Thank you so much for having me.

Severin Matusek

So how did life change for you since last year? I guess you were traveling a lot before, researching for your book in China and suddenly, things shut down in the US, about a year ago? How was last year for you?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, very similar to a lot of people, I was just really slowing down time and kind of time to reflect. So that felt really important but it was also very surreal because before the pandemic, I was doing a lot of research in rural China and in China. There was definitely you know, this moment where China was in pretty severe lockdown but then by October or November of last year, we were still pretty stuck at home, all these things. Then talking to people that I visited in China, their lives were pretty much back to normal and that was also very strange. I think over the past year, just thinking more about what's the next step in my work more broadly, and also developing new, I guess related, but more new research interests on subjects of health and healing and things like that.

Severin Matusek

I don't know if you picked it up last year, but I saw that you do Tarot card reading. Does that come from last year where you had the time to start something like that?

Xiaowei Wang

So, I've been reading Tarot since high school really but you know I always joke, people who read Tarot professionally, do like professional witchcraft stuff. They're always like, logged off, they're not really online, they're not flying to conferences and giving talks. They're really in that monastic life. So it wasn't until the pandemic came where I was like, well, I don't really have these new ways of meeting new people. So tarot readings seems like this great way to spend an hour with someone, and they're a complete stranger, and all of a sudden they start crying. You're just like, wow, this is intense, but also really rich. It was, I guess, maybe a way of addressing the fact that I wasn't meeting new people during the pandemic.

Severin Matusek

Anyone can go to your website and actually fill out a form and apply to you know, meet you, as a stranger, for an hour of tarot card reading. What were some of the experiences you had, because I've never done it even in real life. So I wonder, you being in Oakland, California, someone from somewhere else in the world joining, you don't know that person and you're sitting in a Zoom call reading tarot cards, and they're bursting out in tears? What sort of connection were you able to build with people for that?

Xiaowei Wang

It was really, I think powerful actually, and a reminder that a lot of, you know, the common human emotions during this time, right? We're watching this collective trauma unfold. There's a ton of grief, whether it's grieving that we can't have a great dinner in Sweden together or grieving that, you know, literal grief for family members, for former ways of life. It was really incredible to see all these common emotions and threads, no matter where in the world people were. They could, you know, be in Alabama of all places to, you know, the UK or other regions throughout the world and yeah, just tapping into this deep connection was truly incredible. I've definitely had sustained connections too which has been really great. Now I have all these internet friends and when I say how we met, it's like, oh, yeah, I gave them a tarot reading and now I feel really close to them. I think the process of tarot reading is very weirdly dissimilar to like, design research, where you're just kind of holding this space for people to really explore and process through their emotions. My only job as a tarot reader is to kind of say, here's the symbolism I'm seeing, what is your relation to this symbolism?

Severin Matusek

I think it's quite interesting, because obviously a lot of people over the last year, sought new ways of connecting to people, you know, either through Zoom calls with family members that are very far away, or social media or through other ways. I think the fact that you started tarot reading, via your own forum, it speaks very much for your approach to technology, because I think you were quite critical about the mainstream ways of how technology is being used, and what sort of relationships come out of that. Was there some systematic thinking behind it, of just trying something different, that's not being imposed by a large platform in order to make money but something that you came up with yourself?

Xiaowei Wang

Definitely. I think it's been really interesting. You brought up social media as this increased way of connection and I was joking with someone the other day, like, oh, Instagram's the worst now, because it's basically Twitter, like people are screenshotting tweets and posting them on Instagram, which wasn't really happening before the

pandemic and everyone's kind of saying their opinion. It's half an invitation to connect because everything kind of devolves.

It's hard to have this rich conversation in public, online, right? So I love tarot, because it is very private, it is very one on one. What's also really interesting, you know, so the people who come to me for readings - this also probably a result of personal networks. There's some set of people who don't work in tech, and they just want to connect; artists, writers, but a lot of those folks, they already have their own personal kind of terror or spiritual practice already. A large set of people who have come to me during the pandemic are tech workers in some way at all different levels and stages of their career and there's this kind of question like, what am I doing, right?

I'm a tech worker, I'm working from home. All this terrible stuff is happening in the world. I feel powerless. Am I really making the world better by improving the music algorithm, recommendation algorithm? What am I doing with my life? What should I be doing with my life? I think that's really fascinating that the people who are working so close, like the closest to the things that are defining what it means to be human today, are also having this moment of existential crisis.

Severin Matusek

I agree and I definitely want to go into that later but for now, I mean, first of all, here's your book. I got it here. Congrats on your book. I read it over the last few weeks and I thought it was really very inspiring and very personal as well. I love the reflections that you had in there. I also saw the trajectory, you gave a talk two years ago when we met at the conference in Malmö that was already related to some of the research. The keynote that I saw today was already building on that and adding more to that. I think, for people who haven't read the book, and also by just reading the title, Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside, you give great examples of, you know, farmers in China using AI to surveil porks or, you know, Taobao, villages and so on. These are some great examples but I felt when I read your book, there's more to that, you know, it's not just giving examples and doing research and observing, I think you very nicely interweaved it with your personal story. It became a sort of exploration for you personally, to find out certain things or clarify certain things. Your approach to the book, I think, was deeply personal in also, who you are, and where you come from, as an American with Chinese immigrant parents, and so on. So can you tell us a little bit about your life in the US growing up? And, you know, having that relationship to China that ultimately led you possibly to research and write that book?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, that's a great question. The other day, a friend sent me this meme that's like, the five types of diaspora immigrant writing in the US. Kind of buckets of diaspora writing. I was like, I'm guilty of all of these but at the same time, like, I do think it's really interesting, because there's kind of like a default writing. So when I started researching the book, you know, one thing I always felt growing up was, Chinese culture is always

the other, and you're always kind of trying to explain it, make it legible. When I started writing my book, I think drawing upon these childhood experiences - I talked about it in my book - helping my aunt who is this recent immigrant, sell things at her little outdoor stand and just the things that I was noticing as a child. What people thought, made in China or being Chinese meant, and all those projections. I think the book is deeply personal, but also at the same time the flip side of that, is that there's a lot of these books that are not personal, and kind of written about China more broadly.

Embodied in that, I think, ultimately is a personal motivation, right? Personal understandings of what innovation means or you know, how the world should work, what intellectual property should mean in the world. So I think that even though those books seem neutral those are also quite personal to me and you know, my book is just another personal edition.

Severin Matusek

Yeah, I love the personal angle to it because one can really follow your thoughts. You also describe how you visit certain family members and what you eat. I wanted to ask you about those recipes. They are spread throughout the book. sino-futuristic recipes, as you call them where you describe some food scenarios of the future. How did you come up with those?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, so the recipes actually came before the book. A few years ago, just starting to play with this idea of recipes as a format because I think people don't take recipes seriously. Honestly, it's seen as like, in the kitchen kind of feminized labor, what can it really offer us? I think it can offer a lot.

You look at recipe books throughout time. I have this collection of like 1930s recipes, 1950s recipes, 1980s recipes, and just even tracing that, it's not just the style of writing, but also what's available as ingredients. All of that is changing in response to war, you know, the things that are World War II recipes are very different from what we would want to eat. Things are changing in response to refrigeration and shipping containers and global trade. It is this way, this encapsulation of change in daily life, through something that's very embodied.

I wanted to make like a little zine of recipes that were speculative. They're supposed to be funny, playful. I think that's an important vehicle to not take things too seriously and really think about the food of the future and what that means about the ways that tech and culture and society has evolved.

Severin Matusek

Can you give an example of one recipe of the future that might give us a hint of how tech and culture evolve in the future?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, so one recipe I have is called Moon Maze Mooncakes and this is actually the true part, which is, a lot of countries in their space program are trying to think through ways of growing food on the moon, or mining the moon, just the moon as another resource. China started germinating these seeds as part of their space program on the moon and so my speculation kind of thinking through it, you know, food and like, feeding the nation has always been this recurring theme. What if there was moon grown corn and that corn becomes this luxury that you can use to put into the center of mooncakes? That's kind of sold during the Mid Autumn Festival.

Severin Matusek

I also want to talk about technology, but also our agency within technology, which I think you know, at the end of your book is one of the main topics you go into, because you basically say, it's too easy to criticize technology for what it is, or for, you know, whatever direction it takes, we still have to understand that technology is a result of our culture of our communities, and we still have agency in shaping it. You don't take the excuse of just saying, 'oh, there are these big tech firms, and there's no escape, we can't do anything about it, we just have to keep on playing within the system'. How did that realization come about?

You know, because I feel like at the end of the book, you try to conclude all these observations that you've made in rural China, and try to meditate about what you do with them. You come to that conclusion that, okay, we need to do something about it, I need to do something about it, I need to act in order to change something. It doesn't really make sense to think about a future where it might be different, because we now live in the present, and that's the only chance we have.

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, I think very much this moment, where I think about these tarot readings that I've given to friends and my network, who are tech workers and it is much easier to keep showing up to your job, keep doing the things that, you know, your project manager at your tech company wants you to do. It's not like you necessarily want to right? You might have all these other reasons, whether it's money to take care of your family, or your own personal ideas of what success means. That's kind of like, oh, you know, I can't leave. For everyone, it's going to be different. There's no blanket answer. It doesn't mean that, you know, there aren't these other ways of like thinking through or being in the world, because on the other hand, I think of my public school teacher friends who they're like, yeah, I teach public school, I don't make a ton of money. I have to do these part time jobs to make ends meet but I'm also working with kids day to day in the public school system, and that feels meaningful.

So I think as a reminder that there's all these different ways of being and that we can't hold off just for this future. A good example is, there was one person who was working at this big tech company, and they really wanted to leave and start a progressive kindergarten. I was like, well, you could do that now. There's kind of a big need for childcare, all these things and they were like, no, I just can't leave. I was like, is it financial and they're like, no, I just feel like I can't leave until I do five years because of my CV and like all these things. I was like, well, once you start a kindergarten will your Google CV really matter? They were just like, I guess not, but I just haven't thought about, like, it's hard to take a leap. So it is hard to take a leap and yeah, I think that's what I mean, when I think about the present. Yeah. I don't know if that answered your question.

Severin Matusek

Well I'm just curious about your own personal work when it comes to that, because you mentioned that one of the main projects you're currently working on is the Logic School. So maybe you can also introduce a little bit what Logic Magazine is, and how the Logic School adds up to that?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, so Logic Magazine, we've been publishing for five years now and very much have a print first philosophy. We're not trying to get into the web content land. I'm sure you know this but it's like, trying to produce web content, people expect fresh content every day.

Severin Matusek

Yeah. Don't go into that.

Xiaowei Wang

It's not sustainable. So we're a print publication and we take a realistic but also critical view on tech and culture. We have everything from reports of... we gave someone money to try on this brain helmet that would read your brainwaves and to report back honestly, with a more theoretical framework about it, taking into social context. In this upcoming issue, we interview someone who's an activist doing distributed web work. So yeah, I think that's our range of what we're looking at.

Severin Matusek

Is the audience tech workers who want to think more critically about what they do and how they create tech?

Xiaowei Wang

Yes, I would say the audience is people who enjoy reading Wired Magazine, but want maybe a little bit more of a political or leftist commentary. Not that wired doesn't do that but I think just more of it. So really trying to create and bridge the dialogue between people who are working at a lot of big companies and in tech, and then people who are activists, who are trying to push at it from the outside. I think creating that dialogue, but also hoping that tech workers feel a sense of agency, to really start changing things in the day to day at their work, that they do have the power, because so much of work is like, I think, managers trying to make their workers feel powerless. That's, you know, trying to push against that.

Severin Matusek

Yeah, it very much relates to a conversation we had yesterday with an artist, German artist, Cornelia Sollfrank, who was one of the first net art pioneers and already in 1997 used techniques from hacker culture to hijack an art institutional art competition - and until today - basically uses strategies like hijacking, or strategies taken from hacker culture, in order to infiltrate art and question certain things. So would you say this is something that that people working in technology should do more? To try and hijack the system basically?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, one of the things that was really interesting in our space - this realization was like, oh - one of the very basic things as a tech worker is that you work at a big company that has a lot of money, and you can reroute funds from your company into activist orgs, right? You can kind of start to make your co-workers think differently. You know, all of these big companies they have lunchtime talks where they bring in outside guests, sometimes it's artists. You can start bringing in activists and just like, give them a couple \$1,000 to come and speak at your company, and really starting exactly like that, planting of a seed for people. Also just in the one on one conversations and interactions that you have with your co-workers like that. You know, I think in the workplace, there's always this sense of like, I have to reach my goals for work or else I'm going to get a bad performance review, but if you can start creating this alternative set of relations in the workplace, this other kind of space, where it's not about failure or success, like your co-workers would probably want to join that space far more than they want to please the manager, right? It's like a space where you can be held and supported. So yeah, very much like trying to hijack, reroute, create these other spaces within workplaces.

Severin Matusek

I think it's quite fascinating to see it because this happens a lot within tech now, right? There's more and more workers of tech companies forming unions or fighting for unions. So from an outsider's perspective, it feels like yes, people understand they have agency and people understand they have responsibility in working at these big companies. I would even say that, you know, someone like you with Logic Magazine, and also as the

author of that book, together with Jenny Odell, for example, who wrote *Resisting the Attention Economy* and a few other authors who are based at the very heart, you know, in the San Francisco Bay Area, there is a movement forming somehow. It's still small and a little bit underground but more and more people are joining right? Do you feel like you're sort of part of a movement of more and more people doing that?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, I mean, it definitely feels that way. Especially as like, you know, time goes on and we all like kind of know the same people.

Severin Matusek

So are you all friends? Do you have like a local club where everyone meets?

Xiaowei Wang

I see Jenny occasionally at Tacos Oscar, which is a taco place. Sorry, very Bay Area. It's like in a shipping container and their whole thing is like organic, small farm tacos. Next time you're in the Bay I'll take you.

Severin Matusek

It's a great way to resist the attention economy to have organic tacos, I would say.

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, but just like, I think similar networks of people. I think there's definitely like, you know for me, The Processing Foundation - this open source software - works a lot with artists and activists. Lauren McCarthy and Dorothy Santos kind of spearhead a lot of their work there. You know, that's been like a nice hub of energy and they really focus on connecting people who are in this like, tech movement, activism work. So insofar there's a movement as in like, people who all know each other and care about the same things. Yes, totally. Yeah. I appreciate that it looks like there's a coherent movement to you.

Severin Matusek

Yes. Somehow I observed that. Great. Well, there was actually one one more thing I wanted to ask you, which is specifically about commerce and culture because at several points in your book, you admit that you love shopping.

Xiaowei Wang

Don't you?

Severin Matusek

Well, I'm not sure if I love shopping honestly, I don't shop too much. I don't know, but I understand that - of course - you're not the only one but you're very much, you know, basically your book is about E-commerce, right? It's about Taobao, which is part of Alibaba. Alibaba is probably the largest E-commerce site in the world that, you know, changes so much of culture right now. You kind of questioned your own relationship to shopping to the real life implications that you observed in China. So has your relationship to shopping changed because of the book?

Xiaowei Wang

Yes, I do love shopping but part of it is like the things that I end up buying or like, end up not actually buying that much. There's just something about the pleasure of looking and like fantasizing about like, my new life with whatever thing, right? It's very relaxing. I do think that, you know, now it's been really - oh God, especially during this pandemic - it's been really fascinating going on to Amazon, like, I don't know if this happened in Austria, but in the US there was like the huge toilet paper shortage.

Severin Matusek

Yeah, it happened here as well, yeah.

Xiaowei Wang

So go on to Amazon, and you know, just based off of like, I feel as part of being an internet researcher, having this fascination with what's going on online, right? So on Reddit, people are like, go to Amazon, you know, you can buy toilet paper there. I would go onto Amazon and just see like, you know, toilet paper that was, I'm like, I've seen that brand before. It's like sold in China, and these exorbitant prices, you know, being set. I was like, this is this crazy, direct from China, small time entrepreneurs on their hustle economy in action. More and more, you know, the other day, my partner was trying to buy a tent for camping. I went online, looking at these tents, and all of them are these off label brands. You start digging into it and you're like, this is some virtual manufacturer in China. There was a great article by Peter Hessler in the New Yorker about these small entrepreneurs in China starting to list things on Amazon and it's like 39% of Amazon sellers now are direct from China sellers. So yeah, so it is like, it's changed my shopping in the sense that, I go on to Amazon, and you know, I don't buy things, but I just love looking and being like, what are these weird companies? Can I try and find their address somewhere? It's a weird, weird hobby.

Severin Matusek

Well, I guess it's because you experienced firsthand that there are real people and real families behind that, right? I found it quite fascinating, when reading your book, that you gave the example that you visited that small town factory full of town workers sewing

these costumes. Then back in the US, you looked for it on Amazon and on page three, you saw that very costume, which is a funny experience. All of us are on Amazon, you know, several times a week, probably, but we don't really associate these products to real people. What your book shows is, these are real people and real families making a living and innovating in some way behind that right?

Xiaowei Wang

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and establishing that connection feels extremely important, especially at a time when all these platforms, it kind of relies on things being anonymous, being impersonal. I don't know, I get like, really just fascinated when I see like, sometimes when I do buy things it shows up with a small imperfection. The object and I love that imperfection. I'm like this is cause, you know, it's it's not like the iPhone factory made it right. It's some small family business that made this and there's this imperfection. So I love that.